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Revisiting al-Ṭabarī on Maqṭal ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib: An Early Report from Historical Learning to Practical Prescription

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Abstract

This paper examines the report (*khbar*) that relates the reasons behind the killing of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), as transmitted in the famous *History* of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), exploring its historical, poetical, and practical facets. After considering its formal and historiographical structure, the paper analyzes some of the report’s phonetical, lexical, and textual elements, revealing its affective poeticity, or capacity to move readers in various ways. A review of different citations of the report in other Arabic medieval compilations positively sheds light on the practical morality that Muslim compilers were orienting their readers to observe, in their employment of titles, subtitles, explicit evaluations, and contextual arrangements among other constructions. The paper aims to attest to the report’s diverse potentials to aid its readers in ultimately answering the ethical question of “What to do, here and now?”

Keywords

Khbar – Qaṭāmi – ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥjam – ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib – poeticity – practicality



What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.

WALTER BENJAMIN



Introduction

This paper examines the romance of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥjam (d. 40/661) and Qaṭāmi bint al-Shijnah¹ reported in Islamic sources. Their affair is featured in the report (*khabar*, pl. *akhbār*) transmitted in *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* by al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) (*The History of al-Ṭabarī*) that relates to the reason behind the killing of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661). According to the *khabar*, Qaṭāmi, a *Khārijīte* woman of Taym al-Ribāb, whose father and brother were killed by ‘Alī, sent Ibn Muḥjam to kill ‘Alī in revenge as a condition for their marriage. Captivated by her surpassing beauty, the report goes, Ibn Muḥjam did in fact kill the fourth Caliph (r. 35–40/656–661), but was caught by ‘Alī’s escorts and executed shortly after, so the two lovers never consummated their marriage.

This paper will focus on the *matn* of al-Ṭabarī’s *khabar* where this romance is narrativized, i.e. given the form of a story.² It proposes an aesthetic-literal treatment of this segment of the report, looking at its poetic potentials on the phonetic, lexical, sentence, and textual levels, which make it highly appealing to readers.³ Various ways of structuring the text will be explored, as it is this structuring that ultimately yields its poeticity, and thus gives it the power to influence the reader cognitively, emotionally, and even physically. The paper

1 Alternatively, “*al-Shajnah*”, meaning “entangled fine branches of trees”. See Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311), “sh-j-n,” in *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1956), 13/233.

2 On the process of “narrativization” of historical realities, see Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. 2nd ed. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 1–25.

3 The trend of aesthetic-literal readings is not limited to Arabic historiographical tradition in recent scholarship. The Qur’ānic text was “literally” inspected in various directions as well. See, for example, Angelika Neuwirth, “The Rhetorical Qur’ān or Orality as a Theologumenon,” in *The Heritage of Arabo-Islamic Learning: Studies Presented to Wadad Kadi*, eds. Maurice A. Pomerantz and Aram Shahin (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 169–190; Thomas Hoffman, *The Poetic Qur’ān: Studies on Qur’ānic Poeticity* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007).

will show that the phonetical characters of individual words, lexical idioms, repetitions, prosaic narration techniques, intertextual insinuations, and historical ambiguities advance the poetic quality of the *matn* under investigation. It is also boosted by the verses of poetry appended to it.

Stepping beyond poeticity, the paper will then test this love narrative's practical capacities; practical in the Kantian sense, "as born of the uniquely human awareness of the *necessity* of doing something,"⁴ i.e. its possible uses or meanings that readers can benefit from "in [their] current present-future of practical engagement."⁵ Successive references to the report in varying genres and far-ranging compilations other than al-Ṭabarī's shall also be closely investigated. The paper will show that by creatively citing this same report over the centuries, Muslim scholars oriented their readers, implicitly and explicitly, to arrive at different practical understandings of the romance. To unlock these understandings, diverse methodical devices such as titles, subtitles, explicit evaluations, and contextual arrangements are used. Readers of the report are artfully invited to pay attention to particular practical lessons and therefore not remain absorbed in the affects induced by the poeticity of the text. Practical prescriptions seem also to pull readers away from the exclusive evidentiary construction of the assigned *khabar*, and to overlook its superior historical "true" merit, by focusing on what it has to offer in practical engagements. Nevertheless, the historical trace is evident with every citation. So, before tackling the poetical and the practical, I will first explore the historical facet of the report, situating it in the context of the major *History of al-Ṭabarī*.

The Historical Khabar: Evidencing the Romance

The *khabar*, with its two complementary components, the *sanad* (pl. *asnād*) or *isnād* (pl. *asānīd*) and the *matn* (pl. *mutūn*), is a recurrent and basic nar-ratological unit encountered in the Islamic sources. The *sanad* is the chain of transmitters of the report, while the *matn* is the substance of the report itself. The term *khabar*, which denotes "news" or "piece of information," gives the impression of factuality. This impression is also strengthened by the fact that the narrated *matn* is ascribed to individuals of flesh and blood: reporters, and sometimes eyewitnesses, designated by their names in the *sanad*.⁶ In this sense, the *isnād* is a type of "historical" evidence, in narrative form,

4 Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 10.

5 Michael Oakeshott, "Present, Future and Past," in *On History and Other Essays*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Fund, 1999), 40.

6 Stefan Leder and Hilary Kilpatrick, "Classical Arabic Prose Literature: A Researchers' Sketch Map," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 23, no. 1 (1992): 11.

advanced by the compiler/narrator, which licenses the reader to believe the *khbar* at hand.⁷ Traditionally, early Muslim scholars were highly concerned with writing down the chains of transmitters of the *akhbār* they included in their compilations, most notably in the canonical *ḥadīth* (pl. *aḥādīth*) collections that encompass the vast corpus of reports and sayings of the Prophet of Islam. These scholars were not only busy in writing down the *asānīd*, but also tremendously absorbed in studying them, a study “mired in the question of authenticity,”⁸ since the *aḥādīth* came to be seen as a primary source of Islamic law.⁹ This preoccupation with *asānīd* kept them from investigating the *mutūn* as vigorously and comprehensively.¹⁰

Thus, the tedious citing of *asānīd* in compilations of varying genres, invoked the critical methodology of *Ḥadīth* scholars in their treatment of *akhbār*. Compilations of history were no exception: this can be noted as early as al-Ṭabarī, himself a *ḥadīth* scholar (*muḥaddith*, pl. *muḥaddithūn*), who authored his *History à la muḥaddithūn*, thus “faithfully” uttering the *akhbār* “*musnadah ilā ruwātihā*”, i.e. as handed down to him from its transmitters.¹¹ In fact, “the presumption that *akhbār* possess factual validity [particularly with *asānīd*] is widespread and dominates the medieval understanding of these texts,”¹² which might have saved al-Ṭabarī and other medieval historians the trouble of propagating the factuality of a vast corpus of their “historical” material. It also might have enabled them to sneakily escape the blame of penning reports prone to objection on the basis of factual value. Al-Ṭabarī writes:

7 Medieval and modern scholars alike adhere to different approaches in their evaluation of *isnād*. As put by Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1, the *isnād* is seen either as a reasonably reliable guarantee of the historicity of its adjoining text (the *matn*), or as a complete fabrication designed to insinuate chronological priority and hence authority into a later *matn*.

8 Herbert Berg, “The *Isnād* and the Production of Cultural Memory: Ibn ‘Abbās as a Case Study,” *Numen* 58, no. 2/3 (2011): 259.

9 We might recognize here a special mode of “binding” practicality. I will touch upon this mode in the third section of the paper.

10 Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) investigates this dichotomy in *Muqaddimat ibn Khaldūn*, ed. ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Wāḥid Wāfī (Cairo: Nahḍat Miṣr, 2004), 3/946.

11 For a detailed bibliographical list of abundant modern references on al-Ṭabarī’s life and works, see Rebecca Williams, s.v. “al-Tabari,” in *Oxford Bibliographies: Islamic Studies*, DOI: 10.1093/obo/9780195390155-0223.

