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Publication Date

2012

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Hikaya of Abu al-Qasim al-Baghdadi:
The Comic Banquet in Greek, Latin, and Arabic

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

by

Emily Jane Selove

2012

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

The Hikaya of Abu al-Qasim al-Baghdadi:
The Comic Banquet in Greek, Latin, and Arabic

by

Emily Jane Selove

Doctor of Philosophy in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Michael Cooperson, Chair

This study centers on an unusual medieval Arabic text, probably from the 11th century, called *Hikāyat Abī al-Qāsim* (The Imitation of Abū al-Qāsim). The *Hikāya* tells the tale of a Baghdadi party-crasher crashing a party in Isfahan, and the author informs us in his introduction that this party-crasher is meant to represent a microcosm of the city of Baghdad. The author also tells us that this text can be read in the same amount of time that the events portrayed take to occur, creating a real-time depiction of time passing perhaps unparalleled in literary history. In analyzing this work, I draw from the ample scholarship on other ancient and medieval portrayals of banquets and dinner conversation, and especially those written in Latin. The *Satyrica* of Petronius, likened by several scholars to the *Hikāya*, features prominently in this analysis.

In portraying Baghdad as an old party-crasher who not only demands to be fed but who dominates the conversation with his overabundant speech, the *Hikāya* paints the city as an entity who, although its physical power may be dwindling, continues to dominate the literary conversation with overbearing arrogance. Abū al-Qāsim himself is part of a literary tradition of

party-crashing characters. Although these characters, as outsiders to the feast, typically act as guides to the reader, Abū al-Qāsim does not describe the Isfahani feast that he is crashing, but rather drowns it out with his words. The tension between language and food is a theme in banquet literature that often serves to problematize the representational qualities of language.

The use of language in the *Hikāya* highlights the power of words to confuse or deceive, thereby calling into question the didactic value of the text even when it claims to be teaching us something. I show that the style known as *mujūn* (which often involves a kind of nonsense language) might be compared to playing a game. I conclude by showing that Abū al-Qāsim, as a microcosm, is a playful Doppelgänger of the prophet Muḥammad. Like Muḥammad, he represents both a real human being and a cosmic symbol, and the *Hikāya* can be seen as his Qur'an.

This dissertation of Emily Jane Selove is approved.

Amy Richlin

Yona Sabar

Rahim Shayegan

Michael Cooperson, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012

For Norman Funicello, a modern-day Abū al-Qāsim.

1942-2007

Table of Contents

- I. INTRODUCTION: 11
 - a. Summary of events: 13
 - b. Manuscript: 17
 - c. Translations: 19
 - d. Authorship and Dating: 20
 - e. Editions: 21
 - f. Scholarship: 24
 - g. A Comparative Approach: 38
 - h. Chapter overviews: 44
- II. CHAPTER 1: WHO INVITED THE MICROCOSM?: 47
 - a. Mimesis or Mannerism? (1.1): 58
 - b. Baghdad the Party-Crasher (1.2): 64
 - c. Those Camels have Passed (1.3): 77
- III. CHAPTER 2: CRASHING THE TEXT: 90
- IV. CHAPTER 3: MUJŪN IS A CRAZY GAME: 115
- V. CHAPTER 4: THE COSMIC CRASHER: 132
- VI. CONCLUSION: 161
 - a. Bojangles Won't Dance: 161
 - b. Philemon and Baucis: 170
- VII. APPENDIX: A Translation of the Chess Game: 180
- VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY: 194

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee chair, Michael Cooperson, for the time and energy he has dedicated to this project. He read large portions of the *Ḥikāya* with me in minute detail, and engaged me in countless discussions of its content and of related topics. Not only did he always encourage me to pursue my interests, he challenged me to think more deeply about them. He also cheered me with his wit and honored me with his friendship.

I would like to thank Amy Richlin for many hilarious hours of reading Latin together, and for sharing her experience, her insight, and her dogs with me. She provided detailed comments on this writing, and I hope to satisfy her desire for further revisions in the future. I would also like to thank Rahim Shayegan and Yona Sabar for generously sharing their time and perspective, and for all of their encouragement and support.

Geert Jan van Gelder read all of the portions of the *Ḥikāya* with me that Dr. Cooperson did not, and in similarly minute detail. He also read and commented upon some of this writing, and cheerfully responded to multiple e-mail queries about many sundry details of the Arabic text. I have benefitted enormously from his encyclopedic wisdom and his bottomless warmth. I fondly remember my hours reading the *Ḥikāya* together with him and Adam Talib, whom I would also like to thank.

Finally I would like to thank my friends and family who read parts of this dissertation and offered their suggestions, especially Kyle Wanberg, Matthew Selove, and my dear mother.

This study was made possible with funding from the University of California Institute for Humanities Research, the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, the UCLA Graduate Division, the Mellon pre-dissertation fellowship, Harry and Yvonne Lenart fellowship, and UCLA Dean's fellowship.

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Publications

The Art of Party Crashing, an English translation of *Kitāb al-tatfil* by al-Khāṭīb al-Baghdādī (Syracuse University Press, 2012).

“Crashing the Text: Speaking of Eating in *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim*.” *Marginalia* (Cambridge Medieval Reading Group, 2011).

“Who Invited the Microcosm?” *Abbasid Studies: Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies* (Gibb Memorial Trust, forthcoming).

Co-Author: Kyle Wanberg. “Authorizing the Authorless: A Classical Arabic Dream Interpretation Forgery.” In *Mundus vult decipi*. Ed. Javier Martínez (Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, forthcoming).

Abbreviations

H Al-Azdī. *Hikāyat Abī al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī*, published as Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī [attributed], *Al-Risālah al-Baghdādiyyah*.

Introduction

Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim, written by the otherwise unknown al-Azdī, probably in the early 11th century, describes a party that begins in the morning and lasts well into the night. Nothing impossible happens at this party: a group of fairly important, decent people have gathered together, food is served which is good but not extraordinary, and capable (though not legendary) entertainers and servants cater to the guests. The ordinariness of the event, however, is overwhelmed by the presence of a remarkable and uninvited guest, Abū al-Qāsim Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Tamīmī al-Baghdādī, who dominates the conversation with his wide-ranging, prolix discourse, which he spews in a quantity just barely possible for an actually human old man who had long earned his bread by entertaining with his conversation, which is what Abū al-Qāsim seems to be.

In his introduction to the *Ḥikāya*, al-Azdī explains that the events he represents occupy a day and a night, and can be read in that same amount of time. He also tells us that the Baghdadi guest, who dominates the conversation with his alternately obscene and elegant tirades, represents the entirety of Baghdad, and indeed a kind of microcosm of creation. The story itself is narrated in a past-continuous, iterative tense, as in “Abū al-Qāsim would walk into a party,” or “Abū al-Qāsim would say, for example.” Thus his act of party-crashing is described only as an example of the kind of thing that Abū al-Qāsim might typically do.

Tempted by al-Azdī’s promise to provide a microcosm of his contemporary Baghdad, readers may look to the *Ḥikāya* for an example of realism, hoping to find within its pages a true-to-life microcosm of the 11th-century city. Although the *Ḥikāya* brims with words for household furniture and food, we may be disappointed in our quest for a realistic depiction of the everyday, seemingly marred by the overabundance and obscenity of Abū al-Qāsim’s speech. For what we

in fact receive is a parodic and grotesque portrait, more about language itself than about reality. Abū al-Qāsim tells us things about Baghdad we may find nowhere else in literature, describing the sounds of the water-wheels in the river, a story about excrement in the streets, and Baghdadi swimming strokes with names like “the scorpion” and “the peacock,” named but not defined.¹ For right at the moment it seems that Abū al-Qāsim’s discourse brings the physical presence of the city closer than ever before, at the next moment his speech seems, like Baghdad itself, a mere literary figment, elaborately imagined.

A mixture of the manneristic and the realistic, the story unfolds in a fashion seemingly unique in the history of classical Arabic literature, comprising a continuous narrative in a single setting. Only by the names and places mentioned in the text itself were Adam Mez and others able to deduce that the *Ḥikāya* was probably composed in the early 11th century, since which it disappeared without a trace in the documentation, surviving only in a single manuscript now held by the British Library in London. Mez produced the first edition of this manuscript with an introduction in German in 1902, exciting the opprobrium of his fellow scholars, one of whom declared it was “so disgusting a text to be unworthy of a serious scholar’s attention.”² Despite its often aggressive obscenity and blasphemy, the text nevertheless has been hailed by all, even its detractors, as a unique innovation in Arabic literature.³

¹ *H*, 106, 71, 313ff.

² Translated by Bosworth, *Mediaeval Islamic Underworld*, 66. Also see de Goeje, “Abulkasim,” 723.

³ For example, “Dieser Versuch, neben den ausgefahrenen Geleisen der alten Literatur einen neuen Weg zur lebendigen Gestaltung der Gegenwart zu bahnen, hat keine Nachfolge gefunden” (Brockelman, “alazdi,” 1569. However Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, though he also describes the *Ḥikāya* as “a work which falls outside the genres of Mediaeval literature,” and “*sui generis*” (84), asserts that it did influence the shadow play of Ibn Dāniyāl (*Maqāma*, 87)).

The *Ḥikāya* may offer less comment on reality itself than on the failure of literature to depict reality. The title alone, difficult to translate, seems to hover between the promise of a realistic portrait and a grotesque parody.⁴ The word *ḥikāyah*, as in the title *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim* could mean an imitation or mimicry, or it could mean a story. However, even if al-Azdī is providing, as he seems to promise, an imitation or mimicry of contemporary Baghdad or Baghdadi speech, mimicry itself can imply not necessarily a faithful reproduction of the thing imitated, but a playful exaggeration.

What is the nature of this text, at once a collection of quotations, and an innovation of unmatched vision? As the author tells us in his introduction, it is a microcosm of the city of Baghdad, of literature, or of humankind. The text seems to strive to contain everything and its opposite in one day's worth of conversation, inviting close readings and philological investigations with its outlandish, puzzle-like language, as well as offering doorways to the broader world of satire and banquet literature, as it adopts and explores tropes of food and wine-consumption, party-crashing, and invective that echo throughout ancient and medieval literary traditions.

Summary of Events

Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim opens with a description of Abū al-Qāsim Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Tamīmī al-Baghdādī, an old man with a white beard, red-faced, alcoholic, dirty, smelly, but also holy, a hermit, and above all, a big talker. Then the narrative begins, describing how Abū al-Qāsim would walk into a high-end gathering dressed in pious robes and spouting pious

⁴ Charles Pellat characterizes the *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim* as the “link in the chain” between the original use of the word *ḥikāya* to mean “imitation or mimesis,” and its modern meaning of “story or relation” because it was written during a time the word seems to have changed in meaning (“Ḥikāya,” 367). This is discussed in further detail below and in Chapter One.

sentiments, moving himself to tears, though the other guests seem uncertain whether to smile or to weep. Finally some tough guy in the crowd intervenes, and in a critical moment, tells Abū al-Qāsim to “come off it because everyone here drinks and fucks.”⁵ Then Abū al-Qāsim removes his pious robes and adopts a casual demeanor. One by one he insults the other guests with stunningly shocking language, and also flirts with a young slave boy present. When the host asks Abū al-Qāsim why he left him out of his insults, our hero replies that birds of a feather flock together, and that therefore the host and his guests are all a bad batch, not one of them gentlemen. Pressed by the crowd to explain how to be gentlemen, Abū al-Qāsim provides what would conventionally be seen as the opposite of good advice with regards to eating, sex, and financial debt. When a fellow guest laughs at this outrageous advice, Abū al-Qāsim reacts very negatively.⁶

The guests, growing tired of his conversation, suggest that they talk about the weather in Isfahan instead. This leads to the beginning of a theme that will continue for most of the book: a comparison of Isfahan to Baghdad. Abū al-Qāsim switches between praising Baghdad and lambasting Isfahan, treating a number of features and amenities of the cities in the following order: overall atmosphere, place names, horses (at great length), cloth, houses, mats, perfumes, food (at very great length), the men who come to clear the food away, fruit, home décor, wine, snacks, drinking companions, and entertainers both male and female (at extremely great length).

⁵ *H*, 55. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

⁶ This is one of the most shocking passages in a generally shocking text, and its partial translation in Geert Jan van Gelder’s *Of Dishes and Discourse*, 78, excited my initial interest in the story. However for van Gelder’s rendering “I have undone the Koran with poetry, broken the teeth of God’s apostle, robbed his grave, erected a mangonel in front of the Kaaba and pelted it with menstrual rags, shat in the well of Zamzam...,” I would translate differently. In contrast, railing against the laughter of his fellow guest, Abū al-Qāsim asks, “Did I undo the Koran with poetry or break the teeth of God’s apostle? Did I rob his grave?...So what are you laughing at?” (*H*, 85-6).

He goes on to describe the charms of Baghdadi slave girls (many of whom he mentions by name), and the ecstatic behavior of their listeners (historical figures identifiable in contemporary biographical dictionaries and other sources). This section on slave girls begins with stories about and letters by Zād Mihr, slave of a certain Ibn Jumhūr whom she openly despises. Her letters to her master are bitingly witty and represent one of the highlights of the work as a whole. After describing the genius and charm of many such Baghdadi slave girls, Abū al-Qāsim lapses into nostalgic memories of his home town, of relaxing in gardens and extemporizing poetry with his friends.

Then he asks the host of the party for food. He is asked what he would like to eat. After responding with elaborately literary demands for fine food and expensive presents, he eventually simplifies his request, and is given some of the light snacks (cheese and pickled foods) that he requested. He eats and then insults the food. Then he convinces another guest to play him in a game of chess. He roundly insults his opponent while winning the game. He then demands more food, and the narrator mentions a number of dishes that might hypothetically be brought to him and what his response to each dish would be. He has a poem or joke ready for every kind of food mentioned. He ends this section by describing what makes a great cook. Then Abū al-Qāsim demands and drinks a glass of Isfahani water. At this moment he changes his tune about Isfahan, which he now praises to the skies, having formally characterized it as a filthy and cultureless city. Rather abruptly he begins a story about two anonymous men eating in Baghdad. One of these men he enthusiastically praises while the other he drags through the mud, all in more or less generic terms. This appears to be an illustration of his willingness to praise one thing and blame another at random (as he does with the cities of Baghdad and Isfahan). He continues describing his food and drink, while praising Isfahan.

A guest asks why he changed his tone so abruptly, having formerly only insulted Isfahan and praised Baghdad. Abū al-Qāsim shrugs the question off, and goes on to describe, in vivid terms, the discomforts and drawbacks of living in Baghdad (perhaps especially of living there with little money). Since he is describing Baghdad so, his audience presses him for more insider information. Abū al-Qāsim responds with a long list of swim strokes and sailor's slang which, as he does not define them, are impossible to understand. The other guests press him to describe his house in Baghdad, and he is offended by their prying, but describes it as a den of iniquity. He continues to praise Isfahan, the wine they are drinking, and the host of the party, who again inquires why he seems to have forgotten about Baghdad, which he formerly lauded to the skies. Abū al-Qāsim rails against his home town yet again and begins praising a guest on his right and insulting one on his left, again demonstrating the overall fickleness with which he chooses to insult one thing or praise another.

He then lauds the musicians at the party, growing more and more drunk. He suggests that the guests all continue to drink the next morning, essentially inviting himself to spend the night. Growing even more intoxicated, he flirts outrageously with a pretty slave girl present. He then verbally attacks her guardian with particular venom. Another guest laughs, and as at the beginning of the story, Abū al-Qāsim turns on this laughter with fury. The Isfahani guests now finally grow sick of him, and resolve to rid themselves of his conversation by encouraging him to drink until he passes out. As he drinks, he again insults them one by one. He then flirts with the slave girl, as well as an attractive boy in the gathering, and then he sings and dances until he falls down. The girl calls him a plague in Persian. He understands the insult, and, with hurt pride, responds with a lengthy boast and further derision of his fellow guests. Finally, with one last loving description of the beautiful boy who has taken his fancy, he passes out.

The next day he wakes up and resumes the pious manner in which he entered the gathering, reciting the same religious verses as at the beginning of the text. He scolds the guests for their celebrations when they should be occupied with more pious thoughts, and leaves them with a *salām ‘alaykum*. The narrator closes by describing him once again as a man of extreme opposites and a representation of the people of Baghdad.

Manuscript

The unique codex manuscript, held in the British Library, contains 264 pages with about fifteen lines per page, plus a title page with the full title, *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī al-Tamīmī wa al-‘ajāyib wa al-gharāyib ‘alā mā jama‘at min al-ḥikāyāt* (The Imitation of Abū al-Qāsim al-Tamīmī the Baghdadi, and the strange things and wondrous things according to the imitations therewith collected). The history of this undated manuscript is obscure, but the title page informs us that it was part of the library of Ṣāliḥ ibn Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Laṭīf (whose identity as yet remains a mystery). The final page of the manuscript is marked, “purchased at Sotheby’s, 3 August 1854, lot 708,” and indeed the Sotheby’s auction record for that year lists “The Comic Tales and Anecdotes of *Abou’l*, Kasem of Bagdad,” part of the collection of John de Whelpdale, Esq., of Armathwaite, d. 1844, whose manuscript and engraving collection was auctioned off ten years after his death. Since practically nothing is known about the transmission of this text, further research into the Whelpdale family may prove fruitful in reconstructing the history of the *Ḥikāya*.⁷

⁷ The manuscript may well have been in the family for several centuries, as one Roger Whelpdale of Cumberland (of which county John de Whelpdale was appointed sheriff in 1804), was already known for his manuscript collection there in the 1400’s. See *Dictionary of national biography*, 447, and Toone, *Chronological Historian*, II: 519.

The manuscript is written in a tidy and well-voweled *naskh* script, with Coptic lettering suggesting that it originated in Egypt.⁸ A marginal note on page eighty-three tells us that the manuscript was read in 1347, so it must have originated before that date. Despite the neat and well-voweled script, it contains numerous inscrutable words and phrases: a few may be scribal errors, but most are probably colloquialisms or specialized terms whose meaning can only be guessed at.⁹ The scribe seemed particularly uncomfortable with the few Persian colloquialisms, which he copied in an uncharacteristically vague and sloppy hand, as though to leave room for multiple interpretations. Consequently, these passages are particularly obscure and difficult to interpret. For example, Abū al-Qāsim, mocking the coarse speech of the Isfahanis, imitates a street-caller's cry, saying something in Persian that he then himself translates into Arabic with the equivalent of, "Hey lady, I'll haul out your shit!" Al-Shālījī, second editor of the text, renders this cry (here unvoweled) as *Ay zn bwākhht ksh̄m*.¹⁰ In her translation, Mary St. Germain suggests this reading in a footnote: *Ay dibānuā guhat kisham*.¹¹ The manuscript, leaving many letters undotted, is vague enough to allow either reading.¹²

Translations

⁸ St. Germain, *Anomalous Text*, 147.

⁹ Some of these are discussed in Chapter Two.

¹⁰ *H*, 110.

¹¹ St. Germain, *Anomalous Text*, 203.

¹² *Hikāya*, 22. Rahim Shayegan expressed bafflement when asked about the Persian sentences in the *Hikāya*. "Manuscript corruption can only account for so much," he added, suggesting that the Persian may well be deliberately partly unintelligible for the sake of mockery.

There have been two translations of the manuscript. Mary St. Germain translates it into English in her unpublished dissertation entitled *Placing an Anomalous Text within the Literary Developments of its Time* (2006), in which the story is rendered in literal, non-literary academic translation. There is also a loose, popularizing French translation by René Khawam, *24 heures de la vie d'une canaille* (1998). In her introduction, St. Germain provides a detailed review of the debate surrounding the authorship and dating of the text, and describes the passages quoted and features shared with other contemporary Arabic works, such as the *Maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī and various works of al-Tawḥīdī. She then argues that the *Ḥikāya* was a subversive prose reworking of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* genre. Addressing a much more general audience, Khawam introduces the *Ḥikāya* in anachronistic orientalist style, claiming it as proof that medieval Islam was *le lieu géométrique de toutes les libertés*, and marketing his translation as sensationally obscene. He divides the text into chapters based on the hours of the day, a creative innovation based, perhaps, on the author's introduction, in which he states that the events described occupy a single day and night. Thus, with St. Germain's attention to the *qaṣīda*-like structure of the narrative's movement, and Khawam's imaginative chapter divisions, both translators attempt to account for the unusual structure of the text, and both arguments will find a place in my own discussion of the question of narrative structure in the *Ḥikāya*. Since this structure is seemingly unique in Arabic literature, this question unavoidably presents itself to any thorough reader of the *Ḥikāya*, and no one is forced to read more carefully than a translator. I am also producing a translation of the text, which will attempt a compromise between St. Germain's literal approach and Khawam's popularizing style. However, given the nature of the manuscript, which, though neatly written, brims with hapax legomena and errors of a confused scribe, any translation, or indeed edition at this stage, must necessarily be considered provisional.

Authorship and Dating

In the opening line of the manuscript, the author is identified as the otherwise unknown Abū al-Muṭahhar Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Azdī. Because no mention of this author or his undated text can be definitively located in any contemporary biographical dictionaries, virtually every modern scholar of the *Ḥikāya* has addressed the question of its dating and authorship, a question debated even in the opinion section of *al-Ḥayāt* newspaper.¹³ Based on the names and places mentioned in the text, all agree it was probably composed in the early 11th century. Mez, the first to make these calculations, notes that the narrative includes such figures as Abū Naṣr ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Nubāta (d. 1014) and Ibn Ghaylān al-Bazzāz (d. 1048), but does not mention any changes to the city of Baghdad associated with the Seljuq empire’s influence on that city, the beginning of which (c. 1055), he provides as the *terminus ad quem*.¹⁴

Most of the debates concerning its authorship center on ‘Abbūd al-Shālījī’s decision to edit the text as a lost work of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Risālah al-Baghdādiyyah* (and indeed the author, whoever he may be, refers to his work as a *risāla*, or epistle, at the end of his narration).¹⁵ ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Rāwī, in his article “A-hiya al-Risālah al-Baghdādiyyah am

¹³ Al-Hussain, “Muqāḍāh,” 17.

¹⁴ See Mez’s introduction to Azdī, *Sittenbild*, xiv-xv. Hämeen-Anttila analyzes two passages that occur in both the *Ḥikāya* and al-Hamadhānī’s *Maqāmāt*, concluding that these passages fit more in their contexts in the *Ḥikāya* than in the *Maqāmāt*. This suggests that al-Azdī therefore probably did not borrow these passages from al-Hamadhānī, but that they both borrowed from an earlier source, “possibly one connected with the circle of aṣ-Ṣāhib ibn ‘Abbād, who was well known for his interest in the lower class in general and the Sasanians in particular.” By “Sasanians,” he means not members of the Sassanid empire, but beggars who (comically) claimed descent from this royal line. He also concludes that the probable date of the composition lay somewhere between 374 AH (a date early in al-Tawḥīdī’s productive years), and 400 AH (984-1009 CE) (“al-Hamadhānī,” 83-96).

¹⁵ *H*, 390.

ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī?,” argues that the *Ḥikāya* was instead written by the poet Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, who, like al-Tawḥīdī, is quoted extensively in the text (1990). Nevertheless these extensive quotations are practically the only basis for either argument, and given that the *Ḥikāya* contains hundreds of quotations from as many sources, and given, furthermore, that we have only one manuscript from which to derive information, any argument about the *Ḥikāya*’s authorship can only be speculative. Since this problem is truly unsolvable with the information currently available, I will refer to the author of the text as al-Azdī, as he is named on the manuscript.¹⁶

Editions

Adam Mez was the first to edit the manuscript. In 1902, when few scholars deemed obscene material worthy of their study, he was well ahead of his time. Acknowledged in the *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse* as one of the first scholars to separate the study of Semitic languages from the study of theology,¹⁷ Mez was interested in the text as a source of cultural history, and in its protagonist, Abū al-Qāsim, as a *Sittenbild*, or depiction of the manners and customs of a typical Baghdadi (his edition was titled *Abulkāsim, ein bagdāder Sittenbild*). In his introduction, he situates the text’s emergence within the history of Arabic literature, particularly

¹⁶ St. Germain’s dissertation provides a complete consideration of this debate (*Anomalous*, 10-35), accompanied by charts showing the birth and death dates of the names mentioned in the text, a review of the quoted passages from many contemporary texts and their probable dates of composition, and a discussion of the probable date of composition of the *Ḥikāya* based on this information. Like me, she concludes that debate on the authorship of the *Ḥikāya* cannot be regarded as conclusive, and therefore chooses to refer to the author by the name given in the introduction. She sets the possible date range of composition between 990 and 1020 A.D. Her analysis of these arguments is thorough in the extreme, and requires no further remark.

¹⁷ He began his career as a student of theology, but broke away from this field of study after visiting the Middle East (Bigger, “Mez.”)

the development of urban entertainment literature, and its “discovery of empirical man.”¹⁸ He devotes special attention to the literary innovators Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr Ibn Baḥr al-Jāhiz (d. 868), and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 1001) both of whom al-Azdī cites copiously in his introduction.

Mez’s contemporaries mostly scorned his efforts as misdirected towards filth, and indeed his harshest reviewer, M.J. de Goeje, confessed himself to have been unable to read the entire story, which he found disgusting and low: *Viel Schmutz, wenig Geist*.¹⁹ His review nevertheless provides a very lengthy and useful list of emendations to the problematic edition. Carl Brockelman also provides a small list of emendations, and also expresses some disgust. However he kindly notes the innovative style of Mez’s unique subject of study. He blames the *Ḥikāya*’s obscene and difficult vocabulary for the lack of imitators of its newly invented *Sittenbild* form.²⁰

In 1980 ‘Abbūd al-Shālījī produced a far more readable edition of this difficult text, publishing the *Ḥikāya* under the title of a lost work of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 1023), *al-Risāla al-Baghdādiyya*. He dedicates most of his introduction to a biography of this well-known scholar and writer, who has in common with the *Ḥikāya*’s protagonist a disagreeable personality and a hurtfully sharp tongue, as well as a propensity for wandering and an apparent affinity for mystical religious practices. Though al-Tawḥīdī is quoted extensively in the *Ḥikāya* and shares certain similarities with its protagonist, he cannot be regarded as its author with any certainty,

¹⁸ Azdī, *Sittenbild*, XII.

¹⁹ De Goeje, “Abulkasim,” 723.

²⁰ Brockelman, “Alazdi,” 1569.

and thus al-Shālījī's lengthy biography and critique of his writings can only be considered tangentially related to the text itself.²¹

Himself a Baghdadi, a cultural historian, and an editor of other similar texts, al-Shālījī is able to recognize many (but by no means all) of the obscure idioms and names of foods and goods found in the manuscript. Al-Shālījī's edition shows considerable improvement over Mez's, whom he praises for his efforts in editing such a difficult manuscript. He is himself forced to leave countless words and idioms largely unexplained, or only tentatively interpreted. Though he often notes his amendments to the manuscript, on rare occasion he makes substantial changes to a word or phrase without any note or justification. His edition also provides an index of foods and goods that are mentioned in the story.²² Such an index would prove useful to scholars seeking to use this work as an encyclopedia of material culture, as some have done. Others, however, have questioned its value as a realistic depiction of Baghdad, as shown below.

Scholarship

Modern scholarship on the *Hikāya* began with Mez's edition of the text (1902) and responses to it. Mez's and these other early treatments of the work often compared it to classical texts, and, focusing on the word *hikāya* as an Arabic translation of mimesis, described it as a (failed) work of realism. In seeking a materiality outside the text, some subsequent scholars also used it as an encyclopaedia of material culture. More recent treatments of the *Hikāya*, beginning

²¹ Kraemer writes of al-Tawhīdī that "his humanism was not a joyful celebration of man's grandeur but a sober acceptance of man's ambiguity," capturing this author's undeniable affinity with the *Hikāya*'s protagonist, who embodies a portrait of mankind at once lovable and aggressively off-putting. Both Abū al-Qāsim and al-Tawhīdī reflect, again in Kraemer's words, "the entire spectrum from piety and asceticism to sacrilege and cynicism" (*Humanism*, 222).

²² *H*, 432-58.

with Abdelfattah Kilito's in *Les Séances* (1983), have taken a more deconstructive approach, focusing on the deceptive and disorienting qualities of its language. They have largely ceased comparing the work to its classical equivalents, as indeed such comparisons, once conducted in a fashion that now seems outdated, held up the classical texts as the standard which the *Ḥikāya* ultimately failed to meet. My approach will follow the methods of later scholars such as Kilito, Kennedy, and Balda (see below), but will return to comparing it with classical texts, in a new interpretive light.

Adam Mez, first editor of *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim*, was interested in obscene literature as a possible source of historical information. For example, he based his history of Buyid Iraq, *The Renaissance of Islam*, partly on such works of Arabic literature. In his introduction to his edition of the *Ḥikāya*, he writes that its author concerned himself not with “the concept” (*Begriff*) but “the individual thing” (*einzelne Ding*),²³ and was inspired not by rhetoric but by observation, taking pleasure in the real (*Freude an den Realien*). According to Stephen Halliwell's *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, European scholars and writers, especially from the 1830's onward, displayed particular interest in the “realism” of literature. This interest was part of the modern reception of ancient notions of mimesis.²⁴ Mez's introduction to the *Ḥikāya* is clearly influenced by these scholarly projects and by the interests of his time.

In bringing Arabic literature into the conversation about the reception of Classical styles and methods, Mez was a pioneer in the field. The Arabic language had been studied in conjunction with Biblical Hebrew, and, in Germany, was often studied in the Faculties of

²³ Azdī, *Sittenbild*, V.

²⁴ Halliwell, *Aesthetics*, 367-8.

Theology.²⁵ Mez, however, approached the *Ḥikāya* and other works of Arabic literature in the tradition of scholarship on works of ancient Greek and Latin, referring in his introduction to parts of the narrative as *das Symposion* and *das Satyrspiel*. Early scholarship on the *Ḥikāya*, all of which is dependent on Mez's innovative work, returned again and again to questions of its relationship to works of Classical literature.

Part of this discussion concerned translations of the word *ḥikāya* as “mimesis,” a question that also relates to this work's potential realism. For example, in his entry “ḥikāya” in the first *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, MacDonald notes that Aristotle's “mimesis” was sometimes translated into Arabic as *ḥikāya*, and that “the conception of literary art as an ‘imitation’ of life may thus, when translated into Arabic forms, easily have resulted in Abu ‘l-Muṭahhar's new literary type.”²⁶ In recounting the history of literary developments preceding the composition of the *Ḥikāya*, Mez emphasizes the role of “imitation with comic exaggeration,”²⁷ as well as of “Mimesis,” which could have a comic effect, but which could also help ensure reliable transmissions of the sayings and deeds of the prophet Muhammad (Hadith), which transmissions had legal significance. Soon after Mez's edition of the *Ḥikāya* appeared, Josef Horovitz published his *Spuren griechischer Mimen im Orient*, which traces elements of Greek mime in early Arabic popular culture and literature (1905).²⁸ Horovitz, who employs “mime” as in

²⁵ Waardenburg, “Mustashrikūn.”

²⁶ MacDonald, “Ḥikāya,” 304.

²⁷ Azdī, *Sittenbild*, XV.

²⁸ Hämeen-Anttila rejects attempts to relate the *maqāmāt* (a type of literature frequently compared to the *Ḥikāya*) to ancient Greek literature, and especially to Greek mime. These attempts he sees as unfounded and unnecessary to explain the evolution of this type of Arabic literature (*Maqama*, 89). As for the translation of “*Ḥikāya*” as “mimesis,” Pellat writes that, although the Greek term was sometimes translated into Arabic this way, and although “it is certainly possible that the idea of literary art as an ‘imitation’ of life might have produced the genre represented by Abū ‘l-Muṭahhar,” the Arabic tradition of mimicry mentioned in al-Azdī's introduction to his work seems sufficient to explain the *Ḥikāya*'s

“farce” interchangeably with “mime” as in “imitation” when discussing the *Ḥikāya*, uses this work and Mez’s introduction as a source for describing the role of mimicry in Arabic literature and culture, both concerned with word-for-word transmission of Hadith and *akhbār* (anecdotes), and with the dialectical peculiarities that distinguished tribes and ethnic groups.²⁹

Such comparisons between Arabic and the classics inevitably implied a hierarchy of value, and Greek and Roman literature were the standard against which Arabic literature was judged. For example, Gustave von Grunebaum (who also describes the *maqāmāt*, a type of literature intimately related to the *Ḥikāya*, as “the attenuated offspring of the classical *mimoi*,”)³⁰ writes in his interesting account of Greek influences on the *1001 Nights* (1946): “The Arab was not accustomed to that historical narrative in which some of the romances excel, and he had, on the whole, no experience in inventing and carrying through a complicated action, with many secondary actions to boot, stretching over hundreds of pages. These differences in literary tradition make for a loss of refinement, greater simplicity, or, perhaps, obviousness of the Arabic tales...” Because of these shortcomings of the Arabic borrowings, which he ascribes largely to their transmission by “professional story-tellers” as opposed to “professional writer-rhetoricians... The artistic level is bound to drop.”³¹ Here von Grunebaum counts not only the Arabic literary tradition as inferior to the Greek, but also oral popular traditions of the “professional story-teller” as inferior to elite written narratives.

innovative project, and references to Greek literary influences, he implies, are not necessary (Pellat, “Ḥikāya.”)

²⁹ Horovitz, *Mimen*, 18.

³⁰ Von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam*, 289.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 306

The author of the *Ḥikāya* almost invites such criticisms with his introduction to his work, in which he apologizes for his low or faulty language (*lahn*) and expresses concern that he will be perceived as having a lack of knowledge (*quṣūr ma‘rifa*).³² Without acknowledging this apology, early scholarly criticisms of the *Ḥikāya* do tend to find fault with its language (too obscene or colloquial), and stem from comparisons to “high” literature, and especially classical models, focusing on the balance and unity of the text. Even Mez criticizes the *Ḥikāya* as a “bungling first attempt” at a style new to Arabic literature, though dependent on Greek *synkrisis* (literary comparisons).³³ Josef Horowitz, in his *Encyclopaedia of Islam* entry on al-Azdī (1913) expresses disappointment in the text, claiming that “the author, led on by his philological inclinations, has interwoven so much of his extensive knowledge of the adab literature and terminology of the different trades and also of pornographic poetry... that the realism of the description as well as the unity of the tale suffer considerably.”³⁴ By “realism” Horowitz here appears to mean “plausibility,” implying that the conversation portrayed in the *Ḥikāya* is too overfull and abundant to be humanly possible. However it is an overfullness of another type of “realism,” language based on the jargon of traders, or language earthy in its subject matter, that is here charged as being responsible for its very lack of realism.³⁵

³² *H*, 44.

³³ Azdī, *Sittenbild*, XIX.

³⁴ Horowitz’s article received a much-needed (though still brief) update by Hämeen-Anttila in the new third edition of the *Encyclopaedia* (2010). Azarnoosh provides a lengthy and thoughtful overview of the entire text in the *Encyclopaedia Islamica* (2012) all the more impressive as he seems unaware of al-Shālji’s edition. He devotes special attention to its importance in the field of Iranian studies and literature, which is where his own academic interests lie.

³⁵ Mez writes that its language is “too unliterary” to be helpful to the philologist (Azdī, *Sittenbild*, XX).

A half-century afterwards, the *Ḥikāya*'s language continued to earn it both criticism and unfavorable comparisons to the classics. One of the earliest articles written on the *Ḥikāya*, Francesco Gabrieli's "Sulla *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim* di Abū al-Muṭahhar al-Azdī" (1942) paints this work as a "bud of the rare plant of Greek mime" (*un germoglio della rara pianta del mimo greco*), which, however, failed to bloom due to the overly luxurious literary tastes of its day.³⁶ In Gabrieli's case, such criticisms were probably founded on his adherence to the "idealistic aesthetics" of Benedetto Croce, which sometimes led him to "polemically" champion "the right of Western scholars to examine and judge Arabic literature according to universal aesthetic criteria."³⁷ Gabrieli also describes al-Azdī's failure to "remain Petronius so as not to become Athenaeus."³⁸ By this he implies that instead of providing a humorous, readable narrative like the *Satyricon* of Petronius,³⁹ the *Ḥikāya* instead consists of a tedious overabundance of literary citations and strange words. And in that regard, he suggests, it resembles Athenaeus's *Deipnosophistae* (3rd century AD), a lengthy Greek work about a dinner conversation encyclopedic in scope, and describable as dull. James Davidson, however, writes of the dullness of the *Deipnosophistae*:

³⁶ Gabrieli, "Sulla *Ḥikāyat*," 36. Gabrieli also writes "The novelty of the *Ḥikāya* of Abū 'l-Muṭahhar in relationship to the *maqāma* of the above two authors is the displacement of the centre of interest from the purely linguistic and formal aspect to the representation of a character and an environment in a genuine *mimesis* of reality (in this case, the bourgeois environment of Baghdād....," ("al-Azdī," 31)). The *maqāmāt* are stories usually about a trickster who disguises himself in a variety of different situations. They often employ obscure vocabulary or elaborately poetic language.

³⁷ Lancioni, "Gabrieli, Francesco."

³⁸ Gabrieli, "Sulla *Ḥikāyat*," 36.

³⁹ This work, frequently compared to the *Ḥikāya* (see below), is also known as the *Satyricon*. In the interest of "regularizing the title of this novel with those of other ancient works," however, "*Satyricon* has become the standard form" (Schmeling, *Commentary*, XVII).

This relationship between a titillating subject-matter and what may be considered to be a dull, pedantic text which zooms in constantly on mere words is not...explicable in terms of accident or of a failure on the part of the author. It is interesting in its own right and needs to be understood as absolutely central to the whole work.⁴⁰

I discuss the function of boredom in the *Ḥikāya* in chapter 1.3, and, like Davidson, I see it not as a failure of the author but as a part of this microcosmic work that deserves its own analysis.

Though this study is dependent on the insightful work of its early scholars, any value judgments that they made in describing the *Ḥikāya* naturally strike us as misplaced from our post-modern perspective, which instead values the text as a world in itself. Thus, some of the faults that Mez finds with the narrative, for example, that the section on horses is “too long,”⁴¹ and that the supposedly Baghdadi Abū al-Qāsim at one point (as if accidentally) claims to be from Isfahan, will form part of my analysis of this text, which takes them not as mistakes as Mez does, but rather as part of the ecosystem of this microcosmic work. Similarly, while Horovitz criticizes the overabundance of the protagonist’s speech as detracting from the text’s realism, this same overabundant speech is central to my analysis of the *Ḥikāya*’s disorienting use of language. As Halliwell writes “ancient mimeticism moved around, and was partly energized by the tension between, two major poles of thought, one a sense of mimesis as a reflection of and engagement with ‘external’ reality, the other an inclination to think of mimesis as the creation or invention of self-contained, fictional worlds.”⁴² I read the *Ḥikāya* (which I would translate as the *Imitation*)

⁴⁰ Davidson, “Pleasure and Pedantry,” 292.

⁴¹ Azdī, *Sittenbild*, XIX.

⁴² This distinction was already blurred in medieval European and Arabic understandings of the term (Halliwell, *Aesthetics*, 341).

as this second form of mimesis, though I read it as having a manneristic twist, in that it seems to question our daily perception of reality with its language-based creation of a second world. Founded on an ancient reading of mimesis, my analysis is nevertheless more in tune with the modern deconstructive reading of Abdelfattah Kilito (1983). His work is described below, following an overview of other earlier works of scholarship which are below presented chronologically.

After Mez and the contemporary European scholars who responded to his edition, Zakī Mubārak was the first scholar to address the *Hikāya*, devoting a chapter to the work in his anthology of 11th-century Arabic prose, *al-Nathr al-fannī fī al-qarn al-rābi‘*, his Ph.D. thesis at the Sorbonne (1931). Mubārak, in reference to the author’s introductory apology for his work, writes that ungrammatical Arabic can prove funnier than high literary eloquence (*al-laḥn qad yakūn amzah min al-faṣāḥa*).⁴³ According to Mubārak, however, because of this language, the author cannot keep his promise to provide a portrait of all Baghdadis, high and low, but actually can provide a portrait of only one side of the city, the silly side: (*waṣaf jānib khāṣṣ huwa jānib al-‘abath wa-l-mujūn*).⁴⁴ Thus, like Horovitz (above), he contends that this narrative’s low language actually detracts from the “realism” of its portrayal of the city of Baghdad. The preponderance of filthy language in this work, however, Mubārak reads as a reflection of the filthiness of an urban environment, with its odors of the fish markets and the corpses of animals.⁴⁵ Thus, he sees the *Hikāya* as a function of the urban environment from which it appears

⁴³ Mubārak, *Nathr*, 419.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 426.

to have originated,⁴⁶ but disproportionally influenced by certain “low” aspects of this environment.

