Unlearning the Aesthetics of Malicious Joy

Adam Talib
American University in Cairo

Abstract

Bodies that are gendered and sexualized through the male gaze appear frequently in the study of classical Arabic poetry, but learned reading practices predetermine how these descriptions are interpreted. These reading practices, which students learn to this day, are connected to a reception tradition that emerged to suit the logics and investments of premodern Arabic anthologies. A critical intervention, this article begins by comparing the presentation of saliva metaphors in erotic poetry to other bodily and relational unmentioneds through a discussion of taste, tradition, and training. In the second half of the article, the reception of a famous teaching text by Bashshār b. Burd (d. 783) is juxtaposed with the pedagogically invested criticism of the Egyptian critic Mohamed al-Nowaihi (d. 1980), who confronted the poem on ethical and presentist terms.

Students of premodern Arabic poetry are more likely to be taught about saliva than sexual violence, coercion, or enslavement. All four topics are prominent in the tradition—sometimes appearing in the space of a single poem—but instructors are likely to censor the topics they present in class, especially in introductory courses. Classical Arabic poetry is taught formally and informally around the world, so it is difficult to make generalizations, but this theoretical intervention, which is informed by my peripatetic experience, suggests that there is a high degree of similarity in pedagogical approaches, which emanate from a premodern scholastic system adapted by Orientalists and other early modernizers. Instructors—facing low student enrollment or engagement, insecure employment, the limited availability of accessible teaching materials, and indifference or hostility from university managers and colleagues—are unlikely to feel empowered or robust enough to discuss highly controversial subjects such as sexual violence or slavery with their students. Such topics are especially fraught in situations in which an instructor feels their prime objective is to disabuse students of poorly informed and bigoted views about the society or topic that is being studied. Tact is also a paramount consideration. It can be stressful, and in some cases traumatic, to discuss topics such as rape, sexual abuse, and gender-based violence, so many instructors, myself included, are reluctant to raise them in class. Sensitivity, empathy, or timidity may explain why sexual violence has not received

© 2024 Adam Talib. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, which allows users to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the original authors and source.

Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā 32 (2024): 340-360

much attention in the study of premodern Arabic literature, but the contrast with saliva's prominence will show that received pedagogical and critical values play a central role, as well. In the second half of the essay, I survey the reception of a canonical teaching text to show critical custom at work and to introduce an alternatively premised critical engagement that models a radically different pedagogy.

The juxtaposition of saliva and sexual violence may appear facetious, but the factors that cause scholars of classical Arabic poetry to pay inordinate attention to saliva offer a partial explanation for the simultaneous obscuring of sexual violence. Saliva is one of many topics, or motifs, that teachers of classical Arabic poetry want students to learn to recognize so that they can become literate readers and connoisseurs. This is not new. Saliva and other poetic motifs have been central to the education of readers of the premodern Arabic poetic tradition going back more than a thousand years.[1] Their prominence is in stark contrast to the minimal attention paid to assault, unwanted sexual contact, harassment, coercion, and enslavement, which are equally present in the tradition. Throughout history, scholars of premodern Arabic poetry have had very little to say about those topics, and as a result they are not key concepts that students are expected to learn about today. In this article, I argue that the organization of poetry teaching around saliva (and other metaphorically rich erotic topoi) and the downplaying of sexual violence, coercion, and harassment are emblematic of a training in seeing and not-seeing that we are free to unlearn.

Tradition

Premodern Arabic poems often describe the pleasant taste of a desirable person's saliva.[2] We find poets, like Jamīl (d. ca. 701), comparing the taste of his beloved's saliva to wine in order to express the idea that a kiss can be intoxicating:[3]

> Her saliva tastes of vintage wine—
> limpid rainwater with a stir of honey.

This intuitive and beautiful metaphor illuminates experience. Why do kisses make me giddy? What makes them ambrosial? Intoxication approximates the effect that erotic touch has on the body. I understand why some teachers think it worth pausing to review a metaphor such as Jamīl's with students or readers. Indeed, students themselves may ask for an explanation, and teachers are usually very good at remembering which points in a text caused confusion in previous terms. Conventional saliva metaphors—a kiss is a sweet drink, saliva is wine, etc.—appear so consistently that they can be used to identify a specific poetic

---

1. Examples of saliva metaphors are dotted throughout poetry manuals; see, for example, the section on *tashbīh* in Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī, *al-ʿUmda fī maḥāsin al-shiʿr wa-ādābihi*, ed. T. al-Nayfar, M. al-ʿUbaydī, and J. Ḥamāda (Qarṭāj: al-Majmaʿ al-Tūnisī li-l-ʿUlūm wa-l-Ādāb wa-l-Funūn, 2009), 1:461–62.

2. "The sweetness of the beloved's saliva [. . .] is a very frequent motif in Arabic love poetry"; G. J. van Gelder, *Classical Arabic Literature: A Library of Arabic Literature Anthology* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 352.

3. *Ka-anna ʿatīqa r-rāḥi khālaṭa rīqahā / wa-ṣafwa gharīḍi l-muzni ṣuffiqa bi-sh-shahdī*; Jamīl b. Maʿmar, *Dīwān Jamīl*, ed. Ḥ. Naṣṣār (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1970), 75.

mode, *ghazal* (amatory), that describes stand-alone poems of erotic infatuation or erotic passages in polythematic poems (*qaṣāʾid*, sing. *qaṣīda*).

Being able to recognize and appreciate metaphor has long been a fundamental element of a person's training as a connoisseur of Arabic poetry. As early as the eighth century, we find scholars of Arabic poetry expending tremendous energy in producing large collections of short poems organized according to topic, genre, or rhetorical figure.[4] These anthologies were a highly successful dissemination format for poetic genres, and they trained readers to apprehend poems as composites of metaphors and other rhetorical figures. Becoming a skilled reader of Arabic poetry means being able to recognize these metaphors and place them correctly in the multifaceted and stylistically organized genre system. The first step is to learn not to take metaphors literally. The second is to see as many examples as possible and learn to classify them. The third is to teach them to others, perpetuating a chain of learning that is by now in its second millennium.

Poetry collections took the form of stand-alone titles or sections embedded in larger works such as Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī's (d. 1333) voluminous encyclopedia, *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition* (*Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*).[5] This massive work, which was copied many times by hand before the twentieth century, stretches to thirty-three volumes in print, or 2.3 million words according to Elias Muhanna, who has crunched the numbers.[6] In the second volume of the encyclopedia, al-Nuwayrī turns his attention to the human body, providing his audience with a series of poetic microanthologies arranged according to human anatomy.[7] This collection of microanthologies—which begins with poetic descriptions of the hair on one's head and ends with descriptions of how women walk—includes a set of sixteen very short poems (thirty-nine verses total) on the topic of saliva, divided into two sections: the first contains poems in which masculine pronouns are used to refer to the object of desire, and the second contains poems in which feminine pronouns are used. This is an organizing principle that we encounter almost as soon as erotic poetry emerges as a stand-alone genre.[8]

Muhanna has translated two of the sixteen poems from this saliva microanthology in his hyper-abridgment of al-Nuwayrī's encyclopedia for the Penguin Classics series. The first of these poems appears under the heading "A poet said of a male beloved":[9]

---

4. See B. Orfali, "A Sketch Map of Arabic Poetry Anthologies up to the Fall of Baghdad," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 1 (2012): 29–59.

5. For more information about this work, see E. Muhanna, *The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

6. Muhanna, *World in a Book*, 37.

7. See J. Sadan, "Maidens' Hair and Starry Skies: Imagery System and *Maʿānī* Guides; The Practical Side of Arabic Poetics as Demonstrated in Two Manuscripts," in *Studies in Medieval Arabic and Hebrew Poetics*, ed. S. Somekh, 57–88 (Leiden: Brill, 1991); and A. Talib, "Woven Together as Though Randomly Strung: Variation in Collections of Naevi Poetry Compiled by al-Nuwayrī and al-Sarī al-Raffāʾ," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 17 (2013): 23–42.

