Naevi, commonly known as birthmarks or moles, are a recurring theme in pre-modern Arabic erotic poetry.¹ Like other bodily features, birthmarks (Arabic: ḥāl, pl. ḥīlān; also shāmah, pl. shāmāt) are a topos of erotic poetry that allows poets to amplify a mark of beauty through allusion, simile, and metaphor into a poetic statement (maʿná).² The trope seems to have emerged in the early Abbasid period and soon became ubiquitous.³ As with other poetic figures, anthologists collected many of these verses together into stand-alone chapters. The objectives of these collections differed; some brought these poems together as an introduc-
tion for poetry novices or to determine who first originated a particular image and whether other poets had indecorously borrowed it (i.e., in sariqāt texts). The anthologists studied here, however, were rather more concerned with poetic depictions of the human body, and devote several chapters to parts of the body often eulogized in erotic poetry. These poetic collections do not always appear systematically organized; in fact, when not arranged alphabetically by rhyme-letter or by order of precedence as in sariqāt-texts, they often appear as though presented at random. The idea of a random presentation of literary material should strike us as dubious, however, and may in fact reflect a continued discomfort with the idea of poetic anthologies as original literary works.

In this article, I will describe an anthological practice I have chosen to call “variation,” which can be seen inter alia in the composition of two chapters of collected poetry centered around the topic of naevi. These mini-collections, I argue, unfold through a subtle, inexplicit progression of thematic and rhetorical movements. It is only by recognizing this mechanism of variation, which relies on overlapping transitions—as though the poems were cascading—that the literary construction and conscious arrangement of these poetry collections becomes apparent. This process of arrangement, along with others, helps to augment meaning and contribute to what we might call the “macropoetics” or “contextual poetics” of Arabic poetry collections.⁴

What is most significant about these poetry collections, for the purpose of literary history, is that they demonstrate how Mamluk poetry anthologists could use their rich knowledge of the Arabic literary tradition to repurpose common motifs as threads to bind together—using a novel approach—new types of poetry collections, such as the epigram anthology. Alexander Sens has discussed how the technique of allusion functioned in the context of Hellenistic epigram collections:

A poet’s reuse of a particular passage activates the reader’s awareness of an entire tradition, thus locating the alluding text in a continuous literary line while treating the target as a poetic ancestor. ... [T]he grouping of poems by type or theme could provide a conspicuous generic template against which readers evaluate the interrelationships among individual poems. But it is in the case of an anthology like Meleager’s Garland, in which the epigrammatist places his own compositions alongside the work of his predecessors, that the impulse to establish and comment on one’s epigram-
matic pedigree is most vivid: in juxtaposing his own compositions with epigrams on which they are based, the poet lays before the reader his own literary genealogy. Sens’ analysis chimes with my own and suggests that this operation—this radicalization of convention through convention—speaks of a thriving literary culture, wherein an appetite for variety and virtuosity was engendered among readers who demanded an attendant aptitude and erudition from authors. This same trend is mirrored in anthologies on motifs such as tears and incipient beard growth (i.e., ‘idhār). Thomas Bauer has explained this trend more globally vis-à-vis Mamluk society: “Eager to find pleasure in literature, to improve their literary knowledge, and to gain social prestige as cognoscenti of literature and the subtleties of the Arabic language, this bourgeois public engendered a broad demand for literary works, especially in the form of anthologies.” Collections of naevi verses, like other poetic anthologies, were part of a wider cultural trend in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods toward encyclopaedism, but they are independent artistic works as well, which exhibit a high degree of aesthetic and formal coherence.

In what follows, I will attempt to draw out one specific compositional dimension in two collections of naevi verses to demonstrate that variation in arrangement (cf. the maxim varietas delectat) is an important facet of the aesthetic foundation of Arabic epigram collections. These collections of epigrams on a common theme unfold like a sonata, through a process analogous to exposition and recapitulation—what I have chosen to call variation—and though this process was not remarked upon by contemporary sources, and has thus far escaped the notice of

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7 EI3, s.v. “Anthologies. A. Arabic Literature. 2. Post-Mongol Period” (by Thomas Bauer).
scholars, its deployment, function, and clear utility make its prominence in certain epigram collections a matter of consequence.\textsuperscript{10}

One chapter of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī’s (d. 733/1333) voluminous encyclopedia \textit{Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab} is devoted to naevi description.\textsuperscript{11} This chapter is divided into two sections with reference to grammatical gender: one “in the masculine” (\textit{’alá lafz al-tadhkīr}) and the other “in the feminine” (\textit{’alá lafz al-ta’nīth}).\textsuperscript{12} One should also note the brevity of the sixteen poems included in this chapter—all are four lines long or less in the form in which al-Nuwayrī cited them—as evidence of the tendency to anthologize epigrammatic poems. Following the example set by Joseph Sadan in his article “Maidens’ Hair and Starry Skies: Imagery System and \textit{Ma‘ānī} Guides,” I will highlight the descriptions used in the sequence of poems in al-Nuwayrī’s chapter to demonstrate for the reader the wide variety of images commonly associated with the naevi \textit{ma‘ná} (figure, metaphor).\textsuperscript{13} Highlighting these figures, I will demonstrate how anthologists employed a sophisticated, if unacknowledged, technique of variation to enhance the arrangements of poems on a given theme.