In his article “Aspects of Arabic Urban Literature” (1955),⁴⁷ von Grunebaum also sees the *Hikāya* as a product of its contemporary urban environment. In making this claim, he compares al-Azdī to Petronius:

[Each] holds up to his contemporaries a realistic caricature of the ways of the town and its polite society, with their absurdities and their elegance, their beauty and obscenity and, above all, of that incessant effort to make the repulsive aspects of our existence less hurtful to human pride and to stylize our lives into compatibility with that heightened concept of human dignity whose actualization Islam imposed on urban society as its foremost task .⁴⁸

Here von Grunebaum characterizes the *Hikāya* as a “realistic caricature” (possibly an oxymoron). He is struggling, like his predecessors, to describe what kind of portrait of Baghdad this work presents. It is realistic, he suggests, in that it challenges constructions of identity that people use to hide their own absurdity from themselves. By likening al-Azdī to Petronius in this regard, he refers, perhaps, to the latter’s parodying of epic literature (a subject of discussion throughout this present study). Von Grunebaum’s earlier assertion in his article that these texts

⁴⁶ Ibid., 429-431.

⁴⁷ Von Grunebaum, “Aspects,” 259-81.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 281.

constitute a “discovery of empirical man”⁴⁹ echoes Mez’s discussion of the *Entdeckung des empirischen Menschen*⁵⁰ in the development of Arabic prose genres that preceded the composition of the *Ḥikāya*. However the import of this phrase as used by Mez and by von Grunebaum differs somewhat.

Despite the various complexities and difficulties found in discussions of the *Ḥikāya*’s realism, some sources use it as an encyclopedia of material goods available in 11th-century Baghdad. ‘Abd al-Wāḥid Dhū al-Nūn Ṭāhā in his article “Mujtama‘ Baghdād min khilāl Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī” (“Baghdadi Society through the Lens of Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī” (1974)) recognizes the *Ḥikāya* as a work of *mujūn* (licentious absurdity),⁵¹ and says it is too ugly to genuinely portray the wide range of classes and social levels promised by the author in his introduction. He supports this assertion with a quotation from Zakī Mubārak, who makes a similar claim as described above.⁵² Nevertheless, Ṭāhā goes on to use the *Ḥikāya* as the encyclopedia of Baghdadi foods and material goods that it sometimes appears to be. In his *Social Life under the Abbasids* (1979), Muhammad Ahsan briefly introduces the *Ḥikāya* as “a satirical but realistic picture of life and manners in Baghdad”⁵³ (not unlike von Grunebaum’s contradictory description of the text as a “realistic caricature”). Ahsan then draws from the

⁴⁹ Ibid., “Aspects,” 275.

⁵⁰ Azdī, *Sittenbild*, XII.

⁵¹ Ṭāhā, “Mujtama‘,” 14-25. The definition of *mujūn* is discussed in Chapter Three.

⁵² Ibid., 16.

⁵³ Ahsan, *Social Life*, 11. Aaron Matz describes what he considers the birth of satirical realism in the 19th century novel. In so doing he provides a useful review of scholarship on the subject of realism and many fruitful explorations of the interaction of satire with realism (*Satire*).

Ḥikāya and other literary texts in a largely uncritical fashion to provide information about the housing, clothing, and foods of Abbasid times.

As is shown throughout the present study, it is difficult to trust the *Ḥikāya* wholeheartedly as a source of such material information. However a sub-genre in medieval Arabic literature that focuses on beggars or other marginal figures does often style itself as a kind of realism. For example, al-Jāḥiẓ's introduction to his *Kitāb al-Bukhalā'* (*Book of Misers*) compares this work to another on the tricks of thieves (not extant), in being not only entertaining but genuinely useful in understanding and avoiding the undesirable habits of these types of people. This is more or less in tune with readings of such literature as portrayals of the filth (literal and metaphorical) of an urban environment. In *The Mediaeval Islamic Underworld* (1976), Clifford Edmund Bosworth attempts to situate medieval Arabic literary portrayals of low-life groups and their secret jargon, particularly Abū Dulaf's *Qaṣīda sāsāniyya*, in their historical and cultural contexts. "The interest in low life and all its manifestations," he writes, "so characteristic of the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries, seems to stem from the progress of urbanization in the Islamic lands, with the concomitant economic prosperity making people more aware of the gaps between social classes."⁵⁴ Giving a brief description of the contents of the *Ḥikāya*, whose protagonist in many ways resembles Abū Dulaf himself, Bosworth characterizes the text as "the culmination of nearly two centuries' evolution of this urban poetic development."⁵⁵

The author of the *Ḥikāya* does offer his work as a sample of the speech of the Baghdadis, and though its language is obscure, one may plausibly ascribe a portion of this obscurity to its

⁵⁴ Bosworth, *Mediaeval Islamic Underworld*, 65.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

use of a particular urban jargon. For example, the long lists of foods and trade goods may indeed prove obscure to the modern reader due to their highly local and time-restricted specificity. Nevertheless, readings of the *Ḥikāya* as a work of realism depicting 11th-century Baghdad must be tempered with an awareness of its use of language in a way that sometimes seems to call reality itself into doubt. Abdelfattah Kilito's *Les Séances*,⁵⁶ an abstract, evocatively fanciful, and astute exploration of the *maqāma* genre, with which the *Ḥikāya* is often compared, evinces keen awareness of the deceitful qualities of language in this text. In his section devoted to the *Ḥikāya*, Kilito explores the idea of opposition embodied in the person of Abū al-Qāsim, whom he compares to a *didd*, a word that means both a thing and its opposite. With this comparison, Kilito not only characterizes Abū al-Qāsim as inextricably aligned with the vagaries of language, but also avoids the temptation to identify Abū al-Qāsim's roguish persona as his true personality, and his pious persona as a mere disguise.⁵⁷ Kilito also emphasizes the idea of cyclically reoccurring time in the *Ḥikāya*, an idea fruitfully elaborated in a later article by Phil Kennedy, "Maqāmāt as a Nexus of Interest."⁵⁸ Kennedy vividly describes it as a kind of "descent into madness," emphasizing Abū al-Qāsim's "altered state."⁵⁹ He also wonders if the text could be considered "deliberately wearisome," raising the question of the reader's experience of its unique portrayal of the passage of time. These features of the *Ḥikāya* highlighted by Kennedy and Kilito are the subject of extensive exploration in this present study, and especially in Chapter

⁵⁶ Kilito, *Séances*, 42-8.

⁵⁷ Cf. Balda, "Marginalité," described below.

⁵⁸ Kennedy, "Maqāmāt as Nexus," 153-214.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

Two, which deals with the ambiguity of its language, and Chapter 1.3, which describes its unusual portrayal of the passage of time.

Shmuel Moreh's controversial *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arabic World* (1992) is an original attempt to wrestle with the *Ḥikāya*'s unusual portrayal of the passage of time.⁶⁰ Moreh sees the *Ḥikāya* as a script for a play, whose overabundant language represents an opportunity for the actor to improvise. As his critics have already pointed out, his theory that the *Ḥikāya* was the script for a live, improvised performance is probably indefensible. This theory was based in part on his reading of the text's iterative-style narrative as an invitation to improvise. Everett Rowson, however, suggests in his review that this style of narrative serves, in fact, to emphasize the "archetypal nature of the scenes portrayed."⁶¹ Jaako Hämeen-Anttila, in turn (2002), has recently suggested that although the *Ḥikāya* is not a theater script, it was probably inspired by the actions of party-crashers and jesters who would improvise entertainment in exchange for food.⁶² These scholarly readings again clash over the palpably vexed relationship between realism and representation in the *Ḥikāya*, whose protagonist is at once archetypal and based on a real human being.

In his brief description and analysis of the *Ḥikāya* in his *Of Dishes and Discourse: Classical Arabic Literary Representations of Food* (1999), Geert Jan van Gelder calls Abū al-Qāsim "not so much a realistic character as a protean mouthpiece of everything that undermines itself."⁶³ Set within a broader context of the storied relationship of food with words in Arabic

⁶⁰ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, 94-103.

⁶¹ Rowson, "Review: *Live Theatre*," 466-468.

⁶² Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqāma*, 85.

⁶³ Van Gelder, *Dishes*, 74.

literature, van Gelder's reading of Abū al-Qāsim also addresses the *Hikāya*'s possible contemporary reception, describing its obscenity as "tolerated subversion." "It would be wrong," he goes on, "to speak of a subversive text, unless one means by it that even the establishment likes to be subverted by way of titillation and as an occasional outlet."⁶⁴

Monica Balda's character study of Abū al-Qāsim, "Marginalité et éloquence contestatoire," further wrestles with the protagonist as a character (2003).⁶⁵ Abū al-Qāsim's often shocking performance, she says, as an imitation of the Baghdadi people, seems to suggest that "to be a Baghdadi, is to be, at root, an *'ayyār* (or brigand)," which is what she thinks Abū al-Qāsim himself is, his pious robes and religious recitations being a mere mask.⁶⁶ This essay is especially useful in its comments on Abū al-Qāsim's relationship to language, noting that Abū al-Qāsim is *hors la loi* even of discourse, which is why his audience never manages to respond to him successfully.⁶⁷ It also provides a useful catalogue of the adjectives used to describe Abū al-Qāsim, but focuses on the negative adjectives (which are indeed dominant), almost to the exclusion of his positive attributes. This seems to favor a one-sided reading of a character who may embody multiplicity itself.

In introducing his work and its protagonist as a portrait of Baghdadis, the author has caused a great deal of confusion for readers of this text. What kind of portrait does it offer, and can it be said to be "realistic?" In answering this question, scholars are often forced to contradict themselves, suggesting, for example, that the language is too unliterary to be realistic, or that its

⁶⁴ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁵ Balda, "Marginalité," 371-93.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 383.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 392.

filthiness at the same times reflects an urban environment while also detracting from its depiction.

Especially the early scholarship addressing these difficulties resorts to often unfavorable comparisons to classical texts, and especially to the *Satyrical*. Even in the introduction to his 1998 translation, René Khawam compares the two works, saying of al-Azdī, “...On est en droit de le considerer comme le Pétrone arabe.”⁶⁸ The *Satyrical*, now surviving only in fragments, undeniably has much in common with the *Hikāya*, even beyond the obscene humor of chief interest to Khawam (a translator known for his work on erotic literature). Like the *Hikāya*, the *Satyrical* draws extensively from traditional literatures, and yet defies categorization or definition with its unique structure that confirms to no one prior genre.⁶⁹ Like the *Hikāya*, its dating and authorship have been the subject of considerable debate,⁷⁰ and the history of its preservation and transmission is something of a mystery, especially given its obscene content. It has been called “one of the most licentious and repulsive works in Roman literature,” and yet (as Laurence Sterne described the transmission of his *Tristram Shandy*), it was able somehow “to swim down the gutter of time.”⁷¹

Although this comparison has often been made, it has never been taken seriously as the point of departure for an in-depth study; I will compare the *Hikāya* to the *Satyrical* and to other ancient and medieval banquet texts. I will explore how these works play with notions of the representational qualities of literature, and how the *Hikāya* in particular works with or against

⁶⁸ Khawam, *24 heures*, 10.

⁶⁹ See Schmeling, *Commentary*, xxx-xxxviii.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii-xvii.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, xxi.

literary tropes in its portrait of Baghdad and its inhabitants. In doing so, I will show that the difficulties in determining the nature of al-Azdī's portrait of Baghdad are rooted in the nature of the narration itself, a defiantly self-contradictory and disorienting work.

A Comparative Approach

This Right Whale I take to have been a Stoic; the Sperm Whale, a Platonian, who might have taken up Spinoza in his latter years.

Melville, *Moby-Dick*, "The Right Whale's Head—Contrasted View"

The introduction to the *Hikāya* quotes the "ancients'" assertion that man is a microcosm.⁷² Medieval Arab thinkers' interest in the philosophy of the "ancients" (by which they often meant the ancient Greeks) is well known, and similar descriptions of man-as-microcosm can be found across great gaps in time and cultural space, as can certain highly specific literary tropes having to do with banqueting, social parasitism, and more. Furthermore, the well-known Arab interest in ancient Greek medical texts would clearly lead them into more "literary" (as opposed to scientific) waters, especially when the subject of food allows authors to do both things at once (as in the *Deipnosophistae*, to take a Greek example, or *Da'wat al-aṭibbā'* in Arabic, both of which texts will receive treatment in this study). None will deny the Arabs' interest in Greek scientific and philosophical material; the fact is, this material often blended seamlessly into what we now call "fiction."

The *Hikāya* is everywhere hailed as unique and innovative. In many ways, it is unique, but elements of the text are easily traceable to trends in contemporary Arabic literature, such as an interest in jargon and the speech of outcasts, and in the character of the party-crasher in particular. Even more of its content and style may be illuminated if we do expand our gaze to

⁷² *H*, 44.

include a broader literary tradition of sympotic and banquet texts, or depictions of urban environments. This may help us answer certain questions about the text, such as the question of why Abū al-Qāsim is portrayed as a microcosm, at once pious and profane? And what does that tell us about pre-modern notions of representation and description in literature?

For example, we find many similarities between far-flung representations of beggars with sharp tongues, or the marginally wise and mad, of which numbers we can count Abū al-Qāsim. Stories of the ancient Greek Cynics and especially stories of Diogenes, shown by Dimitri Gutas in his article “Sayings by Diogenes Preserved in Arabic” to have survived in greater numbers in the Arabic language than even in Latin,⁷³ may account for some of these similarities.⁷⁴ As Daniel Kinney argues, “the link between Cynics and professional parasite-jesters is as ancient as Plautus and Horace at least.”⁷⁵ Named after the dog, who both barks at people and fawns and begs, the shockingly outspoken Cynics, at once shameless and proud, self-sufficient and dependent on charity, often remind us of the similarly ambiguous Abū al-Qāsim. Their parodies of epic rhetorical styles and gnomic sayings twisted to “justify transgressive eating”⁷⁶ are recognizable to any student of medieval Arabic social parasites. Perhaps in parsing the character of Abū al-Qāsim, we may find evocative Branham’s description of the Cynic Diogenes (whom Bakhtin calls a “dialogic figure”): “Diogenes’ most brilliant invention was not a set of doctrines,

⁷³ Gutas, *The Cynics*, 480.

⁷⁴ Just as we find many traces of historical connections between medieval Arabic literature and the ancient world, scholars have posited the influence of this same Arabic literature on contemporaneous medieval and Renaissance European traditions. The *maqāma* genre, sometimes considered to include the *Hikāya*, may, for example, have influenced European picaresque traditions (see Monroe, *Picaresque Narrative*).

⁷⁵ Kinney, “Heirs of the Dog,” 299.

⁷⁶ Branham, “Defacing the Currency,” 93.

let alone a method, but himself—a concrete yet malleable demonstration of a *modus dicendi*, a way of adapting verbally to (usually hostile) circumstances.”⁷⁷

The transmission of these Cynic tales and other Greek texts through Arabic is well documented.⁷⁸ However, a full review of the network of cultural and literary currents responsible for the resemblances between ancient Greek, pre-modern Arabic, and other banquet texts and picaresque-style narratives cannot be provided in this short study, which instead focuses on a few evocative points of comparison, especially with Roman literature. Suffice it to say here that Roman literary traditions are bound to the Arabic traditions by shared culinary and hospitality practices, popular mystical beliefs, and reliance on ancient Greek medical and philosophical thought. Obviously the Roman empire and later Arabic-speaking empires overlapped geographically, and there is a history of interaction between the regions involved, not only through trade, but through wandering entertainers and scholars. Baghdad and Isfahan, the cities featured in the *Hikāya*, were part of what the Greeks knew as the *oikoumene*, or the inhabited world, and this seems to me a more useful rubric to this study than the division of the ancient and medieval world into East and West. Furthermore the well-studied Latin literature (despite a similar prejudice in the scholarship against obscene texts), is equipped with volumes of commentary and theorizing, much of which is informative when applied to the Arabic literary tradition.

Of special interest in the *Satyrica* is the colorful description of a banquet found in the fragment known as the *Cena Trimalchionis*, or “Trimalchio’s Dinner-Party.” Encolpius, hero of the *Satyrica*, himself seems, if not exactly a party-crasher, then at least an outsider to this feast.

⁷⁷ Branham, “Defacing the Currency,” 87. Branham usefully discusses the treatment of Diogenes’s character in *The Dialogic Imagination* on the previous page (86).

⁷⁸ See Gutas, “Plato’s *Symposion*.”

Another sort of outsider to ancient literary feasts is the *parasitus*, a professional sponger who entertains with his witty conversation in exchange for food. These social parasites share much in common with the Arabic *tufaylī*.⁷⁹ In reading Elizabeth Tylawsky's *Sarturio's Inheritance*, which explores the Greek ancestry of the Roman parasite character, we find much that is familiar to an Arabist. For example, the self-praise of the parasites discussed in the *Deipnosophistae* has the same microcosmic tone as those speeches and descriptions of Abū al-Qāsim discussed in Chapter Four: "[I am] at being beaten, Iron; at striking, Thunderbolt; at blinding, Lightning; at abducting, Hurricane; at choking, Noose; at breaking the bolts of the door, Earthquake; at popping in, Cricket; at feasting uninvited, Fly..."⁸⁰

The *parasitus* is not a party-crasher because he is invited. Both *parasitus* and party-crasher, however, earn their bread in much the same fashion, with their eloquence and wit. Thus the party-crasher is basically an uninvited *parasitus*. This study will refer to the party-crasher as a subspecies of the parasite, though many of the traits that I ascribe specifically to party-crashers can be found more generally among all social parasites, for example, their keen interest in food. Food and descriptions of food occupy an enormous portion of the *Hikāya*. In explaining these passages and their descriptive qualities, I will draw from Emily Gowers' *The Loaded Table*, which discusses the symbolic weight of food in Latin literature, and (like van Gelder's *Of Dishes and Discourse*) focuses on the portrayal of words as food. Both Gowers and van Gelder also discuss the "drooling speeches" (Gower's term)⁸¹ of social parasites in love with good eating.

⁷⁹ Lucian's *De Parasito* is of special interest. For the Roman tradition of social parasitism in literature, see Corbett, *Scurra* and Anderson, *Second Sophistic*, 183-5.

⁸⁰ Tylawsky, *Sarturio's Inheritance*, 64.

⁸¹ Gowers, *Loaded Table*, 62.

For further references to food and literature, and to locate the shared roots of Arabic and Latin literary depictions of food, I draw on James Davidson's influential *Courtesans and Fishcakes*, which describes similar works in classical Athens. The greedy *osophagos* reminds us of the greedy *tufaylīs* of Arabic literature in many strikingly specific ways (for example, their avoiding bread so as to leave room for the richer foods,⁸² their ability to eat food hot before the other guests can get to it as they wait for it to cool down,⁸³ and their association with gate-crashers and witty slave-girls in literature generally). Furthermore Davidson and other scholars mentioned, who address descriptions of food in their work, end up discussing representation itself. These discussions facilitate our examination of realism, or apparent realism, in the *Ḥikāya*. As Davidson succinctly puts it: "In Greece, above all, where the sophists had made praising gnats, playing devil's advocate and arguing black was white a national sport, it would be dangerous to take our sources as good evidence even for their own views..."⁸⁴ He refers specifically to Greece, but virtually the same argument, in every particular, could be made about many medieval Arabic authors.

Amy Richlin's *Garden of Priapus* (1983) might suggest a fruitful field for further research on the *Ḥikāya*.⁸⁵ Richlin's study compares the aggressive stance of the satirist to that of the Roman garden god Priapus, who comically threatens garden thieves with rape with his gigantic phallus. Although Priapus is a lowly, often humorously self-deprecating god, he is

⁸² Davidson, *Courtesans*, 26, 144. Compare to one Arabic party-crasher's advice to "throw the dry bread to the dogs" and eat the meat out of the middle in Khaṭīb, *Taṭfīl*, 154.

⁸³ Davidson, *Courtesans*, 146-7. Compare to *H*, 66: "He's got fingers like a cooking spit, working hot beef like iron prongs. Fingers like a fishing-net!"

⁸⁴ Davidson, *Courtesans*, xxii.

⁸⁵ Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*.

nevertheless divine. Similarly Abū al-Qāsim seems at once a lowly beggar and a cosmic symbol (as detailed in Chapter Four). Priapus is also an occasionally terrifying opponent not only of garden-thieves, but of witches and the evil magical power that they represent. Like the phallus itself, obscenity and grotesque and deformed features can be used to ward off the evil eye. Therefore this Priapic position, at once comically abject and boastfully aggressive, paradoxically results in the self-aggrandizement of the satirist, even as he humiliates himself. In Roman and Arabic culture alike, court jesters and dwarves could serve just this purpose at a banquet, where they simultaneously entertained and warded off bad luck with their unusual features.⁸⁶ This may explain why the often grotesque and obscene Abū al-Qāsim was considered an allowable addition to the Isfahani party that he crashed.

Although these comparative approaches can help us fruitfully situate a work within its broader historical and cultural contexts, this is a study of a text that introduces itself as a microcosm, and my reading is influenced by my understanding of this work as a world in itself. I have used quotations from *Moby-Dick* as epigrams for this study. The Pequod, an environment as isolated and self-sufficient as the party Abū al-Qāsim crashes, is usurped in its mission by the wild captain Ahab, a man as tyrannical as the Arab protagonist of the *Ḥikāya*. However a full elaboration of the fruitful parallels we could draw between these two works must await future study.

Chapter Overviews

The first chapter in this study, “Who Invited the Microcosm,” unpacks the author’s introduction to his work. In this introduction al-Azdī compares himself to a *ḥākī* (a non-silent

⁸⁶ In her famous but dated work, *The Fool*, Welsford in fact suggests that the Medieval European tradition may have originated in “the East,” and in particular, as a result of Harūn al-Rashīd’s emissaries to Charlemagne (113).

mime), who in imitating his subject (the Baghdadi), produces what almost seems the platonic ideal of that which he imitates. The focus of his imitation, the character Abū al-Qāsim, is based on a real Baghdadi man that al-Azdī claims to have known. But in his reproduction of this Baghdadi, al-Azdī promises not a realistic portrait of an individual or even a society, but rather a kind of microcosm of Arabic literature. Though playful in tone, this introduction makes reference to important philosophical concepts concerning man and his place in the cosmos, popular in the ancient and medieval world. This chapter is divided into three sections that elaborate on the themes found in the author’s introduction: “Mimesis or Mannerism,” “Baghdad the Party-Crasher,” and “Those Camels Have Passed.”

“Mimesis or Mannerism” uses Stefan Sperl’s exploration of mimetic and manneristic tendencies in Arabic literature to further explore questions of realism and representation in the *Ḥikāya*.⁸⁷ It argues that this text is more easily read as in dialog with literary traditions than as a portrait of the city of Baghdad. “Baghdad the Party-Crasher” further explores the tropes and themes at play the *Ḥikāya*’s literary portrait of a city. Michael Cooperson’s “Baghdad in Rhetoric and Narrative” describes how Baghdad, almost from its very founding, was an inspiration for poets and writers, whose praise and blame of the city often followed certain tropes and literary patterns.⁸⁸ This literature, he argues, in turn affected visitors’ perceptions of the physical city itself. My chapter expands on Cooperson’s argument to show that the *Ḥikāya*’s portrayal of Baghdad as a greedy party-crasher fits an even more ancient literary topos, in which a center of empire is portrayed as a greedy, consuming body. In portraying Baghdad as an old party-crasher who not only demands to be fed but who dominates the conversation with his

⁸⁷ Sperl, *Mannerism*.

⁸⁸ Cooperson, “Baghdad,” 99-113.

overabundant speech, the *Ḥikāya* paints the city as an entity who, although its physical power may be dwindling, continues to dominate the literary conversation with overbearing arrogance.

“Those Camels Have Passed” further discusses Abū al-Qāsim’s old age and other signs of time passing in the *Ḥikāya*. As the author states in his introduction, this text can be read in the same amount of time that the events portrayed take to occur, creating a real-time depiction of time passing perhaps unparalleled in literary history. Despite this hyper-realistic portrayal of time, the *Ḥikāya* also seems to inhabit a kind of topsy-turvy time in which day and night are reversed. This unusual chronotope highlights the reader’s experience of time passing while reading literature, which, if tedious, can sometimes drag by rather slowly. This chapter also compares the *Ḥikāya*’s chronotope to other textual portrayals of the passage of time, a theme especially common in banquet literature.

Chapter Two, “Crashing the Text,” shows that Abū al-Qāsim is part of a literary tradition of party-crashing characters. Although these characters, as outsiders to the feast, typically act as guide to the reader, Abū al-Qāsim does not describe the Isfahani feast that he is crashing, but rather drowns it out with his words. The tension between language and food is a theme in literature that often serves to problematize the representational qualities of language. The use of language in the *Ḥikāya* highlights the power of words to confuse or deceive, thereby calling into question the didactic value of the text, even when it claims to be teaching us something.

Chapter Three, “*Mujūn* is a Crazy Game,” further explores the topsy-turvy, unreal atmosphere of the *Ḥikāya*, focusing on a chess game between Abū al-Qāsim and another guest. In analyzing an episode from al-Zubayr ibn Bakkār’s *al-Akhhbār al-muwaffaqiyyāt*, I show that the style known as *mujūn* (silly or grotesque Arabic literature) might itself be compared to playing a game, in which everyday rules are replaced with game rules, often constituting a kind

of orderly nonsense. During the chess game, Abū al-Qāsim’s speech is repeatedly described as raving or nonsense, so this chapter also explores the incomprehensibility of the *Hikāya*. It also discusses the chess game as a microcosm or cosmic symbol.

Chapter Four, “The Cosmic Crasher,” reads Abū al-Qāsim as a doppelganger of the prophet Muḥammad, who shares his *kunyah*. Comparing the language of al-Azdī’s introduction to descriptions of man-as-microcosm found in the writings of al-Jāḥiẓ and the Ikhwān al-Safā’, this study shows that Abū al-Qāsim, like Muḥammad, represents both a real human being and a cosmic symbol, and that the *Hikāya* can be seen as his Qur’an.

This study concludes with a closer look at Abū al-Qāsim as an old man, and his drunken struggle against time as the party comes to an end. In the section “Philemon and Baucis,” I question how this cosmic party-crasher’s visit might have affected the people and objects in the Isfahani household, even after the party-crasher was gone.

Chapter 1: Who Invited the Microcosm?

But no more of this blubbering now, we are going a-whaling...

Melville, *Moby-Dick*, "The Carpet-Bag"

Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim, because it exists in only one undated manuscript attributed to an otherwise unknown author and identifiable in no contemporary sources, is a text enveloped in mystery. The contents of the text are no less mysterious than the envelope, filled with difficult language, often nearly incomprehensible. For the moment, some of these unknown words and certain questions about the *Ḥikāya*'s history and authorship must go largely unexplained. Some of the puzzles of its unique narrative style, however, are very gracefully explained in the introduction to the text, written by the mysterious author himself, who seems aware that his bizarre literary offering is bound to raise questions. And although he states his project quite plainly, the project itself is somewhat complex, so I will first attempt to unravel the author's own explanation of his text, thus introducing most of the problems addressed in this study. I will begin with a translation of the author's introduction:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate:

The distinguished author, Abū al-Muṭahhar Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Azdī, God rest his soul, after praising the Almighty as is His due, and wishing peace upon our lord

Muhammad and his family, wrote:

The kinds of literature I prefer are the speeches of the Bedouins and old Arabic poetry, followed by the fantastic and flowery imaginings of well-read scholars, plus the strange innovations born of the genius of the prominent modern poets. These are the sources I have drawn from in my book, adorning myself with their work and often passing it off as my own; the witticisms they have discussed at length and competed over

I have heard with my own ears. I have also included parts of my own poetry, letters that I have circulated, and records of literary gatherings that I attended.

This is an imitation based on a Baghdadi man whom I knew well for a time. He was always blurting pronouncements, sometimes pleasant and sometimes rude, as well as local sayings from his city, sometimes high-brow and sometimes shocking. I have preserved them in my mind to serve as a token of the manners of all the people of Baghdad, of all different social classes, and as a sample of their local customs.

It is as though this work gathered them all together into one form under which their various types fall, each type of person participating under one definition in which, thereby, they do not differ, in spite of their station or their varying lifestyles. Perhaps they have thus become as Abu Uthman al-Jahiz described in one of his books:

“Nevertheless, we sometimes see a man who can do impressions, of the people of Yemen for example, recreating their unusual pronunciation in every particular. He could imitate a Moroccan, a Khurasani, a Persian, a Sindi, or an African, and yes, even to the point that it seemed more natural to him than to them. For instance, were he to imitate a man with a stutter, it would be as though the peculiarities of speech of every stutterer in the world were gathered together into one tongue. Likewise you might find him imitating the blind, all in one form made with his face, his eyes, and his limbs, in such a way that you couldn’t find, even among a thousand blind men, one who gathered all of these features together into one person. It is as though this imitator had gathered the intersection of them all, and contained all of the elements of impressions of the blind in one blind man. There was a fellow who used to stand at the Karkh Gate where the muleteers gathered, and he would bray such that no donkey, including the sick, old, or

overworked donkeys, could resist braying back. Had they heard a real donkey braying, they would not have paid him half the attention or been stirred as they were by this donkey-impersonator. It was as though he had joined all the melodies of every donkey's bray into a single donkey bray, and every donkey was moved in his soul to hear it. That is why the ancients claimed that a human being is a microcosm in a macrocosm, because he forms every form with his hand, and imitates every sound with his mouth, and because he eats plants like beasts of burden, and eats meat like beasts of prey, and eats seeds like birds, and because in him are the shapes of all the kinds of animals.”

That said, I will add that this imitation amounts to the events of a single day, from its beginning to its end, as well as a full night. One can get through it and absorb it in that same span of time. For those readers who are active in their hearing of this work, and who do not find its long-windedness or literary overflowings to be a strain on their minds, and who do not consider the common expressions evidence of my faulty vocabulary or think less of me for using them, (especially when they arrive at the literary Bedouin *ḥikāya* that I added to the end, and if they follow the saying that “the spice of wit is low language, its charm is brevity, and its vitality in it's being well cut short”), for such readers I have gone to great pains, and have burdened myself so that they are left with what is enjoyable. Furthermore there is precedence for my endeavor, as is expressed in a poem which I will borrow here:

I here present a book like any other book you've read,
if you can overlook that several shocking things are said!

The poet further confirmed my position when he wrote:

Take, good sir, my hand—the one I used to wipe my ass!
for I have something strange to see, it sticks out straight and fast,
like an egg that stands on edge inside a boiling pan...
so come enjoy this oddity on which I've plied my hand!

He was right to say of himself, as I will say of myself after him: “All my speech is a late-night chat, so come enjoy this late-night chat of mine!”

Thus I will begin my tale, having already apologized for it, for as the poet remarked:

Usually I'm decorous, but when I'm with the men I trust
I lose my shyness and become the opposite of decorous!

One of the notable features of this text is its lack of chains of transmission, despite the fact that in many ways the *Hikāya* is a collection of quotations. But the entire work is attributed to al-Azdī, as if by a third person, at the beginning of the cursory *ḥamdalah* (praise of God), constituting a kind of *isnād* for the entire text to follow,⁸⁹ which itself becomes a single *khbar* in extreme close-up (as I argue in the final section of this chapter). In his own voice, al-Azdī then begins his introduction by mentioning his sources, including poetry old and new, Bedouin speeches, and all of his personal experiences as an attendant of literary gatherings and a man of letters. Having thus briefly explained the ocean of quotations to follow, the author states, *Hādhihi ḥikāyatun 'an rajulin baghdādī, kuntu u'āshiruhu burhatan min al-dahri* (“This is a *ḥikāya* of a Baghdadi man, whom I knew well for a time”).⁹⁰ In his article on the word *ḥikāya* in

⁸⁹ It is typical for works of classical Arabic prose to be comprised of a collection of short anecdotes (*akhbār*), each preceded by a chain of transmission (*isnād*) that tells the original source of the story and who subsequently told it to the compiler of the present text.

⁹⁰ *H*, 42.

the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Pellat states that *ḥakā* ‘an can mean, in a chain of transmission, to relate word for word on the authority of someone.⁹¹ With this reading, al-Azdī’s use of the phrase *ḥikāya* ‘an essentially attributes the entire text to the “Baghdadi man he knew well for a time,” which source is represented by the character Abū al-Qāsim (although it is not suggested that Abū al-Qāsim was the man’s real name).⁹² Pellat identifies *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim* as the “link in the chain” between the original use of the word *ḥikāya* to mean “imitation or mimesis,” and its modern meaning of “story or relation.” Thus, the elastic title written on the manuscript, *Ḥikāyat Abi al-Qasim*, could plausibly be translated as *The Mimetic Performance of Abū al-Qāsim*, either in the sense that Abū al-Qāsim is the performer or is the object of imitation, or *The Imitative Relation on the Authority of Abū al-Qāsim*, in which case Abū al-Qāsim, or the friend of al-Azdī that he represents, would be the authority for a lengthy imitative quotation of the people of Baghdad, or, finally, it could simply mean *The Story of Abū al-Qāsim*. Given al-Azdī’s treatment of the word in his introduction, however, this last seems less likely.⁹³

So, having stated that this is a story or mimesis about a/relation on the authority of an unnamed Baghdadi man, the author goes on to describe, not his acquaintance, but the contradictory speech acts of his acquaintance, which, he says, he “preserved in [his] mind as a token of the manners of all the people of Baghdad.” He has strung all the people, high and low,

⁹¹ Pellat, “Ḥikāya,” 367.

⁹² Abū al-Qāsim shares his *kunya* with the prophet Muhammad, and like so many trickster figures in world literature, he appears to have certain spiritual qualities. Indeed the *Ḥikāya* itself in certain respects resembles the Qur’an, as shown in Chapter Four.

⁹³ Abdelfattah Kilito probably best defines the word in this context as the imitation of the speech of a type or of a fictional character (*Séances*, 157), as when a writer writes in the voice of a character. For more on this, see Chapter 1.1 below.

together under the same “paradigm” (as *ṣūra* has been translated)⁹⁴ in such a way that he became, he says, himself a *ḥākī* (mime) of the sort al-Jāḥiẓ describes.

Al-Azdī then quotes a lengthy passage from al-Jāḥiẓ’s *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, occupying more than a third of the introduction, in which al-Jāḥiẓ describes the sort of *ḥākī* to whom al-Azdī compares himself. This *ḥākī* seems first and foremost to imitate the accents or dialectical peculiarities of different types of people, and although a physical imitation of a blind man is mentioned, al-Jāḥiẓ begins and ends with a description of the imitation of a kind of speech act, beginning with funny accents, ending with a donkey imitator who imitates not the movements but the braying of a donkey. He imitates so well that he exceeds the donkeys themselves with his vocal expressions, producing what seems almost the platonic ideal of braying, a gathering of all the melodies suited to a donkey bray in a single donkey bray, the hearing of which revives the spirits of all the donkeys in audience. And that is why, al-Jāḥiẓ abruptly informs us, the ancients claimed that man is a microcosm:

...because he forms every form with his hand, and imitates every sound with his mouth, and because he eats plants like beasts of burden, and eats meat like beasts of prey, and eats seeds like birds, and because in him are the shapes of all the kinds of animals.⁹⁵

Here al-Azdī ends his quotation, having satisfactorily justified his mind-bending literary project with a passage from the father of Arabic prose himself. This project consists, it seems, of himself becoming, in a written text, the imitator of an individual Baghdadi, who in turn

⁹⁴ For example, Azarnoosh, “al-Azdī,” translated by Suheyl Umar.

⁹⁵ *H*, 44, in turn quoting Jāḥiẓ, *Bayān*, 69–70.

embodied to the imitating author the intersection of all Baghdadiness, low and high, and perhaps, in fact, of the entire world in the form of a human microcosm. This explains a great deal about the peculiarity of the text's narrative structure: for example, the contrast between a rather writerly superstructure and the long, encyclopedic lists, which help paint a literary portrait of a grand and brimming microcosm, against the written mimesis of dialogues between Abū al-Qāsim and the other party-goers, so vividly conversational that they led Shmuel Moreh to conclude that the *Ḥikāya* is the script for a largely improvised live play, and that the iterative mode in which the entire book is written (as in "Abū al-Qāsim would enter a party, and he would say, for example...") is an invitation to improvise with the script, itself a mere shadow of a spoken form of literature. However, as previously described, the features that mark the *Ḥikāya* as a written text lead most to condemn this claim, and the continuous tense in fact serves the much more writerly aim to "underscore," as Rowson's review puts it, "the archetypal nature of the scenes portrayed."⁹⁶

The text indeed seems archetypal in many ways, but at the same time contains colloquialisms or specialized terms so ephemeral that, in their present garbled unvoiced state, they are sometimes practically meaningless to us.⁹⁷ These may indeed represent a trace of partially lost dialects and vocabularies, but one has to suspect that Abū al-Qāsim's Isfahani audience was almost as nonplussed as we are. Thus the *Ḥikāya* appears at once inaccessible and inviting. Al-Azdī has managed to capture something lastingly familiar in his crazy-old-man character, without losing the time-specific quality necessary to make his text a mimesis of a very particular time (and Pellat states in his article that in its original sense the verb *ḥakā* "applied

⁹⁶ Rowson, review: *Live Theatre*, 467.

⁹⁷ For example, the section on Baghdadi sailor's slang, which can be found in *H*, 318-19, are discussed in Chapter Two.

exclusively to the present and could not indicate an imitation of the past,")⁹⁸ so that we do not get so much an impression of Baghdad, as an impression of having lost Baghdad. For let us remember the party takes place in Isfahan, and Baghdad is always, almost from the very founding of the city, a departed ideal to be longed for in language, and striven after in poetry.⁹⁹

The *Hikāya* everywhere contrasts metaphysical time with real time, portraying the events of the day as at once a cyclically recurring affair, in which Abū al-Qāsim greets the morning with exactly the same pious phrase at the beginning and end of the text, and performs all his actions in the iterative mode describing habitual behaviors, while at the same time, the goings-on in the story are absolutely singular; Abū al-Qāsim blows in the door of an ordinary party like an anomaly of the universe—the archetypal unexpected guest, who changes the entire order of the party, a divinity in disguise. We must again ask ourselves if the events represented are as singular and unusual as they seem, or are themselves in some way the typical order of things. Furthermore, these events appear to be narrated in a kind of literal real time. A colleague and I timed ourselves reading a portion of the text and calculated that one would occupy about twelve hours reading slowly,¹⁰⁰ with time for questions and bathroom breaks, the entire text from beginning to end, which is what the author almost seems to suggest we do.

Was the *Hikāya* really meant to be read out loud? One thing is certain, out-loud readings of certain portions of the text still cause Arabic speakers to blush with embarrassment (I have confirmed this with experimentation as well). Would it best be read in the privacy of one's own home, preserved on just the sort of pretty, portable, mysterious manuscript as that which is now

⁹⁸ Pellat, "Hikāya," 368.

⁹⁹ Cooperson, "Baghdad in Rhetoric," 99-113.

¹⁰⁰ This colleague was Hassan Hussein, now lecturer in Persian at Columbia University.

held by the British Library in London?¹⁰¹ Furthermore the dauntingly exhaustive lists of carpets, dishes, and other household objects seem to spring from the author's desire to create an impression of the fullness of an entire city, and, as with Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, his quest for fullness results in a long and daunting read. Nevertheless even these lists are rhymed, and therefore pleasing to the ear, and one cannot deny that the tradition of the live performer, the *ḥākī* whom Moreh describes at length, pervades this text. Abū al-Qāsim's lengthy diversion into horse poetry towards the beginning of the book may even be a nod to the popular performer's favorite pet, the hobby horse.¹⁰² However, these same horse poems have been otherwise explained by Mary St. Germain in her dissertation as an allusion to the *riḥla* (travel) section of a *qaṣīdah*.¹⁰³ Thus, just like the speech of al-Azdī's Baghdadi friend, sometimes *faṣīḥ* (formal/eloquent) and sometimes shocking, our analysis of this text must vacillate in its focus from the highest literary traditions to the lowest form of street entertainment, from *qaṣīda* to hobby horse.