12 Stefan Leder, “The Literary Use of Khabar: A Basic Form of Historical Writing,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, I: Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. L. Conrad and A. Cameron (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1992), 279.

This book of mine may [be found to] contain some information mentioned by us on the authority of certain men of the past, which the reader may disapprove of and listener may find detestable, because he can find nothing sound and no real meaning in it. In such cases, he should know that it is not our fault that such information comes to him, but the fault of someone who transmitted it to us. We have merely reported it as it was reported to us.¹³

As a professional historian, al-Ṭabarī “is [willingly] at the mercy of his transmitters,”¹⁴ skillfully selecting, arranging, and documenting verbatim thousands of expectantly factual reports, each reinforced with their respective chains of transmission, i.e. their “ready-made” textual evidence that purportedly establishes their veracity.

Al-Ṭabarī’s *History* comprehensively covers “*akhbār al-māḍīn*” since the dawn of creation up until his own time, including Biblical history, the ancient history of Persia, and the first three centuries of Islamic history. This last Islamic portion, featuring the mention of the murder of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib under the heading “*Dhikr al-khabar ‘an maqtal ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib*” under “*al-sanah al-arba‘ūn*” (year 40), comprises the seemingly most “historiographical” *akhbār*, although remarkably “there is no trace in this whole portion of the *History* of any explicit judgment on men or events nor any speculation on the course or significance of events.”¹⁵ Actually, one could say that in this Islamic segment, al-Ṭabarī built a *historical* rather than practical past, in Hayden White’s sense: a corrected, organized version of that part of the whole “real past” of humanity, licensed by his intermittently cited chains of transmission. A past constructed as an end in itself, existing autonomously inside the greater whole, which “provides no guidelines for acting in the present or foreseeing the future.”¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarī’s Islamic *akhbār* in their evidential *sanad-matn* form seem to establish a historical past that does not yield lessons for

13 Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of Al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 1, translated by Franz Rosenthal (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 170–171.

14 Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 76.

15 Ibid. 80.

16 Hayden White, *The Practical Past*, 9. Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990) first devised the distinction between a historical past and a practical past, setting them as two different notional concepts (See his *On History* cited above). Employing this theoretical partition, White (1928–2018) introduced important critical observations on the relationship between the two concepts, particularly in his last book *The Practical Past*. On Oakeshott’s distinction and White’s use of it see Jonas Ahlskog, “Michael Oakeshott and Hayden White on the practical and the historical past,” *Rethinking History* 20, no. 3 (2016): 375–394.

its present-day readers. These closed narrative units, analytically distributed and not disturbed by any overt historical critique, represent a construction of a narrative account of reality in which “discontinuity rather than continuity governs the articulation of the discourse”:¹⁷ history is fragmented by years, and incidents are scattered in detached *akhbār*. This construction of “the past” prevents laypersons and professionals of other disciplines from relying on it as a basis for judgements and “practical” decisions in their daily life. Al-Ṭabarī is compared to “the detective who would give you in immaculate detail every piece of evidence which he has found relevant” but does not articulate his conclusion about his case, “leaving you [as a reader] to draw your own conclusions from the evidence he has set in order before you.”¹⁸ Although it is thus confined in the “strict and punctilious chronometric arrangements of events,”¹⁹ Marshall Hodgson is quite right to remark that “al-Ṭabarī’s story does not become boring, for almost every report is humanly vivid.”²⁰

In fact, it has been argued that one of the points of genius in al-Ṭabarī’s approach to the writing of history is that he is attuned to both levels of discourse: the collective historical trend and the specific thoughts and feelings expressed by individual voices.²¹ The flesh and blood individuals teeming in the *mutūn* of *akhbār* in this comprehensive historical text lend themselves to fictional narrative representation—“fictional” not in the sense of being purely imaginary or fantastic,²² but that such representation is moved by an internal order of narrative poeticity. Historical *ikhbār* (reporting) is combined with *imtāʿ* (delighting), allowing the text to evoke and authoritatively narrativize the events to the extent of artfully convincing the reader that he is literally “witnessing” them.²³ The “poetical” narrative representation, woven with

17 Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” 10.

18 Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 353.

19 Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Times of History: Universal Topics in Islamic Historiography* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2007), 146.

20 Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 353.

21 Peter Heath, “Some Functions of Poetry in Premodern Historical and Pseudo-Historical Texts: Comparing *Ayyām al-ʿArab*, al-Ṭabarī’s *History*, and *Sīrat ʿAntar*,” in *Poetry and History: The Value of Poetry in Reconstructing Arab History*, ed. Ramzi Baalbaki and al. (Beirut: The American University of Beirut Press, 2001), 55.

22 For our interest in the past should take us beyond “the facts as conventionally understood in historiographical thinking; beyond the idea that a ‘fact’ is identifiable by its logical opposition to ‘fiction’, where fiction is understood to be an imaginary thing or product of imagination.” See White, *The Practical Past*, 23.

23 I here evoke Ṭahā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān’s discussion over a convictional condition of the deliberative language, when “*iqnāʾ*” merges with “*imtāʿ*.” See Ṭahā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, *Fī uṣūl al-ḥiwār wa-tajdīd ʿilm al-kalām*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2007), 38.

words, seizes the reader by “a weight and value of their own” instead of merely referring to the “historical” individuals and incidents in the related reports.²⁴ In this sense, poeticity “isn’t an ornament that is added to the text, but an internal structure, and force, that make it what it is, namely an argument not only because of what it says, or claims [...] but because in the poetic text the what of the said and the how of the saying merge.”²⁵ The historical accounts are, after all, “intended to be read not for facts, but for their allusive power”.²⁶

However rigorous al-Ṭabarī may be in setting up an Islamic *historical* past, the poetical power is not lacking in his *History*, it is only waiting for an attentive reader to expose it. This I will try to achieve in the following section where poetic elements embedded in the report under investigation will be thoroughly inspected.

The Poetic Shades of the Khabar: Romantically Trapping the Reader

‘fa-ltabasat bi-‘aqlihi’: The Poeticity of Prose

Detailing “sabab qatlih wa-maqtalih” (the reason behind his killing), the report al-Ṭabarī relates on the circumstances of ‘Alī’s murder describes the plotting of three men, among them ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muljam, to kill “*a’immat al-ḍalālah*,” the *imams* of error (including ‘Alī), “*irāhatan li-l-‘ibād*,” in revenge for their fellows (killed at the battle of *Nahrawān*). When the three agree on a date for the execution, they go to the places where each of the targeted men happened to be at the time. Since Ibn Muljam is the one who volunteers to kill ‘Alī, *Kūfah* is his destination. There, he meets:

امرأة من تيم الرباب يُقال لها قطام ابنة الشَّجْنَةِ وقد قتل [عليّ] أباهَا وأخاها يوم النهر،
وكانت فائقة الجمال، فلَمَّا رآها التبست بعقله، ونسي حاجته التي جاء لها، ثم خطبها،
فقال: لا أتزوجك حتى تشفي لي. قال: وما يشفيك؟ قالت: ثلاثة آلاف وعبد وقينة وقتل

24 I am here liberally borrowing Jakobson's words on poeticity which, as he articulates, “is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality” in Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, eds., *Roman Jakobson's Language in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987), 378.

25 Jørgen Dines Johansen, “A Semiotic Definition of Literary Discourse,” *Semiotica* 165 (2007), 122.

26 Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the Abbāsīd Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 216.

