

# MALĤŪN AS A CONCEPT: SOME PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

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## **Abstract:**

This reflection addresses the epistemological challenges of defining *malĥūn*, a Maghrebi poetic genre whose contours remain unclear due to limited scholarly research. Rather than proposing a definitive definition, the study critically examines previous interpretations, particularly the debate on the meanings attributed to the root *l.ĥ.n* as discussed by al-Fāsī (1986–97) and al-Ġirārī (2025). Building on insights from a contemporary *malĥūn* poet, Aĥmad Suhūm (1993), the article suggests a new reading that revisits an insight briefly articulated in the final pages of his work and develops it further by linking the term to intelligence, creativity, and persuasive expression, while grounding this interpretation in a lexicographical dimension beyond the two dominant interpretations expounded by al-Ġirārī and al-Fāsī. By reflecting on language, geography, and metre, this contribution aims to stimulate further debate on what fundamentally defines *malĥūn*.

## **Keywords:**

*malĥūn*, *zaġal* poetry, Maghreb, epistemology

## **1 Introduction**

The present reflection arises from the difficulty of defining what *malĥūn*<sup>1</sup> truly is. Despite several scholarly attempts to address this question, and due to the existence of only a few comprehensive studies<sup>2</sup>, its contours remain blurred and uncertain. Rather than proposing yet another definition, this study approaches *malĥūn* as an

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<sup>1</sup> While recognizing the challenges of providing suitable examples of the genre, due to the reasons discussed in this article and given that this study does not include an analysis of poems, it is nevertheless important to introduce the reader to *malĥūn* as a poetic form. For this purpose, the reader may consult, for example, Appendix IV in Melanie Magidow's dissertation (2013), which includes both original poems and their English translations. For those interested in its performance, see UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Vocke (1990), al-Ġirārī (2025) and al-Fāsī (1986–97).

epistemological problem, that is, as a question about the conceptual foundations and assumptions that have shaped its understanding as a genre.

This contribution acknowledges its limitations: it neither relies on an exhaustive corpus nor claims to resolve the long-standing debates surrounding *malḥūn*. Instead, it seeks to re-evaluate the foundations upon which existing definitions have been built, particularly through an examination of the etymology of the root *l.ḥ.n*. Such a perspective invites reflection on what we truly mean when we speak of *malḥūn*, encouraging us to move beyond the binary framework established by the debate between al-Fāsī (1986–97) and al-Ġirārī (2025) and to reconsider, more fundamentally, what makes *malḥūn* “*malḥūn*”. This reflection first considers the possible criteria used to define the genre (language, geography, and metre) and highlights their limitations, before proposing a new reading of what the term *malḥūn* may signify through the lens of its linguistic root.

## 2 Etymology and language

### 2.1 Etymology

This reflection begins by addressing the most prominent debate in *malḥūn* studies: the etymology of the word *malḥūn*. This debate is mainly shaped by the contributions of al-Ġirārī (2025) and al-Fāsī (1986–97).

The debate focuses on the meaning of the root *l.ḥ.n*. Al-Fāsī (1986: I, 29) argues that the root refers to “melody”, since the poems were usually sung. He defines *malḥūn* as follows: “I think that they derived this word from *talḥīn* in the sense that the *malḥūn* poetry was meant to be sung. We find support for this view in the words of Ibn Ḥaldūn, as he mentioned in his *Muqaddima*, Chapter 50” (*ibid.*). He also stresses that the root *l.ḥ.n* should not be understood as meaning “grammatically incorrect”, that is, poetry in a language that does not follow the rules of *i’rāb*. He adds that it is “hard to imagine someone calling their own poetry with a word that refers to ignorance” (*ibid.*). Al-Ġirārī (2025: I, 98–99), by contrast, disapproves Al-Fāsī’s analysis and interprets the root as referring to grammatical mistake, because the language of *malḥūn* does not follow the rules of *i’rāb*. This interpretation is shared by Charles Pellat (2012) and Jamel Eddine Bencheikh (2000:249) in their definitions of *malḥūn*.

