

RIDICULING THE LEARNED: JOKES ABOUT THE  
SCHOLARLY CLASS IN MEDIAEVAL ARABIC  
LITERATURE \*

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*Hādhā zamānun laysa yuḥẓā bihi ḥaddathanā l-Aʿmashu ʿan Nāfiʿi.* (“Ours is a time when [the phrase] ‘al-Aʿmash said on the authority of Nāfiʿ’ is appreciated but little.”)

Ibn Khallād al-Rāmhurmuzī

The low esteem that the literate élite had for the common people in the Middle Ages is well known and evidenced by countless passages in the mediaeval Arabic literary corpus.<sup>1</sup> One cannot fail to notice the relish with which the members of the *khāṣṣa*, or élite, amused themselves by jokes about the ignorance of the *ʿāmma*; a phenomenon that, given the fact that the Arabic literature known to us would always be produced principally if not exclusively by the literate and learned élite, seems to be rather logical and natural, and not at all difficult to account for. Jokes in which the ignorance and coarseness of the common folks is portrayed derisively tend to be concerned with métiers of very low prestige, like that of the *muʿallim* (elementary school teacher), the *hāʾik* (weaver), or special modes of living such as that of the *aʿrābī* (Bedouin).<sup>2</sup> That women were also seen by many people as somewhat defi-

\* The research leading to this article could never have been carried out without the financial support, at various stages of the work, of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Instituto de Filología (CSIC), Madrid, and a postdoctoral fellowship (D38012) of the Foundation for Academic Research (Hungary). I also benefited greatly from the comments, suggestions and hospitality of all the scholars of the Departamento de Estudios Árabes, CSIC, Madrid; and I owe very special thanks to Maribel Fierro, Mercedes García-Arenal, and Fernando Rodríguez Mediano.

<sup>1</sup> I do not wish to offer even a tentative definition of the distinction between élite and commoners; let it suffice here to note that such boundaries are necessarily fluid, and perhaps impossible to draw precisely. Cf. Shoshan 1991: 68.

<sup>2</sup> For jokes on the naiveté of Bedouins, cf. for example Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zirāf*, 116; Ibn Simāk, *Zaharāt*, 149; al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣāʾir*, I, ii: 98; II, iv: 109; III, vi: 16, 78; V, ix:

*Al-Qanṭara* XXV, 1 (2004) 93-117

cient in intellect, hence a good target of similar jesting at the expense of perceived inferiors, is demonstrated by some stories.<sup>3</sup> In addition to such jokes that implicitly corroborate this tendency, we have at our disposal quite a few texts which record the learned classes' low esteem of the common folks in quite a straightforward and matter-of-fact manner. An anonymous scholar is cited in a source as having considered it an unspeakable disgrace, immensely lessening his own self-esteem, to have been corrected on a point of linguistic usage by a mere craftsman, a characteristic contemporary reaction to any aspirations by the common people.<sup>4</sup> In a famous overview of sophisticated and elegant manners in the high Abbasid period, the fashionable circles (*al-zurafā'*) are said consciously to have avoided various foods, drinks, and even locutions, solely on account of considering those comestibles the common people's fare and those phrases the common people's diction.<sup>5</sup> A line or two from another work will perhaps suffice further to illustrate this generalized negative judgement:

Never take part in a gathering of common people (*wa-lā tujālis al-ʿamma*); but if you have to, the proper thing to do (*fā-ādāb dhālik*) is not to get involved in their conversation or take heed of their baseless chinwag, but let their worthless comments pass unnoticed...<sup>6</sup>

60; al-Thaʿālibī, *Thimār*, II, 820; al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 532-3; al-Bayhaqī, *Maḥāsin*, 664. (In a common subcategory of these jokes, the laugh is induced by the asinine comments of the Bedouin on certain Quranic passages that he has just heard.) A greengrocer's job was apparently also one of positively low prestige; cf. a remark by al-Ḥajjāj b. Arṭa'a in al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 140. For jokes on the stupidity of elementary school teachers, see al-Bayhaqī, *Maḥāsin*, 643-4; for jokes on weavers, see al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣā'ir*, II, iv: 138-9.

<sup>3</sup> E. g. al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 538.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Zubaydī, *Lahn*, 234.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Washshā, *Muwashshā*, 194-6. Note especially such arguments as "according to them that is common folks' food" (*wa-huwa ʿindahum min akl al-ʿawāmm*), "it is [too] frequent in the speech of the common people" (*mimmā kathura stiʿmāluhu fī khiṭāb al-ʿawāmm*), "it is the drink of the common folks, the scum, the plebeians and the servile class" (*huwa min sharāb al-ʿamma wa-l-raʿāʿ wa-shurb al-sūqa wa-l-atbāʿ*). See also Ghazī "Un groupe social", 40.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 133. Cf. al-Washshā, *Muwashshā*, 222 on the undesirability of keeping company with common folks; and also a passage in which the Abbasid Caliph al-Manṣūr emphatically distances himself from having any interest whatsoever in the concerns and gossiping about him of the common populace in Ibn Simāk, *Zaharāt*, 58. Al-Ma'mūn is quoted in a similar vein; see al-Bayhaqī, *Maḥāsin*, 128; and cf. op. cit., 170-2. For yet more ruthless condemnations of the *ʿamma* and their ways and lore in general, see al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj*, II, 29-31; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Quṣṣaṣ*, 318; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs*,

Given the above facts, one might well be surprised to find that the corpus of literary products of various genres targeting the lower classes are matched by a no less bulky, and indeed probably bulkier, group of “anti-élite” jokes, anecdotes and poems. That this reverse phenomenon, of anti-élite jesting, should also have existed is, I believe, definitely puzzling. However, the fact remains that the irony and sarcasm, sometimes all but reaching the grade of hostility, directed at the representatives of the intellectual professions is actually a conspicuous phenomenon in the Abbasid period; and this is the question that the present article is dedicated to examining and hopefully offering an interpretation for.

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It is interesting to observe which are the disciplines whose experts tend to be ridiculed frequently in the texts with which we are concerned. One finds that perhaps more than any other group of scholars, the experts of Classical Arabic grammar (*al-naḥwiyyūn*) appear to have been an especially convenient target of such joking in the literature of this period. Frustratingly, a substantial part of the jokes about the grammarians is virtually impossible to translate, loaded as they are with the technical terms of the craft; something that we may greatly regret but cannot help. One of the typical sorts of “anti-grammarian” anecdotes is that in which we are expected to laugh at the strict and pedantic application of the rules of Classical Arabic grammar in quite mundane, trivial contexts and situations – in the market, the bazaar, or when addressing servants –; in other words, the point of the jokes is the discrepancy between the linguistic and the social level of the situation. Such anecdotes seem to have sometimes been regarded as a genre of their own and gone under the name *nawādir al-naḥwiyyīn*.<sup>7</sup> They no doubt parody the behaviour of a tiny but existent group of pedantic scholars who would actually insist on presumably “correct” – in fact, just bookish, literary and antiquated – linguistic usage in every domain of their lives. One such anecdote may be regarded as a typical example, which stands here for lots of similar ones:

387 ff.; and an anecdote in al-Isfahānī, *Aghānī* XIII, 128. On the varying views among the learned élite on popular culture, cf. Shoshan “High culture”, 90-4.

<sup>7</sup> E. g. al-Ḥarīrī, *Durra*, 579.

