

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND CENSORSHIP IN MEDIEVAL ARABIC LITERATURE

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This article explores the restraints placed upon literary production in medieval Arabic literature (particularly poetry) and the ways in which such control was effected. After surveying the various ways of controlling the production of texts, which ranged from mild self-censorship to the actual execution of authors by state authorities, we will try to find general patterns in the data, with a special emphasis on the different treatment of *lèse-religion* and *lèse-majesté* respectively.

This study must begin with some observations on the problems raised by the title that precedes it.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, having to justify the choice of title may alert the reader to the inherently problematic nature of the terms used. Indeed, some of them that I employ above and below are used only for want of better alternatives. ‘Freedom of expression’ and ‘censorship’ are two brief terms, familiar enough to a modern readership, but their inadequacy for describing the medieval Arabic situation is all too apparent. My intention is thus to apply them in as abstract a sense as possible, although it would perhaps be naïve to suppose that such loaded terms could ever be entirely devoid of their modern connotations. The noun ‘censorship’ is meant here to refer to any attempt, successful or ineffective, to control the speech or writing of other people by any means, usually by causing the author to alter or suppress parts or the whole of the work, or else by destroying the work irrespective of the author’s consent or even knowledge. ‘Freedom of expression’ is simply taken to be a lack of such efforts or their failure, and therefore covers very diverse phenomena ranging from a mere lack of interest by the authorities in controlling some works of art in any sense (possibly for the perceived insig-

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nificance thereof) to the inconspicuousness of an author's works owing to their limited circulation in the public arena, to the ability of some poets or prose writers to evade attempts at controlling them 'from above'. Arguably, much of what has been preserved till the modern age belongs to the first category; deemed too insignificant to be paid much attention, it passed practically unnoticed by those in power. Thus, the issue is obviously not one of 'censorship' in its modern sense, and given the widely known history of extremely ruthless and effective censorship by various modern states, the problems of applying a loaded term like this to a completely different historical setting are evident. Of course, nothing in medieval times really compares with the ability of a modern state to impose very efficacious controls, and painful sanctions too, on the freedom of speech and writing. As we have seen, the medieval version of 'censorship' is perhaps better understood as a variety of attempts of varying effectiveness to control the circulation of *some* works by *some* individuals. Also, as we will see, most of it took the form of retrospective reactions, and definitely did not add up to a well-designed, coercive system operated by the State. Moreover, it must be emphasized that a conceptual framework that relies on the notion of the opposition 'censorship' versus 'freedom' is not 'native' to medieval Middle Eastern society in any sense; indeed the very term 'censorship', which will mostly be rendered in modern standard Arabic as *raqāba*, describes an imported concept that would have been wholly alien to medieval Muslims. They would likely have formulated the whole issue of *mujūn* and the control thereof in terms of the upholding, or neglect, of Sharī'a rulings on different actual manifestations of frivolity, while the issue of *hijā'* and political commentary would certainly be viewed in the context of the respective rights of ruler and ruled (the key terms here being '*adl*, 'justice', and *zulm*, 'injustice'), and also of *sharaf*, or 'honor'. For all these reasons, having used the term 'censorship' for its convenient brevity in the title of my article, I will opt for using the terms 'control' or 'forms of control' wherever applicable throughout my article and thus avoid the misleading connotations of the former noun.

#### *The problems of analyzing past forms of control*

One of the most salient features that cannot fail to make an impression upon the student of medieval Arabic literature in its golden period (from the early Abbasid era to about the time of the Seljuks) is the remarkably outspoken tone one hears in much of it, as reflected in extremely irreverent or indecorous poems and anecdotes in literary and also in everyday speech (as reported in written works) – an observation that is certainly

striking in view of the present limits of free expression in today's Arabic writing and the public arena in the Middle East, but indeed often quite notable even in comparison with present Western standards of decorum and political correctness. Two conspicuous and prevalent examples are the phenomenon of licentious speech and writing style known as *mujūn*, and that of invective poetry, or *hijā'*, directed against powerful individuals, not infrequently against rulers both secular and religious (as in the case of the caliphs). Religious matters were often the subjects of jesting that may have been relatively good-natured as well as almost blasphemous, and some of the rhymed and prose political comments formulated in written works or reported to have been uttered publicly by common folk are instantly recognizable even to a modern Western reader as gross instances of *lèse-majesté*. Representatives of other respectable social estates, persons of unquestionably high status and prestige (particularly experts of the religious sciences and other disciplines considered 'serious'), were also often targeted by both uneducated people and *littérateurs*.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, it would be mistaken to suppose that the above-mentioned phenomena resulted from some people's lack of tact or their poor grasp of the borderline of what was licit and illicit. In other words, neither the outrageous political comments nor the indecorous products of *mujūn* were instances of occasional or eccentric *faux pas*, cases of bad judgment, committed by some injudicious individual; quite on the contrary, they were specimens of a flourishing and lucrative strain well within the mainstream of the literary taste and popular culture of the Abbasid and Buwayhid eras, and perhaps to a lesser extent later eras too. It was, to put it shortly and bluntly, a fashion. And the more striking it was, the better. With the passage of time *mujūn* had to be strikingly audacious to be really cherished by the audience – witness its further development into the highly popular and profitable genre of *sukhf*, a combination of gratuitous obscenity, scatological humor and vulgarity. *Mujūn* was a calculated literary and everyday fashion: not a collection of accidental outrages, but a conscious effort to sound scandalous. That the producing of *mujūn* works was a very profitable activity and a good career to opt for from an economic point of view seems to be beyond doubt. There are plenty of indications in the sources available to us of the immense popularity of this kind of literature, as well as any sort of witty and/or risqué writing and speech.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On this phenomenon, see my analysis in Szombathy (2004).

