CLASSICAL POETRY PARODIED
THE CASE OF ḤUSAYN ŠAFĪQ AL-MIṢRĪ (1882-1948)

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"After his passing away[1] the Egyptian journalist and poet Ḥusayn Šafīq al-Miṣrī was elegized by only a very few of his friends, in spite of the fact that his death caused grief to the hearts of millions of people, who found themselves cut off from his literary and humorous masterpieces. With his death the shadow of comic literature dwindled and the Arabic language became henceforth deprived of the most brilliant comic style."

These are the opening words of the book *Abū Nuwās al-Ǧadīd* ("The new Abū Nuwās"), which bears the subtitle *Muḫtārāt min ḫayr mā katab amīr al-fukāha* ("Selection of the best writings by the Prince of Humour"), edited by Muḥammad Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn and Abū Buṭayna[2]. The book contains no year of publication, but probably appeared soon after Ḥusayn Šafīq's death[3].

Some biographical details are given in Abū Buṭayna's introduction, according to which Ḥusayn Šafīq was born in Cairo in 1882 of Turkish parents. His father, Muḥammad Efendi Nūr, was the owner of several

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[1] On the 30th of September 1948.

[2] Abū Buṭayna is the penname of Muḥammad ʿAbdalmunʿim (b. 1905). Brockelmann (*Geschichte der arabischen Literatur, Suppl.* III, p. 178) mentions a collection of *zaǧal* poems by his hand published in 1930. In 1932 he founded the Union of *Zaǧal* Poets (*Rābiṭat az-Zaǧǧālīn*). His ninth volume of *zaǧal* poems was published in Cairo in 1974. His book *az-Zaǧal al-ʿarabī, māḍīhi wa-ḥāḍiruhu wa-mustaqbaluhu* (Cairo 1973, Kitāb al-Hilāl No. 270) contains some information on a controversy between Ḥusayn Šafīq al-Miṣrī and Bayram at-Tūnisī. Under the leadership of Abū Buṭayna the Union of *Zaǧal* Poets of Cairo and the Society of Popular Poets (*Ǧamʿiyyat Udabāʾ aš-Šaʿb*) of Alexandria organised the General Conference of *Zaǧal* Poets in the *Dār al-Udabāʾ* in Cairo on 1 March 1977.

[3] The book was printed by Maṭbaʿat Aḥmad Muḫaymar, Š. Fārūq.

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houses and landed property, but his extravagance in living was responsible for the loss of the greater part of his wealth. The recurrence of the disastrous results of an extravagant lifestyle as a theme in Ḥusayn Šafīq's verse seems to echo his father's experiences.

On account of an ill-fated treatment of an eye disease, Ḥusayn Šafīq almost lost his power of vision and was therefore unable to complete his primary education. Yet he did have access to classical Arabic literature, especially Arabic poetry, for which he developed a devoted passion.

He was later engaged as a journalist, writing for several papers and magazines, at some stages acting as an editor as well; he also wrote for the theatre[4].

He appears to have led a life of roaring frivolity for several years, becoming more tranquil by the time he was forty. His non-Arabic origin, his bent for humour, wit, irony and mockery, and his addiction to drink and worldly pleasures (*laḏḏāt*) represent many of the characteristics that are usually ascribed to al-Ḥasan ibn Hāni' Abū Nuwās and therefore, in the view of Abū Buṭayna in his Introduction, fully justify his nickname "the new Abū Nuwās". The honorific title "Prince of Humour" (*Amīr al-Fukāha*) is bestowed on him on account of some fifty pieces of comic verse which are at the centre of interest in this article.

These compositions constitute a body of criticism of all kinds of social abuses that were prevalent in Egypt in the 1930s. The author uses a subtle medium to express his criticism: rather than posing as a lampoonist or satirist and using opprobrious language, he writes what, at first sight and to all intents and purposes, looks like a classical poem, creating – by the use of all kinds of formal features of classical poetry

[4] Ḥusayn Šafīq's journalistic activities and his prose work are outside the scope of this article. His *Ḥawādiṯ wa-ārā' al-ḥāǧǧ Darwīš wa-Umm Ismā'īl* in Egyptian colloquial Arabic, published in Cairo 1929 and mentioned by Brockelmann (*GAL S* III, p. 237), acquired further publicity after its republication (with transcription in Roman letters) by Karl-G. Prasse, Copenhagen 1980.

– a lofty atmosphere that is diametrically opposed to that of washing one's dirty linen in public.

