

## Still the Same Old Jokes: The Continuity of Jocular Tradition in Early Twentieth-Century Egyptian Chapbooks

*Ulrich Marzolph*

In accordance with the widely accepted general periodization of Arabic literature (see Heinrichs 1990; Ashtiany e.a. 1990; Meisami/Starkey forthcoming), the development of the particular field of Arabic jocular literature might be divided into three major periods: classical, intermediary (post-classical, pre-modern), and modern. 1.) The classical period of jocular literature begins with the pre-written and formative stages (before 800 C.E.), about whose character due to lack of documented evidence few serious assumptions are permissible. It goes on with the stage of establishment and expansion, lasting from about 800 (first major author is al-Djāhīz, who died in 868) to the Mongol invasion and the resulting downfall of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258. The classical period encompasses the "Golden age" of Arabic jocular literature between 1000-1200 with such brilliant works as Ibn abī 'Aun's (died 934) "Book of Silencing Answers" (*Kitāb al-Adjwiba al-muskita*), al-Ābī's (died 1030) seven volume encyclopedia of anecdotes and jokes, "Pearls of Prose" (*Nathr ad-durr*), probably the most comprehensive compilation of its kind worldwide, and the three jestbooks of the traditionalist historian and preacher Ibn al-Djauzī (died 1201; see Marzolph 1991a). 2.) The intermediary period, usually defined in analogy to political events as the Mamluk or Ottoman period (between 1258 and 1800), is most often considered as an age of decline and decadence. Accordingly, few specialized studies have been undertaken about authors of literary works of this period (see Bosworth 1989 for Bahā'addīn al-Āmilī, who died in 1621). As for jocular

literature (see the materials used by Sādān 1983; Marzolph 1992, vol. 1, 59-73), the intermediate period may be described as a stage of preservation and imitation, whose superior merit lies in the secondary documentation of older sources now lost, as well as the repeated elaboration of traditionally accepted topics. 3.) The modern period, initiated by Napoleon's Egyptian expedition, is generally regarded as determined by innovative impulses from the West resulting in a break with native Arabic tradition and the formation of Arabic literature in a modern sense. It is my thesis that this break never occurred for jocular literature, at least not to a decisive extent. For jocular literature, the modern period is mainly characterized by the introduction of printing techniques in the Arab world and the resulting printed publication of jocular items since the middle of the nineteenth century. The new techniques were innovative in terms of production and distribution, but in respect to content they reinforced a jocular conservatism dominant until the very present.

The development that Arabic jocular literature underwent since the introduction of printing in the Arab world appears to be a consequence of trends which had been initiated much earlier and which had in fact taken place to a minor degree at all previous times. The decisive innovative step is the new medium, favoring the faster and cheaper output of literary items as compared to the tedious and costly production of manuscripts. The relevant stages might roughly be sketched as follows: 3.1.) The material basis is formed by the widely read voluminous compilations of the intermediary period, themselves already secondary to original works of the classical period. One of the most prominent of these compilations is the encyclopedia of "The Most Delighting Items of Every Delicate Topic" (*Kitāb al-Mustatraf fī kull fann mustatraf*) by the early fifteenth-century Egyptian author Bahā'addīn Abū l-Faṭḥ Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Ibshīhī. 3.2.) Books like this apparently formed the basis for a process of condensation and compression, resulting in the second half of the nineteenth century in less bulky compendia of popular and entertaining contents, which—similar to the European *vade mecum*—sometimes lay claim to the function of "travelling companion" (*anīs al-musāfir*; *samīr ar-rukkāb*). Representatives of this stage are Sheikh Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī's *Kashkūl* and Shākīr al-Baṭlūnī's "Distraction of the Minds: Selected Anecdotes and Narratives" (*Kitāb Tasliyat al-khawāṭir fī l-mulah wan-nawādir*), the latter being familiar to many (German) students of

classical Arabic because sample anecdotes taken from it serve as introductory reading matter in the *Arabische Chrestomathie aus Prosaschriftstellern* (Brünnow/Fischer 1984), often employed for language instruction. 3.3.) Eventually, albeit previously present, towards the end of the nineteenth century cheap popular booklets of two to three printed sheets in octavo size were propagated. While it holds true that short and cheap popular booklets are already mentioned in Ibn an-Nadīm's bookseller's catalogue (*al-Fihrist*), compiled in the year 987 (see Dodge 1970), the production in print since the middle of the nineteenth century resulted in indefinitely larger numbers of copies. These booklets, produced by the booksellers of the al-Azhar area in Cairo were most likely passed on by peddlars all over the Arab world and would potentially reach a huge audience. Thus, they constitute a vigorous contribution to popularizing the items contained, some of them of literary origin. Their easily digestible contents of a traditional, entertaining, and popular nature together with circumstances of production and (supposed) marketing strategies make it incumbent to regard those "small books and pleasant histories" (alluding to the chapbook-study by Spufford 1981)—if anything—as Arabic "chapbooks." It might be worthwhile to mention, at this point, that research on chapbooks in the Islamic Near and Middle East is only just beginning. Besides some earlier sketches on Persian lithograph prints (Bertel's 1934), Arabic jestbooks (Littmann 1955), and Turkish popular romances (Boratav 1975), a number of recently published and forthcoming introductory surveys for chapbooks in Arabic (Khayyat 1987), Turkish (Derman 1989), Pashto (Heston 1991), Persian (Marzolph 1994a), and Urdu (Hanaway forthcoming) are laying the material foundation for more detailed studies which might eventually focus on questions of historical and social relevance (Marzolph 1994b).