<sup>3</sup> As I am going to devote a separate article to this issue, I will not concern

A digression is necessary here. In discussing the issue of the production and circulation of outspoken texts, I have not so far made any distinction between literary works (poems as well as prose texts) and banal, everyday utterances made by common people or intellectuals in casual conversation that somehow – probably because of their being considered witty or otherwise noteworthy and memorable – infiltrated into written works and were thus recorded.<sup>4</sup> These are clearly two different registers to which different standards and rules applied in medieval Arabic society – just like in any other society. In fact, the issue is still more complex, since, as I have briefly mentioned above, the fate of much of *mujūn* poetry, spoken or written, was determined by the range of its circulation more than any other factor. Meant as entertainment for a close circle of friends, quite a few *mujūn* works certainly would not survive their primary audience, and problems would, or might, arise only if such poems started to circulate outside the group of the poet's intimate friends. In other words, the publication of the material was a crucial factor, an observation made explicitly in some medieval sources too.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, here I will continue largely to disregard the aforementioned, very important difference, and treat the examples of outrageous speech or writing as they now appear recorded in Arabic

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myself with it here. Apart from the issue of the profitability of this literary fashion, *mujūn* has been the subject of a small but slowly growing body of scholarly research – general discussions of the phenomenon as well as studies on various aspects of it. For good summaries of what the term *mujūn* covers, see Pellat (1960–) [quite sketchy]; Rowson (1998); Tāhā (1398/1978). Both Rosenthal (1956) and Pellat (1963) analyze early Muslim conceptions of, and attitudes to, humor and frivolity. Also, practically anything written on the poetry of Abū Nuwās tends to discuss *mujūn* at some length. Many of van Gelder's works offer valuable insights into *mujūn*; of particular interest are his exhaustive article on the mixing of the jesting and the serious registers in Arabic literary works (1992), and his study of frivolous quotations from the Qurʾān (2002–3). Ulrich Marzolph's (1992) two-volume study of humorous prose (basically, anecdotes) in Arabic is of obvious relevance to any analysis of *mujūn*, as is Bosworth's extremely useful book (1976) on the urban low-life of the Abbasid era and its colorful characters. Meisami (1993) approaches *mujūn* poetry as a literary phenomenon; while Schippers (2001) is a detailed analysis of the typically frivolous punning and conceits of the celebrated Andalusī poet Ibn Sahl. A recent article by Lagrange (2006) explores the obscene genre of *sukhf* as it was cultivated by the vizier al-Šāhib b. ʿAbbād and his circle.

<sup>4</sup> For an example of such a process, see Szombathy (2005).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, see below, n. 43.

sources, whatever their origins as to linguistic level or social class, as essentially one single corpus. This is solely for the sake of convenience, and I remind the reader that the point is far from unproblematic. My main concerns in this article, however, lie elsewhere, and for the purposes of this paper, I will not stress the distinctions between *mujūn* as literature and as everyday behavior, or between spoken and written language in general, a question I plan to address in a separate paper.

There is no such thing, in any society whatsoever, as unrestrained free speech. The constraints any given society puts on the expression of the individual's views and emotions are highly characteristic, offering a precious insight into the values and mechanisms of that society. However, such constraints may, and indeed usually are, rather fluid and variable according to the persons involved in any given case, and also situationally determined. The process of identifying those limits is thus by no means straightforward and unambiguous, and one interested in the issue must Endeavour to find the situations (and the kinds of sources in which they are typically recounted) in which the limits of free expression are made reasonably manifest, all the more so as this tends to be a matter that, in most cases, is not stated explicitly. Considerable difficulties are further brought about by the idealizing tendencies of medieval Arabic written culture – indeed of much medieval writing in general – as very often it is not what *is* but what *ought to be* that is recorded, without any allusion to the not inconsiderable difference.

Our best guide is certainly to be found in those cases unequivocally identified as transgressions or enormities, and the resultant sanctions. Arabic sources often tell of the fate of some poems – such as how they were received, what kind of recompense (or punishment) they brought upon the head of the author, and so on, and these reports are valuable for the kind of research with which we are concerned. Of course, although it is the best source material we have, it will result in a somewhat inverted method: we will be guessing at causes on the basis of consequences instead of the other way round. As sources mostly keep silent on the question of precisely what was generally considered tolerable and what was not, all we can do is peruse stories of tangible punishments caused by opinions or emotions expressed in writing or speech, and then assume that they did transgress some limits which other works clearly did not, since they did not generate comparable reactions.

#### *Mechanisms of control*

The medieval Muslim system of punitive measures, like that of any modern Western country, was not wholly objective, detached, imper-

sonal and coherent. In searching for, and studying, the various sanctions meted out for crimes of the tongue and the pen, and we cannot assume that such punishments were always fixed and necessarily consistent. We shall certainly see much irregular, *ad hoc* penalization. Thus, all that one can expect to glean from the source material is some general tendencies instead of hard-and-fast rules. These general tendencies I will present here in a spectrum that proceeds from mild to severe.

The first kind of constraint is not a sanction at all in the strict sense, rather a precaution on the part of either the potential transgressor or the state. In fact, while self-censorship and enforced prohibitions are, for obvious reasons, rather hard to detect after the fact, it is not unreasonable to suppose, on the basis of the available data, that they represented some of the most forceful mechanisms for the controlling of artistic (and everyday) expression. Some authors seem to have deliberately refrained from engaging in the production of certain genres, especially those that ‘good taste’, political tact or religious sentiments strongly discouraged cultivating. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that poetry of whatever themes and hues (except strictly pious pieces) was, from a religious point of view, always a somewhat ‘suspect’ activity in medieval Arabic culture, despite – or because of – its infinite popularity and deeply entrenched position in élite and lower-class circles alike. Given the prevalence of such attitudes, it is far from surprising that some poets and literati thought it necessary to atone for every merry, light-hearted poem that they composed by writing another, which they intended to function and be regarded as a kind of restitution or reparation for the guilt inherent in producing the previous, ‘improper’ piece. I have encountered reports of this practice from al-Andalus and North Africa, but in my view it is unlikely to have been unknown elsewhere either.<sup>6</sup>

That old age brings remorse for past misdeeds and a heightened sense of religious duty, which in turn are likely to lead to a growing conformity to religious prescriptions, is arguably a universally valid observation. Be that as it may, we certainly see many instances of the tendency among medieval Arab authors and/or their biographers. Poets who in their older days relinquished the cultivation of a number of genres considered offensive to religious sentiments or to accepted concepts of decorum were by no means exceptional, and the practice is regularly commented upon in anthologies. The genres usually affected in this way are

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<sup>6</sup> Such compensatory poems went by various names like *mukaffirāt* (‘expiatory [pieces]’) or *mumahhiṣāt* (‘purificatory [ones]’); see al-Ḥillī, *‘Āṭil*, 10–11; Ibn Diḥya, *Mutrib*, 149; and cf. Kopf (1956), 34–35.