Al-Kisā'ī says: I have sworn always to talk to a plebeian in a manner appropriate for him and similar to his own (*ḥalaftu allā ukallim 'āmmiyyan illā bi-mā yuwāfiqūhu wa-yushbih kalāmahu*). I once stopped at a carpenter's, and asked, "What is the price that this pair of doors costeth (*bi-kam ḥādhān al-bābān*)?" He retorted, "Two pieces of shitteth, oh you idioteth (*bi-salḥatān yā miṣfa'ān*).” Then I swore never to talk to a common man in an unfitting manner.<sup>8</sup>

Another account also bears testimony, if in a somewhat more benign manner, to the exasperating, dogged precision of some grammarians who would not leave uncriticized even the most common vernacular locutions:

[...] It was narrated to me by al-Zaghal: Once I saw Ibn al-A'rābī [the grammarian] [as a guest] in our house. An old woman [servant]

<sup>8</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ẓirāf*, 125. See another anecdote of identical purport on the same page; a slightly different one in al-Tawḥīdī, *Imtā'*, 194; and plenty of others in Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ẓirāf*, 126-7; al-Ibshīhī, *Mustatraf*, 535. In one of the the last two examples (both in al-Ibshīhī's work), the humorous effect is achieved by the application, by forced analogy, of some word-form (namely, *af'ul*) to totally inappropriate radicals: by analogy with *aruzz*, "rice", does a grammarian create nouns like *a'sul*, *akhlul*, etc., and where else but in the marketplace. In the other example, a preposterously vainglorious grammarian all but bores his father to death by his verbal constructions produced out of the names of common meals (*a'dasa*, *sakbaja*, *dajjaja*, *lawzaja*, etc.). A story in al-Ḥarīrī, *Durra*, 579 and Ibn al-Jawzī, *Taqwīm*, 93 also depicts the hairsplitting linguistic precision of a grammarian in a totally workaday situation, as does a joke on Ibn Sayyāba in al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣā'ir*, I, i: 155; and another quoted in al-Qisṭaynī *al-Sukhriyya*, 39. In a more serious tone, al-Jāhīz, with his characteristic common sense, discourages secretaries in particular from talking to common people in a style appropriate for the educated élite, and *vice versa* ("*lā yukallim al-'amma bi-kalām al-khāṣṣa wa-lā l-khāṣṣa bi-kalām al-'amma*"); see Yāqūt, *Irshād*, V, 2108.

It is ironic that sometimes those intellectuals ever insisting on accurate classical usages in contradiction of widespread popular ones could at times also be shown to commit mistakes by their own standards; cf. for instance al-Zubaydī, *Lahn*, 154 on the incorrect form *ratta* (accurately: *rutta* or *ratat*) current among die-hard linguistic classicists (*al-mutaḥaṣṣihūn*); and Ibn al-Jawzī, *Taqwīm*, 180 on a sort of malapropism with the word *lābatān* ("two lava fields"). That this was not an isolated case is confirmed in the following passage: "Many [learned] people would now commit mistakes and suppose meanwhile that what they say is correct, whereas a lot of common people (*min al-'amma*) use correct forms while being unaware of it. So it may well happen that a man who uses incorrect forms ridicules another who is correct..." See Ibn Makkī, *Tathqīf*, 43. For grave spelling mistakes committed by great if unnamed scholars cf. *op. cit.* 44; and for words and phrases that were common in an incorrect form among the self-important scholars (*al-mutaḥaṣṣihūn*) and in a correct one among the common folks, cf. a whole chapter (titled *Bāb mā l-'amma fihi 'alā l-ṣawāb wa-l-khāṣṣa 'alā l-khaṭa'*) in *op. cit.*, 295-301.

of us said: “My lady (*sittī*) says this and that.” Ibn al-Aʿrābī remarked: “If this [word] comes from ‘lordship’ (*suʿdad*), then [the correct form is] *sayyidatī*, and if it is [meant to be] a numeral, then [the correct form is] *sittatī*. I do not know of any meaning that *sittī* might have in the language”.<sup>9</sup>

Besides grammar and its specialists, the mediaeval Arabic sources contain a wealth of anecdotal material and other sorts of texts (primarily short poems) in which the butt of the sarcasm is some other branch of learning, another intellectual or religious activity, as well as the practicers of that science; this category includes such disciplines as the study of *ḥadīth*, the correct pronunciation of the Quran; and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) may likewise be added to our list of “victimized” disciplines.

Analysing the stories, we see that the source of irony thereof is the sort of discourse and the methods usually applied by the *muḥaddithūn* (just as it was in the case of the *naḥwiyyūn*): the elongated and meticulously presented *isnāds*, or the punctilious analyses of each informant’s credibility and integrity (*jarḥ wa-taʿdīl*), etc. As many passages indicate, *muḥaddiths* must have looked as an uncommonly ludicrous lot in the eyes of many on account of their apparent high airs, self-conceit, pride of profession, and pedantry. As we will see, many of them had the habit of denouncing other professions and tended to disapprove of joking and merriment in general, which is more than likely to have made them extremely unpopular with a part of the common people as well as many fellow-scholars. Their main tool of profession, the *isnād*, is the subject of much jesting in mediaeval Arabic literature, both in poetry and prose.<sup>10</sup> The reader

<sup>9</sup> Al-Jawālīqī, *Takmila*, 873; and a slightly differing version in Ibn al-Jawzī, *Taqwīm*, 143. Of course, *sittī* is, and was in that period too, a perfectly ordinary and comprehensible word. Another scholar, al-Akhfash, is shown in an account prohibiting his pupils the use of some of the most common words in the contemporary Iraqi dialect (like *bakht*, “fortune, luck”). See al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣāʾir*, III, vi: 179.

<sup>10</sup> In an anecdote which was apparently highly popular, for it got into more than one *adab* collection, the celebrated hero of many funny stories, Ashʿab, is asked to transmit whichever *ḥadīths* he remembers. He does transmit one, featuring the respected ʿIkrima in its *isnād*, concerning two personal traits not to be found combined in a true believer. Upon further inquiry, however, he has to admit that he is unable to specify the two traits, as he has forgotten one and the worthy ʿIkrima forgot the other. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zirāf*, 63; and cf. Rosenthal *Humour in early Islam*, 29-30, 117. For two licentious lines by Abū Nuwās which make fun of the style of *isnād*, see al-Rāghib, *Muḥāḍarāt*, II, 119. For an indecent

will probably be familiar with a typical example, an extraordinarily popular and oft-repeated joke in which a *ḥadīth* expert will have no scruples to drink a cup of wine offered to him by a Christian, as the beverage's genuine nature cannot be established beyond doubt because of the obvious unacceptability of an *isnād* featuring a Christian, his servant-boy, and a Jewish innkeeper.<sup>11</sup> Another widespread method of creating a funny effect out of the genre of *ḥadīths* was the deliberate misconstruction of the purport of certain *ḥadīths*. Such jokes are also plentiful in Arabic literature, as are, incidentally, those based upon a misunderstanding of the meaning of Quranic verses, a subject which is beyond the scope of this article but which I hope to examine elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> (Incidentally, some *ḥadīths* being relatively well-known, jesting at the expense of *muḥaddithūn* was greatly facilitated.)

The concept of reprehensible novelties, or *bidʿa*, a pet of the pious *fuqahāʾ*, is also made fun of in a story which tells of the celebrated Mālikī jurist Ibn al-Mājishūn's unfortunate encounter with a highway robber, who demands that the scholar hand his clothes over to him immediately. When the latter appeals to the robber for a little delay until he can get another set of clothes, the criminal meditates a while, then declares that giving a delay to victims has never been customary among robbers since the Prophet's era, adding, in the genuine style of the *fuqahāʾ* which is certainly impossible to render fully in another language: "I dislike [the idea of] inventing a new custom in Islam, for which I alone shall be culpable among all those who follow it till the Day of Judgement (*wa-akrah an abtadiʿ fī l-islām bidʿa*

proposal in verse, propped by an *isnād* for emphasis, see al-Iṣḥānī, *Aghānī*, XVIII 214. For a smiling but innocuous application of the concept of *isnād* in a love poem, see al-Ṣafādī, *Tawshīḥ*, 181; and for the method of *isnād* being built into a wine song ("[...] *lā aḥādītha turwāʿan Qatādataʿan Anas*"), see al-Thaʿālibī, *Tatimma*, II, 74. For an enchanting mock *isnād* built into a panegyric by the North African Ibn Rashīq, see Ibn Dīḥya, *Muṭrib*, 58. For various poems and jokes lightly mocking the style of *ḥadīths*, especially the *isnād*, see al-Thaʿālibī, *Khāṣṣ*, 70-1. For a whole mock *ḥadīth* recommending, nay commanding, wine sessions in the morning (and of course intended as a joke), see al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*, II, 204. Such parodistic uses of solemn elements are classified as "carnivalised" literature in El-Outmani 1995: 166. Significantly, all these jokes and poems reflect a familiarity with only the very rudiments of *ḥadīth* scholarship, without an eye for its often extraordinary precision, on which cf., for instance, ʿIyād, *Ilmāʿ*, 122-34, 146-73, 178-82.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance in al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 527.

