

Crashing the Text: Speaking of Eating in *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim*

Emily Selove
University of California, Los Angeles

Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim, probably written in the eleventh century by the otherwise unknown al-Azdī,¹ tells the story of a Baghdadi party-crasher crashing a party in Isfahan. In his introduction, the author explains that the events represented occupy a day and a night, and can be read in that same amount of time. He also tells us that the Baghdadi guest, who dominates the conversation with his alternately obscene and elegant tirades, represents the entirety of Baghdad, and indeed a kind of microcosm of creation. The *Ḥikāya*, a real-time representation of a feast, is in fact an all-inclusive banquet of words, incorporating elements of a wide variety of contemporary and ancient Arabic poetry.

Many scholars of the *Ḥikāya* have looked to the text as an example of realism, hoping to find within its pages a true-to-life microcosm of medieval Baghdad.² Although the *Ḥikāya* brims with words for household furniture and food, these scholars are inevitably disappointed in their quest for a realistic depiction of the everyday, which they complain is marred by the overabundance and obscenity of Abū al-Qāsim's speech.³ For what they in fact receive is a parodic and grotesque portrait, more about language itself than about reality. Abū al-Qāsim tells us things about Baghdad we may find nowhere else in literature: the sounds of the water-wheels in the river, a story about excrement in the streets, and Baghdadi swimming strokes with names like "the scorpion" and "the peacock," named but not described. For right at the moment it seems that Abū al-Qāsim's discourse bring the physical presence of the city closer than ever before, at the next moment his speech seems, like Baghdad itself, a mere literary figment, elaborately imagined.

¹ On questions of authorship, see my forthcoming dissertation, '*Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim* and the World of Satire,' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2012).

² The first editor of the *Ḥikāya*, Adam Mez, introduced it as such in 1902, and many have followed his lead. See Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Abū al-Muṭahhar al-Azdī, *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī / Abūlkāsim: ein bagdāder Sittenbild*, ed. by Adam Mez (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1902), p. xii, and G.E. Von Grunebaum, 'Aspects of Arabic Urban Literature,' *Al-Andalus*, 20 (1955), 259-281 (p. 275), and Francesco Gabrieli, 'Abū'l-Muṭahhar al-Azdī,' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2, 12 volumes (London: Brill, 1960-2006) 12 (2005), 31.

³ See especially Josef Horowitz, "Abū 'l-Kāsim," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 4 volumes (Leiden: Brill, 1913-1936), I (1913), 133, and M.J. De Goeje, 'Abulkasim von Muhammad ibn Ahmad, hrsg. von Mez,' *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen*, 164 (1902), 723-736 (p. 723).

Like many seeming works of realism from medieval and ancient literatures, the *Ḥikāya* is a reaction to traditional literary notions of depiction and mimesis. Thus it represents less a comment about reality itself than about the failure of literature to depict reality. The title alone, difficult to translate, seems to hover between a promise of a realistic portrait and a grotesque parody.⁴ However, even if Azdī is providing, as he seems to promise, an imitation or mimicry of contemporary Baghdad or Baghdadi speech, mimicry itself can imply not necessarily a faithful reproduction of the thing imitated, but a grotesque exaggeration.

To create this imitation, the author gathered from a wide range of sources, old and new, and “passed them off as his own.”⁵ Indeed Abū al-Qāsim touches on many genres of high-flying Arabic *adab* (*belles-lettres*), often quoting well-known sources from the classical literary tradition. These poetic recitations set off his rhymed prose lists of Baghdadi goods and foodstuffs, which go on for pages listing item after obscure item in a sometimes baffling effusion. Abū al-Qāsim’s bombastic or grotesque poetry and prose both stand in contrast to his conversational exchanges with his half-stunned audience, as well as to the narrator’s voice, which speaks rarely and simply. Thus the *Ḥikāya* weaves contrasting registers of Arabic literature into a continuous dinner conversation. To take an example, Abū al-Qāsim, having hinted (not so subtly) that he is hungry, is asked what he would like to eat. He replies with an acrobatic recitation of literary requests not only for food, but for gifts fit for the guest of a king: a swift charger, a choice singing girl, fine clothing, and so on.⁶ When the other guests complain that they are intimidated by these extravagant requests, Abū al-Qāsim makes a more realistic request in prose: “A soft loaf, cheese that weeps, strips of local meat, tender and smiling, something from the ready foods of the market, and whatever lingering little bites you have around, like pickled snacks.”⁷ Then the narrator describes food brought to the table even more simply, mentioning

⁴The word *ḥikāya*, as in the title *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim* could mean an imitation or mimicry, or a story. In his *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article, “Ḥikāya,” Charles Pellat characterizes *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim* as the “link in the chain” between the original use of the word *ḥikāya* to mean “imitation or mimesis,” and its modern meaning of “story or relation” because it was written during a time the word seems to have changed in meaning (*Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2, III (1966), 367-72).

⁵Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. All citations of the *Ḥikāya* are from ‘Abbūd al-Shālji’s edition, which credits Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, instead of Abū al-Muṭahhar al-Azdī, with authorship: (Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *Al-Risālah al-Baghdādiyyah* (Koln: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 1980), p. 42).

