MIXTURES OF JEST AND EARNEST IN CLASSICAL ARABIC LITERATURE

PART I

1. Introduction

1.1 Jest & Earnest: Jest vs Earnest

Like its equivalents in Western literatures, the Arabic antonymous pair "jest and earnest" serves both as a common expression and a topos. The standard terms are hazl and jidd, but especially for the former there are several near-synonyms. In pre- and early Islamic idiom the opposite of jidd "earnest" is very often mazh, muzäb, lacib "play", or bdtil "falsehood", "nonsense"; yet the combination of the nouns jidd and hazl, or their verbal cognates, may be found in early texts too. Charles Pellat has studied the concept of jest and earnest, or seriousness and humour, in Arabic literature, concentrating on religious and literary

1 Amr Ibn Kulthüm: Fa-in kānā jiddun fa-sayŷā mā wasi'tumā / wa-in kānā li's-bun ākhira l-dahrī fa-l'abā (given in WKAS s.v. l'h); Zayd Ibn Jundab (end of 7th century AD): ... farragānā / ūlū l-jiddāli wā-khālu l-jiddū bi-l-la'ā'ībī (see below, note 28); 'Umar Ibn Abī Rabī'a: Fa-atāt hā tabbatun ʿālimatun takhlīju [var. tamzuju] l-jidda mirāran bi-l-la'ā'īb (al-Washshā, Muwashshā, 149, Diwān, 13); 'Utayba b. Bujayr al-Māzīnī: ... ka-ananhū / wa-gad jadda min jarī jīl f-μukhāhāt māzhībī (Hamāsāt Abī Tammām, ii, 360); al-'Ujayr al-Sālūlī (or Zaynab Bint al-Tāthiriyya): Idhā jadda 'inda l-jiddī arḍākā jidduhsī / wa-dhī bāṭūlīn in shatā althākā bāṭālūk (see below, note 31); al-Mustahill Ibn al-Kumayt Ibn Zayd: Ya sālīkan qaṣda l-ṭariqī l-wadīhi / lā takhlījī l-jidda bi-qawli l-māzībī (al-Sūlī, Awarāq (qism al-shu'arā), 153); Bashshār Ibn Burd: Siwākī l-yawmu ahwāhī / 'ālā jiddin wa-lā la'ā'īb (Diwān, i, 233, and see 283, 287, 340 for the same pair of opposites); Abū Nuwās: Sārā jiddan mā mazahut bihi / rubba jiddin jarrahu l-la'sūbī (Diwān, iv, iv, 14, and cf. iv, 16, 166); Abū Tammām—the most famous example—: ... fi ḥaddithi l-haddu bayna l-jiddi wa-l-la'sūbī (Diwān, i, 40); etc. More examples can be found in WKAS s.v. l'h.

2 Bishr Ibn Abī Khāzīm: Jadadta bi-hubbī hā-wa-halalat... (Mufaddaliyyāt, 334); Hassān Ibn Thābit: ... fa-lam yada' / li-dhī irbatin fi l-qawli juddan wa-lā la'ā'īb hāzalā (see below, note 39); 'Umar Ibn Abī Rabī'a: ... wa-lākinni ajiddu wa-tahzīlī (Diwān, 158); al-Kumayt Ibn Zayd: Arānā 'ālā ḥubbī l-hayātī wa-jālāhī / yuğaddū bi-hi ḥallī yuwa'mīn wa-nahzīlī (Ḥashimiyyāt, 112); Bashshār: ... wa-lā āra / muqarabatun fiha bi-hazallīn wa-lā jiddī (Diwān, iii, 12); of uncertain authenticity is the line ascribed to Abū Tālib, 'Alī's father: la-kunnā tiba'na'nā ṣalā kullī ḥayalatin / mīnā l-dahrī jiddīn ṣawārī qawlsī l-tahāzūlī (Ibn Hishām, Sīra, i, 280, al-Baghdādī, Khīzānāt al-adāb, ii, 56, 74; cf. the remark in Ibn Sallām, Ṭa'baqāt, 204). There are a few ṣawārī that employ the words hazl and jidd: "Lying is not proper, neither seriously nor in jest"; "There are three things of which the earnest is earnest and the jest is earnest" (they are marriage, divorce, and remarriage with one's former wife); "O God, forgive me [sins committed in] jest and earnest"; see Concordance et indices de la Tradition musulmane, s.v. ḥzl. In the Koran the word jidd is absent; hazl is found only in Sūra 86.14: (Innāhū la-qawluñ fāṣīl) Wa-mā huwa bi-l-haζ "(Verily it is a saying distinct); It is no frivolity" (Bell's translation).
attitudes towards humour, joking and laughter, and, to a lesser extent, on the combination of those with earnestness. The same field is covered, this time for the history of Arabic literature until the nineteenth century, in the essay by Sadok Lassouad. “Jest and earnest” as a topos in the proems of countless Arabic prose works was studied by Frithiof Rundgren.

The phrase “jest and earnest” is one of the many oppositional expressions in Arabic that combine true antonyms (like ẖilm and jahl) or complementsaries (like “pen and sword”, lafz and ma’nā, ʿaql and naql). Using such expressions does not always imply a contrast, or even a conflict, between polarities. Just as “young and old” may stand for “everyone, including young and old”, so “jest and earnest” may denote inclusiveness rather than contrast. Thus the hadith “O God, forgive me my hazl and my jidd” (see note 2) clearly means “Forgive me all my sins, whether they were committed in earnest or jestingly”. This is often the case, too, in the exordium, as Rundgren has remarked: when an author says that his book contains kull fann min al-jidd wa-l-hazl he tells us that it contains every imaginable genre, and that it is both instructive and entertaining.

Nevertheless, an antithetical contrast is often obviously intended, and the merits of jesting and earnestness are compared and contrasted. There are two sides to this: a moral and a literary one, and they are on occasion to be distinguished. This is, however, often impossible, if only because in the term adab both aspects are almost inseparable. Of course there were those who categorically condemned jesting, laughter and humour.

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5 Frithiof Rundgren, “Arabische Literatur und orientalische Antike”, Orientalia Suecana 19-20 (1970-71), 81-124, esp. 111-19. In Peter Freimark, Das Vorwort als literarische Form in der arabische Literatur (Münster 1967), the topos is hardly mentioned (see p. 64); for Rundgren it is one of the main topics of the exordium, with the “Laus Deo”, “the Occasion [for composing the book]”, the “Horror taedii” and the “Brevitas-formula”.