The anonymous author of the first poem compares the mole on the beloved’s right arm to the black spot of the heart and says it is like coal-black jet set in a delicate pearl.

\[
\text{في سعيد اليماني كأنه من سبج فاحم} \\
\text{كائن من لؤلؤ رطب} \\
\text{مثلك على القلب} \\
\text{من المديد}
\]

\text{fī s-sā‘idī l-aymani khālun laḥū / mithlu s-suwaydā‘i ‘alā l-qalbī} \\
\text{ka‘annahū min sabajin fāḥimin / murakkabin min lu‘lī‘in raṭbī}

On his right arm there’s a birthmark,

\textsuperscript{10} Contemporaries did occasionally discuss anthological techniques—albeit obliquely—and they also discussed the importance of variation in the composition of \textit{qaṣā‘id} (sing. \textit{qaṣīdah}) (see, e.g., Ibn Khaldūn, \textit{The Muqaddimah}, trans. Franz Rosenthal [London, 1958],3:373ff). Robert H. Brower and Earl Miner have discussed a process they call integration (made up of two “integrating techniques”: progressions and associations) in connection with Japanese poetry collections, which is clearly analogous to the process of variation I describe here (see R. H. Brower and E. Miner, \textit{Japanese Court Poetry} [Stanford, CA, 1961], 436–38; 319–29; 403–13).

\textsuperscript{11} The most detailed and most recent study of this massive encyclopedia is Muhanna, “Encyclopaedism in the Mamluk Period.”

\textsuperscript{12} Al-Nuwayrī, \textit{Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab} (Cairo, 1964–98), 2:80–82, 83.

like the black spot of the heart
It’s as if it were made of coal-black jet
and set in a lustrous pearl.¹⁴

The second poem, by Ibn Munir al-Ṭarābulusī (d. 548/1153), speaks of a natural beauty who requires no ornaments (ḥāṭil), who appears and instantly attracts the ornaments of [the assembly’s] gaze. His mole is not, the poet says, crumbs of the ambergris of his temples nor a drop of his eyeliner (ṣībghat al-kaḥal); rather it is the black spot of the heart of the one who loves him floating over the fire of his blushing cheek.¹⁵ Ibn Munir is also the author of the third poem, in which he reprises a simile from the previous poem. Here he addresses his audience, “Do not take the mole on his cheek (note the paronomasia, lā takhālū khālahu) for a dried drop of his eyeliner (min ṣībghī jafnin). It is an ember from the fire of my heart, which has sunk into [his cheek], been extinguished, and rests there.”¹⁶ The next poem is connected to this last poem by use of the same apostrophic injunction; it begins, “Do not take the mole on his cheek / for a drop of musk that melted from his forelock,”¹⁷ and as in the poem before it, the last line—the punchline, as it were—gives a more meaningful, and metaphorical, explanation for the presence of this feature of beauty: “That is my heart, it has been robbed of its kernel (dāhāka qalbi sulībat ḥabbatūhū) / which has now settled on his cheek as a mole (fa-ʾstawat khālan ʿalā wajnatihi).” Here there is a pun on the phrase “ḥabbat al-qalb,” which can mean both the “heart’s beloved” and “kernel (lit. grain) of the heart,” but there is also a further pun because “ḥabbat al-qalb” is also known as “suwaydāʾ al-qalb” (“the innermost part [or kernel] of the heart”). Read literally, however, “suwaydāʾ al-qalb” is the “little-black-thing of the heart” and thus refers to the image of the birthmark: the little black thing stripped from the lover’s heart, which has settled on the beloved’s cheek.

The next poem in this sequence is by the same Ibn Munir al-Ṭarābulusī and though the grain allusion (ḥabbah as grain weight) is not made explicit, the figure of weight and scales makes clear the relationship between this poem and the one that came before it.¹⁸ The poet compares the beloved’s cheeks to two gold

