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# Medicine, *Mujūn*, and Microcosm in *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī*

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## Abstract

In this essay, connections between medieval medicine and medieval Arabic literary banquets are investigated on the basis of the Arabic commentaries on the Hippocratic Aphorisms on the one hand and passages from *Ḥikāyat Abī l-Qāsim* on the other. Intersections between these two kinds of texts describing the advantages and disadvantages of wine explain the contemporary wisdom behind comical medical speeches.

## Keywords

Comic literature – literary banquets – medicine – wine

Given the modern tendency to divide the study of the sciences from those of the humanities, it may not at first seem intuitive that there are numerous connections between medieval medicine and medieval Arabic comic literary banquets.<sup>1</sup> Some of these connections are, however, obvious: for example, both medical literature and comical banquet literature share an interest in food, and in functions of the human body (namely the sexual and the excretory) that do not receive attention in other forms of literature. One story, Ibn Buṭlān's *Da'wat al-aṭibbā'* (the Physician's Dinner Party), joins the two genres together by featuring a miserly host who denies his *tufaylī*-esque guest a series of dishes, after describing in detail the medical dangers associated with each ingredient

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1 As my primary research interests are in the *tufaylī* (or party-crashing) character and the comic literary banquets he attends, I approach my work on medieval medicine from the perspective of a literary scholar.

involved. Ibn Buṭlān (d. 429/1066), a Christian physician intimately familiar with the ancient Greek medical tradition, cites Galen and Hippocrates, and includes a broad sample of the medical wisdom of his day in this comic banquet text.

To fully describe the intersection between medicine and literature (especially *mujūn*, or comic, obscene literature),<sup>2</sup> would require much more than a single article. These connections are broad and deep, and relate to the idea that the physician, as philosopher, may read apparent symptoms to discern hidden ills, helping to heal society at large (as described in James Montgomery's recent article "Al-Jāhīz, *Falsafa* and Hippocrates Arabicus"). They also relate to the various healing properties of language itself; for example, Julia Bray shows that medical poetry could help heal patients by providing therapeutic images of their illness.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, medical language and ideas formed part of a learned person's vocabulary, and thus they appear along with other vocabularies in literary displays of eloquence and learning such as those found, for example, in *maqāmāt*, or stories of eloquent tricksters.<sup>4</sup>

To limit my discussion to a manageable size, I will here focus on some specific examples of intersections between the Arabic commentaries on the Hippocratic Aphorisms and my personal favourite example of party-crashing *mujūn* literature, *Ḥikāyat Abī l-Qāsim al-Baghdādī*. This text, probably written in the fifth/eleventh century by the otherwise unknown al-Azdī, tells the story of a Baghdadi party-crasher crashing a party in Isfahan.<sup>5</sup> The author introduces this mysterious text and its protagonist as a microcosm, relating them to the widespread and ancient idea that an individual human being contains all the varied and opposing features of the universe. Obviously this idea is also important to medical literature. Commentaries on the third book of the Hippocratic Aphorisms, for example, which focuses on the four seasons and their effects on the human body, rely on the assumption that the human body is a microcosm, comprised of the balance of contradictory attributes such as heat, cold, moisture, and dryness, which are likewise reflected in his environment. In transcribing these commentaries, I finally understood Abū l-Qāsim al-Baghdādī's

2 For a lengthy definition of this difficult-to-define word, see Szombathy, *Mujūn*, 34-42, 303-309.

3 Bray, *The Physical World*, 233-236. She more specifically explores poetry used on the occasion of bleeding patients in Third and Fourth century Bleeding Poetry.