particularly those of love poetry, wine poems, lampoons (especially the more biting specimens of the genre), and virtually everything that can be labeled *mujūn*. Love poems composed in the prime of youth could later become simply an embarrassment for the author, if he happened to have been elevated to a position of respectability, like that of a religious scholar or a high dignitary.<sup>7</sup> Occasionally, panegyrics might also be disavowed by their authors, apparently because of their heavy load of religiously suspect hyperboles, as well as the fact that they were mostly felt to be objectively dishonest and untrue, which we can safely accept they were. Below is a typical account of a poet's change of behavior for a more righteous pattern and the concomitant renouncing and destruction of previous works. Here, the protagonist is a poet of the early Abbasid period known for his numerous love poems on boys:

The Baṣran poet Sa'īd b. Wahb, a client of the Banū Sāma, having repented [his wrongdoings] and become an ascetic (*tāba wa-tazahhada*), gave up composing poetry. He had ten sons and ten daughters. Whenever he came across any piece of his poetry, he tore up [the paper] and burned it. He was a faithful man, who prayed a lot and paid the *zakāt* for everything he possessed, even the silver [jewelry] on his wife.<sup>8</sup>

A similar case is that of the famous Abū l-°Atāhiya, who gained fame as the specialist *par excellence* of ascetic, pious poetry (*zuhdiyyāt*) after what seems to have been a less than perfectly pious start. No matter how hard the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd would try to persuade him to compose love poems – and the poet is said to have actually spent a whole year in prison for his reluctance – the latter would not yield to the request, which he felt would be damaging to his religious devotion.<sup>9</sup> A certain Ismā'īl al-Dahhān, an Iranian poet of the Buwayhid period, who had belonged to the circle of the courtiers of the *amīr* Abū l-Faḍl al-Mīkālī but later repented his misdeeds and adopted a pious, ascetic lifestyle, expressly asked the celebrated anthologist al-Tha°ālibī not to include any of his previous love poems and panegyrics in his great collection *Yatīmat al-dahr*. Al-Tha°ālibī did, although not very happily, oblige.<sup>10</sup> A poet known under the sobriquet Ḥayṣa-Bayṣa, who flourished in the Seljuk period, is reported to have systematically kept his own *dīwān* free of all

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, the case of a highly esteemed and devout *qāḍī* of the Buwayhid era called Abū Khāzim; al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār* 1: 89–90.

<sup>8</sup> al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 20: 351.

<sup>9</sup> al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 4: 33–34, 68–69.

<sup>10</sup> al-Tha°ālibī, *Yatīma*, 4: 433.

the lampoons he had ever composed (*nazzaha dīwānahu minhā*), and the mere mention in his presence of three such verse lines sent him into a tantrum (*fa-lammā sami<sup>c</sup>ahā tanammara*). In this case, the motivation for such self-censorship must have had to do with the poet's social status and the consequent ambition of cultivating a noble and clean image of himself.<sup>11</sup> Such acts of repentance must have been common and celebrated enough to give rise to similar occurrences that proved to be, rather than expressions of honest feelings, whimsical or even downright parodistic gestures that would not last. A pertinent example is the poet Abū l-Faṭḥ b. Qirān (sixth/twelfth century), who would not give up his merry ways even as an old man, and when he once flirted with the usual outward rituals of repentance, he apparently meant it as fun, and immediately recorded the experience in a strikingly ribald and obscene poem.<sup>12</sup>

Cases of politically motivated reticence are also occasionally mentioned in the sources, and such cases of self-muzzling seem to have been driven by a very strong, and understandable enough, fear in the poets for their lives. For instance, it was probably very reasonable for the poets of Baghdad to keep silent on the shocking event of the enthronement, by a military faction, of the young caliph Ibn al-Mu<sup>c</sup>tazz, and his subsequent murder a mere one day later (296/908). Poets did not dare to comment on

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<sup>11</sup> al-Iṣbahānī, *Kharīda*, 1 (1): 349–50. The anthologist accounts for the poet's behavior by alluding to his inner nobility of soul and good qualities, rather than any outside pressure (*karaman fī jibillatihi wa-ḥiṣṣatan fī ḥiṣṣatihi wa-murū<sup>3</sup>atan fī gharīzatihi wa-nazāhatan fī shīmatihī*). Motivations for self-bowdlerization are not always easy to identify afterwards from written sources. In a report on an Andalusian poet known as al-Ghazāl, the anthologist Ibn Dihya uses so cryptic a wording when recounting the poet's repentance and return to a more pious lifestyle after a long and merry sojourn in Iraq that one is unable to go beyond guessing what this 'reformed' conduct exactly entailed as far as his literary activities were concerned: '[...] he did not take up the piety of the non-Arabs, but displayed the refined ways of a polished person, and pursued a path of uprightness acceptable to God (*wa-lam yansuk nuskan a<sup>c</sup>jamiyyan bal zarufa zarfan adabiyyan wa-salaka maslakan min al-birr marḍiyyan*).' The poet had produced, before his 'conversion', plenty of drinking poems as well as very painful satire; the report asserts that he gave up drinking. See Ibn Dihya, *Muṭrib*, 149. At any rate, the passage is suggestive of a contemporary distinction between extreme and moderate forms of about-face and penitence; what the author might mean by alluding to an ethnic factor is mysterious to me, unless he is referring to the extremely rigorous enforcement of religious imperatives by the (Almoravid) Berbers.

<sup>12</sup> al-Iṣbahānī, *Kharīda*, 1 (2): 342–43.



the bizarre occurrence, which it is fair to suppose would normally have invited much commentary but for the fear of retribution by the new authorities. Only one poet had the courage to lament the deceased caliph in a dirge, while another composed a work ironically disguised as an elegy for a tomcat; with the rest of the guild guarding their silence.<sup>13</sup> Another tell-tale case is that of Bashshār b. Burd, who once composed a poem containing satirical verses against the Abbasid al-Manṣūr. When his powerful patron died, the poet thought it wise to alter the names in the work, delete some parts, and generally reshape it to sound as though it had been against the fallen general Abū Muslim.<sup>14</sup> A later example is from seventh-/thirteenth-century Morocco, where a certain poet's political poetry was only discovered after his death, as he had presumed – as it turned out, rightly – that making them public would cost him his life.<sup>15</sup>

Attempts by the authorities to suppress certain literary products took two forms, neither of which seems to have been really frequent. First, the holders of political power might forbid a famous, living author to produce a certain kind of literature, usually lampoons or love poetry. It often seems to be the case that such interdictions resulted not so much from a perception of the intrinsic harmfulness of the banned works but from scandals and unrest that the poet's products had stirred or were likely to stir. A pertinent example is when the celebrated Bashshār b. Burd was forbidden to write outspoken love poems. One version of the account describes the circumstances of this act of 'censorship' in the following manner:

Abū Ghassān Damādh has told us that he had asked Abū °Ubayda about the reason for which [the caliph] al-Mahdī had prohibited Bashshār from mentioning women [in his poems]. He replied: 'The beginning of all that was the way the women and youths of Basra became wanton because of his poems; so much so that Sawwār b. °Abd Allāh al-Akbar and Mālik b. Dīnār would say: "Nothing incites the inhabitants of this town to [engage in] debauchery as much as do the poems of this blind man." So they kept admonishing him. And Wāṣil b. °Aṭā'

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<sup>13</sup> al-Tha°ālibī, *Thimār*, 1: 320–21. On the other hand, several elegies were composed for the Barmakī family of viziers after their falling out of grace and the execution of many of their numbers by Hārūn al-Rashīd; see al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 5: 1731–32. I would hazard to suggest that the different reactions by the poets to the two events may well have to do with the brutal methods of the Turkish military commanders and the general feeling of turmoil around the time of Ibn al-Mu°tazz.

<sup>14</sup> al-°Askarī, *Maṣūn*, 162–64; al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 3: 149–50.

<sup>15</sup> García Gómez (1940), 35.

would often say: “Some of the most effective snares and traps of Satan are the words of this blind atheist.” When it had been going on for too long, and various people had brought it to al-Mahdī’s attention, and [Bashshār’s] panegyrics on al-Mahdī had [also] been recited to the latter, [the caliph] prohibited him from mentioning women [in verse] and composing love poetry. Now, al-Mahdī was of a most jealous temperament. I told him: “I do not think the poems of this man are more powerful in this theme [of love] than those of Kuthayyir, Jamīl, °Urwa b. Ḥizām, Qays b. Dhariḥ and similar [great early poets].” He replied: “Not everyone who hears those poems understands their purport, while Bashshār[’s style] is accessible to women, so that they will not fail to appreciate what he is saying and referring to. Is there any chaste, virtuous woman whose heart is not affected when she hears Bashshār’s works – let alone coquettish women and young girls whose only concern is men?”<sup>16</sup>

The second sort of prohibition was that which came after the production of a work, and would usually take the form of a ban on circulating or reading the work, or the whole *oeuvre*, in question. This latter type of drastic control is recorded in *ḥisba* manuals<sup>17</sup>; but it is extremely doubtful to me just how effective these strictures proved to be. In fact, the strong condemnation and prohibition in *ḥisba* manuals of certain writings may easily be seen as the echo of precisely the great popularity of the condemned works.

An extreme form of controlling literary contents is the confiscation and destruction of written products. This procedure, by all appearances, was not at all common in the Abbasid era, although it did occur at times. Even when it did, the form it would take seems to have been a *post mortem* destruction of the artistic heritage of a person; and of course, given the potentially quite numerous copies by then in circulation, it had less chance of being fully successful in deleting the whole legacy in question than it would have been within the author’s lifetime. An example is the Baghdadi poet Jamāl al-Mulk °Alī b. Aflaḥ al-°Absī (fl. mid-sixth/twelfth century), whose poems, consisting mainly in extremely biting and obscene lampoons much dreaded by the aristocrats, were hard to come by soon after their author’s death, as the then caliph attempted to wipe out this whole poetic heritage by sending his servants to the deceased man’s house to collect all they could of his writings with the

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<sup>16</sup> al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 3: 176–77. Al-Mahdī’s jealousy and his wrath at the possible influence of the poet’s works among womenfolk are also mentioned by another informant as the caliph’s primary motives for this restrictive regulation regarding Bashshār; see *op. cit.* 3: 238.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., al-Shayzarī, *Nihāya*, 104–5.

intention of destroying them (*al-khalīfa naffadha wa-akhadha min baytihi ash°ārahu kullahā*).<sup>18</sup>

The expurgation of certain texts subsequent to the production thereof might occasionally originate with the compilers of anthologies, rather than any stately authority, and lead to the purposeful exclusion of certain *outré* pieces from anthologies. The genre most likely to provoke such decisions was definitely *hijā°*, particularly the more gross and obscene specimens of the genre. It is useful to bear in mind that quite often the anthologist would be personally acquainted with the target as well as the author of such works, and it is no great surprise, then, that individual sensitivities might be protected in this way.<sup>19</sup> Political topics might also be thought risky; we have mentions of the purging of verses bitterly critical of the reigning caliph,<sup>20</sup> or expressive of extreme Shiite leanings.<sup>21</sup> Lampoons and politics apart, the margin of tolerance appears to have been generally wide, and genuine *mujūn* was probably only infrequently censured. A passage in al-Tha°ālibī may represent such a case of unacceptable *mujūn*. There the anthologist quotes a mere one line of verse from the *mājin* poet Abū Mālik al-Ras°anī, and then ends the citation, saying: ‘In this [poem] there is such [inadmissible content] that I

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<sup>18</sup> al-Iṣbahānī, *Kharīda*, 1 (2): 52–54 (and cf. some of the surviving verses on pp. 66–68).

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, the late seventeenth-century Arabian anthologist Ibn Ma°ṣūm on his perusal of, and selection from, the *dīwān* of the Meccan poet Ibrāhīm b. Yūsuf al-Muhtār. Widely feared and disliked for his ferocious lampoons, the poet left a collection of mainly invective poetry, from which the anthologist only took some mild and harmless verses, while he deliberately refrained from quoting any of the poet’s trademark rhymed attacks on other men’s honor. See Ibn Ma°ṣūm, *Sulāfa*, 244 (and the poems actually quoted: 244–48).

<sup>20</sup> E.g., al-Iṣbahānī, *Kharīda*, 1 (2): 81–84. The grounds for deleting parts of the work are specified thus: ‘I have suppressed many verses from this poem, because [therein] he takes liberties with the caliphal authority (*hādhihi l-qaṣīda alghaytu minhā abyātan kathīra li-annahū ya°riḍu li-l-sudda al-sharīfa*). Bizarrely, just a page earlier the anthologist does cite some very derogatory lines on the caliph al-Muqtadī (467–87/1075–94), as well as other lines on the highest dignitaries of his state.