¹⁴ This phrase “murakkab min” ought to mean “composed of,” but in context it clearly means “set in,” “placed in.” The poetic syntax is somewhat clumsy, but it is not necessary to substitute “fī” for “min” here, although it would make the line read more smoothly.
¹⁵ Al-Nuwayrī, Nihāyat al-Arab, 2:80. This is also the source for the poem as it appears in the Diwān (Ibn Munir al-Ṭarābulusī, Diwān, ed. ‘Umar Tadmurī [Beirut, 1986], 132).
¹⁶ Al-Nuwayrī, Nihāyat al-Arab, 2:81.
¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ The ḥabbah is equivalent to the avoirdupois grain, equivalent to one-sixtieth of a dirham, or dram, i.e., 64.799 milligrams. On coins, money-changing, and weights see EI2, s.vv. “Dīnār” (by G. C. Miles), “Ṣarf (a.)” (by A. Zysow), and “Makāyil. 1. in the Arabic, Persian and Turkish lands” (by Article: http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MSR_XVII_2013_Talib_pp23-42.pdf
coins (dinār) being weighed on a scale [to certify their value]. The money-changer (sayrafī) carefully balances the scale, but because one cheek weighs less than the other the money-changer has to add a carat (qīrāṭ)—the mole itself—to the cheek that weighs less so that they balance.\(^{19}\) The next poem in the sequence departs from the speck motif to introduce a simile with political significance.\(^{20}\) The anonymous poem announces that “a successor (khalīfah, caliph) to Joseph in beauty has appeared.” The reader will recall that the figure of Joseph became a by-word for beauty in the Arabic tradition. This successor to Joseph’s beauty is nevertheless more daunting than the prophet as depicted in the Bible and Quran: “When he appears both worlds shudder.” In the second line of the poem, the beloved is compared to the caliph. The poet says to his companion, “Stop with me and look at him so that you may see / the black flag of the caliphate (alam al-khilāfah) on his cheek.” This comparison between the mole and the caliph’s black flag is the simile that underpins the entire poem, and also links the idea of religious and political succession to aesthetic succession.\(^{21}\) The beloved is so beautiful that he is reckoned to be in the line of succession from Joseph, but the introduction of the figure of the caliph introduces a whole layer of complexity to this brief poem that is worth unpacking. Two significant layers of meaning were added to the institution of the caliphate during and after the Abbasid revolution. The Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad dynasty in a revolution that was, theoretically, motivated by a strong desire among the Abbasids, their supporters, and their Alid comrades-in-arms to rectify the succession of the caliphate, which had become a hereditary dynasty of the Umayyads. The Umayyads, unlike the family of al-ʿAbbās, were not related Hashemites (banū Hāshim) and this was used to great effect to bolster support for the Abbasids among proto-Shiʿites.\(^{22}\) Succession (khilāfah) is thus not merely dynastic succession, but also familial succession from the Prophet, and it is this complex metaphor that is correlated to the idea of the beloved inheriting his beauty from Joseph. Similarly, the Abbasids were known for having constructed an awe-inspiring, fearsome image of the caliph and his imperial strength. The black standard of the Abbasid armies and the caliph’s black robes

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\(^{19}\) Geert Jan van Gelder kindly suggested “fa-ḥtāṭā” be read for “wa-ḥtāṭā” at the end of line 1 here.

\(^{20}\) Al-Nuwayrī, Nihāyat al-Arab, 2:81.

\(^{21}\) Cf. EI2, s.v. “ʿAlam” (by J. David-Weill).

\(^{22}\) The history of the Abbasid revolution is a very vexed issue and much has been written on the subject. My discussion is limited to the popular conception of this revolution and the ethos of the Abbasid caliphate as represented in pre-modern Arabic culture and should not therefore be confused with a historical account. For an introduction to historical and historiographical discussions of this most significant event in early Islamic history, see EI3, s.v. “Abbāsid Revolution” (by Elton L. Daniel), EI2, s.v. “Abbāsids” (by B. Lewis).
came to symbolize incontestable military and religious authority as an emblem of the Abbasid uprising and subsequent caliphal dynasty but it drew on another common eschatological motif. In the hadith literature, the Prophet Muḥammad explains the signs of the apocalypse thus:

When we were with the prophet, young men from Banū Hāshim [the prophet’s kin] entered and when the prophet saw them his eyes filled with tears and his color turned ... so I [ʿAbd Allāh, the narrator] said, “We still see something in your face that we fear,” and [the prophet] said, “We are the people of a house for whom God has chosen the afterlife over this life, and after me, the people of my house will face trials, expulsion, and persecution. Until a people come from the East with black banners [emphasis mine, ṭāwāf] and they will ask for charity and will not be given it and so they will fight and will be made victorious and then they will be given what they had asked for, but they will not accept it until they bring it to a man from the people of my house and they will fill it with justice as they had filled it up with injustice, and let him among you who realizes this go to them, even if it is as hopeless as crawling on ice (ḥabwan ʿalā al-thalj).”

Against this historical background, we can see that the poet’s comparison of the mole on the beloved’s cheek to the black caliphal standard and its awesome cultural resonance is a light-hearted way of elevating the description of the beloved beyond the trope that he is Joseph’s successor in beauty. The beloved is Joseph’s successor (khalīfah), but he is also linked to the figure of the tremendous, awe-inspiring emperor-caliph (lit. successor). The mark of his beauty (the mole on his cheek) is, for the one who is infatuated with him, as terrifying as the black standard of the caliph’s armies.

The poem that follows on from this one is linked to the caliphal motif by an expression contained in its last line—the line that usually carries the most weight and serves as a climax in these epigrammatic poems. With the image of the fearsome caliph still fresh in the reader’s mind, she then encounters a poem that at first does not seem to be correlated with the one immediately preceding it. Yet it is in the last line of this poem that we find a reference to the same cultural nexus of caliphal mystique that links these two poems in a series. The paradoxical ex-

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pression that concludes the poem is made doubly poignant when read against the historical background of another system of caliphal imagery.24

kam qultu li-n-nafsi ilayhi –dh’habī / fa-ḥubbuhu l-mashhūru min madhhabī
muḥafhafu l-qaddi lahū shāmatun / min ‘anbarin fī khaddhi l-mudhhabī
āyasanī t-tawbata min ḥubbīhi / tūlū’uhū shamsan mina l-maghrībi

I’ve often told my soul, “Go after him!
Loving him is the path (or doctrine) I’m known for.”
Slender bodied, with a spot
of ambergris on his gilded cheek.
I was made to despair of repentance from his love
when he rose as a sun in the west.

