Essay

Ibn al-Khaṭīb: Character Assassin

SHERIF ABDELKARIM

ألا لا يجهلنَّ أحد علينا فنجهل فوق جهل الجاهلينا
No one takes us for a ride. We wreck the reckless.
—ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm (d. ca. 584 CE)

So before you die let's see who can out-petty who.
—Eminem, "Killshot" (2018)

This essay reconsiders the affects and aesthetics of *hijāʾ*—the art of diatribe, satire, or invective—in premodern Arabic literature. The *hijāʾ* of the celebrated Andalusian ambassador Muḥammad al-Salmānī, better known as Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1375), provides this essay's case study. The professional hardships this minister bore in his later years occasioned many invectives—some of medieval Spain's baddest.[1] In keying their compositions to this odd mode, so wide in its generic affiliations, authors rarely expressed hard feelings in good faith; beyond allowing them to vent, their insults rarely served constructive or elucidating ends, such as conflict resolution or the pursuit of justice. Rather, they fed grudges personal and political and sought the ugliest expressions known to instigate enmity. Many poets resorted to the art as their harsh circumstances necessitated. Harried by a life on the run, Ibn al-Khaṭīb consoled himself with one last boast: "وكان لساني سيفاً صقيلاً وكانت يراعي قناً ذبّلا." ("My tongue was a sword, my stylus an arrow"; "Jazatnī Gharnāṭah," line 17).

In the same poem, the minister also echoed ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm's *jāhilī* ("pre-Islamic") boast: "ولا خلق أجهل ممن يظن بمقدار مثلي أن يُجهلا" ("No one's more reckless than anyone who thinks I can be messed with"; line 15). If these lines fail to stand in for real feelings, they testify to the real toll of false words and speak to an art of

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insincerity in a time of insecurity, an art more complex than an emotive commemoration, than mere mimesis.

Whether uttered or written, insults disrupt the public forum. They make explicit a culture's creative, repressive, or odious aspects by forcing insulters and insulted alike to reflect on the effects of so-called bad language in social spaces. The words in themselves need not offend to unsettle. Muslim scholars, for instance, struggle to make sense of these well-known lines, problematically ascribed to the foremost religious scholar al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820):

ولو لا الشعر بالعلماء يزري لكنت اليوم أشعر من لبيد
وأشجع في الوغى من كل ليث وآل مهلب وبني يزيد
ولولا خشية الرحمن ربي حسبت الناس كلهم عبيدي

(al-Shāfiʿī, lines 1–4)

Were it not that poesy tarnished scholars
I would have now Labīd outshone,
Shown more courageous than every battle-lion,
The House Muhallab, the Banī Yazīd.
Were it not for fearing al-Raḥmān, my Master,
I would have counted the people—all people—my slaves.

Could al-Shāfiʿī really have recited these lines? Does the boast repudiate an arrogant culture of strongmen, or does it seek to own it? Innocuous though they seem, the verses simulate what Sianne Ngai calls "ugly feelings," or tones not easily reducible to a text's representation of an emotion or a reader's own emotions in response (38–88). The process plays out as follows: an artist remembers a perpetrator's wrongs and then unfriendly feelings ranging from anger to disgust are stirred and directed toward crafting an artwork—a poem. ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm's ode against a king and his mother includes a sequence about his bitter upbringing and harsh existence, invoked to fuel his metered fury. Its narrative's facticity unverifiable, the ode celebrates injuries endured and wounds inflicted by the pre-Islamic poet and his tribe, in a manner analogous to how contemporary rappers build steam on dis tracks by pronouncing what upsets them. The affects behind these hard feelings range from less ambiguous emotions like anger to the more complicated ugly feelings of irritation or disgust. Unlike genres whose emotions on the page invite analogous reader responses—say, grief (elegiac poetry), arousal (erotic literature), or angst (young adult novels)[2]—invectives elicit less predictable feelings from their enacted rage and scorn, such as excitement and pleasure from the confrontational tones and entertaining wordplay. Whether actual hard feelings ever informed them, invectives implicitly condone the pain that made them, as they do the moral and cultural taboos consequently brought out. For premodern Muslim poets, these hard feelings posed technical and ethical problems.

As his *laqab* ("title") *Lisān al-Dīn* ("Tongue of the Faith") and *nasab* ("patronymic") *Ibn al-Khaṭīb* ("Son of the Orator") imply, the minister possessed so acute a command of language that it earned him recognition as Granada's premier panegyrist and annalist. As a secretary and minister, Ibn al-Khaṭīb enjoyed exceptional privileges rarely available to wazirs of previous eras in the region, chiefly administrative powers that placed him on par with Granada's ruling elite.[3] It is apt that a *shāʿir* ("poet") would double as a historian, since eventful happenings were signified in eulogies, elegies, odes, and lampoons—a throwback to the old days in the East.[4] Despite losing their ancient Arabian status as soothsayers, postclassical Arab poets of the premodern period stayed central in shaping their communities' voices and legacies. Patrons and audiences alike appreciated the power of their words, whose arrangement, packed into compelling figures, delivered moving messages that shaped attitudes toward a person or people, precipitated visceral responses, and cemented historical narratives. This appreciation only deepened with the advent of Islam, which spread a culture of language learning, validating the ontological weight of words.[5] Thus, lexicographers define *shāʿir* as one in possession of intuition and knowledge, while *shiʿr* ("poetry") shares its lexical roots with *shuʿūr* ("knowledge" or "perception"), as does *mashāʿir* ("feelings," "rites," or "ceremonies"), which has incantatory dimensions.[6] Carl Brockelmann reaches back to the

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time before Islam to speculate on the term's magical potential:

> Der Dichter führt bei den Arabern den Namen šâʿir, d. i. der Wissende, und zwar als Inhaber übernatürlichen Wissens. Er galt al seine Art Orakel seines Stammes, gleich dem Kàhin . . .; auch seine Fähigkeit, wie die des Kâhin, führte der Volksglaube auf die Inspiration durch einen Ǵinn zurük. (12–13)

> The poet goes by the name *shāʿir* to the Arabs, that is, *the knower*, and as the bearer of supernatural knowledge. He was considered a sort of oracle of his tribe, very similar to the *kāhin* ("diviner") . . .; folk belief also traced back his ability, like that of the *kāhin*, to inspiration by a jinn.

Exactly how or whether ancient Arabian poetry enchanted, nobody knows. The first generations of Muslim poets who preserved the extant *jāhilī* lore scrapped the poet-as-prophet tradition, yet in the centuries that followed Islam's arrival, medieval courts thrived on poetry's symbolic magic: its power to entertain, console, commemorate, and broker. These new poets—experts of every stripe, from religious scholars to medical doctors, philosophers to diplomats—emulated their storied predecessors who attained high status from the discernment, resourcefulness, and wisdom their special knowledge afforded them (ʿAlī 9: 77–78).

If premodern Arabic poetry, that purest expression of emotion, imparted if not revealed knowledge, it simultaneously stood for artificiality par excellence. As the axiom goes, خير الشعر أكذبه ("the best poetry is that which 'lies' the most"; qtd. in Heinrichs). In turning to *hijāʾ*, courtiers of the Islamic empires maintained its subjective essence, so manifest as to discredit all poetry as false. Of pre-Islamic *hijāʾ* the historian Jawwād ʿAlī notes, "[الهجاء] يمثل العواطف الشخصية والانفعالات النفسية، والتهيج الآني. وإنّ شعراً من هذا القبيل لا يمكن أن يحمل محل الصدق، وأن نقول عنه إنه يعبر عن الواقع." ("[*Hijāʾ*] represents individual feelings, personal emotions, and momentary irritation. Poetry of this sort cannot hold the place of sincerity, rather we cannot say about it that it expresses reality"; 4: 594). What sets apart invective verse from other forms of poetry is its very reliance on unpleasant feelings as a mode of negative expression. Unlike, say, poems about lovesickness, which usually aim to elicit positive emotions from readers even as they consider uncomfortable, ambivalent feelings, with invective the content stays ugly. Ibn al-Khaṭīb's hard and ugly feelings—a blend of frustration, contempt, resentment, entitlement, and paranoia—threaten to exceed the entertainment value of his artistry. The hateful words of Ibn al-Khaṭīb earned him status but likely harmed him in the long run. His *hijāʾ* enjoyed royal backing until he fell from royal favor in the early 1370s, whereupon the minister's calamities fueled his art, an art he refused to abandon until his demise. What compelled the premodern Muslim artist to cleave to so fiery a mode even as it ceased to secure his protection and spurred his demise?

