

YĀQŪT AL-ḤAMAWĪ

**ON ABŪ 'ĀMIR AL-JURJĀNĪ
FROM DICTIONARY OF THE SCHOLARS**

TRANSLATED BY DAVID LARSEN

FROM MU‘JAM AL-UDABĀ’ (DICTIONARY OF THE SCHOLARS) BY YĀQŪT AL-ḤAMAWĪ

Al-Faḍl ibn Ismā‘īl al-Tamīmī, known as ABŪ ‘ĀMIR AL-JURJĀNĪ, was a member of the circle around the grammarian ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471 A.H./1078 CE). A man of culture, charisma, wit, and distinction, his handwriting was exquisite and his recitations from memory were beyond reproach. In poetry and prose he was a major talent, and his books were as expertly arranged as they were written. Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd [al-Nīsābūrī al-Ghaznawī, *fl.* 2nd ½ of the 6th century A.H./12th c. CE] says in his book *Sirr al-surūr* (The Secret of Gladness) that Abū ‘Āmir’s literary output “raised the standard of distinction. The flowers of the earth were outshone by his discourse, which was a fulsome garden of learning replete with marvels surpassing the very springtime. In his hands, the art of poetry was divinatory magic, pervading his repartee and forming an aura around him. The signs of his excellence are plainly legible in his verses, where his sweet inventive flair is [as if] emblazoned on flying banners.

“Abū ‘Āmir’s books were sunshine and rainwater to the city of Ghazna, where he sent them in dedication to the exalted *shaykh* ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd [ibn Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ṣamad al-Shīrāzī, d. ca. 512/1118]. These include: *Kitāb al-Bayān fī ‘ilm al-Qur’ān* (The Book of Elucidation of Qur’ānic Studies), *Kitāb ‘Urūq al-dhahab min ash‘ār al-‘arab* (The Book of Veins of Gold in the Poetry of the Arabs), and *Salwat al-ghurabā’* (A Consolation for Out-of-Towners).”

In his *Kitāb al-Siyāq* (The Book of Continuation [of the History of Nishapur]), ‘Abd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī calls Abū ‘Āmir “one of the most roundly distinguished men of his day for excellence of poetry and prose. He served Abu ‘l-Maḥāsin al-Jurjānī for a time as secretary, as he did for other state officials, and socialized with the dignitaries and the secretarial class alike. I received my education in hadith from some of the same elders that he did, including Abū Sa‘d ibn Rāmish, Abū Naṣr ibn Rāmish al-Muqri’, Abū Bakr al-Shīrāzī and Abu ‘l-Qāsim al-Nūqānī. Among the teachers of his youth were members of the Ismā‘īlī school, and in the year 458 (= 1066 CE) he studied with Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn Maṅṣūr ibn Khalaf al-Mahgribī.” His death date is not mentioned by ‘Abd al-Ghāfir [who himself died in 529/1134-5], but it is evident that Abū ‘Āmir predeceased him.

When Abū ‘Āmir went to Nishapur, he got together with Ya‘qūb ibn Aḥmad al-Adīb (d. 474/1082), who asked him to inscribe some lines in his book entitled *Jūnat al-nadd* (The Coffer of Incense), an anthology combining Ya‘qūb’s verse with that of his contemporaries and predecessors. I inspected these unmistakable examples of Abū ‘Āmir’s hand in the autograph copy, and made my own facsimile copy of the best of his poetry that I found there, leaving out the prose pieces. This is what Abū ‘Āmir wrote:

“I WAS ASKED by the excellent and learned *shaykh* – may God perpetuate his blessing – to inscribe some of my trifles in this notebook. At this, I am on the one hand repelled by shame and hindered from obliging him with so much as a single line. On the other, in response to his summons I feel the urge to demonstrate my obedience by emulating his inscriptions [in this book]. I am in any case confident in his goodness, serene in his nobility of character, and certain of his zeal to right his brothers when they slip, and to cover up their faults as best he can. And I ask God to rectify our shortcomings with His grace, and to erase our malpractice with His charity. All this is well within His capability. [With that,] here are my trifles (meter: *sarī*):

O you who are the death of me, won’t you let me live
 long enough to march me to my [fated] death?
 By God you swear that you are in the palm of
 my hand, as long as the power to clutch at you is in it.
 And to my heart [I say also]: You! Imposing
 on my gaze with illicit intent – towards how many?

