Citystruck

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The cities of pre-modern Arabic literature are erotic playgrounds. The proximity engendered by urban life and the opportunity to encounter, seduce, and manipulate strangers afforded by the imperative of economic exchange are key themes in Arabic narratives and lyrics about cities. In poetry especially, all social interactions in the urban sphere were given an erotic veneer. Sexual opportunity, the vulnerability of women and young men, elite prerogative, and anonymous encounters can appear rather fun and titillating from the perspective of most poets in the Arabic literary tradition, which has generally been the preferred point of view adopted by most scholars, but the outlines of another city can be detected beneath the façade of the erotic playground so often encountered in literature and recreated in scholarship. It is the predatory city, an exhaustingly erotic, frighteningly promiscuous, and diverse and dangerous arena in which eloquent objectification and amusing assaults have not yet lost their sting.

Smooth Trade

في غلام خيَّاط: [من المنسرح]

[١] لَـمَّـا أَتَـى والـمِـقَـصُّ فـي يَـدِهِ وفَـصَّـلَ الـعـاتِـقَـيْـنِ والـبَـدَنـا

[٢] فـقـالَ وصْـلاً أعُـوزُ قُـلْـتُ لَـهُ ألـعـائِـزُ الـوصْـلَ يـا حـبـيـبِ أنـا

On a young tailor / tailor-slave:[1]

He came to me, shears in hand,

and measured my shoulders and torso.

1. This anonymous poem is edited in A. Talib, "Pseudo-Ṯaʿālibī's *Book of Youths*", p. 648, no. 94. When that article was published, I enjoyed discussing the poem and its puns with my colleague and mentor Humphrey Davies, a paragon of urbanity (in both senses of the word) and an inspiration to all who take this megalopolis as our muse. I dedicate this article to him. I would like to thank Samah Selim for her incisive and supportive comments on this article. Thanks are owed as well to Domenico Ingenito, Katharine Halls, and the anonymous reviewers for their corrections and suggestions. Nizar Hermes and Gretchen Head kindly invited me to contribute to this volume and were more patient and good-humored than I had any right to expect.

"I need to take a receipt (*waṣl*)," he said, but I replied,

"It's me who needs union (*waṣl*) with you, my love."

A scene so familiar it has become a film cliché. A wealthy and powerful man—perhaps a mafia don or king, or a poor man in the company of a wealthy sponsor, or in some cases a secret agent—stands in the center of the tableau, often several centimeters off the ground, and usually in front of an array of mirrors, as another man—hunching and obsequious—moves around him silently, taking measurements, running his hands over the other man's body, pinning, pleating, and chalking. The poem quoted above is at least as old as the mid-fifteenth century so the scene being depicted and the clothes being tailored are, of course, radically different from the familiar film scenes set in Savile Row—radically different from the few old-fashioned tailors left in Downtown Cairo, too—but the power imbalance, peacocking, and unusual intimacy inherent in such scenes has not diminished much over the past five centuries. The homoeroticism in modern and contemporary depictions of such scenes is hardly hinted at however, whereas in the pre-modern literary depiction presented above, homoeroticism is the whole point. It is the subject of the poem as well as the point of the poem's epigrammatic structure (premise-exposition-resolution).

Premise: Tailor comes to perform a fitting (heading and l. 1a)

Exposition: Tailor performs fitting and asks for a receipt or promissory note (ll. 1b, 2a)

Resolution: The resolution hinges on a point, in this case a pun (or *jināṣ mumāthil*) in l. 2b.[2] The word *waṣl*, by which the tailor character means "receipt" or "promissory note" (l. 2a), is used by the poet-persona in his antanaclastic reply to mean "union", either the union of souls or spiritual union with the Godhead, and often a euphemism for sex.[3] The word can also mean "an act of kindness, favor".

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2. Pierre Cachia terms this form of perfect paronomasia (*jināṣ tāmm*) "congruent paronomasia" (see P. Cachia, *The Arch Rhetorician*, no. 19).

3. The caesura in the second line is interesting linguistically. I have edited the dialogue according to the conventions of Classical Arabic:

[...] *qultu lahū* || *ʾal-ʿāʾizu l-waṣla yā ḥabībi ʾanā*

[...] ⏑ – ⏑ ⏑ – || – – ⏑ – – ⏑ – ⏑ – ⏑ ⏑ –

but one could read it as a case of mixed Arabic, in which what appears as the definite article in the word *al-ʿāʾiz* is actually a relative pronoun:

[...] *qultu lahūl-* || *lī-ʿāʾyizə l-waṣlə yā ḥabībi ʾanā*

[...] – ⏑ ⏑ – || – – ⏑ – – ⏑ – ⏑ – ⏑ ⏑ –

This is not, as far as we know, how the relative pronoun *illī* was written in pre-modern Arabic—that would be الي or اللي—but it is one of the orthographic forms that it takes in contemporary Cairene Arabic. Compare the preposition *fi*, which is often written as the letter *fāʾ* prepended to an indefinite or definite (*fāʾ-lām*) substantive when proclitic, as distinct from "*fī*" ("there is"), which is often written *fīh*. There is a slight

This poem is one of hundreds, if not thousands, in Arabic about the various professions and trades encountered in the life of a pre-modern city. In addition to individual lyric poems, there are whole collections devoted to trades and artisans, including encyclopedias, dialogues, etc. and these have drawn the attention of social and cultural historians alike.[4] Similar concerns about urban space and social interaction are also reflected in the *shahr-angīz* (*şehrengiz*) genre in Persian, Turkish, and Urdu literatures.[5] Yehuda Al-Ḥarīzī's (d. 1225) *maqāmah*-esque *Sefer Tahkemoni* is an example of the same urban genre in Hebrew literature as can be seen in the following poem on a miser the poet met in Mosul (tr. Peter Cole):

In Mosul I praised a miserable man
with a poem that was sheer invention;
and he made me a vow as full as my song
of wind and utter pretension.
From Baghdad to Spain, I've never known
an oath even half as vain—
and when his friends objected, "Lord,
your hands were taught to be open!"—

he answered them: "I've got nothing left,
and don't know what I can say.
Every day I've bills to pay
and so, it seems, I'm stuck:
I've got a boy who does my will
—our bed is always fresh—
but I'm obliged by law to provide him

possibility that scholars may mistake the relative pronoun for the definite article in indistinct cases.

4. See Ibn Makānis (d. 794/1393), *Muḥāwarah bayn ahl al-ḥiraf*; al-Bilbaysī, *Kitāb al-Mulaḥ wa-ṭ-ṭuraf min munādamat arbāb al-ḥiraf* [unseen] (On this work and author, see *EI*[2], "al-Bilbaysī" [Joseph Sadan]. NB: Ibn Baṭṭūṭah specifies the vocalization Balbays). See also Muḥammad Saʿīd al-Qāsimī, *Qāmūs aṣ-ṣināʿāt ash-shāmiyyah*, which includes literary material. See also relevant discussions in Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Word*, pp. 44–6 and *passim,* and in Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters*, p. 172.

