

# THE QORAN AND JOCLAR LITERATURE

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THE Ḥanbalite theologian and traditionary Ibn al-Ġawzī in his entertaining study on stupid people (*Aḥbār al-Ḥamqā wal-muġaffalīn*) on the authority of a certain Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥarbī<sup>1</sup> relates the following anecdote:

Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥaṣīb was stupid (*aḥmaq*). He owned a donkey, and whenever the people at night provided their steeds with a nosebag, he would take his donkey's nosebag, recite above it the qoranic verse: «Say: He is God, One.» (Q 112:1).<sup>2</sup> Then he would attach the empty bag to the animal while remarking: “May God curse anybody who thinks that a measure (*kaylaġā*) of barley is better than the verse «Say: He is God, One».” He continued to do so until his donkey died, whereupon he exclaimed: “By God, I never would have thought that the verse «Say: He is God, One» kills donkeys! By God, I am sure it is even more lethal for humans, so I will not recite it again as long as I live!”<sup>3</sup>

This anecdote is the Islamicized version of a joke first attested in the post-classical Greek collection *Philogelos* where it is mentioned that an egghead (*scholastikos*) wanted to teach his donkey not to eat anything at all, so he did not supply it with fodder. When the donkey had starved to death, the stupid man remarked: “What a pity. Just as it had learned

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<sup>1</sup> Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥarbī is also mentioned in al-Ḥuṣrī, *Ġamʿ al-ġawāhir*, ed. ʿA. M. al-Biġāwī, Cairo, 1372/1953, p. 195 (two anecdotes, the second anecdote of which is quoted in Ulrich Marzolph, *Arabia ridens, Die humoristische Kurzprosa der frühen adab-Literatur im internationalen Traditionsgewebe*, I-II, Frankfurt am Main, 1992, at vol. 2, no. 501).

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from the Qoran follow the translation by Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, [London 1955] Oxford (1964) 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Aḥbār al-Ḥamqā wal-muġaffalīn*, ed. K. al-Muḏaffar, 147; see Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, II, no. 674, quoting one earlier version in at-Tauḥīdī, *al-Baṣāʿir*, ed. W. al-Qāḍī, IV, p. 110, no. 354; cf. also *Arabia ridens*, II no. 973 (“Do not tell the horse I allowed you to feed it!”).

<sup>4</sup> The English translation follows Andreas Thierfelder, *Philogelos: Der Lachfreund, von Hierokles und Philagrios*, Griechisch-deutsch mit Einleitungen und Kommentar heraus-

not to eat anything at all, it died!”<sup>4</sup> The anecdote continued to be popular in the oral tradition of various European regions until the twentieth century,<sup>5</sup> but the European versions differ decisively from the quoted Arabic version: The butt of the European versions clearly is the stupid man who does not feed his donkey at all and still expects it to live and work. The Islamicized version in general follows this outline, but it adds another ingredient: After all, the donkey is being fed—even if “only” by oral recitation—a qoranic verse. So, in some ways, the target of the joke has shifted, from the obvious stupidity of an interchangeable simpleton who ignores a basic presupposition of animal life to a more specific situation, resulting in a punchline that risks insinuating the conscious discrediting of the Muslim scripture.

But does the anecdote really make fun of the Qoran? Does it degrade the Muslim scripture to a mere requisite sharing the absurdity of the anecdote’s protagonist? Is the anecdote about the man who fed his donkey a qoranic verse an “anti-qoranic” anecdote? The obvious answer to these questions is: No, certainly not. Any consideration of humor about the Qoran from a Muslim point of view is strictly out of question and Ibn al-Ğauzī would certainly not have included any such anecdote in his collection. Joking about God and His divine revelation is blasphemy, and people daring to do so would be regarded as apostates in a way similar to the British Muslim author Salman Rushdie being condemned for satirizing the prophet Moħammad in his 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>6</sup> The relevant passage in Rushdie’s book does not, by the way, necessarily derive from his own imagination. Already in 1767, Frances Sheridan in his *Nourjahad*, a moral tale in the Oriental mode,

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gegeben, München 1968, no. 9; see also Barry Baldwin, *The Philogelos or Laughter-Lover*, Translated with an Introduction and Commentary, Amsterdam, 1983, no. 9; Ulrich Marzolph, “Philogelos arabikos: Zum Nachleben der antiken Witzesammlung in der mittelalterlichen arabischen Literatur,” *Der Islam*, 64 (1987) 185-230, at p. 198 f.

