

# THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE IN *MUJŪN* AND THE *CANTIGAS* *D'ESCARNHO*: A PROPOSED STUDY

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Laughter proved to be just as profoundly productive and deathless a creation of Rome as Roman law.

MIKHAIL BAKHTIN, *The Dialogic Imagination*<sup>1</sup>

IBN ʿABBĀD

I agree with Bakhtin's contention that the novel mobilizes a new practice in Europe, namely dialogic structures, at a linguistic and thematic level in literature. I am not certain that his model applies entirely to Arabic, and I think his view of poetry as monologic deserves scrutiny. It is in this part of his theory that I would like to intervene, and I think my work can provide a useful elaboration on this very well-known model, in addition to the merit I see in rigorous comparative work.

I do not think, at least so far as Arabic is concerned, that the monologic quality Bakhtin ascribes to poetry is accurate.<sup>2</sup> It seems arguable that the pre-Islamic corpus tends toward monologic voicings, although even that raises doubts. Diglossia is part and parcel of this literature—recited in intertribal gatherings, it asserts regional and familial identity as one of its most important functions—but the triumphalism of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Bakhtin, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, he makes no claims about Arabic. But neither does he delineate exactly the geographic scope of languages and literature where his theory applies. If he were to do so, he would probably need to also qualify exactly *how* applicable his theory was to various canons outside of Europe—a weighty task that falls to us subsequent critics. It is to that task that I hope to provide a small contribution.

pre-Islamic ode seems to me consistent with Bakhtin's contention that poetry has a monologic telos. Similarly, much of the praise-poem format in later centuries strives to be monologic (that is part of its political program; Abbasid praise poetry is not just supremely triumphalist but also highly authoritative in voice, much as the Hellenic epic is). But, even if the complications of tribe and ethnicity do not trouble our reading of Bakhtin—and I believe they should—certain developments in Arabic poetry are founded on difference, be it linguistic, ethnic, or genetic. Pre-Islamic love poetry is one such development, in which the beloved is of a different tribe from the poem's speaker, and is therefore forbidden. By the time we reach late-Abbasid Iraq, the poetic canon has already taken new generic and stylistic forms—e.g., *badʿ*, *hijāʾ*, and *mujūn*—that utter explicitly some of the semantic and social pluralities of Arabic.

The pith of what I am saying is that Arabic *poetry* does what Bakhtin describes *prose* doing in the literature he analyzes. Ibn ʿAbbād, with his dual career as patron and author, will confirm this contention, not least because of his Persian background in language and ethnicity. The literature of primary importance to this study is that of Ibn ʿAbbād himself, as well as those poets he admires, and hires. Al-Thaʿālibī's famous Abbasid anthology *Yatīmat al-Dahr*, in its chapter on Ibn ʿAbbād, selects among the vizier's own compositions a group of *mujūn* and *hijāʾ* (invective) fragments.<sup>3</sup> This text marks my central research source and a jumping-off point. Of great importance to al-Thaʿālibī's and my work is Abū Dulaf al-Khazrajī, whose *Qaṣīda Sāsāniyya* (poem of beggars/mendicants) is largely attributable to his association with Ibn ʿAbbād, according to historian Clifford Bosworth (60)<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps just as crucial as *Yatīmat al-Dahr* is Abū Hayyān al-Tawhīdī's *Akhlāq al-Waṣṣīrayn* ('Qualities of the Two Viziers'), a central—albeit viciously pejorative—documentation of Ibn ʿAbbād's cultural and political life.

It is hard to overstate the importance of social class in *mujūn*. It is a genre by and for educated literati, but its invocations of low, illicit and uncouth behavior inevitably raise the issue of *who* is low and uncouth in society. Sinan Antoon's observations on *sukhf*, an offshoot of the *mujūn* tradition, are applicable in part to my primary literature—not least because his dissertation is about *sukhf* master Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, who himself associates with Ibn ʿAbbād's literary circle.

One of the primary functions of poetry, and of *adab* in general, was entertainment for the elite. It was, after all, partly commissioned by them and composed primarily for their immediate consumption. *Sukhf* allowed the elite to listen to, take a peak, and mock the inability of these nameless

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<sup>3</sup> Al-Thaʿālibī, p. 271.

