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The fat bride and the foolish messengers: humorizing the love theme in an early Islamic poem

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Abstract: The main premise of this study is that the long poem by early Islamic poet Ḥumayd b. Thawr al-Hilālī (d. ca. 68–70/688–690) has a dual function. One is expressive and poetic—striving for elegant and affective verses mainly related to love. The other is humoristic and attempts to amuse. The poem’s humor appears predominantly in the passages describing a corpulent bride, and the failure of two go-betweens to set up a meeting between lovers, with the narration of multiple love affairs further contributing to its comedy. The main objective of this study is to shed light on the use and techniques of humor in classical Arabic culture, a topic neglected in modern research.

Keywords: Arabic love poetry; earnest versus jest; General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH); Ḥumayd b. Thawr al-Hilālī; humor; incongruity; Logical Mechanism; Script Opposition

1 Introduction

The study of humor in literature has received close attention in recent Western research and even in Eastern non-Arabic studies. Its analysis is based on modern models and general theories of humor, which view wit and comedy as universal human traits. Arabic poetry, particularly classical Arabic poetry, has not, however, enjoyed the same good fortune as Western studies of literary humor, with these theories rarely applied. One possible justification is that these analysis techniques were developed for the study of non-Arabic literatures, and their use in discussing Arabic humor would be forced. This view, however, suggests that Arabic literature and civilization are and should remain isolated from the non-Arabic, which should not, of course, be the case. Humor, like laughter, is universal. The theories and

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models used to analyze the wit of a humorist living beside a European lake or on a North American prairie are equally applicable to texts that elicited laughter from sixth-century Bedouin in the deserts of Arabia. Much of what was comic to Bedouin 1,500 years ago is funny to us today.

There are, in my view, basic, natural, and universal characteristics common to all humankind. Their core does not change neither does it differ greatly between nations or eras. This idea is in consensus with the traditional anthropological and cultural notion of the “consensus gentium” (or consensus of all mankind), the notion that there are basic issues that all men agree upon as right, real, just, attractive, or even—one can add—comic (Geertz 1973: chapter 2, cf. 35, 38–39). Laughter as human nature thus remains laughter across time and culture, as do its main paths and triggers. Only its secondary manifestations—that is, its characterization of particular individuals, cultures or periods—differ. It is possible that a certain image or incident considered funny in one culture or at one time or even by one individual may not be seen as comic when the circumstance or person changes. Pouring a cup of tea on a classmate, for example, may be funny to one person but hurtful to another. These minor manifestations of humor are, to a great degree, influenced by the psychological or emotional background of the individual or by the cultural conventions of the place or time. The primary reasons why an individual would laugh at this incident, however, resemble those that trigger laughter in others at different incidents. In other words, the main sources that make a certain image, text or action funny are universal. The quoted passages in the poem by Ḥumayd, remain humorous in modern times. They triggered strong laughter in students in my different classical Arabic poetry classes. My premise is that this poem was seen as a comical text in the time of Ḥumayd, as well. Since there is no record of how classical audiences reacted to it, however, its humoristic aspect must be proved by locating and anatomizing the main, universal, elements of humor it contains.

The main theoretical goal is to determine why a text should be considered humoristic and to analyze the techniques the writer used to make it so. The need for such theories is vital, especially in the study of classical literatures where no material testament remains of the circumstances in which centuries-old poems and prose were composed. These theories can help establish whether the text was intended as humorous. In the present study, it is assumed that parts of the long *mīmiyya* (mono-rhymed poem, with *m* as rhyme consonant) by the Umayyad poet Ḥumayd b. Thawr al-Hilālī are humoristic. I support this by scanning and analyzing three of the six main parameters in the GTVH model—the central Script Oppositions (SO) or incongruities, the Target (TA) and the Logical Mechanism (LM). Since this article addresses not only scholars and students of humor, well acquainted with the theories frequently used for analyzing it, but also scholars and

students of classical Arabic poetry who are less familiar with these theories, the three terms are briefly explained below.

2 The poet and the poem

This poem and the life of the poet who composed it have been recently discussed (Hussein 2020). Ḥumayd b. Thawr al-Hilālī is a *mukhaḍḍam*—that is, a poet born in the pre-Islamic era, who lived on into Islamic times, dying sometime between 68 and 70/688–690 during the reign of the Muslim Umayyad caliphs. Several different versions of his poem are extant, each with differing numbers of verses, differing structures and sometimes with different wording. The length of the poem, as well as its diverse versions, led Régis Blachère to suggest that it is an amalgamation of two poems (Blachère 1952–1965: 277). In classical Arabic literature, there are several long literary works that have mistakenly been considered by classical anthologists as single poems (examples are discussed in Hussein 2011a: 10–18, 2011b: 322–323). Such poems have certain internal characteristics which make it clear that the text is compiled from two different poems. This work by Ḥumayd is different. Having made a detailed study of all its versions and offered a new edition of the text, I consider it a single work (Hussein 2020). Its narrative and structure are analyzed in my previous article and described only briefly here. The version of the poem suggested in this previous article is used here, with its English translation slightly modified.