<sup>5</sup> See references in Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale, A Classification and Bibliography*, translated and enlarged by Stith Thompson, second revision, Helsinki 1973, no. 1862; Ulrich Marzolph, “Pferd fasten lehren,” *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, X (in print).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Daniel Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West*, New York, 1990; Z. Sardar, M. W. Davies, *Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair*, London, Kuala Lumpur, 1990. The indigenous Iranian discussion on Imam Khomeini’s fatwa has not been taken account of adequately in the Western debate. For instance, it would be deserving to analyze the Persian “bestseller” (until 1995 seven editions with a total of about 35,000 copies) written by ‘Aṭā’ollāh Mohāġerāni, *Naqd va touṭe’e-ye Āyāt-e šeiṭāniye*, Teheran (1368/1989) 71373/1994. Mohāġerāni in the new government headed by Khāṭami since 1997 is head of the Ministry of culture and Islamic guidance (farhang va eršād-e eslāmi).

had his hero plan a “blasphemous party in which youthful and ravishing members of his harem [were] to impersonate the wives of the Prophet”.<sup>7</sup>

Acknowledging the fact that joking about the Qoran is out of question, from a contemporary Western perception of the Islamic world it moreover appears highly improbable that the Qoran might be mentioned anywhere near to jocular expression. According to Muslim belief, the Qoran is the word of God, and it is difficult to imagine the holy scripture of Islam to be connected with humor in any way whatsoever, be it humor in the Qoran, about the Qoran, or humor employing the Qoran in any jocular context.

Humor is a complex human characteristic to which no strict definitions apply.<sup>8</sup> Franz Rosenthal in his comprehensive study of the Ash‘ab legend has defined humor as being connected “with the relief felt at the momentary lifting of one of the many restrictions which the physical and social environment imposes upon”<sup>9</sup> humanity. This holds true, yet in order to constitute humor, the said “momentary lifting” has to be achieved in a specific, i.e., a humorist or jocular way. Moreover, whatever people originating from different social or cultural contexts experience as humorous or funny varies greatly. Besides, the physical reaction of different individuals might range anywhere between a ludicrous laughter and a dignified smile. In order to incorporate all different aspects of humor as a human quality, jocular literature in the following shall be understood in a fairly general way as the detached representation of poignant resolutions to conflicts.

The conflicts treated in the anecdote about the simpleton feeding his donkey a qoranic verse are, at least, twofold: The primary conflict consists in the simpleton’s action contradicting both reason and human experience. A secondary conflict exists in the fool regarding oral recitation possessing a nutritional quality. Yet the fool does not recite a passage of any random work deemed beneficial by him, such as the foolish jeweler Ibn al-Ġaṣṣāṣ, who continuously touched the books of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal in order to receive their blessing—and when challenged about his attitude towards to the Qoran, replied: “(The Qoran might

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<sup>7</sup> See Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, Harmondsworth, 1994, 245 sq.

<sup>8</sup> Rainer Wehse, «Humor», *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, VI, Berlin/New York, 1990, cols. 1312-1317.

<sup>9</sup> Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam*, Leiden/Philadelphia, 1956 (reprint Westport, Conn. 1976), p. 1.

be as good), yet this I know by experience!”<sup>10</sup> In this anecdote as well as in the one currently discussed, the Qoran forms an integral part of the conflicts represented on various levels, one of them being the social conflict resulting from the Qoran’s constant presence in the Islamic community as well as from its role as the major legal source for settling debates and solving questions of everyday life. This last aspect also forms the focus of an anecdote in which a stupid judge is to decide about a crime for which no specific punishment (*ḥadd manṣūṣ*, *ḥukm mā’rūf*) is mentioned in the Qoran: Since the assembled *fuqahā* collectively (*bi-iğmā’ihim*) leave the decision up to him, he decides to resort to the Qoran as a source of inspiration. As the passage he eventually opens at random reads «We shall brand him upon the muzzle (*ḥartūm*)!» (Q 68:16), he decrees to cut the culprit’s nose and let him go.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, classical Arabic literature obviously does not adhere to rigid restrictions excluding the Qoran from being bordered by humor but rather regards it as permissible to include the Qoran in jokes and anecdotes. Before proceeding to discuss the further connections between the Qoran and jocular literature as well as representations and uses of the Qoran in jocular texts, it might be useful to cast a short glance on the neighboring topic whether the Qoran itself knows and contains humor.