8. On genre-organizing principles, see G. Schoeler, "The Genres of Classical Arabic Poetry: Classifications of Poetic Themes and Poems by Pre-Modern Critics and Redactors of Dīwāns," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, n.s., 5–6 (2010–11): 1–48.

9. Shihab al-Din al-Nuwayri, *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition: A Compendium of*

O you, who denies me the sweetness of sleep, and grants me
Only the cloak of emaciation, and who leaves me like a mirage:
Who gave you license to deny me your
Honeyed saliva—oh you with your quivering spear
And your well-ordered teeth, your coal-black hair
Your eyes that spin webs of entrapment?

The poem is cited in a section that al-Nuwayrī entitled "Verses about the Sweetness of Saliva and Breath in the Masculine," but the poem is about more than just saliva. It is an entreaty to the object of desire, begging them for a kiss.

The poem focuses on desire, manipulation, and agency as much as it does on saliva, but that is not how the tradition remembered it. Unlike saliva, "manipulation" and "agency" are not keywords in any anthologies of classical Arabic poetry.[10] The poem's narrative tension centers on authority. The speaker in the poem asks the object of desire who gave them the right to deny the speaker a kiss ("Who gave you license . . . ?"). This framing makes clear the disparity in social status that is a common premise of homoerotic poetry in Arabic and related languages. The object of desire's bodily autonomy—their ability to say yes or no to sexual activity and intimacy with others—depends on a network of social relations that remain unseen in the poem, which, like most erotic poetry, shows us only the intimate pair as imagined by the domineering speaker.

Taste

The tradition of interpreting classical Arabic poetry (its hermeneutics) has tended to follow the models laid down by premodern systematizers—the people who performed one or more roles as rhetorically minded anthologists, poets, critics, teachers, repeaters, and so on. It has mostly been concerned with two broad categories of information: biographical or literary-historical detail and issues of language, style, and rhetoric.[11] To explore the latter, teachers may ask students to explain the meaning of a poem or to translate it into modern Arabic—either its international prestige form or one of its many regional forms. Around the world, it is usually the case that scholars translate the texts they study into the languages of the societies that they work in for the benefit of students and the interested public. In doing so, they inevitably draw the reader's attention to differences highlighted by the act of translation.

Knowledge from the Classical Islamic World, trans. E. Muhanna (New York: Penguin Classics, 2016), 60; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab* (Cairo: al-Muʾassasa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Taʾlīf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr, 1964–98), 2:55.

10. The chapter headings of poetry anthologies are formulaic in a way, but they are incredibly diverse in terms of their arrangement, focus, expression, etc. A lot of comparative research needs to be done on chapter headings, tables of contents, and such before we can speak with any confidence about how many semantic fields these anthologies covered.

11. These broad scholarly trends encompass more or less the entire library of secondary sources on classical Arabic poetry, so I will not provide any exhaustive listing here. Instead, the reader should aim to recognize these schools of thought going forward. A recent study examining the dense rhetoric of a poem by Bashshār b. Burd is an instructive example of one of these: S. H. Nasser, "Bashshār b. Burd's Double Entendre: Master of *Shiʿr* and *Rajaz*," *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 10, no. 1 (2023): 33–55.

Modern interpreters of classical Arabic poetry have decided that readers need the image of saliva to be translated and explained to them. The implication is that the uninitiated reader may be able to decipher a reference to saliva and connect it to kissing, but they will struggle to understand its cultural significance and connotations without the translator's gloss. On the other hand, sexual violence and coercion, like love or death, are assumed to glide smoothly from one patriarchal language to another. In the introduction to a widely taught anthology of Classical Arabic literature in English translation, the late Robert Irwin wrote:[12]

> A translator may well be successful in translating the words, but this cannot mean that he has translated the associations that those words had for their original audience. For a Western readership, saliva and salivation are likely to be associated with spitting, and, perhaps, the dissemination of disease, incontinent drooling, or a response to a dinner bell. But, as the late Professor A. F. L. Beeston pointed out in his fine selection of translations from the poems of the ʿAbbasid poet Bashshar [Bashshār b. Burd, d. 783], saliva (*riq*) occupies a privileged place in the Arabic vocabulary of love. A poet is more likely to speak of his beloved's saliva than of her kiss.

Setting aside the fact that spitting and contagion are also disliked in the contemporary Arab world and that an appetizing meal is also said to cause one's mouth to water (*yujarrī rīqahu*), ask yourself: What boundary is Irwin's intervention on the topic of saliva trying to draw? If I do not find the mention of saliva strange—if I find it evocative and alluring—does that make me a pervert? Or simply a non-Western? We may not have ever used the term "swapping spit" in my California high school to refer to kissing with tongues, but we would have understood it, and I think we would have also understood even at that tender age—in a way that Irwin's "Western reader[s]" are imagined not to—that many aspects of sexual contact and bodily intimacy can seem disgusting when divorced from arousal.

It is obvious that we often express intimacy, care, affection, and passion through saliva. How does a parent remove a smudge from a child's cheek? How do you nurse a cut on your own finger? Saliva in the context of intimate human relations is rarely repulsive; in fact we miss it when it's not there. How would you interpret a lover's perfunctory, tight-lipped kiss? How would you feel if someone you desired wiped the rim of your glass before drinking from it? Exoticizing the mention of saliva is one example of a scholarly tendency or teaching method that imposes its position, manners, and sexual ethics on the historical texts presented to novices. This method is helped by the fact that conventional saliva metaphors are lurid without being coarse. Scholars who may not feel comfortable discussing sex, let alone sexual violence, coercion, or abuse, feel that they can legitimately discuss saliva and, by extension, kissing so long as they frame that discussion as an explication, a deciphering of rhetoric, or instructions on how to solve a linguistic puzzle. Saliva becomes

12. R. Irwin, *Nights and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (London: Allen Lane, 1999), ix; idem, *The Penguin Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (London: Penguin, 2006), ix. Ahmad Almallah offers a cogent description of Irwin's anthropological approach and its relationship to Orientalism as a method in his article "Ethnicity in Modern Rewritings of Bashshār ibn Burd: 'Free Thinker,' 'Libertine' or 'Love Poet'?," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 23, no. 3 (2020): 140–59.

just another recurring metonymy in the connoisseur's curriculum of Arabic tropes. In his intervention, Irwin emulated and cited A. F. L. Beeston (1911–95), an influential British Arabist of the second half of the twentieth century. Beeston's list of poetic conventions does not include the same style of graphic but misleading comparison we see in Irwin's intervention, but it clearly indicates that learning to recognize and understand tropes is a key skill that students of Arabic poetry are expected to acquire.[13] Beeston's primer was published in 1977, but it was still my first introduction to Classical Arabic poetry, and I understood, without having to be told, that absorbing its contents, concerns, and judgments was crucial for any educational and professional success that I hoped to have. With some maturity, I now see Beeston's primer as an example of the symbiosis that exists between the rhetorical investments of the teaching tradition and the decontextualized presentation of some harrowing scenes of sexual harassment, coercion, and violence. In this article, I return to my undergraduate encounter with a poem by Bashshār b. Burd in order to unlearn what no longer seems right. Some may see this as a drift toward postcritique, but my objective is simply to shed light on the received practice of my guild.

