

COME HELL OR HIGH WATER
AFTERLIFE AS A POETIC CONVENTION
IN MEDIAEVAL ARABIC LITERATURE

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The Qur'ān, 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'ānic description of Paradise and Hell, not surprisingly, proved to be a constant inspiration to most people's imagination. The Qur'ān 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'ānic passages with like details, as attested by stories about the *quṣṣās* and other bearers of the new, urban, Islamic folklore. Even a cursory look into *muhḍat* 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 (*ġanna*, *ġinān*, *firdaws*, 'adn, etc.) and Hell (*ġahannam*, *an-nār*, *saqar*, *al-ġahīm*, 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 heat¹.

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 one². Occasionally, however, we do encounter examples of more original variations on the evergreen theme. A famous intellectual of the Buwayhid era, Abū Ishāq as-Sābi' 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'ālībī, *Yatīma* II, 259). The Egyptian poet Abū Muhammad al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Wakī' at-Tinnīsī, displaying the characteristic *muhdat* preoccupation with witty paradoxes, likens his non-Muslim beloved to a *hūrīyya*, then proceeds to add that this beloved person cannot be regarded an infidel since the houris' dwelling-place, as is clear from the Qur'ānic text, is Paradise and certainly not Hell³. Finally, the poet Abū l-ʿAtāhiya 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

¹ To list just the harvest of a very cursory survey: Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt* 6 ("yā rahmata 'llāhi hullī fi manāzilinā, ḥashī bi-rā'ihati l-firdawsī min fiki"); at-Ta'ālībī, *Yatīma* IV, 210 ("adīrī min dahikīn gadā sababa l-bukā wa-min ḡannatin qad awqa'at fī ḡabannamī"); at-Ta'ālībī, *Tatīmma* I, 139 ("in takun ḡannata n-na'imi fa-fihā min adā l-ḡabli wa-l-ḡumārī ḡahīmū"); op. cit. II, 38 ("ḡammāmuhu ka-ḡahīmin min ḡararatihī lākin mata ta'tihī yaḡdumuka Ridwānu"); al-Bāḡharzī, *Dumya* I, 114 ("kilā rāḡatayka nadan radan ka-annaka li-n-nāsi nārūn wa-ḡanna"); Ibn Sa'īd, *Rāyāt* 61 ("madat ḡannatu l-ma'wā wa-ḡā'at ḡabannamū, fa-hā anā aḡḡā ḡā'da mā kuntu an'amū"); Ibn Sa'īd, *Muqtataf* 107 ("idā adḡaltahu n-nāra ḡakā rā'ihata l-ḡanna"); al-Ḡurḡānī, *Wasāta* 303 ("fi mahallin bayna l-ḡināni wa-bayna n-nāri arḡū tawran wa-tawran aḡāfu"); Pseudo-Tawḡhidī, *Risāla baḡdādiyya* 113 (falsely attributed in this edition to at-Tawḡhidī, it is in fact a work by Abū l-Muṭaḡhar al-Azdī) and at-Ta'ālībī, *Fḡāz* 246 ("ilā ardin ḡanāḡa min ḡanā ḡannati Ridwāni"); Ibn Dihya, *Mutrib* 3 ("futtihati l-ḡannatu min ḡaybihi fa-bitu fi da'wati Ridwāni"); Ibn al-Ḥatīb, *Ḡays* 14 ("[...] fa-a'āda n-nāra ḡanna", in a *muwassāḡa* [by Ibn Baḡī]). To this list of poetic examples, I might add an idiomatic usage cited in a late mediaeval source: a stupid plus obnoxious individual would be referred to as *baḡar saḡar* ('hell's cattle'), while a stupid but harmless one would be called *baḡar al-ḡanna* ('heaven's cattle'); see al-Ibḡīhī, *Mustatraf* 22.

² E.g. Ibn Sa'īd, *Rāyāt* 71; Pseudo-Tawḡhidī, *Risāla baḡdādiyya* 358; al-Hillī, *ʿĀtil* 31, 174 (in a *zaḡal* and a *qūmā* respectively); Ibn al-Ḥatīb, *Ḡays* 161 (in a *muwassāḡa* by 'Īsā ibn Labūn); al-Marzūqī 1967:110 (in a Tunisian vernacular poem of the *mahzūz* genre).