On *Hijāʾ*

Throughout its long history, *hijāʾ* has existed across manifold forms of *naẓm* ("metered verse") and *sajʿ* ("rhyming colons"). Artists have written it in an array of meters and genres to evoke tones ranging in intensity and mood. Geert Jan van Gelder captures its affective potentials thus:

> [*Hijāʾ*] may be, and often is, combined with other modes or themes in one poem, such as elegiac and amatory verse (nasīb) and, especially and naturally, vaunting poetry (fakhr). The register and the tone may be lofty and serious, taking the moral high ground (thus merging with ʿitāb, "poetry of reproach," and ḥikma or "wisdom poetry"), but often it is distinctly unserious, humorous, amoral or even immoral, with gross exaggerations, blatant fictions, patent lies, and obscene diction, aimed at humiliating and ridiculing the opponent rather than reforming him. ("Hijāʾ")

In earnest and in jest, verbal dueling forms the core of invectives in this culture.[7] Transmitters of pre- and early-Islamic *hijāʾ* such as Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī (d. 1333) catalog famous insults against individuals and tribes. Overwhelmingly, the verses target their rivals' lack of generosity,

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neighborliness, or courage (al-Nuwayrī 247–65). Al-Nuwayrī tellingly delineates the genre's parameters according to those deserving of verbal abuse: "ويستحق الهجاء من اتصف بسوء الخصال، واتسم بأخلاق الأرذال والأنذال، وجعل اللؤم جلبابه وشعاره، والبخل وِطاءه ودثاره." ("Deserving of *hijāʾ* is he who is known for ugly qualities, distinguished by the manners of the vile and base, who makes meanness his robe and garment, stinginess his shoe and mantle"; 249).

These criteria may serve the poet, in whose eyes another appears fair or foul, but al-Nuwayrī's conditions bespeak the expectation that those targeted somehow deserve blame for their all-around lowness, connoted in so many terms above (*sūʾ al-khiṣāl*, *ardhāl*, *andhāl*, *luʾm*). This lowness gave practitioners of classical *hijāʾ* license to put lowlifes in their rightful place. Popular premodern expressions indicate cultural endorsements of this code: in the words of the Old Arabic anthologist Ibn al-Aʿrābī (d. 846), "فإن لكل مقام مقال" ("Surely, to every station accords its proper speech"; qtd. in al-Maydānī 150). Likewise, theologians have sanctioned the same idea in famous phrases, such as one ascribed to al-Shāfiʿī: "تكبر على الظالمين مرتين" ("Show arrogance to the arrogant twice"), and another ascribed to Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 767): "أظلم الظالمين من تواضع لمن لا يلتفت إليه" ("most unjust is he who humbles himself before someone who pays no attention to him"; qtd. in al-Khādimī 39). Assuming they needed the pretense to do so, *hijāʾ* poets would have found cultural justifications to lower their register to a level their rivals could understand.

This license obtained, poets proceeded to abuse others over trifles (or seemingly nothing) by any means necessary (ʿAlī 4: 593–94). The act entailed *munāfarah*—that is, putting down another person or other people while elevating oneself in the process (Ḥusayn 84–101). The pleasant imagery expected in happier modes is reversed, such that a figure's faults are enumerated, posed implicitly or explicitly against the author's merits (Stetkevych 334, 338–39). Just as cursing and swearing echo imprecatory resonances in the English language, so too does the *hijāʾ* of classical poetry resemble pre-Islamic forms of spell casting, intended to harm a person or tribe.[8] Whether they cursed solemnly or in jest, poets did so both to ridicule and to express feelings like anger and scorn.

Hijāʾ expresses its emotions rather bluntly. Compared with other styles, such as *madīḥ* ("panegyric"), *rithāʾ* ("elegy"), and *waṣf* ("description"), which employ elaborate figures of speech to elevate their topics, this mode uses mundane language to get its point across as straightforwardly as possible, with cultural values accordingly telegraphed (Ḥusayn 33–34). These well-known lines by al-Akhṭal (d. 710) against the Banū Yarbūʿ, the kinfolk of his rival Jarīr (d. 728), demonstrate as much: "قوم إذا استنبح الأضيافُ كلبَهم قالوا لأمهم: بولي على النار." ("A people that, when guests cause their dog to bark, told their mother: piss on the fire"; qtd. in ʿĪsā 175).

As premodern critics explain, the line derives its sting from the depth of the insult, already acerbic on the surface. The family's miserliness, a plain defect, does not stop at their refusal to honor approaching guests but extends to the selfish (and lewd) means by which they put out their own fire, doubtless to avoid hosting guests. That the mother puts it out so meanly further debases the tribe as a whole—perhaps she holds less urine, another sign of stinginess. As with other *hijāʾ*, the insult relies on the values shared between poet and audience, here generosity, modesty, and hospitality.[9]

Poets writing in the light of Islam found new guidelines for such justified fault finding. Several Qurʾanic verses expose, mock, threaten, and curse personal enemies of the Prophet Muḥammad.[10] While these divine insults do not resort to lies, obscenities, or indecent language, they nevertheless demonstrate a practical need for verbally defending oneself. One verse permits the use of foul language should an occasion call for it: "لا يحب ال الجهر بالسوء من القول إلا من ظُلم وكان الله سميعاً عليماً." ("Allāh dislikes the use of ugly speech in public, save for those who have been wronged. Allāh is ever hearing, knowing"; *al-Qurʾan* 4.148). While the verse reveals the undesirability of using ugly words unnecessarily, it locates their proper

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place in circumstances of injustice, both to allow the victim to vent and to make the offense publicly known. By default, of course, the Qurʾan and the Sunna ("Prophetic tradition") recognize all foul language as sinful.[11] This may help explain why no neat legislation elucidates the opportune deployment of harsh words—they were never called for. The speaker alone legitimates the utterance of harsh words, often spoken in the heat of the moment, as is famously alleged to be the case of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (d. 634), the Prophet's greatest companion. Upon ʿUrwah ibn Masʿūd's suggestion that Muḥammad's men would abandon him, Abū Bakr reportedly told him, in the Prophet and his companions' presence, to suck al-Lāt's clitoris, al-Lāt being a pagan goddess. Abū Bakr's insult outweighs ʿUrwah's taunt, but the circumstances clarify his vitriol. ʿUrwah had been sent by the Quraysh tribe to the Muslims, resting about nine miles outside Mecca at the well of Ḥudaybiyyah, to deny them passage into the city to fulfill the rites of the lesser pilgrimage (al-Bukhārī 526–37). Though they are on Abū Bakr's side of the situation, Muslims from hadith experts to laypersons continue to wrestle with the very idea that the Prophet's best companion should resort to ugly words.

Authorized poets were often allowed—indeed commanded by Muḥammad—to compose invectives against the religion's enemies. One narration reports that the Prophet ordered his companions "اهجوا قريشاً فإنه أشد إليها من رشق بالنبل" ("satirize Quraysh. [Your hijāʾ] is harder on them than the arrow's strike"; Muslim 165–66). The Prophet then called on ʿAbd Allāh ibn Rawāḥah (d. ca. 629), Kaʿb ibn Mālik (d. ca. 670), and Ḥassān ibn Thābit (d. 674) by name to fulfill this task.[12] In keeping with the *adab* ("literary etiquette") of classical poetry, the companions' diatribes lacked obscenity and vulgarity. As it flourished in the Umayyad and Abbasid courts, *hijāʾ* verse and prose forms varied considerably, but in theory, rules of composure and decency governed this register. According to the poet and literary critic Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (d. 1064), the best invective does not stoop to indecency and remains honest in its assertions, not relying on slander, remarking on a rival's physical defects, or targeting parents. Many satirists make use of these very tactics, but they are less apt to resort to immoral language, which Ibn Rashīq deems superfluous to the style, a last resort to satisfy a meter. Nearly all poets, reports Ibn Rashīq, find discarding obscene language to be the more correct approach to composing *hijāʾ*. Thus, poets diminished and dismissed their targets more through tones of mockery and disgust than through explicit language.