⁶This poem (minus an obscene line or two) also appears in al-Hamadhānī’s “Al-Maqāmah al-sāsāniyya,” in which the chameleon Abū al-Faṭḥ recites it while disguised as one of the Banū Sāsān beggar clan (Badī’ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, *Maqāmāt* (Beirut: Dar el-Mashriq, 1968), pp. 93-4). Thus we can read this poem as typical of a rascally Bānū Sāsān character. But Abū al-Qāsim, like Abū Zayd, never adheres to one genre for long.

⁷Translation mine. Al-Tawḥīdī, p. 277.

“a platter of the cheese he had asked for, and some pickled things.” Though Abū al-Qāsim is not exactly cheerful at the spread, so simply described, he brightens up when a lamb dish follows, apparently forgetting his outrageous requests in verse, as well as his lists of elaborately superior items to which he implied the Baghdadis were accustomed. Thus the substance and intricacy of Abū al-Qāsim’s requests for food are adversely proportional to the material sustenance given him to eat – only when he makes his request in simple terms is he fed. However, he greets each dish with another literary outburst.

Works of Arabic *adab* often include many contrasting discourses, old and new, edifying and frivolous, and some also use the setting of a dinner party to present a literary feast. Though unique in many ways, *Hikāyat Abī al-Qāsim* falls within a pan-Mediterranean tradition of sympotic literature, or texts depicting literary banquets. In one Arabic example, Ibn Buṭlān’s *Da’wat al-Aṭibbā’* (The Physician’s Dinner-Party),⁸ a stingy doctor invites a young aspiring physician to his house for dinner, but allows him to eat very little, saying it is bad for his health. The doctor’s friends arrive at the dinner, and each discusses his medical field of specialty. Thus the banquet consists of a multi-course meal of conversation, but very little actual food. Ibn Buṭlān, himself a physician, was certainly influenced by the Greek tradition of medical and philosophical literature. Dimitri Gutas has shown that even Plato’s *Symposium* was not unknown to Arabic writers.⁹ However, although we cannot say for certain that Azdī himself was familiar with the writings of the “ancients” he makes reference to in his introduction (indeed we cannot say for certain that his name was Azdī), the connections between the two traditions are palpable enough for us to discuss them side by side.

Classical sympotic texts (Plato’s *Symposium*, and Trimalchio’s dinner-party (the *Cena*) in the *Satyricon* being two of the most famous examples), explore the relationship of description and reality by setting various literary depictions of pleasure in a context of the real physical pleasure of a party. Furthermore, in these classical texts, unusual patterns of consumption often play against unusual literary productions, or replace the consumption of food with the consumption of conversation and literature. The guests at the *Symposium* famously forego the typical pleasures of a banquet for the pleasures of an intellectual debate. In the *Cena*, the superstitious, shocking, colloquial speech of the social-climbing freedmen garnishes the indigestibly showy, hybrid foodstuffs provided by Trimalchio.

⁸ Al-Mukhtār ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Buṭlān, *Da’wat al-aṭibbā’* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2002).

⁹ Dimitri Gutas, ‘Plato’s *Symposium* in the Arabic Tradition,’ in *Greek Philosophers in the Arabic Tradition* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), pp. 36-60.

Encolpius, the (anti-)hero of the *Satyricon*, is an outsider to Trimalchio's party, if not himself a crasher, and he asks his neighbor to explain the events and people that he sees there. His freedman interlocutor not only describes and explains the feast, but helps color its seedy atmosphere with his low, colloquial dialect. Because of this layered portrayal of the proceedings, Erich Auerbach credits Petronius with producing a representation of a social milieu by means of mimetic speech, which representation is "closer to our modern conception of a realistic presentation than anything else that has come down to us from antiquity."¹⁰ However, in all of these texts, the replacement of food with talk raises the question of the insubstantiality of speech, which cannot fill your belly, thus complicating any claims to realism these texts might otherwise have.¹¹

Similarly hailed as an early attempt at realism, the *Hikāya* also replaces consumption itself with depictions of consumption, and conversation about absent food as well as sex, music, and material goods dominate the feast. This conversation does not match the food or events at the party in nature, as does the speech of the freedmen in the *Cena*. For although the dinner served at the Isfahani party seems modest enough, Abū al-Qāsim's elaborate foodstuff-laden speech leaves audience and reader alike with a feeling of dazzled overfullness. This dinner conversation is not a realistic representation of the food served, but a false display of a sumptuous feast, whose grand, luxurious offerings of gourmet meals, sex, cushions and song, like Abū al-Qāsim's incredible ravings, are ultimately just indigestible words. Azdī promises us a written mimesis of Baghdad, but throughout his text, there is a tension between words and reality, emphasized by this replacement of banquet with text. Abū al-Qāsim exchanges his wordy descriptions that may not describe something real in Baghdad, for real food at a party in Isfahan that is hardly described at all.

The frustration of being served a meal of words instead of real food is a common theme in contemporaneous Arabic literature.¹² In Hamadhānī's "Al-

¹⁰Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 30.

