Abū Nuwās, famous for his erotic and bacchic verse, also excelled in almost every other poetic genre known in his time. His *hiḍā* (a term that includes anything from dignified satire to virulent invective and obscene abuse) takes up 157 pages in the edition by Wagner. The poems in this section were subdivided into eight rather heterogeneous categories by the 10th-century redactor, Ḥanża al-‘Isfahānī: 1. invective on (Arab) tribes, Bedouins and the sedentary Arabs of Basra; 2. on (tribal and local) «nobles and lords» (*asbrāf* and *sāda*); 3. on scholars (*‘ulamāʾ*); 4. on poets; 5. on various kinds of people (*akhlāt al-nās*); 6. invective by way of joking and ridicule (*al-‘abab wāl-sukhrī*); 7. excessive, obscene and feebly composed invective (*al-hiḍā al-musfrīt al-mufshih wāl-da‘if al-raṣf*); 8. invective that does not belong to the (preceding) sections.

It is not possible, in the scope of this article, to give an adequate survey of all of Abū Nuwās’s invective poetry, much of which – by no means only the poems in section 7 – consists of verbal abuse. Here I shall limit myself to those ten poems, with a total of 97 lines, that were made on one particular person. His name is given by Ḥanża as Zunbūr Ibn Abū Ḥammād, the client (*mawlā*) of al-Muhalhil Ibn Safwān. Ḥanża tells us that Zunbūr made many invective poems on Abū Nuwās, who reciprocated with numerous poems, of which only a few are preserved. They were his undoing: Zunbūr, in his vexation, composed an invective epigram on the erstwhile patrons of Abū Nuwās, the Banū Nayarbakht (or Nawbakht) family, and then showed the lines to them, pretending that they were made by Abū Nuwās.
Thereupon the Naybakht family had Abū Nuwās killed by means of a slow poison.\(^4\)

Of the ten poems four are given in the fourth section, on invective on poets; the remaining six poems stand in the seventh section. Zunbūr (his rather uncommon name means «wasp» or «hornet»)\(^5\) must have been a very minor poet and, indeed, a very obscure person altogether, since nothing else is known of him. The chronological order of the remaining poems being unknown, I deal with them as they come in Hamza’s redaction.

According to some, says Ḥamza, the first epigram (seven lines) was not made on Zunbūr but on someone called Ayyūb Ibn Abī Sumayr.\(^6\) It is perhaps the best of the ten poems: a mock-heroic hunting poem, where Zunbūr/Ayyūb is the hunter, and the lice and fleas in his coat are the game, killed by the sharp swords of the fingernails.\(^7\) It derides the addressee for his poverty and filthy habits. In itself it is not particularly vicious; but that which, when said among friends, would amount to little more than jesting, may in a spirit of enmity turn into hurtful satire.

Other people’s hunting-grounds may be far away;
but Zunbūr’s hunting-grounds are his clothes.
One glance at them will suffice: his lance
drinks blood of lice (not once but twice).\(^8\)
Ah, many a creature lurking in the folds
of the seams, flanked by its nits,
Spreading its mischief without being noticed
when its creeps along –
Ah, many a jumping-jack was not saved
by his jumping!
He was killed by the sharp sword-edges
sheathed in his finger.
Bravo, you hunter whose hounds
are his nails!\(^9\)

\(^4\) Diwān, ii, 75. This is one of the several stories concerning Abū Nuwās’s death; see Wagner, Abū Nuwās, pp. 92-94. On Zunbūr’s quarrel with Abū Nuwās (and a number of other poets), see Der Diwān des Abū Nuwās, hrsg. von Ewald Wagner, Tl. I, Wiesbaden, 1958, pp. 43-44.

\(^5\) For others of that name see e.g. al-Jāhiz, al-Burāq (Beirut, 1981), p. 138; Zunbūr al-Taghlibī; al-Suyūtī, Buqyat al-wu’ūt (Beirut, 1979), i, 570; Zunbūr Ibn Ya’sūb («Wasp, son of Drone») al-Hadrami, nicknamed Abū Shabwa («Father of/Man with the Scorpion Sting»); for an Ibn Zunbūr see al-Ḥusaynī, Jām‘ al-jawābir (Beirut, 1987), pp. 273-74.

\(^6\) Al-Jāhiz, al-Hayyawān (Cairo, 1965-69), v, 379-80 also has Ayyūb.

\(^7\) Diwān, ii, 73-74, German translation in Wagner, Abū Nuwās, p. 369.

\(^8\) The rhymes in the translation are quite fortuitous.

