

# Exemplum, anecdote, and the gentle heart in a text by Al-Jahshiy

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EXEMPLUM, ANECDOTE, AND THE GENTLE HEART IN A TEXT  
BY AL-JAHSHIYĀRĪ

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I will discuss a passage, consisting of three consecutive *akhbār*, from al-Jahshiyārī's *Kitāb al-wuzarā' wa-l-kuttāb*.<sup>1</sup> My principal interest is in the third. I wish to examine in it, first, the creation of the illusion of reality through the development and combination of simple narrative routines<sup>2</sup>, and, second, the contrasting arrangement of certain motifs, and the associations likely to have been prompted by them. The first and second *akhbār* are simple in form, and merit a look because they help illustrate the complexity of the third.

The first *khābar* is extremely brief:

It has been related that a daughter of Yaḥyā ibn Khālīd visited him in prison, and said: "I have managed to hold on to a bit of my money. What do you think I should do with it?" He said to her: "Consult someone whose star is in the ascendant, and do as he says. Fortune has turned from me, and an unlucky person gives unlucky advice. No suggestion of mine would do you any good."

This is the simplest possible setting of an aphorism. It states the principle that the second *khābar* illustrates: that it never rains but it pours. The *khābar* is not an *exemplum*: it puts the aphorism into the mouth of a personage, but it contains no event to illustrate it. The second *khābar* does contain one:

It has been related that at one time during his imprisonment, when he was being treated with severity, Yaḥyā ibn Khālīd conceived a desire for *sikbājah*. He could obtain it only with much trouble, and when it was done, the pot fell from the hands of the person carrying it, and broke. Yaḥyā said, addressing the world:

1 Ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā' *et alii* (Cairo, 1938) 245-48.

2 I am using "routines" to avoid confusion with "simple forms" in Jolles' sense, to which I shall also have to refer. Unlike Jolles' "simple forms," my "narrative routines" have nothing absolute about them. They just happen, in early Arabic prose literature, to be as they are, and to produce great numbers of stories with a family resemblance.

I have cut loose from you the cords of hope and found rest from alighting and setting out;  
 Discovered in my breast the coolness of despair and lowered my saddle from the back of my mount.  
 Now, O world, I have come to know you — so get you gone, O house of nothing but parting and separation.  
 Time has become my teacher now: it brings me examples (*amthāl*) morning and night.

This version of the *sikbājah* story (for another one will follow in the third *khobar*) has the bare-bones quality of an exemplum. It would be well described by the old rule for exempla quoted by Jauss: *solum quod facit ad rem est narrandum*.<sup>3</sup> It is not so overtly didactic as to put into one sentence the principle that “when it rains it pours,” but it does announce itself as exemplary: *ghadā wa-rāḥa ‘alayya bi-l-amthāli*.

The third *khobar* begins as follows:

Aḥmad ibn Khallād said: Ghazwān ibn Ismā‘īl related to me that at one time, while Yaḥyā ibn Khālid was imprisoned along with his son al-Faḍl, and they were treated with severity, and allowed no contact with others, the official entrusted with their confinement wrote: “I heard them laugh out of all measure.” So al-Rashīd dispatched Masrūr to inquire into this matter and its causes. He went to them and said: “What was this immoderate laughter that has come to the attention of the Commander of the Faithful and vexed him, so that he said ‘This is nothing less than making light of my anger’?” The two of them laughed harder than before, and Masrūr said: “This is no way to act! I fear it may plunge you into something graver than your present plight. What is the story behind this, and what caused you to do what was reported to the Commander of the Faithful about you? What is this all about?” They said: “We had a craving for *sikbājah* and we schemed until we managed to buy the meat, and to get hold of the pot and the vinegar. Then, when we had obtained all these things, and were done with the cooking, and the dish was just right, al-Faḍl went to take it off the fire, and the bottom of the pot fell out. Then laughter came over us, and amazement at what our state had been and what it had become.” Masrūr the Eunuch then went to al-Rashīd and told him the story. Al-Rashīd wept and said: “Carry to them a tray (*mā'idah*) daily and allow someone whose company they enjoy to visit them and converse with them.” Masrūr told them of this, and asked them whom they wished to choose. They chose Sa‘īd ibn Wahb, the poet, who had been in their service, and he received permission to visit them. He

3 H.R. Jauss, “The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature,” *New Literary History* X (1979) 229.

would go to see them every day, take his early meal with them (*yataghaddā*), chat, and then leave ...