That it is not a regular classical poem becomes clear soon enough, but still the initial tone is such that the Arabic listener immediately feels in touch with his glorious past. Before long, however, the great expectations that are thereby created are destroyed as it appears that the theme of the poem is the dirty misery of everyday life, nothing to be proud of.

Ḥusayn Šafīq's social criticism is aimed at the privileged position of the rich in society, whose wealth is not based on merit. Often they have come by it through inheritance rather than work. They squander it and will, as a result, get into problems. No use for the needy to count upon them. They tyrannize their servants and are addicted to alcohol and frivolities; they never fast in Ramadan, but instead eat more. They shield each other in a society full of nepotism.

By contrast, the poor have nothing to expect from a government ruled by the rich. They have to live in misery, in houses without electricity, full of dirt and often in a state of decay, in town quarters where five minutes of rain cause a complete dislocation of the entire infrastructure. It would even seem that there is little hope for improvement for the poor man's condition, as in this society the only thing that counts is money, even in love, the other important theme of Ḥusayn Šafīq's poetry. Love is often pictured as a torment, especially as there operates a "no money no love"-law in Ḥusayn Šafīq's Egypt. The rich man's daughter cannot marry the man of her heart.

Love is, on the whole, a tricky business. For a man, that is. He is readily trapped by a fickle woman. When he thinks she is still young, it turns out that she dyes her hair and that she is even older than her lover's mother. Or, when the lover thinks his beloved is a virgin, there is a Leporello-like critic who reveals the entire catalogue of her former lovers. And if ill luck has it that he becomes united with her in matrimony, he will find her more exacting every day. She spends her housekeeping money at the jeweller's shop and wants to be taken to the

theatre, in indecent clothing even. And when her husband tries to keep her under control, she threatens to call out her male relatives.

These are the sad conditions pictured, and at the same time relativized, in poems of an average of sixteen lines, in one of the classical metres, monorhyme, full *iʿrāb* and with several stylistic devices characteristic of classical poetry.

For example, there are many instances of poetically vague expressions, such as when undefined instead of defined nouns are used:

> "A man deserves honour on account of his work, not on account of the wealth of a mother deceased or the wealth of a father": *wa-l-marʾu bi-š-šuġli ahlun li-l-karāmati lā / bi-māli ummin tawaffat aw bi-māli abi* (45/2)[5].

This line also shows a characteristic syntax. In comparison with prose, Arabic poetry enjoys a greater syntactical liberty which allows the separation of elements that in prose would go together[6], the transposition of words from their usual order (*hyperbaton*) and periphrastic constructions. These features also abound in Ḥusayn Šafīq's verse. To quote some examples:

> "In Nejd is an electricity company ...": *naǧdun bihā li-n-nūri kumbāniyyatun* (53/1)
>
> "My heart is a perfectly made water-pipe and the best tobacco to fill it is your delight": *wa-ṣ-ṣadru minnī šīšatun matqūnatun / wa-riḍāki fīhā aḥsanu t-tumbāki* (50/3)

Temporal clauses introduced by *iḏā* followed by a noun are rare in prose but relatively common in poetry[7]. Characteristically, they also occur in Ḥusayn Šafīq's work, e.g.:

> "She takes asafetida which, when a dog smells it, will produce a headache in the dog, so that it will start barking": *wa-taʾkulu*

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[5] The figure 45/2 refers to the second line of the poem starting on page 45 of *Abū Nuwās al-Ǧadīd*.

[6] This is the phenomenon called "*Sperrung*" by Alfred Bloch in his *Vers und Sprache im Altarabischen, Metrische und Syntaktische Untersuchungen*, Basel 1946, p. 114ff.

[7] Bloch, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

ḥintītan iḏā l-kalbu šammahū / aṣāba ṣ-ṣudāᶜu l-kalba minhu fa-habhabā (60/7)

The following lines, taken from an elegy on the gold Egyptian pound when it was replaced by paper money, show several classical features, e.g. a classical syntax, the use of a *maqṣūr*-form *bukā* instead of the regular *mamdūd*-form *bukā'*, the phrase *yā lahā min*, the use of a periphrastic *ra'ā*, etc.:

"My eye didn't shut, nor his eye, until we heard the roosters' crowing. What a night that was! We only weeped and wailed, lamenting the bygone days of the pound; our tears flow, whenever it comes to mind": *lam taġtamiḍ ᶜaynī wa-lā ᶜaynuhū / ḥattā samiᶜnā mi-d-duyūki ṣ-ṣiyāḥ // fa-yā lahā min laylatin lam yakun / fīhā lanā illā l-bukā wa-n-nuwāḥ // nabkī ᶜalā ᶜahdi l-ǧunayhi lladī / iḏā ḏakarnāhū tarā d-damᶜa sāḥ //* (61/1-3)

