

THE *ŠAWĀ'IR AL-ĠĀHILIYYA*:  
GRAMMAR DON'T MATTER MUCH

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Discussion of the grammar used by the *šawā'ir al-ġāhiliyya* is meaningful only within the framework of a much bigger context, and I must begin by referring to some of the larger problems; for, though it would be easy enough to focus solely on interesting grammatical features in the *šawā'ir al-ġāhiliyya*, that would be far too narrow a viewpoint and would do still further injustice to work that has been sadly mistreated over the centuries.

A full reappraisal of the scanty extant laments of the *šawā'ir al-ġāhiliyya* is long overdue, for very little has been done on them since Cheikho's *Šawā'ir al-'arab*. That was an excellent work for the time it was written showing Cheikho's scholarship at its not inconsiderable best. Though there is ample scope for a good book on the early women poets, I must make it clear that in my view the word 'good' precludes a doctrinaire feminist approach. It is true that the laments have been subject to the vagaries of male chauvinism and caprice since pre-Islamic times, but a dose of feminist treatment will simply take us to another unfortunate extreme and marginalise their work in a new but equally damaging way. A wide focus is essential; if we are to make the most of the surviving material; and it is within such a focus that grammar should be examined.

It is important, too, in looking at the corpus to remember that it is poetry, often good poetry. One of the saddest instances that I have come across of lack of appreciation by Arabs of a fine poem concerns a lament by Ġanūb al-Hudāliyya that begins:

*sa'altu bi-'amrin 'ahī šahbahu | fa-afza'anī ḥīna raddū s-su'ālā.*

I have asked a number of Arab scholars with excellent traditional learning and literary sensitivity whether they knew the poem. The answer has been uniformly, 'No, who is Ġanūb al-Hudāliyya?'. Yet as soon as I quote the first three syllables of line 18, as I shall do later, they are immediately able to finish the line. They know it by heart as one of the *šawāhid*. They know nothing of the rest of the twenty-five line poem, which is a moving lament for the death of her brother 'Amr Dū l-Kalb, killed by two mountain leopards.<sup>1</sup> Nor do they know anything of her splendid *bā'iyya*. There is surely something wrong when a poet of the quality of Ġanūb is remembered only by one line that has become one of the *šawāhid*.

This reduction of the general knowledge of Ġanūb's poetry to a single line epitomizes the drastic way in which the laments of the *šawā'ir al-ġāhiliyya* have suffered neglect or suppression. Most, if not all, of the suppression took place at the earliest stage of all, that of the incorporation of laments into what I will loosely call the original tribal *dīwān*, the poetry that along with a tribe's *'ahbār* and *'ansāb* helped to give the tribe its identity.

<sup>1</sup> All the poems quoted are to be found in Cheikho 1897. Ġanūb's *l. dmiyya* is treated at length in my *Early Arabic Poetry*: 37-50.

It is an axiom of Arabic literary criticism that all women's laments refer to dead adult male relatives. This is a fair description of the material that has survived. But I ask you to think again. Just remember what the men poets have to say about women lamenting. A single example from the *Lāmiyyat al-'Arab* (line 13) will suffice: *ka-'annahā murazza'atun taḵlā tarinnu wa-tu'wīlu* 'as though it were a woman, smitten and bereft of her child, screeching and howling'. Laments for children were clearly very common. It could hardly not be so. In societies similar to that of pre-Islamic Arabia, mortality is at its greatest during the first year of life. The next most dangerous period is from 1 to 5, followed by the teens when women begin bearing children and the men taking part in fighting. Yet it is only when we come to this last group that laments survive. The inescapable conclusion is that other laments were treated as ephemera, of no long-term interest to the tribe. However, it seems to me to be possible neither to deny their existence nor to suggest that they were wholly different in kind from the material that has survived. Clearly there would be some thematic changes — it is hardly possible to eulogize a stillborn child, for example, except perhaps as 'the unfulfilled hope of the tribe' — but the basic themes would be the same. It is perhaps possible to see something of the pattern that might have been used of a lament by an unknown woman that survives in the *Ḥamāsa* of 'Abū Tammām.<sup>2</sup>

