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Sinan Antoon, *The Poetics of the Obscene in Premodern Arabic Poetry: Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and Sukhf*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 224 pp., $95.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781137301536.

"Has it ever happened that when you were amazed by my poetry
Its sukhf did not make you laugh?"

Sinan Antoon examines diverse bodies of poetry produced by Ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 391/1001), a medieval Arab poet from Baghdad, arguing that their appearance was a landmark in the formulation of the poetics of the obscene in the Arabic literary tradition. The obscene, expressed and enacted through *sukhf*, *mujūn*, and kindred poetic forms, was a "culmination of a parodic and ribald trend whose roots preceded" the time of al-Ḥajjāj (2). Antoon offers us a profound and multifaceted picture of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's relationship to the literary tradition. He shows how the poet carved out a new and legitimate space within the tradition and how the dialectical tension between *hazl* (jest) and *jidd* (seriousness) made such a space conceivable. Antoon's study also explores the manner in which Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poetry recasts the literary tradition's enshrined norms as articulated by critics and grammarians. Additionally, he sheds light on the particular way in which the poetics of *sukhf* displaces these norms.

Investigating the poetry of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and his peers is an occasion for Antoon to raise critical questions about the place *sukhf* occupies in the Arabic literary tradition, as well as the multi-modes and intra-generic play that leads to dislocation, and hence, to a new poetic form. The incongruous registers and the fusion of poetic modes evident in the parodies and the scatological strands of *sukhf* amount to a commentary on the literary tradition itself.

Sukhf poems form only one portion of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's extant poetry. He composed panegyrics and a substantial body of well-crafted invectives (*hijā'*), particularly against popular figures like al-Mutannabī and Ibn Sukkara. Antoon draws our attention to three other poets who shared in the same mode of *sukhf*, namely, Abū Ḥukayma, Abū'l-`Ibar al-Hāshimī, and Abū al-`Anbas al-Ṣaymarī. He also looks closely at seven *sukhf* poems discussing the tropes that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj appropriated from Abū al-Nuwās and which he transformed to fit his particular poetic style and sensibilities. *The Poetics of the Obscene in Premodern Arabic Poetry* is lucidly written and the poems are beautifully translated. In Appendix A, the Arabic font used for the poems is not attractive or easy to read. The index

is well organized but it would have been helpful to add entries like *ṭibāq* (antithesis), *kināya* (extended allusion), and *jinās* (paranomasia) to it.

By using the term "premodern" instead of "medieval" to refer to Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poetry, Antoon does not intend to paint the premodern scene with broad strokes and then simply contrast it to the modern. Rather, he tries to start new conversations within modern Arabic literary criticism about why the medieval poets of the obscene were muted in the modern period and, by extension, what gets to be counted as representative of the Arabic literary tradition and what does not, and why. Most modern critics, as Antoon notes, have been unwilling or unable to reconnect Ibn al-Ḥajjāj to his literary roots and/or to distinguish his work from pornography. In other words, they are unprepared to find what the Arabic literary tradition can say about itself through grotesque humorous poetry rather than through 'reputable' and revered poetic forms. Antoon also tries to speak to modern scholars and students who have difficulty understanding how premodern poets navigated multiple sacred and secular spaces at a time when God's law, the *sharī`a*, regulated many features of daily life. Thus, for instance, he informs us that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj was elegized by the well-known Shi`a religious scholar and *naqīb* dignitary of Baghdad, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī. Indeed, Antoon is compelled to organize some of the sections of his book around this intent to make us imagine what these heterodox spaces in literature looked like, how serious and possible obscene poetry was, and how it was done professionally and rewarded by medieval audiences from different walks of life. Antoon succeeds in making the point that the poetry of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj embellishes a persona that is blatantly irreverent and obscene but that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj himself was for the most part distinguishable from his poetic persona. He was depicted by his contemporaries, including the vizier Ibn al-`Amīd, as serious-minded.

