



HUMOR

HUMOR. To make jokes and enjoy them is a universal human characteristic manifesting itself in all cultures and in many different forms. Taking into account both its psychological and its social aspects, humor has been described as "... the relief felt at the momentary lifting of one of the many restrictions which the physical and social environment imposes upon man. A great variety of dealings among human beings is immediately classified as humor if there is any suggestion of a deviation from ordinary reality and the conventions of human society" (Rosenthal, p. 1).

Essentially humor arises in the actual contacts between people, in their conversation, when they make witty remarks or tell funny stories, as well as in their behavior. In the latter case, laughter may be elicited intentionally, e.g., by clowning or making practical jokes, but also unintentionally, if someone acts in a manner that provokes laughter or even ridicule. Humor is one of the most important ingredients of entertainment. However, it may also be used for ulterior motives. It may be used as a weapon in personal rivalries, especially between poets and writers who compete for the favors of a patron. Finally, humor plays a prominent role in society as an instrument of social and political criticism. In that function it often becomes the victim of censorship. Literature reflects these various kinds of humor and has created special genres of humorous writing.

Humor of a particular kind is frequently ascribed to a specific ethnic group. Its features are supposed to be easily recognizable both to members of the group and to outsiders. More often than not such ethnic associations are based on



little more than subjective taste and preconceptions. They result in stereotypes that cannot be substantiated and therefore are best avoided. In the present article no attempt will be made to describe the essence of Persian humor. The focus will be on a description and classification of the types of humor that can be found in Persian literary sources, mainly belonging to the classical period.

If the question whether or not specifically Persian humor really exists can be left aside, the label of “humor in Islam” is a different matter, first of all because this is defined not by racial but by social and religious criteria. It cannot be denied that in Islamic culture as a whole certain common views on humor have developed, which lend themselves to an objective description. It may even be said that a tradition of humorous discourse came into being, which has been laid down in a variety of literary texts.

Of fundamental importance is the question of the permissibility of humor as such in the light of Muslim ethics. This discussion is to be put into the perspective of the seriousness that basically should be the attitude of the true believer. A categorical condemnation of humor (*mezāḥ*) by the prophet is actually on record, but more nuanced views can equally be found in the prophetic Tradition. Though, in anticipation of the Final Judgment, weeping is to be preferred to laughter, there is not much harm in the occasional smile, as long as this does not become a habit, as too much and too exuberant laughter darkens the heart. The sort of joking that may be permitted is kindly intended and does not harm people or disparage their dignity. Such mild humor is usually called *moṭāyeba*, which could best be rendered by “gentle teasing.” The prophet himself occasionally joked with people, especially with women and children, if he wanted to cheer them up. A specimen of his humor is the remark that old women cannot enter Paradise. When an old woman who overheard him appeared to be very upset about this, he explained, “God first makes them younger than they ever have been” (cf. Moḥammad Ḡazāli, *Kimiā-ye sa’ādāt* II, pp. 480-83). The same anecdote appears in Jāmi’s *Bahārestān* and in the popular collection of humorous anecdotes and aphorisms, *Laṭā’ef al-ṭawā’ef*, by Faḳr-al-Din ‘Ali Ṣafī, known as Wā’ez-e Kāsefi (1463-1532).

There exists a common stock of humorous material—anecdotes, comic types, hilarious situations—which has been drawn upon in texts written in the various languages of Islamic culture, including Persian. The characters Bahlul and Juḥā, for instance, who are originally Arab clowns, appear frequently also in Persian comic tales. Persian writers of humorous vignettes, such as Sa’di and Jāmi, like to situate their anecdotes in the Arab countries and use comic



situations that are typically Arabic. Much of this comic material goes back to sources reporting on the ambiance of refined, fun-loving people (*ẓarīfs*) in such places as Medina and the cities of early Abbasid Iraq during the first Islamic centuries. They have been transmitted in many writings belonging to the general category of *adab* literature.