¹¹The *Satyricon* of Petronius contains many fruitful points of comparison with the *Hikāya*. Like the *Hikāya*, it draws extensively from traditional literatures, and yet defies categorization or definition with its unique structure that confirms to no one prior genre. Like the *Hikāya*, its dating and authorship have been the subject of considerable debate, and the history of its preservation and transmission is something of a mystery, especially given its obscene content. Von Grunebaum likens the *Hikāya* to the *Satyricon*, calling it a "realistic caricature," thus capturing the tension between realism and representation in these works ("Aspects of Arabic Urban Literature," p. 281). In the introduction to his translation, René Khawam also compares the two works, saying of al-Azdī, "On est en droit de le considerer comme le Pétrone arabe" (*Vingt-Quatre Heures de la vie d'une canaille* (Paris: Éditions Phébus, 1998), p. 10). Khawam here refers chiefly to both works' delightful uses of obscenity and humor.

¹²This topic is addressed throughout Geert Jan van Gelder's *Of Dishes and Discourse* (Richmond; Surrey: Curzon, 2000), as well as in Emily Gower's *The Loaded Table*, which explores similar tropes in Latin literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

maqāmah al-maḍīriyyah” a host, reminiscent of Trimalchio in his tastelessness, and almost as long-winded as Abū al-Qāsim, boasts so much to his guest about his food and household accoutrements that the guest becomes disgusted and unable to eat.¹³ “In [this story],” comments Daniel Beaumont, “language does not disclose reality, it is rather a deafening roar which obscures it.”¹⁴ In al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s *Kitāb al-Taṭfīl* (another 11th-century Baghdadi party-crashing book), a man describes a pastry so deliciously that his friend grows angry. “What do you think,” says the man, “O Abū al-‘Abbās, about jawzīnaj’s light and flaky crust, and the power of its sweetness, drowning in sugar and oiled nuts?” To which Abū al-‘Abbās replies, “If the pastry were only here right now, I would savor its presence so much more than your description. But as it is not, please let us do without more description as we must do without the pastry itself.”¹⁵ In a similar anecdote, someone asks the famous gourmand and party-crasher Bunān what he thinks about the pastry fālūdhaj. “Should anyone,” he replies, “asking about fālūdhaj in this earthly life refer to intellect or reason? You simpleton! Eat it!”¹⁶ Other party-crashers in the same text advise avoiding conversation altogether during a feast, as it interferes with the chewing process, further highlighting the tension between talking and eating.¹⁷

On the other hand, almost all of these party-crashers get fed by means of their silver tongues; indeed in a society that values eloquence above all else, one may make a living eating one’s words, so to speak, by exchanging praise and poetry for daily bread. *Kitāb al-Taṭfīl*, the *Cena*, and many other tales of Mediterranean banquet texts share in common this interest in party-crashers or parasites, who exchange words for food.¹⁸

The parasite is a pervasive figure in banquet literature, and he often seems to serve the role of intratextual narrator of the text as banquet. For example, in many banquet texts, the narration occurs through the perspective of an outsider to the feast: in Plato’s *Symposium*, the narrator Apollodorus hears his tale from Aristodemus, who tagged along to the party with Socrates, uninvited by the host (Socrates makes witty literary excuses, saying “To the feasts of the good the

¹³ For a translation, see Badī’ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, *Maqāmāt*, translated by W. J. Pendergast (London: Curzon Press, 1973), pp. 88-98.

¹⁴ ‘A Mighty and Never Ending Affair’, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 24 (1999), 139-159 (p. 159).

¹⁵ Abū Bakr Aḥmad Ibn ‘Alī al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Taṭfīl wa ḥikāyāt al-ṭufaylīyyīn wa akhbāruhum wa nawādir kalāmihim wa ash’āruhum*, ed. by Bassām ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Jābī (Beirut: Dār Ibn Hazim, 1999), p. 105.

¹⁶ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, p. 155.

¹⁷ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, pp. 111, 131.

¹⁸ The parasite is not a party-crasher because he is invited. Both parasite and party-crasher, however, earn their bread in essentially the same fashion. Thus the party-crasher is basically an uninvited parasite. For the Roman tradition of social parasitism in literature, see Philip Corbett, *The Scurra* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986).

good unbidden go.”)¹⁹ In the *Satyricon*, Encolpius, a stranger and a buffoon wherever he goes, attends Trimalchio’s banquet for a free meal, and continuously asks his neighboring diner for explanations of the scene. These explanations allow both Encolpius and the readers a glimpse into the world of Trimalchio.

In the *Hikāya*, the dominant perspective is also that of a party-crasher, Abū al-Qāsim. However, Abū al-Qāsim does not narrate the banquet that he sees, but rather drowns out its description and the comments of its Isfahani guests with his ravings. The *Hikāya* therefore resembles the tradition of narrating through the lens of an outsider to the feast, but with a twist, because at this party, the uninvited guest takes over the banquet, commanding as if he, the guest, is now the host. Likewise his speech dominates the text, shoving the scenery, the other characters, and reality itself to the margins. Thus Abū al-Qāsim represents a twist on the typical role of the party-crasher as guide to the reader, because he makes the party his own,²⁰ and he replaces the real Isfahani feast that might have been described, with a force-feeding of his words. The other guests at the party in the *Hikāya* at once represent the reality which is occluded by Abū al-Qāsim’s grotesque speech—the simple Isfahani party about which we hear so little—and also the experience of the reader when confronted with the *Hikāya* and the representation of Baghdad as a literary bully, impossible to resist, difficult to question, eminently entertaining but nauseatingly overabundant. The reader is united with the audience in their reaction to Abū al-Qāsim, who has hijacked the party and the text, making the original members of the banquet and the readers alike outsiders in their shocked response.

