International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation
ISSN: 2617-0299 (Online); ISSN: 2708-0099 (Print)
DOI: 10.32996/ijllt
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/ijllt

IJLLT
AL-KINDI CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Translation and Analysis of ʾAbd al-Jabbār Ibn Ḥamdīs' Poem No. 110: "Qaḍat al-Nafs"

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| ABSTRACT
In this paper, I undertake a complete translation of Ibn Ḥamdīs' poem No.110 "Qaḍat al-Nafs" and provide a structural analysis in order to demonstrate that the poem in its entirety is structured through a succession of related metaphors that lends unity and organization to the speaker's experience. Though Ibn Ḥamdīs is committed to the canon of classical Arabic poetry in the division of the poem into three canonical segments of the classical qasīda (physical decay and the loss of youth, the wine song and the nostalgic feelings for a lost homeland), I argue that these segments are not loosely structured but built upon a succession of related and resonating metaphors that lends unity and coherence to the speaker's experience. The poem can also be read as an autobiographical document in which Ibn Ḥamdīs records his own tragedy as an exile and the tragedy of Muslim Sicily and Arabic culture. Having led a very active life in his youth, the persona is now old, frequenting taverns and indulging himself in merry making in an attempt to recapture youth. However, the speaker's attempt is overwhelmed by the tragic awareness that his action is futile; youth cannot be regained. This realization is intensified by the feeling that Sicily, the speaker's birthplace and the setting of his youth, is also lost forever. Regaining his "paradise" is as impossible as regaining his youth. Old age and the great sense of loss make him turn to God with a penitent attitude.

| KEYWORDS

Ibn Hamdis, Sicilian poetry, translation, Arabo-Islamic culture

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 10 November 2023 **PUBLISHED:** 30 November 2023 **DOI:** 10.32996/ijllt.2023.6.12.2

1. Introduction

ʾAbd al-Jabbār Ibn Ḥamdīs (447-525/1056-1133) is one of the most prominent Arab Sicilian poets. He was born in Syracuse to a noble family of the Azd tribe. With the Norman conquest of Sicily, Ibn Ḥamdīs chose self-imposed exile, seeking fame and wealth as a panegyrist in the royal court of Prince al-Muʾtamid Ibn ʾAbbād in Seville (r.1078-91). The invasion of Seville at the hands of Al-Moravids and the banishment of al-Muʾtamid forced Ibn Ḥamdīs to flee one more time and seek refuge in North Africa. After the Seville years, his poetry came to be characterized by a deep sense of nostalgia for a lost homeland and lamentation over the loss of the vigor of youth and the bitterness of old age. He spent the rest of his life moving between royal courts in North Africa (mainly modern Algeria and Tunisia), eulogizing his patrons and mourning the loss of his homeland. He spent some time at the Zirid court of Mahdiya in present-day Tunisia, in Bijaya, the seat of the Algerian house of the Hammadids, and in Aghmat, Morocco. In the final years of his life, Ibn Ḥamdīs lived in Majorca, where he died around 1133.[i]

Ibn Ḥamdīs's poetry is characterized by artistic versatility and the employment of various genres used in classical Arabic poetry, like panegyric, elegy, wine songs and the devotional poetry. As Granara and Carpentieri have demonstrated, Ibn Ḥamdīs' poetry was to a great extent dictated by the canonical conventions of the neoclassicism of the later Abbasid period, in that it departed from the old forms, the stock images, phrases, themes, and structures of the classical qasīda. However, in his late poetry, he seems to have developed specific sub-genres of the classical qasīda to articulate private and collective plights. Most importantly he came up with a poetic style based on sets of opposites: old age/youth, darkness/light, voluntary journey/forced exile, morning/evening, hope/despair, permanence/transience, and so on. These opposites, together with the use of puns and paronomasia, form a world

in which past and present clash. The past is evoked through the metaphors of the praise of youth and the glories of Arabo-Islamic civilization, while the present is pictured via the conventions of the poetics of ageing and through the narrative of Muslim Sicily's tragedy.[ii]

