

6. THE STRUCTURE OF THE SOURCE TEXT (CORPUS)

A lot has been written about the fact that the Anthology which Abu 'l-Faraj compiled has not survived in its original form. The author himself could have produced more than one version of the whole work, or of sections of it, as he went over it with students, working and reworking it. As for the manuscripts, they exist in bits and pieces, many of them written by copyists who seem to have pieced the material together faultily, upsetting the order of articles or quite evidently dropping out vital parts of them. Lacunas could also be caused by the author intending to include certain material, but never getting around to it, or changing his mind, for not everything he mentions is to be found in the work, and loss cannot account for all of the gaps, according to Kilpatrick.¹

It is not my intention to recap the known textual problems of the *Aghani* or to discuss the lack of a scholarly edition which consults all available manuscripts (Kilpatrick gives an exhaustive account of that in her fresh book on the subject). Rather, I wish to provide a description of the structure of Volume I of the Anthology. As almost every researcher in the field states, the writing culture of medieval times has its own features, which often put off the modern reader. This culture has been elaborated on by the scholars of the field, making it more comprehensible for the prospective reader of a work of those times, by providing a clear outline of what to expect. For my part, I will provide such an outline for the work I have studied. What I am about to state about the first volume of the Anthology *Kitab al-Aghani*, need not be true for all works of that period, since the work I am considering is specifically an anthology of songs, but it does provide a fair idea of the structure of the 25-volume strong Anthology as a whole. This information can therefore be made use of to extend the study I have made of the first volume to cover the entire Anthology, an undertaking I strongly recommend for conclusive evidence on how representative or irrepresentative of the entire work the findings of this thesis are. (Admittedly, this is a comment that belongs under 'recommendations for further research' but I could not resist stating here, that such a comprehensive survey needs to be made before much can be said about the entire work. According to my own estimate, this is a major undertaking, which will take many years to complete, and which is an exciting, albeit quite formidable project). So, the structure I am about to outline, does hold true for not only the first, but also the rest of the volumes of the Anthology, and can help overcome a 'culture barrier' which makes it seem distant and unfathomable, and to a lesser degree, it can be helpful in understanding other epics or histories of that period too. The second, and more immediate reason for my wishing to provide this outline, is that the structure and components of the text have a great bearing on the findings of this study.

What I found out when I acquainted myself with the work is that it can be divided into four clear and distinct, albeit intermixed and intertwining components. That is to say, the components I am about to enumerate, are not separated by titles (many of which have been added by editors, anyway) but seem, at least at first sight, indistinguishable from each other. Still, a careful look leads us to conclude that the text is composed of (if we disregard the titles and subtitles): 1. The chain of transmitters with which the author either authenticates the material he provides, excuses his providing it, or explains where it is believed to have originated, as far back as he can tell (*isnad*). In other words, a type of source / bibliography list of either oral transmitters or written works precedes every bit of information, constituting a claim that it is verifiable and trustworthy. (The fact that the author may often have a differing opinion or wish to cast doubt on a piece of information by adding his disbelief of it, is a different matter.) 2. Lines of poetry – poems, excerpts of poems or the poetry that has been turned into the lyrics of a song. (Poems that became lyrics of music ceased to be

¹ See Kilpatrick 2003, p. 30-32.

complete poems in their own right, for they underwent many alterations and verses from different poems were pieced together to form the lyrics of a song).² 3. Notations of ‘musicology’, often following poetry, explaining (in obsolete terms, for today’s reader) who performed what and in which manner or tune. This is often preceded by an indication of who composed the original poem or poems, who set the lyrics to music and who sung it. 4. The narrative part of the text, which typically consists of units known as “reports” (s. *khābar* / pl. *akhbar*). These are supposed to relate true incidents, which are often anecdotal in nature, but not necessarily. In any case, they are not presented as fictitious, and it is common to encounter many different versions (usually from two to three) of the same report.

So, an unabridged medieval text is likely to be a disappointment for anyone who approaches it like a novel, wishing to recline and bite into the flesh of a “good story”. It takes a lot of wading through material which is useful only to a researcher, before true enjoyment can be wrought from the reading. It is also good to keep in mind, that medieval belles-lettres is characteristically anecdotal in nature, full of witticisms and proverbiality, resembling more a slapsick comedy stage-act than a Shakespearean play.

