Conference Report:
Serious Laughter: Beyond the Jest-Earnest Binary in Classical Arabic Literature (King's College London, 19-20 June 2025)

Conference Organizers:

Betty Rosen
King's College London

Jonny Lawrence
Cornell University

Report by:

Jonny Lawrence
Cornell University

> *Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci*
> *lectorem delectando pariterque monendo*
>
> He who mixes the instructive with the pleasant shall win every point
> He delights and instructs his reader at the same time
>
> (Horace, *Ars Poetica*, ll. 343–4)

During the recent Arabic literature workshop "Serious Laughter," I kept thinking about Michael Haneke's 1997 horror-thriller classic, *Funny Games*, in which two young sadists commit a home invasion and triple homicide, all the while torturing their victims with bizarre and seemingly pointless trials. Names are instructive. *Funny Games* is, in many ways, a horrifying title for a brutal film that demonstrates an unremorseful, unrepentant vision of gratuitous violence. Such is the point. It seems easy, even facile, to write off the implications built into the name, to reframe the title as demonstrating the perspective of these ruthless killers, getting their kicks out of horror and violence.

© 2025 Jonny Lawrence. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, which allows users to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the original authors and source.

However, throughout the film, as is the case in other Haneke films (most obviously the 2005 neo-noir, *Caché*), we the audience are brought into the chain of events, made complicit with the murderers' acts. Paul, one of the two murderers, winks and stares at the audience through the camera, or even rewinds the film itself in order to change the course of events. His modernist encounter with us as an audience becomes a funny game of its own, as Haneke and Paul play with our complicity in the scenes before us: we are made to watch as Paul and his less witting accomplice Peter terrorize a family as part of a murderous commitment to the seemingly entertaining rules of fiction and emplotment. Throughout the film, Paul theorizes the film's and his own generic ideals; the "rules" of horror and thriller films are discussed repeatedly, as the character plays with the demands placed upon the action that he is undertaking. This forces us to question our involvement in the scene before us: are we really enjoying the pair's manipulation and abuse of their victims? Do we not actually find something comic about Paul's ludic attempts to control the narrative and our relationship to it, his reaching out from the scene to us directly, his establishment of a direct relationship with us at the expense of his victims? In the end, we are left with the uncomfortable prospect that Paul has played these funny games for our entertainment and willing spectatorship.

Such issues as the film raises, about the location of comedy, about power, including readerly and writerly power, and about how individuals and characters may or may not conform to generic types and rules, were central topics of discussion over two days at King's College London this past June. The workshop "Serious Laughter" was held under the auspices of the UKRI-funded MUSLIVE (Musical Lives: Towards an Historical Anthropology of French Song, 1100-1300) Project, run by Professor Emma Dillon, with support and sponsorship from the Cornell University Society for the Humanities.

The old *adab*-esque adage of *plaire et instruire* seems to imply that the *plaire* is doing something separate from the *instruire*, even if they are intertwined or juxtaposed in their literary manifestation. Outlining and understanding the apposition of these two generic modalities, the serious and the funny, has proven an enduring source of interest to scholars.[1] What, we might ask, is the point of writing funny things when we want to get something serious across? Indeed, what is the point of entertainment itself?

Yet, beyond finding the comedy in a text and understanding how it sits against serious themes, the use of comedy raises equally serious issues for readers and writers. Much as in Haneke's *Funny Games*, comedy queries perspective and commitment; what is funny for me might not be funny for you. Laughter can feel unpleasant when it is directed at us, when we are not in on the joke. Comedy can provoke all manner of serious emotions.

1. There have been several key studies on the variation of humor and seriousness in Arabic and Islamic literatures, most notably: Charles Pellat, "Seriousness and Humour in Early Islam," *Islamic Studies* 2, no. 3 (1963): 353–62; Geert Jan Van Gelder, "Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature: Part I," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 23, no. 2 (1992): 83–108; idem, "Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature: Part II," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 23, no. 3 (1992): 169–90; Gabriel Rosenbaum, "A Certain Laugh: Serious Humor and Creativity in the *Adab* of Ibn al-Jawzī," in *Compilation and Creation in Adab and Luġa: Studies in Memory of Naphtali Kinberg (1948–1997)*, eds. Albert Arazi, Joseph Sadan, and David J Wasserstein, 97–129 (Tel Aviv: Eisenbrauns, 1999); Dominic Brookshaw, ed., *Ruse and Wit: The Humorous in Arabic, Persian and Turkish Narrative* (Boston: Ilex Foundation, 2012).