Ibn Ḥamdīs' poetry is best known for themes that converge around exile and the loss of homeland, physical decay, and the loss of youth. Nostalgia for a lost and romanticized homeland as a motif in Ibn Ḥamdīs is intertwined with the other prominent motifs of old age and physical decay and the loss of the vigor of youth. Critics of Ibn Ḥamdīs' poetry tend to focus on the poet's verses of nostalgia for Sicily. Exile was to mark Ibn Ḥamdīs' life, as he restlessly wandered in the Western regions of the Islamic world (North Africa and Andalusia) in search of a patronage.[iii]

2. The Poem[iv]

2.1 Analysis

In a lecture delivered through video conference at Sultan Qabus Cultural Center, Professor William Granara notes that the poem adheres to the canon of neoclassical Arabic poetry in that it is divided into three segments: the gnomic introduction in which the speaker bemoans the loss of youth, the wine song and the lamentation for the speaker's lost homeland, Sicily. Professor Granara goes on to say that the poem contains a lot of autobiographical information in that the sequence of the three segments constitute a response not only to the poet's own plight as an exile but also to the main events of the time.[v] That is not to say, however, the poem is loosely structured, and the three segments present discrete motifs. The speaker's profound awareness of his tragic situation is conveyed through a succession of related metaphors that terminates in a sensory experience. These metaphors structure and organize the speaker's experience in such a way that the truth communicated becomes incommunicable by any other means. The image of "white hair" in the first line, a symbol of old age and menacing death, is a central image that conveys the speaker's sense of loss. "White hair" connotes the idea of light emerging out of darkness. Throughout the poem, the speaker becomes increasingly aware of light coming out of darkness, an image which runs like a leitmotif in the poem. The friends are "like the brightness of stars" passing wine that glows "through the darkness of the night" (16); The juice of the wine is like the light of stars (18); the songstresses are like moons in a halo (23); and the light of the candles dispels darkness and exposes secrets (30).

The darkness-light metaphor conveys the ready and natural analogy between the physical action of light in enabling us to see objects and that of spiritual light, a new insight into the truth of the speaker's tragic situation. This vision that "white hair" inspires is well expressed by Ibn Ḥamdīs in another poem:

نفى همّ شيبي سرور شبابي لقد أظلم الشيبُ لمّا أضاء

(The cares of old age have wasted the pleasures of my youth; white hair brought darkness

where it gave light).

It is out of the light of white hair that the dark and gloomy truth emerges. However, up to the end of the poem the speaker tries to remain blind and oblivious to that truth. As Carpentieri notes of the motif of the loss of youth and physical decay in Ibn Ḥamdīs' poetry, the speaker longs for the vigor of youth time when he is "a fearless warrior and a conqueror of women's hearts"[vi] Denying old age, the speaker tries to relive the past with a youthfully ardent thirst for all its sins:

So, in war time I wore out its instruments, and I am now preparing for the sins of peace

Time (4).

The speaker's roaming through taverns can be seen as a quest for the lost vigor of youth and an attempt to consummate all its hedonistic pleasures: wine, women and song. However, the subsequent metaphors converge to convey the old man's failure in the act of consummating such pleasures and culminate in the central metaphor of the candle which brings about his tragic realization. In the following lines, the barmaid is metaphorized as a "gazelle":

Haply, a barmaid buttoning up her hand on the neck of a gazelle

Went around carrying a ruby in a pearl and dipping the fire in its water (7-8).

The image of the barmaid fastening the dress around her neck implies that the speaker is sexually attracted to her. She represents desirable femininity ripe for consummation and perhaps challenging the speaker's virility and vigor. In this sense, the fire of the cup (metaphorized as a ruby) and the water of the wine (metaphorized as a pearl) become the embodiment of the speaker's sexual desire. Wine and desirable femininity completely merge into one metaphor; both are ready for fruition. The bottles of wine are described in terms of maidens ripe for deflowering:

We courted four maidens of hers [The barmaid's] so that gaiety should break their

virginity

Of those whose vintage is as old as the juice of the light of stars.

Their brides show you long hands embracing their waists (17-19).

Both the bottles of wine and the maidens are fresh, pure, untouched, unsullied, and ready to be conquered. The figure "four" unmistakably refers to the number of marriages a Muslim can enjoy. Drinking four bottles of wine and consummating four marriages require vigor and potency of youth which the speaker has obviously lost. Sex for him is a means for survival and creation, and thus, for exorcizing the ghost of old age and death. The idea of desired femininity ripe for fruition is further conveyed by the image of the songstresses and the dancer:

[Then] we turned to a halo which revealed moons on boughs of ben

The king of gaiety would see cares rebellious in it and kill their rebels

The moves of grief were lulled by songstresses moving their strings

As this songstress embraced her lute for me and that kissed her pipe.