Training

I first encountered A. F. L. Beeston's primer, *Selections from the Poetry of Baššār*, as an undergraduate at UCLA in the middle 2000s in a seminar taught by Michael Cooperson. My memory is not entirely clear, but I can remember being very excited and very nervous. I was twenty-one, I think. Among many other texts from early ʿAbbasid Baghdad, we read a few poets, beginning with Bashshār b. Burd (d. 783), and although every word presented a challenge back then, those weeks changed my life.

Bashshār remains one of the most prominent names in Arabic poetry's long history.[14] He and his contemporaries were associated with a new school of poetry that would earn them the title of "Moderns" (*muḥdathūn*) in contrast with the pre-Islamic and early Islamic poets.[15] Bashshār was said to straddle the ancient and modern trends in poetry, but he is most often recognized as one of the founders of the new movement, the "father of the Moderns." Although noting that "the contrast between old and new has

13. A. F. L. Beeston, *Selections from the Poetry of Baššār: Edited with Translation and Commentary and an Introductory Sketch of Arabic Poetic Structures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 7.

14. I encourage readers to seek out the recent appraisal of Bashshār's important legacy by Ahmad Almallah: "Parody and the Creation of the *Muḥdath Ghazal*," in *The Routledge Handbook of Arabic Poetry*, ed. H. J. Fakhreddine and S. P. Stetkevych, 33–54 (New York: Routledge, 2024). Important studies of Bashshār's poetry, in addition to recent work by Ahmad Almallah and several studies by Ameur Ghedira, include ʿU. Farrūkh, *Bashshār b. Burd wa-fātiḥat al-ʿaṣr al-ʿabbāsī* (Beirut: Maktabat Munaymina, 1949); Ṭ. al-Ḥājarī, *Bashshār b. Burd* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1954); A. Rizk, "Baššār Ibn Burd: Ein Dichter der ʿabbāsidischen Moderne, in der Überlieferung und der Darstellung des *Kitāb al-Aġānī*" (PhD diss., Heidelberg University, 1966); and R. Blachère, "Le cas Baššâr dans le développement de la poésie arabe," in *Analecta,* 583–602 (Damascus: Presses de l'Ifpo, 1975).

15. See G. J. van Gelder, "*Muḥdathūn*," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2009).

been exaggerated and simplified," Geert Jan van Gelder nevertheless finds that "the most characteristic innovation of the [Moderns] lies precisely in the development of refined rhetorical techniques, a novel use of metaphor [. . .], and of increasingly complex imagery and 'conceits.'"[16] Huda Fakhreddine argues that this poetic school was also self-consciously countercultural:[17] "[T]he Abbasid modernizers are poets who also composed subversive poems which challenged the *status quo*. They were artists who had complicated and sometimes contradictory relationships with power and with the multilingual, multiethnic societies they lived in." She goes on to argue persuasively, as she has elsewhere, that the aesthetics of this new (*muḥdath*) poetry and the *badīᶜ* style that emerged out of it depends radically on interplay—competition, parody, allusion, etc.—with the long history of poetry in Arabic that preceded it.[18] Gregor Schoeler locates the linguistic and generic creativity of the Moderns in psychological responses to ethnic rivalry and the fight for social status.[19] The innovations of the Moderns will continue to occupy scholars for many more years and for good reason, but let us stipulate that their revolution succeeded and that, forever after, the rich metaphorical and metapoetic style that they pioneered became a central focus of their legacy.[20]

Bashshār b. Burd's poems were routinely included in anthologies that collected examples of popular tropes, including the collection of saliva poems in al-Nuwayrī's fourteenth-century encyclopedia discussed above. Al-Nuwayrī cites a single verse by Bashshār, which describes someone with a beautiful mouth that is so chaste that only the *miswāk* brush has had the pleasure of experiencing it. Muhanna translates the line as follows:[21]

> O you, with the sweetest mouth of any man,
> Unexplored, save by the tips of toothpicks

The line does not seem to reflect much in the way of the *badīᶜ* aesthetic at first, especially in translation, but there is a fanciful conceit that gives the line its logic: the toothpicks (or brushes) have the human attribute of being able to testify.

16. Van Gelder, "Muḥdathūn."

17. H. J. Fakhreddine, "Teaching the Abbasid *Muḥdathūn* at the Global Turn," *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1, no. 4 (2019): 45–56, at 46.

18. Fakhreddine, "Teaching the Abbasid *Muḥdathūn*," 47. See also, of course, H. J. Fakhreddine, "Defining Metapoesis in the ᶜAbbāsid Age," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 42, nos 2–3 (2011): 205–35.

19. G. Schoeler, "Bashshār b. Burd, Abū l-ᶜAtāhiyah, and Abū Nuwās," in *ᶜAbbasid Belles-Lettres*, ed. J. Ashtiany et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 283–85.

20. G. Schoeler, "Bashshār b. Burd," 284: "*Badīᶜ* [. . .] increasingly becomes an artistic principle rather than merely an artistic instrument."

21. *Ya aṭyaba n-nāsi thaghran ghayra mukhtabarin / illā shahādata aṭrafi l-masāwīkī*. The line is cited in al-Nuwayri, *Ultimate Ambition*, 60, and al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 2:56, as well as in Ibn Abī ᶜAwn, *The Kitāb al-Tashbīhāt of Ibn Abī ᶜAun*, ed. M. ᶜAbdul Muᶜīd Khān (London: Luzac, 1950), 107, with the variant *yā ṭayyibi n-nās rīqan* for *ya ʾaṭyaba n-nāsi thaghran*. A more famous example of the same metaphor can be found in Bashshār b. Burd, *Dīwān*, ed. M. al-Ṭāhir b. ᶜĀshūr (Algiers: al-Sharika al-Waṭaniyya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīᶜ, 1967; repr. Algiers: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, 2007), 2:190: *ayyuhā s-sāqiyāni ṣubbā sharābī / wa-sqiyānī min rīqin ṣafrāʾa rūdī*.

Poets’ and audiences’ enthusiasm for the *badīᶜ* aesthetic only grew in the centuries after Bashshār b. Burd’s death. This transformation in literary taste is connected to a preoccupation with the language, style, and rhetoric of Arabic poetry, which began in premodernity and informs us to this day. Skipping ahead a few centuries, we find another kissing poem that illustrates just how complex the associative images of Arabic poetry would eventually become:[22]

لا أعلم قائله وقد أجاد إلى الغاية

[١] قَبَّلْتُهُ فبكى وأَعْرَضَ نافِرًا   يُذْري ٱلْمَدامِعَ مِنْ كَحيلٍ أَدْعَجِ

[٢] فكأَنَّ وَقْعَ ٱلدَّمْعِ مِنْ أَجْفانِهِ   لَمَّا بَدا في خَدِّهِ ٱلْمُتَضَرِّجِ

[٣] بَرَدٌ تَساقَطَ فَوْقَ وَرْدٍ أَحْمَرٍ   مِنْ نَرْجِسٍ فسقى رِياضَ بَنَفْسَجِ

I don’t know who wrote this poem, but they did an excellent job:

When I kissed him, he cried and turned away.
Tears spilled from his kohl-black eyes—
Falling from eyelids
onto flushed cheeks like
hailstones falling from a narcissus onto red roses,
watering the violets beneath.

This poem reveals only two characters, an I (the persona) and a young man, and the plot is communicated rapidly. The persona’s unwelcome kiss causes the young man to cry and turn his head away. All of this is established in a single half-line, with the remaining five-sixths of the poem devoted to a description of the young man’s tears, a bodily reaction to unwelcome sexual contact. This disproportion—between the incident that causes the young man to cry and the long and highly figurative description of his tears—epitomizes how sexual assault can be stylized. The tears that fall from the young man’s wide, black eyes on to his flushed cheeks glimmer like hailstones falling from a narcissus (his eye) onto roses (his cheeks), watering the fields of violets below (his downy beard). The elegant climactic and horticultural metaphors in the poem, which make it exquisite, are heightened by the contrast with the tawdry action that sets it in motion. Metonymy directs the listener’s attention toward a tableau of conceptual relationships mediated by figuration, not toward characterization or resolution, but the poem nevertheless communicates information about dynamics of power and agency, how people react to violation, and what counts as beauty.

