

7. AN OVERVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH

As stated in the Introduction, the authority *par excellence* on the medieval Arabic anthology entitled *Kitab al-Aghani*, is Hilary Kilpatrick who has as recently as 2003 published a meticulous compilation entitled *Making the Great Book of Songs*, analyzing this work and the craft of its author.¹ Her research is too vast to summarize here in spite of its relevance, so only the points she makes, which I consider acutely pertinent to my own area of research, will be touched upon in the following paragraphs. Mainly, I wish to emphasize her outlook and opinions on the research that has been conducted so far.

In her book, Kilpatrick encourages serious research into the *Aghani* and provides a survey of the modern research conducted on it thus far. Her comments on the nature of the research conducted in Arabic and that done by foreign scholars are worth noting. She states that “in most domains of *Aghani* studies the major part of the work has been carried out by Arab scholars. This holds good for text editions, biographies of the author, and investigations of his method of working. Foreign scholars have contributed most to the identification of the *Aghani*’s sources and of methods of transmission of the material. “As far as I can judge, it is specifically in the field of musicology that Arabs and foreigners have concerned themselves with the same problems.”²

Kilpatrick elaborates on this issue by stating that while knowledge has been furthered on all aspects of the text in question since World War II, there are three obstacles which separate research carried out in the Arab world and that carried out elsewhere: 1. Arab and foreign scholars seem oblivious of each other. Khalafallah’s and Sallum’s books are hardly quoted in foreign studies, while Zolondek’s approach to sources is unknown in the Arab world. Periodicals in which Arab and foreign scholars publish their articles are often accessible only to the readership of particular countries, limited circulation (especially in the Arab world) posing one problem and fluency in either Arabic, by foreign scholars, or in a number of European languages, by Arab scholars, forming another obstacle. Added to this factor, some important contributions, such as the doctoral thesis of Mandour (submitted to a French university in 1956) and an important work of Fleischhammer’s, remain unpublished, which is why they have been ignored by virtually everyone.³

Even more noteworthy is Kilpatrick’s assessment of the quality of Arabic research. She states the following about the work done by Arab scholars: “Although their studies of the *Aghani* and of Abu l-Faraj’s life are extremely useful, both Sallum and al-Shaykh Musa betray striking misconceptions of the social and intellectual history in which the *Aghani* was written. Sallum speaks of the “fanatical” (*mutacassib*) Muslim milieu” in which Abu l-Faraj lived, while al-Shaykh Musa’s ignorance of the complexities of Shi’i movements in the fourth/tenth century has already been noted. Al-Simti’s study of Abu l-Faraj’s narrative techniques betrays an even greater lack of knowledge of the literary culture which produced the *Aghani*. The detailed research on different aspects of medieval Islamic civilisation which has been going on abroad for the last fifty years or so appears scarcely to have penetrated some Arab academic milieus, at least where the study of literature is concerned.”⁴

So, as we can surmise from the above, Kilpatrick is critical of some of the research presented thus far. She feels that where it is not on an erroneous path altogether, it is rather insufficient and narrow.

¹ Hilary Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs*, Routledge Courzon, NY, 2003.

² Kilpatrick 2003, p. 12.

³ See Kilpatrick 2003, Chapter 1, p. 1-13.

⁴ Kilpatrick 2003, p. 12-13.

On the whole, it is her opinion that there is much room both for betterment of its quality as well as its expansion into domains which have not been addressed yet.