Latif Khayyat, former assistant librarian at the New York Public Library, in an essay published in 1987 has sketched the "style and contents" of what he defines as "folk material" in these Arabic chapbooks of the early twentieth century, basing his survey on the holdings in the Oriental Division of the New York Public Library. Khayyat supplies a very valuable, indeed the first detailed introduction to the field, even though he quite unjustly accuses German scholars like Enno Littmann (1875-1958) of not making "use of these turn-of-the-century pamphlet publications in [his] work with Arabic folk tales"

(Khayyat 1987:59): After all, Littmann already in his presentation of Arabic folk tales and jocular stories, published in 1955, had pointed out the close connection of oral jocular tradition with printed materials, basing his argument on references to chapbook items in his own private collection (Littmann 1955:135f.). The materials Khayyat draws upon form part of the Schiff collection, acquired at the beginning of the twentieth century by the Oriental librarian Richard James Horatio Gottheil (1862-1936) through funding by Jacob H. Schiff, then editor of the *New York Post*. The booklets today are in a very fragile condition, and care is taken to preserve them in microfilm form. The Schiff collection of Arabic chapbooks, amounting to more than a hundred different items, is probably the largest preserved collection of its kind. Littmann's comprehensive collection of more than 150 items has been sold after his death. Its contents, listed in the sales catalogues by Brill's at Leiden (Littmann 1959: nos. 3240, 3255, 3380, 3394, 3433, 3472), have been sold and scattered to various institutions in Germany, Spain, and the U.S.A. The few remaining items in the specialized library at the University of Tübingen (where Littmann had held a chair in Oriental philology) appear to be just leftovers and duplicates from Littmann's acquisition activities. Even so, the Tübingen library holds more than twenty Arabic chapbooks in perfect condition.

While Khayyat's essay supplies a general orientation based on a librarian's perspective, my own considerations about the continuity of jocular tradition in early twentieth-century Egyptian chapbooks result from a comprehensive folklorist survey of Arabic literary works of the classical period containing jocular material. The following remarks constitute an adapted version of parts of the original study in German, where detailed references for statements given here are supplied (Marzolph 1992: especially vol. 1, 56-88). Even though distances in time in addition to more or less distinct contrasts in size, content, intention, and function seem to prohibit direct comparisons, from the above introduction it may justly be assumed that Arabic chapbooks in some respect constitute direct modern descendants of their classical predecessors. This applies all the more when restricting the scope of research to jocular items in chapbooks. Even though by no means all Arabic chapbooks contain jocular items, a large number of them do. These jokes and anecdotes, whether scattered throughout the chapbooks or whether forming distinct sections, are presented together with longer narratives in the tradition of the *Arabian Nights*, with other kinds of

tales and stories, with poems, songs, rhymes, riddles, and various other entertaining and edifying ingredients. Typical representatives are the items quoted in Littmann's presentation. The items in the Schiff collection of the New York Public Library, whose contents have recently been examined by the present author, do not differ in any decisive respect.

About a dozen of the chapbooks surveyed contain a sizeable number of short humorous prose narratives. They constitute the basis of the following presentation. No attempt shall be made to deal with any contents of narrative or non-narrative genres other than jocular prose included in those chapbooks, genres which have been partly outlined by Khayyat. Those humorous prose narratives are here termed jokes and anecdotes for matter of convenience, without intending a faithful rendering of whatever the Arabic terms (*nādīra*, *ḥikāya*) might imply (see Khayyat 1987:68-70; 'Abdel-Meguid 1954). The following presentation is primarily of historical and philological concern. It will concentrate on the question by means of which process jokes and anecdotes survived over long periods of time until finally being incorporated in modern chapbooks. As a further step of introduction, the body of chapbook material surveyed will be presented in more detail.

It is quite impossible to render the Arabic chapbook's picturesque rhymed titles in a corresponding English fashion. The items originating from Littmann's collection which today are preserved in Tübingen include the following (Tübingen shelf marks Ci IX 800 and 14 A 9808). All of the booklets were published in Cairo between 1900 and 1911, thus no specific place or date is given here. The sequence follows Littmann (1955:134f.):

no. III: The Book of the Crowing Chicken: Funny Anecdotes and Tales (*Kitāb Ṣiyāḥ al-katākūt fi n-nawādir al-muḥḥika wal-ḥawādīt*)

no. III a: The Translator of the Mind: Tales and Riddles (*Turjumān aḍ-ḍamīr fi l-ḥawādīt wal-fawāzīr*)

no. VI: The Clever Devil: Funny Anecdotes and Tales (*al-ʿIfrit an-nifrūt fi muḥḥik an-nawādir wal-ḥawādīt*) [identical with no. XIX]

no. VIII: The Caravan of Flowers: Stories and Narratives (*Kārawān al-aẓāhir fi l-ḥikāyāt wan-nawādir*)

no. IX: Conversation in Moonlit Nights (*as-Samar fi layālī l-qamar*)

no. X: Witty Words: Funny Anecdotes and Poems (*Laṭāʿif al-aqwāl fi muḏḥik an-nawādir wal-azdjāl*)