The poem's 183 verses narrate multiple love affairs. It opens with an elderly lover visiting the abandoned campsite (*aṭlāl*) of his long-departed beloved, Umm Sālim, a visit that makes him melancholy and triggers memories of earlier love affairs. First, he recalls parting from another woman he loved (Salmā, whose sobriquet is Umm Ṭāriq), a bride preparing to leave her tribe for the campsite of her betrothed, who apparently belongs to another clan. The bride's tribe waits for the marriage ceremony to end, then hurries away in search of new fertile pastures. The lover recalls following them covertly for a stolen meeting with yet another woman, Maryam, who confusingly has the same sobriquet, Umm Ṭāriq. The poem then moves on to describe a dove, perched in a tree, watched by the lover-protagonist. He tells its story which, to some degree, resembles his own: both have lost the person they love, with the dove's mournful cooing spurring despondency in the lover. Next comes a description of lightning, which makes him sadder still. The sight of the lightning in classical Arabic poetry evokes within the lover feelings of nostalgia and longing towards the distant beloved. After all this, the reader learns that these tales of love, the dove and lightning are all attempts by the lover-protagonist to convince two comrades to undertake a dangerous visit to the

campsite of his current love, Laylā l-‘Āmiriyya, and arrange for him to see her. He gives the messengers explicit instructions, which are soon seen to be worthless because their mission fails. The poem ends with the poet bemoaning his loss of Umm al-Walid—possibly a sobriquet for Laylā l-‘Āmiriyya, or for yet another beloved woman. The main premise of this article is that at least two sections of the long poem are humoristic: the affair with the bride and messengers’ story.

3 Script Oppositions I: the fat beloved, the damaged howdah and the weakness of the strong camel

The preparation of the bride and her departure comprise the poem’s longest segment, almost half its total (vv. 26–100). The core of its humor is in the following verses:¹

- [66] They sent for [the bride]. She came slowly toward them, moving heavily and awkwardly.
- [67] Women from the tribes of Sulaym and ‘Āmir came to her, group by group.
- [68] They told her: “We have come to take you away! Mount this beast and ride!”
Without a word, she signaled: “No!”
- [69] They told her again: “Get up and ride! You are delaying us!”
The sun was already high, motionless and blazing in the sky.
- [70] They told her: “By God, the Keeper! We thought that marriage is the desire of every woman who has no husband.”
- [71] She raised herself, moving heavily, undulating
slowly like the final flow of a torrent.
- [72] They walked with her. She is a woman with much flesh on her bones, a bashful virgin who refrains from doing ill.
- [73] She came, her gait rippling her Maysanānī clothes, as humidity ripples the soft sand dunes.
- [74] Below her back, her buttocks quivered. They resembled the fat on the sides of a tall camel’s hump.
- [75] She is a fair-skinned woman who grew up with a [young and] naïve mother, and a devout father, who loved his family and cared for it.
- [76] She had led a soft life of plenty. If small ants crawled on to her, the places that they touched would ooze blood.
- [77] You can see her white bracelet on her plump wrist. Her anklet does not move, anchored by her chubby leg.
- [78] She is a fair-skinned and languorous woman. If she ensnares a man, he will never safely escape her.

¹ The Arabic text as revised in Hussein (2020).

- [79] She sleeps until the late hours of the morning. She is distant from her neighbours, Nor is she close to those who are near, unless she is urged.
- [80] She breathes deeply and steadily. The perfume marks on her upper chest are like smears of blood on the prey of a predatory beast.
- [81] She does not speak before her tribe, declaiming: “We do this!” and “This is the way!”
- [82] Such speeches have no use. They are no more than doubtful lies, only recently invented.
- [83] They stepped on the camel’s two front legs and told her: “Mount your camel, before it grows irked and weary!”
- [84] They helped her mount the beast. She swayed and tottered, as a sand dune totters and tilts.
- [85] They supported her with all their might until she could control the camel’s rein, With wrist and fingers that resembled the fringe of a silk cloth.
- [86] She did not mount until the morning lengthened.
Their hands formed her stepladder to the howdah.
- [87] Once she entered the howdah, its upper thongs were severed, and the howdah broke.
- [88] With half her body inside the howdah, the camel brayed.
Her other half sat directly on the camel’s withers.
- [89] As she mounted, she blocked the entrance to the howdah.
Her two belts were fastened flimsily over a slim branch.
- [90] She mounted, but very slowly.
As she climbed, she moved her buttocks as if she were raising a high sand dune.
- [91] It was midmorning. They did not move until the foreheads of the virgins flowed with saffron and brazilwood [gold and orange dyes].
- [92] When she mounted, the camel could not carry her. It could not stand until it collected its body and exerted its strength.
- [93] And until the robes that decorated it swished, and its breastbones were crushed.
- [94] Its knees and chest left marks on the solid stone.
The camel pondered what it could do with Salmā, then began its journey with all its strength.
- [95] When the camel stood, the women looked at it from behind: “How does it carry her?” Its back is elevated; its flesh is full and solid.
- [96] They loudly praised and exulted the Lord when they saw the camel moving lightly, running determinedly, with her swaying rhythmically atop its back.
- [97] My eye has never seen a woman travel like Salmā, nor has it seen a howdah or camel, greater or vaster.
- [98] After mounting the camel, she did not need to urge it forward.
It swayed and ran with vigour.

In analyzing the humor of this passage, I use three parameters from Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo’s General Theory of Verbal Humor model (GTVH). According to this, the text is humoristic if it includes: (1) A *target* at which to laugh; (2) a *script* with comical incongruities; and (3) a *logical Mechanism*. These three elements are briefly defined as follows (Attardo 1994: 222–226, 2008: cf. 108–114, 2017):

- *Target (TA)*: The object (often a person) at which the audience laughs; that which is comically presented or mocked.
- *Script Opposition/s (SO)*: Two or more opposing words or ideas that are unexpectedly combined in the text. The term is used here synonymously with the term of incongruity, which is taken from the Incongruity Theory of Humor—the unexpected and absurd juxtaposition of two disparate objects/ideas/concepts/situations (Carrell 2008: 308, 311; Morreall 2008: 225; Ruch 2008: 24).
- *Logical Mechanism (LM)*: This refers to a logical relationship between two objects (such that logic links a cause to its natural result), but is inapplicable in other situations. The term can also explain a less serious tertium comparationis that links two opposed scripts. In this poem, there are similes in which the relationship between the incongruous primum and secundum comparationes seems, to the non-Arabic reader at least, illogical and unresolved.

