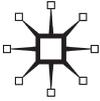


Contents

<i>Note from the Editor</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
1 Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and <i>Sukhf</i> : Genealogies	5
2 Parodying the Tradition	45
3 <i>Sukhf</i> in Panegyric Poetry	65
4 <i>Sukhf</i> as <i>Sukhf</i> : Abū Nuwās, <i>Mujūn</i> , and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj	93
5 <i>Sukhf</i> , Scatology, and Society	125
Conclusion	135
<i>Appendix A: Arabic Texts</i>	137
<i>Appendix B</i>	177
<i>Appendix C</i>	183
<i>Notes</i>	185
<i>Bibliography</i>	213
<i>Index</i>	221



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CHAPTER 1

Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and *Sukhf*: Genealogies

I saw that the fruits of poets' thoughts are [like] offspring, akin to each other, and like nations, their poems are scattered upon the earth. Except for the poems of the unique littérateur Abū 'Abdullāh Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, for they are a strange nation that spreads on its own and a wondrous offspring . . . no one's mind was able to master their likeness.

—Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣri (686–768/1287–1366)¹

If I die, by God, you will not see
anyone who can rival me in my style

The people of poetry have all concurred
that those who write are not my equals²

[I]

I am the one and only in my style
It is impossible that there be another³

[II]

...
Were it not for me, *sukhf* would never
have been read, nor ever written in a book⁴

[III]

...
[I am] A man who claims prophethood in *sukhf*
Who dares to doubt prophets?⁵

[IV]

Such is my poetry, its leaves
are spread and turned over again

6 • Poetics of the Obscene in Premodern Arabic Poetry

There is not a noble man on earth
without a book of them

He acknowledged that I am the prophet
of *sukhf* and he is merely a poet⁶

[V]

Poets, especially premodern Arab poets, were never at a loss when it came to literary boast and self-aggrandizement. So much so that that itself is a common topos. However, only few leave a mark on their age. Even fewer are those whose poetry outlives them and remains influential in later ages. One is reminded of al-Mutanabbī's (303–354/915–965) oft-quoted line:

I am the one whose eloquence the blind could see
and whose words forced the deaf to hear⁷

[VI]

Hyperbole aside, al-Mutanabbī's fame and influence are truly proverbial both in the realm of scholarship as well as in contemporary Arab culture (both literary and popular). For he had secured his permanent spot in the canon and the cultural archive of the Arabs. The same cannot be said of his contemporary, erstwhile enemy and ultimate "other," Ibn al-Ḥajjāj (330–391/941–1001).⁸ The latter's boasts about literary immortality and about pioneering a new mode of poetry (hence the repeated boast of being the prophet of *sukhf*)⁹ rang true in his time and for centuries after his death, but seem to have almost expired in the modern period. Canons, as well as the cultural archives to which they belong, are, of course, not fixed entities. They reflect and are shaped by dominant ideologies and sociohistorical contexts and forces.¹⁰ Many a poet is often consigned to oblivion and "disappeared" under layers of amnesia into a dark and distant corner of the archive. While the number of premodern Arab poets who eagerly await, and are deserving of, scholarly attention is not negligible, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and *sukhf* represent one of the most serious cases of cultural amnesia and academic neglect. Matters were not so a millennium ago.

Premodern Views: The Lightheartedness of the Age

When Ibn al-Ḥajjāj died in *Jumādā al-Thāniya* (*al-ākḥira*) 391 AH, May of 1001 CE,¹¹ his friend, the famous poet and *naqīb* of the Ṭālibids,

al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (359–406/970–1015) composed a moving elegy, some of whose lines are as follows:

I cried over you for the extraordinary famous verses
 Their words perfumed with [elegant] meanings
 ...
 Never did I think that death
 could blunt the edges of that tongue
 ...
 Be gone just like tender youth [did]
 when it let you down the day you met the women

 Let the age cry for you
 For you were its lightheartedness¹²

[VII]

Beyond the social conventions that occasion the composition of such elegies and the literary conventions that predetermine, to a large extent, their content, this one bears an added significance. That a highly respected religious figure and major poet such as al-Raḍī would accord Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and his poetry such honor underscores the positive approach and appreciative attitude toward Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and *sukhf* in his own time, one that contrasts sharply with the negative and neo-Victorian manner in which Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's legacy was largely dealt with in the modern period.

Another contemporary, the great essayist and master of *adab* Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (315–411/927–1023) wrote the following in his *Kitāb al-Imtā' wal-mu' ānasa* (The Book of Enjoyment and Conviviality):

As for Ibn al-Ḥajjāj... he is of a frivolous style, far from seriousness, exquisite in jest (*hazl*). Reason has neither share nor counterpart in his poetry. But his wording is sound and his speech flowing. His qualities are far removed, in their dignity, from his harmful habits. He and Ibn Sukkara share this obsession [with *sukhf*]. When he composes in seriousness (*jidd*), he squats like a dog and when he composes in jest (*hazl*), he is like a snake.¹³

Considering al-Tawḥīdī's legendary bitterness, jealousy, and cantankerousness, this is a very generous evaluation. He does sound deceptively conservative in his characterization of *sukhf* in this passage, but his own works abound with numerous obscene and scatological anecdotes and excerpts of poetry that would fall under the *sukhf* category. One need only leaf through *al-Baṣā'ir wal-dhakhā'ir* (Insights and Treasures) for example,

or *Mathālib al-wazīrayn* (The Faults of the Two Viziers) to find some of the most obscene passages ever written in Arabic letters.¹⁴ Moreover, *al-Risāla al-baghdādiyya* (The Baghdad Epistle), previously thought to have been penned by Abū ‘l-Muṭahhar al-Azdī, but recently attributed to al-Tawḥīdī,¹⁵ is the *sukhf* prose text par excellence.¹⁶ Its narrator and main character Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-Baghdādī appears to have been modeled after Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s persona. The latter’s poetry is excerpted therein as well. I emphasize persona because the sources tell us that unlike the extreme obscenity and shocking all-out irreverence of his poetry, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj was nothing like that in his social conduct and “private” life as far as we know. In *al-Imtā‘ wal-mu‘ānasa*,¹⁷ al-Tawḥīdī preserved an intriguing and telling account of the first encounter between Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and the vizier, patron, and famous *adīb* Ibn al-‘Amīd (d. 360/970), one of the great figures of the Būyid age¹⁸ and a recipient of many of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s panegyrics:

by God I am amazed by you. As for my liking of you, it is not recent. For I used to comb your *diwān* and yearn to meet you and say: What kind of man says these words? [He must be] the most reckless, frivolous and obsessed of all . . . You are indeed one of the miracles of God’s creatures and the marvels of his worshippers. By God none will believe that you are the very same man who composed your *diwān* and that it is yours with all this contradiction which exists between your poetry and the seriousness of your person.¹⁹

This speaks volumes about Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s fame and the respect he enjoyed, but also the “buzz” that he had created among the cultural elite. In another standard work and the major anthology of the second half of the fourth/tenth century, al-Tha‘ālibī’s (350–429/961–1038) *Yatīmat al-dahr* (The Solitaire of the Age), Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and his poetry are accorded ample space and a glowing preface:

Although he, in most of his poetry, does not hide under the veil of reason and bases most of his sayings on *sukhf*, he is one of the magicians of poetry and the marvels of the age. All those insightful in literature and knowledgeable in poetry agree that he is unique and unprecedented in the style for which he has become famed. No one has competed with his way, nor has anyone in command of the meanings which are found in his style been seen, with the smoothness and sweetness of his words . . . even if they express frivolity [*sakhāfa*] and are tainted with the speech of beggars and street gangs. Were it not that the seriousness of *adab* is serious and its jest is jest, as Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī said, I would have guarded this book of mine from much speech of one who extends the hand of *mujūn* and twists

the ear of the sacred [*haram*] with it. And he opens the sack of *sukhf* and smacks the neck of reason with it . . . he has composed panegyrics to kings, princes, ministers and his *dīwān* travels faster than a proverb and quicker than a shadow across the horizons.²⁰

Al-Tha‘alibī makes extensive use of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s poetry in his other works as well, especially *Thimār al-qulūb* (The Fruit of Hearts).²¹ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Al-Jurjānī, in *Kināyāt al-udabā’ wa ishārāt al-bulaghā’* (The Metonymies of the Literati and the Allusions of the Eloquent) also adduces many examples from Ibn al-Ḥajjāj.²² That Ibn al-Ḥajjāj had massive institutional success during his lifetime is well-known and attested by the numerous panegyrics he composed for the Būyid elite as well as by various extant accounts.²³ What further distinguishes him, however, is that he was equally famous among his peers, the critics, and even the “masses” of later times as we shall see later. In addition to the unique and original character of his poetry and its comic content, this was probably due to the relative simplicity of some of his diction and his deliberate use of vulgar street language.²⁴ A *ḥisba* (market inspection) manual composed in the eighth/fourteenth century (three centuries after Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s death)²⁵ instructs teachers to prohibit boys from reading or memorizing any of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s poems (or those of Ṣarī‘ al-Dilā’ (d. 412/921)²⁶ for his *dīwān* is “of no value”) and to be beaten if they are found doing so:

He [the teacher] must forbid boys from memorizing anything of the poetry of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and reading it and he must beat them for that. The same goes for the *dīwān* of Ṣarī‘ al-Dilā’, for it is no good and he should chastise them for that.²⁷

This, undoubtedly, illustrates Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s lasting popularity and fame. In an ironic twist of history, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj was himself the erstwhile *muḥtasib* (market inspector) of Baghdad for three years during the reign of Mu‘izz al-Dawla (945–967).²⁸

Another measure of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s importance and lasting influence is the number of selections of his poetry that were made by other poets. *Al-Naẓīf min al-sakhīf* (That which is Purged of *Sakhīf*)²⁹ was made by the aforementioned al-Raḍī, but is, alas, not extant.³⁰ This manuscript would have helped to shed much needed light on what was considered non-*sukhf* by one of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s contemporaries.

Al-Badī‘ al-Asturlābī (d. 534/1139–1140) made his own selection based on poetic motifs (*aghrād*) and divided into 141 chapters under

the title *Durrat al-tāj min shi‘r Ibn al-Ḥajjāj* (The Crown’s Jewel from Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s Verse).³¹ Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣrī (d. 768/1366) composed *Taltīf al-mizāj min shi‘r Ibn al-Ḥajjāj* (Livening the Mood with Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s Poetry).³² Abū ‘l-Qāsim Ibn Ḥalabāt composed *Mulah min shi‘r Ibn al-Ḥajjāj* (Fine Selections from Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s Poetry).³³ Finally, Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī (767–837/1366–1434) composed *Laṭā‘if al-taltīf* (Selections from Livening the Mood).³⁴

Writing more than three centuries following Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s death, al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) echoes al-Tha‘ālibī in *al-Wāfi bil-wafayāt*:

In his style he was unique in his time and the *imām* of poetry in its [various] modes (*kāna farda zamānīhi fi bābīhi wa-imāma al-shi‘ri fi aḍrābīhi*) . . . the first to open that door was Abū Nuwās and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj came with plenty more afterwards. He was prolific and distinguished . . . I regard him as one who can [rightly] be called a poet, because he mastered panegyric, invective, love, description, adab and all types of poetry, but in *mujūn* he is an *imām*, and all who composed it after him were merely his servants [*lakinnahu fi’l-mujūni imām wakullu man atā ba’ dahu bishay’in min dhālika fā-huwa lahu gbulām*].³⁵

Of these emulators, or servants, to use al-Ṣafadī’s term, Ibn al-Habbāriyya (d. 509/1115–1116) was the most famous to come after Ibn al-Ḥajjāj.³⁶ The shadow plays of Ibn Dāniyāl (d. 1311) were probably influenced, at least indirectly, by Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s *sukhf*.³⁷

In his manual on *muwashshahāt*, the strophic poetic form that originated in al-Andalus, Ibn Sanā’ al-Mulk³⁸ (550–608/1155–1211) stated that the *kharja* (the parting final line of the poem) must be “Ḥajjājian in its *sukhf* and Quzmānian³⁹ in its use of colloquial Arabic, scorching hot, and well-done and spicy.”