عليّ بن أبي طالب. قال: هو مهر لك، فأما قتل عليّ فلا أراك ذكرته وأنت تريدني. قالت: بلي، التمس غرّته، فإن أصبت شفيت نفسك ونفسي، ويهنئك العيش معي، وإن قتلت فما عند الله خير من الدنيا وزينتها وزينة أهلها، قال: فوالله ما جاء بي إلى هذا المصر إلا قتل عليّ، فلك ما سألت. قالت: إنّي أطلب لك من يسند ظهرك ويساعدك على أمرك، فبعثت إلى رجل من قومها من تيم الرباب يقال له وردان فكلّمته فأجابها، وأتى ابن ملجم رجلاً من أشجع يقال له شبيب بن بجرة فقال له: هل لك في شرف الدنيا والآخرة؟ قال: وما ذاك؟ قال: قتل عليّ بن أبي طالب، قال: ثكلتك أمك! لقد جئت شيئاً إداً، كيف تقدر على عليّ. قال: أكن له في المسجد، فإذا خرج لصلاة الغداة شدّدنا عليه فقتلناه، فإن نجونا شفيانا أنفسنا، وأدركا ثأرنا، وإن قُتِلنا فما عند الله خير من الدنيا وما فيها. قال: ويحك! لو كان غير عليّ لكان أهون عليّ، قد عرفت بلاءه في الإسلام، وسابقته مع النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم، وما أجدني أنشرح لقتله. قال: أما تعلم أنه قتل أهل النهر العباد الصالحين. قال: بلي. قال: فقتله بمن قتل من إخواننا، فأجابه. فجاءوا قطام وهي في المسجد الأعظم معتكفة فقالوا لها: لقد أجمع رأينا على قتل عليّ، قالت: فإذا أردتم ذلك فأتوني، ثم عاد إليها ابن ملجم في ليلة الجمعة التي قتل في صبيحتها عليّ سنة أربعين فقال: هذه الليلة التي واعدت فيها صاحبي أن يقتل كل منّا صاحبه، فدعت لهم بالحرير فعصبتهم به، وأخذوا أسيافهم وجلسوا مقابل السدة التي يخرج منها عليّ، فلما خرج ضربه شبيب بالسيف فوقع سيفه بعضادة الباب أو الطاق، وضربه ابن ملجم في قرنه بالسيف، وهرب وردان حتى دخل منزله [...] ²⁷

([...] [A] woman of Taym al-Ribāb called Qatāmi bint al-Shijnah, whose father and brother ‘Alī had killed at the canal. She was of surpassing beauty and when he saw her she confused his mind and he forgot what he was about. He asked to marry her but she said, “I will not marry you until you give me what I want.” He asked, “What will satisfy you?” and she answered, “Three thousand [dirhams], a slave, a singing girl, and the killing of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.” He said, “That is a fitting dowry for you, but as for the killing of ‘Alī, I would not have thought that you would mention it to me, while wanting me.” She said, “Indeed yes. Look out for when he is off his guard and if you get him you will have satisfied yourself and myself, and life with me will be good for you. If you are killed, then what is with God is better than this world and its adornments and those of its people.” He replied, “By God, it was the very killing of ‘Alī that brought me to this town. What you ask for is yours.” She said, “I will seek out for you someone who will aid you and support you in your task.” She sent to a man of her tribe of Taym al-Ribāb who was called Wardān and spoke with

27 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrahim, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1971), 5/144–45.

him, and he agreed. Ibn Muljam went to a man of the Banū Ashja‘ called Shabīb b. Bajarah and asked him, “Would you like honor in this world and the next?” He replied, “How?” and Ibn Muljam said, “The killing of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib!” “May your mother be bereaved of you!” he answered, “Then you would have done something grave. How will you be able to get to him?” Ibn Muljam said, “I shall lay in wait for him in the mosque and when he comes out for the morning prayer we shall attack him and kill him. If we escape, we shall have satisfied ourselves and attained our revenge. If we are killed, then what is with God is better than this world and what is in it.” Shabīb said, “Woe to you! If it were anyone other than ‘Alī, it would be a matter of less importance to me. But you know how much he has been tested in Islam and his precedence in following the Prophet. I do not think I could find it in me to be happy at his killing.” Ibn Muljam said, “Do you not know that he killed the people of the canal, the righteous servants of God!” “Indeed yes;” he replied. “Then let us kill him for those of our brethren whom he killed!” And Shabīb assented. They went to Qaṭāmi who was in the great mosque practising “withdrawal.” They said to her, “We have agreed to kill ‘Alī;” and she said, “When you want to do that, come to me.” Then Ibn Muljam went back to her on the night before the Friday in the morning of which ‘Alī was killed in the year 40, and he said to her, “This is the night when I promised my two companions that each one of us would kill his man.” She called for silk to be brought to them and bound it around them and they took their swords and sat before the door out of which ‘Alī would come. When he appeared, Shabīb struck at him with his sword but it hit the door post or the arch; Ibn Muljam struck him on the top of his head with his sword. Wardān fled and went into his house [...])²⁸

At the outset, in short telegraphic sentences, the reader is told about Ibn Muljam’s encounter with a woman “of surpassing beauty” named Qaṭāmi, whose father and brother ‘Alī had killed, and who “confused his mind” to the extent that “he forgot what he was about” and “asked to marry her.” The stormy entrance of such a woman, with the profound effect she had on Ibn Muljam, pushes the reader into a novel narrative possibility. Unexpectedly, the reader is seduced to follow a new sub-narrative of love, which pops up in the midst of the main narrative of the assassination plot. Nevertheless, the euphony of this love at first sight, is poetically marred by aggression, violence, and dangerous

28 Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of Al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 17, trans. G.R. Hawting (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 214–16.

sway.²⁹ The reader cannot promise himself a charming escape from the heft of the impending assassination foreshadowed in the report. However, this narrative of love transports him, at least for a short while, into another “rhythm of time.” It pauses the historical present flowing in the text thus far, and launches a “condensed time,” an eternal present of love.³⁰ How then is the poeticity of this narrative produced?

Lexica

Qaṭāmi, to begin with, like *fī‘ālī*, is a female name, a variation from *Qāṭimah*, or *Qaṭmah*,³¹ or from *al-qaṭm*, i.e. *al-qaṭ*, “*qaṭama yaqṭimu qaṭman idhā qaṭa‘a*” (to cut).³² It is thus a suggestive proper name, which might be mirroring traits of brutality and aggression, distinctive in the woman it designates.³³

Qaṭāmi is portrayed as an extremely beautiful woman, whose encounter with Ibn Muḥjam risks being a serious distraction from his original mission that brought him to the city in the first place. At her sight, the killer-to-be almost forgets his initial plot, and eventually proposes to her. In fact, the English translation of the sentence “*fa-ltabasat bi-‘aqlihī*” into “she confused his mind” exemplifies how the English translation misses the finer shades of the text’s linguistic poeticity as conveyed in Arabic. Besides the missed phonetical resonance of the verb *iltabasa*, one might also miss a possible correspondence with other reports featuring the expression. One can think here of a version of the *shaqq al-ṣadr* (the splitting of the chest) narrative in the *Sīra*, where the Prophet was shocked by what he had experienced and allegedly said: “*wa-ashfaqtu an yakūna qad iltubisa bī*.”³⁴ This reciprocal intertextual resonance helps the

29 For a medieval “taste” of this theme see Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), “On Falling In Love At First Sight,” in *The Ring of the Dove: A Treatise on the Art and Practice of Arab Love*, trans. A.J. Arberry (London: Luzac, 1953), 52–54.

30 On the several “temporal rhythms” man can be aware of see Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 33.

31 Sibawayhi (d. 180/796), *Kitāb Sibawayhi*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Hārūn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1992), 3/277. There is disagreement on the short vowel of this *wazn*, and whether it should be a *kasrah*, *fathah*, or *ḍammah*. *Al-Ḥijāziyyūn* considered “*binā’ahu ‘alā al-kasr*”. See on this question *ibid.*, 3/277–78; and Ibn Al-Anbārī (d. 328/940), *Al-Mudhakkār wal-mu‘annath*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Uṣaymah (Cairo: Wizārat al-Awqāf, 1999), 2/192–201.

32 Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933), *Kitāb Jamharat al-lughah*, ed. Ramzi Baalbaki (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm li-l-Malāyīn, 1987), 2/923. See also Ibn Manẓūr, “*q-ṭ-m*,” in *Lisān*, 12/489.