The background that paves the way to the humoristic scene quoted above is the former lover-protagonist recalling his love affairs to convince two comrades to make a secret visit to his beloved Laylā l-ʿĀmiriyya and set up for him an assignation. In the passage, the lover recalls how a woman he once loved, Salmā/Umm Ṭāriq, approached the camel that would carry her to the bridegroom's campsite. There are lengthy descriptions (not quoted here) of preparing the camel and howdah before the bride is called to mount the beast, all portraying the strength, size and nobility of the camel, and the beauty and sturdiness of the howdah which will accommodate the bride (vv. 26–65).

Verses 26–100, which narrate the story of Salmā/Umm Ṭāriq, mix gravity with jest; a technique often used in classical Arabic literature to produce humor (Sadan 2007 [1983]). The passage opens with an earnest description of the camel and howdah [vv. 26–65] with no hint of levity. Next [vv. 66–70], still in serious mode, it depicts the women informing the bride it is time to leave. She refuses—either because she truly objects to her marriage (possibly signifying her fidelity to her lover), or to display loyalty to her kinsfolk with reluctance to marry outside her tribe. Verses 71–82, give glimpses of humor, drolly hinting at the corpulence of the beloved amid the glowing description of her beauty and noble descent [vv. 71, 73–74, 77]. The satire becomes clearer in verses 83 and 87–97, when the bride's massive body, atop the camel, hyperbolically causes the beast great suffering and damages the howdah. From verse 98, the text again turns serious, describing the leave-taking of the bride from her tribe.

There are three central SOs in the quoted passage that, in my view, transform the poem's heartfelt love theme into comedy. All target the bride for mockery (TA). The first SO is the dissonance between the traditional poetic image of the beloved and the vastly overstated corpulence portrayed in this passage. The second and the

third are ancillary to the first, hyperbolizing the heft of the bride. These are the beloved's camel, described as huge-bodied, robust, and strong in verses 26–39, which nevertheless staggers under the bride's weight [vv. 88, 92–97]; and the sturdy, beautifully decorated howdah [vv. 40–65] which the bride wrecks when she attempts to enter it [vv. 87, 89]. These three SOs all subscribe to normal/abnormal or traditional/non-traditional scenarios. The plump body, strong camel, and firm howdah, all norms of pre- and early Islamic poetry, shed normality and tradition. The plump beloved becomes an excessively fat woman, the strong camel can scarcely support her, and the solid, well-made howdah is obliterated by her bulk. The language in all three scripts is hyperbolic in describing the fleshy bride. The text includes similes and periphrases (*kināyas*) as auxiliary tools in drawing the hyperbolic portrait of the beloved.

Plumpness is traditionally considered beautiful in women in pre- and early Islamic poetry (Hussein 2017). Nor is this standard of female beauty restricted to the Arabic society, with many Baroque paintings and ancient Roman and Greek sculpture reflecting a similar image. In the verses quoted here, the first indication of the bride's size deceptively depicts her as desirably plump [v. 66]. The slow and heavy progress of the female as depicted in this verse is a traditional periphrasis for leisured movement and feminine roundness, and thus suggests that the poem is embracing the conventional love theme (Hussein 2017). Then, unexpectedly, the image expands to depict the bride's obesity, which is far beyond the familiar poetic tradition. Verse 71 compares her with "the final flow of a torrent," and although the comparison is only with its final flow, the word for torrent (*sayl*), taken with the image of the bride's immense body, gives a sense of hugeness. There are three logic explanations for the relationship between the primum and secundum comparationes—or, in GTVH terms, to resolve this beloved/torrent or beloved/nature incongruity: (1) The bride is as white as the torrent's white and foamy water; and both (especially the final flow of the torrent) move gently and slowly. This is ostensibly a flattering portrait of the beloved. (2) Both torrent and beloved bride are vast and destroy everything they encounter. This interpretation is reinforced by verses 87–88 and 92–94, which describe the destruction of the howdah and its ropes, and the suffering of the camel. (3) The slow undulation is not of the bride herself but only of her buttocks. They quiver as she walks, similarly to the torrent waters' final flow: both are white, slow-moving, and wobble from side to side. This last feature of the buttocks is stressed again in the similes in verses 73 and 74, where the bride's gait is likened to "soft sand dunes rippled by humidity" and to the "fat on the sides of a tall camel's hump." These two similes are also based on incongruities: human/nature and human/animal. The image of buttocks likened to sand dunes is often used in classical Arabic poetry to describe the shape and generosity of the woman's posterior, so its use here is not, in itself, comic. What

makes it so is Ḥumayd's addition that the bride's buttocks resemble not merely a sand dune but one covered with humidity that causes it to ripple it—creating a picture of buttocks which move both up and down as well as right and left like a sand dune crumbling after the rain. The simile thus conjures not only the traditional shape and size of the buttocks but also their movement which, together with the final torrent waters image, is pregnant with sexual and ludic allusions and imagery. The other simile portrays the buttocks as fatty as the camel's hump. Focusing the image solely on the size and shape of the buttocks is logical—both are fat and rounded. The simile triggers, however, a faulty logic (LM), picturing the body of the beloved to resemble an animal—she looks like a camel. To the best of my knowledge, this incongruity between human and animal is not traditional. The camel's hump is usually compared with the body parts of other animals. The ram's rump, for example, is likened by a pre-Islamic poet to a camel's hump (Hussein 2018: cf. 209, 216). Ḥumayd's use of the camel's hump to depict a part of the beloved's body in this poem is surprising and not rooted in serious logic: why should a beloved's bride trigger the image of an animal?

