The Qur’an, as is well known, confers an outstanding role to detailed descriptions of Heaven and Hell, and it is equally obvious that the Islamic religious sciences and the popular culture of the Muslim Arabs were not a jot less preoccupied with this subject. It was quite natural that the theme, so conspicuous in the Islamic scripture, should captivate the minds of the common people and the educated classes alike, regardless of their social standing or level of literacy. Being thus a firm part of the cultural heritage of the Muslim Arabs, afterlife naturally occupied a prominent position in the imagery of their poetry and prose works as well, in addition to constant references to it in the everyday speech and joke repertoire of the common people, two strata of language use that we shall see interacted with each other frequently, lending and borrowing witty phrases or thematic conceits. What I want to discuss briefly in the following is to what lengths poets and prose writers could go in utilizing images and phrases borrowed from the religious tradition, and the actual ways in which the eschatological material was handled in non-religious literature.

The various terms and elements appearing in the Qur’anic description of Paradise and Hell, not surprisingly, proved to be a constant inspiration to most people’s imagination. The Qur’an commentaries offer obvious instances of how every single name, phrase etc. referring to the afterlife was surrounded with ever more meticulous details and explanations, and apparently popular culture did not lag behind in embellishing these well-known Qur’anic passages with like details, as attested by stories about the qussâs and other bearers of the new, urban, Islamic folklore. Even a cursory look into muhdat poetry will not fail to persuade us that littérateurs were extremely fond of incorporating religious imagery, including concepts of Heaven and Hell, into their poetry and prose, often in very profane contexts indeed, this being regarded as one of the finest tools of zarf, that is (in one of the term’s manifold senses) wittiness and urbane elegance in the use of language.

To begin with, the very words denoting Paradise (ganna, ginân, firdaws, cadn, etc.) and Hell (gâhannam, an-nâr, saqar, al-gahim, etc.) were turned into hackneyed literary metaphors that expressed little more than something very pleasant and very unpleasant respectively. Examples of this are so plentiful and well-known to every
scholar of Arabic as to make any mention of them really superfluous here. Hell is also often used in poetry as a simile of, or metaphor for, extreme heat.

The houris, lovely maidens of Paradise who are reserved for pious Muslims as part of the charms and joys of Heaven, are, understandably enough, a conspicuous presence in Arabic literature. Likening one's beloved girl to a houri is a real commonplace if ever there was one. Occasionally, however, we do encounter examples of more original variations on the evergreen theme. A famous intellectual of the Buwayhid era, Abu Ishaq as-Sabi' offers his beloved, in a charming poem of his, the compliment of possessing so supernatural a beauty as to serve as evidence of their religious doctrines for the followers of all religions. Beginning the list with the Muslims, the poet says that the beloved person, by virtue of his or her beauty, will prove to them the existence of the houris (at-Ta'âlibî, Yatima II, 259). The Egyptian poet Abū Muhammad al-Hasan b. al-Aslāfi, Ibtida, displays the characteristic muhâdat preoccupation with witty paradoxes, likens his non-Muslim beloved to a âhârya, then proceeds to add that this beloved person cannot be regarded as an infidel since the houris' dwelling-place, as is clear from the Qur'anic text, is Paradise and certainly not Hell. Finally, the poet Abū 1-Atâhiya is said to have been occasionally criticized and suspected of heresy, but was apparently unharmed, on account of his line suggesting that the model for the creation of the houris had to be a stupid plus obnoxious individual would be referred to as "baqar saqar" ('hell's cattle'), while a stupid but harmless one would be called "baqar al-ganna" ('heaven's cattle'); see al-Ibäsî, Bayanat gannatu l-mawâ wa-gi'â'ar tawran ("we had no doubt that he must have started a row with the warrior is described thus; "we had no doubt that he must have started a row with the...""). Yet another poem puts a little twist on the theme, the sort of slight change that appealed so much to the mediaeval Arab audience, by saying that a lovely-looking boy was banished from Paradise by Ridwan himself lest he should prove a temptation to the houris! A muwaṣṣâf of the Andalusi poet Ibn Sahl al-Isrá'îl modifies the theme again; here it is a houri sent to mankind by Ridwan that the beloved is likened to (as-Safadi, Tawwî 159). We will return to the topic of al-wildân al-mubâlladân further on, when speaking of more risky thematic conventions.

The various named rivers of Paradise, like Kawâq, Salsabil and Tasnim, have always been a staple of Muslim popular imagination, and were readily utilized by men of letters as metaphors for pleasant sensations, gustatory or otherwise, such as the girl he loved and not vice versa ("fa-hâdâ bi-qudrati nafsibi hûra l-qinâni 'alâ mitâlîkî")

As widespread as images of the houris is the recurrent thematic fixture of al-wildân al-mubâlladân, or the handsome young lads waiting on the inhabitants of Paradise, whose conspiciousness in the Qur'ânic passages describing the eternal bliss of Paradise has lead to numerous fixed expressions and conceits in literature as well as, apparently, in daily chat. A usual turn of speech in poems in describing some uncommonly beautiful boy is that he used to belong among these heavenly creatures but escaped from Paradise for some sin committed there and came to live among humans. Quite common in poems, this expression is also found in prose works like, for example, the al-Asâdiyya maqâma of al-Hamdânî, where a young Turkish warrior is described thus: "we had no doubt that he must have started a row with the rest of the paradisiacal lads and had [consequently] left Paradise, fleeing from Ridwan" (fa-mâ lakâkânân hâsâma l-wildân, fa-faraqa l-qinâni, wa-barâba min Ridwân) (al-Hamdânî, Maqâmât 42). This is very similar to a passage in the Yatima of at-Ta'âlibî where an exceptionally comely young servant called Nastus of the Hamdanid court is characterized as looking "as though, in a moment of Ridwan's inattention, he ran away from Paradise" (ka-anâa Ridwân gâfâla 'anfu fa-a'âda min al-qinâni). Yet another poem puts a little twist on the theme, the sort of slight change that appealed so much to the mediaeval Arab audience, by saying that a lovely-looking boy was banished from Paradise by Ridwan himself lest he should prove a temptation to the houris! A muwaṣṣâf of the Andalusi poet Ibn Sahl al-Isrá'îl modifies the theme again; here it is a houri sent to mankind by Ridwan that the beloved is likened to (as-Safadi, Tawwî 159). We will return to the topic of al-wildân al-mubâlladân further on, when speaking of more risky thematic conventions.