5. See *inter alia EI*[2], *"Shahrangīz"* [J. T. P. de Bruijn; Talat Sait; Munibur Rahman]; Sunil Sharma, *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier*, pp. 107–16; Aḥmad Gulchīn Maʿānī, *Shahr-āshūb dar shiʿr-i Fārsī*; Michael Glünz, "Ṣāfīs Šahrangīz"; Emine Tuğcu, "Bursa Şehrengizlerinde güzellerin mekânları: bahçe, hamam ve çarşı". On Urdu Rekhti poetry see, Ruth Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City*.

with clothing, food, and a fuck."[6]

Al-Ḥarīzī's poem is a lampoon of a man whose miserliness, it emerges, is the result of his sexual profligacy—a humorous juxtaposition of vices. It is also a reflection of potent social anxieties about urban living.

Fish-Out-of-Water

The Arabic tradition is, by no means, unique in having mixed feelings about the relative merits of rural and urban life, but there is a good case to be made that the tradition is predominantly anti-rustic. Consider the modern Levantine proverbs "*zabbāli l-mudun wa-lā sulṭāni l-ʔarāyā*" ("Better a city garbage-collector than a rural sultan"), "*ʿīshat il-ʔarāyā min il-balāyā*" ("To live in a village is to be cursed"), and "*in jāra ʿalayk iz-zamān lā tiskun illā l-mudun*" ("If fate turns against you, live only in a city").[7] This fact notwithstanding, cities are themselves often depicted as dangerous places. One of the most anti-rustic texts in the Arabic tradition is the 17th-century tour de force *Kitāb Hazz al-quḥūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf* (*Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abū Shādūf Expounded*) by Yūsuf ash-Shirbīnī, in which the author mischieviously excoriates country folk and their uncouth customs and lifestyles for the amusement of an urban readership. Even in that work, however, the city is depicted as a threatening, inhospitable environment whose foundation has been corrupted by money (tr. Humphrey Davies):[8]

> [A]nother man from the countryside went up to the city and was overtaken by the need to defecate, but found himself at a loss, not knowing of an alley in which he could take a shit. When things became unbearable he complained to a citizen of Cairo, may the Almighty protect it, and told him, "I can't go any longer without taking a leak and a crap, but whenever I try to piss in front of a shop, the people stop me and abuse me!" Said the man, "Peasant, in the city no one shits without paying. If you have money on you, I'll show you an alley or a hole where you can shit. If not, you can shit on yourself."

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6. Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem*, pp. 210–11. See also Jonathan P. Decter, "Judah al-Harizi's Book of Tahkemoni". On another "sodomite" in medieval Hebrew literature, see ibid., "A Hebrew 'sodomite' tale from thirteenth-century Toledo: Jacob Ben Elʿazar's story of Sapir, Shapir, and Birsha".

7. The first of these is recorded in Anis Freyha, *A Dictionary of Modern Lebanese Proverbs*, p. 338; the last two are from Michel Feghali, *Proverbes et dictons syro-libanais*, pp. 441; 438. A particularly nasty example of this is another proverb also recorded by Feghali: "Feed a peasant milk for forty years and his shit will still be black" (اطعم الفلاح اربعين سنة حليب بتضل خريته سودا) (p. 440).

8. ash-Shirbīnī, *Kitāb Hazz al-quḥūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf (Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abū Shādūf Expounded),* ed. and trans. Humphrey Davies, 2:57–8, 1:53 (Arabic text) (2005–13 ed.); 1:86–7 (2016 ed.).

The fish-out-of-water peasant is the butt of the joke as the rest of the story makes clear. The depiction of a clueless tyro in an urban environment allowed urban audiences to question the patterns of life they took for granted. This is the same genre of social criticism presented in, *inter alia*, al-Muwayliḥī's novel *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām* (*What ʿĪsā ibn Hishām Told Us, or A Period of Time*, 1907) the Egyptian film *Ṣaʿīdī fī l-jāmiʿah al-amrīkiyyah* (*An Upper Egyptian Attends the American University [in Cairo]*, 1998) and a number of early Eddie Murphy films: *Trading Places* (1983), *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), and *Coming to America* (1988), as well as Murphy's groundbreaking *Saturday Night Live* sketch "White Like Me". In the fictional sketch, broadcast on NBC on 15 December 1984, Murphy masquerades as a white man in order to conduct an undercover journalistic investigation of white urban spaces. In one of the first scenes, a white cashier lets Murphy take a newspaper without paying, which causes momentary confusion until Murphy realizes—as he explains in a voiceover—that "when white people are alone, they give things to each other for free." In Murphy's sketch, the money saved on a newspaper is a synecdoche for white privilege, just as in many fish-out-of-water tales, money acts a central and mystifying criterion of difference. Language, too.

Al-Shirbīnī tells another humorous story about three bumpkins travelling to Cairo that manages to incorporate all three of these dimensions of alterity: milieu, money, and language:[9]

> When they were almost there [i.e. Cairo], their leader and counselor said, "The City of Cairo is all troopers and foot-soldiers that cut off people's heads, and we are peasants, and if we don't do as they do and gabble at them in Turkish, they'll chop off our heads." "Abū Daʿmūm," said his companions, "we know nothing about Turkish or anything else!" [...] "When we get to the city," he said, "we'll go to the bathhouse, which people call the Sweetness of This World, and take a bath and wash our hides—they say it has a deep hole that they shit and piss in! As we're leaving the Sweetness of This World, and standing wrapping ourselves in our cloaks and about to be on our way, I say to you, '*Kardeş Mehmet!*' ('Brother Mehmet!') and you say, 'At your command!' and '*Hah! Ne var?*' ('Huh! What's up?'). Then I ask you, 'Do you have *bir munqār*?' meaning one *jadīd*, and you say '*Yok yok!*' meaning 'No, we don't.' Then the bathhouse keeper will get scared and say to himself, 'These are foreign troopers who chop off people's heads!' and he'll let us leave without paying and everyone will stand in awe of us and we'll be treated in Cairo like *amīrs*.

