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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

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

'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah (d.93AH/712AD or 103/721), Umayyad-era Meccan poet, is a slippery figure. By turns a womanizer, chaste lover, renunciant, and martyr, the *akhbār* (anecdotes; sg. *khbar*) that biographers have used to relay his life portray a complicated man who was full of contradictions. As Hilary Kilpatrick has pointed out, the various accounts of his life, as found both in the different *akhbār* and the ways in which later biographers strung selected *akhbār* together, highlight "the equivocity of almost everything concerned with 'Umar's life, as distinct from his poetry."¹

'Umar is certainly not the only figure in early Arabic literature whose anecdotal life story appears anchored to reality through and because of their poetry. Majnūn, otherwise known as Qays ibn al-Mulawwah, is an extreme case in point. Both in medieval and modern scholarship, it has long been debated whether a person by this name and with his life story actually existed, or whether a singular person or many people wrote the poems that now form his *dīwān* (collection of poetry).² Likewise, Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych has noted that "there is some connection" between the poetic oeuvre and the *akhbār* about the poetic persona of Imru' 'l-Qays (d.544AD).³ In her reading of Ibn Qutaybah's (d.276/889) collection of *akhbār* about the pre-Islamic poet, she notes that, while individual verses or images found in the *mu'allaqah* may become more comprehensible thanks to the *akhbār*'s linking of obscure names or places to supposedly real biographical moments, these *akhbār* do little to explain the poem as a whole. Indeed, Stetkevych notes that some of the *akhbār* are so "facile" that they appear to be "generated by the poem itself."⁴ Dana Sajdi has also noted that the same is true for the reports of Laylā al-Akhyaliyyah's

1 Hilary Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs: Compilation and the Author's Craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's "Kitāb al-Aghānī"* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 232; for her full discussion of 'Umar's article in *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, see 228–33.

2 Kristen Beck, "Iṣbahānī's Invitation to Madness: Introduction to the Majnūn Laylā Story," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 49.4 (2018), 330–354. Charles Pellat, for example, terms him an "imaginary character" who was "furnished by the *ruwāt* (storytellers) with an *ism* (name) and with a complete genealogy" (translations added), Charles Pellat, "Majnūn Laylā 1. in Arabic Literature," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2012, accessed Dec. 2, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0608. Future references to this text are listed as *EI*².

3 Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (1993; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 257–8.

4 *Ibid.*, 258.

(d.c.85/704) life and that of many other Umayyad-era poets, the *akhbār* about whom appear to be generated by information found in the poems.⁵

In reviewing Ibn Sallām al-Jumāhī's (d.232/846) *Classes of Champion Poets* (*Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu'arā'*), Jonathan Brown notes that "the *akhbār* that the author includes to reconstruct the personalities of early Arab poets are little more than commentary on their verses," noting that Ibn Sallām believed the poetry had "biographical value" and took the poets at their word.⁶ Stetkevych has also described the various *akhbār* relating to Labīd (d.40/660–1), a *mukhaḍḍam* poet, as a "*sharḥ*" (commentary) of his *mu'allaqah*.⁷ The "value and the intention" of the *akhbār* about his life are "not historical and biographical, but essentially literary and moral."⁸ Ostensibly biographical *akhbār* appeared as a form of commentary on the poem's meaning because, according to Stetkevych, there was a need "in the period of primary orality" for an interpretation of the poem "to be in memorable narrative form."⁹

I do not intend to grapple with the question of orality and literacy as technologies of preserving texts or biographies, or the effect that this has on genre constraints and expectations. However, I would like to pause at her assertion that the literary/moral is a category of *khbar* that is essentially separate from the historical or the biographical, and the idea that commentary as literary form precedes and finds expression through biography.

Caitríona Ní Dhúill's discussion of "metabiography" is useful here in helping us push past the impulse to categorize (seemingly) different types of text according to strict definitions. In suggesting that commentary and biography are (or should be) exclusive of each other and that, consequently, a text is either biography or commentary, we are unable to explore the generative potential of their coincidence in these *akhbār*, the dialogic relation between *akhbār* and poetry, and, moreover, what this coincidence tells us about how poems (and other writings) were once read and understood. Metabiography explores the unresolved tensions found in biographical literature, what Ní Dhúill terms the "palimpsest of (mis-)representation."¹⁰ Rather than "sifting through" this

5 Dana al-Sajdi, "Trespassing the Male Domain: The 'Qaṣīdah' of Laylā al-Akhyaliyya," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 31.2 (2000), 124–5.

6 Jonathan A.C. Brown, "The Social Context of Pre-Islamic Poetry: Poetic Imagery and Social Reality in the Mu'allaqāt," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 25.3 (2003), 30.

7 Stetkevych, 54.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Caitríona Ní Dhúill, "Approaching the Master: Gender, Genre and Biographical Tradition," *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), chap. 2, para. 19, <https://bodleian.lds.org.uk>.

palimpsest for the historical real-truth, as Stetkevych does in her use of Ibn Qutaybah's *akhbār* about Imru' al-Qays, metabiographical analysis, the sort in which we are engaged here, concentrates instead on "the conditions under which these life-traces were constituted and preserved, on the narratives for which they are mobilized and on the meanings they elicit."¹¹ Biography is not simply a neutral recording of a life. In Ní Dhúill's analysis it becomes a "hermeneutic mode, an interpretative response to a life's traces" that do not so much tell us about the life lived, but rather about the way that life makes meaning for later readers through the act of stringing episodic narratives together and rearticulating them in different ways.¹² For Ní Dhúill, metabiography wants to know "how biographies work, what they are made of, what ideological investments they betray, and whose interests they serve."¹³

Stetkevych's "essentially literary and moral" *akhbār* represent a form of interacting with a life that does not necessarily mirror modern, Euro-American epistemological commitments to the "historical and biographical" as fixed genres, with specific constraints, formats, or truth claims. In other words, despite not being reflective of "biography," the *akhbār* about 'Umar are indeed making meaning out of their engagement with the historical life lived by setting the physical and material "traces" of this life (the poetry) into narrative contexts. In doing so, the events, scenes, and interactions depicted in the poetry are set into his real, historical, non-poetic life. In other words, the lyrical world is transposed and collapsed into the extra-textual world.

Building from this startingpoint, I explore the ways in which poetry and *akhbār* are interrelated in their formation, as well as how they expected to be and actually were received by contemporary readers.¹⁴ The fact that some *akhbār* feel too facile to the reader and too obviously spun out of the poetic material is likely because they were. The literary processes by which poems generate *akhbār*, the claims the *akhbār* make to historical truth, and the consequent biographical claims that the *akhbār* make about the poetry—these are all questions that are ripe for analysis.

Turning back to the question of commentary, it is necessary to explore how *akhbār* and poetry fit together to better grasp the nature of their relationship. What the reader (and biographer) has at his or her disposal, in essential terms, are two basic texts. On the one hand, we have a series of poems, at least

11 Ibid., para. 21.

12 Ibid., para. 26.

13 Ibid., para. 47.

14 For want of a better term and to avoid awkward phrasing, I use reader in the broadest sense as someone who receives a text, either through written or oral transmission.

supposedly written by the poet, that provide a material link to the poet's extra-textual life; obviously, in some cases, like that of Majnūn, even this assumption is equivocal. On the other hand, we have a great mass of *akhbār*, teeming with contradictions and variants, that is written and rewritten over a number of centuries and intersects with but does not necessarily complement the poetry. We might turn here to Beatrice Gruendler's reading of a selection of *akhbār* from Abbasid-era collections, in which she suggests that *akhbār* "stage" poetry "within a literized social context and reception," and through this "they situate verse within a narrative context and dramatize its occasion, delivery and reception."¹⁵ Building on this concept, I suggest that the "staging" functions to interpret, explain, or provide exegesis of both the poem and the life lived by the poet, since the *akhbār* make claims on the poet's life and the meaning of the poetry through narrative "staging."¹⁶ These *akhbār* feed off the poems as their primary raw materials and often function to explain the contents of the poems and, in so doing, provide the poems with fixed interpretative contexts for the biographical life of their authors.

This function resembles another literary relationship, one between the Qur'an and *al-tafsīr bi-l-riwāyah*, a form of Qur'anic interpretation which uses both Qur'anic and non-Qur'anic textual sources to explain the contents of the Holy Text.¹⁷ In the methodology of *al-tafsīr bi-l-riwāyah*, place names or names of Prophets and other figures can be explained through extra-Qur'anic

15 Beatrice Gruendler, "Verse and Taxes: The Function of Poetry in Selected Literary *Akhbār* of the Third/Ninth Century," in *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. Philip F. Kennedy (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2005), 96, 88.

