

Julian Millie

Bidasari

Jewel of Malay Muslim culture

BIDASARI

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edited by

JULIAN MILLIE

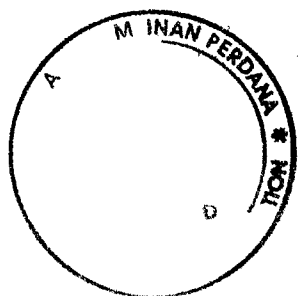


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Introduction

A poem is a formal structure in which many elements operate at the same time. In analysis, each element must be constructed separately. By nature, analysis is plodding at best. Were an aeronautical engineer to analyse the flight of a gull, for example, he would find himself involved in a great deal of crabbed detail. No one, however, would be tempted to believe that the analysis tried to take the place of the gull, or that it damaged the gull in any way.

Stephen Spender¹

Among older literary works written in the Malay language, very few have lived a life as expansive and varied as the work this book is dedicated to. Since it was created in an unknown location, the poem of *Bidasari* has lived its life vicariously through the labours and experiences of countless listeners, singers and actors in Malay lands, including theatrical companies of West Sumatra and South Kalimantan, Amir Hamzah, the producers of the 1965 film 'Bidasari', and the Maranao people of Mindanao Island. It has stimulated scholarly endeavour from Muhammad Cing Sa'idullah, Raden Rio Rekso Di Poero, Dr Wolter Robert van Hoëvell, H.C. Klinkert, Dr P.P. Roorda van Eysinga, Tuti Munawar, Jamilah Haji Ahmad, Ester Vallado Daroy, Chauncey Starkweather, Vladimir Braginsky, and now myself.

How can we explain why all the above were attracted to the work? The tasks I have set myself are to reveal its powers of attraction in the transliteration and translation of the Malay poem, and to describe and interpret the way the text expresses them in the second part of this book.

The *Syair Bidasari* is an outstanding example of the genre known to scholars as 'romantic *syair*', a genre that achieved considerable popularity in Malay society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The authors and scribes engaged in producing these works invariably created an imaginary royal elite; they differentiate this elite from common people not so much by

¹ The source of this excerpt is the Australian literary journal *Meanjin* 83 xix-4:458, 1960. The journal gives no source for the quote.

attributing great deeds or piety to them as by the beauty of their speech; in the *Syair Bidasari*, beauty of speech is a surer sign of innate quality than one's deeds. The authors then subject these nobles to various trials, during which their aristocratic bearing is disturbed, and common people are able to laugh at and make fun of their 'betters'. But this does not mean these writers were revolutionaries, far from it. They were very concerned about the decline in traditional values and the neglect – visible everywhere around them – of the example set by the Prophet Muhammad. And so, we see that for the elites of the romantic syair, fidelity to the traditional values of their class was more important than self-interest. In contrast, the writers felt the times in which they lived to be tainted by the necessities of routine and ordinariness. But they ensured that these kinds of mundane constraints did not impose restrictions on the erotic lives of these elites, or at least of the males among them; the poem's language and narrative contrivances are rich in desire, yearning and lovemaking.

The story of Bidasari was known widely throughout Southeast Asia. It was known as far west as the Minangkabau region of Indonesia, where Ch.E.P. van Kerckhoff noted that it was one of eight syair adapted for musical and theatrical performance in Padang (Van Kerckhoff 1886:305), and as far east as the island of Mindanao, from where Ester Vallado Daroy obtained the source text for her translation into English from the Maranao language.²

The work was featured among the repertoire of the *Mendu* theatre (Skeat 1900:520; Chambert-Loir 1987:5-6). More recently, a feature film based on the work starring Jins Shamsuddin and Sarimah was made in Malaysia in 1965 (Amin and Wahba 1998:92).

With the exception of a manuscript written in Makassarese, all surviving manuscripts of the work are written in verse. It is possible, however, that a story of Bidasari existed in forms other than verse, such as the rhymeless, oral, storytelling form, or in the form of the prose *hikayat*. These possibilities are raised in the first stanza of the poem, and also by Dr J. Leyden, who travelled through the Malay region in 1807 and wrote the following:

There is also one class of stories which the learned *Malays* term *Susupún*, I imagine from an ancient dynasty of *Javanese* princes to whom they relate [...] The *Hikaiat Sri Rama* is reckoned a *Susupun* story, as are the *Kusoma Indra* or history of INDRA, the *Balinta Sena*, the *Sah Kóbut*, or history of the war with the Apes, the *Rajah úlar Ninggawong*, the *Hikaiat Bida Sari*, the *Hikaiat Raja Pikermadi* or VICRAMADITYA CHERITRA, the *Hikaiat Derma RAJAH*, and the *Hikaiat Kalil o Damna* or Malay version of the *Kalil a Dumna*. (Leyden 1811:177-8.)