In *Sharḥ al-kāfiya al-badī‘iyya*,⁴⁰ Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (677–750/1278–), who himself dabbled in shades of *mujūn* and *sukhf* (although he does not employ these terms explicitly),⁴¹ uses a few of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s lines as examples of rhetorical devices.⁴²

Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s proverbial status has him later appearing, for example, in *Nuzhat al-albāb* (The Promenade of Hearts) to narrate, at length, a very humorous scatological anecdote about himself.⁴³ In *Ṣubḥ al-a’ shā fi sinā’ at al-inshā* (The Nightblind’s Morn in the Craft of Composition) by al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418), Ibn al-Ḥajjāj appears under the heading (Those who were [so] unique in their time as to become exemplary [proverbial]) (*man kāna fardan fi zamānīhi bihaythu yuḍrabu bihi ‘l-mathalu fi amthālihi*): “Abū Nuwās fi ‘l-mujūn wal-khalā‘a wa Ibn al-Ḥajjāj fi

sukhf al-alfāz” (Abū Nuwās in ribaldry and debauchery and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj in the frivolity/obscenity of words).⁴⁴ I shall return later to this important distribution of *mujūn/sukhf* between Abū Nuwās and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and to the latter’s debt to the former.

There were, of course, those whom Ibn al-Ḥajjāj did not impress at all. In the famous *al-ʿUmda* (The Pillar) as part of a discussion of poets who refrained from responding to invective from those they deemed inferior (*bāb man raghiba min al-shuʿarāʾ ʿan mulāḥāt ghayr al-akfāʾ*), Ibn Rashīq (390–463/1000–1071) includes, as one of a few examples, al-Mutanabbī’s non-response to Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s invectives

And so did al-Mutanabbī when he was plagued with Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Baghdādī’s foolishness [*hamāqāt*]; he did not respond out of contempt and disdain. For had he responded [to him] he would not have been where he is in his haughtiness, because he [Ibn al-Ḥajjāj] is not his counterpart, nor is he of his class.⁴⁵

What Is *Sukhf*?

Be it as a signifier or a poetic mode, *sukhf* is not easy to pin down.⁴⁶ Not unlike many other literary terms, its semantic boundaries are porous and shifting. The term was not used uniformly, nor did it even have the same referential field within one type of discourse or usage. There is, to start with, much overlap with *mujūn* (again both as a literary term, but also a social attitude) and, to a lesser extent *hazl*. Montgomery points out that “the medieval Arab literati appear not to have used *sukhf* as a designation of a poetic genre, preferring *mudjūn*.” Rowson maintains that “*sukhf* is distinguished from it [*mujūn*] in referring less to hedonistic behavior offensive to the prudish than to gross language and comportment upsetting to the squeamish.”⁴⁷ Van Gelder provides the following synonyms for *mujūn*: shamelessness, indecent poetry (sex, alcohol, scatology); for *sukhf*: foolishness, obscene, or nonsensical poetry.⁴⁸ Ibn al-Ḥajjāj himself couples *sukhf* with *mujūn* and *hazl* in referring to his own poetry (see later). This instability is part and parcel of the slippage of language itself as a system and is not uncommon when dealing with literary terminology⁴⁹ (a central strand of *sukhf* itself, as will be illustrated later, is an incessant breaching and violation of boundaries of all sorts). Moreover, premodern Arabic literary criticism and terminology present their own added difficulties in this respect.⁵⁰ Not being a major or “official” mode, *sukhf* was bound to receive very little critical attention. One might add that *sukhf*’s intricacy and complexity as, ultimately, a dialogue, even if a dissonant one, with

the entire tradition, renders it even more challenging than other terms for classificatory or taxonomic purposes. Nevertheless, an exploration of its genealogy or polygenesis is *sine qua non*, especially since it becomes linked to, and almost synonymous with, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and his poetry, during and after the fourth/tenth century when it begins to influence the trajectory of Arabic poetry. It is with, and after, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj that *sukhf* is more often than not linked specifically to obscenity and scatology. Ibn al-Ḥajjāj punctuates many of his poems with references to “my *sukhf*”:

The demons of poetry
kneel before mine when it comes to *sukhf*⁵¹

[VIII]

O Minister, [hear] a plea from your servant
who has become an exemplar in *sukhf*

[IX]

The same line appears elsewhere in a slightly different version:

O Sir, [hear] a plea from a poet
whose style of poetry is not fake⁵²

[X]

When I compose *sukhf* I am Imru' al-Qays⁵³
even though my father is not Ḥujr

I bring many a poem that has
made my style of *sukhf* odd

Had I wanted to write serious poetry
It would not be difficult for me

But then I would merely be like
all those who write poetry in our age

Were it not for me, *sukhf* would never
have been written down or read

...

And to him who faults me for my *sukhf* I say:
You most foolish of all people!⁵⁴

[XI]

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

[XII]

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?⁵⁵

[XIII]

At other times, however, he refers to his poetry as *mujūn* or *hazl*:

If my poetry were to be serious you would see
 the night stars flowing therein
 But its jest is a ribaldry
 to make my ends meet⁵⁶

[XIV]

‘Aḍud al-Dawla’s (324–963/372–983) scribe wrote a poem to Ibn al-Ḥajjāj asking him to tone down his *sukhf*, and his response was:

[Do you blame me] for the *sukhf* and *mujūn* in my poetry
 or the wine, singing and slave girls?⁵⁷

[XV]

And in a panegyric⁵⁸ to Ibn al-‘Amīd (d. 366/977) he wrote:

Did you not see the Prophet at Badr
 fighting with Ḥassān’s poetry?⁵⁹
 Ḥassān with Jarīr and al-Akḥṭal⁶⁰
 would not even be close to [being] my servants
 If they were present with me so that I may fight them with my *sukhf*
 Their muses would pray to mine

[XVI]

And elsewhere:

O you who fault my
 blatant admission of debauchery
 And a foolishness which soils
 my style of composition
 It is with *sukhf*’s precious commodities
 that my market flourishes amongst people⁶¹

[XVII]

While most of these “punctuations” and references to *sukhf* were practical responses to literary slander, they can and should be read as “authorial statements” to use Fowler’s term;⁶² a branding or conscious poetic labeling of sorts. There is also sufficient evidence to prove that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s impact anchors *sukhf* and links it more specifically to what he himself does in his poetry and thus stabilizes its meaning as obscenity and scatology.⁶³

In the standard lexicons, *sukhf* is mostly related antithetically to the realm of the intellect and, thus, *sakhīf* is “shallow-minded,” “foolish,” “frivolous,” or “silly.”⁶⁴ These could be functioning as euphemisms for “obscene,” which is the primary realm in which *sukhf* operates. It is not always easy to discern clearly which is meant. An important definition for our purposes is the one offered by Badī al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1008) in his *rasā’il* about the *sakhīf* being “one who is heedless about the consequences to him of what he does” . . . a definition similar to that offered of *mādjin* by Ibn Manẓūr.⁶⁵

In *Dīwān al-ma’ānī*, al-‘Askarī writes the following in commenting on the misuse of diction and the use of *gharīb* words by some poets: “*dalla ‘alā sakhāfati ‘aqlib*” ([it] indicates his shallow-mindedness).⁶⁶ But he also uses the verb *sakhuba* to describe meaning (*ma’nā*): “*wa lā khayra fī mā ujīda lafẓuhu idhā sakhuba ma’nāh*” (There is no good in having sound wording, but frivolous meaning).⁶⁷ In the section dealing with *hijā’* (invective) in *Dīwān al-ma’ānī*,⁶⁸ obscene lines by Ibn al-Rūmī (221–283/836–896) are described as “*sakhīfa*.”⁶⁹ The designation is used again in commenting on lines also by Ibn al-Rūmī describing a singing-girl (*qayna*):

So stinky, she is like a [clove of] garlic
although her color is that of a citron

Her anus is like a [piece of] coal
on which a frivolous man sprinkled his snow⁷⁰

[XVIII]

He adds: “. . . and they are obscene verses, most of which I have left out due to their obscenity (*wa-hiya abyāt sakhīfa taraktu aktharahā lisukhfih*).⁷¹ Al-‘Askarī justifies his inclusion of such obscenities as follows:

Were it not for my intention to collect the choicest motifs I would have left out these outrageous utterances in poetry and prose, but if scholars were to refrain from quoting obscene poetry, they would lose many

benefits and advantages like [the ones in] the poetry of al-Farazdaq, Jarīr, al-Ba'īth, al-Akḥṭal and others. Were it not acceptable to mention genitalia explicitly [*al-furūj bitaṣriḥ asmā'ihā*], then the lexicographers doing so would have been wrong and that is impossible.⁷²

Mujūn and *sukhf* were allotted some space in anthologies and adab works. The eighteenth night of al-Tawḥīdī's *al-Imtā' wal-mu'ānasa* is devoted to *mujūn* as its opening section informs us:

He [Ibn Sa'dān] once said: come let us make this night of ours one of *mujūn* and indulge in much jest [*na' khudhu min al-bazli binaṣībīn wāfir*], for seriousness has tired us, beaten our energies and filled us with sadness. Give us what you have.⁷³

The overlap with both *sukhf* and *hazl* is evident. *Hazl* is invoked in the previous excerpt and most of the *akhbār* (narratives) and excerpts of poetry included in this chapter can justly be categorized as *sukhf* material. They range from anecdotes about cross-dressers (*mukhannathūn*) to anal intercourse, sodomy, scatology, *kudya* (begging), and Ramaḍān bashing. Here are a few examples:

A man asked Ru'ba [Ibn al-'Ajjāj] (d. 145/762): do you place a *hamza* on *khur* [shit]? He said: [yes] with your finger, you son of a wicked one.⁷⁴

“al-Sha'bī⁷⁵ was asked: Is it permissible to pray in a church? He said: Yes, and [permissible] to shit [there] too.”⁷⁶

“Naḍla [?] said: I entered a public water stop in al-Karkh and I performed the ablutions. When I came out its attendant latched on to me and said: Give us something, so I farted and said: Let me go, for I have annulled my ablutions. He laughed and let me go.”⁷⁷

The following is an example of *kudya* (begging poetry) where in lieu of the traditional ruins of encampments, the poets address pots, and rather than the usual reunion with the beloved, he desires a meal:

Salute the immovable pots!
Even if they be too mute to speak

And [salute] their large bowls when they
come to you brimful of food

My heart goes out to vinegar-stewed meat
That heals hearts from their malady⁷⁸

[XIX]

Another *kudya* excerpt by Abū Fir‘awn [al-Sāsī], a famous *kudya* poet,⁷⁹ is also included. In this one, the misery of the poet (or his persona) is expressed by resorting to scatology:

For some time now lice have made a pact with my beard
I am so emaciated my fart is weakened

My testicles feed on my trousers
God damn my kind of life⁸⁰

[XX]

The importance of these examples for our purposes is that such themes were the threads that *sukhf* weaves together in various combinations. We have a parody of classical motifs (in the *kudya* excerpt), mockery of religion and religious practices, and sexual and scatological themes. The chapter in *al-Imtā‘* ends with a nod of approval by the vizier Ibn Sa‘dān, who tells his interlocutor al-Tawhīdī: give preference to this style over others [*qaddim hādihā l-fanna ‘alā ghayrih*].