Antoon sufficiently demonstrates that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's choice of the *sukhf* mode was deliberate and that *sukhf* poetry is anything but *sakhīf* (trivial). It is entertaining but noncompliant, funny but thought-provoking. Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's parody of the icons of the Arabic poetic tradition evokes some of the features of the *maqāma* with its antihero. Even though the *maqāma* had caught the attention of modern critics and novelists like Emile Habibi, as I noted in one of my articles,[1] the antihero of *sukhf* does not make it into the modern world of fiction or poetry.

The parody inverts the admiration for the exemplary *mu`allaqa*, as the virginal model of poetry. It is the defiled *mu`allaqa* which is celebrated by Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, the *mu`allaqa* made unchaste by the unruly buffoon. The *nasīb* (amatory verses at the start of the poem) and *aṭlāl* (depiction of the deserted camping place of the beloved) motifs are transformed in this terrifically humorous way:

> Peace be upon you O `Ātika's two farting places
> Rest assured that you are the reason for [my] misfortune
>
> My cock cries tears for you, startled
> Its testicles lacerated and bloodied from them [farting places] (30-31).

[1] Rula Jurdi Abisaab, "*The Pessoptimist*: Breaching the State's *da`wa* (sacred creed) in a Fated Narrative of Secrets," *Edebiyat*, No. 1, 13 (2003): 1-10. See also Rula al-Jurdi, "Qāmūs al-Sirr fī Riwāyat *Sa'eed Abu al-Nahs al-Mutasha'il*" (The Dictionary of Secrets in *Sa'eed the Pessoptimist*), *Al-Ṭarīq* (August-September, 1997): 151-55.

The Conquering and the Defeated Cock

Antoon draws our attention to the disruptions that the *sukhf* poetry of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and his peers brought to the female image of classical poetry. Ibn al-Ḥajjāj embellishes the castrating effect of women's bodies on men. Women's bodies are both overpowering and perilous, while penetration appears like "tiptoeing on the edges of knives and needles" for if "I enter her I will be endangered" (36). This presents a clear inversion of the image of the alluring woman of the classical poly-thematic ode (*mu`allaqa*) and the sexually fearless lover. It mocks the amorous and erotic features of the *mu`allaqa* of Imru' al-Qays. Ibn al-Ḥajjāj devotes numerous verses to the depiction of the defeated cock or as Antoon puts it the "inept cock." Ibn al-Ḥajjāj wreaks havoc on celebratory male virility at the same time as he transforms women's bodies into grotesque and arduous terrains. The women, however, are not passive. They act upon the man and his sexuality.

Some of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's panegyrics, however, restore the cock's power and revive its status as conqueror. Abū Ḥukayma, his predecessor, would boast that his cock penetrated forts not "even conquered by Abū Bakr or `Umar." In his pieces of invective poetry against illustrious grammarians like al-Kisā'ī and Sībawayh he declares,

> Do you not know that
> in my absence and presence
>
> I fuck Jarīr's mother
> with my panegyrics to you (48).

Antoon also sheds light on the particular adaptations that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj made of the topoi in Abū al-Nuwās's *mujūn* poetry. These cover references to "sexual escapades as conquests" as well as the inversion of the trope of tightness of the anus, and the presentation of women's orifices as hyperbolically large, and their vaginas as seas (98, 103).

Did Sukhf Evolve into a Poetic Form for the Obscene?

Antoon explores the lexical spectrum of the term *sukhf* as it came to represent, according to him, the poetry of the obscene. He notes the overlap between *sukhf* and what he calls "its sister mode *mujūn*" as well as other terms/categories such as *hazl* (jest). He wants to show, however, that "more often than not" *sukhf* was linked to "obscenity and scatology" (45). *Sukhf* became more or less an independent genre. This conclusion allows Antoon to draw stronger links between Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and the more 'mainstreamed' poet Abū al-Nuwās removing many of the lines drawn between the two and challenging the existing categorization of their poetry.

It remains uncertain, however, whether *mujūn* can be treated as a subcategory of *sukhf* or vice versa. Rather, the two have been interchangeable in particular texts, contexts, and periods. Medieval literary critics still preferred the term *mujūn* over *sukhf* to describe the poetry of the obscene. As such, Antoon does not succeed in showing that *sukhf* evolved systematically into a specific mode of poetry which can be grounded in obscenity.