Undeniably, a great deal of research has been conducted into medieval Arabic literature by various scholars over the last decades. One such noteworthy study is that of Fedwa Malti-Douglas entitled *Structures of Avarice*,⁵ in which she studies how miserliness ‘*bukhl*’ is depicted in the works of two medieval authors (al-Jahiz and al-Khatib). In her superbly well-structured analytical presentation, in which she defines *adab* (Arabic belles-lettres, esp. medieval) and provides a biography of the authors, she dissects the compilations of anecdotes on miserliness, grouping them into similar categories, for which she gives titles such as “the object anecdote”, “the hospitality anecdote”, “the agent/victim anecdote”, and so forth, dividing the anecdotes into altogether about five or six categories, apart from the anecdotes in verse. In anecdotes on miserliness, she considers the principal emotive effect to be humour (about which she states that we are faced with a complication, because of the “... unfortunate fact that there exists no generally accepted universal and comprehensive theory of humor explaining all the techniques of humor and why they [the anecdotes] are funny”⁶), for which she dedicates a separate chapter, as well as treating it in her work, which was originally, in its earlier form, submitted as a doctoral dissertation. In general, her work abounds in psychological insight, such as her statement that Object anecdotes have a “... less tangible, almost surreal, quality combined with a distinctive typ of psychological focus, one which places more emphasis on motivations than actions.”⁷ In her chapter entitled *Contexts and Conclusions* she states: “Words, and especially emotionally laden words, can be understood by more than their formal definitions. They possess patterns of usage or association which color their meaning. This creates a situation in which certain words, possess, from a frequent use, a general tendency to call to mind certain associated areas for which the word’s usage seems appropriate.”⁸ She summarises that, although the complete character or psychological portraits of the individual miserly person, the *bakhil*, are rarely given, generalizations do emerge “through an accumulation of examples”.⁹ It is her opinion that if we wished, we could derive psychological definitions for the characters in medieval literature, through which it would be possible to define their attitudes and motivations,¹⁰ and adds: “Perhaps the most accessible to a modern Westerner is the social interpretation.”¹¹ She speaks of the relationship which is created between the reader and the purely semantic aspects of a text “which places the reader in a particular psychological posture”¹² and advocates “understanding the Arabic systems synchronically on their own terms”.¹³ Yet, because her work is a highly academic and theoretical one, it may not contribute much to the lay person’s understanding of the medieval Arabic culture, which would serve as an eye-opener as to the awarenesses of today’s Arab. It is a scholarly work, though, which if simplified, has a lot to offer in this respect, and it did guide and enlighten me throughout the writing of my own work.

A less scholarly book dealing mainly with the concept of aesthetics from an Arab/Muslim angle, but one which is good and more accessible to the layperson, is that of Doris Behrens-Abouseif.¹⁴ Although much can be gained from its entirety, especially from the sections dealing with love, beauty, music and the status of Arts in Arabic literature (mainly medieval) and the Arab

⁵ Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Structures of Avarice*, Leiden E.J. Brill, 1985.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 109.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 93.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 144.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 148.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 151.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 159.

¹³ *ibid.* p. 166 (the last paragraph of the book).

¹⁴ Behrens-Abouseif Doris, *Beauty in Arabic Culture*, Markus Wiener Publishers, Princeton, 1999.

environment, I will quote only one passage from her book: “An episode reported in the *Book of Songs (al-Aghani)* by Isbahani (d. 967) illustrates the emotional factor in the perception of beauty. During a visit to Constantinople, an Arab heard in the street a voice singing an Arabic song. He was delighted by what he heard, but then he asked himself whether this delight was due to the quality of the performance or to the thrill of hearing an Arabic song in Constantinople.[...] The awareness of the psychological moment is thus deeply rooted in Arabic culture. It had a strong impact on European thought, in particular on Thomas of York, who used Arabic sources to emphasize the psychological and subjective character of beauty.”¹⁵ In her book, Behrens-Abouseif brings to the fore the significance of the emotional factor as a decisive element in the qualification of what is morally good and pleasing, arguing very interestingly that the subjective perception of pleasure, rather than any objective criteria, often sanctified actions and modes of behaviour. She also deals quite extensively with the subject of the influence of the Arabic view of aesthetics as a background for ethics and morality on Western thought. The latter topic is one that is far beyond the reach of this Thesis, but the former is a topic that, although, I cannot manage to treat it here, it is in its vein that any interpretations of the material I have presented should be attempted, at some future point.