Almost a century later, we find *mujūn* and *sukhf* coupled in the title of the sixteenth chapter of al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī’s *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabā‘* (The Apt Quotables of the Literati).⁸¹ Some of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s lines are included. Al-Ābī’s (d. 421/1030) *Nathr al-durr* (Scattering Pearls)⁸² has *mujūn/sukhf* sections as well.

In his *al-Wasāṭa bayna al-Mutanabbī wa khusūmih* (The Mediation between Al-Mutanabbī and His Opponents), al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī⁸³ (d. 391/1001) exemplifies one other use of *sukhf* as a negative term for bad or weak wording or wording that is incongruous with the topic or theme it is meant to convey. This is a corollary to his advice to poets earlier in this work to

spread the wording according to motifs/topics, so that your love poetry must not be like your boast, nor your praise like your threatening [*wa’id*] . . . nor your jest like your seriousness . . . describing warfare and weapons is not like describing a boon session or wine. Each of the two has a path to which it is more appropriate and a way which the other does not share.⁸⁴

This, in a way, serves as a perfect, albeit reversed, definition of one central dimension of *sukhf*. For it is precisely what al-Jurjānī is advising poets not to do that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj revels in doing time and again. Namely, injecting “disorder into the [literary] system” to use Kilito’s phrase, by intentionally confusing registers and dictions so that it becomes difficult to distinguish between modes. There are subsections of examples in *al-Wasāṭa* where Abū

Nuwās, Abū Tammām, and al-Mutanabbī are all shown to have misused the appropriate diction or wording. *Sukhf* is mostly attributed to *alfāz* (words or wording) and seems to mean “frivolous” or “shallow” and is not related to obscenity or scatology.⁸⁵ Thus, the various shades of meanings of *sukhf* and its adjectival forms seem to be apt designations for what Ibn al-Ḥajjāj does in and with his poetry. In addition to the obvious “obscene” and “scatological,” we have “unreasonable,” “silly,” “heedless,” “frivolous,” and “shallow-minded.” All of these are interrelated, for explicit mention of scatological and very obscene matters is universally foolish and reckless, but so is using inappropriate wording, jumbling and mixing high and low diction, and violating literary and social conventions and expectations. While accurately describing *sukhf* and its effects, perhaps one can suggest that exteriorizing *sukhf* to the realm of the “frivolous” was a strategy on the part of some critics to deem it unworthy in order to not have to deal with it at length. While more often applied to *alfāz* (words and wording), at times the designation is used for *ma’ānī* (meanings, topics, or motifs). It is interesting to note the tendency to couple *mujūn* with Abū Nuwās and *sukhf* with Ibn al-Ḥajjāj (as both al-Ṣafadī and al-Qalqashandī did for example). This is reflective of a difference in degree in terms of the use of obscene and scatological themes and diction, with Ibn al-Ḥajjāj going to the extreme, whereas Abū Nuwās toyed with them without obsessing as Ibn al-Ḥajjāj did. Abū Nuwās was ultimately mainstreamed by modern critics and successive Arab publishers who excised much of his extremely obscene poetry, at least until very recently⁸⁶ and tried to project and attach a repentance of sorts to his biography. To sum up, *sukhf* is obscene and scatological parody that also encompasses frivolous, intentionally irrational, and blasphemous elements.

Hazl

In addition to its frequent mention in Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s poetry, *hazl* (jest) is an important literary category under which *sukhf* is at times subsumed and with which it often overlaps. Like *sukhf*, *hazl* is

not easily defined... it is not identical with “humour” “joking,” or “the comical,” nor with “nonsense,” “folly” or “playfulness,” even though there is considerable overlap with all these. *Hazl* is a concept with fuzzy edges, and any attempt to define it is doomed to fail.⁸⁷

Often coupled with *jidd* (seriousness) to form a topos, the concept has roots in the tradition and even appears in the Qur’ān, but was

established and perfected in *adab* early on by al-Jāhīz (160–255/776–868).⁸⁸ He expounds on it in his *Risāla fi ‘l-jidd wal-hazl and al-Tarbī‘ wal-tadwīr*. Some detractors notwithstanding, the predominant consensus was that “a judicious mixture” of both was desirable in *adab*.⁸⁹ There seems to have been a general tendency favoring minimum overlap between, and confusion of, *jidd* and *hazl* and that, ideally, they should be juxtaposed and neatly separated.⁹⁰ While largely adhered to in *adab*, these prescriptions are often violated and blurred “in the lighter forms of poetry and especially in invective or satirical poetry.”⁹¹ Even al-Jāhīz himself condemned combining low subjects with high diction and stressed that “silly (*sakhīf*) words are fitting for silly thoughts,” but he flouted this rule in his own writings.⁹² Al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī’s warning against mixing modes was already mentioned earlier. At the outset of his *al-Baṣā‘ir wal-dhakhā‘ir* (Insights and Treasures), al-Tawḥīdī highlights the importance of *hazl* and warns against discarding it altogether: Beware not to refrain from listening to these things that are full of *hazl* and *sukhf*, for if you were to reject them entirely, your understanding would be lacking.⁹³

Al-Taftāzānī’s (d. 791–797/1389–1395) definition of *hazl* as “something employed in a sense contrary to convention (*an yurād bi-l-shay’ mā lam yūda’ lahu*)”⁹⁴ is the most interesting for our purposes. This is, by and large, what Ibn al-Ḥajjāj does to literary conventions, motifs, and diction by redeploying them for entirely different and novel ends. The parasitical function of *hazl* here seems to be very close and almost identical to parody. *Jidd* and *hazl* are not addressed seriously and extensively until Ḥāzim al-Qarṭājannī (608–84/1211–1285).⁹⁵ His views on this issue are aptly summarized by van Gelder.⁹⁶ The most important points are his general division of styles into *jidd* and *hazl* with the latter linked, of course, to *mujūn* and *sukhf* (*wa ammā ṭarīqat al-hazl fa’ innahā madhbhab fi ‘l-kalām taṣdur al-aqāwīl fih ‘an mujūn wa sukhf binizā‘ al-bimmah wal-hawā ilā dhālik*)⁹⁷ and his recognition of *hazl*’s parasitical relationship to and effects on *jidd*. Particularly significant is the topic of diction where the characteristics are a “low style, employing the vocabulary of vagabonds, wanton people, those of humble occupations, women and children.”⁹⁸ While cautioning against using words in modes that are inappropriate for them, he makes an exception for *sukhf* and *hazl* and mentions Ibn al-Ḥajjāj as an example:

When it occurs in the poetry of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and his kind, those who specialize in jesting and bawdiness, it is approvable and praiseworthy in relation to its style.⁹⁹

Van Gelder concludes that al-Qarṭājannī's tolerant view must have been derived from Ibn Sinān al-Khafājī (422–466/1031–1074) who had a similarly positive view of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj:

Abū 'Abdullāh Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, although his poetry contains many words not fitting in a serious context, used them in a filthy context; therefore they are good, not ugly.¹⁰⁰

A passage referenced in van Gelder, but not quoted or translated, is the following:

The poetry of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj has been faulted for its inclusion of obscene motifs and it is not so for me. For composition in an obscene motif is like composing in a beautiful (*jamīl*) motif. What is required in each of them is the soundness of the motif and that of the wording. The fact that the motif (*ma'nā*) is, in and of itself, obscene or beautiful has no bearing on composition.¹⁰¹

Thus, this premodern critic who lived more than a millennium ago reminds us, like many premodern critics before him, that irrespective of the content, what matters in evaluating poetry is craftsmanship.¹⁰²

Modern Views

A few exceptions notwithstanding, modern critics have been neither as generous nor as sober as most of their premodern predecessors in dealing with Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and *sukhf*. In reviewing al-Tawḥīdī's *al-Risāla al-baghdādiyya* whose narrator, as already mentioned, was probably modeled after Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poetic persona, Margoliouth questioned the worth of such content for scholarly attention. This Pavlovian reaction was to be repeated by most of the scholars, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, who even bothered to mention Ibn al-Ḥajjāj.

Adam Mez, however, stands out as the first, and one of the very few, to recognize Ibn al-Ḥajjāj as a major poet and accord him his rightful place among his contemporaries and in the canon as a unique parodist. He quotes excerpts from al-Tha'ālibī's *Yatīma* and translates some of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's verses observing:

Like one freed from some unwelcome restraint, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj rejoices in and boasts of his license...but his filth never worried his contemporaries... He calls everything by its right name... his *diwan* brings together a whole heap of expressions from the colloquial language of the Baghdad

of the 4th/10th century. For him the traditional poetic model exists only to be parodied . . . and through the mist of filth shine here and there the stars of the night which manifestly made his contemporaries regard this utterer of obscenities as a poet of great distinction.¹⁰³

Thus in the fourth/tenth century Sanaubari [*sīc*] and Mutanabbī, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's and ar-Riḍā [*sīc*] stand side by side—each at the very height of his own sphere, gazing from one high, at the unfolding centuries of Arabic literature.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, we have seen how Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's *sukhf* was to become a trend in the centuries following his death. This is confirmed by 'Alī Jawād al-Ṭāhir in his comprehensive study of Arabic poetry in the Saljūq period (429–590/1038–1194).¹⁰⁵ In addition to his more famous disciple Ibn al-Habbāriyya, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj had significant influence on al-Bārī' (443–524/1041–1130),¹⁰⁶ Murajjā,¹⁰⁷ Ibn al-Qaṭṭān¹⁰⁸ (477–548/1085–1163), and Shayṭān al-ʿIrāq (sixth/twelfth century).¹⁰⁹ Al-Ṭāhir included a paragraph on *sukhf* in this book:

The most salient features of *sukhf* are mentioning all manner of sexual and scatological matters that are unacceptable in general morals and also toying with the sacred and religions. Laughter is one of its objectives. This frivolity of topics is coupled with a frivolity in style, for it intentionally uses lowliness [*rakāka*] which brings it closer to the vulgar language of daily life. It also makes intentional use of all types of vocabulary including non-poetic, colloquial and even foreign, at times. This *sukhf* had precedents in the pre-Būyid periods, but there is almost a consensus that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj is the leader of this school, if not its originator.¹¹⁰

As a prelude to this work, which was the culmination of his graduate studies at the Sorbonne, al-Ṭāhir edited al-Aṣṭurlābī's *Durrat al-tāj min sh'ir Ibn al-Ḥajjāj*.¹¹¹

Al-Ṭāhir's positive and nuanced view of *sukhf* is obvious, but returning to work in Iraq in the 1950s, he probably knew that the stakes would be too high for his career if he were to associate his name with this risky topic. Moreover, he feared that even if he published this work it might be censored and face obstacles in distribution in most Arab countries. A number of publishers accepted and promised to publish *Durrat al-tāj*, but later reneged.¹¹² In Chapter Six titled “*al-Sukhf wal-hijā' wal-ghazal bil-mudhakkār wal-khamr*” (*sukhf*, invective, male to male love poems and wine poems), al-Ṭāhir wrote, “while we now have enough examples of this *sukhf* poetry to devote a separate chapter to them, we do not dare study them, but prefer to point to them without mentioning any examples.”¹¹³