And a dancer whose leg was joined with a skillful hand that stroke on her tambourine (23-

7).

The images of the songstress like "moons on boughs of ben," embracing "her lute" and kissing "her pipe" are all charged with sexual connotations. The songstresses and the dancer, like the barmaid, evoke in the speaker feelings of sexual attraction and helplessness at the same time. Sexual imagery, in this sense, is a metaphor for the power of youth which the speaker has lost.

At this point in the poem, the speaker becomes increasingly aware of the "cares" and "griefs" which he has been trying to suppress by indulging himself in revelry and the boisterous life of youth. However, his pretentious behavior could not mask the feeling, lurking inside him, that youth cannot be regained and that his action is futile. This tragic awareness is conveyed through the central image of the candles:

And sticks of yellowish candles which show you light out of their fire,

Had columns well-arranged as if justice balanced their ends.

Darkness was dispelled on their heads and secrets were exposed by their light

As if we sat their ends on them to demolish their lives (28-31).

The candle is a natural and ready symbol for life. There is an obvious analogy between the speaker's life and that of the candle: the older man grows, the sooner he approaches death, and, by the same token, the stronger a candle blazes, the sooner it dies out. The process of living is one of self-consumption. Furthermore, the candles are depicted as having heads over which darkness is dispelled and "light exposes their secrets," which recalls the metaphor of "white hair" in the first line: white hair with which the speaker's head blazes exposes his secrets and becomes an ominous sign for his approaching death.

The word for "sticks" in Arabic is قُضُب, plural of the word قضيب which also refers to the phallus. Hence, the image has obvious phallic connotations suggesting vital potency. However, the word is modified by the adjective مصفرة (yellowish), which implies the loss of that potency. In light of the sexual symbolism dominating the poem, the image of the "yellowish sticks" becomes a symbol of the speaker's failure in consummating the sexual pleasures offered by the barmaid, the songstresses and the dancer.

His secrets violated, the speaker comes to the tragic realization that youth cannot be recaptured, a realization which converges in the speaker's memory with the loss of Sicily, his birthplace and the setting of his youth. Both become a memory, something of the past but lost forever:

I remembered Sicily as grief stirred up its memory

And a time of past youthful passion filled with men of wit.

Even though I was evicted from paradise, I am still talking of its past glory (32-4).

Sicily is for the speaker a lost paradise and he is Adam who has been evicted from it. He is doomed to exile, roaming about, and burdened with the sins of his youth. Guilt-stricken, the old man has to atone for the fruits of the sins he sowed in his youth:

Time has never planted in soil a plant without reaping its fruits (3).

As he is aging and losing the vigor of youth, the speaker has to abandon the quest for hedonistic pleasures as they are unattainable for an old man and can only incur regret.[vii] This great sense of loss and the feeling of the approach of death make the speaker turn to God with a penitent attitude. As the speaker's quest for redemption and meaning in time has been thwarted, he tries to find solace in the possibility of a divine forgiveness:

In my twenties I laughed out of passion, in my sixties I cried over its sins.

[Yet] do not exaggerate your sins as long as God forgives them (36-7).

As we have seen, lamenting the loss of the homeland occurs in the last movement, which is a development and culmination of the first one which addresses the motif of physical decay and loss of youth. These two motifs resonate in the middle movement about wine. The jugs of wine are seen in terms of four virgin girls to be deflowered. However, the persona, old and impotent, is helpless in the face of the temptation of wine and women. The central image of the "yellow candles," which occurs towards the end of the second movement, evokes the idea of weakness and self-consumption. It is an image that sums up man's existential dilemma: the journey of life is but a process of self-consumption that inevitably leads to death. With this mood of helplessness and resignation, the poem ends, the past youth and the past homeland are irrecoverable; they can only be evoked in woundlike memories. Hence the only chance for redemption is to seek refuge in the hereafter. As such, the speaker's penitent attitude is not a matter of choice but forced upon him.

2.2 Translation

"Qadat al-Nafs"

ʾAbd al-Jabbār Ibn Ḥamdīs

The self has in youth spent out its desires, but white hair has brought it to its end.