16 Ibid., 90–6.

17 This form of *tafsīr* is often understood as the opposite of *al-tafsīr bi-l-ra'y*, which, without wading into the debate too deeply, uses the intellect (broadly speaking) to interpret the revelations. For a thorough discussion of *tafsīr* and its history, see Andrew Rippin, "Tafsīr" in *EI*². Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation" in *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 184–5 explains the concept of *Asbāb al-nuzūl* and controversies associated with using it as a method of divine interpretation. Recently, Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 111 and 47–54 discusses the relationship between the Qur'anic text and the contemporary context of seventh century Hijaz. Equally, a discussion of the differences between *al-tafsīr bi-l-riwāyah* and *al-tafsīr bi-l-ra'y* and the role of using ḥadīth in interpreting the Qur'an can be found in R. Marston Speight, "The Function of Ḥadīth," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 63–82. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for the suggestion that this is similar to aggadic midrash and thus potentially part of a broader Late Antique framework for text interpretation; for a detailed discussion of aggadic midrash, see Judah Goldin, "Midrash and Aggadah [First Edition]," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 6014–6. Accessed Dec. 2, 2020.

narratives, such as the *Isrāʾīlyyāt*. Most importantly for our purposes, a branch of this genre of *tafsīr*, the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (lit. the reasons for the revelations), uses the narratives found in the Prophetic *sīrah* literature in order to explain the reasons for certain Qurʾanic verses or revelations.¹⁸ This literature makes a number of explicit claims about the Qurʾan. Crucially, it stages the Qurʾan as the result, to some extent, of a dialogic relationship between Muḥammad's present and God's speech; the revelation of some verses of the text are caused by specific incidents that happen in the Prophet's life and are therefore comprehensible through an appreciation of the moment in which they were received. One of the most commonly cited examples of this is the revelation of *al-Nūr*/24:11–15 after ʿĀishah (d.58/678) was accused of adultery.¹⁹ In this way, the *sīrah* literature is an interpretative tool that helps us understand the text of the Qurʾan; perhaps more fundamentally, the *akhbār* about the Prophet's life and the revelation of the Qurʾanic text become so interlinked in this framework that one can provide evidence and explanation for the other.

Similar to the use of the *sīrah* to explain discrete verses of the Qurʾan, the relationship between *khbar* and poem is dialogic. As Andrew Rippin notes, the function of many *asbāb al-nuzūl* is to place the metaphor, legal doctrines, and imagery used in the Qurʾan into an established set of historical events.²⁰ This movement from open-ended, ambiguous text to concrete human setting produces a certain exegetical space in which the indefinite material can be interpreted, which establishes the text within recognizable contexts. *Akhbār* that feature snippets of poetry or scenes depicting ʿUmar's liaisons with different women provide the poetry, which could be interpreted in many different ways, with a fixed place and interpretation based on its supposed context within the poet's life. Just as the *asbāb al-nuzūl* have a dialogic relationship with the Qurʾan, the *khbar* uses the poetry as material reference to stake a claim to its own truth, meaning it uses the poetry as evidence for its own occurrence in ʿUmar's biographical life. In so doing, these *akhbār* also stake a claim on the poetry, that it can be used as a source for material to narrate the poet's life.

There are problems here, however. Whilst the *akhbār* may individually seem to provide information for readers (and writers) about the narrative

18 Andrew Rippin, "The Exegetical Genre '*asbāb al-nuzūl*' a Bibliographical and Terminological Study," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48.1 (1985), 1–15.

19 Nabia Abbott's classic biography of ʿĀishah retells this scene at some length; see Nabia Abbott, *Aishah: The Beloved of Mohammed* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1942), 30–8. See also W. Montgomery Watt, "ʿĀisha Bint Abi Bakr," in *ET*² for a short discussion of this episode.

20 Andrew Rippin, "The Function of *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* in Qurʾanic Exegesis," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51.1 (1988), 7–8.

contexts behind certain poems, or about the setting in or for which certain poems were originally composed, when read together they are contradictory and variable; many of them have several different recensions that each show a different face of the poet. We might ask ourselves how these contradictory *akhbār* can be used to tell the history of a life, or how they can be strung together to do so.

Instead of being a commentary, or rather the commentary taking the form of biography in order to transmit more easily as oral narrative, I suggest that both literary relationships (that between the Qur'an and the diffuse *tafsīr* traditions and that between *dīwān* and *akhbār*) point to a certain understanding of the relationship between text and life. Meaning, they point to a way of reading texts that assumes they have exegetical contexts in the extra-textual world to which they refer, with the awareness that life is itself as contradictory, messy, and uneven as the *akhbār* about 'Umar. This way of reading or interacting with text (oral or written) was operative for the very first readers and biographers of 'Umar's poetry and for other early poets like Imru' al-Qays, the *akhbār* about whom are also deeply interwoven with the scenes found in his poetry.²¹ Through this way of reading, the poetry is understood to have some evidentiary link with the poet's life, to present a kind of scenic narration of that life. That is not to say that readers necessarily took the poems to be literal diary-entry accounts detailing the poet's life. However, readers appear to have understood the poem to be connected to moments within the poet's life, depicting scenes, emotions, or relationships that were really experienced by the poet, and which inspired or caused the production of individual poems. Taking seriously both this connection and the epistemological underpinnings that generated it, this article will explore the way poems and *akhbār* intersect in their formulation. Thereafter, it will look at how the contextualizing relationship between the *akhbār* and the poems produces later biographical attitudes towards 'Umar's work and morality, casting him by turns as imaginative poet, womanizer, and chaste lover.

Poems as Biography

'Umar's *dīwān* is full of self-mythologizing—it shamelessly recounts romantic affairs with named and unnamed women of the Umayyad-era Meccan upper classes. Often in his poems he supposedly retells a conversation he had with his beloved or recounts his receipt of an amorous letter and his response; these

²¹ See Stetkevych, 241–85.

poems purport to be a realistic, episodic depiction of moments of 'Umar's life. We might take a look at the following short example [*khafīf*]:²²

كَتَبْتُ تَعْتَبُ الرَّبَابُ وَقَالَتْ قَدْ أَتَانَا مَا قُلْتَ فِي الْأَشْعَارِ
 سَادِرًا عَامِدًا تُشِيرُ بِاسْمِي كَيْ يَبُوحَ الْوُشَاةُ بِالْأَسْرَارِ
 فَاعْتَزَلْنَا فَلَنْ نُرَاجِعَ وَصَلًا أَضَاءَتْ نُجُومُ لَيْلٍ لِسَارِي
 قُلْتُ لَا تَصْرِيحِي لِتَكْثِيرِ وَاشٍ كَاذِبٌ فِي الْحَدِيثِ وَالْأَخْبَارِ
 لَمْ نَبْجِ عَنْدَهُ بَيْسٌ وَلَكِنْ كَذِبٌ مَا أَتَاكَ وَالْجَبَّارِ
 لَا تُطِيعِي فَإِنِّي لَمْ أُطِعْهُ أَنْتِ أَهْوَى الْأَحْبَابِ وَالْأَجْوَارِ

Rabāb wrote, scolding me, and said,
 "I know what you have written in your poems.
 Recklessly, purposefully, you have spread my name around,
 such that slanderers are revealing our secrets.
 Stay away from me! We will not meet again,
 for as long as the night sky lights the way for travelers!"
 I said, "Don't leave, making much of a gossipier,
 who lies when he talks and tells stories.
 I have never told anyone our secret.
 What you have heard is a lie, by God!
 Do not submit to it, for I never have.
 You are my dearest friend and lover."

In this poem, we seemingly have the bare bones of an anecdotal narrative told from 'Umar's perspective. He recounts to the reader an epistolary exchange in which he is blamed for having recklessly written poetry about a woman named Rabāb and reveals his response to her. The poem is, of course, ironic, given that it only further publicizes their secrets (*al-asrār*). In narrating her reaction to a previous poem through its framing as reported speech, this poem turns the poet's interaction with the reader into an example of the selfsame gossip about which she complains. He makes her name only more infamous (*tushahhir*

22 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah, *Dīwān 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah*, ed. Yūsuf Shukrī Farhāt, 255. In a forthcoming article, Julia Bray also translates this poem and provides a longer commentary and analysis of its place in 'Umar's *dīwān*; I thank her for generously sharing her work before publication. See Julia Bray, "A Competitive Fantasy Figure and His Female Conquests: 'Umar ibn Abi Rabi'a," in Martha Bayless et al., eds., *Gender and Status Competition in Pre-Modern Culture* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, forthcoming).

bi-smī) through its repetition. Rabāb is not an uncommon name in 'Umar's *dīwān*; Jibrā'īl Jabbūr notes that 'Umar wrote about twenty-five poems that mention the name Rabāb.²³ In reading 'Umar's poems, one could be forgiven for thinking that Rabāb was a real person. Indeed, if one reads the *dīwān* with the assumption that each name refers to someone real, then we might assume that other names like Nu'm, Asmā', or Baghūm were likewise real women with whom he had emotional and romantic encounters, narrated truthfully from his perspective as if he were writing diary-entry autobiographical accounts.

Some readers and storytellers certainly did entertain this possibility, telling and retelling narratives of 'Umar's different love affairs and using the poems as their raw material; al-Zubayr ibn Bakkār (d.172/788–9) collated the many different *akhbār* of 'Umar's life together into a no longer extant physical book less than a century after his death, which was later a significant source for the very long collection of *akhbār* preserved in Abū 'l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's (d.356/967) Book of Songs (*Kitāb al-Aghānī*).²⁴ In al-Iṣbahānī's collection of *akhbār* concerning the poet, there is an interesting short section in which al-Iṣbahānī narrates two *akhbār* about a woman called Baghūm, mentioned in one of 'Umar's poems.²⁵ In the second of these, a group of enslaved women narrate that Baghūm was another enslaved woman who had accused 'Umar of lying in his poems about their time together.²⁶ In the first, however, Baghūm is supposedly spotted by Sufyān ibn 'Uyaynah (d.198/814), a prominent early religious scholar, as he was sitting by the Ka'bah with two friends.²⁷ Sufyān tells his friends that the decrepit and one-eyed elderly woman standing before them was the legendary Baghūm of 'Umar's poetry. The story turns on the unexpected, striking contrast between the haggard woman's appearance and the beautiful woman of the poem.