Verse 77 uses periphrasis to describe Salmā's plump wrists and chubby legs: "Her anklet does not move." Portrayal of the beloved bride's colossal body grows more intense, however, in verses 84 and 87–97 when she tries to mount the camel. In verse 84, as she climbs onto the camel's back, she is again likened to a tottering, tilting sand dune. She tries to enter her howdah, climbing very slowly, raising her buttocks which, for the third time, are equated with a high sand dune [v. 90]. Only half of her fits into the howdah [v. 88], however, the remainder stranded on the camel's withers [v. 88]. Totally blocked by her body [v. 89], the howdah's upper thongs snap and it is broken [v. 87]. The women, who help Salmā onto the camel, are tired and perspiring [v. 91], not solely from the sun's heat but also because of their strenuous attempts to help the bride onto the camel. The camel itself, whose size and strength the poem has praised at length [vv. 26–39], is distressed by the weight on its back. It starts braying [v. 88] and must exert all its strength to carry the bride [v. 92]. As it makes arduous attempts to stand, the ropes with which it was tied give way, and its breastbone is almost crushed [v. 93]. Its knees, pressed on solid stone as it tries to rise, leave their imprint [94]. Funnier still is the wonder of the women [vv. 95–97] when they see the camel managing to carry the bride.

The camel's anguish and the howdah's ruin are comic for several reasons. First, they are periphrastic expression of the hyperbolically fat body of the beloved, conjuring an image of huge women. Second, they reflect the "strong/weak" incongruity—a droll contrast with how camel and howdah are introduced [vv. 26–65] and their collapse when they encounter the bride.

In addition to the incongruity of these contradictory images of howdah and camel, the humor in the suffering and damage done to both can be also explained

by the Superiority Theory of Humor, also known as the Hostility/Disparagement Theory. It is well expressed by Thomas Hobbes (d. 1679 CE):

The passion of laughter is nothing else but some sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly. Laughter is thought to result from a sense of superiority derived from the disparagement of another person or of one's own past blunders or foolishness. (McGhee 1979: 22; Ruch 2008: cf. 30)

Readers, supposedly fascinated by the strength of the camel and the size and sturdiness of the howdah, will laugh once they realize that both fall victim to the compulgence of the beloved.

The verses quoted here are the most direct expression of humor in Ḥumayd's poem. Not everyone, however, will find them funny, their sympathies resting with the suffering of the camel and the damaged howdah, and discomfited by the beloved depicted as fat and ugly. This is perhaps inevitable in any text classified as humoristic by the Superiority Theory. Painful mockery will always evoke laughter in some and passion in others, depending on psychological, cultural and social background (Carrell 2008: 314–315). This does not, however, negate that the text is humoristic.

4 Script Oppositions II: a clever plan but a failed mission

In addition to the humoristic passage considered, there is a second such passage in this poem, although its humor is not as direct or clear. Here, too, I use the GTVH model as an auxiliary tool to show its humorous components or at least to demonstrate that it is humoristic. It reads:

- [163] O my two friends! I am lamenting what happened so that you understand what I have endured.
- [164] I confide in you with perfect trust. If either of you betrays me, God will, one day, lay this sin at your door.
- [165] Do not tell anyone my secret, and do not forsake a brother who has confided in you.
- [166] Please give me this chance—God bless you—to reach the family of Laylā l-ʿĀmiryya.
- [167] Once you reach the ʿĀmir tribe, tell them, next to the tribes of Nahd and Khath'am:
- [168] "We are strangers from the tribe of Jarm b. Rabbān, which, even during time of war, pours no vessel of blood."
- [169] Then go over to the two thin camels, their humps shrouded under a cloth.
Do not carry weapons, other than your sticks for arrows and kindling fire.
- [170] The provisions you carry should be small and light.
Do not betray my secret, and do not carry my blood on your hands.

- [171] If it is night, do not reveal your true lineage.
If you fear you will be recognized, cover your faces.
- [172] Say: “We are two merchants. Our camels are following us. We left them in the Tathlith to rest.
- [173] “Had our slaves and goods arrived, there would have been something for every needy person among you.
- [174] “All of you would have flocked to us, in our laden caravan, thanking God and praying for our safety.”
- [175] Take your time in offering them your merchandise. Make sure that they trust you.
Do not rush into a deal you may be forced to honour.
- [176] When you feel safe and trusted, find a moment alone to talk to her.
- [177] Ask her: “What should we do with our friend, whose heart you have enslaved?
- [178] “Tell us! We have travelled all this way on camelback to see you, uncertain that we would manage to do so.”
- [179] The messengers went, but met with no success.
They did not settle the matter.
- [180] What kind of messengers were they?
May God destroy their holdings and impoverish them both!
- [181] Did neither of you see the state I am in? Did you not remember my love when my wadi was collapsed?

Language itself does not play a significant role in creating humor in this passage. Unlike the image of the beloved, it includes no comic descriptions expressed through hyperbole, periphrasis, or simile. Rather, it is based on the “serious/silly” incongruity, a type of incongruity used to create humor in classical Arabic poetry (Hussein 2018: 215–216). In this poem of Ḥumayd, the story of the two messengers concerns an important and serious undertaking, which is painstakingly dictated to the lover’s two comrades but whose outcome is unexpected and, to some degree, irresponsible (silly). Placing the serious adjacent to the frivolous is among the most comical combinations considered by Henri Bergson (1859–1941) and Michael Bakhtin (1895–1975) in their work on humor (Bakhtin 1984: 20; Bergson 1987: cf. 83, but also 24, 25–27, 29, 50–70, 97–99). The same narrative strategy used previously in Salmā’s affair recurs in this passage: serious descriptions, narrated in detail, which lead to a contrary outcome. Within it, glimpses of humor can be detected.