1 To list just the harvest of a very cursory survey: Ibn al-Muctazz, Tabaqât 6 ("yâ rahmata itlābi hûra fi masâlînâ, hâshi bi-râ'ibatî l-firdawsi min fi ki"); at-Ta'âlibî, Yatima IV, 210 ("asâvi min dalâkin gâdâ sababa lubâka wa-min gannatu qud waqîf at-fi gannamû"); at-Ta'âlibî, Yatima, I, 139 ("in taken gannatu n-nâ'îmî fis-hâka min 'âdâ l-firdawsi wa-l-qinâni gâlîsimû"); op. cit. II, 38 ("hummanwâhu kâghâshûn min bararatah lâkîn mata ta'âthi yabdumar Rasûlu''); al-Sâhirî, Munâfij 1, 114 ("kâla raftayka nubâna wa-nfâna bâna bâna l-qinâni"); Ibn Sa'id, Rayât 61 ("madat gannatu l-m'âwa wa-qa'at gâlîsimû, fa-an a'âa bâda ma kunnu an'amî"); Ibn Sa'id, Munâfij 107 ("âda adglashûn n-nâra hâshi radin dha l-qinâni"); al-Qarqâni, Wasâta 303 ("fa-mahillun hayna l-qinâni wa-hayna n-nâra âhâshu tanwân us-tawwân afâsî"); Pseudo-Taâwî, Risâlât baghdâdiyya 113 (falsey attributed in this edition to at-Taâwî; it is in fact a work by Abû l-Mothâhar al-Asidi) and at-Ta'âlibî, Pgâz 234 ("aâdî adglashûn n-nâra wâẖâshu gannatu l-mâwâ"); Ibn Dihyâ, Mutâfî 3 ("fa-fittihatu l-gannatu min qudîshû fakâtî fakâtî fakâtû fakûtû l-wildân"); Ibn al-Hârîb, Gâyû 14 ("...fittihatu n-nâra gannatu").

2 E.g. Ibn Sa'id, Rayât 71; Pseudo-Taâwî, Risâlât baghdâdiyya 358; al-Hilli, Atzîl 31, 174 (in a zaqîl and a qa'înâ respectively); Ibn al-Hârîb, Gâyû 161 (in a muwaṣṣâf by 'Iâsâ ibn La'bûn); al-MaRâqûî 1967:110 (in a Tunisian vernacular poem of the maâzuzû genre).

3 at-Ta'âlibî, Yatima I, 371: "li-anâño bâla l-qinâni faywârîbâ wa-l-qinâni lâ yusînandâ 'lâbhû s-saqar".

4 Ibn Qurayba, Sîr 411. In fact, this appears to be either a poetic convention or an instance of plagiarmism, cf. an expression of the same idea in Abû Nuwas, Drag W 403 ("faruk'amâ hâshabu basaran wa-râyân hadâ hûra l-qinâni 'alâ mitâhâdîkî").

5 at-Ta'âlibî, Yatima II, 89. Cf. also Ibn al-Kattânî, Tabâbit 162; Pseudo-Taâwî, Risâlât baghdâdiyya 362.

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Beginning the list with the Muslims, the poet says that the beloved person, by virtue of his or her beauty, will prove to them the existence of the houris (at-Tacalibi, Yatima II, 259). The Egyptian poet Abu Muhammad al-Hasan b. Ali b. Wakic at-Tinnisi, displaying the characteristic mubdat preoccupation with witty paradoxes, likens his non-Muslim beloved to a buqar al-ganna (in a Tunisian vernacular poem of the genre).

As widespread as images of the houris is the recurrent thematic fixture of al-wildan al-muballadun, or the handsome young lads waiting on the inhabitants of Paradise, whose conspicious in the Qur’anic passages describing the eternal bliss of Paradise has lead to numerous fixed expressions and conceits in literature as well as, apparently, in daily chat. A usual turn of speech in poems in describing some uncommonly beautiful boy is that he used to belong among these heavenly creatures but escaped from Paradise for some sin committed there and came to live among humans. Quite common in poems, this expression is also found in prose works like, for example, the al-Asadiyya maqama of al-Hamadani, where a young Turkish warrior is described thus: “we had no doubt that he must have started a row with the [rest of the paradisiacal] lords and had [consequently] left Paradise, fleeing from Ridwan” (fa-ma zakakna annabha hasama al-wildan, fa-faraqa l-ginan, wa-baraba min Ridwan) (al-Hamadani, Maqamat 42). This is very similar to a passage in the Yatima of at-Ta’alibi where an exceptionally comely young servant called Nastus of the Hamdanid court is characterized as looking “as though, in a moment of Ridwan’s inattention, he ran away from Paradise” (ka-anna Ridwan gafla ‘anhu fa-abhiq min al-ganna). Yet another poem puts a little twist on the theme, the sort of slight change that appealed so much to the mediaeval Arab audience, by saying that a lovely-looking boy was banished from Paradise by Ridwan himself lest he should prove a temptation to the houris! A muwassath of the Andalusi poet Ibn Sahal al-Isra’ili modifies the theme again; here it is a houri sent to mankind by Ridwan that the beloved is likened to (as-Safadi, Tawci I 159). We will return to the topic of al-wildan al-muballadun further on, when discussing more of speaking thematic conventions.

The various named rivers of Paradise, like Kawtar, Salsabil and Tasnim, have always been a staple of Muslim popular imagination, and were readily utilized by men of letters as metaphors for pleasant sensations, gustatory or otherwise, such as

