



## “DANGLING LOCKS AND BABEL EYES”

*A Biographical Sketch of Abu Nuwas*  
(c. 757–814)

### *Background and Origins*

Without a shadow of doubt one of the greatest, most versatile and celebrated of classical Arabic poets was the man known fondly during his lifetime – and ever since – by the sobriquet, or Arabic “cognomen”, Abu Nuwas (“He of the Dangling Locks”), a nickname he acquired as a boy or adolescent in Basra in southern Iraq where he grew up. His full name was Abu ‘Ali al-Hasan ibn Hani’ al-Hakami, and while to posterity he is simply Abu Nuwas, his friends and contemporaries addressed him just as often as Abu ‘Ali. He was born in the province of Ahwaz, in the region of Khuzistan (ancient Elam) in south west Persia *circa* 757 CE. Puzzlingly this varies as much as 21 years in the classical sources; but he was in any case well over fifty years of age by the time of his death in the year 814 or 815, following the death of the caliph Muhammad al-Amin, son of Harun al-Rashid (d. 809), in September 813. The consensus is that he was about 59 years of age when he died.

His Persian mother, Jullaban, was a seamstress of modest background (who may also have worked selling bamboo artifacts) and who apparently never mastered the Arabic language. Her house is said to have been a meeting place for singing girls.

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She was widowed around the time of Abu Nuwas's birth, but appears at some point to have remarried, as evidenced by a line of satire directed at Abu Nuwas by one of his nemeses in his later years in Baghdad ("What is your mother doing with that 'Abbas?!"). She outlived her son and Abu Nuwas's paltry estate came into her possession upon his death. It is said he bequeathed her as little as 200 dinars – astonishingly little given his eminence as a poet and the rewards that were probably heaped upon him, sporadically, during his lifetime. Unlike his mother, Abu Nuwas both mastered and crafted the Arabic language as well as any poet ever has and it provided him with a living, but he was also recklessly generous and a hedonist to boot – he suffered materially from the very same impulse that enriched his poetry.

He probably never knew his father, Hani' ibn 'Abd al-Awwal, who had served in the army of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II (d. 750); Hani's grandfather, al-Sabbah, had served Jarrah ibn 'Abdullah al-Hakami, a clan of the south Arabian tribe of Sa'd ibn 'Ashira. This ethnicity is important in that a distinct, quasi-political feature of Abu Nuwas's poetry was his at times pronounced disdain for the northern Arabian tribes. This north-south tribal dichotomy constituted in broad terms a sort of Jets-versus-Sharks enmity in Umayyad and early Abbasid political society. Medieval philologists declared pithily that there were three great poets of the "Yemen" (which stands here for the southern group): Imru' al-Qays, Hassan ibn Thabit (the "court poet" of Muhammad the Prophet) and Abu Nuwas. Significantly, while it may be that Abu Nuwas acquired his sobriquet simply on account of his disheveled appearance, another explanation is that it signals his South Arabian affiliation due to its obvious evocation of the pre-Islamic Yemeni king Dhu Nawas.

The Persian origins of Abu Nuwas's mother, Jullaban, has been significant in discussions about the poet's cultural sympathies. Yet the question of whether or not Abu Nuwas was an Arab or Persian poet *at heart*, is misplaced. He doubtless

considered himself overwhelmingly to be an Arab poet – one firmly set within the Arab tradition; he was simply influenced in a relatively minor key by elements of a Persian ambience, as manifested in his celebrations of Nawruz and in the use of Persian vocabulary and names that pepper some fragments of his verse. Though in early Abbasid society there was an important and vociferous pro-Persian movement of literary figures, Abu Nuwas himself was anything but consistent and probably abhorred the complacency of any trenchant cultural, theological or political view. He could, for example, make fun of Muhra, the mother of his beloved Janan, for her *métier* as a procuress and tie that to her incompetence in Arabic exhibited partly in her use of Persian words – he was caricaturing her for a kind of lewd *déformation professionnelle*. In sum, he simply had a more ethnically diverse background than some of his contemporaries in the Baghdad circle of the early ninth century.