4 See Orfali and Pomerantz, *A Lost Maqāma*.

5 See Selove, *Who Invited the Microcosm?* and *The Ḥikāyat of Abī al-Qāsim*.

opening volley of insults against his Isfahani hosts: “Your city is cold and dry like the nature of death, and your natures are like it.”<sup>6</sup>

Ibn al-Quff (d. 684/1286), a Christian physician and the most thorough of the commentators on the Hippocratic Aphorisms, writes in his commentary to Aphorism 5.18,<sup>7</sup> that “Life comes with heat and movement, which are among the characteristics of a living being. As for coldness, it comes with stillness and rigor, which are among the characteristics of the dead.”<sup>8</sup> In his commentary on Aphorism 3.4, he writes, in explaining why autumn is the worst season for health, that “[autumn’s] mixture tends towards dryness, which is contrary to life and corresponding to death.”<sup>9</sup> From these two passages we can see that coldness and dryness, attributes that Abū l-Qāsim ascribes to Isfahan and its inhabitants, are attributes of death and contrary to life and to health. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī (d. 628/1231), the famous physician and writer, further explains in his commentary on Aphorism 3.3, which says that certain diseases, ages, and constitutions are better or worse suited to certain environments and seasons, that “an opposite state is more healthy, and a state similar to the state [sc. of the patient] is more harmful.”<sup>10</sup> As is apparent from these passages, to have a cold dry nature and live in a cold dry environment is the worst possible situation for bodily and mental health.

In a similar attempt to explain the contemporary medical wisdom behind comical medical speeches, I will focus the rest of this study on a particular passage of *Ḥikāyat Abī l-Qāsim* which describes wine as a kind of microcosm,<sup>11</sup> and compare this passage to various medical discussions found within the Arabic commentaries on the Hippocratic Aphorisms. Although many of these commentaries were likely composed centuries after the *Ḥikāya* (which was

6 Al-Azdi, *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim*, [ed. al-Shālījī], 81: *بلادكم باردة يا بسطة طبع الموت، وطباعكم مثلها*.

7 Hippocratic Aphorism numbers provided are as found in the Loeb edition cited in the bibliography.

8 Th4, 139b.: *الحياة معها الحرارة والحركة، وهما من صفات الحي. وأما البرودة فمعها السكون والجمود اللذان*; *Th4, 139b.: الحياة معها الحرارة والحركة، وهما من صفات الحي. وأما البرودة فمعها السكون والجمود اللذان*; I am indebted to my former colleagues on the Arabic Commentaries on the Hippocratic Aphorisms team at the University of Manchester for their assistance with transcriptions and translations of these previously unedited commentaries.

9 Y, 133b.: *ميل مزاجه إلى اليبس الذي هو مضاد للحياة ومناسب للموت*.

10 CB1.: *فإن حال الضد أصلح، وحال الشبه عند الشبه أردى*.

11 For other references to the medical properties of wine in Arabic literature, see Qayrawānī, *al-Mukhtār min Quṭb al-surūr*, 47 ff.; and Nawājī, *Ḥalbat al-kumayt*, Bāb 3 *Fī tabāʾiḥihā wa-manāfiḥihā wa-khawāṣṣihā*, and Bāb 4: *Fī stiʾmāliḥā ʿalā raʾy al-ḥukamāʾ*. Thanks to Geert Jan van Gelder for these references as well as for his assistance in researching and translating the *Ḥikāya*.

probably composed in the fifth/eleventh century), as cited here they represent centuries of accumulated medical wisdom, much of which was already ancient by the time of the *Hikāya*'s authorship.

The passage in question runs as follows:

ما في الدنيا ، والله ، تزيق يعادلها تذرُق بالطعام إلى غور البدن ، غسل الجسم من عفونات الأخلاط ، نضوج المعدة من غوامض<sup>12</sup> الادواء ، قوت النفس شقيقة الروح . ثم تسلم شاربها إلى وثارة المهاد ، ولذّة الرقاد ، الذي هو جمام الأعضاء ، وراحة الجوانح ، والمرقّة عن الحواسّ ، وبه تتمّ أفعال الطبيعة ، ويجود الهضم ، وتشبّ الشباب ، وتطريّ المشايخ . معادلة ، والله ، للإنسان ، في الطبائع الأربع مشابهة لها ، رطوبتها مشاكلة للرطوبة منها ، وقوامها ولونها مثل قوام الدم ولونه ، والطافي منها كالزبد بمنزلة الصفراء ، والراسب فيها كالثقل بمنزلة السوداء ، كلّ شراب في الدنيا عيال عليها.<sup>13</sup>