Of the same generation as al-Ṭāhir but of a very different approach is Shawqī Ḍayf, whose attitude is typical of the great majority of Arab scholars when dealing with the cultural past, especially if the subject of sex is involved. A disfigured understanding of the Arab-Islamic past produced a desire to cleanse and purify the cultural past from all that is deemed unproductive and unedifying. In his history of Arabic literature,¹¹⁴ he attributes the appearance of *mujūn* to the social decadence caused by foreign (Persian) influence and devotes two pages to a stern condemnation of both Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and Ibn Sukkara. While he acknowledges their talent and importance, he is at a loss as to why they composed in the *sukhf* style:

This libertinism caused there to appear poems whose composers were not embarrassed to mention genitalia... and we are amazed today that that would be taken as a way of jest and entertainment for people, as if they had no other means to entertain themselves... This poetry was chock-full of *sukhf* and this *sukhf* was not due to mentioning wine, but also descriptions of debauchery and the unabashed mention of sins. Those who were behind this were Ibn Sukkara and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj in the fourth century.¹¹⁵

C. E. Bosworth ends up reaching the same conclusion on similarly nonliterary, but rather moral, grounds (“pornography” is grossly inaccurate in categorizing Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s poetry):

It is in the Islamic world of the 3rd/9th century that a definite interest in low life and in the vulgar, even criminal, elements of the population appears. The new trend was undoubtedly related to the progress of urbanization and sophistication of life in this period... The reverse of these qualities was now exemplified in *sukhf*, scurrilousness and shamelessness, and *mujūn*, levity and scoffing, which begin to intrude into the themes of Arabic literature. In the field of poetry, this development is particularly associated with Waliba b. al-Ḥubāb (d. 170/786–7) and his pupil Abū Nuwās (d. 198–813)... and reaches its peak in such a figure as Ibn al-Ḥajjāj.¹¹⁶

The supreme pornographer of the ṣāhib’s age and arch-exponent of *sukhf*, scurrilousness and shamelessness in literature, and *mujūn*, levity and scoffing, was the notorious Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥusain b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 391/1001). There had always been a vein of earthiness and obscenity in Arabic literature from the earliest of known times. The Bedouin poets of Jāhiliyya and the Umayyad period used scabrous enough language in their satires against rival poets and tribes, as the *Naqā’ id* [of] Jarīr and Farazdaq amply demonstrate, but this coarseness seems of a piece with the harsh life of the desert environment, untempered by any of the refinements of

civilized life. As such it does not grate intolerably, but seems the natural corollary of a way of existence that was often nasty, brutish and short. Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, on the other hand, used the language of the dregs of urban society, the Baghdad slums, and he appears to us as a pure pornographer, delighting in his filth and his ability to shock; his poems are acres of dreary obscenity, eulogies of unnatural vice, unredeemed by what would appear to us as stylishness or wit.

He boasts outright of his impudence and scatology as being positive virtues and as embodying a salutary reaction against the bland and coarseless sentimentality of other poets.¹¹⁷

What is interesting about Bosworth's take is that he recognizes that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's *sukhf* was a "culmination" of a trend already discernible in earlier periods and that it is responding to certain fossilized forms and topics, but he nevertheless fails to appreciate the importance of parody and deems Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's obscenity "unnatural." Of al-Tha'ālibī's oft-quoted line about Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's popularity and the rewards his poetry brought him, Bosworth says that "this seems to be regrettably true."¹¹⁸

Abdelfattah Kilito, in *al-Maqāmāt: al-sard wal-ansāq al-thaqāfiyya* (The *Maqāmāt*: Narration and Cultural Patterns) was the first scholar to publicly lament the absence of any studies dealing with *hazl*, especially in poetry, and to call for remedying this state of affairs. "The ancients were less strict than us," he says of the scholars and critics of Arabic literature writing today.¹¹⁹ He observes that the current cultural climate in the Arabic-speaking world has no use for Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's irreverence and lightheartedness:

If Ibn al-Ḥajjāj is forgotten, it is because his poems do not reproduce that image of Arab culture desired today. No textbook, on the other hand, can afford to ignore the likes of Abū Firās [al-Ḥamdānī] (320–357/932–968) and al-Mutanabbī, who glorify war and represent a reverent image of the past.¹²⁰

Kilito praises Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's masterful manipulation and parody of the tradition to "contradict or change its meaning . . . what distinguishes him, first and foremost, is irreverence and unexpected reactions . . . He calmly injects disorder into the heart of the literary system. Tradition is indeed reflected in his verses, but it appears disfigured, deconstructed, barely discernible."¹²¹ Elsewhere, Kilito stresses that studying Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and other *hazl* poets "would shed much light not only on *hazl* itself, but also on *jidd* and transform our view of classical literature."¹²²

The Egyptian scholar Abdelghafur El-Aswad wrote a thesis at the University of Giessen in 1977, providing a partial edition of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poems ending in the rhyme-letter *nūn* and a concise introduction about the meager extant biographical information.¹²³

The first and only lengthy study of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poetry was completed in 1986 and submitted to SOAS at the University of London by Hashim Manna.¹²⁴ The unpublished thesis falls into two parts, the first of which is a study of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's "life and verse." The second (which occupies volumes two and three) is a critical edition of the last part of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's *dīwān* (6,116 lines from *mīm* to *yā'*). The latter part of Manna is a most important and welcome contribution to the field (if it can be called so). It provides, for the first time, a large number of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poems, especially the longer panegyrics, and thus enables future scholars to closely examine his techniques. While informative in certain parts, Manna's own study leaves much to be desired. The first chapter, "Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's life and times," dwells on the sociopolitical atmosphere of the Būyid period, a topic already saturated by many studies. It does, however, collect the surprisingly few details we have about Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's life. The main thrust of the remainder of the thesis is to demonstrate that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj far from being only a poet who engaged in "pornographic" themes, as Manna calls them, was able to compose in all of the genres. Manna, in effect, restates the case already made by the premodern critics and chooses examples to show Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's mastery of rhetorical devices. It is understandable that Manna would want to show that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj was fluent and comfortable in other modes. However, while not Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's only style, *sukhf* was his great achievement and masterpiece; however, Manna does not focus sufficiently on it and tiptoes around the topic. The choice of terminology and unconscious acceptance of the "pornographic" label causes him to miss the parodic dimension at the heart of *sukhf*, leading him, at times, to miss the jokes in the poems. Finally, while the molecular approach has its benefits, there is no discussion whatsoever of the unique manipulation of the structure of the traditional *qaṣīda* by Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and how he was able, for example, to integrate *sukhf* into *madīh*.

Aside from Manna, there is no study focusing on Ibn al-Ḥajjāj or *sukhf*, except for a short article by Julie Scott Meisami titled "Arabic Mujūn Poetry: The Literary Dimension."¹²⁵ Meisami laments the gross neglect suffered by *mujūn* and its treatment as light entertainment by most scholars and calls for approaching it from literary perspectives rather than sociohistorical ones that end up short-shrifting the literary

games involved. She then notes the importance of the antiheroic persona of the *mujūn* poet and how that leads to *mujūn* being a counter-genre that inverts literary conventions.¹²⁶ The article concludes with a partial reading of a *madīh* (panegyric) Ibn al-Ḥajjāj composed for Bahā' al-Dawla (379–403/989–1012) and shows how it parodies and vulgarizes traditional literary conventions. While an important contribution and a reminder of how grossly under-researched parody is in the field of Arabic literature, what is a bit disappointing, but perhaps unsurprising, is that Meisami chooses to gloss over the scatological section in the poem. Moreover, one cannot but object to her disdain for the suggestion that sociopolitical forces might have had any influence on poetic production, in the case of *mujūn/sukhf*. It is true that viewing cultural production as entirely conditioned by sociopolitical forces is faulty, but so is viewing it as a literary game immune from these very forces. Perhaps the most productive approach is to view poetic production, like all cultural production, as an interface of sorts, reflecting, simultaneously, its own internal evolution but also being constantly influenced by social and political institutions. Muṣṭafā al-Tawātī provides a more nuanced approach to the sociology of cultural production in the Būyid period.¹²⁷ Al-Tawātī adopts a Gramscian approach to cultural production and is keen on exploring the socioeconomic milieu of the period and the class conditions of “intellectuals.” His survey examines the various ways in which the makers of culture responded to the political climate of the day. While this is certainly much more promising than most previous approaches, it nevertheless ends up, at times, falling into the old trap. The prevalence of *sukhf*, for example, and of its use of colloquial and vulgar expressions is attributed to a general cultural decline, not only in socioeconomic conditions but in taste as well, caused by the fact that the Būyids were themselves of modest origins. While the few pages he devotes to Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and *sukhf* are a refreshing departure from the usual moral verdicts, he, alas, ends up misreading *sukhf* and underestimating its complexity as parody. Its excesses and approach end up being comparable to “pornographic film.”¹²⁸

***Hijā* (Invective)**

There is no doubt the *hijā* mode is one of the main tributaries of *sukhf*.¹²⁹ However, the few who have alluded to *hijā*'s influence have only mentioned the coarse and obscene language and grotesque imagery that is redeployed in *sukhf*. While true, there is more to it. Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and Ibn Sukkara traded first-rate invectives, which drew comparisons to the *naqā'id* (flytings) of Jarīr (ca. 33–111/653–729) and al-Farazdaq

(ca. 20–110/640–728).¹³⁰ However, the most important precedent set by *hijā'*, especially from the *muhḍathūn* (modern poets) period, is probably the incongruous combination of *nasīb* and *hijā'* and the abrupt transitions within one poem from the former to the latter.¹³¹ The cohabitation of these two modes in particular provided a model for someone like Ibn al-Ḥajjāj to try even more daring and jarring combinations of *aghrād* (motifs), as this study will show. So much so that in many of his panegyrics, the typical diction and topoi of *hijā'* spill over entirely into the *nasīb*. Moreover, one of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's most important innovations is reshuffling the grotesque imagery of a *hijā'*'s victim(s) or subject(s) and applying it instead to the figure of the beloved in the *nasīb* section of many of his poems. Yet another innovative shift was exploiting this same repertoire in the *raḥīl* section of his panegyrics whereby the symbolic arrival at the feet of the *mamdūh* (patron) comes not after the poetic persona's arduous journey through a barren valley, but rather after encountering a hyperbolically disfigured and grotesque female body. This innovation earned him an appearance as one of the most unique poets in *barā'at al-takhalluṣ*; moving seamlessly from the opening motif to the poem's telos.¹³² Aside from the longer panegyrics and *sukhf* poems, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's extant poetry boasts a large number of well-crafted invectives, the most famous of which are the ones he composed against Ibn Sukkara and al-Mutanabbī.¹³³ As stated earlier, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj mined the established repertoire of *hijā'* and the influence of its masters Jarīr and al-Farazdaq is easily discernible in his poetry. Another direct influence is that of Ibn al-Rūmī's own style of *hijā'* with its microscopic focus on and relish in exposing physical defects.¹³⁴

Phallegy: Abū Ḥukayma's *Rithā' al-matā'*

The extant poetry of Abū Ḥukayma (Rāshid b. Ishāq b. Rāshid al-Kātib, d. 239–240/854)¹³⁵ represents a significant phase in the development of parodic modes and, thus, of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's putative literary genealogy. His *dīwān* is indeed “the link we were missing between the *mujūn* of Abū Nuwās and the *sukhf* of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj.”¹³⁶ One quickly recognizes a number of parallels and important strategies from which Ibn al-Ḥajjāj later benefited, as well as tropes he further developed in his own poetry.¹³⁷

