

THE CAMBRIDGE
HISTORY OF
GAY AND LESBIAN LITERATURE

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Male-Male Love in Classical Arabic Poetry

THOMAS BAUER

Clouds before the Sun: A Late Representative of a Millenary Tradition

*rūḥī fidā'u 'idhārin ḥalla wajnata man fāqa l-kawākiba shamsan thumma aqmārā
law-lā l-'idhāru la-mā stā'at lanā muqalun ilā muḥayyāhu bāhī l-ḥusni ibsārā
ka-sh-shamsi lam tuṭīqi l-absāru ru'yatahā law-lā saḥābun laṭīfun ḥawlahā dārā*

I would give everything for the sprouting beard that settled on the cheeks of
one who – being a sun – is superior to stars and even moons.

If it weren't for his beard, our eyes could not look into his face with its radi-
ant beauty,

Just like the sun, which our glances could not bear if fine clouds did not
surround it.

This epigram of three lines is one of hundreds of thousands of love poems on young men that were composed in the millennium between 800 and 1800 in Arabic. It is not only in this respect that it is quite an average poem. The poem presents a beautiful although not very original image of the beloved making use of time-honored similes. The beloved's face is compared to the sun – an object of comparison for beautiful faces that was already in use in the pre-Islamic period. As a sun, it outshines the other celestial bodies – stars and moons – that are other potential objects of comparison for beautiful men and women. But then another phenomenon of the sky comes in, and it is a more original one: the young man's sprouting beard is likened to *clouds*, which together with the sun, moons, and stars forms what is known in Arabic stylistics as a nice "harmonious choice of images" ("murā'āt an-nazīr"; Heinrichs 658). It is only thanks to the clouds that we can look into the sun's face. If the hyperbolic simile that equates the beloved's face with a sun is taken literally, a simple poetic syllogism proves that the young man's beard is a prerequisite for looking into his face. Consequently, it is the beard that makes him loveable

in the first place because without looking into his face one could hardly fall in love with him.

The poem belongs to a category that could be called *apologetic beard epigrams*. In these epigrams of mostly two or three lines, a poet apologizes for his beloved's growing beard. Although the apologetic dimension is not very prominent in our sample poem, every reader would have realized that it belongs to this tradition. As such, the poem is not remarkable because there are thousands of epigrams on this subject. What makes it remarkable, however, is the date of its composition. Lebanese poet 'Abdallaṭīf Faṭḥallāh (1766–1844) composed it in the year 1815 (no. 510). This makes it one of the last poems of its kind. A few decades later, a thousand-year history of homoerotic poetry in Arabic would come to an end.

There is no other premodern literature in which homoerotic texts are as numerous and as central as they are in classical Arabic – Persian being the only serious rival. It is therefore impossible to deal with the whole of homoerotic literature in classical Arabic in the course of this chapter, even superficially. Therefore, I will confine myself to presenting the conditions that made an epigram like 'Abdallaṭīf's possible. The following section will deal with the early history of male-male love poetry in Arabic, followed by a section on the social norms underpinning it. The subject of the *beard*, the central topic of our poem, will be addressed in this context. Another section will deal with the stunning career of erotic epigrams from the Ayyubid period onward, and after a "mystical intermezzo," a final section will ask why 'Abdallaṭīf's epigram was one of the last of its kind.

Among the subjects that there is not room here to discuss are prose literature, including love stories and prose works in the form of the *maqāma* (rhymed prose with interspersed verse; see Rowson, "Two"), popular literature including poems in the vernacular and stories like those of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and literature on the love between women, which is far less visible than that about men. Love between women did leave its trace in literature. Indeed, one of the legendary Arabic couples of myth (like Laylā and Majnūn) was a female-female pair (Hind bint Nu'mān, princess of al-Hīra, and Zarqā' [Amer 18]). Nevertheless female-female love hardly plays a role in love poetry and the reason for that is simple: while women *did* compose poetry, they were not supposed to *publish* it, and those who did were addressing a male audience. Furthermore, I will limit myself to literature in the narrower sense of the word and not take scientific, religious, and legal texts into account.