Once again, in this poem the mole on the beloved’s cheek is compared to ambergris, thus connecting this poem to the mole motif shared with other poems in this chapter. Yet we should not overlook the image that ends the poem: a sun rising in the west. Those familiar with the traditional lore associated with the Fatimid dynasty will have noticed the connection between this poem and the caliphal poem that precedes it. It is easy to see that this concluding image refers to the Ismaili belief that the Fatimid leader al-Mahdī billāh rose like a sun in the west in accordance with prophetic hadith.25

The image of the sun rising in the west is one of the signs of the apocalypse and is well-known from the hadith literature.26 In the Sunni hadith collection of Ibn Mājah (d. 273/886), there is a chapter “On the rising of the sun in the West” in the section on “Trials and tribulations” (fitan).27 Here Ibn Mājah relates three reports (aḥādīth, sing. ḥadīth) relating to this apocalyptic sign. The Prophet is recorded as saying “The hour [i.e., the end of time] will not come until the sun rises in the West” and “The first sign of the resurrection (khurūjan) is the rising of

24 Al-Nuwayrī, Nihāyat al-Arab, 2:81.
the sun in the West.” Another harbinger of the end times, of course, is the reappearance of al-Mahdī. Line two of this poem is also connected to another piece of Fatimid lore: the man with the birthmark (ṣāḥib al-shāmah). One of the most famous and successful of the Fatimid commanders was al-Ḥusayn ibn Zakarōye, the son of a Fatimid dāʿī. He had a birthmark on his face, which he claimed was a heavenly sign (āyah), and for this reason was known as ṣāḥib al-shāmah. Line two would not necessarily put one in mind of him, but the Fatimid imagery in line three makes the allusion clear and demonstrates the extent to which these epigrams drew on a wide body of shared cultural knowledge. This interpretation of two poems of a total of five lines may seem overlong, but by demonstrating that these poems deal with more than just the birthmark topos and eroticism, and that anthologists arranged these poems in their collections conscientiously—if subtly—we can begin to understand how these poetry collections operated as literary texts; something more than neutral compilations.

The next poem in the sequence builds on the sun motif introduced in the preceding poem. In this poem, the poet describes a slender youth, through whose [dark] hair and [gleaming] brow people arrive at both darkness (ẓulmah) and light (ḍiyāʾ). “Don’t be surprised,” he says, ending the poem, “by the mole on his cheek / for every anemone has its black spot.” In the next poem, this black spot is morphed into a burnt spot: “When my eye saw the fire of his cheek / my heart rushed toward it like a moth [to a flame] / that was burnt by [the fire] and thus became a mole / Just look at the trace of smoke around the edges (al-ḥawāshī).” The last image, the edges (al-ḥawāshī), can also be read as a reference to the beloved’s incipient beard. In the next poem, the simile foregoes the image of fire, but retains the image of flight, as with the moth in the preceding poem. The poet says that a mole appeared upon the beloved’s cheek, adorning him [or the cheek], and this increased the lover-narrator’s existing passion. “The mole,” he says, “is as though it were the beloved [also “grain,” ḥabbah] of my heart, which flew up

28 See EI2, s.v. “al-Mahdī” (by W. Madelung).
30 Ibid., 79.
31 Al-Nuwayri, Nihāyat al-Arab, 2:81.
32 Ibid., 82.
34 Al-Nuwayri, Nihāyat al-Arab, 2:82.
when it saw him, and so I told it to stop on his cheek.” The figure of the heart leads to the next poem, which is all about the interaction between heart, mole, and eye.  

Thus the beloved (also grain) of the heart motif in the previous poem has here been altered to create the image of the lover’s diseased heart. This diseased heart then provides the occasion for the punchline of the poem in which the rational eye, which recognizes the birthmarks as harmful to the lover, is juxtaposed with the passionate heart, which still retains affection for the thing that has caused it pain. What had been expressed through chromatic synecdoche—white for good, black for bad—becomes explicit in the poem that follows. In this poem, the poet says the beloved’s cheek is a mirror of all good things and that its beauty makes all facial features [or qualities, more generally] beautiful. “Why then,” he asks in the concluding line, “do I see stars upon it / which are shy even though they are shooting stars (nayyirāt)?” Here again it is the concluding image, the shooting star, that provides the link between this poem and the next.

