

**Enrique Jiménez and Catherine Mittermayer (eds.).** *Disputation Literature in the Near East and Beyond*. Berlin, Boston: Walter de Gruyter. 2020. 470 pages. ISBN-13: 9781501517075.

Reviewed by **Şeyma Benli**  
İstanbul 29 Mayıs University, Turkey  
sbenli@29mayis.edu.tr

This edited volume appeared as a result of the two following international conferences: (1) ‘Disputation Poems in the Near East and Beyond: Ancient and Modern’, organised by Enrique Jiménez, in Madrid, in 2017; and (2) ‘4000 Mille Ans de Disputes: De l’Orient à l’Occident’, organised by Catherine Mittermayer, in Geneva, in 2018. The organisers compiled the proceedings in this volume under five main sections. Composed of an introduction by the editors and twenty-two articles, the volume handles literary disputations from the ancient Near East to contemporary Arabic literature, and from West to East and East-Asian literatures.

The first section, ‘Disputations from the Ancient Near East’, consists of one article for each of the three different categories of Sumerian disputations: precedence, school and women’s disputations. In the first article, ‘The Sumerian Precedence Debates: The World’s Oldest Rhetorical Exercises’, Catherine Mittermayer focuses on the techniques utilised by the contestants in their speeches. With reference to two sample debates, she demonstrates several advantages of the winner, such as being the first speaker and having more time to speak. However, the author points out that the quality of the speeches and arguments also helps to determine the outcome of a debate. Given that rhetoric and eloquence were praised, she concludes that these debates were used for educational purposes among the Sumerians; yet we do not know whether they had a theoretical framework. By discussing the basic structure of Sumerian precedence debates and the argumentation techniques they employed, Mittermayer enables interested scholars of any literary field to compare the structure of the earliest examples of the genre with their own field. In the second article, ‘An Introduction to the Sumerian School Disputes: Subject, Structure, Function and Context’, Manuel Cecceralli examines the disputations of Akkadian or Amorite students during the Old Babylonian Period. After expounding on the structure and various features of these disputations, he elaborates on their context and function. The author explains that these disputations were composed to help students to develop their Sumerian language skills and learn moral values, while also stating that they may have been staged, as their content was based on the real life of the students. In the next article, ‘“She Was Dumbstruck and Took It to Heart”: Form and Function of Insults in Sumerian Literary Disputations between Women’, Jana Matuszak examines the insults levelled at each other by two women in a disputation text written during the Old Babylonian Period. Contrary to previous assessments, the author demonstrates that the text is a complex literary composition that evolves from a joyful contest to a severe conflict, concluding that the disputation may have been staged, based on the use of the third singular pronoun.

Another pillar of the ancient Near East, Akkadian literature, is discussed in the first section as well. Based on the forewords of the disputation's three tablets, A.R. George, in 'The Tamarisk, the Date-Palm, and the King: A Study of the Prologues of the Oldest Akkadian Disputation', reveals that the King Gušūr-Niši mentioned is Gušur, the King of Kiš, previously mentioned in the *Sumerian King List* and the Babylon omen tradition. Based on a book record he found, Enrique Jiménez asserts, in 'Antiques in the King's Libraries: Akkadian Disputation Poems at Nineveh', that most of the extant Akkadian disputations would not have survived to the present, had it not been for Asurbanipal's library. He adds that these disputations were valued as antiquities even then and that they had been placed in the library for their rarity. Based on the existence of unique and partial copies, he concludes that disputations were no longer in demand, despite the fact that they had previously been used as educational tools in schools.

