UNSQUARING THE CIRCLE:
REREADING A POEM BY AL-MU'TAMID IBN 'ABBÄD*

BY

JULIE SCOTT MEISAMI

RAYMOND SCHEINDLIN's 1974 analysis of compositional techniques in the poems of al-Mu'tamid ibn 'Abbād (1039-1095) remains a landmark in the study of Arabic poetic structure. Challenging the traditional view «that the Arabic poem is not an organic whole, but an aggregation of various unrelated or only tenuously related parts» (p. 2), Scheindlin demonstrated the attention given by the Hispano-Arabic poet to the structure of his poems, and sought to develop «techniques of analysis that could...be applied to Arabic poetry of other regions and periods» (p. 7). His results were limited, however, by his reduction of the structural strategies found in al-Mu'tamid’s poems to a single basic pattern conceived of as being fundamental to the poet’s style: the «anticipation-resolution» pattern, found at a variety of compositional levels from single verses to groups of verses to entire poems and seen as deriving from the system of Arabic prosody itself. This pattern provides the structural perspective from which Scheindlin views whole poems as constituted of «verse-blocks» organized according to the same structural principles as the single verses of which they are composed.

* Author's note: Preliminary research for this essay was done with the support of a Fellowship for Independent Study from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

1 Raymond P. Scheindlin, Form and Structure in the Poetry of al-Mu'tamid ibn 'Abbād, Leiden, 1974 (page references in the text).

2 The view that «the patterns that unite verses are similar to those that unite the parts of the individual verses» (p. 84) underlies the statement prefacing the analysis of whole poems: «Now that we have examined the ways in which individual verses are formed, and the ways in which the syntactic and conceptual structures of the verses may join two or more verses into a group, we must try to see in what ways the elements of form already identified may be combined to create fluctuating patterns corresponding to the fluctuation of themes within the single poem» (p. 135; my emphasis). While thematic elements are accorded a role in the formation of groups of verses, their relationships are not clearly perceived; long poems in particular are treated as aggregates of «verse-blocks» whose coherence is seen as resting upon thematic similarity or contrast.

Arabica, tome xxxv, 1988
Scheindlin's adherence to this perspective seems reinforced by his view that «Arab critics cannot be said to have developed a concept of the form of the poem as a whole, outside of the unifying effect of the poem's prosodic scheme» (p. 10), and that the habit of such critics (more properly, rhetoricians) of discussing one or several verses rather than whole poems reflects not merely their own methodological limitations but actual poetic practice\(^3\). This leads him to assume that the principle according to which verses are combined into larger units is one of aggregation, and accordingly inhibits his perception of larger structural patterns. Moreover, while Scheindlin considers al-Mu'tamid's poems as «thematic entities» in that each treats «a single general subject» through one or more «themes» related to it, he stresses the «fluctuation of themes» within a single poem and the absence of «regular whole-poem patterns» such as the «stereotyped patterns... claimed for the ancient qasida» (p. 135). Caught between the Scylla of «fluctuation» and the Charybdis of «stereotypification», he can find no mediating structural principle on the basis of which verses and blocks of verses are combined to create whole poems other than the prosodic-syntactic pattern of anticipation-resolution; while on the

\(^3\) In Scheindlin's study (as in others as well) the question of poetic structure is discussed with reference to the rhetoricians' demand for the syntactic unity of the verse (cf. pp. 11-15) and their habit of discussing isolated verses. The syntactic independence of the verse (linked in Arabic poetry to the conventions of end-stopped lines and monorhyme) is fundamentally irrelevant to the question of overall structure, since as Scheindlin himself observes (p. 16) it does not preclude connections between verses (the Iliad, for example, features a high proportion of end-stopped, syntactically independent lines and a complex architectonic structure; cf. Michael Zwettler, The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry, Columbus, 1978, pp. 69-79). The second assumption, which equates rhetorical habitus with poetic practice, is equally irrelevant: to conclude (as does G. J. H. van Gelder) that «neither [the critics] nor the poets themselves expected anyone to analyse a poem as a system where everything is simultaneously present, where each level and each part interacts with any other, where, ideally, nothing can be ignored, deleted, added or altered» (Beyond the Line: Classical Arabic Literary Critics on the Coherence and Unity of the Poem, Leiden, 1982, p. 200) is to ignore the insistence of those very critics on coherence within the poem, and to take an erroneous and decidedly un-medieval view of poetic unity as implying inalterability. As the late Judson Allen succinctly observed concerning the identical habit among medieval European rhetoricians, «The most important principle one must see in this habit of analysis by division is that there must have existed, in the medieval awareness of the material of their poetry, a firm conviction that the material involved had a unity, an integrity, an essence, a stability, so strong that analysis by mere division would reveal and not obscure its essence» (The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages, Toronto, 1982, pp. 141-142).