Contemplating the Stronghold of Arabic Poetry from the Aperture of a Privy

Nefeli Papoutsakis: Classical Arabic Begging Poetry and *Šakwā*, 8th–12th Centuries. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2017 (Arabische Studien 14). VIII, 254 p. € 58.00. ISBN: 978-3-447-10872-0.

A Quarter Poet

According to a tradition reported in the *Muwaššaḥ* of al-Marzubānī (d. 384/994), where it is traced back to a certain al-Baṭīn (probably al-Baṭīn [al-Buṭayn] b. Umayya, a poet of the ʿAbbāsid age),[1] the experts of poetry have reached a consensus that poetry is based on four pillars (*arkān*): an elevating praise, an abasing invective, an adequate simile, or a splendid boasting. In the poetry of Ǧarīr, al-Farazdaq, and al-Aḫṭal – always according to al-Baṭīn – excellence has been achieved in all these four categories. As for their contemporary, the desert-dweller Ḏū l-Rumma, he only did well in simile and, accordingly, would amount to no more than a quarter poet (*rubʿ šāʿir*).

Nefeli Papoutsakis's *Classical Arabic Begging Poetry and* Šakwā*, 8th–12th Centuries* (henceforth '*Begging Poetry and* Šakwā'), originally the author's Habilitationsschrift, deals with poets who excelled[2] in none of the four aforementioned categories. Hence, if we were to stick to al-Baṭīn's categories and apply to these poets his rigid assessment, then they would amount to non-poets at all, or, in the best of cases, to anti-poets. Although such a judgment is sweeping, there is some share of truth to it. For if we leaf through the effervescent and fervent debates that permeated Arabic literary criticism during

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1   ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Baǧāwī (ed.): Al-Marzubānī, al-Muwaššaḥ. Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, 1965, 273. A full translation of al-Baṭīn's dictum is found in G. Schoeler: The Genres of Classical Arabic Poetry: Classification of Poetic Themes and Poems by Pre-Modern Critics and Redactors of Dīwāns. In: Quaderni di Studi Arabi. Nueva Serie 5/6, 2010–2011, 6. On al-Baṭīn b. Umayya see F. Sezgin: Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums. 17 vols. Leiden 1967–2015, vol. 2, 477.

2   The idea of "excelling" or "doing well" ("*yuḥsin*" in al-Marzubānī's wording) is far from being conspicuous; I understand it in this context as "achieving a reputation in one of the acknowledged 'genres' of poetry."

the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries we would hardly encounter the names of the 'poets' that populate the here-reviewed book. This is even more the case with the modern scholarly tradition, which – until very recently and with few exceptions – have turned a deaf ear to this corpus of lowbrow poetry. In this sense, these poets stand outside the literary tradition, or rather, to use a Deleuzian formula, they are its 'outside'. Indeed, and in Papoutsakis's own concluding words, "begging poetry was an uncommon and 'off-centre' genre of classical Arabic literature; the same is true of lowbrow *šakwā*" (212).

The monograph's endeavour is thus to trace the history of a genre, baptised "begging poetry and *šakwā*," and to point out its exponents, unfold its texts, its standard opuses, conventions, and sub-genres. In other terms, it is an attempt at setting begging poetry and *šakwā* (app. "complaint poetry, grievance") free from the two dominating genera of Arabic poetry (and poetics), *madīḥ* (panegyric, eulogy) and *hiǧāʾ* (invective poetry, lampoon), and to claim for them the 'modern' tag of 'genre'. The validation of reading begging poetry and *šakwā* in a single parcel, along with the monograph's terminological apparatus, are clearly sorted out in the introduction.

In what follows I will sketch further the monograph's topography before dwelling on two observations that accompanied me through its reading and that might suggest new dimensions to its venture.

