

Lafz and Ma'Na in the Line: Ibn Qutayba's (D.276/889) Exposition of Types of Poetry

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Received date: November 30, 2016; **Accepted date:** December 16, 2016; **Published date:** December 22, 2016

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Abstract

Abu Muhammad 'Abd Allah b. Muslim al-Dinawari al-Kufi also known as Ibn Qutayba (d.276/889) was the first literary critic who made a rigid distinction between lafz and ma'nā. Being both a theologian and a man of letters, he never tried to put one above the other. At least, no explicit statement indicates his preference of lafz over ma'nā or vice versa. His analysis is very interesting in terms of its division and classification. However, his conclusions have opened him to many attacks, especially by modern critics, as will be discussed later in this paper.

This research paper is going to discuss extensively on the foregoing issues and also elaborate more on some connected analysis on word and content (lafz and ma'na) in Arabic literary critical circle.

Keywords: Lafz and Ma'na; Line; Poetry; Exposition; Al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'ara'

Introduction

Ibn Qutayba's analysis was a response to the discussion over the aesthetics of speech. The issue that occupied his mind (i.e., whether the artistic merit lies in lafz or in ma'nā) was inherited by him from his master al-Jāhiz. As we know, al-Jāhiz believed elegant phraseology or wording to be secret of eloquence. Muhammad al-Ammari stated that, "The first aspect that can be grasped, after reading Ibn Qutayba's analysis, is that he implicitly rejected the view of his master al-Jāhiz; he perceived his theory to have overridden his master's views which focused on literary and figurative language, and considered the merit of meaning to be 'valid'.

Al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'ara'

Ibn Qutayba divided artistic composition into four types. In his pioneering work, al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'ara', he stated: "I have delved deeply into poetry and I found that it can be classified into four types: the first type is that which has an excellent lafz and whose ma'nā is excellent¹. He gave various examples of poetic lines that, in his view, fulfilled the parameters of excellence in both lafz and ma'nā, for example, he commented of Abu Dhu'ayb's line,

The soul would be desirous and wishing for much when you allow that; but when it is driven back to little, it is content.

He stated that, "I was told that al-Asma'i said, "This is the wisest line that Arabs ever composed. Also, [among poems that belongs to this type]

I see my eyesight [my ability to see] has become weak after it was sharp [because of maturation]. It is indeed a real regret that one becomes weak after being healthy.

No poet work on the subject of describing aging better than him"².

The second type of poetry in his analysis is poetry which composed in a very artistic style, but its meaning lacks depth. In this type, Ibn Qutayba perceived that some poems have 'sound effects'; however, their ideas or themes are not striking. He stated about the second type, "When you look deeply, you would find its meaning empty as in the following lines:

When we had fulfilled all the tasks (of the pilgrimage) at Mina, and everybody had touched the corners (of the Ka'ba),

And our saddles had been affixed to the hump-backed mahari-camels, while those who departed (in the morning) did not see those who arrived (in the evening),

We took up the threads of conversion and the valleys flowed with the necks of the mounts³.

These lines have beginnings and endings, and a beautiful meter. However, when you look between the lines, you discover the following simple meaning: 'After we spent the (required) time in Mina of Mecca and finished the rituals, our luggage was bundled up on the backs of our camels, we left and no one was left behind. Finally, we started chatting, and the camels ran across the valleys.' Unfortunately, this type of poetry is too common⁴.

Ibn Qutayba stated that, "[The third type] is the one whose meaning excels while its style is inferior. For example, Labid b. Rabi'a said:

¹ Ibn Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'arā, p.5.

² Ibn Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'ara, p.7.

³ Ibn Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'ara, p. 5.

⁴ Ibn Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'ara, p. 6.

The wise man realizes always the one should be called to account is himself. Indeed, a good friend makes his friend better"⁵.

In this example, Ibn Qutayba noticed that in such poetry, poets usually try sensible and shrewd themes at work as aphorisms. At the same time, they give less attention to the style because their poetic energy is absorbed in intellectual thinking and creativity [1-5].

The four type of poetry in Ibn Qutayba's classification is the type which has a bad lafz and a bad ma'na. As an example he quoted al-Asha's lie:

wa fuhun ka aqahighadhahu da'imu al-hatli
*kama shiba birahinbaridin min 'asali al-nahli*⁶.

What beautiful lips that are similar to daisies watered by an uninterrupted rain. They are similar to a cold wine that is attacked by honeybees.

