

PREFACE

At present, we scarcely find secondary literature on the subject of classical Arabic poetry or the *qaṣīdah* studied from the perspective of modern Western literary theories and interartistic perspectives. This book demonstrates that those contemporary theories are useful for discovering and reconstructing a possible original meaning of the *qaṣīdah*.

This study was submitted in its original version as a doctoral dissertation to the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Indiana University (October 2001); the study has now been reassessed and revised. The subject of the study is *wasf* or “description” as one of the salient characteristics of the *qaṣīdah* tradition. We find something similar to *wasf* in the Western tradition under the name of ekphrasis. Originally interpreted in the Western rhetorical tradition as “clear and distinct description” of any object, ekphrasis in its modern understanding bears a more limited sense, “verbal representation of non-verbal texts.” In this modern conception, ekphrasis is concerned with the transdisciplinary field of intermedial and interarts studies.

This study aims at reexamining the functions and significance of *wasf* in a selected group of Arabic *qaṣīdahs*. My goal is to reveal unrecognized aesthetic dimensions in the *qaṣīdah* genre in a way that is consistent with Western critical discourse. I employ various theories of culture and anthropology, of art history, and of interarts studies, including the concept of ekphrasis, which refers to the representation in verbal art of the other arts: painting, singing performance, and architecture.

The *qaṣīdah* must be analyzed within its conventional framework in light of its thematic unity and “frame of reference” (a set of standards, beliefs, or assumptions governing perceptual or logical evaluation or social behavior).¹ One aspect of classical Arabic poetry’s conventionality, reflected in every ode in this study, is its bipartite

¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “frame of reference.” For its further meaning, see pp. 124–25 in Chap. 4.

or tripartite structure—*nasīb* (elegiac prelude), *raḥīl* (the poet's journey through the desert and his mount, the she-camel), and *fakhr* (the poet's praise or boast of himself and his tribe) or *madīḥ* (court panegyric in which the praise of the ruler substitutes for *fakhr*)—with polythematic formation. I investigate not only how *wasf* functions in each section, but also how it furthers or echoes a larger aim of the entire poem, e.g., boasting or panegyric, both structurally and thematically. I do not analyze descriptive sections solely as individual parts, but in relation to the whole thematic structure of the *qaṣīdah*.

With regard to the “frame of reference,” I attempt to re-construct the meaning that the *qaṣīdah* held for its audiences and the effect it had on them, because the original audience would receive much more than what is in the text. It is this view that allows me to interpret descriptive passages in an ode as fully integrated into the panegyric function of the entire ode and show the complex interaction of aesthetic, ideological, political, and self-(pre)serving motivations that were apparently clear to the original audiences but have been lost to later critics and scholars.

Hence, I believe that in terms of methodology, a combination of the consideration of the conventional characteristics of classical Arabic poetry and modern Western theories serves to clarify the nature of the genre. Above all, modern Western interarts theories have not been applied extensively to the *qaṣīdah* before. The concept of contest likewise plays a pivotal part in the *qaṣīdah* genre, for it is an essential incentive for the poet's enterprise of *wasf*.

To provide a broader picture of *wasf* and various facets of the verbal description of other types of art, instead of focusing on one poet and his works, I have selected eight odes characterized by representative descriptive motifs from different periods: two odes with the motif of a horse from the pre-Islamic era (the sixth century C.E.), two odes with a motif of bees and honey-gathering from the Jāhili (pre-Islamic) and Mukhaḍram (straddling the pre-Islamic and Islamic age) eras, two odes with a motif of visual arts (a design on a wine goblet and a wall painting), another on the theme of a singing performance from the 'Abbāsīd era (the eighth and ninth centuries C.E.), and one ode with an architectural motif from the Andalusian era (the fourteenth century C.E.). While descriptions in Chapters One and Two are investigated in association with the poems' cultural and literary milieu, relying on their related anecdotes (*akhbār*) and the ancient symbolism of the poetic objects, the last three chapters attempt

to examine descriptions from the perspective of the transdisciplinary area of interarts studies.

Technically speaking, my approach in each chapter except for the Introduction is the detailed discussion of one or two poems for the purpose of creating a new reading of the odes. I do not, however, elaborate every line or phrase. Rather, I focus on sections which are crucial for my argument. Moreover, I use the word “poet” to refer to the maker of a poem, while employing the word “persona” or the poet’s name in quotation marks to indicate the speaker in the poem.

The Introduction offers the theoretical background for both *wasf* and ekphrasis, showing how the two concepts were treated and understood in their own literary traditions and the commensurable aspects of these two concepts. I demonstrate where the Arabic materials under examination in the following five case-studies are situated in light of the understanding of ekphrasis.