<sup>12</sup> For such a misrepresentation of the purport of a *ḥadīth*, see for example Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ẓirāf*, 100 [on the tradition "*Maṭl al-ghanī zulm*"].

*yakūn ʿalayya wizruhā wa-wizr man ʿamila bihā baʿdī ilā yawm al-qiyyāma*). Take off your clothes!”<sup>13</sup> The point of the anecdote is so densely loaded with *termini technici* of jurisprudence that it is obviously intended to allow some good-natured laughter at the expense of the religious élite. Another concept that is utilized in an anecdote, and a rather rude one at that, is *ijmāʿ*, the consensus of the community.<sup>14</sup> Yet another hugely popular (because frequently cited) joke also makes fun of the punctilious concepts of Islamic jurisprudence:

It is told that a man fornicated with a slave-girl and left her pregnant. Others reproached him, “Oh you enemy of God, if you couldn’t hold back from committing this abomination, couldn’t you practice *coitus interruptus*?” He answered: “I’ve been informed that *coitus interruptus* is seen unfavourably in religious law (*balaghanī anna l-ʿazl makrūh*)”. They said: “And haven’t you been informed that fornication is forbidden?”<sup>15</sup>

The *termini technici* of *fiqh* and *naḥw* were a popular and widely utilized means of creating a humorous effect in verse and probably in conversation too, usually by interweaving their everyday, original meaning and their technical one, which very strongly suggests that such punning was a practice within the élite itself rather than a popular pastime, as the common folks seem to have often been surprisingly ignorant of the standard religious and grammatical lore contained in the sources. These puns typically serve as the points of countless short couplets or single lines, and while they may sometimes display a measure of wit, they more often than not tend to be poetic exercises rather than any sophisticated kind of poetry.<sup>16</sup> Of

<sup>13</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zirāf*, 86-7.

<sup>14</sup> I prefer to skip this positively vulgar story in its full form, but the punch line alone will perhaps illustrate the liberties that some people took in amusing themselves with the concepts of serious legal scholarship: “So you have shat yourself”, the main character of the story, a *faqīh*, makes his ruling, “by consensus of all the legal schools (*kharīṭa bi-ijmāʿ al-madhāhib*).” See al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 533.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 167. For other versions of this popular joke, see al-Rāghib, *Muḥāḍarāt*, II, 120; al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣāʾir*, I, i: 183.

<sup>16</sup> For various examples, cf. al-Ḥarīrī, *Durra*, 142 [the humorous effect is based on the ambiguity of the sense of *ʿatf* as either “compassion, tenderness” or “conjunction”, respectively]; op. cit. 579 [a well nigh untranslatable remark utilizing the everyday and the technical meanings of *ʿāʾid* and *ṣila*: first, as “a person visiting an ailing acquaintance” and “gift” respectively; secondly, as terms for certain parts of a relative clause];

course, the potential sexual connotations of some terms of grammar as taken literally (e. g. *rafʿ* might mean either “the nominative case” or “raising, erection”) did not escape the attention of some mirthful spirits and were put to use accordingly.<sup>17</sup> In addition to these easy puns, among the semantic devices popularly applied in the poetry of the Abbasid period one finds the application of the argumentation

al-Thaʿalibī, *Yatīma*, IV, 312 [a poem joking with the phrase *lāzim lā yataʿaddā*, which can be interpreted either as “intransitive” or as “inalienable, which cannot be passed on”]; al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣāʾir*, III, v: 131 [on *naṣb*, “accusative”, being misinterpreted as “pro-Omayyad leanings”]; III, vi: 67-8 [various jokes on the misunderstanding, in their non-technical sense, of the grammatical terms *hamz* and *jarr*]; al-Tawḥīdī, *Imtāʾ*, 197 [a joke based on the difference between the ordinary and scholarly meanings of *hamz*]; al-Thaʿalibī, *Khāṣṣ*, 66-9 [a lot of verses and anecdotes based on grammatical terms]; al-Qishtaynī *al-Sukhriyya*, 111 [an interesting example of such a pun, ascribed to an Iraqi politician of the 20th century]; al-Ibshīhī, *Mustatraf*, 275 [punning with the word *daʿif*, “weak”, also a *terminus technicus* of *ḥadīth* scholarship for a “weak”, or untrustworthy, tradition]; op. cit. 488 [a poem by Ibn ʿAfīf punning with another category of *ḥadīths*, *ḥasan*, “good, acceptable”, which happens to mean “beautiful” too]; op. cit. 277 [a couplet playing, I take, with the meaning of the phrase *Ṣiḥāḥ al-Jawharī*, either “The Trustworthy Traditions of al-Jawharī”, or, minus the capitals, “valuable gems of the jeweler”]; op. cit. 446-7 [a poem utilizing the primary, banal meanings of the names of the four schools of jurisprudence; e. g. *mālikī*, “my lord, my possessor”; *shāfiʿī*, “intercessor on my behalf”; etc.]; al-Ṣafādī, *Tawshīḥ*, 117 [a *muwashshaḥ* poem by the book’s author toying with the words *mālikī* and *ʿtizāl*, this latter noun meaning either “the Muʿtazila theological school” or “coitus interruptus”]; al-Thaʿalibī, *Yatīma*, III, 267 [an obscene piece by al-Ṣāhib b. ʿAbbād utilizing the semantic ambiguity of *ʿtizāl*]; al-Rāghib *Muḥāḍarāt*, II, 109 [a rather rude joke playing on the possible sexual connotations of the theological term *istiṭāʿa*, “ability, faculty of acting”]; op. cit. II, 113 [a rude line of lampoon based on the carnal notions inherent in a term of Shīʿite dogma, *al-qāʾim*, “the Awaited, Justful Ruler”, literally, “upright, standing”; also a joke applying the technical terms of poetical metre to describe a penis].

<sup>17</sup> See for instance al-Rāghib, *Muḥāḍarāt*, II, 110 and 113, where various anecdotes exploit the sexual associations inherent in such terms of Arabic grammar as *fiʿl*, *naṣb*, *al-fāʿil wa-l-mafʿūl*, *ḥarf jāʾa li-maʿnā*, *muḍāf*, *muḍāf ilayhi*. For a rather vulgar verse exploiting the same ambiguity of meaning (“*Ya murunī bi-l-naḥwi fī naykihi bi-l-rafi wa-l-naṣbi wa-bi-l-khaḍīr*”), cf. al-Thaʿalibī, *Tatīmma*, I, 42; and cf. also al-Thaʿalibī, *Khāṣṣ*, 68; and a line full of grammatical terms by Abū Nuwās (rendered in English as best they might be) in van Gelder 1992: 187. The sexual connotations of the term *al-fāʿil wa-l-mafʿūl* are the basis of a joke in al-Tawḥīdī, *Akhlaq*, 159.