Ibn Qutayba was sensitive to the general contemporary literary taste. Ibn Qutayba group examples under the subtitle "what excels in ma'na. However, after examining these examples, he provided no further analysis and expected the reader to take his opinion for granted. Ibn Qutayba did not elaborate on why these particular examples have been selected.

Ma'na according to Ibn Qutayba's standards is either a theme or an ethical statement. He insisted that each line of poetry must have a meaning. Still, he disliked some meanings and criticized them. Although they might carry an idea, for him, it was too simple. An example of this is his analysis of the lines about the end of pilgrimage, which were attributed to Kuthayyir.

Ibn Qutayba intruded his religious and artistic aesthetics onto his discussion of poetics. Win-Chin Ouyang thinks that in addition to the accusation of shu'ubiyya by contemporary critics against some poets, Ibn Qutayba accused the same poets, such as Bashshār and Abū Nuwās, of being zanādiqa (magians or heretics)⁷. Ibn Qutayba took an active part in these debates. He devoted part of his analysis, in his introduction, to highlighting the defects of composition in the work of those shu'ubī poets. His religious propensities were due to his education. He was taught by a number of very well-known theologians⁸. These theologians were historically recognized by their attachment to the Prophetic Traditions, either as theologians, traditionalists, or philologists, or usually as all three in one [6-8].

Since the establishment of the theory of construction, which strongly rejects the duality of lafz and ma'na in the fourth century A.H., literary critics have had mixed feelings about Ibn Qutayba's analysis. Initially, there were no direct attacks against Ibn Qutayba by classical critics. However, some modern critics claimed that there were an implicit criticism against Ibn Qutayba for his rigid division between lafz and ma'na. Muhammad Mandūr stated that,

*"Ibn Qutayba's evaluations rely on two principles. First, lafz is deemed to serve ma'ni, and a specific man can be expressed by different alfāz which of themselves can be either good or bad. Second, each line must bear its own ma'na. These two principles have serious shortcomings and they are responsible for the weakness of his literary analysis"*⁹.

In reality, before accepting Mandūr's criticism, we need to examine more deeply the different literary and scholastic elements of Ibn Qutayba, and take into account other factors in order to have a better understanding of his analysis. Muhammad Mandūr also commented on Ibn Qutayba's inclination toward ethical meaning as follows:

"It is a closed-minded perspective, because eventually the substance of poetry is neither ethics nor ideas. The best poetry is that which could function as artistic poetics. Also, it can only symbolize a psychological feeling in a highly effective way, because it is deeply truthful and honest, although it might be simple or naïve. The best example is Dhū al-Rimma's poem about a sentimental poet who had arrived at the aḥlāl (ruins) of his beloved's dwelling, but did not find her there.

On that evening, when I lost all hope, I ended up by picking up pebbles, and drawing [signs] on the sand.

I drew on the sand, then I erased what I drew, then redrew again while the crows descended onto the ruins"¹⁰.

Muhammad Mandūr criticized Ibn Qutayba's concept of ma'na by citing this example. He wondered, "What would be the ma'na that Ibn Qutayba was looking for here in this beautiful and truthful image?"¹¹.

However, Mandūr seems to be overly harsh in his criticism of Ibn Qutayba's attempt to establish a standard of the substantial theme in poetry. Mandūr was right when he said that the substance of poetry is not ethics however, he judged Ibn Qutayba based on the latter's rejection of Kuthayyir's line.

Mandūr misunderstood Ibn Qutayba's concept of a beautiful meaning. Ibn Qutayba disapproved of Kuthayyir's and other lines for lack of 'substantiality' in his ma'na.

To understand Ibn Qutayba's standard, we need to distinguish between two types of ma'na here. The first one is the ma'na that Ibn Qutayba considered to be ordinary, such as the one that Kuthayyir articulated in his poem, which merely spoke about daily activities that are quite ordinary and unexciting. Secondly, the other type of meanings that Ibn Qutayba proffered is that which is considered 'substantial'. In discussing Dhū al-Rimma's lines, Mandūr stated, "Is there any truthful description better than that? Is there any inspiration better than that? Who Knows? May be the most beautiful merit of Dhū al-Rimma's lines is their lacking of any idea, and its truthfulness is a reflection of its extreme naivety"¹². Since Dhū al-Rimma's lines differ in many aspects from Kuthayyir's, one is surprised that a critic so

⁵ Ibn Qutayba, Kitab al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'ara, p. 6.

⁶ Ibn Qutayba, Kitab al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'ara, p. 7.

⁷ Wen-chin Ouyang. Literary criticism in medieval Arabic-Islamic culture. p.73.