The heading that introduces this anonymous poem in the anthology in which I found it was probably written by the compiler, Shams al-Dīn al-Nawājī, who died in 1455. A scholar and successful tastemaker in fifteenth-century Cairo, he came across a poem about a young man crying and trying to get away from unwanted sexual contact and enjoyed the imagery in the poem so much that he chose to include it in a collection of homoerotic poetry,

22. Anonymous poem quoted in Shams al-Dīn al-Nawājī, *Khalᶜ al-ᶜidhār ᶜan waṣf al-ᶜidhār*, ed. Ḥ. M. ᶜAbd al-Hādī and M. Y. Banāt (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ᶜIlmiyya, 2016), 77. The imagery and diction of this short poem can, of course, be compared to antecedent examples, such as those cited in Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī, *al-ᶜUmda*, 1:463.

recommending it to his peers. If al-Nawājī's brief and formulaic heading is not dispositive, consider what his contemporary Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī (d. 1434) had to say about the poem:[23] "Look, reader [lit. person contemplating], how these similes are drunk by the ears as though they were wine and cause otherwise healthy tastes to become uncontrollably infatuated with their charms." These historical readers and systematizers draw our attention to the language game created by the nest of similes and metaphors in the poem, but their mannerism cannot be separated from their understanding of plot. The poem appears in al-Nawājī's anthology of homoerotic poems about incipient beards because of the final allusion to "violets," but in Ibn Ḥijja's endorsement, we see the critic addressing the question of plot and characterization implicitly in his own use of metaphor. He acknowledges that the dense metonymies in the very short poem are a threat to "healthy tastes" (*al-adhwāq as-salīma*) and may invoke in the listener ("the contemplator") a passion (*huyām*, *gharām*) similar to that experienced by the speaker of the poem. Beauty, whether in the form of a poem or a person, corrupts and overwhelms any who encounter it.

* * *

After this reflection on the centrality of connoisseurship to premodern and modern appreciation and training, I want to return to a poem by Bashshār b. Burd that I read in that seminar nearly twenty years ago.[24] I have grown more and more interested in the presentation and reception of Arabic poetry over time, so I will pay special attention to the narrative surrounding the poem in *Kitāb al-Aghānī* compiled by Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī in the tenth century as well as later critical assessments and presentation contexts. In *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, al-Iṣbahānī looks back two centuries to tell the story of some scholars in Basra who began complaining that Bashshār b. Burd's poetry was driving the men and women of that city to sin.[25] When al-Mahdī, who ruled as caliph for ten years before his death in 785, received these complaints, he forbade Bashshār from "mentioning women's names in poetry and composing verses about love."[26] According to al-Iṣbahānī's informants, the scholarly view, epitomized by Abū ʿUbayda (d. 825), was that Bashshār's poems had the power to threaten public morality: "If Bashshār's poetry can stir the heart of chaste, free-born women, imagine the effect it could have on flirtatious women and girls who think

23. Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī, *Khizānat al-adab wa-ghāyat al-arab*, ed. K. Diyāb (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2001), 2:488: أنظر أيها المتأمِّل إلى هذه التشابيه التي يرشفها السَّمع مُدامًا وتهيم الأذواق السليمة في محاسنها غرامًا

24. The poem is no. XVII in Beeston, *Selections*, 38–40 (English), 7–8 (Arabic). The anecdote and the text of the poem are given in Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, ed. M. al-Saqqā et al. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1927–61), 3:182–84. For this article, I have reproduced the poem as it appears in *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, as the differences between different versions (in 23, 26, and 28 lines) are not my focus here.

25. Beatrice Gruendler has produced an informative and exhaustive study of the stories related to Bashshār's controversial literary output in al-Iṣbahānī's collection: B. Gruendler, "'Farewell to Ghazal!': Convention and Danger of the Abbasid Love Lyric," In *Poetry and History: The Value of Poetry in Reconstructing Arab History*, ed. R. Baalbaki, S. S. Agha, and T. Khalidi, 137–72 (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 2011).

26. Al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 3:182–83. See also 3:219 as well as H. Kilpatrick, "Time and Death in Compiled *Adab* 'Biographies,'" *Al-Qanṭara* 25 (2004): 387–412, at 402.

of nothing but men!"[27] Abū ʿUbayda then recited a twenty-three-line poem in the *munsariḥ* meter by Bashshār as an example of the type of poetry that can "sway hearts and make a difficult thing easy":[28]

[١]	قد لامَني في خليلتي عُمَرُ	واللَّوْمُ في غيرِ كُنْهِهِ ضَجَرُ
[٢]	قالَ أَفِقْ قُلْتُ لا فقالَ بَلَى	قد شاعَ في ٱلنَّاسِ منكُما الخَبَرُ
[٣]	قُلْتُ وإِذْ شاعَ ما ٱعْتِذارُكَ مِـ	ـمَّا لَيْسَ لي فيهِ عِنْدَهُمْ عُذُرُ
[٤]	ما ذا عليهم وما لهم خرسوا	لو أنّهم في عيوبهم نَظَروا
[٥]	أَعْشَقُ وَحْدي ويؤخَذون به	كالتُّرْكِ تغزو فتؤخَذُ ٱلخَزَرُ
[٦]	يا عَجَبًا للخِلافِ يا عَجَبًا	بِفي ٱلَّذي لامَ في ٱلهَوَى ٱلحَجَرُ
[٧]	حَسْبي وحَسْبُ ٱلَّذي كَلِفْتُ بِهِ	مِنّي ومِنْهُ ٱلحَديثُ والنَّظَرُ
[٨]	أو قُبْلَةٌ في خِلالِ ذاكَ وما	بأْسٌ إِذا لَمْ تُحَلَّ لي ٱلأُزُرُ
[٩]	أو عَضَّةٌ في ذِراعِها ولَها	فَوْقَ ذِراعي من عَضِّها أَثَرُ
[١٠]	أو لَمسةٌ دونَ مِرْطِها بِيَدي	والبابُ قد حالَ دونَهُ ٱلسُّتُرُ
[١١]	والساقُ بَرَّاقةٌ مُخَلخَلُها	أو مصُّ ريقٍ وقد عَلا ٱلبُهُرُ
[١٢]	واسْتَرْخَتِ ٱلكَفُّ للعِراكِ وقا	لَتْ إيهِ عَنّي والدَّمْعُ مُنحَدِرُ
[١٣]	اِنهَض فَما أَنْتَ كالَّذي زعموا	أَنْتَ ورَبّي مُغازِلٌ أَشِرُ
[١٤]	قد غابَتِ ٱليَوْمَ عَنْكَ حاضِنَتي	واللهُ لي مِنْكَ فيكَ يَنْتَصِرُ
[١٥]	يا رَبِّ خُذْ لي فقد تَرَى ضَرَعي	مِنْ فاسِقٍ جاءَ ما بِهِ سَكَرُ
[١٦]	أَهْوَى إِلى مِعْضَدي فرَضَّضَهُ	ذو قُوَّةٍ ما يُطاقُ مُقْتَدِرُ
[١٧]	أَلْصَقَ بي لِحْيَةً لَهُ خَشُنَتْ	ذاتَ سَوادٍ كأَنَّها ٱلإِبَرُ
[١٨]	حَتَّى عَلاني وأُسْرَتي غَيَبُ	وَيْلي عَلَيْهِمْ لَوْ أَنَّهُمْ حَضَروا
[١٩]	أُقْسِمُ باللهِ لا نَجَوْتَ بِها	فاذْهَبْ فأَنْتَ ٱلمُساوِرُ ٱلظَّفِرُ
[٢٠]	كَيْفَ بِأُمّي إِذا رأَتْ شَفَتي	أَمْ كَيْفَ إِنْ شاعَ مِنْكَ ذا ٱلخَبَرُ
[٢١]	قد كُنْتُ أَخْشَى ٱلَّذي ٱبتُلِيتُ بِهِ	مِنْكَ فماذا أَقولُ يا عَبِرُ
[٢٢]	قُلْتُ لَها عِنْدَ ذاكَ يا سَكَني	لا بأْسَ إِنّي مُجَرِّبٌ خَبِرُ
[٢٣]	قولي لَها بَقَّةٌ لها ظُفُرٌ	إِنْ كانَ في ٱلبَقِّ ما لَهُ ظُفُرُ

