

## Reading Arabic Poetry

In this course, we will be reading classical and modern Arabic poems in English translation. These texts might seem very foreign and difficult to understand at first, but you will become more adept at reading these texts as the semester progresses. Along the way, you will have to develop some reading strategies to help you read effectively. What does it mean to “read effectively”? It does not mean you understand everything in the text by the time you finish reading it. Rather, it means you are paying attention to the text and actively responding to it as you read. You are not reading passively, hoping to absorb as much information as you can. Instead, you are doing things like making notes, asking questions, figuring out relationships to outside knowledge. You do not have to have any specific knowledge or understanding to do these things. Here are some tips to get you started:

- Plan on reading the text more than once. The first time you read it, read the poem aloud. This poetry was composed in a highly oral culture, so get a feel for the sound of it. Try to get a sense of the major contours of the text. The second time through, look up unfamiliar words, identify difficult or interesting parts you want to explore further, and get a more detailed idea of what is going on in the text. A third or even fourth reading may be necessary in order to feel familiar with the text, depending on the difficulty and density of it. Doing this work is part of your class preparation.
- Take notes! This means having a hard copy of the text rather than reading it off a screen. It is not enough to highlight or underline important passages. Note-taking can include the following:
  - Listing new vocabulary words and unfamiliar phrases
  - Writing down your observations and questions
  - Composing an outline of the poem’s structure and noting where transitions occur
  - Noting relationships you notice to outside knowledge
  - Highly recommended: write down what each section is about in the margin. This can be a word, phrase, or sentence that will help you sum up and remember the topic of it
- Think and write about your answers to these questions:
  - Who are the characters in the poem? What does the text tell you about them? How does it communicate these things?
  - What genre(s) does this text include? Be specific – e.g. not just ‘poetry,’ but rather ‘erotic love poetry’ or ‘poetry of yearning from a distance’
  - What kind of audience do you think this text was composed for? What kind of background knowledge does this audience already seem to have? (Think about what references the text makes but does not explain.) What pieces of background are familiar/unfamiliar to you?
  - What are the formal features of the text? Does it rhyme? Does it have a particular cadence, rhythm, or meter? Is there a lot of repetition of words or phrases?
  - What strikes you as being important to the text and its characters? Think about what main topics they talk about, discuss, and argue about.
- After reading the text:
  - Write a short summary of what you have read.
  - Identify what you find most interesting, puzzling, likeable, and displeasurable about the text. Think about why you find these aspects interesting, puzzling, likeable, and displeasurable.