STREET-ARABS, SATIRE, AND THE STATUS OF POETRY

Geert Jan van Gelder

University of Groningen

Children’s verse in Classical Arabic literature, though not abundant, exists in several forms. Goldziher published an article in 1879 on ‘Jugend- und Strassenpoesie in Kairo’\(^1\), about children’s verse and language in his own days as well as in the time of aš-Širbīnī (11th/17th century). The few pages that he wrote on lullabies and cradle-songs (‘Altarabische Wiegen- und Schlummerlieder’, 1888)\(^2\) were followed up in more recent studies, notably Enno Littmann’s ‘Kinderlieder und Kindersprache im heutigen Ägypten’ (1935)\(^3\), Wiebke Walther’s ‘Altarabische Kindertanzreime’ (1968)\(^4\) and Aḥmad Abū Sa’d, Aḡānī ṭarqiṣ al-ʾatfāl ‘inda l-ʿarab (1974)\(^5\). But there is another sort of poetry for children, or at least enjoyed by them.

There are quite a number of stories where young children, ʂibyān, play a part in the spread of poetry, usually invective or satirical\(^6\). The poet Abū ʿṢamaqmaq (d. c. 190/806) is said to have exploited this and

---


5 Aḥmad Abū Sa’d, Aḡānī ṭarqiṣ al-ʾatfāl ‘inda l-ʿArab, Beirut, 1974 [not seen].

6 Although ʂaby is often defined in classical dictionaries as ‘[a boy] that has not yet been weaned’, it usually denotes a child between the age of a ṭiʃl (‘toddler’) and that of a ɡulām or ‘adolescent’.
to have blackmailed both Baṣṣār Ibn Burd and Marwān Ibn Abū Hafṣa. When Abū š-Šamaqmaq recites his epigram ending in ... Baṣṣāru yā Baṣṣāru yā bna z-zānīyah, Baṣṣār jumps up and gives him 200 dirhams, saying, ‘Don’t let the children hear it’? In another story Abū š-Šamaqmaq says to Baṣṣār, ‘I heard the children recite:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hallilinah hallilinah} & \quad \text{tāna qittātin li- tinah} \\
\text{Inna Baṣṣāra bna Burdin} & \quad \text{tisun -a'mā fi safinah}
\end{align*}
\]

Hallelujah, hallelujah, a cucumber pricking a fig!

Baṣṣār, son of Burd, is a billy-goat in a boat.

(According to al-Ḡāhiz this last expression denotes a very stupid person)\(^7\). Baṣṣār again pays 200 dirhams and says, Ṭa takun rāwiyat as-sībyān! ‘Please do not teach your verses to the children’?\(^9\). The same expression, Ṭa takun rāwiyat as-sībyān, is used by Marwān ibn Abī Hafṣa speaking to Abū š-Šamaqmaq, on the occasion of another scurrilous epigram (Marwān, though, pays only two dirhams, or ten in another version)\(^10\). Di‘bil (d. c. 860) paid a thousand dirhams (five would have been ample, according to his friends) in order to silence a poet of doggerel who had made two obscene lines on him that were certain to be popular among the common people and children, al-ṣāmma wa-s-sībyān. He paid in vain, for ‘they became widely known and the rabble, the lower classes and slaves loudly declaimed them’\(^11\).

\(^7\) Abū l-Faraq al-Isfahānī, al-ʿAgāni, Cairo, 1928-74, iii, 194 f.

\(^8\) al-Ḡāhiz, al-Ḥayawān, Cairo, 1965-69, ii, 150, v, 457.

\(^9\) al-Isfahānī, al-ʿAgāni iii, 195, al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādi, Tarīḫ Baġdād, Cairo, 1931, xiii, 146, ar-Rāǧīb al-Isfahānī, Muhādarāt al-udabā‘, Cairo, 1287, i, 55. The translation of the exclamation hallilīna (not found elsewhere) may not be wholly correct. The cucumber and the fig refer to homosexual practice (which is, probably, why Tarīḫ Baġdād has a different, not indecent, version of the first line). Note the elision of the hamz of aʾmā.