27. Al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 3:183.

28. Al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 3:183–84. This phrase (*bi-mithl hādhā l-shiʿr tamīl al-qulūb wa-yalīn al-ṣaʿb*) is rephrased by the Syrian poet Shafīq Jabrī (1898–1980) in his discussion of the poem in an article on Bashshār's lingual dexterity: Sh. Jabrī, "*Lisān Bashshār*," *Majallat Majmaʿ al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya bi-Dimashq* 40, no. 3 (1384/1965): 546–56, at 552.

[Prologue, 1–6]
ʿUmar criticized me for [carrying on with] my girlfriend—
but blame out of place is a drag.
"Snap out of it!" he said. "Why should I?" I protested.
"You must! They're all talking about you."
"What would you have me say
"when you know they'll never let it go?"
It doesn't concern them anyway. If they could only
see their own faults, they'd never utter a word.
I'm the lover here, but somehow they're the ones defiled?
The Turks do all the fighting, but do they ever get the spoils?
I can't believe we're arguing about this!
May rocks fill your mouth if you blame others for loving!

[Encounter, 7–23]
Me and the one I love are happy just to
talk and look at each other.
Maybe a kiss when we're there together—
it's OK, if her clothes stay on.
Maybe I nibble on her arm—
her bite has left a mark on mine.
Or maybe when the portiere is drawn,
I slide a hand beneath her skirt,
Against legs, shimmering with anklets,
or slurp her spit as heavy breathing fills the air.
She lowered her hand to push me away:
"Get off!" she says, tears streaming down her face.
"Get out of here. You're not like they said you'd be.
"By God, you're lusty and insolent!"
"My nanny is away today,
"So only God can protect me from you."
"Save me, God. You can see I'm weaker
"than this degenerate who isn't even drunk."
"He grabbed the cuff on my arm and crushed it,
"He's so strong no one can overpower him."
"He presses his coarse, black beard against me,
"Like needles on my skin."
"He overpowered me (*ʿalānī*) while my family was away,
"Oh if only they'd been here!—"
"I swear—you would not have come out alive.
"Get out of here. You're the assaulter (*musāwir*), the hero."
"What will my mother say when she sees my lip?

"What will happen if you tell people about this?"
"I'd always feared what I've suffered
"At your hands. What can I say, you brute?"
"My Blessing," I soothed her. "Everything's going to be fine."
"I've been through this before."
"Just tell her it was a mosquito with claws—
"If such a creature even exists!"

Although there is no formal division in the poem, I suggest that it is made up of two sections of unequal length. I will call these the prologue (lines 1–6) and the encounter (lines 7–23). The prologue sets up the dilemma of desire and scandal that lies at the heart of the poem: a group of men has singled out one of their number for blame because he has failed to conceal his romantic relationship with a woman. The man is irked by this, and it is his protest that we hear most clearly because he is the speaker of the poem. Around line 7, the poem transitions from prologue to encounter, but the chronological ordering of the two sections remains ambiguous. In the prologue section, it is clear from the speaker's use of "you" and "they" pronouns that he is addressing (directly and rhetorically) the people who are gossiping about his relationship. This changes in line 7, when the persona starts speaking on behalf of himself and "the one I love." The character who was introduced in the first line of the poem as a "girlfriend" (*khalīlatī*) and the source of friction within the community of men returns to the foreground, but she is depicted as silent and mostly passive (ll. 7–11). The persona describes chatting to her, exchanging glances (l. 7), kissing her (l. 8), running his hand beneath her clothing (l. 10), and so on. The woman's reactions are scarcely mentioned, but we do learn from the persona that she has bitten him on the arm and that he enjoys biting hers (l. 9). Biting suggests self-defense, but it can also reflect sexual desire, as in a verse by the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd II (d. 744):[29]

By God and His pious
angels and those who worship Him and do right, I swear
I long to hear [music] and drink
wine and bite beautiful cheeks.

The significance of the woman's bite and its place on the spectrum of harm and pleasure that attends physical encounters will shift as the listener learns more about the woman's state of mind.

In line 12, just as the sound of heavy breathing fills the air, the young woman pulls her hand away and protests: "'Get off!' she says, tears streaming down her face." The woman's reaction transforms our perspective on what the persona has been describing and interrupts the poem's imprecise timeline. The persona has led us to think that he and his "girlfriend" (l. 1) saw each other more than once and that there was a steady progression of intimate activity (ll. 7–11), but her reaction throws everything we thought we knew about the situation into doubt. Maybe he misinterpreted the woman's biting his arm in order

29. Al-Walīd b. Yazīd, *Dīwān*, ed F. Gabrieli (Damascus: Maṭbaʿat Ibn Zaydūn, 1355/1937), 38.

to defend herself as a form of "foreplay," a term I borrow sardonically from one scholar's translation of this poem, but no reading of the first eleven lines as the testament of a naive and self-centered protagonist can withstand the sudden intervention of the woman's voice in line 12.[30] The narrative climax of the poem (ll. 13–21) takes the form of the woman's counternarration of the events described by the persona in lines 7–11. By the time she has finished speaking, even the persona's use of the term "girlfriend" (*khalīlatī*) in the poem's opening line seems untenable.

Earlier I suggested that the narrative of the poem is divided into two sections, prologue and encounter, but we can also see the poem as enacting two nihilistic thought experiments about scandal and assault, the imagined consequences of uncontrolled sexual desire. In the first case, the speaker washes his hands of the scandal he caused because of other men's hypocrisy, and in the second, he offers a cruel and caustic response to the woman's tearful outburst (ll. 22–23). As parodic antihero, the speaker advocates an antisocial and hedonistic position that is ostensibly opposed to the priorities of the men around him. When they challenge him, he insinuates that they are acting like assaulted women themselves and compares himself to a Turkish warrior (l. 5). For all that the woman character is drawn with a modicum of sympathy, she exists primarily to praise the persona by condemning him. That may seem counterintuitive, but praise in the form of blame was common enough.[31] The poet manipulates the emotional impact of a woman narrating her own violation in order to emphasize the persona's manly attributes. She tearfully tells the persona that he is insolent (l. 13), cruel (l. 21), too strong to repel (l. 16), and a man with a coarse black beard (l. 17) who shamelessly gropes women when is sober (l. 15) and visits them when their families are absent or distracted (l. 18). The tearful litany is actually a rave review—one of those parodies that Bashshār is remembered for today.[32] Being cruel and insolent means he is not tenderhearted and swooning; groping women while sober means he is bold and does not need to find courage in a bottle; his strength and coarse black beard mean he is vigorous and not decrepit; and visiting women without their families' knowledge shows stealth and courage. Where I depart from premodern critics and most contemporaries is that I understand Bashshār's macho boasting to be directed primarily at other men, attaining its value in an economy of homosocial competition, and that when those other men invoke the vulnerability of young women listeners, they are cashing in a different token of patriarchy, guardianship over women and children.[33]

Beatrice Gruendler discusses this poem and others by Bashshār in a survey of stories

30. T. Khalidi, *An Anthology of Arabic Literature: From the Classical to the Modern* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 28.