And (meter: *khafīf*):

Onto the jasmine cheek, with a burgeoning hyacinthine
 stripe [of curling locks] upon the jasmine,
 I imposed my kiss, and [the youth] said: ‘Beware in my head
 the forked tongue of [the dragon] Tinnnīn!’

And (meter: *wāfir*):

When you are pierced by the event of a weighty matter,
 and you have come to something small or great,
 match it stroke for stroke, or outdo it if you can.
 The more you churn, the more butter you’ll get.

And about the officer Abu 'l-Faḍl, may God perpetuate his highness (meter: *wāfir*):

Attractive women turn away from my ill-concealed
longings; after all, I offer them nothing more.
They see my hair's gray dressing, and my
imminent decline, and their compact with me is voided.
These days, my envier wishes me no harm,
and I feel friendly towards him too, now that
age has veiled my looks and my wealth is gone.
But I suffer no distress while you are near.
I am constantly amazed, and my amazement is total, 5
at men of consequence humbled before a squirt.
Thanks be to God, Who spared me from service
to anyone but 'Abbās ibn Sa'd!
To him belongs the purest part of me, my heart and my affection.
He is the object of my visits and of my will.
He is what I live for, and he is my restorer,
and whether I go wrong or right, I go to him.
Others love him too, but they also love others.
My love for him is undivided [with God nor man].
When I take fright, his highness is the cave [I hide in]. 10
When I thirst, he is the reservoir I seek.
In boastworthiness and noble traits you are all-surpassing,
and in giving off good graces and earning praise you go beyond.
And when I became your servant, Anūshirwān was well pleased,¹
and with my servant I hope he's pleased as well.
What liberties I take with you are those of a dependent.
Let them meet no reproach or resentment from you.
It is an irrepressible trait of mine, [jocosity,
one I inherited from my father and grandfather.
Live with me for a thousand years in the best of health, 15
and a thousand plus two thousand after me.
Next to you, all other people are mirages of the waste.
They dazzle and mislead and are of no use.
So be mine, you whose nobility is unmatched, and be matched
to another unmatched one, matchless though you [assuredly] are.

And (meter: *mutaqārib*):

We charge towards death, courting it and cheating it.
Our necks are thick, and so are our livers
as we go devirginating faultless [youths] with black tresses,
pink cheeks and yellow in the solar plexus.

And (meter: *mutaqārib*):

For [what I might do to] a wise-ass nuisance, I beg forgiveness:
the one who bared at me his slender, cutting sword,
saying, “I am the man for you, O Ibn al-Wakīl!”
What was I hoping for, besides that?

And (meter: *majzū' al-kāmil*):

The young buck put me through quite an ordeal,
and a delightful ordeal it was, for me.
For when I put his natural element to my test
I found its water sweet and drinkable.
And when I stripped away his clothes,
the shelled almond's meat was tender.
The clearest description I can give is [to say] that he
was exactly the way I love them to be.

And (meter: *kāmil*):

My chest is compressed by the bureaucrats of our day
– a plurality of evil, by common consent.
They are inveterate farters, and if you complain,
they redouble the volume, really making you hear it.
This one's anus makes a sharp report, while
that one lets fly as if firing a catapult.
Part of the hardship [of a state secretary's life] is the company
of a bunch of farters, as they punctuate the rhythm of time.

And (meter: *mutaqārib*):

I tire of the struggles with hazard
that used to bring me wonders and thrills,
back when fate made me merry to the point that I would
call out for my donkey while I was riding him.

And (meter: *kāmil*):

When you rival the sun in splendor
I take on Mercury's nature,
so that every single day we meet
you condemn me to a live burning.

[Abū 'Āmir concluded with what's called an *ijāza* statement, authorizing Ya'qūb ibn Aḥmad as a transmitter of his work:]

“I have been graced by the excellent and learned *shaykh* – may God perpetuate his blessing – with an oral recitation of my work. May God make it serviceable to him and grant him favor, and may His care relieve the eye inflamed by study. Also present for his recitation were his son, the eminent *shaykh* Abū Bakr al-Ḥasan, and the eminent and learned jurist Abu 'l-Majd Muḥammad ibn Abi 'l-Qāsim, and they attended to all my elucidations of the inanities inscribed herein, may God grant them both long life.”