It is remarkable that the terminology of humor, even in present-day Persian usage, consists largely of Arabic loanwords. Its size is very considerable; a list of more than two hundred terms can be found in 'Ali-Aṣḡar Ḥalabī's monograph (pp. 97-180). The boundaries between their respective semantic fields are rather indistinct. The most comprehensive terms are *mezāḥ*, *ṭanz*, and *hazl*. The last mentioned has been extended into the generic appellation *hazliyāt*, which is used in particular for all sorts of light verse and occurs among the section headings in *divāns*. Together with its opposite, *jedd* ("seriousness"), it denotes the theme of the discourse about the permissibility of humor in Muslim ethics (cf. Pellat, *EI2*, s.v. "al-Djidd wa'l-hazl"). As opposed to good-natured joking, the category of satire or lampoon, called *hajw* (q.v) or *hejā*, is more problematic, because it deliberately aims at denting the reputation of the person being ridiculed. A funny story, usually very brief, is designated as *laṭīfa* (plural *laṭā'ef*) or *zāarifa* (plural *ẓarā'ef*). These words occur in the titles of collections containing comic anecdotes. The term *fokāḥiyāt* covers humorous compositions in verse and in prose. Recently, the Persian neologism *šuk-ṭab'i* (literally "aving a humorous bent or disposition") has gained currency, as well as *jok* (joke), the loanword from English, both by itself and in compound verbs such as *jok goftan* and *jok sāktan* (to tell jokes; to make up jokes).

In traditional Persian society the gathering of friends (*majles*) was the archetypical situation where humor thrived in the witty conversation of the guests as well as in the songs with which they were entertained. Such occasions could be the drinking (*našāt-e šarāb*) of a ruler with his boon companions at a court but also a private party with intimate friends. In lyrical poetry this conviviality forms the background to the prologues (*nasibs*) of panegyrics and to the Persian *ḡazal*, but these are serious lyrical genres, which hardly ever show traces of the hilarity also indulged in at such parties. However, the latter did leave its traces in two short topical *matnawīs*, an (untitled) poem by Mas'ud-e Sa'd-e Salmān and Sanā'i's *Kār-nāma-ye Balki* (also called *Moṭāyaba-nāma*), both written in the early 12th century C.E. The witticisms and jokes that spiced the conversation of courtiers are also



exemplified in the collections of occasional verses (*moqaṭṭa'āt*) and quatrains (*robā'iyāt*) to be found in the collected poetry of almost any Persian poet. Sa'di's *Golestān*, which contains many witty stories, was composed with the purpose of providing his friends with narrative material that could be useful in social life (cf. *Golestān*, p. 54).

A cross-section of the witty stories typical of humor in classical literature is contained in the sixth chapter (*Rawza*) of 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Jāmi's *Bahārestān* (pp. 96-121), a book written in imitation of Sa'di's *Golestān*. This chapter consists entirely of funny stories and poems suitable for use in conversation "to make the buds of the lips laugh and bring the blossom of the hearts into flower." The collection starts with a few specimens of the humor displayed by the prophet and then continues with funny stories and poems featuring various people and social types about whom jokes commonly were made. Sometimes the Arabic origin is made explicit, e.g., by referring to caliphs (Mo'āwiya, Hārūn-al-Rašid), uncivilized bedouins, the clowns Bahlul and Juḥā, and Arabic scholars, poets, and writers such as Asma'i, Farazdaq, and Jāḥeẓ. The cities of Baghdad and Basra are specified as locations by Jāmi, but in other stories major Persian cities such as Nišāpur, Balkh, and Ghazna also occur. Anonymous persons who figure in these stories include descendants of 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb, religious scholars, preachers, doctors, poets, craftsmen, and slaves, but also beggars, people with a handicap, a deformation of the face or the body, and simpletons. The funny part of the story is a hilarious situation, but very often the clue is hidden in a witty exchange of arguments. Jāmi also does not shun telling bawdy jokes about prostitutes or illicit forms of sexual intercourse, or an unsavory tale about a vomiting drunk who is approached by a dog.