Needless to say, the bathhouse keeper sees right through the bumpkins' ploy and they end up paying the price in more ways than one. It is no coincidence that a story such as this should be set in a bathhouse. For all that they were ubiquitous and functional features of

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9. ash-Shirbīnī, *Hazz al-quḥūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf (Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abū Shādūf Expounded)*, ed. and trans. Humphrey Davies, 2:48–9; 1:41–2 (Arabic text) (2005–13 ed.); 1:72–5 (2016 ed.).

pre-modern Islamic cities, bathhouses were also sites of moral and erotic anxiety.[10] This notoriety is mirrored in early-modern English culture as words that originally meant bathhouse—"stew" and "bagnio"—later came to mean brothel.[11]

Hot and Steamy

The Yemeni scholar Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Ḥaymī al-Kawkabānī's (1073–c. 1151 / 1663–c. 1738) treatise *Ḥadāʾiq al-nammām fī l-kalām ʿalā mā yataʿallaq bi-l-ḥammām* (*Gardens of Wild Thyme: Everything there is to know about the Bathhouse*) is an overview of the bathhouse and sociocultural elements related to it, including mores.[12] Al-Ḥaymī cites prophetic traditions and legal opinions pertaining to the subject of public bathing and gives quite a comprehensive set of instructions for the virtuous bather. These include rules about nudity, bodily contact, cleanliness, Qurʾan recitation, when to visit the bath, what to do at the bath, economic use of water, hygiene, etc. While al-Ḥaymī does address issues of nudity and bodily contact, they do not seem to preoccupy him greatly.[13] He makes it clear, however, that one should not be nude in the bathhouse and that one should leave if other people present there are nude. One should also reprimand nude bathers. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah actually went a step further when he found men bathing in the nude at a bathhouse in Minya in Upper Egypt; he reported the incident to the governor.[14] One is allowed to be massaged by the bathhouse attendant only if the attendant is wearing a *ḥāyil* (a washcloth glove called *kīs* or *kassa* in North Africa today) and one should not allow the attendant to touch one's thighs or pelvic region.[15] One should also avoid lying prone when being massaged.[16] Al-Ḥaymī's straightfor-

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10. See two important articles by Elyse Semerdjian, "Naked Anxiety" and "Sexing the *Hammam*"; and Irvin Cemil Schick, "Representation of Gender and Sexuality in Ottoman and Turkish Erotic Literature". See, too, reporting in *Mada Masr* <www.madamasr.com> on the case of a televised raid on the Bāb al-Baḥr bathhouse in Cairo in 2015. More generally on bathhouses in pre-modern Arab cities, see *EI*[2], "Ḥammām" [J. Sourdel-Thomine and A. Louis] and Heinz Grotzfeld, *Das Bad im arabisch-islamischen Mittelalter*. See also, Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, "Baiarum Grata Voluptas: Pleasures and Dangers of Baths".

11. Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy,* p. 191.

12. In his anthology *Classical Arabic Literature*, Geert Jan van Gelder has translated part of the same author's *ʿIṭr nasīm aṣ-ṣabā*, which also has to do with the bathhouse (pp. 345–51).

13. al-Ḥaymī al-Kawkabānī, *Ḥadāʾiq an-nammām*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, pp. 76–78.

14. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭah*, ed. at-Tāzī, 1:225.

15. al-Ḥaymī al-Kawkabānī, *Ḥadāʾiq an-nammām*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, p. 77. It is tempting to interpret the word *ḥāyil* as deriving from the verb *ḥāla* [*dūna*] "to come between" (root *ḥ-w-l*), scil. *ḥāʾil*. The city in Najd is known variously as Ḥāyil and Ḥāʾil.

16. If the reader will indulge a weak generalization, I would note that sleeping in a prone position is also frowned upon in popular culture and religious discourse in the Arab World today. One can point to *ḥadīth* reports, including one narrated by Ibn Mājah in which the prophet Muḥammad remarked that sleeping on one's front "[...] is how people in Hell sleep" (*innamā hiyya ḍajʿat ahl an-nār*). I was once told by a middle-aged woman whom I knew from the Mubtadayān neighborhood in Cairo that: *illī bi-yənām ʿalā baṭnuh ʿāyiz yitnāk*

ward guidelines about bathhouse behavior are subverted literarily by the poems he includes in his treatise, however.[17]

Al-Ḥaymī includes a selection of poems about the sight of handsome young men entering the bathhouse:[18]

لا شكّ أنّ داخل الحمّام قد يكون جميلاً يجرّد من طرفه صارمًا صقيلاً فهو من الحسان الذين «شدّوا مآزرهم من الأرداف على الكثبان»

> Of course, the person entering the bathhouse may be handsome and may unsheath the sharp and polished sword of his glance[19] for he is one of the pretty ones who "gird[s] their loincloths over their buttocks atop the sand-dunes".[20]

The quotation in al-Ḥaymī's heading refers to the first poem he cites, a poem by Maḥāsin al-Shawwāʾ (d. 635/1237) on a group of handsome young men entering the bathhouse (*fī zumrah min al-ḥisān dakhalū l-ḥammām*):[21]

[من الكامل]

[١] شَدُّوا ٱلمآزِرَ فوقَ كَثْبانِ ٱلنَقا بأنامِل حَلُّوا بِها عَقْدَ ٱلتُقَى
[٢] وتجرّدوا فرأيتُ بانَ معاطف نَشَروا ذُؤابتَهُمْ عَلَيْه فأوْرَقا
[٣] وبَدَوْا فأطْلَعَ كُلُّ وجْه مِنْهُمُ بدْرًا فأضْحى كُلُّ بدْرٍ مُشْرِقا
[٤] وتَضَوّعَ ٱلحَمّامُ مِسْكًا عِنْدَما نَثَروا مِنَ ٱلأصْداغِ نَظْمًا مُعْبِقا
[٥] مِنْ كُلِّ أهْيَفَ حَلّ عُقْدَةَ بَنْدِهِ أضْحَى بِلَحْظِ عُيونِنا مُتَمَنْطِقا

> They girded their loincloths atop the sandy hillock,
>
> with the [same] fingertips they used to untie the knots of piety.
>
> When they undressed, I saw the ben-tree of bending bodies;[22]

("Whoever sleeps on their front is asking to get fucked").

17. The passage by al-Ḥaymī, which G. J. van Gelder translated, is also highly homoerotic (see fn. ## above).

18. al-Ḥaymī al-Kawkabānī, *Ḥadāʾiq an-nammām*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, p. 103. I reproduce here the earlier recension of the text; the editor al-Ḥibshī includes additions from the expanded recension between brackets in his edition.

19. The verb *jarrada* can also mean "to undress" and the adjective *ṣaqīl* ("polished") is also used to describe gleaming skin.

20. *Shaddū maʾāzirahum* (prepare for battle): compare "to gird one's loins".

21. al-Ḥaymī al-Kawkabānī, *Ḥadāʾiq an-nammām*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, p. 103. The active participle *muʿbiq* in l. 4 is not attested, but I assume it to be a synonym of the attested active participle *muʿabbiq*: (of a fragrance) permeating.

22. *bāna maʿāṭifin*: the last word in this line makes it clear that the intended meaning of the word *bāna* is the ben-tree, and not the verb "to appear" (*bāna*), but the use of the verb "to undress" (*tajarradū*) in the beginning of the line may prompt an initial, intentional misperception. See P. Cachia, *The Arch Rhetorician*, no. 108.

then they loosened their locks and it burst into leaf.

When they appeared, each of their faces revealed

a full moon, so every full moon became resplendent.

The scent of musk filled the bathhouse when

they scattered the fragrant pearl-strings of their temples.

Each slender one who undid the knot of his belt

was girdled by the side-glance of our gaze.