Even though both explanations are important and widely cited, they can be questioned. Looking at al-Ġirārī’s view, several questions appear. How important was *fushā* in working-class circles in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Morocco? Since *malḥūn* was first created and performed by urban artists, craftspeople, and Ṣūfī groups (Magidow 2021), how literate were these individuals for them to consider their own poetry as grammatically incorrect? Al-Fāsī’s point about the unlikelihood of artists giving their own work a negative name also raises questions. Can we really

assume that this never happened, given that artists usually promote their work positively?

Looking more closely at al-Fāsī's interpretation, another question arises. If *malĥūn* refers to melody, then its existence and name are linked to performance, especially singing. How does this affect the status of written *malĥūn* poetry? Does its genre or identity change depending on performance, or do performers recognize these poems by other features besides performance? Finally, how should we understand the status of long *malĥūn* poems, like al-Maġrāwī's *Hawl al-qiyāma*<sup>3</sup> and Qaddūr al-'Alamī's *Ġumhūr al-awliyā'*,<sup>4</sup> which, as al-Ġirārī (2025: I,73) notes, were not meant to be sung?

## 2.2 *Zaġal* and *malĥūn* as synonyms? A semantic issue

In the first part of his book, al-Ġirārī attempts to describe the main features of *zaġal*. He begins by defining the term and linking it to the poetic art produced in al-Andalus in colloquial Arabic, referring in particular to Ibn Quzmān (1078–1160) as a major figure of this genre. He suggests that the Moroccan variety of *zaġal* is most likely a continuation of the Andalusian tradition. Al-Ġirārī then presents eleven contextual synonyms for the word *zaġal* used in Morocco, such as *aš-ši'r* ("poetry") (al-Ġirārī 2025: I,104) and *al-'ilm al-mawhūb* ("the gifted knowledge") (al-Ġirārī 2025: I, 101). Among these synonyms, he includes *al-malĥūn*. Further in the book, he identifies several forms of *zaġal*, mentioning, for instance, *al-'ayta*<sup>5</sup>, *at-taqṭuqa*<sup>6</sup>, and

<sup>3</sup> See al-Maġrāwī, *Dīwān* 141–154, *qaṣīda* no. 11.

<sup>4</sup> See al-'Alamī, *Dīwān* 113-138, *qaṣīda* no. 8.

<sup>5</sup> "In the sense of a call, from *'ayyaṭa*, "to call out." It is discussed by Idrīs al-Idrīsī in *Kaṣf al-ġiṭā 'an sirr al-mūsiqā*, where he states: "*Al-'ayṭa* is of two types: Mellāliyya and Marsāwiyya. The Mellāliyya is associated with Beni Mellal and the neighbouring mountains, as well as the outskirts of Tadla. Its melodies are always extremely high-pitched, resembling cries of lamentation and weeping. The expressions used in it are often mixed with Berber words. From it derives the Sūsī style, which is characterized by a lightness of rhythm and a shift in the musical cycle. As for the Marsāwiyya *'ayṭa*, it is entirely different and is found among the various settled Arab tribes. It surpasses the former in the richness of its themes and in its emotional impact, and it is also the most refined and delicate in craftsmanship. Much of it is found among the tribes of al-Ḥawz, such as 'Abda, Dukkāla, al-Rĥāmna, and aš-Šāwiya. Its original centre, where it first emerged and was composed, is 'Abda. From there it spread among the tribes and became widely disseminated. Another centre exists in aš-Šāwiya, near Settāt, called Qbāl and in al-Wādī al-Aḥḍar. The Marsāwiyya *'ayṭa* is further divided into distinct types, within which it circulates and is categorized: Agbāḥ, from which at-Tulṭī is derived, which corresponds to the *ḥaddārī* rhythm; then the Sūsī; and finally, the Ḥrizī, which is specific to the tribes of aš-Šāwiya" (al-Ġirārī 2025: I, 119-120). For more about *'ayṭa*, see Naġmī (2024).