Obscenity has always been a favorite comic effect in all kinds of classical Persian humor. This includes both hetero- and homosexual acts and the accusation of being a cuckold or a pimp (*qaltabān*), as well as the use of vulgar expressions for the sexual organs. This feature of Persian humor had often been denounced by modern critics, both in Persia and in the West, and has received scant attention. A notorious example is Sa'di's collection of *hazliyāt*, in poetry and prose, which is better known as the *Ḳabiṭāt* ("Perverse Pieces"). In an introduction Sa'di notes that he wrote them against his will for the decadent pleasure of a princely patron, and mentions the 12th century poet Suzani as the eponym of this kind of scabrous literature. The most scandalous parts of the collection are "three mock homilies of incredible coarseness"



(Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* II, p. 532), which preach a perversion of the sexual norms. Although they belong to Sa'di's collected works in most manuscripts and were printed in 19th-century lithographed editions, modern editors have taken a more prudish attitude by either bowdlerizing these texts or leaving them out altogether (see further Yohannan, pp. 110-15).

The relaxation of the mind, which was ascribed to humor, must have been the main reason for its rather surprising appearance in Persian mystical poetry. Even in the great didactical works—notably Sanā'i's *Ḥadiqat al-ḥaqīqa* (q.v.), the *maṭnawīs* by Farid-al-Din 'Aṭṭār (q.v.), and Rumi's *Maṭnawī-e ma'nawī*—funny stories occur as illustrations of the poet's exposition of mystical and ethical themes. Quite often they are not merely funny but downright obscene and contain the same taboo words which any street entertainer might use. In Sanā'i's *Ḥadiqat* a great variety of comic types appear, including male and female prostitutes (cf. de Bruijn, 1995). There is also much obscenity to be found in the lyric verse of this great religious poet (cf. Zipoli, 2001).

The freedom with which classical authors dealt with sexual matters, in particular through the mention of the taboo words for the sexual organs and racy, often exceedingly coarse stories, has been drastically curtailed in more recent times. A clear sign of this is the necessity felt by present-day editors to purge classical texts of such expressions and replace them by dots (cf. Sprachman, 1995).

A more subtle kind of humor is irony, a feature of Persian lyrical poetry exemplified at its finest in Ḥāfeẓ's *gāzals*. It is used in particular in his denunciations of insincerity and false piety, e.g., when he contrasts the hypocrite preacher of the town (*wā'eẓ-e šahr*) with the sincere sinner, the “drunk” (*rend*), arguing “an animal does not become human by not drinking wine” (*Divān*, ed. Kānlari, no. 220).

The genre of humor in traditional Persian literature most appealing to modern readers is undoubtedly the parody of an intertextual kind. Sometimes this may be combined with satire, when the victim is a rival of the author whom he really wants to hurt (for this aspect see s.v. HAJW). However, parodies were often not intended personally but aimed at making fun of certain genres of serious literature merely to provide entertainment. Perhaps most of the poems of the notorious satirist Suzani (d. 569/1173) should be read in this manner, because he often targeted poets who were not his contemporaries and hence



