The Rude, the Bad and the Bawdy

Essays in honour of
Professor Geert Jan van Gelder

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Modern Arabic Literature and the Disappearance of *Mujūn*: Same-Sex Rape as a Case Study

Frédéric Lagrange

Sexuality is no longer a discursive taboo in modern Arabic fiction, as has been amply proved by many recent novels and novellas.[1] Homosexual behaviours and/or identities in particular have now become almost as regularly alluded to as they were in pre-modern texts, after the long colonial-era parenthesis. But the humorous element so pervasive in mediaeval texts is now absent: 'deviant' sexualities are mostly perceived in terms of individual suffering, as a metaphor for political oppression, as a 'trope of national decline,'[2] or as a social issue caused by gender segregation. *Mujūn* (ribaldry, debauchery and shamelessness),[3] a topos of pre-modern Islamicate literatures essentially linked to laughter

[1] See Hanadi Al-Samman, 'Out of the Closet: Representation of Homosexuals and Lesbians in Modern Arabic Literature', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 39 (2008), 270–310. This does not mean that novels cannot be forbidden at times because of explicit sexual contents, even in relatively 'liberal' countries in the Arab world: from ʿAbduh Wāzin's *Ḥadīqat al-ḥawāss* (1993) banned by the Lebanese law courts to Muḥammad Shukrī's 1973 novel *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī*, infamously suspended from the American University in Cairo's Arabic curriculum in 1999 following a violent press campaign against Prof. Samia Mehrez, then the inexplicable banning of Ḥaydar Ḥaydar's 1983 *Walīma li-aʿshāb al-baḥr* when it was reprinted in Cairo in 2000, there are numerous examples of State censorship under the pretence of the prosecution of pornography. What I argue is that what gets actually printed and distributed in bookshops (or exchanged in scanned copies on the internet) and escapes censorship is much more important that what sporadically gets blocked for moral/political reasons. I also mean that including sexually explicit passages, whether to shock, arouse or raise the consciousness of the reader, is now quite common, not limited to male authors, and does not endanger one's position in the literary establishment: see Saudi authors Zaynab Ḥifnī and Warda ʿAbd al-Mālik's graphic descriptions of intercourse in their novels (although one suspects these aliases may hide a male author).

[2] See Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 310.

[3] E.K. Rowson's definition is particularly concise: 'A term used to describe both a mode of behaviour and a genre of medieval poetry and prose. Closely related [...] to the throwing off of societal restraints, *mujūn* refers behaviourally to open and unabashed indulgence in prohibited pleasures, particularly the drinking of wine and, above all, sexual profligacy. *Mujūn* literature describes and celebrates this hedonistic way of life, frequently employing explicit sexual vocabulary, and almost invariably with

and comedy in which homoeroticism,[4] in its outrageous and transgressive declensions, was a major element, hardly exists anymore, at least in fiction. The ways in which same-sex relations are depicted in contemporary fiction are at odds with the pre-modern literary tradition. Graphic descriptions of intercourse, heterosexual or homosexual, may have become more common in the last decade, some authors may even celebrate the pleasures of the body and seek to arouse their readers, as the Syrian Salwa al-Nuʿaymi does in her acclaimed erotic novel *Burhān al-ʿasal,*[5] which attempts to link modern Arabic literature and Arab identity with the exaltation of desire and pleasure found in mediaeval erotica; but more often than not, the function of crude descriptions of sexual acts is to provide an occasion for the denunciation and condemnation of social dysfunction.[6]

If sexuality is obviously much less linked to humour in modern literature than it was in mediaeval *adab* and poetry, 'revivalist' currents[7] would see this as the sorry consequence of modern rigourism and the untimely adoption by contemporary Islamicate societies of those very Victorian moral values that Western cultures, after centuries of supposed Christian denial of the body, have learnt to forget and have replaced with an open attitude towards sexuality. But is the case so clear-cut? The motif of homosexual rape could be taken as a case study for a comparison between its treatment in the mediaeval sources and in contemporary fiction. The homosexual *dabīb*, i.e. the rape of a male adolescent in his sleep, or the tricks used to lure a young man and abuse him, appear in various forms in a number of mediaeval texts and forced sex between males was one of the most common humorous and erotic scripts of *mujūn* in pre-modern literature and verse; it is still very present in contemporary fiction, although cast in a different light, neither comical, nor (voluntarily) erotic. Forced and non-consensual sex, which was deemed a frivolous but

primarily humorous intent.' *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (London/New York: Routledge, 2010 [1st ed. 1998]), 2: 546.

[4] I will avoid the use of the term homosexuality when dealing with pre-modern literature, see Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), and Frédéric Lagrange, *Islam d'interdits, Islam de jouissance* (Paris: Téraèdre, 2008). When used, it is not intended as an essentialist concept.

[5] Salwa al-Nuʿaymī, *Burhān al-ʿasal* (Beirut: Riyāḍ al-Rayyis, 2008). English translation: *The Proof of the Honey*, trans. Cal Perkins (New York: Europa Editions, 2009).

[6] This is particularly true of same-sex intercourse, which hardly aims at arousing the reader, see examples analysed by Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, chapter 'Deviant Fictions', 269–334.

[7] By 'revivalist currents' a term I coin here, I mean authors and intellectuals such as René Khawam, Malek Chebel, Abdelwahab Meddeb in France, Hafid Bouazza in Holland, western publishers of mediaeval Arabic erotica (translated or not), such as Manshūrat al-Jamal / Kamel Verlag in Germany, that constitute, consciously or not, an editorial current presenting mediaeval Arab-Islamic societies as cultures allowing pleasure, celebrating the body, and tolerating various irregularities that are presently condemned in contemporary Arab-Islamic societies. This discourse aims at 'rehabilitating' Islamic cultures, both for Western opinion and the liberal readership in Arab-Islamic societies, through this 'uncovering' of a pleasure-tolerant past. As generous and perhaps even necessary as this endeavour might be, in the light of the common negative perception of Islamic cultures, this trend seldom questions what mediaeval texts really say, and in the end proves no less essentialist than the opposite current denouncing Arab-Islamic societies as cultures of eternal repression, see Lagrange, *Islam d'interdits*, 9–28. (In French).

immensely amusing and arousing subject in *adab*, is hardly considered a laughing matter nowadays and forces us to take a closer look at 'the rapist's laugh' of mediaeval lore as opposed to the insistence on the victim's (or the torturer's) shame of contemporary fiction. A clarification: only 'actual' rape as a social phenomenon will be examined here, and the article will not deal with forced homosexual penetration as a political metaphor or allegory denouncing the Arab man's loss of honour, identity or virility when submitted to violence, direct or symbolic, exerted by the State, or the West, or globalization. The political economy of (homo)sexuality, common in many Egyptian and Levantine novels, has already been analysed in depth by Joseph Massad.[8]

MUJŪN AND ITS DISAPPEARANCE

Mujūn, in both its heteroerotic and homoerotic dimensions, remained a legitimate mode of discourse in Arabic prose and poetry until the 19th century. Indeed, the word 'mode' could almost be replaced by 'mood,' in its grammatical sense, for modals alter reality and *mujūn*, likewise, is a ritual discourse that does not necessarily describe something that takes place, but expresses a wish, an accusation, or a fantasy of highly coded forbidden desires. Pre-modern *mujūn* poetry and mediaeval and post-mediaeval *adab* prose that deal with *mujūn* please readers by arousing and/or making them laugh with accounts of transgression – for *mujūn* is not presented as a serious matter and remains linked to humour and jest (*hazl, lahw*). However, this discourse on transgression is not a transgression *per se*, as long as it is enunciated in the right form and at the right time and place. In prose, *mujūn* is a mood because the author seldom takes responsibility for it: anecdotes dealt with are usually attributed to an informant and present a character who is neither the informant nor the author. Even if the author should mention his own experience, his account is not necessarily to be taken for granted and acknowledged as a reality, precisely because his discourse falls within the realm of *mujūn* or *sukhf*[9] (obscenity), where exaggeration and outrage are expected. With regard to verse, it is accepted that *khayr al-shiʿr akdhabuhu* (the best poetry is the most insincere);[10] thus poets do not have to account for the reality of their claims (unless the State or the Prince has some harsh example to set[11]). The

[8] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*. See in particular his analysis of Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's *Sharaf*, 376–386.

[9] 'Obscenity and scatology, particularly as used in poetry for its shock value and humorous effect [...] Although often paired with *mujūn* in later literature, *sukhf* is distinguished from it in referring less to hedonistic behaviour offensive to the prudish than to gross language and comportment upsetting to the squeamish.' E.K. Rowson, 'sukhf,' *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, 743.

[10] Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī, *Al-ʿumda fi maḥāsin al-shiʿr wa-adabih*. In the electronic version downloadable from www.al-mostafa.com, 248. All translations in the article are the author's, unless stated otherwise.