There is nothing in this world, by God, to equal it as an antidote, shepherding the food to the depths of the belly, washing the body of corrupted humours, digesting the hidden illnesses out of the stomach; food for the soul, a sister of the spirit. Then it commends its drinker safe to his soft place of rest and pleasant sleep, which is the respite of the body-parts, and the relaxation of the bosom, and the comfort of the senses. By it [i.e. wine] the actions of nature are realized, digestion is improved, youths are made men, and old men are freshened. A balance, by God, for mankind in the four natures that resemble it: moisture is like its moisture, and its vigour and colour are like the vigour and colour of blood. The bubbles floating on it like foam are like yellow bile, and its dregs are like black bile. Every drink in the world depends upon it!

First let us begin with the claim that there is no antidote in the world to equal wine. Wine appears as both a cure and a possible cause of illness in medical literature. In a commentary by Ibn al-Quff, he writes that there is no cure better than wine for prolonged pain, especially of the eye, and this curative power is a result of its stimulating “natural heat, which is the instrument of all strength.”

<sup>12</sup> MS: غوايض.

<sup>13</sup> MS, 101a-101b. Al-Azdi, *Hikāyat Abī al-Qāsim* [ed. al-Shālji], 134-135, and [ed. Mez] 109-110.

ولا شك أن الوجع المتطاوّل سببه لا محالة خلط غليظ قد لحج في منافذ العضو  
ومسامه، والمداواة التي ذكرها من أوفق الأشياء له. فإنّ الشراب بما فيه من  
التسخين والتلطيف وتقوية القوى وانعاش الحرارة الغريزية التي هي آله كل قوة من  
أوفق الأشياء لذلك.<sup>14</sup>

There is no doubt that prolonged pain is inevitably caused by a viscous humour that has gotten stuck in the body-parts and the pores, and the treatment that he mentioned [sc. wine-drinking] is one of the best things for it. For wine, because of its heating and thinning properties, its strengthening effect, and its stimulating of natural heat which is the instrument of all strength, is one of the best things for that [sc. prolonged pain].

Abū l-Qāsim's claim that there is no antidote to equal wine seems to be a less specific, more opportunistic recitation of this belief in the power of wine and its ability to stimulate the all-important, life giving property of natural heat in the body. It is this same stimulation of natural heat that links wine, however tenuously, to the kind of physical microcosmic status of containing all the four elements, in a commentary by Ibn al-Quff on Aphorism 7.7, which states that "rigor and delirium after excessive drinking are bad":

استدلّ في الفصل الأول على الخلط الغالب على البدن بصدافة البراز، ذكر في  
هذا الفصل دليلاً آخر يدلّ على ذلك الخلط، وهو ما يظهر عن الشراب من الآثار.  
فإنّ الشراب من شأنه أن يثيرها ما يصادفه في البدن من المواد بسبب حرارة مزاجه  
ولطف قوامه.<sup>15</sup>

In the first section he sought to identify the dominant humour in the body by the appearance of the feces. In this section he mentioned another indication of that humour, namely the signs appearing from wine-drinking, for indeed wine has the ability to stir up substances that encounter it in the body because of the heat of its mixture and the thinness of its consistency.

14 Th4, 310a.

15 Th4, 286a.

Thus we see that although wine is not said to contain all of the four types of matter that make up the human body (as Abū l-Qāsim claims), however because of its warmth, it brings any dominant hidden matter to the surface. This may also account for Abū l-Qāsim's claim that it digests hidden illnesses in the body.<sup>16</sup> This is a claim whose echo can also be heard in a commentary by the little know al-Kilānī (eighth/fourteenth century):

قال بقراط رحمه الله: إذا حدث من كثرة الشرب اقشعرار واختلاط ذهن فذلك دليل رديء .