<sup>6</sup> "It is a form of singing specific to the mountainous regions of northern Morocco, though it has gradually spread to urban centres as well, where it enjoys considerable popularity. It

*al-a'yū*<sup>7</sup>. We can represent his reasoning as a syllogism:

1. *zağal* is a synonym of *malḥūn*;
2. *al-'ayta*, *at-taqtūqa*, and *al-a'yū* are forms of *zağal*;
3. therefore, *al-'ayta*, *at-taqtūqa*, and *al-a'yū* are forms of *malḥūn*.

I would argue that this reasoning is inaccurate because the first premise, “*zağal* is a synonym of *malḥūn*,” is not correct. As Magidow notes, “*Zajal* refers to any colloquial Arabic poetry<sup>8</sup>, and thus *malḥūn* is a kind of *zajal*. (The term *malḥūn* became more specific with time)” (Magidow 2016:310). In other words, unlike *zağal*, *malḥūn* is not an umbrella term for colloquial poetry, but rather occupies the same level as the other forms of *zağal*, such as *al-'ayta*, *at-taqtūqa*, and *al-a'yū*. Each of these forms has its own unique characteristics, which makes it impossible to apply *malḥūn*-specific metrical rules to them.

This leads to a second point regarding the understanding of *malḥūn*. If al-Ġirārī reached such a conclusion, and considering that other forms of *zağal* differ significantly from *malḥūn*, does this suggest that the boundaries between what counts as *malḥūn* and what counts as other forms of *zağal* are blurred and unclear?

### 3 The Linguistic status of *malḥūn*

Describing *zağal* and, by extension, *malḥūn* as poetry composed in colloquial Arabic should be reconsidered for two main reasons.

First, the question of intelligibility complicates this assumption. If we take the Moroccan and Algerian traditions as examples, since these are relatively well documented, one may ask whether two native speakers, one Moroccan and one Algerian, with limited or no familiarity with *malḥūn* would easily understand its

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consists of a composition made up of several sections, each composed of two lines sharing the same rhyme. The sections generally differ from one another in both rhyme and meaning. As for the performance, it begins with the solo singer, after which the group follows by repeating the section. During the singing, the phrases *ya l-wlād* or *ya sīdī* are added at the end of the first hemistich of each line in order to maintain the rhythm. The sections are separated by a formula such as *ayā mulāt ad-dlāl*, through which the singer seeks to regulate or “align” the rhythm, as they themselves say.” (al-Ġirārī 2025: I, 126). For more about *taqtūqa*, see Maghnia and Kharchafī (2000).

<sup>7</sup> “Its origin lies in the mountainous region, among Bni ‘Arūs, Bni Amsūr, and Jbel Ḥabīb, though it later spread to the cities of the north. It is the closest of the genres to the *taqtūqa*; indeed, it resembles it in that it consists of a series of sections, each composed of two lines sharing the same rhyme. There may be a thematic link between the sections, though often there is none, especially with regard to the subject matter. At times, coherence may even be lacking within a single section, where the first hemistich or even the entire first line may diverge in vocabulary from the theme of the rest of the section. Yet this is of little concern to its practitioners, so long as the metre remains sound and the rhyme consistent.” (al-Ġirārī 2025: I, 128).

poems. The answer is most likely negative. The linguistic register employed in *malĥūn* appears “unnatural”, or at least uncommon, from the perspective of contemporary speakers of colloquial Arabic.

Second, this raises the question of how this linguistic register should be defined more precisely. As al-Fāsī notes in the introduction to his glossary of *malĥūn* (1991), its basis is colloquial Arabic, albeit heavily influenced by borrowings from Classical Arabic. This observation has two implications. First, the composition of *malĥūn* presupposes a certain degree of competence in Standard Arabic, as illustrated by poets such as Sa‘īd al-Mindāsī (d. 1677) and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Maġrāwī (d. 1605). Second, not all *malĥūn* can be understood as purely “folk” poetry, since more “elitist” forms also exist, including poetry produced by figures considered part of the elite, such as Sultan Mawlāy ‘Abd al-Hafīz (d. 1937).