Ibn al-Khaṭīb's *hijāʾ* steers clear of decorum. His attacks are harsh in both their tone and their terms. The chaotic state of al-Andalus may account for the density of his words. If so, Ibn al-Khaṭīb may be considered a late arrival to the region's satire scene, as old as its existence (ʿAbbās 112–26). Many satirists from the region, including Ibn al-Khaṭīb, applied *hijāʾ* to larger political figures and structures as a form of social protest or ideological critique, unleashing invectives on others to force their hands. Rulers such as al-Muʿtamid ibn ʿAbbād (d. 1095) exposed themselves to poetic abuse for their poor administration (ʿĪsā 40–41; see 19–20, 46–50). The poet Sumaysir (d. 1087–88) nearly lost his life for poking fun at the Berber heritage of the ruler of Granada, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Bilqīn al-Zīrī. The anecdote has taken on a life of its own, and different versions of his insult have been recorded.[13]

By turns true, false, playful, and grave, invectives have flourished in al-Andalus since its inception. Whatever their authors' inspirations and intentions, they offer an unofficial commentary on the region's political instability, its ethnic and religious diversity, and, according to contemporaries who disapproved of the mode, its dissolution of morals. Everyone and everything proved susceptible to poetic attack, from social groups (Arabs, Berbers, Jews, Christians, Muslims, converts, non-Arabs, children, women, slaves) to institutions and classes (emirs, wazirs, rulers, jurists, theologians, philosophers, doctors, linguists, secretaries) to inanimate objects and concepts big and small, for comic effect (ʿĪsā 63–188). Ibn Zaydūn (d. 1071) and Wallādah bint al-Mustakfī (d. 1091) exchanged scandalous satires when their love affair ended, while ʿAbd al-Wāḥid al-Marākashī (d. 1250), following the footsteps of al-Ḥuṭayʾah (d. ca. 678), went so far as to pen

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invectives against himself—affirmation that nothing under the sun was safe from public mockery.

A Man of Letters

Ibn al-Khaṭīb's fluencies as a poet-chronicler reflect Granadine culture at its most mature. The Naṣrid dynasty (1230–1492) saw al-Andalus's final florescence before fading into factionalism (Kennedy 273–304). Under Yūsuf I (titled *al-Muʾayyad Billāh* ["Aided by Allāh"]), who ruled from 1333 to 1354, and Muḥammad V (*al-Ghaniyy Billāh* ["Sufficient with Allāh"]), who ruled from 1354 to 1359 and again from 1362 to 1391, both of whom Ibn al-Khaṭīb served, Granada's intellectuals connected to and collaborated with Muslim and non-Muslim scholars abroad. At home, Yūsuf I launched the reputed, cosmopolitan *al-Madrasah al-Naṣriyyah* ("the Naṣrid School") in 1349, while his successor continued to develop the country's manufacturing sectors, public buildings, and defenses (al-Ṭūkhī 38–42, 182–86, and 316–20). During these reigns, al-Andalus reconciled with the Maghrib by allying with the Marīnids (who ruled from 1244 to 1465), and both sultanates managed shifting alliances with Castile, Aragon, and Portugal, all the while employing non-Muslims within the court.[14] Ibn al-Khaṭīb not only lived with this kind of political and intellectual internationalism; he nourished it.[15] The minister's most important biographer, Aḥmad al-Maqqarī (d. 1632), devotes over a third of his great history of al-Andalus to his life and works, holding them up as proof of the poetic and historic richness of its lands—the product and preserver of Granada's cultural fertility (Elinson 142). Over his nearly three decades in the Naṣrid court, Ibn al-Khaṭīb served and befriended his sultan, dining with the ruler and joining him in administrative and social gatherings (al-Ṭūkhī 179). This access gave him the chance to play the ever-wise wazir in stately letters, poems, and sketches of affairs past and present, inscribed with unimpeachable versions of himself, as when he writes himself into his 1367 history of the Naṣrids alongside a fawning portrait of his young sultan, cast as the epitome of regal triumph.[16]

Despite these reported successes, al-Andalus faced losing battles against neighboring Christian potentates, while pretenders to the throne jockeyed for rule within.[17] Naṣrid Granada ailed from overcrowding as immigrants poured in from surrounding Muslim districts in collapse, while economic inflation, land insecurity, and political instability led many of the region's intellectuals to flock to Cairo, including Ibn al-Khaṭīb's former colleague, the famous sociologist Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406).[18] Al-Ghaniyy Billāh himself fled for Fes with his court in 1359 after his half-brother, Ismāʿīl II, usurped the throne; with the help of Pedro the Cruel, he regained it in 1362. Ibn al-Khaṭīb, despite his personal successes, distanced himself from court and country from that point on. His writings show a growingly embittered and mistrustful minister, at times desperate to survive, to the point of defecting to the Marīnids in 1371. By then, the minister had proved perfectly capable of living—and killing—by his words.

As the arm of the Naṣrids, Ibn al-Khaṭīb did not playfully pick on court rivals but went after emulators within the ruling elite, often with a mind to neutralize them politically through his invectives, described by al-Maqqarī as homicidal:

> واعلم أنّ للسان الدين ابن الخطيب، رحمه الله تعالى، الغاية في المدح والقدح، فتارة على طريق الترسّل، وطَوْراً على غيرها، وقد أقذع وبالغ رحمه الله تعالى في هجو أعدائه بما لا تحتمله الجبال، وهو أشدّ من وقع النبال. (7: 131)
>
> Know that Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb, Allāh have mercy on him, owns the perfect praises and blames. One moment he's on the path of pleasantness, another its opposite. He, Allāh have mercy on him, anathematized and exaggerated his attacks against enemies with what mountains can't handle. He's harder than the fall of arrows.

Ibn al-Khaṭīb swallowed whole the classical poetic tradition.[19] The diplomat mastered its meters, conventions, and obscure vocabulary despite his remove from the cultural efflorescence of the Muslim East, where classical poetry flourished between the eighth and thirteenth centuries in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf. His poetic expertise allowed

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him to produce rather intricate invectives. The official lampoons he left behind reflect a stately post, except that their contents push the culture's proprietary limits. Cleaving to *hijā'*s conventions, the caustic chronicler satirizes professional acquaintances' boorishness, immoderation, and failures large and small, social and political.[20] Of one minister who briefly joined al-Ghaniyy Billāh's reinstallation team, ʿAlī ibn Yūsuf of the influential Ibn Kumāshah family, Ibn al-Khaṭīb spread numerous damning reports, including these taunts:

قيل لي ماتت فراشة من بخار ابن كُماشه
أحرزتْ أجرَ شهيدٍ ناله الطعنُ وناشه
رحمة الله ورضوا ن على تلك الفراشه

(Ibn al-Khaṭīb, "Qīl[a] lī," lines 1–3)[21]

I was told a moth died
From Ibn Kumāshah's vapor;
It earned the prize of a martyr
Struck by an arrow.
Allāh's mercy and approval
On that moth.

The short lines exaggerate the death of a moth at Ibn Kumāshah's expense, a martyr to his *bukhār*, an allusion to his breath and flatus. The verses revel in a colleague's public shaming and make light of his professional disgrace, as manifested in his repulsive and threatening—hence unacceptable—bodily emissions. Elsewhere, Ibn al-Khaṭīb accuses Ibn Kumāshah's family of allying with Christian forces and altogether denies him a moral ground to stand on. One wonders whether the poet's intense interrogations into Ibn Kumāshah's character, faith, and allegiance played a role in his removal from Granada or his arrest at Málaga.[22]

It would not be unreasonable to assume that Ibn al-Khaṭīb spoke out against fellow wazirs, as Ibn Khaldūn would later claim of his sometime friend and colleague. Al-Ghaniyy Billāh employed several ministers, and naturally they competed for a seat by the sultan; for a time, Ibn al-Khaṭīb sat nearest the ruler (al-Ṭūkhī 176–77, 180–82). According to Ibn Khaldūn, Ibn al-Khaṭīb thus envied coministers to the point of derailing them, seeing to their imprisonment or deportation. Ibn Khaldūn blamed his own removal from office in Granada on Ibn al-Khaṭīb[23] and criticized him as not only paranoid and prodigal but treacherous, deeming his move to the Marīnids deceitfully calculated.[24] Apparently, Ibn al-Khaṭīb had no problem burning professional bridges.

Elsewhere, he burns entire households. One invective, composed in rhyming colons, takes aim at Ismāʿīl II's minister Ibrāhīm ibn Abī al-Fatḥ and his son Muḥammad, probably for their involvement in the author's brief arrest in 1359, on the heels of Ismāʿīl's coup.[25] Ibn al-Khaṭīb defames Ibn Abī al-Fatḥ and his son with stock failings, condemning, for instance, their penchants for stealing and carousing, wrapping up his assault with the following volley:

فما رأيت منكوبين أقبح شكلاً، ولا أفقد صبراً، من ذينك التيسين الحُبَقَيْن، صلع الرؤوس، ضخام الكروش، مبهوري الأنفس، متلجلجي الألسنة، قد ربت بمحل السيف من عنق كل جبّار منهما شحمة أترجية كأنها سَنام الحُوار، لا يثيرون دمعاً، ولا يستنزلون رحمة، ولا يمهدون عذراً، ولا يتزوّدون من كتاب الله آية، قد طبع الله على قلوبهم، وأخذهم ببغيهم، وعجل لهم سوء سعيهم.