² Daroy 1980. The Maranao people, a Muslim minority of the Philippines, reside on the island of Mindanao.

A number of manuscripts of the work, including the manuscript selected as the object of this research,³ were produced during the 1820s in the office of the General Secretariat in Batavia. From the sparse reference material available concerning the activities of the office, it is evident that the origins of the original manuscript(s) upon which these General Secretariat copies were based cannot be stated with accuracy. Voorhoeve has described how works were procured for the purposes of duplication at this office (Voorhoeve 1964). One method was to send delegates to obtain manuscripts from Malay speaking areas such as Riau and Lingga, Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan (Voorhoeve 1964:258). A further example of the way source materials were obtained was the transfer to the General Secretariat of manuscripts confiscated from the sultan of Palembang after his defeat by the Dutch (Voorhoeve 1964:259; Teuku Iskandar 1986). Considering this, a geographically specific source for the work cannot be identified.

Teuku Iskandar (1995:476) has ventured the proposition, mainly for lexical reasons, that the *Syair Bidasari* originated from Palembang. Van Hoëvell (1843: xxiii-xxiv) suggests the poem is an original Malay work, and that the presence of many Javanese words indicates Palembang as a possible place of origin. I regret that I cannot yet add to the statements of these two gentlemen, at least as far as identifying a geographically specific source is concerned. Nevertheless, in Chapter III I propose some ideas concerning the position of this manuscript against the general background of Malay text culture.

As far as the date of the creation of the poem is concerned, not much assistance is derived from the manuscripts themselves. As stated above, the earliest manuscript is dated 1814, and the earliest mention of the title is from 1807 (Leyden 1811:177-8), so all that can safely be concluded is that the work was in circulation before that time. A. Teeuw was faced with a similar paucity of information when postulating dates for the *Syair Ken Tambuhan*. The earliest manuscript of that work is dated 1791 (Teeuw 1966a:232), and he thought it possible that the work was composed no earlier than 1650 (Teeuw 1966a:xxxiii).

The Malay syair

There is no need to explore in these pages the history of the formal structure known as the *syair*, for this has already been done elsewhere. Among the major contributions to the debate concerning the origin of the Malay *syair* are

³ Appendix A contains a discussion of existing materials relating to the *Syair Bidasari*, along with a justification of the selection of Codex Orientalis 1964 of Leiden University Library as the source manuscript for the text contained in this book.

those of A. Teeuw (1966b), Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas (1968), P. Voorhoeve (1968), Amin Sweeney (1971), Harun Mat Piah (1989:223-31), and Vladimir I. Braginsky (1991). The only aspect of this history I will draw attention to at this early stage is the immense popularity of the syair until relatively recent times. C.W. Watson (1971:420-1) has discussed the popularity of syair written in the language of *Melayu rendah* (colloquial Malay) from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. These publications included works of fiction, along with works concerning contemporary historical events. Ian Proudfoot (1993:29) writes, 'syair were undoubtedly the most popular form of literature in the nineteenth century. So popular was this genre that works of prose were versified to supply the easy reading for which the public clamored.' Even dream-books were published in syair form in order to broaden the accessibility of the public to these popular creations (Overbeck 1929). Behind this warm public reception of the syair lay a custom that shall frequently be referred to in this book, namely that of reading, chanting, or singing from a written text to gathered listeners.

The *Syair Bidasari* is commonly referred to as an example of the genre known as 'romantic syair'. The designation is apt if we consider the meaning of the term 'romantic' in European scholarship, which M.H. Abrams (1999: 34-5) defined as:

a type of narrative that developed in twelfth-century France, spread to the literatures of other countries, and displaced the earlier epic and heroic forms [...] The romance is distinguished from the epic in that it does not represent a heroic age of tribal wars, but a courtly and chivalric age, often one of highly developed manners and civility. Its standard plot is that of a quest undertaken by a single knight in order to gain a lady's favour; frequently its central interest is courtly love, together with tournaments fought and dragons and monsters slain for the damsel's sake; it stresses the chivalric ideals of courage, loyalty, honor, mercifulness to an opponent, and elaborate manners; and it delights in wonders and marvels.