Although not a major poet, Abū Ḥukayma's poetry is excerpted in many an anthology and has secured him his rightful place in the standard biographical dictionaries.¹³⁸ His claim to fame in the tradition is for devoting his entire career and oeuvre as a poet (he was, as his name informs us, a *kātib* and this is reflected in his frequent use of metaphors related to writing and manuscripts)¹³⁹ to “elegizing his cock,” or rather its

lost virility (*rathā matā‘ abu bimā lam yaji’ aḥadun bimithlih*) [he elegized his cock in such a way none other had]. *So much so that* in al-Tha‘alibī’s *Thimār al-qulūb*, his cock is proverbial “because of how much he praised its past and dispraised its aftermath, describing its weakness, limpness and failure . . . he spent his poetry on that.”¹⁴⁰ Ibn al-Mu‘tazz includes an anecdote that shows Abū Ḥukayma’s consciousness and sense of ownership of this mode,¹⁴¹ like Ibn al-Ḥajjāj with *sukhf*. When Aḥmad b. Abī Ṭāhir recited a phallegy¹⁴² of his own to Abū Ḥukayma,¹⁴³ the latter is said to have responded as follows:

By God, I have no counterpart in this style, and I have distinguished myself in it amongst all people. I hereby pledge to God and he shall hold me accountable if I ever compose anything in this style again.¹⁴⁴

In referring to impotence we are, of course, speaking of the poetic persona, but there is a tendency among premodern critics and even contemporary scholars to conflate the poetic persona with the poet himself. There is no consensus in the sources over whether Abū Ḥukayma’s phallegies were merely a clever move to establish a new mode, or indeed a reflection of actual impotence. There is no way to ascertain this beyond doubt, but it is of no bearing on the poetry itself. However, it is worth pointing out as this is almost a recurring “default” attitude toward other poets who write in similar modes (the “clinical” approach to Abū Nuwās and also Ibn al-Ḥajjāj being a case in point; i.e., seeing the poetry as a symptom of the poet’s personal life and producing studies that attempt to subject Abu Nuwās to psychology (al-Nuwayhī) and Pellat’s suggestion that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj had a split personality, being at once a family man, yet capable of writing such obscene poetry).¹⁴⁵

Some of the sources suggest that Abū Ḥukayma resorted to this mode to counter an accusation of *liwāt* (homosexuality). Al-A‘rajī points out that this alone “cannot explain why he would compose forty poems and that one or two would have sufficed. It is rather that *mujūn* was part of the zeitgeist.”¹⁴⁶ Moreover, the stiff competition dictated by the presence of such major poets such as Abū Tammām (189–232/805–845) and al-Buḥturī (206–284/821–897) precluded finding a profitable market by following the *jidd* style. These factors and Abū Ḥukayma’s desire to produce something utterly different and even bizarre *ighrāb* (use of rare and uncommon words or style) must have led him to come up, so to speak, with his *ayriyyāt*.

Abū Ḥukayma did compose a few poems in *jidd* (serious) modes (three “proper” elegies for the vizier al-Faḍl b. Marwān (d. 250/864) and for a

servant, one poem on old age, three *dhamm* (dispraise) poems on Egypt, and an invective on his servant).¹⁴⁷

The ‘Abbāsīd age, especially its initial phases, was one of specialization par excellence and it witnessed the rise and development of various minor modes.¹⁴⁸ There were, to be sure, already many variations on *rithā’* in which the elegized was a nonhuman entity.¹⁴⁹ However, the great majority of these were composed in the *jidd* mode and were not meant to be parodies of *rithā’* proper.¹⁵⁰ What interests us here are parodies of *rithā’* with sexual and scatological overtones that are of relevance to *sukhf*.

Abū Ḥukayma’s particular way of parodying *rithā’* introduced an important subversion by personifying the phallus and making it both the subject and object of the *marthiya*.¹⁵¹ This move, in and of itself, opened the way for potential fusion of hitherto uncommon groupings of motifs and also produced a number of other “inverted” tropes that were highly productive for Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s *sukhf*. This serves as a perfect example of “topics and motifs wrenched out of context to supply material for a new type of poetry.”¹⁵²

First, it combined for the first time two traditionally incongruous topics (*mujūn* and *rithā’*) in a single context (and also *madiḥ* in one instance discussed in the following).¹⁵³ This meant appropriating the diction and repertoire of *rithā’* for sexual themes and turning its serious and sombre tone and function into a comical one by making it a topic for *mujūn*:

1. O ye cock, many a tear of mine
shed over you can be seen trickling down
2. I bemoaned you while you were still alive
and penned elegies like strung pearls
...
3. When people remember their dead
I remember you sad and frowning
4. I rise up with the wailing women
striking my cheeks and tearing my garments over you¹⁵⁴
5. Recounting your good days
Crying over your bygone life
6. I see you hiding from time submissively
Subdued like one who’s been oppressed
7. No spot left in you for a pleasure seeker
to be lucky in

8. You've been crushed after me, but has there ever been
a cock that wasn't crushed?

9. Where are your good stances?
Have they been swept away by a fateful event?¹⁵⁵

[XXI]

The *rithā'* repertoire is almost perfect for this type of parody. So much so that in most of the poems, one or two lines of explicit mention of the “*ayr*” (cock) are sufficient to shift the entire tone and produce a subtle extended allusion (*kināya*) and many puns. In the quoted example, line 1 starts with a very comical direct address to the *ayr* (in lieu of the elegized human), which sets the parody in motion. The stock metaphor of poetry as strung pearls in line 2 is probably also an allusion to the image of “ejaculation.” Lines 3 and 4 are typical, except for the fact that a male would never join the public display of mourning and wailing, nor the striking of the cheeks, usually reserved for women. The use of “*qumtu*” (I rise up) and later “*mawāqifuka*” (your stances) highlights the “dead” cock.

The diction and entire repertoire of the fallen warrior and battle imagery fits perfectly for the impotent cock as we shall see later. The discourse of warfare, being phallogocentric and penetrative, allows for extensive punning: *wāqi'a*, battle; *wāqa'a*, to copulate with; *ḥiṣn*, fortress; *muḥṣanāt*: chaste women; *manī'i*, fortified; *tamannu'*, rejection in erotic parlance; *iqbāl wa-'idbār*, charging forth and retreating; *dubr* (back) *ṭa'n*, stabbing and so on.

Phallus as Ṭalal

The *ṭalal* (Trace) motif is handled in a novel way in Abū Ḥukayma's poetry. The poetic persona has no desire to cry over the *aṭlāl* of olden times, because he has experienced the ravages of fate and time in a much more personal and immediate way that is visible in his own body. Hence, some of Abū Ḥukayma's phallegies start with an anti-*aṭlāl* (in the Nuwāsian sense) or anti-*nasīb* motif, but instead of turning to a bacchic scene as in the *khamriyya* (wine poem) or to a *raḥīl* (journey) (which is out of the question for an ex-hero or antihero) as in the other types and variations of *qaṣīda*, there is a parody of the *ubi sunt* imbued with the *rithā'* mode.

Here is one example:

1. Cry not for the departing caravans leaving in the evening or early morning
And do not keep asking the departing women: whereto?

2. Halt not at abodes where no human is left

...

3. Let your eye cry for an unstirring cock instead
One whose main [body] is arched, parts loose
4. He loves beautiful women so its parts loosen
As if it is a piece of leather touched by rain
5. The beautiful woman gets up angry
Having neither desire nor wish fulfilled
6. Salmā kept moving it for a desire [she had]
But it was neither of harm nor benefit
7. When it bent/became crooked, she said as she squeezed it:
Why is this bow without a string?
8. Then she started to wail for its paralysis
Just as one wails for those whom the graves hide
9. She did not forgive it its sleep and neglect of her
Never! Such a crime is unforgivable
10. When it crouches on its testicle it is like
An old man whose every part bespeaks old age
11. Diminishing, almost invisible to the eye
When yesterday it was huge and not inconspicuous¹⁵⁶

[XXII]

The first two lines are typical anti-*aṭlāl/nasīb*, but line 3 triggers the parody which will invite other motifs as well. Instead of the Nuwāsian “*wa-ʿshrab*” (drink!), for example, we have “*wa-l-tabki*” (cry!) typically employed in the *rithāʿ*, but over a “dead” cock in this instance. Line 6 introduces Salmā (one of the stock names often used in the tradition) who, at first, seems to resemble the teasing beloved (reminiscent of the dialogues of Ḥijāzī *ghazal*). “*Taghmizuhū*” can be read both as “winking,” but also “squeezing.” The next line will reinforce the second meaning. Upon discovering the limpness, she assumes the persona of the wailing woman of *rithāʿ*.

Like the *ṭalal* itself, the cock, too, is a victim of fate and the ravages of time. It is often likened to a *shaykh* (old man) or an effaced script. The *ṭalal* simile often comes toward the end of the poem, either ending it or preceding a line of *ḥikma* (wisdom):

I cry over you, not over a trace
at al-Ruqmatāni or Dhū Salam¹⁵⁷

[XXIII]

30 • Poetics of the Obscene in Premodern Arabic Poetry

Invisible to the eye [so much so] that I compare it
to the script of an effaced book

Like a camp's trace whose features are effaced
Wear and tear have left nothing of it¹⁵⁸

[XXIV]

The following is another poem where an anti-*aṭlāl* section precedes the phallegy:

1. The tribe's loss should not make you feel lonesome, if they leave
Let them go, for each lost one you will find another

2. Cry not over a trace at Dhī Salam
Let not your boredom remind you of your youth days

3. Do not halt among traces of encampments inquiring
For traces will never answer

4. Let your eye, instead, cry over an unstimulating cock
Neither aroused by touching, nor by kisses

...

5. Nothing left of it but worn-out skin folds
Like traces effaced by bygone times

...

6. They turned his fortunes around after they had been straight
And the fortunes of kingdoms might turn

...

7. Recount his deeds of yesteryear and cry
For that is your worry and not saddles (she camels) and camels!¹⁵⁹

[XXV]

There is a pun in the last line: *manāqibahu* means “virtues, memorable and generous actions,” but is also a plural of *naqb* and *nuqba*: “hole, perforation, or road between two mountains.” Taking into consideration the martial diction appropriated for sexual allusions, the meaning is clearer: the orifices conquered by the cock in its heyday.

In addition to adopting Abū Ḥukayma's impotence motif and using it extensively, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj added another unique twist to the parody of *aṭlāl*. Instead of the phallus, the *ṭalal* is the anus of the parodied beloved and it is the poet's cock, rather than his eyes, that sheds the tears:

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]¹⁶⁰

[XXVI]

Ibn al-Ḥajjāj extends Abū Ḥukayma's motifs and takes them to their (il)logical ends, if one may use such a term. Two of the salient motifs fused together by Ibn al-Ḥajjāj are the “cock as warrior” and “woman's body as arduous terrain”; they come together in many of his poems. In the excerpt above, for example, the cock is wounded because of its skirmishes and the afflictions and misfortunes caused by 'Ātika's grotesque body.

Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's style will be discussed at length in the following chapters, but suffice it to say here that, in general, the motifs used by Abū Ḥukayma are often expanded and made much more complex, irreverent, and extreme, especially in terms of their scatological content. In Abū Ḥukayma's poems there are scant references in one or two lines at the most and they revolve mainly around describing the cock as having only retained its urinary function after losing the sexual. Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, on the other hand, dwells on scatological matters.

