THE USES OF THE QAȘĪDA: THEMATIC AND STRUCTURAL PATTERNS IN A POEM OF BASHSHĂR

Discussions of the structure and function of the post-Islamic qaṣīda have traditionally focussed upon Ibn Qutayba’s famous definition and the objections raised to it, chief among which are: that his definition bears no relation to the pre-Islamic ode which (it is assumed) Ibn Qutayba purports to describe; that his prescriptions were, in his own time, more honored in the breach than in the observance; and that his resistance to departures from the qaṣīda’s traditional topoi demonstrates his conservatism and anti-Shuʿubi prejudice.¹ It has been maintained that the divisions of the qaṣīda—dhikr al-aṭṭāl, nasīb, rāḥīl and mādhī—bear no “organic” connection with one another; that both their presence and their order in the poem are arbitrary and decreed by convention; and that, more specifically, the nasīb (with the function of which this essay is chiefly concerned) is primarily a means of attracting the audience’s attention and sympathy through evoking the universally attractive topic of love.² The persistence and survival of the qaṣīda have been viewed as reflecting the triumph of the philologists over poets who, despite their efforts to “shatter the mold” of the form, were unable to overcome the formal restraints imposed upon them by the forces of conservatism.³

Several recent studies have contributed greatly towards elucidating the proper context in which Ibn Qutayba’s remarks on the qaṣīda should be understood;⁴ this essay proposes to make a further contribution in the way of augmenting the general picture of the qaṣīda’s development in the early ʿAbbasid period. The widespread popularity of the form and the at-

⁴ See especially the studies by Bencheikh, Jacobi and van Gelder cited above (note 1).
tention lavished upon it by major poets suggest that they may not have found it as restrictive as some modern critics seem to think, and that it flourished because it in fact proved a useful instrument for varied purposes. Accepting (though for different reasons) Lecomte’s remark that, for Ibn Qutayba, “La poésie...n’est nullement une fin, mais un moyen,” and extending its application to the poets themselves, I will attempt to identify one important aspect of the ends served by this means. Since theory is of little value unless supported by textual evidence, I will present a paradigmatic text which suggests significant lines for further investigation. Confining myself to what M. M. Badawi has termed the “Secondary Qaṣīda” in its panegyric mode, I have chosen as my model a qaṣīda by Bashshār ibn Burd (d. 783) which is of interest for a variety of reasons. Composed at a transitional period in the development of the panegyric qaṣīda, it suggests at least one direction in which the form was moving; it is not addressed to a ruler, which minimizes its ceremonial aspect; it is recognizably “courtly” with respect to many of the motifs and values presented in it; it is virtually a textbook example of Ibn Qutayba’s definition, which it antedates by some hundred years; and it exhibits an organizational pattern which is to become typical of many qaṣīdas, in which the interaction between nasīb and madīḥ is so carefully structured that the meaning of the poem as a whole is found to be generated by the nasīb, which thus constitutes its most important section, as it establishes the context in which the poem must be understood. This is accomplished primarily through exploiting the analogy between the love relationship and that of poet and patron, which establishes a parallelism between the situations of nasīb and madīḥ; this encompassing figure is supported and rendered more explicit by a variety of other devices. In the following analysis, therefore, I shall devote greatest attention to the nasīb.

The qaṣīda in question is a panegyric addressed to ‘Uqba ibn Salm, governor of Basra (from 764-768) under the Caliph al-Mansūr, and a

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5 Lecomte, p. 240; cf. van Gelder, p. 45. That the conception of poetry as primarily a means rather than an end typifies medieval poetry in general, and not merely that of the Islamic tradition, is amply borne out by comparative studies; cf., for example, W. T. H. Jackson, *The Literature of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1960), pp. 34-44.


8 The interrelationship between the parts of the qaṣīda has been discussed extensively by Sperl, who is concerned primarily with caliphal panegyrics; I wish to discuss here such interaction in poems of a less ceremonial, hence more flexible, nature.