Style and register in Arabic, Hebrew and Romance strophic poetry

Schippers, A.

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In this paper I wish to deal with the typology of strophic Hebrew Andalusian and Arabic poetry in comparison with Romance poetry (the poetic genres of the Occitan troubadours, which had a large diffusion in the Iberian peninsula) on the basis of two aspects:

1. The system of reference in the poetry. In this connection I shall look at some of Zumthor’s findings and their adaptation to Occitan and Medieval Arabic poetry. Are his conclusions about the nature of the poetry of the trouvères (or trouveurs) also valid in describing the characteristics of Medieval Arabic and Occitan poetry?

2. Closely connected to this point are: the themes of poetry.

The first point to be discussed is the typology of Medieval poetry, both Arabic and Romance. Zumthor has attempted to construct a typology of the French trouvères poetry on the basis of internal, textual evidence. Bencheikh and Van Gelder have also tried to use some of Zumthor’s notions namely with respect to Arabic poetry. In turn, I will try to evaluate these notions and their usefulness for comparing Arabic with Occitan poetry.

In his article on style and register in the poetry of the trouvères, Zumthor wanted to avoid defining style as merely rhetorics and amplification. He looked at recurrent expressions in the semantic field,

noted different ways of expressing the same notions and concepts of joy and love; or the servility of a lover towards the beloved. From his analysis it appears, for instance, that the frequency of the verbs is far higher than that of substantives and adjectives. He considered this to be an important factor in the register. Furthermore, he regarded as significant the frequent occurrences of the first person singular in the verbs, as well as possessive expressions in the first person. Certain poems of the genre consist of extensive cumulative catalogues of recurrent motifs which were also frequently used elsewhere.

Zumthor's analysis is also valid for the earlier Occitan poetry, especially the love poetry which was in a sense the precursor of trouvère poetry, especially in the examples of love poetry where the poet complains about his situation: his loyal love towards his beloved, but the harsh treatment of his beloved to him; his feeling of desperation, hope and fear.

In the following section I will try to describe some Arabic and Hebrew muwaṣṣāt in terms of Zumthor's register. On another occasion this year I have already had the opportunity to make some remarks about a muwaṣṣāt of Ibn Baqī (d. 540/1145) which could be described in terms of Zumthor's register. This muwaṣṣāt begins with the words ajrat la-nā min diyār al-khillī and resembles Occitan and trouvère-like love poetry in the thematic sense: the theme of the wind as a messenger of the beloved's country which we see in Occitan poetry expressed by Peire Vidal and Bernart de Ventadorn, is found here in an identical form.

5. ZUMTHOR, op. cit., p. 264.
6. ZUMTHOR, op. cit., p. 270.
7. ZUMTHOR, op. cit., p. 272.
8. ZUMTHOR, op. cit., p. 272.
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What is striking here is that the 'framework' of this Arabic poem is so similar to that of Romance poems, although it is part of a different tradition. The "I" and "now" are present in abundance in the poetry by means of the first person as well as possessive forms e.g. badani (my body), shajani (my sorrow) (strophe 1), alayya (against me), anni (away from me), ishiba' (my suffering, bearing, enduring), wasli (my rendez-vous), ibid (my using suatagems), qu'il (say me) (strophe 2), etc. Here again the focal point, i.e. the love-object, is referred to as a third person. The verb and its derivatives are also dominant in this poem (in favour of adjectives and substantives), but this may be a coincidence. The key-words are those pertaining to love, which may appear in various guises. Hope and fear, possession and deprivation are connoted by the use of time.

I give some further examples of the register in Arabic and Hebrew strophic love poetry: I wish to deal with two poems by Ibn Ma‘ al-Sama‘ and one by Moses ibn ‘Ezra’.

In poem no. 1 (p. 5, sarî) Ibn Ma‘ as-Sama‘ stresses the injust deeds of the beloved one, but the beloved one and his killing glances can do so without being blamed. The beloved and his glances are compared with a king who rules over a people:

4. Man walâ – fi ummatin amran wa-lam ya’dili/
   Yu’thalî – illâ lihîa - r-rashâ’î -l-akhalî/
0. Someone who reigns with authority over a people and does not practise justice, will be blamed except the black eyes of a fawn [they will not be blamed].