[11] According to the pseudo-biographical elements on Bashshār b. Burd in the *Aghānī*, or on Abū Nuwās in Ibn Manẓūr's *Akhbār Abī Nuwās*, the former's flogging by order of al-Mahdī and the latter's banishment to Egypt under the reign of al-Rashīd had more to do with political reasons than their supposed *zandaqa* or misbehaviours. As a general rule, a poet's *mujūn* doesn't expose him to the ruler's wrath unless it is coupled with political satire or a close relationship with the enemies of the State.

transgression of social or sacred norms is in itself normed: the anomic deeds or sayings alluded to in *mujūn* literature are highly ritualistic and pertain to a closed list of socially and/or sexually transgressive attitudes, usually intertwined and alluded to in clusters: wine-drinking, utterance of crude words referring to sexual organs, sexual intercourse and bodily functions, boasting by men of illicit intercourse with women, of anal penetration of boys, of rape, expression by women of inextinguishable desire in the coarsest terms, hyperbolic description of sexual organs, etc. If pre-modern *mujūn* is often a satire or a subversion of religious lore and sacred laws, it is nevertheless quite conservative on the level of social hierarchies and it confirms male domination: the phallus remains almighty, the free Muslim male, preferably of the *khāṣṣa* (elite), dominates the scene, and marginalized groups remain marginalized when laughter recedes. Poets and prose writers might very well 'successfully deconstruct textual, theological, and social-hierarchical barriers dominating Arabic literature, politics and society',[12] but this Bakhtinian perspective on mediaeval laughter, as we shall argue, underestimates comedy's aptitude at reinforcing the norms that it simultaneously subverts.

One of *mujūn*'s last expressions in pre-modern Arabic literature is probably Fāris al-Shidyāq's *Al-sāq ʿalā al-sāq* (*Crossing Legs*, 1855),[13] which operates, unusually, in a purely heteroerotic declension. This fictional travelogue favours allusive and peculiar vocabulary when dealing with sexuality, whereas mediaeval works preferred to call a spade a spade, and therefore an *ayr* (penis) an *ayr.* But Shidyāq also opens the gates to 'new perversions,' unknown to classical mediaeval *mujūn* and *sukhf* discourse: for instance, he describes with a daunting profusion of details the sexual specialties practised by Parisian women of the mid-nineteenth century (or perhaps French prostitutes; this is not clearly stated, since all Parisian women are believed to have loose morals), and he particularly mentions oral sex, in highly refined and lexically cryptic – though extremely obscene – images:[14] '*fa-minhum man turīd ʿalā ṣifāt al-mudqim, al-ṣifa al-latī dhakarahā Abū Nuwās fī l-hamziyya, wa-minhunna man yuʾthir al-tajaḍḍum al-kamarī ʾaw al-imtilāj al-qunubī*' (Among them some should be qualified as *mudqim*,[15] in the sense Abū Nuwās mentioned in his poem rhyming in *hamza*,[16] while others prefer penile absorption or clitoral mastication). It must be noted that our translation hardly reflects the lexical inventiveness and the utter rarity of those terms and roots, which is such that no educated reader of the 19th century could have been expected to understand precisely the sexual innuendo without an intensive search through its mediaeval lexicon. Oral sex is indeed hardly ever alluded to in classical sources, as E.K.

[12] J.W. Wright, Jr., 'Masculine Allusion and the Structure of Satire,' *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 16–17.

[13] Translation by Humphrey Davies, *Leg over Leg* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

[14] Fāris al-Shidyāq, *Al-sāq ʿala al-sāq* (Beirut: Dar al-Raʾid al-ʿArabi, 1982), 626.

[15] According to *Lisān al-ʿArab*, root *d/q/m*: 'The *mudqima* among women is the one whose vagina devours anything, and it has been said that it even makes sound during intercourse.'

[16] Presumably Abu Nuwās's verse '*min yadi dhāti ḥirrin fī ziyyi dhī dhakarin / lahā muḥibbāni lūṭiyyun wa-zannāʾu*' ([wine] served by one with a vagina in the attire of one with a penis / who has two lovers: an active sodomite and a philandering adulterer), i.e. a woman who is seeking both vaginal and anal intercourse.

Rowson rightly remarks.[17] This is another clue that should arouse caution: the mere fact that a fairly common sexual act such as fellatio[18] is virtually unknown to pre-modern Arabic sources suggests how ritual and modal the discourse of *mujūn* is in classical sources.

At the turn of the 20th century though, Shidyāq's *al-Sāq ʿalā al-sāq* had become unbearably obscene for Jurjī Zaydān, who explains in his *Encyclopaedia of Famous Men* (*Mashāhir al-Sharq*):[19]

> [Shidyāq] included in his book words and expressions by which he intended *mujūn*, but it passed the limits to the point that a man of education would never consider uttering them, and one certainly wishes they had never passed through our shaykh's mind and had never been written in his book, for writers' pens should avoid phrases that would make a young man blush, not to mention a maid.

At the same time that this classical work of *adab*[20] was suddenly judged inadequate for a new generation of readers fifty years after its first publication, Muḥammad ʿAbduh decided to castrate Hamadhānī's *Maqāmāt* in his famous edition, still used in schools, for young women were now included in the virtual readership and unmediated silent reading had become the norm. In the *Maqāma mawṣiliyya*, for instance, when the anti-hero Abu al-Fatḥ al-Iskandarī outrageously pretends that a corpse is still alive by putting his finger up its warm anus (*istuhu*), ʿAbduh's edition reads 'under his armpit' (*ibṭuhu*), a lexical alteration which obviously does not fit with the original rhyme (*sajʿ*) of the text (*lamastuhu/istuhu*) but is certainly close enough to take in an inattentive reader.[21] *Adab*, not *muʾaddab* enough, now needed to be *muhadhdhab* (refined).[22]

Khalid El-Rouayheb, in his monograph *Before homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World 1500–1800* has also shown how the homoerotic contents of Mamluk and Ottoman poetry were gradually erased from literary memory.[23] Not only would new editions of the classics

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[17] See Everett K. Rowson, 'The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists' in *Body Guards, The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. J. Epstein, K. Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 50–79.

[18] Making assumptions about sexual practices of pre-modern Arab societies is certainly problematical, but fellatio is documented in Ancient Egypt (the myth of Isis reviving Osiris through fellatio), Ancient Greece, Mesopotamia, the Roman Empire and the *Kama Sutra*. See Thierry Leguay, *Histoire raisonnée de la fellation* (Paris: Le Cercle, 1999). We believe it is highly improbable that fellatio was unknown to the classic Islamic world, an heir to those civilizations.

[19] Jurjī Zaydān, *Mashāhīr al-Sharq*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, n.d.), 2:112.

[20] *Al-Sāq ʿala al-Sāq* is a pivotal text, considered both as one of the last monuments of *adab* in the mediaeval sense of the word, and one of the founding works of modern Arabic literature, see Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (London: Saqi Books, 1993); M. Peled, 'Al-Sāq ʿalā l-sāq, A Generic Definition', *Arabica* 32 (1985), 31–46.

[21] See Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, *al-Maqāmāt*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbduh (Algiers: Mufam, 1988), 152, compare with Muhammad Muḥyi al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, *Sharḥ Maqāmāt al-Hamadhānī* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1979) 113–120, a reprint of Hamadhānī, *al-Maqāmāt,* ed. Muḥammad Muḥyi l-Din ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Al-Maktaba al-azhariyya, 1324/1923), 108–114.

[22] On the suppression and/or condemnation of the *mujūn* and homoerotic dimension in classical Islamicate literatures, also see Paul Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1995), El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 156–161, Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 290–301.

[23] El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 63.

of Arabic literary lore be emptied of any material deemed unsuitable for the new reading public created by the development of public education, but no modern *adīb*, at the turn of the twentieth century, would consider dealing with bodily functions, with desire, with sexualities, and with transgressions of social and religious norms as crudely as pre-modern authors. The 'space of transgression' (and specifically of verbal transgression) allowed within the realm of classical *adab* had disappeared in prose fiction.

However, the vanishing of *mujūn* cannot be analysed simply as a sorry consequence of Arabic literature's confrontation with European criteria of decency during the colonial age and its resulting self-censorship, and it cannot be dismissed as the progressive imposition of prudish norms seen as tokens of modernity. The gradual relegation of the crudest forms of *mujūn* to the field of the 'unspoken' or the 'unpublished' is not merely a loss of freedom or a moral restriction imposed upon Arab societies by modernity and the extension of the reading public. It is precisely *because* of its outrageously misogynistic tone, of its celebration of homosociality, of its homoerotic flavour, that this whole corpus of Arabic literature became, during the 19th century, at odds with the evolution of Arab societies as they aimed at redefining the role of 'woman' (*al-marʾa*), an essentialized and abstract entity that was to be the only legitimate object of male desire.

