

In the Presence of Power

*Court and Performance in the
Pre-Modern Middle East*

Edited by

Maurice A. Pomerantz and Evelyn Birge Vitz



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mountain, he replied. Samnūn then said: Oh you coarse one (*lujāfi*), God took an oath not to entrust His wisdom to a barbarian heart (*a'jamiyy al-qalb*). I did not answer in poetry because I am incapable of clear expression; rather, I wanted to teach you that in the merest trifle of things lies the strongest indication to Him.¹

This chapter focuses on the formative period of Sufism (tenth to twelfth centuries).² Many anecdotes, reports, and poems from this period survive in Sufi anthologies, handbooks, and treatises. These anthologies and treatises contain hundreds of lines of poetry, often with separate chapters dedicated to the performance of this poetry in the beatific auditions (*samā'*) and other chapters on the poetic verses chosen by Sufis to illustrate their mystical experiences.³ Interestingly, in both cases, this poetry is often juxtaposed with prose, usually borrowed from the Arabic courtly poetic tradition.⁴ By looking at reports and anecdotes surviving in early Sufi anthologies from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, this chapter examines how the themes or motifs of the pre-Islamic, Umayyad, and early Abbasid periods were used performatively to create a mystical poetics. Reframing these courtly poetic topoi, Sufis reperformed this poetry and reinterpreted it in a new context.

Remembering the Beloved: Poetry and Authorial Voices in Beatific Auditions

The term *samā'* (translated here as “beatific audition”) can be applied to singing or any musical performance or sound that delights the ear. Poetry recitation, which can be seen as a type of singing, is included in this category. We find its application to the Sufi musical tradition in ritualized form.⁵ The discussion of *samā'* is found in almost every handbook or anthology on Sufism and was a subject of controversy even among the Sufis themselves.⁶

The surviving literature demonstrates that the use of poetry in *samā'* was very common, and in fact, it was preferred to the Qur'ān.⁷ Surprisingly, most of this poetry is court poetry from the *ghazal*, wine, or panegyric tradition, sometimes even taken from the *dirwāns* of well-known pre-Islamic, Umayyad, and Abbasid poets. So how did

Mystical Poetics

Courtly Themes in Early Sufi Akhbār

BILAL ORFALI

It is common practice in modern times to read mystical poetry and apply it to our mundane lives and loves. Sufis in the early period did the opposite. Their mystical hymns often spun out of the courtly poetic *ghazal*, panegyric, and wine songs.

This chapter highlights the relation of the Arabic courtly poetic canon to early Sufism. Poetry appears to have been closely associated with the lives, thoughts, and legacy of the Sufi personalities of the eighth to tenth centuries, as is apparent in the primary anthologies of their *akhbār* and statements. These Sufis and Pietists used poetry to describe mystical experiences and thoughts that were better hidden in subtle intimations than expressed in statements of prose. Sufis often talk about *ibāra* (expression) and *ishāra* (allusion), and many Sufi states (*alḥwāl*) and thoughts are hard to express in plain prose and require the use of poetic language. Consider, for example, the following anecdote:

Someone asked Samnūn about God's saying “So they plotted a plot: and We plotted a plot” (27:50). Is it permissible to ascribe plotting (*makar*) to the God? Samnūn replied:

وَيَقِيحُ مِنْ سَوَاكُ الْفِئَالِ عِنْدِي فَتَعْمَلُهُ فِيحْسِنُ مَنْزَقُ ذَاكَ

The act, from someone other than you, is hateful to me,
You carry it out—and I find it beautiful.

The person said: I ask you to comment on a Qur'anic verse and you reply in poetry! Samnūn asked him: From which land are you? From the

this poetry gain the dimensions that exerted such a strong influence on the Sufis?

The Sufi masters Junayd and Ruwaym, when asked about the cause of the rapture associated with *samāʿ*, explain that *samāʿ* is an act of recollection (*dhikr*); the souls reawaken at remembering the archetypal moment of divine awareness, the primordial covenant, *yawm al-mithāq* or *yawm alastu* (Junayd: *harrakahum dhikr dhālik*, Ruwaym: *fa-inza ʿajū*).⁸ On this preexistent day described in the Qurʾān, human beings before their creation stood witness in the form of specks of light to God's Lordship. God asked them, "Am I not your lord?" (*alastu bi-rabbikum*), to which they affirmed, *balā*. The Sufis' aim is to reenact the witnessing on the day of the primordial covenant through constant recollection of God (*dhikr*). *Dhikr* means both "to mention" and "to remember." Thus, the role of poetry in *samāʿ* is to remind the Sufis of that moment.

The same line of poetry, however, can elicit different reactions at a *samāʿ* gathering. Abū ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī, in his treatise on *samāʿ*, declares that the object of listening is one and the same, but the difference lies in the listeners.⁹ Similarly, Junayd states that *samāʿ* is fashioned by the listeners.¹⁰ Sarrāj relates several statements that enumerate the different kinds of listeners (*ḍurūb al-mustamiʿin*) or their hierarchy (*ḥabaqāt al-mustamiʿin*).¹¹ Sulamī narrates a related anecdote:

I heard ʿAbdallāh b. Muḥammad say: "One night I was with Shibli and a group of Sufis in a listening session [*samāʿ*]. When a singer sang something, Shibli shrieked, while the group was silent.