12. The fourth stanza of this muwâlah is descriptive:

4. Dâllin ka-fahimi laylin ja’dî/
   qad khutta fi sahbîn min wârdî/
   ka’-msatî -l-nûnî fâwqa –î-khuddî/
   aw swâlahîn ’akifin aw silli/
   bamt hâmâ- bu shîr-nu –î-nasîl/
4. A (coquetish) jeweled down, curled and pitch black like the night, is painted on the smooth surface of roses, with a curve like an ‘n’ or a bent stick or an adder, whose cave is defended by the edges of a sword.

The rhetorized description of the beloved boy in Arabic literature differs considerably from the plain description of beloved women in Occitan poetry (cf. JEANROY, op. cit., 1, 106, 107), which nevertheless also is very conventional.


The poet then addresses the fawn by saying:

1. Jurta fi-’hukmi-ka fi qatliya yâ musrifûl/
   Fa-nasli fi-wâjibun an yunsîfî –î-munisîfûl/
1. You did wrong in your sentence to kill me, O extravagant person! Be just, it is a duty that the just one will be just.

Only then does the poet-lover ask compassion for the fire of his longings. The beloved one kindles the fire of temptations by his prominent appearance. When he shoots, he cannot fail to hit the shields of the hearts. 'How would I then', the poet-lover exclaims, 'escape from your arrow that you sent to me, come to me, let me stay alive, do not kill me'.

The poet describes his beloved one in stereotype terms: he is the splendour of the sun, he is more brilliant than the stars, he is the wishes of the poet’s soul, his endeavour, his request. He exclaims: 'O me, would your enemies overcome, what has overcome me! My reprovers are separated from the sufferings of separation, and the one who is free from love does not ask about the one who is afflicted by it.' Here we have the enemies of love, who have no part of it and do not understand the pains of love because they are not inflicted by it.

Love makes right wrong or in the words of the poet to his beloved one:

4. Anta qad - sayyarta bi-l-husni min ar-rushdi ghayyl/
   lam ajid - fi tara’ay hubbî-ka dhanban ‘alayy/
   fa-ta’id - wa-in tasha’ qaliya shay’an fa-shayyl/
   ajmîlî - wa-wâlî-nî min-ka yada –î-mufîlî/
   fa-hya li - min hasanâtî z-zamani –î-muqîlî/
4. You made through your beauty from the right way a misguiding one. I did not find in the two extremities of your love a crime against me. But be slow, when you really want to kill me, so want! Be kind and reach me from you the hand of a benefactor. [Such a hand] would belong for me to the good things of the coming time.

The glances of the beloved one are of great value, they make the poet-lover live and they reveal the love secret. The heart of the lover is in possession of the beloved, while the poet-lover sings the kharja:

5. mâ-khadhdhâ - tarfiya illâ bi-sanâd nazaray-kîl/
   wa-ka-dhâ - fi-t-hubbî mî bi layâs yakhfî ‘alay-kîl/
   wa-li-dhâ - unshîdû wa-l-qalbu rahînun ladây-kîl/
   yâ ‘alîyy - sallâta jafnay-ka ‘alâd maqalîl/
   fa-bqî lî - qalbi wa-jud bi-l-fadîlî, yâ maw’îlî/
5. My glance can only be nourished by the splendour of your eyes. So...
from the love that is in me nothing is concealed from you. Therefore I recite, while my heart is held in pledge with you: 'O elevated person, you have es.ablished your eyelids as rulers — charged with my death. But let live my heart and be generous with your kindness, O my refuge'.

The paradoxes of love frequently occur at the end of this type of poem: joy together with vexation is expressed, a monologue of the poet-lover about his situation, alternated with feigned conversations with the beloved one. The statistics reveal the interaction between the first and second person by the alternation of 'I and you' and 'my' and 'your' and the high rate of imperatives (35x) and vocative particles (6x). Thus not really so different from Occitan love poetry and trouvère poetry as described by Zumthor.