Aye, it took share in the cups of passion which were offered to it.

Time has never planted in soil a plant without gathering its fruits.

So, in war time I wore out the instruments of war, and I prepared for the sins of peace time

Wine that fills a young man with joy if he urges more rounds of it.

The cup receives it [the wine] from the jug so that you would think it were destined for it.

Haply, a barmaid, buttoning up her hand on the neck of a gazelle,

Went round carrying a ruby in a pearl and dipping the fire in its water.

And true friends like the brightness of stars, with noble manners,

Passed cups brimming with wine that glowed through the darkness of the night.

As if its [the wine's] texture of bubbles has webs arresting its birds.

And a nun locked her convent up, as we were her visitors.

We were guided to her by the fragrance of coffee that would reveal its secrets to your nose.

Only that young man who turned towards Darin or her house could attain its musk.

As if its [the musk's] containers jugs of wine contained within its tar.

I cast my dirhem in her [the nun's] scales; she poured dinars out of her jug.

We courted four maidens of hers, so that gaiety should break their virginity.

Of those who are as old as the juice of the light of stars.

Their brides would show you long hands embracing their waists.

And [then] a discerning young man carefully examined their fragrance and chose them.

He has associated with wine long enough to discern the good quality of its juice.

He could discern the best quality of coffee and know its maker.

[Then] we turned to a halo which revealed moons on boughs of ben.

The king of gaiety would see cares rebellious in it and quell their rebels.

The moves of grief were lulled by songstresses moving their strings.

As this songstress embraced her lute and for me and that kissed her pipe.

And a dancer whose leg was joined with a skillful hand that stroke on her tambourine.

And sticks of yellow candles which would show you light out of their fire

Had columns well-arranged as if justice balanced their ends.

Darkness was dispelled on their heads and secrets were exposed by their light.

As if we sat their ends on them to demolish their lives.

I remembered Sicily as grief stirred up its memory

And a time of past youthful passion filled with men of wit.

Even though I was evicted from paradise, I am still talking of its glory.

Had it not been for the saltiness of tears, I would have thought them its (Sicily's) rivers.

In my twenties I laughed out of passion; in my sixties I cried over my sins.

[Yet]do not exaggerate your sins as long as God forgives them.

Appendix

" قضت النفسُ"