The next poem is interesting not only because of the way it is linked to the poem preceding it, but for the system of metaphors it puts forth:

Our gaze makes pilgrimage to your face,
O Ka‘bah of beauty, and circumambulates,
Rubbing the birthmark on your cheek
as if it were the black stone in the corner.\textsuperscript{38}

Let us understand how this poem is connected to the one before it by elucidating the poem’s system of imagery. The gaze of the admirers is likened to pilgrims making the pilgrimage to Mecca, and like these same pilgrims the gaze is said to be circumambulating. Yet rather than say that the gaze is circumambulating the Ka‘bah by use of a direct object, the poet employs apostrophe, “O Ka‘bah of beauty,” to draw maximum attention to the beloved, who is, of course, the idol around which the gaze is performing the ritual circumambulation (\textit{ṭawāf}).\textsuperscript{39} Additionally, the gaze is said to be brushing against the birthmark on the beloved’s cheek just as human pilgrims rub their hands against the black stone embedded in a corner of the Ka‘bah.\textsuperscript{40} This tactile gaze seeks the beloved out with all the intensity of a religious experience. That pilgrims often also kissed the stone only increases the delicacy of the comparison between religious talisman and the beloved’s adorned cheek.\textsuperscript{41} The reader familiar with the tropes associated with the naevi topos could probably foresee the reference to the black stone, and would certainly have understood the allusion to the shooting stars of the preceding line; in the Islamic tradition one of the popular explanations for the provenance of the black stone (\textit{al-hajar al-aswad}) was that it was something akin to a meteorite.\textsuperscript{42} The traditional account of the history of the black stone is as follows: when Ibrāhīm (Abraham) was building the Ka‘bah with his son Ismā‘īl (Ishmael) after the aborted sacrifice, the angel Jibrīl (Gabriel) brought them the black stone, which had been stored in Abū Ḳubays, “the sacred mountain … overlooking the Great Mosque [i.e., the site of the Ka‘bah] in Mecca,” for safekeeping during the flood. Ibrāhīm and his son then built the stone into a corner (\textit{rukn}) of the Ka‘bah structure.\textsuperscript{43}


\textsuperscript{39} See \textit{EI2}, s.v. “\textit{Ṭawāf}” (by F. Buhl).


\textsuperscript{41} On kissing, touching, and prostrating toward the black stone, see Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Azraqī, \textit{Kitāb Akhbār Makkah}, Ser. Die Chroniken der Stadt Mekka, Bd. 1 (Leipzig, 1858), 233–35.

\textsuperscript{42} See ibid., 218–24, 225–33.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{EI2}, s.v. “Abū Ḳubays” (by U. Rubin); cf. ibid., s.v. “Ka‘ba” (by A. J. Wensinck, rev. J. Jomier).
The next poem in the sequence is linked to the poem preceding it but one, thereby creating a retrospective thematic loop that sets the three poems off as a subset. Let us examine how this sequence progresses. The three-line poem by al-Asʿad ibn Balīṭah (d. 440/1048) begins by comparing the effect of the beloved’s beauty to the intoxicating effects of wine: “Drunk after seeing him though I don’t know / if it was because of his good looks or the wine?” In the last line of the poem, the naevi topos is taken up and here it is said that the birthmarks on the beloved’s cheek are like “hours of separation on a night of coming together (wiṣāl).” This theme of union, or coming together (wiṣāl), which is often a metaphor for sex (also spiritual union), serves as the punning core of the first line of the next poem, the first of two naevi poems on a female beloved:

\[ \text{من البسيط} \\
\text{لِمُسْتَـهامٍ بِا لِلوَصْلِ مُنْـتَـظِرِ} \\
\text{والخالُ في صَحْـنِهِ يُغـْني عَنِ ٱلحَجَرِ} \\
\text{فَـدَيْـتُ زائِـرَةً في ٱلعِيدِ واصِلَـةً} \\
\text{فَـلَـمْ يَـزَلْ خَـدُّها رُكْناً ألوذُ بِهِ} \]

\[ fadaytu zāʾiratan fī l-ʿīdi wāṣilatan \\
li-mustahāmin bi-hā li-l-waṣli muntaẓirī \]

1. I’d give my life for a visitor, come on the feast day to see
   An adorer who longs for her arrival [or union with her, or sex]

The second line of the poem reintroduces the pilgrimage motif of the last poem but one; a motif foreshadowed by the use of the word visitor (zāʾirah) in the first line.

\[ fa-lam yazal khadduhā ruknan alūdhu bi-hī \\
wa-l-khālu fī ṣaḥnihi yughnī ʿani l-ḥajārī \]

2. Her cheek remains the corner I seek shelter in
   And the birthmark on its surface obviates the need for any stone!

This last line makes several direct allusions to the hajj (pilgrimage) ritual that demonstrate the extent to which, by manipulating situational terminology (a device called tarjīḥ), Arab poets were able to eroticize otherwise non-erotic references. When we take account of all the hajj allusions, the reading of the line changes dramatically:

\[ 44 \text{ Al-Nuwayrī, Nihāyat al-Arab, 2:82.} \\
45 \text{Poem by Kushājim (d. ca. 350/961), al-Nuwayrī, Nihāyat al-Arab, 2:83.} \]
Her cheek is the corner of the Ka’bah (rukn) where I seek shelter / and the birthmark in the courtyard [i.e., of the mosque] (ṣaḥn) obviates the need for the Black Stone (al-ḥajar).