It would be of great benefit if sufficient research were available to enable us to identify the salient characteristics of the romantic syair genre. This is not possible at this time. Firstly, the amount of research already completed that would be of assistance in this endeavour is very small. Secondly, the volume of material that could potentially be included in this classification is of great internal variety; the rich diversity of texts discussed under the rubric of *syair romantis* in Braginsky's encyclopaedic work, for example, indicates the great effort of research that would need to be expended before progress could be made in this task (Braginsky 1998:252-3, 373-4).

The formal features of the syair are amply described in the sources mentioned above. But for those unable to access those, I will reproduce here Raja Ali Haji's instructions to those wishing to write a syair and *pantun* in

the Malay language, which he penned in 1858. This writer was a poet and scholar from the region of Riau. This short treatise is useful, for it indicates some of the conventions the author of Cod. Or. 1964 would have paid consideration to in the composing process.

Rules of syair versification by Raja Ali Haji

‘These are the rules for composing Malay syair. All of you who wish to compose Malay syair or pantun must first become familiar with the rules of the metre, rhyme and with defects in these, for any endeavour undertaken without first studying from those who have already mastered it will be prone to errors and defects. Because of this, I have composed these rules to serve as a guide for anybody who wishes to compose Malay syair. To begin with, a perfect Malay syair involves three matters. Firstly, correct metre; secondly, correct rhyming; thirdly, it must not be flawed by virtue of repetitions or irregularities. I have elaborated upon these in three sections below.

The first section deals with the syair metre. Be aware that a verse of a Malay syair is complete when it has four lines (*mistrâ*), which people liken to the four panels of a door.⁴ Now each line is accented (*ditimbang*) four times with four *kalimah*, which means four words. Each one of the words is described by people as the ‘angles’ (*siku-siku*). It is understood that these words can be nouns, verbs or function words. Occasionally, however, a function word is joined with another utterance as if they were one word. The result is that the four lines comprise sixteen words. Here is an example:

dengarkan tuan suatu rencana / dikarang fakir dagang yang hina
barangkali ada yang kurang kena / tuan betulkan jadi sempurna

The second section deals with rhyme. To begin with, rhyme is the letter that falls at the end of each line, and there are two categories. The first is the more beautiful; the second slightly less so. The more beautiful one has uniformity occurring before the end of the line, for example as follows:

⁴ The term *mistrâ* (Arabic for the leaf, or panel of a door) is used by Raja Ali Haji for ‘line’. The metaphor originates in Arabic prosody. In Arabic verse, one line consists of two clearly distinct halves, the second following the first horizontally. Because one half lies on the reader’s left, and the other on her right, a whole line is likened to a door consisting of two door panels which meet in the middle, their hinges at opposite sides. The Malay text in this book is composed of stanzas with lines arranged underneath the preceding one. In Malay syair written in Arab/Malay script, however, such as those written by Raja Ali Haji, the first line of a stanza is followed by the second on the horizontal plane, and the third by the fourth also on the horizontal plane. Hence, the ‘leaves of a door’ metaphor is applicable to Malay syair written in Malay/Arabic script.

dengarkan encik dengarkan tuan / dengarkan saudara muda bangsawan
nafsu dan hawa hendaklah lawan / supaya jangan kita tertawan

The second, which is slightly less beautiful but still correct in its rhyme, is like this:

ayuhai saudaraku yang pilihan / menuntut ilmu janganlah segan
jika tiada ilmu di badan / seperti binatang di dalam hutan

The third section deals with *syair* that are flawed. To begin with, the flaws in *syair* comprise three categories. Firstly, there are those where the rhyme is flawed XXX [...] but the meaning and intention cannot be discerned. As for those flawed with regard to their metrical composition, this is an example:

hai sahabatku yang berbudi lagi berakal / janganlah kamu lalai dan jahat dengan nakal
hendaklah kamu berusaha serta rajin dengan tawakal / ketika mudamu apalah patut bekerja mencari bekal

If the metre of the above example were to be corrected and both its meaning and intention could be comprehended, this is how the example would sound:

hai sahabatku yang berakal / janganlah kamu lalai dan nakal
hendaklah kamu rajin tawaka / ketika mudamu mencari bekal

As for those flawed because of repetition which does not emphasize the meaning, here is an example:

ayuhai encik ayuhai tuan / menuntut ilmu apalah tuan
carilah sahabat carilah kawan / menuntut bersama sertamu tuan

The repetition of *ayuhai* and *carilah* within the four lines does not flaw them, but the repetition of *tuan* at the end of the lines does.