In my opinion, the porous boundaries between *mujūn*, *sukhf*, *hazl*, and *ḥumq* (foolishness), among others, makes it more compelling to view *sukhf* as fluid and versatile. One could argue, for instance, that the term *hazl* can serve Antoon's conclusions much like *sukhf* when

it comes to how the obscene was produced and received in premodern Baghdad. For premodern audiences the obscene could be subsumed under silliness, innocent playfulness, and loss of restraint. This would entail in turn a greater freedom in representing the body. These shades of *hazl* are reflected in several sources including Ibn Nubāta's anthology, *Talṭīf al-Mizāj min shi`r Ibn al-Ḥajjāj* (*Livening the Mood with Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's Poetry*). The link between obscenity and scatological parody also brings humor into view:

> She said about my fucking her:
> Is this dick of yours Mu`tazilite?
>
> I said: Yes. She said: Is this how
> the people of *jadal* [rationalists] fuck?
>
> I wish I had one of them
> Like Ḥusayn al-Ju`alī (116).

In my view, the fluidity offered by the medieval landscape can tell us a different story about the relationship of the obscene to the non-obscene in the literary tradition. For instance, what does it mean to place the poetry of the obscene in the same category or alongside *kudya* (begging poetry) and associate it with *ḥumq* (foolishness), and plain silliness? The answer to this question cannot be answered if we take *sukhf* out of the category and fix one meaning to it, namely, that of the poetry of the obscene. Inevitably, any scholar who tries to account for this type of poetry will come face to face with unresolvable tensions and incongruity. The latter may thus result from privileging the term *sukhf* over the multiple Arabic references (especially *mujūn*) in the original premodern setting and make it stand only for the poetry of the obscene.

As long as one realizes that something is going to be inevitably lost in the choices and interpretations one makes, one can still pursue such choices and defend them the way Antoon has done in this work. I must confess, therefore, that despite what I have just stated, I am inclined to see the poetry of the obscene being carved out like that and to try and examine it as a field in its own right. It is for this reason that I find Antoon's project exciting and vital to the unearthing of new trajectories for the Arabic literary tradition. For instance, I can think of Antoon's study as one way to critique the ideas of Adonis in *al-Thābit wa-al-Mutaḥawwil* if the study's theoretical scope were to be expanded and some of its assumptions driven to their logical conclusions. Having been working on this question myself, and advancing a set of interventions in the narrative of Adonis, I find Antoon's study an important contribution in this direction.[2]

Displacing Literary Form and Canon

Drawing upon Abdelfattah Kilito's critical inquiries into the Arabic literary tradition, Antoon argues that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj displaces Arabic literary forms and canon. Among the instructions which medieval critics like al-Qādī al-Jurjānī gave to poets, were imperatives to spread the "wording according to motifs/topics, so that your love poetry must not be like your boast" (18). The poet was thus being advised to draw out the boundaries between these

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[2] Adonis, *Al-Thābit wa-al-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ittibā` wa-al-Ibdā` `inda al-`Arab* (The Static and the Changing: A Study on Emulation and Originality among the Arabs), 4 vols., (Beirut: Dār al-`Awda, 1983).

topics. Antoon illustrates how Ibn al-Ḥajjāj displaces the arrangement of poetic themes especially through scatological intent. He makes abrupt transitions from *nasīb* to *hijā'* and creates "incongruous combinations" in one and the same poem. Parody, Antoon asserts, is a "conscious ironic or sardonic evocation of another artistic model" (46). It creates another literary field, namely *sukhf*, which is set apart from other forms. Another way in which Ibn al-Ḥajjāj dismisses the canon is to replace the figure of the beloved in the section classically devoted to *nasīb* with the "grotesque imagery" of the subject of invective. Antoon draws insightful conclusions about the translocation created by transferring the lines of *aṭlāl* and *nasīb* into the lower part of the body. The significance of this translocation may outweigh earlier types of parodying of the *mu`allaqa* of Imru' al-Qays and mockery of the *nasīb* and *aṭlāl* features of the classical poly-thematic ode. Ibn al-Ḥajjāj thus challenges the authority of the literary tradition itself and the power exerted by medieval critics and grammarians to lay claims to this tradition.

