

5. THE BOOK OF SONGS AND ITS AUTHOR

By far the most scholarly and informative book on the anthology entitled *Kitāb al-Aghani* (*The Book of Songs*) has been written by Hilary Kilpatrick. The results of her meticulous research have been published under the title *Making the Great Book of Songs*, as recently as 2003. In this paper, I have relied somewhat on her summations, recommendations and indexing, which made the task I set out to tackle when I decided to research the frequency and significance of the use of emotional appeals in this particular sample of the medieval Arabic anthology, easier to navigate. Her expert insights and the guidance they provided cannot be fully accounted for by the passages and references I make to her book. Suffice it to say, that I consider it a stroke of good fortune that her book came out, just when I was in the middle of re-assessing the substance I should present in this Thesis. In this Chapter, I will merely highlight some of the background information about the Anthology, which I find more or less relevant to weighing the significance of its emotive content. In addition, I will summarize some of the information I presented in a Paper entitled *An Appraisal of the Book of Songs and its Author* to the Department of Semitic Languages of the University of Helsinki in July 2002. The Paper is based on research conducted into the life and writings of Abu 'l-Faraj al-Isfahani by Arab researchers and orientalists.

“From the time of its composition until now, the *Aghani* has been both popular and generally recognised as one of the masterpieces of Arabic literature.”¹ Today, it is available in at least five different printed editions,² not to speak of nine or more abridgements.³ Of the first abridgement,⁴ Kilpatrick states, that the aim of Father Antun Salhani’s undertaking (which was the first abridgement to be made of the work) was “to acquaint his contemporaries with the resources of the Arabic language **and in particular its capacity to express emotional states and mental processes in different communicative situations.**”⁵ As I remark in the Section entitled *An Overview of Relevant Research*, Kilpatrick points out that the Anthology has been used to research a variety of subjects and topics, but according to my understanding, no systematic research of the emotive content, with the express intention of determining the ‘emotional states and mental processes in different communicative situations’ has been undertaken so far. This Thesis, is a modest step towards attempting to fill that gap.

There are multiple reasons behind shying away from studying ‘emotional states’ in general, and in medieval works, in particular. One of them, is the structure of medieval texts, which I discuss in detail in the Chapter entitled *The Structure of the Corpus*. Although medieval literature occupies the position of ‘classics’ and is highly valued, its works pose two problems for today’s societies: 1) They contain some archaic material which old conventions dictated, and which permeates the text, often disturbing the rhythm of reading that one is accustomed to expect in a ‘coherent text’, by today’s standards. 2) They seem to be liberally littered with vulgar, even obscene material, which today’s reader, for some reason, is embarrassed to confront and would rather deny the existence of, in its heritage. In Kilpatrick’s words: “Both Arab and foreign scholars are conscious of the difficulty modern readers have in approaching the *Aghani*. This is a point made in the introductions to many of the abridgements as one of the motives for abbreviating the work.”⁶ She mentions,

¹ Kilpatrick, 2003, p. vii

² The edition I have used, as stated in the Bibliography, is

³ Kilpatrick, 2003, p. vii.

⁴ Abridged by Father Antun Salhani, entitled *Rannat al-math.alith wa-l-math.ani fi riwayat Kitāb al-aghani*, published in Beirut in 1888.

⁵ Kilpatrick, 2003, p. 5 (boldface added).

⁶ Kilpatrick 2003, p. 9.

giving the example of the abridgement made by Muḥammad al-Khudarī, that many abridgements have dropped the *isnads*⁷ as well as obscene or objectionable passages.⁸

The practice of ‘tidying up’ classics, before presenting them to the public, is an established one. These ‘cleaned up versions’ are the ones that are presented to schools, and other institutions in society. As Kilpatrick points out: “The *Aghani* has also provided texts for a reader designed for Persian colleges and secondary schools. Here the *isnads* have been omitted, and notes in Persian provided on the persons named. In Arabic a selection for youthful public was published in the *Maktabat al-usra*⁹ series in connection with the Festival of Reading for All in 1996; it contains excerpts from the articles on Jarir, al-Akhtal, al-Farazdaq and al-Ra‘ī.¹⁰” In the abridged versions and excerpts, one is highly unlikely to come across the ‘charged language’ which is included in this Thesis, especially under the category of Tapinosis. Trends, tendencies and personal traits pervading medieval society and characterizing some of its prominent figures, have also been subdued and given if not totally false, then rather ameliorated interpretations.¹¹

Taking a look at the profile of Abu ‘l-Faraj al-Isfahani, can help us understand the material at hand better, since it gives us some insight into the author as a person and the times he lived in. If one were to attempt a character depiction one could be justified in claiming that alone from the kind of company that the author kept, it can be said that his life was full of “amusement, frivolity, humour and uninhibitedness” (*al-lahw, wa ‘l-cabath wa ‘l-ducabah wa ‘l-mujun*).¹²

