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"Passed around by a Crescent"
Wine Poetry in the Literary Traditions of the Islamic World

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Poetry as Provocation: The *Khamriyyāt* of al-Walīd ibn Yazīd (d. 6/743)

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There is general agreement among scholars that the wine poetry of the short-lived caliph al-Walīd ibn Yazīd was a major development in the *khamriyya* genre, and that al-Walīd is the most important forerunner of Abū Nuwās (d. 813).[1] It appears that these views are primarily based on the information provided by Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī in the chapter on the poet in his *Kitāb al-Aghānī*.[2] Indeed, it would be hazardous to draw far-reaching conclusions from the limited number of *khamriyyāt* transmitted in the corpus of al-Walīd's poetry. As Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī tells us, al-Walīd composed a great number of verses on wine, but other poets plundered them and included them in their own poetry. Abū al-Faraj mentions Abū Nuwās in particular, whom he accuses of adopting all of al-Walīd's motifs (*maʿānīhi*) and using them repeatedly in his *khamriyyāt*.[3] We are hardly in a position to substantiate Abū al-Faraj's statement on account of the few surviving texts of al-Walīd's verses on wine. As far as we know, there has been no *dīwān* of al-Walīd in Arabic literary tradition. His poetry seems to have been scattered across different sources, and the poems collected and edited by Francesco Gabrieli and later published with an essay in an Arabic edition constitute only a small part of his oeuvre.[4]

This chapter discusses two aspects of al-Walīd's poetry on wine: his contribution to the development of the *khamriyya* genre, and the question of how his verses reflect his individual taste, creativity, and tempestuous character. For what makes his poetry unusual and highly interesting is its intimate connection with his life and personality. Because he was a caliph—though for most of his life only designate—he did not have to seek anybody's favor but was free to follow his own poetics and inclinations, which he certainly did. This is a reason for the originality of his verses. As to his biography, we know more about him than about most other early poets. What is more, his scandalous behaviour stimulated authors to transmit and, in all probability, also invent stories about him, to entertain their readers. Even if some of

1 Jamel-Eddine Bencheikh, "Khamriyya," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. E. van Donzel, B. Lewis, and Ch. Pellat (Leiden, 1978), 4:1003; Dieter Derenk, *Leben und Dichtung des Omaiyadenkalifen al-Walīd ibn Yazīd. Ein quellenkritischer Beitrag* (Freiburg, 1974), 59–62.

2 Aghānī, 7:1–84.

3 Aghānī, 7:20.

4 Francesco Gabrieli, "Al-Walīd ibn Yazīd. Il califfo e il poeta," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 15 (1934): 1–64; see also the second revised edition of *Dīwān al-Walīd ibn Yazīd* (Beirut, 1967). I quote from the latter edition. For a detailed bibliography, see Robert Hamilton, *Walīd and His Friends: An Umayyad Tragedy* (Oxford, 1988). Hamilton includes a great number of verses with translation.

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