The Poetic and the Material

Faced with scant data about Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's personal life in biographical dictionaries, Antoon approaches the sources, at times, sociologically—i.e., he attempts to understand what literary trends Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poetry evoked and what ideas various critics and poets had about it. At other times, he tries to discern questions about his family and social class by making creative use of anecdotes, especially ones involving a scatological mishap narrated by Ibn al-Ḥajjāj himself.

Antoon highlights the socio-economic shifts that marked the rise of the Buyids to power in Baghdad, and how these shifts could have set the tone for some of the poetic themes taken up by Ibn al-Ḥajjāj. In Antoon's view, poetic production is "an interface of sorts" that reflects its "own internal evolution" while it is simultaneously "influenced by social and political institutions" (24). On the one hand, then, poetry is neither an autonomous entity creating itself nor, on the other hand, does it simply mirror the existing socio-economic realities or bend to the structures of power. Antoon does not attempt to draw out any specific pattern for material 'influences.' He also rejects the idea that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poetry reveals aspects of his life in a definitive way. The anecdotal literature merely transmits echoes of his personal life. It is possible then, but not certain, that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's interest in *sukhf* poetry emerged in connection to images of lowly strangers and handicapped beggars who lived in lodges on land sold by his father. We are told that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj started to write down what they were saying, presumably in the vulgar language of the street.

With respect to the Buyids, I would note that their rise to power paved the way for new intellectual developments as well as shifts in the boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy. Under the Buyids, the Sunnite *ahl al-hadīth*, especially among the Ḥanbalīs, were decentered. At the same time, previously marginalized groups, including the *mutakallimūn* (rational theologians) and the Twelver Shi`a were accorded a greater, if not a central, place in Baghdad's public sphere. The Buyid setting witnessed intense but lively doctrinal and theological debates across the *madhāhib* (schools of law). Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poems evoke distinct features of this vibrant ambiance. It is telling that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poetry appeared around the same time the major canonical Shi`a *ḥadīth* and doctrinal works emerged.

The Premodern and the Modern: Epistemic Shifts

Antoon argues that "most premodern critics were more tolerant of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and his ilk than the great majority of modern and contemporary ones" and that this fact "is telling of the change in the way scatology and the body are perceived" (134). In the original Arabic sources, the 'obscene,' is interwoven with certain notions of lightheartedness, foolishness, and feebleness. The medieval listener and reader were capable of separating between the persona and the poet. Whether through his panegyrics to the Buyid elite or through comic and vulgar street language, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, as Antoon repeatedly points out, achieved "institutional success," and his poetry made it into *Subḥ al-A`shā* by al-Qalqashandī as a good example of frivolity (9). True, a few medieval critics considered Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poetry weak; but for the most part they focused on what constituted good or bad poetry rather than on what constituted moral or immoral poetry.

Antoon tries to push this conversation further. At the beginning of his work he poses the question, "What made Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and his *sukhf* so successful, accepted, and popular in premodern times, yet virtually unknown nowadays" (2)? There is indeed an epistemic shift brought about by modernity which has prevented us from properly investigating volumes and volumes of *mujūn* poetry produced by diverse poets including a Sufi like Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī—who was the *shaykh al-Islam* in Qonya—and Bahā' al-Dīn al-`Āmilī, who was *shaykh al-Islam* in Iran.