(qtd. in al-Maqqarī 7: 132)

I haven't seen a grief-stricken pair more ugly or less patient than these useless billy goats. Bald-headed, big-bellied, short-winded, tongue-tied. In place of the sword's target—at each of these oppressors' necks!—bronze wattles developed like the humps of young camels. They're not moved to tears, they don't show mercy or grant pardons, and they haven't taken a single verse from Allāh's book—Allāh's sealed their hearts! May He take them for their tyranny and hasten for them the evil of their enterprise.

These measured lines insist on the eloquence of its author, here beautifying two ugly men with an anti-description both like and unlike a standard ode's *waṣf* ("description") of a lover.[26] With these lines, Ibn al-Khaṭīb demonstrates his social, moral, physical, and spiritual superiority over his political rivals, whose dead children—likened to dogs—he proceeds to malign. After rejoicing in their drowning amid a campaign in Alexandria, deemed divine retribution,

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he takes the occasion to further abuse their father, Ibrāhīm ibn Abī al-Fatḥ:

> فكان فرعون هذا الزمان جبروتاً وعتوًّا وميتة، عجّل الله لهم العذاب، وأغرقهم في اليم، فانظر كيف كان عاقبة الظالمين، فسبحان من لا تضيع الحقود مع عدله . . . وفي ذلك أقول مستريحاً وإن لم يكن – علم الله تعالى – شأني، ولا تكرر في ديواني :
> وما كنت ممن يدخل العشقُ قلبَه ولكنَّ من يُبصر جفونَكِ يعشَقِ
> ومن أمثالها ((من استُغضِب فلم يغضب فهو حمار)) والله سبحانه يقول ومن أصدق من الله قيلا (وجزاء سيئة سيئة مثلها) والعفو أقرب للتقوى والقرب والبعد بيده سبحانه.
> (7: 132–33)

> He was the pharoah of this time in terms of oppression, cruelty, and death. Allāh hastened their punishment and drowned them in the sea, so see how was the end of the unjust. Praised is He whose justice never spares the malicious. . . . For this occasion I comfortably declare, though it be not my wont, Allāh Almighty knows, nor does it repeat in my collection:
> I was not one in whom desire lodges itself,
> But whoever sees your eyelids yearns.
> And among the sayings, "whoever is angered but doesn't get angry is an ass." Allāh the Praiseworthy says "and who is more truthful than Allāh in assertion?" "and the retribution for an evil deed is an evil deed like it," and clemency is closer to piety, and the closeness and farness is in His hand, the Praiseworthy.

Exuding euphoria, this summary of an enemy's end does not juxtapose so much as blend sacred and profane registers. Consequently, the allusive, Qurʾanic vocabulary is used for mockery, and rather giddily. The quoted verse, by al-Mutanabbī (d. 915), encapsulates the high contrast of the situation, where the drowning of a family is likened to falling in love. In another couplet, Ibn al-Khaṭīb rejoices at the death of Ismāʿīl II and his brother, Qays, and declares their demise sufficient medicine for his healing (7: 134). Gruesome though they are, such negative literary and poetic depictions force readers to fathom the enormity of the wrong done to the court of al-Ghaniyy Billāh that made Ibn al-Khaṭīb state publicly what most would entertain only in their heads.

Ibn al-Khaṭīb's abuse does not end here. For Ibn Abī al-Fatḥ, he composed a thirty-eight-line *rāʾiyyah* ("a poem whose lines end in *r*"), whose burns I excerpt (line numbers appear in parentheses):

(1) كُنْ من صروف الردى على حذَر لا يقبل الدهر عُذرَ معتذر
(4) كم شامخ الأنفِ ينثني فرحاً بالَ عليه زمانُهُ وخَرِي
(5) قل للوزير البليد قد ركضتْ في ربعكَ اليوم غارةُ الغِيَرِ
(6) يا ابن أبي الفتح نسبةً عُكِسَتْ فلا بفتحٍ أتتْ ولا ظفر
(11) يا طللاً ما عليه من عملٍ يا شجراً ما لديه من ثمرِ
(12) يا مُفرِطَ الجهلِ والغباوةِ لا يُحْسَبُ إلّا من جملة البقر
(13) يا دائمَ الحقدِ والفظاظةِ لا يَفْرِقُ ما بين ظالمٍ وبَرِي
(20) يا ناقص الدين والمروءة والعق ل ومجري اللسان بالهَذرِ
(21) يا ولد السَّحْقِ غيرَ مكتتم حديثُهُ، يا ابن فاسدِ الدبرِ
(22) يا بغلَ طاحونةٍ يدورُ بها مجتهدُ السيرِ مغمضُ البصر
(35) والله لا نال من تخلّفه من أملٍ بعدها ولا وَطَرِ
(38) ما عوقبَ الليلُ بالصباح وما تقدّم البرقُ عرضَ المطرِ

("Kun min ṣurūf")

(1) Take heed from the obliterated:
Time refuses the excuser's excuses.
(4) How often does the high-nosed strut in self-importance—
His days pissed and dumped on him!
(5) Tell the stupid minister, "today the world's attacks transpired—
Charging your household!"
(6) Oh Ibn Abī al-Fatḥ—ascription inverted![27]
For no conquest came, or victory!
(11) Oh ghost town empty of activity—
Oh fruitless tree!
(12) Oh extravagant in ignorance, dim-wittedness—
Counted among cattle!
(13) Oh envious, insolent—
Who can't sort guilty from innocent!
(20) Oh poor in faith, virtue, intelligence—
Running your mouth with nonsense!
(21) Oh outcast, inept at withholding speech—
Oh attendant of iniquity!
(22) Oh mule of the mill, circumambulating—
Studious-moving, eyes unseeing!
(35) I swear you won't attain from Allāh's delay
Any hope or aim!
(38) May morning light not follow night,
Or rain lightning!

Ibn al-Khaṭīb's abusive poetic gives his contemporaries a fictional life only to assassinate their characters. The poet's emphatic insinuations of his enemy's deceit and betrayal simultaneously entertain and disturb audiences, while his manic feelings and their gamut of affects invite them to muse on the limits of critique that the poet has exceeded. From an ethical standpoint, Ibn al-Khaṭīb must

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have believed his rival minister, presumably a fellow Muslim, to be in some absolute and exceptional wrong to cross such lines of decency. From a poetic one, the sustained *nidāʾ* ("apostrophe") formally parallels the lines' insults, each introducing a new metaphor; altogether, the lines' succession of curses, exhorting divine justice in the form of pure wrath, amounts to a performed imprecation, the hateful weight of which unsettles the poem's formal artistry. Only Ibn al-Khaṭīb—and perhaps his circle of patrons and rivals—could have fully accounted for if not enjoyed this display of ugly beauty.

After al-Ghaniyy Billāh's return to power in 1362, Ibn al-Khaṭīb assumed the highest office as privy counselor. Now the belletrist enjoyed unprecedented powers of attorney, acting as deputy ruler in his ruler's absence, second only to the sultan (Zaghal 110). This appointment would end in calamity. By 1371, Ibn al-Khaṭīb received his sultan's permission to inspect Granada's coasts. Reaching Gibraltar, he fled to Ceuta, then Tlemcen, where the Marīnid court of Abū Fāris al-Mustanṣir ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz welcomed him with open arms.[28] To ease the shock of his departure, Ibn al-Khaṭīb sent back a letter in which he pledged allegiance to the Naṣrids and downplayed his escape as a brief spiritual retreat.[29] Elsewhere, however, the minister mentioned his wish to unburden himself of the responsibilities of his post as the main impetus behind his unannounced retirement (ʿInān 136–37). Though he promised to return to Granada, the fugitive wazir —as good as stateless with the abrupt death of al-Mustanṣir in 1372—made no effort to do so. Not long afterward, al-Ghaniyy Billāh hunted him down. The agents responsible for apprehending him turned out to be the minister's former student and fellow wazir, Ibn Zamrak, and the chief justice, whom Ibn al-Khaṭīb himself appointed, Abū al-Ḥassan al-Nubāhī (al-Maqqarī 1: 84–85). They accused him, among other charges, of apostasy, indecency, grand larceny, obstruction of justice, and divulging state secrets (7: 113–14, 122; see 116–25). Several other wazirs of the Maghrib, in whose way Ibn al-Khaṭīb stood over the years, shared in the conspiracy to seize him, publicly beat him, imprison him, and strangle him.[30] His books were burned, as was his corpse, which earned him his last title: "Dhū al-Maytatayn" ("The One of the Two Deaths").[31] Life at the top proved treacherous. The diplomat's invectives and contrasting self-eulogies from this era help explain his swift fall.