A sheikh asked him: Abū Bakr, aren't they listening like you? What's wrong with you?

He rose in ecstasy and recited:

لو يسمن كما سمعت كلأها
خروا لآفة رگنا وسجودا

If they heard her speech as I did,

They would prostrate themselves to ʿAzza in prayer

He then recited:

لي سكران وللدمان واحدة
شيء خيبت به من بينهم رحدي

I have two intoxications, whereas my boon companions have just one

This is the thing that singles me out"¹²

In these texts, the assignment of authorship is not determined by the creation of new words but rather by the perception of a sincere expression of true feeling. Poetry thus is the product of a social network of textual producers. Everyone is to some degree a poet. Most often, the performer recites a line of court or religious poetry. The listeners give the line a new meaning through interpretation and remembrance. They are free to apply the lines to their own states and conditions.¹³ Every performance is a collection of new texts that depend on the individual and collective state (*ḥāl*) of the listeners.¹⁴ Another famous example is an anecdote related to Dhū l-Nūn's visit to Baghdad:

When Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī entered Baghdad, [local] Sufis gathered around him. Among them was a singer [*qawwāl*]. The Sufis asked Dhū l-Nūn's permission to have him [the singer] perform something for them.

He gave them permission, and the singer began to recite:

صخر هوانك عذابي
وأت جعت من قلبي
أما ترني لسكتي
إذ ضحك الخي بكي
كيف به إذا اختكا
هوى قد كان مشركا

Even a little amount of [my] passion for you has caused me [great] pain

What would happen, if it were to take full control over me?

You have brought together in my heart a passion that used to be shared with others.

Have you no sympathy for one who is broken by mourning,

who weeps, while one who is free [from affliction] is laughing?!

[On hearing this] Dhū l-Nūn stood up and fell on his face, blood streaming from his forehead onto the ground. Then, one of the Sufis also

stood up and displayed ecstatic behavior. Dhū l-Nūn told him [quoting the Qur'ān]: "[The All-Compassionate] who sees you when you stand" (26:218), and the man sat down.¹⁵

The *ghazal* poetry recited by the singer is one of the organizing groups of songs offered by Abū l-Faraj al-Isfahānī (d. 356/967) in his great book of songs *K. al-Aghānī*. Isfahānī attributed the poetry to the Abbasid vizier poet Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Malik al-Zayyāt and the original song to Abū Ḥashīsha.¹⁶ We do not know exactly how Dhū l-Nūn interpreted the three lines, but one possible Sufi interpretation ascribes the pronoun in the phrase "your love" (*hawāka*) to God; the "bringing together of the heart" (*jama' ta fī qalbi*) could refer to the state of unification (*jam'*) in Sufism, in which the Sufi sees everything as one and directed to the one. The third line could refer to the state of separation (*farq*), in which the poet is returned to his human existence and sees the calamity of being at a distance from God.

The lines brought Dhū l-Nūn to a state of genuine ecstasy. The poetry to Dhū l-Nūn referred to God and to God's love and his own human existence in relation to the divine. In the same anecdote, another man attempted a similar interpretation and reaction that was denied by Dhū l-Nūn, who cited decisive evidence from the Qur'ān that the man could not deny or reject. We are not told why Dhū l-Nūn reacted this way. He may have sensed that the man was not sincere in his emotions or that in a state of ecstasy he could not control his reactions, but when he returned to his initial state of awareness, he was able to see his action through the behavior of the other man and then make a rational response to it by disapproving of it. The example shows how a *ghazal* poem recited in a Sufi context can bring listeners to a state of ecstasy through remembrance and interpretation.

Walking in the Steps of Poets: Poetic Examples and Illustrations in Sufi Akhbār

The use of the motifs of love and wine in Sufi poetry, in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Turkish, is common knowledge to any scholar of Sufism. In Arabic, a quick glance at the *diwāns* of Ibn al-Fāriq and Ibn 'Arabi

suffices to reveal the strong reliance on these motifs. But how did this come about in the early period?

Early Sufi anthologies dedicated chapters to the poetic verses chosen by Sufis to illustrate their mystical experiences and sometimes composed works for this purpose, such as *K. al-Amthāl wa-l-istishādāt* (Book of examples and poetic illustrations) by Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī¹⁷ and *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl* (Book of poetic illustrations and examples) by Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī.¹⁸ This section draws examples from these two works to demonstrate how Sufis were constantly looking over their shoulder to see how earlier poets had expressed certain motifs, themes, and emotional and psychological states in order to reference them, thus making the inherited poetic conventions a medium for the expression of their own experiences.

As the titles of the two works indicate, the authors try to collect "similes" (*amthāl*; literally, "likenesses") that give poetic expression to the Sufis' mystical experiences, along with "illustrations" (*istishādāt*) found in a variety of Sufi writings. The authors may have understood these "illustrations" as the fruit of the Sufi experience of *mushāhada* ("witnessing" or "contemplation"), using them to give testimony in verse to the height of mystical experience.¹⁹

Sulamī's treatise has a somewhat unusual introduction, presenting an anonymous Sufi who, when asked about his own mystical experiences or doctrines, explained them by quoting poetic verses composed by others.²⁰ Thus Sulamī's *K. al-Amthāl wa-l-istishādāt* can be seen as a compilation of such verses, often mentioned in relation to the circumstances under which they were recited. Sulamī is meticulous in introducing each quotation of poetic verses with a chain of narrators (*isnād*), thereby identifying his direct informants and their sources. In *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl*, Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī records Sufi teachings from his father and other Sufis (including himself), which are followed by lines of poetry that express the same motifs. Qushayrī quotes some poetry in Persian, while Sulamī provides only Arabic poems.