This highly erotic poem is primarily ekphrastic and its use of natural comparisons to describe features of the men's bodies is a well known convention of Arabic erotic poetry. In this poem, the beautiful young men are blameless, though they are said to have "untie[d] the knots of piety", and it is the onlookers whose gaze violates appropriate bathhouse behavior. In the following poem by Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf (d. 750/1349) many of the same natural comparisons are deployed to depict an entirely more disreputable scenario.[23]

وقال جمال الدين يوسف الصوفي رحمه الله تعالى في مليح تركيّ دخل الحمّام ورشّ مَنْ به بماء الورد وجعل يتّجه عليهم

[من الطويل]

ولَمْ أَنْسَهُ لَمّا تَعَرّى ثِيابَهُ ... وجازَ إلى حمّامِهِ يَتَخَطّرُ
ولمّا أفاضَ ٱلماءَ فوقَ قَوامِهِ ... وفي وَجْهِهِ نورٌ مِنَ ٱلحُسْنِ يَظْهَرُ
رأيتُ هِلالاً تَحْتَهُ غُصْنِ فَضَّةَ ... يلوحُ عَلَيْهِ لؤْلؤٌ يَتَحَدّرُ
أتانا بِما وَرْد ذكيّ فَبَخّهً ... بِثَغْرٍ لَهُ كالمِسْكِ بَلْ هو أعْطَرُ
فقُلْتُ أظَبْيُ ٱلتُّرْكِ قَدْ فَاحَ مِسْكُهُ ... أَمَ ٱلوَرْدُ مِنْ خَدّيْهِ يَحْمَى فيقْطُرُ

Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf al-Ṣūfī, God rest his soul, wrote [this poem] about a handsome young Turk who entered a bathhouse and sprayed rose-water on those present and proceeded to go up to them:

I'll never forget him: when he stripped off his clothes,

and walked into the bathing chamber, swaying his hips,

and when he poured the water over his body,

while the light of beauty in his face shone out:

I saw a crescent moon above a branch of silver,

23. al-Ḥaymī al-Kawkabānī, *Ḥadāʾiq an-nammām*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, p. 105.

glinting pearls sliding down over him.

He came to us, [bearing] fragrant rose-water, which he sprayed

from his mouth. It was like musk, only more fragrant.

So I said: has this Turkish deer sprayed his musk

or has the rose on his cheeks warmed and begun to drip?

In this poem, the handsome young man—who, in the world of classical Arabic poetry, calls to mind the figure of the wine-server—pours liquid all over his own body, and the kind of language that is used to describe wine and goblets in a *khamriyyah*-poem is used to describe the liquid that glistens against the surface of his skin.[24] The image of his scent wafting over the other men assembled in the bathhouse renders the titillatingly close quarters of the setting almost palpable.

We find the same eroticization of the bathhouse environment in a poem from Ṣafī ad-Dīn al-Ḥillī's (d. c. 750/1350) *Dīwān*.[25] The cluster of double-entendres (*tawriyah*) in the second hemistich of line three necessitates an expanded translation.

[١] لَمْ أَنْسَ ما عِشْتُ حمّامًا حَلَلْتُ بِه ما بَيْنَ كُلّ رَخيمِ ٱلدّلِّ فَتّانِ

[٢] في جَنّةٍ مِنْ طِباعِ أَرْبَعٍ جُمِعَتْ أَرْضٍ وماءٍ وأَهْواءٍ ونيرانِ

[٣] فَنِلْتُ مِنْ حَرِّها بَرْدًا عَلَى كَبَدي وفُزْتُ مِن مالِكٍ فيها بِرِضْوانِ

[٤] فَٱعْجَبْ لَها جَنّةً فيها جَحيمُ لُظى تُذكي ولَمْ تَخْلُ مِنْ حُورٍ ووِلْدانِ

1. I'll never forget, so long as I live, a bathhouse I once visited:

   it was full of heartbreakers, easy on both the ears and the eyes.

2. It was a heaven that brought together all four of the elements:

   Earth and Water, Air and Fire.

3. I took from its heat a cool salve for my distressed liver

   (i) and I won a slave called Riḍwān from his owner there.

   (ii) I had the better of a man named Mālik there and took my [sexual?] satisfaction (*riḍwān*, *ruḍwān*) from him.

24. Compare lines 2–3 of a very well known poem by Abū Nuwās' (*Dīwān*, 3:106–8, Poem 82).

25. Ṣafī ad-Dīn al-Ḥillī, *Dīwān*, ed. Ḥuwwar, 1:456; ed. Maẓlūm, 1:317–18 (slightly different reading) [meter: *al-Basīṭ*].

(iii) I defeated the angel Mālik, the Guardian of Hell, so that I could reach the angel Riḍwān, the Guardian of Paradise.

4. Marvel at that Paradise where Hellfire

rages, and beautiful young women (*ḥūr*) and men (*wildān*) are found.

This poem, suffused as it is with same-sex desire, is not particularly transgressive, not even with its explicit references to the divine text in ll. 3–4, but it is not morally inert either. Nevertheless, poems such as this represent the mainstream of elite Arabic cultural aesthetics in the pre-modern period. Recent interventions by Thomas Bauer and Shahab Ahmed have delved into this culture of normative heterodoxy with more detail and erudition than I can offer here and all interested readers should consult them.[26] The implicit and explicit transgressions in the poems discussed above reflect the erotic dimension of proximity; an urban condition that engendered much discomfort in pre-modern Arabic literature. Sinan Antoon connects the utility of *sukhf* poetry to the sometimes fragile divide between the elite and hoi polloi:[27]

> Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's "wallowing in filth," for which he and other scatologues are condemned, was, on one level, a performance that allowed his audience to symbolically cleanse themselves of unwanted nearness implied in expressions of disgust. Needless to say, this reinforcing of boundaries justified and legitimized, unconsciously, the way the world was configured and naturalized socioeconomic and other inequities by linking them to nature and the body.

This discomfort does not belong exclusively to the pre-modern period, as the United States' recent legislative trans-panic most eloquently demonstrates. The eroticization of anxiety-causing proximity—rather than diminishing the sanctimony of a treatise such as al-Ḥaymī's—complements it, by demonstrating mimetically what moral instruction aims to prevent. By eroticizing urban spaces such as bathhouses, and indeed the entirety of a city's public and semi-public spaces, these mimetic works reinforce social strictures that regulate proximity (the predecessor of what Michel Foucault called "disciplinary power").

Goods for Sale

Urban economic exchange was no less regulated, and the activity of buying of goods and services also provided the material for much erotic creativity.[28] The protagonist or narrator of these literary exchange-encounters is almost always the purchaser, while the vendor is

26. Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität*; Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The importance of being Islamic*.