\(^10\) al-Isfahānī, al-ʿAgāni x, 79.

Sometimes the children call out only snatches of verse, a few words of a line. In this manner they pester a certain doctor called Nuṣayr, with an expression from an epigram by al-Ḥusayn Ibn ad-Daḥḥāk. Children force an administrator in ar-Rayy to give up his post by repeating a few words from an epigram on an unfortunate accident: ‘the fault came from a fart’, min ad-darti ḡa’a l-ḡalat. Hālid b. Yazīd al-Kāṭib is pursued by boys shouting Ya Ḥālid yā bārid, Hey Hālid, you daft one!’, after lines by Abū Tamamānī. In an edition of the Agānī one reads, after these lines, fa-ṣalimahā s-sībyānu, ‘the children got to know them’; another version has fa-ṣallamahā s-sībyāna ‘he taught them to the children’ a reading that is entirely possible. Diʿbil, mentioned before as a victim, was himself not wholly innocent of this practice. He had a quarrel with Abū Saʿd al-Mahzūmī, who made a poem against him that was only known to the learned people in town. Abū Saʿd complained:

What can I do? I make good poetry that is recited by nobody, and he makes bad verse that is recited... He has taught it to the school-children, to people on the street and the lower classes. Now wherever I go I hear this gibberish from the rabble. Some of them know me and blame me, others do not know me but let me hear it because it is so easy on the tongue.

The epigram in question is certainly one that would appeal to boys: an easy, short metre, colloquialisms, grotesque comparisons and obscenities. Diʿbil himself is reported to have said: ‘I got some nuts, called the children and gave them some. Then I told them, “Shout to him:

---

12 al-Isfahānī, al-Aghānī viii, 214.
14 al-Isfahānī, al-Aghānī xx, 280; cf. Ibn al-Muʿtazz, Ṭabaqāt 405 (not mentioning the verse ascribed to Abū Tammām). The lines are not found in the Diwān of Abū Tammām.
15 Yāqūt, Muʿjam al-udabāʾ, Cairo, 1936-38, xi, 49 f.
Abū Saʿd, old bag [apparently a nickname], who whores with his sister and his wife

Ya Abā Saʿdīn Qawsārah[zāniya l-uḥṭi wa-l-marʿah]”17.

Diʿbil knew of course that the lines were merely doggerel: ‘I only made some silly verses on him, such as children and slave girls play with.’ Someone objects: ‘you should not do that. The man has hurt you. Now get even with him by means of a similar reply. This nonsense that you are so proud of will miscarry and you will be disgraced forever’18. But Diʿbil’s reputation does not seem to have suffered from his occasional indulging in vulgarity.

The incidents mentioned so far all date from early Abbasid times. This does not mean that children played no part before that period. Shortly before the coming of Islam, for instance, the three brothers aṣ-Šammāḥ, Muzarrīd and Ǧazʿ, when children, šibyān, successfully prevent their mother’s second marriage by means of a few raḡaz lines19. But here we have talented youths making their own verse for their own purpose, not a band of obnoxious boys shouting obscenities just for the fun of it. Ḥassān Ibn Ǧābit was perhaps the first poet to exploit schoolchildren in this way: it is said that he ordered someone to write down an invective epigram and hand it to the schoolchildren, šibyān al-kuttāb20.