Interestingly, such semantic coincidences seem also to have been utilized for serious purposes, namely, as mnemotechnic devices. See for instance such expressions as *al-rafi li-l-murtafiʿ wa-l-khaḍ li-l-munkhaḍ* (the form with the vowel *u* for the high thing, the form with the vowel *i* for the deep-set thing), *al-maksūr li-mā yankasir wa-l-maftūḥ li-mā yanfatih* (“the form with the vowel *i* for that which may break, the form with the vowel *a* for that which opens up at birth”), *al-rafi li-l-rafi wa-l-naṣb li-l-naṣb* (the form with the vowel *u* for the [thing] elevated high [by God], the form with the vowel *a* for the [thing] erected [by people]), etc., in Ibn Makkī, *Tathqīf*, 424-6.



common in Islamic scholastic theology and jurisprudence to quite banal and unfitting themes, usually to arguments between lovers.<sup>18</sup> An example of that is when the poet Abū l-Faḍl al-Mīkālī begs his beloved boy to pay the *zakāt* due on his disproportionately great beauty, in the form of a couple of kisses; while the quick-witted boy retorts that the *Ḥanafī* legal school, to which he professes to belong, does not require a minor (*ṣabī*) to pay any *zakāt*.<sup>19</sup>

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The next aspect of the issue worth scrutinizing is the underlying motives of the ill-feeling and criticism implicit in all the above jokes and poems; in other words, those characteristics of the scholarly groups singled out for ridicule that get derided and deplored. Even a cursory overview of the sources leaves little doubt about the fact that the reason for which Quran readers, judges, jurists and Sufis get laughed at in our texts is their perceived materialism and moral vices (especially hypocrisy), as well as their not infrequent ignorance beneath a show of learning.<sup>20</sup> The contrast between the high moral standards and concepts voiced by many religious experts and their more or less obvious *arrière-pensée* of material gains and other less than respectable motives is probably a recurring, important subject in the cultural heritage of all the great religions, and Islam is no exception, evidence for which is provided by a host of jokes and stories to this effect.<sup>21</sup> The hypocrisy and affected piety of many learned schol-

<sup>18</sup> See for instance al-Thaʿālibī, *Khāṣṣ*, 71-3.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 464; al-Thaʿālibī, *Khāṣṣ*, 72. That one should have to pay *zakāt* on various positive personal traits is a hackneyed poetic conceit.

<sup>20</sup> See some jokes on Quran readers in al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 533. Also Abū Bakr al-Quhistānī's lampoons on the hypocrisy of a certain jurist whom he suspected of perverted sexual predilections in al-Bākhazī, *Dumyā*, II, 788; and a simile mentioning the usual hypocrisy of *ḥadīth* experts in al-Thaʿālibī, *Yatīma*, II, 212. Another work, after entertaining the reader with anecdotes bearing testimony to the surprising ignorance of a scholar, adds: "the experts of *ḥadīth* are seldom exempt from such [mistakes], so they have been compared to a gatherer of firewood at night (*ḥāṭib layl*)". See al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣāʾir*, I, ii: 23-4; and an example of the appalling ignorance of a noted *muḥaddith* in op. cit. III, vi: 114; and more on the ignorance of many of the specialists of *ḥadīth*: Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs*, 115.

<sup>21</sup> An anecdote tells of a woman who hires a professional Quran reader who earns his living by reciting the Scripture in the cemetery, and gives him a loaf of bread as remuneration for reciting over his dead son's grave. The man recites: "The day when they will be pulled, faces downward, towards hellfire. Taste the touch of Hell!" (Quran 54:48). Ut-

ars were likewise often noticed and commented upon by fellow-members of the literate élite.<sup>22</sup> In a literary source, the religious scholar Ibn Sīrīn is asked about some people's vehement, ecstatic reactions to the recital of the sublime Quranic text, and he remarks that a fairly accurate way of measuring sincerity in such cases could be to make these people sit on the top of a high and narrow wall and recite the Quran in front of them: whoever is gripped by ecstasy in such conditions can probably be accepted as sincere in his claims.<sup>23</sup> Another passage of the same work mentions that according to some people, the testimony of a Quran reader regarding another cannot be accepted in court, as they are too well known for their jealous competitiveness that matches that of billy-goats (*fa-innahum ashadd taḥāsudan min al-tuyūs*).<sup>24</sup> Experts of scholastic theology are also sometimes portrayed as having a distinctly unprepossessing character and working style.<sup>25</sup> All these particular points converge into the general observation that we are presented with a critique of personal vices and shortcomings, and not the deploration of a social class as such.

terly indignant, the woman reproaches him that this is perhaps not precisely the appropriate passage for recital over a grave. The man answers (using, significantly, a vernacular interrogative here): "Why, what do you expect for a loaf of bread? 'Reclining on cushions with a brocaded trimming' [Quran 55:54]?! That costs a *dirham*!" See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zirāf*, 140. In a story, the famous linguist Abū l-Aswad al-Du'alī is ridiculed for his excessive miserliness, which he would justify with alluding to a *ḥadūth*; see al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 185.

<sup>22</sup> A characteristic example of such comments is the following paragraph from a discussion of the topic of covert scandal-seeking gossip: "Some people professing to be learned in religion and devout (*ba'd al-mutaḥḥiqhīn wa-l-muta'abbidīn*) will gossip by innuendoes which are as easily comprehensible as plain talk would be. Such a man, when asked what a certain person is like, will say: "May God correct us", "May God forgive us", "May God correct him", "We must ask God [to grant us] recovery", "We must thank God for sparing us from entering the darkness", "We seek refuge with God from haughtiness", "May God grant us recovery from shamelessness", "May God pardon us", and suchlike phrases that make clear one's low opinion [of the person asked about]. All this sort is [in fact] forbidden gossip." See al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 94; and see also Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs*, 117-8.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 112. Of course this text is aimed at the less than artless antics of some Sufis, but I mention this story solely for its dry sarcasm which is rather characteristic in a host of other anecdotes too, some of them directed against far more learned hypocrites.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 225. Cf. al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*, III, 127, where a mock *ḥadūth* asserts that the "dessert of Quran readers is [malicious] gossip".

<sup>25</sup> Al-Jāhīz, *Ḥayawān*, I, 97; al-Tawḥīdī, *Muqābasāt*, 194, 223; al-Tawḥīdī, *Akhlaq*, 231-2.

The common denominator in the majority of our source material, therefore, is the fact that it is largely the foibles, sins, snobbery and pedantry of the learned specialists that is laughed at, against which the common sense and the down-to-earth attitudes of more healthy minds are shown in a favourable light. Experts of grammar are ridiculed on similar grounds. Whenever grammarians are spoken of in the literature of the period, we often encounter the verbal forms *tashaddaqa* or *taqa<sup>cc</sup>ara*, meaning “talk in a pompous, full-mouthed manner”, or “affect a pedantically classical pronunciation” which sounds quite artificial in a mundane context.<sup>26</sup> One might gauge just how disagreeable these presumptuous individuals appeared to many of their equally learned contemporaries by the existence of a *ḥadīth*, most probably fabricated, which makes the Prophet condemn precisely that *recherché* speech style, that pomposity, of which we are talking: “The most obnoxious among you in my eyes are those who are garrulous, put on airs and make declamations (*Inna abghaḍakum ilayya l-tharthārūn al-mutafayhiqūn al-mutashaddiqūn*)”.<sup>27</sup> It must be added that pride in one’s branch of learning would not infrequently degenerate into a chauvinism of *métier*, with many grammarians, theologians, jurists, scribes and pursuers of other learned crafts being, to a man, convinced of the unequalled superiority of their own discipline.<sup>28</sup> This attitude seems to have been particularly common among the *ḥadīth* experts, whose haughtiness and presumption are more than perceptible in quite a few texts, which no doubt are just a reflection of the way these scholars were wont to parade in their everyday rapport with other people.<sup>29</sup> Here I remind the reader of the

<sup>26</sup> This was so well-known a word that it even developed a distorted, vernacular form too (*taqa<sup>cc</sup>wara*); see al-Zubaydī, *Lahm*, 264.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Makkī, *Tathqīf*, 62. The tradition is only cited in some *Gharīb al-ḥadīth* collections. The rendering of *mutafayhiqūn* as “those who put on airs” is a mere tentative, as the purport of this word was obviously rather elusive to mediaeval Arab scholars too; it is said to mean either “speaking in an affected, pompous manner” or “being self-conceited”. See Abū ‘Ubayd, *Gharīb*, I, 106.

<sup>28</sup> See for instance al-Tawḥīdī, *Muqābasāt*, 147-8.