### ***Education***

In his early childhood Abu Nuwas followed his mother to Basra in lower Iraq where he attended Qur'an school. Ahwaz held little promise for a family whose breadwinner had just died, and the move to Basra was doubtless motivated by a quest for livelihood, if not fortune. It was a cultural heartland. Abu Nuwas became a Hafiz (i.e., he memorized the Qur'an) at a young age; indeed his deep knowledge of the Scripture would manifest itself consistently in the linguistic tissue of his later poetry. His youthful good looks and innate charisma attracted the attention of the Kufan poet, Abu Usama Waliba ibn al-Hubab al-Asadi (d. 170/786). The latter was a handsome blond and blue-eyed man of Persian extraction who took Abu Nuwas to Kufa as a young apprentice.

The influence upon Abu Nuwas exerted by this light-spirited and nigh-delinquent poet should not be understated; there are many lasting traces of the impact he had upon the young poet, especially in his more iconoclastic mood. Waliba's

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poetry is homoerotic, licentious, skilled and eloquent, yet light of diction, and it is particularly in his facetious treatment of the Devil as a topos that he clearly left his mark on Abu Nuwas, who made much of this theme in his later years as a Bacchic poet. According to one tradition the Devil (Ar. Iblis from Gk. *diabolos*) played a concrete role in the relationship between Waliba and his pupil: Iblis appeared to Waliba in a dream and said of Abu Nuwas: "I will lead astray the Community of Muhammad with this youth of yours; I will not be satisfied until I sow love for him in the hearts of all hypocrites and lovers on account of his sweet and pleasant verse."

By all accounts Waliba intuitively recognized in Abu Nuwas his talent as a poet and encouraged him toward this vocation. But it is also clear that Waliba was attracted sexually to the young Hakamite and may have had erotic relations with him. Whether or not this predisposed Abu Nuwas to visit this behavior upon others when he was older can only be mooted, but certainly Abu Nuwas's relationships with adolescent boys when he had matured as a man seem to mirror his own experience with Waliba.

On the evening of their first encounter, one tradition has it, the two men drank together and ate. When Abu Nuwas removed his clothes, Waliba beheld his corporal beauty and kissed his behind at which point the young man farted in his face. Waliba cursed him for being so vulgar but Abu Nuwas retorted confidently with a maxim: "What reward can there be for the one who kisses ass except a fart!" The exchange is rude and trifling but it is of some significance in that Abu Nuwas is so often recorded as outwitting his associates. He was willing to heed advice, though, and this is nowhere more evident than in his relationship with the other man who had a profound effect on his poetic formation: Khalaf al-Ahmar (d. 796).

Returning to Basra from Kufa still an adolescent, Abu Nuwas became a disciple of this eminent transmitter and forger of early poetry. Khalaf is connected in Arabic literary history with the fabrication of a number of early poems,

including conceivably – the issue has never been settled – the superb *Lamiyyat al-‘Arab* (“The L-Poem of the Arabs”) attributed to al-Shanfara al-Azdi (*fl.* sixth century). While Waliba was quintessentially a poet of his time, and one of the so-called “Dissolutes of Kufa,” Khalaf was a philological master of the great tradition of ancient bedouin poetry and had both the authority and innate skill to round Abu Nuwas’s poetic education.

If Abu Nuwas was to become the quintessential “Modern” (Ar. *muhdath*) poet of the early Abbasid efflorescence, yet he was bred certainly from the pre-Islamic tradition which he came to refashion. In this connection, it is essential to understand the often layered textual allusions of his verse which Khalaf was at least in part responsible for nurturing. This is the basic point to be gleaned from the most famous and quasi-legendary incident in their relationship. When the young Abu Nuwas asked Khalaf for permission to compose poetry of his own (somewhat disingenuously, as he doubtless already had), he was told: “Only once you have learnt by heart a thousand ancient poems”. Abu Nuwas disappeared for a while then returned, announcing that he had memorized the requisite amount. He recited them out aloud over several days and then reiterated his initial request. But Khalaf now insisted that his pupil forget all the poems which he had just learnt. After a period of seclusion in a monastery Abu Nuwas forgot the poems and was *finally* authorized to compose. The incident smacks of the imaginary in the terms that it is related and it probably simply marks the formal induction of Abu Nuwas as a poet at the hands of Khalaf. However, it also helps one to appreciate the fact that in his mature years Abu Nuwas never aped the ancient corpus; rather he would be subliminally affected by it.