In the few studies of *Hikāyat Abī al-Qāsim*, a few key passages receive the most attention: the introduction of the author, as well as the opening pages of the story in which Abū al-Qāsim himself is described, and various of the more outrageous and notable outbursts of the protagonist. But few notice the comments of the largely silent Isfahani party-goers, and the modest comforts offered at the banquet Abū al-Qāsim crashes. Indeed with uninterrupted quotations from the protagonist, some as long as ninety-three pages (in Shālījī’s edition), it can be easy to forget that there is anyone else at the party. For the most part,

¹⁹Plato, *Symposium*, translated by Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1996), p. 14. This is a sentiment the prophet Muhammad himself would have approved, as demonstrated by early chapters of al-Khaṭīb’s *Kitāb al-Taḥfīl*, in which the prophet brings uninvited guests along to parties, or lets strangers follow him on his way to a feast.

²⁰This in itself is not unusual behavior for Arabic party-crashers, who seem to question the very premise of ownership by their behavior. In one story in *Kitāb al-Taḥfīl*, for example, a very pushy crasher wonders silently to himself, “Whose house is this?” and then answers his own question saying, “It’s yours, man, until someone says otherwise” (Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, p. 112).

Abū al-Qāsim only grudgingly entertains questions and grows furious and abusive if the guests laugh at his monologues. But by focusing on the few moments when Abū al-Qāsim converses with the other guests, one learns something about his character, and a little about the hypothetical but realistic party of people in awe of his shocking and literary speech, which is so overabundant that they hardly have time to digest what he is saying or the food they are eating. Indeed Abū al-Qāsim's conversation is almost indigestible, and though the other guests attempt to engage him in conversation and laugh at his jokes, he never really allows them to respond, as he drowns out their meal with his words.

The first to try to talk besides the protagonist is a "tough guy" (*jald*) from the crowd, who puts an end to Abū al-Qāsim's initial display of piety. At first the crowd, moved by his passion, respond as the audience of a pious exhortation should—with pious tears. But after all, they are at a party, and soon the crasher is cut short with an abrupt "Never mind!" from the tough guy, "There's no one in this crowd but drinks and fucks!"²¹ This exclamation follows the tough guy's suddenly "understanding" Abū al-Qāsim (*yaftan lahu*), though what precisely he understands could be a subject for debate. Monica Balda might argue that he "understands" that Abū al-Qāsim is not really pious, as his tearful recitations suggest, but is only a rogue putting on an act.²² The tough guy may understand, at least, that Abū al-Qāsim is not *merely* pious, or that he has more to offer in the way of un-asked-for party entertainment than pious recitations. Either way, he suggests that Abū al-Qāsim's religious display is inappropriate for the party in question, composed of a group of people in a private convivial setting, who could handle sterner stuff in the way of entertainment. Despite the tough guy's braggadocio, the crowd will soon realize that Abū al-Qāsim's conversation is in fact much more than they can handle.

The party-crasher smiles at the guest's remark, and changes his manner entirely until the end of the tale. He takes off his sombre hood, relaxes his demeanour, and begins to insult each member of the feast, asking the other guests first to identify one another, saying "who is such-and-such?" We can compile a guest-list from their brief responses: first there is the "tough guy," then an eru-

²¹ Tawhīdī, p. 55.

²² In her character study of Abū al-Qāsim, 'Marginalité et éloquence contestatoire,' Balda argues that Abū al-Qāsim, as he exposes the hypocrisy of the other guests, is himself a hypocrite—a rogue who only wears the mask of piety (in *Identidades Marginales* ed. by Cristina de la Puente (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2003), 371-93 (pp. 378-9). It seems, however, he is a genuine embodiment of opposites, and is described as such in several locations in the text, and particularly in the opening pages of the story, which includes a long list of often contrasting adjectives. In the final lines of the text, the narrator writes again that he is a "gathering of the beautiful and the hideous" (Tawhīdī, p. 391).

dite man named (“for example”)²³ Abū Bishr, then a secretary or writer (*kātib*), and an “important” (*khaṭīr*) man connected to the chief of a government bureau, his black servant, a visitor and friend of the leaders of the community, a *ṭunbūrī* player, a joker, a butler, a beardless youth, and the host. Later in the party we learn there is also a man sitting silently, plus two friends, an *‘ūd* player, a singer, a slave-girl, and a slave boy. With the exception of the young and attractive members of the party, who are instead made the victims of Abū al-Qāsim’s sexual aggression, each of these party-goers is lambasted by the crasher as being the worst of a stereotype: for example, the writer is an illiterate idiot, and the “important” man is in charge of guarding the duck guano on the river bank, and only brings a servant to puff himself up. The guest introduced as a “joker” receives the most scathing and lengthy round of insults, and indeed almost leaves the party in humiliation. This aggression of the protagonist is particularly telling, as Abū al-Qāsim, despite his entertainingly outrageous behavior, does not want to be identified as a joker himself. He may be funny, but he will not stand to be laughed at, and thus leaves the audience unable to interact with him at all. He denies that every other guest properly suits his category or profession, and himself refuses to be classified in a category.