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1 To list just the harvest of a very cursory survey: Ibn al-Mut’azz, Tabaqat 6 (“yâ rahesta illaihi hulli fi masâzin aw,” baqwari’ hi’ r/kârastu min fik”; at-Ta’alibi, Yatima IV, 210 (”adri min dalakin gâbû sabkha l-bukâ wa-min gânmatu qad awqâtu at fi gânmanu s”); at-Ta’alibi, Yatima I, 139 (”in token gânmatu m-sîmî fi sîhâs min adâ l-âfbih wa-l-humari gânmanu”; op. cit. II, 38 (”hummanwâ muqalâ-m min barastash lâ kanata masta’is’ti ‘iyadîminu Ridwanu”); al-Sâheri, Dunya I, 114 (”kula wa’afata nân darsan ka-anna li-n-nâri nûri wa-gânma”); Ibn Sa’id, Rayâi 61 (”madat gânmatu l-ma’wa wa-gâat gânmanu, fa-anu anâ bâda ma-kantu an’ama”); Ibn Sa’id, Qustafat 107 (”sâd adjelâlhu n-nâri hukm râ’îhata l-gânma”); al-Qurashi, Wazata 303 (“fi mabdin hanyu l-gânma wa-hanyu n-nâri arqâ tawaskat tawurâm alshufr”); Pseudo-Tawhidi, Risa’la bagdaddyia 113 (falsely attributed in this edition to at-Tawhidi; it is in fact a work by Abu l-Mutahhar al-Asadi) and at-Ta’alibi, Qustafat 246 (”sâd ardîn gânmanu n-nâri gânmati Ridwanu”); Ibn Diya, Mutrib 3 (“futtahati l-gânmatu min gânmati khushu’ bi’r/kârastu min fik”).

2 E.g. Ibn Sa’id, Rayâi 71; Pseudo-Tawhidi, Risa’la bagdaddyia 358; al-Hilli, Atiz 31, 174 (in a qâfâl and a qumâ respectively); Ibn al-Ha’ib, Gayy 141 (in a muwâshâh by Ibn Baqi); to this list of poetic examples, I might add an idiomatic usage cited in a mediaeval source: a stupid plus obnoxious individual would be referred to as baqar saqar (’hell’s cattle’), while a stupid but harmless one would be called baqar al-ganna (’heaven’s cattle’); see al-Libihi, Qustafat 22.

3 at-Ta’alibi, Yatima I, 371: ”li-annahbi kaal-hûrû fi tasvirbâh wa-l-hûrû lâ yusirahu ‘llatibu s-saqaar”.

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4 Ibn Quraya, Sûr 411. In fact, this appears to be either a poetic convention or an instance of plagiarism, cf. an expression of the same idea in Abu Nuwas, Dréan B 403 (”fa-lammar râhtahu balaran yaswinin hada hûrû l-gânma ‘alî al-hudâh’un”).

5 at-Ta’alibi, Yatima I, 89. Cf. also Ibn al-Kattâni, Tawbihi 162; Pseudo-Tawhidi, Risa’la bagdaddyia 362.

6 at-Ta’alibi, Yatima I, 205: ”al-qawwâb Ridwanu min dârîbhu mahjûfata tawwasqa l-hûrû bi’r/kârastu min fik.” That the paradisical virgins might be susceptible to the charms of mere mortals already appears in a verse by Abu Nuwas, cf. Abu Nuwas, Dréan A 433 (”wa-latwannahat hûrû l-gânmanu mins bi-llatibu s-saqaar”).
the saliva of the beloved person. Again, examples of this convention are so conspicuous that I omit to make an inventory here.

Of the constituents of the Muslim conception of Hell, Malik the gate-keeper of the Inferno is often mentioned in witty contexts, as are the horrible workforce of Hell, the zabāniya. One of the striking characteristics of the uses of ‘hellish’ images in poetry is the fact that they are subject to apparently no constrictions when a sense of humour palpably permeates them, a general observation to which I wish to return at the end of this paper. The secretary Abu l-Fath 'Ali al-Busti complains to a vizier of the latter’s gate-keeper by stating that while the vizieral palace is a heavenly abode for all visitors, its doorman rather reminds one of Malik (“dārūka li ḍarnatun wa-s-lākimna ba-waw-babba Māliku ǧaḥimī”)⁷. In a poem, the famous Buwayhid vizier as-Sāhib b. ʿAbbad ridicules a man of parasitic habits with the hyperbole that he would probably try even to prey on the hospitality of Malik, if only by asking for some free zaqqum fruit, which of course is normally regarded as a disgusting trial awaiting sinners, one of the punishments of Hell⁸. A pleasantry popular in muḥdīt lampons is the suggestion that someone’s presence would be regarded an added form of torture even in Hell and a cause for complaint for its inmates (Ibn al-Mu’tazz, Tabaqāt 168). A light-hearted, easy-going attitude is also evident in a verse referring to a roast chicken as a crucified sinner who has been punished by hell-fire⁹. Loaded as it is with eschatological imagery, the following line describing a bath was no doubt relished by the educated mediaeval audience as a particularly witty accomplishment: “Its pleasantness recalls Eden, its heat does the Inferno; its servants are [like] houris which later); Ibn al-Muṭazz, al-Baharzī, I, 133; al-Ibsihi, Tabaqāt al-Mustarraf 105 (in another verse, the figure of Malik is substituted by the two terrible interrogators of the deceased, Munkar and Nakir).⁸

⁷ Cf. for instance al-Bāharzī, Dumaṣ II, 1392 (here the cliché is juxtaposed to another popular conceit of mediaeval Arab poets, the qutubah or incorporation of Qur’anic phrases [this one from 55: 54], about which later); Ibn Sa’īd, Rāyūs 88; Ibn Dihya, Mutrib 170; Ibn al-Kattāni, Tābiḥāt 92; al-Ibshī, Mustāraf 277; Pseudo-Tawhīdī, Risāla baḥḍaddiya 358, 376; Ibn al-Ḥatib, Ṣa‘īd 185 [Abū Ṭāmir ibn Yaqūq].

⁸ See for example al-Maʾṣīrī, Gūfrān 44; as-Taʿlībī, Gāz 204; Ibn Dihya, Mutrib 96; al-Ǧāhāsī, Ḥayawān I, 133; al-Ibshī, Mustāraf 356.

⁹ as-Taʿlībī, Yatīma IV, 326; and cf. the same conceit by other poets in al-Ibshī, Mustāraf 105 (in some verses, the term of Malik is substituted by the two terrible interrogators of the deceased, Munkar and Nakir).


¹¹ al-Bāharzī, Dumaṣ I, 446. However, the word ‘fire’ in this line might also be understood as referring to the stake rather than to Hell. (The poem, as is proudly remarked by the author of the anthology, is by his own father.)