31. See P. Cachia, *The Arch Rhetorician, or The Schemer's Skimmer: A Handbook of Late Arabic* Badīʿ *Drawn from ʿAbd al-Ghanī an-Nābulsī's "Nafaḥāt al-azhār ʿalā nasamāt al-asḥār"* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998), 99–100, no. 137.

32. See recent articles by S. H. Nasser and A. Almallah.

33. "So many of the social reactions that strike us as psychological are in fact a rational management of symbolic capital"; P. Bourdieu, *Classification Struggles*, trans. P. Collier (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 91.

remembered about the poet's conflicts with the political and moral establishment of his day.[34] She refers to the poem as a "graphic *ghazal* of a raunchy love conquest" and a "graphic mock-ʿUdhrī *ghazal*."[35] The distinction between chaste and explicit erotic poetry informs the analysis throughout Gruendler's article and can be connected to other interpretations of Bashshār's poetry as primarily parodic. This is not the place to question the chastity of earlier love poetry, but there is plenty of evidence in *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, for example, of those earlier, nonurban love poems known as *ʿUdhrī* causing social scandal with tragic effects in the community. Gruendler acknowledges that "the older ʿUdhrī verse glorifying death through love was potentially more hazardous to the lives of impressionable young people," but what I mean is that the stories of the poets, their beloveds, and their families and neighbors record the devastating impact that these scandalous poems were remembered or imagined to have had.[36] The prohibition against Bashshār's poetry reflects a different political system, an elite society, and perhaps the outsized influence of the scholarly community, which also suggests to me that the threat to public morality—while expressed in similar terms—may have been imagined differently. There is no doubt that Bashshār and his peers were parodic geniuses, repurposing the male and female characters of earlier Arabic poetry to create new narratives, innovate, entertain a jaundiced crowd, and, of course, spin new, dazzling metaphors, but we ought also to consider what their critics may have been doing through their own rhetoric. Expressing concern for impressionable youngsters and gullible women is nothing new, but it is not a static posture either and may not always be sincere. Nevertheless, this fossilized condemnation of Bashshār's poetry has led many critics to see him as an advocate of libertinism.[37]

The Syrian poet and critic Adūnīs connects Bashshār b. Burd's style of *badīʿ* aesthetics, an aesthetics that "gave unfamiliar metaphorical and figurative dimensions to the language [of poetry]," to a larger project of social iconoclasm.[38] He argues that "Bashshār refused social norms and some dominant religious views. He mocked these and cast doubt on them, while at the same time championing pleasure or, what we might call, a civilization of the body."[39] Adūnīs is referring to Bashshār's oeuvre, not this specific poem, but his analysis is clearly informed by stories, such as that of the caliph's intervention, which fuel the perception that Bashshār's poetry ran afoul of elite mores. In *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, al-Mahdī cites this poem as an example of poetry that could "stir the hearts of women" and lead to social disorder; the world of the text clearly belongs to a "civilization of the body," but we need to argue more about whose interest this iconoclasm served.

34. Gruendler, "'Farewell to *Ghazal*!'" Gruendler translates the version of the poem that appears in Bashshār's *Dīwān* (edited by Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir b. ʿĀshūr), which is slightly different from the *Aghānī* version used here.

35. Gruendler, "'Farewell to *Ghazal*!,'" 142, 157.

36. Gruendler, "'Farewell to *Ghazal*!,'" 142.

37. See Almallah, "Ethnicity," for a history of critical responses to Bashshār's poetry.

38. Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-ittibāʿ wa-l-ibdāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab* (London: Dār al-Sāqī, 1994), 3:16. Almallah has analyzed modern critical approaches to ethnic and sexual themes in Bashshār b. Burd's poetry in "Ethnicity."

39. Adūnīs, *al-Thābit*, 3:16–17.

I assume that the poem's role in scandal, as well as its intriguing narrative structure, led scholars of Classical Arabic literature to include the poem in anthologies of translated texts, or chrestomathies. These scholars include A. F. L. Beeston, who remarked that the poem was rare for being "frankly erotic."[40] In his anthology for students, Tarif Khalidi introduces the poem by referring to the events depicted in it as a "seduction."[41] Khalidi's description echoes that of the Italian Arabist Francesco Gabrieli (1904–96), who called the poem a "scene of seduction" decades earlier.[42] Gruendler echoes this in her description of the poem as "an instruction in poetry of how to lure a woman from the street, dupe her with idle protestations of eternal love, and spend a passionate afternoon."[43] Van Gelder, who included the poem in his Dutch-language anthology of classical Arabic literature, calls it "playful" ("frivool").[44] Although he was not a fan of Bashshār's poetry, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889–1973) claimed that line 21 demonstrated "[the poet's] skill in depicting women—or a type of woman—when they are distressed by enthusiasm and pleasure (*tahāluk wa-ladhdha*)."[45] The Syrian poet Shafīq Jabrī (1898–1980) described Bashshār's "mocking tone" (*sukhriyya*) in the poem as "elegant" and "witty."[46]

One critic stands out for his nonconformity. The Egyptian critic Mohamed al-Nowaihi [Muḥammad an-Nuwayhī] (1917–80), who was Beeston's contemporary, excoriates the speaker of the poem in his book-length study of Bashshār b. Burd's character, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār* (1st ed., 1951; 2nd ed., 1971).[47] In a long and arresting analysis of the poem, al-Nowaihi argues that Bashshār composed the poem not for the sake of prurience but in order to take revenge against his contemporaries, against "husbands by making their women fair game and against fathers by corrupting their sons."[48] Both al-Nowaihi and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn agree that the content of the poem is obscene, even if its expression is not.[49] When citing an extract of the poem in his 2017 anthology of Classical Arabic poetry, ʿĀrif Ḥijjāwī recalls

40. Beeston, *Selections*, 19.

41. Khalidi, *Anthology*, 28.

42. F. Gabrieli, "Appunti su Baśśar b. Burd," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 9, no. 1 (1937): 151–63, at 160: "Ecco una scena di seduzione."

43. Gruendler, "'Farewell to *Ghazal*!,'" 143–44.

44. G. J. van Gelder, *Een Arabische tuin: Klassieke arabische poëzie* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bulaaq, 2000), 244: "Een frivool gedicht."

45. Ṭ. Ḥusayn, "Shiʿr Bashshār," in *Ḥadīth al-Arbiʿāʾ*, 14th ed., 2:197–211 (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 2013), 206. The article "Shiʿr Bashshār" was originally published in *al-Siyāsa* (17 Ramaḍān 1342/12 April 1924).

46. Jabrī, "Lisān Bashshār," 553: *ayy sukhriyya araqq min hādhihi al-sukhriyya* [. . .] *ayy sukhriyya alṭaf min dhikr al-baqqa fī ḥāl mithl hādhihi al-ḥāl.*

47. M. al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1951; 2nd ed., Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1971). See also M. A. Abubakar, "The Contribution of Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī to Modern Arabic Literary Criticism in Egypt" (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1984).