When a previously strictly homosocial world opened itself to (limited) mixing of the sexes in the public space, the norms of literary production had to be modified. This 'new refusal' of obscenity and awkwardness regarding the excesses of the desiring body may be explained by changes in the ways in which literature, along with other cultural productions, was consumed: written works now circulated freely, without the long schooling in textual consumption formerly provided by the shaykh to his pupil. The progress of women's status and rights in Arab societies throughout the 19th and 20th centuries imposed new rules and conventions for a literature now available and legible to a large audience.[24]

One century later, now that the heteronormalization of most Arab urban societies has been gradually achieved, can *mujūn* resurface in new forms of Arabic fiction, and can its homoerotic dimension be brought back to life? In other words, can Arabic literature present same-sex love/sexuality as a fact of life that can be viewed with a smile instead of a frown or a sigh? Thus worded, the question suggests that the reappearance of *mujūn* would enable a desirable rejuvenation of a humorous dimension absent in contemporary literature, where the essential link between sexuality and laughter seems lost. However, this revivalist perspective makes sense only if the mediaeval laugh is suitable for the modern world, which is what I shall next examine.

[24] On heteronormalization in society, Afsaneh Najmabadi's perspective on Iranian society in *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards, Gender and sexual anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) can be applied to Arab societies. For literature, in addition to Massad, *op. cit.*, see Lagrange, *Islam d'interdits*. On women's image and essentialization, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas' classic *Woman's body, Woman's word, Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). The relationship between the expansion of female readership in the Arab world and the heteronormalization of literature still needs to be closely studied.

DABĪB GONE WRONG? THE RAPIST'S LAUGHTER IN MEDIAEVAL *ADAB*

Dabīb in early Umayyad poetry is a common motif of erotic poetry (*ghazal*): the lover 'crawls' (*dabba*) around his lady-love's tent, and surprises her in the middle of the night; she feigns outrage and asks him to leave but ultimately gives in and grants him a whole night of poetry, a kiss, or more. A semantic change occurs in early Abbasid poetry, when *dabīb* comes to mean a form of scenarized rape, usually of homosexual nature, although sometimes heterosexual.[25] 'Consensual *dabīb*' was the original behavioural script, in the sense developed by J. Gagnon;[26] later, 'forced *dabīb*,' i.e., rape, developed as another script. Desire for the narrative's pretty boy and arousal of the reader were triggered by the latter's identification of familiar elements and the unfolding of an oft-repeated scenario. This script includes: a reluctant (or supposedly reluctant) boy, a cunning hero, wine-drinking and induced sleep, the difficulty of undoing the drawstrings of the victim's trousers, penetration, the victim's awakening either during the act or the next morning, the traces of the evil deed, and the final confrontation.

This new form of *dabīb* became a topos in 10th-century *adab*, a change that culminated in entire chapters of mediaeval erotica being given over to *dabīb*.[27] It appeared as a standard episode in folk-tales and the rapist (the *dābb*) developed into a stock-character in the anecdotes of high-literature and poetry, as well as in popular narratives.[28] No more is the enamoured knight given a secret rendezvous by his Bedouin or Umayyad princess; now the *dābb* has become the lascivious lover of adolescents, whether slaves ready to surrender themselves for a few silver coins or free *fityān* (young lads) ready to kill for their honour, and the 'rapist' deploys the most malicious tricks to make them fall into his clutches and penetrate them against their (avowed) will.

The reason for this semantic evolution is probably twofold: in poetry, the 'new' *dabīb* is obviously a parody of Umayyad courtly *dabīb*, as the cunning tricks used to penetrate the desired lad mimic ʿUmar b. Abī Rabīʿa's tricks to enter the lady's tent unnoticed by her tribe. The courtly warrior becomes a rascal, in poems that are an ironical wink at this common motif of 'old' poetry, just as *khamriyya* poetry can include a parody of the *wuqūf ʿalā l-aṭlāl* section of the *qaṣīda* or subvert images of ʿ*udhrī* love-poems. The parodic nature of *dabīb* narratives, which speak nonchalantly and jokingly of rape and always seemingly take the rapist's side, laughing with him and rejoicing at his victories, certainly reduces

[25] The 'rape' meaning of *dabīb* is certainly already present at an early period, and the line between surprise and forced sex already crossed: see *Akhbār Sukayna bt. al-Ḥusayn* in Iṣfahānī's *Aghānī*, in which the verb *dabb ʿala* is used by the author when the Umayyad poet al-Farazdaq is caught by a Bedouin whose maid he tried to sleep with at night, betraying his host's hospitality. Jarīr naturally blamed him for this shameful act. But *dabīb* in poetry, at this early exclusively heteroerotic stage, has not yet undergone its mutation.

[26] See John Gagnon, 'The Implicit and Explicit Use of the Scripting Perspective in Sex Research,' *The Annual Review of Sex Research* 1 (1990): 1–44.

[27] See Aḥmad al-Tīfāshī, *Nuzhat al-albāb*, ed. Jamāl Jumʿa (London: Riyad al-Rayyis, 1992), 207–221 and Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Yamanī [=Ibn Falīta], *Rushd al-labīb ʾilā muʿāsharat al-ḥabīb* (Al-Māya, Libya: Talā, 2006), 133–163.

[28] See for instance Everett K. Rowson analysis of Ibn Dāniyāl's *Lawʿat al-Shākī* in 'Two Homoerotic Narratives from Mamlūk Literature,' *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, 158–191.

their shockingness for a contemporary reader. The parody partly accounts for the fact that *dabīb* is necessarily associated with humour, jest and *hazl*. On the other hand, *dabīb* could not have become a literary script if it were entirely unrelated to social realities and practices. This scenario, narrated from the perspective of the rapist, is simply the other side of popular narratives of young heroes escaping rapists (by cunning or through violence), told from the virtual victim's point of view; both illustrate a fear of male-male rape, at the age when boys are moving toward manhood but have yet to achieve it, and allude to what must have been a reality of pre-modern societies.[29] As explained by Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı in their book *The Age of the Beloveds, Love and The Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society*:

> Beneath the surface violence of love rhetoric in the Age of the Beloveds – the language of war and self-defense, of swords and daggers, bows and arrows [...] lies a subtext of sexual violence. In both Europe and the Ottoman Empire, where it was common for mature men and youths to seek sexual relations with quite young boys and women, sexual violence was widespread [....] it is true that actual sexual violence (as opposed to the symbolic or displaced violence of the stories) was a problem in the Ottoman Empire as it was in the rest of Europe.[30]

The mediaeval scenario will be examined through two anecdotes (*akhbār*): Ibn Manẓūr's account of Abū Nuwās' adventure with 'The Three Egyptian Lads' and Iṣfahānī's account of the rape of Abū al-Aṣbagh's son in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*.

The Three Egyptian lads

This anecdote is found in both Abū Hiffān's *Akhbār Abī Nuwās*[31] and Ibn Manẓūr's *Akhbār Abī Nuwās*.[32] The poetic verses upon which the anecdote is constructed are quoted additionally, although with significant variations, in Wagner's edition of Abū Nuwās's *Dīwān*, based on Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī's collection,[33] and the anonymous collection *Al-fukāha wa-l-iʾtinas fī mujūn Abī Nuwās*.[34]

While walking through the markets of Fusṭāṭ (presently Old Cairo) after having fled Baghdad and joined al-Khaṣīb's court, Abū Nuwās spots three handsome lads, *kaʾannahum al-ṭawāwīs* (as beautiful as peacocks), all three *fityān* of noble origin or sons of rich merchants. He disguises himself as a street porter and proposes to help them take the merchandise they have bought to the house they are sharing. When he reaches their place, he cleans

[29] See for instance the story of Tāj al-Mulūk and Dunyā in the *Arabian Nights*.

[30] Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, *The Age of the Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2005), 256–257.

[31] Abu Hiffān, *Akhbār Abī Nuwās*, ed. ʿAbd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr [ʿUyūn al-adab al-ʿarabī], 1954), 60–66.

[32] Ibn Manẓūr, *Akhbār Abī Nuwās*, ed. *Mulḥaq al-Aghānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1992), 179–181.

[33] Abū Nuwās, *Diwān* ed. E. Wagner, 5 vols. (Beirut: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2003), 5: 22–23.

[34] *Al-fukāha wa-l-iʾtinās* = Abū Nuwās, *Al-nuṣūs al-muḥarrama*, ed. Jamāl Jumʿa (London: Riyāḍ al-Rayyis, 1998), 60–62.

their house, prepares a delicious dinner, and pours wine until they are so drunk that they fall asleep. He rapes the three of them while they are unconscious, then spreads some saliva between his own thighs, lets his pants down on his ankles, and falls asleep. When the three lads awaken on the next morning, he pretends they are all victims of an unknown rapist: 'Each one of us has become like a young virgin deflowered on her wedding night, so let's eat and drink and enjoy the pleasures of life as she would do with her husband' (an ambiguous sentence and *de facto* avowal of his crime they fail to decipher). They all decide to hush the story so their reputation will not be endangered. But the poet finally decides to change his clothes and reveal himself as the famous Abū Nuwās, by whom they were all afraid to be abused, for his reputation as a *lūṭī* (sodomite) has preceded him. While they are about to hit him, he argues that what is done is done and that they had better finish the remaining wine with him. They reluctantly accept, and he leaves them, reciting verses that tell the whole story.