<sup>29</sup> The following text might be said to be fairly representative: «Ṣāliḥ b. Aḥmad narrated that he had heard his father say, “Humankind is comprised only by those who say ‘we have been told’ or ‘it has been transmitted to us’ (*mā l-nās illā man qāla ḥaddathanā wa-akhbaranā*).” And when [the caliph] al-Mu‘taṣim turned to my father and told him to talk to Ibn Abī Du‘ād, my father turned his face away from him, and said: “How could I talk to someone whom I have never seen at the door of a religious scholar?”» See ‘Iyāḍ, *Ilmā*, 28. The same infuriating self-conceit recurs in various poems composed by *ḥadīth*

down-to-earth remarks that make fun of the high airs and affected religious rigour taken up by many *quṣṣās*; such plebeian but irresistibly witty remarks are a characteristic of other anti-élite jokes as well.<sup>30</sup> It has to be noted here that *qāṣṣ* anecdotes are in all probability an intermediate phenomenon, as this class of people was simultaneously representative of religious learning of some kind on the one hand and popular culture, urban folklore, on the other. However, what is normally ridiculed in the majority of jokes about the *quṣṣās* is unmistakably their excessive preoccupation with otherworldly affairs, which is often contrasted to the common folks' healthily down-to-earth attitudes, which helps class these texts with the rest of the "anti-élite" jesting. The following lovely passage about a *qāṣṣ* combines the critique of the street preacher with that of the quintessential ascetic poet Abū l-°Atāhiya so as to have a laugh at all those who never have a laugh:

A certain *qāṣṣ*, in the course of his preaching, said: "There is an angel in Heaven who declares every day: 'Beget children for death and erect buildings for destruction (*lidū li-l-mawt wa-'bnū li-l-kharāb*)'". At this, a quick-witted person said (*qāla ba°d al-fuṭanā*): "That angel is called Abū l-°Atāhiya".<sup>31</sup>

\* \* \*

experts too, one of which also alludes to the hostility of some people to the *muḥaddithūn*. See op. cit., 39, 41. (Note such assertions as the one calling all branches of not strictly religious learning *zandaqa*, "heresy", and *waswās al-shayāfīn*, "the whispers of the devils".) As for the often noted *ressentiment* of élite scholars on account of the disproportionately great popularity of such bunglers of their profession as the *quṣṣās*, cf. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Quṣṣās*, 170, 318, 319 [a story on Abū Ḥanīfa's mother].

<sup>30</sup> Cf. this one about a *muḥaddith*: "The governor Fadl continued, for a full sixty years, to slaughter a sacrificial [animal] on his wife's behalf. One day, hearing a *muḥaddith* tell the *ḥadīth*, "When people rise on the Day of Resurrection, their sacrificial animals will be in front of them", he remarked: "If what you say is true, my wife will on the Day of Resurrection become a shepherdess with two staffs [needed to herd the sheep]." See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zirāf*, 143.

<sup>31</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zirāf*, 132. See other *qāṣṣ* anecdotes with similarly flippant retorts by some member of the audience in op. cit. 142. However, sometimes it is perceptibly the rough, ignorant and plebeian nature of the *qāṣṣ* that is being ridiculed, which classifies such anecdotes with the rest of the very rich anti-°amma joke repertoire. A rather typical example is the following: "There lived a *qāṣṣ* in Marw, who would weep throughout his sermoning. Then, having had a fill of his wailing séance, he would take a small mandolin out of his sleeve and strike the strings, saying, 'After this long sorrow one does need a moment's joy'." See al-Ibshīhī, *Mustatraf*, 112.

In seeking to identify the originators and consumers of these jokes and poetic flippancies, perhaps we are not too mistaken to try and interpret these literary texts in the context of the enormous social changes taking place in the high Abbasid period, and see them as the reflection of a new, urban type of culture, which was no more ready to limit itself to idolize the ancient linguistic usages, lifestyle and culture of the Bedouin, but was determined to manifest itself with no inhibitions in literature as well as in other spheres of cultural life.

The selection of the specialists of certain disciplines for serving as the targets of numerous jokes, anecdotes and sarcastic poems appears to have resulted precisely from their conscious option of standing aloof from the vibrant, light-minded urban culture of the era, a fact particularly true of the students of Classical Arabic grammar, which, among the branches of mediaeval Arabic scholarship, was possibly the one most alien to the everyday culture of the period, therefore it must have stood for all the aloofness and hauteur of the ivory tower of dry scholarship. The *naḥwī* is, then, the representative *par excellence* of pedantry and a bookish, artificial and somewhat anachronistic culture which nevertheless sought to continue imposing itself as the highest model to imitate.<sup>32</sup> It is always healthy, “folksy” common sense and gaiety that this clashes with in our texts. For instance, the portrayal of boring, artificial grammatical arguments and religious bigotry on the one hand and exuberant fun-loving on the other as two opposed extremes is made emphatically in the following lines by the poet Abū Bakr ʿAlī al-Quhistānī: “What have I got to do with piety and constant worship and [such grammatical examples as] *inna Zaydan* or *inna ʿAmran?*» / [...] / Oh you who reproach me – but reproaches are useless talk –; I shall continue drinking wine as long as I live!”<sup>33</sup> It must be added here that the antipathy felt by many men of letters towards the self-important, pompous grammarian would sometimes be vented in a quite outspoken, and indeed obscene and vulgar,

<sup>32</sup> It must be noted that of course this stereotype was not true of all experts of grammar; in a source, one ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā al-Naḥwī quotes a (rather indecent) vernacular saying, remarking that it is very witty. See al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣāʾir*, II, iv: 86. However, the typical attitude of a lot of grammarians was probably one of vainglory and arrogance over their discipline; see Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs*, 126.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Bākhārī, *Dumyā*, II, 787. The two lines in the original: “*Mā anā wa-l-nusku wa-l-taḡarrī wa-inna Zaydan wa-inna ʿAmrā* / [...] / *Yā lāʾimī wa-l-malāmu laghwun la-ashraban mā ḥayītu khamrā*.”

form, as in the following typical piece: “I have been informed that Abū Riyāsh has perfected the science of language and has surpassed [everyone] in what he professes. / So who will inform me when I inquire who has acquainted him so well with the p... of [the great philologist] al-Aṣmaʿī?”<sup>34</sup>

The quintessential *muḥaddith*, *naḥwī* and suchlike scholars are depicted as the counterpoint as it were to a folkish, sane *joie de vivre*, which they seek to ignore or suppress. This exuberant enjoyment of life, combined with indulgence in some of the usages and customs of the urban masses, was by no means a prerogative of the lower echelon of society. Although a high social standing or a scholarly fame did impose very heavy strictures of acceptable behaviour on those who were fortunate enough to belong to the select classes, it was chiefly in public that one had to guard his own demeanour; in private even the otherwise awe-inspiring members of the élite could, and apparently did, ease their behaviour somewhat<sup>35</sup>, and there are indications that quite a few, at any rate in the great urban centres of Iraq and adjacent areas, disapproved of those who would not engage in, or at least tolerate, such a relaxation of mores in private. These petty Savonarolas

<sup>34</sup> Al-Thaʿālibī, *Yatīma*, II, 352. The original version is “Nubbi ‘tu anna Abā Riyāshin qad ḥawā ‘ilma l-lughāti wa-fāqa fī-mā yadda‘ī / Man mukhbiri ‘anhu fa-innī sā’ilun man kāna ḥannakahu bi-ayri l-Aṣmaʿī”. The two lines cited are by the Iraqi poet Ibn Lankak, but indulgence in this style was especially enjoyed by the celebrated master of obscenity in mediaeval Arabic poetry, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, who says, with apparent relish, such things as “If [the philologist] Thaʿlab finds fault with my poetry or my levity, / I will shit on the chapter on the pattern *afaltu* in [his] Book of Correct Language” (*In ‘āba Thaʿlabu shiʿrī aw ‘āba khiffata rūḥī / Kharītu fī bābi afaltu min Kitābi l-faṣīḥī*), and describes his own talent as “A mind that slaps al-Farazdaq in the face and a grammar that f...s al-Kisāʿī’s mother (*Khāṭirun yaṣfā‘u l-Farazdaq fī l-shiʿrī wa-naḥwun yanīku umma l-Kisāʿī*).” See al-Thaʿālibī, *Yatīma*, III, 31 and Yāqūt, *Irshād*, III, 1041 and similar (but even ruder) pieces in al-Thaʿālibī, *Yatīma*, III, 32; also Pseudo-Tawḥīdī, *Risāla baghdādiyya*, 187. The reader will probably agree with me that “criticizing” the philologists and grammarians in this manner and on these grounds is a very far cry from the criticism voiced by those indignant Arabs who complained of the grammarians’ largely non-Arab origins and their “insolence” to teach the Arabic grammar according to their scholarly rules; cf. a poem by ʿAmmār al-Kalbī in al-Zawzanī, *Ḥamāsa*, II, 137. Similar to the above examples in its brusqueness and obscenity (e. g. “Fī sti ummi ‘ilmī wa-ādābī wa-falsafatī...” etc.), yet of a different purport is a poem by the secretary ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿIsā in al-Suyūṭī, *Mustaṭraf*, 25-6, in which the depressing fact that learning of whatever sort will not guarantee material wealth is deplored in a markedly strong language.

