AN EARLY EXAMPLE OF NARRATIVE VERSE
IN COLLOQUIAL ARABIC

Abū l-Maḥāsin ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Sarāyā l-Ḥillī ṭ-Ṭāʾī s-Sinbisī, known as Ṣafīyy ad-Dīn al-Ḥillī, who was born in Hilla in 677/1278 and died in Baghdad probably in 750/1349, is notable for his ventures in the highways and byways of verse composition. He not only had a solid reputation as a poet in the late classical manner but also initiated the badīʾiyya genre with a poem in praise of the Prophet which illustrated every rhetorical device known in his day; he composed a qaṣīda sāsānīyya which expounds the ways and uses the jargon of the underworld of vagabonds, beggars, and thieves; and he is the author of one of the earliest and fullest treatises on the so-called “Seven Arts”, i.e. non-classical verse compositions, mostly in the colloquial.

It is to this last work that we turn our attention here. In it, al-Ḥillī—unlike many of the scholars of his and of later times—repeatedly displays his admiration for the subtleties of which the non-classical genres are capable; yet he is mildly defensive about his involvement with them, for after a long exposition of the features of zajal based on a meticulous scrutiny of the practice of its pioneers, he prefaces his description of the other varieties with the statement that he had indulged in them a great deal “in his youth” without lending his compositions great weight or troubling to record them, and had retained of them only enough to illustrate the book he had been “charged” to write.

Of particular interest to those eager to trace back the development of Arabic colloquial narrative verse is the genre known as kān wa kān. Of its form, al-Ḥillī says only that it is always a monorhyme with a long vowel preceding the rhyming consonant, and that it has a distinctive metre with the second hemistich shorter than the first. From other sources and from all the examples given, it appears that the metre is mustāfīlūn fāʿīlātūn mustāfīlūn mustāfīlūn, with the second hemistich lacking the two final syllables, and with one variation added to those allowed

3 Hoenerbach, p. 136.
4 Expounded and illustrated in Hoenerbach, pp. 148-170, the text transcribed and translated below being on pp. 157-162.
5 Hoenerbach introduction, pp. 46-47.
in classical prosody, namely that the fa'ilātun foot may be reduced to maf'ūlun, so that the scansion may be represented as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\sigma & \underline{\sigma} - \underline{\sigma} - | \sigma & \underline{\sigma} - | \sigma & \underline{\sigma} - \\
\sigma & \underline{\sigma} - | \sigma & \underline{\sigma} - | \sigma & \underline{\sigma} - 
\end{align*}
\]

The very designation of the kān wa kān, which may be rendered as "there was this and there was that", is consonant with the relation of a succession of occurrences, and al-Hillī specifies that it was a Baghdadi invention originally used at least partly for narrative purposes, until a number of worthy gentlemen resorted to the form for more edifying gnomic or ascetic exhortations. The illustrations he gives, however, which are of his own composition, are in a light, witty, and mostly amatory vein, and the one transcribed below is the detailed and lively story of a seduction. As is usual both in classical examples of mujūn and in present-day folk ballads, it is told in the first person, starts with clever badinage and ends with explicit erotic description.

Since we cannot be certain of the way the Iraqi colloquial was pronounced in the thirteenth century, the transliteration follows the text as edited by Hoenerbach, giving consonants the phonetic value they have in classical Arabic, and altering the vocalization only when variations known to be allowable accord better with the metre.

**THE TEXT**

\[\text{jāzat fa qult in ṭatnī lā budda mā tal'ab maṣi} \]
\[\text{tū laḥāna? wa ṣabāṭa ṣana ṣifū ṣiṣraf} \]
\[\text{min} \text{ ṣabaratnī tahayyat wa harrakat li ṭasahā} \]
\[\text{wa ṭaqqalat maṣyāthā wa ḥazzat al-ʔaṭaf} \]
\[\text{qultū ṣabāḥan mubārak qālat ʾa} \text{ man takallamū} \]
\[\text{qult in sami} \text{ ʾa} \text{qul-lū qālat wa ʾillā nhāf} \]
\[\text{wa b yaddahā raṭṭalatnī wa ʾabražat li zandahā} \]
\[\text{kannū sabikah fiḍḍah ʾaw jawharan ʾaṭāf} \]

---


7 In his observations on the linguistic licenses of the zajal, which he affirms apply to other non-classical forms, al-Hillī specifies that to avoid similarity to the classical all desinences should be those of the accusative—Hoenerbach, pp. 135, 18.

8 For mundhu, which is said to be too classical—Hoenerbach, pp. 30, 80.

9 The text has ʾaḷā, but here as in line 14 the metre requires a short syllable. Shortening to ʿa accords with present-day colloquial practice, and parallels al-Hillī’s assertion that maṭā may be reduced to maṭ—Hoenerbach, p. 32.