⁸ The most important among them were three individuals who were known to have had the greatest influence on Ibn Qutayba, especially in his youth, namely, Ishāq b. Ibrahim b. Rāhawayh al-Ĥanbalī (d.ca.237/851), a foremost follower of Ibn Ĥanbal; Ab Ĥātim Sahi b. Muḥammad al-Sijistāni (d.ca.250/864), a famous Sunni philologist and traditionist, and finally, al-'Abbās b. al-Faraj (d.257/871).

⁹ Mandūr, Muḥammad, al-Naqd al-Manhaji 'ind al-'Arab p.33

¹⁰ Mandūr, Muḥammad, al-Naqd al-Manhaji 'ind al-'Arab p.23.

¹¹ Mandūr, al-Naqd al-Manhaji, p. 23.

¹² Mandūr, al-Naqd al-Manhaji. p.35.

distinguished such as Mandūr would describe Dhū al-Rimma's lines in this way, that is, emphasizing their simplicity. There are great differences between Dhū al-Rimma's lines, on the one hand, and those of Kuthayyir. It would be out of place to describe Dhū al-Rimma's poetry as 'naïve' or 'simple', merely because he, unlike Kuthayyir, does not describe here a daily activity. Rather, Dhū al-Rimma's image expresses the level of desperation and sadness which has overcome the poet. Yet, who knows? Ibn Qutayba might have considered Dhū al-Rimma's image as an excellent one [9-11].

Ibn Qutayba was inclined to combine pragmatic and artistic viewpoints. Arab critics were known to have given a prominent place to the functional side of poetry. In the views of some critics, the quality of poetry is judged according to its success in striking listeners by the force of its meaning. Geert van Gelder brilliantly observed that some of Ibn Qutayba's views on poetry were a reflection of the pragmatic side of Arabic poetry during that time¹³.

To realize the true contribution of Ibn Qutayba, one needs to distinguish between the principles and theoretical elements of his methodology, on the one hand, and our views and criticism of his perspectives on the other. Most published studies focus on the second part¹⁴. For example, Mandūr criticized Ibn Qutayba for not discussing poetry by means of practical criticism. In his view, Ibn Qutayba discussed issues, and then he started narrating poets' biographies and some of their poetry without explaining why he chose them¹⁵. One would find that Ibn Qutayba's chief contribution lies in his critique of poetry from v and in not bringing in the external factors that dominated the critical analysis of his predecessors, e.g., the works of the works of the ṭabaqāt genre, such as in the works of Ibn Sallām al-Jumāhī (d.232/846). These critics are usually juxtaposed against each other in the literature, because they were the founders of ṭabaqāt al-shu'arā' method of analysis. This demonstrates an important merit in both critics' works, in that they were concerned with the classification and categorizing of the poets. Ibn Qutayba and Ibn Sallām were driven by different motivations. For example, Ibn Qutayba stated in his introduction, "This book is about poets. I have depicted their era, their influence and the effect of their personalities and of their tribal background.

I have also described parts of their poetry and classified it"¹⁶. In practical terms, however, Ibn Qutayba did not compile his work as an exercise in literary criticism; he did aim, however, at compiling a comprehensive work integrating a variety of topics [12-14].

Ibn Qutayba was a reformer in the literary thought of his time. He contributed to the issue of lafz and ma'nā and did not follow his predecessors' opinions, especially Ibn Sallām who preceded him in dealing with this subject. The latter's school of critical thinking is based on three main fundamentals of evaluating poets: first, the quantity of the poetry written by a given poet; he preferred some poets because they composed a lot of poems. Secondly, the variety of a poet's topics;

and thirdly jawda (the quality) of the poet's poetry. Ironically, Ibn Sallām made jawda inferior to kathra (quantity or abundance)¹⁷. Ibn Qutayba was not satisfied with Ibn Sallām's methodology. For this reason he established parameters of classification that do not approximate those of Ibn Sallām's.

It appears that Ibn Qutayba tried to refute some of Ibn Sallām's theoretical elements, especially that of kathra. He expresses his opinion on this issue by criticizing the principle established by Ibn Sallām, without however, mentioning him by name: "I do not think that a wise and sensible person who considers himself to be fair and who taraka ṭariq al-taqlid (does not adapt others' views blindly), would opt for a poet with a large body of poems, over that of his comrade, except in cases in which the good poetry of the former is better than that of the latter"¹⁸. It is tempting to see Ibn Qutayba as a reformer of previously established standards and dominant literary thought.