Images of the Muslim conception of the Day of Resurrection (yaulumi al-qiya'amah) are also something of a commonplace in the poetic language of the muḥdītūn as well as in prose and in the educated conversational style of the age. So much so that the very word resurrection, qiya'amah, and the expression qamāt al-qiya'amah (the day of resurrection has arrived) have become perfect commonplaces to designate a scene of excited confusion, and indeed the latter expression continues to be much used even in contemporary Arabic dialects.¹² This linguistic usage is the point of an apparently popular joke in which a man, when hearing the above expression on a terribly windy day, remarks that this looks a qiya'amah of a sparing sort, lacking as it does such common attributes of the last day as the arrival of the Antichrist, the Mahdi, or the Beast (dāḥib al-ard) (at-Tawhīdī, Basāʾir II, 3: 85). As the Day of Judgement is conceptualized by the Islamic tradition as a preternaturally long one, spanning over years and years if measured by earthly chronology, it is little wonder that the phrase was also popular as a metaphor for excessively long and unpleasant periods of time, like in a line complaining of the irritating and lengthy presence of a boring acquaintance: “an hour spent together with him [feels] as long as the Day of Resurrection (fuqṣatun minhu ḍindī fi tuṭi yaulumi l-qiya'amah)”. Such elements of the description of Resurrection in the Qurʾān as the scales that weigh every man’s good and bad deeds (al-mizān), or the trumpet (as-sūr) sounded by the archangel Isrāfīl to signal the arrival of the last day, or the extremely thin bridge over which the saved souls make their last walk to Paradise (as-sirāt al-mustaqīm), all get their highly conventional treatment in mediaeval Arabic literature and folklore, often in a less than serious manner. A line by an anonymous poet says: “I have come to like the Day of Resurrection solely because I may see you then on the sirāt” (abbahbudu l-qiya'amata lā lisi jin wa-l-aqām kay arākā ʿalā s-sirāt).¹³ The Syrian poet Abū ʿUmāra aṣ-Ṣūfī says...

¹² Examples include the following: as-Taʿlībī, Yatīma I, 299 ("wa-qāfyin aqāma qiya'amati min qabli at-taw yi-lqiyamah"); al-Bāharzī, Dumaṣ I, 101 ("qumun wasati aqāma qiya'matī bi-quwāmīthī lamān taw wa-yuwallad"); Pseudo-Tawhīdī, Risāla baḥḍaddiya 363 ("wa-yuwa ṭalikūshī mina l-qiya'matī la-qad qamāt qiya'matuhumma fi il-dunya"); al-Ibshī, Mustāraf 284 ("la taʿgabī in qamāt fihi qiya'amati tena l-qiya'matī yawma kaftā vāqū"); note also the masterful reference in this line by Ḫūr-Rumma to Q 68:42; Ben Cheneb 1922:141 ("ṭayī fī lāshūk fi naṣīnh qadi ḥudārat qamāt qiya'matahu bayna l-musālima"); cf. also the same idea (without the use of the term qiya'amah) moulded in the form of a simile in Ibn al-Kattāni, Tābiḥāt 291; and the use of Qur’anic phrases depicting yaulumi al-qiya'amah to describe extreme turmoil in al-Hamādānī, Maqāmat 67 ("fa-qāma bihā sḥayratāt kādāt laḥā lard tarsaf, wa-n-miṣrūn tarkādīr").


¹⁴ as-Zawzānī, Ḥamāsī II, 116. See also Ibn Dihya, Mutrib 59; and a muwaṣṣal by Ibn Baṣīr in Ibn al-Ḥarīb, Gāzī 15 ("in ʿaṣṣatā lqiyamah, tamattata min qabli ʿaṣārin"). The sirāt is also mentioned in a twining quasi-verbal diatribe transferred into the famous Baghdadian Epistle: "I'll drink you, then only piss you out on as-sirāt al-mustaqīm". See Pseudo-Tawhīdī, Risāla baḥḍaddiya 378. In a funny anecdote, an uncouth Bedouin, the usual butt of many jokes, praises the luxurious sweetmeat called...
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the saliva of the beloved person. Again, examples of this convention are so conspicuous that I omit to make an inventory here.

Of the constituents of the Muslim conception of Hell, Mālīk the gate-keeper of the Inferno is often mentioned in witty contexts, as are the horrible workforce of Hell, the zabānīya. One of the striking characteristics of the uses of ‘hellish’ images in poetry is the fact that they are subject to apparently no constrictions when a sense of humour palpably permeates them, a general observation to which I wish to return at the end of this paper. The secretary Abū l-Fath ‘Alī al-Bustī complains to a vizier of the latter’s gate-keeper by stating that while the vizier’s palace is a house of abode for all visitors, its doorman rather reminds one of Malik (“daruğa lī ǧarnatūt wa-s-lākīmna bawṣū̄bābāb Mālīk l-ǧagīmī”)9. In a poem, the famous Buwayhid vizier as-Sāhīb b. ‘Abbād ridicules a man of parasitic habits with the hyperbole that he would probably try even to prey on the hospitality of Malik, if only by asking for some free zaqqūm fruit, which of course is normally regarded as a disgusting trial awaiting sinners, one of the punishments of Hell10. A pleasantry popular in muḥdātī lampoons is the suggestion that someone’s presence would be regarded an added form of torture even in Hell and a cause for complaint for its inmates (Ibn al-Muṭṭazī, Tabāqāt 168). A light-hearted, easy-going attitude is also evident in a verse referring to a roast chicken as a crucified sinner who has been punished by hell-fire11. Loaded as it is with eschatological imagery, the following line describing a bath was no doubt received by the educated mediaeval audience as a particularly witty accomplishment: “Its pleasantness recalls Eden, its heat does the Inferno; its servants are [like] hours working next to the zabānīya” (hakd l-cadna tiban wa-l-gahīmā hardratan wa-huddāmuhu hūrūn talībah zabānīya) (al-Bāḥārī, Dumya II, 856).

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9. See for example al-Ma‘arrī, Gafārīn 44; al-Ta‘lībī, Fāzūs 204; Ibn Dihya, Mubīrī 96; al-Ǧāhīsī, Hayyālīn I, 133; al-Ībīṣī, Mustāraf 506.
10. See for example al-Ma‘arrī, Gafārīn 136; cf. the same conceit by other poets in al-Ībīṣī, Mustāraf 105 (in one of the verses, the figure of Malik is substituted by the two terrible interrogators of the deceased, Munkar and Nakir).
13. Cf. al-Bāḥārī, Dumya I, 446. However, the word ‘fire’ in this line might also be understood as referring to the stake rather than to Hell. (The poem, as is proudly remarked by the author of the anthology, is by his own father.)
of an irritating bore, a real pain in the neck (the proverbial taqil, 'heavy' of mediaeval Arabic literature) that his weight would not only counterbalance all mankind if put on the Judgement Day's scales, but also break the device. An almost deaf man is described mockingly as someone who will not take note even of the kind if put on the Judgement Day's scales, but also break the device. An almost mediaeval Arabic literature) that his weight would not only counterbalance all mankind if put on the Judgement Day's scales, but also break the device.