In the anecdotes dating from Abbasid times other categories are often mentioned together with such children: the rabble, the lower classes, slaves and slave girls, water carriers, muleteers. In earlier periods these same categories are rarely mentioned in similar contexts, although of course there were slaves, water carriers and children. I think we may

18 al-ʿAgānī xx, 175 f.
19 al-Ǧāḥīz, al-Bayān wa-rābiʿin, ed. ʿAbdassalām Muḥammad Hārūn, Cairo, 1968, iv, 34 f.
20 Ḥassān Ibn Ǧābit, Diwān, ed. Sayyid Ḥanafi Ḥasanayn, Cairo, 1974, p. 179.
say that in pre-Islamic tribal society there were no higher and lower classes, only individuals or clans with higher or lower status. After the conquests this situation changed, but it took some time for these ‘lower classes’ to appear in anecdotes about poetry; after all, many of them must have had an imperfect knowledge of the Arabic poetic language, Arabic being their second language. Ibn Mufarriq, who died c. 69/688, himself an Arab, replied with a few lines in Persian when boys shouted at him in Persian while he was paraded through the streets of Basra in a rather humiliating fashion. By this time, however, also the Arab population of the garrison cities was clearly divided into an elite group, the bāṣṣa, and the ʿāmma or common people.

Among the earliest of the anecdotes under consideration is the one about Garīr and al-Aḥtāl, somewhere in the middle of the Omayyad period. Al-Aḥtāl was rather proud of his own line, the best invective line known to him:

People who, when the approaching guests make their dogs bark, say to their mother, 'Piss on the fire'!

However, says al-Aḥtāl, the line was known only to connoisseurs of poetry, whereas a line by his rival Garīr was recited by ‘every water carrier or slave girl’. The line in question was:

---

21 al-Isfahānī, al-Āğānī xviii, 264; cf. al-Ǧāḥiz, al-Bayān i, 143. Ru’ba Ibn al-ʿ Ağāġ (d. 145/762) is pestered by children in Basra who shout yā mardum, yā mardum! (al-Āğānī xx, 352); I suppose Persian mardum ‘man’ is meant. Children sing a line in Persian against Asad b. ʿAbdallāh in 108/726-7: ‘From Huttal he came / he was put to shame’. (Ṭabarī, Tārīḵ VII, Cairo 1966, p. 43; cf. the variants pp. 44 and 119.)


23 al-Isfahānī, al-Āğānī viii, 318. The line is often quoted and discussed, see e.g. al-Mubarrad, al-Kāmil, ed. W. Wright, Leipzig, 1894-92, p. 734, al-Ḥātimī, Ḥilyat al-muhāḍara, ed. Ǧafar al-Kattānī, Baghdad, 1979, i, 349, Ibn Raṣīq, al-ʿUmda ed. Muhammad Muḥyī d-Dīn ʿAbdalhamīd, Cairo, 1955, ii, 175, 181 (respectively, in the chapter on biğā and, together with al-Aḥtāl’s complaint, in a section on sayrūrat anṣūr ‘the currency of poetry’).
The Tağlibite, saying ‘Ahem!’ while expecting hospitality [or, as most people interpret it, ‘when his hospitality is expected’], scratches his arse and quotes proverbs [i.e. mumbles some platitudes]24. al-Aḥtal seems to regret this state of affairs; indeed, to be popular, even with the populace, was a sign of superiority. When Garîr is informed that his other great rival al-Farazdaq is more popular with the elite and the learned, hawâṣ an-nâs wa-ulamâ’uhum, but he himself rather with the common people, ‘āmmat an-nâs wa-dâhmâ’uhum, he is pleased: ‘I have won’25! When al-Ağğâg and Abû Nuḥayla, two raḡaz poets, hold a slinging match, someone is about to chase away the children that have gathered. But al-Ağğâg insists on their presence: ‘Leave them; they will decide who wins and will pass it on, (yuğallibûn wa-yuballîğûn)26.