The lover-protagonist provides the two messengers with all the information they need to arrange a meeting between him and his beloved—this time, a woman called Laylā l-ʿĀmiriyya [vv. 166, 176–178]. The instructions are minutely detailed: the messengers should visit Laylā, masquerading as merchants from the weak, humble Yemenite tribe of Jarm b. Rabbān [vv. 166–168, 172]. To convince Laylā’s parents they are truly merchants, the poet-protagonist instructs them to ride thin camels to bear out their supposedly long and exhausting desert journey (Papoutsakis 2009: cf. 148–150). In their guise as Jarmīs, they should carry no

weapons, bringing only light provisions and kindling sticks (to prepare food on their travels and warm themselves on cold nights) [vv. 169–170]. Should they arrive at night, they can easily hide their identities, but if they are concerned, they should cover their faces [v. 171]. The poet-protagonist even tells the two what to say [vv. 173–175]. Only after they have won total trust should they seek a stolen conversation with Laylā and tell her about the lover’s determination to see her. They should relate the dangers they faced to reach her [vv. 176–178]. According to one version of the poem, the two comrades are instructed to deceive Laylā, telling her they left her lover severely ill, and if she does not hurry to see him, she may find him dead:²

أَبِينِي لَنَا إِنَّا رَحَلْنَا مَطِينًا إِلَيْكَ وَمَا نَرْجُوهُ إِلَّا تَلُومًا

Answer us! We rode our beasts to you while we do not expect he will live long.

This is all part of the serious mission dictated by the lover. But, before the unexpected result, which turns the passage into a humoristic text, there are phrases that may be interpreted as “humoristic flashes” or, as I called them above, “humoristic glimpses”—that is, minor descriptions that may be considered humorous, but are not the passage’s primary element of humor. In verse 164, the two comrades are presented as people who may betray the lover-protagonist or people whom he does not completely trust. This is why he describes his misfortunes in love so fully in this poem and why the instructions he gives the messengers are so detailed. An indication that this part of the poem bears humor is the faulty logic (or LM in the GTVH) in the thinking of the lover-protagonist. If he is so desperate to see his beloved, why choose untrustworthy messengers, who need such detailed directions? The question goes unanswered unless the lover-protagonist is seen as no less naïve than his two messengers. He plays the role of a silly lover, his silliness enhanced in verse 165 where he begs the comrades: “Do not tell anyone my secret,” while spelling out this “secret” in detail in a poem clearly meant to be heard. Producing this kind of image of the lover is based on the “traditional versus non-traditional” incongruity, a type much used in pre- and early Islamic humoristic poems (Heinrichs 2009: 187–192, 206; Hussein 2018; Jacobi 2009: 169, 173–177, 183). In classical Arabic poetry, the lover is traditionally portrayed as a serious person with a sincere and usually sad experience of love. Ḥumayd’s poem unexpectedly brings a totally non-traditional lover, and the exaggerated description of his corpulent beloved in the previous passage only emphasizes this.

² Verse 115 in Ḥumayd b. Thawr (1965 [1951]: 30). This replaces verse 178 in Hussein (2020).

Another humoristic glimpse comes in verses 167–168, where the poet-protagonist mocks the Jarm b. Rabbān tribe as cowardly—people, who have “never, even during time of war, poured no vessel of blood.” Such mockery may provoke laughter not only at the tribe but also at the two comrades required to pretend they are members of it. The theologian and prose writer Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) described this invective against the two comrades, and more particularly against the Jarm, as “a wicked satire” (*min khabīth al-hijāʾ*) (Ibn Qutayba 1982 [1958], I: 390). Renowned fifth/eleventh century classical Arab scholar Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (d. ca. 456/1063–1064) quotes the opinion of Umayyad poet Jarīr (d. ca. 110/728–9), a contemporary of Ḥumayd, that good satire is what makes an audience laugh (Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī 1981, II: 172). In light of both Ibn Qutayba’s description of Ḥumayd’s verses and of the Umayyad poet’s opinion concerning comic satire, it is reasonable to believe that Ḥumayd added these verses for humor. Ridiculing the cowardice of an individual or tribe is explained by the notion of superiority. Ḥumayd’s contemporary readers, familiar with the Jarm’s reputation, would have enjoyed this mockery of a humble tribe whom they considered inferior. Their sense of superiority would have been expressed in derisive laughter.

Together with these humoristic glimpses, the “serious/silly” incongruity is the main source of humor in this passage. The clever and meticulous guidelines given by the lover leave no doubt that, correctly followed, the mission cannot fail. The following passage expresses the admiration of classical scholars for the way these instructions are given (Al-Khālidiyyān 1995: 24):

He gave them detailed instructions, which could not be more detailed. He provided them with clever ruses which none before him [before Ḥumayd the poet] ever provided.