³ at-Ta'ālībī, *Yatīma* I, 371: "li-annahū ka-l-ḡūrī fi taswīrihi wa-l-ḡūru lā yuskinuhā 'llāhu s-saḡar".

the girl he loved and not vice versa ("fa-ḥadā bi-quḍrati nafsihi ḥūra l-ḡināni 'alā miṭālik")⁴.

As widespread as images of the houris is the recurrent thematic fixture of *al-wildān al-muḥalladūn*, or the handsome young lads waiting on the inhabitants of Paradise, whose conspicuity in the Qur'ānic passages describing the eternal bliss of Paradise has led 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 maqāma* of al-Hamadānī, 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 Ridwān” (*fa-mā šakaknā annahu ḥasama l-wildān, fa-fāraqa l-ḡinān, wa-baraba min Ridwān*) (al-Hamadānī, *Maqāmāt* 42). This is very similar to a passage in the *Yatīma* of at-Ta'ālībī where an exceptionally comely young servant called Naṣṭūs of the Ḥamdānid court is characterized as looking “as though, in a moment of Ridwān's inattention, he ran away from Paradise” (*ka-anna Ridwān ḡafala 'anhu fa-abiqa min al-ḡanna*)⁵. 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 Ridwān himself lest he should prove a temptation to the houris⁶! A *murwāṣṣah* of the Andalusī poet Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī modifies the theme again; here it is a houri sent to mankind by Ridwān that the beloved is likened to (aṣ-Ṣafādī, *Tawṣī'* 159). We will return to the topic of *al-wildān al-muḥalladūn* further on, when speaking of more risqué thematic conventions.

The various named rivers of Paradise, like *Kawṭar*, *Salsabīl* and *Tasnīm*, 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

⁴ Ibn Qutayba, *Šīr* 411. In fact, this appears to be either a poetic convention or an instance of plagiarism, cf. an expression of the same idea in Abū Nuwās, *Dīwān* B 403 (“fa-lamma ḥattahu baṣāran sawiyyan ḥadā ḥūra l-ḡināni 'alā ḥidāhu”).

⁵ at-Ta'ālībī, *Yatīma* I, 89. Cf. also Ibn al-Kattānī, *Taṣbiḥāt* 162; Pseudo-Tawḥīdī, *Risāla bagdādiyya* 362.

⁶ at-Ta'ālībī, *Yatīma* II, 205: “abraḡahu Ridwānu min dārihi mahāfata tuftatana l-ḥūru” (by a poet of Mosul called Sa'īd b. Ḥāšim al-Ḥālidī). That the paradisiacal virgins might be susceptible to the charms of mere mortals already appears in a verse by Abū Nuwās, cf. Abū Nuwās, *Dīwān* A 433 (“wa-taṣawwaḡat ḥūru l-ḡināni mina l-ḥulūdi ilā miṭālik”).

the saliva of the beloved person. Again, examples of this convention are so conspicuous that I omit to make an inventory here⁷.

Of the constituents of the Muslim conception of Hell, Mālik the gate-keeper of the Inferno is often mentioned in witty contexts, as are the horrible workforce of Hell, the *zabāniya*⁸. 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-Faḥḥ 'Alī al-Bustī complains to a vizier of the latter's gate-keeper by stating that while the vizierial palace is a heavenly abode for all visitors, its doorman rather reminds one of Mālik ("dāruka lī ḡannatun walākinna bawwābahā Māliku l-ḡahīmi")⁹. In a poem, the famous Buwayhid vizier as-Saḥīb b. 'Abbād ridicules a man of parasitic habits with the hyperbole that he would probably try even to prey on the hospitality of Mālik, 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 *muhdat* 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-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt* 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 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 working next to the *zabāniya*" (*hakā l-'adna tiban wal-ḡahīma harāratan wal-huddāmuhu hūrun talīhim zabāniya*) (al-Bāḥarzī, *Dumya* II, 856).

⁷ Cf. for instance al-Bāḥarzī, *Dumya* III, 1492 (here the cliché is juxtaposed to another popular conceit of mediaeval Arab poets, the *iqtibās* or incorporation of Qur'anic phrases [this one from 55: 54], about which later); Ibn Sa'īd, *Rāyāt* 88; Ibn Dihya, *Mutrib* 170; Ibn al-Kattānī, *Tasbiḥāt* 92; al-Ibšīhī, *Mustatraf* 277; Pseudo-Tawḥīdī, *Risāla baḡdādiyya* 358, 376; Ibn al-Ḥaṭīb, *Ġayṣ* 185 [Abū 'Amir ibn Yanaq].