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18. Similarly flippant comparisons of Paradise with pronouncedly profane and unbecoming subjects (especially the private behaviour of certain people) were by all appearances much relished by men of letters.

Wine, as favourite a topic with the muhdat poets as ever before, was the subject of much light-hearted jesting among literary figures when it came to discussing the religious condemnation attached to it. It gave rise to a very popular poetic convention, that of openly challenging if not provoking the religious establishment by declaring one's willingness to continue drinking in spite of one's knowledge of the consequences of such a behaviour in the afterlife. The most famous and probably one of the earliest manifestations of that poetic convention are some celebrated lines by the Iraqi poet known as as-Sarî ar-Raffâ', full as usual of word-play: "Hand over to me that which will be [considered] multiplied sin on the Day of Resurrection; its colour as beautiful as that of fire, the consequence of drinking it being also fire." (Hâfiz il'â' iyya yassâna hâzâr awwârî; ka-n-nârî fî l-husnî qiqba 'n-nârî)'20. Similarly flippant comparisons of Paradise with pronouncedly profane and unbecoming subjects (especially the private behaviour of certain people) were by all appearances much relished by men of letters.

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15. That jesting, exercised within reasonable and recognizable limits, has a wholesome effect on a civilized person's character was a fundamental notion in mediaeval Arabic thinking, cf. for instance van Gelder 1992:91.

20. As-Tâ'âîî, Hâfiz 61; also as-Tâ'âîî, I'â'âz 131. On the subject of Paradise and wine-drinking, cf. also the ironic proposition of Abu l-A'âl'a ar-Mâ'ârî that those who would not abandon wine-drinking during their earthly career will be denied that part of the pleasures of Paradise, an idea nowhere to be found in 'orthodox' religious doctrine; see also ar-Mâ'ârî, Gufrân 45, 47.

21. See, e.g. al-Qâhîz, Rasa'il II, 128; as-Tawhîdî, Basâ'id II, 4: 156; ar-Râghîb, Muhdârât II, 118; Yâqût, Mish'âd IV, 1685.

22. A slight shift of emphasis from the traditional theme of rejecting the interference of someone else in one's own affairs (the 'âdil or 'adilâl).
of an irritating bore, a real pain in the neck (the proverbial taqil, 'heavy' of mediaeval Arabic literature) that his weight would not only counterbalance all mankind if put on the Judgement Day's scales, but also break the device. An almost deaf man is described mockingly as someone who will not take note even of the trumpet of the Last Day. A seemingly very popular cliché was to praise a generous person by saying that, were it possible, he would be willing to share his good deeds with those in need of them on the Day of Judgement. Arguably the most sacrilegious imaginary account of the scenes of the Day of Judgement, which will move us on to the next point, is a well-known passage to be found in the Risālat al-ğurar, replete with a highly ironic evocation of all the details of the Islamic conception of this day, including the idea of intercession (lāṣa'ā).

It must be remarked that some of the literary uses of the theme of Paradise and Hell strike the modern reader as positively daring or risqué if viewed through the lense of Islamic piety. Nevertheless, the fact remains that such uses were not unknown and seem to have been tolerated, indeed enjoyed, by the educated classes as long as they were clearly kept within the confines of jesting (hazz) and did not evolve into statements of unbelief.

To start with, one sporadically runs into highly inappropriate comparisons between Paradise and worldly subjects, in which a standard method of creating a humorous effect can be easily observed. I am referring to the deliberate juxtaposition of stylistically distant, discrepant things, especially the most sacred and the most profane. The famous licentious poet Muṭṭa’s b. Iyās once said (apparently in casual conversation): "There is an attribute date-wine shares with Paradise, because God says (Q 35:34) that the inhabitants of Paradise will say: 'Thanks to God, who has driven sadness away from us!' Now, date-wine drives away sadness."

Wine, as favourite a topic with the muḥdath poets as ever before, was the subject of much light-hearted jesting among literary figures when it came to discussing the religious condemnation attached to it. It gave rise to a very popular poetic convention, that of openly challenging if not provoking the religious establishment by declaring one's willingness to continue drinking in spite of one's knowledge of the consequences of such a behaviour in the afterlife. The most famous and probably one of the earliest manifestations of that poetic convention are some celebrated lines by the Iraqi poet known as as-Sarī ar-Raffā', full as usual of word-play: "Hand over to me that which will be [considered] multiplied sin on the Day of Resurrection; [its] colour as beautiful as [that of] fire, the consequence of drinking it being also fire." (Hālā lī ḥaṣrā wa-hawāna l-hāsir awzārā; ka-n-nārī sī l-husnī qubā sabīhā n-nārī)20. Similarly flippant comparisons of Paradise with pronouncedly profane and unbecoming subjects (especially the private affairs of certain people) were by all appearances much relished by men of letters.

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18 See, e.g. al-Ǧāḥīz, Rawā̄sīl II, 128; at-Tawhīdī, Basā’ir II, 4: 156; ar-Ragib, al-Maqārim, 118; Yāqūt, Kitāb al-Diyār IV, 1685.

21 A slight shift of emphasis from the traditional theme of rejecting the interference of someone else in one's own affairs (the 'adīl or 'adilā) to the notion of openly challenging if not provoking the religious establishment by declaring one's willingness to continue drinking in spite of one's knowledge of the consequences of such a behaviour in the afterlife.

22 One of the earliest manifestations of that poetic convention are some celebrated lines by the Iraqi poet known as as-Sarī ar-Raffā’, full as usual of word-play: “Hand over to me that which will be [considered] multiplied sin on the Day of Resurrection; [its] colour as beautiful as [that of] fire, the consequence of drinking it being also fire.” (Hālā lī ḥaṣrā wa-hawāna l-hāsir awzārā; ka-n-nārī sī l-husnī qubā sabīhā n-nārī)20.
Haggag, the poet of the Buwayhid era made famous and successful by his obscene language and imagery, the following line of which is sufficient hint of the rest: “Give me to drink, unmixed, that which the God-inspired Qur'an clearly forbade” (fasqiyanu mahda lilti nataqa l-tahy bi-tabririn wa mina l-Qur'ani)24.

