

الشعر الجاهلي

T H E
P O E T R Y
of the
P A G A N
A R A B S

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Arabic Literature

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ANCIENT ARABIAN POETRY

PRE-ISLAMIC POETRY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO THE TRIBE

The Pre-islamic period covers scarcely more than a century (500-622 A.D.) yet it was during this time that the oldest poems known were composed. These years saw the rise and decline of a poetry of "unapproachable excellence." It was rooted in the life of the people, it moulded their minds and it fixed their character. Poetry made them morally and spiritually, a nation. It depicted their life and nature around them as it really was, with no fantasy or coloured stories added. The poetry of the Pagan Arabs was their history.¹

In those long ago days, poetry was not just for the cultured few, it was the sole medium of literary expression for the tribe. Poets freely said what they felt and thought. Their unwritten words "flew across the desert faster than arrows" and came home to the hearts of all who heard them.

Poetry gave life and currency to the ideal of Arabian virtue. It insisted on sacred blood ties, it became the invisible bond between clans and it was the basis of a national community of sentiment.²

THE POET

There was always great rejoicing when a poet appeared in the family. There was feasting and celebration, women played upon their lutes and men and boys congratulated one another for now there was a defender of the family honour, a weapon to ward off insult and a means of perpetuating the glorious deeds of the family and tribe and establishing their fame forever. The birth of a poet was one of three things every family wished for and was equal to the foaling of a noble mare.³

POSITION OF THE POET IN THE TRIBE

The poet was the tribe's guide in peaceful times and their champion during war. The tribe looked to him for counsel, where to find new pastures, when to strike their "houses of hair." After all, the poet was thought to be in league with the jinn, to have supernatural knowledge, wisdom and magical powers.⁴

When a well had been found and all had drunk and bathed, voices were raised with the poet as he sang,

"Spring up, O well,
sing ye unto it."⁵

FORMS OF PRE-ISLAMIC POETRY

THE QASIDA - Through the qasida, Pre-islamic poetry said much about the exploits and virtues of heroic men struggling against a harsh environment and the hostility of fellow desert-dwellers. The Pagan Arabs did not have gods or heroes, they did not see water nymphs or dryads as the Greeks did but they had their camels and their horses and saw great beauty in them. Their aesthetic pleasures were wine, women and song.⁶ All of these were expressed through the qasida.

A qasida was required to open with a couplet called a bait since an ode had a strictly prescribed sequence of ideas and subjects. It had to begin with mention of women, constantly shifting habitation and wandering tribesmen seeking pasture through Winter and Spring. The poet had to tell of his love and troubles and could describe the beauty of his mistress if he wished to do so.⁷ He could weep and complain and address the desolate campsite and beg his companion to halt so that he could speak of his beloved who once dwelt there. To this was linked the exotic prelude or nasib in which the poet bewailed the violence of his love and the anguish of separation from her, his desire and his passion for her.⁸

After his Song of Love, the poet had to proceed to the main object of the poem either abruptly or by interposing a description of his horse

or camel by which means through the animal, he could escape the memory of burdens when they became too difficult for him to carry. The swiftness of his horse was often compared to the wild ass, the ostrich or other wild animals of the desert. This was because the poet had to display intimate acquaintance of their habits.⁹

After the main object there had to be a panegyric on his tribe, himself or someone else, a description of some scene of travel or war, the chase, the revelry of victory, satire, and the pleading or warning to the foolish.¹⁰

Having said all, the poet would then bring his poem to its end without any elaborate device. Sometimes he used some precept of wisdom or he would describe a storm which would carry his thoughts to distant lands or pastures where rain would fall to revive the meadow. The poet fully expected to receive some kind of reward from the person to whom the ode had been addressed.¹¹

The length of an ode rarely exceeded 100 lines and seldom fell below 25 lines. Most of the ancient qasidas were sung.

THE SATIRE - In its oldest form, satire came out of feuds between the tribes. It generally introduced and accompanied the tribal feud. It was an element of war that was equally as important as the actual fighting.¹² The menacing things the poet verbally hurled against the enemy were believed to be inevitably fatal. His rhymes were compared to arrows and solemn curses as spoken by the priests or divinely inspired prophets.

Of symbolic character was the pronunciation. This was part of the ceremony. In order to emphasize these verbal menacings (or satire), the poet might anoint his hair with oil on one side, let his mantle hang down loosely or wear only one sandal. Satire was linked to these ominous associations.¹³

THE OCCASIONAL PIECE OR FRAGMENT - Shorter than the ode, the fragment was confined to a single incident or purpose. It did not have the elaborate description of the ode. The circumstances in which it had been composed had to be known in order for it to be thoroughly understood. It did not tell its own tale like the ode.¹⁴

Other forms of poetry in the Pre-islamic period included the Fountain Songs, War Songs, Hymns to Idols, Love Songs and the Dirge (or Elegy). The power of the poet was exhibited through his poetry.

MUSIC AND POETRY IN PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

The oldest form of Pagan poetry did not have meter. Rhyme without meter was known as saj. Saj later became a rhetorical ornament and was the distinguishing mark of eloquence. Music followed the form of saj. Saj was a special form adopted by poets and soothsayers in their supernatural revelations and for conveying mysterious, esoteric folklore.¹⁵

ANCIENT METERS - THE RAJAZ

The oldest and simplest meter to be used in Pagan poetry was the rajaz. Its distinguishing characteristic was that every hemstich had to rhyme.

↓. ↓. | ↓. ↓. = Meter of the Rajaz
"Ye hedia | ye hedia,
ye yeda, | ye yeda."

Its primitive beat corresponded to the lowering and lifting of the camel's feet and the poetry which was really more of a monotonous chant was sung according to the gait of the camel.

While Arabic verse consists of two halves or hemstichs and is not an independent unit, rajaz is the sole exception. It is not divided into hemstichs. The verse or line forms an unbroken whole and rhymes with what has preceded it. A further characteristic of rajaz is that only a few lines are spoken at a time and express some personal feeling, emotion or experience.

The rajaz meter was the only meter that could not be used in the qasida since it was considered to be beneath the dignity of the ode. As the word "qasida" is connected to the word "qasada" meaning to break, each verse or line of the qasida is divided into two halves whereas in the rajaz meter, there is no such break.²⁰ Poets preferred the longer meters such as the tawil, basit, wafir and kamil for their odes since these lent themselves more readily to improvisation. Improvisation became an important part of melody as it historically evolved.

As has been mentioned in the foregoing, contact with the Greeks in the 4th century by the Arabs, resulted in the organization of poetic meters into various rhythms which followed the Greek system of rhythm. One of the earliest styles of the ghina (also part of the melodic, historical evolvement), the hajaz, was the first "song" to employ rhythm.²¹

*Formally
organized
in the
8th cent*

In a lecture given earlier this year by the writer, it was seen how melody too, evolved from the huda or Caravan Song. Eventually melody was arranged into modes to fit poetic verse. Out of melody and rhythm came form which again was influenced by poetic verse endings and was to also influence form in music. The form of early Arabian poetry and music was in its turn, to have an impact on ancient Andalusian music which, based on research and investigations by certain Spanish musical scholars (Felipe Pedrell to mention one) has had a profound influence on later Spanish composers.

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