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### **Antiquity and Embassies in Late-Ottoman Arabic**

My paper examines Arab writers' techniques of adapting Hellenic cultural artifacts for the purposes of forming a cosmopolitan modern literature. I contend that Levantine poets and translators began to see ancient languages as the avenues by which they could conduct a form of literary diplomacy. During the 1880s-90s, Sulayman al-Bustani translated the *Iliad* to "edify the nation" of Arab Ottoman subjects. In a 1904 letter congratulating al-Bustani on publishing his *Iliad*, the Greek ambassador to Egypt framed the project as a political achievement for Arabs on the world scene. A diplomat himself under the Sultan, al-Bustani became a cause célèbre in Egypt and throughout Greek-speaking Ottoman communities for expanding the reach of the venerated epic. Poet-playwright Khalil Mutran offers a crucial counter-argument, my study finds. In the aftermath of al-Bustani's seminal literary experiment, Mutran mapped out a larger cultural campaign from Hellenism. For Mutran the true value of this *Iliad* lay in the extraordinary mix of "high" and "middling" Arabic forms that al-Bustani had employed in his book. Mutran saw in it a blueprint, not for learning from Homer but for modernizing Arabic literary life. Al-Bustani's willingness to mix the *qasida* with lyrical, less prestigious forms upset the existing order of Arabic poetry enforced by "conservative cliques" of writers. I conclude my study by exploring Mutran's 1924 Beirut performance of his own literary crossing-over. His experimental poem of near-epic length, on Nero, asked the audience to consider tyranny beyond its political definition. Dogmatic literary *forms* were the current Nero, he insinuated. Al-Bustani's gesture toward Ancient Greek, and Mutran's Arabic composition set in "the Rome that Nero burned," foresaw a literary community of bourgeois, multilingual poets replacing the *qasida* with short stanzas and Free Verse. Such aspirations for Arabic poetry prized the *demos* of representative democracy but retained the exclusive, elite nature of twentieth-century diplomatic bodies.