could not have been a threat to him in his professional life. Literary considerations undoubtedly were prominent in the case of ‘Obayd-e Zākāni of Shiraz (d. ca. 772/1370). In his parodies in prose and poetry—usually going together in one composition—the targets are genres of serious writing. In the *Aklāq al-ašrāf* (The ethics of the noble), for instance, he wrote a textbook of “alternative” ethics preaching a doctrine containing the opposites of the accepted virtues, which are said to be “abolished.” In the *Riṣ-nāma* (The book of the beard) a personification of the beard engages in a hilarious dispute with a poet on the merits of the beard, which, as the appearance of the first hair on the chin of a youngster, was a stock item of lyrical poetry with clear homosexual overtones. Modern interpreters have surmised that ‘Obayd’s intention was to criticize the social and political degeneration of his own days. However, the entertainment value of such mock compositions should not be underrated. A political background is undeniably to be understood in the humorous fable *Muš o gorba* (The mice and the cat). In a series of *Ṭa’rifāt* (Definitions) ‘Obayd mocks all kinds of jargon used in social discourse, especially by scholars and the literati. His *Resāla-ye delgošā* (The heartwarming [or cheer-making] treatise) is a collection of funny stories, alternatively in Arabic and Persian. Parody in poetry continued to flourish in southern Persia throughout the 15th century C.E. Bushāq (Abu Eshāq) Aṭ’ema (q.v.) a cotton-carder in Shiraz, used culinary motifs in his *Divān-e aṭ’ema* (The divan of food) in parodies of poems by Ḥāfeẓ and the great mystic Šāh Ne‘mat-Allāh-e Wali. In *Divān-e albasa* (The divan of clothing) garments were the specialty of another parodist, Maḥmud Qāri of Yazd (on both poets, see Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* III, pp. 344-53). According to Ḍabiḥ-Allāh Šafā, the upsurge of satirical writing in the first centuries after the Mongol conquest was an effect of the great disturbances in the political and social life of Persia (cf. *Adabiyāt* III/1, pp. 86-97, 333).

In modern Persian literature certain forms of classical humor in poetry and prose survived, but they were applied in new ways and in new genres, which were introduced mainly under Western influences. Political upheavals and the profound transformation of traditional life in Persia since the beginning of the 20th century affected the function of humor. With the disappearance of courtly patronage, the personal motivation for satire became less important. If individuals still were lampooned, this was done within the framework of issues of a wider public interest, such as the politics of the day, and the exposure of corruption and social injustices.



Already before the outbreak of the Constitutional Revolution, in the first decade of the 20th century, it was realized that criticism of the backwardness of late Qajar Persia could best be expressed in the form of humor. The genre of the satirical novel owed much to James Morier's *Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824; q.v.), whose satirical picture of early Qajar society was translated into Persian and became very popular. An original work in the same genre is Zayn-al-'Ābedin Marāḡa'i's *Siāḡat-nāma-ye Ebrāhim Beg* (The travelogue of Ibrahim Beg), a description of the deplorable state of Persia during the reign of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah as it was revealed to a Persian nationalist who, living in exile, had conceived unrealistic ideas about the grandeur and prosperity of his homeland. The rise of an independent press during the years of the Constitutional Revolution opened up fresh opportunities for satirical journalism both in verse and in prose. The most brilliant examples were the columns under the heading *Ĉarand o parand* (Charivari, or fiddle-faddle, see [ĈARAND PARAND](#)) in which 'Ali-Akbar Deḡodā (q.v.) commented with superb wit on current affairs. In the short story, which from 1920 onwards became the dominant form of modern prose literature, humor was an effective device to criticize the wrongs of contemporary society. Some of the best specimens are to be found already in Moḡammad-'Ali Jamālzāda's *Yaki bud yaki nabud* (Once upon a time), the first collection of Persian short stories. Language became an important device in humorous writing. Jamālzāda made use of the differences in speech habits to characterize social types, such as the traditional mulla and the westernizing intellectual. Ṣādeq Hedāyat (Sadeq Hedayat; q.v.) followed him in his effort to fill the gap between literary Persian and the spoken language in all its great variety. He tried to record the coarse humor of popular speech in the novelette *'Alawiya Kānom* (q.v.), which describes a group of people on their pilgrimage to the shrine of the Imam Musa'l-Rezā at Mašhad. Most modern writers who use humor in their works do so against the background of serious and often tragic plots. This is the case, for instance, in Hedāyat's novel *Ḥāji Āqā* (q.v.), portraying a profiteer in his shady wheeling and dealing at the time of World War II. Political satire remained alive in modern Persian prose, in spite of changes of regime. Hušang Golširi (q.v.) in the 1970s wrote in the story "Mardi bā kerāvāt-e sork" (The man with the red tie) a hilarious monologue put into the mouth of a Sāvāk agent; he also ridiculed the prohibition of alcohol after the Islamic Revolution in "Fath-nāma-ye mogān" (The proclamation of victory of the magians). One of the most popular humorous writers of recent decades was Iraj Pezeškzād, whose novel *Dā'i Jān Nāpel'on* (q.v.; Dear Uncle Napoleon, 1973; tr. Dick Davis as *My Uncle Napoleon*, Washington, D.C., 1996) ridicules