27. Sinan Antoon, *Poetics of the Obscene*, p. 131.

28. On this regulatory environment, see Kristen Stilt, *Islamic Law in Action* and Ahmad Ghabin, *Ḥisba, Arts and Craft in Islam.*

cast as the erotic object as in the poem with which this article began. This dyad of exchange maps cleanly onto the more ancient dyad of lover-beloved in Arabic erotic verse. The sexual thrill of economic exchange often takes the place of the commodity being traded as in the following poem on a handsome young druggist (*malīḥ ʿaṭṭār*) by Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363):[29]

[من الطويل]

[١] كَلِفْتُ بِعَطّارٍ حَكَى ٱلبَدْرَ فِي ٱلسَّنَا[30] وظَبْيِ ٱلفَلا فِي جِيدِهِ ونِفارِهِ
[٢] دَوَا أَلَمِي ٱلوردُ ٱلمُربّى بِخَدِّهِ يَذُرُّ عَلَيْهِ آنَسُونَ عِذارِهِ

I've fallen for a druggist, who resembles the moon in the sky

and a desert gazelle, fine-necked and skittish.

He cured my pain with the rose growing on his cheek,

he sprinkled on top of it the anise flowers—or, rather: the intimates of his cheek-down.[31]

The same erotic conflation of a commodity for sale and the body of the person selling it is central to this modern song (*mawwāl*) from Aleppo by Muḥammad al-ʿĀṣī.[32] In this case, the object of a desire is a woman selling roses in the street.

[من البسيط]

29. aṣ-Ṣafadī, *al-Ḥusn aṣ-ṣarīḥ*, Princeton MS Garrett Yahuda 935, ff. 78b–79a; ibid., ed. al-Hayb, p. 73.
30. *as-sanā*: reading with Princeton MS, rather than al-Hayb's editon: *as-samā*.
31. The double entendre in this final hemistich has to do with the near homophony in the words for anise (*yānisūn*) and intimate companions (*ānisūn*). The rose in the preceding hemistich would lead the reader to assume what is meant is another type of flower, but this is a feint.
32. Ḥasan Aḥmad Khayyāṭah (ed.), *Mawsūʿat al-mawāwīl al-Ḥalabiyyah*, pp. 319–20.

[١] ذاتَ ٱللّيالي سَرَيْنا نَبْتَغي وَرَدا
[٢] مِن خَمْرَةِ ٱلحُبِّ أَوْ مِن ناهِدٍ وَرَدا
[٣] شُفِنا ٱلعَجايِبْ عُيونَ تْصَدّنا وَرَدا
[٤] تَصَرعْ ذَوي ٱللّبِّ مِنْ راش ٱلسّهِمْ خَدَها
[٥] هاروتُ لَوْ شافَها ضَلّ بْشَرَكْ خَدها
[٦] غَيْدا تَبيع ٱلوَرِدْ والوَرْدُ في خَدِها
[٧] وتْصيحِ ياهل ٱلهَوَى مَنْ يِشْتِري وَرِدا[33]

We went out one night in search of a drink

of the wine of love, or from the buxom girl who crossed our path.

What a vision! Her glances parry and strike back!

Discerning men are cut down by the arrows [of her glance].

Even Hārūt, the king of magic, would get stuck in her trap if he saw her.

The young woman sells roses, but true roses are her cheeks,

and calls out: "Come on, all you lovers, who wants to buy a rose?"

The persona of the poem comes upon a beautiful woman, by chance, though it is clear that he and his companion(s) are in the mood for a romantic encounter, not simply an intoxicating drink. The man does not speak to the woman, but to the audience, and his only interaction with her, according to the text of the song, is through glances; in her case, these glances are hostile and deadly. In fact, the woman seems not to entertain the man's interest at all: she is described as parrying men's glances, slaying them with her eyes, and setting traps for them. Why should the poet, or singer, accept the woman's predatory supremacy in this scene? The answer lies in the simple reality communicated by the final two lines: the beautiful, able, and fierce woman who has been described in lines 2–5 is a vendor of roses, though we are told that the real roses are her cheeks. The beloveds of Arabic poetry are often cruel and deadly—and this woman is no exception—but in this case, the persona need not outperform her or suffer at her hand. He has another means of defeating her: economic exchange. The rose-cheeked woman, addresses "romantics" in the final line of the song and offers her roses for sale, but by now the border between commodity and body has been blurred. The woman is ferocious because she is vulnerable. The man is stoical because he has purchasing power. Their urban interaction has already been economically determined.

33. *tṣīḥ*: emended from printed ed. "*t-ṣ-b-ḥ*"

It has become a scholarly cliché to cite wine-drinking at a monastery, tavern, or private gathering as the most prominent representation of illicit behavior or moral transgression in pre-modern Arabic literature, but the economic exchange implicit in this topos makes it relevant to the present discussion. That these settings are equally popular in other Islamicate literatures points to a broader trend toward an eroticization of urban space.[34] In the following poem by ʿUbayd-i Zākānī (d. ca. 1370), wine drinking is not simply the pastime of social outcasts, it is an anti-materialist rejection of wealth accumulation:[35]

[۱] دَر خانه تا قَرابه ما پر شراب نیست — ما را قرار و راحت و آرام و خواب نیست
[۲] در خلوتی که باده و ساقی و شاهد است — حاجت به شمع و مطرب و چنگ و رَباب نیست
[۳] خوش کن به باده وقت عزیزان که پیش ما — عمری که خوش نمی گذرد در حساب نیست
[۴] اینک شراب اگر هوست می کند وُضو — در آفتابه کن که در این خانه آب نیست
[۵] ما را که ملک فقر و قِناعت مسلَّم است — حاجت به جود خسرو مالِکِ رِقاب نیست
[۶] این مال و جاه را که غَنیمت شمرده ای — بالله چو نیک در نگری جز عذاب نیست

[۷] همچون عبید خانه هستی خراب کن
[۸] زیرا که جای گنج بغیر از خراب نیست

If the flagon at home
isn't full of wine,
there'll be no rest, or calm,
or sleep, or ease of mind.
In seclusion, with wine and a serving-boy
and a beauty at one's side,
who needs candles or music,
or to hear a singer whine?
Enjoy drink in company with friends—
delight in leisure!
The only days that count for us
are days of pleasure.

34. See, e.g. a poem by Nefʿī (d. 1635) in Walter G. Andrews, Najaat Black, and Mehmet Kalpaklı (trans.), *Ottoman Lyric Poetry*, p. 109.

35. ʿUbayd-i Zākānī, *Kullīyāt-i ʿUbayd-i Zākānī*, ed. Muḥammad-Jaʿfar Maḥjūb, p. 76, no. 27 [meter: *możāreʿ*].

Take this wine, if you want

to wash in time for prayer.

Pour it in the basin.

We keep no water here.

We, who've been promised the reign

of poverty and austerity

have no need of slave-master

Khosrow's generosity.

This wealth and this status

that you cherish so dearly

may please the eye

but how it makes the soul weary.

Follow ʿUbayd and lay ruin to the world!

You'll only find treasure in the ruins of the city.

