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Popular Literature in the Abbasid Caliphate: How It Represented and Defined the Culture of the Abbasids

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Popular Literature in the Abbasid Caliphate: How it represented and defined the culture of the Abbasids

The Abbasid Caliphate was an Islamic empire that existed from 750 to 1258 C.E. as it was centered in Baghdad and included much of the Middle East. Poetry and literature were significant ways that the Abbasids expressed their cultural values. Based on what the Abbasid poetry emphasized, it is clear that the Abbasid court valued the caliph's authority, entertainment, and the experience of proving knowledge through poetry recitation. Prose literature had a significant role in the Abbasid court as well. The didactic collection of prose stories entitled *Kalila and Dimna* exemplifies that the Abbasids enjoyed literature that gives instruction on behavior while providing entertainment. *The Arabian Nights* is another example of didactic prose, and it has similar messages that demonstrate how people should behave in the court. It also emphasizes everyday behavioral expectations and people's duty to revere God. warfare. The poetry and literature from the Abbasid Caliphate exemplify different ways to understand eras in history. To learn about a society, it is helpful to study literature, not just wars and politics. Literature shows how society develops, and shows what societal norms and values are.

Even before the influence of Islam, the tradition of poetry was well established in the Middle East. Participants of the trade fairs recited poetry that either praised or criticized others at Mecca's annual trade fair. Therefore, poetry was a public experience, where Arabs were used to judging the quality of the spoken word.[1] Praise poetry existed within the tribes, because poets

[1] Bonebakker, S.A "*Adab* and the concept of *belles lettres*," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, ed. Julia Ashtiany, T.M. Johnstone, J.D. Latham, R.B. Serjeant, and G. Rex Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 20.

praised the strength of tribal leaders.[2] Poetry demonstrated the importance of praising others, especially tribal leaders, to affirm their leadership and control within the tribe. The experience of poetry reflected Arab culture, even before Islam influenced the region. As the centralized caliphate began to replace tribal organizations as the main form of government, poetry became a significant part of the Abbasid court. Praise poetry, once directed at tribal leaders, shifted to revere kings, caliphs, and other leaders within the court. Litterateurs were people who recited and memorized poetry, and they quickly became a very elite class. They clustered around the caliph, and while they knew many forms of poetry, they were rewarded financially for their praise poetry of the royalty. Praise poets would venerate their leaders by complimenting their strength, courage, and generosity. Even if the praise was exaggerated, it demonstrates that the royalty valued spreading their reputation through the spoken word.3 This indicates that one of the main functions of praise poetry was to spread the king's legitimacy of authority.

There were several forms of poetry that were controversial, but were still circulated throughout the Abbasid courts because of their entertainment factor. Like praise poetry, love poetry was also popular before the influence of Islam.[4] Often times the subject of the poem, or the beloved, would be unattainable and be portrayed as cruel while the author suffers. Some authors would be extremely graphic with their sexual desires, but this was less common within the court.[5] While "unhappy love was fashionable,"[6] many poets who based their careers on

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[2] Hugh Kennedy, "Poetry and Power in the Early Abbasid Court." in *When Baghdad Ruled The Muslim World*, (Cambridge: Perseus Book Group, 2004), 113.
[3] Kennedy, "Poetry and Power," 114.
[4] Kennedy, "Poetry and Power," 115.
[5] A. Hamori, "Love Poetry (ghazal)," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, ed. Julia Ashtiany, T.M. Johnstone, J.D. Latham, R.B. Serjeant, and G. Rex Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 216.

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entertaining the court hesitated to recite graphic poetry. Abu Nuwwas was an exception this,[7] but most litterateurs preferred to focus on entertaining the people of the court with less controversial genres of poetry.[8] This demonstrates that many poets felt poetry within the court's purpose was to entertain the royalty, and was not intended to be controversial or graphic. This did not mean that graphic love poetry did not exist, but that the role of poetry within the court was to entertain the royalty first.Wine poetry was also popular in the Abbasid courts. Wine poetry was controversial among pious Muslims, because the Quran forbade alcohol consumption.[9] It is that reason that wine poetry would often "twist and melt into the erotic."[10] Abu Nuwwas is well known for his wine poetry, and he was clearly aware that he sinned. He wrote "Sing to me, Sulayman, and give me wine to drink; serve me a goblet to distract me from the muezzin's call."[11] Wine poetry was popular in the Abbasid courts, but most likely for the entertainment factor.[12] Since wine poetry was circulated through the court, it likely does not demonstrate the actions of most Muslims at this time, but suggests that they valued entertainment in the court setting.