Incidentally, it seems to be a mistake to try to see the *martiya* in terms of the *qaṣīda*, though this was done by the early Arab critics, who tend to consider the *riḡā'* as a type of *madīḥ*. Though this is not entirely unjustified, as the *martiya* will normally contain a eulogy of the dead man, and that is clearly *madīḥ* of a kind, praise of the dead and praise of the living are not quite the same, even though they draw on a common stock of ideas. It is also the case that the *martiya* appears to have its own structure: the evidence of the surviving material clearly shows that they evolved their own basic format: (a) news of death; (b) events leading to death (these two may be combined); (c) eulogy; (d) consolatory *ḥikma*. Not all these will necessarily be present, and other material, particularly threats against those responsible for the death, may well be included.

At present there is only one inference that I wish to draw from my initial reappraisal of the *riḡā'* genre: that it is probable (certain?) that women composers of *marāṭīf* composed more material than we have hitherto been led to believe, i.e. they had greater experience of using the poetic register than we have supposed.

However, it would still appear to be the case that women were, by and large, only occasional composers of poetry. There were, it is clear, a few women who were poets in their own right, such as Laylā l-'Aḥfā, wife of the poet al-Barrāq, and al-Ḥirniq, the sister of the poet Ṭarafa, but they appear to have been rare birds. Even so, and allowing for a greater general activity than has hitherto been imagined, we must assume that the move from listening to the recitation of poetry to the active composition of it would have been far from easy for the general run of *bedu* women who composed laments, and it is not unreasonable to expect that from time to time their compositions would show linguistic stress and throw up constructions that were some way from normal expectations.

<sup>2</sup> See Jones 1991:31-6.

Before going into detail, two general questions have to be broached. The first, the problem of authenticity, I can touch on only in the most general terms, basically by way of a brief statement of the position as I see it rather than through close argument.

Despite all the problems caused by oral transmission and the activities of some *rāwīs*, I feel confident that most of the surviving laments by the *šawā'ir al-ġāhiliyya* are genuine. It is true that we do not have the safeguard of quotation by contemporary, *muḥaḍḍim* or Umayyad poets; but against that we can set the fact that there would have been little prestige for a *rāwī* in forging such *marāṭif* and also the fact that from time to time we have lines whose sentiment would have been totally unnatural to anyone with an Islamic background. Perhaps the most striking of these lines is one in the *riṭā'* by 'Amra al-Ḥaṭ'amīyya, a poem otherwise most notable for its grammatical peculiarities.<sup>3</sup> The line runs:

*bunayyā 'aġūzin ḥarrama d-dahru 'ahlahā |*  
*fa-laysa lahā 'illā l-'ilāhu siwāhumā*

Two dear sons of an old woman, whom Fortune has deprived of her family.

Other than the two of them all she has is God.

Though at first glance the presence of *ḥarrama* and *al-'ilāh* might appear to indicate strong Islamic influence, the reverse is the case. The word that carries most force in the line is undoubtedly *ad-dahr*, which clearly transcends *al-'ilāh*. That could well be a natural expression for someone who had learned something about God but not all that much, a stance quite conceivable for a member of the Ḥaṭ'am tribe which had some links with Nağrān and its Christians. I find it very difficult to imagine anyone in the Islamic period producing such a line. Moreover, there is a grammatical point in favour of an early date, though it does not come out in single-line quotation. The initial *bunayyā*, which is undoubtedly a genitive form, is apposition to the *humā* in *siwāhumā* that ends the previous line. The use of *ā(ni)* for all three cases was a feature of the northern Yemeni group of dialects to which Ḥaṭ'am belonged.<sup>4</sup>