48. Al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*, 168: *yantaqim min rijālihim bi-stibāḥat nisāʾihim wa-yantaqim min shuyūkhihim bi-ifsād shabābihim.*

49. Ḥusayn, "Shiʿr Bashshār," 206: *fa-laysa fī al-lafẓ fuḥsh kathīr, bal fī al-maʿnā, fa-l-maʿnā kulluhu fuḥsh.*

al-Nowaihi's judgment:[50] "This is loathsome humor, of course. Al-Nuwayhī [al-Nowaihi] goes on for many pages excoriating Bashshār's moral character on the basis of this poem. While he may have excused Bashshār for being passionately in love, he could never forgive him for taking advantage of a young girl." Al-Nowaihi argues that what makes the poem "wicked" is that its "cruelty and obscenity" is disguised and not immediately obvious to the reader, just as a colorful snake's appearance distracts from thoughts of its venom.[51] For him, this is the "most vengeful," "most bitter," "most misanthropic," and "most obscene" poem in the history of Arabic.[52] Although I read the poem differently, al-Nowaihi's analysis of its point of view has helped me understand it better, and I am left wishing that my own engagement with these historical texts were less antiquarian and more intuitive.

Al-Nowaihi's polemic is rooted in an assumption that the poem reflects Bashshār b. Burd's psychology. Both his and Ḥusayn's interpretations of the poem are primarily psycho-biographical, as this was a dominant trend in mid-twentieth-century Arabic literary scholarship.[53] Al-Nowaihi writes that "Bashshār feels a malicious joy when he has the opportunity to take revenge on people by raping one of their chaste young women."[54] I understand al-Nowaihi to be talking here about Bashshār as a character in the poem—the character I have called the persona or speaker. It is both endearing and embarrassing to see a critic take a work of medieval literature so seriously, but it is also necessarily true that this poem influences the world, so it is good analytical complication for critics, teachers, and students to ask whether the poet's perspective is the only one available to us.

Al-Nowaihi and I both read the poem as a narrative of sexual assault, so it is no coincidence that we listen closely to the testimony of the woman character. Al-Nowaihi considers the woman an active participant in the activities leading up to her protest, which she later regrets.[55] In his reading of the poem, there is an interval of time between that episode and the woman's reaction after she has "recovered from her rapture" (*thābat al-fatāh min nashwatihā*) and "temporary passion" (*tafīq min shahwatihā al-waqtiyya*).[56] By contrast, I see no gap in the timeline of the poem. I also do not share al-Nowaihi's reading of the woman's speech as being Bashshār's cruel mockery of a woman's voice, as I have previously explained. In my reading, it is the absence of any lag between lines 7–11 and the protest in line 12 that triggers a radical shift in perspective. The sudden transition from the persona's narration of a copacetic encounter to the woman's objection

50. ʿĀ. Ḥajjāwī, *Tajaddud al-shiʿr: Zubdat al-shiʿr al-ʿabbāsī min Bashshār ilā al-Buḥturī* (Cairo: Dār al-Mashriq, 2017), 60–61.

51. Al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*, 171.

52. Al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*, 169: *ashadd al-shiʿr al-ʿarabī tashabbuʿan bi-rūḥ al-intiqām*; *aʿnaf al-shiʿr al-ʿarabī sakhṭan ʿalā al-nās wa-karāhiyatan li-l-bashar*; *awghal al-shiʿr al-ʿarabī ifḥāshan*.

53. This school of criticism, which had its own internal disagreements, is the subject of M. al-Būrī, *Tajalliyāt al-manhaj al-nafsī fī naqd al-shiʿr al-ʿabbāsī bi-Miṣr* (Sale: Maṭbaʿat Banī Aznāsin, 2013), and it is analyzed to great effect in J. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

54. Al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*, 171–72: *wa-huwa bi-hādhā yafraḥ faraḥan khabīthan an utīḥa lahu al-intiqām min al-nās bi-ghtiṣāb fatāh min nisāʾihim al-ʿafīfāt*.

55. See al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*, 177, 183–84.

56. Al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*, 178, 179.

and counternarration throws the world of the poem into turmoil. Al-Nowaihi goes on to argue that although Bashshār may have intended for the woman's account of his "manly violence" to advertise himself as a sexual partner to other women in society, his project failed in the long run.[57] Ultimately, he concludes, the poem teaches women, like a fable, how to "preserve their honor," undermining Bashshār's original intention.[58] In a fascinating example of how our contemporary world constantly intrudes on our encounters with the past, al-Nowaihi explains that he would teach this poem to his teenage daughter.[59] He departs from literary analysis to persuade the reader that educating women about "men's ploys" is more useful than merely warning them of aggression would be, because the former is the real threat to women, not that they will be "attacked by [an anonymous] attacker and raped."[60] For that reason, he says, never leaving the house or veiling one's face does not offer adequate protection.[61] This passage would be effective in an intellectual biography that aspires to show how al-Nowaihi's criticism connects to his "courageous public championship of Muslim women's rights," the very successful daughter he raised, and his own polygamous marriage, but in this essay I cite al-Nowaihi to draw attention to his avidity, not the overlapping contexts of his intellectual project.[62]

His is one possible reading of the poem, which exists simultaneously alongside all the others. The tools that we use to read this way are the same as those that enable us to read the poem in the hygienic isolation of its historical context and according to the language game of its metonymies. The text remains all at once fictitious, mimetic, ludic, parodic, mannerist, and thoroughly embedded in a sociolegal context that gives it meaning. In every reading, the poem informs the present and is informed by the present. This reductive axiom should not embarrass us. Connecting the textbook to the outside world is an opportunity to reflect on the historical process forged by the learning institutions of Arab-Islamic

57. Al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*, 181: *lākin laʿalla Bashshāran la yaqṣud bi-hādhayn al-baytayn mujarrad ḥikāyat mā ḥadatha, bal yarmī ilā tashwīq sāʾir al-nisāʾ fī ʿaṣrihi ilā an yatadhawwaqna minhu mā dhāqathu tilka al-fatāh min ʿunf al-rujūla.*

58. Al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*, 186–87.

59. Al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*, 187. He is speaking here about his daughter, Magda al-Nowaihi, the future scholar who had a significant influence on Arabic literary studies in the United States before her premature death in 2002. Her memory lives on at my university through a graduate student prize in a way that her father's does not, although he taught at AUC for many years. A special issue of *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* edited by J. Massad, S. Mehrez, and M. Yahya, was dedicated to her life and work. In that issue, Joseph Massad recounts that Magda al-Nowaihi "had the kind of memory that could reproduce verse upon verse of the poetry of whatever poet came up in conversation"; J. Massad, "Remembering Magda al-Nowaihi," *MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 4 (2004): 5–6, at 5. I cannot know, but I like to think that her virtuoso memory was cultivated in part by her father and that this moment in his engagement with Bashshār b. Burd reflects an actual encounter between the received tradition of premodern Arabic literature and the demands of twentieth-century childrearing.

60. Al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*, 187.

61. Al-Nuwayhī, *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*, 187.

62. A. H. Green, ed., *In Quest of an Islamic Humanism: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Memory of Mohamed al-Nowaihi* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1984; repr. 1986), xiv.

premodernity that saw performances such as Bashshār's incorporated into historiographical and anthological texts for study. In this sesquimillennial learning tradition, whose major dilemma is an abundance of texts, unlearning can lead us to new places in the Arabic panoply. We will never apprehend its dimensions if we stick to the narrow path.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank the editors and reviewers for very constructive and insightful comments. I also want to thank the many readers and audiences who have entertained my ideas on these subjects with a great deal of camaraderie and patience over the years. I am genuinely grateful.

Bibliography

Abubakar, M. A. "The Contribution of Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī to Modern Arabic Literary Criticism in Egypt." PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1984.

Adūnīs. *Al-Thābit wa-l-mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-ittibāʿ wa-l-ibdāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*. London: Dār al-Sāqī, 1994.

Almallah, A. "Ethnicity in Modern Rewritings of Bashshār ibn Burd: 'Free Thinker,' 'Libertine' or 'Love Poet'?" *Middle Eastern Literatures* 23, no. 3 (2020): 140–59.