no. XI: The Delight of Witty People (*Muṭrib az-zurafāʿ*)

no. XIII: The Entertainment of the Boon Companion: Stories, Narratives, and Riddles (*Samīr an-nadīm fi l-ḥikāyāt wan-nawādir wal-fawāzīr*)

no. XIV: The Entertainment at Night and in Daytime: Stories, Narratives, and Poems (*Samīr al-lail wan-nahār fi l-ḥawādūt wan-nawādir wal-ashʿār*)

no. XVI: Elegant Meanings: Stories and Songs (*Zarīf al-maʿānī fi l-ḥawādūt wal-aghānī*)

no. XVII: The Peasant's Civilization (*Tamaddun al-fallāḥ*)

no. XIX: Entertainment: Stories and Riddles (*as-Samīr fi l-ḥawādūt wal-fawāzīr*) [identical with no. VI]

[no. XX:] Entertainment of the Travellers: Stories, Tales, Narratives, and Games (*Samīr ar-rukkāb fi l-ḥikāyāt wal-ḥawādūt wan-nawādir wal-alʿāb*) (quoted by Littmann 1955:177, no. 16).

The above titles are abbreviated renderings for easy reference. Just one extensive quotation of a full title-page may suffice to demonstrate their actual, often baroque intricacy (the virgules indicating new lines), as well as the wide span of entertaining genres contained:

Entertainment / in / Stories and Riddles / containing popular stories, sayings from literary tradition and riddles / to laugh about, followed by a number of humorous funny love poems / and some popular narratives and poems / by its collector Amīn Afandī az-Zayyāt / printed with the capital of the one hoping for God's facilitation / the bookseller Maḥmūd Afandī aṣ-Ṣubayḥ / close to the brilliant al-Azhar / Copyright preserved

as-Samīr / fi / l-ḥawādūt wal-fawāzīr / wa-huwa yahtawī ʿalā ḥawādūt ʿammīya wa-amthāl adabiya wa-fawāzīr / fukāhīya, walyāhī djumlat mawāwīl muḏḥika hazalīya / wa-baʿd nawādir wa-azdjāl ʿammīya / li-djāmīʿihī Amīn Afandī az-Zayyāt / ṭubīʿa ʿalā dhammat ar-rādji min Allāh at-taysīr / ḥaḍrat Maḥmūd Afandī aṣ-Ṣubayḥ al-Kutubī / bi-djiwār al-Azhar al-munir / ḥuqūq at-ṭabʿ maḥfūza

Out of a total of roughly 490 jocular tales and anecdotes included in the above listed chapbooks, about eighty (in about forty variant texts) can be proven to date from the classical period (see index C in Marzolph 1992, vol. 2). Some, though not all of the texts, are presented in the Egyptian colloquial Arabic. Probably this constitutes an attempt to imitate or facilitate an oral stage of story-telling. But

above all, the presentation of classical texts in the colloquial adapts materials of diverse origins to the contemporary Egyptian surrounding and succeeds in veiling (some of) the material's ultimate origin.

To give an idea of the topics and character of the classical jokes, the following (fairly literal) translations present a sample collection of the most frequently quoted texts in the chapbooks (the Latin numbers refer to the above list of items):

1. Someone had been sick for two months, so his father got fed up and went to fetch a corpse washer. The boy's mother, however, said: "Man, are you crazy? Why do you (want to) fetch the corpse washer when the boy is perfectly well?" He replied: "Don't you worry! Until he is going to finish washing him, his soul will have passed away!"

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 164; translated from III: 3, no. 11; similar in III a: 4, no. 13; X: 10/-6; XIV: 14/16; XVI: 8, no. 9)

2. A bedouin was present at (the governor's) al-Ḥadjdjādī's (died 714). The food was served, and the people ate; then the sweets were served. al-Ḥadjdjādī waited until the bedouin had eaten some of it, then he said: "Whoever is going to eat a single bite of the sweets will be decapitated!" So the people refrained from eating it. The bedouin remained looking at al-Ḥadjdjādī, then at the sweets. Finally he said: "My lord! I entrust my children to your care!" With that he proceeded to eat. al-Ḥadjdjādī laughed and ordered a present to be given to him.

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 904; translated from XI: 9, no. 27; similar in III a: 8, no. 37; IX: 18/-11; XIX: 36/16)

3. A person got sick while he was in the house of one of his friends. His friend's wife was a very old woman of more than eighty years, so her sense of hearing was very weak and she could hear only with great difficulty. She used to visit the sick man every day, inquiring about his health. Now it is well known that sick people get fed up quickly with company, even if it be their close companions. So this old woman entered the sick-room one day according to her custom. In front of the sick man there was a bowl of soup, so she asked: "Are you well today?" He said: "I am struggling with death." And she remarked: "As God wills!" Then she asked: "What are you eating?" He said: "The poison of death." And she remarked: "My felicitations!" Then she asked him again: "Who is your doctor?" He answered: "The angel of death!" And she remarked: "Congratulations, my son. May God preserve him for

you!" At this the youth shrieked: "Deliver me, o Muslims! Death is better than conversation with this daughter of a dog!"

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 1232; translated from X: 9/-8; similar in XIV: 13/-1; another version in VIII: 5, no. 6; XVI: 3, no. 2)

4. Somebody was standing in front of his house when a beggar came up to him, requesting: "For the charity of God!" The man said: "My wife is not there." The beggar remarked: "I did not ask for (intercourse with) your wife, I asked for a piece (of food)!"