<sup>4</sup> See also al-Thaʿālibī, p. 357.

characters, who were presumed to be and represent the *‘amma*, to restrain and refine their expression and control their bodies, which are always represented as grotesque and uncontrollable. This laughter was accompanied by the disgust scatology spontaneously engenders. This disgust, however, is sociopolitically productive as it reinforces the distance and boundary between the elite and the filth and unrestraint of the masses. (241)

It is important to note that *sukḥf* is a discrete and radical subset of *mujūn*. As differences in register distinguish the two, the class distinction Antoon notes in *sukḥf* is not quite as pronounced in *mujūn*. The lines between *kbāṣṣa* (elite class) and *‘amma* (common folk) are nonetheless a conspicuous and operative part of *mujūn*—the link between laughter and disgust, delight and rejection, is very much there. Andras Hamori calls this ticklish relation “The Poet as Ritual Clown” (31), though he emphasizes the author’s agency more than Antoon does, and more than I will in my work.

The didactic content of *mujūn* is partially its presentation of negative behavioral examples;<sup>5</sup> it is also, in my view, a class argument quite different from *sukḥf*s. When the *mājīn* (libertine; grammatically, the active participle of *mujūn*’s verbal root) speaker celebrates his indiscretions in verse, he is affirming that one of his rarefied class can somehow get away with them. He thus identifies less with the *‘amma*—as Antoon depicts Ibn al-Ḥajjāj doing disingenuously—than with a certain member of *kbāṣṣa*: a mischievous, irresponsible intellectual, comparable to Wolfgang Mozart’s character in the film *Amadeus* or Jacques Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

This is the sort of personage Ibn ‘Abbād assumes, as it were, in his authorship and patronage of *mujūn*, while leaving to such professional scoundrels as Ibn Ḥajjāj the work of extreme outrage. In this way, he keeps the line between authority and entertainer solid and politically functional. As he pays poets to break social rules for his entertainment, he participates in a reciprocal arrangement distinct from the exchange of poem for money. Ibn ‘Abbād’s *mājīn* can flout rules cavalierly, not just because of his class, but also because of the authority he is granted by association with the patron. (I should note that social class and individual patronage are not completely separable in Abbasid life.) To swear and lech as a politically or financially unmoored poet seems both less safe and less credible than performing the same literary maneuvers in a salon or royal court. The patron benefits, not merely by idle entertainment, but by demonstrating the luxury he enjoys, paying someone else to transgress for him. The more cavalier and unapologetic his poet, the more his work might incriminate him and his patron; but at the same time, the more the patron flaunts his ability to manipulate his

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<sup>5</sup> I gratefully acknowledge James T. Monroe for applying the phrase “teaching by negative example” to Arabic ribald poetry, during my coursework with him.

proxy in front of a prominent audience. The more social rules seem to bend in this performance, the more sway the patron holds on the social game he is playing.

This is a crucial observation, because it leads logically to the hypothesis that largely motivates this study: *mujūn* is political tool, whose political *consequences* include its potential as an accusatory or even slanderous medium. The lines between *mujūn*'s playful indecency and all-out invective (*hijā'*) are far from hermetic, both in Arabic and, as I will argue below, in Romance languages.

#### ALFONSO X

Alfonso X's linguistic ambitions outstrip and transcend even so lofty a scholar as Ibn ʿAbbād, but the king's literary productions show remarkable consistency with Buyid-era *mujūn*. Like *mujūn*, *cantiga* poetry is for elites, by elites. My concentration upon King Alfonso X is motivated by (1) his tremendous career as patron, especially insofar as Castilian language is concerned; and (2) the incongruity, at least superficially, of his Galician-Portuguese poetic foray. His poetry, I argue, is not a side-project superfluous to his political work but rather an operative part of it. The *cantigas* form part of his singularly difficult tasks: to strengthen his tenuous hold on a multilingual empire while promoting spoken Castilian to court language.

