THE FUNCTION OF RHETORIC IN
MEDIEVAL ARABIC POETRY:
ABÛ TAMMĀM’S ODE ON AMORIUM

The emergence in the ninth century, and the subsequent rapid spread, of the highly rhetorical and ornate style in Arabic poetry (and literature in general), which is known as bādi’ (literally—the New) is an intriguing literary phenomenon. It is not that the ornate style as such is a peculiarity of Arabic poetry, although it is still a popular prejudice to think that Arabic tends to be flowery and verbose. Similar examples can easily be found in other literatures as well as other arts. One does not have to look for them only in adjacent and more related cultures such as the Persian, from which some scholars assumed bādi’ to have ultimately derived. In fifteenth-century Europe the fashion of the ‘aureate’ was followed not only by the Scottish Chaucerian poets, but it spread to their French contemporaries, the grands rhétoriqueurs. In English prose the euphuistic style may have been limited to few somewhat idiosyncratic works such as John Lyly’s Euphues and perhaps Sir Philip Sidney’s Arcadia, but in English poetry, on the other hand, the Elizabethan conceit (vide Campion’s well known poem beginning with ‘There is a garden in her face’) was a less uncommon feature of style, and ‘metaphysical’ poetry certainly proved to be of longer duration. Mannerism is a familiar phenomenon in the history of western art. However, whereas in Europe Mannerism was only one stage in the development of art and was followed by other stages marked by other styles, bādi’ continued to exercise an attraction, which in some cases was fatal, for well nigh a thousand years.

Of course, the mystery may become a little reduced, though it will by no means vanish, when we bear in mind the highly conventional nature of Islamic Arabic poetry and the limited scope in which the individual talent could show its originality within the extraordinarily narrow confines of the tradition, which compelled poets to concentrate on minute stylistic features such as rhetorical devices. Before long rhetoric was studied, analyzed and codified by medieval Arabic literary critics, rhetoricians and grammarians, whose studies became more elaborate, refined and indeed mechanical as time went on. The five main elements into which bādi’ was reduced by Ibn al-
Muʿtazz in the first treatise to be devoted to the subject *Kitāb al-bādiʿ* (c. 274 H./886 A.D.) became no fewer than thirty-five different figures of speech by the time Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskāri wrote his *Kitāb al-ṣināʿatāin* (c. 394 H./1003 A.D.). This number was multiplied several times in the work which was destined to become a most popular manual of rhetoric, *Kitāb miftah al-ʿulūm* by al-SakkāKI (d. 626 H./1228 A.D.). By the sixteenth century we find Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911 H./1505 A.D.) stating that there are more than two hundred figures of speech.  

At times, as can be seen even in the brief list provided by A. J. Arberry in his *Arabic Poetry: a Primer for Students* (1965), the case was one of distinction without difference. Indeed about the proliferation in Arabic critical writings of technical terms denoting the various subtle and super subtle nuances of verbal devices one could echo Quintilian’s well known complaint about the Greeks’ predilection for naming ‘figures’ after Aristotle’s time. And perhaps the real parallel to the dominance of this type of rhetorical thinking, at least in Arabic critical theory, is to be sought not so much in post-Renaissance Europe as in the early history of European literary criticism during the long period stretching from the latest classical times and the dominance of such works as the *Progymnasmata* of Hermogenes to the end of the Middle Ages and the downfall of the Trivium in which rhetoric, of course, held the same important position as logic and grammar and was often inextricably bound up with them. So strong was the rhetoric tradition that not a few Renaissance books of criticism devoted a large space to a discussion of figures. For instance, in the third book of his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), significantly entitled ‘Of Ornament’, Puttenham enumerates more than a hundred figures which he divides into three classes with the quaint names: ‘auricular’, ‘sensible’ and ‘sententious’.

As is well known, *bādiʿ* did not assert itself in Abbasid times without a struggle. Strong opposition was voiced against the artificial mode of writing by several critics and scholars. The battle of the ancients and moderns was in many respects a battle over the use of *bādiʿ*. *Bādiʿ* became the issue at the centre of the dispute over the

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1 Ibn al-Muʿtazz insists that *bādiʿ* proper is divisible only into five types, although at the end of his book he adds some thirteen ornaments of speech. See *Kitāb al-bādiʿ*, ed. Ignatius Kratchkovsky, London, 1935, pp. 57-8 (Arabic text).