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 644; translated from III a: 3, no. 10; also in III: 3, no 9; XI: 5, no. 10; XVI: 18, no. 40)

5. A burglar entered a person's house and started to look for something he could steal. He did not find anything, so he intended to leave. The owner of the house, who had been watching him, waited until he reached the door and wanted to step outside, then he shouted: "I beg you close the door!" The burglar answered: "Did I take anything from you, so that I should be obliged to close the door? Or is there anything you are fearing for?"

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 337; translated from XIX: 36/-4; similar in IX: 36/-4; XI: 15, no. 47)

6. Two persons shared in buying a slave. One day, one of them seized the slave and hit him. His companion got angry and said: "Why do you hit him?" The other, who had hit the slave, replied: "Why is that your concern? I am just hitting my share."

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 172; translated from XIV: 14/11; similar in X: 10/-2; III a: 6, no. 25.)

7. Somebody had stolen a goose. When he was brought to court, he asserted that he had not stolen the goose, but that it had been with him ever since it was a gosling. When he went away, he was met by somebody who had stolen a gun. This person asked him: "What did you do?" He replied: "When they asked me about the goose, I told them it had been with me ever since it was a gosling, and I had reared it until it grew up." When the judge entered, he asked: "You, my boy, did you steal this gun?" The thief answered: "No, it has been with me ever since it was a pistol. I raised it until it became a gun." The judge remarked: "Good man, can a pistol grow up?" — "So what about the goose that grew up?" — "That has got a soul!" — "But my pistol has got seven souls!" — "Well, we are afraid your gun might grow still further and become a cannon



with which you might destroy our city, by God!" And he put him into prison.

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 751; translated from IX: 19/2; similar in XI: 14, no. 43; XVII: 7, no. 5)

8. At one time, the lion, the wolf, and the fox went hunting together. They caught a gazelle, a cheetah, and a hare. They got together to distribute the booty among themselves, and the lion asked the wolf to portion the shares. The wolf said: "You take the gazelle, I take the cheetah, and the fox takes the hare." At this, the lion got very angry, reached out and struck the wolf, plucking out his eye. Then he addressed the fox: "Now you portion the shares." The fox said: "It is so obvious, what should I portion? The cheetah is for your breakfast, the gazelle for your lunch, and the hare (may be used) for filling your teeth!" At this, the lion was very pleased and said: "Who taught you to portion this way? You are a good counsellor!" And the fox said: "I was taught to portion this way by the wolf's eye!"

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, 932; translated from III: 4, no. 18; also in III a: 5, no. 21; XIII: 19/10)

9. There was a certain consumer of hashish who had ten donkeys. When he was riding and counted them, he found them to be nine. But when he dismounted, he found them to be ten. So after this he said: "I shall prefer walking while possessing ten rather than riding while possessing nine!"

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 977; translated from IX: 23/5; similar in XVI: 17, no. 37; XVII: 16/-1)

10. A certain peasant got sick while in a foreign country. At one time, he met somebody he knew (from his own country) and said to him: "Please, go to my parents and tell them their son has got a sickness in his legs, his nose, his heart, his eyes, and his bowels, that he is deaf and dumb. Ask them to come here without any delay." The other person replied: "That message will take too long to deliver. I will just tell them you died, that's all!"

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 1158; translated from IX: 24/-6; similar in III: 5, no. 20; III a: 5, no. 23)

11. Someone bought a fish and said to his wife: "Cook it, while I sleep a little until it is ready." She cooked it and ate it together with her children, then she smeared her husband's hand (with the remains). When he woke up, he said: "Bring the fish!" She replied: "You have eaten it already." — "No, I have not." — "Smell

your hand!" He smelled it and remarked: "You are right, but this is definitely the least satisfying fish I ever had!"

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 1222; translated from XVI: 14, 29; similar in: XIII: 24/-5; XVII: 22/-7)

By modern Western standards, the above jokes appear funny to a very limited degree only. Even though they are smart in a lovable way, they lack a dominant aggressiveness, without which they certainly would not succeed in the modern Western world. Besides, the transposition of culturally defined intextual mechanisms is a tedious affair. Simpleness and stupidity portray traits of character mankind has laughed about ever since it learned to distinguish between clever and stupid. Yet, the subtle humor of anecdotes such as no. 2—elaborating the distinctive Arabic disposition of pardoning no matter what offence for the sake of a clever verbal retort—appears difficult to duplicate.

Some of the anecdotes constitute folktales known in the West for a long time. At least three of them are listed as international tale-types in the Aarne/Thompson (1973) index of folktales: No. 3 is tale-type 1698 I: *Visiting the Sick*, known similarly in India, Iran, and Rumania; No. 8 is tale-type 51: *The Lion's Share*, documented in European collections of exempla since medieval times (see Tubach 1981: no. 3069), with both the Arabic and European traditions of this tale apparently deriving from an Aesopic fable; No. 9 is tale-type 1288 A: *Numskull Cannot Find Ass He Is Sitting On*, printed many times in European jestbooks since its inclusion in the *Facetiae* of the Papal secretary Poggio Bracciolini in 1450 (see Rotunda 1942: J 2031.2; Poggio 1905: no. 55).