Huda Fakhreddine notes in her article on defining metapoesis in the Abbasid age that "meta-poetic compositions often voice the anxieties of a poet towards his/her role and place in a tradition."²¹ Fakhreddine distinguishes thematic metapoetry (poetry about poetry) from "referential

or contextual metapoesis” that reflects the conscious manner in which a poet engages poetic references in front of his alert audience.²² Fakhr-edine explains how the Abbasid poets strived to decipher the elegiac motifs, interpreting them and assigning to them new meanings and significances, how they participated in the poetic debates of their day, and how they reflected on the nature and function of their poetry.

Sufi *akhbār*, in their turn, evoke past poets and their poetic heritage. They tend to quote eminent poets whose poetry must have been widely circulated and memorized. Yet Sufi *akhbār* place this readily recognizable poetry in a new context that deliberately changes the past. Majnūn (d. ca. 68/688) becomes the Sufi who left reason aside; his beloved Laylā stands as a symbol of divinity. Abū Nuwās (d. ca. 200/814) becomes a toxic Sufi, and his wine a symbol for divine wisdom and knowledge. Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 283/896), Abū Tammām (d. 231/846), Buḥturī (d. 284/898), and Mutanabbī (d. 354/965) stand in the court of the quintessential generous patron, Allah, and seek his bounty. It is in some sense a process of a metaphorization in which the reality of the pre-Islamic, Umayyad, and Abbasid models now acts as a device or metaphor for the Sufi poetics. Sufis who recite the poem illustrate, explain, or justify their mystical experience or idea via the embedded motif or theme, but at the same time, Sufi performers evoke, link, and reinterpret the poetic heritage associated with the poem, thus placing themselves within a poetic tradition against which their own experience becomes more evident. Despite the evocation of the poetic heritage and in order to dehistoricize the poems, these texts rarely name the original composers.

The Ruined Abodes (*al-atlāl*)

Whether Bedouin or courtly, the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* often begins with the ritualistic elegiac *nasīb*, which contains motifs that revolve around decay, loss, and nostalgia for times past.²³ Among them is the motif of the “ruined abodes” (*dhikr al-diyār* or *al-atlāl*), which reflects the Bedouin lifestyle.²⁴ In the Abbasid age, the conventions of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* needed to be explained, modified, and reinterpreted to fit the new urban setting.²⁵ As Suzanne Stetkevych observes, “the *badīʿ* poets . . . replaced the obsolete mnemonic rhetorical devices with ones whose primary function was now the expression for the first time of

modern, abstract concepts.”²⁶ Similarly, we find in *K. al-Amthāl wa-l-istishhādāt* and *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl* an abstraction of the ruined abode in which the beloved once dwelled. Consider the following example:

I heard Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Shādhān saying: A man said to Abū Muḥammad al-Jurayrī:

“I was once standing on the plane of delight, and a path to openness became evident. But I slipped, and my former station became hidden from me. How can I reach it again? Please show me the way back to where I was.”

Abū Muḥammad al-Jurayrī cried and said, “Oh Brother, everyone is attempting to overcome this obstacle. But I will recite to you verses, which have an answer to your question.”

He recited:

قِفْتُ بِالْبَدَايِرِ فَهَذِهِ أَتَارِئُهُمْ نَبِيَّ الْأَحْبَةِ حَسْرَةً وَتَسْوِئُهُا
كَمْ قَدْ وَفَّقْتُ بِهَا أَسْأَالَ مُخَيَّرًا عَنْ أَهْلِهَا أَوْ صَادِقًا أَوْ مُنْجِنًا
فَأَجَابَنِي دَاعِي الْهَوَى فِي رَسْمِهَا فَأَرْقُفُ مِنْ تَهْوَى قَعْرِ الْمَلْتَفِي

Stand upon the abodes! These are their traces

Mourning for the loved ones, in grief and yearning.

How I have stood inquiring after its people, asking

An informant, an honest man, or a sympathizer.

What in these ruins awakens passion answered me

You left your beloved. Oh how precious is reunion!²⁷

The ruins refer to the lost station in the Sufi path. The Sufi, like his pre-Islamic predecessors, stands abandoned, lost, and bewildered, seeking news, truth, or comfort. The traces remind the Sufi of a station of nearness (*qurb*) or gathering (*jamʿ*) that was followed by remoteness (*buʿd*) or dispersion (*farq*), and they tragically announce the hard truth: “Oh how precious is reunion.” While the pre-Islamic poet suffers from the vicissitudes of time, the Sufi grieves his own slips. But if all pre-Islamic poets had to stand and reflect by the abode, so do all Sufis, as Jurayrī proclaims: “Everyone is attempting to overcome this obstacle.”