The final poem in the sequence of naevi poems in this chapter of al-Nuwayrī’s encyclopedia is similarly linked to the one preceding it both by grammatical femininity as well as a common semantic cluster. Where the previous two poems were linked by words sharing the root w-s-l, this final poem is linked to the one immediately preceding by the root n-z-r. Where the lover of the previous poem was waiting (muntaẓir), hopeful for union with the beloved, in this poem, the same root is used to generate two words having to do with sight: nāẓir (looker) and manẓar (view; sight).

[من الطويل]

\[\text{wa-mahjūbatin fī l-khidrī ‘an kullī nāẓīrin wa-law barazat mā ḍalla bi-l-laylī man yasrī bi-khālin bi-dhāka l-khaddi aḥsana manẓarān mina n-nuqṭātī s-sawdā’ī fī wādahī l-badrā’}^{16}\]

Protected from a peeper’s gaze, this woman in the women’s quarters; If she were to appear, no night-traveler would go astray.
With a birthmark on her cheek, that is a more beautiful sight Than even the black spot on the brightness of the full moon.

This poem takes up common tropes: the beloved’s face, gleaming like the moon, illuminates the darkness and the mole on her cheek is compared to the spot on the moon’s surface, some of which we have seen employed in other poems in this chapter. What is most interesting about this poem and the entire sequence of naevi poems in this chapter is the way in which the author—the anthologist—strings these poems together. They are not simply a random assortment of poems on a single topic.

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16 Al-Nuwayrī, Nihāyat al-Arab, 2:83. The poem is by al-ʿAbbās ibn al-Ahnaf (d. ca. 192/808); see also in Al-Muhīb wa-al-Makhūb, 1:59 (discussed below) and in the poet’s Dīwān (ed. Karam Bustānī [Beirut, 1385/1965], 161), where these lines are presented as vss. 3 and 5 of a six-line poem.
This diagram represents the variation underlining a series of transitions in al-Nuwayrī’s short chapter on naevi verses

Of course, these poems are indeed poems on the common topic of naevi, or else they would not have been included in this chapter at all, but the virtuosity implicit in al-Nuwayrī’s anthology is the way in which he (or some other as yet unidentified anthologist from whom he borrowed) orchestrates his collection so that the poems follow on from one another in a sequence that takes the reader from one poem to the next.\(^\text{47}\) In an article investigating “… what relations a pract-
ticed medieval reader noticed between parts of a text,” Andras Hamori ponders a
difficult question that we may never be able to answer with any certainty: “[t]he
modern reader is more or less trained to react to such patterns in a text, but the
rhetoric books do not tell us whether the medieval reader observed them.”48 One
cannot know whether the medieval reader detected the patterns of arrangement
in al-Nuwayrī’s chapter—a mini-anthology—which I have sketched here in detail;
Hamori is right that the sources are silent about this. One could even imagine
that al-Nuwayrī did not himself realize that he was creating a structured, the-
matically cascading arrangement of poems in his chapter on naevi descriptions.
But because this technique is employed by other authors, as we will see below,
and because it stands to reason that “practiced medieval reader[s]” were infinitely
more sensitive to and aware of patterns of arrangement and intertextuality, I do
not think it likely that this is a case of arrangement by accident, or coincidence.
Whether every reader detected this pattern is a matter for debate, but it is clearly
discernible with only a modicum of concentrated attention and I personally doubt
that it went unnoticed by the audience of its day. The question is not whether me-
dieval readers were sufficiently aware of, or properly trained to look for, patterns
in poetic arrangements. The question is—having posited, as an axiom of antho-
logical reading, that these poetry collections were not simply collected but were
chosen with discretion, arranged with a literary eye, and presented to a literate
and sensitive audience—whether any reader could overlook a pattern so obvious.

In al-Sarī al-Raффāʾ’s (d. ca. 972) Kitāb al-Muhīb wa-al-Mahbūb wa-al-Mashmūm
wa-al-Mashrūb, the anthologist includes a chapter on naevi in the first book of
four, the “Book of the Beloved” (kitāb al-mahbūb). Though three of the poems in
this chapter (nos. 2, 8, and 9) are included in al-Nuwayrī’s chapter of some three
and a half centuries later, we cannot detect the same degree of orchestrated ar-
rangement in al-Sarī al-Raффāʾ’s collection of eleven naevi poems. This should not
be taken to mean, however, that al-Sarī al-Raффāʾ compiled his collection without
any artistic vision or that he did not find occasion to employ variation in his ar-
rangement. The anthologist presents eleven epigrammatic poems—note that, as
in al-Nuwayrī’s chapter, none of the poems (as cited) is longer than four lines—on
the naevi motif, detailing variations in descriptive (ekphrastic) representations
(wasf) of this hallmark of beauty. The first four poems in this chapter are not ar-
ranged by means of the same technique used by al-Nuwayrī, but they do form a

set. The set is made up of two poems of one line (poems 1 and 3) alternating with two poems of three and two lines describing women with birthmarks. The one-line poems, the first alternating subset, both hinge on the image of the beloved's ivory white cheek:

[Poem 1] A birthmark like a speck (nuqṭah) of copperas (zāj) on a sheet of ivory.