Ibn Mā' al-Samā's poem no 2 is interesting because here the beauties of a woman are described, and love is compared with religion. The poet begins with the idea that love for beautiful women or wild cows is a religion. From all these splendid bracelets a moon rises. From the beauty of the horizons of perfection its most marvelous beauty appears. In the rest of the poem the most beautiful woman among all women is described using all kind of metaphors and comparisons. At the end of the third strophe the poets tells how he cried out aloud: 'O heart belonging to a young girl who possesses power, whose glance is more cutting than the sharp edge of a polished blade of a sword on a most courageous hero.'

In the next strophe breasts (this time quinces) and eyes are described. In the last two lines which form the simt the poet once again exclaims: 'My love for her is an act of devotion, I seek protection against this glorious pride with a fawn who pastures in the garden with the flowers of beauty, every time I become ripe.'

The last couplet is again devoted to the lady:

5. 'afī flat dh-huyālī - naqiyyatu th-thiyābīl
sallābatu-l-waqqūlī - araqqī min sharābihl
adhā la-hā nuḥālī - fī-l-hubbī min 'adḥābīl
fi-n-nawm lī sharādāh - wa-hukmu-hā ḥukmu-qidārī - kulla-mā anna'll
— min-hā, fa-in ṭayfu-l-khayālī - zārā-nī aḥja'll

5. She is decent and innocent and pure of garments. She takes away the intellects, is thinner than wine. My emaciation for her in love has become my punishment. In sleep there is a flight for me; while her sentence is a powerful one, the more I withdraw from her. When a phantasm of her visits me, I sleep peacefully.

In this poem the poet speaks at length about the beauties of the lady, and her power. For the description of his own sufferings the poet uses only the simt of the strophes 3, 4, 5. Even here love is more an act of devotion, a religion. So in this poem 'she' dominates, the 'I' only exists as an extension of this description.

After these three types of Arabic muwaṣṣāḥāt which look very similar to the Occitan type of love poem, we will deal with a Hebrew Andalusian muwaṣṣāḥ, which describes tormented love.

The Hebrew muwaṣṣāḥāt may occasionally reveal the same tormented love as the Arabic examples. They also reveal the same characteristics as the Occitan love poetry. Moses ibn 'Ezra', however, by no means exclusively favours tragic love in his muwaṣṣāḥāt. Who does not remember the love adventure with a boy which he described in one of his muwaṣṣāḥāt? There he described how he took off the clothes of the boy in a rendez-vous, which had been successful. It is quite in the style of Abū Nuwas' poems of the kind, which describe how he took off the clothes of the boy after having seduced him with wine. Moses ibn 'Ezra' also has love muwaṣṣāḥāt about elegiac and tormented love, whose inspiration is comparable with the description of tormented love in the poetry of the troubadours. We will consider in the following the contents of his poem no. 255.

0. Sho'<a>lay - ēk lo nispanu - madwē lehabīl
Sho<a>lu - 'ofer akzarī - yiṭrof ke-labīl
0. O those who ask me why the illnesses of my heart are not concealed, ask a cruel gazelle which lacerates my heart like a lioness.

1. El-she'on - hisḥiqī sevantī - bēnot šela'ayīl
ki ge'on - appo yagorti - lūlē demaq’ayīl
yom se'on - širī netaftī - gillu nega'ayīl
'okeray - 'ēnay ki banu - sod maḥ<a>shabīl
riggelu - bal-lat el-'ofrī - wayye'ena naf bi'll
1. I have concealed the noise of my love in my interior, because I feared his pride, were it not that my tears that I shed on the day of the outbreak of my sorrow, revealed my blows. My slanderers are my eyes since they revealed the secret of my thought. They spied secretly for my gazelle (2 Sam.) so that he is furious with me.

The poet describes in the next strophe that even his enemies have compassion for him when they see the gazelle's harsh treatment of him:

2. Ah<o>ré - man'amme yof'ya - shat lèbb me'odawil
ye'<o>reh - mig-gannè nhàyo - 'eni weradawil
yeh<o>reh - ki-sam et-sibyo - nesheq le-yadawil
sor<o>ray - otj yahbonnu - bi-r'ot mer'Rell
yish<o>lu - fanaw u-sh'èrî - killah shebîbî.