At the same time, these 16 verses [vv. 163–178] of directions raise a degree of tension: readers may hold their breath as to whether the mission will meet its expectations or fall short. And then, after the lengthy description, a single verse [v. 179] abruptly announces the mission’s failure—likely eliciting laughter from an audience which well understood that the mortifying outcome was on an entirely different level from the resolute attempts made by the lover-protagonist to meet his beloved. His reaction [v. 180] makes the failure funny/funnier. He demands to know what kind of messengers they are, reflecting, on one hand, his anger and, on the other, that the two are even more foolish than supposed. All attempts to convince them to undertake the mission—the sad, funny stories of past loves and coaching them how to act—were to no avail. The poet-protagonist’s curse: “May God destroy their holdings and impoverish them both!” makes his reaction yet funnier because it is a total character reversal. Throughout the poem, he has been presented as a tender lover, who has suffered greatly because of misfortune in love. Now, his image about-faces as he turns belligerent, venting his fury on his

comrades. His angry eruption is comical, combining as it does two utterly diverse temperaments. The passage's humor can also be attributed to a sense of superiority enjoyed by the reader at the lover's failure. Until this point, he has appeared clever and creative. Verse 179 reveals this as nothing but ashes.

5 Script Opposition III: traditional versus non-traditional functions of the love theme in the classical poem

There is a third central SO in this poem—a general one that links all its parts. It relates to the unexpected incongruity between the traditional versus non-traditional function of the love theme. One comical incongruity combination is violating a topos or a standard scene by narrating a non-archetypal notion (Attardo 1994: 179–180). The non-traditional or non-archetypal notion is often found in the text itself, whereas that which is traditional or standard is contained solely in the encyclopedic knowledge of the reader. At the start of a text with familiar content, the expectation is that it will comply with tradition. When it branches off along an unexpected, incongruous route, it is understood as humoristic. Christina Larkin Galiñanes calls this “external incongruity” to differentiate it from “internal incongruity, in which the two parts of the SO appear within the text (Galiñanes 2000: cf. 100). Ḥumayd's poem combines the traditional poetical love canon, an Arabic poetical tradition well known to his audience, with a surprising, non-traditional use of the love themes as they appear in this poem. The traditional poem often starts with a sad love affair between poet-protagonist and a beloved from a different tribe. The two tribes share pasture but then separate. The lover later returns to the abandoned campsite of his beloved, which triggers memories of their love. In some poems, the lover-poet recalls more than one love affair, seeking to comfort himself with memories of older happy affairs. Sometimes he recalls old loves to show that his fate in love is always the same—misfortune (Hussein 2011a, 2012; about the love theme in general in pre- and early Islamic poetry, see Bauer and Neuwirth 2005; Jacobi 1984, 1985). In Ḥumayd's poem, this tradition is shattered when it comes first to Salmā's affair, and then to the story of the messengers and Laylā l-ʿĀmiriyya. The motifs at the poem's outset promise that it will progress traditionally according to audience expectations: a former lover visits the *aṭlāl* of his beloved where he weeps, fruitlessly asks the abandoned campsite about his departed beloved, and bemoans what has happened. He then describes his old age and recalls his past youth. All this moves the poem in the tradition of other pre- and early Islamic poetry (see, for example, Hussein 2009:

64–68). After verse 11, the audience expects the poem to take one of two main directions: either describe the journey of the poet-lover from the *aṭlāl* on his strong she-camel (the camel-section of the traditional poem [Jacobi 1982]) or hear of the past glories of the melancholy poet-lover's youth, recalled to console him. In Ḥumayd's poem, however, the reader is ambushed. The text goes on to narrate other love affairs, not to console but, as will later be revealed [v. 163], to convince his two comrades to arrange an assignation between the elderly lover-protagonist and his most recent beloved, Laylā l-ʿĀmiriyya. The lover recalls not the loves of his youth, but his most recent relationships (Hussein 2020: 555). His recounting of his multiple love affairs as a way of engineering a meeting with his current beloved is an incongruity or SO between the serious and the foolish. The serious heart-breaking love affairs narrated in the poem are contrasted with the target for whose purpose they are narrated. Every love affair it describes paints the lover as totally honest in his love. The immediate transition that follows to another love surprises, perhaps making readers laugh rather than weep about the end of the preceding affair. The long story of Salmā/Umm Ṭāriq, for example, implies that the lover was deeply affected by her marriage. His unexpected decision to follow her tribe's caravan and meet secretly with her kinswoman, with whom he also has a relationship, can only invite laughter. His apparent loyalty to Salmā is seen as farcical once his involvement with another woman from the same tribe at the same time is revealed. Nor does his suffering at the departure of his two beloved women hold water once readers realize he has used them to trap the messengers into reconnecting him with his most recent love interest.

6 General narrative strategy of the poem: earnest versus comic and the function of love

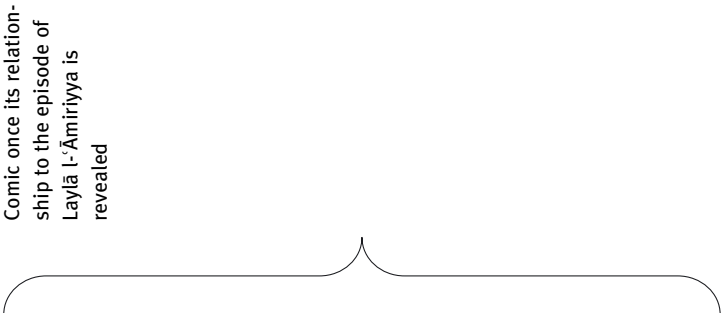
As Table 1 shows, this poem mixes earnest and comic. The episode of Salmā/Umm Ṭāriq is the most directly humoristic, with that concerning Laylā l-ʿĀmiriyya also comic. Other sections include earnest descriptions of issues related to love and old age—the abandoned campsite of the departed beloved and the misery of the elderly lover [vv. 1–11]; the departure of the tribe of the beloved and the description of their camels [vv. 12–25]; preparing the bride's camel and decorating her howdah [vv. 26–65]; the conversation between the women and the bride [vv. 66–70]; the bride's beauty in verses other than those that describe her hyperbolic size [cf. vv. 72, 75–76, 78–82]; the episode of Maryam/Umm Ṭāriq, especially the description of her beauty [vv. 105–132]; the dove and lightning scenes [vv. 133–162]; and the verses that express the sincere love and longing for Umm al-Walīd [vv. 182–183].