واعلم أن الشراب ينفع للممرورين بإدراة المرة والمرطوبين بإنضاج الرطوبة وهو يقطع البلغم ويحلله ويزلق السوداء فتخرج بسهولة ويقمع عاداتها بالمضادة ويحل كل منعقد من غير تسخين كثير وينعم المنفذ للغذاء والشراب . وكلما زاد عطريته وزاد طيبه وطاب طعمه فهو أوفق وأجود . وإن من كان قوي الدماغ لم يسكر بسرعة ولم يقبل دماغه الأبخرة المتراقية منه بل يدفعه . وقد رأى البعض أن السكر إذا وقع في الشهر مرة أو مرتين نفع لإحمام القوى النفسانية ويريح البدن ويدر البول والعرق ويحل الفضول . ولو شرب الصبيان كان كزيادة نار على نار في الحطب الضعيف . فأما ما احتمل الشيخ فليسق وعدل الشبان فيه وإذا شرب يستحيل من الحرارة الغريزية وينقلب إلى جوهرها فتصير مادة لها زائدة في كميتها . هذا إذا شرب القدر المعتدل منه لأن تجاوزه عن حد الاعتدال يغمر الحرارة الغريزية ويخنقها صنيع الحطب الكثير إذا وضع على النار دفعة

Hippocrates, may God have mercy on him, said, 'If tremors and delirium result from excessive drinking, this is a bad sign.'

Know that drinking benefits bilious people by causing the bile to flow. [It benefits] moist people by cooking the moisture. It breaks up the phlegm and dissolves it, loosens the black bile so that it exits [the body] with ease, blocks [black bile's] usual path with its opposite, loosens every clot without excessive heating, and eases the passages for food and drink. The

<sup>16</sup> If that is indeed what he says; the manuscript here is unclear. See note 10.

more fragrant and pleasant smelling it is, and the tastier its flavour, the more suitable and salubrious it is. If someone has a strong brain, he does not become drunk easily, and his brain is not affected by vapours rising from [the wine], but rather [the brain] repels them. Some have thought that becoming drunk once or twice a month is beneficial to the heating of the psychic faculties, relaxes the body, stimulates urine and perspiration, and dissolves excesses. If a young person drinks it, it is like adding more firewood to fire in weak wood. As for what the old man [*shaykh*] can handle, let him drink his fill, but let young men [*al-shubbān*] drink in moderation. For when [wine] is drunk, it changes from its innate heat and returns to its substance [*jawhar*], so that the amount of its [innate heat's] matter increases. This will happen, if one drinks a moderate amount of [wine]. However, going beyond the natural balance blocks the innate heat and strangles it, like putting a lot of firewood on a fire all at once.<sup>17</sup>

Here we see that wine can help different people in different ways, whether they are dominated by moisture, phlegm, or bile. Like Abū l-Qāsim, al-Kilānī recommends occasional drunkenness as a salubrious activity, though he is considerably more restrained in his advice. Indeed the alcoholic Abū l-Qāsim, in his citation of pseudo-medical information on the benefits of wine, resembles those misers and party-crashers who cite the Qur'ān or *Hadīth* woefully out of context in order to justify their bad behaviour. For example, one party-crasher, confronted by the suspicious glances of the other (invited) guests, cites a *hadīth* saying not to stare at fellow diners while they are eating.<sup>18</sup> This *hadīth*, intended to preserve good manners at the table, is here used to deflect attention from the bad manners of the uninvited guest. Similarly, al-Kilānī recommends restraint to youths drinking wine, while Abū l-Qāsim has nothing but good things to say about wine's effects on young and old alike, and thus he edits and adjusts a body of knowledge to serve his own hedonistic purposes.

Al-Kilānī ends with a caution about wine's heat-stimulating properties. These properties are only healthy in moderation, he writes, for too much wine can act like too much firewood dumped all at once on a fire: an excess of fuel can put the fire out. As is well known, ancient Greek medical traditions emphasized the value of moderation in all things, even in seemingly healthy things, and indeed in health itself; the famous Aphorism 1.3 states that "In athletes a perfect condition that is at its highest pitch is dangerous," and some

17 L6, 88b; edited and translated by the Arabic Commentaries on the Hippocratic Aphorisms Project, University of Manchester.