<sup>35</sup> In one source, excessive modesty and discretion in a private situation are even called “common people’s behaviour” (*ḥādhā l-khulq al-‘āmmī*)! See al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 196. Cf. Sadan *al-Adab al-‘arabī* 40 [on *ṭarḥ al-takalluf*]. (Here I would like to thank Prof. Sadan for kindly sending me a copy of this interesting monograph.)

were often dubbed *baghīd*, or “abominable”, in everyday parlance.<sup>36</sup> True enough that there are quite a few passages that give testimony to many scholars’ scorn and dislike of all sorts of joking, like one in which jesting (*mizāh*) – and it must be added that any sort of jesting, *in general* – is described in an angry diatribe as something that “destroys one’s dignity, blemishes one’s face, generates hatred, puts an end to the sweetness of belief and love, deforms a religious scholar’s learning, encourages a rash man’s insolence, spells death onto the heart, distances one from the Almighty God, and breeds stupidity and humility (*yakhruq al-hayba wa-yadhhab bi-mā’ al-wajh wa-yu’qib al-ḥiqd wa-yadhhab bi-ḥalāwat al-īmān wa-l-wudd wa-yushīn fiqh al-faqīh wa-jujri’ al-safīh wa-yumīt al-qalb wa-yubā’id ‘an al-rabb ta’ālā wa-yuksib al-ghafla wa-l-dhilla*)”.<sup>37</sup> However, such opinions are far outnumbered by texts that clearly show that a lenient attitude towards foibles and petty sins was seen as a praiseworthy trait and spoken of admiringly. The following two anecdotes, about the founding father of the *Ḥanafīyya* school of Islamic jurisprudence and a famous chief judge respectively, are two cases in point:

Abū Ḥanīfa had a neighbour working as a measurer (*kayyāl*) who was a habitual drinker, and who, when drinking, would sing the verse of [‘Abdallāh b. ‘Amr] al-‘Arjī: “They have wasted my life; and what a [prime] lad they have wasted for a fierce battle and the protection of the frontier!” Now, one night [this neighbour] was caught and imprisoned by the night-guard. Missing his voice and feeling deprived of it, Abū Ḥanīfa asked his family what had happened to the measurer their neighbour, and was told that he had been caught and jailed by the night-watch. The next morning Abū Ḥanīfa went to see ‘Īsā b. Mūsā. He asked permission to enter, which [‘Īsā] promptly gave. Now, Abū Ḥanīfa very seldom appeared at the rulers’ courts, so ‘Īsā b. Mūsā hastened to meet him and asked him what the purpose of his visit

<sup>36</sup> See for instance al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*, I, 89; al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, I, 390.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 133. A very similar, dismissive view on jesting and humour appears in an oft-quoted work by a distinctly unexhilarated authority on urbane ways; see al-Washshā, *Muwashshā*, 21. A lot of religious scholars were as hostile to jesting and joking as they were to “mingling with the despicable common folks” (*ṣuḥbat al-‘amma al-ardhāl*) and to whatever they regarded as lessening their aura of respectability. See al-Khaṭīb, *Kifāya*, 139. For diametrically opposed views, cf. al-Jāhīz, *Ḥayawān*, I, 365; al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣā’ir*, I, i: 55; II, iv: 43. For various *ḥadīths*, both for and against jesting, see al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 528-9. On this issue, cf. also van Gelder “Mixtures of jest”, 84-5, 89-91, 169; and Rosenthal *Humour in early Islam*, 3-4.

was. He said: 'God make the emir's whole life righteous; I have a measurer for a neighbour who was caught by the emir's night-guard on the night of such and such a day, and he has been imprisoned. 'Īsā b. Mūsā then ordered that everyone in the prison should be set free as a token of his high esteem of Abū Ḥanīfa. Presently there came the measurer heaping words of gratitude on Abū Ḥanīfa. Seeing him, Abū Ḥanīfa said, "Now, have we wasted you, lad?", alluding to the verse that he usually sang. He answered, "No, by God, you have rather [shown] caring and protection!"<sup>38</sup>

Now, a similar anecdote concerning the politeness (*waṭā'a*) of [many] austere judges towards those with inquiries (*li-l-mustaftīn*), and their tolerance (*talāyun*) in situations calling for that, is the one that has been narrated about Ḥāmid b. 'Abbās, who asked 'Alī b. 'Īsā in the vizier's office (*dīwān al-wizāra*) what was the [best] cure for hangover, as it did not cease torturing him. He refused to talk to him [about such a matter] and only said: "What have I got to do with such a question?" Feeling embarrassed, Ḥāmid turned to the Chief Qāḍī Abū 'Umar instead, and asked him [the same thing]. The Qāḍī cleared his throat and replied: "God has declared: 'Take whatever the Prophet has brought to you, and give up whatever he has prohibited to you'.<sup>39</sup> And the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: 'In every craft, seek the assistance of its experts.' Now, this craft's most famous master in the *Jāhiliyya* was al-A'shā, who says: 'One cup [of wine] I drank for my pleasure, and another, to cure myself of the previous one.' Then in the Islamic era he was followed by Abū Nuwās, who says: 'Leave off reproaching me as reproaches will just urge me on; but cure me with that which caused the illness!'" Ḥāmid's face brightened up, and he said to 'Alī b. 'Īsā: "What harm would it have done you, you dull man (*yā bārid*), if you had answered me with something like the answer of the Chief Qāḍī? In order to give an answer, he has utilized first the words of God, then those of the Prophet, making clear his legal opinion, doing justice to the subject (*bayyana l-futyā wa-addā l-ma'nā*), and disengaging himself from any responsibilities (*tafaṣṣā min al-uhda*)."<sup>40</sup> 'Alī b. 'Īsā's embarrassment before Ḥāmid at these words was even greater than that of Ḥāmid before him when he initiated the whole question.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 421.

<sup>39</sup> Quran 59: 7.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Ḥarīrī, *Durra*, 444-5. Incidentally, it was apparently thought by some people to be a good joke to ask for a legal opinion (*fatwā*) concerning frivolous, and indeed often inde-



One cannot miss the approving tone with which the great scholars' lenient attitude is recounted, and this tone recurs in quite a few other accounts as well.<sup>41</sup> A keen sense of humour, as I have repeatedly said, was also admired among the majority of the members of the literate classes. A story in Yāqūt's great biographical work on literary figures tells of an otherwise deeply religious Shī'ite man in Iraq who, when reproached for a strikingly risqué joke on 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, answers: "By God, I would never omit a good joke, even if it caused my death in this world and earned me a place in Hell in the next!".<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, many educated people appear to have had little appreciation for the more serious branches of scholarship (as opposed to light poetry and belles-lettres), and indeed some did dare give voice to this dislike.<sup>43</sup> It seems to have been a kind of entertainment for some jocular intellectuals to prepare bogus philological problems to ask solemn scholars about, and laugh at the latter's pretensions.<sup>44</sup> Overly serious scholars were apparently less than popular because they were, to put it bluntly, boring. It is formulated amusingly in the following anecdote:

Abū Hātim al-Sijistānī says that there was a man, an *aficionado* of scholastic theology, who frequented Ḥusayn al-Najjār's company. He

cent, things; see for instance al-Rāghib, *Muḥāḍarāt*, II, 117 under the heading *al-Mustaḥḥi fī saw'atihi 'āliman sukhfān*, "On those who, out of frivolity, ask a religious scholar to give a legal opinion concerning their genitals", and also al-Jāhīz, *Ḥayawān*, I, 367.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, cf. a story about a paternal uncle of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd noted for his piety and heartfelt religious devotion, 'Abd al-Malik b. Šāliḥ, in which he would sooner drink a cup or two of wine than become a killjoy for a drinking company. Al-Ibshīhī comments that this is an act of a truly noble spirit (*makārim al-akhlāq*), see *Mustaṭraf*, 427-8. Another story tells of Ibn al-Mu'tazz's benevolent discretion when he, upon entering a bath, found a group of naked men with a young boy in a scandalous scene; see al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣā'ir*, II, iv: 139-40.