Personally, Abu ‘l-Faraj was a dirty man in every sense of the word: his appearance was unappealing, he was smelly and foul-mouthed – characteristics, which must have been passed on to him very early on, by the two teachers who instilled learning into him, in his youth, and who were renowned and prominent for their filthiness; namely, Ahmad b. Jaʿfar Jaḥṭhah and Ibrahim b. Muhammad cArafah. In general, his habits and manners were far from civilized: he had a voracious appetite (and peculiar tolerance – he was famous for eating heaps of hot pepper, with a straight face), lousy table manners and a quick temper, which induced him to bad-mouth even the closest and most loyal friends that he had, when he was assailed by a fit of rage. Not even al-Muhallabī, his patron and provider, was spared his lampoonery, but he knew this trait in his protégée and during stupors of drunkenness, would tell him that he was aware of being a target for his slick, shaprtongue, which wagged behind his back, and would corner him into insulting him in his face, whence Abu ‘l-Faraj would feel obliged to admit and repeat the condescending verses that had escaped from his lips, making fun of al-Muhallabī, or even deriding him.¹³

⁷ Chains of transmitters of information.

⁸ Kilpatrick 2003, p. 5.

⁹ Arabic for: Family Library

¹⁰ Kilpatrick 2003, p. 6. Author’ notes: (note 53 on p. 348) The Persian language reader is edited by Muḥammad cAlī Khalīlī and entitled *Muntakhab-e kitab-e aghani* [Tehran] 1319 /1940-1 and (note 52 on p. 348) the Arabic reader published in Cairo in 1996 enjoys the patronage of the President’s wife, Mrs. Suzanne al-Mubarak. (Note 53 on p. 348 refers to an attempt by a foreign scholar to render the entire work into Persian, of which only volume one was published in Tehran in 1358/1979-80.)

¹¹ In the Chapter entitled Review of Relevant Research, the fact the ‘orientalist’ and ‘native’ researchers can be said to differ radically in their attitudes and approach to research, is brought up.

¹² Khalafallah, p. 138.

¹³ Khalafallah, p. 162-5. (Sallūm, p. 9: al-Muhallabī, on the other hand, was particular about his appearance and had fine table manners. He changed his spoon after each mouthful – a habit Khalafallah confirms – but he was never offended by Abu ‘l-Faraj, who might cough sputum on his food, without chagrin from his host or any signs of embarrassment from the coarse Abu ‘l-Faraj. cAsī, p. 15, also confirms the striking discrepancy in the manners of al-Muhallabī and Abu l-Faraj, and paraphrases Yaḥyā al-Ḥamawī’s account of the former being attended by a servant, standing to his right, carrying a tray of about thirty sparkling glass spoons, each of which he would use for one mouthful, after which the servant standing to his left would dispose of it for him, in the tray reserved for the used spoons ... He also paraphrases al-Tanūkhī on the issue of al-Muhallabī’s extravagance, providing an account of his

An assessment of Abu 'l-Faraj, both as an individual and as a rawiya, can safely be made against the background of his friendship with his patron: First, it must not escape us that Abu 'l-Faraj never left al-Muhallabi's court or company from the day they met onwards, and that al-Muhallabi catered for all his financial needs, as is elaborated in many a poem that Abu 'l-Faraj addressed to him. Secondly, although this court included theological judges (qudat al-sharc) and imams (hamalat kitab Allah al-Karim), in addition to other learned men, it was the artists and entertainers who set the tone for the ongoing in this court, where wine and jocundity had a pervasive effect on behaviour, bringing out the crasser sides of all alike. Learning, ambition and money were all, thus, subjugated to the aim of enjoying "the good life" and maintaining it. Thirdly, men of a higher caliber than the constant frequenters of this court, such as al-Mutanabbi, for example, took offence in this company – it was not a setting that serious or studious thinkers thrived in or wished to be associated with.¹⁴

With regard to the place of religion in Abu 'l-Faraj's life, the following can be said: Abu 'l-Faraj confessed openly to being a zaydi *shici* – *shicizm* in itself, being as much a religious as a political outlook; with emphasis on the latter, in his case. This matter aroused much astonishment and open condemnation from others, such as that expressed by the author of *Rawdat al-jannat fi ahwal al-c'ulama' wa 'l-sadat*, where Abu 'l-Faraj is depicted as sychophantic infidel descending from the rotten tree of the Umayyads, which is cursed in the Qur'an and by each and every tongue.¹⁵

