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The Lightning-Scene in Ancient Arabic Poetry
Function, Narration and Idiosyncrasy in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Poetry

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Contents

Foreword ................................................................. XI

CHAPTER ONE
Introduction ......................................................... 1

I. The Lightning-Scene: Definition and Modern Criticism .......... 1
   Definition of the Term “Lightning-Scene” ........................ 1
   Rain and Lightning as a Multi-Dimensional Theme in Ancient Arabic Poetry 3
   The Lightning-Scene in Modern Research ....................... 6

II. Corpus of the Study ............................................. 13
   Appendix 1: Compilations Used in this Study ................. 17
   Appendix 2: Short Excerpts Containing Descriptions of Lightning,
   Clouds, or Rain ................................................. 18

CHAPTER TWO
Division of the Ancient Arabic Poem: From Gharaḍ Shī‘rī to Functional Unit . 21

I. Division of the Poetry into Thematic Sections ................... 22
   Division of Individual Poems ................................... 24

II. Towards a New Division of the Ancient Arabic Poem:
   Function and Functional Unit .................................. 31
   “Function”: Definition of the Term ............................ 31
   Function in the Ancient Arabic Poem .......................... 34
   The Lightning-Scene in the light of this Division ............. 36

CHAPTER THREE
Lightning as an Expression of Longing for a Distant Beloved or
an Expression of Self-Consolation ................................. 37

I. Lightning as an Expression of Longing for a Distant Beloved .... 37
   'Abîd b. al-Abraṣ ..................................................... 39
   Imru’ al-Qays ......................................................... 42
   Al-Muraqsh al-Asghar ............................................ 51
   Abû Qilâba l-Hudhali ............................................ 53
   An-Nâbigha dh-Dhubyâni ....................................... 55
   Al-A’shâ l-Kabîr ....................................................... 59
   Al-Muzarrid b. Dirâr ................................................. 62
II. Lightning as a Means of Self-Consolation for a Gloomy Lover
   Al-A’shā l-Kabīr ........................................... 97

CHAPTER FOUR
Variations on the Function of the Lightning-Scene ................... 101

I. Lightning as an Expression of Longing for the Divorced Wife .... 101
   ‘Urwa b. al-Ward ........................................... 102
   Aws b. Hajar .................................................. 105
   Khufāf b. Nudba ............................................ 107
   Tamīm b. Ubayy b. Mūqbil ................................ 111

II. Lightning as an Expression of Longing for the Tribe, Family, and Home 114
   ‘Āmir b. Juwayn ............................................. 115
   Imru’ al-Qays .................................................. 118
   Tufayl al-Ghanawi .......................................... 121
   Abū Qurdāda t-Tā‘i ....................................... 126
   ‘Adī b. Zayd ..................................................... 129
   ‘Iyād b. Kunayz ad-Dabbī ................................ 132
   ‘Amr b. Ma’dikarīb .......................................... 135
   Labīd b. Rabī‘a ............................................... 137
   Nahshāl b. Hārī n-Nashshāl ............................. 140
   Tamīm b. Ubayy b. Mūqbil ................................ 143
   An-Nābigha l-Ja’dī .......................................... 146

III. Lightning as a Means of Displaying Skill at Composing Poetry
   ‘Abid b. al-Abraṣ ............................................. 151

CHAPTER FIVE
Thematic, Functional and Narrative Idiosyncrasy in the Pre-Islamic
and Early Islamic Arabic Poem ................................ 155

Thematic Idiosyncrasy ........................................ 155
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional Idiosyncrasy</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Idiosyncrasy</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER SIX</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Idiosyncrasy in Lightning-Scenes</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lightning</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Clouds</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rain</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Thunder</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wind</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Protagonist’s Wish/Prayer</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Protagonist’s Psychological State</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix: Motifs According to the Seven Secondary Paragraphs in the Lightning-Scenes</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusions</strong></td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appendix</strong></td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>References</strong></td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lexical Index</strong></td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword

In Ancient Arabic poetry composed from the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods to the end of the orthodox Caliphate, the lightning-scene is that part (theme) of the poem in which the protagonist asserts that he lay awake all night because he saw lightning flashing far away in the sky. In this book we explore the different functions of this scene such as why and when a poet included it, and its relationship with other scenes or parts of the poem. In addition, the book provides a study of the motifs constituting the lightning-scenes in this poetry.