Who's Who and Who's Not

Despite his promotion, Ibn al-Khaṭīb struggled in an increasingly inhospitable Naṣrid court, and his invectives indicate as much. Several stand out in his late collection of biographical sketches, الكتيبة الكامنة في من لقيناه بالأندلس من شعراء المائة الثامنة (*al-Katībah al-Kāminah fī man laqaynāh bil-Andalus min shuʿarāʾ al-miʾat al-Thāminah*; *The Concealed Legion of Eighth-Century Poets We've Met at al-Andalus*). Composed in his retirement, months after al-Mustanṣir ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's death, the collection samples poetry by diverse figures, from ascetics to orators, judges to secretaries. The thread that binds these various professionals is not only their shared interest in poetry but their acquaintance with Ibn al-Khaṭīb at one point or another. The minister directly learned from, taught, or collaborated with each of them, and the range of the collection reveals the hidden role he personally played in shaping the region's poetic scene. Sifting these generous sketches, readers uncover another motive not outlined in the author's preface: the exposure of a handful of treacherous ex-friends. This twist in the genre's conventions draws out another meaning from the work's title: among this concealed legion of poets hides a troop of poetasters lying in ambush.

Ibn al-Khaṭīb excelled in a hybrid genre that blends chronicle and biography. Throughout his courtly career, the author compiled *akhbār* ("reports") that present history in anecdotes not fixed to an overarching narrative. He packaged these reports into biographical sketches, extending a tradition that primarily cataloged Islam's hadith transmitters.[32] Under Ibn al-Khaṭīb, the poems take center stage with their authors, memorialized as the movers and shakers of Granada's literate elite, including its prime critic, the minister himself. By writing into existence a milieu of aristocratic

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belletrists, Ibn al-Khaṭīb legitimates his own profession in the process.[33] The general reverence he shows toward his predecessors culminates with the inclusion of himself among them: concluding his magnum opus الإحاطة في أخبار غرناطة (*al-Iḥāṭah fī Akhbār Gharnāṭah*; *The Comprehensive History of Granada*) is an "About the Author" that establishes his intellectual pedigree and samples much of his own poetry. The autobiography towers over the 498 biographies preceding it, reaching about two hundred pages in printed editions. At the outset, the author positions himself as the latest in Granada's line of litterateurs:

> فإني لمّا فرغت من تأليف هذا الكتاب . . . قد تخلّدت مآثرهم بعد ذهاب أعيانهم، وانتشرت مفاخرهم بعد انطواء زمانهم، نافسْتُهم في اقتحام تلك الأبواب، ولباس تلك الأثواب، وقنعت باجتماع الشمل بهم، ولو في الكتاب. وحرصت على أن أنال منهم قُرباً، وأخذت من أعقابهم أدباً وحباً، وكما قال : ساقي القوم آخرُهُم شرباً.
> (*al-Iḥāṭah* 4: 373)

> Upon completing this book . . . I immortalized the elites' deeds and proclaimed their points of pride after their age's exit. With them I competed to enter those doors, to dress in those garments, and resolved to gather these men if only in the book. I took care to draw near them, and took from their legacy out of respect and love. As he said [in the Prophetic narration]: the nation's cupbearer is its last to drink.

In his prefatory remarks Ibn al-Khaṭīb creates a competitive link between himself and the predecessors he cites. By following in their footsteps, he means to outdistance them, an intention more apparent in the cameo he makes in an earlier biographical collection of the 1360s, أوصاف الناس في التواريخ والصلات (*Awṣāf al-Nās fī al-Tawārīkh wa-al-Ṣilāt*; *Peoples' Profiles in Times and Ties*). After introducing himself as the Mercury to the Naṣrid constellation, its full moon and guiding light, Ibn al-Khaṭīb paints himself thus:

> أقوم بين يدي سرير [الدولة النصرية] والوفود قعود، وأجلوا الغيم عن شمسها والجو بروق ورعود، وأبادر نداءها إن كانت هيعة، وأمسك منها اليمين إن همت بتجديد بيعة، فمن اختال في حلل هذا التشريف غني عن التعريف، وأما شعري في امتداحها فمثل سائر، وطائر في الآفاق ميمون الطائر، وأما كتابتي عنها فأبهى من وجوه البشائر، وأحلى من الشهد في يد الشائر. (*Awṣāf* 134–35)

> I stand amid the Naṣrid state's trust while delegations stay seated. I remove the clouds from her sun in stormy weather. I respond to her cries even when they frighten. I clasp her right hand when renewed oaths are due. He who takes pride in the wealth of this honor needs no introduction. As for my poetry in praise of her, it is a popular example, repeated by the people, soaring at the horizons with a blessed ascent. As for my letters on her, they're fairer than fine faces, sweeter than honey in the hand of the beekeeper.

Seeing that Ibn al-Khaṭīb would defect from the Naṣrids and thereby make enemies of court intimates only a few years later, these claims carry a range of conflicting feelings beneath their sturdy surface: perhaps the delusions of an overconfident celebrity, or the anxieties of an unprotected clerk. Whatever his precise emotions and however messy they might actually have been, the poet at any rate composed a clear image of confidence for history to keep.

Though *al-Katībah* departs from previous biographical compilations by its stress on its author's prestige, its invectives form its starkest difference. The attacks tend to critique a poet's technique and temperament together, and they vary in intensity. The sketch of Muḥammad al-Ghassānī, deceased at the time of composition, seems impersonal:

> هام بوادي الشعر مع من هام، واستمطر منه الجهام، ولم يختر الله له منه ذلك الإسهام، ولا سدد السهام، وهو يعتقد فيما يأتي به الإلهام [. . .] وتكاثرت عليه رحمه الله بسبب لسانه الأحن، وتعاورته المحن، وتصرف آخر عمره في الأعمال المخزنية، متعللاً بنزر القوت إلى الأجل الموقوت. (*al-Katībah* 152)

> He thirsted with those thirsting at poetry's valley, yearned from it nimbus. Allāh chose not for him such favor, nor did He level his arrows, though he thinks he's inspired. . . . He became outnumbered on account of his venomous tongue, Allāh have mercy on him. Calamities disturbed him. Financial matters busied him the end of his life; he was distracted by scarce provisions until the appointed time.

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The entry hardly endorses the late judge, but the attack could have been worse. The philosopher ʿAlī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Raqqāṣ, also deceased at the time of his character assassination, is described as "رجل متهور، وفي أقبح الأطوار متطور، يأوي إلى أبوة خاملة، وحماقة على حملة العلم حاملة، إلا أنه ظهر باجتهاده، وترفع عن وهاده، واستمرت حاله على تكلف، إلى أن مات قتيلاً في سبيل تخلف." ("a careless man who excelled in the ugliest fashions; constitutionally dull, [he was] a genius of imbecility, which he struggled to overcome, elevating himself above his lowland until he died of stupidity"; 94).

Al-Raqqāṣ is made ridiculous by the high contrast of his folly, here no mere outcome of God's decree, as was al-Ghassānī's case. The philosopher makes headway in the wrong direction, probably on account of his profound unintelligence. From an aesthetic standpoint, audiences unaware of the exact occasion for these attacks or the men involved may find humorous the incongruities of these satirical sketches. From a practical one, they grant Ibn al-Khaṭīb the final word in a one-sided argument whose points could have returned to him—he himself endured financial hardships and was accused of all manner of recklessness.

Among living former colleagues praised in earlier biographies is Ibn al-Khaṭīb's main accuser of apostasy, al-Nubāhī. Whereas in a previous biography Ibn al-Khaṭīb takes pains to showcase his friend's scholarly training and talents as a poet and prosaist (*al-Iḥāṭah* 4: 69–77),[34] the ex-Naṣrid now provides a whole new assessment, whose opening reads:

> أطروفة الزمن، التي تجل غرائبها عن الثمن، وقردٌ شاردٌ . . . لا يفرق بينهما في الشكل . . . لا يجلب لأدب يرسم، ولا حظ من حسن الذكر يقسم، ولا لعرف يتنسم، ولا لبركة تتوسم . . . وإن كان لأبيه ببلده درجة الأمير، عند مولدي الحمير، ينظف بيديه أرحامها، بعد أن يحكم بالدهن إقحامها، ويستنطق بوحي بنانه الصفنة الجاحدة، وينزي العير الحصور فيحبل الأتان بواحدة، وكانت أمه أم جعسوس قابلة ذلك الوضع، ومقدرة الفطام والرضع.
>
> (*al-Katībah* 146–47)

> A measureless joke of the ages. An errant ape . . . indistinguishable in appearance. . . . Uncreative, imbecilic, unmannered, unsanctified. . . . In his land, his father held the status of emir among donkey deliverers. With his hands he would clean their wombs after stuffing them with fat, and would cause to speak through the inspiration of his fingers the disavowing sack. The celibate strikes the wild ass and it conceives such a one. His mother—mother of the runt—accepted that parturition, assumed the weaning and breastfeeding.