As for the interpretation of the Section of this Paper which deals with the concept of *Tarab*, an invaluable book is that written by A.J. Racy and entitled *Making Music in the Arab World*.¹⁶ Had I been wise enough, I might have concentrated solely on this subject to the exclusion of all the other emotive ingredients in the Anthology in question, and written a highly specified analysis on ‘how and what in Arabic music moves an Arab deeply’. But since I chose to cut down on the analysis in favour of providing as wide a repertoire of examples as possible, for the reader to draw his or her own conclusions, I will provide as a guideline for drawing those conclusions, a quote from the above-mentioned excellent book, written by the Professor of Ethnomusicology. In his Chapter entitled *Saltanah* (which could be translated as “feeling as euphoric as an emperor”, which he uses as a synonym for *Tarab*) he has a passage entitled *Eastern soul*, which I will quote in full: “Musicians stress that for a person to experience *salṭanah*, or in a broader sense *ṭarab*, he or she must be fully attuned to a certain pervasive local disposition. In the mid-nineteenth century, al-Shidyāq presented *ṭarab* as part of the Eastern mental-emotional character. Today, artists identify *ṭarab* or *salṭanah* with a somewhat abstract but genuinely felt native ethos, or Geist, in Arabic, *ruh*, literally, “soul” or “spirit”. Accordingly, the ability to truly fathom the music’s emotive dimension presupposes having a deep-rooted sense of “Eastern-ness” or “Arab-ness.” Regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds the performers and their audiences must be connected to the music’s indigenous essence, its local feel. They must possess *ruh Sharqiyyah* (Eastern soul) or *nafas Sharqi* (Eastern breath). As the violinist ‘Abū al-‘Alī explains, since every nation or people has its own *ruh*, a performer must absorb (*yataṣharrah*) a certain nation’s *ruh* in order to feel its music and perform it properly.”¹⁷ The comment I would like to provide on this passage, is that it is as painful as it is profound to note that the “Eastern soul” cannot be understood if one does not step out of the “Western soul”, even if temporarily, if that is possible at all; or in the very least, the

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 42

¹⁶ Racy A.J., *Making Music in the Arab World, The Culture and Artistry of Tarab*, Cambridge University Press, 2003. (Another noteworthy textbook, if one were to expand on this subject, would be that of Joseph Norment Bell: *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam*, 1979, in which gets too technical to, in some places, to get into here. On p. 1, he states that Hanbalism is not a monolith, which, of course, holds true for any faith, denomination, or other grouping. On p. 9. he mentions that many anthologies of love literature appear to have been completely lacking in organization. He deals with the specific and numerous terms for love, such as ‘*hawā*’, ‘*ḥubb*’ and ‘*ishq*’, e.g. on p. 35. He is concerned with the various names for love and the stages of emotion they represent, especially in response to the Sufi stratification of love terminology. He also discusses the views medieval men had of women, especially as temptresses, e.g. on p. 28. His scholastic work, where he uses such terms as ‘the concupiscible appetite vs. the irascible appetite’, e.g. on p. 15, and in which he raises the questions of ‘*ḥalal*’ and ‘*ḥaram*’ with regard to love and lust, is one that would be an obligatory reference, in a more specialized study of this subject.)

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 126.

Westerner must be able to identify strongly with parallels in his or her own culture, which may have ceased to exist in their earlier form, nowadays. Whether or not a guidebook could be drafted for such an exercise and of what use that might be is a question that could very well be addressed on the basis of the examples of emotively charged exclamations and utterances provided in this Thesis. Namely, an Arab can imagine him or herself exclaiming most of the phrases extracted from the literature I studied, I would be bold enough to postulate, but can a Westerner?! That might be the most adequate starting point with which to approach the cited examples, and the query to keep in mind when going over them.

