GENRES IN COLLISION: NASĪB AND HIJĀ

Thanks to many studies especially from the past few decades Arabists have come to terms with the “normal” classical qaṣīda, consisting of nasīb and raḥīl or camel description, followed by fakhir or madoh or both, sometimes combined with hijā. In their diverse ways, these studies have shown, often convincingly, how these seemingly incoherent and disjointed poems could be explained as coherent and unified structures. But I do not think that all composite poems can be adequately handled in the ways suggested in these studies.

Among the most perplexing features of classical Arabic poems is surely the juxtaposition of nasīb or ghazal and hijā, the combination in one poem of tender, elegiac, chaste love poetry with scathing, foul-mouthed, obscene vituperation; two themes utterly unrelated, employing discordant types of diction, yet not rarely found together without any attempt at a logical transition. I shall thus be talking of poems such as those that are ridiculed by Horace in The Art of Poetry: Risum teneatis, amici, “Could you hold your laughter, friends”, when you saw a poem like a painting that combined a horse’s neck with a human head, or something that starts out at the top as a beautiful woman but ends in a hideously ugly fish?

One might well ask how this phenomenon could arise and remain being practised by the poets for a considerable time; how it was appreciated by ancient critics; and how modern generic theories that aspire to universal validity could possibly cope with it.

If we take for granted the polythematic nature of the ancient qaṣīda (the origins of which are not wholly clear), then the first question—how did such poems come into being—is not difficult to answer. It seems obvious to me that the particular form, nasīb with hijā, arose more or less fortuitously, and was not created consciously as an artistic whole embracing two extremely contrasting parts, a strophe with its antistrophe, something like the English Jacobean masque with its comic and grotesque anti-masque. Nor should one compare it to the classical pre-Islamic qaṣīda where the contrasts and oppositions are often well integrated, or to

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1 A version of this essay was read at the Halmos Chair for Arabic Literature Conference on “Genre and Language in Arabic Literature”. Tel-Aviv, October 1988. It is meant as an elaboration of some points made in my The Bad and the Ugly: Attitudes towards Invective Poetry (Hijā?) in Classical Arabic Literature, Leiden, 1988. The word “genre” in the title of this article is employed in a loose sense: it does not imply that I consider the “modes” of nasīb and hijā to be genres in a stricter sense of the term.
the standard Abbasid panegyric poem as studied by Sperl and others.\(^2\)

On the contrary, I think that the *nasib-cum-hijāj\(^3\)* poem is the result of the merging, in the course of time, of diverse elements, together with the abandoning, the elimination, of other elements; a process of inclusion combined with exclusion, or addition with subtraction.

In pre-Islamic times hijāj\(^2\) either takes the form of short epigrams or it is combined with *fakhr* and description in a polythematic poem where an introductory *nasib* does not contrast too harshly. Around the time of the Prophet Mohammed poets like Ḥassān Ibn Thābit and al-Ḥuṭayj\(^3\)'a develop the *hijāj-qasīda*, in which hijāj\(^2\) is the main theme. But even when introduced with *nasib* the contrast is relatively mild, because the more virulent kinds of hijāj\(^2\) are still restricted to short epigrams.\(^3\)

Soon after that, however, these virulent kinds invade the *qasīda* while the *nasib* remains unchanged. In the time of Jarīr and al-Farazdaq a *qasīda* may combine very different registers indeed, from chaste love poetry to very unchaste slander, although sudden shifts from one extreme to the other are still avoided as a rule, while a more gradual transition

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\(^3\) Two examples:


1. Alā man li-qalbin ʿarimi n-nażarātī
   yugaffī'u ʿaja l-layli bi-z-zafarātī

2. Iḏhā mā th-thunayyāʾ ākhira l-layli dʿnagat
   kawākibihā ka-l-jizjī munḥadirātī

3. Hūndilīka lā aḵshshā maqālata kāšīhīn
   idhā nūbīda l-ʿazzābū bi-l-ḥajarātī

4. Laʿ-ʿarī ḥa-qad jarrabtukum fa-wajadtukum
   qībāḥa l-wujju ke sayyiʿa l-ʿidharātī

5. Lahum naʃarun mithlu t-tuyūsī wa-niswatun
   mamājīnu mithlu l-ʿātun n-naʿārātī

B. Ḥassān Ibn Thābit, *Dīwān* ed. Sayyid Ḥanafi Ḥasanayn, Cairo, 1974, 316 f.:

1. Mā bālu ʿayn dināmī wāṭā ṭakīfū
   min dhikrī khawādīn šoṭṭat bi-hā quḥufū

2. Bānāt bi-hā ghurbatun taʿummū bi-ḥā
   ārđān siwānā wa-sh-shaklū mukhṭalīfū

3. Mā kuntu adī bi-washki boynihimū
   ḥattā raʿaytu l-ḥudʿāt qad ʿazafū

4. Fa-ḥādārūnī wa-n-nafṣu ghālībūhā
   mā shaffahā wa-l-humūmu taʿtakīfū

5. Daʿ dḥa wa-ʿaddi l-qariḍī fi naʃarīn
   mā laḥumū ghayru subbatī sharafū

6. Kuntum ʿabidun lānā nukhaywīlūkum
   man jaʿanā wa-l-ʿabīdu ṭudṣaʿafū