The Composition of Mutannabbi's Panegyrics to Sayf al-Dawla [Review of: A. Hamori (1995)]

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It may occur in any type of qasida, often together with episodes involving other animals, oryx or ostrich, in every possible combination. Bauer insists, repeatedly, that in early Arabic poetry, almost anything is possible: "there is hardly anything that isn't there" (I, 74, cf. 67, 127, 134, 273). Well, I could think of a thing or two that aren't there, but a bit of exaggeration is justifiable. The central part of Volume I deals with the structure of the episode itself: its dramatis personae (which include the hunter's bow and arrows); the interaction of description and narrative; the parts of the narrative, often marked with formulaic introductory expressions. According to the champions of the "oral poetry thesis" of Arabic poetry, one should find exact repetition of words or syntactic patterns; as it turns out, exact repetition is so rare as to make conscious quotation likely. Instead, one finds an infinite number of variations. What is valid for these formulas may be said about the episode as a whole: for all its apparent sameness, the subject offered an opportunity to the poet to display his originality and his ability to make subtle variations. These can only be appreciated by a public thoroughly familiar with the genre. The formula (also discussed in a separate chapter) serves as an indicator, a familiar signal that alerts the audience to the fact that, in all likelihood, something original is to follow. It is wrong to conclude that the occurrence of such formulas proves that the poems were extemporized.

In a separate chapter on metre and rhyme, the individuality of poets is further analyzed, by means of a formula (a mathematical one, for once) for calculating the "originality index" of a poet in terms of metre or rhyme. Imra' al-Qays or 'Alqama score low, unlike Muraqqish and 'Amr Ibn Qaml'a; the greatest artist with rhyme is al-Shammakh. That phonological figures play a significant role in early poetry has often been overlooked, especially if one searches with the tools of the 'Abbásid critics. The recognized forms of tajnis are perhaps rarely found, but, as Bauer demonstrates, there are many instances of sound repetition, especially combinations and permutations of consonants. It was one of the means available to the ambitious poet aspiring to originality. Other chapters deal with metonymies (like jamal "camel"), the ordinary words for onager, himār wahšī or 'ayr, are hardly ever used, similes and metaphors, and formulas.

In a chapter on the historical development, Bauer posits that the transmission began when "folk poetry" changed into "art poetry" (Kunstichtung), which happened at the time of 'Amr Ibn Qaml'a. Although Bauer believes that 'Amr's treatment of the onager theme proves that it was still in statu nascendi at his time, I wonder if the tradition is not much older. As M.V. McDonald once said (J. of Arabic Lit. 9, 1978, p. 30), the reason that the oldest preserved poetry dates from some two centuries before it was collected and recorded may well be the fact that "two hundred years is the absolute maximum of time for a piece of oral poetry to remain in men's memories". And why should "folk poetry" not be transmitted just like "art poetry"? It is possible that the onager episode was invented by 'Amr or a contemporary, but that does not mean that this coincided with the beginning of "art poetry". A final chapter points out the similarities between early Arabic and medieval Provençal poetry, which has been unjustly criticized for the same reasons — since modern critics sought in it what should not be sought. The point of the poetry is not to convey a deeper knowledge of the world, but to explore the depths of poetry itself. It should not be described as a primitive precursor of "true" poetry which expresses individual emotions and characters (in a similar fashion some have dismissed all music before Bach or Beethoven). Is there a "deeper meaning" of the onager episode? Structuralist, psychological or mythological interpretations usually solve non-existing problems and force the poems into cruel straightjackets. Each onager episode has to be looked at separately; its function in different poems may be wholly different. The onager stallion often stands, in a sense, for the poet-hero himself, but by no means always.

Bauer's book is a very important contribution, which strikes the right course between the plausible but unreadable (e.g., Gottfried Müller's Ich bin Laden) and the readable but implausible (e.g., some of Suzanne R. Stetkevych's various studies). It may well be the most significant monograph on early Arabic poetry since Renate Jacobi's Studien zur Poetik der altarabischen Qaside of 1971.