The workshop began with two presentations on comedy in *ḥadīth* literature. In his presentation, entitled "Laughter and Humor in the Life of Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) and His Companions: A Critical Exploration," Shoyab Ahmed (University of South Africa) presented an array of *ḥadīth* texts that foreground the Prophet's humor and the humor of the Companions, arguing that these texts show how humor and comedy were operative modes for the construction of dogma, in spite of *ḥadīth*s claiming too much laughter to be bad for the believer. Ahmed drew on many instances of the *salaf*'s use of humor and comedy in their daily interactions with early believers to conclude that humor could be a teaching tool, useful for imparting behavioral guidance through levity rather than stricture.

In her presentation, "Early Islamic Contributions to the Serio-Comic: A David Narrative in a Ninth-century Hadith Collection as Case Study," Madeline Wyse (University of California, Berkeley) turned our focus from the Prophet Muḥammad back to the Prophet Dāwūd (David), reading a series of *ḥadīth*s from Ibn Abī Shayba's *al-Kitāb al-Muṣannaf fī al-aḥādīth wa-l-āthār*.[2] A scholar of both Rabbinic Judaism and early Islam, Wyse set the normative memory of Dāwūd in the Islamic imagination as an icon of repentance, following God's discussion of Dāwūd's faulty adjudication between two men and later repentance in Qurʾān 38:21–25, against earlier prototypical representations of this Prophet-King. The Qurʾān's emphasis on repentance sits in tension with other memories of David/Dāwūd that derive from the story of his affair with Bathsheba and his assassination of Uriah in the Hebrew Bible (2 Samuel 11–12, 1 Kings 1–2), memories that cast him as an adulterer, a man who lacks insight, a man who covers up his crimes. These memories, she argued, perdure in interesting, at times ludic, ways in the *ḥadīth* tradition.

A particularly memorable reading followed a pious, unnamed woman thrown before Dāwūd and Sulaymān/Solomon after becoming the victim of a plot to frame her for adultery, with her dress splattered with albumen to make it look as if she had been ejaculated upon. There is a vicious, biting comedy to the scene that Wyse called upon us to recognize, outlining in particular how we should "savor the verbal and visual similarities between the terms *māʾ al-rijāl* (men's water, semen) and *māʾ al-bayḍ* (albumen)." Yet, underlying the scene is a striking exploration of the gendered relationship to power and justice. This pious woman is, of course, falsely accused of the crime that Dāwūd actually committed, but Dāwūd condemns her for it until she is eventually saved by Sulaymān's ingenious trick to heat the stain up and see if it cooks or evaporates. Here, Dāwūd, the penitent before God, is turned into a figure of power and hierarchy, while at the same time the exposition of adultery calls forth his own equivocal memory, providing, as Bakhtin might say, a "second accent" onto the *ḥadīth* in question and cutting through its pious import with a serio-comic undertone.

The relationship between comedy, gender (or social personhood), and power was later taken up in my own paper, "ʿUmar b. Abī Rabīʿa and Abū Nuwās Come to Class." In this presentation, I focused on the trials of teaching aspects of early Arabic literature today. In particular, my enthusiasm for the poetry of ʿUmar ibn Abī Rabīʿa has come up against a lukewarm, even hostile reception from students. I reflected on the joyless ways in which

2. Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Kitāb al-Muṣannaf fī al-aḥādīth wa-l-āthār*, ed. Abū Muḥammad Usāma b. Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-Farūq al-Ḥadītha, 2008), 10:439 [32492].

moral absolutism can jar against the comedy explicit in the racy poems and stories that follow the Meccan poet in his playful, yet potentially dangerous, dalliances with pilgrims at the Kaʿba. In the contemporary classroom, ʿUmar's plays for attention can be, and often are, read through the lens of consent, or lack thereof, and of unwanted male attention. Such a reaction is worth sitting with and analyzing, rather than dismissing.