Two main purposes will be accomplished by conducting such a study. The first will shed light on two important terms connected with Ancient Arabic poetry: the “function” or “functional unit”, and the “poem’s narration”. The study will show how a certain part can function differently from text to text, and how these different functions formulate the narration of a certain poem and consequently make the poem, to some degree, idiosyncratic; i.e., a text that differs from other poems that include the same part or even poems that include parts that are similar to each other. The second purpose is to make a comprehensive study of the internal components, namely the motifs, which constitute the lightning-scenes. Here, conclusions are made regarding whether these components differ from text to text, or whether they are purely repetitions. In other words, this purpose of this study is to determine whether the lightning-scenes by themselves, detached from the other parts in the poems, are idiosyncratic, or on the contrary are fossilized and traditional. In the light of the two purposes, the title chosen for this book is The Lightning-Scene in Ancient Arabic Poetry: Function, Narration and Idiosyncrasy in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Poetry.

The poems are analyzed according to a method developed by this author. The method was explained in an article published in the Journal of Arabic Literature.\(^1\) According to this method, the first term – function or functional unit – plays a major role. The function of each part in a given poem is analyzed in an attempt to reveal the narration of the poem through these parts and their functions. In our case, the analyses will include a general discussion of the different parts in each poem and the function of each part, as well as a thorough discussion of the function of the lightning-scene. In addition, the narration of each poem is analyzed.

The book includes the following chapters:

1. **Chapter One – Introduction**: The introduction provides the background for the main issues discussed in this study. It includes a definition of the term “lightning-scene”; a review of the different places in which lightning and rain were described in ancient Arabic poems; a review of the most important researches conducted on the lightning-scene; and a discussion regarding these researches.

2. **Chapter Two**: This chapter explains the methods used in modern research studies for dividing the ancient Arabic poem. Each method is highlighted and discussed. My contention is that these methods normally fail to demonstrate a good understanding of the poetic text and do not highlight the idiosyncratic aspects of each poem, but rather tend to treat the ancient Arabic poem as imitative and traditional. At the end of the chapter, a new division of the ancient Arabic poem will be presented by the author. This division is a functional one and will be used as the basis for studying the lightning-scenes in this book.

3. **Chapters Three and Four**: These chapters include analyses of the poems in the corpus of this study. As mentioned above, the function of each part in the poem is highlighted, and the different functions of the lightning-scene in these poems are analyzed. The relation between the function of the lightning-scene and those of the other parts in each poem is discussed, and the narration of each text, extracted from these analyses, is explained.

4. **Chapter Five**: This chapter presents the formulation of a theory, or at least, of new ideas regarding the idiosyncrasy of the ancient Arabic poem, based upon the analyses of the poems in Chapters Three and Four.

5. **Chapter Six**: This chapter provides an intertextual study of the motifs appearing in the lightning-scenes. Conclusions are derived according to the degree in which the lightning-scenes are idiosyncratic.

6. **Conclusions**: Here the main conclusions achieved throughout this study are paraphrased.

7. **Appendix**: An Appendix, which includes the lightning-scenes used in this study, is found at the end of this book.

Perhaps this is the place to express my great debt of gratitude to Professor Wolfhart Heinrichs for his invaluable comments and generous assistance while I was preparing and writing the first draft of this paper, the product of my post-doctoral research, under his sponsorship at the Department of New Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University. My great debt and warm thanks are also forwarded to Professor Tilman Seidensticker at the Lehrstuhl für Semitische Philologie und Islamwissenschaft, Friedrich Schiller University of Jena, for his appreciable comments and especially for his consultation in writing the last chapter in this study. I must also thank Professor George Kanazi of the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Haifa and Professor Albert Arazi of the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.
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