⁸ See for example al-Ma'arrī, *Ġufrān* 44; at-Ta'ālībī, *Fḡāz* 204; Ibn Dihya, *Mutrib* 96; al-Ġaḥīz, *Ḥayawān* I, 133; al-Ibšīhī, *Mustatraf* 306.

⁹ at-Ta'ālībī, *Yatīma* IV, 326; and cf. the same conceit by other poets in al-Ibšīhī, *Mustatraf* 105 (in one of the verses, the figure of Mālik is substituted by the two terrible interrogators of the deceased, Munkar and Nakīr).

¹⁰ at-Ta'ālībī, *Yatīma* III, 270. Cf. a flippant joke about *zaqqūm* and other dreadful things awaiting sinners in Hell in at-Tawḥīdī, *Basā'ir* V, 9: 119. For more literary uses of *zaqqūm*, cf. Pseudo-Tawḥīdī, *Risāla baḡdādiyya* 180, 296, 379.

¹¹ al-Bāḥarzī, *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.)

Images of the Muslim conception of the Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāma*) are also something of a commonplace in the poetic language of the *muhdathūn* as well as in prose and in the educated conversational style of the age. So much so that the very word resurrection, *qiyāma*, and the expression *qāmat al-qiyāma* (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 dialects¹². 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 *qiyāma* of a sparing sort, lacking as it does such common attributes of the last day as the arrival of the Antichrist, the Mahdī, or the Beast (*dābbat al-ard*) (at-Tawhīdī, *Baṣā'ir* 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" (*fa-sā'atun minhu 'indī fī ṭūli yawmi l-qiyāma*)¹³. Such elements of the description of Resurrection in the Qur'ān as the scales that weigh every man's good and bad deeds (*al-mīzān*), or the trumpet (*as-sūr*) sounded by the archangel Isrāfil 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*" (*ahbabbtu l-qiyāmata lā li-say'in wa-lākin kay arāka 'alā ṣ-sirātī*)¹⁴. The Syrian poet Abū 'Umāra as-Sūfī says

¹² Examples include the following: at-Ta'ālībī, *Yatīma* I, 299 ("wa-zabyin aqāma qiyāmatī min qabli an ta'tiya l-qiyāma"); al-Bāharzī, *Dumya* I, 101 ("qamarun aqāma qiyāmatī bi-qawāmihī lammā ta'awwad"); Pseudo-Tawhīdī, *Risāla bagdādiyya* 363 ("wayha l-qulūbi mina l-uyūni la-qad qāmat qiyāmatuhunna fī d-dunyā"); al-Ibšīhī, *Mustatraf* 284 ("lā ta'gabū in qāmat fihī qiyāmatī inna l-qiyāmata yawma kaṣfi s-sāqī"; note also the masterful reference in this line by Dū r-Rumma to Q 68:42); Ben Cheneb 1922:141 ("ḥafī ilāhaki fī nafsīn qadi ḥtadarat qāmat qiyāmatuhā bayna l-musallīnā"); cf. also the same idea (without the use of the term *qiyāma*) moulded in the form of a simile in Ibn al-Kattānī, *Tasbihāt* 291; and the use of Qur'ānic phrases depicting *yawm al-qiyāma* to describe extreme turmoil in al-Hamadānī, *Maqāmāt* 67 ("fa-ṣāha binā sayhatan kādat labā l-ard tanfaṭir, wa-n-nuḡūm tankadir").

¹³ al-Bāharzī, *Dumya* II, 732. Cf. Bilāl b. Ḡarīr's lampoon on Ḥammād al-Minqarī in Ibn Qutayba, *Ṣir* 231.

¹⁴ az-Zawzanī, *Hamāsa* II, 116. See also Ibn Dihya, *Mutrib* 59; and a *muwaṣṣah* by Ibn Baqī in Ibn al-Ḥatīb, *Ḡays* 15 ("in ḡuzta sirāta ṣaddī, tamatta'ta min qurbi 'adni"). The *sirāt* is also mentioned in a sweeping quasi-vernacular 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 bagdādiyya* 378. In a funny anecdote, an uncouth Bedouin, the usual butt of many jokes, praises the luxurious sweetmeat called

of an irritating bore, a real pain in the neck (the proverbial *taqīl*, '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 device¹⁵. An almost deaf man is described mockingly as someone who will not take note even of the Trumpet of the Last Day¹⁶. 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 Judgement¹⁷. Arguably the most sarcastic 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-ḡufrān*, replete with a highly ironic evocation of all the details of the Islamic conception of this day, including the idea of intercession (*ṣafā'a*)¹⁸.