In terms of its manner of grasping reality, this second version of the story of the *sikbājah* is an instance of what André Jolles called *memorable*.<sup>4</sup> Added detail has here turned exemplum into anecdote. Not that the exemplary force has been extinguished: the caliph weeps, not because the pot of stew was lost, but because he too has glimpsed in its loss the work of fortune and mutability. The story describes the way the world is; let us call it an exemplary anecdote. The principal details by which the story of the *sikbājah* has been enriched are the Barmakīs' laughter and the ruler's weeping. As Jolles remarks of similar cases in old and contemporary texts, the surprising coincidence of opposites projects a sense of uniqueness, and renders the event more concrete.<sup>5</sup> A further added detail is also noteworthy. In the simple version of the story of the *sikbājah*, "the pot fell." Someone, it would seem, let it drop. In the more elaborate second version, there is no human error: the bottom of the pot falls out. This touch is a somewhat comic representation of the all-around malignity of the world towards a man whose luck has soured, but, through its very absurdity, it also throws into relief the uniqueness of the event and so heightens the illusion of reality. Finally, we should note the reports and questionings that produce a dense atmosphere of watching and being watched. The simpler version of the *sikbājah* story has no interest in such things.

We now come to the second part of the third *khobar*. One day al-Rashīd orders Masrūr to go and see what the Barmakīs are up to. Masrūr enters their prison unannounced, and finds al-Faḍl asleep, covered with rags. Al-Rashīd, still in his clement mood, orders Masrūr to give al-Faḍl a fur-lined cloak (*duwāj*). The Barmakīs, and Saʿīd ibn Wahb when he comes for his daily visit, hope that this gift will mark the beginning of their return to favor. But the text goes on as follows:

Even as Saʿīd was talking with them, al-Faḍl heard from outside the cry of a man offering a young gazelle for sale. This reminded him of someone who had favored him with affection (*baʿḍa man kāna yuḥzīhi*), and his bearing showed his grief, restlessness, and troubled state of mind. Saʿīd noticed this and asked

4 *Einfache Formen*, 2nd edition (Halle 1956) 165-80.

5 *Einfache Formen*, 166-67.

him about it. Al-Faḍl would not tell him, but said: “What can you recall of story or verse passed down to us that fits what you have witnessed?” Saʿīd said: “The words of Majnūn ibn ʿĀmir:

Someone called as we were at the Khayf of Minā<sup>6</sup> and, unwittingly, stirred the heart to its core (*fa-hayyaja aṭrāba l-fuʿādi*);  
He called out Laylā’s name, calling another, and it was as if, with the word ‘Laylā,’ he had made a bird take wing in my breast.”

Al-Faḍl said: “Bravo! Take this cloak, for it is yours.”

It is now related that al-Faḍl, certain that the matter of the cloak will be reported to al-Rashīd who will then question the poet, fears that there may be evil consequences, presumably to the young person in question, whose connection with al-Faḍl, if known, can only cause him harm.<sup>7</sup> So al-Faḍl asks the poet to think of some other verse, *khabar* or witticism (*mulḥa*) and pretend, if al-Rashīd investigates, that it was the cause of al-Faḍl’s generosity.

Saʿīd said: “By God, I can’t think of anything to tell you.” Al-Faḍl said: “Let’s have whatever you can come up with” (*hāti mā amkanaka*). Saʿīd said: “I used to have leading into my house a small door through which only beardless youths would enter, and I had a servant charged with keeping that door. One day he came to me and announced that a bearded man was at the door, asking to be let in. I said: ‘Listen here (*yā hādhā*), did I order you to come and ask leave for such people to enter?’ He said: ‘I told the man about the custom (*sunnah*), but he insisted on asking to be let in and claimed that he is one of those who used to enter through this door.’ So I got up and took a look, and sure enough, he was an ex-lambkin of mine who had vanished for a while, during which time his beard had grown out. He now came as had been his habit. I returned to my *majlis*, and wrote to him:

Say to him who, in his ignorance, [still] had his mind set on the entry intended for innocent gazelles (*al-ḡabyi l-gharīri*)

After having hung about his face the feedbag of barley,  
Would he please, when he comes, enter through the big door.”