An Urban Encounter

I know of no text that more perfectly combines the anxieties of proximity and exchange with the erotic possibilities of an urban environment than the following song, which was first published in 1893. The song was published by Urbain Bouriant in his *Chansons populaires arabes*, which he claimed to have taken from the manuscripts of an unnamed Cairene balladeer, and was again published in a revised and annotated edition along with a translation by Pierre Cachia in 1989.[36] The song is set in Cairo's Izbikiyyah district, an area famous at the turn of the 20th century for its licit and illicit pleasures; there the protagonist encounters a beautiful maiden (*ʿadhrā*) being escorted by a donkey-driver (*ḥammār*). The protagonist proceeds to convince the woman, through far-fetched lies, to abandon her escort and to accompany him back to his palace. When they arrive at the man's shabby dwelling, and his dishonesty is exposed, she gives him another chance to win her affection: he must use his eloquence to do justice to her beauty (l. 94). He succeeds in doing this and the poem ends just as the couple begin to kiss (l. 107), but not before a final stanza; a stanza of praise

36. U. Bouriant, *Chansons populaires*, pp. 126–33; P. Cachia, *Popular Narrative Ballads of Modern Egypt*, pp. 103–20. See also the non-erotic genre of Turkish "street-*destan*" as described in Özkul Çobanoğlu, "Street-*Destans* in the Turkish Minstrel Tradition".

for the Prophet (*dawr al-madīḥ*) in which the poet begs forgiveness for his sins and shortcomings and those of all believers (ll. 108–112).

The poem begins with an erotic couplet (*maṭlaʿ*) in which the object of beauty is grammatically masculine, but the gender of this figure is soon made ambiguous by its juxtaposition with the character of the beloved who makes her appearance in the stanza that immediately follows:[37]

[*al-Maṭlaʿ*, ll. 1-2]
I fell for a boy,
lithe and lively,[38]
how dark his glance,
how plump his ass.

Good sense abandoned me
when I laid eyes on him.
All I wanted was to have him,
even if it cost me a thousand gold pieces.[39]

[Stanza (*dawr*), ll. 3–7]
All that came to pass one day—
oh, how the heart suffered—
on one of Cairo's streets,
down in Izbikiyyah.

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37. I have re-translated extracts from the song for this article but I would not have been able to do so without reference to P. Cachia's excellent edition and translation. NB: the object of desire in my translation of the refrain is male, in Cachia's it is female. The grammatical gender is masculine in the Arabic. I maintain the gender of the Arabic in my translation. For a discussion of this thorny issue in translation, see Selim Kuru's remarks in his review of W. G. Andrews, N. Black, and M. Kalpaklı (trans.), *Ottoman Lyric Poetry*.

38. Cachia also translates the word *miṭaqṭaq* as "lively", but he links the word to contemporary meanings of "cracking" and "smartening up"(see Hinds and Badawi, *Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*, s. r. "*ṭ-q-ṭ-q*") (Cachia, *Popular*, 120). I prefer to link it to Lane's definition based on az-Zabīdī: "in the language of the common people, *Light in person*; and *light*, or *prompt*, *in speech*" (Lane, *Lexicon*, s. r. "*ṭ-q-ṭ-q*").

39. Reading with MS and Cachia, "*wi-ʔaṣdī yiwāṣilnī*" *contra* Bouriant's emendation: "*wa-ʔaṣadt innuh yiwāṣilnī*".

It was fate, not even luck,
that caused me to look up
and see a donkey-driver
escorting a radiant maiden.

Her ass stuck out
a full cubit, no less,
and her waist and her breasts—
Have Mercy, Lord, our Savior.

Her mouth was a ring of gold,
adorned by shining teeth,
her fair cheeks
were crowned by red roses.

She shipped me off
over seas of love
when my eyes fell upon
her marble chest.

By the second line, it is obvious that the protagonist has internalized a price system for sexual exchange. In this case, we understand that one thousand *dīnār* (itself a classicizing topos) would be an awful lot to pay for sex, and that this extravagance reflects the young man's beauty. Other marketplace references are used to describe the female beloved, who is the main object of desire in the poem: her rear measures a cubit and her mouth is like a golden ring adorned with pearls.

Having been struck by the woman's beauty, the protagonist decides to follow her and her companion to see what may happen between them (l. 8: "*ḥattā tanẓur aysh yaqaʿ baynak wa-baynuh*"). This is the key moment in narratives of urban seduction. The city holds secrets: one never knows when one will encounter another citydweller whom one does not know, has never seen, and may never see again. The chance encounter in the anonymous

city is loaded with an urgency that other erotic settings simply lack. The protagonist follows them, but is soon spotted by the donkey-driver, who addresses him, first in a neighborly fashion and then suspiciously (ll. 11–12):[40]

> "What's up with you?" he said.
> "What's the matter?
> "Come, I'll show you the way,
> "If the sun's got you blinded."
>
> "Or are you a thief?
> "Or a rascal that's trailing us?
> "Scouting the place so you can come
> "at night with the rest of your gang?"

The donkey-driver's reaction makes clear a fundamental tension at the heart of urban life: cities are large and confusing and people may need one another's help to find their way, but cities are also crowded and full of strange people, some of whom have nefarious intentions. When the female beloved speaks for the first time it is to resolve this tension. She asks the protagonist to identify himself: by name, neighborhood, and profession (ll. 13–14).[41] The protagonist ignores most of the woman's questions and answers the final question about his five trades in a clever and florid recital of sexual innuendo. He is a cannoneer whose cannon "knocks and crashes and demolishes walls and castle gates" (l. 17), and a chicken-hatcher whose three-quarter cubit-long, red-crested cock rests "shrunken and curled-up over its eggs" (l. 22).[42] He is a potter, who works "from the inside out" (l. 23) and who strips off his clothes when he is working (l. 24), presumably on account of the heat of the kiln.[43] "If I get caught up in work," he says in line 25, "stay up for me. I'll make you a thousand jars [or give you a thousand strokes] each night." He is also a lancer who "never stops thrusting" (l. 30) and the captain of a boat, whose "furling rope moves back and forth between us" (l. 36).

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40. In l. 10, I read "*tābiʿ khaṭwithum*", *contra* Cachia and Bouriant: "*tābiʿ khaṭirhum*".

41. Add to this list age, religion, and marital status, and you have the exact same information that is present on an Egyptian personal identity card (*biṭāqah shakhṣiyyah*) today.

42. P. Cachia translates *yadak* as "ramrod", but it means something like wick or botefeux.

43. "From the inside out" (l. 23): I read "*min guwwa li-barra*", *contra* Cachia and Bouriant: "*min guwwa l-mibarra*". It may rather mean" "I work inside the kiln area, [firing the ceramic], and outside of it, [sculpting it]."

"When [he] lets go of the tiller, it gets thrown about, but then [he] pulls out the punt-pole and nails it in the rear" (l. 37). This recitation makes an impression on the woman, who then asks the protagonist about his possessions (l. 38).