the obsession with conspiracy theories (q.v.) of many Persians. As a journalist he wrote columns making fun of the literary scene of the 1950s which were later collected under the title *Āsemun rismun* (This and that, 1964).

Political conditions in Persia made it hazardous to write openly on political issues, even under the guise of humor. Long periods of severe restrictions were interrupted only briefly by times when a certain freedom of expression was allowed. Already in the late 19th century Persian writers in exile produced the kind of literature that directly challenged the ruling regime from the outside. In spite of this, a tenacious tradition of subversive writing continued within Persia, applying the perennial subterfuge of humor as its armor. From the time of the Constitutional Revolution onwards, an effective medium for ventilating criticism in a funny manner has been the periodical press. Numerous journals have been on the market for a longer or shorter period, frequently reappearing under new titles when they were closed down by the authorities. The journal *Tawfiq*, which began to appear in the 1930s, managed to prolong its existence for a long time and has become an almost legendary example. During the Moṣaddeq years (1952-53) *Čalangar* (The locksmith) was published by Moḥammad-‘Ali Afrāšta (q.v.), a forceful political satirist, who in 1953 fled the country as a member of the Tude party. After the Islamic Revolution the journal *Asġar āqā* was published in London by Hādi Kōrsandi. Another modern vehicle of political satire which emerged early in the last century was the cartoon, which was the more influential as it could reach a much wider, illiterate public (for specimens see the illustrations in Browne, *Press and Poetry*, and Javadi).

There was always more space for humor that censures social wrongs. Iraj Mirzā (q.v.), whose humorous poems published in the 1920s are still very popular, defended in particular the case of women in Persia. Other modern poets famous for their humorous verse were ‘Abbās Forāt and Abu’l-Qāsem Ḥālat (q.v.) who both wrote for the journal *Tawfiq*. Sa‘di’s *Golestān* continued to inspire modern Persian writers also as a model for satire. On this model the *al-Tafāṣil* (Detailed expositions), a satirical collection by the poet Fereyduṅ Tavalloli, was based. Although drama only became a literary genre in early modern times, at the popular level theatrical performances have a long history in Persia. Undoubtedly, humor was always prominent on the repertoire of storytellers, the plays presented by puppeteers, and in the acts of jesters. The first modern plays to be introduced were adaptations in Persian of the comedies of Molière. At the court of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, who was a great lover



of drama, a small theatre was built in the palace where farces were performed, such as *Baqqālbāzi dar ḥożur*, commenting on the reforms proposed in 1871 by Ḥosayn Khan Sepahsālār. Original work for the theater, written on the lines of Western drama, were the comedies of Mirzā Faḥ-‘Ali Ākūndzāda (q.v.) in Azeri Turkish; they were adapted in Persian by Mirzā Moḥammad-Ja‘far Qarājadāgi. Three plays by Mirzā Āqā Tabrizi (formerly ascribed to Malkom Khan) satirized the oppression of the people by corrupt local governors. Very soon these early plays were translated into European languages, where they were appreciated both for their satire and their use of colloquialisms. In the Pahlavi period, the development of dramatic art, including both films and theatrical productions was promoted by the government. Besides the obvious influences of Western models, popular Persian traditions, for which the interest was increasing, also provided an inspiration. An example is the character of the black clown (*siāhbāzi*). Biżan Mofid’s *Šahr-e qeṣṣa* (The city of stories) of 1968 is a social satire based on children’s stories, which was put on the stage with the use of animal masks.

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