2. [To go] after the blisses of his beauty [my] heart has put its strength -
while my eye plucked from the garden of his cheek its roses. He became
harsh with me, so that he made his beauty his weapon. Even my enemies
have compassion for me when they see my adversary; his face shines
when the sparks of my passion have consumed my flesh.

3. Asefah - et orah 'ayish - li-jnè me'oroll
tarefah - bat 'éno layish - 'issuz be-suroll
anefah - wat-tasem dayish - libbi le-sirroll
ok<o>bay - al-na tallinu - ki mà<o>šabill
'ol<o>lu - 'ènaw u-mzori - ba-hem we-tubill

3. The Great Bear [Ursa Major] has collected its light from the face of his
star. The pupil of his eye could lacerate a ferocious lion by the sharpness
of its steel. The eye was furious and trampled down upon my heart with
its sorrow. O my lovers, do not make complaints [murmur] against me,
because his eyes inflicted my grief. From them comes my illness and
my recovery.

In the fourth strophe the poet describes how the hairlocks of the
gazelle's head are black like his own heart which is black because of
sorrow and burning pain. The gazelle's eyes unsheathen a sword on the
poet's back, piercing and beating him with their glances. Finally he has
become thin and meager like the gazelle's waist:

4. Ma'lefof - rosho ki-lhabî - qaderu, we-'ènawwil
sholefof - hereb 'al-gabî - 'ad shab ke-mo'nawwil
dolefof - dema' 'al-šobî - 'ènay ke-shinnawwil
ah<o>lay - Éli yikkonu - darkè <o>hubill
yahmelu - 'ènaw li-mzori - u-t-'zzot ke'èbîill

4. The hair locks of his head are black like my heart and his eyes
unsheathen a sword on my back, so that it becomes [thin and meager] like
his [i.e. the gazelle's] waist. My eyes are dripping tears because of my
grief like his teeth [dripping with salival]. Would that the ways of my
beloved were directed towards me and that his eyes showed compassion
with my passion and great distress.

From these four strophes we can gather that there is a suffering 'I
and a 'he', the object of love. In every simï a third category is introduced,

namely, my slanderers, my enemies, my lovers. The poet personifies his
eyes as slanderers. This and other features such as the comparison of the
black hairs of the beloved with the blackness of his heart gives the whole
poem a manneristic tone17. In this respect some poetry in Hebrew and
Arabic may differ from Occitan love poetry, which in general is not that
complex18.

An important feature of strophic poetry in Arabic and Hebrew in
contrast to non-strophic poetry in these languages is that a certain motif
such as the description of the sufferings of the lover is dealt with more
extensively than would have been in non-strophic poetry. So the extension
and repetition of the motif is perhaps a quality inherent within the
strophicness of the poem. And this makes strophic love poems in Arabic
and Hebrew look like strophic poems in Occitan poetry, e.g. when themes
such as the cruelty of the beloved and the sufferings of the lover are
broached.

However, a difference with Occitan lyrics occurs due to the presence
in Arabic and Hebrew muwaššahât of kharjas in partly colloquial Arabic,
partly Romance language. These are present in two cases of the
muwaššahât discussed above. In these two examples by Ibn Baqî and
Moses ibn 'Ezza', the poet who is suffering out of love for a boy, in the
last strophe, also compares himself implicitly with a girl who suffers from
love.

In Ibn Baqî's case the last strophe, including the kharja, goes as follows19:

5. Wa-rubba khawdin jafâ-hâ l-wajdul!
wa-shaffa-hâ l-haynu thummâ l-bu'dul!
fa- 'a'lanat bi-l-firdqi tashdull!
Benid, la Pasqa, ay, aun shin ellill!
Lasrandol?{I meu corajon bor ellill!

5. Many a girl who was in love and suffered from rejection, and who had

17. This manneristic taste derives from earlier Eastern Arabic poets, cf. e. g. S. SPERR, Mannerism in Arabic Poetry, Cambridge 1989.