The first section also contains articles on ancient Egyptian dialogue and disputations. Bernard Mathieu, in 'La fable égyptienne du Corps et de la Tête (Tablette Turin CG 58004): Un procès littéraire au temps des Ramsès', focuses on the trial of the body and the head as a prototype for inter-organ debates and the genre of fables, seen in many later works, such as Aesop's and La Fontaine's Fables, Titus Livius' *History of Rome*, and Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*. In the trial, the body and the head represent the riot-prone public and authority respectively. Stating that the trial could be read as a criticism of the Ramesside Egypt authority, given the prevalence of corruption cases, the author compares this work with the Near Eastern tradition. He concludes that although the mentioned tradition had an impact on spreading the genre in ancient Egypt, its impact on the trial should not be exaggerated. Highlighting that late Egyptian disputations are shorter and simpler than the Mesopotamian ones, Andréas Stauder remarks, in 'Opposing Voices in Ancient Egyptian Literature', that each speaker represents different voices in *Debate of a Man and his Ba*, *Eloquent Peasant* and *Dialogue of Ipuwer and the Lord of All*, and evaluates the voices from a Bakhtinian perspective. In the next article, 'Those Who Cannot Do, Reign? The Sources of the Fable of Jotham', Andrés Piquer Otero states that 'The Disputation of Trees', a unique debate in ancient Hebrew and mentioned in the Bible, is a rewriting of a similar text in Near Eastern disputation literature, based on two different texts with a similar storyline.

The second section, 'Eastern Disputations during the Middle Ages', includes a wide range of literary traditions in Syriac, Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, Turkish and Armenian. In the first article, 'Disputation in Syriac literature', Sebastian Brock evaluates the technical aspects of Syriac disputations. Benefiting from various texts, he draws a general frame for their structure, protagonists, liturgical context, authorship and transmission.

Geert Jan van Gelder, in 'The Debate of Spring and Autumn in Arabic Literature', introduces both debates and works focusing on the seasons. Describing the technical structure of the Arabic debates, he simultaneously compares spring-autumn debates in other literatures with those in Arabic. Van Gelder points out that the theme may have gained popularity from the ancient Persian festivals celebrating the equinoxes, which occurred in these two seasons. In the next article, 'Night and Day in Islamicate

Literary Disputation', David Larsen identifies nine Arabic and Persian debates written in the tenth–nineteenth centuries, asserting that there is no critical difference in their content and that Night and Day generally boast about making people's praiseworthy works possible.

Amparo Alba Cecilia, in 'Disputation Poems in Medieval Hebrew Literature in Spain', notes that Hebrew literature emerging in tenth-century Spain produced works similar in form to the Arabic *maqāma* genre, but embellished with Jewish beliefs and culture during the twelfth–fifteenth centuries. The author states that individual examples of debates are limited and usually included in *maqāmas* and collections of stories. Cecilia introduces 13 Hebrew debates, as well as medieval Spanish debates.

Firuz Abdullaeva-Melville observes that the debate genre started in pre-Islamic Iranian literature and demonstrates, in 'Debate in Iranian Literary Culture', that educated young aristocrats in Medieval Iranian court culture engaged in literary debates to illustrate their eloquence. She argues that the ode and debate genres stem from the same sources, due to their shared writing purposes, which include praise, self-praise and satire. While the judge was usually a god in the Sumerian debates, he morphed into a boss in Persian debates, a fact presented as another piece of evidence strengthening the relationship between the two genres. Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, in 'Rhetoric of Persian Verbal Contests: Innovation and Creativity in Debates between the Persians and the Arabs', associates Asadī Tūsi's debates *The Arab and the Persian* and *The Zoroastrian and the Muslim* with the *Shu'ūbiyya* movement, arguing that both the religious and the ethnic position of Muslim Persians is demonstrated in these poems. Citing examples from the twentieth-century poet Mishkat's Arab-Persian debate, he reveals that these poems emphasise Iranian cultural superiority to Arab culture and how this genre serves political and cultural agendas.

Hatice Aynur, in 'A Survey of Disputation Texts in Ottoman Literature', mentions the first examples of debate in Central Asian Turkish literature appearing from the eleventh century onwards, noting a great increase in debate writing among the Ottomans. She briefly introduces 36 Ottoman Turkish debates, having classified them by their protagonists. Aynur concludes that debates about mind-altering substances and between pen and sword dominate Ottoman disputation literature.

Sergio La Porta states, in 'Dispute Poems in Armenian', that disputations entered Armenian literature in the fifth century, through translations from Syriac. Although Armenian literature eventually produced its own works, disputations were never a popular genre. In the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, prose developed in a question-and-answer format, both for didactic purposes and as a result of increased interaction with missionaries. Taking the form of dialogue until the seventeenth century, this genre then began to give examples of precedence dispute poems. The author links the origin of this type of disputation with the concurrent institutionalisation and popularisation of the tradition of minstrelsy.