A possibly even more daring and brazen, but still not uncommon, theme in Arabic literature is probably due to the somewhat ill-defined role that the paradisiacal boys (al-ulidân al-muhalladân) are supposed to perform. It has given rise to the sarcastic inquiry about the exact nature of their mission, or even a more or less explicit suggestion that this role might be of a sexual character, like that of the ubiquitous gilmân of the age, a phenomenon so widespread in that period as almost to invite the supposition25. For instance, such is the purport of a passage in the Risâlat al-gusfran, where the author puts in the mouth of Iblis the inquiry whether, just like wine, intercourse with the heavenly lads has not become permitted to the inhabitants of Paradise after having been strictly prohibited in life26. Given the unequivocal condemnation of homosexuality in Islamic jurisprudence, this supposition remained a rude sort of jesting with sanctity, yet nonetheless enjoyed by contemporary littérature as a very witty joke.

Light-hearted joking with deliberately misunderstood or misinterpreted verses from the Qur'an was a favourite kind of witicism among Muslim intellectuals in the Middle Ages, and it was certainly not taken seriously by anyone if no harm was intended. What is worth noting in this context, as indeed elsewhere too, is the fact that playing with the Qur'anic text appears to have been as common in normal, everyday conversation as it was in ‘high’ literature, as testified by a large number of jokes or quasi-jokes in the anecdotal material of adab collections. So much so that a work on political humour even regards this source of fun a typical manifestation of the Arabs’ sense of wit (al-Qishayni 1992:27). As far as literature proper is concerned, allusions to the Qur'an’s verses as a source of humour are especially common in adab collections, that is to say in anecdotes, but they are by no means absent from poetry.

24 at-Ta'libî, Yatima III, 66. See also another extremely provocative Baccic poem by Ibn al-Haggag in op. cit. III, 91, where the poet says that the wine which he consumed during his earthly life he will urinate only later, when in Hell.

25 Cf. the implicit argumentation of sâhib al-gilmân (‘the lover of boys’) in al-Ghazî's Mu'afgarat al-fanâr wa-l-gilman in al-Ghazî, Rasûl II, 96 (‘uswa-sinawwa ashîyam wa-liyâna ashîa’). In a later work, Abû Nuwas is quoted to have remarked to the statement that God had made a firm promise to marry believers to the lovely hours of Paradise: “I am not a man with a taste for women. The paradisiacal lads, much sooner.” See ar-Râghib. Muhabdarat II, 109. See also the words of the qadî Yahyâ b. Aktam, a famous homosexual, in Ibn Sa'id, Muqtafat 208.

26 al-Ma'arrî, Gusfran 138. That joking about supposed sexual activities in the afterlife was probably not an unknown topic in educated conversation is indicated by an anecdote about a passive homosexual (muhabn) called Quranful and certain sexual enjoyment he has found in Hell, see at-Tawhidi, Basîr I, 4: 44.

either27. For instance, one such anecdote tells of an embenname man, a frequent star of witty stories, climbing to the summit of a mountain in Syria, then, angry with exhaustion, addressing the mountain: “Oh what a joy it is going to be for me to see you become like carded wool” (wa-samâtati bika yawm arâka la-kel 'ibn al-manfîs), wherein, of course, the last two words are a Qur'anic phrase (101:5) depicting a scene of doomsday28. The horrors of doomsday are also made fun of in a story about a host who would postpone again and again the date of an invitation to a party for his friends. The latter, exasperated with the repeated postponement, chided the host with the Qur'anic verse “when is your promise going to come true?” (Q 67:25), which originally are the words of unbelievers mocking the Prophet. The host, finally coming round to organizing the party, invites his friends with the phrase “go ahead towards what you have been denying” (intalqi ilâ mân kuntum bibi tukaddibûn), which in the Qur'an (77:29) refers to the unbelievers being driven towards Hell (Ibn al-Gawzi, Zîraf 90). A scrutiny of anecdotal literature will yield a multitude of further examples to illustrate this penchant for jesting based on religious concepts, not least those concerning the afterlife29. In the field of poetry, an allusion of no infrequent occurrence is to the verse when the earth begins to tremble (iddâ zulsilat}
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Light-hearted joking with deliberately misunderstood or misinterpreted verses from the Qur’an was a favourite kind of witticism among Muslim intellectuals in the Middle Ages, and it was certainly not taken seriously by anyone if no harm was intended. What is worth noting in this context, as indeed elsewhere too, is the fact that playing with the Qur’an’s text appears to have been as common in normal, everyday conversation as it was in ‘high’ literature, as testified by a large number of jokes or quasi-jokes in the anecdotal material of adab collections. So much so that a work on political humour even regards this source of humour as a very witty joke.

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25 Cf. the implicit argumentation of sikh al-gilmân (‘the lover of boys’) in al-Gahih’s Mufadharat al-ṣufiār who ‘in his (Iblis) heart is in Heaven, and a later work, Abū Nuwas is quoted to have remarked to the statement that God had made a firm promise to marry believers. The paradisiacal lads, much sooner.” See at-Raghb, Muḥākamat II, 109. See also the words of the qādi Yahyâ b. Ākta, a famous homosexual, in Ibn Sa‘îd, Muqatatf 208.

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27 The Arabic term for literary quotations from the Qur’ān is iqtibās, which was thought to have two subcategories, one of these being the conscious and deliberate alteration of the real sense of the cited Qur’ānic passage; see von Grunebaum 1944:245.