33 This distinguished feature of some proper names in Arabic is lively expressed and exemplified in Ibn Jinnī (d. 392/1002), “*Bāb fī al-istikhlās min al-a‘lām ma‘ānī al-awṣāf*,” in *Al-Ikhtisās*, 4th ed. (Cairo: al-Hay‘ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Ammah li-l-Kitāb, n.d.), 3/273–275.

34 The narrative relates how angels opened the Prophet’s chest and removed his heart, washed it, before restoring it in place. While compilations of various genres vary in their

reader to situate one report in the context of a wider tradition. It builds on the reader's poetic "familiarity" with its texts.

Besides her ferocious name, Qaṭāmi is then defined by the "fact" that ‘Alī had killed her father and brother. In the shadow of two violent deaths, a certain emotional nuance bloodily links her with ‘Alī. Repetitions of the verb *ashfā* (to satisfy) in various forms echo the dark desire for revenge, and so the occurrence of the verb *qatala* (to kill) fifteen times across the report binds the reader to the brutality of the killing throughout.

Conversational Rhetoric

Seemingly, Qaṭāmi appeals to the portrait of the *femme fatale*, who dangerously captivates the man and seduces him into performing the most outrageous acts at the prospect of satisfying his desire for her. In the case of Ibn Muljam, that act was an assassination, as his beautiful woman, evidently filled with rage and pain, was seeking her revenge, and it is in a dialogue following his proposal that Qaṭāmi's vengeful intentions are revealed. Unlike the previous brisk third-person narrative sentences, the dialogue quoted in the report is relatively long. The reader is privileged to get so close as to hear the "voices" of the two people. This shift in discourse is poetically moving, as it further dramatizes the situation. However, the poetic culmination of the dialogue is Qaṭāmi's explicit demand of her suitor to kill ‘Alī, which she places as a condition for the marriage (i.e. Ibn Muljam's satisfaction). This paradoxical pairing of love and death is hard to miss. If the reader was up to this point enjoying the romance that diverted the characters from the main assassination plot of the report, Qaṭāmi's utterance brashly changes that. The reader, just like Ibn Muljam, is forced to recall the murder to mind.

Qaṭāmi's overt request leads to a startling double discovery on both sides: she did not know that he was already embroiled in a plan to kill ‘Alī, and he did not know that she would make the killing part of her dowry upon his proposal. It is the moment of doubled recognition in this tragic *khbar* that definitively decides ‘Alī's fate.³⁵ The power of hate boosted by the power of love

details of the related episode, it is generally considered as a purifier initiatory passage into his prophetic mission. See Al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066), *Dalā'il al-nubuwwah*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mu‘tī Qal‘ajī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1988), 2/8. For recent reference see Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 67–69.

35 "Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune." *The Poetics of Aristotle*, ed. S.H. Butcher, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1902), 1452a.

revives the anticipated criminal act. In fact, Ibn Muġjam's reaction to Qaṭāmi's words exposes a certain reluctance on his part to finish his mission, which had brought him to Kūfah in the first place, and he is only persuaded by her firm and decisive instructions, in which she explains the concrete modalities and potential satisfactions (in this life and the afterlife) of the killing. His newfound conviction is expressed by his "performative utterance" when he addresses her by saying: "What you ask for is yours." To utter this sentence in this specific circumstance "is not to *describe* [his] doing of what [he] should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that [he is] doing it: it is to do it."³⁶ The effective power of such a sentence leaves the reader hanging in suspense, in anticipation of the moment when he will actually do the deed. Meanwhile, the almost verbatim repetition of Qaṭāmi's words of encouragement by Ibn Muġjam when he is addressing Shabīb ibn Bajarah and attempting to persuade him to join the mission traps the reader in the swirl of revenge, as he reads again the reasoning for the killing, mainly involving 'Alī's responsibility for the death of *ahl al-nahr*.

Later narrative details in the *khābar* relating the actual execution of the set plan do not lack poetic undertones either, albeit of more ambiguous and obscure quality. For example, we read that Qaṭāmi wraps the waists of Ibn Muġjam and his two helpers with silk clothes, and that she then retreats (*mu'takifah*) into a mosque, where the three men pay her a visit just before they leave for their mission to have a final conversation with her. Why is she in retreat by this point, and what kind of retreat is it? How then do Ibn Muġjam and company pay her a visit? Why does she wrap them with silk?³⁷

Names

Beyond the *khābar's* narrative specificities and stylistic properties, a more general, underlying layer of poeticity frames it: its association with the persona of 'Alī. This association effectively determines the reader's general attitude toward the story; it draws his attention, and immediately evokes a certain set of connotations. Moreover, the invocation of 'Alī, with the rich connotations of excellence and precedence that he possesses, stimulates the poetical inception of the two "exemplary characters" of Qaṭāmi and Ibn Muġjam. Through the narration of the historiographical "real" incident which led to killing 'Alī,

36 J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 6.

37 This very last detail is what Laura Veccia Vaglieri found strange and with no explanation in her article on Ibn Muġjam in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. See L. Veccia Vaglieri, *ET*², s.v. "Ibn Muġjam". Perhaps the wrapping was meant to protect their bodies from likely sword stabbings in case of any probable fight, which could have interrupted or followed their mission?

the two characters take shape. Pre-reflectively, the reader perceives them and remembers their names as anchored in the act of murder. Parallel exemplary establishment of certain characters is similarly distinguished in the remarkably similar revenge account of Hind bint ‘Utbaḥ over Ḥamzah ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib for killing her father in the battle of *Badr*. The *Sīra* mentions that whenever Hind passed by the Abyssinian slave Waḥshī [who had been asked to kill Ḥamzah in return for his freedom] she would say, “Satisfy your vengeance and ours.”³⁸ On account of this association with Ḥamzah, whose liver she later takes a bite of in the battle of *Uḥud*, Hind is sometimes exemplarily referred to as *ākilat al-akbād*, “the liver-eater,” a reference that highlights her vengeful role in the battle scene.

In other words, the poetic “humanness” of the romance and its “consequences” narrated in the report overrides the latter’s evidential historiographical form, and probably a share of its detailed content too. What resonates at the end is the names of the privileged exemplary characters. Does not the trio of ‘Alī, Ibn Muljam, and Qaṭāmi prevail in memory over that of Ibn Muljam, ‘Amr ibn Bakr, and al-Burak ibn ‘Abd Allāh for example? Will any reader remember that the *matn* of this *khavar* is preceded by the *isnād*: “According to Mūsā b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Masrūqī—‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥarrānī Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān—Ismā‘īl b. Rāshid”? The historical existence of Qaṭāmi by itself retreats [Does it matter if she really existed?] in favor of her poetic authority. This is not to say that Qaṭāmi’s existence has not been properly assessed in terms of its historical value, but that this specific kind of assessment touches only one aspect, the historical one, of that existence.³⁹ One might think that Qaṭāmi the exemplary character is as—if not more—present in this text than the historical one.

“There Is No Dowry, However Costly, More Costly Than ‘Alī”: The Poeticity of Poetry

The long report partially cited above is appended by several short anecdotes intimately related to it. With no explicit *asānīd*, they are only preceded with the word “*dhakarū*” [They say that]. ‘Alī’s *waṣīyah* (testament) follows, then some verses of poetry are quoted, including:

38 Nadia Maria El Cheikh, “Hind bint ‘Utba: Prototype of the Jahiliyya and Umayyad Woman,” in *Women, Islam, and Abbasid Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 20–21.

39 L. Veccia Vaglieri notes, “Given the number of sources which mention her, there seems no doubt of the existence of this woman and her belonging to the Taym al-Ribāb” in *ET*², s.v. “Ibn Muljam”.

