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A VERSE TRANSLATION
OF THE *LĀMIYAH* OF SHANFARĀ

The *Lāmiyah* of the robber-poet Shanfarā is one of the best-known pre-Islamic Arabic poems. The rascally and misanthropic valor that animates it will appeal to anyone but the most effete citizen of the Welfare State. Its prosody is very adroit: each of its 68 lines rhymes in the syllable *lu*, whence comes its title, "The Poem Rhymed in L." The poem is, however, not only nearly untranslatable into English but nearly unreadable in Arabic. The text, the grammar, and especially the vocabulary present numerous problems.

Since the following translation tries to be both literal and poetic, it is naturally full of compromises. Some paraphrasing and glossing were inevitable, but substantive adding or subtracting has been avoided. Although an adaptation of the original rhyme and meter proved unworkable, I have used rhyme and meter more suitable for English. In order to make the poem's rambling structure easier to follow, I have divided it into parts.

Shanfarā is being abandoned by his tribe, who have apparently become disgusted with his thievery (1-4). He says he would rather live in exile anyway, for he has a more faithful tribe in the wild beasts of the desert (5-9) and his own resources (10-13). Unlike his sedentary tribe, Shanfarā is unmoved by hardship and danger (14-20). He disdains hunger (21-5), like the gray wolf, whom he describes in an extended simile (26-35). As for thirst, he bears it better even than the desert grouse (36-41). After years of bearing the injustices of war, now he has to bear the pains of exile (44-8). But his endurance is limitless (42-3, 49-53). On the stormiest nights, he raids camps single-handed (54-61); on the hottest days, he goes bareheaded (62-4). Finally, he depicts himself standing on a hilltop after a day of walking across the desert, admired even by the wild goats (65-8).

For the literal meaning of the Arabic, I am principally indebted to Professor George Makdisi of Harvard, in whose course I read this poem. Mr. John McCloskey, a fellow student, has criticized my translation constructively. I have also consulted the texts, translations, and commentaries of J. W. Redhouse,¹ A. I. Silvestre de Sacy,² and Georg Jacob.³

¹ "The L-Poem of the Arabs," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 13 (1881), pp. 437-67.

² *Chrestomathie Arabe*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1826, Vol. 2, pp. 134 ff.

³ *Lāmijāt al-Arab*, Berlin, 1913.

- Sons of my mother, get your camels up!
 For I choose other company than you.
 Go! You have all you need: the moon is out,
 The mounts are girthed to go, the saddles too.
 The world will keep a good man safe from harm,
 And give him sanctuary from ill-will.
 Yes, by your life! The world has room for one
 Who seeks or flees by night, and uses skill.
- 5 I have some nearer kin than you: swift wolf,
 Smooth-coated leopard, jackal with long hair.
 With them, entrusted secrets are not told;
 Thieves are not shunned, whatever they may dare.
 They all are proud and brave, but when we see
 The day's first quarry, I am braver then.
 When hands go out for food, I am not first:
 The first one is the greediest of men.
 That is how much I condescend to them;
 The better man is he who condescends.
- 10 If I lose one who pays no favors back,
 And in whose friendship is no charm, three friends
 Make up for that one: a courageous heart,
 A bare blade, and a long and yellow bow
 Of polished back, that twangs, whose excellence
 Thongs hung upon it and a baldric show,
 That groans when arrows leave it, like a wife
 Who cries and wails, her son and husband dead.
 I am not thirsty, pasturing at night
 A herd with teats untied but young ill-fed,⁴
- 15 No coward, timid, staying with his wife,
 Who asks her how he ought to play his part,
 No fearful ostrich, just as if a lark
 Were flying up and down inside his heart,
 No lazy stay-at-home and flirt, who goes
 Mascaraed and perfumed by day and night,
 No tick, to whom there comes more bad than good,
 Defenceless, weak, roused only by his fright,
 Nor am I scared by shadows, when the wilds
 Loom trackless in the fearful traveler's way,
- 20 For, when hard flint-stone meets my calloused feet,
 Up from it sparks of fire and splinters spray.
 I always put off hunger, till it dies;
 I keep my mind far from it and forget.

⁴ She-camels' teats are tied up to keep their young from nursing. But if a thirsty herdsman milks the camels dry, the young can get no milk even from untied teats.

