CLASSICAL POETRY PARODIED
THE CASE OF ḤUṢAYN ṢAFĪQ AL-MĪṢRĪ (1882-1948)

Willem Stoetzer

Leiden University

“After his passing away¹ the Egyptian journalist and poet Ḥusayn Ṣafīq al-Mīṣrī 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 Muḥṭārāt min ḫayr mā kātib amīr al-fūkāḥa (“Selection of the best writings by the Prince of Humour”), edited by Muḥammad Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn and Abū Buṭayna². The book contains no year of publication, but probably appeared soon after Husayn Ṣafīq’s death³.

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

---

¹ On the 30th of September 1948.


³ The book was printed by Maṭbaʿat Ahmad Muḥaymar, Ş. Fārūq.
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 Husayn Šafig’s verse seems to echo his father’s experiences.

On account of an ill-fated treatment of an eye disease, Husayn Šafig 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.

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 (laddāt) represent many of the characteristics that are usually ascribed to al-Hasan 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 Husayn Šafig’s journalistic activities and his prose work are outside the scope of this article. His Hawādīt wa-ārā’ al-hagg Darwis wa-Umm Ismail 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.

Husayn Šāfīq'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 Husayn Šafīq's poetry. Love is often pictured as a torment, especially as there operates a "no money no love"-law in Husayn 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 i‘rāb 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”:\nasl mar‘u bi-š-šugli ahlun li-l-karāmati lā / bi-māli ummin tawaffat aw bi-mālī abi (45/2)\n
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, the transposition of words from their usual order (hyperbaton) and periphrastic constructions. These features also abound in Husayn Šafīq’s verse. To quote some examples:

“In Nejd is an electricity company ...”:\nagdun 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”:\nasl-sadru minni šišatun matqūnatun / wa-ridāki fihā ahansu t-tumbāki (50/3)

Temporal clauses introduced by \iddā followed by a noun are rare in prose but relatively common in poetry. Characteristically, they also occur in Husayn 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”:\nta’kulu

---

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

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.
hintītan idā l-kalbu šammahū / asāba š-sudā'u 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 maṣṣūr-form bukā instead of the regular mamdiūd-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 wept and wailed, lamenting the bygone days of the pound; our tears flow, whenever it comes to mind": lam ta气势amid ʿaynī wa-lā ʿaynūhū / hattā samīnā mid-durūki š-siyāh // fa-yā lahā min laylatin lam yakun / fiḥā lana illā l-bukā wa-n-nawāh // nabkī ʿalā ʿabdi l-ğunayhi ilādī / idā ḏakarnāhū tarā d-damīʾa 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 Husayn 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 Husayn 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 aku“u aṭmānahā ǧimā uka“a'ūhū (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 *ka̰a*, 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 *itka̰a*.

Another paronomastic construction is used when the poet says: “you tuck your money away in the banks”: *wa-tadsisu fi 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 šufnahu* (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 *šufnahu*, which is neither classical nor colloquial.

Very often prosodic requirements lay at the root of the formation of hybrids, as when Ḥusayn Ṣafīq’s words “it is difficult for someone like me to serve a person who is offensive to his servants” are phrased as *wa-ša’bun ʿalā mišli l-badāmātu ʿinda man / yakūnu ʿalā būddāmiḥi yatarādal* (52/6), where *yatarādal* (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-mafīṣi min ǧāyri nārin qattu dubbānun* (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* proves very useful. Under the word *būz* we find the expression *huwwa mādīd 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 ʿafīt* 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 Husayn Ṣafīq 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

---

a sickening demon had taken possession of me": \textit{unzur ilā būzi ta' gid tūlahū / mitrayni min hammī llađi là yazāh // mukul'dimin ka-anninī rākibun / ʿalayya ʿıfrītan taqīlu l-mizāh} (61/8-9).

References or allusions to the Koran or to Koranic usage can also be found. The line \textit{fa-ıdā š-suʿūbu taḥāsamat wa-tahārabat / baqyya l-ilāhu wa-kullu šay'in fānī} (69/15), for instance, echoes Koran 55/26-27: \textit{kullu man ʿalayhā fānīn wa-yabqa wağhu rabbika dī l-ğalāli wa-l-ıkrām}. In another line we read: "Whoever walks into the traps of an old woman, and marries her, that will be a moon without honey!": \textit{wa-man yaqaʿ fī ʿağūzin in tazawwağaḥā / fa-dālika ṣahbrun gayru dī ʿasali} (33/6). The association with Koranic \textit{qurʾānan ʿarubiyyan ġayra dī ʿıwağin} (Koran 39/28) and \textit{bi-wādīn ġayri dī zārīn} (Koran 14/27) seems intentional.