The argument that *malĥūn* is rooted in colloquial Arabic is further supported by Sa‘d Allāh, who, in his discussion of the superiority of Standard Arabic (1998: II, 313), notes that dialectal variation is such that a poem composed in Tlemcen may be difficult to understand in Constantine and vice versa. This raises further classificatory questions. In the case of Constantine, where the so-called *ma’lūf* (*mālūf*) tradition is dominant, should this observation be taken to imply that Constantine also produces *malĥūn* despite its association with a different poetic tradition, or should *ma’lūf* itself be reconsidered as a form of *malĥūn*? If so, what criteria would allow us to distinguish between *ma’lūf* and western Algerian forms such as *hawzī*?<sup>9</sup>

At first glance, one might conclude that the linguistic register of *malĥūn* occupies an intermediate position between colloquial Arabic and Standard Arabic. However, this raises further methodological questions. How can we measure the degree of proximity between this register and colloquial Arabic? If such a measurement is possible, can it be applied consistently across the various Maghrebi traditions of *malĥūn*? Moreover, how should we account for Judeo-Arabic *malĥūn*, as illustrated by the “Story of Joseph” in Magidow’s dissertation (2013:212–219)? Further research is needed to clarify the position of these variants within the broader framework of the genre.

#### 4 Geography and metres

Charles Pellat (2012) defines *malĥūn* as “the state of the language used for the expression of certain forms of dialectal poetry in the Maghrib, as well as the poetry itself”. As some researchers have shown, there are indeed different varieties of dialectal poetry called *malĥūn*. The most documented ones, despite the general lack of research on this genre, are the Moroccan (al-Fāsī 1986–97, al-Ġirārī 2025) and

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<sup>9</sup> On *ma’lūf* see, e.g. Davis 2005. For a general overview of different genres, see Glasser 2016.

Algerian (Tahar 1975) *malḥūn*. Less known forms of *malḥūn* also exist in Tunisia (Sraïeb 1989), Libya (Dellai 1996), and Mauritania (Taine-Cheikh 2005).

This raises an important question: apart from the shared name and the use of dialect, are there any distinctive features that define this poetic genre? In other words, what do Moroccan and Libyan *malḥūn*, for example, really have in common?

It is well known that Moroccan and western Algerian *malḥūn* originated in Tafilalt in the 15th century (Magidow 2021). From there, it spread to Moroccan cities such as Fez and Marrakech, and to cities in western Algeria such as Tlemcen. Poets from both sides maintained close contact and continued to influence each other. We can therefore speak of a certain continuity between the Moroccan and Algerian varieties of *malḥūn*. But what about the other forms of *malḥūn*?

It seems quite unlikely that the Moroccan-Algerian tradition interacted intensively with the Tunisian and Libyan publics, given the large geographical distance and the absence of dialectal poetry known as *malḥūn* in the areas between western Algeria and Tunisia or Libya. Moreover, it is said that in Tunisia the genre originated in the 14th century. However, due to the lack of studies, we cannot confirm or reject this claim, nor assume that the same applies to the Libyan *malḥūn*. As for the Mauritanian variety, establishing a connection with the Moroccan or Algerian ones requires further research.