As for those that are flawed because of their meaning and not their rhyme, that is to say that the content in the four lines differs so that the meaning cannot be comprehended, here is an example:

dengarkan tuan suatu peri / di dalam laut hiu dan pari
mengenangkan untung nasibnya diri / mukanya manis berseri berseri

[Listen oh sir, to a story. / In the sea there are sharks and rays.
Reflecting on his fate, / his face glowed sweetly.]

The metre of the *pantun* resembles that of the *syair*. There are those with

⁵ The critical apparatus gives the information that the text is incomplete at this point (Van der Putten and Al Azhar 1995:267).

proper rhyming, and those which have small imperfections not noticeable when the poem is read out loud, but which are noticeable when in written form. Here is an example of a beautiful pantun:

cincin bandu permata sailan / jatuh ke padang pati temu
jika rindu pandangan bulan / jatuhlah pandang di sana bertemu

As for one slightly less beautiful, here is an example in which the end of the lines does not precisely rhyme:

rumah besar tengku di hulu / atapnya batu sisik tenggiling
sayitan siapa datang mengaru / nasi ditelan serasa lilin

Those are the rules of *syair* and *pantun* verse.' (Van der Putten and Al Azhar 1995:119-21.)

Methodology and plan of this book

The book contains two distinct halves. Part One is the Malay text of the *Syair Bidasari* (Cod. Or. 1964), transliterated without alteration into Roman script, accompanied by an English translation of this text with minor additions. Part Two consists of six chapters of discussion and analysis. The Appendix describes the previous literature concerning the *Syair Bidasari*, along with the reasons for selecting Codex Orientalis 1964 as the source text for this book. The remainder of this introduction describes the contents of Part Two.

The Glossary at the end of this book can be referred to for explanations of terms, both Malay and English, used in Part Two of the book. Only one term needs to be explained in this introduction, namely *pengarang*. This Malay term refers to a person who organizes or arranges something. Hence, it is aptly used to describe the composer of an original work, but can equally be used to refer to an arranger of existing textual materials. It can be assumed that the *Syair Bidasari* was once composed as an 'original work'. Yet the nature of the Malay composing tradition was such that this compositional process involved the use of much material already appearing in similar works, or in works stored and reproduced by oral specialists. Furthermore, scribes responsible for producing subsequent copies of the work were not prevented from adding further material to the text, or amending it (Voorhoeve 1964). Clearly, many individuals were involved in the creation of the text contained in Codex Orientalis 1964. The term is therefore used in this book to refer not to a single, unknown author, but to all those who contributed to the composition of the manuscript in the ways just described.

Nowadays, the *Syair Bidasari* exists in the forms of the manuscript and the book, and it was with one such book (Van Hoëvell's edition) that I com-

menced the research leading to the production of this volume, by sitting down to read, in silence, without any human company.

R.J. Wilkinson, the creator of one of the most useful dictionaries for reading Malay texts, had done the same thing during the early twentieth century, and made the following comment about the book: 'When I read Van Hoëvell's magnificent edition of the *Shair Bidasari*, with his translation and notes, I could not help viewing it as a dull stone in a magnificent setting. It seemed a pity that the talent and power there displayed had not been devoted to a worthier literature' (cited in Koster and Maier 1982:11).

I am in full agreement with Wilkinson's praise of Van Hoëvell's workmanship, but wish to put a correction on the record; the *Syair Bidasari* is not a dull stone. In fact, it is a brilliant jewel. What could the reason have been, then, for Wilkinson's dissatisfaction? The problem lay, most probably, in the process of reading undertaken by Wilkinson. He consumed the published product in the method familiar to readers accustomed to the ways of print culture, that is, by visual consumption, most probably in silence. The potential of the *Syair Bidasari*, however, and the strategies employed by its author in its creation, are not uncovered in this reading process. Its potential and strategies were connected to differing customs for consumption of texts, customs in which texts were enjoyed in the activity of reciting, performing and listening.

This being the case, it has been a high priority in these chapters to steer the mode of interpretation away from the consumption habits I am most comfortable with (the silent reading typical of print culture), and address the text's potential in the light of reciting, listening and performance.

This priority is not easily put into effect, however, for the reason that the *Syair Bidasari* is no longer performed or listened to, and furthermore, there appear to be very few descriptions of such performances on record. Nevertheless, there are a number of intertexts available which can be used as keys to unlocking the potential of the text. The two that I have made prominent use of in this book are the available literature concerning the poetic form of the pantun, and scholarly writings concerning Malay theatre, in particular Malay theatre which incorporates textual materials in syair verse. The work of Robert Dumas (2000) was a revelation, for it describes how a text very similar to the *Syair Bidasari* is utilized in the medium of the Malay theatre, and therefore has been used in this book to explore a number of facets of the manuscript under observation here.