<sup>42</sup> Yāqūt, *Irshād*, V, 2108.

<sup>43</sup> E. g. al-Tha'ālībī, *Tatimma*, I, 51-2, where the poet Abū l-Dardā' al-Mawṣilī complains of the tedium of conversing on theological points and denominational differences, and proposes, what else, drinking as a healthy alternative. The idea of the dreariness and repugnance of "serious" scholarship to an urbane, civilized man is a theme in some of Ibn Quzmān's dialectal poems too; cf. al-Ḥillī, *Āḥīl*, 201, 203. An extremely interesting passage in al-Ābī's *Nathr al-durr* also demonstrates the rather modest popularity in the 5th/11th century of "serious" themes, as opposed to the popular demand for entertaining topics; see it in English translation in van Gelder, "Mixtures", 170. H. Kilpatrick makes the important observation that of the poets of the Abbasid period, very few seem to have been involved in "serious" scholarship in any way. See Kilpatrick "Abū l-Faraġ's Profiles", 106-7.

<sup>44</sup> E. g. al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*, IV, 226-7; V, 206-7.

was a bore with a pompous style (*kāna thaqīlan mutashādiqan*), so that [Ḥusayn] would not know what to say to him for a while, until he realized that he would prepare a reply in the same vein as the question had been, thus stopping and silencing him. So one day, when [that man] asked him, “What do you say, may God bring you happiness, on the terminal point of the annihilation of delusions at the prime of closeness to the reaching of the final goals (*fī ḥadd talāshī l-tawahhumāt fī ‘unfuwān al-qurb min dark al-maṭālib*)?”), Ḥusayn replied: “This is part of [the issue of] the existence of the closeness of conditionality in the manner of aspectuality, by which mutual negation and affinity take place with neither encounter nor separation (*hādhā min wujūd qurb al-kayfūfiyya ‘alā ṭarīq al-ḥaythūthiyya wa-bi-mithlihi yaqa‘ al-tanāfi wa-l-mujānasa ‘alā ḡhayr talāqin wa-lā ftirāq*).” Then the man said: “This will require some consideration and deduction.” And he replied: “Just think it over, for we have found rest at last”.<sup>45</sup>

The mixture of sarcasm, irreverence, common sense, and a somewhat affected plebeian attitude that we can observe in so many stories and anecdotes was apparently much appreciated, and indeed cultivated, by lots of educated people. We have a quite explicit text attesting to the the popularity of this quasi-plebeian demeanour, which is all the more interesting as it is concerned with the social aspects of the use of grammar, which we have seen as the theme of many a joke:

It is said that the incorrect use of the classical tongue (*laḥn*) is more objectionable in writing than in speech. *Most learned people use unclassical language when speaking so as to avoid being classified as a tiresome and insufferable individual* [emphasis mine, Z. Sz.] (*wa-akthar al-‘ulamā’ yalḥan fī kalāmihi li-allā yunsab ilā l-thiqal wa-l-buḡḥd*). However, in writing and reciting poetry, it would be very ugly and quite unacceptable.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣā’ir*, I, ii: 183-4. Cf. a similar anecdote, this time making fun of the speech style of the Sufis, in al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*, I, 99.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Ṣūlī, *Adab*, 130. A source claims that those scholars and aristocrats who insisted on avoiding grammatical mistakes in lofty and everyday contexts alike (*lam yalḥanū fī jidd wa-lā hazl*) could be counted on the fingers of one hand even in a relatively early period; see al-Zajjājī, *Amālī*, 14, where the habit of al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf of keeping aloof from the use of words of Persian origin even in talking to his cook is cited approvingly.

The same idea, namely, that insistence on correct classical grammar in all speech situations is a tedious trait of a pain-in-the-neck rather than a praiseworthy scholarly characteristic, is versified in two short pieces by the poet Ibn Wakī<sup>c</sup> al-Tinnīsī, the first of which runs thus: “Correct grammar is nice in oratory and poetry, [in reading] a Quranic chapter or a book; / But should it go beyond these, it becomes a thing distasteful to the ears.” (*Yaḥsunu l-naḥwu fī l-khiṭābatī wa-l-shī<sup>c</sup>ri wa-fī lafzi sūratīn wa-kitābī / Fa-idhā mā tajāwaza l-naḥwu hādhi fa-huwa shay’un mina l-masāmi<sup>c</sup>i nābī*). And the second couplet is even more unequivocal: “Should you want to turn all the people around you into vilifiers and gossipers set on you, / Assume a morose mien when meeting them, and talk to the people with classical case endings.” (*In shi’ta an tuṣbiḥa bayna l-warā mā bayna shattāmin wa-mughtābī / Fa-kun ‘abūsan ḥīna talqāhum wa-khāṭibī l-nāsa bi-ī<sup>c</sup>rābī*).<sup>47</sup>

Add to all this the incredibly great liberties which those unwilling to conform to any social and moral austerity – the notorious and debauched (*mujjān*) – habitually took; and it will be beyond doubt that the tone in the literate circles of Baghdad was hardly set by the pursuers of religious and other “serious” subjects in the high Abbasid and the Buwayhid eras.<sup>48</sup> Among the lettered and moneyed élite, wit, hu-

The idea that non-classical linguistic usage, *lahn*, is a sign of a clever and jocular mind occurs in a much earlier context too, as the Omayyad Caliph Mu‘āwīya is cited in a text to have said that talking in an incorrect classical Arabic only makes a witty person sound wittier (*fa-dhālik azraf lahu*); see al-Anbārī, *Aḍḍād*, 239. All this, of course, is only true if my tentative interpretation of the passage in question is right and that of al-Anbārī is wrong; for he advocates the idea, not very convincing to me, that given that this word belongs to the class of words with two opposed meanings (*aḍḍād*), *yalḥan* also means “he is sharp-witted”, “he is right”. This interpretation, as far as the passage about Mu‘āwīya is concerned, seems to be an attempt to distance the Caliph, a true Arab, from any “vulgar” and “incorrect” usages. At any rate, both al-Jāhīz and al-Tawḥīdī are quoted to have advocated the idea that *lahn*, in the sense of “grammatically incorrect speech”, was seen as a cheery and attractive feature in a young girl; cf. Yāqūt, *Irshād*, V, 2109-10. For the associating of grammatically incorrect, vernacular language with humour, see al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣā’ir*, I, i: 111. It must be emphasized, however, that the growing interest in and acceptance of the vernacular speech notwithstanding, the primacy and superiority of Classical Arabic was never questioned. For instance, the same vizier Ismā‘īl b. ‘Abbād who was notorious for his penchant for the indecencies and argot of his time is reported to have given a fat award to a man merely for having uttered the verb *halaka* with an ultra-correct classical vocalization. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Taqwīm*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Tha‘ālibī, *Tatimma*, I, 30.