Another popular form of poetry within the court was hunting poetry. The caliph and his men would enjoy spending the day hunting, where they would impress one another with their

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[6] Kennedy, 117.
[7] Kennedy, 117.
[8] Hamori, 215.
[9] Kennedy, 122.
[10] Kennedy, 123.
[11] F. Harb, "Wine Poetry (khamriyyat)" in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, ed. Julia Ashtiany, T.M. Johnstone, J.D. Latham, R.B. Serjeant, and G. Rex Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 230.
[12] Harb, 231.

hunting skills. At night, the men recited poetry about the hunt they went on, called *tardiyyah.*[13] Hunting poetry often was full of complex and sophisticated language. Abu Nuwwas wrote much hunting poetry in his collection of poems called the *Diwan*, which are full of complex metaphors and poetic devices.[14] Another poet named Ibn al-Mu'adhdhal wrote lengthy hunting poetry in the complex *rajaz* metre (*urjuzah*). This exemplifies the exclusivity of hunting poetry. A person had to be affluent enough to hunt for pleasure. The complex language of hunting poetry also suggests that only the very elite and educated could understand and appreciate hunting poetry. This proves that the role of hunting poetry in the court was to not only to provide entertainment, but also to affirm the wealth and status of those who were elite enough to experience this style of hunting. The shared tradition of poetry suggests that the Abbasids valued entertainment and praise in the court setting. While primary documents would explain why the court structure existed and operated in the Abbasid caliphate, it cannot fully demonstrate the values that most of the people in the courts had. The values described in the popular court poetry shows the culture of the Abbasids in a way that other primary documents cannot demonstrate.

Prose was also popular within the Abbasid courts, because many stories had the dual purpose of being entertaining and didactic. One of the most popular works was *Kalila and Dimna*. *Kalila and Dimna* is a collection of stories, originally written in Sanskrit, that have been attributed to a third-century Indian scholar named Vishnu Sharma.[15] Around 750 C.E., the Persian writer Ibn al-Muqaffa translated the stories into Arabic. This allowed the work to be

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[13] G. Rex Smith, "Hunting Poetry (tardiyyat)" in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, ed. Julia Ashtiany, T.M. Johnstone, J.D. Latham, R.B. Serjeant, G. Rex Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 167.
[14] Smith, 168.
[15] Paul Lunde, "Kalila wa-Dimna, in "*Muslim Heritage*, n.d. Accessed October 12, 2016.

circulated throughout the Arab world, as the Abbasid influence increased through trade and other interactions.[16] *Kalila and Dimna* embodies popular values at this time, such as friendship, dedication to family, and revering royalty. The stories were meant to advise and entertain at the same time. Part of the reason the stories were so popular was because they provided entertainment while exemplifying proper behavior.

As an example of didactic literature, *Kalila And Dimna* was intended to entertain and instruct the audience. Ibn al-Muqaffa likely intended for the readership of his translation to be the elite in the Abbasid courts.[17] In many ways, *Kalila and Dimna* provided an alternative to Islamic legal texts on proper behavior in society. Most of the stories focus on court life through allegories of animals behaving like humans. The framework and structure of these stories are complicated, because there are multiple stories being told within the stories. The animals tell each other stories and explicitly state the moral of each story, so the reader can discern the proper behavior from the example of the characters in each story.