The anecdote is obviously conceived as a prosaic expansion of elements found in the original verses, whether they are by Abū Nuwās himself or any *mājin* poet of his generation. The prosaic version adds to the poem some symbolically relevant elements and follows a script that involves key items: the well-known predator in disguise; young lads who take the risk of living out of the family cocoon and pay a dear price for it; wine-drinking and its dangers; the tricky opening of the drawstring of the sleeping victim's trousers (*tikkat al-sirwāl*), a challenge that will be turned into an art in Ibn Falīta's *Rushd al-Labīb* (14th century), an obscene parody of treaties on the art of war; abusing a lad while he has passed out; traces of saliva and semen on the thighs; the will to kill then the final surrender to escape dishonour; the public shame of poetry.

The narrative is constructed from the predator's point of view, never from the lads' perspective. Abū Nuwās's verses conclude the anecdote, and readers laugh with him, enjoying his victory and mocking the young men's naivety, for they got what they deserved. The lesson is twofold: (1) young men cannot be protected like girls through seclusion, even if self-imposed, and however hard they try to ward off predators using unnatural ways (living together locked up in their house, not interacting with strangers), their lack of knowledge of the outside world will lead to accident; (2) they failed in their mission of reaching adulthood with an unaltered body (i.e. un-penetrated anus) because they indulged in illicit worldly pleasures (wine). The narrative opens many ambiguous paths, though: Abū Nuwās the *lūṭī* doesn't object to being momentarily seen by the lads as a victim of rectal penetration and he feminizes himself along with them, admitting to have become a *ʿarūs*; the text seems to suggest that if being penetrated is a sorry accident on the path to manhood, it is not a permanent stigma as long as purely accidental and since no pleasure was felt or sought by the victim.[35] The final *coup de théâtre*, when Abū Nuwās identifies himself, seems unnecessary on the plot's level since it exposes him to the lads' desire to take their revenge. From the perspective of mediaeval comedy, though, this revelation is indispensable: without it the trick played on the three boys would be incomplete. They

[35] See the enlightening lines on the significance of feeling pleasure vs. the mere fact of being penetrated in David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 122.

need to know they were played, their arrogant beauty must be soiled, and they have to face their humiliation by drinking wine, however reluctantly, with their rapist. Laughter is triggered by two paradigmatic situations identified by Henri Bergson: repetition (of the *dabīb* scenario played anecdote after anecdote in Ibn Manẓūr's collection, so that the lads' defeat is expected with a smile), and inversion (the shameless *lūṭī* is the one teaching a lesson instead of being punished; the victims are invited to drink and rejoice with their torturer in their own house instead of throwing him out and cannot but accept). This confirms Bergson's hypothesis that 'any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement.'[36] The inclusion of this narrative in a series of anecdotes on the devious schemes of the lustful *lūṭī*, in which Abū Nuwās himself is depicted as having once been a *muʾājar* (male prostitute) assuming the passive role and in which other desirable lads (*fityān*) are simultaneously seekers of boys, negates the trauma of rape and laughs it off as a fact of life, certainly better avoided but quite common. Male pleasure is linked to coercion: while Abū Nuwās could have paid some pretty *muʾājar* for sex, it was much more enjoyable for him to trick free, Muslim, rich, reputable, handsome *fityān*, who are *not* supposed to be available for penetration (although they can legitimately be objects of chaste passion). He expresses this conception of desire in these verses, also quoted in Ibn Manẓūr's *Akhbār*: '*Aladhdhu n-nayki mā kāna -ghtiṣābā / bi-manʿi l-ḥibbi ʾaw bi-manʿi r-raqībi*' (*The sweetest fuck is that obtained by coercion / Whether the lover refuses or the censor does).* This conception of pleasure should certainly not be considered a unique social norm or the standard attitude towards pleasure expressed in the realm of mediaeval Islamicate cultures; indeed, a considerable number of erotic treatises advocate that pleasure should be felt by both partners – although such a conception is only to be expressed in the case of heterosexual intercourse. But the *lūṭī* as a literary comic figure must ritualistically defend a posture of aggressive masculinity. Abū Nuwās's argument, shocking by modern standards, should not be taken too seriously: *mujūn* is a parodic mode that subverts the narratives of epic victory and applies its principals to sexuality; it seeks to provoke laughter and pleasant outrage. But the mere fact that this conception of pleasure is seen as amusing in mediaeval literature in the form of *hazl* or *mujūn* or *sukhf*, is in itself indicative of an elitist conception of society. The free Muslim grown-up man is the only dominant element and can deal with bodies other than his own as he wishes, whereas bodies of not-yet-adult males, such as our *fityān*, that are still desirable, may fail to reach maturity and the stage of masculinity without incident.

Mediaeval Arabo-Islamic *adab*, a repository of Aristotelian philosophy, certainly expresses the opinion that 'jesting is witty contumely,' that contumely consisting of 'the disgracing of another for one's own amusement' for those who are chiefly risible are 'those who are in some way inferior, especially morally inferior, although not wholly vicious in character.'[37]

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[36] Henri Bergson, *Le rire* (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 1989 [5th ed]), 53. English translation by C. Brereton, F. Rothwell, available on http://www.authorama.com/laughter-1.html.

[37] Aristotle, *Poetics* ed. and trans. by Stephen Halliwell (London: Loeb 1995), 44, quoted and analysed by Quentin Skinner, 'Hobbes and the Classical Theory of Laughter,' *Visions of Politics*, vol. III Hobbes and Civil Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 143.

Laughter is primarily an expression of power and superiority and no mercy is shown for the weak. The surprising ambiguity of such anecdotes is that the laughing man is himself a dubious figure, much more so than his victims. There are two ways to interpret this apparent contradiction: on the one hand, we can argue that the only absolute norm expressed by *mujūn* literature is that of hegemonic masculinity, a norm the *lūṭī* reinforces in his own dissolute and unethical way; he is therefore the only one entitled to laugh, and the reader/consumer of these anecdotes is brought to side with him by the deployment of narrative perspective. On the other hand, *mujūn* is a ritualized subversion of norms, particularly religious and moral ones. Its legitimacy in high literature makes it more akin to what Mikhail Bakhtin characterized, for French literature, as the Renaissance attitude towards laughter than to the mediaeval banning of comedy from 'serious' literature (in spite or because of its 'exceptional radicalism, freedom and ruthlessness'[38]) and the later conceptualization according to which laughter 'can only refer to individual and individually typical phenomena of social life.' During the Renaissance, explains Bakhtin, 'Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man.'[39] It is a cosmic satire inherited from mediaeval laughter transposed into literature, for laughter is an interior form of liberation, that frees man not only from exterior censorship but, and above all, from the 'great interior censor,'[40] – the fear of sacred and authoritarian prohibitions. Bakhtin's take on Renaissance laughter certainly is in keeping with the nature of laughter in mediaeval Arabic literature. Even a seemingly untouchable social norm, the 'classic' construction of masculinity by sexual roles, is partly ridiculed in anecdotes where ambiguity and gender blurring are extreme. I would argue that the two conceptualizations, i.e. of 'laughter as expression of power' and of 'laughter as expression of liberation,' are opposing forces present at the core of mediaeval *mujūn*. In that genre, laughter confirms social norms (while mocking the sacred ones) as a condition for its legitimacy and its collective consumption, whereas it also subverts them for individual reading. The great ambiguity of *mujūn*, the fact that it is never possible to decide whether it finally strengthens or mocks conventions, may well be the ultimate reason for its unsuitability for modern times, as we shall see.

Also to be noticed is the fact that physical pleasure is secondary in this narrative, and clearly second to literary pleasure. Neither the verses nor the accompanying anecdote dwell very long on Abū Nuwās's sexual enjoyment: his pleasure is derived from domination and from poetry; it is primarily an intellectual enjoyment. As for the passive partners' pleasure, it is simply unsaid and unthinkable. The three Egyptian lads literally feel *nothing* during the act (improbable as this may sound); only the next morning's pain can be, for them, a legitimate feeling. Pleasure would turn them into *maʾbūn-s* (catamites), a physical condition and a position of infamy, whereas being the accidental victim of a pleasureless rape is a mere stain that will go away with time, washed away by adulthood like those conspicuous traces of saliva or semen on their thighs that are highlighted by the narrative.

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[38] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 71.

[39] Ibid., 66–67.

[40] Ibid., 93.