The question of metre remains crucial in defining a poetic genre. In the case of Moroccan *malḥūn*, four main metres are known<sup>10</sup>:

- *mbīyyat*: The *mbīyyat* metre is one of the commonly used forms in Moroccan *malḥūn*, characterized by its balanced structure and regular rhythm. An example can be found in the *al-Burāqīyya* poem:

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<sup>10</sup> “The Moroccan scholar Abd al-‘Azīz bin ‘Abd al-Jalīl explains that there have been **four basic metres in *malḥūn* poetry** ever since it developed thematic categories in the tenth century. The first metre is *mbīt* / couplets (most commonly two parts, but possibly up to five). For example, see the first stanza of *al-Burāqīyya*. Each couplet contains two half-lines (Ar. *shaṭr* / hemistich), the first ending in *-ī* and the second ending in *-ā*. [...] This metre, *mbīt*, was the norm until a new kind developed. In the second type of metre, *maksūr l-juḥh* / Broken of Wing, the basic unit is the stanza, and not the line. The stanza consists of lines of varying length, creating an effect of imbalance, resisting the need for closure that the simpler *mbīt* delivers so predictably. For example, in *Shāyq nzūrak* / Wanting to Visit You, every stanza is preceded by the phrase *qāl ana yā sīdī* / Sir, in order to balance the line, as if healing a broken wing. The third type of metre, *mšattab*, takes its name from traditional furniture stuffing, and is characterized by “stuffing” that lengthens the stanzas. The fourth type of metre, *sūsī*, is considered relatively free, allowing flexibility. The organization of the stanza can extend the introduction, increasing suspense, before arriving at the refrain. This final innovation suits narratives best because it provides the most flexibility.” (Magidow 2013:27–29). Emphatics were added by the present author. Otherwise, the spelling follows that of Magidow.

ونُطَرِّزُ خُلَّةَ المي صفاها      نبدا باسم الجليل نعم الحي الرزاق  
 محمد جوارحي سبها      ونقول أفاهم اللغا هَلَّتْ دمع رماقي  
 لا حول لي فيما قضاها<sup>11</sup>      حب في دواخل الحشا مَرَّقَ مير سفاقي

- Another form is *maksūr l-ġnāh*, which, according to al-Fāsī (1987:22), is used in poems such as *al-Faraġ* by ‘Abd al-Qādir al-‘Alamī (2009:163):

وهو يا سيدي ربي لا رب غيرك امجيب في كل حين يصاب  
 انت الجليل وانت الحي المعبود  
 رب غني راحم ودود      احليم معطي جيّد موجود  
 واسع الجود  
 لو اجتمعت اعبادك جملة في مكان واحد  
 واضحى كل عبد ايطلبك منهم شين رايد  
 القصد كلهم نالوا  
 امثيل من اشعل راس شمعة من لهيب مسراج<sup>12</sup>

- The *mšattab* metre, as noted by al-Fāsī (1986:145), appears in several poems, including *Rabī‘a at-tāniya* by Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥafīz (*Dīwān* 289–290):

هاني بهواك نبوح      راحتني تعذابي  
 ما بين جمع احبابي      صدها ايزيد اشغابي  
 ما ابحال الساعي ملدوغ في الصدر      حالتي مطروحة في الجمر  
 من صدود الهجران      ما اشبهني هايم ولهان

<sup>11</sup> We begin with the name of the Majestic, yes the Ever-Living, the Provider  
 We embroider a pure garment  
 And we say to those who understand the language, my eyes teared up  
 Muḥammad my insides did captivate  
 Love in the inner regions, my prince caused it to rip  
 I have no control over that which he appoints (translated by Magidow (2013:  
 175))

<sup>12</sup> O my Lord, there is no god but You, the One who responds at every moment.  
 You are the Majestic, You are the Ever-Living, the One who is worshipped.  
 A Lord, Rich, Merciful, Loving, Forbearing, Giving, Generous, Ever-present,  
 Abundant in generosity.  
 If all Your servants were to gather in one place,  
 and every single one of them were to ask You for something they desire,  
 then all of them would receive their share.  
 Like one who lights the tip of a candle  
 from the flame of a lamp. (translated by author)

بالعكس هلكتو وامحان  
 رفيعة الشان  
 في الزين ما ليها تان  
 لله قول لها ولقي رانا بقيت واقف ما بين دفوف  
 دمعتي لحاجة<sup>13</sup>