Despite his inclination to give both lafz and mana equal weight in his criticism, his partiality toward lafz or diction and style is obvious. However, Ibn Qutayba himself never explicitly stated his preference for one or the other. When examining his analysis and classification, one sees nevertheless that he preferred poetry with a beautiful lafz and lacking a beautiful ma'nā over poetry with a good ma'nā and lacking good lafz. He usually described the lack of good lafz as faqada al-ma'nā wa al-rawnaq (it lacks mildness and grace). Ibn Qutayba did not excuse bad style. For example, when he commented on some lines of al-Khalil b. Ahmad al-Farāhidī, he stated, "Indeed, these lines are poor because they include the [unattractive] words. For example, the poet Jarīr was reciting a poem before one of the caliphs, who was pleased with it, until Jarir reached the line:

Bawza' mocked me and said, [What a shame] you started using a stick.' O Bawza', why do not you find someone else to laugh at.

The caliph felt disappointed and disgusted upon hearing the word Bawza' and said, "You have corrupted your poem by including this name... the ugliness of the name of something beautiful renders the whole poem ugly"¹⁹.

Ibn Qutayba's analysis represents an early attempt to establish a basic literary theory. He did not, of course, compile his book following a specific methodology. However, such tentative attempts had primarily been made. His work was compiled for different purposes. For example, it was supposed to serve as an anthology and literary history, as well as a work of literary criticism. The book therefore includes many anecdotes and stories about the lives of the poets under discussion.

Ibn Qutayba's division between lafz and ma'nā provoked hostility and criticism against him. As Mandūr has defined it as a nazariyya taqrīriyya nizāmiyya (static or simplistic theory). He felt that the main defect in Ibn Qutayba's views lies in his methodology²⁰. Mandūr believed that non-literary influences corrupted his practical criticism:

¹³ Geert van Gelder. Beyond the Line. p.45.

¹⁴ see Mandūr al-Naqd al-Manhajī, p. 23; and 'Ammāri s Qadiyyat al-Lafz wa al-Ma'nā.

¹⁵ Mandūr, al-Naqd al-Manhajī, p.22.

¹⁶ Ibn Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'arā', p: 2.

¹⁷ He stated about the poet, al-Aswad b. Ya'fur: "We have only one long wonderful poem of his. If he would have composed another one, we would make him the head of his category or level" (Ibn Sallām pp. 54). Moreover, Ibn Sallām considered other factors such as time or place, as he categorized some poets based on their milieu: such as desert, al-hawādir (cities), or their ethnic background, e.g., Jewish poets.

¹⁸ Ibn Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'arā', p: 19.

¹⁹ Ibn Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'arā', p. 56.

²⁰ Mandūr, al-Naqd al-Manhajī, p.31.

“The defect in Ibn Qutayba’s perspective can be attributed to his intellectual propensity overcoming his sensitivity to the literary elements”²¹. In other words, the fixed division or the clear cut between lafz and ma'nā is referred to as a philosophical way of thinking, according to Mandūr.

In contrast to Mandūr’s opinion, the failing of which Ibn Qutayba is usually accused, has nothing to do with his emphasis on ‘intellectualism’. Ibn Qutayba regarded the mutaqaaddimūn (ancient poets) with respect, and credited their poetry as the criterion for excellence, even though he did not define their qualities. In his theoretical analysis of the four types of poetry which occupies his introduction, all his commentaries discussed pre-Islamic poetry²². A fact that implies that he indeed viewed pre-Islamic poetry as superior [15].

However, regarding the issue of ancient versus modern poetry, Ibn Qutayba took a middle position. He explained his view as following.

In my analysis of each poet, I have not followed the way of those who imitate or approve what others approved. I have not esteemed the poetry of the ancients, just because it was written in the past, and I have not undervalued the poetry of the moderns just because of their modernity.

Rather, I looked at them objectively in order to judge each group (i.e., the ancients and the moderns): I gave each one of them the credit it deserves. [Unfortunately], I have noticed a group of our contemporary scholars who think highly of tasteless poems, only because the poet is ancient. In the same manner, they look down upon good poetry whose only defect is that it was composed recently. Indeed, God does not confine knowledge, poetry, and eloquence to a specific time, or make them restricted or exclusive to a specific generation. God has created knowledge, poetry, and eloquence in order to be shared by his servants in each time. He has also made ancient poetry to be modern in its relevance for the present²³.