Any audience in a Mediterranean sympotic text would recognize a fool as a familiar dinner guest, his function including humorous insults for each guest. However Abū al-Qāsim refuses to inhabit this paradigm, and during his insults the crowd seems uncertain whether they should try to defend the other guests or to play along, trying both strategies alternately. At first, they seem hopeful that he is there to entertain them, and is himself another joker: for example, they join him in a hearty chorus of “his beard in your bum!”²⁴ (Abū al-Qāsim’s favorite insult, directed in this case toward the house steward). Thus they encourage his verbal barbs.²⁵ Indeed the crasher soon demands to be fed, reinforcing the

²³ The entire text is in fact narrated in a hypothetical, past-continuous tense, as in “Abū al-Qāsim would walk into a party, and say something like...” Thus the party is presented merely as an example of something that might regularly occur.

²⁴ Tawhīdī, p. 80.

²⁵ The host even complains “There’s no one left in the party for you to mention but me!” inviting a rain of insults on his own head (though these are relatively restrained; Abū al-Qāsim does seem reluctant to bite the hand that might feed him). The host’s complaint about being left out of the fun suggests that Abū al-Qāsim’s insults could still serve the socially recognized function of entertaining the guests, and exchanging, in semi-professional manner, words for food; this kind of insult could be amusing and even flattering. The emperor Vespasian is said to have similarly solicited a joker’s ridicule, and Carlin Barton explains in her *Sorrow of the Ancient Romans* how insulting dinner guests may ward off envy and evil eye (Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 108 f. In her *Garden of Priapus*, Amy Richlin likens the satirist to the garden god Priapus, whose phallus threatens and wards off the “chthonic forces” (p. 113). She nevertheless reads satire as an often socially conservative act of ritual reversal and even violence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). An overly positive Bakhtinian reading of Abū al-Qāsim’s violent speech would indeed seem idealistic.

impression that he is engaged in an exchange. So the crowd continues to play along when he exclaims, "There's not a living man among you, Arab or otherwise!" "What do we say?" they ask, encouraging him to go on, "What do we do?" Abū al-Qāsim responds with sexual and financial advice so immoral that one guest makes the terrible mistake of laughing out loud; the protagonist, who hates above all to be laughed at, erupts into a blasphemous and scatological tirade whose fury he hardly matches again during an entire day of scatological outbursts. "What are you laughing at?" he asks the laughing guests, adding that the sound alone hurts his ears. As Balda puts it, Abū al-Qāsim is "*hors la loi*" of discourse, impossible to respond to or even laugh at.²⁶

"You've gone too far!" the guests exclaim for the first time during Abū al-Qāsim's vicious tirade against the "joker." And during his excoriation of their hometown, Isfahan, the guests again complain that he is "going too far," exceeding the bounds of proper conversation even for a jester. Later Abū al-Qāsim bridles violently when they ask him for some entertaining "*ḥikāyāt*,"²⁷ exclaiming, "Do you think I'm a buffoon?" For though he resembles nothing so much as an entertainer who sings for his supper,²⁸ only by addressing him in a tone of meticulous respect do the guests manage to guide his conversation to several topics that interest them.

Abū al-Qāsim not only refuses to allow the guests to respond to him in an ordinary way, he also refuses to let them remain silent. For the last man he attacks is a guest sitting silently through his verbal rampage, whom he calls a "statuesque vegetable."²⁹ This attack seems finally too much for the other party-goers, for before the crasher can really get started on his new round of insults, one guest remarks, "That's enough of Abū al-Qāsim, let's talk about something nice, like the beautiful weather that we're having in Isfahan!" Ever the enemy of anything resembling normal human conversation, Abū al-Qāsim bridles at the suggestion that the guests talk about the weather. In fact, this offending reference to Isfahani weather sets off the theme for the majority of his conversation: the comparison of Isfahan with Baghdad, in which, at first, Baghdad is depicted as a paradise of luxury, and Isfahan a hell of backwardness and filth. The Isfahani crowd listens uncomfortably, occasionally encouraging him with a polite but curt "speak, Abū al-Qāsim," occasionally complaining again that he has

²⁶ Balda, p. 392.

²⁷ As described above, the word *ḥikāya* could mean either a story or an imitation.

²⁸ Mary St. Germain sees him as exactly that in *Al-Azdi's Abī al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī: Placing an Anomalous Text within the Literary Developments of its Time* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Washington, 2006), p. 117.

²⁹ Tawḥīdī, p. 89.

gone too far. But after a very long rant, the crasher again demands to be fed. When his appetite is finally satisfied, he calls for water, and having quenched his thirst, he abruptly changes his tune about Isfahan, which he insulted up to this point. "By god," he declares, "I've been unjust to the people of Isfahan in all that I've said about them."³⁰ He then launches into a panegyric on the city's sweet water, ample flowing air, and temperate seasons, using some of the same phrases he previously used to describe Baghdad.