<sup>48</sup> Two lines attributed to Abū Nuwās put it in a humorous and pert way; see al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, IV, 106. See also Kraemer, *Humanism*, 15-6; Blachère, “Un pionnier”, 18; and Ghazi, “Un groupe sociale”, 46-7.

mour, frivolity and cheekiness were appreciated by as many, if not more, than solemnity, piety, and conservative learning; even if a lot of serious scholars, as I have said, seem to have taken this popularity of values other than their own in a very bad spirit. It is highly indicative of the general atmosphere in the Iraqi metropolitan area that one of the most successful poets of the early Buwayhid era was the incredibly obscene Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, whose *oeuvre* continued to be avidly sought after among the literati, even by the distinguished and respectable (*tatafakkah al-fuḍalā' bi-thimār shī'rihi*), and copies of his *dīwān* are said to have sold for exorbitant prices.<sup>49</sup> A very interesting and valuable source contrasts the relaxed, witty, frivolous and decidedly secular tone reigning in the educated circles of Baghdad with the educated class of Iṣfahān, too bent on religious scholarship (*yatajādalūn fī l-madhāhib wa-l-adyān*) and excessively preoccupied with what the narrator presents rather impertinently and ribaldly as “all the crap of al-Aṣma'ī's mother”.<sup>50</sup>

In sum, one may largely discard the notion that all the “anti-élite” jesting in mediaeval Arabic literature represents the voice of the lower classes. Obviously, the authorship of what we read now as the

<sup>49</sup> Al-Tha'ālibī, *Yatīma*, III, 30, 34; Yāqūt, *Irshād*, III, 1040. On the tradition of obscenity in Arabic literature, cf. J. E. Montgomery, “sukhf”, *EI2*, IX, 804; also Khayati, “Breves remarques”, 139-41. That Baghdad in particular was generally stereotyped as having a frivolous and irreverent cultural milieu is reflected in a story in which the *ḥadīth* expert Ibn al-Mubārak wants to turn away a prospective student of otherwise impeccable credentials solely on account of the latter's Baghdadian origin; see 'Iyād, *Ilmā'*, 238-9. Even more expressive of the image of Baghdad is the following joke: “A descendant of 'Alī [b. Abī Ṭālib] smuggled a prostitute into his house. When he wanted [to have intercourse with] her, she said: “The money [first]!” He said: “Come off it, woe unto you; I am a relative of God's Messenger, peace be upon him!” She replied: “Stop that! You should opt for the whores of Qumm; this won't sell with the whores of Baghdad!”” See al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣā'ir*, II, iii: 87. A modern work claims that obscenity is seen as a long-established, distinctive feature of Iraqi popular humour; see al-Qishtaynī 1992: 110. The inhabitants of al-Rayy must also have been thought to be an uncommonly frivolous lot, cf. al-Tawḥīdī, *Akhlāq*, 365. On the other hand, the image of North Africa and al-Andalus, as opposed to the Eastern lands in general, was palpably one of humourless austerity and gravity. Cf. an account, very unequivocal in this respect, in Ibn Sa'īd, *Muqataṭaf*, 219.

<sup>50</sup> Pseudo-Tawḥīdī, *Risāla baghdādiyya*, 176, 186. It is quite evident that the author includes grammar in the list of tedious and boring scholarly subjects, as he keeps swearing and cursing when describing the exponents of this “disagreeable” discipline: “[the typical scholar of Iṣfahān] kills the conversation either [by talking] about the difficult linguistic questions or nattering on and on about the problems of grammar, may God subject him to those problems forever!” (*yushaqqiq al-kalām immā fī 'awīṣ al-lughā aw yatabazzam bi-'ilal al-naḥw, sallaṭa llāhu 'alayhi l-'ilal wa-lā aqālahu minhā*).

literary production of that epoch is practically confined to the higher and literate classes of the society<sup>51</sup>, and there is precious little in the sources to suggest, nor any real reason for us to suppose, that commoners were allowed much voice vis-à-vis the scholarly élite. Whenever the common people's attitude and style are contrasted approvingly with those of scholars, it is the scholars' intolerant condemnation of easy manners, frivolity and similar traits that is joked at, and certainly not learning, knowledge or religiosity as such – values shared by all the élite. Besides, the *ʿamma* of Baghdad and other great Eastern cities seems to have often been clearly on the religious puritans' side; and it seems that often it was the ultra-religious, nay fanatic, and the “ostentatiously learned” who enjoyed a truly huge popularity and respect, and the zealots had greater appeal among the common folk than the “immoral” and debauched bohemians.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, one may well hazard the guess that the jokes, anecdotes and poems which this article has attempted to put in context are in all likelihood not the reflection of the lower classes' coming to their own, a reaction by them against the select few, the *khāṣṣa*, but rather the manifestation of the fashion of a frivolous attitude (and maybe some amusingly bizarre aspects of popular culture<sup>53</sup>) *within the higher and literate classes*, that is, within the *khāṣṣa* itself.

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Sadan, “Hārūn al-Rashīd”, 3-4. The fact that many poets and literary figures had quite modest origins (cf. Kilpatrick, “Abū l-Faraġ's Profiles”, 103) colours but certainly does not invalidate this statement.

<sup>52</sup> Joel Kraemer calls attention to the fact that the unconstrained and uninhibited cultural activity of the Buwayhid era was in fact limited to a fairly narrow social stratum, that of the highly educated class. By contrast, the urban poor were not infrequently fascinated and manipulated by aggressive Ḥanbalī puritans. See Kraemer *Humanism*, 30, 60-3; and an illustrative incident in 284/897 in al-Alūsī, *al-Raʾy al-ʿāmm*, 186.

<sup>53</sup> On this “interest in low life and in the vulgar”, cf. Shoshan, “High culture”, 101-4.

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## ABSTRACT

Sarcastic stories and comments against the representatives of various intellectual professions is a highly conspicuous phenomenon in the high Abbasid and Buwayhid periods. While the experts of Classical Arabic grammar appear to have been special targets of such jesting in the literature of those times, we also find lots of texts in which other “serious” disciplines and their specialists (like the study of *ḥadīth* and Islamic jurisprudence, etc.) are singled out for ridicule. Examining the sources of irony in these anecdotes, jokes and poems, the article seeks to identify the common element of the texts in question in the fact that the jesting is almost always directed against the pedantry and solemnity of the scholars, whereas gaiety, common sense and frivolity are portrayed as attractive alternatives. All this might be interpreted in the context of the huge social changes taking place under the Abbasids: it is reasonable to suppose that simply the new, highly civilized, urbanized and frivolous literary culture is reflected in these texts, which, no longer content to mimic earlier, more solemn models of



speech, lifestyle and culture, sought to manifest itself much more freely in literature as well as other spheres of cultural activity. These transformations, however, seem to have been limited to the educated élite, and one probably should not interpret our texts as the voice of the common people in literature.

### RESUMEN

El sarcasmo que se manifiesta hacia los representantes de las profesiones intelectuales es un fenómeno patente en los periodos 'abbasí y buyí. Aunque los eruditos de la gramática árabe fueran clásica el blanco especial de tales burlas en la literatura de ese período, también se encuentran en las fuentes muchas anécdotas e historietas en las que se hace burla de otros estudios y actividades intelectuales y religiosas, así como de los que las ejercen. La lista incluye disciplinas tales como el estudio del *ḥadīth*, varias ramas del *fiqh*, etc. En este artículo se analiza el contenido irónico de los chistes y versos y se identifica el elemento común en la mayoría de estos textos en el hecho de que se hace burla, casi siempre, del esnobismo de los doctos demasiado pedantes y solemnes, contra los cuales "triunfa" lo alegre, sensato y realista. En conclusión, se ofrece una interpretación de estos chistes y alusiones en los textos literarios en el contexto de los enormes cambios sociales del período 'abbasí: parece razonable suponer que se refleja aquí un nuevo tipo de cultura literaria, urbana, altamente civilizada y frívola, para lo cual no bastaba ya con imitar modelos de expresión, vida y cultura anteriores y más solemnes, sino que buscaba manifestarse con mayor libertad tanto en la literatura como en otros ámbitos de la vida cultural. Todo este cambio cultural, empero, parece haber sucedido dentro de la clase educada y élite, de forma que no se debe suponer que estos textos representen la voz de las clases bajas en la literatura.