The author apologizes for both the colloquial elements (the *lahn*) and the excessiveness of his *Hikāya*, excusing it in part by attaching an imitation of Bedouin speech to the end of his tale, described as *adabiyyah* (belonging to polite literature), as if to make up for

¹⁰¹ At the 18th annual meeting of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers, Amy Richlin, participating with me on a panel entitled "The Rules of the Writing Game: History and Fiction from Vergil through Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Arthurian Vulgate Cycle, to Gibbon and Carlyle," made the intriguing suggestion that the novel and similar written narratives originated almost as plays or public performances that could be enjoyed alone in the privacy of one's own home. This reading reads especially true of narratives containing risqué content, as many early novels did.

¹⁰² These toy horses and the farces performed with them are described in Moreh, *Live Theatre*, "Players of *Kurraj*," 27-37.

¹⁰³ St. Germain, *Anomalous*, 53-77. A *qaṣīda* is a particular form of poem associated with pre-Islamic composition.

what he fears the reader may perceive as a deficiency in his literary education.¹⁰⁴ Although this Bedouin tale has been lost, it may have resembled “al-Maqāma al-Bishrīyya” which often ends the *Maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī.¹⁰⁵ This *maqāma* leaves the quick-talking urban trickster to describe not another exploit of Abū al-Faṭḥ (the shifty hero of the other stories), but a seemingly pre-Islamic *ṣu‘lūk* named Bishr. In a tale of swashbuckling adventure, Bishr recites poetry with vocabulary whose obscurity reflects his native mastery of the Arabic language, while Abū al-Qāsim’s obscure vocabulary often reflects, on the contrary, his lapses into the urban, sub-literary colloquial.¹⁰⁶ Having advertised his Bedouin story, al-Azdī then variously justifies himself with literary quotations, and three poems attributed to that master of obscene poetry and the literarization of urban street-speech, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj.

Although al-Azdī’s turn towards poetry for justification and support is traditional in Arabic literature, the effect of his quotations is to suggest that the *Ḥikāya* is also a mimesis, a rather mocking mimesis, of *adab* (polite literature) itself. The first Ibn al-Ḥajjāj poem quoted suggests that his literary offering will unfold in the ordinary way: you have to forgive all the oddities brought on by his foolishness (*sukhf*). Al-Azdī’s claim that his offering is in any way ordinary seems at first glance outrageous, unless you admit with him that the most ordinary thing of all is a text bespattered with the foolishness of its author. In the second poem of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, he seems to offer his work in the form of a strangely upright turd, or perhaps an erection, that shocks even the light-hearted litterateurs Bishr ibn Hārūn and al-Bustī. In the third poem, he

¹⁰⁴ *H*, 44.

¹⁰⁵ Hamadhānī, *Maqāmāt* (Beirut: Dar el-Mashriq, 1968), 250-8.

¹⁰⁶ Abū al-Qāsim’s speech actually includes instances of both types of obscurity, as indeed he quotes from pre-Islamic poetry not unlike that recited by Bishr. Nevertheless, Kilito names the *Ḥikāya* alongside the poetry of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj as being “truffled” with vulgar linguistic oddities (*Séances*, 63).

purports along with Ibn al-Ḥajjāj that all his speech is merely *samar*, or an evening chat. The evening is the time appropriate to silly talk, if ever there is an appropriate time, and al-Azdī explicitly begins his tale in the morning, when Abū al-Qāsim throws off his pious robe and says “Good morning, and no scandal!”¹⁰⁷ It is a kind of scandal, a nod to the topsy-turvy ethos of *mujūn*, to begin one’s *samar* in the morning light.

With such an ambiguous apology before her, the reader must ask herself what kind of reproduction of 11th-century Baghdad is presented. The *Ḥikāya* is often regarded as a possible source of historical and cultural information, with its exhaustive lists of household objects and phrases that otherwise found no place in formal Arabic literature. No doubt it is a treasure-trove, but one must remember, our source is a drunken and probably insane old man (he lacks the flawless self-control of Abū Zayd, to say the least).¹⁰⁸ The party itself, although it seems realistic, is hardly described at all, and the ordinary-seeming Isfahani guests mostly sit on in stunned silence.

The *Ḥikāya* is sometimes criticized for saying too much, and for the unevenness of its commitment to realism, but if we carefully examine what the author himself claims in his introduction, perhaps we can see in this unevenness the wrestle between the individual and the literary tradition, in which Abū al-Qāsim, a wild-eyed old man, once, no doubt, the master of the Arabic language, is now mastered by it. Raving all day long until he passes out on the floor, this aged wanderer alienates his would-be audience with his irrepressibly vicious tongue, even as he draws them in with an eloquence that suggests enormous personal experience.

¹⁰⁷ *H*, 56.

¹⁰⁸ In contrast with the hero of the al-Ḥarīrī’s *Maqāmāt*, Kennedy writes that Abū al-Qāsim is as if in an “altered state” (“Maqāmāt as Nexus,” 167).

“Here I begin my writing, having apologized for it,” al-Azdī goes on after the third poetic quotation, and ends with one more, in which he claims that he is generally shy and diffident, unless he is with the right people, in which case he lets himself go.¹⁰⁹ With this invitation to become his co-conspirators, al-Azdī begins his *Hikāya*. During the course of the day, he will touch on virtually every genre of Arabic literature, though his literary citations are often wrenched from their original context and placed in outrageous juxtaposition with one another. At every turn in this world, we will find a war staged between realism and the grotesque, among other literary opposites.

Mimesis or Mannerism?

From Icelandic, Dutch, and old English authorities, there might be quoted other lists of uncertain whales, blessed with all manner of uncouth names. But I omit them as altogether obsolete; and can hardly help suspecting them for mere sounds, full of Leviathanism, but signifying nothing.

Melville, *Moby-Dick*, “Cetology”

In his *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*, Stefan Sperl defines mannerism as a style of literature for which literature, not reality, is the correlate.¹¹⁰ Contrasting two descriptions of ships by al-Buḥturī and Miḥyār, he shows how the first (mimetic) seems to describe an individual ship at a particular time, while the second (manneristic) seems a riddle made of metaphors alluding to ships in general. Abū al-Qāsim’s speech is sometimes riddle-like, and sometimes describes individual people or events at particular times. This is because he quotes from virtually all genres of Arabic literature. Consequently, anything in his speech that seems a realistic description of his experience as a citizen of Baghdad is just as likely one quotation in a

¹⁰⁹ *H*, 45.

¹¹⁰ Sperl, *Mannerism*, 164.

beautiful bouquet of quotations. Can the *Hikāya* constitute a classically mimetic rendering of al-Azdī’s contemporary Baghdad, as many scholars seem to hope? Does the *Hikāya*, using Sperl’s elaboration of his definitions of mimesis and mannerism, display “concord between signifier and signified, [reflecting] faith in the mimetic adequacy of language?” Or rather does it show, with “manneristic discord,” “despair over [language’s] inadequacy as much as delight in its potential as a creator of meanings and patterns?”¹¹¹

As described above, in his introduction al-Azdī says that Abū al-Qāsim is based on a real person, but is meant to be a mimesis of an entire city, and that man himself is a microcosm. Thus he suggests that Abū al-Qāsim represents not only a real Baghdadi man he once knew, but the entire world, or the world of Baghdad (itself sometimes characterized as a microcosm of the Islamic world).¹¹² Thus, since the author promises us a mimesis and a microcosm, we can well understand why many have viewed the *Hikāya* as being dedicated, however unevenly, to realism.¹¹³ Nevertheless, al-Azdī’s introductory description of his project is focused emphatically on language—on the language of his friend (as opposed to, for example, his actions or appearance), on the language mimicked by the mimes described by al-Jāhiz, and on the language of his own text—its literary sources and linguistic flaws—so that he seems to introduce not so much a mimesis of the reality of Baghdad, but of the speech of Baghddadis, about Baghdad. It is uncertain, however, that even Baghdadi speech is faithfully reproduced, as Abū al-Qāsim’s diatribes are often decidedly literary in nature—more a collection of poetic quotations, strange words, and metaphors, than a Twain-like reproduction of dialectical

¹¹¹ Sperl, *Mannerism*, 180.

¹¹² See Kraemer, *Humanism*, VII, and Cooperson, “Baghdad in Rhetoric,” 99-113.

¹¹³ See also Gabrieli, “Sulla *Hikāyat*,” 35.

peculiarities.¹¹⁴ The *Ḥikāya* thus provides a caricature of Baghdad, and suggests that a literary microcosm of the fantastical city of Baghdad could only be, in fact, a literary microcosm of literature itself, the city of Baghdad long imagined as a center of cultural and literary production. Of course the party takes place in Isfahan, but all possible descriptions of this party or the conversation of its guests are drowned out by the obscene tirades of the Baghdadi crasher.

Just as a city must include sewer pipes to evacuate waste, the obscene functions of the human body have a role in a microcosmic portrayal of an entire city, and obscene verse in an encyclopedic portrayal of Arabic literature (one is reminded of Ibn al-Hajjāj’s famous verses in which he asks, “Who could live in a house with no toilet?”)¹¹⁵ But al-Azdī chooses to portray the city of Baghdad as an old man, who, although he shows signs of piety and literary refinement, is most notably a decrepit and foul-mouthed alcoholic.

By depicting Baghdad as a drunken old man, nostalgic for his youth, the author suggests that Baghdad is past its prime. Abū al-Qāsim joins thousands of other old men characters in literature to complain that the good old days are behind him. Like so many satirical texts of both the Arabic tradition and other Mediterranean traditions, the *Ḥikāya* smacks of *fasād al-zamān*, or the “rotteness of the age,” a theme closely resembling the Roman tradition of the *locus de saeculo*, which compares the decaying present with the glory of the past.¹¹⁶ In both the Arabic

¹¹⁴ Kennedy calls it “a repository of *gharāba*” (“Maqāmāt as Nexus,” 165). Al-Shālījī does note that some of the words and phrases used in the *Ḥikāya* are still used in Baghdad today, especially during a section in which Abū al-Qāsim quotes a letter by the slave girl Zād Mihr (*H*, 230-8).

¹¹⁵ Antoon, *Poetics of the Obscene*, 21-2. Bryan Turner notes that the close quarters necessitated by an urban environment inevitably leads to the obtrusion of bodily functions and the obscene on the psyche of its inhabitants, and indeed the *Ḥikāya* falls within a tradition of satirical literature that couples an urban environment with a discourse of filth and obscenity. Cf. Juvenal’s famous satire three on the city of Rome, and John Gay’s poem “The Walker through London” (*Body and Society*, 118ff).

¹¹⁶ For more on this subject, see Chapter 1.3.

and Roman literary traditions, complaints about modern decadence are found everywhere, including in literature that seems at once realistic and grotesquely exaggerated. The *Satyrice* of Petronius, whence comes the quotable lament *heu heu, quotidie peius!* (“Alas, alas, every day gets worse!”)¹¹⁷ brims with this familiar trope (or *locus*), that the good old days have lapsed into despicable modern decadence (a theme treated both seriously and satirically). The very language and narrative form of the *Satyrice* darkly and mockingly echo the epic poetry of the heroic past. Patricia Rosenmeyer, in exploring the *Satyrice*’s parody of Ovid’s “Philemon and Baucis” story (on which see more in the conclusion), describes how this parody’s language “[exposes] the impossibility of a pure, heroic past; the vision of an honest, simple ‘Golden Age’ of innocence collapses into a sophisticated series of variations on the theme not of the decline of civilization, but of the eternal simultaneous existence of good and evil, strong and weak, epic and mundane.”¹¹⁸

In the author’s introduction the *Hikāya* is explicitly contrasted with “literary Bedouin tales,”¹¹⁹ and Abū al-Qāsim is thus presented in motley urban contrast to the pre-Islamic model of pure Arabic-speaking desert warriors. The hero of the *Satyrice*, driven by the wrath of the lowly phallus god Priapus, is a parody of epic Odysseus, driven by the enraged god of the sea. Characters burst into poetry or make epic references in the most farcically low situations, and Eumolpus, the professional poet, is often stoned and derided by audiences who find his epic

¹¹⁷ Petronius, *Satyrice* (44:12).

¹¹⁸ Rosenmeyer, “The Unexpected Guests,” 405. Van Gelder recently delivered a paper at the American University of Beirut’s conference *Inḥitāt*, entitled “Good Times, Bad Times: Opinions on *fasād al-zamān*,” in which he details many instances of this topos, both earnest and satirical. In a private communication to me, he added that “the idea of *fasād al-zamān* [is] an idea that has always been around, even in the time of Adam” (he in turn refers us to Ibrāhīm al-Aḥḍab al-Ṭarābulusī, *Kashf al-ma‘ānī*, 414–419).

¹¹⁹ *H*, 42.

long-windedness an unwelcome interruption to their daily lives. The *Hikāya* mocks not only the high-flying epic tendencies of classical literature, but even the classic satirical tradition, presenting them side by side in such insane overabundance that both literary traditions seem equally out of touch with the reality of the Isfahani party, which is muffled in its noise.

In insulting a man identified by his fellow guests as a “joker,” Abū al-Qāsim applies particular venom. “Wouldn’t you like to get to know him?” the other guests ask him. “No, by God! Why poke a bag of shit?” he replies.¹²⁰ Soon after, when Abū al-Qāsim turns his lewd eloquence towards a beautiful boy at the party, the other guests ask him “Do you know him?” “Yes!” he replies “I have known him since he was a toddler...back when he could piss but couldn’t talk. This is my boy! I raised him myself! I suckled him at my own bosom,” and goes on to recite an obscene poem about the boy’s mother.¹²¹ Abū al-Qāsim does not address the other guests personally or try to get to know them. He uses them as cues to spew literature and universal insults. Bakhtin similarly describes the praise and blame used by Panurge and Friar John when speaking to one another: “Formally the praise-abuse of the litanies is addressed to Friar John and Panurge, but actually they have no definite, restricted addressee. They spread in all directions, drawing all spheres of culture and reality after them...”¹²² Such universally addressed insults and descriptions may not best be read as representations of an individual person, time, or place.

Abū al-Qāsim so thoroughly dominates the conversation that he becomes our unreliable narrator by proxy. Al-Azdī, the author and given narrator of the *Hikāya*, tends to fade into the

¹²⁰ Ibid., 75.

¹²¹ Ibid., 79.

¹²² Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 419.

background with the Isfahānī guests, although he first excites our suspicion by introducing his text as an “evening chat” and then beginning it in the morning. It is this voice, moreover (and not Abū al-Qāsim’s), that names itself as the *hākī* of the people of Baghdad. Abū al-Qāsim himself is the gathering point of this *hākī*’s impression of Baghdad. He is similar to a stereotypical persona adopted by a comedian, Andy Kaufman’s “Foreign Man,” for example, a hapless stand-up comic with a strong, vaguely eastern-European accent. Such a character’s speech, when it dominates the narrative, cannot be considered reliable, but rather is intended to enrich the portrait of the character being created. Indeed by Kilito’s insightful definition of the word *ḥikāya* as the imitation of the speech of a type or of a fictional character,¹²³ as when a writer writes in the voice of a character, the speech in a *ḥikāya* would by definition represent a markedly subjective viewpoint. In his article “Focusees’ of Jocular Fiction,” in *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature*, Ulrich Marzolph describes what he calls *Kristallisationsgestalten*, characters around which certain types of anecdotes crystallize, because these anecdotes exemplify the types of things that character would typically do or say.¹²⁴ The Cynic Diogenes, compared elsewhere in this study to Abū al-Qāsim, seems himself to be such a character, as the sayings attributed to him did not necessarily originate with him, but were simply “apt,”¹²⁵ and indeed Cynicism itself has been read as representing not so much a *telos* as a rhetorical stance.¹²⁶ In his account of the character Abū al-Qāsim, al-Azdī ultimately offers us a

¹²³ Kilito, *Séances*, 157.

¹²⁴ See also Kilito, *Author*, 63.

¹²⁵ Krueger, “The Bawdy and Society,” 224.

¹²⁶ See Branham’s “Defacing the Currency.”

comedic impression or impersonation of the people of Baghdād, similarly language-oriented or rhetorical in import.

Baghdad the Party-Crasher

By art is created that great Leviathan, called a Commonwealth or State—in Latin, Civitas) which is but an artificial man.

Hobbes' *Leviathan*, as quoted in Melville, *Moby-Dick*, "Extracts"

From his mighty bulk the whale affords a most congenial theme whereon to enlarge, amplify, and generally expatiate... Applied to any other creature than the Leviathan—to an ant or a flea—such portly terms might justly be deemed unwarrantably grandiloquent.

Melville, *Moby-Dick*, "The Fossil Whale"

Like readers who seek information about Baghdad from the *Hikāya*, the Isfahani guests at the party Abū al-Qāsim crashes occasionally press him for details about his hometown.¹²⁷ As described elsewhere in this study, his answers are less than informative. When they ask about his house in Baghdad, he bristles, and after revealing that he lives on *Sikkat al-Jawhari*,¹²⁸ describes it with obscene poetry about dens of iniquity.¹²⁹ His answers are always in some way evasive. In fact, we cannot even be sure that Baghdad is his hometown: at one point in the story he recites a poem that seems to suggest that he first lived in Isfahan and only later moved to Baghdad:

You ask me about Isfahan (may time yet tear it down!);
the young men look like old men there, the old resemble hounds.

¹²⁷ This line of questioning begins with them asking the meaning of the word *dādhī*, which he uses in insulting Baghdad, saying the wine is undrinkable without *dādhī*. To this question he supplies a vague but semi-helpful answer, implying that it is a good-smelling thing put in date wine (*H*, 312). Dozy identifies it at St. John's Wort, and describes how its seeds were used in Baghdad to increase the odoriferousness of date wine (*Supplément*, 419).

¹²⁸ "Alley of the Jeweler." I have been unable to identify this street in, for example, le Strange, *Baghdad*. Maybe his answer is a joke of some kind.

¹²⁹ *H*, 322.

I left when just a child, and thus escaped those sterile grounds!¹³⁰

Like everything the character says, however, this poem may be a literary quotation, loosely appropriate to the topic of discussion, but not necessarily autobiographical. Since in his introduction, the author al-Azdī admits to weaving multiple sources, literary and conversational, popular and personal, into one narrative, and passing it all off as his own, it is often impossible to distinguish whether any given section of the text is a citation or an invention of al-Azdī's. We are similarly unable to determine if Abū al-Qāsim the character is reminiscing on his life or showing off his knowledge of Arabic literature when he, for example, recounts relaxing in gardens outside of Baghdad with his literary friends, or even screaming in pain as the fleas in his bed bite him in the Baghdadi nighttime.¹³¹

Abū al-Qāsim's Isfahani audience are eventually led to question the sincerity of his opinions on Baghdad and Isfahan (as shown below), so we the readers should probably question them as well. Having occupied the first 183 pages of the manuscript with an almost unbroken tirade against Isfahan ("the weather is dust, the soil is muck, the water is clay," he says,)¹³² punctuated by heartbreaking exclamations of longing for his beloved hometown, Abū al-Qāsim drinks a glass of Isfahani water. "By god," he declares abruptly, "I've been unjust to the people of Isfahan in all that I've said about them."¹³³ He then launches into a panegyric on the formerly maligned city's sweet water, ample flowing air, and temperate seasons, using some of the very same phrases he used to praise Baghdad earlier in the conversation. Likewise, some of the very

¹³⁰ Ibid., 90.

¹³¹ Ibid., 268, 308.

¹³² Ibid., 91.

¹³³ Ibid., 300.

same strategies he used earlier to insult Isfahan, he now uses to insult Baghdad. For example, he lists ugly place-names in both cities.¹³⁴

Abruptly he begins talking about two men, referred to only as *fulān* and *fulān* (so-and-so), eating in Baghdad. Someone asks, “What sort of a man is *fulān*?” (indicating one of the two men, who are not otherwise named or described). “What do you mean what sort of a man is *fulān*?” he replies in the story, “Is the moon hidden, such that you have to ask after it?” Without otherwise identifying the two anonymous men, Abū al-Qāsim goes on to exclaim at the enormous difference between them, one like Capella, the goat star, and the other like a goat. These comparisons continue for several pages, devolving finally into a virulent tirade against the lesser of the two men, who is “lower than shit and filthier than manure.”¹³⁵ At last a guest interrupts the story to ask, “Who is this whom the old man Abū al-Qāsim is describing with such infamies?”¹³⁶ Abū al-Qāsim brushes the question aside (“What’s it to you?” he asks). We learn nothing about the two men in this story, except that one is heaped with exaggerated though generic praise, and the other is dragged through the mud. Since they are both referred to only as *fulān*, it is unimportant which is which.

Abū al-Qāsim then goes back to describing food recently brought to the table. This leads to the further lauding of Isfahan, for indeed food seems to improve the old man’s disposition. Then he turns with satirical fury against Baghdad. “Abū al-Qāsim,” says one of the guests, “You weren’t saying anything of the sort about Baghdad before now. You were just insulting the

¹³⁴ Ibid., 93-4, 310-11.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 304.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 305.

people of Isfahan.” “Gentlemen,” Abū al-Qāsim replies, “Those camels have passed, and their cargo was carelessness. God knows that I say,

‘Neath hardwood trees in Isfahan, on unplowed ground to tarry,
More dear to me and sweet it is than all of Baghdad’s berries,
There nights have two sides, half is of insomnia, half fleas,
To whom, as they still bite, I jump and scream and utter pleas.”¹³⁷

In this exchange we see how Abū al-Qāsim turns his former arguments on their heads, showing that in the world of words, everything, like a Baghdadi night, has two sides: the two men who walked into the dining hall are just *fulān* and *fulān*, and arguments can be made as passionately and eloquently for Isfahan as for Baghdad. Attacking both sides of the argument with equal vigor and eloquence, Abū al-Qāsim at once demonstrates the power of language to persuade, and its promiscuous ability to make either side of any argument seem true. By placing this story at the moment Abū al-Qāsim reverses his position on Isfahan and Baghdad, the comparison of the cities falls side by side with this generic exercise in praising and blaming. A description of the two men’s specific identities or individual physical appearances would be irrelevant.

The *Hikāya* represents a response to certain literary treatments of the city of Baghdad and of cities in general. Debates about the relative merits of major cities, such as Kufa and Basra,¹³⁸ or Baghdad and Isfahan, were one common form of a common literary genre that featured

¹³⁷ Ibid., 308.

¹³⁸ See van Gelder, “Kufa vs. Basra,” 339-362.

debates between a wide range of competing entities, such as the narcissus and the rose.¹³⁹ These debates often seem as much rhetorical exercises as expressions of the author's opinion.¹⁴⁰ Van Gelder, in discussing this debate style in general and the debate between Kufa and Basra in particular, suggests that "one should, perhaps, imagine a reservoir of many statements and judgments, positive or negative, concerning the two towns, that occur as quotations in written texts, either separately or combined to form texts with direct confrontation of opposing views..."¹⁴¹ This reservoir, he explains, often exists prior to the debate itself, adding that "it happens sometimes that a particular point is mentioned first with one town, then with the other" (for example, in the debate that he examines, both Kufa and Basra are at some point referred to as "the dome of Islam.")¹⁴² This is to say that such portrayals of individual cities are often very much derived from literary traditions about those cities or about cities in general.

In his article, "Baghdad in Rhetoric and Narrative," Michael Cooperson explores the dual portrayal of Baghdad in a long history of literature about the city, as at once the center of culture as well as of debauch, both longed for and reviled, ever absent in time or space, but never in

¹³⁹ See Heinrichs, "Rose vs. Narcissus," 179-189.

¹⁴⁰ Similar debates are found even in Herodotus, as described by James Romm's study which, he writes, "focuses on cultural encounters in which an alien perspective is privileged over that of a native" (Romm, "Dog Heads," 123). Narratives, for example, in which a barbarian mocks civilized life (ibid. 135) themselves resemble another medieval Arabic literary topos in which a Bedouin Arab encounters civilization, often exposing its culture as comparatively miserly. Sometimes the Bedouin seems stupid in comparison to the city-dwellers, and sometimes more noble. Romm argues that these narratives of encounters with strangers from other civilizations can often reveal the illogical nature of one's own civilization, the same experience as encountering a Cynic, whose contempt for social decorum and customs can often remind us of Abū al-Qāsim and his trickster ilk. Abū al-Qāsim does not, however, reveal the flaws of the Isfahani society in which he is a stranger (though he insults them for a large portion of the book), but rather, with his rudeness, reveals his own flaws and, by analogy, the perceived flaws of the Baghdadi people.

¹⁴¹ Van Gelder, "Kufa vs. Basra," 343.

¹⁴² Ibid., 344.

prose or poetry. He uses Abū al-Qāsim's speeches as examples of widespread tropes, such as expressions of homesickness for Baghdad, as well as tirades against its foul smells and dangers. These last he attributes partly to the "disillusionment" felt by the visitor to Baghdad, due to "the city's failure to live up to such inflated expectations" as those presented in the copious literature about it.¹⁴³ Descriptions of the city, he explains, are shaped by an interaction between literary perceptions and certain "actual circumstances of urban life," especially the tension between public and private domains within an extremely diverse community.¹⁴⁴ Given this intimate interaction between a literary tradition of a city and the experience of its inhabitants and visitors, readers should consider the anxiety of influence weighing on any author of literature of Baghdad.

What the *Hikāya* certainly reveals, however, is something about the city's reputation, a city represented as a loud-mouthed party-crasher of extraordinary verbal ability. In the *Hikāya*, as in medieval Arabic literature, Baghdad dominates the conversation. Baghdadis themselves had a reputation for overweening pride, according to travel-writer Ibn Jubayr, who writes, "Every one of them imagines that, compared to his town, the entirety of existence shrinks into insignificance."¹⁴⁵ Certainly this is an apt description of the loud-mouth party-crasher who talks all day. As for Isfahan, the city in which the *Hikāya* actually takes place, the author of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* article on the town describes it as "second in prominence only to

¹⁴³ Cooperson, "Baghdad in Rhetoric," 102.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 101. Von Grunebaum characterizes this prideful boasting as a topos of urban literature, quoting Broadhurst's translation of Ibn Jubayr's descriptions of the inhabitants of Baghdad, who indeed resemble Abū al-Qāsim in their obnoxious arrogance and xenophobia, coupled with a seemingly hypocritical humble demeanor: "As to [Baghdad's] people, you scarce can find among them any who do not affect humility, but are yet vain and proud. Strangers they despise... Each conceives, in belief and thought, that the whole world is but trivial in comparison with his land, and over the face of the world they find no noble place of living save their own... They trail their skirts trippingly and with insolence, turning not, in deference to God, from that of which He disapproves..." ("Aspects," 264).

Baghdad.” He cites the *Hikāya* as his source for this claim,¹⁴⁶ though indeed the *Hikāya* seems an even poorer source of information about Isfahan than about Baghdad. What it does say about the Persian city is Rabelaisian at best; in the first half of the text it is portrayed as a world of shit inhabited by monsters, and in the second half, a magical land of musk and jewels and breezes scented with wine (a mere rehashing of previous descriptions of Baghdad).

Isfahan did share Baghdad’s dual reputation as a place of power and luxury, and a place that had also suffered from the ravages of bad politics and natural disasters.¹⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that according to Yāqūt’s 13th-century *Muʿjam al-buldān* (*Dictionary of Countries*) the Isfahanis were proverbial for their miserliness, and the misers of Arabic literature are always the arch enemies of the party-crashers.¹⁴⁸ Monographs on the two subjects tend to appear side by side,¹⁴⁹ so perhaps Baghdad the party-crasher was sent to Isfahan for this very reason—to face his mortal literary enemy.¹⁵⁰

Yāqūt’s description of Isfahan also notes the necessity of manure to render the hard Isfahani soil fertile,¹⁵¹ and Abū al-Qāsim does mention this practice, saying, “They carry their

¹⁴⁶ Kamaly, “Isfahan.” He writes, “In the eyes of its contemporary townsfolk, Buyid Isfahan stood second in prominence only to Baghdad, centre of the ‘Abbasid caliphate, and Ray, the Buyid capital,” citing page 17 of Mez’s edition. He is in fact referring to Mez’s introduction to the *Hikāya*, which in turn cites Ibn al-Faḥrī, who, according to Mez, called Isfahan the “second Baghdad.”

¹⁴⁷ Kamaly, “Isfahan,” *passim*.

¹⁴⁸ Yāqūt, *Muʿjam*, IV: 985. The people of Isfahan in this story might strike us as especially generous for putting up with their overbearing guest at all, though the host does take a suspiciously long time to feed his guests (not until page 277 in *H*).

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Rosenthal, *Muslim Historiography*, 432.

¹⁵⁰ Mez suggests that behind this literary opposition of cities there was the historical circumstance of rebellion in the east of the ‘Abbāsīd empire, as well as rebellion by Isfahani residents of Baghdad within the city (c. 932) (*Azdī*, *Sittenbild*, XVII).

¹⁵¹ Yāqūt, *buldān*, I: 294.

shit piled up on their heads and on the backs of their beasts of burden to their orchards, where they pollute the rivers with it and raise their crops on it, and so they eat it, yes, by my life! It is their excrement; it issued from them, and to them it returns. They are the most deserving of it!”¹⁵² Yāqūt in fact recounts a tale that he heard from “one of the merchants” (and one is tempted to call it an urban legend), in which a rich Isfahani gives people food under the condition that they evacuate their bowels on his farmland.¹⁵³

Yāqūt also emphasizes the delicious sweet water of Isfahan’s river,¹⁵⁴ and indeed it is after drinking a glass of Isfahani water that Abū al-Qāsim begins praising rather than insulting the city. However the party-crasher earlier describes this river, Zandarūd, in strongly unflattering terms:

I only see a piddling little stream in a wasteland, like a flow of poor-man’s pee. When the river-level is up, it’s filled with mud and garbage. When it’s down, it’s just a trash-heap with dung and bits of dust. They named it, in their stupidity, “Zandarud,” meaning “river of life.” When they’re waxing poetic, they call it “Zarinrud,” meaning “River of Gold.” May God make their minds go! And heat up their eyes! Were this water-course you boast of in Iraq, it would not be considered sufficient for two little hamlets. It wouldn’t water two farms!¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² *H*, 91

¹⁵³ Yāqūt, *buldān*, I: 294.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁵ *H*. 109.

Abū al-Qāsim goes on to mention other Isfahani locations by name, and to provide false scatological etymologies for these names. Despite these lists of real place names (themselves used only as the set-up for rude jokes), descriptions of both Isfahan and Baghdad in the *Ḥikāya* are often so generic or so fantastic, they could be used to express love or hate for any urban center in the world. Even the descriptions of Isfahan as relying on manure may be an ancient trope; the description of Persians as “eaters of dung,” a reference to their use of manure in farming, can be found even in Herodotus,¹⁵⁶ and perhaps itself represented a long-lived literary trope.

The phrases used to describe both Isfahan and Baghdad in the *Ḥikāya*¹⁵⁷ are often widely-used literary tropes; the breeze of musk or wine, for example, or the pebbles of jewels, are metaphors also used to describe Damascus in poems by the Damascene Ibn ‘Unayn.¹⁵⁸ By using these phrases to describe first one city and then its competitor, Abū al-Qāsim almost destroys the credibility of his descriptions altogether. In between his fanciful literary exclamations, he does list types of textiles, dishes, fruits, spices, drinks, carpets, and houses supposedly found in Baghdad. However, these are all in fact presented as lists of things *not* found in Isfahan.¹⁵⁹ The opposing lists of things found in Isfahan are so fantastically fecal in content as to make the entire encyclopedic enterprise of exhaustive listing seem unlikely to describe reality objectively (did the people of Isfahan really get in brutal street fights while vying

¹⁵⁶ Romm, “Dog Heads,” 125.

¹⁵⁷ *H*, 301.

¹⁵⁸ Von Grunebaum provides a useful collection of such poems in his “Aspects,” 262-3.

¹⁵⁹ Van Gelder made this observation after my presentation of “Man Behind the Mouth.”

over sewage, for example?)¹⁶⁰ The *Hikāya* often seems a linguistic encyclopedia—a collection of outrageous words—rather than a material one. Abū al-Qāsim may be listing “lexical rarities.”¹⁶¹ As for the poetry he recites, which almost dominate the story, these show us little about Baghdad or Baghdadis, except, perhaps, for their predilection for quoting copious verse.

To characterize the city of Baghdad as a party-crasher, who habitually drops in on gentlemen’s parties, and then repeatedly hints that he is hungry, also emphasizes the greedy consumerism of the capital. Indeed it is a topos of banquet literature to characterize the empire as a body that consumes.¹⁶² In ancient Roman literature, a dish called the “Shield of Minerva” included ingredients from all over the Roman domain, so that the consumer could imagine eating the whole world in one platter.¹⁶³ Abū al-Qāsim’s enthusiastic lists of foods likewise include many dishes named for far-flung places around the Islamic world, so his depiction of dining in Baghdad creates an impression of eating the entire empire (“Kaskari duck and Sarsari kid, and Indian fattened chicken, and Turkoman suckling lamb!”)¹⁶⁴ Indeed one of Baghdad’s detractors

¹⁶⁰ *H*, 110.

¹⁶¹ Kennedy, “Maqāmāt as Nexus,” 165.

¹⁶² Gowers, *Loaded Table*, 12. Although the following comparisons are literary rather than historical, Patricia Crone reminds us in her “Imperial Trauma: The Case of the Arabs,” of the historical similarities between the Roman empire and the early Arabic empire: “Briefly to remind the reader of the Roman development, the many problems that the Romans faced as a result of their expansion included that of preventing the wealth and political opportunities in the conquered lands from undermining the social and political organization of the metropole, the Roman city-state. Ultimately, it proved impossible. The republic collapsed in civil war, to be replaced by the principate of Augustus (27 BC–14 AD). Already by then, however, it had long been clear that there was a cultural analogue to this problem, namely how to prevent the ways of the conquered peoples from undermining those of Rome. In the long run, that too proved impossible” (107-116).

¹⁶³ “...The Shield of Minerva, which contained all the products of the world in miniature, summed up and trivialized supreme power” (Gowers, *Loaded Table*, 207).

¹⁶⁴ *H*, 157.

described it as a terrifying consumer, writing that, “during the time of her dominion, [it was] like an insatiable bloodsucker had swallowed up the whole world.”¹⁶⁵

Abū al-Qāsim’s greedy world-devouring rants bring to mind the narcissistic host in the *Cena*, Trimalchio, who serves a series of absurd dishes designed to overawe his guest. One course depicts the entire zodiac, thus inviting the diner to eat the universe itself. Catherine Connors argues that, with this grandiose dish, Trimalchio portrays the scope of his own doings as “imperial, drawing on the idea that Roman *imperium* stretched over sea and land.”¹⁶⁶ Elsewhere the *Satyrica* makes this point more explicitly through Eumolpus’s poem on the Roman Civil War, which begins, *The victorious Roman now held the whole world... nor was he satiated.*¹⁶⁷ It goes on to describe all the corners of the world from which Rome ravenously gobbled exotic goods and beasts, for entertainment and for food. Trimalchio himself, though he makes himself a very symbol of this imperialist greed, also recites a poem chiding Rome for its world-devouring nature.¹⁶⁸ This poem is traditional in its moralizing theme, but in the mouth of greedy, extravagant Trimalchio, its moral content is difficult to digest without a grain of salt.¹⁶⁹ Likewise the *Hikāya* contains multiple traditional literary stances for and against Baghdad, but they are all fatally undercut by their context. After all, Abū al-Qāsim’s moral advice seems to dive straight into the gutter, especially when he is asked for advice on how to be a gentleman.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ Cooperson, “Baghdad in Rhetoric,” 102, citing the 13th century Armenian chronicler Kirakos of Gandzak as described in Boyle, “The Death,” 145-6.

¹⁶⁶ Connors, *Petronius the Poet*, 113.

¹⁶⁷ Petronius, *Satyrica*, 119:1.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 55:6.

¹⁶⁹ Connors, *Petronius the Poet*, 56.

¹⁷⁰ “True studs, they say, do not demur/ so climb on filth, and fuck a cur!” he replies (*H*, 83).

The empire, when thus characterized as a greedy host, rarely offers digestible sustenance to its guest—the Roman examples typically involve a garish host who, either by his stinginess or by his nauseating display, fails to satisfy anyone.¹⁷¹ Trimalchio himself is an intruder on high-society and power, a party-crasher of his own feast. But Abū al-Qāsim is not the host of his feast at all, and offers nothing more than words to consume, stomach turning or otherwise. Indeed he is like the party-crasher described in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's 11th century *al-Taṭfīl*:

More pushy than nightfall, and faster...

If he's in the house, he's the master!¹⁷²

He does not own the house, but he dominates it by means of his irresistible, attention-arresting verbosity.

Party-crashers have no place or power at the banquet beyond their mighty silver tongues, with which they dominate all else. Abū al-Qāsim, representing Baghdad, may be a beggar at the table of Isfahan, but empty words about Baghdad are the standard against which Isfahan is measured in Abū al-Qāsim's speech. One of his chief criticisms of the city concerns its inhabitants' illiterate and sloppy conversation, which he mimics in semi-intelligible Persian. According to contemporary *shu'ūbī* discourse, the Arabs were lizard-eating upstarts from the desert, crashing the party of former Iranian glory.¹⁷³ The Arabic language, the language of the Qur'an, and Abū al-Qāsim's double-edged weapon, is the locus of their upstart empire's new

¹⁷¹ Cf. Juvenal's *Satire* 5 and Horace's *Satire* 2.8. Al-Hamadhānī's *al-maqāmah al-maḍīriyyah* (discussed above) provides an intriguing Arabic comparison.

¹⁷² Khaṭīb, *Taṭfīl*, 75. All translations of this volume are from Selove, *Art of Party-Crashing*.

¹⁷³ Van Gelder, *Dishes*, 25, 30-33, and Crone, "Post-Colonialism," 17.

power. It is at once the language of state, and the language in which God chose to present mankind with his final revelation. But like the fabled Abbasid caliph, remaining in Baghdad chiefly as a figurehead, while the Persian Buyids there held actual political sway, Abū al-Qāsim may have literary dominance over the party that he crashes, but the meat and potatoes of the Isfahani feast are provided by the Persians, so to speak.¹⁷⁴

Like Abū al-Qāsim, an embodiment of opposites, Baghdad offered a double perspective to the observer. Many note, for example, that Baghdad could be a paradise for the rich and hell for the poor.¹⁷⁵ Cooperson compares the city to “the Afterlife, where the blessed and the damned can observe each other by looking over a wall.”¹⁷⁶ In his *Plot of Satire*, Alvin B. Kernan describes Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*, which observes first the elegance of an upscale restaurant’s dining room, and then the chaos and filth of the kitchen where the food is prepared. “The point at the soundproof door,” writes Kernan, “is the position the satiric description always occupies.”¹⁷⁷ Abū al-Qāsim’s wide veering between paradisiacal luxuries and hellish filth gives a similar impression of a double perspective on an environment in absurd contradiction with itself.

A legendary city of power, Baghdad was also the target of endless uprisings and attacks, physical and literary. It at once wielded its powerful hold on the cultural imagination and fell

¹⁷⁴ I mean this figuratively because potatoes, domesticated in the Americas, were not yet part of Eurasian cuisine.

¹⁷⁵ The narrator of *Da ‘wat al-aṭibbā’*, who is himself a kind of party-crasher, claims he left Baghdad for this very reason (Ibn Buṭlān, *Da ‘wat al-aṭibbā’*, 53).

¹⁷⁶ Cooperson, “Baghdad in Rhetoric,” 106. This observation is in reference to Abū al-Qāsim’s lengthy quotation of the brutally clever letters of slave Zād Mihr to her master, in which she complains that “Baghdad is a paradise for the rich and a torment for the poor” (translation Cooperson’s).

¹⁷⁷ Kernan, *Plot of Satire*, 86.

victim to it. Likewise Abū al-Qāsim dominates the party with his speech, but is ultimately dominated by it, and passes out on the floor in drunken exhaustion, having scared off and wounded any potential new friends with his sharp tongue. Like Trimalchio's party, which ends in mock death, fake house fire, and utter chaos, Abū al-Qāsim's bombastic drunken collapse suggests the decadent reeling of power on its last legs. Of course neither the *Cena* nor the *Ḥikāya* take place in the centers of power, in Rome or in Baghdad, as if these legendary cities were always already gone and passed away.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, like Trimalchio, Abū al-Qāsim holds his audience's attention riveted to the bitter end, and wakes up the next morning ready to crash another party. Both Abū al-Qāsim and the city of Baghdad may be old, but they are both perennially powerful and vigorous in the field of literary domination.

Those Camels have Passed

...that all this should be, and yet, that down to this blessed minute (fifteen and a quarter minutes past one o'clock P.M. of this sixteenth day of December, A.D. 1851), it should still remain a problem, whether these spoutings are, after all, really water, or nothing but vapor—this is surely a noteworthy thing.