The relationship between Husayn Şafiq'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 Husayn Şafiq, sometimes quite ingeniously, develops his own theme.

In the opening line of one of his elegies, \textit{a-Šarīf ar-Rādī} (970-1016) speaks metaphorically of Abū Ishāq aš-Ṣābi' as a light having gone out\footnote{at-Ta'alībī found the elegy so impressive that he included all of its 82 lines in the \textit{Yatīmat ad-dahr} (ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī d-Dīn ʿAbdalḥamīd, vol. II, pp. 306-310.).}. Husayn Şafiq 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
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":
šalat lana l-kuntūra kumbāniyyatun / mašūnatu l-ābā’i wa-l-ağdādi
// fa-ğadat sulũku l-kahrabā’i ka-anahā / baytun min-a l-qutni l-ādī
// huwa laktarikun ġayra anna bayādahū / fi baytīnā mutabaddilun
bi-sawādī // fa-n-nûru munqaṭṭun wa-dālika kasfatun / fi wišši
bayna ahibbatīn wa-aądī (41/1-4)

Not all of the original poems that inspired Ḥusayn Šāfīq date from
early times. A poem by his contemporary Ḥāfiz Ibrāhīm (1871-1932)
starting with the line lā talum kaffi idā s-sayfu nabā / šabha minni l-
‘azmu wa-d-dahrī abā (“do not blame my hand if the sword misses! my
determination is all right, but Fate refuses”) 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-kaffi ‘araqun / sāla ku-mā’i idā 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-Hayyāt: hudā min šabā nağdin amānān li-qalbihī / fa-qad
kāda rayyāhā yatīru bi-lubbīhī (“search for a refuge for his heart from
the Nejadi 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 tasālī (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 tasālī-vendors will cry out: “tasālī, libb, kakōla, tasālī,
libb”. Libb in particular is used for dried sunflower seeds, and these are

---

10 Diwan Ḥāfiz Ibrāhīm, ed. Ahmad Amīn, Ahmad az-Zayn and Ibrāhīm al-Ibyārī,
meant when the poet says: *wa-lam yulhihi 'anhā tīgazīzu lubbihi* (36/1: "he did not find distraction from her in munching seeds"). The colloquial *libb* is dressed up in *fushā* clothing and the resulting *lubbihi*, 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-A‘šā’s *mu‘allaqa waddī hurayrata inna r-rakba murtahīl / wa-hal tutīqu wadā‘an ayyuhā r-rağulū* ("take your leave of Hurayra; the party of riders is about to leave. But will you, man, be able to bear this farewell?") ¹¹. Husayn 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: *śālū l-izāla wa-rāḥū kullūm saḥaran / ilā bağūrin lahu min taḥtihī ‘aġalu // yaḡrī wa-yānḥuḍa dūbhānan fa-taḥsībuhū / saḥā‘īban ba‘dūḥā bi-l-bā‘īdī muttasīlu* (55/1-2)

The interlaced clouds of the second verse (*saḥā‘īban ba‘dūḥā bi-l-bā‘īdī muttasīlu*) echo two lines of the original: *yā man yarā ʿāridan qad bittu armaqūhū ka-amnāmā l-barqu fī ḥāfātihī š-ṣūålū // lahū ridāfūn wa-ğawān munṣamūn ‘amilūn / munāṭṭaqaq bi-siğālī l-mā‘ī muttasīlu* ("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 ʿārid is used for

---


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

In a five-line poem by Baṣṣār b. Burd beginning *lam yatul laylī wa-lākin lam anam / wa-nasāʾ annī l-karā tayfun alamm* (“my night was not long, yet I have not slept; a haunting phantom banished sleep from me”\(^\text{13}\) the physical consequences of Baṣṣār’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 fi burdiya ḍisman nāhilan / law tawakkaʾtiʿalayhi 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”: *ṣāhibu l-bayti šahīhun ḍāhilun / 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 *Muṣ’alaqāt*, imitations of the famous *Mu’allaqāt*. A discussion of these interesting examples of Egyptian humour is, however, beyond the scope of this article.