This opening conveys its scorn quite immediately, which readers expect of the *hijāʾ* mode. Ibn al-Khaṭīb's obscene imagery and transgressive, dehumanizing attacks on al-Nubāhī's physical makeup and his parents take us to the art form's limits, where an audience's moral and cultural standards are no longer represented or raised, and where we expect entertainment values to drop. Insofar as they exceed expectations of style and audience tastes, the attacks appear especially personal. Conventional inversions of taste (in every sense) merely set up further individualized assaults, such as the so-called charlatan's incompetence and unpopularity as a judge and his superstitious practices. In one anecdote, Ibn al-Khaṭīb has al-Nubāhī sitting in the company of virtuous men, attempting to interpret an epithet Ibn al-Khaṭīb slapped on him, *jaʿsūs* or *juʿsūs* ("lowly runt"), a term al-Nubāhī had originally used in vague reference to the unspecified treacheries of "اليهود والمجوس" ("the Jews and the Majus"; Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *al-Iḥāṭah* 4: 75). In Ibn al-Khaṭīb's story, al-Nubāhī attempts to define this term by using it in a sentence, misquoting the widely known Qurʾanic precept, taken from a verse against betraying community members. He says "ولا تجعسسوا"—an incoherent phrase. The men at once correct him, supplying the correct passage: "ولا تجسسوا" ("never spy on one another"; *al-Katībah* 148–49; see *al-Qurʾan* 49.12). In taking al-Nubāhī's smear and defaming him with it, then thickening its import with the most popular Islamic maxim against betrayal, Ibn al-Khaṭīb associates al-Nubāhī with the treacherous "Jews and Majus," either because the judge allegedly spied on the minister, as the anecdote implies, or because he joined the rest of the Naṣrid court in condemning Ibn al-Khaṭīb—himself accused of treason and collusion with the Marīnids—upon his breaking ranks with Granada. Ironically enough, Ibn al-Khaṭīb ends his updated

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sketch of al-Nubāhī with deferential poetry the judge had previously written for the minister when they were friends, self-deprecating verses that elevate Ibn al-Khaṭīb's character, now fully at al-Nubāhī's expense (*al-Katībah* 146–52).

Al-Nubāhī's coconspirator and Ibn al-Khaṭīb's ex-student, ex-protégé, and successor Ibn Zamrak is also scathed in abrogation of prior praise.[35] His entry leaves nothing intact of its subject, whose connivance and predisposition to talking nonsense precede his birth and development. The wazir calls him thankless. He calls him a deceiver who dirtied the waters with intentions unknown, and he blames himself for ever supporting such a monstrous ringleader. The biographer then compliments Ibn Zamrak for his poetic abilities, though quite backhandedly:

> وأكثر إجادته في القصائد التي تطول، ويلوى بدينها الطبع المطول، وبينه وبين معاصريه مداعبات في غلام له غريب، جعله مرمى غزل ونسيب، وصرف إلى ذكره ذكرى جنيب، تشعشع كئوس الأنيس كلما جليت، وتقلد ليالي الفكاهة بلآليها إذا حليت . وفيه يقول:
>
> يا فرجاً عللتُ نفسي به والفال محبوبٌ لتعليله
> حرَّمت احليلك هذا على نفسي وأفتيت بتحليله
>
> (*al-Katībah* 283)
>
> His greatest skill lies in long odes, contorted by their elongated nature. Between him and his contemporaries are dalliances toward a mysterious youth whom he made the object of his erotic poetry. He turned to his remembrance—the remembrance of a sidekick mount. Goblets glittered when polished. Drollery decorated nights with her pearls when adorned. About him he says:
>
> O vulva! I've justified myself with him;
> The erring is loved for his warrant.
> On myself I've proscribed this, your urethra,
> And decreed his legalization!

Ibn al-Khaṭīb develops his allegation against Ibn Zamrak by tossing off a few more lines that poke fun at his former student's purported sexual indecency. Thereafter, the biographer reproduces turgid verses that applaud Ibn al-Khaṭīb in the extreme (282–88). In contrast to his own libelous remarks, Ibn Zamrak's eulogizing lines throw into relief the exiled minister's bitterness at a friendship and mentorship betrayed.

A third state agent, Aḥmad ibn Farkūn, likewise receives a reassessment bearing the intensity of a former bond. As with al-Nubāhī and Ibn Zamrak, his previous biography in *al-Iḥāṭah* (1: 92–93) is canceled with an unremitting hit piece. The younger secretary, whom Ibn al-Khaṭīb claims to have raised personally and supported professionally as stepson and scribe, is compared to an unnaturally disloyal dog, a failure of acculturation and apprenticeship. For all this the author imprecates: "والله تعالى لا يعصمه . . . وعدل الله تعالى كفيل باتباعه، وقص باعه، ومجازاة ختله، وإهداء كبده إلي من بعد قتله، ليُجعل منها على العضة الدامية، ويشوى باقيها على النار الحامية." ("May Allāh Almighty not protect him. Able is Allāh Almighty's justice of hunting him down, disabling him, penalizing his trickery, and rewarding me his liver after his killing, for part of it to be set to the bloody bite; the rest, the blazing fire"; *al-Katībah* 306). The obsequious verses that follow this curse only heighten its gravity. The negative affects surrounding these poets' verses—indeed, their ironic inclusion in the collection itself—export those qualities the author's enemies accuse him of, from prince-pleasing to treachery. In highlighting the courtiers' indebtedness to him and framing their praises as studies in hypocrisy, not a change of heart or circumstance, Ibn al-Khaṭīb sought to secure his name and reaffirm his place among Granada's vanguard. He succeeded and failed.

Assassin among Assassins

Ibn al-Khaṭīb wrote as a matter of survival. In his satires, ugly feelings are both real and feigned, as complicated as the reactions the ugly art elicits: shock, amusement, disapproval, vengeance. Words armed the minister but also exposed him to attacks: Ibn al-Khaṭīb's continued swipes at al-Nubāhī spurred the Naṣrids to hunt down the runaway on charges of treason and blasphemy (al-Maqqarī 7: 116–19). An object of so much lampooning, al-Nubāhī would have appreciated the power of words to make and break reputations, as would Ibn al-Khaṭīb, a victim of slander and libel in turn.[36] Both attempt to clear their names at length, as indicated by the letters al-Maqqarī records in his narration

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of this personal and political turning point. The barbs considered in this essay thus reflect a harsh existence, the hostile content born out of turbulent conditions, the biting words liable to cut their wielder.

Ibn al-Khaṭīb glorified friends only to blast them later. Readers cannot gauge the sincerity of such a poet's panegyrics and invectives, but the stark switch from praise to blame, or vice versa, reflects the ugliness of the feelings therein contained—anxious, ambivalent, vague. The purpose of the *hijāʾ*—putting haters in their place—justified all means available to its author to malign any addressee, even as it exposed the author to reprisals.[37] The minister knew that an enemy's demise, laughed at today, could become his own tomorrow. As a historian, he knew well the many ways kings and courtiers could die. His final collection, أعمال الأعلام (*Aʿmāl al-Aʿlām*; *Acts of the Illustrious*), a catalog of prepubescent rulers, penned in response to critics back home who blamed the minister for pledging allegiance to the four-year-old Marinid king Abū Zayyān Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (who ruled from 1372 to 1374), brings together scores of disparate kings who underwent the vicious cycles of intrigue and bloodshed, rebellion and vengeance, and general injustice. At one point, Ibn al-Khaṭīb interrupts his somber survey to share his own crisis and clear his name (2: 268–76). The minister affirms his recent status as the Naṣrids' nucleus before blaming then cursing internal enemies for shaking it:

> وصرت أنظر إلى الوجوه، فألمح الشر في نظراتها، وأعتبر الكلمات، فأتبين الحسائف في لغاتها والصبغة في كل يوم تستحكم والشر يتضاعف . . . .والأصحاب الذين تجمعهم المائدة كل يوم وليلة يعتنون في الإطراء والمديح وتحسين القسم والمحالات في الغي والتقرب بالسعي، أنظر إليهم يتناقلون الإشارات بالعيون والمغافرة بالجفون والمخاطبة باللغوز فإذا انصرفوا صرف الله قلوبهم قلبوا الأمور ونقلوا العيوب وأفسدوا القلوب، وتعللوا بالأحلام، وقواطع الأحكام. (2: 272)
>
> I took to studying faces until I'd discern the evil in their stares. I'd weigh words until I'd make out the malice in their language. Their character every day would confirm this; evil would double. . . . The friends whom the dinner table brought together every day and night gingerly offer false flattery, excessive praise, beautified oaths, underhanded intercessions, skillful seductions. I see them, exchanging signals with their eyes, condoning with their eyelids, conversing in riddles. May Allāh disperse their hearts when they disperse: they plotted, brought disorder, marred hearts. Their reveries and crimes consumed them.