Ibn Qutayba defended the Arabic literary tradition against the penetration of philosophy. Contrary to Mandūr’s opinion that Ibn Qutayba’s intellectual background influenced his analysis; the latter rejected the use of logic in the analysis of literary aesthetics. He attacked the concept of the integration of pure philosophy as a way of explaining Arabic literary merits and taste. In the following passage, he attacked philosophers who wanted to analyze literary text and the Qur’an relying on philosophical analysis, which to some extent shows that Ibn Qutayba was not inclined to philosophical leaning as Mandur implied.

May God fill the heart of those arrogant [i.e., philosophers] with the light of guidance. Those philosophers found themselves hard and exhausting to absorb and understand [the spirit] of the knowledge of the Quran, the Traditions of the Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him and his companions, and the knowledge of Arabs’ languages [i.e., their dialects] and literature. Those philosophers relied only on the perception of this area as knowledge (i.e., philosophy) which had been relinquished by devout Muslims, Philosophy is a silly discipline [i.e.,

cannot explain the literary merits of Arabic texts]. Indeed, philosophy represented rendition without sense. [Its terms] are just big things without a body²⁴.

In the same passage, Ibn Qutayba criticized those who admired philosophy. The great achievement of Ibn Qutayba was to caution critics about the futility of analyzing Arabic literary taste, rhetoric, and criticism by means of philosophy.

Actually, the vast majority of critics and the mainstream of scholars took a dim view of philosophy; it became an area of knowledge only after Arabs had moved away from the strong source of their literature. The artificial philosophical methodology that dominated the analysis of Qudama b. Jafar (d. 275/337) and similar rhetorical studies distorted the Arab literary taste. According to Muhammad Mandūr, “It dried up the fountains of rhetorical taste and led it to stagnation, unproductively, and a lack of creativity”²⁵. One can nevertheless say, with certain reservations, that Ibn Qutayba was inspired by his philosophical background to arrange his analysis more systematically and to follow a specific methodology. It is however very difficult to accept the sweeping statement made by Mandūr about Ibn Qutayba’s criticism [16-18].

The secret of Ibn Qutayba’s attack on philosophy was his feeling that the aim of philosophers was to find fault with the Qur’an. In the introduction of his book Adab al Kātib, he said the following about the philosophers: “Their ultimate goal is to study astronomy and the stars, and link events to destiny and logic. Then, they censure the book of God, although they do not understand its meaning, and they slander the traditions of the Prophet while remaining ignorant of their transmitters (i.e., they are not sure whether a given tradition is authentic or not), They abandon God’s bounty and just seek to be described as having deep perceptions (i.e., they replaced the Qur’anic guidance with their own intellectual perspectives)”²⁶.

Conclusion

Regarding the achievements of Ibn Qutayba, he paid particular attention to the issue of ṭab’ and takalluf (that is, natural and artificial poetry). He paved the way for subsequent critics to develop the issue that he was considered the first to define such criteria through his classification of poetry. He stated that, ‘Poets are divided into two types: mutakallif (one who composes artificial poetry) and matbū’ (a talented or natural poet). The first type of poet is the one who qawwama shi’rahu bi al-thiqaf (who truncates, i.e., who adjusts), revises, and thinks deeply, such as Zuhayr and Hutaya al Asmai said that Zuhayr and Huṭay’a and those who are similar to them are ‘the slaves of poetry’²⁷. From this passage, Ibn Qutayba can be seen to offer a distinction that influenced Arabic literature throughout the following centuries and resulted in preference for easy and natural expression. This inclination sometimes went against objective views. Nevertheless, although Arab literary critics and those who were attracted to such a tendency to naturalness had to adroit, sometimes, the quality and

²¹ Mandūr, al-Naqd al-Manhaji. p.35.

²² Except for the panegyric poems of ‘Ali b. al-Ḥusayn.

²³ Ibn Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shi’r wa al-Shu’arā’, p.5.

²⁴ Ibu Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shir’r wa al-Shu’arā’, p.13.

²⁵ Mandūr, al-Naqd al-Manhaji, p.30.

²⁶ Ibn Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shi’r wa al-Shu’arā’, p. 5.

²⁷ Ibn Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shir’r wa al-Shu’arā’, p: 5.

beauty of the stylistic constraint, they remain loyal to their favorite tastes and inclinations.

Ibn Qutayba himself admitted this when he wrote that “Mutakallif poetry sometimes comes in a well- constructed and excellent form; still the intellectuals are not mistaken in observing what the poet has undergone in extensive thought, concentration, a sweating forehead, a pressure for the creation of poetic necessities, while omitting what meaning demands, and retaining what they do not need”²⁸.

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²⁸ Ibn Qutayba, Kitāb al-Shir'r wa al-Shu'arā', p: 22.