عبد الجبار ابن حمديس الصقلي

قَضَتْ في الصبا النفسُ أوطارَهَا وأبْلَغَها الشيبُ إنْذارَها

نَعَمْ وأجيلت قداحُ الهوى عليها فقسمْن أعْشارها

وما غَرَس الدهرُ في تربة غراساً ولم يَجْن أثْمارَها

فأفنيتُ في الحرب آلاتَها وأعددت للسلم أوزارَها

كُمَيْتاً لها مرحٌ بالفتى إذا حثّ باللهو أدوارَها

تناولها الكوبُ من دنها فتحسبه كان مضمارَها

وساقيةٌ زرّرت كفُها على عُنُق الطَبْي أزرارَها

تدير بياقوتة درةً فتغمس في مائها نارَها

وفتيان صدق كزُهْر النجوم كرامُ النّحائز أحرارَها

يديرون راحاً تفيض الكؤوسُ على ظُلَم الليل أنوارَها

كأنّ لها من نسيج الحَباب شباكاً تعقلُ أطيارَها

وراهبة أغْلقتْ ديرَها فكُنّا مع الليل زوارَها

هدانا إليها شذا قهوة تُذيعُ لأنفكَ أسرارَها

فَما فازَ بالمسك إلا فتىً ... تَيَمّمَ دارينَ أو دارَها

كأن نوافجَه عندَها ... دنان مُضَمّنَةٌ قارَها

طَرَحْتُ بميزانها درهَمي ... فأَجْرَت من الدن دينارَها

خَطَبنا بنات لها أربعاً ... ليفترع اللهوُ أبكارَها

من اللائي أعصارُ زُهْر النجوم ... تكادُ تُطاولُ أعْمارَها

تريك عرائسُها أيدياً ... طوالاً تصافحُ أخصارَها

تَفَرَّسَ في شَمْه طيبَها ... مَجيدُ الفراسَة فاختارَها

فتىً دارسَ الخمرَ حتى درى ... عصيرَ الخُمور وأعصارَها

يَعُدُّ لما شئتَ من قهوة ... سنيها ويَعرفُ خمارَها

وعُدْنا إلى هالة أطْلَعَتْ ... على قُضُب البان أقمارَها

يرى ملكُ اللهو فيها الهمومَ ... تَثور فيَقْتُلُ ثوارَها

وقد سَكَنَتْ حركات الأسى ... قيانٌ تُحرك أوتارَها

فَهَذي تُعانقُ لي عودَها ... وتلك تقبلُ مزمارَها

وراقصة لقطت رجلُها ... حسابَ يد نَقَرَتْ طارَها

وقُضُب من الشمع مصفرة ... تُريكَ من النار نوارَها

كأن لها عمداً صُففت ... وقد وزن العدلُ أقطارَها

تُقلُ الدياجي على هامها ... وتَهتكُ بالنور أستارَها

كَأَنّا نُسَلط آجالَها ... عليها فتَمْحقُ أعمارَها

ذكرتُ صقليَّةَ والأسى ... يهيج للنفس تذكارَها

ومنزلةً للتصابي خلت ... وكان بنو الظرف عمارَها

فإن كنتُ أخرجتُ من جنة ... فإني أحدث أخبارَها

ولولا ملوحةُ ماء البكا ... حَسبْتُ دموعي أنهارَها

ضحكت ابن عشرين من صبوة ... بكيت ابن ستين أوزارَها

فلا تَعْظُمَنّ لديك الذنوبُ ... فما زال ربُك غفارها

Notes

[i] For a complete account of Ibn Ḥamdīs' biography, see William Granara , *Ibn Ḥamdīs the Sicilian: Eulogist for a Falling Homeland*, (London: Oneworld Academic, 2021). Since little is documented of Ibn Ḥamdīs's life, Granara constructs a biography of the poet from his *Diwan*. As Granara puts it, a chronological rearrangement of Ibn Ḥamdīs' *Diwan* would create "a diary in verse."

[ii] For the development in Ibn Ḥamdīs' poetry, see William Granara, "Remaking Muslim Sicily: Ibn Ḥamdīs and the Poetics of Exile," *Edebiyat*, 9(1998, pp. 169-171); and Nicola Carpentieri, "Towards a Poetics of Aging: Private and Collective Loss in Ibn Ḥamdīs' Late Verse," *De Gruyte*r, 3 (2016), pp. 119-121.

[iii] For a study of this major motif in Ibn Ḥamdīs' poetry, see Granara, "Remaking Muslim Sicily," p. 1972; Carpentieri, "At War with the Age: Ring Composition in Ibn Hamdis No. 27," *Quaderni Di Studi Arabi*, 10 (2015), pp. 39-55 and "Towards a Poetics of Aging," pp. 128-131; and Mirella Cassarino, "Palermo Experienced, Palermo Imagined: Arabic and Islamic Culture between the 9th and 12th Century," in *A Companion to Medieval Palermo: The History of a Mediterranean City from 600 to 1500*, "Leiden: Brill, 2013), Ed. A. Nef, pp. 89-129.

[iv] The poem is originally untitled and cataloged as No. 110 in the *Diwan*. The Arabic text of the translation has been established based on Iḥsān ʾAbbās' edition of the Diwan (*Diwan Ibn Hamdis*, ed. I Iḥsān ʾAbbās, Beirut, Ṣādir Publishing House, 1960). As ʾAbbās states in the Introduction, the Sicilian scholar Ibn Ẓāfir al-Azdi holds that Ibn Ḥamdīs compiled the *Diwan* by himself (p. 22). Two manuscripts of the *Diwan* survived and were both used by ʾAbbās in his edition. The first copy is kept in the Vatican Library of Rome (No. 447). The second one is kept in the Asiatic Museum in Saint Petersburg (No. 294).

[v] "Poetry and Prose: Ibn Ḥamdīs the Sicilian-Reflections on Lost Youth and an Usurped Homeland," YouTube, Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center, September 15, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VlK1HO5aS78

[vi] "Towards a Poetics of Aging," p. 122.

[vii] For a discussion of this motif in other poems by Ibn Ḥamdīs, see Carpentieri, "Towards a Poetics of Aging," pp. 122-23.