Other chapbook items dating from the classical Arabic period, which are not translated here, include versions of tale-type 1213: *The Pent Cuckoo*, one of the *Merry Tales of the Mad-men of Gotham* (Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 166); tale-type 1501: *Aristotle and Phyllis* (Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 469; see also Brednich 1977); tale-type 830 C: *If God Wills* (Marzolph 1992, vol. 2: 481; see also Masing 1990); and tale-type 1529: *Thief Claims to Have Been Transformed into a Horse* (Marzolph 1992, vol. 2; no. 1249; see also Matičetov 1981).

How then, to return to the original question, did the quoted items survive the long span from the end of the classical period (around 1200) to their actual printing in the chapbooks (around 1900)? To

demonstrate this, it seems advisable to retrace the way of a single specimen.

12. A man at the time of (the 'Abbāsīd caliph) al-Ma'mūn (reigned 813-833) claimed to be a prophet. al-Ma'mūn said to him: "Do you have a proof (of your prophethood)?" He replied: "Yes." — "And what is your proof?" — "My proof is that I know what is in your mind." — "And what is in my mind?" — "In your mind is (the thought) that I am a liar!" — "You are right."

(Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, no. 390; translated from [XX:] 18/-8; more elaborate in XVII: 17/-9)

The above is one of the best documented anecdotes of the chapbook material, the chain of evidence covering a span of ten centuries in ten occurrences. The following is a full list of occurrences: In the classical period, the anecdote is found in *al-Iqd al-farīd* by Ibn 'Abdrabbih (died 940), *Djam' al-djawāhir* by al-Huṣrī (died 1015), *al-Baṣā'ir wadh-dhakhā'ir* by at-Tauḥīdī (died 1023), *Nathr ad-durr* by al-Ābī (died 1030) and *Rabī' al-abrār* by az-Zamakhsharī (died 1144). The intermediary period has it in *Nihāyat al-arab* by an-Nuwairī (died 1332), *al-Mustaṭraf* by al-Ibshīhī (15th century), *an-Nawādir* by al-Qalyūbī (died 1658), and the anonymous *Nuzhat al-udabā'* (17th century). In the modern period, it can be traced in one of the first printed Arabic editions of the jocular tales of Djuḥā (1864), of which it apparently remained an integral part until the early twentieth century (another edition of Djuḥā-tales dated 1927 also has it), even though in the chapbooks the anecdote is not quoted in the name of this particular protagonist.

A listing like the above should not lead to the impression of a continuous and unbroken chain of transmission. It is a well-known fact that transmission always has to be regarded as an active (and interactive) process, not a given state. As a process, it is subject to evolution, comprising numerous points where tradition might be broken off or intermingled with various other trends, or older threads are taken up again. In most cases it cannot be verified exactly, which earlier source a later author exploited, and it is by no means imperative that one of the closer sources should have been used: Various later authors might draw their material from the same famous book, such as the works of al-Djāḥiẓ (died 868). Sometimes a later author might skip a number of previous sources, drawing his inspiration from earlier works. Some compilations, such as *al-Mustaṭraf*, became authoritative, gained

a large audience, and remained popular until the very present. Others fell into oblivion and had to be "excavated" by philological research in the twentieth century, such as al-Ābi's magnificent jocular encyclopedia, whose text only very recently has been made available in an Arabic edition (for portions of its second volume in English translation, see Owen 1934). To complicate matters even more, oral tradition has to be considered as a powerful momentum, too. Even though its existence in historical times remains largely hypothetical, it can never be ruled out with certainty. After all, why should any narrative reproduced many times in different popular works in writing not be transmitted (by the simple process of reading, listening, and retelling) to the oral stage and be repeated there, before eventually being restored to writing again?

Jocular tradition in Arabic literature begins in the classical period, which is understood by later authors as a kind of common pool everyone was authorized to exploit. Terms like "copyright" and "creativity" as well as "originality" and "plagiarism" bear a distinctly different notion from their meaning in the West. The quality of an author (in the genre of compilative literature considered here) is not measured according to his inventiveness. It is rather permitted,—in fact, encouraged—to rearrange previously collected materials according to new criteria. This very fact is characteristic for all jocular compilations, thus authorizing an individual author's method by collective norms. Individual merit in terms of literary originality does not consist in *what* is presented, but rather in *how* this is done: The raw material is regarded as common property, and the author's achievement lies in the individual art of his presentation. This evaluation, for the intermediary period of Arabic jocular literature, leads one to look for a number of "transmitting stations": collections that would draw from works of the classical period, would rearrange the material, and, by their ensuing popularity, would invigorate tradition, enabling its survival for any considerably long period of time without being reproduced in the meantime. One such powerful "transmitting station" has been quoted several times already, the *Kitāb al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fann mustaṭraf* by the early fifteenth-century Egyptian author al-Ibshīhī (see Marzolph 1991b).