All of these, taken separately from the story of Laylā l-‘Āmiriyya, would be considered fine love verses, competing favorably with other beautiful love poems. Several have been quoted by classical scholars as examples of fine verse, especially concerning love (Ibn Ḥamdūn 1997, VI: 117), gnomic topics related to old age (for example, Ibn al-Sikkīt 2002: 277), and the unique description of the dove (for example, Abū Tammām [No date]: 193). The inclusion of the two humoristic passages discussed previously, however, and the realization that the earnest sections are the lover’s attempt to convince his comrades to act as his messengers demand a rethinking. Contrary to other love poems, whose main functions are expressive and poetic, Ḥumayd’s has a third function: humor in a love theme. In this poem, the lover-protagonist expresses his love—mainly for Laylā l-‘Āmiriyya but also for other women (the expressive function)—producing affective, skillful poetry admired by both classical scholars and modern readers (including the author of this article). Ḥumayd, however, deviates from the norms of the love poetry of his and earlier eras by shaping this text in humoristic mode. Nor is the collision between love and humor limited to this poem. It is also found in pre-Islamic poetry, in which sexual allusions are the mainstay of humor, as well as in the poetry of an Umayyad contemporary of Ḥumayd, ‘Umar b. Abī Rabī‘a (d. 93/712). The number of poems from the pre- and early Islamic eras which use humor to serve the love theme or *vice versa* is, however, very limited—and it is not used in other works as lengthy as Ḥumayd’s poem. Ḥumayd employs humor in this poem differently from other contemporary poems. In her discussion of humor in ‘Umr b. Abī Rabī‘a’s love poetry, Renate Jacobi concludes that its main use is in exchanging gender roles. She argues that, in contrast to the traditional role of the lover, the female in ‘Umr’s poetry is controlled by the male. ‘Umr becomes the beloved, admired by the female, which is, in itself, the core of the ‘Umrīte love jest (Jacobi 2009). The switched roles of lover/beloved went unnoticed, at least as a main humoristic factor, in Ḥumayd’s poem.

Classical rhetoricians address the term *iftinān*, translated by Pierre Cachia as “double service” (Cachia 1998: 131 [English part]). This signifies two different, often contradictory, poetic motifs in the same verse or two verses, such as erotic and martial, panegyric and satirical, congratulatory and consolatory. Despite the fact that the term relates to the collision between such two motifs within one or two sequential verses, some classical rhetoricians, such as Ibn Ḥijja l-Ḥamawī (d. 837/1434), expanded its definition to include a complete poem in which different sections focus on contrasting themes—such as the belligerent warrior and tender lover in a poem by the famous Egyptian Ibn Sanā’ al-Mulk (d. 608/1211) (Ibn Ḥijja l-Ḥamawī 2005, II: 41–53). The clash between humor and sincere love in Ḥumayd’s poem can be rhetorically justified. In his time, many rhetorical elements (such as the *iftinān*) were possibly unrecognized, both

Table 1: The poem divided into earnest and comic themes.

Love affair	Theme	Verses	Earnest/comical
Umm Sālim	The <i>aṭṭāl</i> (abandoned campsite)	1–7	Earnest
	The vigor of the young man, whom the lover once was, and the ravages wrought by age.	8–11	Earnest
	Departure of the beloved's tribe and description of its camels grazing.	12–25	Earnest
	Readying the camel of the bride, describing the strong and large-bodied beast, its saddle and its sturdy and decorated howdah.	26–65	Earnest
Salmā/Umm Ṭāriq	Sending for the bride, and trying to convince her to approach her camel.	66–70	Earnest
	The lingering progress of the beloved toward her camel, her beauty, her comical attempt to ride it, and her departure.	71–98	Earnest and Comical
	The women's farewell to the beloved, their preparation for their tribe's departure.	99–104	Earnest
	The pursuit of the beloved on the lover's strong she-camel. Description of the camel and the desert. Their secret meeting. Description of the beauty of the beloved and her female comrades.	105–132	The content of this passage is earnest; however, the idea that the lover, sorrowing over Salmā's marriage, immediately pursues another beloved from the same tribe is humorous.



Comic once its relationship to the episode of Laylā l-'Āmiriyya is revealed

Table 1: (continued)

Love affair	Theme	Verses	Earnest/comical
The dove scene	The sad story of the bird which has lost its young. Its cooling triggers sadness in the lover.	133–157	Earnest
The lightning scene	Describing the lightning triggers the sadness and longing of the lover.	158–162	Earnest
Laylā l-‘Āmiriyya	The instructions to the two comrades, and their failure to arrange a meeting between the lovers.	163–181	Earnest and Comic
Umm al-Walīd (possibly Laylā l-‘Āmiriyya?)	His longing for her.	182–183	Earnest/Comic if the beloved is not the same as Laylā l-‘Āmiriyya

Comic once its relationship to the episode of Laylā l-‘Āmiriyya is revealed

theoretically and terminologically, even though they appear in the poems—just as prosodic meters have been skillfully used without the poets of the time having theoretical knowledge of prosody or metrics. The clash of soft, sincere love motifs in Ḥumayd's poem with those that are rigorous and humoristic may doubtless be considered an early example of the *iftinān*.