\(^9\) Diwān, ii, 73-74, German translation in Wagner, Abū Nuwās, p. 369.
The second poem (five lines) takes up the same motif: Zunbūr’s «arrows» (his fingernails) have no feathers, nor are they glued or tied up with sinews; his hunting ground is his pocket, where no nit escapes. He cracks his prey between his teeth. Like the first poem, it may be hurtful but cannot be considered verbal abuse.

The following two epigrams (of four and six lines) are different in this respect; they employ an extremely common form of verbal abuse: obscenity. Nevertheless the redactor, Hamza al-Isfahānī, apparently found them not sufficiently «excessive and obscene» to banish them to the seventh section. His criteria are rather obscure, since ۞۝ۜ۝, obscenity, may be found in all sections. It was one of the conventions of the genre that verbal abuse should refer to sexual abuse: the victim of the invective, and especially his female relations, are regularly described as involved in all kinds of active and passive sexual irregularities. Needless to say, there is no reason to believe that there is any truth in such accusations, which amount to a kind of verbal rape.

The mother of that bloke Zunbūr,
she came to my place at night, as usual;
Asking for more of the same I had given her;¹¹
hand in hand with her pimp.
I said to her, «Here’s my prick; put it inside you!»
So she put my P into her Q.¹²
She rubbed my prick after I had fucked her,
as if it were the youngest of her children.¹³

¹³

Al-Zunbūr¹⁴ is submersed in yellowness;
his ears cannot bear it.
In the seas of his bowels
a thousand fireships burn.
The chastest person in his house is his mother:
though chaste, a lesbian.
You who are eager to fuck: come up,

¹⁰ Diwān, ii, 74. The editor of the Egyptian edition, Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Ghazālī, did not understand the poem, as he admits in a note; understandably, since he reads ۝۝۝۝, a non-existing word, for ۝۝۝۝, «nit» (Diwān Abū Nuwās, Cairo, 1953, p. 532).
¹¹ A variant has «To make the monk enter her monastery».
¹² The letters could stand for «prick» and «quim», of course; but it is the shape of the letters that matters, as in the Arabic (which has ۝۝ and ۝۝).
¹³ Diwān, ii, 74; ed. al-Ghazālī, p. 567, the third line and two words of the fourth having been replaced by dots. Here, instead of the name Zunbūr, we find ʿAbbās. For more examples of letters indicating sexualia, see WAGNER, Abū Nuwās, p. 397.
¹⁴ Here, exceptionally, the name has the article; perhaps necessitated by the metre.
to that snorting woman who strangles pricks.
— She swallows a prick in the cleft of her arse,
  like Nubians swallowing a... (?) —
And rend her husband’s arsehole:
  he has slaughtered the she-camel.15

This poem presents a number of problems. Why is Zunbūr yellow? First, there is possibly a hint at the colour of a zunbūr, wasp. Furthermore, an ardent lover ought to be pale, of course; but perhaps another sense is hinted at, for homosexual lovers are sometimes described as being partly besmeared with yellow or brown filth, donated by their boys’ behinds. But then one would expect the nose rather than the ears to be offended. The dots in the fifth verse result from ignorance rather than expurgation (the word būqa means «bundle» or «bouquet», which does not make much sense to me). The slaughtered camel in the final line also is obviously not a real camel. There is, of course, no reason why we should expect to understand everything; if Zunbūr himself and his contemporaries understood it, the poem has served its purpose.

The poems in the section of «excessive, obscene and feeably composed poems» are longer than the preceding ones. As a general rule, short invective epigrams are more effective because they are more easily memorized and transmitted. Nevertheless, some among the greatest poets, such as Jarīr in Umayyad times and Ibn al-Rūmī in the ‘Abbāsid period, saw no harm in extending their verbal abuse to poems of considerable length. After all, a longer poem could serve as a mine from which short quotable fragments could be lifted at will. Compared to Ibn al-Rūmī’s hijā’ Abū Nuwās’s poems are short. The longest of the ten poems on Zunbūr has twenty-two lines:

Zunbūr, you swine, son of a whore
  (it is an honour for your mother to be called a whore);
Your mother has amply given her favours
  to yelping dogs – to say nothing about humans.
Fornicators mount her belly
  like Abyssinian slaves on top of a water-wheel.
In this life your old woman is despised; but in Hell-fire her position will be more prominent than that of Mu‘āwiyā’s [old woman.16

Hind has had her share of noble qualities;
  she said that your old woman is, like herself, in Hell’s abyss.17
Zunbūr reviles me, but his mother, in spite
  of the blessings she has bestowed, was a worn-out hag.
That chick (the result) of fornication should not speak