The following are excerpts from Abū Ḥukayma:

You were a fucking spear
 [But] now you have become a pissing down spout¹⁶¹

[XXVII]

It sleeps when its dream comes true
 [But] is erect in the bathroom when none is there but me¹⁶²

[XXVIII]

You are perplexed when thrown into battle
 [But] erect and never soft in the bathroom

You combine limpness and softness
 As if you were a wrung rag

Were it not for pissing I wouldn't shelter you
 and would hasten to rid the earth of a eunuch¹⁶³

[XXIX]

By contrast, the following is an example from Ibn al-Ḥajjāj:

1. She said, as my cock, with its waistwrapper loose,
 was like a shroudless dead man:

2. There you go struggling, old man,
to get this decrepit cripple to rise up
3. Never! Leave it, perhaps you can piss with it
like the billy-goats piss on the dung heaps
4. I said: how long can a man of sixty go on fucking?
And how long will the water of intercourse trickle from my body?
5. Even the waters of the Euphrates would vanish
If, for six years, they were bled into a jug
6. [It was] an excuse I needed, out of humiliation
I could have done without it, were it not for that uncircumcised
woman¹⁶⁴

[XXX]

The cock as a shroudless dead man in the second line is a direct appropriation from Abū Ḥukayma. So is the mild scatological tidbit in the third line. This excerpt brings us to another traditional motif that is parodied in *sukhf* and that is traditional *ghazal* dialogues. These conversations hark back to the classical amorous and erotic conversations preserved in the tradition such as, for example, the one in the *mu'allāqa* of Imru' al-Qays (6th century) or those that punctuate the poetry of 'Umar b. Abī Rabī'a (23–93/644–712). In *sukhf*, however, all is topsy-turvy. Even if the female beloved is young and desirable as she traditionally is, the poetic persona is impotent and/or a very old man. The poetic persona invokes the topos of time and decay. In lines 4–6, he replies to the woman's ridicule by saying that even the Euphrates would eventually dry if it were to be milked for 60 years. The other topos employed is that of a *shaykh* and his old wife who are incapable of having intercourse:

1. Sulaymā says: Why is your cock invisible?
Did a bird fly off your testicles with it?
2. Or has the hand of death pierced its body
and it became one of those made to disappear in the cemeteries?
3. I said to her: My cock is still in its place,
But is limp and thin
...
4. Has your eye ever seen before me and it
a man whose cock disappears yet he remains present?
5. As if he never came to aid when war buckles down
and warriors would chase away with spearheads?

6. And his spear never pierced through shielded ones
to be sharpened in their sides, while it is bareheaded?
7. If you were amazed that he is weak after [being so] potent
Many a warrior was overtaken by calamities
8. When a defect appeared in him you heap scorn
as if you never saw him plentiful?
9. Days may obliterate the standing of the young man
and vigorous branches may dwindle away¹⁶⁵

[XXXI]

The question posed by the beloved, Sulaymā, in the first line is a hilarious *tajābul al-‘arīf* (feigned ignorance). Again, after introducing the parodic context, the second line is typical of *rithā’*. In the third line, the poet speaks explicitly telling the woman that his cock is still there, but admits his impotence. The remainder continues using the typical diction of *rithā’*, but the allusion is obvious. Martial imagery is employed to lament a once potent and penetrating warrior, who is no longer so. The poet reminds the woman of the days of glory and ends with a gnomic line about the vagaries of time.

1. I am an old man and my wife is a hag
She tries to seduce me into what cannot be
2. She wants me to fuck her every day
and that, for the likes of me, is difficult
3. If it passes her by she is angered and, away she turns
like a recalcitrant woman
4. She said: Your dick has become smaller since we’ve aged
I said: it is rather that the measure is bigger¹⁶⁶

[XXXII]

Ibn al-Ḥajjāj will always takes things a step or two further and have the dialogues be, for example, between the cock and the anus:

1. An anus passed by my cock
as if it were night prayer and the road empty
2. And said to it: Until when will you keep despising me
and shamefully exposing my thoughts?
3. How long will you choose to fuck the pussy over me?
To hate me and turn away from me?

34 • Poetics of the Obscene in Premodern Arabic Poetry

4. Don't you see that I have the shape of the full moon
and the pussy is the opposite of the crescent?

5. Look at my waistband!
How can one compare the ravines to the hills and highlands?

6. So my cock bent its head for a long time
Thinking of an answer to this question¹⁶⁷

[XXXIII]

The frivolous tone of *mujūn* and *sukhf* allows for a higher degree of blasphemous statements. Abū Ḥukayma has a famous poem parodying the *hajj* (annual pilgrimage)¹⁶⁸ but more relevant to our discussion here is his constant depiction of the cock as a minaret, or a signal tower:

How often did you glisten like a fire atop a tower
So that all eyes look up to it?¹⁶⁹

[XXXIV]

And:

I knew you at a time when you
stood like a minaret

People saw you as if
made of steel and stone¹⁷⁰

[XXXV]

Elsewhere, the impotent cock is likened to a pious man who has taken a vow:

As if he's sworn by God
never to rise for a male or female¹⁷¹

[XXXVI]

And in another poem, in remembering the past exploits of the elegized cock, the poet compares its previous heroic deeds to those of the rightly guided caliphs Abū Bakr (r. 10–12/632–634) and 'Umar (12–23/634–644), who ruled after Muḥammad's death:

And how many fortified forts did you penetrate?
Ones not even conquered by Abū Bakr or 'Umar?¹⁷²

[XXXVII]

Again, with Ibn al-Ḥajjāj things are always taken a few steps further. The excerpt below is one of numerous examples that can be found in his poetry. Note the fusion of (anal) sexual intercourse with prayer. Although *ṣalāt* (prayer) is not explicitly mentioned, it is inferred from the context and from the use of the verb “*aqāma*” (to hold [prayer]). What adds to the debauchery of this excerpt is that this type of prayer is not an official prayer, but one that the more pious believers pray and without an *adbān* (call for prayer). This is probably intended by Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s as it accentuates the blasphemous atmosphere:

My cock calls for the forenoon prayer inside her ass
and prays at noon

The winds of her tail-bone storm northward
Is there a wind more tender than the north wind?¹⁷³

[XXXVIII]

The following poem by Abū Ḥukayma is one where many of the inversions/subversions later adopted and expanded by Ibn al-Ḥajjāj can be found:

1. [A woman] of lethal gazes and magic looks
[Of] an appearance that fell short due to a bad reputation
2. She hunts hearts with her eyes and with her words
takes prisoner any man she approaches
3. Some are deceived by [the sweetness of] her words
Others carried away on ships of deception
4. Like a green colocynth whose color pleases you
But whose taste and trace are reprehensible
5. Her face’s beauty compelled me to marry her
I had no knowledge of the signs under the garments
6. When I hoped for the good life alone with her
and said to myself: Good tidings! You have won your prize!
7. I saw the wall of Gog and Magog around her/it
and a valley which evil filled with thorns and stones
8. He who crosses her passes by a narrow strait
as if tiptoeing on the edges of knives and needles
9. Onto a great expanse to which [even] the sea
with its vehement waves would seem small

10. Terrifying and of many mischievous afflictions
If I enter her I will be endangered
11. Many, before me, have visited her
No eye can see them, no trace have they left
12. If eyes were to see [inside her] they would
see wonders, unheard and unseen
13. I turned and fled away chastising her
She is one of whom fear and caution is worthy
14. Just as those in war would run away from the catapult
when onlookers scream: [beware] the stones!
15. And my cock is wounded as if its head
has cuts inflicted by the Turks and the Khazars
16. If the hands of young women complain of its limpness
It will complain to them of what she caused and apologize
17. Let no man of ardent love after me fall for her
For there is a sign, in me and in her, for those willing to learn¹⁷⁴

[XXXIX]

The first hemistich is traditional (the femme fatale of *ghazal* whose lethal gazes overpower men), but the second is unusual and gives us a foreshadowing of what might follow later in the poem *azrā bihi sū'u mukhtabar* (fell short due to a bad reputation). Lines 2–3 continue in the serious mode, but line 4, again, gives a second hint of the parodic shift that is about to come (this is probably a teasing of sorts, since it was expected on the part of the audience that sooner or later Abū Ḥukayma would turn to the *mujūn*). In this poem, the phallegical statement (the impotent cock) is delayed until the very end. The woman described, like the poem itself, is of a deceptive exterior. In the next line (5), again, the face (exterior) is contrasted to what lies under the garments. Line 6 marks the climax (*abshirī*, good tidings; *zafar*, prize) before switching to full-fledged parody. The much-awaited joy of *wiṣāl* (union) by marriage leads not to anticipated joys and beauty. For under the garments there is a calamity of Qur'ānic proportions, because the Gog and Magog are about to storm the scene.

They are hordes of people mentioned in the Qur'ān, as well as in the Bible (Ezekiel 38:2). Alexander the Great is believed to have built a barrier between two mountains to hold them back. They will burst through

this barrier at the end of time to take part in an eschatological battle.¹⁷⁵ The woman has no smooth skin, but shrubs and thorns and a path leading to a grotesquely loose vagina.¹⁷⁶ The obvious inversion here is of the traditional young, supple, and virginal woman.

The climax of this section is *al-hajar al-hajar*. The impotent cock, usually introduced early on, is left till the very end and followed with a parody of a gnomic line. This section, which later became a hallmark of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's *sukhf*, is probably adopted from and influenced by the classical *rahīl* (journey) section.

Abū Ḥukayma was emulated by contemporaries and later poets, but none managed to surpass him in his style. As mentioned earlier, he represents an important parodic juncture in premodern Arabic poetry and especially in parodic subgenres. He was successful in reorienting the diction and topoi of traditional *rithā'* and deploying them in a new function and context. Moreover, he represents one of the most important links between Abū Nuwās and his *mujūn*, and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's *sukhf*.

Abū 'l-'Ibar al-Hāshimī

The number of poets who composed and engaged in what falls under *sukhf* is admittedly large. A comprehensive literary and cultural history of *mujūn* and *sukhf* is sorely missing, but it is beyond the scope of this chapter.¹⁷⁷ However, not many of those *mujūn* poets shared, as far as we know, the parallels that Abū 'l-'Ibar¹⁷⁸ (ca. 175–250/791–864 or 865) shares with Ibn al-Ḥajjāj. Although very little of his poetry has survived,¹⁷⁹ a few illuminating *akbbār* about his career and style have, and they yield important precedents for our purposes. Let us first examine a few biographical excerpts. In *al-Aghānī*, which devotes a separate entry to him, we read that Abū 'l-'Ibar was

born five years after al-Rashīd became caliph and survived until the caliphate of al-Mutawakkil... He is said to have abandoned *jidd* in al-Mutawakkil's time and turned to *ḥumq* (foolishness) and became famous for it (*taraka al-jidda wa 'adala ilā al-ḥumqi wal-shuhra bihi*) From it, he gained scores more than what any contemporary poet made from *jidd*... He made much wealth during the reign of al-Mutawakkil and composed praiseworthy poems to him, writing *madiḥ* [to him] and *wasf* [description] poems about his palace, his bird cage and the pool, poems with much absurdity (*muhāl*) and excessive in lowliness. There is no sense in mentioning them here as they are very famous amongst people.¹⁸⁰

In *Ṭabaqāt al-shu‘arā’*, Ibn al-Mu‘tazz adduces the following evaluation:

He was the most lettered of people “*ādab al-nās*,” but when he saw that folly and *hazl* were more profitable for the people of his time, he resorted to them and abandoned “*‘aql*,” becoming a master in foolishness (*faṣāra fī al-raqā‘ati ra’san*).¹⁸¹

This *jidd* to *hazl* conversion became a topos in its own right and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, too, never tires of justifying his conversion in marketability terms. Not many poets, however, were able to distinguish themselves in both realms of *jidd* and *hazl*. From the earlier excerpts and the ones to follow, it seems that Abū ‘l-‘Ibar did. I doubt that his conversion is simply attributable to his inability to compete in *jidd*. That gesture, on the part of authors, is more of a rationalization of *mujūn* and *sukhf*. Ibn al-Mu‘tazz does say that he was *ādab al-nās* before converting. In addition to this *takhaṣṣuṣ* (specialization) and the conscious career move to *humq* (foolishness), what is common to both Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and Abū ‘l-‘Ibar is that both injected *hazl* into traditional modes, *madīh* (panegyric) specifically.