- I eat the dust, lest some do-gooder think
 That for a favor I am in his debt.
 Were I not fleeing blame, the only drink
 And food for living well would be with me;
 But this proud soul of mine gives me no peace
 If it is blamed, until the time I flee.
- 25 I bind my bowels upon my hunger, as
 A weaver's taut and twisted threads are bound.
- I breakfast poorly, like a lean, gray wolf,
 Whom deserts make to wander round and round.
 He, hungry, reeling, fights the wind till noon;
 He pounces near the ends of clefts and runs.
 When food escapes him where he looks for it,
 He howls; his comrades answer, hungry ones,
 Thin-bellied, gray of face, like arrow-shafts
 For play, that by a gambler's hands are cast,⁵
- 30 Or flushed-out bees, whose hive is hit by poles
 A climbing honey-gatherer makes fast.
 They, gaping, wide-mouthed, look as if their jaws
 Were all stick-splinters, as they scowl and bite.
 He howls, and they howl in the desert, like
 Mourners, bereaved of sons, upon a height.
 He ceases; they cease. He holds; so do they.
 They all console each other, all hard-pressed.
 He grieves, and they grieve; he stops, and they stop;
 For patience, if grief does no good, is best.
- 35 He goes, and they go, hurrying, and each
 Is brave, despite his pain from what he hides.
- The drab grouse drink my leavings, after they
 Have traveled though the night with rumbling sides.
 I run, and they run, racing, and they lag;
 Their leader (I am he) goes on with ease.
 I turn from them; they fall at the well's rim,
 And up to it their beaks and gullets squeeze.
 Their noise around it, on both sides, is like
 A group of camping travelers of clans.
- 40 From every side they gather at it, as
 A pool draws camels from their caravans.
 They gulp some water, then go on, just as,
 At dawn, Uḥāzah riders speed away.
- 44 If War, Dust's mother, sighs for Shanfarā,
 The time was long she had him for her prey.⁶

⁵ In a pre-Islamic game, players drew numbered arrow-shafts as lots, for larger or smaller portions of a slaughtered she-camel.

⁶ This transposition of lines 42-3 and 44-8 seems to me to make better sense. But I have rhymed the translation in such a way that the lines may be read in the order of the manuscripts, if the reader prefers.

- 45 The sport of wrongs that cast lots for his flesh,
 His carcass, to whichever won, went first.⁷
 They slept when he slept, but with open eyes;
 They quickly worked their way to do their worst.
 He lives with cares that still keep coming back,
 Severe as quartan fever, or more so.
 I shoo them when they come, but they return;
 They reach me from above and close below.
- 42 I know the earth's face well, for I bed there
 Upon a back raised by dry vertebrae.
- 43 I lean upon a bony arm, whose joints
 Stand up, like dice a gamester threw at play.
- 49 Thus, though you see me, like the snake, Sand's child,
 Sun-blistered, ill-clad, sore, and shoeless, still
- 50 I have endurance, and I wear its shirt
 Upon a sand-cat's heart, with shoes of will.⁸
 And I am sometimes poor, yet I am rich:
 The exile has true wealth, for he is free.
 I do not show myself distressed by want,
 Or proud and haughty in prosperity.
 No follies rule my reason. Do you see
 Me gossiping and lying? You do not.
- One baleful night, the bowman burns for warmth
 His bow and shafts, with which he would have shot.
- 55 I go in dark and drizzle, and my friends
 Are hunger, shivers, shuddering, and fright.
 I widow wives and orphan children, then
 I go as I have come, in darker night.
 Next morning, sitting at Al Ghumayṣā',
 Two tribes ask questions, all because of me.
 They say, "Our dogs growled in the night. We said,
 'A prowling wolf or jackal, could it be?'
 But, after just a sound, they dozed. We said,
 'Could it have been a frightened grouse or shrike?'"
- 60 He, if a demon, ravaged on his way,
 And if a man, . . . No man could do the like."
- One day of Sirius, whose vapors shine,
 Whose asps, on his hot earth, contort their shape,
 I set my face against him, with no veil
 Or covering, except a ragged cape
 And long hair, from both sides of which the wind,
 When raging, makes my uncombed mane to blow,
 Far from the touch of oil and purge of lice,
 With matted dirt, last washed a year ago.

⁷ See note 5.

⁸ For the translation "sand-cat", see A. F. L. Beeston, "The Heart of Shanfara," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. 18 (1973), pp. 257-8.

- 65 As for the dried-up desert, like a shield,
I cross on foot its seldom-traveled sand.
I scan its start and end when I have climbed
A height, and sometimes crouch and sometimes stand.
The yellow she-goats graze about me, like
Maidens whom trailing dresses beautify.
At dusk, they stand around me, like a ram,
White-footed, long-horned, climbing, dwelling high.

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