28 For the anecdote, see at-Tawhidī, Basâ’Ir I, 1: 98.

29 E. g. the misinterpretation of the Qur’ānic phrase “wa-gannatūn al-jifdr” (78:16) as “one million [of] alf paradises”, see at-Tawhindī, Basâ’Ir I, 2: 231. A similarly absurdical misapprehension (of the word mušâbî in Qur’an 76:18) is mentioned in al-Gahih, Hayawān I, 188-89. According to another joke, the ignorant popular preacher Sayfawayhi added the following commentary to the Qur’ānic verse that describes the hours as being “like rubies and corals” (55:58): “Now surely they aren’t like your sluts of a wife!” See at-Tawhidī, Basâ’Ir II, 4: 49. In a source, an unnamed Baghdadian woman is quoted to have sarcastically remarked, with the words of a husband, on seeing a religious dignitary give away his old sandals as alms: “The believer will find shade under his alms on the Day of Resurrection” (al-mu‘min taba zill adadaqahibi yawm al-jame). See Ibn Sa‘îd, Muqatatf 178. Cf. also Hammâd ‘Agrad’s joking with the verses 104:6-8 of the Qur’an ("inshallah ilâ yamnah al-mu’sade") in Ibn al-Mu‘atzz, Ṭahātq 26; Balsâr b. Burd’s sarcastic remark on a depiction of Paradise by a popular preacher in az-Zaggâqî, Amâl 137; and Abû Ishaq an-Nasîbî on the boredom of life in Heaven (although whether he meant this as a joke, which I would guess he did, is open to interpretation) in at-Tawhidī, Muqatasat 194. For further examples of playing with the Qur’an’s text or meaning, cf. al-Ishîî, Mustâraf 477 (a splendid pun on the expression “fibâ ‘ayman a’ayra”, Q 88:129, 539 (on a description of Heaven: "wada’abu bi-salāmim aminin", Q 15:46; “wa-ma bâ ‘inshî bikhârghîn”, Q 15:48); aq’alîbî, Yatima III, 197 ("Fealâla fea’alâna fe wa’ul-lakâhîn", Q 37:55); IV, 435; and aq’alîbî, Tâtimma II, 101 (a poem describing the appearance of a beautiful boy’s beard with the phrase “afâ ilânas kawwatsar”, Q 81:1); al-Bâhîrî, Darumya II, 854 (“wâllâ biwa siliyyan", Q 19:70); II, 1387 (an anecdote based on an extremely funny misconception of the purport of Q 9:63 and 4:114); Pseudo-Tawhidī, Risâla baqkhâlayya 230 (a joke on a well-known element of the Qur’anic description of the final judgement, "hâtha wa’al-lamânu fi sammi l’jâfâr", Q 7:40, 305 (the jestful use of various Qur’ānic phrases describing the pleasures of Paradise).
l-ardu zilzalahā; Q 99:1), a sign of the arrival of doomsday, which we find incorporated in various poems to create a funny effect, sometimes in a quite frivolous manner. Even these pale, however, beside a poem by the famous vizier and patron as-Sāhib b. ‘Abbād, in which God’s words—as cited in the Qur’ān (14:7)—are put in a sexual context, and a disgustedly obscene one at that. Less offensive yet distinctly mischievous is a poem on an unrefromable drunkard whose preferred Qur’ānic verse is one narrating a terrifying scene of doomsday: “And you will see the people (as though) being drunk” (wa-tard n-ndsarak; Q 22:2) (at-Ta‘alībī, Yatima IV, 352). Smiling allusions to the Qur’ān’s text can even be found in such a vernacular genre as the Andalusian zajāl. The above examples perhaps suffice to show that the ubiquity of eschatological conceits and conventions in written literature is but a reflection of the popularity of this source of humour among the people in general, aristocrats and commoners alike. It is indicative of the general acceptance of this sort of humour that an often cited hadīt makes the Prophet himself misintend deliberately the Qur’ānic passage (56:36-37) that those entering Paradise will do so in a rejuvenated body when saying jokingly to an old woman: “No old woman will ever enter Paradise”.

To summarize my argument, the following observations can be made. In all the above examples, wittiness and esprit (zarf) were apparently an excuse for jokes, thematic conceits and metaphors that would otherwise have been regarded outrageous by pious Muslims. That this should have been so at least in the high Abbasid period is not too much of a surprise. It can generally be observed that the stiffness of the old Bedouin code of behaviour, which used to weigh heavily upon ancient poets, underwent a more than palpable relaxation in the cultural milieu of the Abbasid, and especially the Buwayhid, periods, a phenomenon no doubt connected with the rapid urbanization of the age. Lots of anecdotes attest that jokes, remarks, and ways of behaviour which formerly would have been cause for murder or the capital punishment had by then come to be not only tolerated but even relished by most people.

30 See at-Ta‘alībī, Yatima III, 272 (here the humorous effect is further enhanced by the incorporation of the subsequent Qur’ānic verse too in the second line); at-Ta‘alībī, Fīgāz 162; Ibn al-Mu‘azz, Tabāqāt 141 (here the Qur’ānic phrase is juxtaposed to a breathtakingly obscene expression).

31 at-Ta‘alībī, Yatima III, 267. There is an insignificant variation of the wording of the original passage.


33 E.g., Ibn Sa‘īd, Muqataba‘/173. This story is frequently met with in Arabic sources, cf. Sadan 1983:64.

not least among the intelligentsia. The spectacular proliferation of eschatological jokes, witticisms and poetic conventions is easy to fit into that general trend. It will also have been noted by the reader that a lot of the poetic conceits current in the East found their way to the Muslim West, especially al-Andalus, which is beyond doubt due to the immense prestige that Eastern literary traditions and cultural patterns enjoyed in the West.

There seems to have been no limit to the uses of such humour, zarf being a sufficient justification for it, sometimes all but calling for such allusions to religious topics to give a frivolous, mischievous flavour to a poem or a prose passage. Even otherwise deeply pious people appear to have had no reservations about enjoying the poetic merits of patently irreverent works. As Franz Rosenthal put it in his work on anecdotes about Abū ‘Abdāl-rāmān: “The otherworldliness of Islam did little to stop the actual enjoyment and literary appreciation of humor”; and in another passage: “ [...] there existed a pronounced predilection for humor and gaiety which knew few restrictions”. And few they were indeed, as I hope to have shown above. The celebrated literary critic al-Qādī al-Ğurgānī certainly expresses the view of many of his contemporaries when writing thus: “If [a poet's unsound] religious beliefs were a shortcoming in his poems, and wrong convictions were a cause for discarding a poet, it would be necessary to delete the very name of Abū Nuwās from poetic anthologies and to forgo even mentioning him when enumerating the generations of poets, and even more so the poets of the Gāhibīyya and all those who are notorious among the Muslims for their disbelief. [...] However, these are two very distinct fields, and religion has nothing to do with poetry”. Significantly, a modern Arab author has

34 It must, however, be remarked in this context that there were some periods and special circumstances in which this general observation might not be valid, and joking with religious concepts could, and did, on some occasions lead to the death penalty. Cf. Fierro 1990, esp. p. 117. I am indebted to Maribel Fierro for calling my attention to the fact that some genuine external or internal threat felt by the Muslim religious establishment (like the advance of the Christians or the 'fashion' of seeking martyrdom through insulting Islam by the Mozarab Christians in mediaeval Andalusia) might at times increase orthodox sensitivities and lower the level of tolerance.