The crowd is baffled by his fickle use of words, and though he embarked on his comparison in angry response to what he considered a trivial, meaningless use of language (the comment about Isfahani weather, which trivial conversation he characterizes as "completely meaningless, like splashing water about"),³¹ his own words seem equally substanceless in their way, full of tropes and clichés he is willing to use for either city. Towards the end of the party Abū al-Qāsim grows increasingly drunk and obnoxious, and when another guest again makes the mistake of laughing at him, and this sparks another obscene tirade, the crowd agrees to get rid of him by getting him drunk to the point of unconsciousness. They have generously tried and failed to verbally and socially interact with their monstrous fellow diner.

One may well ask why they put up with him at all. More than one answer is possible, but like much that is obscene or frivolous in contemporaneous Arabic literature, both al-Azdī and his character Abū al-Qāsim win themselves the partial indulgence of their audience by promising to teach them something. Al-Nafzawī, for example, author of the famous fourteenth-century sex manual *The Perfumed Garden*, promises in his introduction to teach his patron and his readers about sex.³² Nor is his work without educational content, though what really hooks us, it seems, is its page-turning obscenity. Azdī and Abū al-Qāsim also promise to teach us something, but, although they are not as uniformly obscene as a sex manual, they are shocking enough that the modern reader, and

³⁰ Tawhīdī, p. 301.

³¹ Tawhīdī, p. 90.

³² He introduces his work as fulfilling a patron's request for a guide to things stimulating intercourse and things that hinder it, as well as methods to enlarge the penis, and other similarly useful information (al-Shaykh al-Nafzāwī, *Al-Rawḍ al-ʿaṭir fī nuzhat al-khāṭir* (London: Riyād al-Rayyis lil-Kutub wa-al-Nashr, 1993), p. 25.

probably the Isfahani audience, may endure some annoyances just to hear what they will say next.³³

Azdī promises a portrait of Baghdad that has proved enticing to modern scholars of the city, some of whom seem to endure the obscene content only to benefit from these educational insights into Baghdad. Likewise, in the story, Abū al-Qāsim renews the attention of an offended audience by offering to teach them how to be “gentlemen” (*nās*), and thus tempts them to hear his further rants. Both enticements of educational content are immediately undercut, however: Azdī, in the same introduction in which he promises a portrait of Baghdad, characterizes his work as a mere “evening chat” (*samar*), designating a kind of story with very low truth value. And because Abū al-Qāsim provides such bad advice, a kind of “modest proposal” to plunge into debt and “fuck [anything that moves],” it would be difficult to consider his speech anything but a mockery of the didactic.³⁴

Many scholars have noted the “encyclopedic” quality of the *Ḥikāya*--like the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī, it could be considered a reference work of unusual words and phrases, if not actually of material goods found in Baghdad and Isfahan.³⁵ And it is true that we can turn to different sections of the *Ḥikāya* for poems about horses, fruits, beautiful and ugly people, and many other topics. It can serve, therefore, as a kind of encyclopedia of *adab*, a word that means both literature and good breeding, as indeed a familiarity with literature was required of a participant in polite society. But not only are these poems not provided with *isnāds* (citations), their immediate source, Abū al-Qāsim, cannot exactly be considered a guru of high culture—although he knows his literature, his manners are appalling, and he smells bad and drinks excessively.

³³ Medieval authors often hid obscene sections at the tail end of their encyclopedic works, but at least one such author fretted that his readers turned to these spicy chapters first, sometimes forsaking the bulk of his book altogether. Therefore he dispersed his obscenity throughout the text, explaining, “If I had devoted a separate section to [jest] and had not mixed jest and earnest in this book, most present-day readers would have gone for that one section and they would have considered the serious parts as something heavy and dull, even something to be avoided and left alone, in spite of its being valuable like gold and pearls,” Al-Ābī, *Nathr al-durr* (translated by Geert Jan van Gelder in his article, ‘Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature,’ *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 23 (1992), 169-90 (p. 170).

³⁴ Philip Kennedy makes a similar observation concerning Ibn Buṭlān’s *Physician’s Dinner Party* in his article ‘The Maqāmāt as a nexus of interests: Reflections on Abdelfattah Kilito’s *Les Séances*,’ in *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam*, ed. by Julia Bray (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 153-214 (173).

³⁵ Some, like Muhammad Ahsan, have looked to the work, and especially Abū al-Qāsim’s long lists of foods and goods, as an encyclopedia of material culture (*Social Life Under the Abbasids* (London: Longman Group, 1979). Also see Dhū al-Nūn Tāhā, ‘Abd al-Wāhid, “Mujtama’ Baghdad min khilāl Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim al-Baghdādī’ (Baghdad Society through *Ḥikāyat Abī al-Qāsim*), *al-Mawrid*, vol. 3 (1974), 14-25. Others have seen it as an encyclopedia of strange words and sayings (see Kennedy, ‘Maqāmāt as a nexus of interests,’ pp. 161-167).