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The present study deals with a part of al-Mutanabbi's Panegyrics to Sayf al-Dawla, and is especially concerned with the structure of long panegyrics connected to battle scenes. The qasidahs often consist of different parts, such as introductions (erotic or gnomic), summaries of the battle, descriptions of the battle itself, laudatory passages on Sayf al-Dawla, satirical passages on the enemy, gnomic endings, etc. Hamori discovered many stylistic and thematic features, and special rules and laws according to which the above mentioned poems are organized. Hamori singled out twenty-two battle-scene pieces from the Sayfiyyat. In the book he systematically studies the structure of the Sayfiyyat in which we can find a special structure, if we compare these poems with poems from other periods by al-Mutanabbi, before as well as after; or by other poets, although at the end of the book he analyses one poem by Nābighāh al-Dhibyānī, which in a way can be considered as a predecessor of those by al-Mutanabbi. The book deals with formal and semantic aspects and their interrelation: formal aspects are isocola, repetitions of grammatical elements, grammatical symmetry. Semantic aspects dealt with are e.g., invocations, optatives, gnomic statements and conditionals, which crop up especially at the end of the battle-poems. An intriguing question posed by Hamori is, whether the presence of gnomic endings in the Sayfiyyat has something to do with the special admiration of al-Mutanabbi for Sayf al-Dawla, and whether the abandonment of it in the Kafuriyyat with his despite for Kafūr. The author of the present book also uses a special terminology for links between the different elements of al-Mutanabbi's war qasīdahs, or the elements themselves: Chronicle is used for
the narration of the battle events; coda is used for the final part with often gnomic remarks; and cadence, as a "type of utterance used for stops along the way: to mark the end of a theme, to provide a treshold before the next". The author defines a syntactic attacca [an Italian imperative used as a musical term, meaning "connect immediately with the preceding passage, go on immediately with a new theme" A.S.] as certain devices introducing a new theme. These attacca are syntactic devices such as an imperative, an interrogative particle, a vocative, etc. Among the formal criteria which combine with thematic, Hamori examines for instance: battle descriptions beginning with a perfect verb (as we see in chapter 2). Before the onset of the battle scene, several possibilities of cadence can be distinguished: gnomic ones which can also consist of the utterance of a universal truth of which Sayf al-Dawlah is the exception: a beautiful comparison or simile [rasbih mithl, sometimes introduced by ka-anna or mithl]; a wisdom sentence or proverb [hikmah or mathal] working well in closure; or a taqsim [which seems to be a kind of parallel syntactic division of the line: "We get no medieval help", Hamori affirms, A.S.J. The exceptions to the rule are called by Hamori "special cases".

The author also devotes a chapter to closures, and how the battle narrative comes to an end in the closure. Certain concepts such as Majd (glory), Allah (God), Dahr (Time, i.e., Fate), Layali (Nights, i.e., Fate), Ayyam (Days, i.e., Fate), Zamân (Time, i.e., Fate), Manâyû (Fate), mention of ancestry and the use of anaphora of anta (You) often occur in those final parts of such a battle qasidat.

In the appendices diagrams are given which demonstrate how the different parts of those battle qasidatds are linked together.

My first remark about this study is the following: from the title one could easily imagine that Hamori wants to deal with the Sayfîyât in toto. This is not the case: he selected the long war poems which are undoubtedly the most important part of this collection. The collection, which is usually presented as part of al-Mutanabbi’s total Diwân, comprises 79 pieces of different length, among them panegyrics with laudatory sections on Sayf al-Dawlah, and three pieces written before or after al-Mutanabbi’s Sayf al-Dawlah period. Al-Mutanabbi began to write for Sayf al-Dawlah, the Hamdanid prince, at the age of 35 being already a poet of considerable fame, when he was in Antioch in 337/948 where he composed three poems on his new patron. In al-Wahidi’s and al-Yaziji’s more or less chronologically arranged editions the second part of the poet’s Diwan begins with the Sayfîyât, when the poet had already composed at least 159 pieces (which are the contents of the first volume). Al-Mutanabbi stayed in the service of Sayf al-Dawlah nine years, after which he came to court with the black ruler Kafîr in Egypt in the year 346/957. Hamori deals with 22 poems of the Sayfîyât, whose original Arabic texts we find in one of the appendices of Hamori’s book. Sometimes nasûb-passages are left out, such as the famous nasûb passage of the first poem of the Sayfîyât. Al-Mutanabbi’s nasûbhs are famous because of their peculiar character. As said, Hamori’s book deals with the Sayfîyât as far as the longer battle-poems are concerned.

This study by Hamori is a very useful one, it is an eye-opener for those who have studied the Sayfîyât in a limited way, only looking for the historical setting or the themes which are used. We know the historical setting of the poems from the book by Blachère.) From my new book on the relationship between Arabic and Hebrew Andalusian poetry, one can see al-Mutanabbi’s war themes. I used a lot of al-Mutanabbi’s war poems to show the influence of the Sayfîyât of this poet on the war poems by the Hebrew Andalusian poet and statesman Samuel han-Nagid.) The influence apparently was limited to the thematic domain and my study was restricted to thematics. In his treatment of the structure of al-Mutanabbi’s war poems, Hamori has introduced a new way of analysis, and discovered features which no orientalist nor Arab literate were aware of. Therefore this study by Hamori is to be considered as a mile stone in the study and analysis of Classical Arabic poetry.

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1) See Régis Blachère, Un poète arabe du IVe siècle de l’hégire XVe siècle de J.C., Abou l-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi, Paris (Adrien-Maisonneuve), 1935. However, Blachère did not have much appreciation for al-Mutanabbi’s poetry.