Melville, *Moby-Dick*, "The Fountain"

Theories of mimesis in literature often address the passage of time portrayed in literature. Due to the passage of time, any repetition necessarily contains difference, since it occurs later than the original.¹⁷⁹ Thus no mimesis can be exactly like that which it imitates, for time itself has changed it. When questioned on his fickle changes of conversational temperament, and especially his sudden reversal in comparing Baghdad to Isfahan, the old man Abū al-Qāsim

¹⁷⁸ Trimalchio's dinner party is held on his estate in Campania, in southern Italy.

¹⁷⁹ This study is lacking a comprehensive overview of theories of mimesis, but the question of mimesis-as-repetition as well as an overview of such theories concerning mimesis and the passage of time (by such scholars as Erich Auerbach, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Derrida) can be found in Melberg, *Theories of Mimesis*.

replies, “Those camels have passed, and their cargo was carelessness.” In addition to marking his literary descriptions as “careless,” this remark evokes the passage of time during the day-long party.

The *Hikāya* throughout evinces an awareness of the passage of time, from al-Azdī’s introductory remarks on the time-frame of the story, to markings of various stages in the party, the meals, and the singing. Indeed in René Khawam’s popularizing French translation the *Hikāya* is divided into chapters based on the hours of the day, as in, “Two o’clock in the afternoon: the hour of wine.” Al-Azdī creates an almost unprecedentedly realistic portrayal of real time in literary time, free of its customary summaries and flash-backs. This day unfolds in a singularly realistic a-literary time, but, at the same time, this narrative’s use of the iterative mode describes actions habitual to the protagonist. The day itself is recurring, archetypal—therefore, on a mundane level, necessarily unreal, in the sense that a literary trope is unreal.

The iterative mode of the narrative is largely responsible for its “unreal” feeling, as the actions described are given only as examples of the type of thing that used to usually happen. Gérard Genette describes this tense in his *Narrative Discourse* as: “where a single narrative utterance takes upon itself several occurrences together of the same event (in other words...several events considered only in terms of their analogy).”¹⁸⁰ He focuses especially on Proust’s innovative use of the iterative mode in his *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust describes this work as “a novel of Time ruled, captured, bewitched, surreptitiously subverted, or better: *perversed*.”¹⁸¹ The *Hikāya*, as argued below, not only subverts and perverts time with its iterative narrative mode, but also employs a strange chronotope in its portrayal of a day passing.

¹⁸⁰ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 116.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

In his *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin defines the word “chronotope” as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.”¹⁸² He provides many examples of common chronotopes found in literature, but none like the *Hikāya*, a real-time portrayal of a single day in a single setting. From the moment Abū al-Qāsim enters the party, the narrative measures the time elapsing with the unabridged content of his conversation, until the moment that he goes to sleep. While other texts depicting full conversations may use similar one-to-one ratios of plot-time to reader-time, none make the chronotope so explicit, and most freely use summaries or leaps in time often found in narratives.

However, some similar examples should be mentioned. A very recent but striking comparison can be found in the television show *24*, which, in twenty-four hour-long episodes, portrays the passing of a single action-packed day. However, it takes an entire season of TV shows to watch the portrayal of this single day. Similarly, although the *Hikāya* could technically be read aloud in a twelve-hour period, it took me three years to come to a provisional understanding of its dense content. This discrepancy in both cases only serves to emphasize how very action-packed and wearisome the day represented was.

Texts that divide stories into days and nights, like the *1001 Nights* and the *Decameron*, provide another interesting point of comparison. Al-Tawḥīdī (who, as noted in the “Introduction,” is sometimes considered the author of the *Hikāya*) produced a similarly organized non-fictional text, *al-Imtā‘ wa al-mu‘ānasa*, which portrays thirty-seven evenings of conversation, the topics divided by night. The *Hikāya* does not, like most contemporaneous Arabic texts, contain individual *akhbār* (anecdotes), each preceded by an *isnād* (citation), but rather seems to attribute the entire text to al-Azdī at the beginning of the introduction, as though what follows represents a single, extremely lengthy *khbar* (anecdote)—a single day or night, in

¹⁸² Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 84.

extreme close-up, taken from a chain of stories in which Abū al-Qāsim habitually crashes parties. A fractal-like effect is achieved, in which a single day can be shown to contain the complexity of an entire universe, just as a single *khobar* may contain enough material to fill an entire book. Here we find one more effect—that of the zoom-in close-up—with which to achieve the feeling of a microcosm,¹⁸³ and of the magical fullness of this single book, or banquet, or man. Nicholson Baker’s *Mezzanine* may provide a further fruitful point of comparison, portraying the thoughts of a man riding an escalator from the ground floor to the mezzanine level in such detail as to occupy the entire length of the novel.

It is difficult to guess how al-Azdī intended his book to be read, or over what period of time. To try to read it at one sitting, as is seemingly suggested in the introduction, is to wonder, with Phil Kennedy, if the text were not intended to be “deliberately wearisome.”¹⁸⁴ By thus exhausting the reader, the narrative draws attention to the passing of time in a narrative relative to the experience of time passing as a reader of a narrative.¹⁸⁵ What is it like to read a book that unfolds at the pace of the narrative itself? The *Satyrical* matches the passage of time during a journey with the length of a poem recited by one of the journeyers.¹⁸⁶ The tedious length of the epic poem recited by Eumolpus matches the tedious length of the journey to the city of Croton. The poet’s fellow travelers carry heavy baggage and listen to Eumolpus recite throughout the

¹⁸³ Kilito discusses a similar effect found in the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī, in which each episode contains in miniature the overall themes found in the work. These episodes, writes Kilito, portray history as cyclically recurring, until it is abruptly brought to an end (*Les Séances*, 228-232).

¹⁸⁴ Kennedy, “Maqāmāt as Nexus,” 164.

¹⁸⁵ This observation was in part inspired by Julia Bray’s insightful response to my presentation, “The Party of Abū al-Qāsim.” It is also a subject addressed in Barletta, *Covert Gestures*.

¹⁸⁶ Petronius, *Satyrical*, 119-124: 295. Other examples include the *Canterbury Tales*, as well as the first book of Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*, in which travelers pass the time listening to a tale which, as it turns out, bears a close resemblance to the main plot.

painful hike. Similarly, the tedious length of Abū al-Qāsim’s speech emphasizes the sensation of a day passing, minute by (occasionally excruciating) minute.

Mez considers literary treatments of boredom (*le genre ennuyeux*) crucial to the development of the literary atmosphere in which the *Ḥikāya* was written. He quotes a friend of Ja‘far commanding a poet to “Sing and make it short!” (*Sing und mach’s kurz!! qul abyātan wa la taṭul!*). As for prose, he writes, “one abhorred nothing so much as a long story.”¹⁸⁷ The introduction to the *Ḥikāya* addresses this concern:

For those readers who are active in their hearing of this work, and who do not find its long-windedness or literary overflowings to be a strain on their minds, and who do not consider the common expressions evidence of my faulty vocabulary or think less of me for using them... and if they follow the saying that “the spice of wit is low language, its charm is brevity, and its vitality in being well cut short”, for such readers I have gone to great pains, and have burdened myself so that they are left with what is enjoyable.¹⁸⁸

The translation of this last phrase (*takallaftu lahu min al-baṣṭ jahdahu al-mut‘ib ‘alayya wa ghayrhu al-mumti‘ lahu*) is debatable. Gabrieli declares the sentence obscure to him, but offers this interpretation: “And to this kind listener I shall be greatly indebted for having bestowed on me his undivided attention to the point of exhaustion.”¹⁸⁹ His translation puts all the burden of exhaustion on the reader. St. Germain gives: “To him I have dedicated myself to (creating) an

¹⁸⁷ Azdī, *Sittenbild*, VIII-IX.

¹⁸⁸ *H*, 44.

¹⁸⁹ Translated by Ronan MacRory. Gabrieli, “Sulla *Ḥikāyat*,” 40.

elaboration exhausting to me when some other option would have pleased him more.”¹⁹⁰ Her translation suggests that the author, even knowing that some other way would have been more pleasing, took great pains to produce something “deliberately wearisome” (as Kennedy suggests).

In concluding his description of the work, Mubārak notes the extreme thoroughness of its literary *mujūn*: “He left no door of jest un-knocked upon... I think he crammed his book with the filthiest dissolute poetry ever recorded.” In noting its exhaustive treatment of the subject, Mubārak effectively acknowledges the occasional tediousness of this work. He then adds, “This type of composition has value anyway, for it is the sort of literature that the soul requires in times of boredom.”¹⁹¹ Thus he sees it nevertheless as not boring, but indeed as a relief from boredom because of the spiciness of its subject-matter. This echoes a sentiment commonly expressed in medieval Arabic literature, as, for example, in Hadith scholar al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s *Book of Party-Crashing* (*Kitāb al-taṭfīl*, discussed in Chapter Two): “‘Alī,¹⁹² may God be pleased with him, said, ‘If your minds get tired, just as bodies do, seek out some entertaining information!’”¹⁹³

It should be apparent that I and other readers have found the *Hikāya* and its protagonist both shocking and entertaining, but it is difficult to deny that Abū al-Qāsim talks too much and can consequently grow tedious. The Isfahani audience decides, “That’s enough of Abū al-Qāsim and his conversation,” very shortly after his arrival at the party.¹⁹⁴ Even Mez appears to have

¹⁹⁰ St. Germain, *Anomalous*, 155.

¹⁹¹ Mubārak, *Nathr*, 431.

¹⁹² ‘Alī was the prophet Muhammad’s cousin. Khaṭīb, *Taṭfīl*, 44.

¹⁹³ Also see van Gelder, “Jest and Earnest.”

¹⁹⁴ *H*, 89.

grown bored with certain sections of the text, complaining that the horse section is too long (*Das Pferdekapitel ist zu lang geraten*).¹⁹⁵ I confess that it eventually seemed so to me as I translated the text). Moreh's reading of the work as a theater script may be an attempt to rescue it from its own long-windedness, as he writes that, "Apparently Abū l-Qāsim did not perform all the *ḥikāya* at one time, but rather used bits suitable to various occasions. The author-redactor unified them in a single *ḥikāya* to be recited or acted by an actor who was free to improvise as he saw fit in response to the reaction of the audience."¹⁹⁶

Moreh's interpretation raises the question of how we are meant to read the *Ḥikāya*. If we pick and choose from the text, we can avoid the tediousness of Abū al-Qāsim's tyrannical style of conversation. But if we are to experience it in full as the author seems to suggest in the introduction, we, like the Isfahani audience, are doomed to suffer some frustrations. In *The Loaded Table*, Emily Gowers suggests that "the limits of Martial's frankness are nebulous, as though the way we read his poems depends on how drunk we are,"¹⁹⁷ arguing that various poems or books in his collection themselves represent dinner parties, or the stages of drunkenness achieved during such a party.¹⁹⁸ If the *Ḥikāya* was intended to be read out loud at one sitting to an audience, we should certainly hope that this audience would be intoxicated, for their sake.

In his *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature*, Andras Hamori describes the wine poem's intoxicated focus on the present moment, and how thereby "the libertine subdues time,"

¹⁹⁵ Azdī, *Sittenbild*, XIX.

¹⁹⁶ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, 100.

¹⁹⁷ Gowers, *Loaded Table*, 247.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 246-7.

at least for a moment.¹⁹⁹ Abū Nuwās's poetry, for example, often does not deny the pain represented by the *aṭlāl*, the time-effaced traces of the beloved, of prime importance in pre-Islamic and Classical poetry, but it drowns that pain in alcohol.²⁰⁰ Late in the party, when Abū al-Qāsim begins to grow seriously drunk, he suggests that the party guests continue drinking in the morning. Like his disavowal of his old age, his drunken reluctance to retire as the party draws to a close shows Abū al-Qāsim as one who strives to transcend the natural course of time. One is reminded of Yahyā Ibn al-Barmakī's poem to his brother Faḍl, in which he articulates a popular topos of Arabic literary discourse, here translated by Reynold Nicholson:

Seek Glory while 'tis day, no effort spare
And patiently the loved one's absence bear;
But when the shades of night advancing slow
O'er every vice a veil of darkness throw,
Beguile the hours with all they heart's delight:
The day of prudent men begins at night.²⁰¹

According to this trope, like the passage of the seasons, or stages of youth and old age, different times of day are appropriate for different types of behavior. Similarly, at specific times

¹⁹⁹ Hamori, *On the Art*, 72.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁰¹ From Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, cited in Nicholson, *A Literary History*, 260. Kennedy (in a reading of Kilito's *Séances*), compares the *Ḥikāya* to a similar narrative found in *Yatīmat al-dahr* ("Maqāmāt as Nexus," 162).

of the year devoted to carnivalesque festivities, topsy turvy behavior is the norm.²⁰² But at the party crashed by Abū al-Qāsim, even the normal boundaries enforcing the practice of foolery are reversed. As al-Nīsābūrī clearly explains in his 11th-century *‘Uqalā’ al-majānīn*, “Wise Fools,” there are certain appropriate times for foolishness, but venerable white-bearded old age, which is Abū al-Qāsim’s stage in life, is explicitly not one of them.²⁰³ Furthermore, instead of occurring on a carnival day or even just during the night-time, the *Ḥikāya*, describing actions throughout as habitual (e.g. “Abū al-Qāsim would walk into a party...”), presents a recurring and potentially ceaseless descent and redescent into the inappropriate and strange.

In his introduction, al-Azdī attempts to justify his strange tale as a *samar*, or evening chat, the evening being the appropriate time for strange and silly narrations (which is why the *1001 Nights* is not *The 1001 Days*).²⁰⁴ But not only does al-Azdī inappropriately begin his *samar* in the morning, for Abū al-Qāsim greets the other guests with a *Ṣabāḥan ṣāliḥan* (good morning!), he also writes in his introduction, “This *ḥikāya* amounts to the events of one day, from its beginning to its end, or likewise, a night.” Al-Shālījī understandably emends this to “the events of one day...and likewise, a night,” (emphasis mine) because the original is more or less nonsense: we know that the story begins in the morning, and lasts into the night. There is no question of it being either a day OR a night, and the usage of “likewise” (*kadhālika*) with “or”

²⁰² Mez describes several amusing examples of this. For example, the festival known as “*laylat al-mahsūs*” (“night of the touch”) [sic], part of Lent celebrations in Baghdad, included cross-dressing, people riding backwards on wooden horses, and unrestrained socialization between opposite sexes. A New Year’s festival in Egypt included a mock market-inspector riding on a donkey, mud and water fights, and students throwing their teacher in a fountain (*Renaissance*, 423-4).

²⁰³ Nīsābūrī, *‘Uqalā’*, 57.

²⁰⁴ *Asmār* (the plural of *samar*) are coupled with *khurāfāt* (fairy tales and talking animal fables) in Ibn al-Nadīm’s famous 10th-century *Fihrist*, or catalogue of books. This category includes an early description of the *1001 Nights* (Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 470).

(*aw*) constitutes a kind of subtle grammatical nonsense in both Arabic and English. However, this nonsensical little word may represent not the error of a (usually careful) scribe, but the subtle introduction of a portrayal of topsy-turvy time. Perhaps what the *Hikāya* represents is a walrus-and-carpenter day, in which:

The sun was shining on the sea,
Shining with all his might...
And this was odd, because it was
The middle of the night.²⁰⁵

In fact, late in the day, Abū al-Qāsim recites a similar poem:

We went out early late at night after the start of day,
And hunted rabbits, jackals, wolves, but donkeys got away!²⁰⁶

Abū al-Qāsim recites this poem, discussed further in Chapter Three, while he is playing chess. As described there, this chess game brings the unusual effects of the narrative's past-continuous tense into sharper focus, as each chess move is described only as a hypothetical move that could have been made in a habitually recurring game, rendering the specific game played impossible to reconstruct.

Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Book of Sand" tells the story of a book lover who acquires a book with infinite pages that, like the sand, has no beginning or end. As the bible

²⁰⁵ Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 183.

²⁰⁶ *H*, 279.

seller who sells the book to him remarks, “If space is infinite, we are anywhere, at any point in space. If time is infinite, we are at any point in time.”²⁰⁷ By telling his tale in the iterative mode, by ending his tale the same way it began, and by introducing his tale as a microcosm, the author creates a similarly baffling portrayal of time in a text. The day is at once today, every day, and no day. Compare this with the works of Rabelais, in which “the feast at the beginning of *Gargantua* has a precise date: it takes place on 3 February in the middle of the Carnival...”²⁰⁸

Satirical and sympotic texts often show a special interest in the relation of the passage of time in daily life to the seeming timelessness of literature. For example, a winning athlete, though long dead in his flawed mortal form, may live on in an idealized state in a praise poem. Satire, however, and banquet literature alike, emphasizing the flaws and the fleeting pleasures of life, implicitly criticize this timeless quality of literature. The *Cena Trimalchionis*, for example, filled with images of gladiatorial contests and of death, emphasizes the death and absence of the young and the vigorous. Trimalchio’s laughable attempt to present a feast of epic proportions itself ends in disintegration, fire, and chaos, while the protagonists flee into a dark and hellish night.

The *Hikāya* seems a response not to the immortality of the epic or the praise poem, but to the literary portrayal of time as cyclical.²⁰⁹ The *1001 Nights*, one of the most famous portrayals of the battle between literature and death, shows how each day is renewed by a nightly descent

²⁰⁷ Translated by Andrew Hurley. Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 482.

²⁰⁸ Translated by Jeremy Whiteley. Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words*, 24. James Montgomery notices a related paradox in the *khamriyya* genre of wine poetry, which at once revels in the moment, urging its reader *carpe diem*, while inhabiting a space of timelessness with its often generic poetic images, or with the longevity of a masterpiece that reaches audiences across the ages (“Justified Sinner?” 1-90).

²⁰⁹ As described in Chapter Four, the end of the *Hikāya* in fact appears to repeat the events described at the beginning of the narration in reverse, so the events appear quite literally cyclical. See footnote 361.

into the world of fantastic story telling. Not unlike *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the night-time descent into madness reaffirms the cyclically renewed order of the day. In the *Hikāya*, the protagonist also descends into madness in the nighttime and reemerges in his pious garb and manner in the morning. And yet his reemergence, far from reassuring the reader and the audience that the right order of things will forever be reinstated, questions the very reality of this order. It is a jarring and unsettling resumption of his former behavior that seems, if anything, less real than the madness of the day and night preceding.

During the party, the guests appear to grow hungry and desirous of drink at realistic intervals, as if a day is actually passing. Contrasting the epic past with the decadent present, the author makes us feel the reality of time ticking by, without the time-leaps and summaries customary to literature. The reader grows weary and exhausted with the party guests during Abū al-Qāsim's day-long tirade, as if she herself were another bewildered member of the feast, overwhelmed by the party-crasher. Despite these gestures towards hyper-realism, this time is also lent a cosmic or magical quality by the cyclically repeating form of the story, and what seems at first a normal, realistically portrayed day, may be a very topsy-turvy sort of day indeed. Thus the structure of the text itself seems at first to mimic reality—the tedious passing of an actual twelve-hour sitting. But like other seeming gestures towards realism in the *Hikāya*, closer examination reveals it as a parody of passing time and its portrayal in literature—a day neither real nor typical, but rather an enactment of literary monstrosity, and the pleasure and pain that it causes.

The introduction to this portrayal of a day-long party raises several important points. It tells us that it is a collection of citations, mixed indiscriminately with the author's own writing, offered as an imitation of the speech of a friend who in turn represented Baghdad to the author.

The individual and the microcosm are shown to be mixed in a complex gesture of literary mimicry. The introduction also tells us that although this protagonist is based on an individual man, he represents all the citizens of Baghdad, high and low, in their total essence. We are led to ask why the author would choose a party-crashing character like Abū al-Qāsim to represent this city. Finally, the introduction tells us that the text can be read in the same amount of time that the events portrayed took to occur, our first hint of the importance of time passing as portrayed in this work. The next chapter will show that although the *Ḥikāya* reproduces the events of a party minute-by-minute and word-for-word, its replacement of the party itself with overabundant speech can often seem a frustrating and provocative exploration of the relationship between words and material reality.

Chapter 2: Crashing the Text

Most statistical tables are parchingly dry in the reading, not so in the present case, however, where the reader is flooded with whole pipes, barrels, quarts, and gills of good gin and good cheer.

Melville, *Moby-Dick*, “The Decanter”

Since the *Hikāya* takes place at a party, we might expect to experience some of the pleasures of this party while we read the narrative. As Abū al-Qāsim compares Baghdad to Isfahan, copiously listing foods and goods in a tirade that occupies a very bulky portion of the narrative,²¹⁰ he seems to proceed in the order of events one would expect to experience if attending a feast. Having begun with the overall atmosphere of the cities,²¹¹ their place-names, and their horses (on which, perhaps, we can imagine arriving at the party),²¹² Abū al-Qāsim

²¹⁰ This section, as I describe it here, begins on *H*, 91. The description of entertainment begins on 187 and can be considered to continue through 270, where he returns to nostalgic memories of Baghdad and then finally demands to be fed (274).

²¹¹ “I wouldn’t trade Baghdad for an eternity in paradise, though it were offered me on the spot. A city to wish and long for, the best of the best; the people are friendly, the weather is mild, its lucky star is ever watchful, its pebbles made of jewels, its breeze of ambergris, its dust of the most redolent musk. Midday’s mild as morning, midnight feels like dusk. Its food is wholesome, its drinks refreshing. The air is bracing... yes, by God, its dust is of ambergris, its pebbles of gemstone, its air is a fresh breeze, its water pure wine. The land is spacious and pleasant, as though the beauties of the earth were there displayed, a picture of heaven painted over all. It is the center of the land, as well as the best part, its face as well its badge. I have seen in your city, by God, no such qualities! On the contrary, I see that your city lies on the outskirts of the earth, the air is dry, the pasture-lands are squalid, the weather is dust, the soil is muck, the water is clay, the ground is animal droppings, July is October, October is January, the people are wolves dressed in robes, their speech is an insult, their joking a beast’s copulation... A country whose privies are the water-sources, whose streets are piles of dung, and not a man of generosity or grace to be found!” (*H*, 90-1).

²¹² I have never in all of my time in Isfahan,” he says, “seen a good man on a good horse—a swift, spirited, high-stepping steed, quicker than the eye, drowning all description, stunningly formed. His breeding apparent, as though veiled with starlight, shod in uncompromising stone, he vies with the falcons in their diving, outracing the arrow in its flight. He leaves the lynx out of breath, towering like a mountain, or rushing in a violent torrent, a diving star or a blast of lightning, a flaming coal or a cloud downpouring, his reins are loose, his step is sure, and his chest is wide. As swift as the passing of a day, his body lent spare wings, he is a ship of the desert, the wind made flesh, the whip his reins, the spread of the earth his racetrack...” (*H*, 114-5). “But in Isfahan I only see a billy-goat riding a donkey, a bastard on a mule, a monkey on a nag. He backs up and flees, or kicks up and stumbles, unsightly, unruly, balky, and wild. He bites and he kicks. When he gallops, he farts. The most notable of your nobles rides a swollen

describes clothing and houses (two of the first things we would notice upon arriving at a party),²¹³ accompanied by perfumes and incense (which we would smell upon entering the room).²¹⁴ He then goes on to describe food at especially great length, as indeed that would be the centerpiece of the events. He even begins with appetizers,²¹⁵ goes on to main courses,²¹⁶ and

hack with a fat neck. Quite an uproar, coughing and farting together! A fart for every step, with a cough and a poot...” (*H*, 127).

²¹³ “Nor do I see on any of your backs red Egyptian Dabīqī robes, coin-festooned Zuhayrī robes, robes of braided silk, or linen, or tapestry, Daṣīsī or Tinnīsī robes, silk brocade, interwoven with gold, scented with ambergris, beautifully striped, as though woven from flowers of the springtime. No diaphanous Sīnīzī gowns, like the very air in thinness, like a mirage. No serviettes of long silver stripes with which to pat the mouth at a party, nor feathered cloth, or sashes of Maghrabī gold, or tabby striped and ornamented. Nor do I see your houses and rooms covered in roofs of teak, graced with niches of ebony and ivory, with charming rows of columns and rooms overlooking the courtyard, or chambers lining a portico, vaulting among the arches, or foyers overlooking from on high. I do not see your houses spread with carpets of al-Maghrab, throws of Anatolia, rugs of Andalusia, of Cordoba, or of Armenia...” (*H*, 133-4). He later describes the same things in Isfahan: “I only see a desolate piece of property on a squalid swamp, the walls fortified with mud and spattered with shit, spread with local wool blankets, Sawādī shag, and Kurdish haircloth, and you, summer and winter, sitting on mats of hair, calico on your bodies, coarse, rough, home-spun, with holes for the farts to get out. Layered yarn: that’s what your shirts are made from, and your turbans, which hang loose around your head and flop over your ears. If you’re dressing up, you go sleeveless, and your slaves go in streaky cloth with bright blue cotton turbans with borders of green and red strips. If you wring out the shirt of your market-man you get a full jar of grease, with cheap perfume that smells like toothpaste...” (*H*, 149-50).

²¹⁴ “I do not see, by God, any perfume of rose-scented powder, musk mixed with ambergris, camphor, or saffron-tinted scents that leave no residue on clothing. No long-burning amber oil, or citron oil, or mixed sandalwood, black or yellow, and no compounds Ṭahmānī, Nihāya, or Muqtadirī. No fresh aloe, moist from Hind, choice from Mandal, coated in Saghdī, or Tibetan, or Nībālī, or ocean musk. No Chinese musk, or saffron of Syria... or jasmine salt like salt of the sea, yes!” (*H*, 139-140.)

²¹⁵ “Fried Byzantium cheese like a piece of pure fat, with biting flavors that makes your eyes tear up like you’ve parted from a loved-one. White that drank of yellow, smooth and fresh, not bloating or parching, and not foully stinking, but stimulating the stomach and absorbing phlegm; after a mere dirham’s weight you could drink a cask of date wine! Peeled walnuts, white and fresh, whose flavor with Dinawārī or Byzantine cheese is sweeter than bodily health. Turnips, white and red, like lumps of fried dough, and the first suckling lambs, bringing light to the eyes, stimulating sexual desire, and cutting through bile, soaked in wine vinegar, imported from Ṣarīfīn and ‘Ukbarā. Cucumbers with vinegar piquing the appetite, and eggplants pickled, and almond cake with pomegranate water. Oleander infusion, so sour it would knock a bird out of the sky, eliminating bile from the stomach...” (*H*, 152-3).

²¹⁶ This section is cited in the Conclusion.

ends with desserts.²¹⁷ Next he describes the servers who come to clear away a finished meal,²¹⁸ and concludes with fruit,²¹⁹ after-dinner atmosphere,²²⁰ wine, snacks, and entertainment. He is

²¹⁷ “Tabāhajāt known as “al-Muwallafa,” and “the redolent,” made with berry water, and grape water, and followed with jelly with rose water and camphor root, or sprinkles of ground semolina with Sulaymānī sugar melted in with honey comb, and coated with hard sifted sugar, and lawzinaj stuffed in thin flat bread, flavored with rose water and musk, with a thin crust and lots of stuffing, fried in almond oil, fragrant of smell with honey like un-chewed gum, and khalīfa lawzīnaj, dry, musked, Abbasid, and fine fālūdhaj with wheat kernels and the saliva of bees, and cool fresh water much intermixed with saffron and almond, pearly of grease, like the almonds in it were stars shining in a sky of lightning. Barmakid ‘ašīda containing fig syrup and bees’ honey, and nice fried qatā’if, drowning in julep, sitting in a crystal conical cup, stripped and sturdy, and colorful Chinese plates...” (*H*, 162-3).

²¹⁸ “Then the food is lifted away and in comes the waiter, radiant faced, with clean clothes, perfect manners, light spirit, with a precious imperial toothpick in his hand, like a silver pole, or a scented Ma’ mūnī toothpick. He kindly offers it to the guests. This is followed with fine mahaleb cherries, scented and flavored, from the Sharikah perfume shop. He bestows upon their hands, once rubbed with scent, white potash, mixed with ground cedar and Khurāsānī clay plus a little frankincense, cyprus, sandalwood, ashed musk, powdered musk, camphor, and Bengal rose, imperial, royal, foaming like soap, frothing like the sea. The hands squeak with it, like an Indian shoe...” (*H*, 164-5).

This is followed by a briefer description of the entire course of the feast in Isfahan: “This is a description of tables in Iraq, of which sort I see nothing of the kind here in Isfahan. I only see a table with no vinegar or vegetables, in disarray, without rhyme or reason, spread with a tablecloth dirtier than the ground is. Instead of cold appetizers there are bunches of onions, bunches of garlic, bunches of mountain garlic, bunches of eggplants, bunches of turnips, bunches of cucumbers, and bunches of another type of cucumber. God burn these bunches! How many bunches there are! Grilled meat, by God, that’s what people’s hearts want!

Yes, then I see pots cooking bones, Ethiopian molars, and al-raskabja, which is stomach, may God heat their eyes and split their bellies! I had thought stomach was only for feeding dogs and cats! I’d never seen noble people and heads of state eat it before! I see pots cooking coarse cow meat, teeth tearing at it like a panther. They eat like beasts of prey! They do not eat with their fingers, but one of them takes a piece of meat in one hand and pulls on it with his teeth, splattering his face, his beard, and his clothes. The meat is mixed with so much gravy that a row boat would float in it, with peoples’ hands plunging in it up to the elbow. Cooked lettuce, broad bean, chard, coleslaw, turnips, the bowls reeking like the fart of a feverish man or the burp of a dyspeptic. Rice, Indian peas, lentils, green beans, sardines, sea crabs, like that eaten by fire-stokers and garbage men! This is followed with black grapes, and sweets kneaded with treacle.

Afterwards a bumpkin comes out, a middle-aged Sawādī with the physique of a camel and a thick grey beard, poor and threadbare, with sticks of firewood in his hand. He gives them out as toothpicks, then herds everyone into the courtyard to wash their hands in the drain, which breaks, by God!, the noses with the smell of all the garbage collected in it. May God burn this species of manhood!” (*H*, 166-8).

²¹⁹ “I do not see, by God, among your fruits, bananas nor chestnuts, nor coconuts, nor fresh pistachios, nor sugar cane, nor musk peaches and wax peaches like red gold, smelling of the most pungent musk...” (*H*, 168).

²²⁰ “No parties thick with perfume, the scent mounting to the sky and crossing over to the neighbor’s house, and no candles of amber and camphor, or royal light-stands as if made of pure gold, a single large

not, however, by any means describing the party he is attending in Isfahan. This party to which we are treated is a wholly hypothetical and encyclopedic feast of words.

Abū al-Qāsim's bombastic or grotesque poetry and prose stand in contrast both to his conversational exchanges with his half-stunned audience, as well as to the narrator's voice, which speaks rarely and simply. Thus the *Hikāya* weaves contrasting registers of Arabic literature into a continuous dinner conversation. To take an example, Abū al-Qāsim, having hinted (not so subtly) that he is hungry, is asked what he would like to eat. He replies with an acrobatic recitation of literary requests not only for food, but for gifts fit for the guest of a king: a swift charger, a choice singing girl, fine clothing, and so on.²²¹ When the other guests complain that they are intimidated by these extravagant requests, Abū al-Qāsim makes a more realistic request in prose: "A soft loaf, cheese that weeps, strips of local meat, tender and smiling, something from the ready foods of the market, and whatever lingering little bites you have around, like pickled snacks."²²² Then the narrator describes food brought to the table even more simply, mentioning "a platter of the cheese he had asked for, and some pickled things." Though Abū al-Qāsim is not exactly cheerful at the spread, so simply described, he brightens up when a

piece without break or joint or soldering line, its lamp shining with five wicks, burning imported anḥāqī oil, with no smell or crudity and no gall in it, fit for a frying pan or burner. I do not see witty, groomed drinking companions, reciting poetry, telling anecdotes, shooting clever jokes back and forth.

I only see a party of low, vile sons of boors, base, from stock sunk in laxity of manners and drunken sleep, milling around like cattle in a small pass, disputing over methods and creeds, with Isfahani glass pumpkins in front of them like donkey balls, and goblets like copper's cups in their round shape, and vessels fit to be slapped, and a lamp in the corner of the party looking like a tree branch, repulsive and crooked, and a murky light, burning on rotten fat whose smoke flies into the brain and dusts up the nose..." (*H*, 175-6).

²²¹ This poem (minus an obscene line or two) also appears in al-Hamadhānī's "Al-Maqāmah al-sāsāniyya," in which the chameleon Abū al-Faṭḥ recites it while disguised as one of the Banū Sāsān beggar clan (al-Hamadhānī, *Maqāmāt*, 93-4). Thus we can read this poem as typical of a rascally Bānū Sāsān character. But Abū al-Qāsim, like Abū Zayd, never adheres to one genre for long.

²²² *H*, 277.

lamb dish follows, apparently forgetting his outrageous requests in verse, as well as his lists of elaborately superior items to which he implied the Baghdadis were accustomed. Thus the substance and intricacy of Abū al-Qāsim's requests for food are adversely proportional to the material sustenance given him to eat—only when he makes his request in simple terms is he fed. However, he greets each dish with another literary outburst.

Works of Arabic *adab* (*belles-lettres*) often include many contrasting discourses, old and new, edifying and frivolous, and some also use the setting of a dinner party to present a literary feast. In one Arabic example, Ibn Buṭlān's *Da'wat al-Aṭibbā'* (The Physician's Dinner-Party), a stingy doctor invites a young aspiring physician to his house for dinner, but allows him to eat very little, saying it is bad for his health. The doctor's friends arrive at the dinner, and each discusses his medical field of specialty. Thus the banquet consists of a multi-course meal of conversation, but very little actual food. Ibn Buṭlān, himself a physician, was certainly influenced by the Greek tradition of medical and philosophical literature. Dimitri Gutas has shown that even Plato's *Symposium* was not unknown to Arabic writers.²²³

Classical banquet texts (Plato's *Symposium*, and Trimalchio's dinner-party being two of the most famous examples), explore the relationship of description and reality by setting various literary depictions of pleasure in a context of the real physical pleasure of a party. As Davidson writes, "Throughout the *Deipnosophistae*, there is a rather peculiar identification of words about food with food. There is an actual feast going on, but there is also a feasting on words, which is given much more emphasis,"²²⁴ later concluding, "From this perspective Athenaeus' banquet becomes a banquet of Tantalus, thanks to a simple rule: you cannot talk properly with your

²²³ Gutas, "Plato's *Symposium*," 36-60.

²²⁴ Davidson, "Pleasure and Pedantry," 297.

mouth full. The feast of words is a feast of not eating, an anti-feast.”²²⁵ Unusual patterns of consumption often play against unusual literary productions, or replace the consumption of food with the consumption of conversation and literature. The guests at the *Symposium* famously forego the typical pleasures of a banquet for the pleasures of an intellectual debate. In the *Cena*, the superstitious, shocking, colloquial speech of the social-climbing freedmen garnishes the indigestibly showy, hybrid foodstuffs provided by Trimalchio. Like the food, their speech is vulgar with “a veneer of respectability and attainment.”²²⁶

Encolpius, the (anti-)hero of the *Satyrica*, is an outsider to Trimalchio’s party, if not himself a crasher, and he asks his neighbor to explain the events and people that he sees there. His freedman interlocutor not only describes and explains the feast, but helps color its seedy atmosphere with his low, colloquial language. Because of this layered portrayal of the proceedings, Erich Auerbach credits Petronius with producing a representation of a social milieu by means of mimetic speech, which representation is “closer to our modern conception of a realistic presentation than anything else that has come down to us from antiquity.”²²⁷ However, in all of these texts, the replacement of food with talk raises the question of the insubstantiality of speech,²²⁸ which cannot fill your belly, thus complicating any claims to realism these texts might otherwise have.

²²⁵ Ibid. 303.

²²⁶ Schmeling, *Commentary*, XXX.

²²⁷ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 30.

²²⁸ Compare to Apuleius, 1.26:505-524, in which the protagonist’s miserly host forces him to talk all night without offering him anything to eat. He then goes to bed having dined only on words (*cenatus solis fabulis*).

Similarly hailed as an early attempt at realism, the *Hikāya* also replaces consumption itself with depictions of consumption, and conversation about absent food as well as sex, music, and material goods dominate the feast. This conversation does not match the food or events at the party in nature, as does the speech of the freedmen in the *Cena*. For although the dinner served at the Isfahani party seems modest enough, Abū al-Qāsim’s elaborate foodstuff-laden speech leaves audience and reader alike with a feeling of dazzled overfullness. This dinner conversation is not a realistic representation of the food served, but a false display of a sumptuous feast, whose grand, luxurious offerings of gourmet meals, sex, cushions and song, like Abū al-Qāsim’s incredible ravings, are ultimately just indigestible words. Al-Azdī promises us a written mimesis of Baghdad, but throughout his text, there is a tension between words and reality, emphasized by this replacement of banquet with text. Abū al-Qāsim exchanges his wordy descriptions that may not describe something real in Baghdad, for real food at a party in Isfahan that is hardly described at all.

The frustration of being served a meal of words instead of real food is a common theme in contemporaneous Arabic literature.²²⁹ In Hamadhānī’s “Al-maqāmah al-maḍīriyyah” a host, reminiscent of Trimalchio in his tastelessness, and almost as long-winded as Abū al-Qāsim, boasts so much to his guest about his food and household accoutrements that the guest becomes disgusted and unable to eat.²³⁰ “In [this story],” comments Daniel Beaumont, “language does not

²²⁹ This topic is addressed throughout van Gelder, *Dishes*, as well as in Gowers, *Loaded Table*, which explores similar tropes in Latin literature.

²³⁰ Hamadhānī, *Maqāmāt*, 104-117. Here is my translation of some of his babble: “Look at this neighborhood, my friend,” he said, “It’s the best neighborhood in Baghdad. Everybody tries to live here. The quality people compete for it jealously. But then, only merchants live here. Manhood is determined by one’s neighbors. My house is the jewel of the neighborhood—the point of the circle. How much do you think one of these houses costs? Go on, guess if you don’t know exactly.” “A lot,” I said.

disclose reality, it is rather a deafening roar which obscures it.”²³¹ In al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s *Al-Taṭfīl* (another 11th-century Baghdadi party-crashing book), a man describes a pastry so deliciously that his friend grows angry. “What do you think,” says the man, “O Abū al-‘Abbās, about *jawzīnaj*’s light and flaky crust, and the power of its sweetness, drowning in sugar and

“By God you couldn’t be more wrong!” he said, “Just ‘a lot’ you say!” He heaved a great sigh. “Praise God the all-knowing,” he said, and we arrived at his house.

“How much do you think I spent on the archway in this house of mine?” he asked. “I spent above the arch and beyond my means! How do you like its fashion and form? Have you ever seen anything like it? Look at the details in its workmanship and examine the beauty of its ornamentation. It’s as if it were drawn with a compass! Look at the skill of the carpenter in the craftsmanship of this door! It’s made from a single piece of wood. Say, ‘How do you know?’ It’s teak from a single tree, strong and sound! When moved, it moans, and when knocked, it rings. And who made it, my lord? Abu Ishaq ibn Muḥammad al-Baṣarī made it, and by God he’s a man with clean clothes and very clever at making doors, and quick-handed. What a gift of God! By God I wouldn’t rely on anyone else for the job! This knocker, look at it! I purchased it in the curiosities market from Imran the curiosity seller for three Mu‘izziyya dinars. And how much copper is in it, my lord? There are six rats in it! It rolls on an axis in its revolution. So knock it and look at it!

By my life I do not purchase knockers from anyone else, for he sells nothing but the finest!” Then he knocked on the door and we entered the foyer and he said,

“May God keep you, O house! May your walls never fall! How firm your walls are! How sure your foundation and how mighty your roots!