Aṣbagh's son

This anecdote is found in many *adab* collections. The version translated here is taken from Al-Shābushtī's famous *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*[41] (10th century):

> There was in Kufa a man called Abū al-Aṣbagh, who traded in singing slaves,[42] and whose son Aṣbagh had the most beautiful face ever seen. Muṭīʿ b. Iyās, Yaḥyā b. Ziyād, and Ḥammād ʿAjrad were regular visitors to his household, for they had fallen for his son, but they could obtain nothing from him. One day, Abū al-Aṣbagh decided to invite Yaḥyā b. Ziyād for a morning draught. The preceding evening, Yaḥyā sent him goat meat, hens, chickens, fruit, and wine. Abū al-Aṣbagh said to his female servants: 'Yaḥyā b. Ziyād will be our guest, prepare for him what he likes most.' When he was done with ordering the food, he couldn't find any messenger to send [to tell Yaḥyā was expecting him] but his own son Aṣbagh, to whom he said, 'Do not leave Yaḥyā's place without him!' When Aṣbagh arrived there, Yaḥyā told his servant: 'Let the boy in, then step aside and lock the door, and prevent him from getting out in case he attempts an escape.' When Aṣbagh entered and delivered [his father's] message, Yaḥyā tried to seduce him, to no avail. Then he fought with the boy, threw him on the ground, and went to open his trousers' waistband. As the cord resisted, he cut it. When he was done with the boy, he gave him forty dinars that were under his prayer rug, and the lad took them. Yaḥyā then told him: 'Go ahead, I'll be behind you.' Aṣbagh left his house and Yaḥyā went to wash. Then he sat down to spruce up his appearance[43] and perfume himself with incense. [His friend] Muṭīʿ stepped in at that moment and saw Yaḥyā smartening up. 'What's come over you?' he asked, but Yaḥyā didn't answer: he merely raised his nose contemptuously, and furrowed his brow. Muṭīʿ asked again: 'I see that you are dressing up and putting on perfume, where are you going?' But the other wouldn't answer. 'Woe on you!' said Muṭīʿ, 'What's happened to you? Has a divine revelation fallen down on you? Did the angels speak to you? Have you been acknowledged as the new caliph?' But Yaḥyā kept shaking his head in denial. Then Muṭīʿ said : 'I see that you are too proud to deign answering, as if you had fucked Aṣbagh, the son of Abu al-Aṣbagh, in person.' 'In fact, that's what I just did,' answered Yaḥyā, 'and I gave him forty dinars.'
>
> 'And where are you going now?' asked Muṭīʿ.
>
> 'His father's invited me.'
>
> 'May he repudiate his wife if you don't let me kiss your cock!' Yaḥyā showed it to him and Muṭīʿ kissed it indeed. Then he asked: 'How did you manage to do it?'
>
> Yaḥyā explained the whole story, then went to Abū al-Aṣbagh's house. Muṭīʿ followed him and waited for an hour [at the door], then knocked and asked to be received. A messenger told him that the master was busy today, that he had no time to meet him and was sorry for this. Muṭīʿ asked for a roll of paper and some ink, and wrote those verses to Abū al-Aṣbagh:
>
> Abū al-Aṣbagh, may you always remain in the unreachable skies!

[41] Al-Shābushtī, *Al-Diyārāt*, ed. Kurkis ʿAwwād (Beirut: Dar al-Rāʾid al-ʿArabī, 1986 [reprint of Baghdad, 1951]), 254–256.

[42] This is the most probable meaning of *muqayyin*, generally used in the feminine form *muqayyina*, lady's maid. The version of this anecdote in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* uses *lahu qiyān*, 'who owns (or deals in) singing slaves.'

[43] The meaning of *yatazayyanu* is both 'to shave' and 'embellish oneself.' The mention of perfume (used by both males and females) and Yaḥyā's boastful banter however suggest more than shaving (one's head, for the beard is a necessity for the male) and contribute to a subtle feminization of his character.

> But do not betray our friendship like he who ignominiously cut the cord
> And did what he'd been craving for, unstopped by fear or respect for a lost right.
> Had you seen Aṣbagh thrown under him, humbled by shame, yielding
> To his hasty and lustful urge, how would you have hated his deed!
> Call Aṣbagh, and ask him: you will discover a ghastly truth.
>
> Abū al-Aṣbagh said to Yaḥyā [upon seeing the note]: 'You did it, son of an adulteress!'
>
> 'I didn't', protested Yaḥyā, but Abū al-Aṣbagh checked his son's trousers with his hand, found the waistband had been cut, and was convinced the scandal had taken place. Yaḥyā told him:
>
> 'What happened happened, and Muṭīʿ, this son of an adulteress, has come to tell you everything. Take my son, he is prettier than yours, we're both Arabs born of an Arab woman, while you and your son are Nabateans born of a Nabatean. Fuck my son ten times for the one time I fucked yours, and you'll keep the money as well, ten times what I paid your son.'
>
> Abū al-Aṣbagh burst with laughter and told his son: give me the dinars, you son of a whore! The boy handed the money and went away in shame, while Yaḥyā said: 'By God, may you never receive Muṭīʿ again, that son of an adulteress!' But Abū al-Aṣbagh and his singing girls argued: 'He should be received immediately; he has cast disgrace upon us!' So Muṭīʿ was ushered in, and sat down to drink with them, while Yaḥyā insulted him with all the words his tongue could speak. He kept on laughing the whole time.'

This anecdote amply illustrates the differences of perception between what was felt as humorous in a distant past, and what is nowadays an unacceptable object of laughter. There is no doubt that this story was felt to be immensely comical, while today it would certainly provoke bewilderment, for the desecration of an adolescent's body is hardly considered an acceptable laughing matter. The anecdote is the narrative of a rape. It not only confirms that the summit of the social pyramid is the adult ethnically Arab male, but also reveals that this adult Arab male is the only subject, while others are merely objects. Like Abū Nuwās in the former anecdote, Muṭīʿ b. Iyās and Yaḥyā b. Ziyād are famous *mujjān* (rakes) whom the reader is primarily supposed to laugh with, not at – although the narrative opens a door for ambiguity with Yaḥyā's conceited ways and Muṭīʿ's parody of homage to the king. The text calls indeed for a distinction between the character mocked by the actors (the boy) and those who are derided by the narrative (all of them). Laughter is here again based on repetition and inversion: the predictable penetration of Aṣbagh, who will be (literally) the butt of the joke, and the inversed scale of punishments accorded to wrongful acts: all the actors are heavy sinners, a parade of transgressors (drinkers of wine in the morning, a homosexual rapist, a boy accepting a bribe for his silence, a man kissing another one's penis, a father pimping his own son after pimping slave singers, another father offering his own son for penetration as compensation, girls laughing off an adolescent's rape in wine) but the only character being laughed at by all the actors is the least of the sinners, the boy. We can hear both laughter as expression of power and laughter at the reversal of the cosmic order ordained by God. But the one voice that is not heard is the victim's voice, for such *nawādir* (piquant and rare anecdotes) never allow the victim to trick his aggressor.

Such jokes, short of reflecting actual behaviours, express at least common representations. The 'pimping father' is a topos of *khamriyya* (wine-drinking) poetry and *shiʿr al-diyārāt* (evocation of the pleasures lived in Christian monasteries) as the Christian or Jewish tavern

owner customarily looks away while his son pleases his patrons, as in Abū Nuwās's poetry[44]. The father here is a Nabatean, that is of peasant origin (*anbāṭ al-ʿIrāq*) as opposed to tribal Arab aristocracy; it is not specified whether he is a Muslim or not, but he might not be. Although the term *muqayyin* is ambiguous, it probably designates a dealer in *qiyān* (female slave singers) and as such someone who is already a kind of pimp. Those loose girls are present when he finally decides to receive Muṭīʿ and they argue in favour of letting him in (to hush the scandal). But the immensely transgressive detail is that the other father, Yaḥyā the *lūṭī*, also appears as a pimping father, offering his son to the insulted father in a parody of *diya* (the bloodprice). Is his proposal 'sincere' (in terms of the fiction) or is it nothing but another joke, the forty dinars being an acceptable compensation the father is quick to pocket? The text will not answer this point.

Also remarkable is the reversal of the paradigmatic preparation for sexual intercourse (which, in real life, culminates in wedding ceremonies) in this anecdote: Yaḥyā takes a bath, shaves and perfumes himself after intercourse has occurred. Whereas the passive partner should be the one making himself desirable before intercourse, the active partner here makes himself desirable *post coitum*.[45]

The wording used in the course of Aṣbagh's seduction/rape scene, '*rāwadahu ʿan nafsihi*', is obviously reminiscent of the Koranic scene in which Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph.[46] She is struck with young Joseph's handsome looks, as is Yaḥyā with Aṣbagh's – as if he were a female charmed by early manhood. Although Yaḥyā (a successful version of Zulaykha) rapes the boy, it is remarkable that he is as cunning as a lecherous woman in this section of the episode, as witnessed by the fact that he pampers himself, perfumes himself with incense, and acts with mock haughtiness, as a woman would be supposed to; today we might say he behaves like a 'bitchy queen.' The active *lūṭī* in this anecdote and elsewhere is slightly different from an über-male who dominates both male and female partners and simply fails to tame his sexual urges, for there are puzzling traces of 'feminization' in his portrait, and although he stands for maleness (*dhukūra*), he never embodies the true values of virility (*murūʾa*). The *lūṭī* of *adab* literature is not the *fāʿil fiʿl qawm lūṭ* of Islamic jurisprudence: the sexual preference implied by the word also goes with a hint of slight effeminacy, as Tawḥidi perfidiously remarked of the vizier Ibn ʿAbbād.