The ninth-century literary critic, poet and caliph-for-one-day, Ibn al-Mu‘tazz, attested with authority to Abu Nuwas’s sound understanding of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), acquired young: he was conversant with fundamental legal opinions and their technicalities; some of this can be sensed in his verse. In addition to his profound knowledge of prophetic traditions

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(Hadith) he was proficient in particular scriptural issues, such as the complex subject of how some Qur'anic verses can qualify or supersede (abrogate) others. He studied Qur'an recitation with Abu Muhammad Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Hadrami, responsible for one of the ten recognized early recitations of the Scripture; Ya'qub even declared that his pupil was the best reciter of the Qur'an in Basra, despite, we might note, the adolescent's lisp (he couldn't roll his r's) but perhaps because of his husky voice. All the above bespeaks further the thorough education he received in Basra. While Khalaf al-Ahmar must certainly have instructed him in tribal lore, it was Abu 'Ubayda Ma'mar ibn al-Muthanna (d. 824) in particular who would have filled out his knowledge of the pre-Islamic tribal "Battle Days." Abu 'Ubayda was the greatest repository of this significant corpus of knowledge in early Abbasid times and remains the principal source for the extant corpus of this literature. In the rivalry between Abu 'Ubayda and al-Asma'i, another illustrious philologist and anthologist of poetry, Abu Nuwas sided naturally with Abu 'Ubayda.

This did not prevent him ridiculing his tutor by writing graffiti on the pillar of a mosque alluding to the fact that the latter enjoyed sex with boys: "God bless Lot and his tribe [of sodomites]; say, Amen! O Abu 'Ubayda! At over seventy you are the last of them ...!" A burlesque scene survives in apocrypha of Abu 'Ubayda, bereft of all dignity, holding his catamite upon his shoulders, demanding that the writings be erased – no doubt, to the scornful mirth of those who sat and watched. The boy had trouble erasing all elements of the verse and the word "Lot" remained visible, at which Abu 'Ubayda remarked tetchily that this was the one word they were trying to "flee from" – "erase it quickly!" he insisted. But Abu 'Ubayda was neither devoid of humor nor gravity, and his opinion that Abu Nuwas was for the "Modern poets" (*al-muhdathun*) what Imru' al-Qays was for the Ancients carries weight. Such a judgment could surely only be made once Abu Nuwas had reached a maturity in his art; the contact between Abu 'Ubayda and Abu Nuwas must have been

on some level – intellectually – a lasting one, and there was no persistent rancor between the two men.

Abu Nuwas not only studied but also taught prophetic traditions (Hadith), and among his own pupils were said to be the great polymath al-Jahiz (d. 869) and the distinguished jurist al-Shafi‘i (d. 820). Two traditions are transmitted by him with chains of transmission going back to the Prophet. Al-Dhahabi (d. 1348) in his *Mizan*, and no doubt other authors, judged that Abu Nuwas was essentially unworthy of transmitting Hadith due to his dissolute and immoral character. It is certainly the case that Abu Nuwas could be contemptuous of the protocols of this religious literature in his poetry; in one 10-line piece, apparently composed in Basra, he parodied the chains of transmission that provide the very authenticity of prophetic deeds and sayings. The story goes: Abu Nuwas attended the salon in Basra of ‘Abd al-Wahid ibn Ziyad to which students of Hadith thronged for instruction. Each pupil was allowed to ask three questions before departing and when Abu Nuwas’s turn came he simply recited the following poem: “We have transmitted on the authority of Sa‘id from ‘Ubada/from Zurara ibn Baqi that Sa‘d ibn ‘Ubada / said: ‘Whosoever screws his lover will gain happiness from him; / but if he dies of doting fondness he will gain the recompense equal to reciting the Shahada (Muslim testimony of God’s unity) ...’” This scurrilous poem, among other details, goes on to give prominence to Jarada, a pander of Basra whose name shares the rhyme scheme of the poem with the respected transmitters of Hadith alluded to transparently, though distorted by concoction, in the first two lines.