<sup>21</sup> E.g., *ibid.*, 2 (1): 208. The justification for the editing, which resulted in the suppression of parts of a panegyric on the Prophet’s descendants, is given as follows: ‘Henceforth [the poet] engages in extremist views (*dakhala fī l-mughālāt*) and ceased to be [merely] loyal [to the °Alids]; therefore we have refrained from writing down the rest, and returned the cup to the cup-bearer.’

have to keep my book clear of it (*wa-fīhi mā aṣūnu kitābī °anhu*).<sup>22</sup> As one can observe, anthologists sometimes omit to mention the exact cause of their rejection of a poem, being content with recording their displeasure in a few laconic and cryptic words. And finally, a way of stopping short of really expurgating a text was for an anthologist to register his disapproval, in a few words, after the actual citation, a good method of eating one's cake and having it.<sup>23</sup>

The imprisonment of poets and other intellectuals, for a great variety of reasons, was definitely far from uncommon in the medieval Middle East, and it did happen from time to time in the Abbasid and Buwayhid periods. Again, reasons – especially the real reasons, as opposed to pretexts – for the incarceration of a literary figure are not always easy to determine from the sources. Indeed, it is quite frequent that the sources only mention the bare fact of someone's having been put in jail, without elaborating on the circumstances or specifying the reasons.<sup>24</sup> It seems, however, that a whole spectrum of offences against authority as well as religion could easily land a poet or any individual behind bars, and even mere mistakes and peccadilloes (as perceived by general judgment among contemporaries) could lead to the same result. But the most likely cause was any act of disrespect for political leaders, and especially *hijā'*. As I have indicated, the real difficulty for the modern reader is to distinguish mere pretexts from genuine causes, a task often next to impossible – a point I shall return to below. Imprisonment, once initiated, might go on indefinitely, there having been no fixed terms for such penalization,

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<sup>22</sup> The omitted verses must either have been incredibly rude and frivolous, or else they must have been political in nature, since it is right before this passage that the anthologist quotes some satirical verses with sexual innuendos, as well as some very outspoken obscenities, by Abū Mālik's brother Abū l-Simṭ al-Ras°anī. See al-Tha°alībī, *Tatimma*, 1: 69–70.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. al-Iṣbahānī, *Kharīda*, 1 (2): 328: *awqa°athu hādhihi l-mubālagha fī-mā tarā wa-nastaghfiru Allāh ta°ālā min mithl hādihā l-qawl*.

<sup>24</sup> Or add explanations so abstruse as to be completely unhelpful. For instance, the successful Iraqi poet al-Mu°ayyad b. °Aṭṭāf b. Muḥammad al-Alūsī was first a close associate of the Seljuk ruler Malikshāh, but was subsequently arrested and imprisoned by the caliph al-Muqtafī (530–55/1136–60), not to be set free until the reign of the caliph's successor. We have no explanations for his misfortune other than the opaque phrases 'fate caused him to stumble (*°athara bihi l-dahr*)', and 'people said about him unbecoming things (*tukullima fīhi wa-fī aṣḥābihi bi-mā lā yalīqu*)' (or perhaps, if we take the verb to be active, 'he said about [the caliph] and his associates unbecoming things'). See al-Iṣbahānī, *Kharīda*, 1 (2): 172–73; Yāqūt, *Udabā'*, 6: 2737–38.

and we know of more than one poet who finished his life in prison, after repeated unsuccessful attempts at securing the forgiveness of the person in authority. The usual way out of prison, however, was through employing the instrumentality of well-placed intermediaries.<sup>25</sup>

The death penalty for crimes of the tongue and the pen was relatively rare, and was certainly not taken lightly, with many long deliberations usually preceding such a decision on the part of those in control, although rulers might occasionally order an offending person to be killed on the spot in a fit of rage. The reason for such indecision was not necessarily a lack of political powers to effect such an execution. Hesitation resulting from religious scruples probably played an important role in the matter, with the killing of a person without sufficient justification being considered an especially heinous abuse of power and probably acting as a check on the actions of all but the most depraved and vicious rulers.<sup>26</sup> Such difficulties are manifest in a story about an insolent nuisance of a poet who operated in the fourteenth century in a Syrian coastal town:

There was in al-Lādhiqiyya a man known as Ibn al-Mu<sup>ʿ</sup>ayyad, who was a habitual composer of lampoons (*hajjāʿ*), from whose tongue no one could feel safe. His religiosity was suspect, and he would nonchalantly talk ugly words of godlessness (*ilhād*). Once he made some request to Ṭīlān the chief *amīr*, which [the latter] did not grant to him. He then went to Egypt and there talked a lot of abominable things about [Ṭīlān], and then later he returned to al-Lādhiqiyya. Ṭīlān wrote to the *qāḍī* Jalāl al-Dīn, [asking] him to find a legal way (*wajh sharʿī*) to kill [the poet]. The *qāḍī* invited [the poet] to his own home, and talked with him, coaxing his concealed godlessness out of him. So [al-Mu<sup>ʿ</sup>ayyad] spoke extremely depraved things, the least of which would have justified killing him. The *qāḍī* had put witnesses behind a curtain, who then recorded his utterances in a document, and it was certified by the *qāḍī*. [The poet] was imprisoned, and the chief *amīr* was notified of the case. Eventually [the poet] was taken out from the prison and strangled to death at its gate.<sup>27</sup>

As the above text, among many others, shows, the offence most likely

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<sup>25</sup> For some accounts of the imprisonment of various poets, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 5: 1820–21; al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 4: 70; Ibn al-Mu<sup>ʿ</sup>tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 56; al-Iṣbahānī, *Kharīda*, 2 (1): 302; and also Kilpatrick (1997), 114–15.

<sup>26</sup> Some rulers – such as the Abbasid caliphs al-Manṣūr, al-Wāthiq and al-Ma<sup>ʿ</sup>mūn, and the Sāmānid ruler Naṣr b. Aḥmad – were praised and remembered for their remarkable patience and restraint vis-à-vis lampoons and other acts of disrespect. See al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 20: 306–7; al-Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>ālibī, *Yatīma*, 4: 69–70; al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 199–200.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihla*, 48.

to lead to a consequence as grave as the death penalty was certainly, again, *hijāʾ* and poetical works that contained serious political criticism. Given the dictates of the dominant honor code, love poetry addressed to a female relative of a ruler (or indeed the mere mention of the name of such a woman in a poem) was perceived to be as grave an offense as the rudest of *hijāʾ*.<sup>28</sup> Violent retributions frequently resulted from such kinds of poetry, and poets who engaged in this genre gambled on their liberty, and indeed risked their very lives. Punishments ranged from being banished from one's country, to being severely beaten, to being murdered surreptitiously or executed in public.<sup>29</sup> It is, moreover, important to note that it was not only rulers or their deputies and governors – that is, politically powerful individuals – who could have offenders imprisoned or executed; men commanding general respect also sometimes vindicated the right of delivering such justice, which the State may or may not then have endorsed. An early example is the religious scholar and judge al-

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<sup>28</sup> For instance, the Andalusian *muwashshah* poet Ibn Gharla was killed for such audacity; see al-Hillī, *ʿĀṭil*, 14–15.