As for the components of the text, mentioned above, roughly speaking, half of the first Volume of the *Aghani*’s text consists of verse and the other half of prose. “Poetry is met with in the *Kitāb al-Aghani* in three contexts. First, it forms the lyrics of the Top Hundred and other songs round which the book is constructed. Second, it is embedded in narratives. And third, it is quoted independently.”³ It is the embedded poetry that must be understood in order to understand the prose sections of this work, as I shall explain a bit further on.

From the point of view of this study, which concentrates on the prose sections of the work, it is significant that out of the 400 or so pages of text, prose constitutes 200 or so pages. Furthermore, as stated above, the prose section consists of chains of transmitters (*isnad*), musicology and narrative. If we were to exclude the *isnad* and musicology components of the prose sections, which constitute about a third of it, we are left with about 130 pages of pure narrative. And it is precisely this material that I have raked for emotive content. Having said this, I must add, that “emotional appeals” can occasionally slip into the purely “scientific lines” (*isnad* and musicology), on which occasions I have picked them out, to the best of my ability. This does not change the fact that the bulk of emotional appeals which have been picked out for study in this survey (a total of 2833) were found on the 130 pages or so, which form the narrative part proper of the text. Further below, I will show that the narrative proper is actually no more than a hundred pages or so, if we remove some more of the notations which are not absolutely vital for the understanding of the reports, which, so to say, is the “flesh” of the book. Here, it can already be stated that the occurrence of emotional appeals is obviously very high and dense, which is a matter I will discuss in more detail in this paper.

There are two points, which I also wish to emphasize here: 1. Although I have excluded verse from my study, it must be noted that poetry is more often than not interwoven into the text or a tale, in a manner which makes it quite inextricable from the “story” being told. Such stories, or reports (*akhbar*), can neither be fathomed nor told or retold, without references to the verse or verses which variously, provide topics for discussion and speculation for the characters in the tale, occupy the place of dialogue between two or more people, form the punchline, and so forth. This is how “embedded” the poetry, in fact, is, especially in the cases where it is not simply a provision of the

² Kilpatrick 2003, p. 55-66.

³ Kilpatrick 2003, p. 55.

lyrics of a song and where it is not quoted independently for its own sake.⁴ For this reason, an understanding of the contents of the verse sections has been incorporated into the study, wherever it has a great bearing on the prose sections that it is a part of, although the emotive content of the poetry has remained completely outside the realm of this study. 2. The other point I wish to make, is that I found the use of poetry to be very much “an emotional appeal” in and by itself. One cannot help but notice, that an image, idea or point is driven home most forcefully by quoting, or composing, as the case might be, a “shattering” verse or a few. A message that prose, however eloquent, fails to encapsulate is captured and delivered in verse. The nature of the poetry quoted or recited is highly charged and draws visceral, gut reactions, more often than purely intellectual ones. So, the category “use of poetry as an emotional appeal” could very well have been added to the list of emotional appeals, but that would have turned this already broad study too large to manage.

One last word about the nature of the narrative sections of the text: Apart from the lines of *isnad* preceding the reports (*akhbar*), passages may have long lists of the names of persons (e.g. who took part in a battle or were sent somewhere or visited someplace as a delegation) as well as their genealogies. The narrative proper is also interspersed with the author’s comments, which vary from providing detailed explanations of the etymology of certain words, to giving background information on people, events or places, or rapping on the knuckles a transmitter, poet, singer or other figure, of whom the author does not fully approve. The author also frequently states that relevant details have been mentioned earlier, so they need not be repeated, or that further information will be supplied later on, in its appropriate place.

As for the critical division of the material, around which this paper revolves: What I find noteworthy is that when poetry, *isnad*, musicology and the author’s comments are removed, one is left with just about one fourth of the material (100 pages or so). As my interest in this paper focuses mainly on the emotive content of the text, it is these 100 pages or so that I expected to find the emotional appeals concentrated in. The surprise was not where they are concentrated, but how concentrated they are! If three-fourths of the book consists of the rather rigid, formulaic prescriptions, which can be called scientific, by the standards and norms of learning adhered to in the age of the author (whether or not they should be termed intellectual), then the descriptive section, where the author has a freer hand, so utterly “counterbalances” it, as to be almost exclusively made up of emotional appeals. The fact that the stories transmitted by the author, apart from all the “other obligatory stuff” consists of up to or over 95% of emotional appeals, is a noteworthy finding, in my opinion.⁵

⁴ Kilpatrick 2003, p. 55.

⁵ There is a rhetorical device called Signification, which consists of repetition and highlighting what is said, by emphasizing it endlessly, which I have excluded from this Study, but which accounts for the fact that the percentage of emotional appeals is truly as high, if not higher, than I claim here.