### *Love for Janan*

It was during his early life in Basra that Abu Nuwas fell for the only woman he is deemed truly to have loved – Janan. She was the slave-girl of the family of al-Wahhab ibn ‘Abd al-Majid al-Thaqafi, a tutor of the eminent religious scholars Ahmad ibn Hanbal and al-Shafi‘i. Janan was exquisitely beautiful,

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intelligent and learned in Arab lore (*akhbar*) and poetry. It may be that Abu Nuwas already enjoyed a reputation as a homosexual by the time he first set eyes upon her, for it is said that he caused surprise among the companions who witnessed his enrapture at the sight of her. It has even been suggested, with only the vaguest evidence, that Janan herself was a lesbian. The relationship between the two was, in any case, complicated and characterized by oscillations between attraction and antipathy expressed in animated poetic exchanges. Abu Nuwas's poems about her circulated in Basra, according to tradition, before they ever met, and this at least supports the view that he had already enjoyed a reputation as a poet before this affair. The poet's continued rhapsodies of love met with her disdain, and when it reached him that she had cursed these indiscretions his response was: "Your curse has come to my ears. Curse then all you will. Does not my name thus pass through your lips?! What more could I ask for?" In a clever conceit he continues: "I have conjectured about you in so many different ways, for is not Knowledge of the Unseen the exclusive province of God?" Even she, the point is, cannot predict the success or failure of his courtship, since only God has knowledge of the future.

When Janan declared her solemn intention of performing the pilgrimage to Mecca, Abu Nuwas determined to accompany her. Piety apparently had no initial part to play in his performance of this rite, though it is related that once he was in Mecca, having donned the garbs of ritual purity, people flocked around him to listen to the pious verse he had composed for the occasion. More famous is the following story about this visit (told by an authority of some repute): "We made the pilgrimage the same year as Abu Nuwas, and we all gathered together to perform the circumambulation of the Ka'ba. He stepped out in front of me and I saw him following a woman round, though I didn't yet know who she was. I then progressed to the Black Stone and beheld the woman kissing the stone and there he was kissing it alongside her in such a way that their cheeks touched.

I said to myself, ‘He is the most perverse of people!’ Then I realized this was Janan. When they had departed, I met up with him and told him, ‘You wretch! Does not even this holy site bring you to your senses!’ He answered that I was a fool to think that I would have crossed so many deserts and desolate tracts for any other reason!” Abu Nuwas then recited his poem about this encounter, verses redolent of the character and antics of the philandering ‘Umar ibn Abi Rabi’ a century earlier; he only lightly minced words: “We did at the Mosque what the pious were *not* doing.”

He was once reprimanded by a judge in Basra, who hadn’t at first recognized him, for talking openly to a woman in the street. The lady in question was a messenger for Janan and when Abu Nuwas justified his encounter in verse, the judge suddenly realized with whom he was dealing and vowed never to bother him again for fear of being satirized. Yet again we sense that Abu Nuwas was already established locally during the time of this affair, but it is hard properly to gauge the nature of the actual relationship; some traditions tell us that Abu Nuwas moved to Baghdad soon after it ended with a heavy heart, others that it was he who was largely responsible for its demise having refused to accede to Janan’s conditions when offered her hand by her mistress – that he give up sleeping with boys. He moved to Baghdad in 786 CE, around the time of Harun al-Rashid’s accession, probably not so much heartbroken as to promote his literary vocation. There, over four decades, he spent his halcyon days as well as some of his darkest moments.

### ***The Move to Baghdad***

In Baghdad success as a poet depended essentially on patronage, and we know something of his dealings with the various “maecenic” figures of the day. At the center of this was the caliphal court, but just as important were the Barmecides and their literary entourage, and other patrons, notably the family of al-Fadl ibn al-Rabi’ whom Abu Nuwas embraced (or vice versa) when

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acceptance into the Barmecide circle was thwarted. He expressed exasperation at the stuffiness of the atmosphere at court, where one could only speak when spoken to. Here he felt the “hot embers of impatience” and would long for his friends, his style cramped by the stately protocols of comportment. It is certainly true that his finer poems reflect antics among friends and cup-companions when released from the behavioral strictures of court life; this attitude would only change, seemingly, during the reign of the caliph al-Amin whom he attended more as companion than subject.