The issue of humor in the Qoran pertains to the general discussion whether scripture can contain humor. In the Islamic case, the debate moreover implies the question whether God has a sense of humor. Considering God’s omnipotence, any dogmatic dispute as for His general capacity to experience and express humor appears irrelevant, and in fact anthropomorphic imagery as attested in the ḥadīth has elaborated this trait of God’s nature without clinging to strict dogmatic restraints.<sup>12</sup> A sensitive reading of the qoranic text reveals passages which are not devoid of a certain humorous element. Mustansir Mir has attempted to show “that the Qoran does not regard humor as a contraband item”.<sup>13</sup> Presenting a number of instances, Mir argues that humor in the Qoran is used to convey a religious insight or elucidate

<sup>10</sup> Ulrich Marzolph, «Die Quelle der Ergötzlichen Erzählungen des Bar Hebräus», *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985), 81-125, at p. 108; Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, II, no. 1002.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn al-Ğauzī, *Aḥbār al-Ḥamqā*, p. 95.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Gimaret, *Dieu à l'image de l'homme, Les anthropomorphismes de la sunna et leur interprétation par les théologiens*, Paris, 1997, pp. 265-279.

<sup>13</sup> Mustansir Mir, «Humor in the Qur’ān», *Muslim World*, 81 (1991), 179-193, at p. 181.

a theological teaching and mainly serves the purposes of characterization. The example Mir discusses in most detail is the episode of Moses being called to prophethood and his inability to understand the implication of this act: When God asks about his staff, he gives a straightforward answer attempting to be exhaustive about the uses of his staff, while failing to recognize that God is about to reveal to him a miracle (Q 20:17-21). According to Mir, the contrast between the supposed and the real implied in this episode might be understood to contain humor. In a similar vein, Mir discusses a number of passages (Q 20:18, 18:60-64, 18:65-82, 7:43, 74:18-25, 33:20, 47:20, 9:127, 19:3-86:75-83, 37:91-92), ultimately extracting various techniques in which humor in the Qoran is accomplished. Considering the initially quoted general definition of humor as the detached representation of poignant resolutions to conflicts, God, no doubt, shows a certain albeit modest humorous spirit in the Qoran, both in acting Himself and in the way His words portray the relevant action.

In this respect, it might also be useful to remember the fact that the prophet Moḥammad, to whom the Qoran was revealed, was quite a humorous person himself. He is known to have taken particular pleasure in playing funny pranks to his contemporaries, occasionally laughing so intensely that his molar teeth showed.<sup>14</sup> In the fundamentalist debate of subsequent centuries about the permissibility of laughter, his example has repeatedly served as a strong argument in favor of a humorous approach to the inevitable shortcomings of human existence.<sup>15</sup> Whether or not Moḥammad's character is related to the factual existence of a humorous notion in the Qoran is, however, a discussion that Muslim dogma prohibits.

The topic of humor in the Qoran is not a particularly promising area of research. On the other hand, it has already been argued that—as far as classical Arabic literature is concerned—no dogmatic restrictions apply to the Qoran being present in humorous contexts, even at the risk of the Qoran itself becoming the target of jocular distortion. A large body of jocular texts mentions the Qoran as a whole, as well as qoranic verses or short quotations. Given the dominant presence of the Qoran in everyday life of the Muslim individual as well as the

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<sup>14</sup> Rudolph Sellheim, «Das Lächeln des Propheten», in *Festschrift A. Jensen*, Munic, 1964, pp. 621—630.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ulrich Marzolph, «'Erlaubter Zeitvertreib', Die Anekdotensammlungen des Ibn al-Ġauzī», *Fabula* 32 (1991), 165-180; Ludwig Ammann, *Vorbild und Vernunft, Die Regelung von Lachen und Scherzen im mittelalterlichen Islam*, Hildesheim, Zürich, New York, 1993.

