Traditionally, madīḥ ("panegyric poetry") and hīgā' ("invective or satirical poetry") have been described or defined as each other's opposite. It is certainly convenient in many ways to think in neat opposites, a tendency made possible by another helpful mode of thought, abstraction. On various levels hīgā' can be considered the exact antonym of madīḥ. The latter praises and raises, the former defaces and debases; they deal with, and deal out, honour and dishonour. Those who want to construe an abstract system of agrād cannot but assume an exact antithesis. The term ġaraḍ, however, is notoriously difficult to translate ("genre," "theme" or "mode" may be found in English, as well as the more literal "aim" or "purpose"). Like western generic terms such as "satire" or "panegyric," the corresponding Arabic terms are used to denote the mode of a particular poem (or passage, or line of verse) and the poem (passage, line) itself. In an abstract sense, "praise" or "invective" is the aim of a poetical utterance, irrespective of its length. Medieval Arabic definitions are often best understood if the term ġaraḍ is applied to a small thematic unit in a poem, as small even as the single line or a few lines forming a passage. On the level of the poem the problems of classification are more complicated, especially, of course, in the case of polythematic poems, if classification in only one category is required, as in a thematically arranged diwān. On the level of the poem, too, it is clear that madīḥ

1 Compare the description of "the best poet" by an anonymous bedouin to Ishāq Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Mawsili: "(…) idā madīḥa rafa' wa-ida haqqa wa'da;" quoted in Ibn Rašīq, al-ʿUmda, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī l-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, Cairo, 1955, i, 122.


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and ḥiḡāʾ are far from being exact opposites. A typical mādīḥ poem would not yield a typical ḥiḡāʾ poem if all its positive laudatory themes and motifs were turned into their negative counterparts; nor does a ḥiḡāʾ poem change into a normal panegyric by a reversed transformation. This point was discussed by al-Ḡāḥīẓ and other critics, who did not accept the view of those poets who claimed proficiency in ḥiḡāʾ on the strength of their excellence in mādīḥ.⁴

The normal mādīḥ poem is a fairly long one, usually polythematic, with two or three distinct thematic sections of which mādīḥ is the last, whereas the normal ḥiḡāʾ poem is shorter, often no more than an epigram, and comparatively rarely with nasīb, the “erotic” introduction.⁵ There are, of course, many exceptions: one thinks of the lengthy invective poems by Ḥārīr, Ibn al-Rūmī and others (in which mādīḥ on a patron is often combined with ḥiḡāʾ on opponents). The motifs of mādīḥ are usually to the point, that is, rulers, administrators, generals or scholars are praised for the virtues they have or ought to have. In ḥiḡāʾ, on the other hand, matter that is irrelevant and improper (in more than one sense) is very often introduced. It is true that a judge may be satirized for being unjust, or a singer for being unmusical, but in typical ḥiḡāʾ we could expect, in addition, obscene and scatological vilification, or mocking description of physical appearances. While ḥiḡāʾ is often said in jest, between friends—although it is often impossible to deduce this from the text of the poem itself—mādīḥ cannot be a joke, or it would turn into a form of ḥiḡāʾ. Even when ḥiḡāʾ is not made in jest, two basic tones are possible: one serious and angry, often moralistic, and the other mocking, humoristic, immoral or amoral. The tone of mādīḥ is always more or less lofty and serious. Finally, an essential difference between the two is that mādīḥ has an “official” status, both in the social context of patronage and in literary theory, whereas ḥiḡāʾ lacks such a status.

Not all panegyric poems are formal odes, however. We find short pieces of a few lines only, epigrammatical in character, possibly improvisations in many cases. It is often impossible to decide whether or not they were originally part of longer poems. In the diwāns of the most of the great Umayyad and ‘Abbāsid poets they form a negligible quantity

⁴ Al-Ḡāḥīẓ, al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn, Cairo, 1968, i, 207-8, Ibn Qutayba, al-Ṣīr wa-l-ṣuʿārāʾ, Cairo, 1967, p. 94, Ibn Raṣīq, al-ʿUmda, i, 112; and see my The Bad and Ugly: Attitudes Towards Invective Poetry (Ḥiḡāʾ) in Classical Arabic Literature, Leiden, 1988, pp. 35-6, 47.