- 6 The analogy is closest if Majnūn is inside the enclosure of the Masjid al-Khayf, and the crier outside. But perhaps only the area known as Khayf Minā is meant.
- 7 It is conceivable that the narrator had in mind something like the famous (and implausible) story of Jaʿfar’s unhappy affair with Hārūn’s sister ʿAbbārah. He could then have meant that al-Faḍl worried on his own account.

Al-Faḍl approves: "Well done, by God, you have come up with something witty," *aḥsanta wallāhi wa-mallaḥta*. And indeed, when al-Rashīd questions Saʿīd and hears the story, he laughs so hard that his molars show. He orders thirty thousand dirhems to be given to the poet.

The first half of this third *khavar*, the fuller version of the *sikbājah* story, was an exemplary anecdote (the kind of anecdote that tells us how the world is), enriched with the features of the *memorable*, and perhaps (but not of course necessarily) developed out of the plain exemplum presented in the second *khavar*. In this second half of the third *khavar* we encounter two more of the basic narrative routines of early Arabic literature: the anecdote that illustrates a virtue (or defect), and the joke.

The memory of a love affair awakened in a gentle heart by some coincidental event, the generosity prompted by an apposite verse or quotation — these motifs illustrate not an aphorism, but rather certain qualities. Such motifs I shall call "*maḥāsin*-motifs." The content of such a motif, like the content of an exemplum, can be expressed, it is true, in a conditional sentence, but the conditional sentences have different structures. "Pride goeth before destruction and an haughty spirit before a fall" tells us about how the world is, and is based on the formula "no A without B:" when A happens B will happen, or where the attribute A exists, B will result. One might think that a *maḥāsin*-motif has the same structure, except in more restricted form, i.e., "in case of a person with a quality Q, when A happens B will happen." But this schematization is clearly wrongheaded. The point is not that whenever a sensitive lover hears the word "gazelle" he will be moved to tears. Rather, the underlying structure is "when in the case of a person P both A and B obtain, then P has a certain quality Q." In such anecdotes we conclude from event to attribute, and not the other way around.

The story that al-Rashīd gets to hear instead of the truth about the cloak is a facetious story, an anecdote ending in a joke.<sup>8</sup> The association

8 "Facetious," in the sense, for example, of Poggio's *facetiae*. As Erich Auerbach wrote in his early work, *Zur Technik der Frührenaissancenovelle in Italien und Frankreich* (2nd edition, Heidelberg 1971) 51: "In den Facetien ist die Pointe so sehr Hauptsache geworden, dass sie alles andere absorbiert. Sie sind kaum noch Novellen zu nennen; sie nähern sich einer Sammlung von Witzen. Wenn er die Novelle von der Stiefmutter ... usw. erzählt, so streicht er Vorgeschichte,

between the “small door” and the beardless youths (*murd*) is an obscene one: as often in Poggio, the joke depends on a play on words.

Such compounding of disparate narrative routines diminishes, in the third *khobar*, the schematic nature of the whole and enhances the illusion of reality.

We must now look at some thematic relationships that link various parts of the third *khobar*. In the story of the *sikbājah*, the prisoners laugh, the ruler weeps. In the second half of the story the prisoner is deeply moved and shows his grief; the ruler hears a double-entendre and laughs. When we consider that between the two halves of the third *khobar* there is only the most exiguous of causal connections (only the poet’s presence in the prison results directly from the affair of the *sikbājah*) we realize that this symmetry of laughter and sorrow plays an important role in giving the story a formal armature.<sup>9</sup>

There are, however, also asymmetrical relations between the two constituent parts of the third *khobar*. Al-Faḍl’s reminiscence of love and Sa‘īd’s joke exhibit two pairs of co-ordinated motifs. In the first, sentimental, anecdote, the gazelle reminds al-Faḍl of an absent person whom he loves still and from whom fate has parted him. The second, unsentimental, anecdote relates the reappearance of a young person at a time when his sexual allure has dwindled, because he is no longer a *ḡaby gharīr*, an “innocent gazelle.” In the first anecdote, the lyrical verses are attributed to Majnūn, and explicitly presented as belonging to the cultural canon (*al-ash‘ār allati ruwiyat*). In the second anecdote, these find their counterpart in a mocking bit of occasional verse of no poetic merit. The relation between these motifs is parodistic. We may note an additional feature shared by *maḥāsin*-anecdote and joke: in each the stimulus to remembrance is spatialized, here in the vendor’s cry from outside the prison, there in the knocking at the door. The more the shared features, the more striking the parody.