- Finally, the *sūsī* form is sometimes described as closer to prose poetry (al-Fāsī 1986:145) and is frequently associated with Ḥarrāz poems<sup>14</sup> (Mṭīrad 2008: 261):

حراز كافر ونصراني  
 شتوة وصيف كبير عاني  
 حاضي احريس كل ما كنبني ايريبه<sup>15</sup>

Imagine a respected shaykh, known for his mastery of these metres and for composing widely admired poems, decided to create a new poem using a fifth metre of his own invention, and claimed it as *malḥūn*. Would his poem be accepted as *malḥūn*? If yes, on what basis – his personal reputation, or on objective elements? And if the latter, what would those elements be?

This is not merely a philosophical question or a thought experiment. It reflects a real situation involving one of the most renowned Moroccan *malḥūn* poets, al-Ġilālī Mṭīrad who invented the *sūsī* metre (al-Ġirārī 2025: I, 220). On what objective grounds was his *sūsī* poem recognized as *malḥūn*? And considering that metre in

<sup>13</sup> Here I am, confessing my love for you —  
 my comfort has become my torment.  
 Among gatherings of my beloved ones,  
 her turning away only increases my longing.  
 I am not unlike a seeker, stung deep in the chest —  
 my state feels as if cast into burning coals.  
 From the pain of her distance and abandonment,  
 No one lost wandering in passion resembles me.  
 On the contrary, I am ruined and afflicted  
 by one of high rank,  
 unmatched in beauty.  
 By God, tell her, my beloved:  
 I remain standing, caught between the drums (or turmoil),  
 my tears flowing insistently. (translated by author)

<sup>14</sup> In Morocco, Ḥarrāz is a stock character in popular sung narrative and theatrical traditions, appearing in a variety of roles.

<sup>15</sup> A disbelieving Christian guardian,  
 in winter and in summer he keeps watch over me.

A vigilant guardian, watchful ... whenever I try to build something, he ruins it.  
 (translated by author)

*malĥūn* is relatively flexible, as Magidow (2013:29) notes, how “free” is it really? In other words, could a free-verse poem still be considered *malĥūn*?

While *malĥūn* has often been described as strophic poetry (Taine-Cheikh 2005), this characterization does not appear to apply uniformly across all cases. Certain poems, particularly those with a narrative structure, do not rely on clear repetition, stable strophic organization, or consistent rhyme patterns (*absence de rimes régulières*). This suggests that features associated with Mauritanian *malĥūn* cannot necessarily be generalized to the genre as a whole. This can be illustrated by Mġirad’s Ĥarrāz poem, where stanzaic divisions vary significantly in length: the first stanza extends from verse 1 to 14, the second from 18 to 35, and the third from 39 to 59, with refrains occurring in between. Such variation, the irregularity of both stanzaic structure as well as the rhyme, points to a more complex and non-standardized poetic organization, which challenges the idea of a consistent strophic model. In addition, given the limited number of studies on the genre, it is currently difficult to maintain this characterization without further comparative research. Finally, returning to the question of geography, one may ask whether metres such as the *sūsī* are attested in other Maghrebi varieties of *malĥūn*, or whether they remain restricted to specific regional traditions.

#### 4 Towards a new understanding of the concept *malĥūn*

Based on the observations made in the available studies and given the lack of research describing the specific features of *malĥūn*, it seems that the contours of this literary genre remain blurred and quite uncertain. In this part of my reflection, I do not claim to solve this issue by defining the genre, since such work would require extensive research on all the different Maghrebi varieties of *malĥūn*; something that, unfortunately, does not yet exist. However, I would like to propose a new interpretation that embraces the diversity of *malĥūn* by re-engaging with the debate concerning the etymology of the root *l.ĥ.n.*

As mentioned earlier, the debate about the meaning of this root has been most thoroughly developed by al-Fāsī and al-Ġirārī. Despite their insightful views, their interpretations can be critically re-examined. Fully aware of the potential risks of inconsistency introduced by this paper and the possibility that a definitive answer cannot be provided, a new interpretation of the meaning of *malĥūn* is nevertheless proposed.