Popularity among the masses is a good thing according to many poets and critics. Ibn al-Muṭazz, poet and critic, was himself from the highest possible circle, being an Abbasid prince. But in his book on poets he remarks, more than anyone else in such works, on the popularity of poets among the ‘āmma or hâssa or both27. One particular line, he says, is recited in every market place or street, which only happens to a line ‘when its meaning is good, its diction sweet and easy on the tongue’28. He admires another line in spite of its ‘silly’ diction; but, he


25 as-Sûlî, Aḥbâr Abî Tammâm, ed. Ḥalîl Mahmûd ʿAsâkir et al., Cairo, 1937, p. 219. Rather confusingly, Ibn Daʾb (d. 171/787) pronounces al-Farazdaq to be aš̲̅r̲̅u ʿâmmata and Garîr aš̲̅r̲̅u hâṣṣata (al-İsfahâni, al-Åğânî viii, 5), which seems to mean the opposite.

26 Ibn Qutayba, aš̲̅r̲̅, p. 602.


28 Ibid., p. 130.
explains, the poet made it so intentionally, so that the common people and children would recite it.\(^{29}\)

One of the merits of poetry, says Abū Hilāl al-ʻAskarī, is its currency among people; ‘nothing is more current than good poetry’.\(^{30}\) Yet after two pages he qualifies this: the status of poetry is diminished by its abundance and the fact that everyone practises it, including the common people and the lower orders.\(^{31}\)

Some great poets were esteemed by the critics and the masses alike. ‘When I was in Basra’, says a contemporary of Baṣṣār,

there was not an amorous man or woman who did not recite some of Baṣṣār’s poetry, nor a professional wailing woman or female singer who did not earn money with it, nor any noble person who did not respect him and fear his wicked tongue.\(^{32}\)

But not everyone agreed that such popularity was always a good thing. Marwān b. Abī Ḥafṣa seems to be of this opinion when, asked to name the best poet of his time, he answered: ‘Our best poet is the one with the widest circulation, ʻaṣārunā ṣasyarūnā’, meaning Rabī‘a ar-Raqqī.\(^{33}\) However, Ibn al-Muʻtazz tells us that some poems by Rabī‘a ar-Raqqī were recited ‘everywhere on earth among the elite – for Rabī‘a’s poetry was rarely found in the hands of the common people’.\(^{34}\)

\(^{29}\) Ibid.


\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 145; cf. Diyā’ ad-Dīn Ibn al-ʻAṭīr, al-ʻGāmī al-kabīr, ed. Muṣṭafā Gawād and Ǧamīl Saʻīd, Baghdad, 1956, p. 75: prose is superior to poetry, because the latter is often produced by those who have no conscious knowledge of the rules of composition, such as as-sūqa wa-l-ʻamma min arbāb al-ḥiraf wa-s-sanā‘. According to Ibn al-ʻAṭīr, those poems are often successful; yet it is obvious that he and other critics and anthropologists gave but scant attention to them (one thinks of illiterate poets such as al-Ḥubzari or al-Habbāz al-Baladī, who are mentioned in at-Taʻalībī’s Yatīmāt ad-dābr).

\(^{32}\) al-Iṣfahānī, al-ʻAgānī iii, 149.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., xvi, 254.

\(^{34}\) Ibn al-Muʻtazz, Ṭabaqāt, p. 165.
So for Marwān the common people did not count at all, and he was not the only one. As a matter of fact, the term ‘common people’ usually al-‘āmma or al-‘awāmm, could include surprisingly many. Used in court circles it could denote anyone not belonging to court circles, but those that we would call ‘the lower classes’ are sometimes thought to be too low to be considered at all. In ar-Risāla al-‘adrā’, a ninth-century treatise on the art of the kātib, the lowest of the eight classes that are enumerated are those of the scholars and the educated. The rest, merchants, market-people and such, do not matter. To Hālid b. Šafwān there are three classes: scholars, orators or preachers, and educated people, udabā; as for the dregs that remain, they only raise the prices, throng the market-places and pollute the water. When you hear me speak of the common people, al-‘awāmm’, says al-Ǧāḥiz, I do not mean peasants, the vulgar herd, artisans and vendors; nor do I mean the Kurds in the mountains or the island dwellers in the seas... The common people of our religion, our language, our adab and our morals, are the class whose intellects and morals are above these people but do not reach the level of our elite.