The Barmecide family were renowned for their generous patronage, yet the poet’s initial attempts to benefit from it were unsuccessful. The poet’s greatest obstacle in this respect was Aban ibn ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Lahiqi (d. 815–816), a poet who controlled the purse-strings of Barmecide patronage, rewarding poets according to *his* judgment of their worth. He appears to have feared Abu Nuwas as a rival, and belittled him in particular in 795 when al-Fadl ibn Yahya al-Barmaki returned from Khurasan where he had been posted as governor; Aban stood in judgment of the eulogies composed for al-Fadl on the occasion and rewarded Abu Nuwas’s poem with a meager – and insulting – two dinars. Abu Nuwas slapped Aban in the face and accused him of having stolen his own mother’s earnings, intimating that she made her living as a prostitute. Al-Fadl, amused by the incident, gave instructions that Aban “patch it up” with Abu Nuwas. No such truce survives in his verse: Abu Nuwas wrote a number of satires upon Aban, suggesting in one that his mother (with whom he appears to have been fixated) had confused letters when she gave him his name: she had meant to call him Atan, which in Arabic means a donkey. Aban wrote a poem of self-praise which he had sent to al-Fadl ibn Yahya; Abu Nuwas parodied this poem stingingly, ending his riposte to it with what became a proverbial line: “What I have said about you is authentic and eternal, while your words will be blown away by the wind.” Aban offered Abu Nuwas a fortune to suppress this satire, but was told simply to grin and bear the stigma.

While the tension between these two poets appears never to have abated, Abu Nuwas did preserve some contact with the Barmecides. A mournful line in praise of al-Fadl ibn Yahya suggests he still had dealings with the Barmecides shortly before their downfall (“... though you have been visibly humbled, yet I have not betrayed my love for you”). Fragments of poetry survive in which he laments their terrible debacle in 803 in which many of them died. Indeed, he took a poor view of one Isma‘il ibn Sabih who took over one of their high administrative functions having served them as their secretary and, adding insult to injury, divulged some of their secrets in the process. The poet’s retribution for this betrayal was to write a lewd poem about Isma‘il’s son Muhammad – thus satisfying two desires at once.

The success Abu Nuwas achieved with Harun al-Rashid, relatively paltry though it was, was probably due not to the Barmecide family but the intercession of the Al Nawbakht already after the fall of the former in 803 and once al-Fadl ibn al-Rabi‘ had become the caliph’s chief minister. Some sources suggest that the caliph shut the poet out completely, but had Abu Nuwas received no recognition from al-Rashid it is unlikely that he would have elegized him upon his death in 809.

Panegyric poems were written also for al-Amin and survive from the period when the latter was still only heir to the caliphate. These poems are less formal than both the status of the patron and tenor of the genre normally required, a fact which bespeaks the friendship and bonhomie between the two men. There may even have been a more charged affection between them, as evidenced by the following, clearly amorous lines: “I am in love but cannot say with whom; I fear him who fears no one! / When I think about my love for him, I feel for my head and wonder if it is still attached to my body!” (*D.* iv, 195) It is assumed these verses refer to al-Amin; if they do, Abu Nuwas was probably right to be coy in this instance than he usually was in such matters.

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His staunchest patrons in Baghdad were the Nawbakht family, in particular the four sons of Abu Sahl ibn Nawbakht: ‘Abdallah, al-Fadl, Sulayman and Isma‘il, and the latter’s own son, al-Hasan. Anecdotes survive of their friendship: they drank together and the poet was rewarded financially as well as, on one occasion, with a slave-girl bought for him by Sulayman. Given that the Nawbakht family was largely responsible for the survival of Abu Nuwas’s poetry after his death, it is puzzling that only one panegyric devoted to them survives as against a number of biting satires.

The most significant contact he had in Baghdad was with a welter of poets. He had various dealings in Baghdad with most of the great bards of the day, by turns amicable and hostile. The list of these relations reads like a Who’s Who of the poetic luminaries at the turn of the ninth century: al-Husayn ibn al-Dahhak (some of whose Bacchic poetry appears to have been ascribed to Abu Nuwas); Muslim ibn al-Walid; Abu al-‘Atahiya, who wrote homiletic poetry chiefly and was jealously proprietorial of the genre; and al-‘Abbas ibn al-Ahnaf, a courtly love lyricist and favorite of Harun al-Rashid in this respect.