The materials in al-Ibshīhī's encyclopedia are not subjected to any strict arrangement. In this respect, the work differs considerably from any previous attempts at encyclopedic presentation of—as Charles Pellat has put it—"everything the average Muslim should know" (Pellat

1976:642; see also Kilpatrick 1982). Even though *al-Mustaṭraf* traditionally starts off with discussing the 'five pillars of Islam' (chapter 1) and the Qoran (chapter 3), the presentation very soon drifts to more mundane topics such as commonly appreciated behavioral manners (*ādāb*; chapter 5). It continues with treating popular sayings, rhetorical aspects, and witty answers (chapters 6-8). The ensuing matters include a large variety of ethical and moral topics, such as a discussion of virtues and vices (chapter 19: justice; 20: injustice; 23: good and bad traits of character; 26: modesty; 27: pride, etc.). They also treat rather strange things, such as the "wonders of creation" (chapters 63, 65, 66) and demons (chapter 64). Some more daring chapters deal with music and dance (chapters 68-70, 72), love (71), and wine (74). Eventually, the author even includes extensive chapters on popular jokes and anecdotes (chapters 75-76) before reminding his readers of the vanity of human existence (chapter 78: fate; 79: return to God; 80: sickness; 81: death; 82: patience) and closing the book with a chapter in praise of the prophet Mohammed (chapter 84).

This arrangement and content apparently was (and still is) very attractive to the Arabic reader, as is shown by the numerous manuscripts and printed editions. Besides, *al-Mustaṭraf* is not a multi-volume encyclopedia like most of the previous ones. Its contents are contained in a single manuscript (later printed) volume. Somebody possessing the book could easily take it along for private or public reading, thus turning it into a mobile mine of knowledge and entertainment, a literal *vade mecum*. By way of the whole work's popularity, the amount of jocular narratives included in many different chapters could become popular in their own right. This is documented by the fact that about a quarter of the forty anecdotes of classical origin found in the chapbooks meet with counterparts in *al-Mustaṭraf* (Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, nos. 246, 338, 390, 391, 460, 513, 895, 932, 1222).

Roughly two centuries later, a second, though less popular "transmitting station" of jocular prose can be found in the "Entertainment of the Educated" (*Nuzhat al-udabāʾ*), probably compiled by some Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Iyās al-Ḥanafī in the middle of the seventeenth century. Contrary to al-Ibshīhī's *Mustaṭraf*, this work is purely dedicated to entertainment. It is divided into 28 chapters containing about 540 anecdotes, treating subjects such as teachers, grammarians, alleged prophets, bedouins, stingy persons, homosexuals,

and prostitutes, as well as some of the most famed popular heroes of Arabic jokelore, such as Djuḥā, Muzabbid, and Ash‘ab. *Nuzhat al-udabā’* ends with chapters on animal fables and popular sayings. Gustav Flügel, who first discussed the work in 1860, regarded it as a most revolting accumulation of obscenities (Flügel 1860). It is true that the *Nuzhat al-udabā’* does contain some narratives which, even according to liberal standards, would have to be considered pornography. Still, the book does deserve attention as an exemplary compilation of the intermediary period. By way of extensive translations in European languages (Hammer-Purgstall 1813; Basset 1924-26), *Nuzhat al-udabā’* has decisively contributed to the European notion of Arabic humor in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the other hand, the book is largely neglected in the modern Arab world, where few literary products of the intermediary period are regarded as meriting serious attention. *Nuzhat al-udabā’* has not been published in print. While the number of manuscripts in Western libraries does not even amount to ten, it is unknown how many manuscript copies linger in private or public libraries in Near Eastern countries. As for the chapbooks, more than a dozen of the forty jocular items from classical sources are rendered in the *Nuzhat al-udabā’*, documenting their popularity up to the seventeenth century (Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, nos. 164, 246, 388, 390, 391, 412, 491, 513, 869, 932, 973, 1079, 1240).

The discussion of the third important "transmitting station" for the tradition of jocular prose leads to a different topic. Since the formative period of Arabic jocular literature, a strong tendency towards the reduction of the number of protagonists can be observed. Already the ninth-century author al-Djāḥiẓ has intelligently described this phenomenon in his book about "Stingy People" (*al-Bukhalā’*):

If somebody were to attribute an anecdote to (such popular protagonists as) Abū l-Ḥārith Djummain, al-Haitham ibn Muṭahhar, Muzabbid, or Ibn Aḥmar, then it would, even if it were boring, have the largest success imaginable. If, on the contrary, he were to reproduce a rather funny anecdote of intricate meaning, and would attribute it to Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥunain, Ibn an-Nawwā’, or any other despised person, then it would not only become boring, but also dull, which is worse. (Marzolph 1992: vol. 1, 237f.)

Out of the few classical protagonists of jocular prose that managed to survive over the centuries, Djuḥā definitely is the most famous. Popular booklets on him date from as far back as the tenth

century (see Dodge 1970: 735, 1025). Without intending to retrace the different stages in the development of books about Djuḥā, it may suffice here to point out that the tradition focusing on him stayed alive and active until the introduction of printing in the nineteenth century—surprisingly without ever producing an Arabic canonical collection. This enabled the anonymous Arabic translator of the first printed Turkish edition of anecdotes about the Turkish jester Nasreddin, whose repertoire had previously mingled with that of Djuḥā, to incorporate a considerable number of tales taken directly from Arabic classical literature, where they are quoted without the least connection to either Djuḥā or Nasreddin (first Arabic edition of the Djuḥā/Nasreddin stories in emendation of Marzolph/Baldauf 1990, col. 1128 was in 1861/62).