As for the penis kissing scene, it is clearly a parodic echo of the *mubāyaʿa* (allegiance) ceremony, jokingly alluded to by Muṭīʿ's question '*aw būyiʿa laka bi-l-khilāfa*' (have you been recognized as caliph?): Yaḥyā is, by this outrageous act, metaphorically crowned 'Caliph of the sodomites.' At the same time, the kissing of the penis is also a parody of oral sex.

[44] See *Dīwān Abī Nuwās*, ed. Ewald Wagner, vol. 3 (references here are made to the reprint edition, Damascus: Dār al-Madā, 2003), piece 62 (pp. 96–97), mention of father of the boy accepting *dabīb* on line 17; piece 84 (pp. 115–117) no mention of the father in Wagner's edition, but the same poem has an additional line in Ilīya al-Ḥāwī's edition (Beirut: Al-sharika al-ʿālamiyya lil-kitāb, 1987): '*lammā raʾānī abūhu qad qaʿudtu lahū / ḥayyā wa-ʾayqana ʾannī mutlifun ṣafadī*'; piece 101, p. 133, the female tavern owner offers a boy (her son?); piece 108 (pp. 148–49) the young *dhimmī* is penetrated by all the drinkers at the end of the poem, is the father unaware?

[45] One would ritually perform ablution after intercourse, but Yaḥyā's grooming of his body is typically a women's expected attitude before intercourse, especially the wedding night.

[46] Qurʾān 12:30 *imraʾtu l-ʿazīzi turāwidu fatāhā ʿan nafsihi*, see also 12:32 and 12:51.

Muṭīʿ had already jumped to kiss a female servant's vagina in the same chapter of Shābushtī's book, so we discover him as a worshipper of both male and female genitalia. The whole anecdote certainly suggests that the dividing line between various categories of *mujjān* is a very thin one, and mediaeval humour, in its Bakhtinian dimension, particularly mocks – between lines – the *lūṭī*'s contention that his manhood cannot be affected by repeated intercourse with other males: to be aroused by a handsome adolescent is normal for any man, but preferring adolescents to maidens is a dangerous slope that may lead to some behavioural ambiguities, warns the anecdote.[47]

In both narratives, the mediaeval conception of humour considers forced sex imposed on male adolescents an acceptable subject of laughter. The narrative takes into account the predator's point of view, watches his triumph with a tone combining feigned shock, weak disapproval, utter amusement and slight arousal. But if mediaeval *mujūn* walks a tightrope between the laughter of the almighty shameless male and the subversive laughter that mocks religion, social norms, and even the construction of masculinity, the absence of the victim's perspective, unnecessary in an *adab* text since his torment is considered to be of no account, might be one of the reasons for this mode of writing's disappearance in modern literature.

FROM *DABĪB* TO HOMOSEXUAL RAPE: THE PERSPECTIVE OF MODERN FICTION

Dabīb hardly exists as such in modern Arab fiction: indeed the word itself has disappeared. The scripted approach leading to the prey, the cunning devices used to induce a boy or a young man's sleep, the final boast of victory, and most of all, the boisterous laugh associated with this victory are not to be found. Since modern literature does not necessarily converse with *turāth*, and particularly not with *mujūn*, this comes as no surprise. However, the elements at the heart of *dabīb* that make this script plausible, i.e. the desirability of male adolescents to slightly or considerably older males, the difficulty of reaching manhood with an unaltered body, the notion that public space is dangerous for boys and young men, particularly if they are good looking and have a fair complexion, the fact that older adolescents will try to force themselves on younger boys and that this is an accepted fact of life, none of these have receded, according to literature, from twentieth century societies. The way to manhood is paved with sexual ambushes and dangers, whether embodied in the shape of an older man, slightly older friends from school or the neighbourhood, or fellow prisoners, just as in the narratives of *Alf layla wa-layla*. However, it took a long time for these representations to be clearly expressed in modern fiction. The danger of

[47] On the normalcy of being attracted to handsome adolescents, see El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 13–51; also see Dror Ze'evi's introduction in *Producing Desire, Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East 1500–1900* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006). On Ibn ʿAbbād and the accidental construction of the 'homosexual' in Tawḥīdī's libel, negating the distinction between active and passive partners, see Lagrange, 'The Obscenity of the Vizier', in K. Babayan and A. Najmabadi (eds.), *Islamicate Sexualities, Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 161–203.

homosexual rape appeared in Muḥammad Shukrī's classic *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī* (*For Bread Alone*) in a flimsy hotel, on the beach, and in a cemetery where the narrator sleeps and has to beware of older teenagers who want to abuse him;[48] in the same author's *Al-Shuṭṭār* (1994), the narrator has become a 20-year-old man and now constitutes in his turn a danger for younger boys, following in the footsteps of Abū Nuwās.[49] In Abdellah Taia's *Une mélancolie arabe* (in French, 2008),[50] the 12-year-old openly gay narrator is almost raped by an older boy in the Moroccan town of Salé (Salā). Ali, the horny older boy, calls the narrator Layla, refusing to grant him a male identity. The gay narrator will accept penetration only if Ali recognizes him as a boy and kisses him. But Ali is not interested in consensual sex: the whole game is meaningful and acceptable only if it appears as a rape. Otherwise Ali's desire would enter a grey zone and turn him into what he cannot be – a partner for the narrator. This is why he calls four other friends to abuse the boy with him, this 'young boy in the red swimming trunks on a blue mattress, shutting his eyes as if plunging into a blue pool.' Only exterior elements will save him: the call for prayer and Ali's mother climbing up the stairs. Rape and/or group sex in this novel fortuitously appear as variations on Abū Nuwās's claim that *aladhdhu n-nayki mā kāna-ghtiṣābā. Dabīb*, or its modern counterpart same-sex rape, are means to escape the danger of same-sex sexuality's ambiguities. Ali's partners in crime are not called to the scene to indulge in pleasure but to witness that this pleasure is taken by force and that the penetrative role is played without hesitation.

One obvious difference between the mediaeval narrative of *dabīb* and modern literature is the narrative point of view. In classical *adab*, the perspective is always that of the *dābb*, the rapist, with the victim's perception being either ignored or hastily alluded to with only one ritual feeling – shame – allowed; that, and the will to cover up the deed so as not to be stigmatized or the readiness to accept money as a compensation. The modern narrative, however, dwells on the victims' feelings, and even, in this rare instance, allows for sexual arousal at the prospect of homosexual intercourse.

Non-metaphorical male-male rape is not a rare subject in contemporary fictions. It is alluded to in at least four novels published in 2009: in the Jordanian ʿAbdallāh Riḍwān's *Ghiwāyat al-zanzalakht* (Temptation of the Chinaberry Tree); in two Saudi novels: *Shāriʿ al-ʿAṭāyif* (Atayif Road) by ʿAbdallāh bin Bakhīt and ʿAbduh Khāl's *Tarmī bi-sharar* (It Throws Off Sparks); and in the Iraqi Ṣalāḥ Ṣalāḥ's *Būhīmyā al-kharāb* (The Bohemia of Devastation). It is a 'common' danger, whether as a consequence of gender segregation (as mid-century Orientalists[51] and these Saudi novelists alike would have it), or because male-male desire is traditionally constructed as natural and masculinity as a social gender is a matter of sexual role regardless of the partner's gender, as contemporary research in gender studies would advocate. This unexpectedly common theme of rape suggests that non-consensual sex between men and adolescents or among adolescents is perceived by authors as an important issue of contemporary Arab societies that has to be dealt with, in the frame of

[48] Muhammad Shukri, *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī* (London: Dar al-Saqi, 1982), 110–115.

[49] Muhammad Shukri, *Al-Shuṭṭār* (London: Dar al-Saqi, 1994). See J. Massad *Desiring Arabs*, 314–319, for a discussion of *Al-khubz al-ḥāfī*.

[50] Abdellah Taia, *Une mélancolie arabe* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 15–32.

[51] See Charles Pellat's unsigned article 'Liwāṭ,' *Encyclopaedia of Islam* II.

the 'realist-reformist paradigm' of fiction.[52] The fact that homosexual rape is so commonly alluded to shows that modern novels deem it necessary to denounce what they perceive as an unfortunate consequence of the failure to achieve mixing of the sexes and the heteronormalization of desire, leading to violence, sexuality by proxy, and deeply hurt souls and bodies. There is no doubt that one of the dominant images of 'homosexuality' in contemporary Arab fiction is forced intercourse, a fact that partly explains the continuing use of '*shādhdh*' (pervert, abnormal, queer) rather than the more politically correct '*mithlī*' in present-day novels that mention same-sex intercourse: what is dealt with is presented as substitution sexuality and unrequited attraction.

Another obvious difference between mediaeval and modern narratives is that in the latter non-consensual sex, far from being a comical matter and a legitimate field for the expression of wit, is viewed as a personal tragedy and/or a social scandal to be denounced. The most obvious resemblance, on the other hand, is that physical pleasure, whether for the active or the passive partner, is in most cases an irrelevant issue: homosexual rape is an assertion of one's domination before being an easy satisfaction of bodily needs and a substitute for heterosexual sex.