Next, I am going to mention the main articles published in the The Journal of Arabic Literature about related subjects. After reviewing all the contents of all the issues of the Journal since its first issue, and carefully acquainting myself with the majority of them, - most of which, maybe understandably enough, deal with poetry; since prose developed much later than poetry in Arabic literature¹⁸ – I decided to highlight a few of the observations researchers have made. It was not possible or even advisable to restrict myself to the relatively scanty studies dealing with Arabic medieval prose, so, I point out whatever I find to be of some interest to this Paper, as follows:-

Renate Jacobi in an article dealing with Structural Analysis states: “There can be no doubt that western orientalist will never be able to compete with Arabs in susceptibility, taste or intuition as regards Arabic (poetry).”¹⁹ She adds that: “... modern tools of analysis mentioned by Petraček have been developed and applied, in order to provide literary aesthetics with a more reliable basis for evaluation – among other reasons. [...] ... he has shown conclusively that modern structuralistic methods are a suitable means for reaching aesthetic judgements.”²⁰ She then goes on to apply the rules of modern structuralistic analysis to a poem, which she examines line by line regarding sound and rhythm, describing the morphological features which deserve our attention. In her conclusion, she mentions that the first theory of sound – even though the standards of medieval Arabic critics were low, compared to ours – was developed in the 13th century by Ibn al-Athīr, who considered sound to be an absolute value. The idea of the equivalence of sound and content struck me as perceptive, in addition to the fact of my being convinced that rigid structural analysis can yield a lot. It is for the first reason, that I went to great lengths to append a transliteration to this Paper, and for the second reason that I grouped my material into such strict categories.

As for what can be reaped from going to such lengths to list, compartmentalize and exhibit emotive content of an Arabic medieval anthology, K. Dalgleish says in an article dealing with the treatment of emotion in a medieval collection of poetry (*diwān*): “... at best there is bound to be doubt as to whether they should be taken as subjective, objective, descriptive or prescriptive.”²¹ Next, he points out that classical Arabic poetry “belongs to a closely-knit tradition that is almost totally unfamiliar to the West. In its crudest terms the problem is that those who understand **what** the poets are saying may still have difficulty in seeing **why** they are saying it.”²² He says that a considerable amount of research has been engaged in, and proposes to add to available studies his own contribution of the inter-related emotion/convention passages in the work of a single poet, of which he says: “The results of so limited an investigation cannot be applied, except by dangerous extrapolation, to any other author, but, equally, generalisations in this field based on anything but detailed studies of individual poets are without real value.”²³ Therefore, I do not either venture to be able to make any

¹⁸ With this topic, I dealt at length in a Paper submitted to the University of Helsinki in Spring 2002 and entitled The Emergence of Arabic Prose.

¹⁹ JAL, 1975, Vol. 6, p. 35, Renate Jacobi: *Ibn al-Mu'tazz: Dair 'Abdun. A Structural Analysis*. (Brackets are my own.)

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 36.

²¹ JAL, 1973, Vol. 4, p. 97, K. Dalgleish: *Some Aspects of the Treatment of Emotion in the Diwān of Al-A'sha*.

²² *ibid.* (Boldface added.)

²³ *ibid.*

conclusive claims about the subjectivity, objectivity, descriptiveness or prescriptiveness of the material I submit. Neither do I wish to provide my own view of **why** what is said is said. In order to avoid “dangerous extrapolations”, I also shy away from generalizing or carrying my suggestion that the “prototype of the Arab”, which one can come up with is one that is of any use to us in understanding today’s Arab. It is much too tricky to do anything other what I have done, which is to provide a survey of the turns of phrase used in the most varied of situations, and to leave it up to the individual reader to deduce why I have placed that particular turn of phrase in the category I entered it under.

Jabra I. Jabra, in an article entitled *Modern Arabic Literature and the West* gives a valid and always equally relevant exposition on the power of words and their place in the minds of Arabs. He talks of the love of language being a “heady and ecstatic” one, expressing the opinion that almost whatever Arabs say and write is, in essence, an echo of the great poetry of the Abbasids.²⁴ He goes as far as using the analogy that for Arabs, poetry is as good as dynamite, in warfare, and can compete with guns, canons and airplanes. It is hard to overestimate the addiction of Arabs to words, in fact, which is one of the reasons that a careful perusal of what they say can be a window to their collective soul.

²⁴ JAL, 1971, Vol. 2, p. 78, Jabra I. Jabra: *Modern Arabic Literature and the West*.