وَلَمْ أَر مَهْرًا سَاقَهُ ذُو سَمَاحَةٍ كَمَهْرٍ قَطَامٍ مِنْ فَصِيحٍ وَأَعْجَمٍ
 ثَلَاثَةُ آلَافٍ وَعَبْدٌ وَقَيْنَةٌ وَضَرْبُ عَلِيٍّ بِالْحُسَامِ الْمُصَمِّمِ
 فَلَا مَهْرَ أَعْلَى مِنْ عَلِيٍّ وَإِنْ غَلَا وَلَا قَتْلَ إِلَّا دُونَ قَتْلِ ابْنِ مُلْجَمٍ⁴⁰

I never saw a dowry provided by any generous man,
 whether Arab or other, like that of Qaṭāmi:
 Three thousand dirhams, a slave, and a singing girl,
 and the stabbing of ‘Alī with the piercing blade.
 There is no dowry, however costly, more costly than ‘Alī,
 and no killing above that performed by Ibn Muljam⁴¹

Prosimetrum Canvas

One could label the verses al-Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn Abī Mayyās al-Murādī⁴² as commentary poetry, which provide reflection on the killing event described and narrated in the prosaic *khbar*. These are like glossary material that do not push the events ahead.⁴³ The poetry recaps the killing incident in only three verses, despite prosaically extending it for pages in the report preceding it.

This expressive intensification, with the transition from long prose to short poetry, crowds the emotional effect, magnifying its poeticity. It captures the gist of the narrative, shutting out all the excessive details, for indeed, “if the story narrates a passion, the poem represents it.”⁴⁴ It is also crucial to remember the intended public: “To Western readers it may seem superfluous, merely ornamental. However, to a traditional Arab audience and readership, the presence of poetry, even though not indispensable [especially when it is appended to

40 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 5/150.

41 Al-Ṭabarī, *History*, 17/225.

42 The verses were also attributed to other poets in other sources. See their *takhrīj* in Iḥsān ‘Abbās, *Shi‘r al-khawārij*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1974), 36.

43 In contrast to action poems which are part of the events, and usually made by actors of these events. The distinction was made by Wolfhart Heinrichs, “Prosimetrical Genres in Classical Arabic Literature,” in *Prosimetrum: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Poetry*, eds. J. Harris and K. Reichl (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997): 258–259. For later adaptations of this distinction see Geert van Gelder, “Poetry in Historiography: Some Observations,” in *Problems in Arabic Literature*, ed. Miklós Maróth (Piliscsaba: The Avicenna Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, 2004), 1–13; Peter Heath, “Some Functions of Poetry in Premodern Historical and Pseudo-Historical Texts,” 39–59.

44 A remark by Jamel Eddine Bencheikh quoted in Wolfhart Heinrichs, “Modes of Existence of the Poetry in the Arabian Nights,” in *The Heritage of Arabo-Islamic Learning*, 529.

prose featuring a historical event], is both familiar and desirable.”⁴⁵ It is worth noting that the rhetorical practice of quoting verses at the end of a prosaic *khābar*—although uniquely voiced in this instance by an “opponent” or *Khārijite* in celebration of the costly dowry of Qaṭāmi and the killing performed by Ibn Muḷjam—was not altogether rare in compositions of this kind. “Prosimetrum,” or the systematic occurrence of poetry in a prose text, is an “almost ubiquitous feature of classical Arabic literature.”⁴⁶ One could argue that it represents a distinctive layer of poeticity here: the poeticity of the antagonistic voice. The rhyming couplets, infused with the villain’s emotions and expressed in lyrical language, drive the reader to live the situation from the killer’s perspective, as opposed to the perspective of ‘Alī, its victim.

Voices

Interestingly, the second and third verse are attributed to Qaṭāmi herself in an early compilation entitled *a-Mu‘ammarūn wa-l-waṣāyā* by Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī (d. 250/864).⁴⁷ The book features an abridged account of ‘Alī’s killing, on the authority of Abū Ḥātim, where the same thread of actions is recounted, i.e. that a woman agreed to marry Ibn Muḷjam on a dowry of three thousand *dirhams*, a slave, a singing girl, and the killing of ‘Alī, though Qaṭāmi is not named. Ibn Muḷjam was reluctant, refusing to do the killing part, before deciding otherwise as she conditioned the marriage to that. The assassination itself is brief: “then he left, and struck him on his head with his sword, so he killed him, before he was killed” (*fa-kharaja, fa-ḍarabahu bi-sayfihī fī ra’sihī, fa-qatalahu, fa-qutila*). Remarkably, in this version, Qaṭāmi stars even in the final scene, where she attends Ibn Muḷjam’s incineration and recites the two verses: “*thumma ‘utiya bihi dār al-mar’ah, fa-ashrafat wa-hum yuḥriqūnahu fa-qālat ...*” (Then they brought him next to the women’s place, so she watched them burning him from above, and said ...).⁴⁸

45 Geert Jan van Gelder, “Poetry and the Arabian Nights,” in *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, ed. Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 15.

46 Wolfhart Heinrichs, “Modes of Existence of the Poetry in the Arabian Nights,” 528.

47 Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī (d. 250/864), *a-Mu‘ammarūn wa-l-waṣāyā*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mun‘im ‘Āmir (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah, 1961), 151.

48 Touching on this same final fate, al-Ṭabarī reports that after Ibn Muḷjam was killed “the people took him, wrapped him in some straw mats, and set fire to him”. In al-Ṭabarī, *History*, 17/223. Remarkably, the burning act is attributed to a woman named Umm al-Haytham bint al-Aswad al-Nakh‘iyyah as per Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 356/967). After al-Ḥasan killed Ibn Muḷjam, the mentioned woman asked him for his cadaver “*istawhabat minhu jifatahu*” and he accepted “*fa-wahabahā lahā*” so she burnt it “*fa-aḥraqathā bi-l-nār*”. See Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn*, ed. Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah, 1949), 41.

Accordingly, the verses are here to be considered as action poetry, since they are spoken in mourning by the main female actor in the event of her suitor's killing. The scene portrays terrible reciprocal brutality and recalls a thread of successive revenges, then and before. However, was the woman already citing Ibn Abī Mayyās, the Khārijīte poet al-Ṭabarī attributes the verses to? Or inversely, was it this unknown poet who cited her subsequently? Adhering to this possibility, the verses were, at the moment when the poet was reciting them, "a linguistic reflection of recalling the past, and a linguistic insinuation of the immanence in the past of the present,"⁴⁹ invoking the voice of Qaṭāmi and paradoxically silencing her by placing "her" words in the mouth of a man-poet.

One could argue, however, that regardless of who originally composed the verses, their poetic force remains intact. But is this really the case? Are we not, as readers, continuously bound to the question "who is the author of this?" Indeed, "reading bases itself on whatever preconception one may have of the author. [...] The shadow of the supposed author looms on the horizon and weighs down—or enriches—any interpretation of the work."⁵⁰ Hence, the attribution of the verses to a male poet, rather than to a woman, even when he is "known" only by his name, might have lent the verses more weight, and might have been more appealing to medieval audiences and their potentially more masculine tastes.

Archetypal Commemoration

Intertextually, the last verse that hosts a universal, archetypal exemplification of the dowry and the killing poetically echoes the famous maxim "*Lā fatā 'illā 'Alī*" (There is no brave youth except 'Alī), which is recurrently paired with another proverbial expression, "*lā sayfa 'illā dhū al-faqār*" (there is no sword except *dhū al-faqār*).⁵¹ As Claude Cahen notes, "[i]n Islam, the gradual growth of the figure of 'Alī has resulted in his being regarded as the *fatā* par excellence, as is expressed in the old saying *lā fatā illā 'Alī*."⁵² The elegant play of the

49 Andras Hamori, *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 103.

50 Abdelfattah Kilito, *The Author and His Doubles: Essays on Classical Arabic Culture*, trans. Michael Cooperson (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 50.

51 Traditionally, the famous sword which the Prophet obtained as booty in the battle of Badr; and which previously belonged to a heathen named al-Āṣ b. Munabbih, killed in the battle. The sword passed to the possession of 'Alī, and later was inherited by the 'Abbāsīd caliphs. It thus became an attribute of 'Alī and an 'Alid symbol. See E. Mittwoch, *ET*², s.v. "Dhu 'l-Faqār".