As in the *Hikāya*, it is difficult in many contemporaneous Arabic works of *adab* to distinguish between the sincerely didactic and the parodic and parasitical.³⁶ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's *Kitāb al-Taṭfīl*, (*Book of Party-Crashing*), for example, presents prophetic *hadith* on hospitality and table manners side by side with party-crashing advice on how to avoid table conversation in order to facilitate rapid chewing. It presents musings from the first successor to the prophet Muhammad side by side with misuses of Qur'an quotes by party-crashers angling to be fed. We can hardly suspect the piety of the author, who, famous primarily as a collector of prophetic *hadith*, begins his text with quotations and actions of the prophet of Islam. If his work has a morally didactic purpose, it must be to justify the party-crasher's actions, as any host who would deny them entry is a miser, at odds with the famously generous prophet Muhammad himself.³⁷ As for the crashers, however, is their advice to "not fraternize," nor "pity the weakness" of an aged guest when elbowing in for meat meant to be taken seriously?³⁸ Rather we should laugh at their single-minded greed. But the compiler makes little effort to distinguish these anecdotes from the *hadith* cited, or the simple advice on table manners and etiquette apparently issued in all sincerity.³⁹ Some pieces of advice lie between earnest and jest: one anecdote warns that reticence and abstemiousness in a guest may hurt the host's feelings;⁴⁰ no doubt it may, but quoted, as it is, by a party-crasher, can we see through to his intentions to use this sound advice as a thin excuse for eating as much as possible at someone else's expense?

Abū al-Qāsim's speech resembles some of these anecdotes by hovering between the genuinely informative and the laughably outrageous. Sometimes his conversation even resembles the deliberately nonsensical speech mocked in *Kitāb al-Taṭfīl* and elsewhere in contemporaneous Arabic texts. In *Kitāb al-Taṭfīl*, Bunān, the famous party-crasher warns against going to dinner with members of certain professions (tailors, for example), and goes on to mock their gossipy, babbling speech ("I'll cut a robe for a third and a dirham of a third, and two dirhams of a third, then three for a half and two dirhams with a half and three dirhams!").⁴¹ Abū al-Qāsim sometimes resembles Bunān in this anecdote, mocking

³⁶ In her work *Petronius the Poet*, Catherine Connors shows how the *Satyricon* also regularly uses morally didactic poetry in contexts that undercuts its meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³⁷ His generosity is attested in many *hadith* about him, al-Khaṭīb's special area of study.

³⁸ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, p. 131.

³⁹ See, for example, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, p. 144.

⁴⁰ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, p. 144.

⁴¹ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, p. 147.

professions with his stereotyping insults. But sometimes he almost resembles the babbling objects of Bunān's mockery; when the audience specifically asks him about swimming strokes or sailor's slang, his answers—lists of unfamiliar terms without definition—are so incomprehensible as to be nearly useless, not only to the modern reader, but probably also to his Isfahani audience.

It is indeed difficult to verify that some of what he is saying might not be made-up nonsense words, or something like the talk of the rambling doctors, barbers, or tradesmen who speak learned nonsense at aggravating length in other Arabic texts.⁴² For example, in a story by Tawḥīdī (thought by some to be the author of the *Hikāya*),⁴³ a sick man is plagued by a learned man who babbles at his bedside with utterly nonsensical advice ("It falls to me in what does not fall to one other than me or like me in one who could as well have been me or as though he were of my age or was known by what is not known of him to me that I see that you are not keeping anything but a diet above what is necessary and below what is not necessary," he begins, and goes on from there!)⁴⁴ These rants, filled with learned-sounding language in grammatically logical but meaningless bundles, betray, perhaps, the author's disgust with specialized discourses, or with those who affect learning and linguistic skill but actually babble incomprehensibly. In an especially interesting example, a seemingly venerable old man discovers in the middle of the night that the household has run out of sugar.⁴⁵ Enraged, he forces all of his family to stand on one foot until his slaves fetch more sugar, meanwhile ranting wildly on a range of subjects, including tax-fraud, the morals of women, and *hadith* concerning proper buying and selling practices. The absurdity of his tantrum undercuts any wisdom found in his disconnected speech.⁴⁶ Though Abū al-Qāsim does not rave in precisely the same nonsensical fashion, he raves nevertheless, enough to put the didactic

⁴² It is difficult to verify because all of his words cannot be defined. Most of them can be, however. For some translated examples of true Arabic nonsense, see *The Maqāmāt of Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī*, translated by W. J. Pendergrast, (London, Dublin: Curzon Press Ltd.), pp. 131-4, or the tale of the mad barber in *The Arabian Nights*, translated by Husain Haddawy (New York: Norton, 1990) p. 254 f.. In both the story told by Tawḥīdī and the mad barber's tale, the narrator is ill during the visitation of the nonsense-speaker, and the babbling language they report has the air of a fever dream. One must therefore question the reliability of the narrators themselves.

⁴³ 'Abbūd al-Shālji published his edition of the text as a lost work of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *Al-Risālah al-Baghdādiyyah* (Koln: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 1980) based on the *Hikāya*'s extensive quotations of other works of Tawḥīdī as well as resemblances in writing style. Given that the *Hikāya* contains hundreds of quotations from as many sources, and given that we have only one manuscript from which to derive information, any argument about the *Hikāya*'s authorship can only be speculative.

⁴⁴ Yāqūt al-Hamawī, *Mu'jam al-Udabā'*, 7 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993), 5, p. 1923.

⁴⁵ Al-Zubayr ibn Bakkār, *Al-Akhbār al-Muwaffaqiyyāt* (Qum : Manshūrāt al-Sharīf al-Radī, 1995), pp. 60-9.