Turning in the second half of my talk to the more challenging topic of explicit sexual violence, I presented a brief analysis of Ibn Manẓūr's story of Abū Nuwās and the Three Boys, a truncated version of which can be found in the *Arabian Nights*.[3] In the tale, Abū Nuwās worms his way into the home of three wealthy, idle youths, before inebriating them and having his way with them, all described in comic and obscene terms. Afterwards he reveals his trick, and the anecdote ends on an uncomfortable note, with Abū Nuwās cajoling the youths to keep drinking with him, even as they realize what he has done—and, perhaps more importantly, who he is. The anecdote is then complemented by a comic poem that sums up the events from Abū Nuwās' perspective. Here, we are drawn onto Abū Nuwās' side, made complicit in the satisfaction of his desires for the unnamed youths whose experience of sexual violence is left unexplored. Comparing the story with ʿUmar's poems, I concluded that both texts operate in a comedic mode, dragging their readers along with them. While some readers may find the lecherous poets revolting, others may delight in their ability to one-up their sexual partners, even at the expense of said partners' consent.

Where I explored readerly interactions with depictions of sexual violence and un/wanted erotic attention, Anna Galietti's (Stanford University) paper on the Umayyad poets Jarīr and al-Farazdaq, "Soft News: Jarīr and al-Farazdaq's *Naqāʾiḍ* and the Value of Infotainment," took up the question of insult in *hijāʾ* (invective) poetry, itself no stranger to lurid depictions of the erotic. Galietti's paper focused on one scene found in the *Naqāʾiḍ*, the assassination of Qutayba b. Muslim after he orders the murder of ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Ahtam. The assassin, Wakīʿ b. Abī Sūd, was, like both al-Farazdaq and Jarīr, a Tamīmī; however, the two poets' views of the assassination differed markedly. Where al-Farazdaq defended his clansman wholeheartedly, Jarīr was placed in a more delicate position, owing to the patronage he enjoyed from Qays ʿAylān, of which Qutayba's own tribe of Bāhila was part. Jarīr's balanced approach to the question of blame, however, was an easy target for al-Farazdaq's satirical eye; harsh invective and satire ensue, leading up to this racy line (tr. Galietti):[4]

لعمري لئن قيس أمصت أيورها *** جريرا وأعطته زيوف الدراهم

I swear on my life, if Qays gave Jarīr their cocks to suck and paid him in counterfeit dirhams!

Tracing the pair's response to the assassination, and their wild invectives against each other on account of it, Galietti reframed them as pundits, drawing on both the deep etymology of the term's origin as the Sanskrit word *pandit* (learned man) and the contemporary understanding of the pundit as a talking head. In doing so, Galietti called

3. Ibn Manẓūr, *Akhbār Abī Nuwās*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Rasūl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Maṭbaʿ al-Iʿtimād, 1924), 1:233–37.

4. Jarīr b. ʿAṭiyyah and Farazdaq, *Kitāb al-Naqāʾiḍ*, ed. A. A. Bevan (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1905–12), poem 51.

for comparisons with the like of Stephen Colbert, whose blend of humor and unserious entertainment cuts through the serious, sometimes difficult news against which it is stacked. Galietti went on to argue, therefore, that the value of the *Naqāʾiḍ* is not just to be found in the vulgarities, fun as they are for modern readers to parse. Rather, the hermeneutical core of the *Naqāʾiḍ* is to be found in its rapid shifts back and forth between serious topics—current events, tribal rivalries, the *ayyām al-ʿarab* and so on—and "unserious" ones, like the aforementioned vulgarities. Galietti concluded that "the primary reason for [these poets'] success in their own time and their lasting fame in the Arabic tradition" was their ability to set major historical events against the minutiae of their lives and personal (or tribal) relationships, coloring the "global" news with a "local" flavor.