Like the work of most poets Abu Nuwas’s *oeuvre* was not biographical, except perhaps in a topical way. However, his migration to the Abbasid capital was marked in real terms by a *khamriyya* (or wine poem) in which the pleasures of life in Baghdad, or some outlying monastery, are set up as a consoling imaginary against the lost – “pious” – youth of his Basran days. The poem is a descriptive fantasia anchored in one central feature to the poet’s biography and must have been written some time after his move: “The prayer-place is now effaced [as are my old haunts], the sand dunes of the two market places of Mirbad and Labab – /Faded is the mosque which [once] brought together noble qualities and religion, faded too are al-Sihan and al-Rahab./Abodes where I spent my youth until greyness appeared in my side-whiskers,/Amongst young men like swords, shaken by the bloom of youth, and adorned with good manners./Then Time brought its afflictions .../Qatrabbul is

now my spring residence, and in the villages around al-Karkh I spend my summer – my mother now is the grape-vine.”<sup>1</sup> (*D.* iii, 29–31) The poem emerges further into the present in a detailed Bacchic vignette: a Christian monastic context is suggested by the relief carved on golden goblets of wine: “Vessels smooth and sleek, engraved with depictions of priests and crucifixes, / Reciting their Gospel, whilst above them lay a heaven of wine, / Like pearls, scattered about by the hands of virgins taken by a playful mood.” (*D.* iii, 34–35) It is the “playful mood” that really marks this poem, and bespeaks most clearly the underlying poetic inspiration and temper. Here the archetypical move (of the ancient and traditional ode) from decadent youth to respectable and forbearing present is overturned, allowing simultaneously some *real* nostalgia for Basra to be felt. The poem may not depict Baghdad – it quite clearly doesn’t – however, it is a choice product of the extended Baghdadi period of the poet’s life. It is in this period that Abu Nuwas matured as a poet, and this is nowhere better glimpsed than in the complexity of his lyric verse, both bacchic and erotic, that dates in bulk from this period. The *khamriyya* which Abu Nuwas mastered and perfected as a genre in the Abbasid capital allows one to situate the man best of all as a poet, absorbing and transforming a whole tradition, and as a person more generally who, in some minimal measure at the very least, was also reacting to his environment.

### *The “Modern” Poet*

In reviewing the wine song we must note: (i) its literary genealogy, of which Abu Nuwas was so clearly conscious (and respectful of, on the whole): he clearly saw himself as the

<sup>1</sup> Mirbad was a market and famous meeting place for poets outside Basra; Qatrabbul was a village near Baghdad renowned for its viticulture and taverns; al-Karkh was the suburb to the south west of Baghdad celebrated for its commerce – it is here that Abu Nuwas appears to have lived.

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inheritor of a pre-Islamic tradition, and in particular of the poetry of al-A‘sha (d. c. 629) whom he often alluded to and even cited (see Chapter 2) – he had, in Dryden’s phrase, “the genius to improve an invention”; (ii) the realism it contains, and how it represents a material culture the poet was exposed to, for all that it is a work spun from the contrary impulses of convention and a feverish imagination; (iii) the principal characteristics which he developed in the genre – they in fact mark the evolving rhetorical contours of the period as well as any other, more conservative and canonical, texts; the intellectual conceits of his poetry, and the application of the rhetorical devices known collectively as *badi‘*, made him the quintessential “Modern” (*muhdath*) poet.

Briefly, in respect of (iii), Abu Nuwas cultivated four principal aspects in the construction of his wine songs: (i) the deft coupling of erotic and Bacchic themes; (ii) two complementary, at times disjunctive, views of Time: the strictures of piety (and an awareness of eschatological salvation) being offset by, and even accommodated with, the urgency of the pagan sense of “seizing the day”; (iii) a varied rhetorical impulse, providing a powerful rationale for drinking in a culture of poetic contention and satire; (iv) the ambiguity that could be preserved within a religious society by treating the themes of repentance and contrition as emergent from, and simultaneously in competition with, pagan – and still valid – values of comportment.

All of the above can be illustrated to some extent through one paradigmatic work: a seduction poem in which the tawdry closing scene parodies the chaste overture. Wine is described in a central passage in a mythic and metaphorical delineation of its age and provenience. Whilst cast tacitly as the instrument of seduction it preserves its own numinous qualities, and all blame, if there is any blame to go round, attaches to human agency. The poem is integrally structured upon an antithesis between its beginning and end, as intimated already, which is essential since such contrast is one of the cardinal features of

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*badi*’. The poem is also saturated with metaphor, parallelism and paronomasia (sophisticated punning), three of the other principal features of *badi*’ and Modern poetry. Excerpts of the poem:

The amorous overture

O enchanting eyes, you are forever languid,  
 Your stare draws out secrets held close in the heart! ...  
 Consider the two of us: you have rent me to pieces, though you  
 Are bare of the garment in which Fate has draped me  
 You work to kill me with no hope of vengeance,  
 As if to kill me is ritual offering to God.