That brings us to the second general problem, the relationship between the poetic register and the language normally used by women poets, their own dialects. The basic problem here is to establish the range of registers that were in use. Clearly poetry was the most complex of the registers current, not only because of its very nature, but also on account of the pressures put upon it by the constraints of metre and rhyme. Examination of any reasonable quantity of the surviving material, e.g. the *Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, makes this clear. That is not possible with the registers that lie between poetry and the dialects. Owing to the disappearance of virtually all the evidence, we can do little more than say what they were, or rather who used them, and little else. First we have the language used by the *kāhins*; then that used by the *ḥaṭīb*s; and finally there is that of the storytellers. Of the former two virtually nothing survives; and with the *'ahbār* material of the storytellers we have nothing that is ancient but only much later recastings. Not all is lost because these registers must be those employed in its own inimitable way by the Qur'ān. The other register that was clearly current if we take all the references to written traces in poetry at

<sup>3</sup> See Jones 1991:51-7.

<sup>4</sup> See Rabin 1951:64 ff.

anywhere near face value was a written one. This is, however, hardly likely to have affected the women poets.

The existence of these registers indicates a much more complex linguistic situation than has normally been considered to be the case. For most people, of course, it would not be a question of active use of the registers, but they would certainly be accustomed to them passively as hearers of poetry, *ḥuḥbas*, *'alḥbār* and *'ansāb*. One can only guess at the effect of this. Perhaps knowledge of a range of registers was of some help when the women had to move from passive use, listening to poetry, to active use, composing a lament.

Another way in which the women were helped was through the distinctiveness of the *martiya* that kept it slightly apart from the mainstream of poetry. This arose not only with the general framework to which I have alluded and the very ample stock of commonplaces and clichés on which the composers of laments could draw. There is also evidence of rhythmic peculiarities that led to *musammaṭ*-like break-up of lines. Several instances of this survive, the most striking being some lines by al-Fāri'a bint Šaddād:

*šahhādu 'andiyatin | raffā'u 'abniyatin |*  
*šaddādu 'alwiyyatin | fattāḥu 'asdādi*  
*nahḥāru rāḡiyatin | qattālu tāḡiyatin |*  
*ḥallālu rābiyyatin | šakkāku 'aḡyādi*  
*qawwālu muḥkamatin | naqqādu mubramatin |*  
*farrāḡu mubhamatin | ḥabbāsu 'awrādi*  
*ḥallālu mumri 'atin | ḥammālu mudli 'atin |*  
*farrāḡu muḥzi 'atin | ṭallā'u 'anḡādi*

However, poetic composition involves more than the use of frameworks, stock ideas and rhythmic patterns; and it appears that their final means of escape from the conflicting pressures of grammar and metre, pressures that they must have felt frequently, was to approximate in grammar, to use constructions that were abnormal, *stricto sensu*, but which any alert person could understand.

There is another factor that must have been of considerable importance. The basic belief, expressed very clearly by such poets as al-'A'šā, is that each male tribal poet had a *ḥalīl* (the Greek *δαίμων*). We have no evidence whether it was believed that a woman such as al-Ḥirniq, apparently the composer of a fair amount of poetry, was thought of as having a *ḥalīl*. At a slightly later stage the impression to be derived from the stories about al-Ḥansā' is that although hers was a poetic family, it was her grief rather than a *ḥalīl* that drove her on. This is in line with the vague overall impression that we gather from the corpus: that grief was the driving force in the composition of *marāṭif*, and that emotion replaced the force of the *ḥalīl*. If that is so, it puts the women composers of *marāṭif* further outside the poetic mainstream.

It is in the light of the above comments that I now wish to draw attention to some of the more striking grammatical peculiarities of the women's laments. They are offered as appetizers, in the hope that more attention will be paid to the pre-Islamic *marāṭif*.

By far the best known of these grammatical peculiarities is the line by Ġanūb to which I have already referred (*Lāmiyya*, line 18):

*bi-'anka rabī'un wa-ğaytun marī'un |*  
*wa-'anka hunāka takūnu t-timāla*

It seems to me to be clear that the poet found herself with a syllable too many in each hemistich, and that her extremely sensible solution was to chop 'anna down to 'an.