18 Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *al-Taṭfīl*, anecdote 142.

commentaries on this aphorism compare an excessively fit body to an overfull garden choked by a profusion of plants. In commentaries on the gynaecological aphorisms, women's lack of natural heat is blamed for all of their imperfections, including their lack of courage and energy, their smaller and weaker muscles, and even the failure of their genitals to protrude out of their bodies like a man's fully formed and perfected genitalia.<sup>19</sup> In Aphorism 5.16, however, Hippocrates warns that the use of too much heat can actually "feminize" the body parts (i.e. make them soft and weak). Thus too much of what makes a man a man, can make a man womanly, just like too much life-giving heat can cause death.

Ibn al-Quff writes that the use of the word "feminize" (*yu'annithu*)<sup>20</sup> in this aphorism is only meant as a metaphor,<sup>21</sup> but I am less certain. Many apparent metaphors in these aphorisms and their commentaries, comparing man's body to a fire and firewood, or to an orchard, for example, remind me of descriptions of man-as-microcosm in which man is compared to various plants, animals, and natural features not as a metaphor, but because in some sense, he actually contains these potentialities and contradictory states of being within himself.<sup>22</sup>

Wine, a similarly contradictory, and, according to Abū l-Qāsim, microcosmic being, can both vivify and kill. This is made especially clear in Hippocratic Aphorism 5.5, which states that "If a drunken man suddenly become dumb, he dies after convulsions, unless he falls into a fever, or he recover his speech at the time when his hangover wears off." In his commentary on this aphorism, Ibn al-Quff again states that wine is warming and thus vivifying, but also gives rise to vapours, which, if the heat is insufficient to dissolve them, can be deadly. If a drinker loses consciousness, and then regains his power of speech, this is a sign that the heat has managed to dissolve and repel these vapours from the brain.

قال أبقراط: إذا عرض لسكران سكات بغتة فإنه يتشبع ويموت إلا أن يحدث به حمي أو يتكلم إذا حضرت الساعة التي ينحل فيها خماره.

19 Y, 248b-249a. L6, 165a-165b. See Selove and Batten, "Making Men and Women."

20 ἐχθρήλυσιν. *Galen Opera Omnia*, ed. Kühn, vol. 17b, p. 801.

21 Th4, 136b.

22 These are found, for example, in the 34th *risāla* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (fourth/tenth-fifth/eleventh century): *Fī ma'nā qawl al-ḥukamā' anna l-'ālam insān kabīr* (about the meaning of the wise men's saying that the world is a giant human).

التفسير: الشراب سريع الصعود إلى الرأس كثير الميل للدماغ<sup>23</sup> برطوبته وأبخرته شديد الغوص في الأعصاب<sup>24</sup> بلطافته وحرارته، غير أنه لحرارته تجفف الرطوبات وتحلل الأبخرة فيصلح بكيفيته ما يفسده بكميته

Hippocrates said, "If a drunken man suddenly falls dumb and then convulses, he will die unless he contracts a fever or [recovers his power of speech] at the time that his drunkenness wears off."

Commentary: Wine rises to the head quickly, drags a lot of its moisture and vapour to the brain, and vigorously penetrates the nerves with its thinness and hotness. Because of its heat, however, it dries up moisture and dissolves vapours, so that it repairs with its quality that which it corrupts with its quantity.

I was struck by this last sentiment, which is found as often in poetry as in medical discussions,<sup>25</sup> that wine "repairs with its quality that which it corrupts with its quantity." Here wine is depicted as an inherently contradictory substance that is actually its own cure for the potential harm that it causes; the wine-loving poet Abū Nuwās (d. c. 197/813) has centuries of medical discussion to back him up when he begs, "Cure me instead with that which is the disease!"<sup>26</sup>

Abū l-Qāsim's day-long orgy of speech ends only when he drunkenly collapses on the ground. When he wakes up in the morning, resuming his exact conversation as at the beginning of the previous day, it is indeed a kind of revivification or even resurrection marked by speech. We are reminded, of course, of the famous Shahrazad's ability to cheat death with her speech in the *1001 Nights*, but it is interesting to find this literary trope of speech as an escape from death enshrined in a foundational and largely practical medical text. Here in this aphorism, as in *Ḥikāyat Abī l-Qāsim* and many other literary and mystical texts that deal with wine, drunkenness represents the moment that transcends speech, reason, and human life.