A Rose on the Cheek: The Evolution of Homoerotic Poetry

Polythematic odes that open with a melancholic reminiscence of a past love affair are among the oldest Arabic poems we know, dating to the sixth century. It is only after the transformation of Arab society in the wake of Islam's advent and the Arab conquests of the seventh century that poems that were exclusively about love started to be composed. In these poems, a love affair was no longer necessarily a thing of the past. Rather the poet could express his persistent love for a woman, a love that could either be unfulfilled (as in most of the poems in a Bedouin context, so-called '*udhrī*' [or "chaste"] love) or fulfilled. Poems of the latter variety flourished in the affluent towns of the Hejaz at the end of the century. This new type of love poetry soon became popular in the towns of Syria and Iraq, especially Kufa, Basra, and after its foundation in 762, in Baghdad. The new urban culture of the Abbasid empire, which rose in 749, not only brought about a new literary style, but also an unprecedented flourishing of *ghazal*, "love poetry," which would remain the most popular genre of Arabic poetry for many centuries (see Bauer and Neuwirth). Another innovation came about that would be no less far reaching: for the first time in Arabic love poetry, the beloved did not have to be a female, but could also be a male.

The poet who enabled the breakthrough of homoerotic love poetry was Abū Nuwās, who was born near Ahvaz (in modern-day Iran) around 755 and died in Baghdad ca. 813 (see Wagner). He was not the first poet to compose homoerotic poetry. His teacher and presumed lover Wāliba ibn Hubāb (d. ca. 786) was his forerunner in this regard, but it was Abū Nuwās who became famous and influential beyond compare. He was a prolific author of love poems, which he directed to both women and – the larger part – to male youths. The redactor of Abū Nuwās's *Dīwān* (poetry collection), Abū Bakr aṣ-Ṣūlī (d. ca. 946), distributed Abū Nuwās's love poems between two separate chapters: love poems on female beloveds (*mu'annathāt*) and love poems on male beloveds (*mudhakkarāt*). This distinction has probably been more influential on modern scholarship than it was in Arabic literary history, however. Although almost all poets after Abū Nuwās composed love poems for beloveds of both genders (and a number of poems in which the beloved's gender remains ambiguous), a classification like aṣ-Ṣūlī's was hardly ever applied again.

Abū Nuwās soon became one of the most famous Arabic poets of all time. In addition to love poetry, *khamriyyāt* (sg. *khamriyya*) "wine-poems" were

another genre that became closely associated with him (see Kennedy). Abū Nuwās was a pioneer in creating poems in which wine and wine drinking are the sole subject. In many of these poems, erotic, especially homoerotic, scenes between the speaker and a beautiful *sāqī* “cup-bearer” are central. As in homoerotic love poetry, it was again Abū Nuwās who would establish the conventions of wine poetry for centuries to come. No other language can boast of a comparable number of elaborated and highly artistic wine poems as Arabic and Persian, the Islamic prohibition on wine notwithstanding.

In the twentieth century, Abū Nuwās became the most prominent – and in the West most often translated – Arabic poet. The first *khamriyya* in his *Dīwān*, to mention just one poem, has been translated more than thirty times into Western languages (see Wagner). His homoerotic poems were translated less often, but intensely discussed, especially in modern Arab literary criticism. Here discussion evolved around questions such as was Abū Nuwās “homosexual” and what psychological reasons could be detected to explain that (see Massad 76–98). Author-centered approaches, however, failed to take notice of the fact that Abū Nuwās’s poems would have been forgotten if they had not met with the expectations of a large public. Besides, the almost complete neglect of Arabic love poetry produced in the centuries thereafter made “homosexuality” Abū Nuwās’s individual “problem” and detracted from the fact that homoerotic love was a favorite poetic subject throughout the subsequent centuries.

Almost simultaneously with Abū Nuwās homoerotic love poetry became an established genre of “high literature.” Wāliba ibn Hubāb’s bohemian lifestyle and literary output were considered provocative and still in Abū Nuwās a libertine attitude is undeniable. But a great many of Abū Nuwās’s love poems are simply very beautiful and affecting and there is nothing in them that could be read as a provocation or a conscious violation of norms. The following four-liner is a rather typical example of Abū Nuwās’s *ghazal*. The first two lines describe the appearance of a self-confident, coquettish youth, “clad in beauty.” The last two lines describe him with the most common images used for beauty, again forming a “harmonious choice of images”: A sand-hill (= the backside) upon which a twig (= the elegantly moving upper body) grows, above which the moon (= the face) shines:

wa-‘arī l-wajhi min ḥulali l-‘uyūbī ghada fi thawbi fattānin rabībī
tafarrada bi-l-jamāli wa-qāla: hādḥā mina d-dunyā wa-ladhḥatihā naṣībī
barāhu llāhu ḥīna barā hilālan wa-ḥiqfan ‘inda munqaṭa‘i l-qaḍībī
fā-yahtazzu l-hilālu ‘alā qaḍībin wa-yahtazzu l-qaḍību ‘alā kathībī

When he, brought up in luxury, appeared, his face was naked,
 bare of blemish, while he was clad in clothes of seduction.
 He was unique in beauty and said: This is my share of this
 world and its pleasures.
 And God, when he created him, created him as a
 moon and a sand dune at the base of a twig.
 Now the moon sways on top of a twig, and the
 twig on top of a sand-hill. (Abū Nuwās 168, no. 32)

Ghazal poets of the ninth and tenth centuries are legion. *Ghazal*, in the main homoerotic, became the most popular genre, rivaled only by the more official and public affair of panegyric poetry. No poet could escape composing *ghazal*, and a number of poets did nothing but (see Bauer, *Liebe*).

