

Conclusion

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The Man of Our Times—most likely a pseudonym for Muḥammad b. Dāwūd—wrote poems short enough to be shared for entertainment at social gatherings among peers, yet rich enough with complex literary references to be studied and analyzed extensively. The poems are a celebration of an intense emotional attachment between two educated men in ‘Abbāsīd Baghdad, a relationship the poems often refer to as “brotherhood” (*ikhā*), among other terms for love and friendship. Whether through brief pieces of correspondence and wise aphorisms or through slightly longer poems with a more developed setting and narrative, the “Man of Our Times” poems never stray far from their central purpose of describing and prescribing an idealized friendship between two males—one based on justice, loyalty, morality, and erudition, yet characterized by such emotional depth and intensity as to summon the tropes of *ghazal*.

The “Man of Our Times” poems seem to indicate that judicious esteem for a friend who is one’s social equal and painfully passionate love for an unattainable beloved can exist in the same interpersonal relationship. They are just one of the many bodies of writing in Classical Arabic literature to which modern scholars have thus far devoted very little attention. The attitudes toward male-male love prevalent in Arabic speaking societies in the ‘Abbāsīd era and the centuries preceding and following it were not monolithic, and the “Man of Our Times” poems represent one of many diverse perspectives on the subject.

This study, the first in English devoted to the unity and diversity of the “Man of Our Times” poems in the first half of *Kitāb al-Zahrah*, showcases just one of the many reasons that Ibn Dāwūd’s anthology warrants continued attention from scholars. It sheds light on one small corner of the vast world of Arabic poetry that exists beyond the works of the most famous poets of the most famous eras, a world of poets whose names and pseudonyms are not immediately familiar to modern audiences but that offers sumptuous rewards to readers in the form of artistic styles, insights into the concerns of the poets’ eras, and reflections on the nature of friendship and love.

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It’s All Just Poetry: Writing ‘Umar ibn Abī Rabī‘ah’s Life

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Abstract

The relationship between poetry and the poet’s life is complex, and reading a poem for biographical material can become a problematic exercise that constrains a poem’s interpretative possibilities. When writing about ‘Umar ibn Abī Rabī‘ah (d. 93AH/712AD or 103/721), biographers and historians have shown a marked ambivalence in this regard. In early anecdotal narratives about his life and romantic adventures, events appear to derive their source material from episodes found in his poetry, whereas in later biographies of the poet, the poems tend to be understood as depicting emotional and symbolic truths, even if the events described did not actually happen. In either method of writing about ‘Umar’s life, the biographer finds the poet’s life story and persona to be filled with contradictions that are difficult to resolve. The embedding of poetry into anecdotes that narrate the poet’s life (in the form of events or emotional truths) resembles the *tafsīr* of the Qur’an through the Prophetic *sīrah*, in which Qur’anic verses are explained through the cementing of the text’s open-ended hermeneutic possibilities into fixed events and contexts. This article examines this relationship as a textual practice evolving through different biographies of the poet, and argues that the relationship points to a way of reading that presupposes a measure of extra-textual reality in the text, even where such a presupposition constructs an impossible biographical narrative replete with contradictions.

Keywords

‘Umar ibn Abī Rabī‘ah – Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī – metabiography – poetry – *akhbār* – *tafsīr* – *asbāb al-nuzūl*