Ibn al-Khaṭīb's direct and indirect experiences with court conspiracies must have discouraged a direct confrontation with these suspected enemies.[38] They catch up with him, as his subdued final verses, composed in prison, attest:

بَعُدْنا وإن جاوَرَتْنا البُيوتْ وجئنا بوعظٍ ونحن صُمُوتْ
وأنفاسُنا سَكَنَتْ دفعة كَجَهْرِ الصلاة تلاهُ القُنُوتْ
وكُنَّا عظاماً فَصُرْنا عِظاماً وكُنَّا نَقوتُ فها نحنُ قوتْ
وكُنَّا شُمُوسَ سماءِ العُلا غَرُبْنَ فناحَتْ علينا السُّمُوتْ
فكم جَدَّلَتْ ذا الحُسامَ الظبا وذو البخت كم جَدَّلَتْهُ البُخُوتْ
وكم سيق للقبر في خِرْقَةٍ فتىً مُلِئَتْ من كساه التُّخُوتْ
فقلْ للعدا ذَهَبَ ابنُ الخطيبِ وفاتَ، ومَنْ ذا الذي لا يَفُوتْ
ومن كان يَفْرَحُ منهم له فَقُل: يفرحُ اليومَ من لا يموتْ

("Baʿudnā," lines 1–8)

We've grown distant though houses neighbor us.
We'd brought advice but are voiceless.
Our breaths stopped all at once,
As silent supplication follows public prayer.
We used to be nobles—bones we'll become![39]
We used to feed others—now we're the fodder!
We used to be suns of the high skies.
We've set. The azimuths mourn us.
How many blades' edges braided the swordsman!
How many favored ones have fortunes thrown!
How many princes, their strongboxes stuffed with apparel,
Were hurled graveward, ragged?
Tell enemies: Ibn al-Khaṭīb has gone and left.
Who among us won't?
And tell whoever gladdens at his cost:
Glad today is he who does not die.

The self-elegy encapsulates the two-faced nature of wazirship: an overlooked and underappreciated position of power and influence, a high life that can crash at any moment, to the mirth of every enemy, unknown and known. Unlike his invectives, whose tones render the text's affects difficult to pin down, Ibn al-Khaṭīb's final lines mimic feelings of resignation and defeat, a familiar refrain in premodern Arabic literature, whose prose and verse records

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echo the brutal deaths of courtiers, their diversity of tortures mirroring the diversity of geographies and centuries spanned, with some confined, some drawn and quartered, others trampled, still others dismembered, burned.[40]

Ibn al-Khaṭīb does more than sublimate his suffering. He exploits his experiences for art's sake, turning unpleasant conditions into neat tropes and schemes. The brilliance of his poetry lies in his sticky affects, some visible (schadenfreude, pettiness, injured merit) and some hidden (opportunism, envy, paranoia), too layered to substitute for clear-cut feelings. His feelings are not quite feelings but rather artful replications of them, crafted to please and persuade readers—to curry favor in the short run, if not secure respect in the long. Even at his guiltiest, in 1371, writing from Gibraltar as he flees Granada for good, Ibn al-Khaṭīb can still cajole al-Ghaniyy Billāh—addressed in majestic plurals—to leave him alone:

وأنا قد رحلت، فلا أوصيكم بمال، فهو عندي أهون متروك، ولا بولد، فهم رجالكم وخدامكم، وممن يحرص مثلكم على الإكثار منهم، ولا بعيال فهي من مربيات بيتكم، وخواص داركم. إنما أوصيكم بحظي العزيز—كان—علي بوطنكم، وهو أنتم، فأنا أوصيكم بكم، فارعوني فيكم خاصة، أوصيكم بتقوى الله، والعمل لغد، وقبض عنان اللهو في موطن الجد، والحياء من الله الذي محّص وأقال، وأعاد النعمة بعد زوالها "لينظر كيف تعملون" وأطلب منكم عوض ما وفرته عليكم، من زاد طريق، ومكافأة وإعانة، زادا سهلا عليكم، وهو أن تقولوا لي، غفر الله لك ما ضيعت من حقي خطأ أو عمدا، وإذا فعلتم ذلك فقد رضيت. (qtd. in ʿInān 136)

I've left. I therefore entrust you not with wealth—for me it's the least important, forfeited; or with my children, for they are your men and servants, and those of your station take care to multiply them in number; or with my dependents, for they count among your household's nursemaids and most precious members. Rather, I entrust you with what's always been my dearest fortune in your nation, and that's you: I entrust you with yourselves, so take care of yourselves for me. I entrust you with the piety of Allāh, with fruit-bearing works, with the seizure of play's reins at the earnest hour, with meekness toward the Allāh who tested and withheld, and replenished blessings after its depletion "to study how you respond."[41] In return for my favors to you, I ask for a journey's provisions, for compensation and aid, these on top of my request—effortless for you—that you tell me, "Allāh forgive you! You haven't squandered, intentionally or unintentionally, what's owed me." Were you to do this I'd be content.

In a measured display of loyalty and friendship, the absent ex-minister writes away his defection. He pleads innocence, looks back on a job well done, and goes so far as to report his favors to his ruler as he abandons him. Explaining why he would risk retribution for this stunt, as a high-level official essential to the kingdom, Ibn al-Khaṭīb can only brandish his laurels:

واعلموا أيضا، على جهة النصيحة، أن ابن الخطيب مشهور في كل قطر، وعند كل ملك، واعتقاده، وبرُّه، والسؤال عنه، وذكره بالجميل، والإذن في زيارته، نجابة منكم، وسعة ذرع ودهاء. فإنما كان ابن الخطيب بوطنكم سحابة رحمة نزلت ثم أقشعت وتركت الأزاهر تفوح والمحاسن تلوح ومثاله معكم مثال المرضعة أرضعت السياسة والتدبير الميمون ثم رقدتكم في مهد الصلح والأمان وغطتكم بقناع العافية وانصرفت إلى الحمام تغسل اللبن والوضر وتعود فإن وجدت الرضيع نائماً فحسن أو قد انتبه فلم تتركه إلا في حد الفطام. وتختم لكم هذه الغزارة بالحلف الأكيد، أني ما تركت لكم وجه نصيحة في دين، ولا في دنيا، إلا وقد وفيتها لكم، ولا فارقتكم إلا عن عجز، ومن ظن خلاف هذا فقد ظلمني وظلمكم، والله يرشدكم ويتولى أمركم. (136)

Know as well, in the spirit of counsel, that Ibn al-Khaṭīb is famous in every land, before every king. Good faith in him, kindness toward him, checking on him, thinking well of him, and seeking permission to visit him, these demonstrate your nobility, capacity, and craft. Ibn al-Khaṭīb lived in your nation as a merciful cloud that descended then dissolved, leaving lush gardens, gleaming beauties. His likeness among you is that of the wet nurse who suckled Politics and auspicious Administration. Then she put you to rest in the crib of Treaty and Peace, and blanketed you with the cover of Health. She left for the washroom to rinse out the milk and filth before returning. If she found the suckling asleep: good. If the suckling took notice, she wouldn't leave him before his weaning. She ends this outpouring with the express oath: I left for you all no directive pertaining to spiritual or worldly affairs except that I fulfilled it for you all. I never parted company with you except out of debility. Whoever suggests otherwise has

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> wronged me and wronged you. Allāh guide you and handle your affairs.

Ibn al-Khaṭīb's words give the impression that he simply is not sorry. Silence shrouds reports of his flight, and of his life and history. But as chronicler, he gets the final word.

Ibn al-Khaṭīb wrote the book on classical Arabic genres, literally. The primer he composed in his first exile, السحر والشعر (*al-Siḥr wa-al-Shiʿr*; *Enchantment and Verse*), introduced students to the classical poetic modes—to poetry's power to move you. It contains no chapter on *hijāʾ*. He did write strong invectives, but not many. Considered from their contexts of court intrigue, their transgressive sentiments seem to stem from personal necessity, such that the invectives' political punch outweighs any need for artistic expression, or occasionally remolds it considerably. All told, the minister's oeuvre consists mostly of works of praise, love, and spirituality, of lyrics and playful anecdotes. These he proudly cites in his autobiography, not his *hijāʾ*. Whether Ibn al-Khaṭīb took pride in his attacks will remain unknown. From a poetic standpoint, he likely recognized the mode's utility insofar as he took pains to push its conventional limits. Ibn al-Khaṭīb probably also assumed at some point, since he used them, that ugly ideas and words would find their most useful fit in an aesthetic geared toward offending others. Perhaps he found their composition therapeutic. Even so, from an Islamic standpoint, his age came and went; it will have its reckoning as will all others (*al-Qurʾān* 2.134, 2.141, 2.286). Though gone, far removed from the histories of his literary selves, which continue to be written, Ibn al-Khaṭīb takes the fruit of his works with him.

