

The Treatise on the Ascension (*al-Risāla al-mi'rājīyya*)

Cosmology and Time in the Writings of Abū l-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī (d. 668/1269)

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I am pleased to present this study, edition, and translation of *al-Risāla al-mi'rājīyya* by the celebrated Andalusī Sufi Abū l-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī (b. ca. 610/1203, d. 668/1269) to Gerhard Bowering as a small token of my gratitude to him. Fittingly, the *Mi'rājīyya* is a Sufi commentary on the Quranic verse, *He governs the command from heaven to earth; then it ascends unto Him in a day whose measure is a thousand years of your counting* (Q 32:5). It sheds light on al-Shushtarī's views on cosmology, eschatology, and cyclical time, subjects that Bowering has explored in several superb scholarly articles to which I am thoroughly indebted.¹

1 The Life and Writings of al-Shushtarī

Abū l-Ḥasan b. 'Abdallāh al-Numayrī al-Shushtarī was a product of the seminal seventh/thirteenth-century Andalusī-Maghribī mystico-philosophical tradition that counts figures such as Muḥyī l-Dīn b. al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240), 'Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291), 'Alī al-Ḥarrālī (d. 638/1240), and 'Abd al-Ḥaqq b. Sab'īn (d. 669/1270) among its many prominent representatives. Beyond the hundreds of followers who accompanied al-Shushtarī during his journeys across North Africa and the Middle East—followers who were eventually assimilated into the Shādhiliyya order—our author won widespread recognition as a Sufi poet and composer of popular songs that continue to be chanted in Sufi ritual and popular devotional gatherings to this day. One of his most famous classics, *Shuwayyikh min arḍ Maknās* (A little shaykh from the land of Meknes), has been recorded by dozens of renowned voices of modern Mashriqī and

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1 I must also extend my gratitude to William Chittick, Klaus Hachmeier, and Kaoutar El Mernissi for their feedback on this paper.

Maghribī Arabic music. The thousands of manuscript copies of his *dīwān* that remain scattered in libraries throughout the world bear witness to his prominence and popularity as a poet. Beyond Sufi poetry, al-Shushtarī was venerated as a friend of God (*walī Allāh*), Sufi theoretician, miracle-worker, and master of the religious and intellectual sciences of his day. His influence extends into the writings of the Catalan mystic Ramon Llull (d. 1315).² He is hailed by medieval biographers as the literary voice of renunciant Sufis who practice “disengagement” from all but God (*adīb al-mutajarridīn*),³ and one contemporary scholar has aptly called him the “Rumi of Western Islam.”⁴

Al-Shushtarī's poetry gained widespread recognition for his ability to transpose profane themes and symbols employed in the colloquial rhythmic poems of the preeminent Andalusī *zajal* composer Abū Bakr b. Quzmān (d. 554/1159) onto a spiritual plane. In other words, he is credited with being the first to compose religious *zajals*. His poetry employs the symbolism of wine and daring images of prostitutes to call upon seekers from all walks of life—from thieves to dancing girls—to turn to the love of God. In contrast to his *zajals* and strophic *muwashshaḥa*,⁵ which are interspersed with Andalusī vernacular dialect, al-Shushtarī's love poetry (*ghazal*) and formal monorhyme *qasīdas* are more expository and doctrinal in nature and have received formal commentaries by later Sufis.⁶

Al-Shushtarī also authored a number of short prose treatises covering a wide range of topics. These include cosmology (*R. al-Mi'rājīyya*), the classification of the sciences (*R. al-Tlmiyya*), theological debates over the Essence and its

2 Llull knew Arabic and reiterates al-Shushtarī's famous refrain, “What care have I for others? / What care have they for me?” in *Blanquerna*. See María Alvarez, *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī*

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3 al-Ghubrīnī, *Urwān al-dirāya* 239.

4 María Alvarez, *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī* 6.

5 The *muwashshaḥa* is a poetic form that is meant to be accompanied by music. It consists of an introduction of 1 or 2 verses, the *madhhab* (also referred to as *maṭla'* or *ghuṣn*) and rhyming in AB. The *madhhab* is followed by the *juz'* (also referred to as *bayt*, *dūr*) consisting of 3–5 monorhyming verses in C or D. The *madhhab* is repeated as a refrain between the *juz'*. In contrast to classical Arabic poetry, in which the accent is generally on the first verses, the *muwashshaḥa*'s stress is on the last verse. This produces a powerful effect that overtakes the listener. His poems are still sung in Shādhili orders in Morocco, Tunisia, Alexandria, Syrian, Yemen, and Java. Massignon, *Investigaciones*, 43. See also *Encyclopedia of Arabic literature* entry *Muwashshaḥ*. Other relevant entries are *Zajal*, medieval; al-Shushtarī; Hebrew literature, relations with Arabic.

6 Zarrūq's commentary on his *muqatta'āt* was edited by Lafqīrī (2012); Ibn 'Ajība's commentary on the *Nūniyya* was edited by al-Kayyālī (2006), and by 'Adlūnī (2013). Al-Shushtarī's *qasīda Ta'addab bi-bāb al-dayr* was commented on by Nābulusī in a work entitled *Radd al-Muftarī*, and reedited by 'Abduh (2016).

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