The adoption of the pantun as an intertext is easily justified, for the reason that very many pantun stanzas appear in this text. In fact, the manuscript I have chosen for this book is unusual for the large amount of pantun found in it.

In relation to the presence of the *Syair Bidasari* in the Malay theatre, we have the article of Ch.E.P. van Kerckhoff, who in 1886 described his observa-

tions of a theatrical enterprise in West Sumatra, named Taman Penglipur Lara (Garden of the Soothing of Woes). The repertoire of this company featured the 'best-known and most loved poems of the Malays', one of which was the *Syair Bidasari* (Van Kerckhoff 1886:305). His description includes the following:

The text of the *syair* is always in rhyme. There is a certain cadence in it, which although monotonous in the long run, sounds nevertheless lovely. They make use of this to sing the words in diverse ways. The Malay knows a number of melodies (*lagu*), among which some make a pleasant impression even to European ears. For instance, to mention a few names, *lagu satu*, *lagu dua*, *lagu Parsi*, *lagu ninsun*, *lagu Perak*, *lagu dansu* etc. The words of the poem are sung to the melody of these songs, with musical accompaniment, with a few alterations for the sake of the metre and rhyme. The music usually consists of a pair of violins, a *kecapi* (a sort of four stringed lute), a pair of *rebana* (tambourines), and a drum with cymbals. Western music, also, such as a march or even dance music, is played now and then, between the Malay music. (Van Kerckhoff 1886:309.)

Bidasari is also mentioned as forming part of the repertoire of the *Mendur* theatre in Kalimantan (Skeat 1900:520).

References to the theatrical performance of works other than the *Syair Bidasari* confirm the relevance of the *syair* to the Malay theatre. Performance of the romantic *syair* known as *Syair Abdul Muluk* in a number of locations in South Sumatra has been described by Nafron Hasjim (1984) and subject to detailed description and analysis by Dumas (2000). Dumas' book is the most detailed of the sources mentioned above, and so will be used extensively in Part Two of this book. The players of the companies observed by him recited lines of dialogue from the Malay *Syair Abdul Muluk* or *Syair Siti Zubaidah*. They were required to learn their lines by heart (Dumas 2000:136, 156). Furthermore, the companies used lithographs or handwritten notebooks as sources for these lines (Dumas 2000:137, 195). Turning to South Kalimantan, we note the statements of Abbas Ikhlas Budi Prayogo, who states that the *wayang orang* (human puppet theatre) of that location adapts stories from the 'kitab-kitab *syair Melayu Banjar*' (Banjar Malay *syair* books; Abbas Ikhlas Budi Prayogo 1996:16).

After studying Cod. Or. 1964 in the light of the sources described in the previous paragraphs, I am convinced that reading the Malay theatre, *syair* and *pantun* as closely related phenomena enables each of these three to be understood individually in its own right. The data concerning theatre, and in particular the distinction between the text delivered in *syair* and that in *pantun*, for example, is of great value in understanding the way *pantun* function in the written *syair* manuscript. Similarly, knowledge of the range of characters appearing in the Malay theatre (clown, king, merchant and so on) and the nature of their interaction is of great assistance in appreciating the

interaction between characters of the Malay *syair*. For this reason, these two intertexts are of great value to the study ventured in Part Two of this book.⁶

Furthermore, I encourage the reader of this book to maintain an awareness, while reading the Malay text and translation, of the possibility that the text may at any point be evoking a performance tradition or cultural practice external to the manuscript. A prominent example is my contention that its formal features are to a great extent determined by the priority of evoking and enabling the performance of traditional art forms such as theatre and *pantun*. In this sense, some of the most important knowledge for appreciating this manuscript is not contained in it, but must be recalled to the written object from the available sources about Malay oral and performance arts.

The *pantun* is used as the key for the initial approach to the work in Chapter I, as this is the most obvious performance intertext evident in the manuscript. Descriptions of the Malay theatre suggest that although the wording of the *pantun* is fixed in the manuscript, in performance, the performer of the *pantun* would not be bound by the wording found in the manuscript, and instead would improvise without recourse to written sources. It follows that this would be the case for our *syair* as well. Furthermore, the tradition of evoking *pantun* in the manuscript determines some of its formal features and textual conventions. For the benefit of readers wishing to appreciate the differing style of *pantun* and *syair*, I suggest an alternative reading strategy to that end. Chapter II is similar, except that the intertextual reference is to the Malay theatre.

