A WEAK POINT IN A STRONG CHAIN:
THE STORY OF İKFA' IN ARABIC POETICS*

BY

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for Prof. Ewald Wagner

Banât al-šur mâ aksau waviyyani
wa là 'arafū 'l-iğazatu wa 'l-sinādā'

([Real] composers of poetry never subjected a rhyme to ikfa'/
and they recognised neither iğaza nor sināda.)

— al-Ma’arrī

All through its long history, the Arabic theory of literature has oscillated between intuitiveness and tortuous analytical discourse. Discernible in the native theorists’ interpretation of sources is an engaging spectacle of startling divergences that sometimes verged on contradiction. Their efforts at establishing a definitive pattern of characterization in regard to a number of literary phenomena were not rarely confusing. Attributing this to some deficiency in the theoretical mechanism of the literary culture or to the differences between the routine idiom and the poetic koine will probably not be a misjudgement (Cf. Kurolowicz, p. 163ff.). An eloquent illustration can be seen in the theoretical discourse over the prosodical defect known as ikfa’, the development of which is examined in this investigation. The veridical meaning of ikfa’ is to deviate or divert something from a straight course, as used by Dū al-Rumma (d. 117/735) in this verse (Dū al-Rumma, p. 789, line 19):

qata’tu bhā ardān tarā waḏha rabbihā,
īḏā māʾalaxhā makfa’an ḡyra sāği.

With it (the camel) I traversed over a land, in which you see the path of those who journey through it undulating, leading to no specific point.

But the earliest use of the word in a jocular but technical sense is in the following satirical poem variously attributed to a number of post-Islamic poets in many classical sources.3

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1 See Ma’arrī1, 2 pt. ii/581.

2 For instance, al-Ḡāḥīz (d. 255/868) and Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) attribute it to al-Burdušt (c. 120/727). In al-Marzubānī it is attributed to both Ibn al-Warrāq (d. 225/840) and Ḥammād al-ʿAğrad (d. 161/777), but al-Ṭaʿālibī (d. 430/1038) attributes it to one Yazīd Ibn Ḥarb. See (Ḡāḥīz, 2/214-15; Ibn Qutayba, p. 479; Marzubānī pp. 25-26; Ṭaʿālibī, p. 53).

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tatahha‘ta lahnnan fi kalami Muraaqi‘sin,
wa haqqua mbniiyyun ‘ala‘ ‘l-lahni aghna‘u
sa ‘aynaka iquwa‘un wa anfuka nakfa‘un,
wa waqqa‘ka taa‘un wa anta ‘l-muraqqa‘u

You searched strenuously for incorrect usage in Muraaqi‘s speech, although your own build is wholly afflicted by faults:
Your eyes are affected by iquwa‘, your nose by ikfa‘,
your face by ita‘, you are indeed the one with many patches.

The use of routine idioms to characterize technical concepts is a common, if not the distinctive, characteristic of the Arabic intellectual locution (cf. Heinrichs, p. 183). In the gradation of the prosodical defects, ikfa‘ comes second in the hierarchy of offensive faults (Damanhūrī, p. 102). Early discussion on ikfa‘ betrays a startling lack of consensus among the classical theorists over the specific phenomenon to which the term applied. To expect a coherent characterization of aspects of poetic production from the outset of the debate will probably be too optimistic, after all no scientific study of the term related to poetic diction and structure had yet emerged. Nevertheless, evidence of a marked tendency towards furnishing the discussion with a sound logical framework was not altogether lacking.

For the earliest documentary analysis of the subject, we are beholden to Sa‘īd Ibn Mas‘āda, who bore the nom de plume al-Āḥfaṣ al-Awsaṭ (d. 215 A.H./830 C.E.). According to him, his attempt to get a definitive clarification from the bedouin Arabs—the ultimate authority on the language—with regards to the particular phenomenon to which ikfa‘ referred, provoked a less than explicit response, for the term was generally applied to any defect in the rhyme, although some of them were inclined to characterize it as a consonantal variation of some sort. Al-Āḥfaṣ also quotes al-Ḥalīl Ibn Aḥmad (d. 170/786) as arguing that ikfa‘ and iquwa‘ are alternate reference terms for the same phenomenon: a prosodical impairment in the rhyme (Ahfaṣ, p. 43f). Among the generation group of al-Āḥfaṣ, Ibn Sikkīt (d. 240/855) equally subscribed to the same proposition (Ibn Sikkīt, p. 150). The specific fault is not thereby clearly defined, and various interpretations are given by later theorists of what was considered to be al-Ḥalīl’s definition (cf. Blachère, pp. 105-106). For instance, Ibn Kaysān (d. 299/911) quotes him as arguing that the terms are synonymous and that both refer to variation in the vowel desinence “maqrā” of the rhyme letter, as when damma and kasra are interchanged (Ibn Kaysān, p. 55). Other scholars to whom a similar definition is attributed include Abū ‘Amr Ibn al-‘Alā‘ (d. 154/771), Yūnus b. Ḥabīb (d. 182/798) and al-Farrā‘ (d. 207/822). (Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, 5/507; Ibn Rašīq, 1/166).3 However, an entirely different characterization of ikfa‘ as a phenomenon distinct from iquwa‘ started to emerge almost at the same time when al-Ḥalīl’s definition as related by al-Āḥfaṣ was imposing itself. Al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī (d. 168/784) was the creative mind behind this line of thought, although it was one of his disciples, Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī (d. 215/830) who articulated the distinction in an explicit fashion. According to him, interchange between phonologically cognate consonants, for example, mim and nun, dāl and fa‘, ha‘ and ha‘, in rhyme position, is ikfa‘; thus limiting the application of iquwa‘ to vocalic variation. Of the early authorities to whom al-Ḥalīl’s equation be-

3 See also (Gawhari; Ibn Manzur; Ibn Fāris, s.v. “kafa‘a”).