Where these poets' verbal duelling takes an iconically nasty bent, Betty Rosen's (King's College London) paper, "Momentous Verse?," charted a much sweeter poetic course. In an anecdote about a group outing to the pyramids in Ayyubid Egypt, a man (and his donkey) become the subject of a series of poetic riffs each built on top of the other in the style of witty repartee that suffuses the *adab* tradition.[5] Conducting a prosopographical analysis of the anecdote, Rosen determined that the men in the group were all friends, part of a broader poetic network that stretched across Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt. The lines of poetry that the anecdote encodes produce funny images that attach to one man in the group, but through inversions of meaning and parodic restructuring, an image of friendship and personal identity emerges: a man becomes a man in part through the ways in which his friends view him—and playfully mock him. The conclusions of Rosen's analysis were then set against the charming and funny description of the highly accomplished poet Ibn Siwār as a bad—but enthusiastic!—dancer in the entries on him in various biographical dictionaries. Across these two anecdotal examples, Rosen called for us to query what makes up a life. The comic image of the poet without rhythm seems to speak in some way to the perceived quality of his melodies, but such a reading jars with biographers' appreciative praise for his actual poetry; perhaps being a bad dancer in a biographical notice can just be a comic aside, a charming memory of a life well lived in spite of one's rhythmic challenges?

Much as Rosen's paper brought up questions of how we read and constitute someone's *shakhṣiyya* (character, personhood) from scattered reports about them, Benatallah Mohamed Oussama (Emir Abdelkader University for the Islamic Sciences) also took on the issue of individuals and types in his paper, "Humor in the Abbasid Era: A Narrative Analysis of Ibn al-Jawzī's *Akhbār al-ḥamqā wa-l-mughaffalīn*." Here, Oussama walked us through Ibn al-Jawzī's rhetorical construction of the fool as a type of person through humorous polemical and anecdotal presentations, with a particular focus on physiognomic characteristics. Ibn al-Jawzī's fools seem to be born this way, with little hope that they may escape their fate. Such a depiction of the timeless fool defined by unusual or undesirable physical characteristics, as Wyse pointed out later in the discussion, serves to construct a community with the reader against these characters; the fool functions as a yardstick against which Ibn al-Jawzī and his reader might measure (and reassure themselves of) their own rationality, all the while remembering that the very existence of such a character

5. Al-Azdī, *Badāʾiʿ al-Badāʾih* (Cairo: [n.d.], 1861), 141–42

implicates everyone into upholding reason and not giving in to too much folly and mirth.

The themes brought up regarding folly and its seemingly innate character in Oussama's paper were likewise tackled by Michaela Davolos (Sapienza University of Rome) in her paper, "When Jest Becomes Serious: al-Tawḥīdī's Contribution." In reviewing al-Tawḥīdī's *Akhlāq al-wazīrayn* and *al-Hawāmil wa-l-shawāmil*, Davolos explored the philosopher's attitudes towards the use and importance, even necessity of humor and jest. Much like al-Jāḥiẓ, whom al-Tawḥīdī references as a model of alternating humor and earnestness, al-Tawḥīdī repeatedly calls for jest as a means to soften the earnest content of his work, in a way mirroring the practice of Jarīr and al-Farazdaq called forth earlier in the conference by Galietti.

Whereas Oussama had sketched Ibn al-Jawzī's hyperbolic presentation of the fool as a kind of social character, a person who might be innately irrational, a man who cannot transcend his folly, Davolos' discussion of al-Tawḥīdī demonstrates a more open-minded (to use modern parlance) view of what makes a man a fool. While for the hardline preacher and moralist Ibn al-Jawzī, there appears no way out for the fool, stuck as he is in a physiognomy that naturalizes the relationship between certain types and certain dispositions, al-Tawḥīdī and his interlocutor Miskawayh offer an alternative vision, arguing that anybody can transcend their foolish or base natures through a committed effort to control their passions—otherwise what would be the point of correction at all?[6]

From these two explorations of individual typology, physiognomy, social behavior, and the potential for change over time, Zach Crutchfield (Cornell University) addressed the thorny question of how groups of people—namely here, Christians, doctors, and Christian doctors—might become "meme-ified" comic figures in his paper, "Al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn Buṭlān." Focusing on variant reports of Ibn Māsawayh's bungling of al-Maʾmūn's death, Crutchfield's presentation asked how Christians—and, in particular, Christian doctors—fit into the broader matrix of ethnic thought that suffused Abbasid literature and culture. Tracing a series of anecdotes over time, Crutchfield argued that though images of the bungling Christian doctor in humorous Arabic medical anecdotes were adapted to fit their local contexts, they all the while retained the essence of a comic meme. Given the association of Christian doctors in this period with the Sasanian and Persianate world through the Gundishapur medical "academy," Crutchfield located these meme-ified representations within the broader trends of anti-Shuʿūbiyya rhetoric.