The subject of the first chapter is the description of a horse by Imru’ al-Qays (d. circa 550 C.E.) and ‘Alqamah al-Fahl (active in the mid-sixth century) in the pre-Islamic era in the context of a poetic contest (*mu‘aradah*) narrated in an accompanying *khavar* (anecdote). I demonstrate the concept of tribal reaggregation and sexuality in the horse description within a social and cultural paradigm.

In the second chapter, I analyze the description of bees and honey-collecting by two Hudhalī poets, Sā‘idah ibn Ju‘ayyah (date of death unknown) from the Jāhili (pre-Islamic) period and his *rāwī* (transmitter) Khuwaylid ibn Khālid known as Abū Dhu‘ayb al-Hudhalī (d. 649? C.E.) who lived through the Mukhadram era. Using an anthropological approach, I investigate the symbolic meanings of the bee, honey, and honey-gathering, relying on *The Sacred Bee* by Hilda M. Ransome.² The bees and honey-gathering are symbols of healing and ordeal and at the same time form a metaphor for the lost meadow.

For the ‘Abbāsīd period, I deal in Chapter Three with the description of a wine cup and a painting by the ‘Abbāsīd poets Abū Nuwās (c. 747/762–815) and al-Buḥturī (821–97). In approaching the description of the works of visual art, I make use of the studies of ekphrasis

² Hilda M. Ransome, *The Sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1937).

by Andrew Sprague Becker.³ In the two poems on visual art works, the *wasf* functions as *madīḥ* without an explicit expression of the words of praise.

Chapter Four deals with the description of a singing slave-girl by Ibn al-Rūmī (836–96). I examine the mutual relations between poetry and musical performance in light of the contemporary account of singing slave-girls by al-Jāḥiẓ (776–869).⁴ I use the concept of the “gestural” in Lawrence Kramer’s book, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*.⁵ The poem fully expresses emotion and affections, and the image of the songstress’s body is revealed through all the senses.

The last topic is the description of the Alhambra Palace by the Andalusian court poet Ibn Zamrak (1333–93?). In this chapter I utilize Richard Brilliant’s theories of portraiture in visual arts.⁶ The ode is shown to offer an emblematic portrait of the ruler, because he is rendered by means of an ekphrastic representation of the famous palace he (re)constructed. Also, the poem serves as a double portrait of the patron-ruler and the poet.

The *qaṣīdah* was negatively judged by many traditional Orientalists who failed to engage it as poetry; they viewed the *qaṣīdah* as merely descriptive, purely objective, and devoid of individual feelings. Objecting to this criticism, I claim that description in traditional Arabic poetry does not only attempt to express pictorial, mimetic images of objects, but also to form a larger conceptual metaphor in an emblematic, psychological, spiritual, metonymical, or symbolic manner. *Wasf* thus has a much more important role than merely describing objects.

My work is related to the school of Jaroslav Stetkevych and Suzanne Stetkevych, what may be called the “Chicago school” in the field of the classical Arabic poetic tradition. Their work has demonstrated a break with the views of the traditional Orientalists by attempting to give a positive picture of the *qaṣīdah* to its reader. Along with other

³ Andrew Sprague Becker, *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995).

⁴ al-Jāḥiẓ ‘Amr ibn Baḥr, “Kitāb al-Qiyān,” *Rasā’il al-Jāḥiẓ*, ed. with commentary, ‘Abd Muḥannā, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥadāthah, 1987–88).

⁵ Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁶ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

new Orientalist scholars such as James T. Monroe, Michael Zwettler, and Michael Sells, the field remains open to further exploration from different angles, particularly with regard to interdisciplinary and literary critical methods. My study is intended to strengthen the *qaṣīdah*'s modern reappraisal in terms of its aesthetic and experiential value. Hence, I aim to further develop and evolve new points of view in the discipline of the *qaṣīdah* tradition on the basis of this new Orientalist scholarly approach. Throughout my study, such new and innovative work on the interpretation of classical Arabic poetic traditions serves to establish the essential foundation on which I build. It need scarcely be said that the canonical and commentary works of Arab littérateurs provide useful and informative sources in developing this debate on a new approach, perhaps leading to a consensus of opinion in the future. In accordance with the goal of this study, I attempt to show how the theories of ekphrasis and inter-arts studies in general are related to *wasf* and how they serve to enlighten the analysis of my Arabic materials.

I have no intention of claiming that my understanding and interpretations in this study are absolute or complete. It is hoped that the approach I have used, and the results I have achieved to date, will contribute to the advance of our understanding of the *wasf* in the Arabic panegyric *qaṣīdah* and that innovative and untried methods will provide us with new and wider perspectives on the Arabic poetic tradition.