Only three poets out of dozens shall be mentioned here. The first is Abū Tammām (ca. 804–45), who became famous as a panegyrist of high-ranking officials and the Abbāsīd caliph al-Muʿtaṣim. He was a controversial figure, not because of the content of his poetry, but on account of his daring mannerist style, which inspired Ibn al-Muʿtazz (see later in this chapter) to write a treatise defending him. That treatise became the founding document of Arabic stylistics. Yet Abū Tammām also wrote love poetry, mainly, but not exclusively, homoerotic, which was quoted again and again in Arabic anthologies of the following centuries but completely neglected by Western scholarship until the 1990s. His *ghazal* poems are short (mostly four-liners), elegant, stylistically sophisticated although unmannered, and of great musicality. With Abū Tammām, homoerotic love poetry had definitely reached the rank of established “high literature” without any hint of provocation or contestation of norms.

Poet al-Khubzaruzzī (d. ca. 938), “the rice-bread baker,” demonstrates that homoerotic love poetry in the style of Abū Nuwās and Abū Tammām was no longer limited to elite circles but had become part of popular literature. Al-Khubzaruzzī gained more attention for his love poems than his rice-bread. The story goes that the youths of Basra frequented his shop in the hope of catching his eye so that he would portray them in his love poems, which are exclusively homoerotic: “His style is described as simple and unsophisticated, but delicate and effective” (Rowson, “al-Khubzaruzzī” 443).

Both the rice-bread baker and Khālid al-Kātib (d. 876 or 883), a functionary in the Abbasid administration and author of a large number of love poems of four lines (see Arazi), are extraordinary in that they composed love poems that were exclusively homoerotic. Abbāsīd prince Ibn al-Muʿtazz, on the other hand, treated both sexes in his *ghazal*, as did the majority of poets subsequently. Born in 861 in the caliphal palace in Samarra, he spent a life

dedicated to poetry and literary criticism until he was himself proclaimed caliph in 908 and was murdered the following day. In spite of his premature death, Ibn al-Mu'tazz was not only the founder of the scholarly discipline of Arabic stylistics, he was also the creator of some of the most breathtaking similes and conceits in Arabic poetry. His poetry acquired canonical status.

In the following short *ghazal* poem, the speaker expresses his perplexity about the beloved's beauty in three exclamations. In the first, his cheeks are compared with a rose; in the second, there is no obvious comparison, but the upper body's "bending" and "straightness" strongly suggest the twig image, which is made more powerful as it is not explicitly mentioned. In the third exclamation, the beloved's teeth are compared to pearls. As in the first line, its continuation is not a comparison but describes the effect of the beloved's eyes as "magic." The last line describes the effect of this beauty on the lover: he weeps and is sleepless. It remains open, however, which of the signs of beauty causes which effect. Again the poet prefers allusion to direct expression. A contemporary reader, however, would have known that "pearls" were not only a common object of comparison for teeth, but for tears as well:

ayyu wardin fi khaddi dhāka l-ghazālī ayyu maylin fi qaddihī wa-tidālī
ayyū durrin idhā tabassama yubdī -hi wa-siḥrin fi ṭarfihī wa-dalālī
fā-li-hādhā jarat dumū'u jufūnī wa-li-hādhā ṭālat 'alayya l-layālī

What a rose on the cheek of this gazelle! What a bending,
 what straightness in his stature!

What pearls does he reveal when he smiles! What magic,
 what coquetry lies in his glances!

These make the tears flow from my eyelids, those make
 the nights pass all too slowly for me! (qtd. in Bauer, "Arabic")

Donkeys Ridden with Reins: Social Norms

Abū Tammām was not only the author of elegant and sophisticated love poems, but also a series of "beard poems of hardly any literary value," as a near-contemporary critic remarked (see Bauer, *Liebe* 181 fn 88). They are addressed to his beloved 'Abdallāh, who is reviled first for having forsaken Abū Tammām, and second for having grown a beard that even his use of depilatory cream could not hide. The literary value of these verses may indeed be minor, but they are an interesting early testimony of the perception of male-male love relations.