Examine, by God, the staircase! Scrutinize it inside and out, and ask me, ‘How did you get it, and how many tricks did you devise to secure it?’ I had a neighbor named Abū Sulaymān who lived in this neighborhood, and he had wealth no treasure could equal, and jewels beyond measuring. He died, God rest his soul, and left an heir who wasted it on wining and dining, and destroyed it in backgammon and dice. I feared he would be led on by desperation to sell the house in the midst of despair, or that he would expose it to deterioration, and then I would see it having passed me by with no chance to buy, and I would grieve its loss until the day of my death. So I took up some goods that weren’t moving on the market, and I carried them to him and showed them to him, and I offered that he should buy them on credit. The loser thought that credit was a gift, and considered it a present. I asked him for a guarantee for the loan, and he made the contract with me. Then I pretended to forget about exacting payment until the hem of his estate’s garment was frayed and then I came to him and exacted it. He asked for more time and I waited. He begged for more goods and I brought them and I asked him to make his house the security for the loan and a guarantee in my hand. And he did it, and I worked him by degrees to sell it until it fell to me by fortune’s rising and luck’s aid and by my arm’s strength. Many walk for one who sits and waits. And I, praise God, am lucky, and much praised in this sort of affair. Just consider, my friend, that I was only a few days ago sleeping in the house when all of sudden there was a knock on the door. So I said, ‘Who is this ill-timed door-banger?’ And lo! it was a woman with a pearl necklace, pearls with skins of water and the fineness of a mirage. She was displaying it for sale, and I practically stole it from her the price was so low. It will yield a great profit and an abundant return, with God’s help. I only told you this story to show you how lucky I am in commerce, and luck squeezes water from a stone. God is great!” For a full translation, see al-Hamadhānī, *Maqāmāt*, translated by W. J. Pendergast, 88-98.

²³¹ Beaumont, “Mighty and Never Ending,” 159.

oiled nuts?”²³² To which Abū al-‘Abbās replies, “If the pastry were only here right now, I would savor its presence so much more than your description. But as it is not, please let us do without more description as we must do without the pastry itself.”²³³ In a similar anecdote, someone asks the famous gourmand and party-crasher Bunān what he thinks about the pastry *fālūdhaj*. “Should anyone,” he replies, “asking about *fālūdhaj* in this earthly life refer to intellect or reason? You simpleton! Eat it!”²³⁴ Other party-crashers in the same text advise avoiding conversation altogether during a feast, as it interferes with the chewing process, further highlighting the tension between talking and eating.²³⁵ On the other hand, almost all of these party-crashers get fed by means of their silver tongues; indeed in a society that values eloquence above all else, one may make a living eating one’s words, so to speak, by exchanging praise and poetry for daily bread.²³⁶

The parasite in banquet literature often serves in the role of intratextual narrator of the text as banquet. For example, in many banquet texts, the narration occurs through the perspective of an outsider to the feast: in Plato’s *Symposium*, the narrator Apollodorus hears his tale from Aristodemus, who tagged along to the party with Socrates, uninvited by the host (Socrates makes witty literary excuses, saying “To the feasts of the good the good unbidden

²³² *Jawzināj* is a kind of baklava made with walnuts.

²³³ Khaṭīb, *Tatfīl*, 105.

²³⁴ Khaṭīb, *Tatfīl*, 155. *Fālūdhaj* is a sweet made of sugar and almonds. For a recipe, see Perry, *Baghdad Cookery Book*, 100.

²³⁵ Khaṭīb, *Tatfīl*, 111, 131.

²³⁶ The exchange of words for a living was practiced by more than just party-crashers, of course. Devin Stewart argues that the trickster/beggar hero of the *maqāmāt* may be inspired by the life of secretaries and men of letters who sold their literary skills to make a living (“Professional Literary Mendicacy”).

go.”)²³⁷ In the *Satyrice*, Encolpius, a stranger and a buffoon wherever he goes, attends Trimalchio’s banquet for a free meal, and continuously asks his neighboring diner for explanations of the scene. These explanations allow both Encolpius and the readers a glimpse into the world of Trimalchio.

In the *Ḥikāya*, the dominant voice is that of a party-crasher, Abū al-Qāsim. However, Abū al-Qāsim does not narrate the banquet that he sees, but rather drowns out its description and the comments of its Isfahani guests with his ravings. The *Ḥikāya* therefore resembles the tradition of narrating through the lens of an outsider to the feast, but with a twist, because at this party, the uninvited guest takes over the banquet, commanding as if he, the guest, is now the host. Likewise his speech dominates the text, shoving the scenery, the other characters, and reality itself to the margins. Thus Abū al-Qāsim represents a twist on the typical role of the party-crasher as guide to the reader, because he makes the party his own,²³⁸ and he replaces the real Isfahani feast that might have been described, with a force-feeding of his words. The other guests at the party in the *Ḥikāya* at once represent the reality which is occluded by Abū al-Qāsim’s grotesque speech—the simple Isfahani party about which we hear so little—and also the experience of the reader when confronted with the *Ḥikāya* and the representation of Baghdad as a literary bully, impossible to resist, difficult to question, eminently entertaining but nauseatingly overabundant. The reader is united with the audience in their reaction to Abū al-Qāsim, who has

²³⁷ Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Plato, *Symposium*, 174B. This is a sentiment the prophet Muhammad himself would have approved, as demonstrated by early chapters of Khaṭīb, *Tatfīl*, in which the prophet brings uninvited guests along to parties, or lets strangers follow him on his way to a feast.

²³⁸ This in itself is not unusual behavior for Arabic party-crashers, who seem to question the very premise of ownership by their behavior. In one story in *al-Tatfīl*, for example, a very pushy crasher wonders silently to himself, “Whose house is this?” and then answers his own question saying, “It’s yours, man, until someone says otherwise” (Khaṭīb, 112).

hijacked the party and the text, making the original members of the banquet and the readers alike outsiders in their shocked response.

In the few studies of *Hikāyat Abī al-Qāsim*, a few key passages receive the most attention: the author's introduction, as well as the opening pages of the story in which Abū al-Qāsim himself is described, and various of the more outrageous and notable outbursts of the protagonist. But few notice the comments of the largely silent Isfahani party-goers, and the modest comforts offered at the banquet Abū al-Qāsim crashes. Indeed with uninterrupted quotations from the protagonist, some as long as ninety-three pages (in Al-Shālījī's edition), it can be easy to forget that there is anyone else at the party. But by focusing on the few moments when Abū al-Qāsim converses with the other guests, one learns something about his character, and a little about the hypothetical but realistic party of people in awe of his shocking and literary speech, which is so overabundant that they hardly have time to digest what he is saying or the food they are eating. Abū al-Qāsim's conversation is almost indigestible, and though the other guests attempt to engage him in conversation and laugh at his jokes, he never really allows them to respond as he drowns out their meal with his words.

The first to try to talk besides the protagonist is a "tough guy" (*jald*) from the crowd, who puts an end to Abū al-Qāsim's initial display of piety. At first the crowd, moved by his passion, respond as the audience of a pious exhortation should—with pious tears. But after all, they are at a party, and soon the crasher is cut short with an abrupt "Never mind!" from the tough guy, "There's no one in this crowd but drinks and fucks!"²³⁹ This exclamation follows the tough guy's suddenly "understanding" Abū al-Qāsim (*yaftan lahu*), though what precisely he understands could be a subject for debate. Monica Balda might argue that he "understands" that

²³⁹ *H*, 55.

Abū al-Qāsim is not really pious, as his tearful recitations suggest, but is only a rogue putting on an act. The tough guy may understand, at least, that Abū al-Qāsim is not *merely* pious, or that he has more to offer in the way of unasked-for party entertainment than pious recitations. Either way, he suggests that Abū al-Qāsim's religious display is inappropriate for the party in question, composed of a group of people in a private convivial setting, who could handle sterner stuff in the way of entertainment.²⁴⁰ Despite the tough guy's braggadocio, the crowd will soon realize that Abū al-Qāsim's conversation is in fact much more than they can handle.

The party-crasher smiles at the guest's remark, and changes his manner entirely until the end of the tale. He takes off his somber hood, relaxes his demeanor, and begins to insult each member of the feast, asking the other guests first to identify one another, saying "who is such-and-such?" We can compile a guest-list from their brief responses: first there is the "tough guy," then an erudite man named ("for example") Abū Bishr, then a secretary or writer (*kātib*), and an "important" (*khaṭīr*) man connected to the chief of a government bureau, his black servant, a visitor and friend of the leaders of the community,²⁴¹ a ṭunbur player, a joker, a butler,

²⁴⁰ For a full description of such gatherings and the types of speech one might have heard at them, see Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons*, passim.

²⁴¹ Interestingly, Abū al-Qāsim describes this man as a party-crasher in an insulting tone that could be considered hypocritical, given that he himself is crashing a party:

"He is a frequent visitor of important people, and an associate of heads of state," they would say. "Damn," he would reply, "He's a scummy hanger-on. He takes without giving anything back. He's a raptor: if he sees something good, he snatches it, but if he sees something bad, he soars off. He's a mosque that takes donations and doesn't give any out. He is living off of handouts; they're taken *by* his hand, but never *from* his hand. He's a Sufi whacko asking of us, when we didn't ask anything of him. He's banging for it like a carnival drum. Like a cat hanging around the kitchen. He's dipping in his neighbor's smoke. He's a party-crasher: he comes, but he sure wasn't called. All he wants in the world is some cute boy to fuck him and some greasy meat to stuff him. All he wants in the world is to sip some wine and stuff some behind! The moment he got used to traveling from table to table, gulping wine from a canteen, and spurring his sulky donkey along, there was no going back. He can smell dinner cooking from a mile away.

If deep beneath the Byzantine soil,
pots are hot or dinner's on the boil,

a beardless youth, and the host. Later in the party we learn there is also a man sitting silently, plus two friends, an *'ūd* player, a singer, a slave-girl, and a slave boy. With the exception of the young and attractive members of the party, who are instead made the victims of Abū al-Qāsim's sexual aggression, each of these party-goers is lambasted by the crasher as being the worst of a stereotype: for example, the writer is an illiterate idiot, and the "important" man is in charge of guarding the duck guano on the river bank, and furthermore he only brings a servant to puff himself up. The guest introduced as a "joker" receives the most scathing and lengthy round of insults, and indeed almost leaves the party in humiliation.²⁴² This particular aggressive act of the

you, from China, quickly come a-riding...
you always seem to know where pots are hiding!

You'll find him by the table at any party, doing some damage to the stew! He'll be frolicking among the tidbits, burrowing in the oddities, picking out the very finest, the most scrumptious, the price-fetchingest, lip-smackingest little throat-pleasers available.

He savages the partridges.
He's never touched a vegetable.
He's reckless and half-rabid
in the presence of an edible.
His hands don't hesitate but grab
the hell out of what's getable.

He's like a lion when it comes to lamb. He's swallowed more meat than an oven. He's got fingers like a cooking spit, working hot beef like iron prongs. Fingers like a fishing-net!

He's a social butterfly with manners pure as glass:
He sends his invitation on the party-host's behalf!

Then he conks out in the morning stuffed with food, and drags home in the evening bursting wine. Praise God, he has a rooster's disposition: he eats, drinks, and screws. Goes out rowdying with the wolf, then goes begging 'round the shepherd's place. Suuu-eee little sheep, come get your barley! Fingers like hearth-stones, teeth like drills, a stomach like the desert! Come and get it! Eat up, you big brute, because the sheep-skinner's coming to town!" (*H*, 63-7).

²⁴² "Who is that goddamnit?"

"He is a person who likes to joke and banter," they would reply.

"You're kidding! What do we have here, exactly? A musty black boot with a hole in the sole? I think he spent the night in the rain, with shit on his chin and a bird in the hand; the bird flew away, but the shit remained! But let's not devote too much thought to him, for I heard a story from a friend of mine in Baghdad: 'I was walking through the Round City,' he told me, 'when I stepped in something warm. I

protagonist is telling, as Abū al-Qāsim, despite his entertainingly outrageous behavior, does not want to be identified as a joker himself. He may be funny, but he will not stand to be laughed at, and thus leaves the audience unable to interact with him at all. He denies that every other guest properly suits his category or profession, and himself refuses to be classified in a category.

Any audience in a banquet setting would recognize a fool as a familiar dinner guest, his function including humorous insults for each guest. However, Abū al-Qāsim refuses to inhabit

touched it, and it was soft. I smelled it, and it was stinky. I tasted it, and it was bitter. I looked at it under a lamp, and it was brownish. I showed it to my friend Abū Mūsa, and by God, it was shit and I didn't know!..."

"Watch yourself," the man would say, "Find out who might be the son of noble people, and then make your jokes!"

"Who are you to talk about noble people?" Abū al-Qāsim would ask, "You sure aren't one of them! Hey guys, get a load of this! He thinks he's one of the 'noble people!'

A louse among the streaks of shit
and bristles of the lower-class,
if *that* one's noble, call a dog
a noble too, or up your ass!

another:

He is a sissy with a tambourine;
his house commands a view of the latrine!

another:

Hey shit on the ass of a monkey
who washes his face with pee,
your chin in my ass, or the chin
of whoever might disagree!"

Then everybody at the party would say, "Your chin in my ass!" and the man would get mad.

"Poor guy," Abu al-Qasim would say, "I think he's getting upset, and he's practically royalty, you know.

He thought he was the best in town,
and so I smacked him to the ground
and in the middle of his face
my ass I solemnly did place."

The man would be on the verge of getting up to leave, and Abū al-Qāsim would say, "God bless him, our friend's going to storm out! He's so sensitive!" (*H*, 70-3).

this paradigm, and during his insults the crowd seems uncertain whether they should try to defend the other guests or to play along, trying both strategies alternately. At first, they seem hopeful that he is there to entertain them, and is himself another joker: for example, they join him in a hearty chorus of “his beard in your ass!”²⁴³ (Abū al-Qāsim’s favorite insult, directed in this case toward the house steward). Thus they encourage his verbal barbs.²⁴⁴ Indeed the crasher soon demands to be fed, reinforcing the impression that he is engaged in an exchange. So the crowd continues to play along when he exclaims, “There’s not a living man among you, Arab or otherwise!” “What do we say?” they ask, encouraging him to go on, “What do we do?” Abū al-Qāsim responds with sexual and financial advice so immoral that one guest makes the terrible mistake of laughing out loud; the protagonist, who hates above all to be laughed at, erupts into a blasphemous and scatological tirade whose fury he hardly matches again during an entire day of scatological outbursts.²⁴⁵ “What are you laughing at?” he asks the laughing guests, adding that

²⁴³ *H*, 80.

²⁴⁴ The host even complains “There’s no one left in the party for you to mention but me!” (*H*, 80) inviting a rain of insults on his own head (though these are relatively restrained; Abū al-Qāsim does seem reluctant to bite the hand that might feed him). The host’s complaint about being left out of the fun suggests that Abū al-Qāsim’s insults could still serve the socially recognized function of entertaining the guests, and exchanging, in a semi-professional manner, words for food; this kind of insult could be amusing and even flattering. The emperor Vespasian is said to have similarly solicited a joker’s ridicule, and Carlin Barton explains in her *Sorrows of the Ancient Romans* how insulting the dinner guests may ward off envy and evil eye (108ff). In her *Garden of Priapus*, Richlin likens the satirist to the garden god Priapus, whose phallus threatens and wards off the “chthonic forces” (113). She nevertheless reads satire as an often socially conservative act of ritual reversal and even violence. An overly positive Bakhtinian reading of Abū al-Qāsim’s violent speech would indeed seem idealistic.

²⁴⁵ “Do as I command you,” he would say, “and refrain from what I forbid you to do. Receive my speech with obedience, for I live by the rules that I recommend to all.

Those of you who are rich: don’t store your wealth in fear of hard times, or save it for some no-good relative to inherit.

Those of you who are poor: Ask for a loan. Take on some debt. Don’t mind the creditors and debt-collectors, but become connoisseurs of fine food, and drink liquor, and listen to beautiful singing-girls, and fuck the girls that don’t sing, and the singers as well. Fuck when you’re up and pray when you’re down. Fuck the free-born, and don’t forget the slaves. Fuck in secret and in full view. Fuck the owned and the free, and the whores and the chaste. Fuck as long as your cocks are standing, because they

won't stand forever. Fuck the young and the old, fuck vaginas and assholes, fuck blooming young girls, and ancient old women, and bright young lads, and ugly old men.

True studs, they say, do not demur,
so climb on filth, and fuck a cur!

Enjoy yourself with slave-girls and slave-boys, luxuriate in young women and men.

Do not choose as your companion one whose reins are pulled too tight, but rather one who with party-madness causes the night to run on into morning, one who doesn't have a woman to go home to, no wife to tell him no or give him trouble, but rather a man who waves his cock from right to left, fucking those he shouldn't and those he may. That is the clever artful sort, the noble young knight. Choose him as your dearest friend. Take him as a partner, as a brother. Join with him to fuck slave-boys, the ones with small pricks and big assholes. Every fresh young slave-boy in a girdled tunic—the ones who haven't changed and don't need to shave yet. Like the moon on a full-moon night, his beauty makes my chest grow tight!

All of this advice, by God, comes from a man who wants the best for you.

This advice comes straight from one who's coming up behind
to march you to the King of Hell tomorrow, line by line.”

One of the people at the party would laugh.

“It sounds like a cutting knife!” Abu al-Qasim would exclaim, “A wrenching blow, a pricking thorn! It's burns so coyingly, gall and vitriol, carving through metal, a bubonic throat-plague! Did I say that God was Two? Or Three? Did I refute the Qur'an with poetry? Did I break the tooth of the prophet of God? Did I ransack his family's tomb? Did I fire a catapult at the Ka'aba, or pelt it with menstrual rags? Did I defecate in the well of Zamzam? Did I hock a holy camel? Did I speak of God as the Jews or Christians do? Did I fornicate in the mosque of the Prophet, between his tomb and the pulpit? Did I shit on the Black Stone? Did I chop off the Head of Husayn, son of 'Alī? Did I cut off the hand of Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib? Did I eat Hamza's liver? Did I rend the flesh of one blessed by God? So *what* are you laughing at?!

I only said,

Eat young tender chicken, eat
young tender roasted kid.
Drink the wine that long has cured,
and through an age has hid,
that hands of many nights have stained
a rich and golden red.

Love the young, nor be of those
who will not love a lass
whose breasts are big, and cunt is loose
and drags beneath her ass.
But do not love old hags whose pubes
with silver hair is splashed.

Do not love the pregnant woman,
infant at her breast,
but do not fail to agitate
the innards of the rest,

the sound alone hurts his ears. As Balda puts it, Abū al-Qāsim is “hors la loi” of discourse, impossible to respond to or even laugh at.²⁴⁶

“You’ve gone too far!” the guests exclaim for the first time during Abū al-Qāsim’s vicious tirade against the “joker.” And during his excoriation of their hometown, Isfahan, the guests again complain that he is “going too far,” exceeding the bounds of proper conversation even for a jester. Later Abū al-Qāsim bristles violently when they ask him for some entertaining “*ḥikāyāt*,” exclaiming, “Do you think I’m a buffoon?” For though he resembles nothing so much as a entertainer who sings for his supper,²⁴⁷ only by addressing him in a tone of meticulous respect do the guests manage to guide his conversation to several topics that interest them.

Abū al-Qāsim not only refuses to allow the guests to respond to him in an ordinary way, he also refuses to let them remain silent. For the last man he attacks is a guest sitting silently through his verbal rampage, whom he calls a “statuesque vegetable.”²⁴⁸ This attack seems finally too much for the other party-goers, for before the crasher can really get started on his new round of insults, one guest remarks, “That’s enough of Abū al-Qāsim, let’s talk about something nice, like the beautiful weather that we’re having in Isfahan!” Ever the enemy of anything resembling normal human conversation, Abū al-Qāsim bristles at the suggestion that the guests

and pound away, for you are young,
and with a hard-on blessed.

Eat, and waste the things you have
to get the things you need,
and follow my advice for this
is wise advice indeed...
I’m positive your mother would
have readily agreed.” (*H*, 83-8).

²⁴⁶ Balda, “Marginalité,” 392.

²⁴⁷ St. Germain sees him as exactly that in *Anomalous*, 117.

²⁴⁸ *H*, 89.

talk about the weather. In fact, this offending reference to the Isfahani weather sets off the theme for the majority of his conversation: the comparison of Isfahan with Baghdad, in which, at first, Baghdad is depicted as a paradise of luxury, and Isfahan a hell of backwardness and filth. The Isfahani crowd listens uncomfortably, occasionally encouraging him with a polite but curt “speak, Abū al-Qāsim,” occasionally complaining again that he has gone too far. But after a very long rant, the crasher again demands to be fed. Having satisfied his appetite, he reverses his former positions, now blaming Baghdad and praising Isfahan.

The crowd is baffled by his fickle use of words, and though he embarked on his comparison in angry response to what he considered a trivial, meaningless use of language (the comment about Isfahani weather, which trivial conversation he characterizes as “completely meaningless, like splashing water about”),²⁴⁹ his own words seem equally substanceless in their way, full of tropes and clichés he is willing to use for either city. The other guests have tried and failed to verbally and socially interact with their monstrous fellow diner.

One may well ask why they put up with him at all. More than one answer is possible, but like much that is obscene or frivolous in contemporaneous Arabic literature, both al-Azdī and his character Abū al-Qāsim win themselves the partial indulgence of their audience by promising to teach them something. Al-Nafzāwī, for example, author of the famous fourteenth-century sex manual *The Perfumed Garden*, promises in his introduction to teach his patron and his readers about sex.²⁵⁰ Nor is his work without educational content, though what really hooks us, it seems, is its page-turning obscenity. Al-Azdī and Abū al-Qāsim also promise to teach us something,

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 90.

²⁵⁰ He introduces his work as fulfilling a patron’s request for a guide to things stimulating intercourse and things that hinder it, as well as methods to enlarge the penis and other similarly useful information (Nafzāwī, *Rawḍ*, 25).

but, although they are not as uniformly obscene as a sex manual, they are shocking enough that the modern reader, and probably the Isfahani audience, may endure some annoyances just to hear what they will say next.²⁵¹

Al-Azdī promises a portrait of Baghdad that has proved enticing to modern scholars of the city, some of whom seem to endure the obscene content only to benefit from these educational insights into Baghdad. Likewise, in the story, Abū al-Qāsim renews the attention of an offended audience by offering to teach them how to be “gentlemen” (*nās*). Both enticements of educational content are immediately undercut, however: al-Azdī, in the same introduction in which he promises a portrait of Baghdad, as seen above, characterizes his work as a mere “evening chat” (*samar*), thereby designating a kind of story with very low truth value. And because Abū al-Qāsim provides such bad advice, a kind of “modest proposal” to plunge into debt and “fuck [anything that moves],” it would be difficult to consider his speech anything but a mockery of the didactic.²⁵²

Many scholars have noted the “encyclopedic” quality of the *Hikāya*--like the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī, it could be considered a reference work of unusual words and phrases, if not actually of material goods found in Baghdad and Isfahan.²⁵³ And it is true that we can turn to different

²⁵¹ Medieval authors often hid obscene sections at the tail end of their encyclopedic works, but at least one such author fretted that his readers turned to these spicy chapters first, sometimes forsaking the bulk of his book altogether. Therefore he dispersed his obscenity throughout the text, explaining, “If I had devoted a separate section to [jest] and had not mixed jest and earnest in this book, most present-day readers would have gone for that one section and they would have considered the serious parts as something heavy and dull, even something to be avoided and left alone, in spite of its being valuable like gold and pearls,” al-Ābī, *Nathr al-durr* (translated by van Gelder in “Jest and Earnest,” 170).

²⁵² Kennedy makes a similar observation concerning Ibn Buṭlān in “Maqāmāt as Nexus,” 173.

²⁵³ Some, like Ahsan, have looked to the work, and especially Abū al-Qāsim’s long lists of foods and goods, as an encyclopedia of material culture (*Social Life*). Also see Ṭāhā, “Mujtama‘,” (both described in the “Introduction.”) Others have seen it as an encyclopedia of strange words and sayings (see Kennedy, “Maqāmāt as Nexus,” 165).

sections of the *Ḥikāya* for poems about horses, fruits, beautiful and ugly people, and many other topics. It can serve, therefore, as a kind of encyclopedia of *adab*, a word that means both literature and good breeding, as indeed a familiarity with literature was required of a participant in polite society. But not only are these poems not provided with *isnāds* (citations), their immediate source, Abū al-Qāsim, cannot exactly be considered a guru of high culture—although he knows his literature, his manners are appalling, and he smells bad and drinks excessively.

As in the *Ḥikāya*, it is difficult in many contemporaneous Arabic works of *adab* to distinguish between the sincerely didactic and the parodic and parasitical.²⁵⁴ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's *Kitāb al-taṭfīl*, (*Book of Party-Crashing*) for example, presents prophetic Hadith on hospitality and table manners side by side with party-crashing advice on how to avoid table conversation in order to facilitate rapid chewing. It presents musings from the first successor to the prophet Muhammad side by side with misuses of Qur'an quotations by party-crashers angling to be fed. I do not suspect the piety of the author, although according to some he was expelled from Damascus as punishment for dalliance with a handsome boy, and possible drunkenness.²⁵⁵ Famous primarily as a scholar of prophetic Hadith, he begins his text with citations and actions of the prophet of Islam.

If his work has a morally didactic purpose, it must be to justify the party-crasher's actions, as any host who would deny them entry is a miser, at odds with the famously generous prophet Muhammad himself.²⁵⁶ As for the crashers, however, is their advice to “not to

²⁵⁴ Connors shows how the *Satyrical* also regularly uses morally didactic poetry in contexts that undercuts its meaning. She also provides a valuable exploration of parodic use of poetic embellishment and quotation, as well as issues of representation and power (*Petronius the Poet*, passim).

²⁵⁵ Malti-Douglas, “Controversy,” 115-131.

²⁵⁶ His generosity is attested in many Hadith about him, al-Khaṭīb's special area of study.

fraternize,” nor “pity the weakness” of an aged guest when elbowing in for meat, meant to be taken seriously?²⁵⁷ Rather we should laugh at their single-minded greed. But the compiler makes little effort to distinguish these anecdotes from the Hadith cited, or the simple advice on table manners and etiquette apparently issued in all sincerity.²⁵⁸ Some pieces of advice lie between earnest and jest: one anecdote warns that reticence and abstemiousness in a guest may hurt the host’s feelings;²⁵⁹ no doubt they may, but quoted, as it is, by a party-crasher, can we see through to his intentions to use this sound advice as a thin excuse for eating as much as possible at someone else’s expense?

Abū al-Qāsim’s speech resembles some of these anecdotes by hovering between the genuinely informative and the laughably outrageous. Sometimes his conversation even resembles the deliberately nonsensical speech mocked in *Al-Tatfīl* and elsewhere in contemporaneous Arabic texts. In *Al-Tatfīl*, Bunān, the famous party-crasher, warns against going to dinner with members of certain professions (tailors, for example), and goes on to mock their gossipy, babbling speech (“I’ll cut a robe for a third and a dirham of a third, and two dirhams of a third, then three for a half and two dirhams with a half and three dirhams!”)²⁶⁰ Abū al-Qāsim sometimes resembles Bunān in this anecdote, mocking professions with his stereotyping insults. But sometimes he almost resembles the babbling objects of Bunān’s mockery.

²⁵⁷ Khaṭīb, *Tatfīl*, 131.

²⁵⁸ See, for example, Khaṭīb, *Tatfīl*, 144.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 147.

It is indeed difficult to verify that some of what he is saying might not be made-up nonsense words, or something like the talk of the rambling doctors, barbers, or tradesmen who speak learned nonsense at aggravating length in other Arabic texts.²⁶¹ For example, in a story by al-Tawhīdī (thought by some to be the author of the *Hikāya*), a sick man is plagued by a learned man who babbles at his bedside with utterly nonsensical advice (“It falls to me in what does not fall to one other than me or like me in one who could as well have been me or as though he were of my age or was known by what is not known of him to me that I see that you are not keeping anything but a diet above what is necessary and below what is not necessary,” he begins, and goes on from there).²⁶² These rants, filled with learned-sounding language in grammatically logical but meaningless bundles, betray, perhaps, the author’s disgust with specialized discourses, or with those who affect learning and linguistic skill but actually babble incomprehensibly. Though Abū al-Qāsim does not rave in precisely the same nonsensical fashion, he raves nevertheless, enough to put the didactic value of his speech in question. Given the authority of the Arabic language, the locus of eloquence and truth embodied in the Arabic Qur’an (itself an often incomprehensible book),²⁶³ these portrayals are generally subversive, but

²⁶¹ It is difficult to verify because all of his words cannot be defined. Most of them can be, however. For some translated examples of true Arabic nonsense, see Hamadhānī, *Maqāmāt*, translated by Pendergrast, 131-4, or the tale of the mad barber in *The Arabian Nights*, translated by Haddawy, 254ff. The barber’s speech begins: “O my lord, eight degrees and six minutes have elapsed of this day, which is Friday, the eighteenth of Safar, in the six hundred and fifty-third year of Hijra and the seven thousand three hundred and twentieth year of the Alexander era, and the planet now in the ascendant, according to the mathematical calculations on the astrolabe, is Mars, which is in conjunction with Mercury, a conjunction that is favorable for cutting hair.” In both the story told by al-Tawhīdī and the mad barber’s tale, the narrator is ill during the visitation of the nonsense-speaker, and the babbling, long-winded language they report has the air of a fever dream. One must therefore question the reliability of the narrators themselves.

²⁶² Yāqūt, *udabā’*, V: 1923.

²⁶³ Interpreters of the Qur’an recognize certain passages as ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*), whose meaning can only be fully comprehended by God (see Kinberg, “Ambiguous”).

also evoke anxieties about who has knowledge in a world of dueling discourses; the Hadith scholars, the debaters, the poets, and the street preachers all make warring claims to power based on various manipulations of the Arabic language and the authority that it represents.

Abū al-Qāsim's esoteric speech may sometimes also resemble expositions of beggar's slang, as in an anecdote in Jāhiz's *Kitāb al-Bukhalā'* (Book of Misers), in which a miser gives a beggar a more valuable coin than he intends, and then takes it back. When the beggar complains, the miser says that he can tell the beggar is not worth the valuable coin, because he is so well versed in different types of beggars. He then awes his interlocutor into silence by launching into a jargon-filled description of all the types of beggars and tricksters found in his society, each of which he provides with a label and a definition. He is thus able to cover his unsavory act of miserliness with his arcane linguistic knowledge.²⁶⁴ This story most closely resembles a passage in the *Hikāya* in which the other guests ask Abū al-Qāsim if he knows any sailor's expressions. The crasher boldly obliges with a long list of obscure words such as *māshūka*, *kanūr*, *kadl*, and *mahār* (about which words 'Abbūd al-Al-Shālji, second editor of the text, can only confess, "I didn't understand them").²⁶⁵ Abū al-Qāsim's verbal display is impressive, but without any definitions for his terms, his speech provides not even the didactic benefits of the speech of Jāhiz's basically despicable miser.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Jāhiz, *bukhalā'*, 46-53.

²⁶⁵ *H*, 318. The short vowels in these words are simply guesses.

²⁶⁶ Jāhiz, *bukhalā'*. Mubārak addresses this passage and the similar passage on swimming strokes, comparing them to Abū Dulaf's *Qaṣīda Sāsāniyya*, a poem of beggar's slang (*Nathr*, 419-421, 432).

Party-crashers themselves crash both physical banquets and banquets of words like the Qur'an,²⁶⁷ using these discourses parasitically, and twisting them to their own purposes. *Al-Tatfīl* tells of a party-crasher who used various quotations from the Qur'an with numbers in them to impress his host into feeding him that number of delicious pastries. Another crasher takes a Qur'anic verse out of context to reassure the host that he has come not to steal his women, but his food.²⁶⁸ Abū al-Qāsim may be no less an opportunistic user of the Arabic language. He is certainly a master of all discourses, and uses and abuses them at whim. Al-Azdī himself openly admits to passing many different works off as his own, though indeed many of his numerous unattributed quotations have been traced to another source. Adam Mez begins his introduction to his edition by saying, "If someone posed the embarrassing question to our author, [of what would happen] if someone told his sentences, 'Go back to where you came from,' then very little worthwhile (though a lot disreputable) would remain."²⁶⁹

As a sympotic text, the *Hikāya* is hardly unique in that regard, resembling, for example, the *Deipnosophistae*, another banquet at which quotations of literature bury the meal itself. As Davidson writes, "The 'real' banquet, described as taking place during the conversations of the *Deipnosophistae*, is evoked in the learned discussions which are provoked by it, but the author spends only the tiniest fraction of his text in describing it." This banquet, held in Rome, of Greek literature, seems a "separate world," whose sometimes tiresome profusion of quotations

²⁶⁷ The Qur'an has indeed been referred to as "God's Banquet" (see van Gelder, *Dishes*, also published under the title *God's Banquet*, 39-40).

²⁶⁸ Khaṭīb, *Tatfīl*, 105-6, 116-7. In the second anecdote, the hungry crasher gains access to a party by climbing a wall adjoining the ladies' private quarters. When the master of the house objects, the crasher quotes Qur'an, Hūd 11:79, "Well dost thou know we have no need of thy daughters: indeed thou knowest quite well what we want," a quotation of the crowds of Sodom, whose lust would not be satisfied by Lot's daughters, but only by his angelic guests (Yusuf Ali's translation).

²⁶⁹ Azdī, *Sittenbild*, V.

exists within their own system of order, and hold the questions of “life, death, and representation.”²⁷⁰

The conversation of Athenaeus’s learned banqueters seems sober and reasonable compared to the near-monologue that takes place during the banquet in Isfahan, with all its tireless quotations and disorienting atmosphere. The next chapter will further address language that is difficult to understand, nonsense language, and language that at first seems to offer us information, but which we at last find elusive in meaning. In doing so, it will offer a definition for the literary style known as *mujūn*, which depicts a seeming madness of speech and behavior, and which can be said to describe much of the discourse of the *Hikāya*.

²⁷⁰ Davidson, “Pleasure and Pedantry,” 303.

Chapter 3: Mujūn is a Crazy Game

“De balena vero sufficit, si rex habeat caput, et regina caudam.” Bracton 1.3, c. 3... A division, which in the whale, is much like halving an apple; there is no intermediate remainder.

Melville, *Moby-Dick*, “Heads or Tails”

“Come!” cried old Omar. “Let us drink, and break into new patterns the tedious roof of heaven!”

F.V. Morley, *My One Contribution to Chess*

The *Ḥikāya* may invite readers to use it as an encyclopedia of material goods or otherwise as a source of historical and antiquarian interest for a number of reasons. One of these reasons is its obscenity, or focus on “low” topics not typically addressed in other forms of literature. The *Ḥikāya* often employs a literary style known as *mujūn*, distinguished by its focus on low topics and use of obscene vocabulary. In “Arabic *Mujūn* poetry,” Meisami writes: “Discussions by Arab scholars typically adopt historical, sociological, or biographical approaches” to *mujūn* literature. Furthermore, “the literary aspects of *mujūn* poetry have received little attention.”²⁷¹ In order to facilitate historical or antiquarian readings of the *Ḥikāya*, among other reasons, we should strive to understand the literary definition of *mujūn* itself. This is not easily done, and some ink has been spilled trying.²⁷²

Here, in discussing the chess game played in the *Ḥikāya*, I will show that *mujūn* itself can be thought of as a kind of game, and thus the style of language known as *mujūn* is by definition playful. In his introduction to his edition, Mez identifies the chess game as the only section

²⁷¹ Meisami, “Arabic *Mujūn* Poetry: the literary dimension,” 9.

²⁷² Meisami reviews some of these attempts and ultimately defines it as “bacchic and erotic, both taken to extremes...not merely anti-religious but also anti-heroic in outlook.” She later adds that *mujūn* is a counter-genre which inverts the conventions of ‘normative’ *ghazal* and *wasf al-khamr*” (“Arabic *Mujūn* Poetry,” 8-9, 14). Van Gelder points out that in distinguishing it from a different style, *hijā*, or invective, the text alone is not enough to decide its nature: one needs to know the intention of the poet and his relationship with the victim” (*Bad and The Ugly*, 51). He is distinguishing between invective (*hijā*) which, in Everett Rowson’s words, has “defamatory intent,” and *mujūn*’s “essential lightheartedness.” Rowson later adds “It is less the illicitness of the subject than the presence of explicit vocabulary and graphic description that sets off *mujūn*” (“*Mujūn*,” 546-7).

comprised of entirely original material in the *Hikāya*.²⁷³ However this chapter (supplemented in the appendix by a full translation), argues that the chess game can be read as a synecdoche for the work as a whole. With its specific and familiar-sounding details, it tempts us to try to reconstruct the exact game described. But upon closer examination we find that the events described are impossible to reconstruct because they are each presented only as hypothetical examples of events, and are also couched in playfully disorienting language. But before exploring the chess game, I will begin with a further discussion of *mujūn* by examining a story from al-Zubayr ibn Bakkār's 9th-century *Al-Akhbār al-muwaffaqiyyāt* that describes not a type of literature, but a type of behavior defined as *mujūn*.

This story is about four sons who are accused before the caliph al-Ma'mūn of unseemly *mujūn*.²⁷⁴ When the caliph confirms the accusation by discovering the silly statements engraved on their signet rings, one son explains that they learned this behavior from their father, a treasurer in al-Ma'mūn's court. By way of example he tells a story of the long and harrowing night in which his father discovered that there were no more cones of sugar in the house. In this story, his father angrily demands that his entire household stand on one foot until the servants can purchase more sugar in the middle of the night. While his tired family abides by his arbitrary command, he raves on a wide range of subjects such as property taxes, the improper behavior of women, and (when the servants finally do return with sugar) the minute details of lawful Islamic buying and selling practices.

²⁷³ Azdī, *Sittenbild*, V.

²⁷⁴ Bakkār, *Akhbār*, 69.

Since this story is presented as evidence of their father's *mujūn*, we can look to it for information on the defining characteristics of *mujūn* itself.²⁷⁵ 'Alī ibn Ṣāliḥ, the treasurer, in his night-long act of *mujūn*, establishes an alternative set of rules for his party to live by (that everyone must stand on one foot until he receives a cone of sugar). Meanwhile, as noted by Stefan Leder in his "Prosa-Dichtung in der aḥbār Überlieferung," his absurd behavior undercuts any wisdom that may be found in his discussion of the laws that regulate daily life (like the property taxes and buying and selling practices). As for 'Alī ibn Ṣāliḥ's speech, Leder writes, "It shows that he considers the lack of sugar a disaster—itself already a laughable exaggeration of a really inconsequential problem—and that he goes from the particular to the general to the point that he seeks to integrate his subjective perception into the level of general truth—the truth of the revelation and the sunna." *Mujūn*, therefore, can describe behavior that follows a set of bizarre rules, whose enactment parodically echoes the logic of the daily laws under which we live (though this may sometimes have the effect of confirming the logic of these laws).²⁷⁶

In this sense, *mujūn* is like playing a game. Game-playing also demands that we abide by a set of arbitrary rules. Paradoxically, abiding by these rules constitutes a break from abiding by the rules of daily life. So to relax and have fun, instead of temporarily eschewing laws altogether, we sometimes prefer to adhere to a very strict regimen of separate rules. Leslie Kurke's *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold* shows that games as portrayed in certain Greek texts have a similarly contradictory status as at once mirroring the laws of life outside the game and representing a distraction from that life. In the *Odyssey*, she writes, Penelope's suitors (describable as party-crashers), pass the time away playing what sounds like a miniature bowling

²⁷⁵ Cooperson first directed me to this story as an interesting subject of study for a student of *mujūn*, and we read it together in the summer of 2010 along with Stefan Leder's "Prosa-Dichtung."

²⁷⁶ Examples are found throughout Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*.

game in which, in this case, the pin is called “Penelope.”²⁷⁷ This is damning evidence of the suitor’s lack of “Greek manhood” because of their “symbolic substitution” of game logic for life (the active courting of Penelope).²⁷⁸ At the same time, however, Kurke describes how the game board is likened to a city, and by implication, life in a city is likened to a game, as, for example, in fragments of Herakleitos.²⁷⁹ One such fragment (“Time is a boy playing, playing *pessoi*; kingship belongs to the boy,”) portrays certain games, like the strategic board game *pessoi*, as reflecting the order of the cosmos. As Charles Kahn interprets, “...these moves follow a definite rule, so that after one side plays it is the other’s turn, and after the victory is reached the play must start over from the beginning. The rules of the *pessoi*-game thus imitate the alternating measures of cosmic fire.”²⁸⁰ As shown below, later texts, and some medieval Arabic texts, make similar analogies, especially with regard to the game of chess.

Of all the games Abū al-Qāsim could have played, chess is certainly not the most absurd, or the one most readily likened to *mujūn*. Abū al-Qāsim in fact proposes that they play either chess or backgammon (Abū al-Jalab and Abū al-Ṣannāj, his nonsense jargon nicknames for the games).²⁸¹ Backgammon, according to medieval game lore, was thought to symbolize a more arbitrary, fate-driven universe, while chess symbolized the logical, careful choices of an agent with free will.²⁸² Indeed in his humorous work *My One Contribution to Chess*, F.V. Morley, son

²⁷⁷ Kurke, *Coins*, 256.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 268-70.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

²⁸¹ For a description of similar nicknames used for food in Arabic literature, see van Gelder, “Edible Fathers and Mothers,” 105-120.