The Monograph

The monograph consists of three chapters, with an introduction (1–17) and an epilogue (205–217). The rationale underlying this topography is manifold: chronologically, we move from the second/eighth to the sixth/twelfth century with a seminal dwelling on the fourth–fifth/tenth–eleventh centuries. Geographically, after starting in Kufa and Basra, the book turns to the Muslim East and then back to al-Andalus. The epilogue returns briefly to the East, yet to a later period, namely the twelfth-century Seljuk era. As for the primary sources, whereas Abū l-Faraǧ al-Iṣfahānī's (d. after 360/971) inexhaustible *Kitāb al-Aġānī* is the main source for the prosimetrum in Chapter One, it is aṯ-Ṯaʿālibī's (d. 429/1038) *Yatīmat ad-dahr*, and its sequel, *Tatimmat al-Yatīma*, that provide the bulk of the material for the poets discussed in Chapter Two, except for Ibn al-Ḥaǧǧāǧ, whose poetry is sought in the hitherto published parts of his *Dīwān* and in two unpublished manuscripts

consulted by Papoutsakis (100 note 102). In Chapter Three, if we put aside the *Dīwān* of Ibn Quzmān, the chief source for the latter's *zaǧal*s, it is mainly from Ibn Bassām aš-Šantarīnī's (d. 542/1147) *Ḏaḫīra* that examples of Andalusi begging poetry and *šakwā* are gained. The main source for the epilogue is ʿImād ad-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī's (d. 597/1201) anthology *Ḫarīdat al-qaṣr*.

Chapter One (19–70) identifies the early exponents of the genre: it is in Kufa and Basra, the two – originally – garrison-cities and scholarship hubs during the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsid caliphates, that the burgeoning of *šakwā* and begging poetry is sited. The earliest, Kufan specimens of the genre are, however, no immature, feeble attempts, but rather pieces of colourful imagery, brilliant playfulness, and a wit that is hardly matched in pre-20th-century Arabic verse. The analysis discerns a recurrent pattern that unfolds with each encounter between the petitioner- or jester-poet and his addressee – an observation that Abū l-Faraǧ al-Iṣfahānī has not failed to notice, as Papoutsakis acknowledges (39). Furthermore, this chapter sorts out the various characters, manners, and stylistic idiosyncrasies of these early exponents, drawing a major contrast between the Kufan poets, of "a rather jolly and waggish trend" and the later Basrans, who launched a "more acerbic and satirical" way (54). The chapter closes on a section consecrated to "ninth-century secretary poets, courtiers and nonsense poets" (54–69).

Chapter Two (71–135) moves to the Muslim East and to a time when the Buyids have dressed themselves as the ruling power in the region. The central figure in the chapter is Abū ʿAbdallāh Ibn al–Ḥaǧǧāǧ (d. ca. 391/1001), "the most obscene and scurrilous Arab poet ever" and "the greatest exponent of classical Arabic begging poetry and *šakwā*" (71). Yet, prior to indulging in the world of Ibn al-Ḥaǧǧāǧ, the chapter summons up a legion of poets from the *Yatīma* (71–98), whose epigrammatic complaint poetry attests to the prominence attained by the genre in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. On the one hand, these poets have retained many of the modes and strategies brought forth by the early Kufans – an aspect that Papoutsakis takes care at bringing to light. On the other hand, they introduced and elaborated a number of novel themes and sub-genres, such as the unsaleability of letters, the blame of the times/Time, and the haplessness of *adab* (*ḫurfat al-adab* – a pun on *ḥirfat al-adab*, the craft of the men of letters, see esp. 64 note 189). Hence, at the time of Ibn al-Ḥaǧǧāǧ, begging poetry and *šakwā* have attained the status of a full-fledged genre. This, however, has

not hindered the latter from forging his own character, as Papoutsakis ingeniously demonstrates. Moreover, his poetry could be seen as an attempt at carrying begging poetry and *šakwā* to their limits, probing to what extent the established norms and conventions could hold. His audacious obscenity, childish humour, "raw earthliness" (134), and parodies are some of the hallmarks of his poetry.