Ṣalāḥ Ṣalāḥ's novel on an aborted bohemia in 1980s Baghdad in the days of the Iran-Iraq war mentions a culture of organized pederasty, with the *farakhjiyya* (literally, 'chicken-hawks') boasting their deeds and conquests. The narrator mentions his own rape while spending a night in jail for disorderly behaviour. Coincidentally in accordance with mediaeval accounts of *dabīb*, the narrator inadvertently takes tablets of Tafranil that put him to sleep:[53] 'They were handed over to me by a guy. Then I lost in this place my first virginity. I've never considered honour had anything to do with preserving your anus' chastity. That is, as far as my first rape was concerned.'

This rather light attitude to forced penetration and the uncommon refusal of the standard definition of masculinity is perhaps dictated by the relativity of horrors in the Baghdad of the 1980s. But it is noteworthy that it still takes no account of the possibility of pleasure felt during intercourse.

This 'light attitude' is quite different from that found in ʿAbdallāh Riḍwān's novel, in which the narrator regrets having been the silent accomplice of a rape scene. While playing on a mountain overlooking their refugee camp, two Palestinian adolescents are suddenly surrounded by four men in their early twenties, also children of refugees, who threaten them with knives:[54]

> Yūsuf asked:
> – What do you want from us?
> – Take off your clothes, answered Ḥasan, self-confidently.
> – What? We cried in unison.

[52] See Richard Jacquemond, *Entre scribes et écrivains, le champ littéraire dans l'Egypte contemporaine* (Paris/Arles: Actes Sud, 2003).

[53] Ṣalāḥ Ṣalāḥ, *Būhīmyā l-kharāb* (Beirut: Dār al-Tanwīr, 2009), 26. Farakhjiyya, 49–51. Prison rape, 56.

[54] ʿAbdallāh Riḍwān, *Ghiwāyat al-zanzalakht* (Amman: Durūb/Al-Yazūrī, 2009), 36–37. Same-sex pleasure is also alluded to in the novel (25–26), while all the Palestinian boys of a same class escape school for a session of collective masturbation, the winner being the first one to ejaculate.

> – I said take off your clothes, or else... he added, brandishing his knife in our faces.
> We all started wriggling and squirming like snakes. No way to escape. I looked Ḥasan in the eye. I knew he was a distant relative of mine, on my mother's side. It was as if I was begging for this kinship. Ḥasan suddenly yelled at me: 'Ali, go to the top of the valley and watch. If anybody comes, if you hear anything, call me. Understood? I'll cut your throat if you run away or if you let anybody approach. Got it?'
>
> I quickly answered: 'Understood.' The guy holding my wrist was surprised by Ḥasan's decision. 'Let him go', he told him, 'he's a relative of mine, he won't tell anything'. He freed my hand and I fled, slowly at first, almost crawling, then running faster and faster. I don't know from where I gathered the ability to run, like a madman, without stopping, I passed the valley, the mountain, the plain, the camp, our house's courtyard, and I did not stop until I reached the corner of the inner room. My mother looked at me wondering: 'What got you so scared?' My sisters stared at me in awe. Mama cried: 'Let him drink from the "fright cup", who knows what the boy's been through? What's up, lad?' I didn't say a word. I was just panting. My heart was about to burst. [...] Yūsuf became everybody's mount. All us boys rode him. His look changed. A broken, sad soul. He wasn't the Yūsuf we used to know anymore, everybody rode him now, including me. From here on out, [I] decided [I] was never going to submit to anyone, for the broken look of submission in Yūsuf's eyes never went away.

This is a story of guilt, an avowal of the rapist's shame. The narrator escapes rape and becomes an 'unbending male' (*alladhī lā yankasir*) while reducing another male to an ever-bended one, *al-munkasir*, a status that cannot be changed with time, an indelible stain, in contrast to the mediaeval narratives' take on rape.[55] Easy physical pleasure can be the only reason why the narrator becomes one of Yūsuf's 'users,' for girls were unavailable in a refugee camp in 1965 (the scene takes place during Habib Bourguiba's visit to the West Bank). Even if the narrator admits having practiced it, male-male sexuality can only be alluded to in terms of substitutive sexuality, and not as a matter of taste.[56] Pleasure, however, is not the topic of this text, and remains irrelevant. The comparison between the textual surface of the original incident (two pages) and the mention of the narrator's use of Yusuf (3 lines) – a narrative surface that is completely at variance with the actual facts and their duration, for the use of Yusuf must have continued for months if not years – show that the original trauma is the only fact the narrator is ready to deal with. Guilt, shame and cowardice can be avowed, but not pleasure. The main reason for this suppression is that many modern narratives are denunciatory and reformist in intent. Same-sex intercourse

[55] Unless Yūsuf enjoys intercourse with other boys, a question the self-centered narrator is not interested in investigating. In this case, mediaeval as well as mid-twentieth social norms would construct him as deviant, but only modern fiction would see him as suffering and self-loathing, while he would be laughing stock for mediaeval *mujūn*.

[56] In Rabʿī al-Madhūn's *Al-Sayyida min Tall Abīb* (Beirut: Al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya lil-Tawzīʿ wal-Nashr, 2009), the main character, Walīd Dahmān, is embarrassed to cross paths in Gaza with the camp's effeminate, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, nicknamed Munā by everybody. He had once had sex with him, and felt like prey: 'Why is this cocksucker [*manyak*] always determined to hurt my honor? It happened only once, by mistake. What does he want from me?' (20). Consensual sex with a recognized passive homosexual (the narrator interestingly uses *mithlī*) is apparently more dangerous than rape; the passive partner is constructed by the narrative as the chaser, i.e. the one with the socially active role, even if not in the actual intercourse. The perspective is here quite different from that found in mediaeval literature.

is not about enjoyment, not about human sexuality, but is an index of underdevelopment, of out-dated gender separation, of ubiquitous violence (generated, in this example's case, by the Palestinian tragedy).

ᶜAbdallāh bin Bakhīt's novel *Shāriᶜ al-ᶜAṭāyif* also takes place in the 1960s, in an imaginary town very reminiscent of the Saudi capital, Riyadh. Its graphic mention of various anomic behaviours in Saudi Arabia some forty years ago led to tepid reviews in Gulf media, which deemed this work a 'novel to forget.'[57] The first part of the novel deals with a character strangely called Faḥīj (wide-open legs), until we later learn his real name, Nāṣir (Victor), an irony of fate that does not go unnoticed by the character. The narration starts as Nāṣir's dead mother is being washed by women of the family before being buried in the very same cemetery in which the character was repeatedly raped during his teen years. While the whole family is busy, Nāṣir seizes this occasion to brutally murder one of his two regular abusers, cuts off his genitals and stuffs them in the man's anus. Later, as an old man on his deathbed, he tells his secret to his wife and asks her to kill his second tormentor. Faḥīj's social agony is described in detail. A plump adolescent, he was ambushed by his two tormentors, the wine of mediaeval narratives being replaced by a dizzying first cigarette: on the slippery slope of transgression, a first mistake, however mild it might seem, is perhaps necessary for the ultimate fall:[58]

> When he lies down under a man, he looks at his body and sees himself lying on the ground as if it were someone else. He observes his bare ass as the stallion is about to assail him. The first time he gave in to other males, he felt disgusted and insulted. He was approximately sixteen. Suwaylam and Faṭīs had dragged him to the old deserted cemetery of the ᶜAjliyya, under the pretense of smoking cigarettes. [...] They took him to an abandoned hut, built of clay, covered by a tin roof [...] He entered the room with Faṭīs, who lit up a cigarette and handed it over to him. He took it with utter pleasure. It was his very first. He puffed twice, felt some dizziness and the pleasure of discovery. When he regained his balance, he noticed Suwaylam hadn't come inside with them. He wondered about it, and Faṭīs told him 'he's making sure no one will catch us.' He thought the guy meant about the cigarettes, and kept silent. Faṭīs made it clearer:
>
> 'Next time, I'll bring a mattress, this time we'll just do it standing.' [...]
>
> Faṭīs and Suwaylam had betrayed him. They had made him think he was one of them, they had even mentioned young boys in front of him, and boasted about their sexual talents. Eventually, he had imagined he was part of their gang. Faṭīs got closer to him and put his hand on his thigh. He stood up, getting away from him.
>
> 'Man, put out your cigarette, let's get done with it.'
>
> He tried to flee, but Faṭīs seized him by the collar and pushed him hard up against the wall. [...]
>
> After this day, the only thing he wished for was that this incident would remain a secret between the three of them. They swore, on condition that he would submit to their demands whenever they wished. Over time he became their intimate friend, and the cemetery his second home. As time passed, the number of his 'intimate friends' going with him to the cemetery to have sex grew. But he remained faithful to Suwaylam and Faṭīs, who both owned his body.