7 How was the poem received?

Unfortunately, there is no record—at least none that this author could find—of the poem's reception by those to whom it was first performed. There are, however, a handful of indirect remarks indicating that parts of this poem were considered comical. One has already been mentioned—that of Ibn Qutayba concerning the invective against the two comrades as *khabīth*. Another is attributed to al-Qāḍī l-Jurjānī, the famous judge, poet, and critic from the Persian Gorgān (d. ca. 392/1001–1002), who considered the description of the chubby bride as (al-Qāḍī l-Jurjānī 1966: 427):

If these verses by Ḥumayd b. Thawr, in which he gives an exaggerated description of a woman mounting her howdah [...], did not remove Ḥumayd from his [high] position and made him a less [valued] poet, then why blame Abū l-Ṭayyib [al-Mutanabbī] for the exaggeration in his verses [...]. Al-Aṣma'ī, when he listened to these verses [by Ḥumayd], said: "If this woman had been al-Māzyār,"³ she could not be more hyperbolic [than the way Ḥumayd has described her]."

Al-Qāḍī l-Jurjānī quotes verses from the poem which describe the bride's corpulence, the damage to the howdah and the camel's suffering. These descriptions are, therefore, considered unfamiliar and hyperbolic even to classical scholars such as this Persian. While al-Qāḍī l-Jurjānī does not say outright that these verses are humoristic—labeling them extra-hyperbolic could perhaps topple their author from his poetic position for mocking the traditional image of the beloved—he may be intimating that classical readers considered them funny or at least ugly. The comment of the famous Basran philologist al-Aṣma'ī (d. ca. 216/831), quoted in this passage, also hints at the comic/ugly content of such a description of the female.

In addition, classical references have preserved for us this anecdote (Ibn 'Asākir 1995, XV: 275):

³ The word *al-māzandar* ("diamonds") which appears in the text does not make sense. The syntax and context suggest that the word refers to a person. Perhaps it should be replaced with *al-Māzyār*, referring to an Iranian strongman who was active in Tabaristan as an opponent of Abbasid rule in the first half of the ninth century CE.

Some poets, among them Ḥumayd b. Thawr, Muzāḥim b. Muṣarrif al-‘Uqayli and al-‘Ujayr al-Salūli, said: ‘Let us visit Yazīd b. al-Ṭathriyya to make fun of him. They went to his house, but he was absent. His young daughter approached them and said: ‘What do you want?’ They answered: ‘Your father’. She said: ‘What for?’ They told her: ‘We want to make fun of him’. She looked at their faces, then declaimed [this verse]: ‘You have gathered from all places against one person. Only when together are you able to match a single man!’ They said: ‘By God; she overcame us!’

The visit of Ḥumayd and other poets to Yazīd b. al-Ṭathriyya (d. 126/744) to “make fun of him” (*natahakkam bi-hi*) may suggest Ḥumayd had a sense of fun. Unfortunately, I found no further information about his personality nor that of the other poets in the anecdote. His surviving poems show a sense of humor especially in his descriptions of women. Analysis of these poems is beyond the confines of this article, but clearly deserve independent research.⁴ If, however, Ḥumayd had a lively sense of humor, it would account for his composition of this comical love poem.⁵

8 Conclusion

The core of humor in Ḥumayd’s poems in the two episodes of the bride and the messengers. In the former, Ḥumayd uses exaggeration to achieve humor—hyperbolically describing the well-endowed bride, her suffering camel and damaged howdah. These exaggerations appear suddenly and unexpectedly, after long, earnest descriptions of the bride’s beauty, the camel’s strength and the howdah’s sturdiness. This creates a comical incongruity between expected and unexpected, and serious and foolish, producing a pleasing sense of superiority in the reader regarding the meanness and weakness (and, to some degree, ugliness) of the bride, camel, howdah and possibly the lover-protagonist, too.

4 See for example the lover’s visit with two of his beloveds at the same time and the conversation related to this visit in poem 2, cf. vv. 32–32; and the conversation of the beloved in poem 40 (vv. 4–8) in which she describes to her lover, apparently in comic mode, her relationship with her relatives, including her father-in-law; also the humorous invective concerning other females in poems 8 and 16; his funny description of his old/ugly wife in poem 19; and poem 39, in which he compares Bedouin with village women, which may also be considered as funny (Ḥumayd b. Thawr 2002: 16–20; 40–45; 55–64; 71–72; 121–122; 123–124).

5 The verse declaimed by the daughter is ascribed elsewhere to a daughter of another poet—‘Adi b. al-Riqā’ al-‘Āmili (d. 95/714) or Ibn Harma (d. 158/775; other dates of death are given), as a response to rival poets (their names and that of Ḥumayd are unmentioned) who came to compete against him with their invective poetry against her father (al-Jāḥiẓ 1424/2003, III: 30; Ibn Qutayba 1982 [1958], II: 618; al-Mubarrad, I: 210; Ibn Ḥamdūn, VII: 200).

The episode of the messengers presents a humoristic incongruity between the detailed directions of the lover-protagonist and the sudden, bewildering failure of their mission. The other sections of the poem, with their serious themes and motifs, become humoristic when related to its main theme: the sustained efforts of the lover-protagonist to convince the messengers to arrange a meeting between him and his beloved Laylā l-ʿĀmiriyya, and, more importantly, to ensure their success in doing so. These serious parts of the poem provide a humorous incongruity with their less respectful target and unanticipated failure in enabling the lovers to meet. Language contributes to the poem's humor only in the section where it describes bride's overly generous body. Sexual humor likewise appears solely in this section of the poem, which depicts the bride's vast buttocks.

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