This prompts a rare moment of introspection: after nearly telling her the truth of his penury, the protagonist decides he is better off lying to the woman in the hope that he may enjoy the "spoils" (*maghnam*) of sexual union with her (l. 40). He then proceeds to dazzle her with a litany of fantastic treasures, including precious metals and jewels, but the showpiece is certainly his house, which the woman is very eager to see (ll. 43–68). The protagonist convinces the woman to ditch her donkey-driving chaperone and then escorts her back to his hovel (ll. 69–71). When they arrive there, the woman is understandably irritated but the protagonist manages, through the same verbal cunning, to get her to go inside the "ruin" (*kharābah*) that is his home (ll. 72–76). On the inside, however, there is no hiding the protagonist's deception and the woman throws the grandiloquent descriptions of wealth back in his face (ll. 77–85). It is at this point that the protagonist comes clean. He admits that he was lying the entire time and that he is dirt-poor. He owns nothing, he says, except his love for her and it was her beauty that drove him to invent his tale in the first place (ll. 86–91). Both characters at this point refer to the protagonist's aspiration as "union" (*waṣl*) (ll. 91–2):

> I composed those words
> so that I could be with you
> when I saw your beautiful
> lamp-bright face.
>
> And she said, "If what you want
> "is to be with me,
> "describe my beauty,
> "if you think you can."

Having demonstrated his rhetorical talents, it is no surprise that the protagonist should accomplish this feat with minimal suspense (ll. 93–106). He even ends his masterful description with the ironic claim: "You've now been a quarter-described, my lovely, but in rhetoric it's always better—and more clever—to hold back" (l. 106). The protagonist—the rightful hero of the song—is rewarded for his eloquence with "union" (*talāqī*) but by this point his accomplishment is already a foregone conclusion (l. 107). The audience is perhaps still

pruriently curious, but they have already been won over by the protagonist's victory in the urban arena. A man with no money, connections, or prospects managed through eloquent trickery alone to meet a stranger in the street, convince her to abandon her chaperone, and bring her back to his abode.[44] Whether or not the woman and the man ultimately unite—and the degree of sexual contact beyond kissing is ambiguous—the protagonist has won the game of urban erotic opportunity.[45]

These erotic opportunities are often framed as zero-sum conflicts, in which the lover can only gain sexual pleasure at the expense of the beloved's chastity. That the lover is often the beloved's social superior (whether in terms of class, gender, or economic status and personal liberty) means that the beloved is frequently in the position of weighing economic gain against sexual coercion. The urban enviroment of the pre-modern Arabic literary imaginary may best be described as the predatory city: an environment in which adult men use their social and economic prerogatives to coerce women and younger men into sexualized interactions wherever and whenever they choose.[46] This literary environment resembles that of songs in the English folk tradition in which cautionary tales are told of handsome and charming strangers who take advantage of a naive girl's generosity ("Soldier, won't you marry me?") or a sailor's wages ("Young Sailor Cut Down").[47] The villains or the victims in these songs are often out of place, like the unlucky peasants in ash-Shirbīnī's *Hazz al-quḥūf*. In other songs, like "Young Ramble Away" and "Let No Man Steal Your Thyme", the threat is specifically sexual.[48]

Another Urban Encounter

Rather than warn young unmarried women about predatory men, the following song, a *ṭaqṭūqah* by Zakariyyā Aḥmad (1896–1961), directly rebukes young men for harassing

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44. There is overlap here with the character-type detailed in Malcolm C. Lyons, *The Man of Wiles in Popular Arabic Literature: A Study of a Medieval Arab Hero.*

45. One can compare this song with a Persian poem by Sūzanī Samarqandī (d. ca. 1173) that depicts a similar scenario to perceive better the different mores of the *ghazal* and *mujūn* genres (translated in Riccardo Zipoli, *Irreverent Persia*, pp. 156–59).

46. For a different perspective on cities in classical Arabic literature, see Hussein Bayyud, *Die Stadt in der arabischen Poesie, bis 1258 n. Chr.*

47. "Soldier, won't you marry me?" published in W. H. Auden (ed.), *W. H. Auden's Book of Light Verse*, pp. 363–64. The song was first published in Olivia Dame Campbell and Cecil Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, New York, NY; London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917, p. 262. "Young Sailor Cut Down" published in S. Roud and J. Bishop (eds), *The New Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*, pp. 217–18. On the history of the song, see ibid., p. 455.

48. "Young Ramble Away" published in S. Roud and J. Bishop (eds), *The New Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*, pp. 215–16. On the history of the song, see ibid., pp. 454–55.

women in the streets of Egyptian cities.[49] The song is sung from the perspective of a young woman and exploits concerns related to class and national pride to shame men into behaving better.

ما يِصَحّش تِعاكِسْني

[مذهب]

[١] ما يِصَحّش تِعاكِسْني يأخينا ولا تِمْشي كِدَهْ سَكْران طِينِه
[٢] عامِل خِفّه وجِنْتِلْمان لِيه تِتْمَحَك في ٱلنِّسوان
[٣] وماشي تِعط وانت برط
[٤] يِجْرى إيه لو تِمْشي تَمّام هو مَشي الحِشْمَه حَرام

ما يِصَحّشْ

[دور]

[٥] الطّرْبوش أربع قَراريط ولابِس بَدْلَه بايط الايط
[٦] دم يا سمْ تِبْقى مِتْرَم[50]
[٧] ما يِجيبَكْش اِثْنَيْن مِلّيم وتِعاكِسْلي كَمان في حَريم

ما يِصَحّشْ

[دور]

[٨] النّار تِدْخُلْها بِرِجْلَيْك والنّاس كُلّها ناقْدَهْ عَلَيْك
[٩] إمتى تْحِسّ يَعْني تْخِس
[١٠] لَمّا تِتْجَوّز وتْعَيش عِيشه عال ما فيهاش يِغْنيش

ما يِصَحّش

[دور]

49. Reprinted in Īzīs Faṭḥ Allāh, *Zakariyyā Aḥmad*, 1:238. In early 20th-century US English, men who verbally harassed women on the street were called "mashers" (see Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013, ch. 10).

50. Emended from *m-r-m*.

[١١] عـاوِز تِـبْـقَـى صَـحـيـح إنْـسـان صُـون أعْـراض ٱلـنّـاس تِـنْـصـان
[١٢] مـا تْـحَـوِّدش مـا تْـلَـوِّدش
[١٣] لـيـه تِـدوس شَـرَفَـكْ وتْـخـون وانْـتَ أبـوكْ تـوت عَـنْـخ آمـون
ما يِصَحّش

You shouldn't harass me

Brother, you shouldn't harass me[51]

And you shouldn't stroll around like that sozzled.

You dress up classy, like a gentleman

So why are you out wheedling ladies?

Walking around like a tramp,

You're just a piece of shit (?).

What's wrong with minding your own business?

When did modesty become a sin?

It just won't do.

You're wearing a four-inch fez

and a "Buy it Elite" (?) suit.

You're a bore (?)