[Poem 3] A birthmark as though it were a speck (nuqṭah) of musk shining against the whiteness of ivory.

These poems are very similar in their imagery, with the substitution of a speck of musk for a speck of copperas in the second of the subset. The figure of the speck is recapitulated in the poem that comes between these two one-liners: the second poem in al-Sarī al-Raḥfā’s chapter, which is an extended version of the last poem included in al-Nuwayrī’s chapter discussed above. The reader will recall that in this poem the birthmark on the beloved’s cheek is said to be prettier than the sight of the black spot on the brightness of the full moon; the word for “spot” in this intercalary poem is the same as that translated as “speck” (nuqṭah) in the poems on either side of it (Poems 1 and 3). The last poem in this set of four, in turn, skips the imagery of the poem that immediately precedes it (Poem 3) to revive the celestial motif from Poem 2:

kmr[j ]

The women set out like shining stars from which they took their beauty and their coquetry, and a birthmark (like that of the full moon) on a face like it was where we found what we desired so we refrained from making gifts (?). 53

Here, as in Poem 2 above, the beloved’s birthmark is likened to a spot on the moon’s surface; here the poet says figuratively “the birthmark of the full moon” (ka-khāl al-badr). But this poem also expands this celestial motif by comparing the group of beautiful women to brightly shining stars. The reader is asked to remember this pattern of alternating subsets—specks of contrasting color on sheets of expensive material and lunar simile—because al-Sarī al-Ra’fāʾ will return to it again at the end of his chapter on naevi descriptions.

The next two poems in this chapter (Poems 5 and 6) are about male youths, whereas Poems 2 and 4 (discussed above) are about females. The similarities with the imagery that has come before is apparent. In Poem 5, the beloved is described almost as if he were a doll whose beauty is literally handcrafted. 54 The birthmark on his cheek is as though it had been painted there intentionally and his skin is so soft it is as if God has “given him a coat of pearl for skin (albasahū qushūra d-durri jildā).” The last line of the poem links it implicitly with the poem that follows, which in turn associates it with Poem 2 above: “And on his cheeks you’ll see / no matter when you come, a rose.” Keeping this rosy-cheeked boy in the front of our minds, let us consider the proposed connection with the poem that follows. The next poem (Poem 6) is also on a youth; one “cutely coquettish with nice eyes / a marvel like his creator” with two jet-black temple curls over his cheeks. 55 In the third line of this four-line poem, the poet describes the beloved’s birthmark as “cutting the heart of one who loves him (yuqaṭṭiʿu qalba man ‘ashiqah)” and it is this image of “cutting” that links the two poems. In the second line of Poem 2 (omitted from al-Nuwayrī’s version of the poem) the beloved’s birthmark is said

52 Poem by Muslim ibn al-Walid (d. 208/823), known as Sarīʿ al-Ghawānī (al-Sarī al-Ra’fāʾ, Kitāb al-Muḥībb wa-al-Maḥbūb, 1:60–61). In al-Sarī al-Ra’fāʾ’s anthology, the 2nd hemistich of the 2nd line begins “laqītu,” but I have adopted the reading of the poet’s Diwān and other sources as cited in the textual apparatus.
53 The concluding phrase “fa-ḥājazanā l-badhlū” is highly unclear; the translation offered here is a guess.
54 Poem by Dīk al-Jinn (d. 235 or 236/849–51) (al-Sarī al-Ra’fāʾ, Kitāb al-Muḥībb wa-al-Maḥbūb, 1:61).
to be cutting as well: “The beauty of the birthmark on her cheek cuts my heart; / if she were to unveil it, it would [positively] resound with magic (tanaghghama bi-s-sīḥrī).” We can see how common metaphors serve to connect poems in these sequences, yet just as common metaphors and figures are repeated in these sequences, they are also implied. These implied figures also serve to connect poems in a sequence. Let us return to the rose on the youth’s cheek; this is a common enough image in erotic poetry. But the rose on the beloved’s cheek is not always a mere rose; it can also be a freshly cut rose, as in the following hemistich: “His cheeks like roses freshly cut” (wa-khudūdūhū ka-l-wardi ḥīna qaṭaʿtuḥū). And we can see the same imagery in the following line from a poem, which appears elsewhere in al-Sari al-Raffā’s anthology:

\[
lahu wardun ʿalā l-wajna/-ti mammūʿun mina l-qatfī \]

He’s got a rose on his cheek
That’s forbidden to pluck.

The connection between roses and cutting is not made explicit but it certainly does seem plausible that there is an allusion to an imagined correlation that both of these poems conjure up. The figure of cutting plants may also tie into the idea of the himā (sanctuary) and its injunctions. In any case whether or not the cutting birthmark reminds the reader of cut roses, the arrangement of these two poems can be explained more simply: they are both on male youths, whereas Poems 2 and 4, which are grouped together, are both on women.

The next two poems (Poems 7 and 8) both compare parts of the beloved’s body to precious materials. In Poem 7, the beloved’s curls are made of jet, his [or her] brow is made of pearl, the birthmark on his [or her] cheek is a “flower of musk on moist earth.” In Poem 8, it is the birthmark that is compared to jet, a former having been said to resemble the black spot of the heart, set in a cheek of pearl. The final three poems (Poems 9, 10, and 11) form a series and seem again to be linked—like the other groupings we have considered—by shared imagery or paronomasia.