18. See also above note 12) about the description of beloved women in Occitan poetry (cf. JEANROY, op. cit., I, 106, 107); the difference between the mannerism of Arabic poetry
and the plainness and ingenuousness of Occitan poetry becomes the more visible in laudatory
poetry: compare Peire Vidal's "Mout es bona terr'Espanha" (MARTIN DE RIQUER, Los
trovadores), II, 879, no. 171) with the sophisticated laudatory poems by the eleventh/twelfth
century Arabic Andalusian poet Ibn Khafaja!

poesia mozárabe (las ḥarrás andalusiès), Barcelona 1973, 196–198. However, for this
kharja see A. JONES, Romance Kharjas in Andalusian Arabic Muwassah Poetry. A
become thin because her beloved went away and is now far from her, declared her loneliness by singing: "Easter has come, but without him, my heart is torn due to him."

The kharja (final part) is a piece that does not fit totally into the poem, it destroys in a way the unity of the poem, because there is no longer an "I" and "now", instead there is a comparison with another lover. Sometimes the main poem even belongs to another genre than the kharja. We can see this in the case of a kharja which has been used in a Hebrew elegy by Yehudah hal-Lewi (d. 538/1143/4903) about a brother of Moses ibn 'Ezra (d. ca. 535/1140/4900).

The last strophe of Yehudah hal-Lewi's poem goes as follows:

5. Shir ab meforad be-libbi kidodoll
Yashir ke-'almah lebabah yiddodoll
Ki moadah ba we-lo ba had-dodoll
Venid la pasqua: adviven sin eluloll
Coma-cande meu corazon por eluloll

5. The song of a brother who has been left alone is a fire in my heart. He sings like a maiden whose heart flutters, because the appointed hour has come, and the beloved has not arrived: 'The time of the tryst has come without him; How my heart burns for him.'

The preceding elegy is totally different from the love poetry and has another source of inspiration, but then, in the last strophe, preceding the kharja, the poet compares Moses ibn 'Ezra's distress with that of a woman in love. It is a particularity of the Hebrew strophes that precede the kharja that they often try to use the same notions in Hebrew which subsequently occur in the kharja in another language. Stern makes this very clear in his articles by translating the last Hebrew strophe and using capitals for identical notions which occur later in the kharja.

We see how in the three lines of the last strophe that 'is a fire (or: a sparkle) in my heart' is a prefiguration of the Romance phrase 'How burns my heart for him', whereas the phrase 'The appointed hour etc., is more or less repeated in the song of the girl. In the Arabic muwaṣṣah by ibn Baqi on a love theme the link of the kharja with the three preceding lines of the last strofe is not as strong as in the last strophes of Hebrew Andalusian poems.

In the last strophe of Moses ibn 'Ezra's poem the comparative

5. Shaberah - lībbī has-sibiyah - tētib <a>quamarīml</a>
Zakerah - ki-ish bi-ramiyah - yağırd geshurīml
Shorarāh - negiḑ bi-bkīyiyah - shīrat 'ofarīml
"Q'adamay[?J - fiyol aliēnī - idh el amībīl
Car[?] diilū[?] - dimib betare[?] - shur-ar-raqīb[?l

5. She, the female gazelle, broke my heart by her words which she sang so well. She remembered a man who by treachery broke so many ties between lovers [i.e. the raqīb or sofeh 'the watcher']. In tears she sang to me the song of the gazelles: "I love a young lad [from abroad] And he loves me as well. We want to remove the watcher."

From all the above examples it appears that we have in Arabic and Hebrew poetry a similar network of lexical, rhetorical and syntactic possibilities as in Romance love poetry, except that Arabic and Hebrew poetry are sometimes more manneristic. The conventionality of the genre in Arabic and Hebrew is the same as in Occitan lyrics. The poet uses a linguistic stock which permits him to treat the topic without necessarily having experienced the passion of love himself. In particular, the strophic love poems include all the motifs which we have seen before in non-strophic Arabic love poems, but the individual motifs are often extended over different verse units. The poet can use several strophes, when dealing with his sufferings. Thus the description of sufferings in Arabic and Hebrew poetry looks sometimes like Occitan strophic poetry which deals with the same subject. However a basic difference between Arabic and Hebrew strophic poetry on the one hand and Occitan poetry on the other, is the kharja which does not exist in Occitan lyrics.