²⁸² Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj*, I:161, V:3477-81.

of the former chair of the mathematics department at John Hopkins University, complains that by careful study of the patterns of chess, the game may cease to be a game altogether, and become something of a mathematical exercise, precluding a sporting match between two players of unequal experience or knowledge of, for example, opening moves.

Morley sees the game of chess as a “dromenon,” defined as “a pattern of dynamic expression in which the performers express something larger than themselves...”²⁸³ In other words, chess is a model of life, and is often considered, like Abū al-Qāsim, to be a microcosm with certain heuristic utilities. When working in a government office dedicated to the resolution of labor disputes (the War Labor Board), Morley found relief from the mixture of chaos and red tape that characterized his job in the relatively orderly representation of the universe provided by the game of chess.²⁸⁴ Having lived through two world wars, he even recommends chess as an activity over which families may reconnect with returning veterans. Chess, long thought of as a representation of war,²⁸⁵ may provide a more orderly and socially pleasurable representation of real life which, though also played according to rules, can nevertheless seem senseless in comparison.

Chess is similarly considered an orderly representation of the universe in Arabic sources contemporary with the *Hikāya*:

Look, and you will see chess revolving like fate

Day and night, misfortune and blessings.

²⁸³ Morley, *My One Contribution*, 47, quoting Jane Harrison in *Ancient Art and Ritual*.

²⁸⁴ Morley, *My One Contribution*, 78

²⁸⁵ It may be of interest that Abū al-Qāsim, as a representative of Baghdad, once a center of empire, wins this metaphorical war against the Isfahani guest.

Its Mover remains, all the rest of it passes,
And after annihilation, it is revived and its bones resurrected.²⁸⁶

In his *Gambling in Islam*, Franz Rosenthal writes that chess was praised by some for its “usefulness for improving the mind and teaching military strategy.” On the other hand, however, it was criticized as “too engrossing and causing neglect of...religious duties.”²⁸⁷ So despite its therapeutic orderliness and status as a dromenon, chess remained a distraction from real life. In a (almost certainly apocryphal) condemnation of the game, ‘Alī ibn Abī al-Ṭālib says, “Chess-players are the biggest liars of all or among the biggest liars, saying ‘I killed,’ when they did not kill.”²⁸⁸ This condemnation, like the narration of the chess-game in the *Hikāya*, links game-playing to a type of speech with a complex relationship to the truth.

Abū al-Qāsim’s speech is wild, drunken, and self-contradictory, but nevertheless forms a kind of microcosm. Likewise, despite criticisms of chess in particular and game-playing in general as distractions from the realities of life, chess also represents a microcosm. For example, the 7th century Pahlavi text by Meher-Awan Kai-khusru, *The Explanation of Chatrang*, explains that the thirty pieces are “like the thirty days and nights” (presumably of a month), the “turning of the board” is like “the revolution of the stars and the rotation of the sky,” and the “progress in a circle of the pieces...resemble the movements of men in this world...who pass away from this earth [and] who become revived at the time of resurrection.”²⁸⁹ This description of chess-as-

²⁸⁶ This poem, by Badr al-Dīn ibn al-Ṣāhib, is quoted by al-Ghuzūlī in *Maṭāli‘ al-budūr* and translated by Rosenthal, *Gambling in Islam*, 161.

²⁸⁷ Rosenthal, *Gambling in Islam*, 89.

²⁸⁸ Ājurrī, *Tahrīm al-nard*, 61.

²⁸⁹ Translated by J.C. Tarapore. Kai-khusru. *The Explanation*, 13-14. Also see Murray, *History of Chess*, 209.

microcosm closely resembles descriptions of man-as-microcosm found, for example, in the 34th *risāla* of the secret philosophical society known as the Brothers of Purity, or the Ikhwān al-Safā' (10th/11th century), “Fī ma‘nā qawl al-ḥukamā’ anna al-‘ālam insān kabīr” (about the meaning of the wise men’s saying that the world is a giant human).²⁹⁰ In this epistle the Ikhwān describe how the course of the planets, the different types of human personalities, and even the number of the days of the week are all reflected in the various organs and characteristics of the individual human beings (for more on this, see Chapter Four). Like chess, man (as well as the *Hikāya* itself) is represented as an intersection of disparate parts that together form a cosmic whole. But when these representations of the universe are presented as nonsensical or divorced from reality, they may cast doubt on man’s perception of the universe itself, highlighting our capacity to live under nonsensical rules or to be convinced by eloquent and seductive but perhaps ultimately misleading speech.

In the poem cited above, the reordering of the chess board after a game is imagined as a metaphor for the day of resurrection. At the end of the *Hikāya*, after Abū al-Qāsim has passed out in drunkenness along with his exhausted fellow guests, he wakes up in the morning and resumes his pious manner and appearance exactly as at the beginning of the book, as if none of his raving or drunken insults had ever been enunciated. Rather than providing a comfortingly orderly representation of the universe, however, this resurrection seems to cast doubt on the reality of anything—of his pious demeanor when entering or exiting the party, or of the whirlwind of verbosity that occupies the bulky middle section of the text.

²⁹⁰ Van Gelder suggested the term “macranthrope” in a private communication to me.

As shown in chapter 1.3, the *Ḥikāya*, though representing the passing of time with almost unprecedented realism, inhabits a topsy-turvy time in which day and night themselves are reversed and confused. The night is the appropriate time for frivolous conversation (*samar*, or “evening chat”), but the *Ḥikāya* begins its *samar* in the morning. Moreover, as Abū al-Qāsim and his fellow guest begin their game of chess, Abū al-Qāsim recites a nonsense poem expressive of this sense of topsy-turvy time:

He would begin by advancing his pawns, and reciting some nonsense (*hadhayān*) by way of opening the game:

We went out early late at night after the start of day,
And hunted rabbits, jackals, wolves, but donkeys got away!²⁹¹

In *Nonsense*, Susan Stewart offers a list of five ways to not make sense. Though she emphasizes the fluidity and incompleteness of this list in her preface,²⁹² we can nevertheless easily find the category, “discourse that denies itself,”²⁹³ that best suits Abū al-Qāsim’s poem. As an example of this category of nonsense, she quotes a poem that begins: “Ladies and jellyspoons:/ I come before you/ To stand behind you/ To tell you something/ I know nothing about./ Last Thursday/ Which was Good Friday/ There will be a mothers’ meeting/ For Fathers only...” Both Abū al-Qāsim’s poem and this poem sound like they refer to a specific time with detailed language (“early late at night after the start of day” and “Last Thursday/ Which was Good Friday”) but

²⁹¹ *H*, 279. See Carroll’s poem, cited in the Chapter 1.3, which discusses portrayals of topsy-turvy time in the *Ḥikāya*. “The sun was shining on the sea,/ Shining with all his might.../And this was odd, because it was/ The middle of the night” (*Through the Looking-Glass*, 183).

²⁹² Stewart, *Nonsense*, VIII.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 72-7.

each added detail actually detracts from our information by rendering the date described impossible and contradictory. Stewart begins her description of “discourse that denies itself” by saying:

The metacommunication necessary for the message “This is play” or “This is a fiction” implicitly carries a denial and a criticism—a denial because of the status of the representation as an activity that is framed as both real and non real, and a criticism because the discourse has been framed, set off, and is examinable from many sides and able to be manipulated.

Thus this type of nonsense in the *Ḥikāya* further contributes to the tension between literary representation and reality that has been the focus of exploration throughout this dissertation. Stewart’s nonsense category of “discourse that denies itself” best suits not only Abū al-Qāsim’s speech during the chess game, but nonsense in the *Ḥikāya* more generally. For example, in describing this category of nonsense Stewart also discusses unreliable narrators like Tristram Shandy, and parodies of didactic speech in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice*.²⁹⁴ Both the concepts of unreliable narrators, and mockeries of the didactic in the *Ḥikāya* are discussed in chapters 1.1 and two.

But as for the type of speech explicitly designated as nonsense in the chess game, aside from the familiar-sounding example quoted above, we also have the following: “Umm Razīn shat in the bread, / “It helps it rise!” Umm Razīn said.” Also: “This is odd manners, gentlemen!

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 73,76.

This is the uncouth language of Baghdad’s Bāb al-Ṭāq, and the strange whims of chance!”²⁹⁵

The poem about Umm Razīn may be nonsense because it does not directly pertain to its context in the story, and also because it describes an absurd action justified with a “logical” explanation (not unlike ‘Alī ibn Ṣāliḥ’s moralizing speeches made while standing on one foot waiting for sugar in the middle of the night). These two examples of “nonsense” are nevertheless disturbing to me because they make about as much sense as does the rest of the *Ḥikāya*. In fact they make more sense than a good deal of Abū al-Qāsim’s conversation. No doubt this is due in part to the highly local and time-specific nature of some of the vocabulary. Why, for example, he refers to the Bāb al-Ṭāq neighborhood of medieval Baghdad is now less than clear. Some of Abū al-Qāsim’s conversation during the chess game in particular can be identified as popular sayings and are locatable in books of Arabic proverbs (see Appendix). One senses that most of his comments in this section are in fact similarly derived from idioms and sayings, and naturally many of these sayings are obscure to modern readers. However, as shown previously, much of the party-crasher’s conversation throughout the day also seems to confuse his fellow guests and contemporaries. But by emphasizing the ideas of “nonsensical” or “raving” speech during the chess game, the narrative aligns game-playing with a particular kind of speech.

Though the *Ḥikāya* is generally brim-full of difficult language whose meaning often seems impossible to determine, the chess game is one of the most difficult passages to understand. Not only is it filled with forgotten sayings and nonsense-poetry, the chess moves described are rarely clear. Like the rest of the narrative, this game is presented in a kind of hypothetical grammatical construction, with each move described only as a possible example of

²⁹⁵ *H*, 288, 289.

a move that could be made.²⁹⁶ This chess game itself is purely hypothetical, for when Abū al-Qāsim asks to play chess or backgammon, the narrator writes, “They would bring out, for example, a chess game,” suggesting that they could have just as easily brought out a backgammon board.

For each hypothetical chess move, the narrator suggests that Abū al-Qāsim would have a quip or poem to recite. Given that there are more possible chess games than atoms in the observable universe,²⁹⁷ this would indeed render Abū al-Qāsim a man of microcosmic verbal ability. As for the chess moves themselves, they often seem hastily-describes excuses for the production of creative taunts (or in other words, set-ups for a joke). Therefore, just as the portrait of Baghdad provided in the *Hikāya* is always ambiguous and unreliable, and the nature of its competition with the physical city of Isfahan flounders in a disorienting flow of words, the precise chess game played in the *Hikāya* is impossible to reconstruct.

To demonstrate the futility of this endeavor, I will here attempt (and fail) to do exactly that. In doing so, I will show that two types of games are being played (as defined by Roger Caillois): *Agôn* (competition), the relatively orderly game of chess, and *Ilinx* (vertigo), the disorienting and dizzying game of *mujūn*. In the chess game here described, the raving quality of the discourse (*mujūn*), drowns out the orderly nature of the competition, which we find unreconstructable.

According to H.J.R. Murray, the tradition of white (or red) playing first is a modern one, so we cannot determine the color of Abū al-Qāsim’s pieces based on the fact that he plays

²⁹⁶ For example: “And if his opponent would take up one of his pawns in his hand, and act as if he were going to move it, he would say, ‘If you see the chicken pecking the rooter’s ass, you know that she’s telling him ‘fuck, fuck!’” (*H*, 282).

²⁹⁷ This fun fact is widely circulating among chess and math enthusiasts, but is explained in careful detail in Breslin, “Number of Possible.”

first.²⁹⁸ Abū al-Qāsim begins by advancing his pawns. His opponent likewise advances his pawns. Given that the pawns, unlike in the modern game, could advance only one square at a time on their opening move,²⁹⁹ Abū al-Qāsim’s response to his opponent’s seemingly modest and conservative opening sounds especially nonsensical:

Then his fellow player would advance his pawns, and he would say, “Hey loser, bite by bite so you don’t choke! Just two squares at a time, so you don’t end in the black! Camel by camel or you’ll break the *maḥāmīl!*³⁰⁰ I say enough, but he’s sneaking up! Your basket won’t split, mister! Don’t hurry, my lord, hurrying’s for tom-cats. He gets two of my pawns for one pawn, now that’s a good deal!

This last comment seems to suggest that Abū al-Qāsim and his opponent have taken one another’s pawns, and Abū al-Qāsim in fact goes on to elaborate on this exchange, reciting: “He got for a beard that for which I sold a hairless asshole.” In terms of sexual value, a hairless asshole may prove more valuable than a beard, as bearded men were not typically considered attractive (to other men). So it seems that Abū al-Qāsim’s opponent is slightly in the lead.

Abū al-Qāsim then would *yasthaẓhir bi-firzān band* (perhaps “advance the Queen protected by a pawn”). According to Reinhard Wieber, who cites this very line in his *Das Schachspiel in der arabischen Literatur*, this suggests that the queen’s movement is protected by

²⁹⁸ Murray, *History of Chess*, 224.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 226.

³⁰⁰ Litters for camel-back, which presumably could be become entangled and break if the camels walked side-by-side.

the pawn sitting in front of her.³⁰¹ The queen, then called the *firzān* or adviser, could move only one diagonal space at a time.³⁰² Abū al-Qāsim, perhaps, advances his *firzān* behind a diagonal line of pawns who had already begun their advance.³⁰³

Having thus moved his queen in relation to his pawns, Abū al-Qāsim makes a baffling comment: *Iṣ'ad bi-lijāf wa-nzil bi-mirwahah*. Michael Cooperson suggested the reading “Go up with a blanket and come back down with a fan,” speculating that, given the medieval Arabic habit of sleeping on the roof on warm evenings, to go up with a blanket to cool off would be counter-intuitive. Likewise to come back down, presumably to warm up, while carrying a fan, would also be counter-intuitive. This reading makes this comment another kind of “discourse that denies itself,” providing contradictory, self-cancelling advice. Mary St. Germain,³⁰⁴ citing a series of Arabic chess terms provided by Wieber,³⁰⁵ translates this comment as referring directly to the game, though her interpretation of these terms and the resulting translation (“back up a square to go around a piece,”) I find less than convincing. Cooperson’s interpretation seems to me the most likely, given the density of proverbs recited during the chess game, many of them locatable in Freytag’s and others’ dictionaries of Arabic proverbs.³⁰⁶ This does not, however,

³⁰¹ Wieber, *Schachspiel*, 322.

³⁰² Murray, *History of Chess*, 225.

³⁰³ Khawam translates: *Cette fois, c'est la Reine qu'il envoie en renfort sur le pion le plus menacé*, suggesting that Abū al-Qāsim moves a queen in order to defend a pawn, though this seems an unlikely strategy, even given the diminished value of the queen in medieval Arabic chess (al-Azdī, *24 heures*, 245). It is also tempting to consider this a reference to a set opening series of moves (see, for example, Murray’s description of the *Queen’s Pawn Opening* popular in the Medieval European game (*History of Chess*, 472-3).

³⁰⁴ St. Germain, *Anomalous*, 328.

³⁰⁵ Wieber, *Schachspiel*, 308, 333.

³⁰⁶ See Appendix for more detail.

mean that the chess-related double meaning of some of these words is without significance, especially considering that the verbs “go up” and “come down” were used specifically to describe the movement of the queen.³⁰⁷ Ultimately the meaning is unclear. As with so much of Abū al-Qāsim’s abundant and head-spinning speech, we must ask ourselves if even his opponent or the other guests watching the chess game know what he means. This impression is strengthened by the narrator’s repeatedly describing Abū al-Qāsim’s speech during the chess game as “raving” (*hadhāyān*) or saying that he “talks nonsense” (*yuhjir*).

The narrator goes on to say that Abū al-Qāsim would limit his opponent’s play from the sides.³⁰⁸ If the opponent broke out of this trap, he would recite an obscene poem. This move is clearly too vague and hypothetical to reconstruct precisely. The narrator continues with a blessedly clear description of the next move: “His opponent would send his knight into the center after the advancing of the pawns.”³⁰⁹ So despite all the talk and braggadocio, we appear still to be in a very early stage of a game, which is unfolding in a usual way with the advance of pawns and a knight.

Abū al-Qāsim then suggests that his opponent move “the king’s guard,” probably the pawn in front of the king.³¹⁰ From this comment we can guess at least that this pawn has not yet moved. Little beyond this is clear. His opponent considers and rejects several moves and is duly mocked for his hesitation. Abū al-Qāsim then takes a pawn on the side of the board, remarking,

³⁰⁷ Murray, *History of Chess*, 227.

³⁰⁸ St. Germain interprets this line not as a move but as further commentary of Abū al-Qāsim (*Anomalous*, 328). It seems unlikely that Abū al-Qāsim is speaking here because this comment is *followed* by “he would say,” which throughout the game introduces Abū al-Qāsim’s speech, while commentary of the audience is introduced by “it would be said.”

³⁰⁹ *H*, 281.

³¹⁰ Or perhaps a piece otherwise protecting the king from attack (see Wieber, *Schachspiel*, 300).

“if you can’t find a rose, take a cyclamen.”³¹¹ His opponent in turn takes one of his pawns. When the audience asks Abū al-Qāsim why he did not see the threat to his pawn, Abū al-Qāsim tells them to go to hell (in so many words) and takes his opponent’s queen or knight. “A blow of the stone hammer is better than a thousand strikes of the mallet,” he says. The next several moves are described in only the most general terms, Abū al-Qāsim’s opponent erring and hesitating and receiving due mockery, being forced to take one move he quickly regrets. The opponent moves the knight to the side of the board³¹² and is mocked for this by Abū al-Qāsim. (Indeed it is poor strategy to limit the knight’s movement in this way). He then blocks Abū al-Qāsim, who screams (he screams and even neighs several times during the game). But he soon takes some of his opponents’ pieces in retaliation. Beyond this, our picture of the state of the board is now wholly unclear. More hesitations and retractions are described than actual moves. At this point we know only that Abū al-Qāsim is dominating both the board and the conversation.

Several more hesitations and false starts follow, until suddenly Abū al-Qāsim’s opponent simultaneously threatens his king and his bishop. It looks bad for our (anti-)hero, who screams again, but in a series of partially nonsensical but clearly threatening poems, indicates that his opponent has in fact fallen into a trap. Indeed his next described move threatens his opponent’s rook and king with his bishop, “an admirable, elegant move.”³¹³

Abū al-Qāsim’s opponent struggles for the rest of the game. The narrator tells us that his head is spinning, he curses, his king is in a tight spot, and his pawns are scattered. Or as Abū al-

³¹¹ *H*, 283.

³¹² A chess-board at that time would probably have been made of soft patterned cloth (Murray, *History of Chess*, 220).

³¹³ *H*, 289.

Qāsim puts it, “He’s in the shit up to his throat and the dogs are standing guard.”³¹⁴ He then moves in for the checkmate using his knight, and overturns the chessboard in raucous triumph, thus ending the game.

Like so much of the *Ḥikāya*, this chess game is a mixture of tantalizingly specific-sounding details comprising a wholly hypothetical and historically unreconstructable scene, couched in familiar but often incomprehensible conversation. In his work *The Most Human Human*, Brian Christian compares the game of chess to a conversation. In both chess and conversation, there are standard traditional openers and closers from which we rarely deviate. Computers can hold a conversation or play chess within these set parameters as well as humans can. As with life itself, he writes, which always starts with birth and ends with death, it is the variations in the middle that make each conversation or chess game uniquely human.³¹⁵ By entering and exiting the party dressed as an ascetic and reciting pious poetry, Abū al-Qāsim evokes the standard pious openings and endings of contemporary Arabic texts. The center of the *Ḥikāya*, however, casts jarring doubt on even these familiar signposts.

On January 27th, 2002, Bobby Fischer, former chess World Champion, declared the game of chess dead.³¹⁶ Entire games could now be played “by the book,” a phrase used to describe moves memorized in patterns, themselves repetitions of former games by past masters. Though filled with literary clichés—familiar tropes and poetic quotations—the *Ḥikāya* is nevertheless not a dead game, and not “by the book.” Partly by virtue of its iterative mode, which leaves all events described hovering between the realms of truth and fiction, and partly by virtue of Abū al-

³¹⁴ Ibid., 291.

³¹⁵ Christian, *Most Human Human*, 99-131.

³¹⁶ This radio interview with a station in Reykjavik can be found on Chessbase News.

Qāsim's refusal to adhere even to the outlandish norms of the buffoon (he will not let his audience laugh), the *Hikāya*, like the chess-game described within it, remains stubbornly anomalous—resembling those games recorded in “the books,” but not quite identifiable within these books. So *mujūn* may be a crazy game, but it may tend to occur within certain temporal and literary parameters in the game of daily life which it parodies and inhabits. *Hikāyat Abī al-Qāsim*, baffling, evading, and turning the very game-board on its face, does not play by the rules.

The chess game in Abū al-Qāsim is paradigmatic not only because it offers us an opportunity to explore the definition of *mujūn* as a type of playful language, but also because the game, like Abū al-Qāsim, is a microcosm. Playing a game, though a distraction from everyday life, can nevertheless teach us something about the universe. The next chapter will discuss Abū al-Qāsim as microcosm, as well as his resemblance to certain holy man characters, and even to prophets.

Chapter 4: The Cosmic Crasher

O Nature, and O soul of man! How far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! Not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind.

Captain Ahab in Melville, *Moby-Dick*, “The Sphynx”

Seems to me some sort of Equator cuts yon old man, too, right in his middle. He’s always under the Line...

Melville, *Moby-Dick*, “The Deck”

Al-Azdī tells us that Abū al-Qāsim is based on a real person that he once knew, though he does not suggest that this friend was himself named Abū al-Qāsim. We may have reason to believe that the name was designed to achieve a particular effect, for it is a name strongly associated with the prophet Muḥammad, whose son Qāsim passed away at a young age. Abū al-Qāsim’s *ism*, Aḥmad (another name for the prophet, derived from the same root as the name Muḥammad), strengthens this impression.³¹⁷ The use of this name to designate a man of Abū al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī’s qualities may at first strike us as inappropriate, but closer examination shows that the prophet Muḥammad and Abū al-Qāsim share more than a name alone. Both are at once real human beings, and “the cosmic individual in whom all [the Islamic Community’s] faculties are realized.”³¹⁸ This is H.A.R. Gibb’s characterization of the prophet Muḥammad in the view of mystical Islam, but it could just as well describe Abū al-Qāsim, introduced as an all-encompassing intersection of all the people of Baghdad.

In many ways Abū al-Qāsim seems a travesty of the prophet, suggesting the distance between the ideal of the Islamic *umma* as embodied in Muḥammad’s epic person, and contemporary Baghdadi discourse, which, as it is represented in the *Hikāya*, tends towards

³¹⁷ Such use of Muḥammad’s name was in fact considered forbidden by many, and seems especially daring given that both of his names, Aḥmad and Abū al-Qāsim, are given to this often foul-mouthed and rascally character. See Azdī, *Sittenbild*, XXV n. 1. Also see Wensinck, “Kunyah,” 395-6.

³¹⁸ From Gibb’s Foreword to Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, XVI.

decadent worldliness.³¹⁹ But Abū al-Qāsim, who is no Muḥammad, is nevertheless not without his own claims to cosmic significance. As an uninvited guest, he resembles the unexpected visit of the divine, dressed in rags.

The party-crasher naturally becomes the life of the party, for, because of his surprising presence, there is a story to tell. Like a prophet, he arrives as an outsider, often with a startling new point of view. Furthermore, the image of the party-crasher as a mystic who “knows the unknown”³²⁰ recurs, however satirical in tone, throughout Arabic party-crashing literature. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s *Al-Taṭfīl* describes a party-crasher in Basra, the leader of a kind of party-crashing cult, the members of which are able to divine the secrets of the dishes consumed at a party.³²¹ On a more earnest note, al-Khaṭīb’s work subtly presents the party-crashers as the allies of the prophet Muhammad, who himself helped uninvited people get into parties.³²² Like a god in disguise, the ragged party-crasher tests the limits of the host’s generosity. The very lowness of the uninvited guest’s appearance may be part of this test.

Abū al-Qāsim enters the Isfahani party with the appearance of a holy man, and his subsequent mad and blasphemous ravings do not necessarily set him apart from other holy men of his time. Indeed one branch of mystical Islam called *Malāmatiyya* (loosely “Blameworthy”) encouraged its members to court blame with outrageous and disgusting behavior, because the

³¹⁹ Abū al-Qāsim’s entrance to the party as a holy man led Moreh to interpret the text as an attempt “to mock Shi‘ite piety and depict everyday life in Baghdad” (*Live Theatre*, 96).

³²⁰ Khaṭīb, *Taṭfīl*, 146.

³²¹ *Ibid.* In the same text, a party-crasher is satirized as having arcane knowledge of hidden things, as long as they’re hidden in pots (*ibid.*, 76). The same theme is repeated in *H*, 64.

³²² Khaṭīb, *Taṭfīl*, 54-9.

praise of one's fellow man is an earthly pleasure unworthy of the sincere believer.³²³ In his catalogue of different types of madmen, al-Nīsābūrī describes those who pretend to be crazy to conceal that they are beloved of God, and emphasizes that Muḥammad himself was considered a madman and a sorcerer by his contemporaries. In Muḥammad's own words, *man 'arafa rabbahu kāna 'ind al-nās majnūnan* ("whoever knows his Lord the people think mad").³²⁴

Wandering Sufis often excited the suspicion of their contemporaries, who accused them of sponging.³²⁵ Indeed Abū al-Qāsim himself perpetuates this stereotype, calling a sponger at the Isfahani party a Sufi who asks but does not give in return.³²⁶ Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, litterateur and philosopher, is thought by some to be the author of the *Hikāya* in part because he, like the protagonist of the *Hikāya*, seems at once a wise mystic and a foul-mouthed beggar. Beggars in contemporary Arabic literature frequently adopt a pious front to garner sympathy, as described by a miser in al-Jāhīz's *Kitāb al-bukhalā'* (translated by R.B. Serjeant):

The *muqaddis* (sanctimonious) is a person who stands by a dead man, begging for a shroud for him. He stands on the road to Mecca by a dead donkey or a dead camel, claiming that it was his, averring that by its death he has been frustrated from performing the pilgrimage. He has learned the dialect of the Khurāsānīs, Yemenis and Ifrīqiyyans

³²³ Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*.

³²⁴ Nīsābūrī, *Uqalā'*, 30. Melville's Ishmael similarly remarks of a shipmate lost at sea: "He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad" (*Moby-Dick*, 440).

³²⁵ For example, van Gelder translates al-Tha'ālibī's comment that "the eating of Sufis is proverbial: one may say, 'eating more than the Sufis'... This is because it is their profession to eat a lot. They take big mouthfuls..." adding, "Such statements derive from a combination of anti-mystical prejudices and the existence of 'false,' or at least hedonistic, Sufis" (*Dishes*, 100. Also see 'Abd al-Mawla's *al-'Ayyārūn wa-al-shuṭṭār*, in which he identifies the *'ayyarūn* as Sufis (32)).

³²⁶ *H*, 64.

and become acquainted with the towns, roads and men of those countries. When he wants, he is an Ifrīqiyyan, when he wants, he is of the Farghānah folk and when he wants he hails from whatever district of the Yemen he likes.³²⁷

This mock holy man bears a striking resemblance to the *ḥākī* (mimic) described by al-Jāḥiẓ in al-Azdī's introduction. Of this *ḥākī*, to whom the author al-Azdī likens himself recreating the speech of the chameleon Abū al-Qāsim, al-Jāḥiẓ writes:

Nevertheless, we sometimes see a man who can do impressions, of the people of Yemen for example, recreating their unusual pronunciation in every particular. He could imitate a Moroccan, a Khurasani, a Persian, a Sindi, or an African, and yes, even to the point that it seemed more natural to him than to them.³²⁸

These descriptions emphasize the deceptive language of the seeming holy man. These tricksters will say anything, and convincingly, using the authority of their eloquence to gain the most personal advantage out of a situation. They are like the trickster hero of Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī's *Maqāmāt*, who, repeatedly found preaching pious sentiments for cash that he subsequently spends on wine and women, repeatedly justifies his actions with an eloquent verse on the mutability of time.³²⁹

³²⁷ Translated by R.B. Serjeant. Jāḥiẓ, *Book of Misers*, 44.

³²⁸ *H*, 43.

³²⁹ The trickster heroes of the *maqāmāt* seem false holy men and chameleons. In Ibn Naqiya's tenth *maqāma*, the trickster al-Yashkurī, who is forever adopting disguises, claims to be a prophet whose divine message is "Wine today, business tomorrow!" (lines attributed to the pre-Islamic poet Imru' al-Qays, translated by van Gelder, "Fools and Rogues," 50.). As Hamori puts it, "the ritual clown and the man of pious exhortation depend on one another," and the *maqāmāt* "unite the two roles in a single person" (*On the Art*, 55).

The *Hikāya* shares many passages in common with al-Hamadhānī's *Maqāmāt*, whose hero Abū al-Faṭḥ often closely resembles Abū al-Qāsim. Partly because of this resemblance, some scholars see Abū al-Qāsim as a low-life hypocrite who adopts the garb of a holy man simply to get fed.³³⁰ However, as an embodiment of a microcosm, Abū al-Qāsim appears on the contrary to genuinely embody both the high and the low, the holy and profane, in all their muddled commingling in a cosmopolitan society.³³¹ The literature cited in this study itself ranges between the serious and the humorous (*al-jidd wa-l-hazl*), blending the two such that they cannot be disentangled. This is only fitting, as literary and philosophical portrayals of man-as-microcosm emphasize the contradictory and ambiguous qualities of humanity.

With the *Hikāya*, however, we are witnessing more than a Bakhtinian carnivalesque ambiguity. We may well be tempted to turn to Bakhtin, who consistently describes Rabelais's jolly giants as cosmic men and microcosms, and centers of gay ambiguity. To Bakhtin, the contradictions of praise and blame, old and new, high and low (which all resonate with the portrayal of Abū al-Qāsim), have a very physical presence. They are located in the body, and symbolize the fertilizing powers of death, and the constantly self-renewing mass of humanity. However, although Rabelais's language is, like al-Azdī's, encyclopedic, overflowing, obscene, and often dense, Bakhtin repeatedly argues that this language is representative not only of universal man in an abstract sense, but of the concrete and physical reality of 16th-century France. Thus when he describes Rabelais's work and its characters as a microcosm, he means, in

³³⁰ Balda, "Marginalité," 378-9.

³³¹ This confusion of the holy man and the madman/vagabond is by no means limited to Islamic or Arabic cultures. In medieval picaresque narrative, the saints are similarly transformed into picaros "through a comic *imitation* of holy models, in such a way as to confuse the boundaries of the holy and the profane" (Giles, *Laughter*, 75).

part, that the work contains an actual miniature geography of France, whose features can be confirmed by historical research. The places around which the giants rampage really existed much as they were described in *Pantagruel*. Though specific place-names in both Baghdad and Isfahan are mentioned in the *Hikāya*, they are mentioned only as an excuses to play word games with these names (e.g. “I hear names like Sārmana (which means camel shitty), Kalmīrai (meaning goat shitty), Adhār (he comes a-farting in their beards), Kūrasmān (constipation or diarrhea), Kūrishān (shit in the beard)...”³³² As shown throughout this study, the *Hikāya* tends to deliberately eschew physical reality in favor of language play. Isfahan, in which the tale unfolds, is described only in improbable hyperbole, and Baghdad, the focus of al-Azdī’s portrayal, is often more concealed than revealed by the confused profusion of Abū al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī’s speech.

And yet in his introduction, the author al-Azdī promises us a written mimesis of all Baghdadis, organized in a single form (*ṣūra wāḥida*). By way of explanation, he quotes al-Jāhiz’s description of a mime, who produces the platonic ideal of that which he mimics in his performance. Because of his capacity to mimic all things, al-Jāhiz adds, the ancients claimed that man is a microcosm, “because he forms every form with his hand, and imitates every sound with his mouth, and because he eats plants like beasts of burden, and eats meat like beasts of prey, and eats seeds like birds, and because in him are the shapes of all the kinds of animals.”³³³ Thus the author presents to us his microcosm of Baghdad, his introduction a light rehashing of the language of contemporary esoteric thinkers and their ancient forbears, who indeed believed that the human body was analogous both to an entire city (which likewise has a head, limbs, a

³³² *H*, 93. These are false etymologies of the Persian place-names.

³³³ *H*, 43-4, quoting Jāhiz, *Bayān*, I: 69.

soul, and a system for the evacuation of excrement), and to the universe itself, the very orbits of the planets reflecting various physical and spiritual systems found in each individual.

At al-Jāhiz's time, the idea of a man-as-microcosm was by no means a new one, as evidenced by his citation of the "ancients" (*al-awā'il*) in al-Azdī's introduction. The fine line between men of greatness and foolish madmen, also suggesting in its way the complexity of the human spirit, was similarly ancient in its origins. The famous opposition of the Cynic Diogenes and Alexander the Great is one example of a type of doubling that echoes through the Arabic philosophical tradition,³³⁴ which abounds with narratives of the ancient Greek Cynics depicting conversations between emperors and ragged ascetics.³³⁵ As Barton writes, "the fool—the *fatuus*, the *morio*, the *sannio*—are mirror images of the prince, as Diogenes the Cynic was the mirror of Alexander."³³⁶ Throughout her work she describes the interaction and mingling of these two

³³⁴ The Banū Sāsān, a group of beggars, even claimed descent from the Sassanid emperors (see Mez, *Renaissance of Islam*, 153, and Bosworth, *Mediaeval Islamic Underworld*, 170. As a representative of the city of Baghdad, Abū al-Qāsim is of course already implicitly connected to imperial power).

³³⁵ Gutas, "Sayings by Diogenes." As Branham writes, "Cynic rejection of shame flies in the face of the most basic Christian doctrine," while at the same time, their asceticism garners Christian admiration (*Cynics*, 19). Kinney explores this double reception of the Cynics in medieval and renaissance Christian thought, which saw "some marginal types as unworldly, and therefore deserving, while rejecting the rest as unnatural, hence rightly suppressed" ("Heirs of the Dog," 306). It seems the Cynics were always "bivalent" characters with a similarly dual reception, in ancient Roman culture and even before (see Krueger, "Bawdy," 225). Their ambiguous nature seems intrinsic to their rhetorical position. In exploring questions of Cynic behavior (does their shocking deportment stem from lack of self-control or from saintly humility that shies from all worldly praise?), and the suspicious reception of even Franciscan monks, whose begging and blaming behavior resembled that of the Cynics (Kinney, "Bawdy," 307-8), Kinney's article, which also links the Cynics with professional parasite-jesters and the *scurra* (*ibid.*, 299-300), might remind scholars of medieval Islam of similarly suspicious receptions of the Sufis, popular holy men, and other dwellers on the margins of society, some of whom seem indeed to have deliberately exploited this ambiguity. In their rejection of affiliation with any one *polis*, and their simultaneous identification with animals, men, and the gods (whose speech and behavior were similarly unfettered), the Cynics also possessed a certain universal or cosmic quality (see Moles, "Cynic Cosmopolitanism," 111-113, as well as the introduction to this highly informative volume in which Diogenes is characterized as a "citizen of the universe," Branham, *Cynics*, 25).

³³⁶ Barton, *Sorrows*, 140. Plato likewise referred to Diogenes as "Socrates gone mad" (Branham, *Cynics*, 9).

figures, both marginal and central, in the classical traditions. Even Jesus, she writes, was represented by the *stupidus* character in early Christian mimes.³³⁷ Elsewhere he was compared to the Cynic Diogenes.³³⁸ Likewise the “fool for Christ’s sake,” partly modeled on the character of Diogenes,³³⁹ is reminiscent of some models of wise-foolishness in the Islamic tradition described by al-Nīsābūrī (see above).

Philosophers from Plato to al-Fārābī and beyond emphasize the importance of a mediator figure, neither here nor there,³⁴⁰ and it is chiefly with this liminal category of being that we are dealing here. Especially common in mystical Islam and Sufism was the notion of a saint or prophet, such as Muḥammad, as representative of the entire community, at one with God and man alike, and a mediator between the two. Though every man is a microcosm, these special people’s spirits were especially in tune with the universe at large.³⁴¹ Ibrāhīm al-Jīlī’s *al-Insān al-kāmil* (the perfect or total man), though written several centuries after the probable date of the *Hikāya*’s composition, provides an illuminating exploration of the ancient concept of man-as-microcosm as realized in Islamic mysticism. Like Abū al-Qāsim, a “gathering of the beautiful and the hideous,”³⁴² the “total man” represents the meeting of opposites, or as al-Jīlī puts it, “a bridge between the divine and the world,” both “transcendent” and “immanent.”³⁴³

³³⁷ Barton, *Sorrows*, 168.

³³⁸ Krueger, “Bawdy,” 229.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

³⁴⁰ See Morewedge, “Neoplatonic Structure,” 68-70.

³⁴¹ See Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, 260.

³⁴² *H*, 391.

³⁴³ Reynold Nicholson’s translation. *Islamic Mysticism*, 78, 87.

Although the comparison of Abū al-Qāsim, a dirty foul-mouthed drunk, with this mystical total man may seem invidious, according to al-Jīlī, “What is ugly has its due place in the order of existence no less than what is beautiful, and equally belongs to Divine perfection.”³⁴⁴ As Travis Zadeh explains, “the monstrous, however portentous, was not just a sign of demonic machinations, but also of a sublime and mysterious order.”³⁴⁵ Everything in the universe, hideous and beautiful, forms a part of this divine plan. But Abū al-Qāsim seems a kind of doppelganger of the prophet Muḥammad, in that Muḥammad represents an ideal cosmos with hints of the grotesque, and Abū al-Qāsim, a grotesque cosmos with hints of the ideal.

In al-Jāḥiẓ’s description of man-as-microcosm, man’s bad qualities are mixed generously with the good. Elaborating on the passage quoted by al-Azdī, al-Jāḥiẓ explains in his *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*:

Don’t you know that man...is called “microcosm,” progeny of the macrocosm, for no other reason that one finds in him all the forms that exist in the macrocosm? ...They have found in him the aggressiveness of the camel, the pouncing of the lion, the treacherousness of the wolf, the cunning of the fox, the cowardice of the [nightingale], the hoarding of the ant, the artfulness of the caterpillar, the generosity of the cock, the sociability of the dog, and the homing instinct of the pigeon...³⁴⁶

Al-Jāḥiẓ, who derived many of these comparisons from Arabic proverbs, portrays man as a mixture of the positive and negative qualities found in the rest of creation, with the Arabic

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 85.

³⁴⁵ Zadeh, *Mapping Frontiers*, 4.

³⁴⁶ Van Gelder’s unpublished translation of Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, I: 212-215.

language serving as a kind of witness in support of a philosophical truth. In a passage bearing a close resemblance to al-Jāhiz's description above, Abū al-Qāsim describes an ugly Isfahani woman as sharing the worst qualities of things that have otherwise positive connotations:

By God, there's not a praiseworthy beautiful thing in existence of which she does not share some feature: with the moon, she shares a spotted face; with the pearl, its oyster; with a coin, smallness and yellowness; with a cloud, gloom; with a lion, halitosis; with a rose, its thorn; with a donkey, its braying voice; with a flame, smoke and pain; with a camel, its teeth; with a bull, clumsiness of tongue; with a peacock, its legs and its shriek; with a leopard, its morals and sociability; with water, scum and turbidity; with the tiger, aggressiveness; with wine, the headache; with homes, the toilet and the well.³⁴⁷

By including not only animals, but heavenly bodies, water, and fire, Abū al-Qāsim's insults actually paint a fuller picture of man-as-microcosm than al-Jāhiz's animal-centered musings. Al-Jāhiz goes on:

This does not mean that he turns into camel because he can find his way in the desert or because of his jealousy, his aggressiveness, his malice, or his endurance in carrying heavy loads. Resembling a wolf in the extent to which he is predisposed to being treacherous and cunning like it, or his sense of smell, its ferocity and its great slyness, does not imply that he is a wolf.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ *H*, 207.

³⁴⁸ Van Gelder's translation.