From Abū Tammām's poems and a host of other sources, we learn that in premodern Middle Eastern societies, the social roles of the lover (*muḥibb*) and the beloved (*maḥbūb*) were precisely distinguished. As is common in patriarchal societies, all social roles were defined around the basis of the adult male. At the same time, sexual relations were understood almost exclusively through the axis of penetration (and this is why female-female relations were given comparatively little attention). Consequently, the standard sexuality of an adult male was to be a penetrator. The sex of the penetrated partner did not affect the active partner's reputation. As for the passive partner, her/his passive role was not considered abasing as long as she/he did not occupy the role of an adult male. The outward manifestation of a man's adulthood was his beard. For the average male-male relation this meant that a lover's beloved should be younger and not yet have a full beard. Consequently, love between bearded men was problematic, not on account of homophobia, nor religious reasons, but because it troubled the image of masculinity in the patriarchal worldview: which member of the pair was the lover, in other words, the "real" male, which the beloved?

To avoid ambiguity, the lover was expected to end the affair and transform his love relationship into pure friendship. Perhaps Abū Tammām would have been less harsh with 'Abdallāh if he had acted according to this norm. If he, having already grown a dense beard, would have given up being Abū Tammām's beloved and taken a beloved of his own, his former lover might have been sad, but he would hardly have reacted in such a drastic way. What 'Abdallāh did instead was to abandon Abū Tammām for another *lover*, which not only violated Abū Tammām's feelings of affection, but also social norms. This is how we can understand the poet's harsh reaction, which remains unique in Arabic literary history.

This was not the normal way relationships were to end. Poetry tells a different story. Obviously, the moment the beloved grew a beard regularly caused emotional crises. What if love persisted despite the beard? And, of course, one does not simply grow a beard in a single moment but over some time, a period of ambiguity. Because premodern Islamic culture was, as a rule, rather tolerant of ambiguity, it was this period of the beard growing gradually more dense that became, in the form of *apologetic beard epigrams*, one of the most popular topics in Arabic love poetry (see Bauer, *Kultur*).

Arabic poetry was not the first literary tradition to deal with the topic, however. The Greek poet Straton (probably second century CE) already composed epigrams to apologize for the sprouting beard of his beloved. Despite the beard, says Straton, his beloved is still as charming as ever. The

subject of the sprouting beard accompanied the whole history of Arabic homoerotic poetry, from Abū Nuwās (where it played only a marginal role) until the end as is seen in the poem by ‘Abdallaṭīf that began this chapter. In early poems, the line of argument was similar to that of Straton: despite his beard, the beloved is still attractive. Soon Arabic poets learned to argue in a more sophisticated way. The beard was compared with beautiful things, explained by fantastic etiologies and poetic syllogisms: if the moon is beautiful despite its spots, the same is true of a face; the beard is not a beard but, rather, ants that are attracted by the sweet honey of the beloved’s saliva; if you settled in a barren country, you would not move away when spring flowers grow, or, as in ‘Abdallaṭīf’s epigram, the beard is like clouds thanks to which it becomes possible to look into the sun of the beloved’s face. Arabic poets never ran out of new similes and conceits to present the sprouting beard as something beautiful. Shams ad-Dīn an-Nawājī (1386–1455) even compiled a whole volume of beard epigrams entitled *Khaṭ’ al-‘idhār fī wasf al-‘idhār*: “Throwing off all restraint in describing the sprouting beard.” The collection soon became extremely popular but is – unsurprisingly – still only available in manuscript (Bauer, “al-Nawājī” 328–29).

In many *ghazal* poems, the sprouting beard was no longer treated in an apologetic way, but as an undisputed feature of beauty. Love for fully bearded men, however, had no place in *ghazal*, and had to be treated in another genre called *mujūn*, which comprises funny and provocative texts about forbidden pleasures and embarrassing mishaps. Many if not the majority of *mujūn* poems are about sex. A poet may indulge in graphic descriptions of sexual acts, may boast of a conscious violation of social norms, talk about masturbation, or complain about impotence and other problems preventing good sex. Sex relations treated in *mujūn* form could be either hetero- or homosexual. In the Abbasid period, the former predominated, featured, among others, by the most famous *mujūn* poet, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 1000). As for *mujūn* treating same-sex relations, sex with bearded men recurs often. Popular poet Ibrāhīm al-Mīmār (d. 1348), a Cairene mason and architect who was famous for his *mujūn*, boasted of his desire for men with all degrees of beard growth:

*yā lā'imī fī dhā l-‘idhāri ftinī hal yurkabu l-jahshu bi-lā miqwadih
uḥibbu arbāba l-liḥā shahwatan wa-kullu man liḥyatuhū fī yadih*

You blame me for desiring one whose beard has sprouted.