Chapter Three (137–203) turns to al-Andalus, in an attempt to carry the line begun in Chapter One in ninth-century Kufa further in time and geography. This proves to be rewarding. Just as Chapter Two, this one revolves around a central figure: the *zaǧǧāl* Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā Ibn Quzmān (d. 555/1160), "the most important exponent of the genre in al-Andalus" (152). It begins, nevertheless, by introducing the contribution of some earlier Andalusian poets to begging poetry and *šakwā*, where traces of Ibn al-Ḥaǧǧāǧ (already discerned by Ibn Bassām, see 138), but also of earlier exponents of the genre such as Abū Dulāma (on him, see 30–41), are identified. Ibn Quzmān's *zaǧal*s are then analysed at some length. The chapter sheds light on the latter's cheerfulness and subtle shift between complaint and joy and on his "inventiveness and humour" which "make timeworn motifs regain their freshness" (164). Indeed, his address to wheat (162–164) is brilliant, and so are his personifications of bread (167–168) and gold (171–172). Moreover, one can discern in his poetry a sort of meta-praise: his explicitness about the mercenariness of his art, which Papoutsakis amplifies (172–173), does not only contribute to the comic effect of his poetry, but could also be read as a meta-reflection on the *madīḥ* genre and the career of the panegyrist.

Since a number of the Andalusian exponents of the genre, and Ibn Quzmān in particular, have attracted some scholarly attention, it was indispensable that Papoutsakis engages with some postulations and ideas. Thereby her chief aim is to maintain the guiding thread that cuts through the monograph, namely, that begging poetry and *šakwā* should be read as a genre, which has developed its own conventions and literary stratagems. Hence one has to be particularly wary regarding two aspects: the first is the relationship between literary reality and the real circumstances of a beggar-poet's life, and the second is the extent of cognisant transgression of begging poetry and *šakwā* and whether its exponents have truly been reflecting a cultural pessimism and social malaise. Papoutsakis dwells especially on the works of García Gómez (145–148) and James T. Monroe (173–175): in discussing the former, she affirms that "poets' plaints were the same in both the East and

West of the Muslim world" (147), and in reviewing Monroe's inferences regarding Ibn Quzmān's praise poetry, she ripostes that "the self-ridicule and clownery were essential features of begging poetry as a genre" (174).

The section on "adventurous narratives" in begging poetry (176–203), which seals Chapter Three, is a retrospective diachronic reading that brings together the three different phases and their exponents, and thereby offers the reader a good standpoint to discern generic connections and development lines as well as stylistic idiosyncrasies. The commonalities and genre-typical strategies of begging poetry and *šakwā* are best highlighted in this section.

Minority and the Encounter with Power

Papoutsakis's observations and inferences are gleaned through a textual analysis, which opts for tackling whole *qaṣāʾid* (or rather anti-*qaṣāʾid*) and proceeds through the discussion of their plot, topoi, language, and, when available, their related *ḫabar* (i.e. prose account, anecdote). The poets' biographical coordinates are sometimes placed in the foreground, yet this contributes to the emphasised distinction between a poet's real-life circumstances and his donned persona. Hence, and in Papoutsakis's own words, the approach "is text-oriented, which explains the frequent and extensive poetic quotations; indeed, parts of the book read as a commentated anthology" (7). One of the obvious merits of *Begging Poetry and* Šakwā is precisely this anthological endeavour – the compilation and reading-in-parallel of a bundle of texts that do not strictly belong to the canon of Arabic poetry and that have not been accorded enough attention in the modern scholarly tradition. Yet, among the anthologised texts, only a limited number is provided in the original Arabic (Appendix, 235–249). This is compensated by providing full translations of the discussed texts. The verses are rendered into clear, pleasurably reading English, with a discernable ambition to convey the original as integral as possible. Moreover, footnotes are expansively used for providing biographical data, bringing out the proper meaning of a word, expanding the various readings of a verse (*riwāyāt*), and pointing out the figures of style and puns that are difficult to render in a translation (see e.g. 65 note 194). Sometimes, when Papoutsakis uses a translation which she deems to depart from the original, a more 'faithful' rendering is attempted in the footnote. In this respect, Papoutsakis's *Begging Poetry and* Šakwā is a meticulous philological exercise. It represents a further contribution to the recently growing interest

in Arabic popular literatures and lowbrow genres of Arabic poetry, and, as such, succeeds in raising relevant scholarly questions and pointing to some potential lines of investigation.