<sup>29</sup> To mention a few examples: 1. the famous early poet al-Aḥwaṣ was threatened with a brutal beating unless he promised to desist from lampooning the family of Muṣʿab b. al-Zubayr (see al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 4: 242–43); 2. the young Abū l-ʿAtāhiya was sodomized by the servants of an aristocrat he lampooned with allusions to his passive sodomy, and then he had to promise never to write such *hijāʾ* again (see al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 4: 25–26); 3. Diʿbil al-Khuzāʿī had to run away and hide after he had had the daring to compose a rude lampoon on the caliph al-Muʿtaṣim (in another version, his enemies produced it and then attributed the verses to him) (see al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 20: 131–32; and Ibn Qutayba, *Shiʿr*, 441); 4. the man of letters Hammād ʿAjrad had to flee from a Basran aristocrat lest he should be killed for a *hijāʾ* piece (see Ibn al-Muʿtazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 23); 5. having learned of a piece of hostile political poetry by the court poet Manṣūr al-Namarī, Hārūn al-Rashīd immediately ordered the execution of the poet, only to find that the latter had already died a natural death (see Ibn al-Muʿtazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 113–14); 6. the poet Muḥammad b. al-Dawraqī was imprisoned for a *hijāʾ* work by the governor of Iṣfahān, Yaḥyā b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Khuzāʿī, and after a lucky escape, he would never return to the town, fearing for his life (see Ibn al-Muʿtazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 159); 7. an Iraqi poet of the Seljuk era, Murajjā al-Baṭāʾihī was killed by the king of the southern Iraqi marshlands for his lampoons (see al-Iṣfahānī, *Kharīda*, 2 [2]: 532–33); 8. the Andalusian poet al-Ghazāl was banished from the Iberian Peninsula for a lampoon against the famous courtier Ziriyāb (see Ibn Dihya, *Muṭrib*, 147–48); 9. the Andalusian Ibn ʿAmmār was jailed, and then killed in a fit of anger by the target of his lampoons, his former patron al-Muʿtamid b. ʿAbbād of Seville (see Rubiera Mata [1992], 89–93).

Sha<sup>°</sup>bī, who ordered the flogging of the poet Hudhayl al-Ashja<sup>°</sup> for a lampoon in which he alluded to al-Sha<sup>°</sup>bī's being influenced and biased, in a verdict he had pronounced, by the charms of one of the parties, an attractive woman.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike affronts to the sensitivities of the powerful, toying with religious topics generally does not seem to have invited the death penalty.<sup>31</sup> Very important exceptions did occur, however, and most of these can be dated to the early Abbasid period. The most memorable cases are the notorious accusations of *zandaqa* (more often than not a notion of ill-defined 'heresy' rather than 'Manichaeism' in the strict sense<sup>32</sup>) directed at many intellectuals, including known *mujjān*, under the caliph al-Mahdī. Well-known poets and littérateurs who were executed on the grounds of their alleged *zandaqa* (whatever that might mean in each case) include Ḥammād <sup>°</sup>Ajrad, Šāliḥ b. <sup>°</sup>Abd al-Quddūs, and Ibrāhīm b. Sayāba, not to speak of many others who were charged with the same but eventually lucky enough to be acquitted.<sup>33</sup> The question of whether such cases really reflect an endeavor by the political authorities to clamp down on flippancy towards religion, or that religion was just a front for settling personal animosities and doing away with rivals and enemies, will be discussed below and therefore need not detain us here. Suffice it

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<sup>30</sup> al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, 110.

<sup>31</sup> I have come across a single case in which a person is said to have been beheaded for joking with the Qur<sup>°</sup>ān's text under orders from a completely unbiased authority evidently disinterested and free of ulterior motives, and this report, significantly, occurs in a work of strict religious views (an anti-*bid'a* treatise) strongly characterized by a prescriptive, rather than descriptive, content. Even more significantly, none of the persons (the culprit, the imam, or the caliph) in the story is identified by name. Moreover, the kind of jesting allusion to the Qur<sup>°</sup>ān described in the text was absolutely commonplace in Iraq, where the story is said to have taken place. On these grounds, I find it very hard to regard it as the record of an actual event. See Ibn Baydakīn, *Luma<sup>°</sup>*, 1: 181–82. The death penalty was actually meted out in some cases for disrespectful jesting with religious concepts, but it was really infrequent and very far indeed from being a consistent rule. For two cases from al-Andalus, see Fierro (1990), 104–9.

<sup>32</sup> On the uses of the umbrella term *zindīq* and its varying connotations in reference to intellectuals, see, for instance, Vajda (1938); Fierro (2001), 465–66; and al-Alūsī (1987), 57, 201–2. *Zendīq* is, incidentally, a loose term of abuse in today's Moroccan dialect; see Westermarck (1930), 86.

<sup>33</sup> al-Baghdādī, *Khizāna*, 1: 542; Ibn al-Mu<sup>°</sup>tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 34–36; and a good overview in <sup>°</sup>Aṭwān (n.d.).

to say, for the time being, that there are indeed numerous indications pointing to the fact that charges of *zandaqa* were, more than anything else, ideal excuses for pursuing other motives.