[57] Saᶜd Muḥārib al-Muḥārib, 'Shāriᶜ al-ᶜAṭāyif, riwāya li-l-nisyān,' *al-ᶜArabiyya* 07/03/2009, http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2009/03/07/67899.html (accessed 24 may 2010).

[58] ᶜAbdallah Bin Bakhīt, *Shāriᶜ al-ᶜAṭāyif* (London/Beirut: Dar al-Sāqī, 2009), 60 and sqq.

As the chapter develops, Faḥīj becomes the neighbourhood ride. The seven players of the local soccer team, older men, even boys from other neighbourhoods: 'He heard them whispering and laughing, describing him as 'wide open' because he didn't feel pain anymore during penetration, as before. He heard Abū Munīf describing him as '*afḥaj*' [open hole].'[59] As they grow up, the two hoodlums, who have a long history of rape cases and almost faced public scandal after abusing a schoolboy, whose father was 'wise enough to shut up so that his son wouldn't be dishonoured,' finally lose interest in Nāṣir. Their very last intercourse, while he is in his twenties, is a pathetic scene where everybody is embarrassed and pretends to joke about it. As an adult, Nāṣir is still called Faḥīj behind his back by people, and tries to keep his head down for an insult recalling his shameful past (*al-tārīkh al-mushīn*) can always be thrown at him: when a friend of his is made fun of and Nāṣir laughs too eagerly, he is reminded of his position:[60] 'Even queers laugh at us now!' The stigma of passive sodomy is never erased. Even in old age, a married man, Nāṣir remains Faḥīj, and even the assassination of his tormentor, as it remains unacknowledged, does not wash away the sins of his shattered adolescence.

Bin Bakhīt's novel obviously aims at shocking the Saudi readership with his detailed account of a man sexually broken by other men, in a society driven by what he qualifies as 'abnormal desires' (*raghabāt shādhdha*). Although he does not specifically say so, it is quite clear that mixing of the sexes is in his mind the only cure for such an illness (each of the three intertwining plots of the novel insists on the tragic consequences of women's inaccessibility). Once again, however, pleasure is never alluded to in Bin Bakhīt's narrative. Faḥīj feels no pain at being penetrated, but it is never once suggested that he might actually enjoy it. His assailants' preference for boys makes them *shādhdh,* but Nāṣir's repeatedly forced role as passive partner never suggests, for the narrative authority (unlike the neighbourhood), that identity derives from repeated acts. Why have other boys escaped Nāṣir/Faḥīj's fate? Could the narrator be 'in denial'?

The language of sex used in the novel, even if mainly metaphorical, never suggests eye contact between both partners: Fahij is always *under* another man (*taḥt rajul*). His only derisory victory, during his very last intercourse with Suwaylam, is that he refuses, for once, to be totally under him:[61] 'He twisted his body so that Suwaylam could reach his goal without him lying on his belly. Suwaylam didn't hesitate and didn't ask for more. It seemed that he also wanted to walk half the way so that they could end this thing. He cuddled on his side and shook him a few times, in a half-hearted effort that could not lead to climax.'

Sexual intercourse remains 'this thing' for the rapist, a sick desire for domination, which is actually more important than reaching climax.

ᶜAbduh Khāl's *Tarmī bi-Sharar*[62] offers rich material for a comparison with mediaeval

[59] Ibid., 62.

[60] Ibid., 81.

[61] Ibid., 77–78.

[62] This novel won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction 2010. English translation: *Throwing Sparks*, trans. Maia Tabet and Michael K. Scott (London/Doha: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, 2014).

Arabic literature. The novel's title is an intertextual play alluding to a Qurʾanic description of hell's fire as 'throwing sparks as big as a castle' (77–32). The action takes place in a palace, set on the coast of Jeddah, owned by an incarnation of evil. The inhabitants of the popular district called Hell's Quarter (*ḥayy al-nār*) dream of working in it and take it for heaven, whereas those who entered it know it is the true Gehenna. The narrator, Ṭāriq Fāḍil, works as a torturer and a pimp for the Master of the Palace (in a bold allegory of the Saudi kingdom). Known as a rough guy and a chaser of adolescents in his neighbourhood, and renowned among bored widows and housewives for his 'third leg,' he flees home after having deflowered the street's belle, Tahānī, and indirectly caused her death, as he discovers many years later. He has no choice but to work as a professional rapist for the Master, who films him as he repeatedly sodomizes his enemies in order to humiliate them: 'a he-goat fecundating he-goats' (*tays yulaqqiḥ tuyūsan*),[63] the ultimate image of uselessness in a society in which status is achieved through family. Ṭāriq is forbidden to masturbate or to have intercourse with women: his penis and his body are the property of the Master, whose wild parties with women and forbidden alcohol turn out to be far from the Abbasid pleasures they evoke. The transgression of all rules and disrespect of all sacred laws prove to be more pathetic than flamboyant, and even the early morning drunken prayer (*ṣalāt al-sukārā*), a clear reminiscence of comparable *mujūn* scenes in mediaeval *adab*, shows none of the joy of rule-breaking felt by Muṭīʿ b. Iyās or Bashshār b. Burd. The Master's boon companions are worthless businessmen, whose fortune depends on the Master's whims and goodwill and who can only copulate hastily and sadly with shattered prostitutes while the Master is asleep, for everybody's body is under control. On a superficial level, Ṭāriq's narrative could appear as the torturer's voice, mimicking the mediaeval perspective in which the only angle ever given is the rapist's. But not only does the rapist here not laugh, he also immediately understands that ever since he was hired for his phallus, he has become a victim as well. This realization comes with regrets: 'I destroyed many boys, without ever paying attention to the feeling of defeat and subjugation engendered inside them. And here I am, tasting an inverted defeat myself.'[64] With the loss of ownership over the body, sexual roles cease to bear meaning: 'This night, I grasped the horror of what I was doing in dark streets. What I did tonight, I did many times before. But now I feel I'm the one being raped, that I call for mercy and no one answers.'[65] In his monologue of self-hatred, Ṭāriq defines himself as *lūṭi* and *shādhdh* (deviant), and the whole system he lives in as producing this corruption: words like *ithm* (sin), *danas* (pollution), *lawath* (filth), *suqūṭ* (fall) are repeated page after page. The narrator obviously does not define himself as homosexual. *Lūṭī* means (to him) a rider of boys, not a man seeking another as a sexual and romantic partner: 'Having sex with other males was not true homosexuality/perversion (*shudhūdh mutaʾaṣṣil*). It was the thing to do in order to escape the claws of boy-seekers, this social habit which appears as a way to show off (*istiwjāh*), because you have to be either a hunter,

[63] ʿAbduh Khāl, *Tarmī bi-sharar* (Baghdad/Beirut/Freiberg: Al-Kamel Verlag [=Manshūrāt al-Jamal], 2009), 117.

[64] Ibid., 132

[65] Ibid., 136.

or a prey. This perversion became a job [...],'[66] The rehabilitation of the homoerotic dimension *of mujūn* is not on ʿAbduh Khāl's agenda. However, one should not hastily conclude from his character's vocabulary and attempted atonement for homosexual acts that this Saudi novel presents homosexuality *per se* as deviance. What it denounces, along with Bin Bakhīt in *Sharicʿ al-ʿAṭāyif*, is a political, religious and social system in which individuals have no rights over their own bodies.

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If one can regret that modern Arabic fiction does not deal with same-sex sexuality with the same pleasure and laughter-oriented freedom that is witnessed in mediaeval literature,[67] the ambiguous nature of humour found in *mujūn* narratives and verses explains much of its present-day unacceptability. The laughter we hear in *adab* anecdotes, while subtly undermining the foundations of social and sacred norms, primarily appears as the laughter of the powerful, of the dominant figure, of the predator whose prey will be humiliated in fact and in poetry. This laughter is a collective peal sent to the universe, for texts are seldom the expression of an individual's vision. Physical pleasure is only a pretence in the game of *dabīb*: it is in the first place a race for domination, and, on a second and more hidden level, a deconstruction of traditional masculinity the contradictions of which it exposes through the stock character of the *lūṭī*. Social mores are a given that satirical literature can mock but does not seriously seek to reform. The modern writer, on the other hand, is responsible for his voice; his take on the body, on intimacy, on pleasure is an intellectual's discourse.[68] If forced same-sex intercourse is an 'issue' and a 'disgrace,' not merely an unavoidable social phenomenon, then it cannot be laughed at. The rape scene embodies 'what is wrong' with society as a whole: 'unhealthy' desires, whether in refugee camps or an out-dated homosocial society such as Saudi Arabia. But equal partners remain unseen, uninteresting, and unmentioned.

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[66] Ibid., 204.

[67] At least male-male sexuality, for lesbianism seems much less of an issue in contemporary novels, see ʿAlawiyya Ṣubḥ's recent *Ismuhu l-gharām* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2009). Lesbianism is out of the scope of this essay and needs further elaboration, both for contemporary fiction (no study until today) and pre-modern sources, for which the only and insufficient reference is Sahar Amer, *Crossing Borders, Love between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[68] See the conclusion of Samira Aghacy's essay *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East since 1967* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

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