Again, just one example may suffice to demonstrate this adaptation of material from the classical period: al-Djāḥiẓ, in his above-mentioned book on stingy people, quotes a nephew of the muʿtazilite Wāṣil ibn ʿAṭāʾ (died 748) as saying:

Djaʿfar, the son of Wāṣil's sister, told the following:

I said to Abū ʿUyaina: "That person did right, who—when he asked his wife for the meat, and she said: 'The cat has devoured it'—weighed the cat, whereupon he said: 'This is the meat, but where is the cat?'" [Marzolph 1992: vol. 1, 75-77; vol. 2, no. 65]

Before its inclusion in the Arabic booklet on Djuḥā, the anecdote, besides its original rendering, is not once quoted in any of the works surveyed for a period of almost a millennium. After its inclusion, it immediately became an integral part of the Djuḥā/Nasreddin-repertoire. Due to its convenient adaptation for visual representation, it even became one of the most often illustrated anecdotes in recent printed collections (see Marzolph 1993).

A number of other anecdotes underwent a similar process, though passing through various intermediate stages of tradition. Notably, about a quarter of the chapbook items had been included in the 1864 edition of Djuḥā-anecdotes (Marzolph 1992: vol. 2, nos. 164, 390, 404, 469, 481, 513, 716, 869, 904, 1222) and were thus not completely unknown to and ready for appreciation by a contemporary audience at the beginning of the twentieth century. The decisive additional step applied in the chapbook texts is their adaptation not only *from* classical literature, but also *to* the contemporary colloquial

language, involving a number of changes in characters, requisites, plot, and the like.

The three "transmitting stations" mentioned above are but a small portion of the actual number of instances involved in the tradition of jocular material from the classical sources. Probably it is useful to point out again that tradition is a process. Moreover, it is not a linear process in the sense of a continuous or even interrupted chain of transmitting accidents. It is, rather, to be imagined as a complicated net of interwoven stations and aspects on various levels. Of this net, the above-presented literary works constitute just one dimension. Other dimensions not scrutinized here, such as intention, context, and meaning (and variant meanings for readers/listeners of different times) also contribute to the process of tradition, above all to the decisive question of whether a joke is reproduced or not.

It has been said that Arabic jocular tradition as documented by the chapbooks has remained conservative to some degree until the beginning of the twentieth century. Still the question of what reasons might account for this very special kind of conservative attitude remains to be answered. Arguing from a philological point of view, it seems incumbent to hold national consciousness responsible for the development (or rather non-development): Political events such as the confrontation with the West and the liberation from Ottoman supremacy undoubtedly had not only caused a shock, but also strengthened the conscious appreciation of an autonomous tradition, of which traditional narrative materials constitute a vigorous ingredient. Of course, much of these narrative materials have survived in oral tradition, while undergoing perceptible changes; in some instances the chapbook authors might not even have been aware of the classical origins the materials they exploited were rooted in. But in the majority of cases, the direct transplanted and adaptation of classical materials (in a classical wording and grammar) into a modern surrounding appears to result from a conscious attempt at reinvigorating traditional values rooted in the "Golden age"—not only of Arabic literature, but also of Arabic history. The same argument applies yet today to the numerous compendia of jocular tales from classical sources, small and large, printed for the contemporary public in the Arabic world at the end of the twentieth century. Whereas a Western reader would be bound to treat chapbook texts dating from many centuries ago as an



historical reminiscence or topic of research, in the Arabic world chapbooks rendering anecdotes from classical times might be appreciated as a living memory of the past, and as a matter-of-course constituent of a vital tradition. In this respect, insignificant as they may seem at first, jocular tales and the way they are employed indicate a national pride and an awareness of a long and precious tradition. Now, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the Egyptian public is bound to tell (not only, but also) the same old jokes that have been told for more than a millennium. To prevent this statement from being misunderstood as an "Orientalist's" arrogance, it should be pointed out that the jocular tradition in any of the Western languages also propagates a considerable amount of material rooted as far back as Latin collections of medieval exempla, Italian Renaissance compilations, or Shakespearean jestbooks. Decisive differences in appreciating the Arabic material lie not only in the appearance of chapbooks at a much later date than anywhere in the West, but also in the quite incomparable richness of Arabic jocular tradition.

### References

- Aarne, Antti and Stith Thompson. 1973. *The Types of the Folktale, A Classification and Bibliography*. Translated and Enlarged by Stith Thompson. Second Revision. Third printing. Folklore Fellows' Communications, no. 184. Helsinki.
- 'Abdel-Meguid, 'Abdel-Aziz. 1954. A Survey of the Terms Used in Arabic for Narrative and Story. *Islamic Quarterly* 1:195-204.
- Ashtiany, Julia e.a., ed. 1990. *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, 'Abbasid Belles-Lettres*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Basset, René. 1924-26. *Mille et un contes, légendes et récits arabes*. Vols. 1-3. Paris: Maisonneuve Frères.
- Bertel's, E. E. 1934. Persidskaja 'lubochnaja' literatura. In *Sergeju Fedorovichu Ol'denburgu k pjatidesjatiletiju nauchno-obschchestvennoj dejatel'nosti 1882-1932*, pp. 83-94. Leningrad.
- Boratav, Pertev Naili. 1975. *Türkische Volkserzählungen und die Erzählerkunst*. Asian Folklore and Social Life, Monographs, vols. 73-74. Taipei.
- Bosworth, Clifford Edmund. 1989. *Bahā' al-dīn al-'Amīlī and His Literary Anthologies*. Journal of Semitic Studies, Monograph, no. 10. Manchester.
- Brednich, Rolf Wilhelm. 1977. Aristoteles und Phyllis. In *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*. Vol. 1., cols. 786-788. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Brünnow, Rudolf-Ernst and August Fischer. 1984. *Arabische Chrestomathie aus Proschriftstellern*. Porta Linguarum Orientalium. Sixth edition. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

