



ABU'L-FARAJ EŞFAHĀNĪ

ABU'L-FARAJ EŞFAHĀNĪ, 'ALĪ B. AL-ḤOSAYN B. MOḤAMMAD B. AḤMAD, author of the *Ketāb al-aġānī*. He was a Quraishite and the descendant of the Omayyad house, and received his *konya*, Eşfahānī, from his birthplace. He was brought up and educated in Baghdad, traveled in various regions in search of knowledge and livelihood, and returned to Baghdad, where he died.

It is generally agreed that Eşfahānī was born in 284/897; for his death date, the year 356/966 has been widely accepted. Yāqūt (*Odabā'* V, p. 150) was the first to question the accuracy of this date, basing his doubts on statements in Eşfahānī's own *Adab al-ġorabā'*. In his introduction to his recent edition of this work (Beirut, 1972), Şalāḥ-al-dīn al-Monaġġed argues convincingly in favor of a date after 362/972. Ebn al-Nadīm, a contemporary of Eşfahānī, states that he died after 360/970 (*Fehrest*, p. 115). The question remains unresolved.

Eşfahānī's learning and fame secured for him the special favor of two of the most prominent viziers of the day, Şāḥeb b. 'Abbād (who is reported to have considered *Aġānī* more valuable than his entire library of some 200,000 volumes) and Mohallabī, who seems to have put up with Eşfahānī's crude table manners and personal appearance out of reverence for his learning. But toward the end of his life, Eşfahānī's fortunes appear to have changed: *Adab al-ġorabā'* embodies his sense of estrangement and misery at this time, and in it we read his bitter complaint of the agony caused by "falling from high position to low, from affluence to hardship" (*Ġorabā'*, p. 21).

While many scholars revere Eşfahānī's work, some have criticized him



vehemently, labeling him unworthy of belief and accusing him of debauchery (*fesq*; Ebn al-Jawzī, *al-Montaẓam fī ta'riḳ al-molūk wa'l-omam*, Hyderabad, 1358/1939, VII, p. 40). Such criticism, however, is clearly motivated by a conservative reaction to Eşfahānī's libertinism and to his Shi'ite leanings. The latter have been a point of contention among scholars. While Shi'ite writers (e.g., Kāẓem Mozaffar, editor of Eşfahānī's *Maqātel al-ṭālebīyīn*, 2nd ed., Najaf, 1965, p. 14) emphasize his Shi'ism, some, especially Sunnite, writers deny it or play it down, arguing that it has been "very highly exaggerated" (Mamdūḥ Ḥaqqī, *Ketāb al-aġānī*, Beirut, 1970, p. 30). It is striking that a descendant of the house of Omayya, as Eşfahānī was, should have such Shi'ite sympathies and so concern himself with the fate of the descendants of 'Alī as to devote a lengthy book (*Maqātel*) to the subject. Yet, while he is critical of a number of his Omayyad forebears, he is able to praise certain of their qualities. At the same time, he does not attempt to portray as perfect martyrs each of the Talibites whose fate he describes. Two centuries after the tragic battle between the ruling Omayyads and the Shi'ites, Eşfahānī is able to display in his works a remarkable degree of intellectual freedom and openness of mind.

Eşfahānī's scholarly achievements embody some of the finest Arabic scholarship of the 4th/10th century. His encyclopedic knowledge is matched by his care for detail on all levels. He vividly portrays the physical, moral, and psychological traits of some figures; he devotes untiring efforts to authenticating his *aḳbār* and weighs the credibility of a reported event (*ḳabar*). In the case of poetry and songs, he relates an individual piece to the style of the composer to whom it is attributed. Moderation distinguishes his writings, as is well reflected in his chapter on the controversial poet Abū Tammām (*Aġānī* XVI, Cairo, 1961, p. 383); he attacks the pretensions of commentators who delight in being critical, seeing in their attitude a desire to give an impression of being highly qualified so as to attain status and other benefits. At times he relates an established story reported to him by some authority, but dissociates himself from it, expressing doubts about its credibility (e.g., his chapter on Maġnūn and Laylā, *Aġānī* II, Cairo, 1970, pp. 1-92); faced with contradictory evidence, he declines to choose between different versions of a reported *ḳabar*. He precisely identifies his sources for *aḳbār*; he recorded some as they were reported; some he remembered from oral reports and wrote down later; others he copied from written texts.

Eşfahānī was one of the finest writers of Arabic prose in his time, with a remarkable ability to relate widely different types of *aḳbār* in a rich, lucid,



rhythmic, and precise style, only occasionally exploiting such formal effects as *saġ* (rhyming prose). He was also a fine poet with an opulent imagination. His poetry displays preoccupations similar to those of other urban poets of his time.

Eṣfahānī is widely reported to have been a homosexual, and he himself testifies to the truth of these reports. His piety was suspect, as he drank to excess, attending drinking and singing parties (*majāles*), and recorded in his books material of an obviously immoral nature. *Aġānī* itself bears witness to the validity of these accusations.

Of his works, only *Aġānī* and two other books have survived: *Adab al-ġorabā'* (also called *Ādāb al-ġorabā'* and *Odabā' al-ġorabā'*; see Monāġjed, *Ġorabā'*, p. 17) and *Maqātel al-ṭālebīyīn*. *Ġorabā'* is distinguished by its originality of theme; it was written in old age, when its author had experienced changing fortunes, fallen “low after being so high,” and suffered misfortunes which “split the heart and tightened the chest.” In this state he felt affinity with those exiles and homeless ones who composed poetry of estrangement and anguish, often writing it on walls or rocks, or singing it in taverns and gardens in drinking parties. In tracing their *aġbār* and recording their poetry, Eṣfahānī found consolation “like somebody clinging to a straw while sinking deep into the water.” The book is devoted to individual experience, personal feelings of anguish, longing, and suffering, sentiments not commonly found in the courts of Baghdad, where most of the major poets worked. It contains some of the finest short poems in Arabic. *Maqātel al-ṭālebīyīn* is a collection of short biographies of descendants of 'Alī martyred up to 313/925.

Eṣfahānī has been criticized for dirty appearance and bad habits, drunkenness and homosexuality, and Shi'ism. These criticisms have not prevented him from becoming one of the most widely quoted authorities on Arab history, singing, music, poetry, and Arab culture in general. His work has been lavishly praised throughout the centuries, and interest in him and his writings has always been great, as evidenced in the numerous articles and books devoted to him by Arab and non-Arab scholars. See [al-Aġānī](#).



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