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

falūdaḡ by declaring that it cannot be anything else but *aṣ-ṣirāt al-mustaḡim* (literally, 'the straight path'); see al-Ibṣīhī, *Mustatraf* 189. For the concept of the *ṣirāt* in mediaeval popular culture, see also Shoshan 1991:84-85.

¹⁵ at-Ta'ālibī, *Yatīma* I, 289. For another example of making fun of the concept of the 'scales' in various manners, cf. at-Ta'ālibī, *Tatīmma* I, 27 ("*wa-suriqat lahu durayhimātun fa-ḡila lā tahtamma fa-innahā fī mizānuka fa-ḡala mina l-mizāni suriqat*").

¹⁶ See al-Bāharzī, *Dumya* II, 1068 (the poem is by the anthologist himself). On the subject of the Trumpet, see further examples in at-Ta'ālibī, *Tatīmma* II, 32 ("*aḡāmū 'alā n-nāsi l-qiyāmata ḡabratan wa-ḡā'ū bi-Isrāfīla fī s-sūri yanfuhu*"); al-Ma'arrī, *Ḡufrān* 126 ("*hattā idā 'nfaddati d-dunya wa-nudiya Isrāfīlu wayhaka hallā tanfuhu s-sūrā*"); Ibn al-Kattānī, *Taṣbiḥāt* 213 ("*ka-anna s-sūra dammat nashatuhu ilayhi kulla man sakana t-turāba*"); op. cit. 257 ("*tabdu bi-waḡhin mā ra'āhu 'mru'un illā tamannā n-naḡḡa fī s-sūri*"); Pseudo-Tawhīdī, *Risāla ḡadādiyya* 332 ("*kullu muḡannin bi-kulli tunburin dūnaka hattā n-naḡḡa fī s-sūri*"); and a lovely anecdote attributed to 'Amir as-Ṣa'bī in Ibn al-Ḡawzī, *Qussās* 302. A poem by Abu Ḡa'far Muḡammad al-Baḡḡāt ridicules an untalented singer by likening his voice to the screams of Doomsday (*ṣayḡat al-qiyāma*), see az-Zawzanī, *Hamāsa* II, 137.

¹⁷ See three examples of it in al-Ḡurḡānī, *Wasāta* 196.

¹⁸ al-Ma'arrī, *Ḡufrān* 90-99. Popular beliefs similar to the notion of intercession (concerning practices that might help a believer save himself on the Day of Judgement) are the butt of a joke about a *qāss*, or popular preacher, who says that by swallowing, rather than just chewing, the blessed liver of Hamza (one of the Prophet's uncles), the abominable Hind bint 'Urba could have saved herself from Hell despite her heinous sin, to which someone present piously responds: "Oh my God, allow us to eat of the liver of Hamza!" See at-Tawhīdī, *Basā'ir* II, 3: 157. As the scenes of the Day of Judgement are so familiar to any ordinary Muslim, it is little wonder that jokes set in these contexts seem still to be popular among contemporary Arabs. For some examples, see al-Qiṣṭaynī 1992:179-180, 191-192. (The latter joke features the two dreadful interrogating angels, Munkar and Nakīr, another well-known element of Islamic eschatology).

as long as they were clearly kept within the confines of jesting (*hazl*) and did not evolve into statements of unbelief¹⁹.

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 Muṭī' 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." (*Inna fī n-nabīd la-ma'nā fī l-ġanna li-anna 'llāh ta'ālā dakara 'an ahlihā annahum yaqūlūna al-ḥamdu li-llāhi lladī adhaba 'annā l-hazan, wa-n-nabīd yudhibu l-hazan*)²⁰. Similarly flippant comparisons of Paradise with pronouncedly profane and unbecoming subjects (especially the private parts of certain people) were by all appearances much relished by men of letters²¹.

Wine, as favourite a topic with the *muḥdat* 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 afterlife²². 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" (*Hāti 'llatī hiya yawma l-ḥaṣri awzarū; ka-n-nāri fī l-husni 'uqba šurbihā n-nārū*)²³. The tone of this poem surely pales in comparison with one composed by Ibn al-

¹⁹ 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 at-Ta'ālibī, *Ḥaṣṣ* 61; also at-Ta'ālibī, *l-ġāz* 131. On the subject of Paradise and wine-drinking, cf. also the ironic proposition of Abū l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī 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 al-Ma'arrī, *Gufṛān* 45, 47.