The contrast between the classical style and trivial subjects is further accentuated in two ways. On the one hand, by interspersing the classical language with colloquial Egyptian, the poet consciously breaks the rule that poetic diction must be characterized by *faṣāḥa*. On the other hand, he does not limit himself to formulating social criticism in macaronic verse, for each composition is presented as an imitation of an existing classical poem or a follow-up to it. This heightens the natural antithesis of classical and colloquial, of serious literature and farce, and the result is attractive, as both the style of the classical examples and Ḥusayn Šafīq's own themes can now be appreciated within a less severe, more lighthearted perspective.

The fusion of these diverse elements leads to comic results, especially when classical stylistic devices are applied to colloquial expressions, or when the original poem and its imitation are ingeniously brought into connection. Some examples may well serve to illustrate these points.

On one occasion Ḥusayn Šafīq uses an expression which freely translated runs as follows: "I have to cough up the money for them as well". The paronomastic Arabic construction *akuᶜᶜu aṯmānahā fīmā ukaᶜᶜaᶜuhū* (37/7) means literally "I cough up their prices among that which I am made to cough up". The construction reminds us of classical

usage, but it is here applied to the root *ka"a*, which, in this sense, is purely colloquial. But at the same time, the passive voice of the second form is not found in ordinary Egyptian colloquial usage, where it would be replaced by the *it*-form *itka"a'*.

Another paronomastic construction is used when the poet says: "you tuck your money away in the banks": *wa-tadfisu fī l-bunūki l-māla dafsan* (40/11). Of current usage in classical Arabic, this construction is not normally applied to a colloquial word like *dafas*. Another verse starts with the expression "how many a man have we seen", rendered as *kam min fatan šufnāhu* (58/1), where the classical phrase *kam min fatan* is combined with the non-classical verb *šāf*, which, however, receives classical treatment leading to the hybrid *šufnāhu*, which is neither classical nor colloquial.

Very often prosodic requirements lay at the root of the formation of hybrids, as when Ḥusayn Šafīq's words "it is difficult for someone like me to serve a person who is offensive to his servants" are phrased as *wa-ṣa'bun 'alā miṯlī l-ḥadāmatu 'inda man / yakūnu 'alā ḥuddāmihī yatarāḏal* (52/6), where *yatarāḏal* (a form not recorded in Wehr's Dictionary) is but a classicized reflex of the intended colloquial *yitrāzil*.

Proverbs and set expressions are also often adjusted to the special framework in which they are used. "No smoke without fire" becomes *wa-mafīši min ġayri nārin qaṭṭu duḫḫānun* (54/11). The identification of typically Egyptian expressions is not always easy for a non-Egyptian, but Hinds and Badawi's new *Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*[8] proves very useful. Under the word *būz* we find the expression *huwwa mādid būzu šibrēn* (literally: "he has extended his mouth by twice the span of his hand") explained as "he is pouting or sulking", and the phrase *rakbu 'afrīt* as "he is possessed by a demon" or "he is in a bad humour, likely to blow up if provoked". These expressions are used and partly adapted by Ḥusayn Šafīq when he says: "Look at my mouth and you will find it to be two metres long because of my never-ceasing cares, sulky as if

[8] Martin Hinds and El-Said Badawi, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic, Arabic-English*, (Beirut), Librairie du Liban, (1986).

a sickening demon had taken possession of me": *unẓur ilā būzī taǧid ṭūlahū / mitrayni min hammī lladī lā yazāḥ // mukaldimin ka-annanī rākibun / ʿalayya ʿifrītun ṯaqīlu l-mizāḥ* (61/8-9).

References or allusions to the Koran or to Koranic usage can also be found. The line *fa-iḏā š-šuʿūbu taḥāṣamat wa-taḥārabat / baqiya l-ilāhu wa-kullu šay'in fānī* (69/15), for instance, echoes Koran 55/26-27: *kullu man ʿalayhā fānin wa-yabqā waǧhu rabbika ḏū l-ǧalāli wa-l-ikrām*. In another line we read: "Whoever walks into the traps of an old woman, and marries her, that will be a moon without honey!": *wa-man yaqaʿ fī ʿaǧūzin in tazawwaǧahā / fa-ḏālika šahrun ġayru ḏī ʿasali* (33/6). The association with Koranic *qur'ānan ʿarabiyyan ġayra ḏī ʿiwaǧin* (Koran 39/28) and *bi-wādin ġayri ḏī zarʿin* (Koran 14/27) seems intentional.