Travel (*al-safar*) and the Journey (*al-raḥīl*)

In Arabic literature, motifs and themes relating to travel and the associated feelings of yearning, alienation, and estrangement can be traced back to the pre-Islamic period, manifested in the journey section of the *qaṣīda* or the scene of the departed caravan (*riḥlat al-ḥawā'in*). These motifs and themes did not, however, form an independent genre until they were collected, starting from the third/ninth century in specialized and multithematic anthologies under the rubric of “longing for the homeland” (*al-ḥanīn ila l-awṭān*).²⁸

Moreover, the Abbasid poets employed the *raḥīl* in their *qaṣīdas*. In this section of the classical *qaṣīda*, which follows the elegiac introduction, the poet usually describes his mounting animal and/or embarks on a journey through the desert.²⁹ The Abbasid poets and critics interpreted the *raḥīl* as an invitation for the compassionate concern of the patron, thus paving the way to the panegyric section.³⁰ The destination of the *raḥīl* is the patron, and his reward is a compensation for family and possessions left behind and for the adversity the poet endures on the way.

The motifs and themes of *al-ḥanīn ila l-awṭān* are frequently visited in Sufi *akḥbār*. In fact, Sufi anthologies often include a chapter on travel, its benefits and etiquette. The Sufi is a perpetual traveler, the journey is the Sufi path, and the homeland is a moment rather than a place—the pre-existential day of *yawm alastu* or *yawm al-mīthāq* described earlier. Sufis accepted the Abbasid interpretation of the *raḥīl* but replaced the earthly patron with the ultimate one. The outer journey is a flight from material possession, wealth, family, and reputation in search for certitude. The outer journey supports the inward journey. Here is an example from K. *al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl*:

He [Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī] said: through service one reaches the reward [*thawāb*], and by reverence one reaches the Real [*al-ḥaqq*]. There is a difference however between one arrival and the other. He chanted:

فسرت إليك في طلب المعالي
وسار سواي في طلب المعالي

I marched to you pursuing high stations
Others marched in quest of earthly needs

He then chanted:

وما الفخر عن أرض العشيّة ساقنا
ولكننا جفتا بالقيآك نسمعد

We left the lands of our clan, not because of poverty
Rather, we sought happiness in encountering you.³¹

Love Poetry (*Ghazal*)

Sufi anthologies often dedicate a chapter to the topic of love (*mahabbba*) that elaborates on the nature and characteristics of divine love, from the human and the divine perspectives. God's love is infinite and manifests itself in mercy. From the human side, we encounter love as gratitude, as God's due, as an act or remembrance, as obedience, as a consequence of free will, and as annihilation.

In Arabic poetry, starting from the second part of the second/seventh century, the independent love poem, the *ghazal*, emerged, in two main categories: the *Ḥijāzī ghazal* and the 'Udhri *ghazal*. The *Ḥijāzī* poets used urban themes and stressed a lady's nobility and her lover's submissiveness. A favorite topic was the encounter of the lovers while on pilgrimage to the shrines of Mecca and Medina. The poetry of 'Umar b. Abi Rabī'a (d. 95/712 or 103/721) played a leading part in this pleasure-oriented urban society of *Ḥijāz*. 'Umar's *ghazal* is lighthearted, frivolous, but never obscene. He usually assigns the lover's friends and the beloved's maids an active part in the relationship.

The 'Udhri *ghazal*, in contrast, stressed the lover's chastity. The beloved was simply irreplaceable, and the poet now found no solace with another lover, with his material wealth, or with his camel, as we find in pre-Islamic poetry. Poets like Jamīl (d. 82/701), Qays b. al-Mulawwah al-Majnūn, and others sang about the fatal nature of love, to which the lover is not only victim but martyr. Love here is as powerful as fate. Love is often expressed in religious terms; the beloved is the object of the lover's total devotion, the shrine to which he makes his pilgrimage. The faithfulness of the loving poet is rewarded with sickness and madness, *junūn*. One offshoot of the 'Udhri *ghazal* is the so-called courtly *ghazal*, which shares many of the topoi with the 'Udhri narrative but denotes an “ideology of servile love,” in which unrequited love is a sign of

identification with a courtly group.³² Both categories of love influenced the development of early Sufi poetry, and the symbolic worldview of the Sufis facilitated the proliferation of these topoi.³³ Umayyad and early Abbasid love poetry was frequently quoted in Sufi *akhbār*, as the following examples from *K. al-Amthāl wa-l-istishādāt* demonstrate:

I heard Ahmad b. 'Alī b. Ja'far say: When Murta'ish was asked about Sufism he said: "Sufism is ambiguity and disguise." He chanted:

سُرِّي وَسُرِّي لَا يَعْلَمُ بِهِ أَحَدٌ إِلَّا الْخَلِيلُ وَلَا يُنْطِقُ بِهِ نَاطِقٌ

My secret and your secret, no one knows it
But the friend and no one else speaks of it

He then chanted:

إِذَا جِئْتُ فَاصْبِرْ طَرَفَ عَيْنَيْكَ غَيْرِنَا لَكِي يَحْسِبُونَ أَنَّ الْهُوَى حَيْثُ نَظَرُ

If you return, cast your eye on someone else
So that our tribe will think you love another³⁴

Both lines tackle the topic of secrecy among the lovers to protect them from blame and envy, relatives and enemies. The second line is by the Hijāzī love poet 'Umar b. Abī Rabī'a, and in it the beloved takes an active role and asks for concealment and secrecy.³⁵

We now turn attention to the 'Udhri *ghazal*. Consider the following anecdote from *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl*:

I heard al-Ḥusayn b. Ahmad al-Rāzī say: I heard al-Shiblī say: from your perspective, am I not a madman and you sound of mind? May God increase me in madness, and you in sanity. He suddenly proclaimed:

قَالُوا لَجِنْتِ بِمَنْ تَهْوَى قَلْبُكَ لِهِمْ مَا لَذَّةُ الْعَشِيقِ إِلَّا لِلْمَجَانِينِ

They say you have gone mad for the one you love
I replied, It is only the mad who know the pleasure of love

He also chanted:

يَعِي جَمْرُ الْهُوَى وَمَا يَبِي جَنُونَ وَجَنُونَ الْهُوَى جَمْرُونَ الْجَنُونَ

I have madness of passion, no madness
And madness of passion is the madness of madness!³⁶

The dominant theme in the last two lines is madness. In Sufism, we encounter the suffering of the lover and his wish for redemption in death, the *fanā'*. In this type of *ghazal*, the Sufi describes how love itself is his affliction. As in the 'Udhri *ghazal*, the focus is not the object of love but the suffering of the lover. The prototype here, Majnūn Laylā, had no need for the sensual reality of his beloved. The suffering shows that his love for God is unconditional. The faithful lover enjoys the affliction that God sends while remaining totally obedient to Him. Laylā often appears in this context as a symbol for the divinity. The following epigram from *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl* serves as an example for the evocation of her symbolism in Sufism:

Many a person finds comfort in his heart and strength in his eyes when he sees his beloved. How many a woman confined to her home [*mukhad-dara*], not used to embellishment [*tabarruj*], going out, and coming into view, when her little child [*waladuhā l-qalāsh*] gets lost, she goes after him. If someone tells her: You have changed your habit and came to this place! She would reply: My trial [*balā'*] is here! He chanted:

وَقَسْتُ لِلَّيْلِ بِالْمَلَا بَعْدَ هَجْمَةِ أَرَأَيْتَهَا فَانْهَيْتِ الْعَيْنُ تَدْمَعُ
وَأَتَّبِعُ لَيْلِي حَيْثُ سَارَتْ وَوَدَّعْتُ وَمَا النَّاسُ إِلَّا أَلْفٌ وَمَوْجٌ
كَأَنَّ زَمَانًا فِي الْفُؤَادِ مُتَمَلِّقًا تَقْرُبُ بِهِ حَيْثُ اسْتَمَرَّتْ وَأَتَّبِعُ

I woke up to appear before Laylā in a crowd
Observing her, the eye burst into tears
I follow Laylā wherever she goes
People are of two kinds: a lover and another bidding farewell
As if I have put around my heart a leash
Laylā drags it and I follow³⁷

Panegyric (*madīḥ*)

The panegyric is among the most enduring elements in Arabic literature. In the panegyric *qasīda*, we find the sociopolitical role of literature in Muslim culture. *Madīḥ*, in the words of Beatrice Gruendler, “fulfilled a twofold role as a ruler’s commemorative portrayal and as an occasion for him to practice Patronage.”³⁸ The panegyric *qasīda* often dwells on the complex relation between the poet and the patron. It acts as a pact and names the duties of both. The poet offers his devotion, loyalty, gratitude, service, and words in return for material tokens of generosity. In Sufism, the poet stands in the presence of the ultimate giver, the most perfect of patrons. In *K. al-Amthāl wa-l-istikhādāt*, we encounter, for example, these lines by Abū Tammām, originally in praise of the caliph al-Mu‘taṣim (r. 218/833–227/842); they emphasize the unusual generosity of the patron, a favorite motif in panegyric poetry from pre-Islamic times.³⁹

I heard ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad of Damascus saying:

I once was attending the study circle of Shibli in the mosque of Medina, when a beggar approached.

The beggar said, “Oh God, Oh most Generous!”

Shibli groaned and then shouted, “How can I describe the Truth [viz. God] by generosity, when His creature says concerning His form:

تَعَوَّدَ بِسَطِّ الْكَفِّ حَتَّى لَوْ أَنَّهُ شَآهَا لَقَمِيصٍ لَمْ تُجِيبِهِ أَنَامِلُهُ
تَرَاهُ إِذَا مَا حِجَّتَهُ مَتَهَلَّلَا كَأَنَّكَ تَطْطِئُهُ الَّذِي أَتَتْ سَائِلُهُ
وَلَوْ لَمْ يَكُنْ فِي كَفِّهِ غَيْرُ رُوحِهِ لِحَاجَةٍ بِهِ فَلْيَتَّقِ اللَّهَ آيَمَلُهُ
هُوَ الْبَحْرُ مِنْ أَيْ التَّوَّاحِي أَيَّتَهُ فَلْيُتَّقِ الْمَعْرُوفَ وَالْجَدُّ سَائِلُهُ

The opening of the hand was his custom

Were he to close it in a fist, his fingers would not obey.

When you visit him, he appears radiant

As if you had given him the very thing you desired.

Had there been something else in his hand besides his lifeblood

He would have generously given it. Let the one who hopes for his reward fear God!

For he is the ocean, from any side you approach.

