COMEDY, PORNOGRAPHY, AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN THE ROMANCE OF AHMAD DANIF*

Students of Arabic popular literature have paid scant attention to the Romance of Ahmad Danif. This appears to be rather unjustifiable neglect. The romance, which circulated in Islamic society, either orally or in written versions, by the fourteenth century A.D. at the latest, was considered by contemporaries as part of the popular literary bag, so to speak. Thus the Damascene scholar Ibn Kathir (ca. 1300-1373 A.D.) found [Sirat] ad-Danif important enough to condemn, together with (the equally neglected by modern observers) al-Bakri’s biography of Muhammad,1 as well as (the more famous, as far as modern scholarship goes) Sirat Delhema wa'l-Battal2 and Sirat ‘Antar.3 All were to Ibn Kathir reprehensible literature.4 The popularity of the Danif Romance is further attested by the fact that, at some stage—like the “Story of ‘Ali Zaybaq,”5 the “Story of ‘Umar b. an-

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1 For a detailed study of this work, see Chapter Two of my Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo (Cambridge, 1993).


Nu'mān," and the "Story of 'Ajib wa-Gharib"—some version of the romance, more accurately: fragments of it, were integrated into the _Thousand and One Nights_ and placed there in a peculiar "historical" context. Thus in the _Nights_ Aḥmad Danaf (Burton's "Calamity Aḥmad"), a Cairene fugitive, is able to infiltrate Ḥarūn ar-Rashīd's entourage and then, together with Ḥasan Shūmān (Burton's "Ḥasan Pestilent," for whom see below), is appointed as "captain of the watch for Baghdad." Aḥmad and Ḥasan are drawn into a conflict with Dalīlah the Wily (al-muḥtiwa) and her daughter Zaynab. They also feature in the _Nights_ tale of the aforementioned 'Ali Zaybaq.

In the course of time the name of Danif transcended the literary realm and was associated, supposedly, with real figures and events. Egyptian chroniclers writing in the early sixteenth century A.D. tell about Aḥmad Danif, a "leading hoodlum" (min kibār al-minsara), who was executed in 891/1486. In their words, "the stories about his acts of robbery are too many to be retold." One of our medieval sources suggests that Aḥmad Danif was in fact a folk hero modelled after the much earlier Ḥamdī, a robber who had been executed in 332/943 or 944. Coming closer to our time, around the turn of the century, a _mawlid_ ("birthday celebration") in honor of Danif used to take place at the Qarāfā Cemetery in Cairo. The name of Danif has been also associated with various Egyptian terms. About 1685 A.D. Shirbīnī speculated that a possible source for the colloquial _yā danif_, meaning...