- Derman, Gül. 1989. *Resimli Taş Baskısı Halk Hikâyeleri* [The Illustrations of Turkish Folktales in Lithograph Prints]. Atatürk Kültür Merkezi Yayını 24, Türk Halk Hikâyeleri Dizisi Sayı 1. Ankara.
- Dodge, Bayard. 1970. *The Fihrist of al-Nadim*. Vols. 1-2. New York/London: Columbia University Press.
- Flügel, Gustav. 1860. Einige bisher wenig oder gar nicht bekannte arabische und türkische Handschriften. *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 15:527-546, especially 534-538.
- Hammer-Purgstall, Josef Freiherr von. 1971 [1813]. *Rosenöl*. Vol. 1-2. Stuttgart/Tübingen; reprint, Hildesheim/New York: Olms.
- Hanaway, William L., Jr. [forthcoming]. *Chapbook Publishing in Pakistan*. Islamabad: Lok Virsa.
- Heinrichs, Wolfhart, ed. 1990. *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft*, Vol. 5: *Orientalisches Mittelalter*. Wiesbaden: Aula-Verlag.
- Heston, Wilma F. 1991. Footpath Poets of Peshawar. In *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, ed. A. Appadurai et al., pp. 305-343. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Khayyat, Latif. 1987. The Style and Contents of Arabic Folk Material in Chapbooks in the New York Public Library. *Fabula* 28:59-71.
- Kilpatrick, Hilary. 1982. A Genre in Classical Arabic Literature, The Adab Encyclopedia. In *Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants. 10th Congress. Proceedings*, ed. R. Hillenbrand, pp. 34-42. Edinburgh.
- Littmann, Enno. 1955. *Arabische Märchen und Schwänke aus Ägypten. Nach mündlicher Überlieferung gesammelt, übersetzt und erklärt*. Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur. Abhandlungen der Klasse der Literatur. Mainz.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1959. *The Library of Enno Littmann. 1875-1958*. Brill Catalogue, no. 307. Leiden.
- Marzolph, Ulrich. 1991a. "Erlaubter Zeitvertreib," Die Anekdotensammlungen des Ibn al-Ğauzī. *Fabula* 32:165-180.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1991b. Ibšihī. In *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*. Vol. 7,1, cols. 6-10. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1992. *Arabia ridens. Die humoristische Kurzprosa der frühen adab-Literatur im internationalen Traditionsgeflecht*. Vols. 1-2. Frankfurter Wissenschaftliche Beiträge. Kulturwissenschaftliche Reihe 21, 1-2. Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. Katze: Die gewogene K. In *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*. Vol. 7, cols. 1109-1111. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1994a. *Dāstānhā-ye širin. Fünfzig persische Volksbüchlein aus der Mitte des Zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*. Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 50,4. Wiesbaden.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1994b. Social Values in the Persian Popular Romance *Salīm-i Javāhiri*. *Edebiyât* 5:77-98.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Ingeborg Baldauf. 1990. Hodscha Nasreddin. In *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*. Vol. 6, cols. 1127-1151. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Masing, Uku. 1990. Gottes Segen. In *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*. Vol. 6, cols. 12-16. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Matičecov, Milko. 1981. Dieb als Esel. In *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*. Vol. 3, cols. 640-643. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.

- Meisami, Julie Scott, and Paul Starkey, eds. [Forthcoming]. *Companion to Arabic Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Owen, Charles. 1934. Arabian Wit and Wisdom from Abū Sa'īd al-Ābī's Kitāb Nathr ad-durar. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 54:240-275.
- Pellat, Charles. 1976 [1966]. Les Encyclopédies dans le monde arabe. In *Études sur l'histoire culturelle de l'Islam*, pp. 631-638. London: Variorum Reprints.
- Poggio. 1905. *Die Schwänke und Schnurren des Florentiners Gian-Francesco Poggio Bracciolini*. Translated by Alfred Semerau. Leipzig: Deutsche Verlagsactiengesellschaft.
- Rotunda, D. P. 1942. *Motif-Index of the Italian Novella in Prose*. Indiana University Publications, Folklore Series, no. 2. Bloomington.
- Sādān, Yūsuf. 1983. *al-Adab al-ʿarabī al-hāzil wa-nawādir at-tuqalā'* [Arabic jocular prose and stories about distasteful persons]. *Dirāsāt wa-nuṣūṣ adabīya*, No. 5. Tel Aviv: as-Sarūdji.
- Spufford, Margaret. 1981. *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and Its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
- Tubach, Frederic C. 1981. *Index Exemplorum, A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales*. Folklore Fellows' Communications, no. 204. Helsinki.

THE OTHER  
PRINT TRADITION  
ESSAYS ON CHAPBOOKS,  
BROADSIDES, AND  
RELATED EPHEMERA

EDITED BY

CATHY LYNN PRESTON  
MICHAEL J. PRESTON

GARLAND PUBLISHING, INC.  
NEW YORK AND LONDON  
1995