Since most of the stories focus on how to behave in the court or around the king, the fables demonstrate the role of the king and how one should behave. For example, one of the main stories focuses on a pair of Jackals who are brothers, named Kalila and Dimna. They are both servants to the king lion. The king had been hiding in his cave for days because a strange bull had been pacing outside, and the king was not sure if it was a threat. Dimna decides to talk to the Bull and alerts him that he was making the king nervous, and this territory does in fact

[16] Andrew J. Lane, "Writing and Transmitting in the Beginning of Islam", *Wayback Machine Internet Archives.* Accessed October 12, 2016.
[17] J.D. Latham, "Ibn al-Muqaffa and early Abbasid Prose," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, ed. Julia Ashtiany, T.M. Johnstone, J.D. Latham, R.B. Serjeant, and G. Rex Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 52.

belong to the King. Dimna brings the Bull and the king together, and once the Bull (named Schanzabeh) has a chance to declare that he was simply lost and lonely, the king welcomes him into the court and names him the "Duke of Beef."[18] The moral of this story is clearly that one should not be afraid of rulers if they have done nothing wrong. A just ruler will welcome honest, good people into the court if they treat the ruler's authority with respect.

In another story, Dimna becomes jealous of the king lion's budding friendship with Schanzabeh the Bull, because Dimna used to be the king's most trusted advisor. He tricks the king and the bull into thinking that they are both secretly plotting to kill each other, which leads to a fight in which the king kills the bull. Kalila is furious with Dimna, and despite all of Kalila's attempts to convince Dimna that this was wrong through story telling; Dimna deceives the king and the bull anyways. After the death of the bull, Kalila declares to Dimna, "throwing away the life of a friend and risking the life of The King? Why – who can trust you now? … I don't want you as a brother. I disown you!"[19] Dimna tries to later convince the king that killing the bull was justified, because "an innocent beast [would not have] challenged [him] so!"[20] Despite Dimna's attempts to console the king, the king retreated to his cave, after which the storyteller said, "and while some did, others did not live happily ever after."[21] The message of the story is that if someone betrays and lies to a ruler for selfish reasons, it will only end in hurting the ruler and hurting all other relationships. A servant to the king should always be honest, loyal, and should put all selfish impulses aside for the sake of the king.

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[18] *Kalila and Dimna*, ed. Ramsay Wood (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1980), 60.
[19] *Kalila and Dimna*, 175.
[20] *Kalila and Dimna*, 182.
[21] *Kalila and Dimna*, 182.

The stories also suggest how a king should treat his people. The original frame story of this piece of literature focuses on a Doctor named Bidpai and a king named Dabschelim. Bidpai is imprisoned after telling the king about how many of his people are suffering due to his poor leadership. However, the king later goes on a quest to find treasure and finds a letter from King Houschenk, which contains a clear list of instructions on how to behave as king, such as “always be merciful” or “never produce harm or injury of any person.”[22] After reading this letter, the king decides to listen to Bidpai’s stories and even promises to “take care of him”.[23] This perpetuates the idea that a king should be attentive and merciful to their people, and to not let corruption or greed get in the way of their duty to govern. Set through the example of Dabschelim and Bidpai, it is clear that a king is expected to respect his people if he wishes to earn his people’s respect for him.

Kalila and Dimna also demonstrates how people should treat one another on a daily basis. The morals implied from many of these stories often do not have anything to do with a ruler or a court, but are just instructions on how everyone should treat each other. For example, during a story called “the Dervish and the Thief”, a dervish watches a lot of lying and deceit, such as being robbed and witnessing adultery and murder. He is present for a trial in which an innocent person will be blamed for many of these crimes, but the dervish tells the judge what actually happened, and then states, “and from all this story one short lesson can be learned: those who indulge in greed (whatever its disguise) cannot hope for the influence of good.”[24] This message can be applicable to anyone, and implies that good behavior is desirable without

[22] *Kalila and Dimna*, 17-20.
[23] *Kalila and Dimna*, 43.
[24] *Kalila and Dimna*, 76.

referring to court life. *Kalila and Dimna* demonstrates how specific cultural values of the Abbasids. Because so many people appreciated and reiterated these stories, it can be assumed that the values in these stories were also appreciated and expected in Abbasid society. Since a large population of people appreciated these stories, it gave a clearer picture of the cultural values