The embedding of poetic characters into reality like this through interactions with a third party is a relatively common anecdotal format. In Shihāb

23 Jibrā'īl Jabbūr, *Ḥubb 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah wa-shi'rūhu* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li-l-Malāyīn, 1971), 189; see also Odette Petit and Wanda Voisin, *Poèmes d'amour de 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah* (Paris: Publisud, 1993), 11.

24 In Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, he notes that al-Zubayr ibn Bakkār wrote a book compiling the various anecdotes about 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah. Ibn Bassām (d.302–3/914–6) also wrote a later work on the same topic. Neither work is extant today. See Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1994), 140, 184; see also 371, where Ibn al-Nadīm categorises these works among those of the *'udhrī* lovers. See also Charles Pellat "Ibn Bassām" in *ET*².

25 Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bajāwī (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-Āmmah li-l-Ta'lif wa-l-Nashr, 1970), 1: 66–256; see al-Iṣbahānī, 1170–3 for these *akhbār*.

26 Ibid., 1172–3.

27 Ibid., 1170–1.

al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ḥalabī's (d.725/1325) *Lovers' Waystations and Hearts' Gardens* (*Manāzil al-aḥbāb wa-manāzih al-albāb*), there is an entire chapter devoted to *akhbār* in which the narrator meets someone they had previously heard about in poetry.²⁸ In one memorable *khavar*, an otherwise unknown man named Ghaylān ibn Jināḥ gets lost on his way from Mecca to Sanaa and meets a woman on top of a mountain who claims to be the "*sākin al-Rayyān*" (inhabitant of Mt. Rayyān) described by Jarīr (d. circa 110/728) in one of his poems.²⁹ Here, the *khavar* furnishes the content of the poem with a biographical setting in Jarīr's life, providing the woman mentioned in the poem, known only as the inhabitant of Mt. Rayyān, with a veneer of historical reality. In meeting another man, in being witnessed by someone else, the woman of the poem (just like Baghūm) jumps from the poetic, textual landscape into the extra-textual world in which Jarīr "really" acted and lived. In this movement, the woman and the poem gain a measure of biographical truth: the open-ended text gets fixed into a specific context and the poetic is thereby framed as the historical.

Later in his section concerning 'Umar, al-Iṣbahānī cites a poem in which 'Umar claims that "*lā uṭīq al-kalām min shiddat al-khawf*" (I cannot bear to speak because of the depth of my fear).³⁰ This poem makes no specific claims on the identity of the person about whom he cannot bear to speak or the reason for the depth of his fear. However, citing an anecdote told to him by Ibn al-Marzubān (d.309/921), the poem is explained by a specific moment in 'Umar's life in which the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (d.86/705) had banned 'Umar from mentioning his daughter Fāṭimah in his poetry.³¹ For al-Iṣbahānī, then, the poem becomes, through the aggregation of *khavar* and poem, a depiction of 'Umar's feelings for and adventures with the Umayyad princess, even if he in no way makes this clear in the text of the poem. Specifically, the poem is situated in a moment of his life when he finds out that Fāṭimah has left the city after performing her *ḥajj*. It is this series of events that explains the emotions he describes in the poem; this *khavar* then provides the poem with its *sabab*, fixing the fear and silence into a recognizable and specific context in the poet's life.

This is one of many *akhbār* that feature the poet chasing the princess' affection. Ibn Taghrībirdī (d.874–5/1470), for example, later notes that the tales of

28 Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ḥalabī, *Manāzil al-aḥbāb wa-manāzih al-albāb*, ed. Muḥammad Dībājī (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2000), 25–8.

29 Ibid., 26–7; the poem [*basīṭ*] can be found in Jarīr ibn 'Aṭīyyah, *Dīwān Jarīr*, ed. Nu'mān Muḥammad Amīn Ṭaha (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1969), 1:160–167 (this section 1:165).

30 al-Iṣbahānī, 1:203–4.

31 Ibid., 1:203.

‘Umar’s adventures with her are well known (*mashhūrah*).³² Their liaison is also noted by Ibn Qutaybah (d.276/889), who names a selection of the women ‘Umar composed poetry about, all of them historical characters, like the daughter of ‘Abd al-Malik “*wa-hiya ḥājjatan*” (when she was on the *ḥajj*) presumably referencing this anecdote.³³ Ibn Qutaybah claims, based on this behavior, that ‘Umar was “*fāsiq*” (dissolute) because “*kāna ... yata‘arraḍ li-l-nisā’ al-ḥawājj fī-l-ṭawāf*” (he addressed himself to women performing the *ḥajj* as they circumambulated [the Ka’bah]).³⁴

By writing a book of songs rather than explicitly writing a series of biographies per se, al-Iṣbahānī reveals many different ‘Umars in his stringing together of *akhbār* and poems. However, as Hilary Kilpatrick notes, it is not as if al-Iṣbahānī did not also strive for accuracy or did not conceive of his work as in some way a recording of history.³⁵ She has already noted that the “article” on ‘Umar’s life, to use her terminology, contains an uneven, contradictory portrait of the poet.³⁶ For example, ‘Umar dies twice in al-Iṣbahānī’s rendering.³⁷ At first, he relates that ‘Umar died at eighty, having spent forty years pursuing amatory adventures (*fataka*), followed by forty years of repentance (*nasaka*).³⁸ Later in the article, ‘Umar dies having pursued a nameless woman, who asks God to smite him for doing so.³⁹ These two *akhbār* simply do not work together. This contradiction is only one of many in the corpus of *akhbār* about the poet’s life and in longer retellings that string *akhbār* together; al-Iṣbahānī is certainly not the only biographer to use contradictory or fantastic stories, as we will see below. Returning to Ní Dhúill’s metabiography, al-Iṣbahānī’s article provides us with a fairly obvious depiction of the way a life narrative can look like a “palimpsest” on which different stories are written. These different

32 Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhirah fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhirah* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1929–1972), 1:247.

33 Ibn Qutaybah, *al-Shī‘r wa-l-shu‘arā’*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1966), 2:554.

34 Ibid.

35 Kilpatrick, *Making*, 29, 45, 111–9; see also Beck, 331–3.

36 Kilpatrick, *Making*, 231; Kilpatrick’s term “article” refers to the section of the text in which al-Iṣbahānī records the *akhbār* detailing ‘Umar’s life and poetry.

37 Ibid. Rajā’ Bin Salāmah has also noted that there are many different *akhbār* telling us about ‘Umar’s death, before going on to retell and analyze the one in which God smites him for chasing after a woman, suggesting it shows a unique (*farīd*) moment in which both God and fate (*al-dahr*) come together in ‘Umar’s punishment, Rajā’ Bin Salāmah, *al-Ishq wa-l-kitābah* (Cologne: al-Kamel Verlag, 2003), 290.

38 al-Iṣbahānī, 1:81.

39 Ibid., 1:255–6; Bin Salāmah, 290.

stories, each depicting different ‘Umars, serve to provide the reader with different impressions of the poet.

Beyond that, however, contradictions also problematize our genre expectations. Contemporary readers’ impressions and understanding of “biography” are created and controlled by different genre constraints from those of the pre-modern Arabic scholars, poets, and readers who pepper the pages of this article. There have been suggestions that we replace the term with “life writing” or another looser term that does not have all the baggage of “biography.”⁴⁰ However, as Ní Dhúill remarks, the looseness of the term “life writing” risks its becoming “vague or inflationary” and, in essence, meaningless, as nearly all writing is “about and from” life in some way.⁴¹ On the one hand, imposing a term like “biography” onto a text might skew one’s own analysis of it through an obsequious devotion to the terms with which one began. On the other hand, limiting the terms of our analysis by not pushing them and remolding them to suit our means and ends through a nuanced application can hinder our ability to compare modalities of, say, biography across traditions. Throughout this article, I use “biography” in perhaps its loosest sense; following Ní Dhúill, the term simply refers to the engagement between someone (with whatever technology they have, not necessarily writing) and the “traces” of someone else’s life, as well as the use of those “traces” to make meaning out of that life.⁴² In the present analysis, this takes many forms. We can call ‘Umar’s poetry autobiographical; certainly, his poems lean on the techniques used by (auto) biographers to narrate a life from the subject’s point of view, even if this narration is always playful and impossible to pin down. Each individual *khbar* is another way of doing biography. Al-Zubayr ibn Bakkār, al-Haytham ibn ‘Adī (d.c.209/824), and other early transmitters of *akhbār* narrate a story in which ‘Umar figures as a character and in which the reader’s awareness of him as a character is used to make meaning in the story. In my view this, too, qualifies as biography, as it is an engagement with the life lived to craft an overall meaning. The final level we see here is what might be more strictly seen in modern discursive terms as biography, that is, the stringing together of these individual *akhbār* to tell the life of the character. By no means complete,

40 Hilary Kilpatrick, “Time and Death in Compiled *Adab* ‘Biographies,’” *al-Qantara* xxv.2 (2004), 387–8; Julia Bray, “Literary Approaches to Medieval and Early Modern Arabic Biography,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20.3 (2010), 238, 243, 253; Julia Bray, “Codes of Emotion in Ninth- and Tenth-Century Baghdad: Slave Concubines in Literature and Life-Writing,” *Cultural History* 8.2 (2019), 184 and *passim*.