35 Cf. Blachère 1930:15-16; Rubiera Mata 1992:16, 22. The latter author first speaks about what he terms the ‘baghdadization’ of the Cordoba court, then later remarks that the Oriental literary influence did not stop at the gates of the Spanish Omayad capital. As the author puts it, “Si Córdoba se había convertido en una pequeña Bagdad, las capitales de los reinos de taifas se convertirán en pequeñas Cordobas [...].”

36 Rosenthal 1956:3, 4. In the introductory part of Ewald Wagner’s edition of the diwan of Abū Nuwās, the frivolous poet par excellence among the Arabs, Hamza al-Isbahànī is cited to the effect that Abū Nuwās’s poetry never ceased to be recited among the religious dignitaries and the noblemen (al-ulamā‘ wa-l-asrāj); see Abū Nuwās, Diwan A, 9.

37 al-Ğurgānī, Wasatīa 66. It should be added that for mediaeval Arab authors, jesting had little if anything to do with ethics, and, as a general rule, “poetry and the criticism of poetry lie outside the domain
l-ardu zilzalahá; Q 99:1), a sign of the arrival of doomsday, which we find incorporated in various poems to create a funny effect, sometimes in a quite frivolous manner. Even these pale, however, beside a poem by the famous vizier and patron as-Sahib b. ‘Abbád, in which God’s words as cited in the Qur’án (14:7) are put in a sexual context, and a disgustingly obscene one at that. Less offensive yet still distinctly mischievous is a poem on an unreformable drunkard whose preferred Qur’anic verse is one narrating a terrifying scene of doomsday: “And you will see the people [as though] being drunk” (wa-tarát n-nása subká; Q 22:2) (at-Ta’alibi, Yatima IV, 352). Smiling allusions to the Qur’án’s text can even be found in such a vernacular genre as the Andalusian zagal. The above examples perhaps suffice to show that the ubiquity of eschatological conceits and conventions in written literature is but a reflection of the popularity of this source of humour among the people in general, aristocrats and commoners alike. It is indicative of the general acceptance of this sort of humour that an often cited hadith makes the Prophet himself misinterpret deliberately the Qur’anic passage (56:36-37) that those entering Paradise will do so in a rejuvenated body when saying jokingly to an old woman: “No old woman will ever enter Paradise”.

To summarize my argument, the following observations can be made. In all the above examples, witiness and esprit (zarf) were apparently an excuse for jokes, thematic conceits and metaphors that would otherwise have been regarded outrageous by pious Muslims. That this should have been so at least in the high Abbasid period is not too much of a surprise. It can generally be observed that the stiffness of the old Bedouin code of behaviour, which used to weigh heavily upon ancient poets, underwent a more than palpable relaxation in the cultural milieu of the Abbasid, especially the Buwayhid, periods, a phenomenon no doubt connected with the rapid urbanization of the age. Lots of anecdotes attest that jokes, remarks, and ways of behaviour which formerly would have been cause for murder or the capital punishment had by then come to be not only tolerated but even relished by most people, especially the Buwayhid, periods, a phenomenon no doubt connected with the rapid urbanization of the age. Lots of anecdotes attest that jokes, remarks, and ways of behaviour which formerly would have been cause for murder or the capital punishment had by then come to be not only tolerated but even relished by most people.

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37 al-Gurghání, Wasíta 66. It should be added that for mediaeval Arab authors, jesting had little if anything to do with ethics, and, as a general rule, “poetry and the criticism of poetry lie outside the domain not least among the intelligentsia”. The spectacular proliferation of eschatological jokes, witticisms and poetic conventions is easy to fit into that general trend. It will also have been noted by the reader that a lot of the poetic conceits current in the East found their way to the Muslim West, especially al-Andalus, which is beyond doubt due to the immense prestige that Eastern literary traditions and cultural patterns enjoyed in the West.

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made the somewhat impressionistic yet perhaps not altogether inaccurate observation that the freedom of modern Arab literati to engage in all sorts of wit and humour compares quite unfavourably with that enjoyed by their predecessors in the Middle Ages (al-Qiṣṭāyni 1992:38).

And finally, not only was such jesting apparently tolerated and accepted, but some, although not all, daring conceits even evolved, as we have seen, into veritable conventions, the typical fate of successful expressions, thematic novelties, and the like in mediaeval Arabic literature. I believe it is nothing short of ironic that something meant to be a bold or even audacious posture should finally end up being a mere convention, but that is precisely what happened to quite a few products of the literary attitude known as muqāfīn, that is frivolity and debauchery, in Abbasid times and onwards. Poking fun at the concepts of the religious tradition, as long as it remained a literary practice, was in this sense a mere fashion and, in the hands of many poets, was bound to grow into no more than mannerism.

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of ethics, in the view of Ḥāzīm [al-Qartāḡānī] and of the majority of Arab critics.” See van Gelder 1992:188.

38 Cf. Hamori 1969:10 on the “self-conscious rejection” of an old poetic convention (the melancholy stopping over a deserted encampment) ending up being a convention itself. As van Grunebaum states at a general observation, after the stir caused by the literary revolution brought about by the muḥdāθāt, conventionalism finally claimed its rights in Arabic poetry around 1000 AD; see von Grunebaum 1944:250. On muqāfīn and related concepts, cf. Pellat 1960ff (and Montgomery 1960ff); also Kraemer 1986:15. Ismail El-ʿOutmani, making use of Bakhtin’s ‘carnival theory’, labels the assemblage of such literary products as ‘carnivalised’ literature, see El-ʿOutmani 1995:165-166. On pp. 169-173, he argues that many poets, such as Ibn al-Ḥaggāḡ, would deliberately maskerade as ‘fools’ in order to escape the possibility of religious charges being levelled against their behaviour and literary activity.
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