It is difficult to overestimate the profundity of Alfonso's Castilian-language campaign in political, scientific, and artistic discourse. It must mean a sea change in courtly and academic life. It also, of course, opens up a wide swath of dialogic possibilities in literature. The phenomenon upon which I will focus is the Galician-Portuguese *cantiga*, clearly a genre in dialogue with the Iberian languages and forms around it, and (most consistent with Bakhtin's model) harboring a plurality of voices *within* its generic confines. The political component of my overall hypothesis will require a good deal of attention to his legal works as well as his poetry, especially the *Espéculo* and his great legal treatise *Las Siete Partidas*, but also records of *cortes* (parliaments) convened during his reign.

Of the *cantigas* Alfonso is credited with authoring, there are two general types: those praising Saint Mary, depicting her contemporary miracles; and poems called *escarnho e mal dizer* ('Mockery and Insult', hereafter *CEM*). Both are weighted heavily with political meanings. In *cantigas de Santa María* (hereafter *CSM*), the Holy Mother intervenes in battles with Moors and other enemies of the kingdom—a kingdom that poetically overlaps with Catholicism, whose Holy Roman Emperor Alfonso vied unsuccessfully to be. These *cantigas* affirm a political program, explaining as divine intervention Alfonso's military victories and ameliorating his defeats with a cathartic postscript, e.g., *CSM* 46, in which a Moor "que con ost' en Ultramar/ grande foi,

[...] por crischãos guerrejar e roubar .../ Aquel mouro astragou/ as terras u pod' entrar,/ e todo quanto robou/ feze-o sigo levar" (10-13, 16-19). Translated by Joseph O'Callaghan as, 'who with a great host in Ultramar ... waged war against the Christians and robbed them ... ravaging the lands that he could invade and carrying off whatever he could steal' (91), the poem specifies that a statue of Mary, carted off among the loot, produced milk from its breast, and thus convinced the Moor to convert to Catholicism.

As Alfonso moves the cultural capital enjoyed by Latin to the spoken language of Castilian, he brings into proximity the empirical tools of scientific language with the heteroglossia built into social language. Each has its function in the Alfonsine project—perhaps the most conspicuous benefit of a discrete poetic language is that it marshals a sub-canon in the greater effort of writing a new high canon in Castilian. The legacy enjoyed by Latin post-Rome—as the legal and liturgical currency used in places where Romance dialects were used socially, lyrically, and in “low” narrative literature—cannot have escaped Alfonso's notice. If Castilian is to replace Latin in that position, leaving its sub-canonical station, it might well need another spoken dialect to take up that station.

This is crucial, from Bakhtin's perspective on language, because he considers social language as having its own innate empirical tool: laughter.<sup>6</sup> I am quite in agreement on this point, and I think that the annexation of the sciences to spoken Romance (i.e., the work Alfonso *commissions*) works synergistically with the parodic, critical faculties of the *cantiga* (i.e., the work that he *authors*). His *cantigas* are dialogic in that their language is spoken, unacademic and in constant contact with the idioms around them;<sup>7</sup> but, from a different angle of dialogic theory, a more precise reading emerges. It is precisely their unacademic and dynamic social qualities that make them a sharp and remarkably empirical tool for social commentary and prescription. It is not just laughter (well-covered by Bakhtin) that makes them useful to Alfonso, but also their potential to defame (*mal dizer*) and instruct (the moralizing content of *CSM*). They are instruments of social analysis (i.e., scientific, although they would never be called such in medieval Spain) and also prescriptive, religiously and politically. When we privilege Alfonso's political and linguistic operations—a reading that I think is necessary to best understand him historically—his literary exploits do not fall by the wayside, but instead triangulate with his scientific and legal language tools.

<sup>6</sup> “Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it” (Bakhtin 23).

<sup>7</sup> Most notably Provençal, whose troubadour tradition is closely tied with the *cantiga* genre.

As their name indicates, the *CEM*'s identity in anthologized Iberian literature rests more on their invective than on their extreme, indulgent obscenities. To use Arabic terminology, they function much more as *hija'* than light-hearted *mujūn*.<sup>8</sup> A great many of Alfonso's *CEM* are directed at recalcitrant or cowardly soldiers, deserters so egregious they merit a poetic drubbing from the kingdom's highest authority. The invective quality of his dirtiest poetics is quite useful to my argument, from a Formalist perspective; it makes plain the intimate relation between verbal transgression and verbal defamation.