While we do not possess examples from Abū ‘l-‘Ibar, we read in *Ṭabaqāt al-shu‘arā’* that “he used to write panegyrics to caliphs and invectives against kings [using] this feebleness/lowliness (*rakāka*).”¹⁸² This last sentence is extremely important as it proves that Abū ‘l-‘Ibar was already using *sukhf* (*rakāka*) in *madīh*—something done by Abū Ḥukayma and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj. Knowing the type of *rakāka* Abū ‘l-‘Ibar was interested in, we can assume that it was of the scatological or the almost surreal type to use contemporary, albeit anachronistic, terminology.¹⁸³ Perhaps a glimpse into Abū ‘l-‘Ibar’s style can be gleaned from the following narrative in *al-Aghānī*. When Abū l-‘Aynā’ (d. 283/869) misquoted a few lines of his, Abū ‘l-‘Ibar responded as follows:

The catamite lied and [by doing that] ate two and one quarter weights of my shit, for he has erred and offended [me] by not quoting me correctly:

Love has laid eggs in my heart
Woe unto me if they hatch!

What good will my love be
If i don’t sweep the drain

And if the bald one [penis] does not
throw his two saddle bags [testicles] on the hearth¹⁸⁴

[XL]

Both the scatological and the irrational strands of *sukhf* are present in these three lines (as well as the quotation that prefaces them). Abū 'l-'Ibar's status as a master with followers and students of his style is evident in the anecdotes about his *sukhf* sessions, such as this one from Ṭabaqāt al-Shu'arā':

I betook myself one day to Abū 'l-'Ibar and upon reaching him I saw him sitting on [top of] a ladder with a sewage-pipe (*bālū'a*) full of hot water. There was a fur garment on his head, and he was surrounded by a group of people to whom he was dictating. The consultations amongst the group commenced, so I sat to listen. One of them said to him: O Abū 'l-'Ibar, why is the Tigris wider than the Euphrates and cotton whiter than truffles? Upon which he said: Because sheep have no beaks and the peacock's tail is four hand spans. Another said: Why does the perfume-seller sell wool and the nick-nack seller sell milk? He said: Because it rains in winter and the sieve cannot hold water. Another said: Why is every eunuch beardless and why is the water never cold in June? He said: because the ship inclines and the donkey strikes with his hinds.¹⁸⁵

A slightly different version of this narrative is quoted in *al-Aghānī*:

Abū 'l-'Ibar was sitting at an assembly in Samarra where the libertines (*mujjān*) had gathered to write down what he dictated. He was sitting on a ladder and there was a sewage pipe between his hands with water and black mud in it. The duct was shut. He had a long reed (*qaṣaba*) in his hands, a boot atop his head and wore two caps on his feet. The one to which he was dictating was inside the well. There were three men around him banging on pots until there was great noise and not much could be heard... Then he would start dictating to them and if anyone present laughed, they got up and poured water on his head from the well if he was of humble background. If he was honorable, they would sprinkle water on him from the tube. Then he would be locked up in the privy until the assembly disbanded and he was not allowed to leave unless he paid a fine of two *dirhams*.¹⁸⁶

It is obvious that Abū 'l-'Ibar's buffoonery had become a much-sought after art to be taught and learned (we read elsewhere that Abū 'l-'Ibar himself used to go to a *hazl* master who taught him and others the secrets of the trade).¹⁸⁷ This spectacle in itself must also be read as a parody-in-performance of those sessions devoted to *jidd* and *'aql* where serious knowledge was transmitted. Aside from the content and the scatological setting (proximity to the privy), the rest is identical. The noise and the banging is an inversion of the quietness and attentiveness of serious sessions. This cacophony and transgression of all norms and conventions seems to have been practiced continuously by Abū 'l-'Ibar. I would like

to suggest that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj enacted a similar transgression, but limited it to textual realms. The master clown that Abū ‘l-‘Ibar was in his surreal settings and absurd utterings¹⁸⁸ metamorphoses into the poetic persona of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj.

Is there sufficient justification to consider Abū ‘l-‘Ibar’s legacy part of *sukhf* even though other terms such as *ḥumq* (foolishness), *raqā‘a* (stupidity/ foolishness/impaired judgement), and *rakāka* (incorrectness, shallowness, weakness in expression) are the ones used to describe what Abū ‘l-‘Ibar did and composed? Terminology is not always as efficient as one might wish. Moreover, *sukhf* and its antecedents are parodic by nature and usually confuse registers and categories rather purposefully. There seems to be a common denominator, however, among *sukhf*, *mujūn*, *ḥumq*, *raqā‘a*, and *rakāka* in denoting opposition, in varying degrees, to the rational and normative, both socially and textually. Whenever sociocultural (including linguistic) and literary conventions are violated, these terms are invoked to describe the violation. Moreover, as adjectives, they are usually used to describe intellect, judgment. There is considerable overlap, as mentioned earlier, especially between *mujūn* and *sukhf*.

The importance of these strands for our purposes is that they can be considered tributaries to what later came to be known predominantly as *sukhf*. There are two other points of commonality that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and Abū ‘l-‘Ibar share and these are the studied and deliberate inclusion of vulgar and colloquial registers into poetry and the desire to effect confusion into accepted norms. When asked about the sources of his *muḥāl* (absurdities) Abū ‘l-‘Ibar said:

I wake up early and sit on the bridge with paper and pen and write all that I hear from the speech of those who come and go, the boatmen and the watercarriers, until I fill both sides of the paper. Then I cut it in half and paste it the other way and get speech that is unparalleled in its folly.¹⁸⁹

In commenting on this passage, Kilito writes: “all this leads to a text where there is a collision of themes and one that doesn’t belong to a known literary genre and has no harmony in its parts.”¹⁹⁰ This is precisely how Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s *sukhf* has been described in its inclusion of various previously incongruous registers and in its deliberate fusion of modes and attempt at shocking and confusing his audience. Al-Ṣafadī, in his entry on Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, has a strikingly similar anecdote about how Ibn al-Ḥajjāj used to collect some of the material for his poetry:¹⁹¹

What aided me in my style is that my father had sold plots [of land] [*mustaghallāt*] connected to his houses. The people who bought them

divided them and built lodges in which they housed beggars, the lowest of the lowly strangers, handicapped beggars, every rascal and homeless from *al-khuld* and loud and foulmouthed ones. I used to hear their men and women, especially in summer nights, cursing back and forth on the roofs. I had a blank paper and a box with writing utensils and I used to write down what I heard. When I encountered what I did not understand, I wrote it down the way I heard it and the next day would summon the person from which I heard it. I knew their speech, because they were my neighbors. So I used to ask him about the explanation and would write it. I remained [like] the Aṣma'ī of that area for a time.¹⁹²

In addition to Abū 'l-'Ibar, Ibn al-Nadīm includes a number of minor and little-known poets who were famous for their *hazl* and clownish personae. The titles of some of the books attributed to them are illuminating. Ibn al-Shāh al-Ṭāhirī, for example, is said to have written *Kitāb fakhr al-mushṭ 'alā al-mir'āt* (The Book of the Glory of the Comb over the Mirror), *Kitāb ḥarb al-jubn wal-zaytūn* (The Book of War between Cheese and Olives), and *Kitāb ḥarb al-laḥm wal-samak* (The Book of War between Meat and Fish).¹⁹³ Of these poets, al-Kutunjī is placed in the same category of importance as Abū 'l-'Ibar and is said to have been his successor after the latter's death.¹⁹⁴

This excursion into Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's likely literary ancestors would be incomplete without mentioning a contemporary of Abū 'l-'Ibar and a master of *sukhf* or proto-*sukhf* in his own right, Abū 'l-'Anbas al-Ṣaymarī.

Abū 'l-'Anbas al-Ṣaymarī: Parodying the Masters

Abū 'l-'Anbas Muḥammad b. Iṣḥāq al-Ṣaymarī¹⁹⁵ was the court companion of al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–247/847–861) and al-Mu'tamid (r. 256–279/870–892). He was also a calligrapher, astrologer, and perhaps judge (*qāḍī*) of al-Ṣaymara. He, too, is said to have converted to *hazl* and *sukhf* in search of more profit. Ibn al-Nadīm lists 40 books attributed to him, none of which is extant.¹⁹⁶ A quick look at some of the titles gives a hint as to Abū 'l-'Anbas's persona and orientation: *Kitāb tiwāl al-liḥā* (The Book of the Longbearded), *Kitāb masāwi' al-'awāmm wa akhbār al-sifla wal-aghtām* (The Book of the Defects of the Commoners and Anecdotes about the Hooligans and the Lowly), *Kitāb al-jawābāt al-muskita* (The Book of Silencing Replies), *Kitāb al-khaḍkhaḍa fī jald 'umayra* (The Book on Masturbation), *Kitāb munāzaratihi lil-Buḥturi* (The Book of His Debate with al-Buḥturi), *Kitāb istighāthat al-jamal ilā rabbih* (The Camel's Plea to Its God), *Kitāb faḍl al-surm 'alā al-fam* (The Book of the Superiority of the Anus over the Mouth).

An amusing anecdote involving him and Abū ‘l-‘Ibar has been preserved. In it, he tries to convince Abū ‘l-‘Ibar to abandon *sukhf*:

I said to Abū ‘l-‘Ibar when we were at al-Mutawakkil’s house: Woe unto you! What compels you to [utter] all this *sukhf* with which you have filled the earth with your poetry and speeches when you are an elegant man of letters [who has] good poetry. He said: You cuckold! Do you want me to be out of demand [so] you can profit? Moreover, you have the gall to speak [thus] when you [yourself] abandoned knowledge and composed in *raqā‘a* thirty books and then some? I would like you to tell me if seriousness (*‘aql*) was profitable would you have been favored over al-Buḥturī when he said of the caliph yesterday:

What a mouth you show when you smile!
What a glance with which you have your way!

And when you came out and said:

In which shit are you mired
With which palm do you slap yourself?

You stuck your head in the womb
and discovered that you will be defeated

You were rewarded, while he was deprived. You were looked favorably upon, while he was shunned. May a cock fuck your mother’s pussy and that of every serious one. So I left him.¹⁹⁷

The three lines by Abū ‘l-‘Anbas preserved here (as well as the list of the names of unfortunately non-extant works) suggest that he was already a specialist in this type of parody, which would later be perfected by Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, and was able to perform it on the spot.

Regardless of the degree of exaggeration that can infect such anecdotes, there is enough evidence to suggest that both Abū ‘l-‘Ibar and Abū ‘l-‘Anbas present us with a “type” that had developed in the cultural/literary sphere, one whose material and mode Ibn al-Ḥajjāj would adopt, develop, and perfect. It is important to add here that Abū ‘l-‘Anbas’s persona became a character in one of al-Hamadhānī’s *maqāmāt*: *al-maqāma al-ṣaymariyya*.¹⁹⁸ As mentioned previously, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, too, provided the model for the ultimate *sakhīf*¹⁹⁹ and antihero immortalized in al-Tawḥīdī’s *al-Risāla al-Baghdādiyya*.