52 Claude Cahen and Franz Taeschner, *ET*², s.v. "Futuwwa".

parallel expressions (*fa-lā mahra aghlā min ‘Alīyyin [...] wa-lā qatla illā dūna qatli-bni Muljamī / lā sayfa ‘illā dhū al-faqār wa-lā fatā illā ‘Alī*) enhances the celebratory tone of the verse. The grandeur of the killing and the dowry borrows from the grandeur of ‘Alī, the victim, whose assassination becomes the killing par excellence, and thus a dowry like no other. An obvious counter narrative evolves as no one among the three murderers could venture to have a decent duel or face to face fight with him. Al-Ṭabarī allows this space for the reader to see through cowardice and resentful acts of revenge.⁵³

Towards Practicality: Some Illuminations

I suggested in section one that the *akhbār* as historically fashioned by al-Ṭabarī in his *History* hold in them a practical potential, despite appearances to the contrary. It is only that extracting this potential is almost entirely left to the reader, as the historian’s own evaluative conclusions are absent. In section two, I proposed that the poetic features of the *khbar* and its subsequent verses, trap the reader in a loop of unexpected emotion.

In the third section below I will show that Muslim compilers, departing from the more distanced historical narration of the *khbar* by al-Ṭabarī, did not leave it up to their readers to judge its content independently by refraining from any critical treatment of it. Transmitting the *khbar* over the centuries across various genres was not a mere silent process of copying from the *History of al-Ṭabarī*. Compilers made use of various tools to raise different practical issues as they repeated the report: paratexts (titles, subtitles), the contextualization of the *khbar* in various “textual milieus,” overt critical analysis, or more literal adaptation.⁵⁴

53 Discussions about the respective qualities and merits of poetry and prose recurrently features in the Arabic tradition to the extent that it is very challenging to pin all the linguistic, literary, selections etc. works which provide thorough or occasional documentation on this notion. For concise yet valuable observations which overweigh poetry, see for example Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (d. 463/1071), “*Bāb fī faḍl al-shi‘r*” in *al-‘Umdah fī maḥāsīn al-shi‘r wa-ādābih*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, 5th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1981), 1/19–27. For a recent reference see Klaus Hachmeier, “Rating *Adab*: Al-Tawḥīdī on the Merits of Poetry and Prose. The 25th Night of the *Kitāb Al-Imtā‘ wa-l-Mu‘ānasa*, Translation and Commentary,” *Al-Qanṭara* xxv, 2 (2004), 357–385.

54 However, prominent later compilers of historical annals more or less adhered to the same methodology. See ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233), “*Dhikr maqṭal amir l-mu‘minīn*,” in *al-Kāmil fī-l-tārīkh*, ed. ‘Abdullah al-Qāḍī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1987), 3/254–260; ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), “*Ṣifat maqṭalihi raḍīya Allāhu ‘anhu*,” in *al-Bidāyah wa-l-nihāyah* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 1993), 7/326–28.

Yet, it should be noted here that the mere “historical” narration of the *khbar* by al-Ṭabarī expresses “the implicit invocation of the moral standard that he [as historian] uses to distinguish between those real events worthy of being recorded and those unworthy of it.”⁵⁵ This ought to be considered the first practical message he conveys to his readers. Any other practical instruction will depart from this initial evaluation, since the act of recording itself testifies to al-Ṭabarī’s attempts to “share” the practical estimation of the recorded report. In fact, the reader cannot fail to observe that ‘Alī’s murder is never detached from the famous romance of Qaṭāmi and Ibn Muljam. Every time the killing is related, the section featuring the couple is included, and the aforementioned verses are appended to it like a required chorus. Even the most abridged versions of the *khbar*, which omit the part of ibn Muljam’s agreement with his two companions to kill ‘Alī, Mu‘āwiyah, and ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ, mention ibn Muljam’s encounter with Qaṭāmi and his fateful passion. Nadia Abbott is thus correct in insisting that “tradition associates the murder of ‘Alī with the grief of one of these [Khārijite women who she designates as “active”], Qaṭam, who having lost father and brother, stirred her lover, Ibn Muljam, to avenge them [by killing ‘Alī].”⁵⁶ It is indeed as if the basic practical appraisal, i.e. that the *khbar* relating the romance is worthy of being recorded, was adhered to unanimously.⁵⁷ Compilers also promoted other specified morals. I will examine these below.

Ibn Muljam Muta‘awwilan: Emendation of the Act of Killing?

Although al-Ṭabarī, as explained above, does not “interfere” by making any comments or judgments in the reports he transmits, one should not jump to the conclusion that historical reports, as fashioned in his *History*, are only equipped with an embedded practical potential (whereby the reports do not yield any lessons without the extraction by an interpreter of implied practical examples). This is particularly evident in the lengthy testament that ‘Alī is reported to have made “when death came to him,” formulating his commands to his elder son al-Ḥasan and all his offspring and family. Here, the general reader is given straightforward, practical “dos and don’ts,” primarily of

55 White, “Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” 23.

56 Nabia Abbott, “Women and the State in Early Islam,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1, no. 3 (1942), 362.

57 Cook puts this association on the background of the “romantic association of numerous tribes and individuals to Kharijism”. His somehow quick treatment of ‘Alī’s killing deceptively leaves the impression that the related reports, featuring Qaṭāmi, are limited to Shī‘ī sources. See Michael Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 54–55.

moral-religious nature, which are fit for present-future implementation. These include: “Look to your relatives and unite them,” “Observe the prayer always,” “Help one another in piety and fear of God but not in sin and enmity to Him,” among others.⁵⁸ This also applies to other verbal enunciations attributed to ‘Alī and reported by al-Ṭabarī: “Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyah said [...] I heard ‘Alī saying, ‘A life for a life. If I die, kill him as he killed me. If I live, I will consider what to do!’”⁵⁹ It is also reported that ‘Alī addressed his elder son saying: “No one shall be killed except my killer. Wait and see, Ḥasan. If I die from this blow of his, then inflict on him blow for blow. But do not inflict mutilation on the man, for I heard the Messenger of God say, ‘Avoid mutilation, even on a vicious dog!’”⁶⁰

In fact, Ibn Muljam’s fate was explored in *fiqh* discourses as attested in the magnum opus *Kitāb al-Umm* by Al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820), for example.⁶¹ Al-Shāfi‘ī evokes it while discussing the application of *qīṣaṣ* on “*al-ṭā’ifah al-mumtani‘ah al-muta’awwilah*,” i.e. the group “that has articulated a particular creed that is rationally comprehensible (*ta’wīl sā’igh*)” rivaling the authority of the imām,⁶² in contrast to its application on an individual man who articulated such a creed and who killed accordingly (*ta’awwala fa-qatala*). As per Al-Shāfi‘ī, *qīṣaṣ* is not applicable on the group, but is applicable on the individual; in the case of Ibn Muljam, *qīṣaṣ* was performed⁶³ because he killed ‘Alī *muta’awwilan*, and was in turn killed by al-Ḥasan. Individual *ta’wīl* is not therefore a “practical” excuse for the killing act, and hence it does not save the subject from punishment. Therefore, to put Ibn Muljam’s act under *ta’wīl* does not imply an ethical emendation here, as it refutes the justification the killer provided for that act. Ibn Muljam is even classified by Al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) as *kāfir*, because he had legitimized himself to kill ‘Alī (*istaḥalla qatl ‘Alī*), and he who legitimizes

58 See the testament in full in al-Ṭabarī, *History*, 219–222.

59 Ibid, 17/218.

60 Ibid, 17/222.

61 The work’s authorship and origin are disputed, and had been particularly challenged by Norman Calder, *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993). For a different evaluation see Ahmed El Shamsy, “Al-Shāfi‘ī’s Written Corpus: A Source-Critical Study,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 132, no. 2 (2012), 199–220.

62 Wael Hallaq, *Sharī‘a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 318. On the rules governing them across legal schools see *ibid*, 318–320.