The third chapter addresses the connection between the context of aural consumption and the composition of the text, viewed from the perspective of its narrative. Using Sweeney (1980, 1987) as a starting point, I argue that the *pengarang* of Cod. Or. 1964 gave very high priority in the composing process to replicating schemata that were within the domain of the oral specialist, and that are evident in a number of transcriptions of oral texts from Sumatra. This

⁶ There is a qualification to be made concerning the use of these intertexts to read the *Syair Bidasari*, relating to the fact that Malay *syair* were almost certainly performed in a wide variety of styles throughout the Malay world. The recital of the *Syair Ken Tambuhan* described by G.L. Koster (1997), for example, differs greatly from the models I have followed in this book, with the result that my analysis may highlight textual conventions not evident in that particular style of performance. Nevertheless, I have focused strongly on the models of theatre and *pantun* in this analysis for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is certain that the *Syair Bidasari* was a theatrical vehicle. Secondly, there exists a striking correlation between the descriptions of Van Kerckhoff and Dumas and the conventions evident in Cod. Or. 1964. Thirdly, intertexts capable of rendering assistance in interpreting Malay *syair* are not common, especially concerning the manner of their performance, so it is desirable to make use of those few available. Fourthly, it is a mistake to consider that a text such as the one contained in Cod. Or. 1964 belongs to one particular style of performance or delivery, or that one form of creative expression is the most correct. Rather, such texts can find expression in diverse cultural practices, depending on locally specific conditions.

line of approach is continued in Chapter IV. Drawing on Koster's discussion of the *Syair Ken Tambuhan* (Koster 1997) and also on Dumas (2000), a unity of action is revealed in that plot structure. The conclusion of my research in this connection is that the plot is organized in order to subvert, or 'play games' with established norms and hierarchies.

Although I have argued in favour of reading Cod. Or. 1964 alongside the corpus of oral transcriptions with which it bears great resemblance, it is important to bear in mind that the manuscript was composed in a process in which the *pengarang* took advantage of the facility offered by writing. This distinction in the composing process is the subject of Chapter V. This facility enabled him to draw on diverse texts, including written genres of various kinds, in the process of composition. The result is that the manuscript has a very diverse internal texture; a formal letter written with all the stylistic flourishes of that genre appears, as does a *sufi* metaphor for the lovemaking of the king and Bidasari. Furthermore, stylized runs from the oral tradition can be adapted to the specific needs of the written narrative, in contrast to the way they appear in transcriptions of oral texts.

Cod. Or. 1964 is not a text that loudly proclaims its didactic purpose; much of its instructional value is implicit. Nevertheless, in some instances, blatantly didactic messages, especially concerning female conduct, are put in the mouths of its characters, usually males. These messages derive coherence when observed against the background of a textual system in which all texts were, to varying degrees, exemplary of what Koster describes as 'Malayness'. The two concepts of Malayness discussed in Chapter VI are, firstly, the ideology of *kodrat Allah* (God's almighty power), and its related concept known variously as *hukum pahala* (the law of reward), *balasan* (compensation / retribution), or *hukum karma* (the law of Karma), and secondly the heavy emphasis on the importance of adherence by females to typical societal roles. This last notion is partly expressed through the device of the archetype of the 'evil queen', which is created in a textual strategy widely found in the romantic syair.

PART ONE

Bidasari

Jewel of Malay Muslim culture

The sly wit and silky eroticism of the verse genre known as romantic *syair* were staple dishes on the Southeast Asian cultural menu, especially in the Malay, Islamic regional centres. Yet very few examples are available in translation for the many readers interested in the genre, and attempts by academics to account for their powers of attraction are even rarer. This book is the author's effort to convey the seductive qualities of the sexiest of the romantic *syair*, the 'Poem of Bidasari'.

Few Malay works have been loved and disseminated to the extent the *Syair Bidasari* has. It was translated in other languages of the region like Makassarese and Maranao and adapted for the Malay theatre and cinema.

Three tasks are attempted in the book: a transliteration into Roman characters of one of the surviving Malay manuscripts of the poem, a translation of that manuscript into English, and an inquiry into the poem's virtues. The intertexts drawn upon in the analysis reveal the author's conviction that understanding of traditions of *kesenian rakyat* (popular arts) such as *pantun* and the Malay theatre provides the background that allows the text to signify most powerfully.

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