The Arabian Nights is another work of prose that was popular during the Abbasid Caliphate. It is a compilation of stories from Persian, Mesopotamian, Indian, Jewish, and Egyptian sources. Most of these tales were collected in the 10th century, but many stories have since been added and adapted over time.[25] The framework for the rest of the stories is about a king named Shahrayar. When his wife is unfaithful, he kills her and takes a new wife each night, but ends up killing each wife out of fear that she will be unfaithful as well. The vizier's daughter Shahrazad volunteers to marry the king, and she says this will "either succeed in saving the people [or I will] perish and die like the rest."[26] Shahrazad prevents the king from killing her by telling him pieces of stories each night with the promise of the conclusion of each story if she can stay alive for the next night. With the help of Shahrazad's sister Dinarzad, who expresses interest in each of her stories and begs Shahrazad to tell the rest of the stories the next night, Shahrazad successfully maintains the king's interest and therefore keeps herself alive until the king falls in love with her. *The Arabian Nights* reflects the Abbasid culture in this time period because it shows what the Abbasids valued, such as reverence for royalty, reverence for God, and the proper place and behavior of each person in society.

[25] Hussain Haddawy, introduction to *The Arabian Nights*, translated by Hussain Haddawy (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), xiii.
[26] *The Arabian Nights*, 15.

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Many of the stories suggested that the people living in the calphate should revere the caliph's authority. For example, during "The Porter and the Three Ladies", Harun al-Rashid, the fifth Abbasid caliph, and his vizier Ja'far enter the story as two of the main characters. They join a house party disguised as merchants, so their presence does not alarm any of the other characters in the story. As the night went on, two of the women hosting the party turned into dogs, and a third woman was forced to beat them. When the caliph and the vizier leave for the evening, the caliph is curious about the three women's terrifyingly erratic behavior. The caliph orders the vizier to bring them to his palace and tell their stories.[27] When the characters in the story realize they hosted the caliph and his vizier, they were overcome with gratitude and joy for having such an honor. Shahrazad said in her storytelling, "the people marveled at the Caliph's wisdom, tolerance, and generosity and, when all the fact were revealed, recorded these stories."[28] According to Haddawy (the editor of this version), Harun al-Rashid's rule of the Abbasid Caliphate "is considered to be the golden age of the Arab empire, and his court in Baghdad is idealized in 'Nights'."[29] "The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies" exemplifies the idea that the caliph deserved reverence, especially in the case of Harun al-Rashid.

Many stories emphasize the reverence for God. One example of this is during Shahrazad's "Tale of the King's son and the She-Ghoul", when a fisherman was tricked by a demon to release him from a jar. The fisherman said "Spare me, and God will spare you; destroy me, and God will destroy you."[30] Since the Demon represents evil he ignores these words, but the fisherman later tricks the demon back into the jar. The moral of this story is that those who

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[27] *The Arabian Nights*, 161.
[28] *The Arabian Nights*, 181.
[29] Hussain Haddawy, footnote in *The Arabian Nights*, 94.
[30] *The Arabian Nights*, 59.

revere God and follow Him will end up protected and safe from danger. This exemplifies the importance of religious belief among at least some Muslims in this time period. Since there is evidence of religious reverence in this story, it is implied that some of the Abbasids used these stories as a way to emphasize and teach morals, such as obedience to God.

Like *Kalila and Dimna,* the stories in *The Arabian Nights* had morals that could apply to the average person. For example, when Shahrazad tells her father the vizier that she wishes to marry the king, he responds, "Daughter, He who misbehaves ends up in trouble, and He who considers not the end, the world is not his friend. As the popular saying goes, 'I would be sitting pretty, but for my curiosity.' I am afraid that what happened to the donkey and the ox will happen to you."[31] The vizier then goes on to describe the mistakes of the donkey and the ox, which is a metaphor for how Shahrazad's naivety will lead to her death. The vizier uses a story to show why Shahrazad should not only should avoid the king, but should listen to her father. This highlights the concept of obedience to the family, and also acting sensibly.