Islamic community, it quite naturally partakes in a humorous attitude towards life as depicted in jocular texts and contexts. The following short survey is an attempt to systematize this material and outline according to which considerations it may be analyzed. The data I am relying on are drawn from the archive employed for my study of medieval Arabic jocular prose, of which a substantial account is included in the final publication.<sup>16</sup>

In general, references to the Qoran in a jocular context are made either to the book as a whole, without specifying a particular content, or to specific sūras or verses; both types of reference may occur in two different modes, the point of the relevant anecdote being generated by either clever or foolish behavior respectively. While the first criterion may be regarded as a differentiation of minor significance, the second criterion is decisive for the way the humorist representation of the relevant anecdote is achieved.

Knowledge of the Qoran is one of the essential prerequisites of a good Muslim, and the ability to quote suitable qoranic verses at specific occasions besides demonstrating devotion and piety adds to a person's reputation. In a number of anecdotes about Ṭufaylīs, the Arabic stereotype of the sponger, clever persons in a learned manner employ the quotation of qoranic verses in order to justify their action and achieve material gain.

Thus, the famous Ṭufaylī Bunān relates an anecdote in which he himself is involved. Being invited by a friend to prepare a special dish for him and his companions, at first he proves his authority in foodways by minutely presenting the various ingredients of the dish he prepares as well as the cooking utensils used. Finally all sit down to partake in the dish of 'aṣīda, a thick paste prepared of flour, which is served in a circular mound on a large pan, the inside of the mound being filled with clarified butter (*saman*). No sooner has the dish been served than there starts a competition as for who gets most of the butter, and while the participants quote suitable qoranic verses, they dig ditches into the mound of 'aṣīda in order to make the butter flow towards them. The first one quotes: «Then they shall be pitched into it [. . .]» (Q 86:6), another one: «'What, hast thou made a hole in it so as to drown its passengers? Thou hast indeed done a grievous thing.'» (Q 18:71), yet another one: «[Then We opened the gates of heaven unto water torrential, and made the earth to gush with fountains,] and the waters met for a matter decreed.» (Q 54:12). Finally, Bunān finishes the dish off by quoting: «And it was said, 'Earth, swallow thy waters; and heaven, abate!' And the waters subsided, the affair was accomplished, and the Ark settled on (the mountain) El-Ġūdī.» (Q 11:44). Upon this, everybody laughed heartily, and one of the participants almost choked on a bite of food.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*.

<sup>17</sup> Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, I, 255 sq.; vol. 2, no. 1035.

Ṭufaylīs, it should be remembered, were not simply uninvited guests or party crashers. Rather to the contrary, in Abbasid times many of them were educated people. They were apparently organized in guilds<sup>18</sup> and possessed a solid knowledge of *adab* in the true sense, encompassing traditional knowledge in all essential fields, most of all the Qoran, the ḥadīṭ, and poetry. In this respect, the Arabic ṭufailī represents a worthy successor to the ancient Greek phenomenon of the *kolax*, an educated and tolerated intruder, who more or less earned his permission to stay uninvited by entertaining the party guests.<sup>19</sup> Of course, a Ṭufaylī would predominantly employ his knowledge in order to further his own cause: A Ṭufaylī rushing towards the food justifies his action by quoting the words of Moses: «‘I have hastened, Lord, only that I may please Thee.’» (Q 20:84).<sup>20</sup> Another Ṭufailī, when asked to interpret the verse of sūra *Joseph*: «Enquire of the city wherein we were [. . .]» does this in analogy to the expression: ‘We ate the table of NN’ (*akalnā sufrata fulān*), which of course means: ‘We ate that which was on the table’—and so “the city” would mean “the people of the city”.<sup>21</sup> And Bunān, the master Ṭufaylī, proves his mastery of the Qoran by quoting verses containing the numbers one to twelve in a consecutive order (while receiving the corresponding amount in pieces of Ḥalwā).<sup>22</sup> Besides the dominant example of the Ṭufaylī, few other persons would similarly employ the Qoran in a clever manner. A waylaying brigand, when caught in the times of Naṣr b. Hārūn an-Naṣrānī, the wazīr of ‘Aḍud ad-dawla, justifies his activity by referring to God’s order being more obliging than the ruler’s—and when questioned which order he referred to, quotes the verse: «[. . .] and that He might cut off a part of the unbelievers [. . .]» (Q 3:127).<sup>23</sup> A beggar, who is reproached for begging by quoting qoranic verses, counters the reproach by saying: “If you were as hungry as I am, you would even try to sell Gabriel and Michael!”<sup>24</sup> And a man who is so drunk that he has to be transported home (on a porter’s back, or in a camel-borne litter [*maḥmal*]), is still sober enough to respond to criticism by quoting: «[. . .] and a remnant

<sup>18</sup> See al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī, *at-Tatfīl*, ed. K. al-Muẓaffar.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Otto Ribbeck, *Kolax, Eine ethologische Studie*, 1883.