The final two papers of the conference brought us forward in time to the later medieval world and into the modern. Both focused on Ibn Sūdūn, the fifteenth-century author of *Nuzhat al-nufūs wa-muḍḥik al-ʿabūs* and a vast array of humorous and semi-serious poetry. In his paper "Subverting the *jidd-hazl* Binary in Ibn Sūdūn's *Nuzhat al-nufūs*," Karim Guirguis (American University of Cairo) presented a capacious overview of Ibn Sūdūn's oeuvre, focusing in particular on how we (and Ibn Sūdūn) categorize types of poetry and how generic labels might instruct but also inhibit the readerly imagination. About a quarter of Ibn Sūdūn's poetry is labeled as *jiddiyyāt* (serious poems), with the vast majority labeled

6. Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Hawāmil wa-l-shawāmil*, eds. Bilal Orfali and Maurice Pommerantz (New York: New York University Press, 2019; Arabic Only Edition), 142–43.

as *hazliyyāt* (comic poems). Yet these distinctions are not as solid as they at first appear. In one notable example, Guirguis pointed out that, if we look closely at a somewhat inscrutable serious couplet, the final letters of each hemistich spell out a word for genitalia, upending our view of this poem as serious in its form and content. Consistently, Guirguis argued, Ibn Sūdūn makes us question and reestablish the actual content and tone of his work, with the reader never quite sure how to take his verse, or if there even is or could ever be a stable division between the comic and the serious in such poetry.

Following Guirguis' broad analysis of Ibn Sūdūn's oeuvre, Maha AbdelMegeed (American University of Beirut) set Ibn Sūdūn into an unconventional literary history, reading him against the seventeenth-century Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī and the nineteenth-century Ḥasan al-Alātī, both of whom reference Ibn Sūdūn as forerunners of their own work. The former explicitly indexes Ibn Sūdūn in *Hazz al-quḥūf*, summoning his name to give readers an approximation of what al-Shirbīnī sees himself doing in his satirical send-up of the rural Egyptian peasantry. As AbdelMegeed emphasized, this has surprised later scholars. There is almost no quotation of Ibn Sūdūn and the texts seem to bear little in common. Yet, the author sees himself in this mold. Moving forward to the practically unknown nineteenth-century al-Alātī, he too claims to be writing in the style of both Ibn Sūdūn and al-Shirbīnī.

Drawing these authors together, AbdelMegeed argued that whilst we may not know exactly how they saw themselves as relating to their forebears, that identification is important for understanding the authors' intentions—and, presumably, was also a salient framework for their readers. Framing the relationship between these texts as a kind of philological network of affiliation, AbdelMegeed then questioned how to read them. When texts are so different from each other and come from such different times, spotting the underlying authorial patterns—such as the fact that all three insistently play the fool within their own texts, abnegating authorial responsibility at the same time as they ask us to engage with their ideas—is tricky, especially using conventional methods of historicizing Arabic (and other) literatures. How, in other words, do we capture an internal comedic discourse, a joke that we are not necessarily in on, confined as we are by the demands of scholarly categorization?

With AbdelMegeed's paper the workshop drew to an end. To return to Haneke, comedy is unsettling. There were lots of laughs over the two days, but it was important to pause over the serious problems we were tackling too. Across these papers, we each learned things that jolted us out of our own prior sense of the material we were studying, whether new methodological approaches that might shape how we go about analyzing comedy in literature or new ideas about what constitutes comedy, how comedy can be painful and upsetting, or just plain bizarre, just as much as it can make us laugh and feel delight.