Whichever the case may be, Abu 'l-Faraj was certainly not a puritan (*mutazammit*), but known, rather, for his immersion in pleasures and unrestrained provocation, to which the verse and prose he composed testifies, as does the company (of *majinin*) that he kept.¹⁶ He had a passion for drinking and boys and did not find admitting this publicly a disgrace,¹⁷ nor was it past him to ridicule even the very essence of *shici* Islam by, for example, distorting the call to prayer with the addition of

buying, on three consecutive days, roses for one thousand dinars, with which he strewed his large pool and with which he decked spaces where he sat and received people. On p. 38-9, he paraphrases Yaqut's description of Abu 'l-Faraj's despicable table manners and tattered apparel, and al-Muhallabi's extreme patience with him. But he follows this, by a rejection of what Yaqut reports about Abu 'l-Faraj, arguing that it has been transmitted from al-Sabi's book, and wonders how al-Muhallabi and Abu 'l-Faraj could have been friends, had they, in fact, been such opposites in the question of cleanliness and etiquette. He does admit, though, that he fails to support his rejection of Yaqut's accounts with any proof to the contrary from literary sources of that period. It is quite obvious, that the matter of Abu 'l-Faraj's personality raises controversies among many learned Arabs, who take pride in him as a literary figure, and would like to come up with an image of him, that fits the picture of a national symbol.)

¹⁴ Khalafallah, p. 148-50. (The disputed relationship of al-Mutanabbi to Abu 'l-Faraj is discussed at length in the Paper entitled An Appraisal of the Book of Songs and its Author, which I submitted to Professor Hämeen-Anttila in July 2002).

¹⁵ Khalafallah, p. 152-3. CAsi, p. 46-55, cites all the sources that doubt that Abu 'l-Faraj is a shici, or forgo mention of this, arriving at the far-fetched conclusion, that the word muttasic (prolific writer) was copied as mutashayyic by al-Tanukhi, transmitting from Baghdadi. CAsi appears convinced that Abu 'l-Faraj was not a shici. He bases his view on the amount of criticism levelled by the author against significant shici personalities both in Maqatil al-Talibiyyin and Kitab al-Aghani. That, which cAsi considers to be criticism, seems to me to be simply a matter of expressing personal dislike, which need not indicate that Abu 'l-Faraj was not himself a shici. CAsi's assumption that every shici must approve of and defend every other shici comes across as an over-simplification, since the opposite is quite often the case: it may be easier to criticize compatriots and faith bretheren with less friction than when one is exhibiting xenophobia or enmity. It must also be recalled here, that Abu 'l-Faraj often criticized his best friends, even though he had some 'blind loyalties', of which one was to Ishaq. See Khalafallah, p. 31-3, for extract of the book, containing evidence that the Talibiyyin were closely allied to the Umayyads, as they had always been on good terms with each other, where one can also find indications of Abu 'l-Faraj's sympathies.

¹⁶ Khalafallah, p. 156.

¹⁷ His favourite lover was more reticent and was anxious to hide this relationship from his father, so he was highly dismayed by Abu 'l-Faraj's not being able to resist the temptation of leaving openly flirtatious inscriptions for him in the places where they met, one of them being his parent's house. Abu 'l-Faraj found often found himself obliged to apologize for his behaviour, in order to appease his lover. See e.g. Khalafallah, p. 165-66 and Sulaiman, p. 45.

disrespectful rhyming phrases of his own, which he weaved into the religious formula shouted by the *mu'adhdhin*. As for Ramadan, the month of fasting, he is known to have declared that it interferes with enjoying the enjoyable in life.¹⁸ Paradoxically, since his ridicule and disdain were directed at a force which was growing in power and influence, namely the *shī'cis*, and with whom he primarily identified, he got away with his less than exemplary attitude, without arousing any ill-feelings.¹⁹

There are two factors which explain him not having particularly angered anyone: 1) In spite of his distinctly shici sentiments, he was quite dispassionate, politically. The fact which attests to this, is that he refrained from depicting any of the dramatic political and social changes which he witnessed with his own eyes during his lifetime (compared to the writings, for example, of his contemporary, Miskawayh); so, his life was quite uneventful, from the point of view of crossing any authority figures.²⁰ 2) Leaders, in general, and religious ones, in particular, such as imams, did not lack a sense of humour, and there is no end to the anecdotes which support this view, and prove, that the time Abu 'l-Faraj lived in, was one, in which wit was appreciated, even if the "ingenuity" of a joke lay in that it was "substandard" or aimed below the belt. The story which Abu 'l-Faraj includes in *Kitab al-Aghani*, telling of a new convert to Islam writing verses to the imam of a masjid, asking him to delay the night call to prayer, so he could stay a bit longer with his male lover, and the imam being highly amused by this request, assures us that one could get away with any kind of depravity, as long as one knew how to be funny.

All sources agree on two things, even though the exact year and place of his birth have not been conclusively established: he lived a long and extremely productive life staying sane until only shortly before he died, when his writings did become somewhat of a muddle (*khalata khaltan*). The second fact that has been established, is that he explicitly urged anyone who could correct a text or add detail to *Kitab al-Aghani* to do so. He was, in the first and highest degree, a chronicler of times up to his time, and of his own age.

¹⁸ See Khalafallah, p. 157, for the verses in which he welcomes the ending of the "month of imprisonment".

¹⁹ Khalafallah, p. 156-8.

²⁰ See Khalafallah, p. 158.