63 Al-Shāfi‘ī, “*Kitāb qitāl ahl al-baghī wa-ahl al-riddah*,” “*Bāb al-sirah fī ahl al-baghī*” in *Kitāb al-Umm* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1990), 4/229. For a late treatment of this opinion of Al-Shāfi‘ī, see Ibn Ḥajar (d. 852/1449), “*kitāb al-imāmah wa-qitāl al-bughāh*” in *Talkhīṣ al-ḥabīr fī takhrīj aḥādīth al-Rāfi‘ī al-kabīr*, ed. Ḥasan ibn Qutub (Cairo: Mu‘assasat Qurṭubah wa-Dār al-Mishkāt, 1995), 4/86–88.

himself to kill the imām (*istaḥalla qatl imām ‘adl*) is a *kāfir*.⁶⁴ No room is therefore left for reasonable justification.

Nevertheless, we can conceive of the intense practical and religious dispute over legitimacy of murder and martyrdom in that primitive period of Islamic history in a saying transmitted by Al-Ma‘arrī (d. 449/1057) in his commentary on *Dīwān al-Mutanabbī*. “They say (*yuqāl*), he states, that as he was struck by Ibn Muljam, ‘Alī said ‘by God I won out’ (*fuztu wa-rabb al-ka‘bah*), he meant winning in the afterlife, as he considered himself a martyr (*li-annahu ra‘ā annahu shahīd*).”⁶⁵ To interpret the added verb *ra‘ā* (considered, perceived) as a mental or physiological act (*fi‘l qalbī*) implies that there existed a possible counter act, i.e. that someone observing the scene may have considered it differently. This rhetorical hesitation leaves space for alternative readings, as though ‘Alī’s martyrdom was ultimately not collectively or completely decided.

‘Alī in the Sequence of Killed Talibīds: Proclaiming Martyrdom

In terms of scholarly method, Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī was a conservative. Adhering to *Ḥadīth* historiography, he used the *isnād* consistently in his historical work, the *Maqātil al-ṭālibiyyīn*, amongst his other compilations.⁶⁶ Therefore, reports of ‘Alī’s killing, collected under the subtitle “*Dhikr khabar maqṭalihi wa-l-sabab fihī*”⁶⁷ in this famous martyrology and for which al-Iṣfahānī cites different authorities including al-Ṭabarī, are not unleashed from their historical cuff. Every report is featured with its respective *isnād*. The *Maqātil*, as advanced by Sebastian Günther, is in well-wrought book format book “with a well thought-out concept, a fixed and systematical order in the presentation of the material, and last but not least with a preface and a conclusion.”⁶⁸ Largely, the *Maqātil* consists of more than 300 biographies of members of the Prophet’s family in the line of Abū Ṭālib, who were killed during a period starting with the Prophet and ending with the date of the book’s completion,

64 Al-Māwardī, *al-Ḥawī al-kabīr*, ed. ‘Alī Mu‘awwad and ‘Adil ‘Abd al-Mawjūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1999), 12/103. Similarly of course, *Imāmī* authorities label Ibn Muljam’s act as *kufīr*. See for example Al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), *al-Mabsūṭ fi fiqh al-imāmiyyah*, ed. Muḥammad al-Bihbūdī (Iran: al-Maktabah al-Murtaḍawīyyah, n.d.), 7/264.

65 Al-Ma‘arrī, *al-Lāmi‘ al-‘uzẓī*, ed. Muḥammad al-Mawlawī (Riyadh: Markaz al-Malik Faṣṣal, 2008), 28.

66 Hilary Kilpatrick, review of *Quellenuntersuchungen zu den “Maqātil at-Ṭālibiyyīn” des Abū ‘l-Faraġ al-Iṣfahānī (gest. 356/967)* by Sebastian Günther, *Die Welt des Islams New Series*, Vol. 33, Issue 2 (Nov., 1993), 289.

67 Al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 28–45.

68 Sebastian Günther, “Maqātil’ Literature in Medieval Islam,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 25, no. 3 (1994), 205.

given by the author as 313/928.⁶⁹ The entry on ‘Alī where the reports of his killing are presented follows the general systemization and pattern applied in each of the book’s entries: (a) an introduction to the personality under discussion: his name, genealogy, birthdate, and a description of his characteristics, merits, and personal peculiarities, followed by (b) the detailed *maqtal*-report itself, and (c) a conclusion to the article in the form of the usual elegiac poetry relating to the particular Ṭālibīd, although sometimes it is cited at a more convenient place before this point.⁷⁰

Considering that the reports featuring the romance portion of the killing plot, were placed alongside hundreds of individual narrations of the martyrdom of other Ṭālibīd descendants, the reader is clearly primed to uphold the martyrdom of ‘Alī too. The reports of ‘Alī’s killing are collected and narratively combined by Abū al-Faraj, and are preceded by other reports demonstrating his blood relation to the Prophet, his precedence and preeminence in the early Islamic community, his courage, and descriptions of his physical appearance. When ending this brief introductory section, the author notes that he included only short reports on ‘Alī’s merits, bound in their brevity to the book structure and plan. Reminding the reader of the status of the person killed intensifies the enormity of the act of killing. The sharp moral judgement upon the latter act is overtly expressed by the cursing phrase (*la’anahu -llāh*) with which the name of Ibn Muljam is consistently coupled (fourteen times across the article). In one instance, the curse is put in the dual form to cover both Ibn Muljam and Qaṭāmi. It is also pronounced on a certain ‘Umrān ibn Ḥaṭṭān who wrote verses in praise of Ibn Muljam for the killing. Abū al-Faraj quotes the two verses and comments: “liar may God curse them and torture them” (*kadhaba la’anahumā -llāh wa-’adhhabahumā*). In fact, similar insulting phrases aimed at Ibn Muljam are recurrent in various sources, and not only when narrating the actual murder (*la’anahu -llāh; la’anahu -llāh ta’ālā āmīn*). They are also coupled with complimentary phrases for ‘Alī (*raḍīya -llāhu ‘anhu; karrama -llāhu wajhahu, riḍwanu -Allāh ‘alayhi, ‘alayhi al-salām, ṣalawātu -llāh wa-riḍwānuhu ‘alayhi wa-raḥmatuhu*)—thus, they are not in this sense appealing only to one sectarian discourse.⁷¹ It is true that similar phrases may conform

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid, 205–206.

71 Mentioning references to those phrases in all the sources is very demanding. See for example Al-Mubarrad (d. 286/900), *al-Kāmil fī al-lughah wa-l-adab*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Hindāwī (Riyadh: Wizārat al-Awqāf al-Su‘ūdiyyah, 1998), 3/125, 147; Al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/918), *Al-Mu’jam al-kabīr*, ed. Ḥamdī bin ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Salafī, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyah, n.d.), 1/97; Abū ‘Alī al-Qālī (d. 356/967), *Amālī al-Qālī*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Jawād al-Aṣma‘ī, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1926), 2/255.

to the category of “paratexts,” and it is hard to confirm that they were written by the authors of the works they appear in, or were added later by copyists/editors. Yet, they still provide practical and interpretive guidance to the reader, as though placing the condemned killer and the praised victim in open confrontation within the lines of the text itself.

For Qaṭāmi: Killing from a Womanly Perspective

In his *Dhamm al-hawā* (*The Condemnation of Passion*), Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) starts “*bāb dhikr man ḥamalahu al-‘ishq ‘alā qatl al-nās*” (respecting those who were driven by infatuation and craving to murder) by citing a short version of the *khbar* on ‘Alī’s murder, featuring Ibn Muljam’s romance with Qaṭāmi.⁷² The work is suffused with a moralizing and sometimes even severe tone. It represents, among other thing, a “trend towards disparaging love in mediaeval Arabo-Islamic culture,”⁷³ as writers increasingly become “guided by a concern for the religious and moral questions entailed in love relationships.”⁷⁴ Although it is a different matter in this instance as it relates to a basic Islamic ethic that unequivocally condemns murders of any of the four caliphs. In some ways, the work echoes the last two chapters of the canonical *Ṭawq al-ḥamāmah* by Ibn Ḥazm, entitled: “The Ugliness of Sin” and “Fullness of Abstinence,” in which (especially in the last chapter) “we can detect a malaise, and we get the impression that Ibn Ḥazm has reached a dead end,”⁷⁵ in a departure from the poignant stories, narrated vividly in the preceding chapters, of cases of temptation to sexual transgressions.⁷⁶ *Ishq*, which is the intense desire for what one craves from his lover, i.e. their sexual union (*al-‘ishq shiddat al-shahwah li-nayl al-murād min al-ma‘shūq*),⁷⁷ had led Ibn Muljam to a bloody end. It was his

72 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Dhamm al-hawā*, ed. Khalid al-‘Alamī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1998), 410. See Stephan Leder, *Ibn al-Ġauzi und seine kompilation wider die leidenschaft: der Traditionalist in gelehrter ubertlieferung und originarer Lehre* (Wiesbaden, Beirut: OIB, 1984).