The caliph, and his intelligence service, have been tricked by the characters, but the caliph has been tricked by the narrator of the third *khobar*

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Charaktere, Milieu, so gut es geht, in einem Satz zusammen, und es ist klar, dass nur das Witzwort, das *facete dictum*, ihn interessiert.”

9 Whether this symmetry is the result of a conscious artistic decision or of a widely shared narrative morphology cannot be determined, and is perhaps a false question.

as well. The symmetry of laughter and sorrow has been deceptive. In the first half of the third *khavar*, laughter and tears had sprung from the same insight, but, in the second half, sorrow and laughter are only parodistically related. Excluded from a story of the heart, al-Rashīd is left with a ribald joke, a shallow parody of the real thing. It is on the ironic note of this exclusion that the *khavar* ends.

Since in my view the parodistic repetition of motifs implies an ironic devaluation, I want to answer a possible objection. If we say that al-Jahshiyārī's readers assigned a higher value to the sentimental experience than to the obscene joke, are we not being guided by our own esthetic norms? We know, after all, that the obscene poetry of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj (941-1001) met with great success, and that this poet was respected by his respectable contemporaries. Such doubts are removed by a look at those of Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's poems that begin with conventional motifs of sentimental love, but very soon slip into all sorts of obscenities. Their comic effect obviously depended on the parodistic treatment, the desacralization, of cultural fetishes.<sup>10</sup>

I want to hazard an additional step in interpretation. For al-Jahshiyārī's audience, this exclusion of the ruler from the story of a constant lover and his sorrow will have carried echoes of statements in the *adab* literature about the inconstant affections of rulers. In turn, the *adab* literature tempted the audience to see the *khavar* as confirmatory, as if exclusion from the story of constancy were a metaphor for exclusion from constancy itself. "The ruler should know," Ibn al-Muqaffa<sup>c</sup> writes in *al-Adab al-kabīr*, "that the people regard faithlessness and inconstancy in love as a characteristic of rulers," *li-ya<sup>c</sup>lam al-wālī anna al-nās yaṣīfūna al-wulāt bi-sū' al-<sup>c</sup>ahd wa-nisyān al-wudd*.<sup>11</sup> The same attitude is expressed more colorfully by Ibn Qutaybah: "In their lack of loyalty to their associates

10 Cf. al-Tha<sup>c</sup>alībī, *Yatīmat al-dahr* (Cairo 1934) III, 30 or III, 66 (Ana bnu Ḥajjājin ...). Yet another worry: al-Rashīd laughs; but al-Rashīd has also wept. How do we reconcile these scenes, the caliph left out in the cold and the caliph weeping in empathy? We do not, any more than we reconcile our impressions of the amiably wild Prince Hal and the cold, calculating Henry who rejects the aging Falstaff without a pang of guilt. Even on the tiny stage of our *khavar*, the moral life does not come neat.

11 Ed. Aḥmad Zakī Pasha (Cairo 1912) 52.



(*aṣḥāb*) and their withdrawal of affection from those who are out of their sight, kings are like prostitutes or schoolteachers: as soon as one [customer] is gone, another comes in his place."<sup>12</sup>

In this metaphorical relation to the *adab* statements, in this intimation at the remove of one level of discourse, lies the strength of the *khavar*. The remove is essential. The *adab* literature loves anecdotes that may be summed up in universally valid didactic sentences. Our *khavar*, which joins a number of simple narrative routines but belongs to none, does not state anything. Rather, its plot lets a certain view of things glimmer through. At the end of the anecdote about the *sikbājah*, an aphoristic summation would have been in place. In the second half of the third *khavar*, however, something entirely particular is related: no aphorism could sum up this sequence of incidents of constancy, generosity, and obscene jesting. Erich Auerbach remarks that in Boccaccio: "nie handelt es sich um Weisheit, Frömmigkeit, Freigiebigkeit überhaupt, sondern von einem ganz individuellen Fall davon ..."<sup>13</sup> By giving his brief text a measure of this quality, our narrator succeeded in letting it hint all the more eloquently at the distance between power and the gentle heart.

12 <sup>6</sup>*Uyūn al-akhbār* (Cairo, 1963 photo-reproduction of the Dār al-kutub edition) I, 45.

13 *Zur Technik der Frührenaissancenovelle in Italien und Frankreich*, 43.