Notes

All translations are mine. For readability, I have added diacritics to letters left unmarked in Arabic editions.

1. For an overview of medieval and postclassical Arabic literature, see Allen and Richards.

2. See Fisher 10.

3. For the prominence of the office of the wazir during the Naṣrid reign, see Shabbānah 49–52; Bū Falāqah 16–17; al-Sāmarrāʾī 90–91; al-Ṭūkhī 182–86.

4. See Rosenthal 11, 66–71, 105. For the historical importance of poets in diplomatic and communal capacities, see al-Ṭūkhī 230.

5. See *al-Qurʾān* 2.117; 3.47; 3.59; 6.73; 16.40; 19.35; 36.82; 40.68; 73.5; 96.1–5.

6. See Ibn Manẓūr's entries on the root word شعر (*shiʿr*; 8: 88–92).

7. For an overview of verbal dueling in other traditions, see Baragona and Rambo; Flower; Riccardo.

8. Pre-Islamic poet-cursers allegedly enlisted the aid of jinns, completing their imprecation by donning a formal gown and shaving the back portion of their heads (Ḥusayn 59; see 46–60). See Goldziher 63–72. Because the word *hijāʾ* itself means "spelling" in addition to "satire" and "invective," one is tempted to draw a direct line between it and spells.

9. See al-Nuwayrī 248–65.

10. Individual targets include ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ubayy, al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, Abū Jahl, and Abū Lahab. See *al-Qurʾān* 63.1–8, 74.11–26, 96.6–19, 108.1–3, 111.1–5.

11. See *al-Qurʾān* 2.83, 2.263, 4.86, 20.44; al-Ghazālī.

12. Ḥassān was the Prophet's chief poet. For a profile of his invectives, see Ḥusayn 196, 207–08, 212–30.

13. See ʿAbbās 113–14.

14. For Naṣrid and Marīnid relations, see Elinson 142–50; Kennedy 285–86. For Muslim-Christian alliances and Christian and Jewish participation in court life, see al-Ṭūkhī 42, 230–31; Kennedy 276–77, 280–81, 288.

15. For a study of al-Andalusi internationalism, see Fierro and Samsó. Safran provides a useful introduction to the culture of difference and integration among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in al-Andalus, especially in the ninth and tenth centuries and through the lens of Mālikī law.

16. Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *al-Lamḥah* 138–52, 154–56. Al-Ghaniyy Billāh assumed power at sixteen in 1354; Ibn al-Khaṭīb would have been over forty at the time.

17. The Naṣrids emerged in the wake of the Almohad empire's dissolution following the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212), a campaign that severely weakened the region's Moorish political integrity and invigorated the Reconquista: "The foundations of the [Naṣrid] Kingdom of Granada were laid in the turbulent years of the second quarter of the thirteenth century. The triumphant progress of the Christian reconquest of the 1230s and 1240s reached its culmination with the taking of Seville in 1248" (Kennedy 273).

18. See al-Ṭūkhī 320–30. Ibn al-Khaṭīb had himself set sights on Egypt, but the plan was never realized (Abbādī 20–21; al-Ṭūkhī 327).

19. As demonstrated in Miftāḥ 1: 29–52.

20. Ibn al-Khaṭīb blames, for instance, the Maghribi scholar Aḥmad al-Qabbāb for turning down an invitation, the Maghribi judge Muḥammad ibn Abī Ramānah for arriving late to greet him when traveling on assignment, and the Maghribi wazir ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd Allāh for ousting Abū Sālim al-Marīnī. See ʿInān 94; Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Muthlā* 6–7; al-Maqqarī 7: 136–37.

21. See also Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Nufāḍah* 2: 361–62; Miftāḥ 2: 741.

22. See Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *al-Iḥāṭah* 4: 57–59 and *Nufāḍah* 3: 161–62.

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23. Upon returning to power in 1362, al-Ghaniyy Billāh enlisted the aid of Ibn Khaldūn, among several Marīnid ministers, to help resume his reign (Ibn Khaldūn 346, 429). For his services, Ibn Khaldūn enjoyed a royal treatment by both al-Ghaniyy Billāh and Ibn al-Khaṭīb (429–31). For Ibn Khaldūn's accusation that Ibn al-Khaṭīb stood between him and al-Ghaniyy Billāh and precipitated his abrupt return to Fes in 1365, see 435–36, 438.

24. Ibn Khaldūn 347–48, 350, 388, 391–92. I am grateful to Francisco Vidal-Castro for referring me to Ibn Khaldūn's judgment on Ibn al-Khaṭīb's flight south.

25. Ibn al-Khaṭīb flays Ismāʿīl and his coconspirators in his history of the Banū Naṣr (*al-Lamḥah* 1: 152–54).

26. For the tradition of beautifying the ugly and its reverse, see Gelder, "Beautifying the Ugly."

27. A sharp pun on *fatḥ* ("victory").

28. Ibn al-Khaṭīb had secured ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's guarantee of protection before his escape (Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Aʿmāl* 2: 273).

29. ʿInān reproduces the letter in full (133–36).

30. Namely, ʿUthmān ibn Abī Yaḥyā, Muḥammad ibn ʿUthmān, Masʿūd ibn Māssī, and Sulaymān ibn Dāwūd (al-Maqqarī 7: 96–107).

31. For a recap of Ibn al-Khaṭīb's troubled final years, see al-Maqqarī 7: 99–107; Ibn Khaldūn 353–54.

32. A prominent example of the biographical dictionary of hadith narrators is سير أعلام النبلاء (*Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ*; *Lives of the Luminary Nobles*), by Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 1348). For an overview of the genre, see Juynboll.

33. For good measure, Ibn al-Khaṭīb features biographies of his own family, including his grandfather (*Awṣāf* 82–84), father (*al-Iḥāṭah* 3: 294–98), and son (*al-Iḥāṭah* 3: 331–33 and *al-Katībah* 279–82). Ženka argues that the minister's social status was just below that of the inner circle of Granada's ruling families (311, 327–30).

34. Curiously, Ibn al-Khaṭīb opens this supportive sketch with the stated intention of clearing al-Nubāhī's bad name, which appears to stem from some unspecified traits and his rulings as a judge. Ibn al-Khaṭīb states:

> وعرض له تقزز فيما يقف عليه من منتخب وصفه، وعدم رضاً بما يُجتهد فيه من تحليته، فوكلنا التعريف بخصائصه، إلى ما اشتهر من حميدها، تحرجاً مما يجر عتبه، أو يثير عدم رضاه. (*al-Iḥāṭah* 4: 69)

> [Al-Nubāhī] took grief for certain traits ascribed to him, and for disapproval over his deliberations. Therefore, we have taken it on ourselves to make known the praiseworthy attributes that suffuse him, avoiding what may draw his censure or precipitate his disapproval.

The fact that Ibn al-Khaṭīb attempted to defend al-Nubāhī by showcasing his scholarly and poetic qualifications reveals his commitment to allies and friends despite their controversies—so long as they did not offend or betray him personally.

35. For Ibn al-Khaṭīb's previous work in praise of Ibn Zamrak, see *al-Iḥāṭah* 2: 196–206.

36. As a poet, Ibn al-Khaṭīb is not alone in paying for his words. Szombathy recounts the violent and fatal outcomes of several classical and early postclassical Arabic lampoonists (92–95).

37. See Szombathy 89.

38. Ibn al-Khaṭīb instead set his sights on undertaking the ritual pilgrimage to Mecca before figuring out his next move. The plan fell through through (Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Aʿmāl al-Aʿlām* 2: 273–74).

39. Knysh notes the double-entendre of *ʿiẓām* ("noble persons" or "bones"; 362–63, 370n4).

40. See Zaghal 148–49.

41. Compare *al-Qurʾan* 7.129, 10.14.

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Abstract: Among the poetic modes to persist since Islam's advent, *hijāʾ*, or classical Arabic invective poetry, pushes the limits of permissible art while preserving aspects of court culture not found elsewhere in the premodern corpus. The harshest pieces of *hijāʾ* have jeopardized its very status as a proper art form, its popular appeal notwithstanding. This essay sketches the ethical and aesthetic contours of *hijāʾ* in postclassical Arabic literature (ca. 1000–1400), including the motivations that occasioned it. It offers as a case study the *hijāʾ* of the foremost Andalusian minister, Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1375). The poet-politician's terms of abuse shed light on Granada's political strains, and they jar with a tradition that proscribes calumny altogether and calls adherents to unite in virtue and piety, not sin and slander. In practice, Ibn al-Khaṭīb's sharp tongue invited physical retaliation, which forced the man to scope the lands, in search of escape.

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