#### *General patterns*

The most important conclusion one can draw with a reasonable degree of probability is that, in common with the ruling classes of other societies, the politically powerful groups in the medieval Arab world tended to be far more sensitive to perceived insults to their personal honor and challenges to their dominant position than to slights to religious sentiments. Political and personal effrontery was thus generally more dangerous than *mujūn* and *lèse-religion*. This was certainly not owing to a lack of regard for the Islamic religion: part of the explanation is that *mujūn*, by definition, was not to be taken seriously; it was, again by definition, in the jesting mode. The dominant conception that *mujūn* poetry poses no challenge to the established order is expressed in a quite emblematic manner in a story in which the Cordoban vizier Umayya b. °Isā b. Shuhayd (vizier of °Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Ḥakam [206–38/822–52]) reprimands a school teacher charged with the education of the children taken as hostages from rebellious chiefs, the cause of his anger being the inclusion in the curriculum of the heroic pre-Islamic poetry of °Antara, instead of which, he insists, harmless frivolities (*ahzāl*) like the works of Abū Nuwās ought to be taught to potential trouble-mongers.<sup>34</sup>

The fact that, despite all the lenience and indulgence accorded to manifestations of the *mājin* spirit, the phenomenon was tolerated precisely because of its being a non-challenge to the established social order, an attitude of no real consequence, is made manifest by the nature of the most characteristic and consistent sanction following it. It was the withdrawal from the *mājin* intellectual of the status of reliable witness (*shāhid*) in court, and, by extension, of a socially mature and honorable person, which virtually turned him into a man of no account, a person to be tolerated but not consulted in momentous affairs – a harmless non-entity if you like. In this treatment, the *mājin* intellectual was equal to many other representatives of mildly reprehensible but not quite deviant conduct, ranging from a fondness for chess playing or music or dancing or joking to appearing naked in public baths to habitual drinking.<sup>35</sup> In

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<sup>34</sup> Ibn Simāk, *Zaharāt*, 122.

<sup>35</sup> al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣāʾir*, 1 (1): 89; 3 (6): 118; al-Khaṭīb, *Kifāya*, 139; Ibn Baydakīn, *Luma*<sup>c</sup>, 1: 173–74; al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 20: 215; Ibn Qutayba, *°Uyūn*, 1 (1): 136–39. Even having a frivolous nickname might suffice for losing the



fact, all of these types of behavior had one thing in common: reeking as they did of frivolity and mirth, they were regarded as being beneath the dignity of a responsible, socially important grown-up man, and thus testifying to a regrettable lack of manly decorum and honor. In fact, a *qādī* might be on very friendly terms with a frivolous person and enjoy his company, and yet reject his testimony in court for his lack of seriousness.<sup>36</sup> It must be added that in certain cases even this grade of sanctioning was foregone, and a frivolous intellectual, indeed even a singer or a known *mājin*, might be allowed to testify in court or hold positions of authority.<sup>37</sup>

As a matter of fact, humor and wit were widely enjoyed and prized in medieval Arabic urban society, not least among the ruling class; and humor might frequently be a tool to be used if an intellectual in trouble wanted to save himself. A *bon mot* had the power of solving a seemingly helpless situation by appealing to the sense of humor of the person in authority, provoking laughter, and thus turning the context into one of insignificance, and causing the powerful person to forgive the offence.<sup>38</sup> The fact that the whole register of flippancy and frivolity was felt to be totally inconsequential and unchallenging is most manifest in the career of some clownish court poets who were allowed to behave as veritable chartered libertines and even to voice quasi-political criticism in the guise of jesting.<sup>39</sup> It must be repeated, then, that *mujūn* was definitely not perceived as a threat to the established social order.<sup>40</sup>

In contrast, when it came to statements of creed or any criticism of religion felt to be truly 'serious' in tone, the limits of tolerance seem to have been far tighter. In 322/943, the inventor of a new Qur'ān reading was summoned to a meeting with the prominent scholars of Baghdad and

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status of reliable witness; see al-<sup>o</sup>Askarī, *Šinā<sup>o</sup>atayn*, 158.

<sup>36</sup> E.g., al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*, 1: 307.

<sup>37</sup> For some examples, see al-Iṣbahānī, *Kharīda*, 2 (1): 403; 2 (2), 489; Kilpatrick (1997), 97; al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 13: 344.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 3: 261–62; Ibn Qutayba, *Ši<sup>o</sup>r*, 367; Ibn al-Mu<sup>o</sup>tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 197; Ibn Rashīq, *Umda*, 176–77; al-Tha<sup>o</sup>ālibī, *Tatimma*, 1: 22; al-Tawḥīdī, *Baṣā<sup>o</sup>ir*, 1 (2): 199; al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*, 7: 252; al-Iṣbahānī, *Kharīda*, 1 (1): 94; al-Ibshīhī, *Mustatraf*, 202.

<sup>39</sup> Two well-known examples of the type were Abū Dulāma and Abū l-<sup>o</sup>Ibar; cf. Ben Cheneb (1922) and El-Outmani (1995), 166–69.

<sup>40</sup> On this point, see Arazi (1979), 14; Kraemer (1986), 13. On the issue of the widespread toleration of norm breaking in various societies, see Goode (1960), 257.

had to acknowledge the incorrectness of his views, a process followed by the burning of his books (*uḥriqat kutubuhu*).<sup>41</sup> The same source gives us another case of genuine – if ultimately unsuccessful – state censorship: after the execution of the ‘heretic’ Sufi al-Ḥallāj, the manuscript copyists and scribes of Baghdad had to take a formal oath never to circulate, buy or sell the writings of the condemned mystic.<sup>42</sup>

However, that religion was theoretically viewed as something not to be tampered with is shown by the fact that such ‘insults’ to religion could, when it was felt to be opportune by a powerful person, be taken as a pretext to do away with an opponent, or a too outspoken critic, or a disagreeable poet. It is beyond doubt that these alleged offences were really just pretexts, as in most cases prosecutions were based on literary motifs or jokes that would otherwise, in normal circumstances, pass unnoticed, being genuine commonplaces of *mujūn*. This possibility of manipulating religious ‘offences’ for personal ends clearly shows the wide discrepancy between contemporary theory and practice. In theory, one ought not to toy with religious sanctities, but is fully entitled to voice one’s criticism of a ruling individual’s character or policies. In practice, one ought not to do the latter but is fully entitled to do the former, provided offences against religion are avoided at all times. Cases in which religious charges (of indecency, frivolity, and insufficient piety) against a poet were clearly a front for political or personal grudges are quite common in the sources.<sup>43</sup> Even widely celebrated, successful poets were

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<sup>41</sup> Miskawayh, *Tajārūb*, 1: 285. On cases of book burning in al-Andalus (for heretical views contained therein), cf. Fierro (2001), 472.

<sup>42</sup> Miskawayh, *Tajārūb*, 1: 82. For cases of the prohibition of certain religiously suspect customs and views, see for instance Shoshan (1993), 13, 49–51.