In this passage al-Jāhiz explains how a man, as a microcosm, can contain many conflicting elements. Nor is it necessary to designate one aspect of this man as his true nature. The true nature of man, as al-Jāhiz explains, is to contain elements from the rest of creation, even if those elements seem to contradict. He goes on:

So they made him a “microcosm,” since in him are all its elements, its constituents, and its natural qualities. Don’t you see: in him are the natures of anger and serenity, the concepts of certainty and doubt, firm belief and aporia, astuteness and stupidity, integrity and guile, sincere advice and fraud, loyalty and treachery, dissimulation and sincerity, integrity and hate, seriousness and jesting, miserliness and generosity, thriftiness and extravagance, humility and pride, sociability and shyness, rashness and deliberateness, discernment and haphazard judgment, cowardice and courage, prudence and neglect, wastefulness and parsimony, vulgarity and dignity, hoarding and trusting (in God), contentment and greed, desire and asceticism, wrath and serenity, endurance and loss of control, remembrance and forgetfulness, fear and hope, ambition and despair, blamelessness and culpability, doubt and certainty, modesty and shamelessness, discreetness and indiscretion, confession and denial, knowledge and ignorance, injustice and fairness, boldness and flight, rancor and placability, irascibility and placidity, joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, expectation and wishful thinking, persistence and repentance, stubbornness and capriciousness, inarticulateness and eloquence, speech and dumbness, determination and hesitation, heedlessness and astuteness, forgiveness and

vindictiveness, freewill and nature, and a countless, unlimited number of other qualities.³⁴⁹

Among the “other qualities” al-Jāhiz suggests are also contained in man we will certainly find those used to describe Abū al-Qāsim in the opening lines of the *Hikāya*:

Praising and speaking ill, clever and foolish, noble and base, close and distant, calm and violent, a true friend and a hypocrite, a late-night chatter and a gambler, a top and a bottom... righteous and heretical, an ascetic and a debauchee, an honor and a shame.³⁵⁰

As Monica Balda points out, even the physical description of Abū al-Qāsim suggests a contrast between his venerable white beard and his alcoholic red face.³⁵¹ After further emphasizing that he frequently insults people, the description continues: “He was a note in a little box in a saddlebag in a (lonely) tower, sealed with ambergris, swathed in green silk.”³⁵² This mysterious passage, though followed immediately with the descriptors “a bucket of sin and a bag of mange,”³⁵³ contributes to Abū al-Qāsim’s cosmic persona. As Balda explains, the beard-hairs of the prophet Muḥammad were similarly preserved in tubes wrapped in green cloth and kept as relics,³⁵⁴ much as saints’ body-parts are kept in cathedrals as objects of veneration. Like these

³⁴⁹ Van Gelder’s translation.

³⁵⁰ *H*, 48.

³⁵¹ Balda, “Marginalité,” 374.

³⁵² St. Germain’s translation in *Anomalous*, 157.

³⁵³ *H*, 49.

³⁵⁴ Balda, “Marginalité,” 375-6.

cast-off scraps of the prophet's person, that nevertheless contain his sacred essence, Abū al-Qāsim is a seeming scrap of humanity containing a universe of symbolic power.

Before al-Jāhiz's list of opposing adjectives, he mentions several cosmic implications of man's microcosmic status:

They call him a microcosm because they find that he forms everything with his hand, and imitates every sound with his mouth, and also, they say, because his limbs and organs are distributed over the twelve signs of the zodiac and the seven planets; for in him is yellow bile, which is generated by fire, and black bile, which derives from earth, and blood, which is the product of air, and phlegm, which proceeds from water. And on his four natures are laid down the four pivotal stations.³⁵⁵

Here al-Jāhiz briefly lays out some of the philosophical/scientific explanations for man's status as a microcosm, which can be found in much greater detail in mystical philosophical texts such as the *risā'il* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. This 10th-century secret society elaborated more fully than ever before on the by-then-already-ancient theory of man-as-microcosm, explaining how each organ and attribute of the human being is found mirrored in landscapes, cities, planets, elements, and other features of the universe. For example, as George Conger describes in his *Theories of Macrocosms and Microcosms in the History of Philosophy*, the Ikhwān liken "mountains...to men's bones... rivers to intestines...cultural centers to the front of bodies, wilderness to the back." They drew parallels between "the wind and breathing...winter and old age...[and] 'stars standing still' to stagnation in men's work."³⁵⁶

³⁵⁵ Van Gelder's translation.

³⁵⁶ Conger, *Theories of Macrocosms*, 49.

The 34th *risāla* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, *fī ma ‘nā qawl al-ḥukamā’ anna al- ‘ālam insān kabīr* (about the meaning of the wise men’s saying that the world is a giant human), first uses several explanatory metaphors to show how a unity can be composed of many disparate parts. For example, a city is composed of many different buildings and people, but ruled by one king.³⁵⁷ Thus they variously demonstrate their argument:

The way and the order of the world and the courses of its events, with all the bodies found within it, regardless of differences in their image, varieties in their shape, and changes in their superficial features, function in the way of a single human body or a single animal body.³⁵⁸

In defending this claim, the *risāla* repeatedly refers to the unity of disparate parts *ma ‘a ikhtilāf ṣuwariḥā* (regardless of differences in their forms). Their language is echoed in al-Azdī’s introduction to the character Abū al-Qāsim, who he says represents to him a token of the nature of the people of Baghdad *‘alā tabāyun ṭabaqātihim* (despite differences in their class), *wa ka ‘annamā qad naẓamtuhum fī ṣūra wāḥida yaqa ‘u taḥtahā naw ‘ūhum* (and it is as though I organized them into one form containing all their variety).³⁵⁹ As a microcosm, Abū al-Qāsim contains many various characters within himself. As the Ikhwān say:

³⁵⁷ Ikhwān, *Rasā’il*, 214. Melville similarly describes the unity of the ship under the will of its captain: “For as the one ship that held them all; though it was put together of all contrasting things—oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and hemp—yet all these ran into each other in the one concrete hull, which shot on its way, both balanced and directed by the long central keel...” (*Moby-Dick*, 585).

³⁵⁸ Ikhwān, *Rasā’il*, 212.

³⁵⁹ *H*, 43. Indeed these esoteric speculations seem to have been borne out in modern scientific inquiries. As mathematician Stephen Strogatz described, human cities follow patterns of organic growth displayed by individual organisms. “These numerical coincidences seem to be telling us something profound. It

...in this city are men and women, old and young, and children... the good and evil, wise and ignorant, righteous and corrupt, and as these peoples differ in natures, characters, opinions, deeds and customs, likewise there are many souls in the macrocosm.³⁶⁰

They then go on to explain that this macrocosm is circular in structure, since the seasons of the year occur in a cycle, and water cycles between the clouds and the sea and rivers.³⁶¹ The *Hikāya* itself has a cyclical quality, beginning and ending in the morning, with Abū al-Qāsim reciting exactly the same pious phrases to greet both days.³⁶²

The end of the Ikhwān's epistle especially resembles al-Jāhiz's description of the microcosm because it focuses on animals. As proof that all the seemingly disparate elements in this world are part of the same whole, they describe how some of the higher animals resemble people, while the lower people resemble animals. Elaborating on the idea that there is a system of degrees (*martaba*) in the universe, reflected in the order of planets, they describe a hierarchy in the relation of plant to animal to man. The highest of all plants, the date palm, resembles

appears that Aristotle's metaphor of a city as a living thing is more than merely poetic. There may be deep laws of collective organization at work here, the same laws for aggregates of people and cells" ("Math and the City").

³⁶⁰ Ikhwān, *Rasā'il*: 217.

³⁶⁰ Ikhwān, *Rasā'il*, 220.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² At the beginning and end of the text, Abū al-Qāsim is described as the embodiment of opposites, and at the beginning and end of the text, he insults each guest individually. At the beginning of the text, he is described as wearing a pious robe (the *ṭaylasān*), and reciting pious poetry. At the end of the text, he recites pious poetry and then dons the *ṭaylasān*. Indeed throughout the text can be discerned a symmetrical circular pattern reminiscent of James Monroe's theory of cyclical composition in poetry (see Farrin, *Abundance*.) Thus the text is round like a globe of the earth, or the orbit of a planet, lending the story the mystical symmetry of an amulet or magic square.

animals in that it bleeds and dies when decapitated, and has shallow roots that derive nutrients in a worm-like fashion.³⁶³ Likewise the higher animals, like the monkey or ape, resemble man in the shape of his body, causing him to mimic the spirit of man in the actions of his spirit (*ṣārat nafsuḥu tuḥākī af'āl al-nafs al-insāniyyah*). Likewise the horse resembles man in his nobility and perseverance. Thus the Ikhwān's description of the higher animals focuses on two animals also important to the *Hikāya*, the monkey and the horse.

In the *Hikāya*, the monkey appears many times as a grotesque mirror-image of man. First, when insulting the guests, Abū al-Qāsim remarks:

These people look like monkeys while
they differ thus: the monkeys smile.³⁶⁴

Next, after insulting the mandolin player, he reproaches the crowd for befriending such a poor musician,³⁶⁵ saying: “A monkey looked in a toilet and said, ‘This mirror suits my face.’”³⁶⁶ Soon after, when spying two friends together, he repeats the insult, saying: “A monkey looked in a toilet and said, ‘This mirror suits my face alone!’”³⁶⁷ One is reminded of al-Jīlī's description of the Perfect Man, “who as a microcosmos of a higher order reflects not only the powers of nature but also the divine powers ‘as in a mirror.’”³⁶⁸ The guests at the Isfahani party, in Abū al-

³⁶³ Ikhwān, *Rasā'il*, 223.

³⁶⁴ *H*, 61.

³⁶⁵ Though to be fair, the musician is never given the chance to play his instrument.

³⁶⁶ *H*, 68.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁶⁸ Nicholson, *Islamic Mysticism*, 82

Qāsim's world of rhetoric and insult, display the qualities of man, reflected in an animal form, reflected in a grotesque puddle of filth. Al-Azdī effectively takes the idea of man as a reflection of the sky above and dives with it into the sewer.

The monkey provides the perfect grotesque reflection of man (just as the devil, as fool and trickster, is *simia dei* (the ape of God);³⁶⁹ as al-Jāhiz writes in his *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, no animal's face resembles man's more closely than do monkeys' faces. Indeed, he writes, some people can hardly be distinguished from them! Monkeys (some of whom, as described in the Qur'an, may indeed be people monstrously transformed),³⁷⁰ also laugh, get moved (*yaṭrab*), eat with their hands, and even talk (or perhaps mimic: *yaḥkā*). Also, like man, the monkey cannot naturally swim,³⁷¹ perhaps suggesting that monkeys share a little of man's distance from the natural world.

When Abū al-Qāsim's monkey-ridden round of insults runs out of steam, he moves on to a lengthy description of horses. This marks the beginning of his comparison of Baghdad to Isfahan; the nobility of a man of Baghdad is reflected in the nobility of his mount, he says, while the man of Isfahan is like "a billy-goat riding a donkey...a monkey on a nag."³⁷² In the Ikhwān's description of the higher animals, they dwell longest on the horse, whose noble nature (*karam*) reflects that of man. Also, the Ikhwān add, the horse can understand the language of man.³⁷³

³⁶⁹ Jung, "Trickster-Figure," 255.

³⁷⁰ Qur'ān, Al-A'rāf 7:166, al-Baqara 2:65, al-Mā'ida 7:60.

³⁷¹ Jāhiz, *al-Ḥayawān*, IV: 98.

³⁷² *H*, 126.

³⁷³ Ikhwān, *Rasā'il*, 225.

Language is again made a measure of humanity. In contrast, Abū al-Qāsim calls the other guests beast-like because they cannot understand human language:

“It’s like a pack of skittish donkeys, fleeing from a lion—deaf, dumb, and blind, and no brain either.

What God gave me of intellect
is lost on donkey, sheep, and cow.
They cannot hear me call, nor would
they understand me anyhow.”³⁷⁴

One is reminded of the Qur’an’s comparison of people who have preserved God’s holy books without seeming to understand them, to donkeys carrying heavy tomes on their back (*kamathali al-ḥimāri yaḥmilu asfāran*).³⁷⁵ In keeping with this tradition, Abū al-Qāsim styles himself a heaven-sent source of wisdom, and his audience as ignorant animals.

Donkeys in the *Hikāya* seem the grotesque mirror image of the noble horse, as the donkey dominates Abū al-Qāsim’s description of bad horses in Isfahan, as compared to the noble steeds of Baghdad (e.g. “The donkey is a tripping disgrace, black as ink, like a worn-out waterskin, or a sack of molasses. If the rider stops for company, the donkey shits, and if he lets him be, turns his tail-end to the crowd...”).³⁷⁶ But donkeys figure most prominently in al-Azdī’s

³⁷⁴ *H*, 82-3. Also see: “He looks like a monkey, or he’s from the monkey mold/ It’s like he’s chewing poop, he’s such a mumbler” (ibid., 223). In these verses Abū al-Qāsim insults the Isfāhanis for their lack of eloquence.

³⁷⁵ Qur’ān, al-Jumu‘ah 62:5.

³⁷⁶ *H*, 131-2.

introduction to his *Hikāya*, in which he quotes al-Jāḥiẓ's description of a donkey-mimic in Baghdad:

There was a fellow who used to stand at the Karkh Gate where the muleteers gathered, and he would bray such that no donkey, including the sick, old, or overworked donkeys, could resist braying back. Had they heard a real donkey braying, they would not have paid him half the attention they paid to this donkey-impersonator, as though he had joined all the melodies of every donkey's bray into a single donkey bray, and every donkey was moved in his soul to hear it. That is why the ancients claimed that a human being is a microcosm in a macrocosm...³⁷⁷

Here al-Jāḥiẓ shows why a mimic is an especially suitable representation of the microcosm, containing the intersection of all creation. As Carlin Barton explains in the case of ancient Roman civilization, each man may play a part assigned to him in the great theater of the universe, but the mime plays all parts.³⁷⁸ In the retinue of *circulatores*, or “wandering steet mimes” (whose homeless milieu seems close to home for Abū al-Qāsim), these entertainers performed in such a way that “you would believe that many were speaking from one mouth” (as one mime's epitaph boasted).³⁷⁹ Similarly al-Jāḥiẓ (as quoted by al-Azdī) says of the mime, imitating, for example, a blind man: “It is as though this mimic had gathered the intersection of them all, and contained all of the elements of impressions of the blind in one blind man.”³⁸⁰

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 43.

³⁷⁸ Barton, *Sorrows*, 137.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 138.

³⁸⁰ *H*, 43.

Al-Jāhiz's *Book of Animals*, as quoted by al-Azdī, focuses especially on imitators of donkeys, who seems to produce the platonic ideal of the donkey bray in their mimetic efforts. Bakhtin mentions similar donkey-imitators in his *Rabelais and his World*, citing the “widespread ass-mimes of antiquity” as proof that “the ass is one of the most ancient and lasting symbols of the material bodily lower stratum.”³⁸¹ They are frequently found in the humorous rhetoric of the Cynics; Antisthenes, for example, compares voting people into leadership to voting to designate donkeys as horses.³⁸² The Cynic Crates is said to have said, “We should study philosophy until we see in generals nothing but donkey drivers.”³⁸³ Far and wide, the donkey is found as the comic mirror of man, from Bottom's transformation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to that of Lucius in *The Golden Ass*. In this story, Lucius hopes to transform himself by magic into a bird, but accidentally transforms himself into a donkey instead, and goes on to suffer a series of comic misadventures before returning to his human shape. This transformation is often read as having mysterious neo-Platonic import: just as the soul falls into a lower earthly form, only to regain its exalted status through trial and effort, Lucius's baser impulses (mainly his greedy, thoughtless curiosity) lead to his initial transformation, while a spiritual awakening, late in the text, returns him to his human state. This reminds us of the hierarchy expressed in the Ikhwān's vision of the microcosm, in which the donkey would represent a lower level of being than that of a man.

³⁸¹ Translated by H el ene Iswolsky. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 78. In fact, Ab u al-Q asim shares with the giants a fondness for the insulting term “donkey-cock” (*vi edaze* in French, *ayr  im ar* in Arabic (Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 170, 351, and *H*, 63)).

³⁸² *Dictionary of World Biography*, 89.

³⁸³ Branham, *Cynics*, 10. Also see Jung, “Trickster-Figure,” 259, where Jesus is likened to a donkey. Stubb, in an ill-advised attempt to lighten Captain Ahab's mood, even compares the great Moby-Dick to a donkey, saying of the captain's destroyed whaleboat, “The thistle the ass refused; it pricked his mouth too keenly, Sir; ha! ha!” (Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 582).

Similarly one Hadith warns, “Do none of you fear that if you raise your head before the prayer-leader does, that God will turn it into a donkey-head?”³⁸⁴

Prominent among the hardships Lucius faces as a donkey (having been punished for a similar lack of discipline) is his consequent loss of speech. The only sound he can make is the bray of a donkey, among the most ridiculous and off-putting sounds to the human ear. Indeed the Qur’an itself says, “Be modest in thy bearing and subdue thy voice. Lo! the harshest of all voices is the voice of the ass.”³⁸⁵ Al-Jāhiz (as quoted by al-Azdī) focuses his description of the mime especially on his mimicking of this despised and comic sound, though he also mentions his ability to mimic forms of human speech, e.g. with foreign accents. Likewise Abū al-Qāsim’s speech can be many things, gentlemanly and beastly, but the focus seems to be on the abrasive and laughable. In fact in the introductory list of adjectives describing his character, two of the first three adjectives describe the harshness and loudness of his voice; he is a *na‘ār*, and a *za‘āq*,³⁸⁶ a yellor and screamer, someone who does not heed the Qur’an’s advice to “subdue thy voice.”

Though Lucius manages to transform only into an ass, traces of human beings’ magical transformation into all manner of beasts and plants abound around him, such that, when walking down the magic-ridden streets of Thessaly, he cannot look upon a beast or even a stone without

³⁸⁴ Jābī, *ḥamīr*, 22.

³⁸⁵ Translated by Marmaduke Pickthall. Qur’ān, Luqmān 31:19.

³⁸⁶ *H*, 46. Early in his book of animals, al-Jāhiz considers the sounds that animals make, avowing that he himself can understand some of the expressions of donkeys, dogs, cats, and camels, when, for example, they call out for their young, or spy food. However, he classifies man alone as *faṣīḥ* (eloquent), because he considers these animal’s speech acts to arise without rational intention, as opposed to the speech of man (Jāhiz, *al-Ḥayawān*, I: 31-33).

imagining that it may have been a man transformed by magic.³⁸⁷ In Lucius's world too it is as the "ancients" say: man, as a microcosm, contains the potential to be all things. When man is a donkey, his story is a comedy, according to Aristotle's definition, which considers comedy to be a representation of mankind as worse than he is (while tragedy represents him as better and nobler).³⁸⁸ This definition of comedy seems to fit the *Hikāya* well, as Abū al-Qāsim is meant to represent al-Azdī's contemporary Baghdad, but his character is so comically off-putting, the representation could hardly be considered a fair and balanced one.³⁸⁹

Comedy, however, does not preclude suffering. Indeed donkeys' comic effects often result from their suffering. This is certainly true in the case of long-suffering Lucius, beaten and humiliated all across the ancient world. Even Eeyore, who famously remarked: "Good morning, Pooh Bear... If it is a good morning... Which I doubt,"³⁹⁰ is a donkey who amuses with his suffering, not to mention the Bakhtinian loss of his tail. Abū al-Qāsim, inveterate brayer, also complains at great length of his suffering. Sometimes these complaints are comic. Just as often though, they seem genuinely sad.

Jung sees the trickster (whom he describes as "both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being") as the "forerunner of the savior," in part because of his propensity for suffering.³⁹¹ Abū al-Qāsim, whether man, god, or beast, is no stranger to suffering: he is

³⁸⁷ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 2.1.

³⁸⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1:II.

³⁸⁹ Mubārak, *Nathr*, 419.

³⁹⁰ Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, 72, 84.

³⁹¹ Jung, "Trickster-Figure," 263. This essay could prove illuminating to the character of Abū al-Qāsim in many of its observations. It essentially reads the trickster figure as being in between the states of animal and human, thus representing the continuing evolution of the human race, which remains in conflict between two mental states, represented by the past and the future.

seemingly a homeless wanderer, and both his nostalgic yearning for Baghdad and his bitter memories of his hardships there often ring true. His descent into drunken ranting and subsequent rising in the morning as a holy man might remind us of the death and resurrection of a savior figure. But if so, what is his prophetic message? He seems too bitter and caustic, and too opposed to laughter, to symbolize the sort of joyous renewal Bakhtin sees in the grotesque portrayal of man. Perhaps Abū al-Qāsim's failure to conform to Bakhtin's model arises from his dual status as carnival king and Tappecou. That is to say, Abū al-Qāsim is at once the comically usurping king of the banquet, who dies and comes back to life (or in his case, passes out and rises the next day), and a kind of Tappecou character, an old man "hostile to laughter,"³⁹² the villain of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, representing the old guard of power and authority.

Though it is difficult to say what, finally, Abū al-Qāsim may represent, on his way to drunken unconsciousness this mysterious man of opposites tells us at least who he claims to be:

Do you know me or not? I eat sand and shit out stones! I swallow date pits and shit out palm trees! ... I invented villainy, and defined brigandry! I am Pharaoh! I am Hamān! I am Nimrod Ibn Kan'ān!³⁹³ I am Satan uncircumcised! I am the bare-fisted bear, the stubborn mule, the cruel war, the rutting camel, the lusty elephant! I am eons overthrowing, I am poverty oppressing! I am the tyrannical lion! I am the trumpet of war, the drum of strife! I am the power of God parting the Red Sea! I am fate! I am warning! I am stone! I tear up the ranks! I cut down two armies! I am known on every

³⁹² Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 267.

³⁹³ Both people were legendary for their blasphemous arrogance. See St. Germain: "Hamān called Moses a lying sorcerer. Pharaoh asked him to build a mud-brick tower so he could survey Moses' God... [Nimrod was] a legendary tyrannical king who used a litter drawn by eagles to try to attack Abraham's God up in Heaven" (*Anomalous*, 408).

horizon for the cutting of throats! I am springtime in a drought! I am the rich man when bankruptcy appears!... I saw a ghoul giving birth and carried Satan's casket, broke the jawbone of the tiger and saddled a lion. I have killed a thousand and I seek a thousand more! ... I'm more rightly-guided than a sand-grouse, cleverer than a magpie, more clinging than fog, more persistent than dung-beetles, sharper than lime and arsenic, dearer than medicine, more bitter than the colocynth, more prominent than a giraffe! When held up in the jungle I lived by eating beasts of prey and made the grass my vegetables! My food is wild game and blood is my drink and viper brains my candy!... By the light of God! I was banished to...every place that Alexander the Great never reached... Pharaoh could not scowl in my face or stand by my side or match me word for word in debate!³⁹⁴

Abū al-Qāsim continues in this vein in typically long-winded fashion, characterizing himself, as he is depicted throughout the book, as a sometimes positive, usually negative conglomeration of qualities in the person of a cosmic man. The passage above seems in fact a parody of a genre of speech attributed to another man-cum-microcosm, the prophet Muḥammad's cousin 'Alī in the Shi'ite religious tradition.³⁹⁵ Compare, for example, the following passage:

I am Alexander the Great, mentioned in the old holy books. I am the master of Solomon's seal. ...I make the springs burst forth. I make the rivers flow. I am the keeper of knowledge. I am the mountain of forbearance. I am the Commander of the

³⁹⁴ *H*, 375.

³⁹⁵ In reference to this section Mez writes that it indeed derives from a type of religious discourse associated with Shi'ism but was subsequently exaggerated by itinerant beggar-preachers in a manner he describes as "grotesque" (Azdī, *Sittenbild*, XVIII).

faithful. I am Certainty itself. I am the proof of God in the heavens and the earths. I am the cause of trembling. I am the thunderbolt. I am the cry of truth. I am the hour of reckoning to him who denied it. I am the book about which there is no doubt. I am the beautiful names by which God commanded that He be addressed. I am the light from which Moses caught guidance. I am the master of the Trump of Doom. I draw out those entombed. I am the master of the Day of Resurrection. I am the master of Noah and his savior. I am the master of Jonah and his salvation. ... I look in the face of the Holy Kingship. ...I anchored the lofty mountain and made the flowing spring run. I am the planter of trees and the sprouter of all kinds of fruit. I am the giver of strength. I resurrect the dead. I make the rain fall. I light the sun and the moon and the stars. ...I am living and do not die, for even if I died I did not die.... I am the master of the heavenly bodies. I am the everlasting torment from God. I am the downfall of the ancient tyrants. I am the cleanser of the vicissitudes of time. I am the master of earthquakes and tremors. I am the master of the solar and lunar eclipse. I am the defeater of Pharaoh with this my sword... . . . I allowed Moses to pass through the sea and drowned the soldiers of Pharaoh. I know the growling of the beasts and the speech of the birds... I am He who kills twice and gives life twice and manifests as I will. I break the tyrants of times gone by and I pluck them out and torture them in the afterlife. .. I speak in all tongues. I witness the deeds of all creation, west and east.³⁹⁶

Both Alī and Abū al-Qāsim compare themselves to famous people or adopt their identities, both claim power over natural forces as well as a special knowledge of animals; both, in short,

³⁹⁶ This translation is based on manuscript number 1011 in the Caro Minasian collection of Persian and Arabic manuscripts at UCLA. The same speech can be found in Ramaḍān, *Bughyat al-Ṭālib*, 408-10, with minor variations.

identify themselves with the all-encompassing power of God. Perhaps the difference between ‘Alī and Abū al-Qāsim is the difference between being a microcosm and thinking oneself the center of the world. The latter trait is human enough, and perhaps the pathos of Abū al-Qāsim’s displaying this arrogance, and then promptly passing out from drunken exhaustion, explains why Gabrieli, for example, in comparing Abū al-Qāsim to his fellow trickster holy men in the *maqāmāt*, writes, “Whilst [the *maqāmāt*’s] heroes al-Iskandarī and al-Sarūdjī offer us nothing more than a somewhat monotonous and stereotyped cliché figure of a rogue, al-Azdī’s Abu ‘l-Qāsim is wholly alive,³⁹⁷ or that he is “a character of meat and bones (even too meaty!)” (*un personaggio in carne ed ossa (anche troppo carnale!*). Gabrieli describes the “curious paradox” that al-Azdī’s “daring attempt at realism” was seemingly derived from an Aristotelian concept of *universal* mimesis.³⁹⁸ Abū al-Qāsim is at once terrifying and pathetic, a seemingly indomitable speaker nevertheless not immune to drunkenness or old age. For although his suffering links him to the savior figure, leading us into cosmic-scale readings of his persona, these same sufferings simultaneously remind us of his humanity. With Captain Ahab he might protest, “In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here.”³⁹⁹ For even as with a savior, it seems Abū al-Qāsim’s status as a microcosm overburdens his frail human frame. As Nicholson writes of

³⁹⁷ Gabrieli, “Abu‘l-Muṭahhar al-Azdī.” He goes on to compare him to the characters in Petronius’s *Satyrice* or to Spanish pícáros.

³⁹⁸ Gabrieli, “Sulla *Hikāyat*,” 34. Gabrieli identifies the physical description at the beginning of the *Hikāya*, which, he writes, differs from stereotypical physical descriptions of *adab*, as one of the most important proofs of the realism of the character Abū al-Qāsim (ibid., 36). However Cooperson, in comparing this physical description to other examples in *adab* literature, describes it as a “manneristic elaboration,” that “does not seek to create a portrait of a particular individual” (“Images without Illustrations,” 15). He begins translating the description in question thus: “He was an old man with a white beard that shone against the redness of his face, and practically dripped unwatered wine. His eyes shone like green glass and glittered as if revolving in quick-silver. He was a howling, growling, bellowing boor; a sponger, a tippler, and a man of letters wondrous strange...” (ibid., 14).

³⁹⁹ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 533.

Abū al-Qāsim's namesake, "I need hardly say that Mohammed gave the lie direct to those who would have thrust this sort of greatness upon him: his apotheosis is the triumph of religious feeling over historical fact,"⁴⁰⁰ the historical facts including his individual, mortal humanity.

Muḥammad and his cousin 'Alī, though human beings, may well lay claim to greatness. In comparison, does Abū al-Qāsim's exaggerated boasting sound a lot like empty talk? Though the Ikhwān al-Safā' and other philosophers perceived man's status as a microcosm as a physical reality, al-Azdī's microcosm is emphatically a world of words, often markedly out of joint with reality. Al-Azdī does not quote the Ikhwān or any other philosophers in his introduction, but rather al-Jāḥiẓ, a man of letters and an innovator in genres of Arabic prose whose truth value is not emphasized. In his description of mimics and the microcosm quoted in al-Azdī's introduction, al-Jāḥiẓ focuses on man's ability to imitate speech; indeed his first example of man's microcosmic capacities is his ability to imitate the sounds of all the animals.

Al-Jāḥiẓ's explanation of man's microcosmic status itself creates, like the *Hikāya*, a full-to-overflowing outburst of language, filled with lists of contrasting adjectives, and with proofs drawn largely from Arabic proverbs. Readers of al-Jāḥiẓ are always wary of his arguments, which seem as often word-games as sincerely expressed arguments. And by linking mimics, who deceive even donkeys with their talents, to the fundamental microcosmic nature of mankind, al-Jāḥiẓ introduces the idea of deceptive and misleading language into al-Azdī's microcosm. The deceptive quality of language, however, itself contains the seeds of creative power. The *Hikāya* has been read as a development of al-Jāḥiẓ's "type" literature,⁴⁰¹ or books focusing on types of people, like misers, party-crashers, or wise-fools. Abū al-Qāsim's two-sided, self-

⁴⁰⁰ Nicholson, *Islamic Mysticism*, 88.

⁴⁰¹ Pellat, "Hikāya," 368.

contradictory manners and speech at once deny the possibility of such definitive categorizations, and allows the creation of a new, seemingly inimitable type of text.

If Abū al-Qāsim is a *Doppelgänger* of Muḥammad, the *Ḥikāya* is his Qur'an. A fractal-like world of microcosms, the Qur'an contains totality in each of its fragments. As Norman Brown describes in his *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, this is why Western readers' reactions to the Qur'an as "a wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite [with] endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement,"⁴⁰² betray a failure to understand the Qur'an's disruptive literary project. In his chapter "The Apocalypse of Islam,"⁴⁰³ Brown compares the Qur'an to the similarly dense *Finnegans Wake*, which tends to "reamalgamerge" the shattered pieces of history, language, and symbolism.⁴⁰⁴ We can also hear echoes of the *Ḥikāya*'s reception in reactions to Rabelais's *Pantagruel*, which, like the Qur'an or the *Ḥikāya*, is an encyclopedic work filled with neologisms and the rubble of the human language. As Bakhtin demonstrates, Rabelais' strange language led critics to complain that his work lacked the unity and coherence of a classical text, characterizing it as "extravagant and unintelligible."⁴⁰⁵ These critics, writes Bakhtin, are able to enjoy Rabelais's work only piecemeal, thus missing its unique, universal, and, to Bakhtin, world-creating qualities. The *Ḥikāya*, similarly criticized for its extravagance, excessiveness, and unreadability, similarly contains a world.

⁴⁰² These are Thomas Carlyle's words, as quoted in Brown, *Apocalypse*, 89.

⁴⁰³ Brown, *Apocalypse*, 69-94.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁰⁵ In the words of Voltaire, in Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 116.

Conclusion

Thus we see now that the spine of even the hugest of living things tapers off at last into simple child's play.

Melville, *Moby-Dick*, "Measurement of the Whale's Skeleton"

Bojangles Won't Dance

In the pages (or hours) before Abū al-Qāsim's superhuman vaunt, he appears to me the most human, or the most "of meat and bones."⁴⁰⁶ In these pages the narrator informs us that Abū al-Qāsim grows increasingly intoxicated and physically exhausted, and in these pages he interacts with the other guests more than anywhere else in the narrative. This is to say, the other guests do here occasionally get a word in edgewise. On page 334 of al-Shālījī's 391 paged edition (*H*), our (anti-)hero, already well into his cups, and having thoroughly exhausted the game of arbitrary praise and blame, recites a poem in a voice choking with emotion (*sawt shajin*) and then wistfully declares: "Tomorrow, by God, we'll resume this party and its pleasures!"⁴⁰⁷ The best way to greet a new day, he explains, is with more drinking and revelry. This suggestion transgresses normative partying behavior,⁴⁰⁸ and sets a theme for the dénouement of the *Hikāya*, in which Abū al-Qāsim repeatedly strives to extend the pleasures of the party beyond the human capacity for enjoyment, with limited and ambiguous success.

Continuing to drink, Abū al-Qāsim praises a beautiful female singer, and then fiercely insults her guardian, in many ways a typical praise/blame sequence for the protagonist, though earthily connected in this case to the bodies of people in the room and his physical responses to

⁴⁰⁶ Gabrieli, "Sulla *Hikāyat*," 34.

⁴⁰⁷ *H*, 335.

⁴⁰⁸ It is interesting to note that Plato's *Symposium* similarly ends with a drunken, chaotic moment of revelry, and that Socrates and some other guests drink again the next morning, while Socrates explains that a writer of tragedy should also be able to write comedy. This seems to suggest something similar about the balance of jest with seriousness during certain appropriate times, while similarly upsetting this balance (see Chapter 1.3).

them (his lust for the singer is obvious, and she rebukes him for it later in the narrative). His expression of hatred for her guardian is even more fulsome in its invective than usual, so when Abū al-Qāsim ends with a quick couplet wondering if, perhaps, he has left too much unsaid,⁴⁰⁹ a fellow guest understandably bursts into laughter.

In the song Mr. Bojangles—whose titular character was, like Abū al-Qāsim, said to be based on a real man⁴¹⁰—a tragic figure, an avowed alcoholic prisoner perpetually in mourning for his dog, is repeatedly asked to dance by his fellow inmates. And what if he chose to refuse? Abū al-Qāsim, though widely identified by scholars as a popular performer singing for his supper,⁴¹¹ emphatically refuses to be laughed at. As at the beginning of the text, when Abū al-Qāsim meets a guest's laughter with an outburst of almost unparalleled fury, the laughter at the end of the party again sparks a verbal rampage. Abū al-Qāsim suggests that laughter is inappropriate in the face of so much pain and so formidable an opponent: “The laughter of a serpent in a bag of lime! A wolf laughing as the hounds close in! A sheep's-head laughing in the butcher shop!... The laugh of a whore when the midwife rebukes her.”⁴¹²

The guest are baffled by his response, which marks a critical turning point in the narrative. Everyone now decides that they must get rid of Abū al-Qāsim, the non-stop joker who will not be laughed at, and they plot to encourage his growing intoxication to the point that he passes out. Those guests not currently involved in a quarrel with their belligerent fellow diner approach him with goblets of wine. “Slow down, creatures of God!” he tells them. “Camel by

⁴⁰⁹“That is my praise for you and for mankind/ You two-horned and sperm-dripping dick/ And if you should feel that I've cut it too short/ Just think this a garden pic-nic” (*H*, 349).

⁴¹⁰ Kwei-Armah, *The Man Who Was Bojangles*.

⁴¹¹ Moreh, *Live Theatre*, 94-101. Hämeen-Anttila, “al-Hamadhānī,” 85. St. Germain, *Anomalous*, 117.

⁴¹² *H*, 349.

camel, don't break the *maḥāmil* (camel-litters)!" This is the second time Abū al-Qāsim has used this rhymed expression. The first was during the chess game, after his opponent moved his first piece, a pawn (as described in Chapter Three). In that case his injunction to slow down is certainly comically hyperbolic—his opponent had only made one move, and a seemingly ordinary and prudent one. Nor, when he uses the warning a second time, does it seem at all appropriate, for Abū al-Qāsim cannot be called a man of moderation or timeliness. When he calls on his fellow guests to slow down and practice moderation, he is already struggling to prolong the party beyond its natural life-span, and encouraging fellow revelers to drink and party even in the morning hours, a suggestion that also flies in the face of timeliness.

The sense of time passing in this text is very strong, and was previously likened to the passing-by of a camel, when a guest asks Abū al-Qāsim why he ceases to praise Baghdad and begins to condemn it. "Those camels have passed," he says, "and their cargo is carelessness."⁴¹³ Bakhtin calls time itself the author of carnivalesque narratives, in which the protagonist is first exalted and then beaten down.⁴¹⁴ Abū al-Qāsim, as the day and the party run out of steam, struggles against this inevitable decline. When he lustily assaults the beautiful slave-girl, she rebukes him, saying, "Don't you know that you're an old man?" Abū al-Qāsim responds with more lusty poetry. Later, as the guests continue striving to subdue him, he says "The old men become like children!"⁴¹⁵ Soon afterwards they admonish him again, saying, "How long will

⁴¹³ Perhaps by mentioning camels, he even evokes the Arabic literary past, as the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* included the *raḥīl* or travel section, with a detailed description of a camel (though not of a camel caravan). St. Germain finds reason to otherwise link the *Ḥikāya* to the *qaṣīda* (*Anomalous*, 53-87).

⁴¹⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 207.

⁴¹⁵ *H*, 358, 367.

this stupidity continue, old man? Have you no shame?”⁴¹⁶ He dances and sings until he falls on the ground in exhaustion. The party will soon be over.

Perhaps we can discern elements of the joyful renewal described by Bakhtin in Abū al-Qāsim’s behavior. Or perhaps he represents Baghdad’s unwillingness to forget its former glory long after it had largely fallen into ruin.⁴¹⁷ Hamori reads drunkenness itself in Arabic literature as a struggle to transcend or forget the inevitable passage of time.⁴¹⁸ And although Abū al-Qāsim is eventually conquered by his exhaustion and falls asleep, he wakes up repeating the very same pious words that began the book: “He would recite the verses in the same order as at the beginning of this epistle, as well as the moralizing described there. Then he would don his pious robe just as he first appeared.”⁴¹⁹ He passes out of the lives of the other guests as he leaves their party, but seems, despite his age, changeless and unconquered by time.

Nevertheless, it is during these final pages of the *Ḥikāya* that the protagonist seems most poignantly human, an old and weakening man.⁴²⁰ We are left wondering if he is human or superhuman, divine or profane. The author himself certainly does not suggest that any conflicts or questions presented by his protagonist are meant to be resolvable. He ends his *Ḥikāya* saying:

This is *Ḥikayat Abī al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī al-Tamīmī*. These situations that I present clearly show you that he was the disgrace of his day and the equal of Satan: a gathering

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 369.

⁴¹⁷ Indeed this is a trait attributed to medieval Baghdadis. See, for example, Bosworth, *Mediaeval Islamic Underworld*, 54, n. 16. Also see Chapter 1.2.

⁴¹⁸ Hamori, *On the Art*, 56.

⁴¹⁹ *H*, 390.

⁴²⁰ As, for example, when he farts, angering the beautiful singing girl (*H*, 360).

of the good and the ugly, transgressing the limits of definition, perfecting the conjuncture of seriousness and jest, comprised of complete sincerity and complete hypocrisy, of which qualities the people of Iraq are created. Praise to God who is One, and His blessing on our lord Muḥammad, His prophet and his family, and peace.⁴²¹

His particular mention of the oneness of God suggests that all of these contradictions can and do coexist within a unified whole. Nevertheless, Abū al-Qāsim's aged humanity does seem actively at odds with his superhuman nature, and unable to keep up with its demands. So is Abū al-Qāsim an archetype or an old man? In his work *Trickster Makes this World*, Lewis Hyde identifies the Trickster as a figure of pantheism, whether he be the coyote of the Nez Percé or China's Monkey King. Hermes, one of Trickster's better-known manifestations, Hyde identifies as a kind of party-crasher of the gods. In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, the newborn baby god steals Apollo's cattle and sacrifices them to all of the deities of Olympus, of whom he will soon be a member. It is a theft that "confuses the definition of theft."⁴²² In this story, Hermes, like Abū al-Qāsim, does not behave appropriately to his age, but seems a "grey-haired baby,"⁴²³ a liminal embodiment of conflicting opposites (Hermes acts far too old for a baby, and Abū al-Qāsim, far too toddlerish for a *shaykh*). Hyde reads the baby Hermes's theft as one typical of the Trickster, who does not eat the food that tempts him but rather turns it into a symbol. At the end of this story, Hermes earns the forgiveness of Apollo by giving him the lyre he has just invented.

This myth is distant from the *Hikāya* in time, purpose, and form, but as an archetypal embodiment of the Trickster, Hermes shares some features with Abū al-Qāsim and some of his

⁴²¹ *H*, 391.