Tell me your verdict: Can a young donkey be ridden without its rein?

I go crazy for men with full beards; yeah, even those who can

grip theirs with their hands!

(qtd. in Bauer, “Dignity”)

*The Goldsmith's Kiss: Epigrams about a World of
Beauty*

When Abū Nuwās composed a love poem about a soldier, he was certainly unaware that countless other poems discussing the beloved's profession would follow in subsequent centuries. The first to collect a whole series of poems of this kind was probably the famous *littérateur* Abū Manṣūr ath-Tha'ālibī (961–1038). His *Book of Youths* (*Kitāb al-Ghilmān*) seems to have been lost (see Talib), but his other works preserve many poems of this kind by him and his contemporaries, among them a poem on a beautiful goldsmith by a certain Abū Bakr an-Nasawī, a law scholar:

*wa-shādinin ṣā'ighin hāma l-fū'ādu bihī wa-ḥubbuhū fī sawādi l-qalbi qad rasakhā
yā laytanī kuntu minfākhan 'alā famihī kay-mā uqabbila fāhu kulla-mā nafakhā*

My heart is passionately in love with a goldsmith fawn.

My love for him has taken firm root in the bottom of my heart.

Oh would that I were the bellows at his mouth, so that I could

kiss his lips every time he blows.

(Tha'ālibī 230)

After the Ayyubids came to power in 1169, the center of Arabic literature shifted from Iraq to Syria and Egypt, and in the more bourgeois atmosphere of the cities of the Ayyubid and Mamluk (1250–1517) empires, epigrams became one of the most popular literary forms. In this new urban ambience, epigrams in the vein of the goldsmith poem flourished. In later Persian and Turkish poetry they became known as *shahrāshūb* or *ṣehrengiz* “upsetting the town” (de Bruijn, “Shahrangīz” 212). Because there is no Arabic term, I will use the Persian *shahrāshūb* for the corresponding phenomenon in Arabic literature. *Shahrāshūb* poems are “based on the representation of the beloved as a youthful artisan or member of another social group having such marked features as to allow a poet to make fanciful allusions to this quality” (de Bruijn, *Of Piety* 7). In Arabic literature from the Ayyubid period onward, poems of the *shahrāshūb* type were often grouped together in larger collections. The author of the earliest collection of this kind that has been preserved is the rather unknown Syrian poet Ibn ash-Sharīf Daftarkh^wān (d. 1257), who composed a thousand and one epigrams on beautiful youths (mostly three-liners) and published them under the title *The Thousand and One Youths* (*Alf ghulām wa-ghulām*). As a sequel to it, he produced another volume on girls, entitled *The Thousand and One Girls* (*Alf jāriya wa-jāriya*), accordingly. Similar collections followed suit, either of a poet's own epigrams or anthologies of epigrams by different poets,

most authors confining themselves to a hundred beloveds or to an undefined number. Most authors wrote about both male and female beloveds, and sometimes they did so in two separate sister works.

The central theme is the beloved's profession. *Shahrāshūb* epigrams are consequently an important (and still largely untapped) source for the history of crafts in the Middle East (perhaps even more important for the history of women's labor than for men's). They are not limited to the crafts or professions, though. The most popular anthology of this kind is probably the *Gazelles' Pastures: On Beautiful Youths* (*Marāṭī' al-ghizlān fī l-ḥisān min al-ghilmān*) by Shams ad-Dīn an-Nawājī (see Bauer, "al-Nawājī" 329). Unlike other authors, an-Nawājī did not compose a counterpart on women. The book, which comprises about two thousand epigrams by different poets mainly from the Ayyubid and Mamluk period, starts with a chapter of epigrams on young men holding positions in the administration, the military, scholarship and education, or a religious office. A large section on beautiful craftsmen follows, in which more than two hundred trades and crafts are represented. A chapter in which wine merchants, cupbearers, gamblers, prisoners, and youths who do something special such as picking apricots or walking in the court of a mosque follows. Another chapter treats the inevitable subject of the beard, augmented by subchapters on moles and other individual characteristics, among them a series of bodily defects such as pockmarks, wounds, a hunchback, blindness, and illness. A selection of epigrams on beloveds who have died concludes the book with a melancholic tone.