<sup>20</sup> al-Ābī, *Naṭr ad-durr*, ed. M. ‘A. Qarna e. a., Cairo 1980-91, II, p. 240.

<sup>21</sup> al-Ābī, *Naṭr ad-durr*, II, p. 234.

<sup>22</sup> al-Ābī, *Naṭr ad-durr*, II, p. 251.

<sup>23</sup> al-Ābī, *Naṭr ad-durr*, VII, p. 341.

<sup>24</sup> at-Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣā’ir*, IV p. 42; az-Zamaḥṣarī, *Rabī‘ al-abrār*, ed. S. al-Nu‘aimī, Baghdad 1976-82, II, p. 85.

of what the folk of Moses and Aaron's folk left behind, the angels bearing it» (Q 2:248).<sup>25</sup>

The large bulk of jocular texts, however, does not speak about clever people but rather portrays fools, uneducated or stupid people in their ignorance to recognize the correct wording of qoranic verses: Children learning how to recite the Qoran are ridiculed when misspelling specific words or passages; ignorant grown-ups quote the Qoran incorrectly, give Qoranic wording not verbatim but only in terms of meaning, mix various passages or amplify or correct the Qoranic wording. A large number of jokes deals with people, particularly Bedouins, who regard poetry as part of the Qoran—or at least as deserving to be included in the Qoran. While performing all these silly mistakes, the fools present absurd justifications for their mistakes and often reveal a charmingly naive attitude towards the basic tenets of the Muslim creed.

A specific problem concerning the representation of the Qoran in jocular literature deals with humorous solutions to the dogmatic controversy whether the Qoran should be regarded as eternal or created (*makhlūq*): A bad recitation is followed by the comment that this probably was the created Qoran;<sup>26</sup> if the Qoran is regarded as created, then—as a sophisticated commentator remarks—it must needs be mortal: and he proceeds to express his condolence.<sup>27</sup> In several cases, the expression of a definite legal opinion is consciously evaded by employing a *ḥīla*, such as by the person who holds up his four fingers, stating that “these four”—whereupon he enumerates the Thora, the gospel, the Psalter, and the Qoran—are created.<sup>28</sup>

Many of the jokes and anecdotes involving mention of the Qoran are quite sophisticated, and some actually require an intimate knowledge of the Qoran in order to be appreciated. On the other hand, the most often quoted single verse of the Qoran in the body of jocular texts under consideration is quite a simple pun, playing on the interchangeability of the protagonists denounced in Q 9:97 «The Bedouins are more stubborn in unbelief and hypocrisy [. . .]». This verse is quoted in four different texts:

<sup>25</sup> al-Ābī, *Naṭr ad-durr*, VI, p. 524; Ibn Abī ‘Aun, *al-Aḡwiba al-muskita*, ed. M. ‘A. Aḥmad, Cairo, 1985, p. 161.

<sup>26</sup> al-Ābī, *Naṭr ad-durr*, V, p. 289.

<sup>27</sup> an-Naisābūrī, *‘Uqalā’ al-maḡānīn*, ed. ‘U. al-As‘ad, Beirut, 1987, p. 74, no. 114.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Aḥbār az-Ẓirāf*, ed. M. Baḥr al-‘ulūm, an-Naḡaf, 1967, p. 48.