The relationship between Ḥusayn Šafīq's compositions and their models varies from case to case. Sometimes the analogy appears to be limited to identity of rhyme and metre. In other instances each line of the imitation is closely tied up with lines of the original. In most cases, however, there is a certain relatedness between the opening lines of the two poems, after which Ḥusayn Šafīq, sometimes quite ingeniously, develops his own theme.

In the opening line of one of his elegies, aš-Šarīf ar-Raḍī (970-1016) speaks metaphorically of Abū Isḥāq aṣ-Ṣābi' as a light having gone out[9]. Ḥusayn Šafīq makes this line his point of departure for a tirade against the electricity company, which cut off his electricity because the poet was two days late in paying his monthly bill, a very unjust action on the part of the company as it still had in its possession a three months' guarantee payment!

"The meter has been removed by a company, curse its fathers and grandfathers! So that the electric wires are now more like threads of simple ordinary cotton. Electricity, true, but in my house its

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[9] *a-ʿalimta man ḥamalū ʿalā l-aʿwādi / a-ra'ayta kayfa ḫabā ḍiyā'u n-nādī*, ed. Aḥmad ʿAbbās al-Azharī, Beirut 1307, pp. 294-298. Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm b. Hilāl aṣ-Ṣābi' died in 994. aṯ-Ṯaʿālibī found the elegy so impressive that he included all of its 82 lines in the *Yatīmat ad-dahr* (ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī d-Dīn ʿAbdalḥamīd, vol. II, pp. 306-310.)

brightness has been replaced by blackness! My electricity cut off! That is a slap in the face to me in front of friend and foe alike": *šālat lanā l-kuntūra kumbāniyyatun / malʿūnatu l-ābā'i wa-l-aǧdādi // fa-ġadat sulūku l-kahrabā'i ka-annahā / ḫayṭun min-a l-quṭni l-ʿādī // huwa laktarīkun ġayra anna bayāḍahū / fī baytinā mutabaddilun bi-sawādi // fa-n-nūru munqaṭiʿun wa-ḏālika kasfatun / fī wišši bayna aḥibbatin wa-aʿādī* (41/1-4)

Not all of the original poems that inspired Ḥusayn Šafīq date from early times. A poem by his contemporary Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm (1871-1932) starting with the line *lā talum kaffī iḏā s-sayfu nabā / ṣaḥḥa minnī l-ʿazmu wa-d-dahru abā* ("do not blame my hand if the sword misses! my determination is all right, but Fate refuses")[10] triggers off a complaint about the discomforts of the hot Egyptian weather, in which he explains that the sword was made slippery in his hand by sweat streaming like water: *zaflaṭa s-sayfa bi-kaffī ʿaraqun / sāla ka-l-mā'i iḏā mā sarsabā* (62/1).

Another fine connection between the opening lines of an original poem and its parody is when Ḥusayn Šafīq quotes the 10th-century poet Ibn al-Ḥayyāṭ: *ḥuḏā min ṣabā naǧdin amānan li-qalbihī / fa-qad kāda rayyāhā yaṭīru bi-lubbihī* ("search for a refuge for his heart from the Nejdi eastwind, for its fragrance almost makes him go out of his mind"). In his own opening line Ḥusayn Šafīq pictures the lover as unable to get over the memory of his beloved. The Arabic word *salā* or one of its derivations is very often used when this motif is expressed. In this case, although there is no such word, there is an ingenious allusion to it. This is because in Egyptian Arabic the word *tasāli* (or *musalliyāt*) is used as a collective noun for assorted nuts, chick-peas, melon and sunflower seeds, etc., consumed to kill time. The idea is that if you have any problems, these noshes will help to keep your mind off of them. At public gatherings *tasāli*-vendors will cry out: "*tasāli, libb, kakōla, tasāli, libb*". *Libb* in particular is used for dried sunflower seeds, and these are

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[10] *Dīwān Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm*, ed. Aḥmad Amīn, Aḥmad az-Zayn and Ibrāhīm al-Ibyārī, Cairo 1980², Vol. II, pp. 7-10.

meant when the poet says: *wa-lam yulhihī ʿanhā tiqazqīzu lubbihī* (36/1: "he did not find distraction from her in munching seeds"). The colloquial *libb* is dressed up in *fuṣḥā* clothing and the resulting *lubbihī*, identical in form but of course not in meaning, constitutes the link with the original verse.