56 It crops up several times in the chapter following the chapter on [descriptions of] naevi in al-Sari al-Raffā’s anthology, the chapter on cheeks (fī al-khudūd); see 1:66, Poems 94 and 95:1:68, Poem 98; 1:70, Poems 102 and 103; 1:70–71, Poem 104; 1:73, Poems 108 and 110; 1:74, Poem 111; and 1:74–75, Poem 113. See also further examples in the chapter after this one, “on [descriptions of] cheeks (wajanāt).”

57 This line is from a poem by the unknown author of “Khādīm al-Ẓurafāʾ wa-Nadīm al-Lutfāʾ,” a seventeenth-century anthology preserved in the Bodleian Library (Oxford) MS Huntington 508, fol. 40a.

sia. Poem 9 is also included in al-Nuwayrī’s text; it is the poem about the female visitor which draws upon pilgrimage imagery (see above). As we have seen, this poem includes a comparison of the beloved’s birthmark to the black stone (ḥajar) of the Ka’bah. The root ḥ-j-r appears to link this poem with the first line of the next poem (Poem 10) in the sequence:

\[
\text{aghannu rabību r-rabrabi l-ghūdī wa-l-mahā}
\]
\[
\text{bi-muqlatī waḥshiyyi l-maḥājīri adʿajī}
\]

One from the gazelle flock: gentle-voiced, supple-necked, and well-raised, alongside a wild cow with the big, black eyes of one feral.

And if it is ḥajar (the stone) in the preceding poem that leads to maḥājir (eyes) in the next, it is then the second and final verse of this poem that introduces us to the concluding movement of the chapter:

\[
\text{lahu wajanātun nuktatu l-khālī waṣṭahā}
\]
\[
\text{ka-nuqṭati zājin fi ṣafiḥati zibrījī}
\]

Upon his cheeks, the spot of a birthmark in the middle

is like a speck of copperas on a sheet of gold

The reader will recall the way this chapter began: with an alternating series of poems on specks of contrasting color on surfaces of expensive material and poems involving lunar similes. Thus we see that this—the final line of the penultimate poem—recalls the movement that began the chapter. Even readers who do not know Arabic can appreciate the paronomasia in the pair nuktah (spot) and nuqṭah (speck) in this line and how it recalls the word that featured prominently in Poems 1 and 3, nuqṭah. Technically, this feature of Arabic rhetoric is known as “al-jinās al-muḍāriʿ” or, to use Pierre Cachia’s expression, “Variant Paronomasia,” in which the “matching terms” differ by one letter, representing a phoneme from the same, or a proximate, area of articulation as the phoneme it replaces (i.e., here kāf and qāf both represent velar sounds). Likewise, the surface (i.e., the beloved’s cheek), which in the opening poem was “a sheet of ivory” (ṣafīḥat ʿāj) is described

\[59\] See Pierre Cachia, The Arch Rhetorician Or The Schemer’s Skimmer: A Handbook of Late Arabic Badī’ Drawn from ʿAbd al-Ghani al-Nābulusī’s Nafaḥāt al-Azhār ʿalá Nasamāt al-Asḥār (Wiesbaden, 1998), no. 42. Strictly speaking, the kāf is postpalatal and the qāf is uvulovelar; see further EI2, s.vv. “ḳāf” and “kāf” (both by H. Fleisch).

here as “a sheet of gold” (ṣafīḥat zibrij) and as in Poem 3 the birthmark is likened to “a speck of copperas” (zāj). These similarities and final-syllable ʤ-sounds make the connection between the end of the chapter and its beginning unmistakable. And if it were not already sufficiently clear, this poem is followed by a one-liner, the last poem of the chapter, which—mirroring the alternating sets at the beginning of the chapter—includes a lunar simile, along with a whole host of velar plosives:

[yā ḥusna khālin bi-khaddin qad kaliftu bihi
ka-annahū kawkabun qad luzza bi-l-qamarī]

O beauteous mole on a cheek I’ve fallen in love with
It’s as though a star has been stuck on to the moon.

This moon image—following on from the verse about a drop on a sheet of gold, which rhymes in jīm—brings the reader back to the beginning, giving this chapter of naevi verses a certain symmetry.

What is notable about the thematic progression and style of arrangement we find in the anthologies composed by al-Nuwayrī and al-Sarī al-Raffā‘ is that the anthologists fashioned a structured, literary order out of a well-known corpus of images and tropes. Anthologists always demonstrated their erudition through selection and commentary—the conventional standard by which anthologies are judged—but the dimension of arrangement is yet another technique of composition inherent in curatorial production. By employing the technique of variation in selecting and arranging epigrammatic poems on one narrowly defined poetic topic, anthologists could weave together an entirely different reading experience than one in which the poems are arranged more explicitly. By shedding light on this technique of variation in the arrangement of poetic collections, I hope to have shone a light on the literary potential lurking in many poetic collections once believed to have been put together “at random.”