⁴²² Hyde, *Trickster*, 219.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

fellow party-crashers. Hermes's transformation of the stolen meat into a burnt sacrifice parallels the party-crasher's exchange of food for words, at once questioning the true ownership and significance of the food and drawing the interpretive eye to the symbolism of the trickster's act. His invention of the lyre is echoed in the party-crashers' winning artistic creativity: their unexpected visit represents an opportunity for creation and change, and they earn their invitation to the banquet (or in Hermes's case, Olympus) with their wit and eloquence, even as they ensure their own marginalization with their outlandish behavior. These acts bring old assumptions and truths into question, but instead of offering a newly codified "truth," they encourage interpretation and further change. "The thief's last theft," Hyde writes, "is to steal himself away... he is not the declarative speaker of traditional prophecy."⁴²⁴ By removing himself as he does at the end of the party, Abū al-Qāsim creates more questions than answers.

But "there are no human tricksters" Hyde writes; "Human beings participate in this mythology, but they simultaneously participate in others, and in history."⁴²⁵ Abū al-Qāsim, in his irascible humanity, fails to comfortably inhabit his archetype. It is clear from al-Azdī's introduction to his work that a conflict will be staged in the *Ḥikāya* between reality, language, and representation. The protagonists and his fellow guests seem to suffer from this very conflict, as does the reader of the *Ḥikāya* (judging by the complaints of modern-day critics). The author promises to tell us something about Baghdad. The party guests themselves seem to expect Abū al-Qāsim to tell them something about Baghdad. But their informant replies with lists of undefined specialized terms that are hardly informative. After hearing his lengthy hyperbolic encomium on the beauty and wit of Baghdadi singers, the audience asks Abū al-Qāsim to favour

⁴²⁴ Hyde, *Trickster*, 287.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

them with some representative stories (*ba‘d tilka al-ḥikāyāt*) as if to hold the author to the promise he made in his introduction, to be a *ḥākī* of Baghdad. Abū al-Qāsim responds at first with indignation: “Gentlemen, are you looking for a clown? Do you want somebody to laugh at? Your friend the fool? No, sir, find someone else to laugh at!”⁴²⁶

And the same guest would reply, “God forbid, Abū al-Qāsim! If you favored us we would thank you, and you would be respected as a gentleman, not ordered about! If you refuse, we won’t ask you for anything like it again, and you would still be an honored guest here!”

This section again raises questions of the correct definition of the word *ḥikāya*. Abū al-Qāsim seems to think that by asking him to produce *ḥikāyāt* (stories or, perhaps, imitations of the slave-girls) the other guests are asking him to reduce himself to the role of popular entertainer or fool. After being mollified by the guests, what Abū al-Qāsim does produce are a series of anecdotes on slave-girls in Baghdad, which section more closely resembles a typical collection of *akhbār* in the *adab* tradition than anything else in the *Ḥikāya*. These, however, are not called *akhbār*, but rather *ḥikāyat*, the difference lying perhaps both in their imitative nature and their low implied truth value. Indeed Abū al-Qāsim’s *ḥikāyāt* about the witty Baghdadi slave-girls includes several short anecdotes with punch-lines that seem to belong more in a joke-book than a history-book. He ends with a string of *akhbār* about stories in which listeners react so strongly to the beauty of a slave-girl’s song, tearing their hair and writhing on the floor, that Abū al-Qāsim’s incredulous audience has to ask, “All this just from listening to some singing?”⁴²⁷

The equation here, however, of *ḥikāya* with a type of *khbar*, confirms the impression that *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim* can be read as a single, book-length *khbar*—as if it is a section of a

⁴²⁶ *H*, 229.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

larger book in extreme close-up. This impression further contributes to the text's microcosmic feeling, in which a small part might represent a universe of being. That the book ends much as it begins, and is told in the iterative mode, suggests that similar stories may exist on either side. We are consequently led to speculate about Abū al-Qāsim's life outside the text.

Thus, though we may accept that he represents a microcosm, we might not be able not to think of him also as a human being. Through his poetry we may glean that he once lived in Isfahan,⁴²⁸ went to Baghdad, and then left that city leaving behind everyone that he loved, but then again, he may simply be quoting poetry to that effect. The iterative mode of the narrative would impress the reader with the belief that he would habitually do the things described, surely an exhausting way of life. Does Abū al-Qāsim still do these things? Has he died? Can he die? Is he man or monster, and should we pity him? Or to put it another way, is he monster or abject hero? As Michael Bernstein describes in *Bitter Carnival*:

The monster is monologic in his self absorption, the Abject Hero is condemned to dialogue, since his conscious is an echo chamber of incompatible desires and prohibitions, a sound box in which the voices of the monster, the contentedly successful citizen, the desperately hungry parasite, and the resigned failure exchange insults and advice with bewildering inconsistency.⁴²⁹

Even the abject hero, as described in this quotation, is in dialog solely with himself, and so it often seems with Abū al-Qāsim. Like modern scholars, his Isfahani audience clearly want him

⁴²⁸ "You ask me about Isfahan (may time yet tear it down!);/ the young men look like old men there, the old resemble hounds./ I left when just a child, and thus escaped those sterile grounds!" (ibid., 90).

⁴²⁹ Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival*, 27.

to tell them something about Baghdad. They ask him about the identity of the Baghdadadi man he describes only as *fulān* (so-and-so), about his house, about swimming and sailing in the city, and either receive the brush-off or an incomprehensible list of words in reply. His tyrannical refusal of the audience's right to laugh is only the worst example of his abuse of the guest and of the reader. He may put us in mind of a mad emperor, a Caligula ruling the feast with his words, or even Tommy DeVito of *Goodfellas* terrifying his friends with the question, "I'm funny how, I mean funny like I'm a clown, I amuse you? What do you mean funny, funny how? How am I funny?"

But what of this abusive microcosm's author, about whom we have said very little? Indeed in the edition cited throughout much of this present study, he is credited not by the name given him at the beginning of the manuscript, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Abū al-Muṭahhar al-Azdī, but by Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, due to one editor's publishing the work under that more famous name (as described in the "Introduction.") The mystery of the author's identity has dominated the scholarship on the *Ḥikāya*, as if the discovery of that identity might be the key that would unlock the secrets of this strange text with its strange protagonist. The author's narrative voice is almost laughably reasonable and modest in comparison to this wildly overbearing protagonist, as if his presence were effaced by Abū al-Qāsim's conversation along with that of the other Isfahani guests. To return to the lines from *Bitter Carnival* above, perhaps he is the abject hero, and Abū al-Qāsim the monster. However:

To mimic the monstrous is still to be only a mimic, and to model one's speech after the mad is still to be dependent on prior examples. But, paradoxically, to desire such a voice for oneself *is* genuinely monstrous... So the Abject Hero is again doomed to a double

existence: parodying a role that is, in reality, already his own, and imitating a state that he already inhabits.⁴³⁰

That is to say, it may be true we know little more of al-Azdī than his authorship of the *Ḥikāya*, but perhaps, in knowing him as the man behind the microcosm, we know more than enough.

Philemon and Baucis

But in gazing at such scenes, it is all in all what mood you are in; if in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of Isaiah, the archangels.

Melville, *Moby-Dick*, “The Tail”

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the gods Zeus and Hermes, disguised as mortals, are denied hospitality at every house except one. At the humble house of the aged couple Philemon and Baucis, the gods are treated with generosity and respect. As a reward, their poor dwelling is transformed into a magnificent temple, and they into its priests. Thus we learn that when the gods show up as uninvited guests, nothing in one’s house remains the same.

While the gods Zeus and Hermes are still pretending to be human, and Baucis and Philemon’s home remains a hovel, the narrator provides a detailed description of the meal that the poor couple serves:

[Baucis] the wood split fine, and the dry twigs, made smaller
By breaking them over the knee, and put them under
A copper kettle, and then she took the cabbage
Her man had brought from the well-watered garden,
And stripped the outer leaves off. And Philemon

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 31.

Reached up, with a forked stick, for the side of bacon,
That hung below the smoky beam, and cut it...
With trembling hands. One table-leg was wobbly;
A piece of shell fixed that. She scoured the table,
Made level now, with a handful of green mint,
Put on the olives, black or green, and cherries
Preserved in dregs of wine, endive and radish,
And cottage cheese, and eggs, turned over lightly
In the warm ash, with shells unbroken. The dishes,
Of course, were earthenware...⁴³¹

By comparison to Abū al-Qāsim's fantastic lists of foodstuffs, Ovid's list feels very realistic. This realism heightens the drama of the humble house's later transformation into a grand temple. As part of a poem with epic pretensions, however, the realism of this description is of a heroic breed. The *Satyrical* provides a parodic response to Ovid's realism in its description of the ramshackle house belonging to Oenothea, priestess of Priapus:

First she took down a tiny scrap of meat. Then, picking up the head of pork—which couldn't have been a day younger than she was—she tried to reach it back up to the hook with her fork. But suddenly the rotten stool on which she was standing crumbled and collapsed, and she tumbled down into the fireplace, smashing the neck of the pot as she fell. The water slopped out, quenching the fire which had just begun to blaze, but not

⁴³¹ Translated by Rolfe Humphries. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VIII: 645ff.

before she touched her elbow to a burning stick and, lashing out in fright, spattered soot and ashes all over her face.⁴³²

This description of a failed dinner is a clear parody of Ovid's "Philemon and Baucis."⁴³³ The disjunction lies between two types of realism: the almost heroically humble description in the *Metamorphoses* and another kind of realistic description, one that emphasizes the messiness of life in contrast with the tidiness of the epic register. The story of "Philemon and Baucis," though its subject begins humbly, suits the grandeur of the Olympian gods, Zeus and Hermes. The *Satyrical* is home to a much more earthly god, Priapus, and the language there also matches the nature of the divinity concerned.

Thus, not only do the gods in these works shape and change objects, but language itself as well. Priapus, a roughly-carved garden god who comically threatens vegetable thieves with his enormous phallus, is a pervasively implied presence in the *Satyrical*. In the description of the house of the priestess of Priapus quoted in part above, a gaggle of sacred geese soon crash the party, their long necks evoking Priapus's phallus. Encolpius, the hapless and impotent protagonist of the tale, bludgeons the aggressive leader of these sacred geese with a table-leg, further incurring the wrath of the garden god. He then compares himself to Heracles performing one of his Twelve Labors by attacking the Stymphalian birds.⁴³⁴ In this episode, and throughout the *Satyrical* (a tale driven by the wrath of Priapus), the language is a suitably humorous version of the epic narratives inhabited by the Olympians (the story of Odysseus, for example, driven by

⁴³² Translated by William Arrowsmith. Petronius, *Satyrical*, 136:1-8.

⁴³³ Rosenmeyer provides a detailed analysis of the parodic features of this episode in "The Unexpected Guests," 403-13.

⁴³⁴ Petronius, *Satyrical*, 136:4-5. Also see Schmeling, *Commentary*, xlviii.

the wrath of Poseidon).⁴³⁵ As for Ovid's narrative of Philemon and Baucis, it contains elements of both heaven and earth, and Hermes, a liminal god of Olympus, is instrumental in the epically-described transformation of Philemon and Baucis's humble abode. Like him, their house and the language of the poem make the journey between one realm and the next.

Divine party-crashers, like prophets, disrupt the perceived reality of the earthly world with a higher truth. The word "Mimesis" or *muḥākāh* (from the same root as *ḥikāyah*) is used in al-Fārābī's *The Perfect City* to describe this ability to see higher forms of knowledge in earthly imitations, or symbols, which faculty is found especially among prophets (or during dreams, themselves considered a fraction of prophecy).⁴³⁶ The perfect man (of whom Abū al-Qāsim is a sort of Doppelgänger) is characterized partly by this imitative visionary faculty.⁴³⁷ Language itself is a kind of imitation,⁴³⁸ and like the imaginative imitations of a prophetic vision, language can represent another world. It can form a crucial part of spiritual transcendence and transformation, as does the language of the Qur'an. Even the wine poem can evoke the drunkenness of a spiritual ecstasy, itself a form of worship.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁵ For an interpretation of the *Satyrica* as parody of the *Odyssey*, see Schmeling, *Commentary*, 523-9, and Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*, 192, as well as her "Sex in the *Satyrica*," 95. Priapus himself, as he is portrayed in the collection of humorous dedicatory poems known as the *Priapea*, seems acutely aware of his low, parodic status in comparison with the lofty Olympic gods. See, for example, poem twenty in which he compares his giant phallus to Jove's lightning bolts, Neptune's trident, and the other gods' phallic-shaped weapons. Also see poems 36 and 75 in Hooper, *Priapus Poems*, which include his (loose) translations facing the Latin.

⁴³⁶ Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīna*, 210-227, 416. Also see Walzer, "Al-Fārābī's Theory," 211-216.

⁴³⁷ Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīna*, 439.

⁴³⁸ Pellat raises this point in discussing al-Zamaksharī's *Asās al-balāgha* in "Ḥikāya." Also see Plotinus in Halliwell, *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 315.

⁴³⁹ As Montgomery writes, "The Symposium was the venue at which God was worshipped and the divine light was celebrated in drinking and in songs." Wine itself, he adds, could serve as a creator or a door to a new world ("Justified Sinner?" 127-130). Also see Hamori's *On the Art*, 56.

But poetry, unlike prophecy, is not beholden to the truth, but rather, in its self-referential or deceitful capacities, can question reality and create a world otherwise unreal. Stefan Sperl writes that classical mimesis (a concept related to al-Fārābī's use of the word *ḥikāya*) runs counter to this mannerist style of literature, which “presupposes an attitude to reality as much as to language: an awareness of incongruity between them.”⁴⁴⁰ Later he adds, “Structural limits are the very instruments of semiological mimesis, providing the constraints which delimit the possible within the combinatory scope of language. These constraints act like prisms, revealing in language a self-contained and boundless world of patterns in relation.”⁴⁴¹ Thus language provides its own system of physics within which to create a new world. While mimetic language may create a new world, this world is in harmony with physical reality. Manneristic language, in contrast, also creates a new world, but the effect of this creation is to question perceptions of reality and the ability of language to represent the real.⁴⁴² Sometimes in creating these new worlds, language has the ability even to transform the real, or the objects that it describes.

The ambiguity and power of language makes it the perfect tool of the trickster, whether a lowly party-crasher or the great god Hermes. In the Arabic literary tradition, poets in particular are known to “say what they do not do.”⁴⁴³ This type of speech can nevertheless have a very real effect on our perceptions of the things around us. As van Gelder writes:

⁴⁴⁰ Sperl, *Mannerism*, 164.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 180. Also see Heinrichs on *takhyīl*: “a shift of the poet’s attention from the level of reality, that is, the level of the objects depicted, to the level of imagery which is erected on a line parallel with reality, but which nonetheless allows the poet...to create a phantastic microcosm at will” (*Literary Theory*, 26).

⁴⁴² Robert Irwin expresses a similar idea in summarizing al-Jurjānī’s *Asrār al-balāgha*: “Jurjani argued that language was a convention and that words, and indeed metaphors and similes, had no independent meaning, but depended on their placement in a linguistic whole” (*Night and Horses*, 216).

⁴⁴³ Qur’ān, al-Shu‘arā’ 26:226.

We should not be surprised that such a high proportion of court jesters known from the sources are poets...judging by the author's [Nizami 'Arudi's] definition of poetry, the function of which is, as it were *qalb al-ashya* ' [reversing things]: 'Poetry is that art whereby the poet arranges imaginary propositions and blends fruitful analogies, in such wise that he can make a little thing appear great and a great thing small, or cause good to appear in the garb of evil and evil in the garb of good.'⁴⁴⁴

Alvin Kernan uses similar language to describe the essential features of the genre of satire, in which language itself can become a kind of trickster. Satire's "magnifying tendency" makes heroic what is trivial, and its "diminishing tendency" involves "the diminution of idea to thing."⁴⁴⁵

Jonathan Swift's satirical rewriting of "Baucis and Philemon" is a good example of satire that diminishes idea to thing. This poem focuses on the transformation of ordinary household objects into items in a church: for example, the chimney turns into a spire and the kettle in the fireplace becomes the church bell:

The heavy wall climbed slowly after.

The chimney widened, and grew higher,

Became a steeple with a spire.

The kettle to the top was hoist,

⁴⁴⁴ Van Gelder, quoting Edward G. Browne's translation in "Fools and Rogues," 37.

⁴⁴⁵ Kernan, *Plot of Satire*, 36, 52. Ibn Qutaybah uses similar language in criticizing al-Jāhiz's writing about "low" topics, saying that he "makes trifles great and great things trifles" (from Mez, *Renaissance of Islam*, 204).

And there stood fastened to a joist;
But with the upside down, to show
Its inclination for below.
In vain; for a superior force
Applied at bottom, stops its coarse,
Doomed ever in suspense to dwell,
'Tis now no kettle, but a bell.⁴⁴⁶

Although the objects in the house are magnified in size, the satirical language of the poem seems to diminish the trappings of a lofty church, which now appear only the magnified furnishings of a hovel, putting on airs. Swift's satirical rewrite also focuses on Philemon and Baucis's stingy neighbors, who, though Christians, show no charity.

What effect does Abū al-Qāsim's unexpected arrival have on the house he visits and the objects and people therein? Some have seen his language as similar to Swift's in its diminishing portrayal of various pious and respectable classes.⁴⁴⁷ Abū al-Qāsim indeed lampoons all the guests and their professions, his sarcasm doubling in bitterness when they defend one another as "noble." But perhaps it better fits another tendency Kernan discerns in satirical language, the "mob tendency," which, a kind of motley stew of language, shows each ingredient in jarring juxtaposition.⁴⁴⁸ As an example of this mode of satire, Kernan describes *The Day of the Locust's* portrayal of Los Angeles as a clash of multiple feigned styles whose proximity to one another only magnifies their falseness. As shown in previous chapters, the *Ḥikāya* has little to say about

⁴⁴⁶ Swift, *Poems*, 92-3.

⁴⁴⁷ See, for example, Balda, "Marginalité," 386, 393.

⁴⁴⁸ The root of the word "satire," *lanx satura*, is in fact a stew of motley and disparate ingredients.

the people or objects in the physical cities of Baghdad and Isfahan. Abū al-Qāsim's descriptions of Baghdad, Isfahan, and the many things found in both cities, overflow with disparate ingredients, and almost taunt us with the unreality of these objects cloaked in language. We are left not knowing what to believe about the people and things present at the party, nor about the absent people or things with whom they are compared.

Compare Ovid's list of foods in the poor couple's house, cited at the beginning of this section, to some of Abū al-Qāsim's descriptions of food and dinner service in the *Hikāya*, which, quoted in full, would occupy tens of pages:

Among the grilled items are Kaskari duck and Sarsari kid, and Indian fattened chicken, and Turkoman suckling lamb, round, its length and breadth the same, just plucked from the teats of its mother, cooked as hot as a nest of hornets. Fattened chicks sweeter than health, atop sugared walnuts, and rice with milk, with saffron thrown in, studded with chickpeas, and strewn with powdered sugar. Sweet bountiful Ja'fariyya, that Baghdadi born in Byzantium. Saffron meat strips, like rods of myrtle, the table like a bride bedecked, surrounded with ornaments: blood red opposite bright yellow, deep black next to shining white, a kid as red as a rose on white Egyptian linen, a mouthful drowning in its own oil before it reaches the rice. The meat and fat of this kid builds a red and white edifice in the stomach, by which a ballista of stones (meaning a drink) hurled against it would be deflected, making no impression at all. Yes! Turtle doves in pickled cheese stew, drowned in their own oil, and pickled fish from a clay oven, fried ring doves, quail, partridges, chicks, stall-fed breasty chickens, golden skinned, silver fleshed, Indian or Barhindiyyan, thick-thighed, heavy breasted, fragrant of fat, fed with the finest of fodder.

Purified oil, pressed from greases, dates, sausages, braided meat, filets, Rashidi kababs, spiced flanks, pregnant hens, chicks still fed in the nest, francolins and geese just sprouting feathers, grilled sides dripping, O God!, juice, the sugared walnuts flowing with grease and broth, and shawarma, and pomegranate vinaigrette with sikbaj cooked in wine vinegar, with young lamb's meat on top, and chicks just ready to fly, and water fowl, and yellow songbirds with peeled almonds inside, and Khurasani raisins, and Jujani jujube, and confectioner's figs, garnished with citron leaves.⁴⁴⁹

This ecstatic orgy of foods begins on a previous page with Abū al-Qāsim asserting that he sees no such luxuries in Isfahan. Thus this list is in fact presented not as a list of things found in Baghdad, but as a list of things *not* found in the supposedly inferior city of Isfahan. Abū al-Qāsim's replacement of food with words itself constitutes a kind of metamorphosis. This (pseudo?) divine party-crasher replaces a barely-described but realistic-sounding meal served in Isfahan (e.g. "a platter of cheese...and some pickled snacks") with an unlikely-sounding absent feast of language. In the *Metamorphoses*, because Baucis and Philemon were such good, pious people, their house was always a temple to the gods, and so the transformation enacted by their unexpected visitors perhaps served only to show things in their truest light. The transformation enacted by Abū al-Qāsim, in contrast, leaves the truth an open question.

Unlike Zeus and Hermes, Abū al-Qāsim leaves his host and the house physically much as he found them. Psychologically, however, his visitation has an impact. The room, at least, must have spun, though it never transformed into a temple. In hosting Abū al-Qāsim, it hosted a microcosm, its boundaries, like a bottle with a ship of fools inside, strangely altered by the impossibility of its contents.

⁴⁴⁹ *H*, 157-160.

Appendix: A Translation of the Chess Game

Then he would wash his hands and say, “Where are Abū al-Jalab and Abū al-Ṣannāj?” (by which he meant the games of chess and backgammon). And they would bring out, for example, a chess set.

“Who’s up for it? ” he would say. “What poor sap wants to offer up his head?”

They would be reluctant to play. “Yes, when the governor arrives,” he would say, “Raḳīqam hides!”⁴⁵⁰ until one would finally agree. When he noticed him he would say, “The pharmacist meets his medicine!”⁴⁵¹ Now isn’t this Mr. Terrible about to become Mr. Terrified!”

“So how does the bum play?”⁴⁵² he would then ask.

“He’s a good player!” they would say.

“Well an old mule isn’t frightened by the tinkle of a bell,”⁴⁵³ he would reply, and turn to him, saying:

⁴⁵⁰ I have been unable to identify the meaning of this proverb. Mez renders this *raqīquhum* (their slaves (Azdī, *Sittenbild*, 93).

⁴⁵¹ Specifically *bizr qaṭūn* (or *qaṭūn*), which, according to al-Shālījī are black seeds with multiple medicinal benefits, including the lowering of fevers, still in use in Baghdad today (*H*, 279). St. Germain, who identifies them as “flea-bane seeds,” adds the creation of erections to their medicinal utilities (*Anomalous*, 327).

⁴⁵² See al-Shālījī for a definition of this insulting term, Abū Mushkāḩal, which he claims is of Aramaic origins, derived from a word used to describe someone who employs trickery to obtain his daily bread (*H*, 279).

⁴⁵³ A proverb. Mez refers us to Freytag, where we find it among “more recent proverbs” translated thus: *Mulus decrepitus sono tintinnabuli non terretur* (*Proverbia*, I: 207).

*You who challenged me, you've thrown a fire on dry sticks!*⁴⁵⁴

*So you can try to touch me but you're going to get a prick!*⁴⁵⁵

And he would begin by advancing his pawns, and reciting some nonsense by way of opening the game:

We went out early late at night after the start of day,

And hunted rabbits, jackals, wolves, but donkeys got away!

Then his fellow player would advance some pawns, and he would say, “Hey bum, don’t bite off more than you can chew! Just two squares at a time, so you don’t end in the black!”⁴⁵⁶ Camel by camel or you’ll break the *maḥāmīl*. I say enough, but he sneaks on up. Your basket won’t split mister! Don’t hurry, my lord, hurrying’s for tom-cats. He takes two of my pawns for one pawn—now that’s a good deal!

Every time he sold his beard, I sold a hairless asshole.

An elegant man, by God!

I gave it to him good, and he found it rather thrilling.

“Your beard up in my ass,” I said, and he was more than willing.

He would advance the Queen protected by a pawn,⁴⁵⁷ and say “Go up with a blanket and come down with a fan.”

⁴⁵⁴ Specifically ‘*arfaj*, a flammable plant.

⁴⁵⁵ From the ‘*awsaj* thorn-tree (a boxthorn; see Lane, *Lexicon*, 612)).

⁴⁵⁶ This translation is based on al-Shālījī’s assertion that *tā* was a Baghdadi colloquial shortening of *ḥattā*, now pronounced *dā* (*H*, 280).

⁴⁵⁷ See Wieber (*Schachspiel*, 322).

He would limit his opponent's play from the sides, and say, "In Mrs. Curves's crack, for it's made of solid rock!

A gift from me sent into you, in myrtle, basil wrapped,

*A peach on bottom, topped with knob of apple, pomegranate.*⁴⁵⁸

But if his opponent broke out and escaped him, he would say:

He slept, but with a shitty shoe,

I slapped him so he'd wake up,

Now look the veins show in his neck

Just how they liked the shake-up.

His opponent would send his knight into the center after the advancing of the pawns.

"Well done!" Abū al-Qāsim would say, "Now we've moved on from stacking blocks to spinning tops!" And he would say, "The morning found me occupied with what I did all night, thus one keeps at a thing until mastering it. So, gentlemen, shit and play with it, that way you can do two things at the same time! Stand on the river-bank and tie up what washes up."⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁸ Clearly an extended metaphor for a penis. Cf. Abū al-Qāsim's earlier taunt: "That's right, honey, you want something planted at one end, with a nozzle at the other. It's not an eggplant, and it's not a gourd... I think you want something that starts with a truffle, ends with a cucumber, and has a nose-bag hanging on its neck. You'd like a good blow on the proverbial horn!" (*H*, 78).

⁴⁵⁹ "What washes up" is an educated guess for *mābāqāt*, used earlier in a similar context: "It's as though he's the Grand High Treasurer of Chicken-shit, or the Trustee of the River Bank in charge of all the duck droppings, or the commissioner of the Tigris tying up the *mābāqāt* with palm fronds" (*H*, 61). Also see Steingass, *Dictionary*, 1136: "*mā bāqi*: the remainder, the rest...*mā bāqīya*: remaining over, rest, remainder, remnant; arrears, balance, surplus." Also see, however, Tawḥīdī's *Akhlāq al-wāzīrayn* in which the editor defines this word as *khūṣūmān* (5).

“You could move the king’s guard, dumbass,” he would suggest. “Your bread is covered in fish paste.⁴⁶⁰ If you weren’t plotting over something you wouldn’t be eating your bread in the corner.”

And if his opponent would take up one of his pawns in his hand, and act as if he were going to move it, he would say, “If you see the chicken pecking the rooster’s ass, you know that she’s telling him, “fuck fuck!”

Then his opponent would stammer, his error apparent to him, and Abū al-Qāsim would say, “So OK, the blind man shits on top of the roof and thinks that no one can see him.⁴⁶¹ You dumbass! The one who farted in your beard ate beans from my farm! Your hand is closer to heaven than to that piece, and one who strives to stomp on the wind is but farting in his mustache.”

Then he would say to one of the people there, “Why don’t you watch this game and see something really amazing?” This would garner a little interest among some of the crowd, who would begin cautioning and advising his opponent, much to the annoyance of Abū al-Qāsim.

“Gentlemen, I told you to watch,” he would say, “I didn’t tell you to get in the way! Leave him alone so he can get his finger jammed in the door, and then I’ll show you how I slap him!”

⁴⁶⁰ See *bunn* in Dozy, *Supplément*, 116. He provides a recipe for this fermented fish paste condiment.

⁴⁶¹ A proverb. St. Germain (*Anomalous*, 328) refers us to Freytag *Proverbia*, II:169, where we find it translated thus: *Caecus super tecto cacat et ipsum homines non videre putat.*

But his opponent would be distracted. “Damn you, what do you expect?” he would ask, “For piping always distracts the piper from cutting the cheese!”⁴⁶²

If he would groan out loud worrying over something, Abū al-Qāsim would say, “He sings the song of a hornet in his clothes! He took a break from his work to cry about his mother-in-law. How he raves, God bless him, like a Hindi divorcee!”⁴⁶³

If someone says to him, “Take that pawn in exchange for one of your pawns,” and he saw that there wasn’t any benefit in doing so, he would leave it and say, “If it’s a monkey for a monkey, at least this monkey’s house-broken.”

Then he would take one of the pawns on the side of the board and say,

*If you can’t get a rose, take a cyclamen.*⁴⁶⁴

Many a thing you despise at first turns out to be worthless.”

His opponent would then take one of his pawns. “Too bad Abū al-Qāsim!” someone would say, “Didn’t you notice it?”

“Go to hell,” he would reply, “And bring firewood!”⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶² “Splitting Dabīqī cloth,” in the Arabic. Abū al-Qāsim makes the meaning of this metaphor clear in an earlier poem: “This party’s taking after drought and famine/ There’s nothing here but thirst and filthy broth,/ A literary sitting of obscenities/ And farting sounds, like torn Dabīqī cloth” (*H*, 278). For an alternate reading of this line see Mez, who reads the piper with his pipe (*al-zāmir bi-zamrihi*) as al-Zāmir ibn Murrah, Ibn Murrah being a nickname for the devil (*Azdī, Sittenbild, LI*).

⁴⁶³ Al-Shālījī recognizes this saying as one popular in 10th/11th-century Baghdad (*H*, 282).

⁴⁶⁴ See ‘*arṭanīth* in Dozy, *Supplément*, II:114-115.

⁴⁶⁵ Literally “and the rushes of Dābiq!” or perhaps “the sticky rushes.” Al-Shālījī explains that rushes are especially flammable (*H*, 283). St. Germain suggests that going to the rushes of Dābiq, a small village

Then he would take a queen or a knight on the opposite side.⁴⁶⁶

“Gentlemen,” he would say, “a blow of the stone hammer is better than a thousand taps of the mallet.”

“Never mind,” his opponent would say.

“If you hear someone say ‘never mind’ in a war, you know that the shit’s above his head,” he would reply.

His opponent would err in his positioning, and then realize it and begin to catch up.

“After the fart, he tightened his ass,”⁴⁶⁷ Abū al-Qāsim would say.

And his opponent would want to swerve to the side with his knight, but then would see that this would obstruct its movement, and Abū al-Qāsim would say, “You dumbass! If you’re going on the hajj, take the straight path!”⁴⁶⁸ So he would return it to its place.

“The seed rolls and rolls, then returns to the mill,”⁴⁶⁹ Abū al-Qāsim would say.

near Aleppo, would mean to die in an out-of-the way place, referring to the death of the Umayyad caliph Sulaymān ibn ‘Abd al-Mālik (*Anomalous*, 330), as described in Yāqūt, *buldān*, II: 513.

⁴⁶⁶ Because the queen could only move one diagonal square at a time (Murray, *History of Chess*, 225), its loss would not be quite the devastating blow that it is in the modern game.

⁴⁶⁷ A proverb meaning something like “to shut the barn door after the horse has bolted,” which according to al-Shālījī is still used in Baghdad today with a slight variation (“after he farted, he fell silent,” (*ṣamat*) (*H*, 283)).

⁴⁶⁸ Literally, “the road of Ctesiphon” or al-Madā’in, a city south of Baghdad and consequently between Baghdad and Mecca.

⁴⁶⁹ A proverb. St. Germain (*Anomalous*, 331) refers us to Freytag, *Proverbia*, I: 419 (where it is translated: *Granum circumvertitur et ad molam redit*).

Then his opponent would softly mutter over something evincing worry, concern and vexation, and Abū al-Qāsim would say,

O you whose anger has led him to gnaw

On the juice of my ass with his teeth...

How much will you grieve? How much will you gripe? How much will you grow angry?" Then he would say, "Poor thing. What's he doing? His flour fell in the thorn bushes and he can't get it back together again."

He would play for something and his opponent would block him, and he would scream, "Hey! He stopped me, by God, by sword and by flame! What do I do?"

But then his opponent would make a mistake in his play, and surrender some pieces to him, and he would say, "Nice going, boneless doggy bag! Put the spoon of your face in my lap!"

Then his opponent would take a piece, and see his error and want to put it back, but Abū al-Qāsim would force him to take it and say, "By God you'll take it even against your will!"

"And what should he do with it?" someone would say.

"What the slave-girl of al-Sukkarī did," he would reply.

"What did she do?" they would ask.

"Take it in her hand and put it in her cunt," he would reply.

Then he would turn to him and recite,

Your cheek turns after the evening meal

To the black-hairy hole of my ass.

Content with the bitter truth, patience!

Or otherwise, just let it pass.

Then he would say, “This, by God, has been the way of the game since its invention, until it bore this fruit that it bore. Yes, for the donkey is on hire until death.⁴⁷⁰ Free straw bursts the sacks.”

Then his opponent would tempt him to take a piece, and he would stretch out his hand to take it, thinking it was free. But the error of his thinking would appear to him, and he would neigh and scream and recite,

*O son of whom my pickle jar penis
comes and goes in her ass's avenues...*

Another:

*He who comes to visit me
runs headlong for destruction,
Look! My hand is on the rook,
out for your king's abduction!*

Dumbass! If you jump on two pegs, one of them is going up your butt.”⁴⁷¹

Then his opponent would turn to someone as if to ask advice. “If the sea-turtle has need of a boat, he’s finished,” Abū al-Qāsim would say.

But the person would advise him to do something, so Abū al-Qāsim would turn to him and say, “Sure, take it from someone whose intellect fits in a fruit-basket. You grew so long, my cock, that you came out of my sleeve!” And he would recite:

*What dire time is this that they go trampling on my game,
these stupid donkeys, hanging on my back.*

⁴⁷⁰ Al-Shālījī informs us that this saying is still in use today in Baghdad in much the same form (H, 286).

⁴⁷¹ According to al-Shālījī, al-Tawhīdī mentions this saying somewhere in his *Al-Baṣā’ir wa-l-dakhā’ir* (H, 286).

*I don't play favorites to the beards a-rubbing in my ass,
Except my friend here, him I'll get to last.*

By whom he meant the host of the party. Then someone would say to him, “Damn you, you can ask advice too if you like, just stop insulting people!”

And he would say, “Break the back of the mother of the one who has to eat beans in order to fart!”

His opponent would strike at both his king and his bishop,⁴⁷² and he would scream and say, “I'll give you some advice, sir, by God!”

“What advice?” he would ask.

And Abū al-Qāsim would reply:

*Tie up your beard, for deep in an ocean of shit
you have now fallen down.*

A sea from my anus which looks like it's drawn

With a compass, so perfectly round.⁴⁷³

Then he would say in a sing-song voice:

Father of Ḥusayn, son of al-Ḥasan,

Your head and your body grow wide!

Your beard too has grown and I wish that it would

In my kaka liki go hide.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷² The bishop (*fīl* or elephant) could move only two squares diagonally (Murray, *History of Chess*, 225).

⁴⁷³ According to Mez, a poem by Ibn al-Ḥajjāj (Azdī, *Sittenbild*, LI).

⁴⁷⁴ The Arabic poem includes the phrase “in my ass” in Persian, *bikūne man*, here translated as *kaka liki*, Mauritian creole for “asshole.”

Then raving he would say,

Umm Razīn shat in the bread,

'it helps it rise!' Umm Razīn said.

“What does this cuckold care about?” he would ask, “A hard head and firm horn!” and he would recite: ...⁴⁷⁵

Another:

O youth whose soft black beard hangs lank

Like long loose strands of silk

...⁴⁷⁶

Your mother's wrapped in

robes of shit, and sealed up with a fart.

Another:

O vilest, lowest of mankind, in my view, without doubt,

How many times I've slapped those asking for it 'tween the eyes!

Your head's allowed for plundering, ears, shoulders blown about,

By power of my hands, now try my shoe-slap on for size.

*Fear God, the cartilage of your ears, the weak veins of your snout!*⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁵ The meaning of the poem here omitted is too unclear to present a translation, and the beginning of the second line appears corrupt in the manuscript. A tentative translation would look something like this: “O husband of she who sold her ass for an i.o.u./...my penis with a lentil dish above. /Don't you see my shoe is curly-toed and Daybūlī? (see *H*, 288 and *Azdī*, *Sittenbild*, LI)/ With it I come to you and stuff your chicken-butt collar.”

⁴⁷⁶ Part of this line is missing in the manuscript.

Suddenly the king and rook would lie exposed to Abū al-Qāsim's bishop, an admirable elegant move, and his opponent would leap up in surprise. Abū al-Qāsim would talk nonsense in a sing-song voice, saying, "This is odd manners, gentlemen! This is the uncouth language of Baghdad's Bāb al-Ṭāq,⁴⁷⁸ and the strange whims of chance!"

Then he would say, "A chess player on his death bed, as he was giving up the ghost, counseled his son thus: 'Beware, my son, the side of the rook! Fear the pounce of the knight! Heed the strike of the bishop! For it is better to sit on the cock of a donkey than to sit in a square open to attack!' And then he died.

"Sound advice, by God! A religious duty! He told his son true, and left him his legacy, may God not bless his carcass nor water his grave!"

This play would end with his opponent's head spinning. "Alas for you!" Abū al-Qāsim would say, "This young man, God bless him, came to my party today, but do you know what he ate?"

"No," they would say.

"A thousand cocks in a loaf of bread!"

⁴⁷⁷ The last two lines of this translation indulge in poetic license. The second to last line in the Arabic plays on the similarity between the sound of the words "hand" and "power," and "sandal" and "light" ("Under the hands (*'aydin*) by whose powers (*'aydin*) they freely administer sandals (*khifāf*) to the head not lightly (*khifāf*.")) In the original poem "snout" in the last line is actually "neck."

⁴⁷⁸ A neighborhood in Baghdad (le Strange, *Baghdad*, 218).

His opponent would respond with a curse, which he would tolerate. “Poor you!” he would say, “For the loser is allowed to mock, while the winner should be tolerant and kind. So I don’t blame him, by God. At this knot the carpenter farted.”⁴⁷⁹

His opponent’s king would be in a tight spot, and he would say, “Too bad! You escaped into a corner.” And he would recite mockingly,

*He said “spin it,” I said “in her cunt
Would that it would, good sir, spin...”*

Should his opponent’s pawns would be scattered, he would try to gather them together with crafty maneuvering, holding them back, and Abū al-Qāsim would say, “When the shepherd dies, the sheep scatter.”

“And has the shepherd died, Abū al-Qāsim?” someone would ask.

“Half of him died,” he would say, “and the other half is on its way.”

“How’s he really doing, gentlemen?” someone would ask.

“He’s in the shit up to his throat,” Abū al-Qāsim would reply, “And the dogs are standing guard. He’s doing about as well as cabbage in a hot pot. He shat in the pan, or rather on the chessboard. He shat in his own coffin. His juices are dry, and only a shell remains.”

His opponent would rush to evade him with one of his pawns, and someone would say, “How quickly he moves his pawn!” To which Abū al-Qāsim would reply, “Someone said to a

⁴⁷⁹ Mez adds only that “this must be a saying,” (Azdī, *Sittenbild*, LI). Given the density of sayings and proverbs used during this chess game, he is likely to be correct. He does not, however, suggest a possible interpretation.

tent-peg, ‘How quickly you go in!’ and it answered, “If you knew what was beating my behind, you’d understand!”⁴⁸⁰ He moved faster than a half-inserted penis or a fleeing gazelle with his young running before him,” he would mockingly remark.

His opponent would be stumped, and Abū al-Qāsim would say, “Night-blindness in the day-time is blindness all the time.”

And he would say, “Gentlemen, we slapped that monkey until we went blind,” and he would recite,

Incense-like his shit did fall,

Oh what a transgression!

“Abū al-Qāsim,” someone would say...

“Yes, there’s nothing for it but a truce! As the poet once said,

The time comes for a truce when truce becomes the only way.

*Not peace but poop and in your beard is what you get, I say!*⁴⁸¹

⁴⁸⁰ For this saying Mez (Azdī, *Sittenbild*, LII) refers us to Socin’s *Arabische Sprichwörter* (203), where we find it translated: *Man fragte den Pflock: “Warum gehst du in die Mauer hinein?” Er antwortete: “Weil Jemand, der hinter mir ist, Gewalt anwendet.”* (Someone asked the stake, “Why do you go into the wall?” It answered, “Because someone who is behind me uses force”).

⁴⁸¹ The original poem uses a play on the words “truce” and “shit,” which sound similar in Arabic. According to Mez this is an old joke found also, for example, in the poetry of Ibn Hijjāj (Azdī, *Sittenbild*, LII).

He would be planning to checkmate his opponent with his knight, and then he would strike, saying, “All right! Take a white thing for your coal, you scum!” And he would knock the chessboard over on his face.

Someone who was absent at the time of the victory would ask what had gone on between them. “We were slapping one another,” he said, “and now he’s complaining of a weak constitution!”

Then he would look around at everybody and ask, “Are we fasting today?”

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