The transition to wine

[So] drink the wine, though forbidden,  
 For God forgives even grave sins.  
 A white wine forging bubbles when mixed – pearls set in gold;  
 She was on the Ark in Noah’s time –  
 Most noble of his shipment whilst the Earth was awash ...

Consummation

Auspicious stars had risen on this night  
 When drunkard assaulted drunkard  
 We passed the time kowtowing to the Devil,  
 Until the monks sounded the bells at dawn  
 And [a young adolescent] left, dragging delightful robes  
 Which I had stained with my iniquitous behavior,  
 Saying, “O woe!” as tears overcame him,  
 “You have torn away the [dignity] I had preserved.”  
 I replied, “A lion saw a gazelle and lunged at it;  
 Such is the variety of Fate’s vicissitudes!” (D. iii, 323–5)

In a parodic turn, inviting his audience to recognize the reversal of poetic conventions, Abu Nuwas has slain the chaste gazelle at whose hands he suffered in the opening lines. Wine intoxicates but recedes from the picture, preserving its sublime qualities – quite the contrary of the lost dignity of the youth.

### *Sexuality*

The eroticism of this poem, in which it is a young male who is rudely seduced, summons one to pause upon the sexuality of Abu Nuwas. In his far-ranging and magisterial study of homosexuality in Islamic culture, Everett K. Rowson writes: “While scholars have often remarked that Abu Nuwas’s verses on women tend to be more conventional, and less enthusiastic, than those about boys, there is considerable parallelism between the two ... we have numerous examples from Abu Nuwas’s own poetry, as well as that of his contemporaries, of the convention whereby women are described, and even addressed in the masculine. And the descriptive phrases employed – slender waist, black eyes, pearly teeth, and so on – are equally applicable to both sexes. Often, however, sheer circumstance makes it clear that the referent is a boy ...” The seductive enchantment of “a stare from Babel”, a place associated with magic in Islamic culture, could apply to women or men. But Abu Nuwas did express preference for men unambiguously in a number of poems in which he vowed never again to risk the dangers of the “sea”, i.e. women, when he could ride and travel by “land”, scilicet upon the backs of men. He composed one such poem on the occasion of his marriage. We know little about this betrothal, which appears to have been forced upon him; he felt little satisfaction at the union however, effectively lampooning his wife on the very evening of their wedding.

Young adolescent boys became his sexual preference. Rowson observes that “he could be specific about the ideal age of the beloved ... Whatever the boy’s age ... the crucial point is the hair. Besides the term *ghulam* (pl. *ghilman*), which means literally ‘(older) boy’ but can also be applied to a male slave (of any age) and (euphemistically) to a eunuch, the word which appears most frequently in these contexts is *amrad* (pl. *murd*), literally, ‘beardless’; and Abu Nuwas’s society, in which shaving was, if not unknown, certainly not generally practiced, considered the appearance of the beard to be *the* criterion for the

transition from the status of non-man to man.” Only on one occasion did Abu Nuwas show that he was still attracted to, and tempted to seduce, an adolescent who had already acquired a beard. And he was fully aware that he had played the role of catamite to other men when in his youth, making light of the fact on one reported occasion. In the market place of Baghdad he encountered one Badr al-Juhani al-Barra’ in the company of some youths (*ghilman*). Abu Nuwas greeted Badr but was not recognized, at first; the poet enquired about the youths and was told they were Badr’s sons, at which Abu Nuwas joked wryly, having divulged his identity, “If I had stayed with you these would now be my children!”

Abu Nuwas’s preferred types were adolescent boys employed in the bureaucracy, youths studying religious sciences at the mosque, and Christian and Zoroastrian acolytes. Note must also be made of the *shatir* (pl. *shuttar*), a sort of fashion-conscious dandy of foppish, and occasionally violent, temperament. Being a *shatir* was apparently, Rowson writes,

... a “life-style” choice of some rebellious young men (and women), perhaps in that sense to be compared to hippies and punks in modern Western society. There was a distinctive *shatir* “look”, as we learn from a description of Abu Nuwas himself, who adopted it (for unexplained reasons) when he traveled to Egypt: “the garb and cut of clothes of the *shuttar*, with his hair in bangs, wide sleeves, and a train to his robes, and covered sandals.” ... They are not to be identified with male prostitutes, another group who appear only very occasionally in anecdotes about Abu Nuwas’s irregular life.

