Introduction

Muḥammad ibn Maḥfūẓ al-Sanhūrī’s Kitāb Muḍḥik dhawī l-dhawq wa-l-niẓām fī ḥall shadharah min kalām ahl al-rīf al-ʿawāmm (The Book to Bring a Smile to the Lips of Devotees of Taste and Proper Style through the Decoding of a Sampling of the Verse of the Rural Rank and File), or, in our abbreviated rendering, Risible Rhymes, is known from a single manuscript (see Note on the Text). Its author, who is otherwise unknown but whose roots must have been, on the evidence of his name, in the town of al-Sanhūr in al-Fayyūm, in Upper Egypt, describes it as having been written at the behest of “a certain witty friend”, unnamed (§1.1). Work on the book began at the end of the month of Shaʿbān of 1058 (mid-September AD 1648) (§5.1).

The first task set for the author by the commissioner of the work is to “to decode a sampling of what the rural rank and file have said in verse” (§1.1). Al-Sanhūrī’s response to this challenge occupies about forty percent of the book, in which he discusses ten samples of supposedly rural verse. The remainder of the book is divided into two sections, the first devoted to the presentation and elucidation of several “hints” (ishārāt) and “riddles” (alghāz)—each a kind of conventional literary puzzle—while the last consists of a “wrangle” (mabḥath), or critical discussion, devoted to an analysis of different explanations of the meaning of a single word in a line of verse by Abū l-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī.

The significance of al-Sanhūrī’s work from the present perspective and the reason for its publication in this series alongside Yusuf al-Shirbīnī’s Hazz al-quḥūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf (Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abū Shādūf Expounded) lies not in its value as literature, which is limited, nor simply in its concern with “rural” verse, but in the occurrence in it, with commentary, of six verses that occur also in the section of Volume One of Brains Confounded headed “An Account of Their Poets and of Their Idiocies and Inanities,” (§5) in addition to four more that do not. Verses occurring (with minor variants) in both books are those beginning wa-llāhi wa-llāhi l-ʿaḍīmi l-qādirī (al-Sanhūrī §2.1.1; al-Shirbīnī §5.5), hibabu furni-bni ʿammī (al-Sanhūrī §2.3.1; al-Shirbīnī §5.6), saʿaltu ʿani l-ḥibb (al-Sanhūrī §2.5.1; al-Shirbīnī §5.7), wa-qultu lahā būlī ʿalayya
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wa-sharshīrī (al-Sanhūrī §2.7.1; al-Shirbīnī §5.3); raqqāṣu ṭāḥūninā (al-Sanhūrī §2.8.1; al-Shirbīnī §5.8), and raʾayt ḥarīfī bi-farqillah (al-Sanhūrī §2.9.1; al-Shirbīnī §5.9). The four verses that occur only in Muḍḥik dhawī al-dhawq are those beginning tanāmū wa-ʾaynī ḍarrahā l-buʿdu wa-l-sahar (§2.2.1), wa-qultu lahā yā bint al-ajwādi rawwiḍī (§2.4.1), saʾaltu llāha yajmaʿunī bi-Salmā (§2.6.1), and laqītuhā qultu sittī bqī taʿā bukrāh (§2.10.1). Naturally, the point, made in the Introduction to Brains Confounded (Volume One, p. xvi), that such verses are mock-rural productions created by educated writers to be made fun of in the majlis (literary salon) applies equally to this work. The question of whether Brains Confounded derives directly from Risible Rhymes or whether each work drew on a common stock of mock-rural verse and whether they therefore constitute elements of a genre otherwise, so far, lost to us is also discussed in the introduction to Brains Confounded (Volume One, p. xxiii).

In its treatment of the rural verses, Risible Rhymes superficially resembles Brains Confounded. It employs some of the formal comic devices found in the latter, such as the use of absurd words as mnemonics to represent meter (e.g., mutanāqiṣun mutanāqiṣun mutanāqiṣun (§2.1.3); cf. Brains Confounded’s mutakhabbiṭun khābiṭun mutakhabbiṭun khubāṭ (§5.2.1)) and references to a line of verse as stretching from one supposedly well-known place to another (e.g., “its length . . . is from Bedlam’s hall to the hospice gate, and its breadth . . . from the Gate of the Chain to that of the Great Keep” (§2.1.3); cf. Brains Confounded’s “their length, at the very least, is from Alexandria to Rashīd, for sure, their breadth from Upper Egypt to Dimyāṭ, or more” (§5.2.1). The opening scene, in which “a man of taste and knowledge” and his companions arrive in the port of Rashīd, enter a mosque, and are accosted by “a man of the countryside . . . like some mordacious cur or mud-caked boar” who challenges them to a contest (§1.2, §1.3) is reminiscent of anecdotes in Brains Confounded such as that in which the Azhari shaykh Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qalyūbī finds himself in a village mosque and is challenged by “a man tall of stature, thick of leg” (§4.3) or that in which villagers subject a benighted scholar to examination by their local fiqī (village man of religion or pastor), who turns out to be “tall as a flagpole on a mountain and bulky and heavy in physique as the Pillar of the Columns, so that just looking at him was enough to make the skin crawl” (§4.2.2).

Risible Rhymes is, however, far in spirit from Brains Confounded. The commentary on the “rural” verse restricts itself to a mundane analysis focused on grammar and prosody in which, despite the presence of the comic devices
referred to above, the poets’ solecisms are taken and dealt with at face value, rather than as occasions for word-play and witty excursus. It is also repetitive and makes no digressions into other areas of life, deriving most of what comic force it may possess from invective rather than wit. Surprisingly, it fails to fulfill the promise of its title, in that the body of the text contains almost no reference, after the first scene, to the “country rank and file,” and, even in that scene, the setting is specified as Rashid, an important port rather than a village (§1.2). Given *Risible Rhymes*’s lack of both the satirical and parodic dimensions to the critique of mock-rural verse that are so well developed in *Brains Confounded*, the only substantive factor shared by the two works may be their contempt for the poetic production of uneducated, nonelite versifiers.

Neither the remaining “hints and riddles” nor the “wrangle” passages of *Mudāḥik dhawī al-dhawq*, whatever their merits—and certainly the critical approach, especially in the “wrangle” over al-Mutanabbi, is not without subtlety and interest—add much to our understanding of the “rural verse” genre. Both sections consist almost entirely of quotations from other writers; they may, indeed, be considered an almost comically extreme example of padding. They do, however, serve to remind us of the intense preoccupation with word-play, grammar, and stylistics that dominated the discussion of poetry in their day and that shaped and made meaningful the mockery of “rural verse.”