His depths are goodness, while generosity is but its shore.⁴⁰

The Wine Song (*khamriyya*)

Wine poetry is a legacy from pre-Islamic times. The wine song flourished in the Abbasid age in the poems of Abū Nuwās, the most important Arabic wine poet of all times. In his wine songs, we find the motifs of the journey toward the wine house or monastery, the rebuke for drinking, detailed descriptions of wine and its effects, the wine *majlis*, the cupbearer, and the boon companions. The consumption of wine is often likened to a wedding, and wine itself is the bride. In these poems, wine is associated with Christian monks, Jewish merchants, and the Zoroastrian community. As early as Abū Nuwās, we can see the idealization and sometimes the abstraction of wine. It is remarkable how often Abū Nuwās is quoted in the Sufi tradition. That which is most profane is transformed into that which is most sacred. Wine is linked to intoxication or drunkenness; it refers to spiritual love or divine knowledge. The cup is the Sufi’s heart; the cupbearer is often God or the prophet, the source of knowledge. Two lines attributed to Ibn Shibl al-Baghdādī (d. 473/1080–81), Ibn Durayd (321/933), or Idrīs b. al-Yamān (d. 450/1058–59)⁴¹ in *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl* describe the lightness of wine and its transformative effect:

He was asked: Why is the dead body heavier than the live one?

He chanted:

تَقَلَّتْ رِجَالُجَانِحَاتِنَا فَرِيحًا حَتَّى إِذَا مُلِفَتْ نَصْرَبُ الرِّيحِ
خَفَّتْ فَكَادَتْ نَسْطِيرُ بِمَا حَوَتْ إِنْ الْجِسْمُ خَفَّتْ بِالْأَرْوَاحِ

The empty bottles arrived heavy

When we filled them with the pure wine

They weighed less and almost flew with their content

Bodies become lighter when souls inhabit them.⁴²

In Sufi poetics, all the devices of the classical model are still there, but they have been transformed into something very different, whether in

the Sufi beatific audition (*samāʿ*) or in the Sufi *khābar*. As we have seen in the anecdote about Samnūn, there were those who disapproved of the use of poetry itself.⁴³ Moreover, not everyone accepted this metaphorical use of the motifs and topoi of classical poetry. Consider the following anecdote from *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl*:

He said: one *faqīr* heard a singer chanting:

يقولون لي بالعراق مريضة فأقبلت من مصر إليها أعوذها

They say Laylā is in Iraq and is sick

I came from Egypt to visit her

The *faqīr* stood and displayed ecstatic behavior. A common man asked: “Who is Laylā to him?” People told him: “There is no relation [*qarāba*] between them; this is a coining of a likeness [*darb mathal*].” The man then insulted and beat him.⁴⁴

Yet, to the Sufis, these earlier poets are the Sufis’ predecessors, their prototypes. The courtly motifs and topoi refer to the human experience of the divine or to the memory of it. The same motifs are also a reminder of past poets who have stood in the same position. The poetic past gives meaning and justifies the present. This transformation reaches its zenith in Arabic in the poetry of Ibn ‘Arabī, with whom we will conclude this chapter:

وإذ بدعي والرباب وزنيب وهدي وسلمى ثم ليلى وزرع⁴⁵

Call out to Da’d and Rabāb, Zaynab and Hind,

Salmā and Lubnā then listen⁴⁶

أدين بدين الحب أتى توهمت
ركايبه فالحب ديني وإيماني⁴⁷
لنا أسوة في بشر هدي وأختها
وقيس وليلى ثم مي وغيلاني

I profess the religion of love.

Wherever its caravan turns along the way, that is the belief, the faith I keep.

Like Bishr of Hind and her sister, love-mad Qays and the lost Laylā, Mayya and her lover Ghaylān.⁴⁸

NOTES

1. Orfali and Saab, *Sufism*, 338.
2. For a detailed survey of this period, see Karamustafa, *Sufism*.
3. Such chapters can be found, for example, in *Kitāb l-Ta’arruf li-madhhab ahli al-taṣawwuf* (Introducing the way of the people of Sufism) by al-Kalabādhī (d. 380 or 384 / 990 or 994); *Al-Lumaʿ* (Book of flashes) by al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988); *Tāhkhīb al-asrār* (Refining the secrets) by Khargūshī (d. 407/1016); the famous treatise on Sufism by Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074); the recently published *Sahwat al-ʿarifīn* (The comfort of the mystics) by Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabari (d. ca. 470/1077); and of special importance because of its heavy use of poetry, *K. al-Bayāḍ wa-l-sawād* (Book of black and white) of Abū l-Ḥasan al-Sīrjānī (d. ca. 470/1077). There are at least two anthologies that were solely dedicated to the use of poetry as a *mathal* (example) or *shāhid* (illustration, witness) in early Sufism: (1) *K. al-Amthāl wa-l-istishādāt* (Book of examples and poetic illustrations) by Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021); and (2) *Kitāb al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl* (Book of poetic illustrations and examples) by Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī (465/1072). For *Kitāb al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl*, see Chiabotti, “Spiritual and Physical Progeny”; and Shahsavari, “Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī.”
4. Prosimetrum is a widespread phenomenon in Arabic literature but one that is surprisingly little studied. For examples and some functions of poetry within prose narratives, see Heinrichs, “Prosimetrical Genres”; Heinrichs, “Function(s) of Poetry.”
5. *Samāʿ* is relatively well studied in modern scholarship. Most of the studies are concerned with the permissibility and/or practice of *samāʿ*, its rituals, and the instruments employed in it. For example, see Klein, “Music, Rapture and Pragmatics”; Gribetz, “*Samāʿ* Controversy”; Michon, “Sacred Music and Dance”; Avery, *Psychology of Early Sufi Samāʿ Listening*; Lewisohn, “Sacred Music of Islam.” See also the primary and secondary sources listed in these articles.
6. This is evident, for example, in Sulamī, *K. al-Samāʿ*; Pourjavady, “Dū athar-i kuban dar samāʿ.” Sarrāj offers a detailed treatment of the phenomenon in his chapter on *samāʿ* with a separate section on its permissibility (*bāb fi wasf samāʿ al-tamma wa-ibāḥāt dhālika laḥur*) and another on those who disapproved of it (*bāb fi man kariha l-samāʿ*); see Sarrāj, *K. al-Lumaʿ*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (Leiden: Brill, 1914), 267–314. Sīrjānī in his *Kitāb al-Bayāḍ wa-l-sawād* includes a chapter on listening to music, its permissibility, and its prohibitions (*bāb ihbāt al-samāʿ wa-l-radd ʿalā man yunkiruh*); see Orfali and Saab, *Sufism*, 340–42.
7. Sarrāj (followed by Qushayrī, Sīrjānī, and Tabarī) relates a story of Abū Ḥusayn al-Darrāj’s (d. 320/932) meeting with Yūsuf b. al-Ḥusayn al-Rāzī (d. 304/916–17). Yūsuf weeps at the recital of a verse of secular poetry after a whole morning’s