41 Caitríona Ní Dhúill, “Towards an Anti-Biographical Archive: Mediations Between Life Writing and Metabiography,” *Life Writing* 9.3 (2012), 281.

42 Ní Dhúill, “Approaching the Master,” para. 26.

the selection, framing, and ordering of different *akhbār*, and, consequently, the choice not to use other *akhbār*, then distorts the presentation of 'Umar we, as readers, receive.

Not Any Woman in Particular

One of the big questions that confronts 'Umar's contemporaries and biographers,—a question ripe for the production of contradictory *akhbār*—is whether he really could have done everything he claimed to have done in his poems. Turning to *akhbār* centred on this question in an article about the intersection between the *akhbār*, poetry, and biography of 'Umar's life feels like being part of a *mise en abîme*. Simply put, certain *akhbār*, by questioning the veracity of the events and scenes depicted in 'Umar's poetry, threaten to dismantle, or invert, the literary practices out of which many of the anecdotal building blocks derive their claim to biography. Ibn Qutaybah, as seen above, clearly believed that 'Umar did, in fact, do everything in his poems.⁴³ For other authors, like al-Ṣbahānī, this is but another unresolved question. At the very start of his article, he recounts a narrative in which an otherwise unknown Samurah al-Dūmānī sees 'Umar at the Ka'bah and asks him if he has really done everything in his poems.⁴⁴ 'Umar says he has and asks God for forgiveness. Yet, this is not a firm judgement made by al-Ṣbahānī and he reports many different opinions on 'Umar, his perceived morality, and the quality of his poetry. Not long after Samurah al-Dūmānī's report, al-Ṣbahānī cites a story from Ishāq al-Mawṣilī (d.235/850), the Abbasid-era musician, in which 'Umar is lying on his deathbed.⁴⁵ His brother, the pious al-Ḥārith, was greatly afflicted. 'Umar then swears to al-Ḥārith that God knows 'Umar committed no "*fāḥishah*" (sexual indecency), to which al-Ḥārith replies that this was his only concern and now he is reassured.⁴⁶

Some *akhbār* are told and retold in differing ways across the biographies of his life, each time changing the reader's impression of how 'Umar viewed his

43 Ibn Qutaybah, 2:554.

44 Al-Ṣbahānī, 1:79.

45 Ibid., 1:81.

46 The term *fāḥishah* is intimately connected with sexual indecency; in the Qur'an, for example, *zinā* (adultery or fornication) is specifically termed a *fāḥishah*, an indecency (*al-Isrā'*/17:32); see also Amreen Jamal, "The Story of Lot and the Qur'an's Perception of the Morality of Same-Sex Sexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 41.1 (2001), 25–9 for a detailed terminological discussion of the word and other terms connected to the root (fā'-ḥā'-shīn).

own poetry and changing the perception of whether he committed the actions it retells. In al-Iṣbahānī's recounting of 'Umar's relationship with Fāṭimah bint 'Abd al-Malik, 'Umar is invited to a pavilion (*maḍrib*) to talk to the person with "the most beautiful face" (*aḥsan al-nās wajhan*) on the condition that he is blindfolded on his way there—an unsurprising demand given her rank.⁴⁷

فلما انتهت بي إلى المضرب الذي أرادت، كَشَفَتْ عن وجهي. فإذا أنا بامرأة لم أر مثلاً
قط جمالاً وكالاً، فسلمتُ وجلستُ فقالت: أنتَ عمر ابن أبي ربيعة؟ قلتُ: أنا عمر. قالت:
أنتَ الفاضل للحرائر! قلت: وما ذاك جعلني الله فداك؟ قالت: ألسنتُ القائل

قالت وعيش أنخي ونعمة والدي لأنهن الحبي إن لم تخرج
نفرجتُ خوفَ يمينها فتبسّمت فعلمتُ أن يمينها لم تخرج
فتناولتُ رأسي لتعرف مسه بمحضب الأطراف غير مشج
فلثمتُ فهاها أخذاً بقرونها شرب التزيف يبرد ماء الحشج

ثم قالت: قم فأخرج عني! ثم قامت من مجلسها، وجاءت المرأة فشدت عيني، ثم أخرجتني
حتى انتهت بي إلى مضربي

When we arrived at the pavilion, [the intermediary] uncovered my face and I was with the most beautiful and perfect woman I had ever seen. I greeted her and sat down; she said, "Are you 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah?"

"Yes," I said.

At this point she said, "You are the one who brings scandal upon free women!"

I replied, "What do you mean? May God make me your ransom!"

She said, "Are you not the speaker of the following:⁴⁸ [*kāmil*]"

She said, "by the life of my brother and the blessing of my father,

47 The whole story can be found in al-Iṣbahānī, 1:198–202; this section 1:198–200. Here, we see a very common narrative motif in the character of a woman, often aged, serving as intermediary between a proposed lover and beloved; see, for example, *Ḥadīth Bayāḍ wa Riyāḍ*, in which the old woman serves as the principal method of communication between the two tragic characters, in Cynthia Robinson, *Medieval Andalusian Courtly Culture in the Mediterranean: Ḥadīth Bayāḍ wa Riyāḍ* (London: Routledge, 2007). See also, Leyla Rouhi, *Mediation and Love: a Study of the Medieval Go-Between in Key Romance and Near Eastern Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

48 The full poem can be found in 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah, 133–136.

I will rouse the neighborhood if you do not leave!"
 I made to leave for fear of her oath, but she smiled,
 and it was then I knew her oath was not binding,
 She took my head with [her] soft, unwrinkled hands,
 fingertips henna-dyed, to feel its touch
 Clasping her hair, I kissed her lips,
 the way a dehydrated man drinks from the cold water of a hollow"

"Leave me," she said before she got up from her seat. The woman came back and blindfolded me and took me back to my lodgings.

This scene happens once more with her response being the same; by the end of the anecdote, he follows their caravan all the way to Syria, but he turns away from it several miles before Damascus. As in al-Iṣbahānī's article, the three underlying assumptions guiding this *khavar* and the narrative sequence are that 'Umar's poetry describes a real incident between him and another woman, that the woman can be recognized from the poem, and that poetry has the potential to do genuine harm to her reputation because it describes a real incident and acts like a kind of confession. Nowhere does 'Umar deny that the poetry indeed describes a real incident or that he could thereby bring scandal upon a free woman.

This particular *khavar*, what Ní Dhuíll might term a "biographeme" following Barthes' terminology, is later recounted by Taqī 'l-Dīn al-Fāsī (d.832/1429) in his *The Precious Necklace, On the History of the Faithful City [Mecca] (al-'Iqd al-thamīn fī tārikh al-balad al-amīn)*, a ninth/fifteenth century history of Mecca.⁴⁹ As she notes, biographemes are mediated through the historical and cultural context of their reception and retelling, generating a complex, layered biographical discourse as they travel across time.⁵⁰ Charting the path of individual biographemes can help us wade through the standard approach to biography and look instead at how the author's selection and recension of the biographeme is put to work in expressing their interaction with the life of that subject. Al-Fāsī's source is his contemporary, the lexicographer Majd al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī 'l-Fīrūzābādī (d.817/1415). In al-Fāsī's retelling, the story is no longer about Fāṭimah, but rather about Marwah bint Marwān, her aunt and fellow princess. The first poem she confronts him with is the second poem found in the version in the *Aghānī*, beginning with a description of a woman as

49 Taqī 'l-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Fāsī, *al-'Iqd al-thamīn fī tārikh al-balad al-amīn* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sunnah al-Muḥammadiyyah, 1958), 6:322–9.

50 Ní Dhuíll, "Approaching the Master," para. 20.

"*nāhidat al-thadiyayn*" (the woman with the buxom breasts) and the beloved reprimanding him, because "*faḍaḥṭanī*" (you have brought scandal upon me).⁵¹ The most important narrative variant is, however, what happens next:⁵²

فَقُلْتُ لَهَا: أَنَا قَائِلُ ذَاكَ فَدَاكَ أَبِي وَأُمِّي. فَقَالَتْ: يَا عَمْرَ مَنْ كَانَتْ هَذِهِ النَّاهِدَةُ الثَّدْيَيْنِ
الَّتِي كَانَتْ هَذِهِ حَالَهَا مَعَكَ؟ قُلْتُ لَهَا: أَطَالَ اللَّهُ بَقَاءَكَ، مَا كَانَ هَذَا مِنِّي مِنْ قَصْدٍ وَلَا
عَمْدٍ، وَلَا قُلْتُهِ فِي امْرَأَةٍ بَعِينِهَا، غَيْرَ أَنِّي أَحَبُّ الْغَزَلَ وَأَقُولُ الشَّعْرَ وَالتَّشَبُّبَ بِالنِّسَاءِ! فَقَالَتْ:
أَنْتَ كَذَّابٌ عَلَى الْحَرَاءِ، فَاصْخِرْ لِلنِّسَاءِ، فَقَدْ فَشَا شَعْرُكَ فِي الْحِجَازِ وَالْعِرَاقِ وَالشَّامِ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ
فِي امْرَأَةٍ بَعِينِهَا!؟

I said to her, "Indeed, I did compose that verse, by [the lives of] my mother and father."

She said, "Umar, who was this woman, the one with the buxom breasts, that you describe here?"