From the thematic point of view medieval Romance lyrics have many motifs in common with Arabic love poetry. Particular attention can be focussed on elegiac love poetry in which the lover suffers due to the absence of the beloved one.

Amongst all of these love themes we find a number of religiously inspired motifs, for example, the theme of obedience; beseeching the beloved one; suffering from martyrdom; preferring a rendez-vous with the

Other themes are the obstacles to love, such as the guardian (guardador or raqib); the slanderer who reveals the secret love; the jealous person, and the reproacher. Among the themes listed by Ecker as occurring in both Arabic and Medieval European poetry are several or the slanderer who reveals the secret love; the beloved one to Paradise. Among the themes listed by Ecker as occurring in both Arabic and Medieval European poetry are several or themes such as: the obstacles to love, the repeated motif or the departure motif; the weeping of the lover; the haughtiness and cruelty of the beloved; the nobility of the character of the lover engendered by love; love as an illness; dying from love and the loyalty of the lover despite the beloved one's fickleness.

These themes are not only present in Arabic and Occitan love lyrics, but can be found in other, contemporary forms, for example, Galician and later Castilian lyrics. In Galician lyrics we find the theme of love during the pilgrimages, which again also appears in early Islamic love poetry. Indeed, the pilgrimage to Mecca was regarded by some as an excellent opportunity for meeting a lady.

However, there are certain differences between Arabic and Romance love lyrics. Post-eighth century A.D. examples of Arabic love lyrics are mingled with the wine genre. It should be noted that wine poetry is totally absent in the Occitan repertoire. In Arabic love poetry often the beloved, who is usually a male rather than female, often pours out the wine for the drinking company. Thus a major difference in the Arabic song is the presence of a boy as the love object whereas in Occitan love poetry the love object is always a woman. Although  is one of the reciters of , counted some twenty women with whom the poet professed to be in love with. was admitted to preferring male lovers to female. The description of the love object is also different in Arabic poetry compared with Occitan poetry: the description of the Arabic boy is a more concrete one whereas in Occitan love lyric the beauty of the woman is described in general, even in moral terms and there are seldom concrete descriptions other than perhaps the pale colour of the woman's face.

24. Cf. Ghazi, op. cit., p. 184 (Ibn 'Ubaida, line 1): "From the source of the blessed in Paradise...".

25. See the sources given in note 2) and see also the bibliography given in notes on pp. 20 and 22 in: Martín de Riquer, Los trovadores, I, Barcelona (Planeta), 1975.


27. See Abû Nuwâs, Dîwân, Wiesbaden (Bibliotheca Islamica no. 20) 1972, IV [ed. G. Schoeler], see the preface of the mu'annathâ by  Ëmamza.

28. See on this universal theme: A. T. Hatto, ed., Eos, an Inquiry into the Theme of Lovers' Meetings and Partings at Dawn in Poetry, the Hague (Mouton), 1965.

29. See however our note 18) above.

At first sight, Arabic, Hebrew and Occitan poetry have in common many motifs, themes and poetic genres. However, from some Arabic and Hebrew strophic poems it becomes clear that Arabic and Hebrew poetry had already reached a stage of high rhetorization, and from this point of view it is not comparable to the beginning Occitan poetry. In Arabic and Hebrew love poetry, the concept of the lover's eyes which are at the same time his slanderers, is a rhetoric elaboration and combination of two stock motifs which can not be found in Occitan love lyrics. In Romance poetry we have to wait until the appearance of Baroque poetry or the Italian manneristic poets of the Seicento to make such combinations possible. In other poetic genres such as the laudatory or encomiastic genre, this fact is even clearer. The Occitan laudatory poem about the Spanish kings is derived from a different inspiration than Arabic or Hebrew laudatory passages.

Having said this, is it quite possible that the genre of the muwaṣṣahāt, due to its musical performances, became popularised to a degree that the high rhetoric became less, and just only the common stock of motifs are mentioned without any rhetoric elaboration. This is apparently the case with many of the so-called muwaṣṣahāt andalusiyāyah which are sung to this day.