I believe that these poems are in equal measure about the poetic speaker's outrage and another kind of outrage: that which obscenity is meant to provoke in the *audience*. If obscenity is the speech of the speechless, the last recourse of one so incensed or flabbergasted that licit words fail, then these poems use that sense of grasping to bring together the two kinds of outrage mentioned above. This is no mean feat, and it is performed cannily and deliberately in the *CEM*. The *cantiga* brings the moral scandal of the disobeyed king into contact with the social scandal experienced by the poems' audience. In doing so, it displaces the shock of its wording onto the cowards/turncoats/apostates it is describing. To restate Antoon's comment, "disgust [...] is socio-politically productive as it reinforces the distance and boundary between the elite and the filth and unrestraint of the masses" (241)—here disgust reinforces the boundary between loyal and disloyal subjects. Those who are elite, and receiving the poem, are reminded that their elite status depends on their service of the king. In this calculus, the final operation equates high class with political fealty. I suggest that Buyid *mujūn* does very much the same work, and that the *CEM* make especially plain the literature's potential to warn, and corral, its audience.

#### PROJECTED CONCLUSIONS

Scholars of satire and parody, Bakhtin foremost among them, focus on reversals. The carnival model places commoners atop society for a discrete period of play. The counterweight, of course, is the aristocrats' assumption of common garb, manners, and low station. This dynamic is not as primary in carnival theory, which is odd because carnivalesque literature is generally written by elites. My patron/poets of interest oblige me to prioritize this downward movement.

We are familiar with myths in which gods masquerade as mortals in order to learn, and teach, lessons about human life. (An example that comes readily to mind

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<sup>8</sup> That is not to say that the two designations are mutually exclusive in Arabic—as the previous section of this discussion has contended, quite the contrary. Much of the most memorable *hija'* may be considered *mujūn* as well.

is the myth of Baucis and Philemon.) The irony in these stories is that the gods use a power in order to appear less powerful than they are. Its efficacy lies in its dissimulation, its use in espionage.

Minus the divine status, this is the sort of power I think Ibn ʿAbbād and Alfonso seek to wield. For them, the point of dabbling in literature reputedly low, vulgar, and popular, is to demonstrate to their subjects that no stratum of society is off-limits to the ruler. Bakhtin sees in the European carnivalesque an egalitarian spirit—certainly, in our own era of zealous democracy talk, there is a temptation to describe *mujūn* and the *CEM* similarly. I believe there is very little egalitarianism in Ibn ʿAbbād and Alfonso's poetry. The political station of the patron/poet both allows and compels him to wield literature as a scepter, to modify Walter Benjamin's phrase (65), or even as a sword. When Ibn ʿAbbād exhorts Abū Dulaf to write the *Qaṣīda Sāsāniyya*, he sends a certain message to his elite audience. Quite possibly, the message is also meant for the roguish Banū Sāsān themselves, whose jargon is designed to conceal its meaning from mainstream society. The point in any case is to show that even the "lowest" of "low" jargons is not beyond his reach—and neither are their speakers.

Similarly, when Alfonso composes lewd invective in the prevailing poetic language of his empire, he is covering strategic points on the social and cultural map. He (1) allies himself with the troubadour tradition from the north; (2) ensures that western Iberians hear his authorial voice in their language; and most importantly (3) inserts himself into the peninsula's poetic landscape, where many of his most important subjects deal cultural capital.

Edward Said, in his highly polemical critique of the Orientalist Edward Lane, concentrates on Lane's reputedly seamless immersion in Egyptian society. In his beard and with his excellent Arabic, biographers contend, he raises no suspicions among Egyptians that he is a foreigner. "Thus while one portion of Lane's identity floats easily in the unsuspecting Muslim sea," Said contends, "a submerged part retains its secret European power, to [...] acquire, possess everything around it" (160). This characterization of Lane hinges on his command of a foreign language, and in that way correlates directly with the heteroglossic questions I forward. Said is talking about 'acquiring' and 'possessing' in figurative terms; for Ibn ʿAbbād and Alfonso, the mandate to acquire and possess is at once abstract and strikingly material.

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