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### ABU NUWAS (CA. 757–CA. 814)

Arab poet. One of the greatest of all Arab writers, Abu Nuwas was the outstanding poet of the Abbasid era (750–1258). Abu Nuwas al-Hasan ibn Hani al-Hakami was born in Al-Ahwaz; his father was from southern Arabia and his mother was Persian. His first teacher was the poet Waliba ibn al-Hubab (died 786), a master who initiated him into the joys of pederasty as well as poetry.

Abu Nuwas continued his education in theology and grammar, after which he decided to try his luck as an author in the capital city of Baghdad. Here he soon acquired great fame as a poet who excelled in lyrical love poetry (*ghazal*), in lampoons and satire, and in *mujun*—frivolous and humorous descriptions of indecent or obscene matters. He became the boon companion of the Caliph Al-Amin (ruled 809–813), son and successor of the illustrious Harun ar-Rashid (ruled 786–809). His irresistible humor and irony made him a favorite figure in popular stories of the Arab world, where he played the role of court jester. (He makes several appearances in *The Thousand and One Nights*.)

Abu Nuwas's favorite themes were wine and boys. He was one of the first Arab poets to write lyrical love poetry about boys, and his genius brought the genre to great heights. His preferred type of youth was the pale gazelle, whose face shone like the moon, with roses on his cheeks and ambergris in his long curly hair, with musk in his kisses and pearls between his lips, with firm boyish buttocks, a slender and supple body, and a clear voice. Beardless boys held the greatest attraction—the growth of hair on the cheek was likened to that of apes—but

here also Abu Nuwas flouted social norms by describing down on the cheek as erotically appealing, since it preserved beauty from indiscreet glances and gave a different flavor to kisses.

The only woman who played an important part in his life was Janan, a slave girl, but, because of his libertine conduct, she never trusted the sincerity of his love. When she asked him to renounce his love of boys, he refused, saying that he was one of the "people of Lot," with reference to the Arab view that the Biblical Lot was the founder of homosexual love. Abu Nuwas was sexually interested in women or girls only when they looked like boys, but even then he considered their vagina too dangerous a gulf to cross. As he said (symbolically): "I have a pencil which stumbles if I use it on the front of the paper, but which takes great strides on the back." Lesbianism he derided as pointless: "It is fat rubbed up by fat, and nothing more. And rub as one may, when down to bare skin, there is nothing to rise in response. There is no wicked shaft that is smooth at the tip to drive itself home and sink into place."

Abu Nuwas was notorious for his mockery and satire, in which the sexual intemperance of women and the sexual passivity of men were favorite themes. A lot of people, even those in high places, were verbally "buggered" by him: "Your penis would not be soft if you did not widen your anus!" Such verbal abuse landed him in prison twice; he was also jailed once for drinking wine.

He liked to shock society by writing openly about things which transgressed the norms and values of Islam. For example, he was probably the first Arab poet to write about the taboo subject of masturbation, which he declared to be inferior to the love of boys, but preferable to marriage. He did not hide his "sinful" behavior behind a cloak of silence, as was expected in Islam; instead he openly boasted of his love of boys and wine: "Away with hypocrisy . . . discreet debauchery means little to me. I want to enjoy everything in broad

daylight." Social blame only served as an enticement, and regrets were not to be expected.

At the very end of his life, Abu Nuwas underwent a sudden reformation, and devoted his final days to the composition of verses in favor of Islamic holiness. Yet it is not these verses which brought him his fame.

*See also Ghulamiyya; Islam.*

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## ACHILLES

Greek mythological hero. Achilles was the son of Peleus and Thetis, usually represented as their only child. All the evidence suggests that the Greeks thought of him as a man, real or imaginary, and not as a "faded" god, and that his widespread cult resulted mainly from his prominence in the *Iliad*. His portrait was drawn once and for all by Homer, and later writers supplied details from their own imagination or from local traditions of obscure origin.

In the *Iliad* he appears as a magnificent barbarian, somewhat outside the sphere of Achaean civilization, though highly esteemed for his personal beauty and valor. Alone among the figures of Homer, he clings to the archaic practice of making elaborate and costly offerings, including human victims. His furious and ungovernable anger, on which the plot of the *Iliad* turns, is a weakness of which he himself is conscious. When not aroused by wrath or grief, he can often be merciful, but in his fury he spares no one. He is a tragic hero, being aware of the shortness of his life, and his devoted friendship for

Patroclus is one of the major themes of the epic. Later Greek speculation made the two lovers, and also gave Achilles a passion for Troilus.

The homoerotic elements in the figure of Achilles are characteristically Hellenic. He is supremely beautiful, *kalos* as the later vase inscriptions have it; he is ever youthful as well as short-lived, yet he foresees and mourns his own death as he anticipates the grief that it will bring to others. His attachment to Patroclus is an archetypal male bond that occurs elsewhere in Greek culture: Damon and Pythias, Orestes and Pylades, Harmodius and Aristogiton are pairs of comrades who gladly face danger and death for and beside each other. From the Semitic world stem Gilgamesh and Enkidu, as well as David and Jonathan. The friendship of Achilles and Patroclus is mentioned explicitly only once in the *Iliad*, and then in a context of military excellence; it is the comradeship of warriors who fight always in each other's ken: "From then on the son of Thetis urged that never in the moil of Ares should Patroclus be stationed apart from his own man-slaughtering spear."

The Homeric nucleus of the theme of Achilles as homosexual lover lies in his relationship with Patroclus. The friendship with Patroclus blossomed into overt homosexual love in the fifth and fourth centuries, in the works of Aeschylus, Plato, and Aeschines, and as such seems to have inspired the enigmatic verses in Lycophron's third-century *Alexandra* that make unrequited love Achilles' motive for killing Troilus. By the fourth century of our era this story had been elaborated into a sadomasochistic version in which Achilles causes the death of his beloved by crushing him in a lover's embrace. As a rule, the post-classical tradition shows Achilles as heterosexual and having an exemplary asexual friendship with Patroclus.

The figure of Achilles remained polyvalent. The classical Greek pederastic tradition only sporadically assimilated