In "Abū Nuwās: Justified Sinner?" James Montgomery shows how wine is described as a paradox in the poetry of Abū Nuwās, and the various mystical

23 VI: الميل إلى الدماغ; CBI: الملا الدماغ; H: الميل للدماغ.

24 VI: الأعضاء; CBI, H: الأعصاب.

25 Montgomery, "Abū Nuwās, Justified Sinner?" 157, note 256.

26 Translated by Montgomery, Abū Nuwās, Justified Sinner?, 123. *Da' 'anka lawmī fa-inna l-lawma iḡhrā'ū/wa-dāwīnī bi-llatī kānat hiya l-dā'ū* (*Dīwān*, ed. Wagner, III, 2).

and religious implications of this paradox. I wish to argue that these same ideas are apparent in medical literature. I have argued elsewhere that Abū l-Qāsim represented a doppelgänger of the prophet Muhammad.<sup>27</sup> After reading Peter Awn's book *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblīs in Sufi Psychology*, I realized that al-Azdī's description of Abū l-Qāsim as "tantamount to Satan," may be, like Abū l-Qāsim's insult to the Isfahanis that their natures are "like death," not just an insult but a reflection of a much broader world view that imagines both the microcosm and the macrocosm as a joining of opposites. Al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) wrote that Iblīs is the opposite of Muḥammad, and an understanding of the preachings of both is necessary in order to achieve gnosis, for God in His unity is found in the paradoxical union of these two opposites.<sup>28</sup> Like drunkenness, at once a sin and a taste of the divine, Abū l-Qāsim is at once a "holy heretic and a pious villain," (*ṣadīq, zindīq, nāsik, fātik*).<sup>29</sup> He is both Muḥammad and Iblīs, since a microcosm should contain all of these paradoxical contradictions within itself. Those of us who consider ourselves scholars of literature might find this and many other ideas that may seem to belong firmly within the realms of the literary, or at least the esoteric and philosophical, also within medical and scientific literature like the Arabic commentaries on the Hippocratic Aphorisms. This would suggest that our tendencies to divide texts according to modern genres is more harmful than we realize, as we struggle to understand elements of a broad-reaching worldview that explicitly allows for the co-existence of different and opposite things.

### Abbreviations

- CB1 Ibn Abī Ṣādiq, *Sharḥ Fuṣūl Abuqrāt*, Dublin, Chester Beatty, MS AR. 3802
- CB2 Al-Baghdādī, 'Abd al-Laṭīf, *Sharḥ al-fuṣūl*, Dublin, Chester Beatty, MS AR. 5458
- H Ibn Abī Ṣādiq, *Sharḥ Fuṣūl Abuqrāt*, Harvard, Houghton Library, MS Arab SM4272
- L6 Al-Kilānī, Ibn al-Qāsim, [Untitled], London, The British Library, Oriental MS Or. 5939

<sup>27</sup> Selove, *The Hikāyat of Abī al-Qāsim*, The Cosmic Crasher.

<sup>28</sup> Ḥallāj, *Tawāsīn*, 49; Awn, *Satan's Tragedy*, 123-4.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Azdī, *Hikāyat Abī l-Qāsim* [ed. al-Shālījī], 48.

- MS Al-Azdī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Abū l-Muṭahhar, *Hikāyat Abī l-Qāsim al-Baghdādī al-Tamīmī*, London, British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, ADD 19, 913
- Th4 Ibn al-Quff, Ya‘qūb b. Ishāq, *Sharḥ Fuṣūl Buqrāt*, Gotha, Landesbibliothek MSS 1895
- V1 Ibn Abī Ṣādiq, *Sharḥ Fuṣūl Abuqrāt*, Istanbul, Veliyeddin Efendi V2508
- Y Ibn al-Quff, Ya‘qūb b. Ishāq, *Sharḥ Fuṣūl Buqrāt*, Istanbul, Yeni Camii, MS Yeni Camii 919

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