With these remarks al-Ǧāḥiz comments on an essay by Biṣr Ibn al-Muṣtamir on oratory and its stylistics, where it is stressed that one’s style should be adapted to one’s audience, depending on whether one addresses the ʿāmma or the hāṣṣa. Whatever al-Ǧāḥiz means by al-ʿāmma, it appears from several of his works that his opinion of them is rather low; an attitude shared by many writers and poets. An early instance

---


36 Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, al-ʿIqd ii, 293.

37 al-Ǧāḥiz, al-Bayān i, 137.

38 See for instance his Risāla fi nafy al-taṣbīb, in Rasāʾil al-Ǧāḥiz, ed. ʿAbdāsālām Muhammad Hārūn, Cairo, 1964-79, i, 283 ff., or his Maqālat al-ʿUṭmānīyya, in Rasāʾil iv, 33, 36-43. For more on the lower classes vs the elite, see the article by M. A. J. Beg, ‘al-Khāṣṣa wa-ʿl-ʿāmma’ in The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition, Jan-Olav Blichfeldt,
is provided by two well-known Omayyad poets, al-Kumayt b. Zayd and at-Tirimmāh, both good friends in spite of their opposed allegiances, for one was a Shiite and the other a Hārīgīte. When asked how this could be, they answered, ‘We both dislike the common people’\textsuperscript{39}. It seems obvious to me that their dislike is not based on religion or politics, but on culture and education. They both belong to the urban literate and literary elite; al-Kumayt’s poetry is old-style desert poetry but he, a schoolteacher, had only second-hand knowledge of the desert.

It was in their time, during the Omayyad period, that an important urban literary elite was formed, which grew in the course of the eighth century and which cultivated the traditional poetic idiom. It became more and more difficult for a poet, using this idiom, to please both the elite and the masses with one and the same poem. When he managed to do this, it was a matter to be noted; when he did not, he could try to please the illiterate only, which was also a matter to be noted, if he was a famous poet. But then he would not be employing the old idiom but the diction, themes and metres of the ‘modern’ poetry of Abbasid times. Most of the great ‘modern’ poets, such as Baṣṣār, Abū Nuwās, Abū Tammām, al-Buḥturī and Ibn ar-Rūmī, used the elevated style as well as the low and vulgar idiom; the latter mostly for invective poetry of course, although Abū l-‘Atāhiya deliberately employed a low style for the poems on zuhd or ‘renunciation [of worldliness]’ that made him famous. He is said to have told an admirer:

Poetry ought to be like that of the early great poets or like that of Baṣṣār and Ibn Harma. If it is not, then the right thing to do is to make one’s diction so that the masses will understand it, like my own poetry; especially my poems on zuhd\textsuperscript{40}.

\textsuperscript{39} al-Isfahānī, \textit{al-Agānī} xvii, 2.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}, iv, 70. Compare \textit{Ibid.} iv, 94 f.: Salm al-Hāsir says to Abū l-‘Atāhiya, ‘You have made a good [poem], but for the fact that the wording is vulgar (sūqyya)’. Abū l-‘Atāhiya replies, ‘By God, what makes you dislike it is precisely what makes me like it’.
Similarly, Baššār defended his little poem on Rabāba, who has ‘ten hens and a cock with a good voice’. For she, he said to a critic, admires this even more than you admire the Muʾallaqa of Imraʾ al-Qays 41: An anonymous poet said:

I shall make biĝa’ on you, if I live to do it, in poetry that isn’t worth twopence [even] if they correct its faults.

They say it’s bad. But it is enough for me that they call it bad and that it is recited 42.