I also copied the following, which I found in al-Faḍl's handwriting:

“God have mercy on the most excellent Ilkiyā Abu 'l-Faḥ [al-Ḥasan ibn 'Abd Allāh], who sent [these verses] to me in a letter (meter: *ṭawīl*):

O Abū 'Āmir! Strings around fingers
are memory aids for dolts and ninnies.
But no such need for reminders has he
whose mind is in control of his eyes.

“And [in a letter] to 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, [Ilkiyā] wrote (meter: *khafīf*):²

Abū 'Āmir is nothing but gracious
in bodily frame as he is in spirit.
And any hidden meaning inapparent to his understanding
is inapparent in the absolute.”

This is the last of what I copied from Abū ‘Āmir’s handwriting, may God have mercy on him. His writings include a poetry anthology entitled *Kitāb ‘Urūq al-dhahab* (The Book of the Veins of Gold), another work on poetry entitled *Kitāb Qalā’id al-sharaf* (The Book of the Necklaces of Nobility), a *Kitāb al-Bayān fī ‘ilm al-Qur’ān* (Book of Elucidation of Qur’ānic Studies), and a *Kitāb Salwat al-ghurabā’* (Book of Consolation for Out-of-Towners).

I also copied something of Abū ‘Āmir’s that was in Ya‘qūb ibn Aḥmad’s handwriting – a copy he made from Abū ‘Āmir’s correspondence with Abu ‘l-Maḥāsin Sa‘d, may God have mercy on him. Ya‘qūb said: I copied this from Abū ‘Āmir’s hand when he first got to Nishapur in Sha‘bān of the year 458 [= July 1066]:³

“May God prolong the *shaykh*’s life. I have spent this year in a weakened, vulnerable state, sick and marred and ashamed to be seen. It is beneath me to elaborate on my condition, even as it rejoices in that [imminent recovery] for which I thank God, be He exalted. I arm myself with patience against all the trials His worshipers may undergo, and am now working to devise a loan of that [sum of money, the lack of] which keeps steady lodging beyond my reach.

“But who makes a loan to a wandering Moses, newly arrived at the city gates with his rod and satchel? I ask God, be He exalted, for my safety and then, regarding my aforementioned malady, I ask our master only for his consideration, because no cure avails, the pox is hard upon me, and no amount of tar-water does any good.

“Lest the contents of this message affect its reverend address as a work of baseness and folly, [I humbly aver that] it defies good sense to conceal my destitution and go on starving. Were it not for my prior service to [the *shaykh*] and his tender concern for me [for me], I would rather gobble hot ashes than disclose my poverty. Yours, etc.”

In his *Kitāb Marw* (Book of [the History of] Merv), Abū Sa‘d al-Sam‘ānī (d. 562/1166) attributes to Abū ‘Āmir the following poem about his cat (meter: *khafif*):

I HAVE A CAT whose foot-pads I dye with henna
before I put henna on my own newborns.
Then I tie cowrie shells to her collar
to repel the harm of evil eyes.
Each day, before I feed my family, I see that she gets
our choicest meats and purest waters.
The playful thing! When she sees
my face contorted in a frown,
sometimes she sings, sometimes she dances,
sparing no exertion for my diversion’s sake.

NOTES

1. Possibly this refers to Anūshirwān ibn Manūchihir (d. 435/1043 or 441/1050), a Ziyārid ruler of Jurjān.
2. ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥasan al-Bākhazī (d. 467/1075) attributes these verses to ‘Abd al-Qāhir himself in *Dumyat al-qaṣr* (The Statue of the Palace), ed. Muḥammad Tūnjī (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1993), vol. 1 (of 3), 571.
3. The date is hard to square with the death-date of 454/1062 reported for Abu ‘l-Maḥāsin by Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) in *al-Bidāya wa-’l-nihāya* (The Beginning and the End), ed. ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Giza: Hajar li-’l-Ṭibā‘a, 1997-99), vol. 15 (of 21), 787.
4. ‘*Adhāb muhīn*, heard in the Qur’ān at 2:90, 3:178, 4:14 *et passim*.

Source: Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-udabā’*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993), vol. 5 (of 7), 2166-71. https://archive.org/stream/Mu3jam_Udaba#page/n2181/mode/1up (accessed January 1, 2017).