Among such potential lines I would like to dwell here on two. Firstly, although only one poet, namely Ibn Quzmām, was consistently using a vernacular variety for his poetical output, we get the impression, already with the early examples of the genre, that their language is a sort of a dialect as well – a less eloquent, minor variant of Arabic. Such an impression or effect, I would suggest, is the result not only of textual features, such as lexical and syntactical choices or the common use of Persian words for instance, but also of extra-textual strategies: this has precisely to do with the highbrow/lowbrow performative mode, evoked by Papoutsakis in the introduction. On the one hand, this mode is a variant of the jester-poet's "lowly posture" and reflected self-awareness, while, on the other hand, it works as an adjuster of the reader's expectations and textual experience. This is another aspect of these poets' loneliness and 'state of exile', as Classical Arabic is tightly related to classical Arabic poetry (and here 'classical' is meant in its full sense) and vice versa. It is interesting to note in this respect that Ibrāḫīm Naǧǧār's work *Šuʿarāʾ ʿAbbāsiyyūn mansiyyūn* (lit. 'Forgotten ʿAbbāsid Poets,' 1997), a seven-volume anthology and one of Papoutsakis's main sources and inspirations (15), bears, in its original French version (Naǧǧār's doctoral dissertation, 1987), the title of *La Mémoire rassemblée: poètes arabes « mineurs » des IIe/VIIIe et IIIe/IXe siècles* (The Assembled Memory: Minor Arab Poets of the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th Centuries): being minor and being forgotten hang together. Yet, it is this very state of exile, of being outside and forgotten, that allowed these 'poets' to give free rein to various sorts of experimentations, attaining realms that are hardly to be excepted even among the most 'innovative' of their contemporary highbrow poets.

The second observation is not completely detached from the concept of minority and touches on the idea of the encounter with power. Papoutsakis's *Begging Poetry and* Šakwā shares some resemblances – in its anthological enterprise as well as in its subject-matter – with Michel Foucault's anthological project *La Vie des hommes infâmes* (*Lives of Infamous Men*).[3] In this anthology,

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3   The texts that this anthology was supposed to include have later constituted the subject of other Foucauldian projects (The memoir of Herculine Barbin, 1978, and Le Désordre des familles, 1982, among others). Of the *Lives of Infamous Men*, Foucault

Foucault intended to collect texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth cen-
turies that he came across while searching the internment archives of the
Hôpital général and the Bastille: petitions, records of internment, and police
reports, among others. For Foucault, these texts are the relics of the lives of
infamous men and women, "transformed into strange poems through who
knows what twists of fate."[4] Although the program of Foucault's project, its
motivations, and the texts it deals with present important, and at times un-
bridgeable, differences to those of Papoutsakis's monograph, the idea of the
infamous' encounter with power and that of the *text* as the vestige where this
encounter is captured and re-enacted, seem to me legitimate grounds to draw
such a connection. As Foucault has remarked, it is the encounter with power
that "snatch them [sc. the infamous men] from the darkness in which they
could, perhaps should, have remained."[5] This collision with power is a very
instrumental notion in Arabic poetry, especially since the Umayyad times,
and it has conscious and unconscious reverberations in the scholarly tradi-
tion of Arabic literature until the present days. It would be valid for both
minor, 'forgotten' poets and for highbrow, major *court*-poets. The presently
reviewed book illuminates many facets of this encounter with power; more
importantly, it points to the potential of this notion in shedding fresh light
on a host of problems, such as the processes of collection and classification
of texts, the formation of canons and classes of poets, questions of author-
ship, originality, metapoetry, innovation, to mention only a few.

I would like to seal this extended review with a poetical quotation from Ibn
al-Ḥaǧǧāǧ. At the outset of the latter's entry in *al-Yatīma*, aṯ-Ṯaʿālibī adduces
the following two verses, which could stand for a whole literary ethos:[6]

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published only an introduction in 1977. Michel Foucault: La Vie des hommes in-
fâmes. In: Les Cahiers du Chemin 29, 1977, 12–29.

