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It may occur in any type of qasīda, 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. Imraʿ al-Qays or ʿAlqama score low, unlike Muraqqish and ʿAmr Ibn Qamīs; 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 ʿAbbāsid critics. The recognized forms of tajnīs 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 himd wahshī or ʿayr, 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” (Kunstlichtung), which happened at the time of ʿAmr Ibn Qamīs. Although Bauer believes that ʿAmr’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, 1976, 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 ʿAmr 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 Lied) 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.
Part with often gnomic remarks; and cadence, as a "type of the narration of the battle events; coda is used for the final theme, to provide a threshold 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: batte 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 malih, 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.]. The exceptions to the rule are called by Hamori "special cases".

The author also devotes a chapter to closures, and how the battle narration 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 qasîdah.

In the appendices diagrams are given which demonstrate how the different parts of those battle qasîdahs 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 Sayfiyyat 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 Diwan, comprises 79 pieces of different length, among them panegyrics with battle-descriptions, shorter laudatory pieces and elegies [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 Sayfiyyat, 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 Kafür in Egypt in the year 346/957. Hamori deals with 22 poems of the Sayfiyyat, whose original Arabic texts we find in one of the appendices of Hamori's book. Sometimes nasib-passages are left out, such as the famous nasib passage of the first poem of the Sayfiyyat. Al-Mutanabbi’s nasibs are famous because of their peculiar character. As said, Hamori's book deals with the Sayfiyyat 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 Sayfiyyat 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 Sayfiyyat 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 Ve siècle de l’hégire Ve siècle de J.C., Abou T-Tayyib al-Mutanabî, Paris (Adrien-Maisonneuve), 1935. However, Blachère did not have much appreciation for al-Mutanabbi’s poetry.