SOME OBSERVATIONS ON QUANTITY IN ARABIC METRICS*

It is with some satisfaction that one reads in a fairly recent book on Persian metres that the author prefers a direct analysis of the material available in the diwans and anthologies of the poets, rather than accepting off-hand the theories of the classical prosodists. Priority of sources over interpretations seems a very sound principle indeed, and, in fact, it enables the author of the book, Professor L. P. Elwell-Sutton, to put forward the idea that, whatever traditional opinion may be, Persian metre must not be thought to have been copied from Arabic. His book, then, deals with Arabic metre as well, but here he does not study the poems themselves but pins his faith to an orientalist’s analysis of a theoretical account by an Arab philologist. As it is, Ḥalīl’s circles are an attempt not so much to describe actual metres in all possible detail, as to reduce the profusion of metrical variants to a minimum of abstract formulae; and Gotthold Weil, the orientalist in question, was so impressed with the beauty of Ḥalīl’s theoretical construct, that he not only failed to compare it with actual usage, but even conjured a new theory out of it, which, as far as I can see, falls wide of the mark.

As a result, even if one grants that Elwell-Sutton has made out a strong case for the independent nature of Persian metrics, one feels one cannot agree with all the statements made in the course of the argument, for example when quantity in Persian metre is compared with quantity in Arabic.

According to Elwell-Sutton, in Persian the quantitative length of a hemistich may vary only by the lengthening of the final syllable (and in certain cases of the initial) by one mora, a maximum variation of two

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1 L. P. Elwell-Sutton, The Persian Metres, (Cambridge 1976), p. 83. The dissimilarity between Arabic and Persian metres is discussed in ch. ii, the example of the Arabic basīf is on page 65 f.

morae, no matter what the length of the line. In order to show that something quite different happens in Arabic, he discusses the Arabic basīṭ metre. This has the following pattern according to Weil: 3

\[ \begin{align*}
&| x\_x- | x\_x- | x\_x- | x\_x- |
\end{align*}\]

Here all syllables marked as X may be either long or short, and quantity would accordingly vary between 18 (all x's short) and 24 morae (all x’s long).

In actual practice, however, almost all 14-syllable basīṭ-hemistichs appear to satisfy the following pattern:

\[ \begin{align*}
&| v\_v- | v\_v- | v\_v- | v\_v- |
\end{align*}\]

There are only two variable syllables and the total quantity is therefore between 21 and 23, in fact a variation of no more than two morae. One of the variables is the initial syllable, but this is a variation which is not characteristic for Arabic alone, since, as we have seen, it occurs in Persian as well.

There is thus a considerable gap between Weil’s theory and actual practice, a fact which is easily borne out by the results of my researches. Let us consider the wāfir and kāmil metres first: The basic pattern of wāfir is as follows:

\[ \begin{align*}
&| v\_v- | v\_v- | v\_v- | v\_v- |
\end{align*}\]

A hemistich consists of three feet, the third of which invariably has the form given here, whereas variation may occur in the first and second foot. Theoretically, the basic foot mufd‘alatun may be replaced by mafā‘ilun, mafā‘ilun or mafā‘ilu. Table 1 shows these variants with their technical names and scansion. Table 2 gives a similar survey of the variants of the kāmil metre.

In order to study the distribution of these variants, I have examined some poems composed in these metres. 4 The results are shown in Tables 3, 4, 5 & 6. Although both metres officially admit 4 regular variants (a, b, c & d in each case) it becomes clear at once that the essential variation is between a & b variants. Together a & b variants make up 1864 cases out of 1890 feet counted. This means that the other variants together represent less than 1.4%. The significant difference between these groups of variants is that a & b have a quantity of 7 morae, whereas the other variants have a quantity of 6 (vid. Table 7). It thus appears that wāfir and

3 Grundriss, p. 69; Elwell-Sutton, p. 73.