
Schippers, A.

Published in: Bibliotheca Orientalis

DOI: 10.2143/BIOR.69.5.2967237

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

The author of this book on the Lightning-Scene in Ancient Arabic poetry has an Israeli-Arabic background: he mentions several professors from Haifa and Jerusalem in his acknowledgements such as George Kanazi and Albert Arazi and the late Rafi Talmon from Tel Aviv University. Professors from the US and Germany were helpful to him such as Wolfhart Heinrichs (Harvard University, where the author had a post-doctoral research scholarship), and also Tilman Seidensticker (Jena University).

This book deals with Ancient Arabic poetry composed from the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods to the end of the orthodox Caliphate, especially focussing on the lightning-scene which is that part of the poem in which the protagonist asserts that he lay awake all night because he saw lightning flashing far away in the sky. In this book the different functions of this scene are explored: why and when a poet included it, and its relationship with other scenes or parts of the poem. The book analyzes the motifs of the lightning-scenes in this poetry. The author asks himself whether the lightning-scenes stand by themselves, detached from the other parts in the poems, are they idiosyncratic, or are they, on the contrary, fossilized and traditional?

Chapter One contains an Introduction (1, p. 1) and the lightning-scene is defined in relation to Modern Criticism (p. 6). Rain and lightning is considered as a multi-dimensional theme in Ancient Arabic poetry (p. 3) and (II, p. 13) the corpus of the study is established with in Appendix 1 an enumeration of the compilations used in this study (p. 17) and in Appendix 2 the presentation of short excerpts containing descriptions of lightning clouds, or rain (p. 18).

The second chapter deals with how the Ancient Arabic poem is subdivided into (thematic) parts: “From Gharad Shi’ri (poetic aim or genre) to Functional Unit” (p. 21). Then is explained (I, p. 22) the division of the poetry into thematic sections and the division of individual poems (p. 24). Erich Bräunlich, Kamal Abu-Deeb and Jareer Abu-Haidar made earlier divisions of individual poems using terms such as elementary unit, formative unit and gross constituent unit (p. 25).

Then a new theory is proposed (II, p. 31) in the subtitle: “Towards a New Division of the Ancient Arabic Poem” with the coining of the terms “Function and Functional Unit” which are defined in view of their role with respect to the Ancient Arabic Poem (p. 34). The word “literary function” is as old as the Prague school of Roman Jakobson (p. 32).

Some of his definitions of function were defined as “a main aim that can be related to a certain unit in speech”.

An important example of how the author wants to consider “functional units” we will find in the following statement: “It is significant that similar groups of verses can be grouped as different functional units in more than one text, if the function of that group differs from text to text. An example of this can be drawn from two famous poems: the muqallada of Labid and the ‘ayniyya of Abû Dhu‘ayb al-Hudhali. In these two poems, a group of verses which deal with the story of the onagers is found. In the ‘ayniyya, the main function of the onagers verses is to express the inability of this strong and clever animal to overcome death. These verses could, therefore, be placed in a functional unit which might be called The Inexorability of ‘Time’ or The Supreme Power of Death. On the other hand, the same group of verses in the muqallada of Labid has a different function. It expresses the lover’s attitude towards his beloved: at some stage, after visiting the atfal, the lover decides to stop thinking of his beloved and to leave her old abodes. In order to express this attitude (or this decision), he describes the fast and strong she-camel which he rides when he leaves the atfal. Here the camel is compared to a pair of onagers that rapidly run from place to place (from insecure places to places where they can be more comfortable). It is, therefore, clear, that the onager verses can be grouped in this poem as a functional unit called The Lover’s Attitude (pp. 34, 35).

The lightning-scene is considered as part of “functional units” in the rest of the book (p. 36).

The third chapter treats lightning as an Expression of Longing for a Distant Beloved or as an Expression of Self-Consolation (p. 37).


For the lightning as a means of Self-Consolation for a Gloomý Lover Al-A‘shâ al-Kabîr is given as an example (p. 97).


The function of each part in the poems is discussed and the different functions of the lightning-scene in these poems are analyzed. The relation between the function of the lightning-scene and those of the other parts in each poem is explained.

The fifth chapter deals with Thematic, Functional and Narrative Idiosyncrasy in the Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Arabic Poem (p. 155) subdivided into subchapters Thematic Idiosyncrasy (p. 155), Functional Idiosyncrasy (p. 170) and Narrative Idiosyncrasy (p. 172). “This chapter presents the formulation of a theory, or at least, of new ideas regarding the idiosyncrasy of the ancient Arabic poem, based upon the analyses of the poems in Chapters Three and Four.”

In the subchapter “Thematic Idiosyncrasy” the author considers four questions: “[1] What are the themes that appear in more than one text in the corpus of the lightning-scene qašıdâs? [2] What are the themes that appear in one text...
only? [3] What is the proportion between the above two kinds of themes? [4] How many qasidas contain the same verses?” (p. 155). There are two tables inserted to answer these questions. Among the conclusions of these tables the author mentions (p. 167): “Two facts seem to emerge from these two tables. First, over half of the themes appear in one poem only (35 themes). The remaining 24 themes occur in more than one text (among them 7 themes are common to two poems only). Secondly, very few poems contain an almost identical array of themes”. The author lists six cases of poems with an almost identical array of themes. The findings on the themes in the ancient Arabic poems “may teach us about the way the ancient poets composed their qasidas. Certain recurrent themes in Arabic poetry were obligatory, yet the poets were resolved to make each poem different” (p. 170).

As far as the “Functional Idiosyncrasy” is concerned, the author concludes that, just as with other themes the theme of the lightning-scene may function differently from text to text (p. 172). In the subchapter “Narrative Idiosyncrasy” is explained how narratives can occur in the different poems and how they are different from each other. Normally the narrations of the poems are not identical but retain their own character (p. 176).

In the sixth chapter the author analyses in the same manner the “Internal Idiosyncrasy in Lightning-Scenes” (p. 177), discussing the following subjects: The Lightning (p. 177), The Clouds (p. 190), The Rain (p. 211), The Thunder (p. 223), The Wind (p. 224), The Protagonist’s Wish/Prayer (p. 227), The Protagonist’s Psychological State (p. 231) and finally he concludes that the motifs that constituted the lightning-scenes were not produced as pure repetitions but the poets tried to preserve some personal idiosyncrasy in the paragraphs that he composed (p. 235).

At the end of the book we find an Appendix with the Motifs According to the “Seven Secondary Paragraphs” in the Lightning-Scenes (p. 241) and finally the author resumes his Conclusions of the whole book (p. 259). Among his conclusions are the fact that in the 42 poems of his ‘Lightning’ corpus the lightning-scene was shown to have five different functions.

The book ends with a final Appendix of nearly 50 poetic fragments in Arabic with Lightning-scenes of the discussed poems (p. 263), Bibliographical References (p. 283), and a Lexical Index of Arabic words (p. 295).

I congratulate the author of the book with his useful results, including the precise schemes and scrupulous translations and thorough study of the poems. Just as the other recent books from the series Arabische Studien this study may offer incentives to further study the field of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry.

Amsterdam, July 2012

Arie Schippers