A book like this transforms the whole world, despite its shortcomings and defects, into a world of beauty and erotic attraction. Even people who did not match the current ideal of beauty – because they had blue eyes or were lame, one-eyed, or leprous – were presented as charming and lovable creatures (see Richardson). The large number of manuscripts preserved of an-Nawājī's book (which remains nonetheless unpublished) and the sheer number of epigrams composed during these centuries (including Persian and Ottoman-Turkish counterparts) demonstrate the appeal these poems had for a broad public. In their celebration of human beauty and literary ingenuity, they were not meant to be autobiographical, but nevertheless, one notes that judge and religious scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī composed several epigrams on mosque personnel such as lamplighters, whereas architect Ibrāhīm al-Mī'mār paid more attention to stonemasons, as in the following epigram. Here the point of the epigram is rather simple and consists in deploying technical vocabulary. The word *shāqūf*, which is

the rhyming word in the second line, is a special term for a stonecutter's sledgehammer:

*yā husna ḥajjārin laḥū nāẓirun safku dami l-'ushshāqi ma'lūfuh
yafalu fi l-aḥshā'i aḍ'āfa mā yafalu fi l-aḥjārī shāqūfuh*

Oh beautiful stonecutter whose eyes are used to shed his many lovers' blood!
They do twice as much damage to hearts than his sledgehammer does to stones!¹

These epigrams usually conclude with a punch line related in one or another way to the beloved's profession or another specific trait. In many cases this is a play on words that does not lend itself to translation. In the following epigram, Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣri (1287–1366), considered by many the greatest poet of his time, portrays a bird hunter who robs everyone's sleep. In the poem, the word *karākī* "cranes" can also be interpreted as the word *karā* "sleep" plus the personal pronoun *kī* "your," thus "your sleep":

*wa-mūlī'in bi-fikhākhin yamudduhā wa-shibākī
qālat liya l-'aynu mādhā yaṣīdu qultu karākī*

His passion is setting snares and laying traps.

My eye said to me: What is it he hunts? I answered: *your sleep / cranes.*²

A common way of creating such a point that was already in use in Abbasid times was to playfully transfer literary similes into the real world in order to create a paradox based on pseudo-logical argumentation. In the Ayyubid period, poet Ibn Maṭrūḥ (1196–1251) used the common comparisons of temple-curls with scorpions, locks of hair with snakes, and beautiful faces with the moon to wonder whether his beloved, whose beauty is extraterrestrial, could have really been bitten by a snake:

*qālū ḥabībuka malsū'un fa-qultu lahum min 'aqrabi ṣ-ṣudghi aw min ḥayyati
sh-sha'arī?*

fa-qīla bal min afā'i l-arḍi qultu lahum min ayna tas'ā afā'i l-arḍi li-l-qamarī?

They said: Your sweetheart has been bitten! I said: By the scorpion of his temple-curl or the snake of his hair?

No, they said, by the vipers of the earth! Oh but how, I replied, could the earthly vipers have ascended to the moon? (Ibn Maṭrūḥ 84 no. 63).

Epigrams of the *shahrāshūb* type were composed by professional poets and amateurs alike. The final example may be one of the latter. Its author is not known, its point is simple but convincing, and it reveals an interest-

ing attitude toward painting in a society in which images were allegedly prohibited:

'alā fi ṣan'ati t-taṣwīri badrun yuqābilu kulla makh'lūqin bi-shibhih
yuṣawwīru kulla mā fi l-arḍi ḥusnan wa-yu'jizu an yuṣawwīra mithla ḥusnih

A full moon whose skill as a painter has ascended, he provides every creature with its counterpart.

He paints everything on earth with beauty, but he's incapable of painting his own beauty.³

Battleground of Hearts and Glances: A Mystical Intermezzo

Arabic poetry began as a purely profane literature in pre-Islamic times and remained one of the most important secular discourses in the Islamic era until the present day. Yet when *taṣawwuf*, Islamic mysticism, emerged, its proponents, the Sufis, felt a need to cast their feelings in a poetic mold. These were feelings of love for God, the overwhelming desire to be near him or even enter metaphysical union, their intoxication when God's presence could be felt, and their pain and feeling of being forsaken when God seemed far. As for the ascetic dimension of Sufism, the genre of ascetic poetry (*zuhd*), developed by poets like Abū l-'Atāhiya (748–826), provided a model. For Sufism's ecstatic side, Sufi poets reverted to the forms, ideas, and topoi of love poetry and wine poetry. A large percentage of poems by early Sufi poets like ash-Shibli (861–945) can be read as mystical poems as well as purely profane love poems. In many later poems, this culture of ambiguity persisted, not least in the case of one of the most famous Middle Eastern poets of all time, the Persian Hafez. In Western scholarship, the question of whether his poetry is profane or mystical has been discussed frequently. It appears that in a culture in which ambiguity was tolerated to a high degree, this question was less pressing and it was considered a hallmark of quality if a poem left room for interpretation.