Later grammarians found this version of the line disturbing and plumped for a text that avoided the problem:

*bi-'annaka kunta r-rabī'a l-muğī'a |*  
*li-man ya'tafīka wa-kunta t-timāla*

This is by no means the only phrase of striking grammar from Ğanūb. A third poem by her opens with an unusual and, it seems to me, very eloquent twist on *layta*:

*yā layta 'amran — wa-mā laytun bi-nāfi'atin*

There is of course nothing that one can complain about here, but the phrasing is unusual and the grammar has a neat and natural twist.

Perhaps the most striking poem for the wealth of its oddities is that by 'Amra l-Ḥaṭ'amiyya, to which I have already referred. The rhyme of the poem is in *humā*, referring to her two sons who had been slain in battle. One might have expected her to get in trouble with the dual, but oddly enough precisely the opposite is the case. She uses the dual *mawlayāhumā* instead of *mawālīhimā* when the latter fits neither rhyme nor metre. However, other aspects of the poetic register land her in serious trouble. She appears to have used *bi-* with the nominative: *wā bi-'anā humā* when *bī* (or *biya* or *biyya*) does not fit. Here too, the grammarians are deeply unhappy. However, the alternative reading that many of them support *wā bi-'abā humā* not only poses more serious grammatical problems but also has an inappropriate sense. 'Amra follows this with a hemistich that is to be savoured:

*humā 'ahawā fī l-qawmi man lā 'ahā lahu*

The phraseology, which looks more like 14 years old than 1,400, is surely that of a woman having serious trouble with the poetic register. It may well be that the composition of this poem was the only time she had to use it.

If we go back still further in time, to the murder of Kulayb and the start of the war of al-Basūs, we find various poems attributed to his female relatives, in which different kinds of unusual phraseology crop up that look as though they are the result of poetic necessity, and not, it would seem, the work of a *rāwī*. (If it was the work of a *rāwī*, he has had to wait a long time for his subtlety to be recognised.) Both Ğaflā, Kulayb's wife, and 'Amra, his sister, use the vocative *yā kulaybun* for metrical reasons; and Ğaflā has a hemistich that is technically correct but seems to strain with every word:

*mā 'azunnu d-dahra ya'tī miḥlahu*

More striking is a hemistich by one of Kulayb's daughters, 'Umāma:

*yubaḥ damuhu sudan ka-dami l-ba'īri*

'Asmā', too, provides the parallel:

*man yuballighū l-hima min ba'dihi*

In both cases the imperfect will not fit, and so the jussive is used. The ready dropping of a syllable is of course parallel to Ğanūb's *bi-'anka*. Pragmatism seems to be the order of the day. There is contrast here with what we find in al-Ḥirniq, where it is archaisms such as *wa-qad ta'damu l-ḥasnā'u ḡāmā* or the simple 'ar'athu that strike the eye. Archaisms are not absent from the *marāṭī* — Ğaflā, for example, provides

us with *man qad yasūduhā* — but they appear less frequent than the grammatical twists.

With other cases, such as Bint Waṭīma's *wa-ḥmarra 'āfāqu s-samā'i*, it is a moot point whether archaism or *ḍarīrat aš-šif'r* is involved.

The examples I have quoted seem to me to show a refreshingly sane and sensible approach to grammar. When necessary, the grammar is subordinated to metre and to rhyme, but in a way that remains comprehensible, however much the ensuing phraseology may have offended the susceptibilities of some of the later grammarians. There is none of the violence that we see in the morphological truncations of some of the men poets such as Labīd's *manā*, apparently for *manzili*, not even *manāzili*, or Ḥalqama's *sabā* for *sabā'ibu*.

It will be some time before my new collection of the surviving poems of the *šawā'ir al-ǧāhiliyya* is ready. In the meantime, I urge you to turn to Cheikho's edition of *Šawā'ir al-ʿArab*. The material it contains is always interesting, and some of the poems are really rather good.

#### REFERENCES

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