"May God grant you a long life! I had no intention or purpose in it, for I did not compose it about any one woman in particular. [The fact is], I love *ghazal* and I write poetry in which I rhapsodize about women [in general]."

She replied, saying, "You are a liar about [the character of] free women and you bring scandal upon them! [You mean to tell me that] your poetry has spread across the Hijaz, Iraq and the Levant and you weren't speaking about a particular woman?!"

As in the story found in *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, this scene happens twice more, with Marwah bint Marwān becoming ever more enraged.⁵³ Yet, his defense remains the same: he did not write any poem about a specific woman, but rather about an imagined or general "woman." This imagined woman serves as the justification for him to write imaginary *ghazal* poetry and divorces the narratives found in his poems, which detail certain liaisons or describe women in unflatteringly revealing terms, from his actual life or lived experience. They thereby become imagined encounters with women, rather than diaries of his sexual exploits and amorous adventures.

Pseudo-Jāḥiẓ also wrote a recension of the same biographeme *Merits and Their Opposites* (*al-Maḥāsin wa-l-aḍḍād*), which follows the same plot-line as

51 al-Fāṣī, 6:324.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 6:325.

al-Fāsī's recension but the woman is instead named Ramlah, not Marwah.⁵⁴ J.C. Bürgel has rather skeptically noted that, considering the staging of the anecdote in which 'Umar is seeking to seduce a high-class woman, it is no wonder that 'Umar claims the poetry does not refer to any woman in particular in order to prevent being rebuffed, as he inevitably is by Fāṭimah in al-Iṣbahānī's recension.⁵⁵ Indeed, both pseudo-Jāḥiẓ and al-Fāsī preserve an alternative ending. After some consideration, the Caliph marries 'Umar to Marwah/Ramlah and the story becomes a narrative tale in which his patience overcomes hardship, thereby turning it into a narrative with an established pattern—that of *al-faraj ba'd al-shiddah*, or deliverance following adversity.⁵⁶ This alternative ending also serves to differentiate his behavior from the 'Umar found in the analogous story in the *Aghānī*, in which he loses the high-class woman after pursuing her. The happy ending operates like a narrative reward for his excellent conduct, both in the particular scene where he promises to behave chastely and in the "scenes" of his poetry, which do not recount specific events or bring scandal upon anyone in particular, least of all himself.

While Bürgel's reading is a valid interpretation of the *khavar* as it stands alone, al-Fāsī deploys a number of *akhbār* throughout his biography that all in one way or another problematize a straightforward biographical reading of 'Umar's poems. This creates an overall impression that, for al-Fāsī, the poetry and the *akhbār* sit in a troubled relationship with each other. Just before the above *khavar*, al-Fāsī narrates a *khavar* about 'Umar's repentance. This was again transmitted by al-Fīrūzābādī from a text called *Love and Fate: on the Virtues of Mina* (*al-Waṣl wa-l-munā fī faḍā'il Minā*), which appears to be no longer extant. This *ḥikāyah* sees him accused by the Caliph Sulaymān ibn 'Abd al-Malik (d.98/717), who asks him if he is the speaker of some poetry that

54 Ramlah is the name of the woman with whom 'Umar supposedly had a dalliance that led to the dissolution of his relationship with Thurayyā, the most famous of his beloveds, before their reconciliation; see al-Iṣbahānī, 1:222–235; see in particular 1:222–3 for the section in which Ramlah appears.

55 J.C. Bürgel, "Love, Lust and Longing: Eroticism in Early Islam as Reflected in Literary Sources," in *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam: The Sixth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Biennial*, ed. Afaf Lutfi Sayyid-Marsot (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1979), 83–4; for the *khavar*, see Pseudo-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Maḥāsin wa-l-aḍḍād*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Hawwārī (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Aṣriyyah, 2003), 264–8.

56 The motif is clearly signalled in the narrative's conclusion through 'Umar's assertion that he won (*ẓafirtu*) because he was patient (*ṣabartu*) (al-Fāsī 6:329). For more narratives on this theme and an introduction to the motif, see Julia Bray's recent translation of Tanūkhī's *al-Faraj ba'd al-shiddah* for the Library of Arabic Literature, al-Muḥassin ibn 'Alī al-Tanūkhī, *Stories of Piety and Prayer: Deliverance Follows Adversity*, trans. and ed. Julia Bray (New York University Press, 2019).

described an encounter at the *hajj*, a location appearing often in the anecdotal history of ‘Umar’s life.⁵⁷

قال نعم فقال سليمان بن عبد الملك: والله لا يشهد الحجّ العام مع الناس، أما والله لو اهتممت بحجّك لم تنظر إلى شيء غيرك، فإذا لم يُفَلت الناس منك في هذه الأيام، فمتى يفلتون؟ فأمر بنفيه إلى الطائف، فقال: يا أمير المؤمنين أواخر من ذلك؟ فقال: ما هو؟ فقال: أعاهد الله عزّ وجلّ، لا أعود لمثل هذا الشعر ولا أذكر النساء في شيء أبداً وأجدّد توبة على يديك! قال أوتنعل؟ قال نعم! فعاهد الله على توبته وخلاه.

So he [‘Umar] said, “Yes[, I composed it]”, to which Sulaymān ibn ‘Abd al-Malik replied, “By God may he not observe the regular *hajj* with other people this year, for if indeed you cared about your *hajj*, you wouldn’t look at anything besides yourself! If people cannot be free of you in these days, when can they be?” And so, Sulaymān ordered for him to be sent to the city of Taif, whereupon ‘Umar said, “O Commander of the Faithful, what if we can do better than that?” When Sulaymān asked him what he meant, ‘Umar said “I would swear to God Almighty that I will no longer compose such poetry and would not mention women again in anything and would renew my repentance with your help.” Sulaymān responded, “Would you really do that?” to which ‘Umar replied, “Yes.” Therefore, he swore to God on his repentance and Sulaymān let him go.

In this anecdote, there is a very clear distinction being made by ‘Umar between action and poetry. While the Caliph believes that the poetry’s allusion to encounters at the *hajj* implies that women are not safe from such behavior, ‘Umar responds that he will “no longer write such poetry” and will “not mention women again in anything.” ‘Umar here suggests that what he must repent from is his poetry, not any specific actions; it is his speech and literary expression that are morally dubious, not his behavior.

Several *akhbār* earlier, al-Fāṣī narrates a further *khbar* attributed to al-Fākihī’s (3rd/9th Century, death dates unknown) *Meccan Tales* (*Akhbār Makkah*). A man called Ṣāliḥ ibn Aslam tells al-Aṣma‘ī (d.213/828) that he saw a woman circumambulating the Ka‘bah, part of whose legs were exposed

57 al-Fāṣī, 6:321–2; for such stories, see al-Iṣbahānī, 1:151–2; for an analysis of this narrative motif, see W. Sasson Chahanovich, “Kissing at the Ka‘bah: Ghazal Poetry and Early Islamic Conceptualizations of the Sacred and the Sensual,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 47 (2019), 187–236. See also Bin Salāmah, 378.

because of how she tied her dress around herself. Šālih, watching 'Umar ogle her, overheard him declaim a poem seemingly about her:⁵⁸

فقلت له: امرأة مسلمة محرمة غافلة قد سیرتَ فيها شعراً وهي لا تدري؟ فقال له: لقد
سیرتُ من الشعر ما بلغك، وربّ هذه البنية ما حلّتُ إزارِي على فرج امرأة حرام قطّ!

And so, I said to him "You have circulated a poem about a free-born, Muslim woman without her knowledge?"

To which he replied, "No, I've put what you heard into poetry! By the Lord of this House [i.e. the Ka'bah], I have not untied my loincloth upon the vulva of any woman who is not permitted to me!"

This final phrase is one which crops up again and again in biographies of 'Umar's life and gets taken up and disfigured by others across time to quash potentially serious accusations of sexual misconduct. A notable example can be found in al-Šafadī's (d.764/1363) biography of Muḥammad ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣbahānī (d.297/909), strict *ẓāhirī* jurist and chaste lover of another man.⁵⁹ The phrase, both when spoken by Ibn Dāwūd or as part of 'Umar's snappy retort to Šālih, emphasizes that there is an important gap between the poetic depiction of a woman (or even the declamation of a poem at the sight of a woman) and the poem being about a specific woman or relating some adventure with her. Here, just as in 'Umar's defense against the accusations Fāṭimah/Marwah/Ramlah levels at him, 'Umar's point is that, while the narrative may appear to depict a real-life incident between him and a woman, named or unnamed, this is in fact a poetic device. It is not that he "circulates" poems about specific women or details specific events in his life through his poetry; as seemingly interrelated as the poem and the moment of its declamation might appear to be, the 'Umar depicted by al-Fāsī emphasizes that the poetry itself makes no truth claim.

In stringing these *akhbār* together within his biographical notice about 'Umar, al-Fāsī stakes an interpretative claim on the nature of 'Umar's poetry and its relationship to his life. Unlike Ibn Qutaybah or al-Iṣbahānī, both of whom claim a connection between the two, al-Fāsī emphasizes that the poetry is more of an imaginative rather than descriptive exercise, and that the poems, therefore, are not credible sources that can tell us about specific narrative or historical moments in 'Umar's life. The many women depicted in the poems

58 al-Fāsī, 6:317; for the anecdote in al-Fākihī, see Muḥammad ibn Ishāq al-Fākihī, *Akhbār Makkah fī qadīm al-dahr wa-ḥadīthih*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār Khidr, 1994), 1:318.