Love poetry in the form of *ghazal* remained the most common form of mystical poetry, and, just as in the profane *ghazal*, the beloved could be either male or female. Ibn al-Fāriḍ (1181–1235) was and is still considered by most critics the greatest mystical poet in Arabic literature. In one of his six *ghazal* poems the beloved is addressed in the feminine and in the remaining five in the masculine. His *jāmiyya* is perhaps the most famous of these. In the first line, the poet complains about being mortally wounded by the beloved's glances. In Emil Homerin's translation it reads:

mā bayna mu'taraki l-ahdāqi wa-l-muhajī anā l-qatīlu bilā ithmin wa-lā ḥarajī

On the battle ground
 between hearts and glances,
 I am slain
 without sin or guilt. (Homerin 84)

In a series of antitheses we learn of the ethereal nature of the beloved, again in Homerin's translation:

muḥajjabin law sarā fi mithli ṭurratihī aghnat -hu ghurratuhū l-gharrā 'ani s-suruḡī

wa-in ḍalaltu bi-laylin min dhawā'ibihī ahdā li-'aynī l-hudā ṣubḥun mina l-balaḡī

He is a veiled one;
 but were he to pass in a darkness
 black as his forelock,
 his blazing face would suffice him light.
 So if I stray for a night
 in his black locks,
 his brow's bright morn
 will give guidance to my eyes. (92)

Of course it is problematic to still call this sort of poetry "homoerotic" because the beloved is clearly no longer a *homos* to the lover. But nevertheless, it was the rich tradition of homoerotic poetry in Arabic that inspired Muslim Sufi poets and provided them with the themes, motives, and conceits to formulate their own specific experience. This was not always only poetic: some Sufis even used the practice of "gazing at beardless youths" to stimulate their mystical experience by becoming intoxicated by male beauty, a practice that was highly controversial from the very beginning. In any case, homoeroticism and Sufism remain closely connected in many ways.

An Encounter with Homophobia

For centuries, Arabic poets hailed both male and female beauty, and there can be no doubt that in doing so they met the expectations of their audience, who came from all walks of life. Numerous extraliterary statements corroborate the view that more or less all men in the premodern Middle East felt that young women and young men were equally attractive and that it was quite natural to fall in love with both. Whenever scholars argued about what was natural, it was an adult male's desire to be the passive partner in a male-male relationship that was seen to need an explanation.

Against this background, the question arises whether it is possible to speak about classical Arabic "gay" or "homosexual" literature. Arabic homoerotic literature that was composed from the eighth century onward until the period of colonialism is (1) not the expression of a *minority*, but the mainstream; (2) not a matter of *identity*, for men who fell in love with other men did not consider themselves to be extraordinary, and no one would have claimed a special identity on account of their "sexuality" (a modern Western concept at any rate); and (3) not associated with a *violation of social norms* on account of its being homoerotic, but only if both male partners are old enough to grow beards. Is it conceivable that *gay literature* is compatible with the literary taste of all men (and perhaps also women) who are interested in literature? Can gay literature affirm and accord with the imaginations of the social elite? Or is classical Arabic literature a challenge to the modern Western conception of heterosexuality and homosexuality, which may not be as universal as the modern West believes?

Before we turn to the influence of Western ideas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a few words on religious norms are in order, as it is the religion of Islam that is mostly seen to be responsible for Middle Eastern homophobia today. Quranic references to the story of the people of Lot (which gave rise to the expression *liwāt* for anal intercourse) and the reference to a "grave sin" are less than clear. It is quite probable that they do not refer to male-male relations, though they have been commonly interpreted along these lines (see Kugle). The two most authoritative collections of *ḥadīth* (reports of the prophet Muḥammad and his companions) by al-Bukhārī and Muslim do not mention same-sex relations at all. Nonetheless, Islamic law is quite strict about sexual intercourse between people who are not linked either by marriage or concubinage. Vaginal intercourse with women who are neither a man's wives nor his slaves (*zinā*) and anal intercourse with men (*liwāt*, a term that is often also used for anal intercourse with a woman) are sanctioned by the most severe punishments, such as stoning to death (see Schmitt). Practical consequences, however, were less drastic. The requirements for applying a death sentence for adultery, fornication, or *liwāt* were extremely high. Thus far hardly any instances of adulterers being stoned to death have been recorded and according to our current knowledge, not a single man was convicted for engaging in consensual sex with another man before the twentieth century.