In early Abbasid times it was still possible for a poet to be both esteemed by the elite and truly popular among all layers of society, although not as a rule with the same poems. As for later periods, I find a curious lack of information. Anthologies and works of criticism keep repeating the old anecdotes about lines being recited by boys and the lower classes, but hardly any new ones are added. Of course this may reflect the concerns of the anthologists and critics; perhaps things went on much as before. But one suspects that the dearth of such anecdotes is an indication that from about the tenth century there was a widening gap between the literate elite and the illiterate, of whom we do not know much; a gap based on the increasing divergence between the literary and the spoken language, as studied in particular by Johann Fück in his ‘Arabiya 43.

Early Abbasid poetry is full of colloquialisms; Abū Nuwās for instance, or Baššār’s verses for Rabāba which Fück thought should be read without ʾirāb 44. They are found less often in the so-called neoclassical poets, although Abū Tammām, al-Buḥtūrī and Ibn ar-Rūmī wrote numerous lines that could still appeal to children and the illiterate, both

44 Fück, ‘Arabiya (French translation) p. 84.
by virtue of their diction and their themes. In his monograph of Ibn ar-
Rūmī, Said Boustany suggested the possibility that some epigrams were
in fact made by the poet primarily with children in mind\textsuperscript{45}. But there
are no accompanying anecdotes to confirm this. It is tempting to think
that lines with silly jokes, crude obscenities, colloquialisms or metrical
irregularities were meant to be enjoyed and recited by a juvenile or lower-
class audience; however, there is abundant evidence that the literate
elite itself occasionally indulged in precisely these things wholly among
themselves.

The lower classes, it is true, could serve to inspire the poet in these
matters, as in the notorious case of Ibn al-Ḥaggaḡ in the second half of
the tenth century. He learned his art of pornographic and scatological
verse by listening, notebook at hand, to the people on the roofs of the
taverns next to his father’s house\textsuperscript{46}. Yet he was a respected man of
some standing, who as a muḥtasib was even charged with the supervi-
sion of public moral behaviour in Baghdad for a time. Later, in the 14th
century, a manual of hisbā enjoins schoolteachers to keep the dīwān of
Ibn al-Ḥaggaḡ away from their pupils, which proves that they liked
it\textsuperscript{47}. But there is no reason to suppose that Ibn al-Ḥaggaḡ composed his
poems for them or for the common people.

Even the poets known to us who composed poems in a language re-
sembling the spoken tongue belonged to the elite, as a general rule. The
earliest known zaḡals and similar non-classical forms date from the time
when these forms became acceptable among the educated. It is well pos-
sible that more or less similar forms existed before among the illiterate,
but the texts and the names of the poets are not recorded.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibn al-Uḥwwa, \textit{Maʿālim al-qurba fī aḥkām al-hisba}, ed. by R. Levy, London, 1938,
p. 172, Engl. abstract, p. 60.
After the great conquests of early Islamic times, Classical Arabic poetry was never truly popular, in the sense of known to and appreciated by all layers of society, except for the odd line or short epigram, usually of the jesting kind, *bazl*, which had a lower status than *gidd*. It is a conclusion that is hardly surprising, but it may serve to counterbalance overenthusiastic statements on the importance of poetry for the Arabs. In pre-Islamic times things were different, but even here one should be careful not to exaggerate. Is it really true that, whenever someone in a clan turned out to be poetically gifted, other clans came to congratulate, meals were prepared, women played the lute, men and boys rejoiced together, all as if there were a wedding? This is what Ibn Raṣīq wants us to believe; he is quoted by as-Suyūṭī, Wilhelm Ahlwardt, Sir Charles Lyall, R. A. Nicholson and probably others⁴⁸. Ibn Raṣīq, writing in the eleventh century, gives no sources or references for these remarkable customs. Perhaps he, esteemed poet and critic, wrote during a bout of wishful thinking, regretfully recalling the days when the status of the poet was higher, but his poetry popular among young and old, high and low.

---