59 Khalīl ibn Ayyak al-Šafadī, *Kitāb al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt* (1931; Leipzig: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 2007), 3:59.

do not necessarily represent real women; Rabāb and Baghūm, two names we encountered earlier, would therefore become simply imagined characters in a poem. This appears to mirror Naïma Benhsine's tentative suggestion that the woman [or women] depicted in 'Umar's poems is not a real, historical person, but rather "la bien-aimée nous est donnée comme réelle" (the beloved is presented to us as if she is real).⁶⁰ Rather than being a true depiction, she is an idealized, "vraisemblable" woman.⁶¹

While the concatenation of these individual biographemes or *akhbār*, and the selection of *akhbār* that explicitly suggest 'Umar's poetry do not recount particular incidents from his life both reflect al-Fāsi's engagement with this question, he also uses specific introductory formulae that signal to the reader that the *akhbār* he uses ought not to be read as literal truth. For example, the long *khavar* about 'Umar's three meetings with Marwah and his subsequent marriage to her is introduced by the term "*ḥikāyah ṣarīfah*" (wondrous tale);⁶² likewise, the tale about 'Umar's forgiveness at the hands of the Caliph Sulaymān is introduced by the term "*ḥikāyah*" as are a number of others.⁶³ Michael Cooperson has reflected on the inclusion of what he terms "implausible stories" in medieval approaches to biography.⁶⁴ Noting that whilst there are many implausible stories told about individual figures in the Arabic biographical tradition, "we must consider the possibility that many implausible tales were included because they contained subtle signals that the reader need not take them entirely at face value," and that would enable professional biographers to adjudicate their veracity.⁶⁵

The term *ḥikāyah*, originally referring to a mimetic narrative, had largely, by this time, come to connote a tale or a story.⁶⁶ Emily Selove notes the changing usage of the term in her discussion of the eleventh-century *Ḥikāyat Abī 'l-Qāsim*, for example.⁶⁷ Likewise, in al-Ḥarīrī's (d.516/1122) *Maqāmāt*, the verb

60 Naïma Benhsine, *L'Image de la femme dans le dīwān de 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2000), 292; I will return to Benhsine's argument in the next section.

61 Ibid., 368.

62 al-Fāsi, 6: 322.

63 This interaction is elsewhere problematized by al-Fāsi, who notes that the necessary date of the narrative cannot fail to match up with the death date as recorded by Ibn Khallikān, as Sulaymān undertook the *hajj* after 'Umar had supposedly already died; al-Fāsi, 6:31–2.

64 Michael Cooperson, "Probability, Plausibility and 'Spiritual Communication' in Classical Arabic Biography," in *On Fiction*, ed. Kennedy, 69–83.

65 Ibid., 78.

66 Pellat, "Ḥikāya," in *ET*².

67 Emily Selove, *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim: A Literary Banquet* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 2 and 24, n.3.

of the same root is also a feature of the introductory formula, with which each individual *maqāmah* begins, “*hakā l-Ḥārith ibn Hammām qāla*” (al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām told a story, saying).⁶⁸ As Selove notes, the term “seems to hover between the promise of a realistic portrait and a grotesque parody,” at one and the same time suggesting the mimesis of a real tale and indicating the falsity of the impression.⁶⁹ Like al-Fāsī, Ibn Khallikān and various later scholars who build on his biography of ‘Umar also note that there were many “*ḥikāyāt*” and “*waqā’i*” (slandorous stories) told about him, destabilizing our belief in the *akhbār* that depict him engaging in many sexual escapades with many different women. Al-Ṣafadī even mentions that there are numerous “*ḥikāyāt mashhūrah madhkūrah fī Kitāb al-Aghānī*” (famous tales mentioned in *Kitāb al-Aghānī*), specifying al-Iṣbahānī’s biographical picture of ‘Umar as the source for these tales, which, importantly, al-Ṣafadī does not go on to recount. Instead, the very fact that there are such tales becomes its own *khavar*, a way of interacting with ‘Umar’s life. These terms connote various genre expectations to readers. As Cooperson notes, we may have lost the ability to grasp the full meaning of each individual genre term, especially given that the underlying genre categorization with which we operate and interact with literature is predicated on different assumptions from those of medieval Arabic readers.⁷⁰ However, we can be certain that such terms as *ḥikāyah*, *khurāfah* (fantastical), or *ẓarīf* (wondrous), all used by al-Fāsī and other later biographers to describe certain stories in which ‘Umar operates as a character, function to signal that the *khavar* does not have a simple or straightforward relationship with the poet’s life.

Out of Many, One

Taking al-Fāsī at his word, and disaggregating the scenes described in the poetry from the poet’s real life, a significant problem still remains. As claimed first by Hishām ibn ‘Urwah (d.c.145–6/763), and noted by Kilpatrick, the poems could

68 See Michael Cooperson’s new edition and translation for the Library of Arabic Literature, al-Ḥarīrī, *Impostures: Fifty Rogues Tales Translated Fifty Ways*, trans. and ed. Michael Cooperson (New York University Press, 2020); he translates this introductory formula variously throughout the work according to the way he “Englishes” each individual *maqāmah*.

69 Selove, 2.

70 Cooperson, “Probability,” 78; it is worth noting that Cooperson also adds here that “many readers within the tradition itself also lost the ability to read the signal properly” (78).

be dangerous if read by the wrong sorts of persons, namely women.⁷¹ Hishām, as reported by al-Madā'inī (d.c.228/843) and quoted by al-Iṣbahānī, commanded that people do not read 'Umar's poetry to their daughters (*fatayāt*) so that they do not get themselves involved in adulterous relations (*tawarraṭna fī 'l-zinā tawarruṭan*).⁷² Even if the poems do not necessarily depict real scenes of 'Umar engaging in erotic affairs with a multitude of women, they are hardly exemplary of good, moral conduct, and paint *zinā* (adultery), one of the primordial sexual sins in Islam, in "far too attractive a light."⁷³

The question of 'Umar's moral status plagues his biographies over the centuries. Ibn Qutaybah's use of the term "*fāsiq*" is highly loaded, as the word literally meaning someone who violates the *sharī'ah* (Islamic Law). In the Qur'ān, it is related explicitly to the non-believers and those who turned away from God.⁷⁴ The picture in Ibn Qutaybah's biography is not this simple, however. Later in the article, Ibn Qutaybah paints him as a martyr, dying when his ship is burnt in a holy war;⁷⁵ this *khavar*, depicting a different death scene from the two others found in al-Iṣbahānī's biography, became a fairly standard unit in some of the later biographies as well.⁷⁶ As James Montgomery notes in his modern biography of the poet, "the sources, indeed, do not question his devotion to Islam, which features prominently in much of his *ghazal*."⁷⁷ Many of the biographers, including Ibn Qutaybah, also note that 'Umar was supposedly born on the same day that 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d.23/644) was assassinated, suggesting some kind of metaphysical link between the Caliph and poet, who occasionally referred to himself as Abū 'l-Khaṭṭāb.⁷⁸ This particular *khavar* received a less than positive reception by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d.110/728), however, who commented "*ayy ḥaqq ruḥ'a wa-ayy bāṭil wuḍi'a*" (what truth was lifted up, and what falsehood set down).⁷⁹

However, this question of morality refers back to the much deeper question regarding the relationship between 'Umar's poetry and his life: how readers might understand his personal morality changes greatly depending on

71 Kilpatrick, *Making*, 231.

72 al-Iṣbahānī, 1:79.

73 Kilpatrick, *Making*, 231.

74 For example, see *ʿĀl Imrān*, 3:81–2 or *al-Ḥashr*, 59:19.

75 Ibn Qutaybah, 2:553.

76 See, for example, Ibn Khallikān, 3:439; al-Ṣafadī, 22:393; al-Fāsī, 6:311; Ibn al-ʿImād, *Shadharāt al-dhahab fī akhbār man dhahab* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qudsī, 1931–2), 1:101–2.

77 James Montgomery, "'Umar (b. 'Abd Allāh) b. Abī Rabī'ah," in *ET* 2.

78 al-Iṣbahānī, 1:66, 76; Ibn Khallikān, 3:439; al-Ṣafadī, 22:393; al-Fāsī, 6:311; Ibn Taghribirdī, 1:247; Ibn al-ʿImād, 1:101.

79 al-Iṣbahānī, 1:76; Ibn Khallikān, 3:439; al-Fāsī, 6:312; Ibn Taghribirdī, 1:247; Ibn al-ʿImād, 1:101.

whether the poems are understood to depict eroticized scenes of love-making between 'Umar and many different women, or whether they are imaginative exercises in writing poetry. A further type of reading, deployed by certain later biographers and modern scholars, has asserted that all of the women depicted in his poetry are in fact the same woman, usually named as Thurayyā ibnat 'Alī. In Jabbūr's reading of 'Umar's *dīwān*, he suggests that there are two types of poems that depict different emotional realities in 'Umar's life; anybody who studies (*man yadrus*) 'Umar's poetry can see the clear difference (*tafāwut bayyin*) between the first set of poems, written for or about friends and acquaintances and which do not actually depict any real passion, and the second set of poems, which contains highly descriptive accounts of his passionate love of Thurayyā.⁸⁰ Turning to the name Rabāb, for example, Jabbūr interprets this name as a moniker for Thurayyā, deployed in order to hide her identity.⁸¹ Following this line of thinking, Benhsine, despite suggesting that the women described in 'Umar's poetry should be read as imagined figures, later nuances this argument, claiming that all of the women, the imagined beloveds about whom he is writing, are actually screen names (*noms écrans*) to hide (dissimule) Thurayyā. She states, "l'anonymat a servi au poète de refuge afin de cacher le nom de sa bien-aimée Thurayya" (anonymity allowed the poet a measure of safety, letting him hide the name of his beloved Thurayyā).⁸² It is a process of imagination as dissimulation, but in this approach to the poetry, there remains a singular and real woman behind all the screens.