recital of the Qur'an had failed to elicit any response from him; see Sarrāj, *K. al-Lum'a*, 291. Sarrāj justifies this by stating that human passions ought not to be satisfied by melodic recitation of the Qur'an. Rather, these passions are better served by poetry, which, in its very nature, has an affinity to human sensitivities and is better able to arouse human passions. See Avery, *Psychology of Early Sufi Samā'*, 18–19; Sarrāj, *K. al-Lum'a*, 283–85.

Later, Ghazālī in his detailed chapter on *samā'* in *Ihyā' ulūm al-dīn* acknowledges the preference of poetry in *samā'* sessions over the Qur'an and gives seven reasons for the effectiveness of sung poetry in producing rapture (*wajd*): (1) correspondence to listeners' states, (2) novelty, (3) meter, (4) musical modes and rendition, (5) percussion instruments in *ghinnā'*, (6) author's intent, (7) the Qur'an as a divine attribute. See a detailed discussion of Ghazālī's argument in Klein, "Music, Rapture and Pragmatics," 234–37.

8. Orfali and Saab, *Sufism*, 348. Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 396; Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, 509; Böwering and Orfali, *Comfort of the Mystic*, 281.

9. Sulamī, *K. al-Samā'*, 81. See also Orfali and Saab, *Sufism*, 342.

10. *Al-samā' min haythu l-mustamī'*. See Sulamī, *K. al-Samā'*, 81. See also Orfali and Saab, *Sufism*, 342.

11. Sarrāj, *K. al-Lum'a*, 277–83. For Ghazālī's different states of listeners, see Klein, "Music, Rapture and Pragmatics," 226–28.

12. Sulamī, *Rasā'il ṣūfiyya*, 88.

13. Ghazālī writes, "Any verse can be applied to carry [any] meaning, and this according to the depth of the listener's knowledge and the pureness of his heart."

See Ghazālī, *Ihyā' ulūm al-dīn*, 359. The quotation and translation are from Klein, "Music, Rapture and Pragmatics," 228.

14. See Frishkompf, "Authorship in Sufi Poetry." Frishkompf speaks of an "inter-author" and an "inter-text" to describe the collaborative assignment of meaning in poetic practices in *samā'*.

15. Orfali and Saab, *Sufism*, 367; Böwering and Orfali, *Comfort of the Mystic*, 286; Sarrāj, *K. al-Lum'a*, 186, 290; Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, 513. Translation is adapted with changes from Knysh, *Al-Qushayrī's Epistle*, 350–51.

16. Al-Ṭṭahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 23–45.

17. Sulamī's life and works have been examined in Böwering, "Qur'an Commentary of al-Sulamī"; the editors' introduction to Sulamī, *Rasā'il ṣūfiyya*, 9–20; and Tibbon, *Œuvre d'Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī*.

18. For the career of Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī's sons in general and the career of Abū Naṣr in particular, see Chiabotti, "Spiritual and Physical Progeny," 47–60; Shahsavari, "Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī," 279–95. The text of *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl* occupies folios 2a–137a of MS Ayasofya 4128; for the authorship of the text, see Chiabotti, "Spiritual and Physical Progeny," 57–60. It should be noted that there is a problem with the folio order in the manuscript. Fol. 93a does not follow fol. 92b;

fol. 96a does not follow 95b; fol. 105a does not follow fol. 104b; fol. 115a does not follow fol. 114b; fol. 125a does not follow fol. 124b; and fol. 137a does not follow fol. 136b.

19. See the editors' introduction to *Rasā'il ṣūfiyya*, 26. See also the various usages of the word *shāhid* in *ṭafīr* and Sufi literature in Chiabotti, "Spiritual and Physical Progeny," 60–64, 69–70.

20. See Sulamī, *Rasā'il ṣūfiyya*, 87.

21. Fakhreddīne, "Defining Metapoesis," 205. See also Wälleké, *Discriminations*, 261–63.

22. Fakhreddīne, "Defining Metapoesis," 206.

23. Renate Jacobi points to the transformation of the desert *qaṣīda* from a Bedouin poem to a court poem toward the end of the sixth century under the influence of panegyric. See Jacobi, "Carnel-Section," 13. On the history of the *nasīb*, see Hamori, *Art of Medieval Arabic Literature*, 16–19.