The influence of legal norms on literature was remarkably low. After all, falling in love with a man was not a sin, nor was composing love poetry, at least not according to mainstream society. Even the Quran provided an excellent excuse for poets who composed literature that conflicted with religious norms, saying that poets "do not do what they say" (26: 226). What was originally meant

as a reproach could well be taken as an excuse. There were religious scholars who opposed erotic and bacchic poetry, though. They argued that poems of these kinds might incite people to commit sinful acts. However, poets, some of whom were themselves religious scholars, did not care much. The end of a millennium of homoerotic Arabic poetry was brought about not by religious strictures, but by the encounter with Western values and attitudes:

Indeed, homosexual practices in Egypt came under assault by the spread of European moral, medical and disciplinary concerns. There is some evidence of direct state intervention to suppress homosexual practices in the military and the homoerotic excesses of popular culture. Far more effective in undermining the long history of social acceptance of homosexual practices in Egypt was the rise of new professional and middle classes championing the values of their European counterparts. Homosexual practices would be found incompatible with the "new" or reformed Egyptian "character" upon which the modern Egyptian "nation" was to be constructed. (Dunne 108)

Colonialism fostered this development, and Islamic revivalism in the twentieth century finally led to the conclusion of an unspoken, unholy alliance between nationalist and allegedly Islamic virtues in the domain of sexuality.

Still there "is much research to be done in assessing the uneven consequences of ... the ways in which largely European normalizing discourses have intersected with, been resisted by and undergone changes through their encounter with indigenous cultural forms and forces" (Dunne 316). In the meantime, studies by Joseph A. Massad and Georg Klauda show convincingly how the introduction of the concept of identity sexuality and especially the binary construct of homosexuality versus heterosexuality meant a deep incision in the perception of love and sexuality in the Middle East. In this respect, a study of the history of Middle Eastern sex might also have consequences for Western attitudes about sexuality. Contemporary Western experience shows that despite public campaigns and tremendous progress in gay rights, homophobia is by no means about to vanish. In those Middle Eastern societies in which men were supposed to find men and women equally attractive and male-male sex relations were a matter of sin and not identity, homophobic attitudes did not exist. It was only the introduction of the Western concept of the homo-hetero binary that made people in the Middle East feel deeply uncomfortable with homoerotic love. It is only consequent to ask if the same concept could have a similar effect in the West itself.

The effect Western notions had on Arabic literature is all too clear. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, homoerotic poetry vanished almost completely and people started to look at their own literary heritage with

mixed feelings. Homoeroticism began to be considered a perversion, and works of classical literature were (and still are) expurgated. Homoerotic literature became, as Khaled El-Rouayheb noted in his magisterial study, an object of shame, and in "1925, a history of Arabic literature designed for use in secondary and higher education in Egypt stated that love poetry of boys was 'a crime against literature and a disgrace to the history of Arabic poetry'" (158).

The existence of a vibrant homoerotic literature played not an unimportant role in establishing a discourse of "decadence" according to which Islamic culture, after an alleged "Golden Age" in the early Middle Ages, went through a process of decline – politically, intellectually, and, of course, morally. Homoerotic poetry was thus seen as a sign of decadence. And because Western scholarship had contributed to the emergence of this perception and cherished it until quite recently, whole genres and periods of classical Arabic literature remained more or less unstudied. Still today, our knowledge of Arabic literature between the Ayyubid period and the onset of modern Arabic literature in the nineteenth century is insular (see Bauer, "Mamluk"). The enormous role played by homoerotic texts is doubtlessly one of the main reasons for this deplorable state of the art.

In modern Arabic literature, the concept of "homosexuality" of the Western episteme was adopted largely in an uncritical way. It is only very recently that Arabic writers and intellectuals try to find a way out of what Khalid Hadeed calls "the epistemic closure" imposed on homosexuality.

Notes

1. Uways al-Ḥamawī, *Sukkardān al-'ushshāq*, Ms Berlin 8407, fol. 148b.
2. Shams al-Dīn an-Nawājī, *Marāṭī' al-ghizlān*, Ms Istanbul Top Kapu 722, fol. 41b.
3. Uways al-Ḥamawī, *Sukkardān al-'ushshāq*, Ms Berlin 8407, fol. 148a.

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