<sup>43</sup> E.g., the poet widely known under the sobriquet al-°Akawwak incited the wrath of al-Ma°mūn by an ardent panegyric addressed to another man, which the caliph thought ought to have been reserved for him. According to one version of the account, the caliph cited some hyperbolic phrases uttered elsewhere by the poet to justify his intention of executing him. (Another version, however, opines that the poet finally managed to get the caliph’s forgiveness.) See Ibn al-Mu°tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 76–77. In the court of the Almohad ruler Ya°qūb al-Manṣūr (580–95/1184–99), certain rivals accused the man of letters (and chief judge of Fez) al-Sulamī of offending religious sentiments by his love poetry but did not succeed in having him convicted. See Ibn Sa°īd, *Ghuṣūn*, 92. In reference to accusations of impiety and heresy in al-Andalus, Maribel Fierro observes that such accusations almost always served as ‘una excusa para acabar con un adversario político’; see Fierro (1994), 207. This assessment seems to be confirmed by our sources from the Mashriq.

not immune. The oft-cited imprisonment of Abū Nuwās by the caliph is, in my view, an obvious example of this tendency. That contemporaries would actually recognize such charges of ungodliness for the pretexts they were is evident from the following account of a conversation between Abū Nuwās and one of his friends called Yūsuf b. al-Dāya. Yūsuf, who is the narrator of the story, interrupts the poet in the middle of his recital of a newly composed poem:

And when he reached the verse ‘[I have never met anyone who could tell me that he had been settled] in Paradise or Hell after his death,’ I said to him: ‘Hey you! Do you have enemies who [eagerly] await any mistake you might commit, so that they should exploit it and find a way to harm you and slander you before the ruler! Fear God, for your own sake, and stop your excesses and *mujūn*, because they will make you a loser in this world and the next, unless God leads you to a more righteous path. If you have not already made these verses public, do forget them and keep them secret.’ But he replied to me: ‘I will not conceal them out of poltroonery. If a thing must happen, it will anyway.’ And so it was: someone else had heard them and reported them to [the vizier] al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ, and then the news reached [Hārūn] al-Rashīd. No sooner had a week passed than [the caliph] put him in prison.<sup>44</sup>

Apparently, the death of the great Bashshār b. Burd was also the con-

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<sup>44</sup> Abū Hiffān, *Akhbār*, 46–47. While I believe personal enmity is the most likely cause of the prison episode in Abū Nuwās’s career, there are numerous other stories too about his imprisonment(s), most of these revolving around the topic of his outrageous behavior (drinking and irreverence), but details differ as to why he was put in jail, by which caliph, how long, and in what circumstances he was eventually freed. One, to me not implausible, report claims that the poet made a sarcastic remark about the rather humble descent of the vizier al-Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ, and when the latter learned of it, he tried, and managed, to get Abū Nuwās immured for a time by citing some of his scandalous verses of *mujūn*. In another story, he is reported to have uttered a usual *mājin* joke with the Qurʾān’s text in the mosque, and was promptly brought before Hārūn al-Rashīd, but was found to be a mere *mājin* rather than a heretic. A third account ascribed to a close relative (a nephew) of Abū Nuwās asserts that the poet was imprisoned by Hārūn al-Rashīd because of a lampoon he wrote against the northern Arabs (*Muḍar*), and it was al-Amīn who freed him after his succession to the throne. The motif that enraged al-Rashīd is claimed elsewhere to have been a verse of praise directed to another person. Other versions cite other causes, including the poet’s notorious drinking habits, and identify al-Amīn (not one for excessive godliness himself) as the ruler who put the poet in prison. See Abū Hiffān, *Akhbār*, 100–101, 106–7, 122–23; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 5: 1820–22; Ibn Qutayba, *Shiʿr*, 419.

sequence of some *hijā'* poetry that its aristocratic target considered to be the last straw. Again, the case was made to masquerade as an effort to defend religion from the poet's irreverent antics, but most versions clearly allude to the outrage caused by Bashshār's lampoons against a Baṣran notable and the caliph al-Mahdī himself. Revealingly, the aristocrats of Baṣra are said to have doled out presents in gratitude for the murder of the impudent poet.<sup>45</sup> Yet another celebrated target of such accusations was Abū l-°Atāhiya, to whom a personal enemy caused much inconvenience by branding him a *zindīq*, and thus inciting some lower-class mobs against him, on account of some (thoroughly conventional and by no means outrageous) motifs in his early light-hearted love poetry. Characteristically, this case also seems to have involved offending the caliph's sense of honor (by the mention of a slave-girl of his wife).<sup>46</sup> Quite a few of the criminal procedures initiated in the early Abbasid period against alleged *zindīqs* among the men of letters seem to have been thinly masked attempts to destroy an irksome opponent. During these years, it was highly advisable for *mājin* intellectuals to guard their tongues in any but the most trustworthy company, lest they should be reported to the authorities as heretics.<sup>47</sup> Later rulers or courtiers might also occasionally find the possibility of playing this card against men whom they sought to kill too tempting to resist. The caliph al-Mu°taḍid (279–89/892–902), having tried in vain to persuade a religious scholar to declare the former vizier Ismā°īl b. Bulbul a heretic, and hence executable, persevered in his effort until he found another, less scrupulous scholar.<sup>48</sup> The foes of the Andalusian Arab poet Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Battī tried hard to get him convicted of *zandaqa*, *ilhād*, and the too avid perusal of Ibn Sīnā's books instead of the Qur°ān, but our source leaves no doubt that in fact he must have been killed by one of the enraged targets of his numerous *hijā'* poems. His body was subsequently found on a heap of decaying litter and animal carcasses.<sup>49</sup>

As a final, very general conclusion, we can assert that, perhaps in common with other societies, politics seems to have been the most dangerous minefield into which an author might venture in medieval Arabic society; and even in matters political, personal considerations – individ-

<sup>45</sup> al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 3: 240–45; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 5: 1684; Ibn al-Mu°tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2–3; Ibn Qutayba, *Shi°r*, 392.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn Qutayba, *Shi°r*, 409–12; al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 4: 55.

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 13: 319–20; 18: 159–60.

<sup>48</sup> al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*, 3: 97–98. Cf. also the story in Ibn Battūṭa above.

<sup>49</sup> Ibn Diḥya, *Muṭrib*, 124.

ual amities, hostilities and rivalries – would often prevail and affect the placing of the boundary between what was licit and what was not. The issue of excessive frivolity and offences against religion (lumped together under vague headings like *mujūn*, *zandaqa*, or *ilhād*) was occasionally used as a front to hide other motivations. But apart from that, it was not particularly perilous, and certainly not uncommon, for poets to treat religious subjects in humorous or flippant ways. Therefore, the implicit rule of thumb for a long and safe career as a *mājin* intellectual might well have resembled the following formula: say and do whatever you like, as long as you avoid making politically powerful enemies who may utilize your careless utterances as a pretext for doing away with you.

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