What Abū ‘l-‘Anbas did to al-Buḥturī’s *madiḥ*,²⁰⁰ Ibn al-Ḥajjāj would apply to the entire tradition in an almost systematic way. Like Abū ‘l-‘Ibar’s sessions, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s *sukhf* was an art to be studied, emulated, and perpetuated. And just as Abū ‘l-‘Anbas stood and subjected

al-Buḥturī's poem to parody, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj would subject the entire tradition to it,²⁰¹ starting with its pillars, the *mu'allaqāt* (Arabian Odes).

This chapter has illustrated that Ibn al-Ḥajjāj was firmly anchored within the premodern Arabic tradition and that his status among his contemporaries and among critics and poets of later periods was unique. He appears in the major compendia and in numerous anthologies. While premodern critics were able to accord him the respect his poetry demanded, modern scholars have neglected to do so. This chapter also explored the semantic spectrum of *sukhf* and its overlap with other related terms and tributaries, such as *mujūn*, *hazl*, and *hijā'*. While certainly unique, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and his *sukhf* were a culmination of tributaries and precedents in the tradition of Arabic poetry. The personae and style of Abu Ḥukayma, Abu 'l-'Ibar and Abū 'l-'Anbas al-Ṣaymarī make them potential precursors to Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and what became his *sukhf*.

Index

- al-‘Abbāsī, ‘Abd al-Rahīm b. Aḥmad,
49, 55
- ‘Abbāsīd age, 27, 46, 66, 70
- al-Ābī, 16
- Abū ‘l-‘Anbas al-Ṣaymarī, 41–3, 130
- Abū ‘l-‘Aynā’, 38
- Abū Bakr, 34
- Abū Ḥukayma, 25–37, 93, 94, 97,
100, 101, 102
- Abū l-‘Ibar, 37–41
- Abū Nuwās, 3, 10, 11, 16, 17, 26,
37–40, 49, 93–8, 101–6, 109,
111, 118, 119, 120, 121,
132, 133, 135
- Abū Tammām, 17, 26
- adab*, 7, 8, 18, 130
- ‘Aḍud al-Dawla, 13, 67, 69
- al-Aghānī*, 37, 38, 39
- ahl al-bayt, 62
- al-Akhṭal, 13, 15
- ‘amma*, 129, 130, 131
- ‘Amr b. Kulthūm, 56, 63
- Arabic literature, 25, 126, 131
- Arabic poetry, 1, 12, 127
- Arabic tradition, 45, 46, 57, 125, 136
- Arabs, 6
- al-‘A’rajī, 26
- Aramaic, 78
- al-‘Askarī, 14
- al-Aṣṭurlābī, 9, 20
- Aswad, Abdelghafur, El-, 23
- aṭlāl*, see ṭalal
- Awānā, 75, 78
- al-ayriyyāt*, 26, 94
- bacchic, 58, 77, 100, 104
- Baghdad, 9, 19, 22, 69, 122, 128,
133, 177, 181, 183
- Baḥā’ al-Dawla, 24
- Bakhtin, 46, 132
- al-Bārī’, 20
- al-Baṣā’ir wal-dhakhā’ir*, 7
- Bashshār b. Burd, 48, 85
- Baṭāṭiyā, 61
- Bosworth, C. E., 21, 22
- al-Buḥturī, 26, 42, 43
- Būyid age, 2, 20, 23–4, 58, 90, 113,
116, 117, 127, 128, 136
- Būyids, 9, 71, 73, 75, 128
- Catullus, 126
- Christian/s, 107
- Dante, 126
- Ḍayf, Shawqī, 21
- Daylamites, 113
- Durrat al-Tāj*, 3, 10, 20, 104
- al-Faḍl b. Marwān, 26
- fakhr*, 50, 56, 57, 63, 86, 88, 98,
100, 102, 124
- al-Farazdaq, 15, 21, 24, 25, 47
- al-Farrā’, 47
- ghazal*, 29, 32, 36, 132
- ḥajj*, 34
- al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf al-Thaqafi, 70, 71
- al-Hamadhānī, Badī’ al-Zamān, 14, 42

- al-Ḥamdānī, Abū Firas, 22
 Ḥammād ‘Ajrad, 48
 Ḥassān b. Thābit, 13
hazl, 2, 7, 11, 13, 15, 17–18, 22, 28, 39, 43, 48
hijā’, 24, 25, 43, 47, 49, 50, 74, 81, 100, 102, 103, 114, 116, 122, 123, 132, 134, 135
hikma, 29
hisba, 4, 9
humq, 37, 38, 40
- Ibn al-‘Ajjāj, 15
 Ibn al-‘Amid, 8, 128, 131, 181
 Ibn al-Faqīh, 125
 Ibn al-Habbāriyya, 10, 20
 Ibn al-Hajjāj, 1–18, 50, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56, 60, 61, 62, 85, 86, 88, 89, 90, 91, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 106, 107, 108, 109, 111, 113, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 122, 123, 124, 125, 127, 129, 130, 131, 132, 134, 135, 136, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181
 and Abū al-‘Anbas al-Ṣaymarī, 41–3
 and Abū Ḥukayma, 25–37
 modern views, 19–24
- Ibn al-Muhallab, 68, 70
 Ibn al-Mu‘tazz, 26, 38, 49
 Ibn al-Nadīm, 41
 Ibn al-Qaṭṭān, 20
 Ibn al-Rūmī, 14, 25
 Ibn Baqīyya, 75, 77, 78
 Ibn Dāniyāl, 10
 Ibn Ḥalabāt, 10
 Ibn Ḥija al-Ḥamawī, 10
 Ibn Manzūr, 14
 Ibn Nubāta, 1, 3, 5
 Ibn Quzmān, 10
 Ibn Rashīq, 11
 Ibn Sa’dān, 16, 82
 Ibn Sanā’ al-Mulk, 10
 Ibn Sinān al-Khafājī, 19
 Ibn Sukkara, 7, 21, 24, 25, 56, 181
- Imru’ al-Qays, 12, 32, 49–52, 54, 55, 69, 70, 85, 179
al-Imtā’ wal-mu‘ānasa, 8
 Iraq, 20, 71, 128, 129, 177
 ‘Izz al-Dawla, 75, 77, 78, 79
- judal*, 116
Jābiliyya, 57, 58
 al-Jāhīz, 18, 130
 Jarīr, 13, 15, 21, 24, 48
 al-Jarmī, 73, 74
jidd (and *hazl*), 17, 18, 22, 26, 37–9
 Jilīs, 113
 al-Jurjānī, ‘Abd al-Qāhir, 9
- al-Karkh, 15, 22, 51, 99, 114
 Kennedy, Philip, 6, 97
 al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad, 48
khamriyya, 78, 104, 107
kharja, 10
khāṣṣa (see *‘amma*)
 Kilito, Abdelfattah, 16, 40, 93, 126
 al-Kisā’ī, 47
 Kraemer, Joel, 128, 129
kudya, 15, 16, 60, 66, 70, 71, 74, 107, 114, 129
 al-Kutunjī, 41
- madīh*, 23, 24, 27, 38, 50, 63, 65, 66, 69, 70, 74, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 86, 88, 91, 132
 Manna, Hashem, 3, 23
 Margoliouth, 19
maqāmāt, 22, 42
 Meisami, Julie Scott, 23
 Mez, Adam, 19
mu‘allaqāt, 2, 32, 45, 49, 50–5
 of *‘Amr b. Kulthūm*, 56–63
mu‘araḍa, 46
 al-Mubarrad, 48
 al-Muhallabī, 128
mujān, 2, 11, 13, 23, 27, 34, 37, 38, 40, 93, 94, 98, 100, 101, 103, 104, 106, 107, 108, 116, 117, 135, 178, 181

- al-Muqaddasī, 125
 Murajjā, 20
 al-Mustanshir, 181, 182
 al-Mu'tamid, 41
 al-Mutanabbī, 6, 16, 11, 17, 22, 25, 49
 al-Mutawakkil, 37, 41, 42, 51, 52, 53
 Mu'tazilites, 116, 117
muwashshahāt, 10
 Mu'zz al-Dawla, 9
- al-Nahrawān, 67, 69
nasīb, 29, 50, 66, 69, 70, 73, 75, 81,
 82, 86, 88, 89, 90, 132
 al-Nawbakhtī, 75
 Nicholson, R. A., 57
- obscene, 2, 7, 8, 11, 14, 17, 19, 24, 26, 91
- Parody, 28, 41, 45–6, 55, 56, 73, 90,
 91, 98, 103, 114, 125
 Pellat, Charles, 26
 Persian, 21, 117
 prayer, 104
- al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī, 16
 al-Qalqashandī, 10, 17
 al-Qartājannī, Ḥāzim, 18, 19
qaṣīda, 3, 36, 39, 63, 66, 73, 91
 Qur'an, 45
- Rabelais, 126, 127, 136
 al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, 16
raḥīl, 28, 37, 70
 Ramaḍān, 15, 108, 109, 111, 114
 al-Rashīd, 37
riṭhā' 26–8, 33, 94
al-Risāla al-Baghdādīyya, 42
 Rowson, Everett, xi, 11
- al-Ṣafadī, 10, 17, 40
 Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī
 al-Ṣāhib b. 'Abbād, 128
 Samarra, 51
 al-Samawāl, 55
 Ṣarī al-Dīla', 9
- al-Sāsī, Abū Fir'awn, 16
 al-Ṣaymarī (*see* Abū 'l-Anbas)
 scatology, 39, 65, 90, 93, 103, 104,
 114, 124, 125, 126, 132, 133, 134
 sex, 85, 86, 98, 101, 102, 109, 110,
 117, 125–7
 Sibawayhi, 47
 al-Shanfarā, 47
 al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, 7, 168
 Shayṭān al-'Irāq, 20
 Shīrī, 118, 178
 Sperl, Stefan, 65, 89, 91
 Stetkevych, Suzanne, 65
Sukhf
 in bureaucracy, 110–11
 definition, 11–17
 modern views, 19–24
mujān and *sukhf*, 14–16, 93–6,
 105–8, 178, 179
 overlap with *hazl*, 15
 in panegyric poetry, 64–6, 89, 90, 91
sukhf poems, 111–24
 as a word in poems, 5, 6, 12, 13, 49,
 88, 124
- al-Ṣūlī, 112, 113
ṣu'lūk, 47
 Sunnī, 118
 Swift, Jonathan, 126
- Ta'abbāṭa Sharran, 47
Ṭabaqāt al-shu'arā', 38
 al-Taftazānī, 18
taḍmīn, 46
 al-Ṭāhir, 'Alī Jawād, 20, 21
ṭalallāṭlāl, 28, 30, 49, 50, 66, 69, 75,
 86, 89, 90, 94
Talṭīf al-Mizāj, 10, 57
ṭardiyya, 98, 99
taqīyya, 71, 118
 al-Tawātī, Muṣṭafā, 24, 129
 al-Tawhīdī, Abū Ḥayyān, 7, 8, 15,
 16, 18, 19, 42, 130
 Tigris, 39
 al-Tha'ālibī, 8, 9, 10, 19, 22, 26, 47,
 178, 179, 182

Tha'lab, 48
al-Tifāshī, 3

ʿUmar b. Abī Rabīʿa, 32
ʿUmar (b. al-Khaṭṭāb), 34

van Gelder, Geert Jan, xi, 11, 18, 19

Wāliba b. al-Ḥubab, 21
Wāsiṭ, 73, 118
Wilmot, John, 126

Zoroastrian, 117
al-Zubayr, ʿAbdullāh b., 55
Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā, 48