A Bedouin passed by some Jews and said to them: “Woe upon you! Why don’t you become Muslim? Do you not despise the passage revealed by God in which he satirizes you?” They asked: “You Bedouin! What has God mentioned about us?” And he replied: “(I am referring to) His speech: ‘Certainly the curse of God is upon the Jews’ (*yahūd*)! The Jews are the brothers of the monkeys (*qurūd*)!”<sup>29</sup> They replied: “What He has revealed about the like of you is much worse!” And as he wondered: “What is it?”, they replied: “«The Bedouins are more stubborn in unbelief and hypocrisy [. . .]!»” To which the Bedouin retorted: “My brothers! That’s all lies, both about us and about you!”<sup>30</sup>

When the Kurds entered Baghdad (*madīnat as-salām*) together with Abū l-Hiǧāʿ and passed through the Bāb aṭ-ṭāq, one of the distinguished old merchants remarked: “Are these the ones concerning whom God has said in His book: ‘The Kurds «are more stubborn in unbelief and hypocrisy»?’” Someone remarked to him: “Hey you! God said this concerning «the Bedouins!»” Whereupon the Šeiḥ remarked: “Praise be to God! Since the Kurds are attacking us—should we now speak bad (literally: lie) about the Bedouins?”<sup>31</sup>

Another [Bedouin] heard somebody recite: «The Bedouins are more stubborn in unbelief and hypocrisy [. . .]», so he remarked: “They have reviled us!” Later on (in the same *sūra*) he heard the same person recite: «And some of the Bedouins believe in God and the Last Day.» (Q 9:99) To which he remarked: “Not to bother: First they revile you, then the praise you!”<sup>32</sup>

And finally, Abū Mahdīya is quoted as saying: It was mentioned to me that the verbal abuse (*hiǧāʿ*) of both, Bedouins and unmarried men, is identical. You might as well recite: ‘Unmarried men (*al-aʿzāb*) «are more stubborn in unbelief and hypocrisy [. . .]»’ instead of : «The Bedouins (*al-aʿrāb*)». Unmarried men should not succeed in deceiving you (about their unbelief), even if they keep the fast and pray (regularly).”<sup>33</sup>

Altogether less than 150 items in a researched body of about 5,600 jocular texts or just about 3% deal with or mention the Qoran. Interpreting this figure, one is tempted to belittle the importance of the Qoran as a topic of jocular literature. True, in terms of numbers, there are more popular topics such as the wide field of sexual humor or the ridiculing of marginalized groups, specifically Bedouins. In this respect, the Qoran is not a favorite topic. Yet, the argument is not so much whether the Qoran is a popular butt for jokes, but rather whether it is treated in jokes at all. In this respect, even the comparatively small percentage of jokes mentioning the Qoran may be taken as indicative of an important characteristic of medieval Islamic society. As seen from the angle of jocular literature, medieval Islamic society was quite liberal insofar as a dogmatic interpretation of the basic tenets of Islam is

<sup>29</sup> The footnote in the edition mentions this as a ḥadīṭ (Ibn Māǧa, Buḥārī).

<sup>30</sup> al-Ābī, *Naṭr ad-durr*, VI, p. 475.

<sup>31</sup> al-Ābī, *Naṭr ad-durr*, VII, ed. ‘U. Būǧānmī, Tunis, 1983, p. 240, no. 126 = ed. M. ‘A. Qarna e. a. p. 379.

<sup>32</sup> ar-Rāǧīb al-Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabāʿ*, Beirut 1961, I, p. 140.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn ‘Abdrabbih, *al-Iqd al-farīd*, Beirut (1982), III, p. 488.

concerned—this being an evaluation confirmed by the large number of jokes about drinking, illicit sexual relations and social conduct otherwise contradicting the religious rules. Even if we take into account that jocular literature by virtue of the genre does not render a faithful portrayal of society, it still is impressive to see how tolerant even some of the most sensitive questions were dealt with. Also, one has to be aware of the fact that the body of jocular material as preserved in literature only to a certain extent mirrors anything like oral tradition—many of the jokes in literature possess a rather literary character and appear to be composed for an educated audience. But even so, the huge amount of jokes in classical Arabic literature to a certain extent is bound to reflect oral tradition. This oral tradition according to the theoretical evaluation as analyzed by modern folk narrative research would in turn most likely have been not only more spontaneous, but also more aggressive. In this respect, the jokes from medieval times preserved in literature are but a faint echo of their former reality. Considering these arguments, it may justly be surmised that the social, religious and moral restraints connected with the omnipresence of the Qoran did not prevent the scripture from extending into the jocular sphere, but rather contributed to generating a jocular outlet of which literature has preserved but a comparatively small quantity.