²¹ See, e.g. al-Ġāhiz, *Rasā'il* II, 128; at-Tawhīdī, *Baṣā'ir* II, 4: 156; ar-Raġib, *Muḥādarāt* II, 118; Yāqūt, *Irṣād* 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 '*ādil*' or '*ādila*').

²³ at-Ta'ālibī, *Yatima* II, 137. There are several other variations on the theme by as-Sarī ar-Raffā'. Cf. also the finishing lines of a poem attributed to Abū Nuwās in az-Zaġġāġī, *Amālī* 98.

Haġġāġ, 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'ān clearly forbade" (*fa-sqiyānī mahda llatī nataqa l-wahyu bi-tahrīmihā minā l-Qurānī*)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-wildān al-muhalladūn*) 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 *ġilmān* 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 *Risālat al-ġufrān*, where the author puts in the mouth of Iblīs 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 *littérateurs* as a very witty joke.

Light-hearted joking with deliberately misunderstood or misinterpreted verses from the Qur'ān 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'ānic 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-Qiṣṭaynī 1992:27). As far as literature proper is concerned, allusions to the Qur'ān'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'ālībī, *Yatīma* III, 66. See also another extremely provocative Bacchic poem by Ibn al-Haġġāġ 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 *ṣāhib al-ġilmān* ('the lover of boys') in al-Ġāhiz's *Mufaḥḥarāt al-ġawārī wa-l-ġilmān* in al-Ġāhiz, *Rasā'il* II, 96 ("wa-sawwaqa ilayhim awliyā'ahu"). In a later work, Abū Nuwās is quoted to have remarked to the statement that God had made a firm promise to marry believers to the lovely houris of Paradise: "I am not a man with a taste for women. The paradisiacal lads, much sooner." See ar-Rāġib, *Muhādarāt* II, 109. See also the words of the *qāḍī* Yahyā b. Akṭam, a famous homosexual, in Ibn Sa'īd, *Muqtataf* 208.

²⁶ al-Ma'arrī, *Ġufrān* 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 (*muhannat*) called Qaranful and certain sexual enjoyments he has found in Hell, see at-Tawhīdī, *Baṣā'ir* II, 4: 44.

either²⁷. For instance, one such anecdote tells of an effeminate 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" (*wā šamātatī bika yawm arāka ka-l-'ibn al-manfūs*), wherein, of course, the last two words are a Qur'ānic 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'ānic 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" (*intaliqū ilā mā kuntum bihi tukaddibūn*), which in the Qur'an (77:29) refers to the unbelievers being driven towards Hell (Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Zirāf* 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 not infrequent occurrence is to the verse "when the earth begins to tremble" (*idā zulzilati*

²⁷ The Arabic term for literary quotations from the Qur'an 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'anic passage; see von Grunebaum 1944:245.

²⁸ For the anecdote, see at-Tawhīdī, *Baṣā'ir* I, 1: 98.

²⁹ E. g. the misinterpretation of the Qur'anic phrase "*wa-ḡannatin alfāfan*" (78:16) as "one million (*alf alf*) paradises", see at-Tawhīdī, *Baṣā'ir* I, 2: 231. A similarly absurd misapprehension (of the word *salsabil* in Qur'an 76:18) is mentioned in al-Ġāhiz, *Ḥayawān* I, 188-89. According to another joke, the ignorant popular preacher Sayfawayhi added the following commentary to the Qur'anic verse that describes the houris as being "like rubies and corals" (55:58): "Now surely they aren't like your sluts of a wife!" See at-Tawhīdī, *Baṣā'ir* II, 4: 49. In a source, an unnamed Baghdadian woman is quoted to have sarcastically remarked, with the words of a *ḥadīth*, 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 tahta zill sadaqatibi yawm al-qiyāma*); see Ibn Sa'īd, *Muqātaf* 178. Cf. also Hammād 'Agrad's joking with the verses 104:6-8 of the Qur'an ("*innahā 'alayhim mu'sada*") in Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Tabaqāt* 26; Baṣṣār b. Burd's sarcastic remark on a depiction of Paradise by a popular preacher in az-Zaggāgī, *Amālī* 137; and Abū Ishāq an-Naṣībī 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-Tawhīdī, *Muqābasāt* 194. For further examples of playing with the Qur'an's text or meaning, cf. al-Ibṣīhī, *Mustatraf* 477 (a splendid pun on the expression "*fibā 'aynun ḡariya*", Q 88:12), 539 (on a description of Heaven: "*udhulūhā bi-salāmin āminin*", Q 15:46; "*wa-mā hum minhā bi-mubraḡin*", Q 15:48); at-Ta'ālībī, *Yatima* III, 197 ("*fa-ttalā'a fa-ra'āhu fī sawā'i l-ḡahim*", Q 37:55), IV, 435; and at-Ta'ālībī, *Tatimma* II, 101 (a poem describing the appearance of a beautiful boy's beard with the phrase "*idā s-samsu kuwwirat*", Q 81:1); al-Bāharzī, *Dumya* II, 854 ("*awlā bihā šiliyyan*", Q 19:70), II, 1387 (an anecdote based on an extremely funny misconstruction of the purport of Q 9:63 and 4:114); Pseudo-Tawhīdī, *Risāla baḡdādīyya* 230 (a joke on a well-known element of the Qur'anic description of the final judgement, "*hattā yaliḡa l-ḡamalu fī sammi l-hiyāt*", Q 7:40), 307 (the jestful use of various Qur'anic phrases describing the pleasures of Paradise).