73 Jalal abd Alghani, “Mediaeval Arabic love theory between dissonance and consonance: Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā’ al-Rāzī and his argument against ‘Ishq,” *Acta orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 67, no. 3 (2014), 282.

74 Lois A. Giffen, “Ibn Ḥazm and the Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma,” in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 423.

75 Abdelfattah Kilito, *Arabs and the Art of Storytelling: A Strange Familiarity*, trans. Mbarek Sryfi and Eric Sellin (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 82. See “The Hostile Eye,” in *ibid*, 74–83 for a fuller examination of *The Dove’s Neck-Ring*.

76 Lois A. Giffen, “Ibn Ḥazm,” 427.

77 Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī (d. late 4th / early 11th century), “*al-farq bayn al-maḥabbah wa-l-‘ishq*” in *al-Furūq al-lughawīyah*, ed. Muḥammad Salīm (Cairo: Dār al-‘Ilm wa-l-Thaqāfah,

passion, according to the title of the chapter, which pushed him to kill. The historical anecdote featuring his pitiful romance is not presented here as an impersonal illustration of facts, but a cautionary tale; a further reason why passion is an emotion the reader must be cautious and careful about.

The chapter titles do not always carry practical prescriptions, though. Another short version of the Ibn Muġjam and Qaṭāmi story is, for example, encountered among tens of other reports listed consecutively without an obvious systematization effort, under a chapter entitled: “*Al-nisā’ wa-nikāḥuhunna wa-ṭalāquhunna wa-khaṭbuhunna wa-mu’āsharatuhunna wa-l-irās bi-hinna wa-māyuhmad wa-yudhamm minhunna wa-mā ittaṣala bi-dhālīka*” in *Rabī’ al-abrār* by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 583/1144).⁷⁸ Qaṭāmi here is a vital personification of the female archetype that weaponizes her qualities of feminine persuasion, ruse, and trickery. Her tempting manner in approaching Ibn Muġjam is noted accordingly. Comparing this version of the *khābar* with the one in al-Ṭabarī, one can detect how the selection of words in this text serves the establishment of the aforementioned female archetype. To Qaṭāmi is attributed the saying: “*lā aqna’ illah bi-ṣidāq usammīhi*” (I will not be contented but with a dowry I designate) instead of “*lā atazawwajuka ḥattā tashfiya lī*” (I will not marry you until you give me what I want) and “*tarūm dhālīka ghūlahu*” (you aim to furiously overtake him) instead of “*iltamis ghirratahu*” (look out for when he is off his guard). The reader is encouraged to take practical note of the overtly wicked wiles of women.

Remarkably, departing from the setting of the killing plot, we hear the voice of Qaṭāmi altercating with the famous poet Kuthayyir in a *khābar* reported in “*Bāb maḥāsīn al-mutakallimāt*” in the early pseudo-Jāḥiẓ’s *al-Maḥāsīn wa-l-aḍḍād* (d. 255/869),⁷⁹ and later in *Kitāb al-Aghānī* by al-Iṣfahānī, and

n.d.), 122. For the degrees of love, see Abū Manṣūr al-Tha’ālibī, *Fiqh al-lughah* (Cairo: Maṭba’at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1938), 171. Cf; Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Abī Ḥajalah, *Diwān al-Ṣabābah* ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Dusūqī (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Sina li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī’, 1994), 21; al-Alūsī, *Rūh al-ma’ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm* (Beirut: Dār Iḥiyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 12:227, where he explains love in the context of the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife’s feelings for him.

78 al-Zamakhsharī, *Rabī’ al-abrār*, ed. ‘Abd al-Amīr Muḥannā (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-‘Alamī, 1992), 5/257.

79 al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Maḥāsīn wa-l-aḍḍād* (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-‘Irfān, n.d.), 165–66. The book represents a literary genre, which developed in the course of the first centuries of the Islamic period, where the terms *maḥāsīn/masāwī* are not limited to a single connotation, such as good, positive, virtuous, proper, laudable, qualities and merits of that which is ḥasan (good)/bad, negative, vicious, improper, despicable, vices and faults of that which is ḥabīḥ (bad). See I. Gériès, EI², s.v. “*al-Maḥāsīn wa-l-Masāwī*”.

al-Muwashshaḥ by al-Marzubānī (d. 384/994).⁸⁰ According to the *khobar*, Kuthayyir pays Qaṭāmi a visit having in mind to rebuke her for the killing of ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib. He was advised not to go “as she’s got intellect unlike that of women” (*laysā ka-‘uqūl al-nisā’*). He insisted, and upon their meeting, she skillfully protests to his words and reproduces them with her improved articulation. She also weakens the verses of poetry he recites, as she quotes verses that are more eloquent by Imru’ al-Qays that allude to the same meaning.

The chapter heading “*maḥāsīn al-mutakallimāt*” proclaims in advance a certain evaluation, from the writer’s part, of the subjects discussed. This invites the reader to share such an evaluation, celebrating feminine eloquence, even before he recognizes which women are to be quoted and lauded next. In this literary and relatively entertaining context, the reader is given the chance to see Qaṭāmi from a different perspective, in a way that puts aside for a moment her role in the killing of ‘Alī, even if the account follows someone who visited her in order to reprimand her for that exact role. Practically speaking, the report observes the eloquence of a woman with exceptional intelligence, who serves within the report as a kind of literary critic, hinting at the humanistic character of the Islamic historiographical tradition.⁸¹

Conclusion

The *khobar* featuring the murder of ‘Alī, in *sanad-matn* disguise, is a case study that exhibits different possible approaches to a narrative text. (1) The “professional” and impersonal abstaining of al-Ṭabarī from any evaluative commentary when citing the *khobar* in his *History* allows favorable space for its “raw” historical representation, and so for diverse and independent reactions to the reports from the reader. (2) Nevertheless, the cloak of historical professionalism does not neutralize the touching poetic qualities of the text, exhibited phonetically, linguistically, and stylistically, especially in the verses

80 al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1994), 15/188–189; al-Marzubānī, *Al-Muwashshaḥ fī ma’ākhidh al-‘ulamā’ ‘alā al-shu‘arā’*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah), 186. Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889) transmits a parallel report as well, where “a woman” is said to meet the poet and argue with him. See Ibn Qutaybah, *al-Shīr wa-l-shu‘arā’*, ed. Aḥmad Shākir (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1958), 508.

81 In the reports transmitted by Al-Marzubānī in his *Muwashshaḥ*, she and other female celebrities are convoked to serve as “arbiters to pragmatically evaluate poetry”. See Mathias Hoorelbeke, “Une évaluation en contexte de la poésie: Le Kitāb Al-Muwaššah d’Al-Marzubānī (M. 384/994),” *Bulletin d’études orientales* 60 (2011), 242.

of poetry at the end of the prosaic reports. Subsequently, the evocation of the same *khavar* in far-ranging textual contexts bring forth abundant practical morals for their readers.

This makes the so-called “past” killing incident of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib “not significantly past at all,” but part of a present-future of practical concern, understood and valued for what it has to offer to us here and now.⁸²

82 Michael Oakeshott, *On History*, 41.