PART ONE

THE POETICS OF HUMAYNĪ VERSE
CHAPTER ONE

DEFINING THE ḤUMAYNĪ POEM

Origins

The Arabic literary tradition is highly conservative in its presentation of itself. It tends to obscure the ripples that would precede major turning points, acknowledging them belatedly and grudgingly. In retrospect, innovations in the Arabic canon seem to spring forth fully-grown. Thus, the polythematic ode (qasīdah), the characteristic form of classical Arabic poetry until the modern era, was said to emerge “with Homeric suddenness” in sixth-century Arabia.1 A raging controversy over rhetorical artifice centers on one ninth-century poet, Abū Tammām, even though earlier poets practiced it and the controversy itself arose after his death. It is similarly difficult to assess whether an individual innovator or a poetic critical mass led to the emergence of strophic poems in Islamic Spain.

In this light, one should not be entirely surprised to read a Yemeni writer of the seventeenth century matter-of-factly describe ḥumaynī poetry as the brainchild of the poet Aḥmad b. Falītah (d. 1332/1333). According to the historian ʿAli b. al-Ḥasan al-Khazrajī, Ibn Falītah, who was a courtier and professional scribe in the Rasūlid court in Zabid, left behind a two-volume collection of poetry. One of these volumes contained classical Arabic poems, and the other, his ḥumaynī poems and other non-inflected genres.

The earliest extant usage of the term “ḥumaynī” is in the entry on Ibn Falītah in a late fifteenth-century copy of al-Khazrajī’s biographical dictionary, Ṭirāz aʿlām al-zaman fī ṯabaqāt aʿyān al-yaman. Ibn Falītah “had a lovely poetry collection (dīwān) that fit in two thick volumes,” writes al-Khazrajī. “The first volume contained his Arabic poems which were arranged alphabetically and the second volume contained the non-Arabic poems such as the ḥamaniyyāt, the sāḥiliyyāt, the bālbāl