4   M. Foucault: Lives of Infamous Men. In: J. D. Faubion (ed.): Essential Works of
Foucault, 1954–1984, transl. by R. Hurley (et al.), vol. 3. Power. New York 2001,
157–175, here 157.

5   Foucault, Lives of Infamous Men (as n. 4), 161.

6   Muḥammad Muḥyī d-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (ed.): Abū Manṣūr aṯ-Ṯaʿālibī, Yatīmat ad-
dahr fī maḥāsin ahl al-ʿaṣr. 4 vols. Cairo 1956, vol. 3, 33.

> *Sukhf* is a must in my poetry
>> If we are to unwind and let go
> Can there be a house with no privy
>> And can a sane man live in it?[7]

<div dir="rtl">

وشعري سخفه لابدّ منه

فقد طبنا وزال الاحتشام

وهل دارٌ تكون بلا كنيف

فيمكن عاقلًا فيها المقام

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Indeed, the stronghold of Arabic poetry might look under a most revealing light when contemplated from the privy of Ibn al-Ḥağğāğ.

In what follows corrections and emendations are proposed to some of the typos, inaccuracies, and mis-transliterations that I could spot:

4n13: read *mawādd* instead of *mawadd*; 11n34: nawāt instead of nawāh; 14n46: al-Hītī instead of al-Ḥītī; 14n46: the correct reference is *al-Wāfī* 8:128 instead of *al-Wāfī* 8:198; 20n6 et passim: Ḫulayf instead of Ḫulayyif; 36, l. 25: the original (i.e. *Kitāb al-Aġānī*) reads *yasāruh* instead of *yusruhū*; 61n173: the original reads *s-suḫāni* instead of *s-salāṭīna*; 67n201: *taʾadduban* instead of *taʾadubban*; 71n1: Muṣṭafā instead of Muṣṭafā; 71n3: the original has *wa-fī n-nakbati min-hā* instead of *wa-fī nakba*; 113n147 (and 237, l. 6): read *amsi* instead of *amsu*; 123n188: another probable alternative reading for *yaḫuḍḍū* is *yaḫūdū* ("*laġğaġa talġīġᵃⁿ: ḫāḍa al-luğğata*," *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, s.v. "l.ğ.ğ"); 137n1 et passim: the nisba "*al-usariyya*" (from *al-usar*, pl. *al-usra*) is more common than "*al-usriyya*" (and is the one adopted in the original spelling in the cited article); 138n5: *nahaqa* is a more common reading than *nahiqa* (Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, s.v. "n.h.q"); 149n41: Ibn Ḥamdīn instead of Ibn Hamdīn; 150n47: *yaḥimu* instead of *yaḥamu*; 174, l. 22: Yaḥyā instead of Yaḥya; 181, l. 21: "you" should probably be "your"; 205: footnotes n. 3 and n. 4 should be interchanged; 206n12: an-Nuʿmānī's instead of an-Nuʿmanī's; 219, l. 26: Mirʾāt instead of Miʾrāt; 220, l. 6 (and 220, l. 37): Ṣādir instead of Ṣadir; 226, l. 23: al-Andalusī instead of *al-Andalūsī*; 226, l. 26: al-Qasṭallī instead of al-Qastallī; 230, l. 31: al-Malik instead of al-Mālik; 238, l. 2: the correct spelling is بَرَعَانِ instead of بِرَعَانِ; 242, l. 15: the correct spelling is أَثَّرِي instead of أَثَّرُ; 242, l. 25: the correct spelling is إِذَا instead of اِذَا; 249, l. 2 and l. 3: read *qaḥba* instead of *qabḥa*.

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7   The translation is from Sinan Antoon: The Poetics of the Obscene in Premodern Arabic Poetry. Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and Sukhf. New York 2014, 13.

Alfred el-Khoury, Bamberg
alfred.el-khoury@uni-bamberg.de