There is some justification for this approach in the medieval sources. Ibn Khallikān noted that 'Umar "*kāna yataghazzal fī shī'rihi bi-l-Thurayyā ibnat 'Alī*" (he used to write love poetry about Thurayyā ibnat 'Alī').⁸³ This statement singles out Thurayyā as the object of his poetry, regardless of the wealth of stories that depict 'Umar in erotic or romantic entanglements with other women—entanglements that, importantly, Ibn Khallikān does not repeat in his biography. Both Ibn Khallikān and al-Ṣafadī devote a considerable portion of their entries on 'Umar to detailing her genealogy and the *akhbār* associated with Thurayyā, a process that lends her a concrete historical reality and ties this reality to his, unlike the other women found in the *Aghānī*, who are almost entirely absent.⁸⁴ Al-Ṣafadī even gave Thurayyā her own entry in *The*

80 Jabbūr, 15; for the full chapter on Thurayyā, see Jabbūr, 33–64.

81 Ibid. For the full chapter on Rabāb, see Jabbūr, 189–96.

82 Benhsine, 45–58; for this quotation, see 51.

83 Ibn Khallikān, 3:436; al-Ṣafadī, 22:493; Ibn al-ʿImād, 1:101 in which he says the same thing with slightly different wording. The various *akhbār* depicting his relationship with Thurayyā are dispersed over the final quarter of his biography in al-ʿIṣbahānī, 1:217–56.

84 Ibn Khallikān, 3:436; al-Ṣafadī, 22:492.

Completion of the Death Notices (*Kitāb al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*), anchoring her into his text's landscape of historical figures.⁸⁵ By contrast, later in al-Ṣafadī's biography, he relates a poem about a woman called Nu'm (*qāla fī Nu'min*; lit. he sang about a woman called Nu'm).⁸⁶ He then mentions that "*qīla anna*" (it is said that) 'Umar heard about a woman called Nu'm having bathed in a spring, whereupon 'Umar ran off there to drink the whole thing up until it was dry (*fa-lam yazal yashrab minhu ḥattā naḍaba*).⁸⁷ Here again, al-Ṣafadī deploys an introductory phrase that indicates this *khavar* may not be literally true; elsewhere, al-Ṣafadī tends to list his sources, whereas here he relates a sourceless tale. Unlike Thurayyā, this Nu'm remains unidentified and unhistoricized.

In Ibn Khallikān's biography of 'Umar, there is only one poem that is interpreted through 'Umar's life, however generally: [*khafif*]⁸⁸

أَيُّهَا الْمُنْكَحُ الثَّرِيَّ سُبَيْلًا عَمْرُكَ اللَّهُ كَيْفَ يَلْتَقِيَانِ
هِيَ شَامِيَةٌ إِذَا مَا اسْتَقَلْتُ وَسُبَيْلٌ إِذَا اسْتَقَلَّ يَمَانِي

O you who give Thurayyā in marriage to Suhayl,
May God bless you, for how will they meet?
Thurayyā [The Pleiades] is/are a northern star when she/it rises
but Suhayl [Canopus] rises from the south.

Ibn Khallikān clearly states that this is a poem 'Umar sang about Thurayyā's marriage to Suhayl, but he provides no firm narrative context for the declamation of the poem; rather, the poem depicts his feelings about an event and is unbound by specific narrative "staging," to return to Gruendler's terms. By contrast, when al-Iṣbahānī includes the poem in his biography of 'Umar, he does provide it with a specified narrative context that "stages" its declamation. Saying that her family were troubled by 'Umar's persisting in his love for Thurayyā, al-Iṣbahānī tells us that 'Umar was sent to Yemen on behalf of Mas'adah ibn 'Amr, the governor of Mecca at the time, on account of a land

85 Thurayyā's entry can be found in al-Ṣafadī, 11:8.

86 al-Ṣafadī, 22:399.

87 al-Ṣafadī, 22:399; this anecdote is recounted in an abridged form by al-Tha'libī in his biography of the poet in *Thimār al-qulūb fī l-muḍāf wa-l-mansūb*, ed. Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1985), 223.

88 Ibn Khallikān, 3:437; the full text of 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah's poem can be found in 'Umar ibn Abī Rabī'ah, 673–4. This poem is quoted across his biographies in the same way as Ibn Khallikān does, see al-Fāsī, 6:313; Ibn al-'Imād, 11:101.

issue.⁸⁹ In reality, the governor was in cahoots with her family, who did not want Thurayyā to marry ‘Umar and who then married her off to a man named Suhayl in ‘Umar’s absence and sent her to Egypt.⁹⁰ It is on hearing this specific news that ‘Umar then composed the poem.

In al-Iṣbahānī’s version of Thurayyā’s marriage, the affair follows the same narrative trajectory of chaste love followed by heartbreak and separation that can be found in contemporary ‘*udhrī*’ stories; the motifs of the annoyed family, the urging male lover, the beloved’s family marrying the woman off to another (often wealthy) man in the absence of the lover, and the lover’s grief at her departure expressed in poetry are all scenes that can be found in the *akhbār* of Jamīl’s love for Buthaynah or ‘Urwah ibn Ḥizām’s love for ‘Afrā.⁹¹ This caught the attention of Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.638/1240), who reworks this couplet into his *The Translator of Desires* (*Tarjumān al-ashwāq*), in which he draws on ‘*udhrī*’ lovers as models to express the depth of his love for God.⁹²

Indeed, Ibn al-‘Arabī is not the only person to have noticed the similarity between ‘Umar’s love for Thurayyā and tales of the ‘*udhrī*’ lovers. As Mònica Colominas Aparicio notes, al-Shayzarī (fl.569/1174), writing a treatise on love, uses the pair’s relationship as important evidence to support his views about love.⁹³ In his depiction of the end of their relationship, she notes that al-Shayzarī freely adapts the various narratives about the pair, taking bits from different *akhbār* and combining them “to compose a love story,” which shares

89 al-Iṣbahānī, 1:242–3; Mònica Colominas Aparicio talks about the way this scene was framed by different writers at length, in “Umar ibn Abī Rabī‘ah and Thurayyā in *Rawḍat al-qulūb wa-nuḥḍat al-muḥibb wa-l-maḥbūb*,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* (Nuova Serie) 5/6 (2011–2), 194–8.

90 al-Iṣbahānī, 242–3; Colominas Aparicio notes the various names attributed to her husband (196–7), as does al-Iṣbahānī, 1:242.

91 Colominas Aparicio notes the similarity between various retellings of this story and the tradition of “courtly love,” most famously associated with the ‘*udhrīs*’ (188–98). See the various narrative motifs described by Stefan Leder, “The ‘*Udhrī*’ Narrative in Arabic Literature,” in *Martyrdom in Literature: Visions of Death and Meaningful Suffering from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. Friederike Pannewick (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2004), 163–87; Leder here sketches out many of the common narrative motifs that can be found in this *khbar* and its various retellings, and in the way some later commentators have talked about ‘Umar’s love for Thurayyā, contrasting them with the emotional attitudes found in ‘Umar’s poetry.

92 Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, trans. and ed. Reynold A. Nicholson. (London: Wheaton III Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), 87. For a freer modern translation of this poem, see also, Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Translator of Desires*, trans. and ed. Michael Sells (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 79–88.

93 Colominas Aparicio, 187.

many features with the tales of heartbreak, woe, and separation found in the *‘udhrī* tradition.⁹⁴

Among modern scholars, Odette Petit and Wanda Voisin have repeated on a larger scale something of what al-Shayzarī was doing in selecting or eliminating various *akhbār* about ‘Umar’s life, and molding them into a novelistic, romantic portrayal of his relationship with Thurayyā from its inception to heartbreak. In their translation of a selection of his poems, Voisin and Petit craft a narrative story and, crucially, use the poems (not the *akhbār*) as evidence for his emotions and feelings.⁹⁵ They too state that, despite the many *akhbār* told about ‘Umar and the various names found in his poetry, Thurayyā was the real object of his real love.⁹⁶ Accordingly, not everyone has given “à l’existence, dans la jeunesse du poète, d’un grand amour, le crédit qu’elle méritait” (the existence of a great love affair in the poet’s youth the credit it deserved) because of a “méfiance justifiée à l’égard des légendes qui ne pouvaient manquer de se greffer ... autour de la vie et de l’oeuvre” (justified mistrust as regards the legends, which could not but become layered onto the life and works) of ‘Umar, especially, in their eyes, because of the oral culture in which the early *akhbār* of his life were transmitted.⁹⁷ However, “tous les livres arabes de Adab ont cependant associé les noms de Thorayya et de ‘Omar comme on a rapproché ceux de Layla et de Majnūn” (all the Arabic books of *adab* associated the names of Thurayyā and ‘Umar, as they had brought together those of Laylā and Majnūn).⁹⁸ There is some limited evidence for this rather sweeping (and unsourced) statement; Ibn al-Nadīm (d.385/999) and al-Washshā’ (d.325/927) are two examples of

94 Ibid., 194–5. The question of where ‘Umar and his poetry fits into the emotional landscapes of early Arabic literature continues to vex modern scholars, many of whom acknowledge that aspects of his poetry and the *akhbār* about him appear to suggest some level of cross-pollination between him and the *‘udhrī* poets, or as Julia Bray suggests in a discussion of a *khbar* that brings ‘Umar together with an *‘udhrī* in a comedic tale, “the characters of each rub off on the other”, Julia Bray, “Verbs and Voices,” in *Islamic Reflections, Arabic Musings: Studies in Honour of Professor Alan Jones*, ed. Robert Hoyland and Philip F. Kennedy (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004), 180. On the other hand, Ṭaha Ḥusayn was adamant that, while operating in the same world as *‘udhrī* poetry, ‘Umar’s work is fundamentally different from that of the *‘udhrī* poets, because the emotions and sentiments it expresses are too ensconced in the mundane, rather than the divine; Jabbūr 13–5, 18–20.