Other societal ideas about behavior appear in the frame story, though not all of them are positive. King Shahrayar is portrayed as wealthy, impulsive, and bloodthirsty. For example, after his first wife was unfaithful, "King Shahrayar grabbed his sword, brandished it, and, entering the palace chambers, killed everyone of his slave girls and replaced them with others. He then swore to marry for one night only and kill the women the next morning, saying, 'there is not a single chaste woman anywhere on the face of the earth.'"[32] He is clearly affluent enough to purchase female slaves, and then murder them out of fear that they will not be faithful. When he kills his new wife every night, he is characterized as impulsive, psychotic, and bloodthirsty. However,

[31] *Ibid*., 15.
[32] *Ibid*., 14.

the vizier, "who could not disobey [Shahrayar], put [each new wife] to death."[33] The rest of the stories balance around pleasing the king, and Shahrazad is always afraid that the king will be upset or bored and kill her. This sends the message that affluence and royalty allow someone to behave erratically. This also suggests that the royalty's authority is absolute and final, no matter how bloodthirsty or psychotic he may be.

Many of the stories in *The Arabian Nights* demonstrate the expectations of behavior for women. Often women are punished based on the severity of their behavior. For example, during "The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies", a woman approached a porter in the market, and immediately led him to her house and introduced him to her sisters. Shahrazad said, "they went on drinking cup after cup [of wine] until the porter began to feel tipsy, lost his inhibitions, and was aroused. He danced and sang ballads and carried on with the girls, toying, kissing, biting…"[34] This behavior is seemingly harmless, but the stories portray the women as frivolous and promiscuous. Later, the events of the story turn much darker when two of the sisters' turn into hounds each night and the third sister has to beat them, because of a curse from a serpent.[35] The story of "The Porter and the Three Ladies" suggests that when women flirt, drink, and act frivolously, they are punished, because their behavior is not responsible. However, they do not have to pay for their misdeeds with their lives. If women commit more serious crimes, such as adultery, they are given much harsher punishments. For example, during Shahrazad's story of "The Enchanted King", a man "sliced [his wife] in half with his sword"[36] because she was unfaithful. Another example of this is during Shahrazad's "Tale of the Second Lady, the Flogged

[33] *Ibid*., 14.
[34] *Ibid*., 87.
[35] *Ibid*., 170.
[36] *Ibid*., 78.

One", a woman's husband was ready to "cut her in half" because "this is the punishment of those who break the vow."[37] When women commit severe crimes, they are often brutally punished. These stories suggest that women's behavior can be categorized, and their actions are punished according to how bad their behavior is.

Shahrazad's behavior suggests how women should behave. Shahrazad is clearly the heroine in *The Arabian Nights.* Despite her father's commands for her to "desist, sit quietly, and don't expose yourself"[38] when she volunteers to marry the king, Shahrazad chooses to risk her life. She decides to marry the king because it would be "saving the people",[39] which is selfless and noble. It is also brave of her to spend each night telling the king stories, when she knows that if he is not thoroughly entertained, he will kill her. Shahrazad successfully solves the king's problem using intelligence and bravery. This indicates how women should behave in front of a king, and if they are virtuous and brave, they can be successful and still serve the royalty. According to these stories, the same expectations are not placed on men. Perhaps men had behavioral expectations, but this collection of stories focuses on the scrutiny of which women's behavior was observed. *The Arabian Nights* gives a deeper and more thorough understanding of history. Multiple people in Abbasid society shared the values described in these stories, so it can be assumed that many people also had these values. Primary documents from this time period can describe how one person was feeling, but shared stories demonstrate the calues of an entire culture.

[37] *Ibid.*, 176.
[38] *Ibid.*, 17.
[39] *Ibid.*, 15.

In order to fully understand societies of the past, it is important to examine what people valued and how they perceived themselves. Analyzing the arts, specifically literature, is an effective way to do this. Poetry, *Kalila and Dimna*, and *The Arabian Nights* showed what the Abbasids (mostly the people in the courts) valued outside of the political and social problems that would typically define this era. While these texts may reflect the political or social problems, examining the culture is a different way to learn about how the Abbasids reacted to the societal tensions and issues. The study of history often includes analyzing concrete events, like succession, war, etc. Many history teachers have to skip over analyzing the culture of a time period in order to give the broadest possible perspective. These stories offer an alternative to the primary documents where "the great men of history" chronicle every war and event with their biases. Because these texts were appreciated by an entire court and often were appreciated by several generations, it reflects the deeper values that the Abbasids had.

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