⁴⁶ Stefan Leder, 'Prosa-Dichtung in der aḥbār Überlieferung Narrative', *Der Islam*, 64 (1987), 6-41.

value of his speech in question. Given the authority of the Arabic language, the locus of eloquence and truth embodied in the Arabic Qur'an (itself an often incomprehensible book),⁴⁷ these portrayals are generally subversive, but also evoke anxieties about who has knowledge in a world of dueling discourses; the *hadith* scholars, the debaters, the poets, and the street preachers all make warring claims to power based on various manipulations of the Arabic language and the authority that it represents.

Abū al-Qāsim's esoteric speech may sometimes also resemble expositions of beggar's slang, as in an anecdote in Jāhiz's *Kitāb al-Bukhalā'* (Book of Misers), in which a miser gives a beggar a more valuable coin than he intends, and then takes it back. When the beggar complains, the miser says that he can tell the beggar is not worth the valuable coin, because he is so well versed in different types of beggars. He then awes his interlocutor into silence by launching into a jargon-filled description of all the types of beggars and tricksters found in his society, each of which he provides with a label and a definition. He is thus able to cover his unsavory act of miserliness with his arcane linguistic knowledge. This story most closely resembles a passage in the *Hikāya* in which the other guests ask Abū al-Qāsim if he knows any sailor's expressions. The crasher boldly obliges with a long list of obscure words such as *māshūka*, *kanūr*, *kadl*, and *mahār* (about which words 'Abbūd al-Shālji, second editor of the text, can only confess, "I didn't understand them").⁴⁸ Abū al-Qāsim's verbal display is impressive, but without any definitions for his terms, his speech provides not even the didactic benefits of the speech of Jāhiz's basically despicable miser.⁴⁹

Party-crashers themselves crash both physical banquets and banquets of words like the Qur'an,⁵⁰ using these discourses parasitically, and twisting them to their own purposes. *Kitāb al-Tatfīl* tells of a party-crasher who used various quotes from the Qur'an with numbers in them to impress his host into feeding him that number of delicious pastries. Another crasher takes a Qur'an quotation out of context to reassure the host that he has come not to steal his women,

⁴⁷ Interpreters of the Qur'an recognize certain passages as ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*), whose meaning can only be fully comprehended by God (see Leah Kinberg, 'Ambiguous,' in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, 6 vols (Leiden, Brill, 2001-2006), I (2001), 70-77.

⁴⁸ Al-Tawhīdī, pp. 318-19.

⁴⁹ Al-Jāhiz, *Al-Bukhalā'* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1963).

⁵⁰ The Qur'an has indeed been referred to as "God's Banquet" (see Van Gelder's *Dishes and Discourse*, also published under the title *God's Banquet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 39-40.

but his food.⁵¹ Abū al-Qāsim may be no less an opportunistic user of the Arabic language. He is certainly a master of all discourses, and uses and abuses them at whim. Azdī himself openly admits to passing many different works off as his own, though indeed many of his numerous unattributed quotations have been traced to another source. Adam Mez, first editor of the *Ḥikāya*, begins his introduction to the text by saying, “If someone posed the embarrassing question to our author, [of what would happen] if someone told his sentences, ‘Go back to where you came from,’ then very little worthwhile (though a lot disreputable) would remain.”⁵²

As a sympotic text, the *Ḥikāya* is hardly unique in that regard, resembling, for example, the *Deipnosophistae*, another banquet at which quotations of literature bury the meal itself. As James Davidson describes in “Pleasure and Pedantry in Athenaeus,” this banquet, held in Rome, of Greek literature, seems a “separate world,” whose sometimes tiresome profusion of quotations exists within their own system of order, and hold the questions of “life, death, and representation” in miniature.⁵³

Many scholars feel compelled to trace Azdī’s sentences back to their source, whether historical or literary. But to scrutinize the ingredients, to attempt to trace them back to the field where they were grown, may distract us from the work as a whole. This is not to say that there are not many sources of interest in the *Ḥikāya* for the student of material culture; it may indeed prove a veritable gold mine for that interest. However, to appreciate the text in its fullness requires a recognition of the fact that Abū al-Qāsim is weaving a deceptive vision with his luxurious lists and poetic flights of description. By juxtaposition of one with another, all in contrast to the narrative setting, the ingredients of this text are made no longer themselves, but part of a grand microcosmic dish, with its own system of physics. To read this encyclopedic work from beginning to end, instead of mining it for information about an individual topic (though indeed it does invite and facilitate that type of usage), is to discover a world in miniature which is more than the sum of its parts.

⁵¹ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, pp. 105-6, 116-7. In the second anecdote, the hungry crasher gains access to a party by climbing a wall adjoining the ladies’ private quarters. When the master of the house objects, the crasher quotes the Qur’an, Hūd 11:79, “Well dost thou know we have no need of thy daughters: indeed thou knowest quite well what we want,” a quotation of the crowds of Sodom, whose lust would not be satisfied by Lot’s daughters, but only by his angelic guests (Yusuf Ali’s translation).

⁵² Mez, p. v.

⁵³ In *Athenaeus and his World*, ed. by David Braund and John Wilkins (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), pp. 298, 303