Antoon concludes that modern Arab scholars who dismissed the poetry of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj to "cleanse the cultural past were following in the footsteps of their Western counterparts who had done the very same with their great scatologues" (134). One of the main reasons these critics ignored Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and his likes, I would concur, was that poetic modernity, despite its local shape and color, could not disentangle itself from colonial legacies and Eurocentric commentaries on the Arabic literary tradition. There was a tendency to 'reform' and modernize, and hence, to perceive this brand of *sukhf* or *mujūn* poetry as crude, decadent, and not suitable for civilized audiences. We have seen how advocates of poetic modernity, in particular, searched for literary figures to uncover from the past who can live up to the universalized values of the European Enlightenment. This involves the "valorization of mind over body" as Antoon notes (134). Therefore, "mainstreaming" Abū al-Nuwās during the modern period involved some negotiation. Modern critics who were eager to secularize and 'free' Arabic verse were able to package important *mujūn* features and bacchic elements together from Abū al-Nuwās's poetry to achieve their aims without delving into the sexually transgressive material. After all, Phallegy may seem backward, probably evoking Orientalist images about oversexed Muslim men. In this climate, as the tradition was being judged by Orientalists and their students, Abū al-Nuwās would appeal to Arab modern sensibilities in ways that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj could not. There are other reasons too. We remain strangers to the heterodox literary, social, and sexual scenes of the premodern context where reason was not an absolute value.

There is a lot that one can say about the reasons and implications of making Arabic poetry of the obscene available in English. I will only note that presenting Ibn al-Ḥajjāj to English-speaking audiences may allow Arab scholars to 'discover' or rediscover his poetry in distinct ways. It may help, for instance, bring it out of the margins—after it has gained some 'legitimacy' within a Western context—because colonial legacies, selective prisms of politics,

and current events all shape deeply how certain types of translated poetry or fiction are received both in the US, and later in the Arab world, especially Iraq.[3]

Sense of Humor

In the wake of the crime committed against the cartoonists of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris, I could not help but think about other conversations which Antoon's study of *sukhf* can start. It can indirectly address the tiresome comments and ill-conceived statements made by numerous liberal Arab intellectuals, not to mention Western scholars, about the lack of an appreciation for humor and grotesque satire in the Arab-Islamic literary tradition. It was astounding to find that some of the same intellectuals and public figures who had condemned Sa`dī Yūsuf's poem "`Aisha bint al-Bāsha" (`Aisha daughter of the Pasha) for its obscenity and blasphemy, hailed the daring and artistic qualities of the cartoons of *Charlie Hebdo*. These intellectuals were arguing that the cartoons reflect a long normative tradition of grotesque humor in France, which Arabs, being backward and non-secular, lack.

Yūsuf's poem is funny, witty, and subversive. It does not even verge on the grotesque, and yet, it was publicly denounced. The *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons are not very funny and not too blasphemous. They are surely not subversive, for the French already live under a secular modern state. I mean the cartoons do not appear as blasphemous to French society, as Bashshār b. Burd's poems appeared to medieval Iraqi rulers and the religious elite. Ibn Burd challenged some of the foundations of religious, theological, and political orthodoxy at the time.

Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's parodies and those of Abū Ḥukayma, as Antoon has illustrated, offer images that verge on blasphemy such as parodying the tediousness of Ramadan, the annual pilgrimage, or even prayer by the over-pious. The antihero of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's scatological pieces invites us all to laugh at ourselves, and he starts with himself and his own body. Abū Ḥukayma crafted hilarious and witty elegies for the cock, likening it in one instance to a eunuch, "It sleeps when its dream comes true/[But] is erect in the bathroom when none is there but me" (31). The grotesque is a serious mode of presenting the self and the body here. The cock is presented also as performing prayer, it must "rise up and say….in the name of God" (72). Elsewhere, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj draws an analogy between sexual intercourse and calling for "the forenoon prayer" inside the woman (35).

In brief, *The Poetics of the Obscene in Premodern Arabic Poetry* is a timely and uplifting work, which must be taken seriously and built upon. I had to put this book down several times just to laugh. As I would go back to it, I could not help but ponder that during al-Mutawwakil's time, just when the rationalists had been defeated, the poet Abū al-`Ibar al-Hāshimī turned to *ḥumq* and abandoned seriousness. His obscene poetry had the straight-laced *ahl al-ḥadīth* type folks in Baghdad rolling in the aisles.

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[3] For more on this question see, Rula Jurdi, "Arabic Poetics through a Canonical Translation: Teaching Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*" in *Teaching Modern Arabic Literature in English Translation: Why Theory, Politics and Ethics Matter*, ed. Michelle Hartman, pp. 1-34 (forthcoming).

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