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51. I have chosen to translate the Form III verb *ʿākasa* / *yəʿākis* / *muʿāksah* as "to harass". Over the past decade, the term *muʿāksah* has been the subject of much public debate as part of the larger issue of street harassment in Egyptian cities. A broad swathe of activists and feminists, and here I include myself, reject the term *muʿāksah* and insist that verbal street harassment be described as *taḥarrush* or *taḥarrush lafẓī*. This new, politically astute usage has since entered the mainstream but *muʿāksah* continues to be used to refer to a spectrum of sexually suggestive speech including consensual flirting between acquaintances or strangers. Some commentators specify this is as *il-muʿāksah ig-gamīlah bitāʿət zamān* (old-fashioned polite flirting). The word *muʿāksah* is even used—but in this case only by the men doing it—to describe making vulgar, sexually explicit, threatening, and objectifying comments to women in public. Some feminists continue to describe consensual, or at least respectful, flirting as *muʿāksah*, though the verb *kān bi-yəflirt* / *bi-yəflirt* is also lately being used. The use of the term *taḥarrush* or *taḥarrush lafẓī* in the place of *muʿāksah* is part of a political campaign to link verbal street harassment to the wider phenomena of hostility and violence directed toward women in public and semi-public spaces. Yet it is clear from this song that the term *muʿāksah* has been used to refer to verbal sexual harassment for at least a century.

and you better straighten up!
As soon as you get your hands on a couple of bucks
you can start chatting up women in the street.

It just won't do.

You're going to hell head-first.
No one can abide what you do.
When will you wise,
by which I mean get lost?
After you get married
and start your great life, lacking for nothing?

It just won't do

If you want to be a proper human,
then respect people's dignity and preserve your own.
Don't swivel,
Don't swerve.
Why would you crush your honor and betray it?
Aren't you the son of Tutankhamun?

The putative harasser is not indigent, rather he has sufficient dispensable income to dress nicely and can look forward to marrying without financial difficulty. Despite her harsh condemnation of the man's behavior, the woman narrating the song is invested in the man's redemption. This is apparent in her appeals to the man's class background, personal dignity, and potential perdition, as well as Egyptian national pride.[52] There is no romanticization of street harassment here unlike in the opening of Cheb Khaled's hit song "Aïcha" (1996). The tone of the admonishment "It just won't do" (*mā yiṣaḥḥish*) is itself rather subdued.

52. There are a few allusions in the song to religious diction, e.g. modesty (*ḥishmah* in l. 4b) and sin and hellfire (*ḥarām* in l. 4b, *an-nār* in l. 8a).

Nevertheless, we cannot mistake the fact that this scene—a man using the presence of a woman or young man in public as an opportunity to objectify them—is one that we have seen over and over again in the examples above, although in this case the story is told by a woman rebuking the man who has accosted her. I do not mean to say that every proposition in the history of pre-modern Arabic literature was unwelcome—that is demonstrably false—but this song may induce us to see the tradition in a different light.

The Predatory City

It may strike some as dour or literal-minded to characterize the urban setting of much pre-modern Arabic literature as the predatory city. Indeed, humor is integral to much of this literature, but that humor often depends on an uncanny and discomfiting schadenfreude that we must recognize, even as we acknowledge that these works were intended to push social boundaries and tickle the sublimated anxieties and desires of their urban audience. One of the ways in which authors achieved this was by eroticizing everything: the promiscuity of public space, semi-public semi-nudity, social stratification, slavery, and the commodification of bodies. No setting was too sacred or somber for erotic exploits, be it the Kaʿbah or a funeral, as in this last example, a poem by Ibn Qalāqis (d. 567/1172):[53]

قال أيضًا وقد رأى صبيًا في بعض المآتم يبكي

[من الرجز]

[١] وابـــــأبـــــي مَـــــنْ لَـــــمْ يَـــــدَعْ فـــــيّ مـــــكـــــانًـــــا لـــــلأَلَـــــمْ
[٢] بَـــــدْرُ أَبَـــــى ضِـــــيـــــاؤُهُ أَنْ تَـــــتَـــــغَـــــشّـــــاه ٱلـــــظُّـــــلَـــــمْ
[٣] أَبْـــــصَـــــرْتُـــــهُ فـــــي مَـــــأْتَـــــمٍ يـــــا مَـــــأْتَـــــمًـــــا عَـــــلَـــــيّ تَـــــمْ
[٤] وقُـــــلْـــــتُ لَـــــمّـــــا أَنْ بَـــــكَـــــى كَـــــأَنّـــــهُ قَـــــد ٱبْـــــتَـــــسَـــــمْ
[٥] لِـــــلّـــــهِ فـــــيـــــهِ جـــــامـــــعًـــــا أَحْـــــسَـــــنَ أَوْصـــــافِ ٱلـــــقَـــــلَـــــمْ

On a young boy crying at a funeral

I'd ransom my father's life for one who doesn't
leave any space in me for pain,
A moon-faced one whose splendor refuses
to be covered by gloom

53. Ibn Qalāqis, *Dīwān*, ed. Sihām Furayḥ, pp. 529–30, no. 417. This motif predates Ibn Qalāqis, of course. See e.g. al-Mihzamī, *Akhbār Abī Nuwās*, ed. Faraj al-Ḥiwār, p. 42.

I saw him at a funeral,

oh what a funeral that brought me to my end!

I said—when he cried,

and in crying it was as though he were smiling—

God has gathered in him

the finest descriptions of the pen.

Let us, for the purposes of argument, stipulate that the scene described in the poem never happened, that it is a conceit and entirely a product of the poet's imagination. These assumptions—good scholarly, critical hygiene though they may be—do not actually help us understand whether these urban literary encounters were understood as hypothetical, impossible, or absurd. We must not allow ourselves to be so seduced by ego-affinity that we can only read these encounters from the perspective of the poet-persona, the I. Would it be overdetermined, or anachronistic, to read this poem from the perspective of the boy being described? A pre-adolescent, grieving in the company of adult men. This imaginary moon-faced boy may never have known that he was the object of the poetic I's narcissistic desire. The poem only mentions the boy's beauty and his grief. It is not even clear that the persona's desire for the boy is sexual. One of the most vexing aspects of classical Islamicate poetry for the modern reader is that we struggle to understand the apparent distinction between the erotic and the libidinous. How would one even begin to express libido in a society in which all social interactions were routinely eroticized? A lack of imagination leads us to fill in unfamiliar and blurry spaces in our schemata of literary encounters with our own anti-erotic society's dominant pre-occupation, libido. This scene is perforce fictional, and perhaps even comic—and we understand that lyric poetry intends to express and stimulate individual and communal emotion—but what must it have been like to live in a society whose culture celebrated and encouraged the eroticization of every form of social interaction? What must it have been like to inhabit the body of a woman or a pubescent male in a pre-modern Arab city? It would be wrong to assume from these texts that all social encounters in pre-modern Arab cities were eroticized in reality, that women and young men would have always felt themselves to be the object of erotic attention or desire in every social interaction with an adult male, or indeed that this erotic attention or desire would have always been unwelcome. But it is no less wrong to assume that it was always fun and games just because the poets tell us it was.

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