In these examples, where the original line is actually quoted, such a relationship is easily understood. But references to other parts of poems also occur, and a knowledge of the original poem is then essential for a correct appreciation of the parody. As an example I wish to refer to al-Aʿšā's *muʿallaqa waddiʿ hurayrata inna r-rakba murtaḥilu / wa-hal tuṭīqu wadāʿan ayyuhā r-raǧulu* ("take your leave of Hurayra; the party of riders is about to leave. But will you, man, be able to bear this farewell?")[11]. Ḥusayn Šafīq continues as follows:

> They took their baggage and all of them went at dawn to a steamer with wheels under it, which runs and lets off steam, which seems to you interlaced clouds: *šālū l-ʿizāla wa-rāḥū kulluhum saḥaran / ilā baǧūrin lahū min taḥtihī ʿaǧalu // yaǧrī wa-yanfuḫu duḫḫānan fa-taḥsibuhū / saḥāʾiban baʿḍuhā bi-l-baʿḍi muttaṣilu* (55/1-2)

The interlaced clouds of the second verse (*saḥāʾiban baʿḍuhā bi-l-baʿḍi muttaṣilu*) echo two lines of the original: *yā man yarā ʿāriḍan qad bittu armuquhū ka-annamā l-barqu fī ḥāfātihī š-šuʿalu // lahū ridāfun waǧawfun mufʿamun ʿamilun / munaṭṭaqun bi-siǧāli l-māʾi muttaṣilu* ("Seest thou there beyond the cloudmass heaped as we gaze, wherein its sides fly the darts of lightning's flickering flame? A mighty backing it has, a middle broad, full of play, and girded round with a belt of buckets charged with a flood"; translation Lyall)[12]. The word *ʿāriḍ* is used for

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[11] *Dīwān*, ed. R. Geyer, London 1928, no. 6 (p. 41-48). Ch. J. Lyall, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems: Namely, the Seven Muʿallaḳāt*, Calcutta 1894, pp. 143-151.

[12] Lines 22 and 23 in Geyer, lines 36 and 37 in Lyall. Lyall's translation in *Festschrift E.G. Browne*, 1922, pp. 283-292. Geyer's translation (in *SBAW* Wien, 192,3/1919 p. 13) runs as follows: "O, wer die Wolkenbank gesehen hätte, die ich nachts beobachtete! Es war, als ob das Aufleuchten an ihren Rändern Feuerbrände wären. Sie hatte Nachzügler und einen aufgeblähten Kern, unaufhörlich blitzend, gegürtet mit Wasserschaffen, unablässig (giessend)".

clouds in the first of these two lines and Ḥusayn Šafīq's rhyme-word *muttaṣilu* is identical with the rhymeword of the second of the two lines.

In a five-line poem by Baššār b. Burd beginning *lam yaṭul laylī wa-lākin lam anam / wa-nafā ʿannī l-karā ṭayfun alamm* ("my night was not long, yet I have not slept; a haunting phantom banished sleep from me"[13]) the physical consequences of Baššār's love for ʿAbda are described as follows: "Beneath my coat there is a wasted body; were you to lean on it, it would collapse": *inna fī burdiya ǧisman nāḥilan / law tawakka'ti ʿalayhi la-nhadam*. In the parody the poet is kept awake not by the memory of his beloved, but by hosts of bedbugs, cockroaches and mosquitoes. The landlord demands prompt payment of the monthly rent, but is unwilling to provide the necessary maintenance of the house in order to prevent these evil circumstances. An extra note of humour is added to Ḥusayn Šafīq's lamentation by his borrowing, and subtle adaptation, of the idea of a collapse: ending his parody he uses the very same rhyme-word *inhadam* of the original: "The landlord is an ignorant miser. Would that his house had collapsed over him": *ṣāḥibu l-bayti šaḥīḥun ǧāhilun / laytahū min fawqihī kāna nhadam* (70/16).

Cases of a more extensive relationship between parodies and their originals can be found in the so-called *Muša'laqāt*, imitations of the famous *Muʿallaqāt*. A discussion of these interesting examples of Egyptian humour is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

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[13] *Dīwān Baššār*, ed. Muḥammad aṭ-Ṭāhir b. ʿĀšūr, IV (Cairo, 1966), p. 166. *Aġānī* III, p. 151 (ed. Dār al-Kutub, 1919). A.F.L. Beeston, *Selections from the Poetry of Baššār*, Cambridge 1977, no. 2.