l-ardu zilzālahā; 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 manner³⁰. Even these pale, however, beside a poem by the famous vizier and patron aṣ-Ṣāhib b. ‘Abbād, in which God’s words as cited in the Qur’ān (14:7) are put in a sexual context, and a disgustingly obscene one at that³¹. 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-tarā n-nāsa sukārā*; Q 22:2) (at-Ta‘ālibī, *Yatīma* IV, 352). Smiling allusions to the Qur’ān’s text can even be found in such a vernacular genre as the Andalusian *zağal*³². 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 *ḥadīth* 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”³³.

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‘ālibī, *Yatīma* III, 272 (here the humorous effect is further enhanced by the incorporation of the subsequent Qur’anic verse too in the second line); at-Ta‘ālibī, *Fğāz* 162; Ibn al-Mu‘tazz, *Tabaqāt* 141 (here the Qur’anic phrase is juxtaposed to a breathtakingly obscene expression).

³¹ at-Ta‘ālibī, *Yatīma* III, 267. There is an insignificant variation of the wording of the original passage.

³² For instance, al-Hillī, ‘*Ātil* 193: “*waslun musāfir wa-sudūdun muqīm, mata nufiq min dā l’-adāh al-alīm*”, a slight allusion to a phrase of extremely frequent occurrence in the Qur’ān.

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

not least among the intelligentsia³⁴. 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 West³⁵.

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 Aṣ'ab: "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"³⁶. And few they were indeed, as I hope to have shown above. The celebrated literary critic al-Qādī al-Ġurgānī 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 *Ġāhiliyya* 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"³⁷. 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 '*bagdadización*' of the Cordoba court, then later remarks that the Oriental literary influence did not stop at the gates of the Spanish Omayyad 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 Córdoba [...]."

³⁶ Rosenthal 1956:3, 4. In the introductory part of Ewald Wagner's edition of the *diwān* of Abū Nuwās, the frivolous poet *par excellence* among the Arabs, Hamza al-Isbahānī is cited to the effect that Abū Nuwās's poetry never ceased to be recited among the religious dignitaries and the noblemen (*al-ʿulamāʾ wa-l-aṣṛāf*); see Abū Nuwās, *Dīwān A*, 9.

³⁷ al-Ġurgānī, *Wasāta* 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

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-Qiṣṭaynī 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 *muḡūn*, that is frivolity and debauchery, in Abbasid times and onwards³⁸. 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-Qartaḡannī] 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 von Grunebaum states as a general observation, after the stir caused by the literary revolution brought about by the *muhdathūn*, conventionalism finally re-claimed its rights in Arabic poetry around 1000 AD; see von Grunebaum 1944:250. On *muḡūn* and related concepts, cf. Pellat 1960ff (and Montgomery 1960ff); also Kraemer 1986:15. Ismail El-Outmani, making use of Bakhtin's 'carnival theory', labels the assemblage of such literary products as 'carnivalised' literature, see El-Outmani 1995:165-166. On pp. 169-173, he argues that many poets, such as Ibn al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ, would deliberately masquerade as 'fools' in order to escape the possibility of religious charges being levelled against their behaviour and literary activity.

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