24. For the *aḥlāl* motif and its relation to *nasīb* and *madīh*, see Spertl, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*, 9–27.

25. See the discussion on this change in the nature of the *qaṣīda* in Fakhreddīne, "Defining Metapoesis," 211–18.

26. Stetkevych, *Abū Tammām*, 34.

27. Sulamī, *Rasā'il ṣūfiyya*, 96.

28. For a detailed treatment of the subject of *al-ḥarīm ila l-awṭān* in pre-modern Arabic literature, see al-Qāḍī, "Dislocation and Nostalgia"; Müller, "Al-Ḥarīm ila l-awṭān"; Arazī, "Al-ḥarīm ila l-awṭān"; see also the editors' introduction to Tha'ālibī, *Zād safar al-muḥibb*.

29. It is worth noting that the Abbasid *qaṣīda* significantly reduced the *raḥīl* section; see Jacobi, "Carnel-Section," 44–19.

30. See Spertl, *Mannerism*, 9–10; for the opinions of pre-modern critics on the coherence of the *qaṣīda* and the relation of its parts, see Gelder, *Beyond the Line*, 23–67, and especially relevant is the opinion of Ibn Qutayba, 42–46.

31. Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī, *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl*, MS Ayasofya 4128, f. 22r. The first line is by al-Mutanabbī; see Tha'ālibī, *Yātimat al-dahr fī maḥāsin ahl al-'aṣr*, 1:155.

32. See Bauer, *Liebe und Liebesdichtung*, 59.

33. See Kuntze, "Love and God."

34. Sulamī, *Rasā'il ṣūfiyya*, 100.

35. 'Umar b. Abī Rabi'a, *Diwān 'Umar b. Abī Rabi'a*, 189.

36. Sulamī, *Rasā'il ṣūfiyya*, 104–5. Both lines are attributed to Ibn al-Mu'tazz; see Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Diwān ash'ar al-amr Abī l-'Abbās 'Abdillāh Ibn Muḥammad al-Mu'tazz*, 428; and Ibn Ḥabīb al-Naysābūrī, *Uqalā' al-majānīn*, 27.

37. Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī, *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl*, f. 24r. See Qays b. al-Mulawwāh, *Diwān Majmūn Laylā*, 146–47.

38. Gruendler, *Medieval Arabic Praise Poetry*, 229.

39. Muḥammad b. Yahyā al-Ṣūlī, *Sharḥ al-Ṣūfī li-Diwan Abī Tammām*, 203.

40. Sulamī, *Rasā'il ṣūfiyya*, 98–99.

41. The two lines are attributed to Idrīs b. al-Yamān in Ibn Dīḥya al-Kalbī, *Al-Muṭṭarīb min ash'ār ahl al-Maghrib*, 197; to Ibn Durayd in al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, 31084. Ibn Shīblī al-Baghdādī in al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, 31084.
42. Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī, *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl*, f. 5r.
43. See also Bowering and Orfali, *Comfort of the Mystics*, 279.
44. Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī, *K. al-Shawāhid wa-l-amthāl*, f. 63v.
45. Ibn 'Arabī, *Turjumān al-ashwāq*, 23.
46. Translation is taken from Sells, *Stations of Desire*, 56–57.
47. Ibn 'Arabī, *Turjumān al-ashwāq*, 44.
48. Sells, *Stations of Desire*, 73 (with modification).

Chaste Lovers, Umayyad Rulers, and Abbasid Writers

JOCELYN SHARLET

Stories of Umayyad-era chaste love affairs, which appear in conjunction with poetry about chaste love, play an important role in Abbasid-era literature. These stories of chaste love are a performance of individual identity in the context of family, tribal, and court authority. In addition, they contribute to the development of Abbasid-era poetry and prose literature on unrequited love, fulfillment in love, courtly love, love theory, and mysticism, which in turn influence these kinds of literature in other languages of the Middle East, the Mediterranean region, and later in South Asia. Abbasid writers record chaste love stories that become canonical as well as a range of other chaste love stories that display noncanonical features. The canonical chaste love stories are viewed as a performance of individual identity that revolves around chaste, obsessive love and resistance to family, tribal, and court authority. Chaste love stories that display noncanonical features, which are the focus of this chapter, are a performance of individual identity through chaste, obsessive love and diverse trajectories of power and desire, as well as different literary modes and registers. Writers display the diversity of these other stories in part through comparisons to the canonical chaste love stories. I discuss these noncanonical chaste love stories using the examples of the stories of Kuthayyir, Laylā al-Akhyaliyya, Waḍḍāḥ al-Yaman, Qays b. Dharrīḥ, Sallāma, and Sulaymān b. 'Abd al-Malik.

Chaste love is known as “Udhri love” in Arabic, after the 'Udhra tribe of eastern Arabia, which became famous for chaste love in the first centuries of Islam under the Umayyads (661–750), who were based mainly in Damascus, by way of literature written under the Abbasids (750–1258), who were based mainly in Baghdad.¹ Although not recorded until Abbasid times, it is clear that there was a core of poetry from Umayyad times from which this literature about Umayyad lovers developed.²