15 Dīwān, ii, 74-75; not in al-Ghazālī’s edition.
16 Hind Bint ‘Utba, the mother of Mu‘āwiyā, the first Umayyad caliph, was a bitter opponent of the Prophet Muhammad.
17 The translation is uncertain.
after I have removed my yard from his behind.
My prick is a stopper for his perineum,
so he had better be silent, in my opinion.
If this son of a bad woman thinks he will escape me,
I will stretch out my tongue,
Until people in their gatherings will distinguish between us
and his invective will be compared with mine.
He was no real danger to me, but I thought, No!
Or I might disgrace the wretch in this way.
I brought his old woman and him together
and took my heart's pleasure from one and the other.
He was buggered first, in the middle of his house, on all fours;
his mother was fucked in a corner.
They remonstrated with me, the two of them, envious of each other;
in the end I had to divide my friends between them.
I went, alone, to Muhalhil's house, with the hunchback
mounted on my cucumber,
And emptied my load in the arses of his houri womenfolk,
holding my friends back from their cunts.
The eldest of them said, when I thrust it behind her:
«Inside please, even though you ravish me!
Don't take me from the rear, mister; come in front
and take me now from the front!
There is quite a difference, if you but tried it,
between my front and my rear.»
Zunbūr, you will not escape, now that you are caught
between my earth and the pebble-scattering wind of my sky.
You used to be safe from such a disaster, you whoreson;
but now you will not be pardoned.
Let now reach you from my tongue far-roaming verses
that will remain as they are, even if mountains crumble.

The next epigram is Abū Nuwās's answer to a poem by Zunbūr, quoted by Ḫamza al-İṣfaḥānī, which I translate here, even though it is far from clear:

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18 Al-Muhalhil Ibn Şafwān was the patron of Zunbūr; he is mentioned by al-Tabarī as a general who was defeated by rebels in 137/754-5 and as a governor of Jurjān who was deposed in 163/779-80 (Tārikh, Cairo, n.d. - 1969, vii, 495 and viii, 149).
19 The word bāṣib, «pebble-scattering wind», is found four times in the Koran as one of God's punishments for sinful people; e.g. «We sent against them [sc. the people of Sodom and Gomorrah] a pebble-scattering wind, except Lot's family, whom We saved» (34:13), or «Are you sure that He who is in heaven will not send against you a pebble-scattering wind?» (67:17).
20 Dncān, ii, 118-20; not in al-Ghazālī's edition. Muhalhil Ibn Yamāt (d. after 946), in his book on the plagiarism of Abū Nuwās (Sāqīt Abū Nuwās, Cairo, n.d., p. 133), condemns the whole poem, of which he quotes the first line, as «bad» (sāqīt).
A letter, written by my prick;
containing a reproach of Abū Nuwās's arse:
Greetings (of stabs into you!) to you from me!
I will have nothing to do with you.
You have taken another instead of the young camel that is not
strong; therefore the strong camel walks away with him.
You may be content with Fadl's prick;
but the gazelle has fled from its covert.21

This faunial piece suggests that the quarrel between the two poets
had something to do with an affair involving boys. Abū Nuwās's re-
response employs the same metre and rhyme as Zunbūr's poem, as was
customary:

I say, why is it that Zunbūr's arse cannot help sneezing
whenever it sees me?
I answer politely: «Bless you!»,
hoping that it may leave my prick in one piece,
And I stuff an arsehole that has, for quite a time,
served as a cap for Abū Nuwās's prick.
To cure the itch in dear Zunbūr's bum
Indian swords or razors would not suffice.
I know Zunbūr's disease, for I have been
directly involved and I have endured it.
I shall leave Muhalhil's daughters, when they ask me
to fuck them, like the gazelles of the covert.22

The second-longest poem (seventeen lines) begins as if it were a
traditional ode beginning with the memory of the absent beloved:

God! Our eyes are dripping with tears of passion,
choked with grief.
They departed for Syria, leaving in al-Karkh
desolate dung-heaps and plains ...

The «dung-heaps and plains» are regularly found in Bedouin odes
in a similar context; but the mention of al-Karkh, the business quarter
of Baghdad, makes it obvious that a parody is meant. The following
two lines address Zunbūr, who has fallen from the highest hill-top; it
is implied that this happened as a result of Abū Nuwās's invective.
The lofty diction is then abandoned:

... When my lampooning was hot on his arse
and he saw that he could not escape from my hands,
And the heat of the bellows was oppressive, he melted

21 Đuwn, ii, 120.
22 Ibid.
ABŪ NUWĀS'S LAMPOONS ON ZUNBŪR IBN ABĪ ḤAMMĀD

... My invective verse has blackened the face of your reputation
so that no whitewasher can ever whiten it again.
Reciters of poetry find it sweet to sing;
young camels will ever make long strides with it.23

The following poem is aimed at Zunbūr and another poet, called
Mukhattam al-Rāsibi.24 The former is depicted in the beginning:

One with a spotted skin I have turned, among people,
into a crow, a woodpecker.
When he sees me he turns aside, as if
he had been made to swallow pus.25
Of the taste of death no-one can inform you
like him who has tasted it.
I kept moving my chest on top of him,
until he called out from under me, «Caw caw!»26
I have been told that Zunbūr is now on the run for me
and has sought the company of other runaway slaves.
So I said, «Please stop mocking him;
it is no light thing, what he has gone through:
Going about al-Karkh when lampooning's hand
has dabbed his face with broad smears from the ink-wad;
Turning while he drags behind him a train
of halters and nooses ...»27

It seems that Zunbūr took pride in being a client of the family of

23 Diwān, ii, 121-22.
24 See FUAT SEZGIN, Geschichte des arabischen Schriftums. Band II: Poesie bis ca. 430 H., Leiden, 1975, p. 600, where he is wrongly called «al-Mukaiyim».
26 Arabic ǧā ǧā, apparently imitating a choking sound and at the same time the
call of the crow from line 1; a humorous exploitation of the poem’s rhyme in -āgā.
Muhalhil. Abū Nuwās questions this relationship in a short poem that is, for once, free from obscenity:

I have come to the Muhalhil family before, with lampoons on you;  
They did not like it and denied knowing you.  
Then I attested that Muhalhil, like his sons, did not know you.  
Come, give me proof in evidence of your being their client!  
One witness will do for me, instead of two.  
Who else should I lampoon when they say they do not know you?  
It is all the same to me, making verses on dung beetles  
or on people like you.\(^\text{28}\)

The last poem on Zunbūr again connects him with al-Mukhattam:

I see the women of this age are hermaphrodites.  
Therefore I have repudiated Zunbūr  
with a threefold (irrevocable) divorce.

(A commentator explains: Zunbūr was effeminate, so Abū Nuwās treats him as a woman in this poem.)

I used to prefer no resting-place for my prick,  
among many people, other than his filth-hole.  
His bum was almost like a family heirloom to me alone,  
herited from his grandfather.  
But when I saw that grey hair had stripped him of his youth  
(which used to be so rich and luxuriant with him),\(^\text{29}\)  
I called my ropes away from his strands of rope:  
our strong bands became frayed and worn...

This is an innocent motif often found in love-poetry: the severing of bands. Here, however, one might detect obscene allusions, since «rope» and «strand» are sometimes used in sexual imagery.\(^\text{30}\)

When he saw that I had broken with him, he donated it  
[(i.e. his behind)]  
to al-Mukhattam, so that he would let poems be sent up,  
[travelling fast.]

When al-Mukhattam learnt that I had lowered him  
in the eyes of people, he pissed and shat himself.

\(^\text{28}\) Diwān, ii, 124, ed. al-Ghazālī, p. 527, where the editor provides as a title «al-Raqāshī the impostor (al-da‘īyy)»; a mistake, for the poet al-Raqāshī had nothing to do with the Banū Muhalhil.

\(^\text{29}\) I translate the line that is given as a variant, which seems easier to understand than the line in the main text.

\(^\text{30}\) See, e.g. al-Aghlab’s obscene poem on the «false prophets» Musaylima and Sajāh, where the same words (habl, quwā) are found (Ibn Sallām al-Jumāhī, Tabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu‘ārā’, Cairo, 1952, p. 574).
ABŪ NUWĀS'S LAMPOONS ON ZUNBŪR IBN ABĪ ḤAMMĀD

You, son of water and reeds (؟), a man
to whom you, of all people, are his rescue is lowly indeed!
Mukhattam, get it up, quickly! For he has come to you with it,
well-anointed, in order to be rescued.\textsuperscript{32}

\*
\*
\*

It is obvious that Zunbūr did not inspire Abū Nuwās to write
great poetry. However, parts of the poems translated here have an
undeniable vigour that must have been very powerful at the time and
is, in a sense, still effective. If the verbal abuse had been in prose, it
would have been lost without trace, no matter how pungent and witty.
The efficacy of verse, its superiority over prose, is demonstrated
eloquently by the fact that the unfortunate Zunbūr would have va-
nished for ever from recorded history but for the poems by Abū
Nuwās. Zunbūr may have brought about a famous poet’s death; by
way of revenge the poet granted Zunbūr an everlasting life of infamy.
The Wasp has lost its sting; from his grave the poet may enjoy his
victory.

\textsuperscript{31} yā bna l-mā'i wa-l-qāf, or qasab; the meaning eludes me; ibn al-mā' ("water's son") is the name of a water bird sometimes described as timid (AL-THA'ALĪBI, Thimār al-qutūb, Cairo, 1985, p. 263).
\textsuperscript{32} Diwān, ii, 124-26.