The third section, 'Western Disputations during the Middle Ages', consists of three articles. In 'Tradition and Innovation in the Early Medieval Latin Debates: Alcuin's *Conflictus Veris et Hiemis*, Scottus' *Rosae liliique certamen*, and the *Eclogue* of Theodulus', Vicente Cristóbal and Juan Luis Arcas Pozo state that, while no such debate genre ex-

ists in ancient Greece or Rome, some of its features appear in other genres like theatre, choral poetry, fables and bucolic poetry. After presenting the forerunners of the genre in ancient Greece and Rome, the authors introduce debates in Medieval Latin literature, demonstrating, through three works, that Christian motifs gradually increase in medieval debates. In the second article, 'Owls, Nightingales, Cuckoos and Other Feathered Disputants: The Genre of the Bird Debate in Middle English, with Special Focus on *The Owl and the Nightingale*', Thomas Honegger notes that bird debates, a sub-genre unique to English literature, are generally transformed into allegorical-symbolical works by making protagonists the spokespeople of a point of view, through either vanishing their natural avian character or presenting their appearance in the real world, so as not to imprison them in this allegorical world. *The Owl and the Nightingale*, on the other hand, is a different type of text, which emphasises the level of usefulness of these birds for humans, rather than personifying them, while also preserving allegorical implications of the birds. In the last article, 'De la dispute des clercs au dialogue des *acteurs*: L'expansion du débat poétique en France à la fin du Moyen Âge', Laëtitia Tabard presents a panorama of fifteenth-century French debate. She touches on the relationship between debates and medieval lyric genres, such as the *tenson* and *jeu-parti*, rather than Latin forms of dialogue. Tabard points out that though the works influenced by the Latin debates continued to be written in the fifteenth century, innovative trends emerged concurrently.

The fourth section, 'Contemporary Disputation Texts', contains two articles. Alessandro Mengozzi reveals, in 'Neo-Aramaic Dialogue and Dispute Poems: The Various Types', that eight of ten poems he identified were translations from classical Syriac. He states that the other two found only in Neo-Aramaic had Arabic and Persian influences. In the next article, 'Modern Vernacular Disputation Poems from Bahrain and the Wider Gulf: Speculations on Their Origin', Clive Holes classifies approximately 20 disputation poems that he compiled from the aforementioned region by their protagonists. As the poems resemble Mesopotamian disputations both in content and structure, Holes uses linguistic and cultural evidence to prove that modern vernacular disputation poems from Bahrain and the wider Gulf area may be derived from ancient Mesopotamian disputations.

The fifth section, 'Other Traditions of Disputations', contains only one article, namely on ludic disputations in the East-Asian cultural sphere. John A. Chaney sheds light on disputations in Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese literatures, while showcasing their similarities and differences. He notes that although disputation literature in China dates back to the Warring States period (453–221 BCE), it did not create an independent genre. He further indicates that disputations in Japanese literature occasionally merge with warrior tales and reveal the fictional poetry contest genre. The author introduces briefly the poets and works that he mentions, and this enables readers unacquainted with Chinese literature to better understand the article.

The book provides the reader with a view on how the disputations have advanced from West to Eastern Asia and from antiquity to the present. Since one-third of the book is dedicated to disputations written in the ancient Near East, it is possible to find detailed information on the first examples and features of this genre. Nearly all

the articles refer to other literatures as well as the literature examined, which allows the reader to better compare and comprehend the topic. At the end of the book there is an index of contestants, which enables the reader to identify the protagonists in the worldwide disputation literature. Although the index is naturally restricted to the content of the book, it does offer a general overview. The book also provides an opportunity to enter the world of Armenian, Ottoman and East-Asian disputations, which have hitherto been insufficiently discussed in English. It is ground-breaking that these disputation literatures have at last been given their due credit. In sum, this volume, as the latest and the most comprehensive study on this topic thus far, is a must-read both for those desiring to discover a 4,000-year-old literary genre and for researchers of any literary field.