To do so, I start from an interpretation offered by Aĥmad Suhūm (1936–2020), a well-known *malĥūn* poet. At the end of his book, he analyses the definitions given by al-Fāsī and al-Ġirārī, rejecting both as misinterpretations. Although he initially followed al-Fāsī’s performance-based explanation that connects *malĥūn* to melody, he later noticed, through the poems of ‘Abdallah b. Ĥsāyn, that *malĥūn* goes beyond

al-Fāsī and al-Ġirārī's interpretations. According to him, the word also refers to "eloquent, convincing, and persuasive speech"<sup>16</sup> (Suhūm 1993:230–231).

This interpretation offers an interesting perspective on the nature of *malḥūn*, though it should be supported by linguistic rather than experiential evidence. My main critique of al-Fāsī, al-Ġirārī, and those who follow them, is that they all base their argument on the root *l.ḥ.n* and connect it directly to the verb *laḥana*. At first glance, this appears reasonable, but by doing so they automatically exclude the possible form *laḥina*. Morphologically, *malḥūn* refers to the passive participle of the trilateral verb *l.ḥ.n*, regardless of the vowel pattern.

If we look at Arabic dictionaries, such as that of Biberstein-Kazimirski (2004), we find that the verb *laḥina* exists and can mean "to be intelligent"<sup>17</sup>. Returning to Suhūm's interpretation (1993), the idea of performing "eloquent, convincing, and persuasive speech" indeed requires a form of intelligence and creativity. These two ideas therefore complement each other: intelligence as a condition for producing an elevated kind of speech.

In this contribution, I do not claim to resolve the long-standing debate about the meaning of *malḥūn*, nor do I intend to reinvent the concept or reject previous interpretations. Yet, the association between *malḥūn* and a form of intelligence appears meaningful for several reasons. First, it allows us to move beyond the binary framework established by al-Fāsī and al-Ġirārī. Second, since few formal features unite the different Maghrebi varieties of *malḥūn*, such an interpretation might help strengthen the concept while still acknowledging its diversity<sup>18</sup>. Finally, one might ask: should *malḥūn* be understood as a single, unified genre, or should we rather speak of *malḥūns* in the plural – each national variety standing as a distinct poetic form in its own right?

<sup>16</sup> "وهكذا فإن القول الملحون هو القول البليغ الواصل المقنع" (Suhūm 1993:231).

<sup>17</sup> We find similar interpretations in classical dictionaries:

- قال ابن بري وغيره: للحن ستة معان: "الخطأ في الإعراب، واللغة، والغناء، والفطنة، والتعريض والمعنى (Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān* 4014).

- اللحن: من الأصوات المصوغة الموضوعة، ج: ألحان ولحون، ولحن في قراءته: طرب فيها، واللغة والخطأ في القراءة، كاللحن واللحانة واللحانية واللحن، محرّكة. لحن، كجعل، فهو لحن ولحان ولحانة ولحنة: كثيره. ولحنه خطأ. واللحنة: من يلحن. وكهزمة: من يلحن الناس كثيرا. ولحن له: قال له قولا يفهمه عنه ويخفى عن غيره، و- إليه مال. وألحنه القول: أفهمه إياه فلحنه، كسمعه وجعله: فهمه. واللاحن: العالم بعواقب الكلام. ولحن، كفرح: فطن لحجته وانتبه. ولاحنهم: فاطنهم. (وفي لحن القول). (محمد: 30): في فحواه ومعناه (al-Firūzābādī, *Muḥīṭ* 1464).

<sup>18</sup> I acknowledge that this view could easily be challenged in the future, especially if further research is conducted on *malḥūn* across different parts of the Maghreb.

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