Abu Nuwas is one of our principal sources on a particular sartorial affectation of early ninth century Baghdad. A number of poems in the erotic section of his *Diwan* devoted to women celebrate the transvestite *ghulamīyyat* – young servant girls and entertainers dressed as young men in svelte and coquettish attire. They wore turbans, close fitting robes and tunics, and sashes; their hair was done up in bangs and side curls, and was

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cut short at the back to look like boys. The vogue had in fact originated at the caliphal court where it was introduced by al-Amin's mother, Zubayda, in order to distract him from his fascination with the eunuchs of the palace; he was known to have been particularly infatuated with a eunuch called Kawthar. Among the numerous allusions to the *ghulamiyyat* in Abu Nuwas's poetry some are quite witty, for instance the following line which seals a wine poem with the description of a youth: "He is called Ma'n but if you 'turn him round' [or turn it, i.e. the name, around], then it is as if you call his sister, for his name when inverted is Nu'm." This is a clever, and more restrained, variant on the poet's most famous descriptive line about a *ghulam*, to wit, that she has two lovers: a fornicator and a sodomite. The "turning round" or "inverting" of the name is a metaphor for something else, and rather than a brother and sister being involved it is clear we are dealing with a single individual. The cult of the *ghulam* explains the line.

In al-Isfahani's (d. 971) redaction of the *Diwan*, a preamble to the homoerotic poems (*mudhakkarat*) explores a curious prejudice: that homosexuality was imported to Abbasid Iraq from Khurasan, the province which had fomented the Abbasid revolution. Until the end of the Umayyad period, he states, male poets celebrated only female loved ones. "With the oncoming of the Black Banners from the East, they [poets, soldiers, or men in general – it is not clear] began to practice sodomy due to their contact with adolescent boys" (without demur, love and sexual practice are considered to be one and the same). Jahiz, the great polymath of the ninth century, had an explanation for this: the Umayyads took their women with them on campaign, while the Abbasids did not. Homoeroticism, according to this view, is a physical confusion of heterosexual love: "These men, who kept the continuous company of adolescent boys, day and night, would cast their gaze upon a cheek like a woman's cheek, or upon an effeminate leg or buttock; feelings were thus stirred up to such an extent that they might be forced to copulate with a beast or relieve themselves with

the palm of the hand. These men returned from their travels with this appetite now instilled in them, exacerbated by the fact that the material costs are negligible and that they could thus avoid the risks of siring children." (*D.* iv, 141–2) Al-Jahiz ascribed the same practice, and the same underlying causes, to "Masjidites" (men who spent time discussing religion and theology in the mosques) and the men and adolescent boys of the secretariat.

Al-Isfahani peddles these sociological opinions of al-Jahiz (and his own) without any reference to the literary aspect of the poems he is introducing. Rather he tries, unconvincingly, to suggest that Abu Nuwas had been "respectable" and restrained when he wrote under the aegis of Harun al-Rashid but then allowed his sexual profligacy to come to the fore under the license and mutual influence of al-Rashid's licentious son and successor, al-Amin (d. 814). Just as there is a continuous cycle of moods in a single author's poetic biography, where libertine themes arc towards respectability and pious contrition then flounder occasionally in weak moments of recidivist decadence, so al-Isfahani maps out a similar recurring cycle upon history: al-Rashid (upright) → al-Amin (sexually decadent/homosexual) → al-Ma'mun (upright) → al-Mutawakkil (decadent/homosexual). There is certainly a complexity of moods in Abu Nuwas, but one is hard pushed to establish a chronology for his poetry in accordance with these moods. Al-Isfahani's preamble would seem to be more apologetic than seriously epistolary or discursive.

### ***Character and Temperament***

*"I sat before a boy who was as lean as a sword  
 With the mirage of desire flickering on his cheek,  
 And I formed a rank in prayer all to myself ...  
 Now, if I cannot find an excuse for this on Judgment Day,  
 I should be in mourning already for wit and charisma." (FP, 174)*