———. "Parody and the Creation of the *Muḥdath* Ghazal." In *The Routledge Handbook of Arabic Poetry*, edited by H. J. Fakhreddine and S. P. Stetkevych, 33–54. New York: Routledge, 2024.

Bashshār b. Burd. *Dīwān*. Edited by M. al-Ṭāhir b. ʿĀshūr. Algiers: al-Sharika al-Waṭaniyya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 1967. Reprint, Algiers: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, 2007.

Beeston, A. F. L. *Selections from the Poetry of Baššār: Edited with Translation and Commentary and an Introductory Sketch of Arabic Poetic Structures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Blachère, R. "Le cas Baššâr dans le développement de la poésie arabe." In *Analecta*, 583–602. Damascus: Presses de l'Ifpo, 1975.

Bourdieu, P. *Classification Struggles*. Translated by P. Collier. Cambridge: Polity, 2018.

al-Būrī, M. *Tajalliyāt al-manhaj al-nafsī fī naqd al-shiʿr al-ʿabbāsī bi-Miṣr*. Sale: Maṭbaʿat Banī Aznāsin, 2013.

Cachia, P. *The Arch Rhetorician, or The Schemer's Skimmer: A Handbook of Late Arabic* Badīʿ *Drawn from ʿAbd al-Ghanī an-Nābulsī's "Nafaḥāt al-azhār ʿalā nasamāt al-asḥār."* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998.

Fakhreddine, H. J. “Defining Metapoesis in the ʿAbbāsid Age.” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 42, nos. 2–3 (2011): 205–35.

– – –. “Teaching the Abbasid *Muḥdathūn* at the Global Turn.” *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1, no. 4 (2019): 45–56.

Farrūkh, ʿU. *Bashshār b. Burd wa-fātiḥat al-ʿaṣr al-ʿabbāsī.* Beirut: Maktabat Munaymina, 1949.

Gabrieli, F. “Appunti su Baśśar b. Burd.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 9, no. 1 (1937): 151–63.

van Gelder, G. J. *Een Arabische tuin: Klassieke arabische poëzie.* Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bulaaq, 2000.

– – –. *Classical Arabic Literature: A Library of Arabic Literature Anthology.* New York: New York University Press, 2013.

– – –. “Muḥdathūn.” In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs. Leiden: Brill, 1960–2009.

Green, A. H., ed. *In Quest of an Islamic Humanism: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Memory of Mohamed al-Nowaihi*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1984.

Gruendler, B. “‘Farewell to *Ghazal*!’: Convention and Danger of the Abbasid Love Lyric.” *In Poetry and History: The Value of Poetry in Reconstructing Arab History*, edited by R. Baalbaki, S. S. Agha, and T. Khalidi, 137–72. Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 2011.

al-Ḥājarī, Ṭ. *Bashshār b. Burd*. Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1954.

Ḥajjāwī, ʿĀ. *Tajaddud al-shiʿr: Zubdat al-shiʿr al-ʿabbāsī min Bashshār ilā al-Buḥturī*. Cairo: Dār al-Mashriq, 2017.

Ḥusayn, Ṭ. “Shiʿr Bashshār.” In *Ḥadīth al-Arbiʿāʾ*, 14th ed., 2:197–211. Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 2013.

Ibn Abī ʿAwn, Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad. *The Kitāb al-Tashbīhāt of Ibn Abī ʿAun*. Edited by M. ʿAbdul Muʿīd Khān. London: Luzac, 1950.

Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī. *Khizānat al-adab wa-ghāyat al-arab*. Edited by K. Diyāb. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2001.

Irwin, R. *Nights and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature.* London: Allen Lane, 1999.

– – –. *The Penguin Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature*. London: Penguin, 2006.

al-Iṣbahānī, Abū al-Faraj. *Kitāb al-Aghānī*. Edited by M. al-Saqqā et al. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1927–61.

Jabrī, Sh. "Lisān Bashshār." *Majallat Majmaʿ al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya bi-Dimashq* 40, no. 3 (1384/1965): 546–56.

Jamīl b. Maʿmar. *Dīwān Jamīl*. Edited by Ḥ. Naṣṣār. Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1970.

Khalidi, T. *An Anthology of Arabic Literature: From the Classical to the Modern*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Kilpatrick, H. "Time and Death in Compiled Adab 'Biographies.'" *Al-Qanṭara* 25 (2004): 387–412.

Massad, J. A. *Desiring Arabs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

– – –. "Remembering Magda al-Nowaihi." In "Magda al-Nowaihi (1958–2002): In Memory," edited by J. Massad, S. Mehrez, and M. Yahya, special issue, *MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 4 (2004): 5–6.

Massad, J., S. Mehrez, and M. Yahya, eds. "Magda al-Nowaihi (1958–2002): In Memory." Special Issue, *MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 4 (2004).

Muhanna, E. *The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Nasser, S. H. "Bashshār b. Burd's Double Entendre: Master of *Shiʿr* and *Rajaz*." *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 10, no. 1 (2023): 33–55.

al-Nawājī, Shams al-Dīn. *Khalʿ al-ʿidhār ʿan waṣf al-ʿidhār*. Edited by Ḥ. M. ʿAbd al-Hādī and M. Y. Banāt. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2016.

al-Nuwayhī, M. *Shakhṣiyyat Bashshār*. Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1951. 2nd ed., Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1971.

al-Nuwayrī, Aḥmad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb. *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*. Cairo: al-Muʾassasa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Taʾlīf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr, 1964–98.

al-Nuwayri, Shihab al-Din [Aḥmad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī]. *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition: A Compendium of Knowledge from the Classical Islamic World*. Translated by E. Muhanna. New York: Penguin Classics, 2016.

Orfali, B. "A Sketch Map of Arabic Poetry Anthologies up to the Fall of Baghdad." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 1 (2012): 29–59.

al-Qayrawānī, Ibn Rashīq. *Al-ʿUmda fī maḥāsin al-shiʿr wa-ādābihi*. Edited by T. al-Nayfar, M. al-ʿUbaydī, and J. Ḥamāda. Qarṭāj: al-Majmaʿ at-Tūnisī li-l-ʿUlūm wa-l-Ādāb wa-l-Funūn, 2009.

Rizk, A. "Baššār Ibn Burd: Ein Dichter der ʿabbāsidischen Moderne, in der Überlieferung und der Darstellung des *Kitāb al-Aġānī*." PhD dissertation, Heidelberg University, 1966.

Sadan, J. "Maidens' Hair and Starry Skies: Imagery System and *Maʿānī* Guides; The Practical Side of Arabic Poetics as Demonstrated in Two Manuscripts." In *Studies in Medieval Arabic and Hebrew Poetics*, edited by S. Somekh, 57–88. Leiden: Brill, 1991.

Schoeler, G. "Bashshār b. Burd, Abū l-ʿAtāhiyah, and Abū Nuwās." In *ʿAbbasid Belles-Lettres*, edited by J. Ashtiany, T. M. Johnstone, J. D. Latham, R. B. Serjeant, and G. R. Smith, 275–99. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

– – –. "The Genres of Classical Arabic Poetry: Classifications of Poetic Themes and Poems by Pre-Modern Critics and Redactors of Dīwāns." *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, n.s., 5–6 (2010–11): 1–48.

Talib, A. "Woven Together as Though Randomly Strung: Variation in Collections of Naevi Poetry Compiled by al-Nuwayrī and al-Sarī al-Raffāʾ." *Mamlūk Studies Review* 17 (2013): 23–42.

al-Walīd b. Yazīd. *Dīwān*. Edited by F. Gabrieli. Damascus: Maṭbaʿat Ibn Zaydūn, 1355/1937.