95 See Petit and Voisin, 27–186, in which they intersperse poetry, commentary and novelistic prose to relate the birth, progression and death of a love affair.

96 Ibid., 11. See also Bray, “Competitive” for a further discussion of the interrelationship between these arguments.

97 Ibid., 10.

98 Ibid., 10.

(much later) authors who placed the two couples in the same bracket as poets overcome by their love for a unique beloved.⁹⁹

There are several problems with this analysis, the most pressing being the wholesale belief in the existence of this “grand amour” common to Jabbūr, Benhsine, Petit, and Voisin, the proof for which can supposedly be seen in the poetry. Here, they all show a troubling engagement with the biographical traditions. Rather than engage with the palimpsestic portrayal of ‘Umar as simultaneously chaste lover of Thurayyā and roving womanizer, they privilege one set of *akhbār*, one approach to the life narrative, as true over another: why are the *akhbār* concerning Thurayyā any more indicative of his emotional state or the events of his life over and above the *akhbār* concerning other beloveds, women, and friends? This approach only adds to the palimpsest of his life but does not resolve the various contradictions inherent within it. Jabbūr’s reading in particular consigns a great number of anecdotes to the scrapheap through his bifurcation of the poetry into heartfelt emotional songs that have symbolic value in helping the biographer explore ‘Umar’s life and love, as opposed to vain poems that do not reflect real emotion, but were instead written for singers and friends.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, the adoption of one approach to the poetry has an effect on how ‘Umar’s life is told and received as a moral example. In reading the poetry as scenic depiction of real events, certain biographers open the poet up to accusations because the poetry is understood to recount his real adventures. By contrast, when a biographer stages Thurayyā as the singular beloved around whom ‘Umar’s poetry turns, they restage that poetry as a depiction of chaste love, of a relationship that never went beyond the licit boundaries of interpersonal contact. The problematic morality of the depictions of the erotic in the poetry is thereby nullified, the scenes turned into fantasy rather than extra-textual reality. Beyond that, however, the *akhbār* about this chaste, unconsummated relationship are, however, just as modelled on generic contemporary emotional expectations and styles as the *akhbār* depicting him as a roving womanizer, and are no more reliable as a historical source because of it. Indeed, this reading of the life narrative still hangs on the poetry as descriptive of emotional truth, even if the scenes are not real in the historical sense. There continues to be a dependence on the poetry to tell the biography, and in that telling, the poetry continues to be fixed into specific hermeneutic contexts,

99 Ibn al-Nadīm, 371; Abū ‘l-Ṭayyib Muḥammad al-Washshā’, *al-Zarf wa-l-ẓurafā*, ed. Fahmī Sa’d (Beirut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1985), 133.

100 Jabbūr, 15 and *passim*.

specific *asbāb al-nuzūl*, concretizing the emotions and feelings behind the open-ended verse.

Abdelfattah Kilito has problematized this approach to poetry, suggesting that love poets are only in love with the beloveds of their predecessors, trapped in poetic language that must conform to style and genre constraints, and that this was how poems were received, for it is “naïve” to believe a love poem expresses the feelings of the poet.¹⁰¹ In this way, Thurayyā also becomes a screen, a cypher for the poet to engage by writing *ghazal* to the proto-beloved. Kilito’s argument cannot be verified with any accuracy, as we can never truly know whether individual poets many centuries ago were really writing about their beloveds or not; as Monica Balda-Tillier notes, for example, it is highly uncertain if the emotions and feelings portrayed and felt by characters in ‘*udhrī*’ love narratives even existed outside of their literary representation.¹⁰² Certainly, Kilito’s suggestion that the poets’ devotion to genre inhibited their emotional discourse is undermined by Jaroslav Stetkevych’s argument that poets and authors can write through genre constraints about heartfelt emotional situations.¹⁰³ [My mentor] Julia Bray has further discussed Stetkevych’s argument in her understanding of the (de-/re-)particularization of poetic language, where generic and mythic symbols (the Pleiades and Canopus, say, or the motif of the “*wāshī*” [slanderer] and his gossip) are used to convey real emotional lives and contexts.¹⁰⁴

However, Kilito’s problematization is useful in destabilizing the notion inherent in Jabbūr’s argument that (at least some of) the poetry conveys emotional truth, even if not scenic truth. These unstated methodological assumptions are just as unstable as the belief that ‘Umar’s poetry describes scenes and events from his life. In assuming that some of the poetry is a direct expression of emotions, we find ourselves lost in the difficult interpretative space of trying to work out which ones are emotionally true and which ones are not, and how that can be integrated into a biography. After all, it is not hard to imagine that poems that have been understood to be about Thurayyā are also simply imaginative exercises in writing *ghazal*, as al-Fāsi’s version of ‘Umar might claim.

101 Abdelfattah Kilito, *The Author and His Doubles*, trans. Michael Cooperson (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 56–7.

102 Monica Balda-Tillier, “Parler d’amour sans mot dire: les stigmates de la passion,” *Annales Islamologiques* 48.1 (2014), para. 5, accessed Dec. 2, 2020, <https://journals.openedition.org/anisl/3164>.

103 Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 51–3.

104 Julia Bray, “Abbasid Myth and The Human Act: Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih and Others,” in *On Fiction*, ed. Kennedy, 12.

Conclusions

Many people have engaged with the traces of 'Umar's life in many different ways; over centuries, scholars have handed down *akhbār* that paint a contradictory and complicated portrait of a controversial man. Like many early poets, there is very little life narrative of him that is separate from his poetry. Rather, the scenes, emotions, and settings of the poetry seem to propel and sustain the life narrative. I have compared this process to the way that the *asbāb al-nuzūl* provide the Qur'an with distinct revelatory contexts. In so doing, the *akhbār* interpret and explain 'Umar's *dīwān* by anchoring it to a supposed life narrative, turning the poetry into a kind of scenic autobiography of its own. The *dīwān* is therefore seen as a record of the twists and turns 'Umar's life took, with his poetry relating directly to and often describing particular moments and events.

Other biographers have problematized this simple reading of the poems, not least because it leaves us with a teeming mass of irresolvable contradictions. Instead, they have tended to cluster around the idea that 'Umar's poems really only speak about one woman, Thurayyā. In their reading of the poetry as a record of 'Umar's relationship with and feelings for Thurayyā, certain biographers have proposed that their work gets behind the supposed screen 'Umar puts up in his poetry and reveals the real love he is talking about. However, there is no screen one can go behind; if anything, behind the screen is just a different set of *akhbār* about a single woman, not a radically different interpretation or a way of reading the poetry that does not rely on contextualizing that poetry within 'Umar's life, in light of specific claims made in specific *akhbār*, or as evidence for the historical person's emotional states. In other words, 'Umar's poetry remains fixed into extra-textual, lived contexts that can supposedly be discerned and deciphered from clues found within the poetry.

The idea that we can use his poetry to gain some insight into his emotional life regardless of Thurayyā or any other beloved is questionable, as is the notion that the poetry has to be interpreted as something set in his life.¹⁰⁵ Al-Fāsi's use of *akhbār* emphasizes disaggregation of poetry from life, suggesting we can never be certain of the contexts behind his poetry or even if the poetry has a context outside of his imagination. Of course, at a distance of over a millennium it is impossible for us to know, without a shadow of doubt, whether an individual *khābar* or poem is a reliable piece of information in helping us write 'Umar's life story. Yet, it is this very clear-cut, binary idea of real-life-story versus

105 Julia Bray comes to a similar conclusion in her forthcoming article, noting that the poems construct a "literary world" that might be better appreciated if we stop attempting to historicize them and adjudicate which are authentic and which are not (Bray "Competitive").

legend that this article has attempted to break down. Our engagement with ‘Umar’s life will likely never move beyond legend, nor should it necessarily. For no matter how we attempt to engage the *akhbār* to fit a biographical scheme we will always come up short, as is true in the writing of any life. Life is always too complicated, varied, and partisan to get down on paper as a “true” record. Uncertain and equivocal to the last, ‘Umar’s life, and his poetry, will continue to evade a firm interpretation as we grapple with the infinite questions their relationship raises. Perhaps, as ‘Umar himself tells us, poetry is just poetry after all.