IBN AL-ʿARABĪ’S “CINQUAIN” (TAḤMĪS) ON A POEM BY ABŪ MADYAN

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Each in their own way, Abū Madyan Šuʿayb and Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī may be said to be the most important exemplars of Śūfism to emerge out of al-Andalus in the sixth/12th century.¹ The real nature of the relationship between them has always been quite obscure, however; and it remains problematic in spite of the fact that Ibn al-ʿArabī refers to Abū Madyan almost regularly throughout his voluminous writings in the most respectful terms. That the two men never met (although they lived in the same general region until around Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thirtieth year) is undisputed. Why they did not meet is the question, inasmuch as it would appear that there must have been ample opportunity for the younger Šūfī beginning his career in Seville to have made a visit (ziyāra) to the Šayḥ al-ṣuyūḥ in Bigāya (Bougie), if he had really wished to pay due homage. In these circumstances, what precisely are we to make of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s repeated references to Abū Madyan as “our master” (šayḥu-nā)?²

As far as any objective evidence indicates, there is actually no warrant for critical scholarship to represent Abū Madyan’s influence on Ibn al-ʿArabī as substantively significant or even really notable. Despite his sincere deference toward the elder šayḥ’s phenomenal renown in the

¹ Both emigrated from their doomed homeland in the 6th/12th century, Abū Madyan to take up residence from an early age in North Africa, and Ibn al-ʿArabī eventually travelling extensively in the East before settling down in Syria. Hence, while the former’s career is inextricably bound up with the history of ṭasawwuf in the Maḡrib, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s fame was (and could only have been) achieved in the less doctrinally provincial Maṣriq.

² That the expression is not to be taken literally is shown in the fact that Ibn al-ʿArabī also applies it to Abū l-ʿAbbās Ibn al-ʿArif, who died twenty-five years before he was born.
Magrib and his association with many local Ṣūfīs who had joined this charismatic leader’s ever-widening circle, Ibn al-‘Arabi, in my view, seems to have owed little to any personal teacher at all, much less to one of whom he only knew through second-hand reports. He was, in fact, always quite mindful of letting this note of independence be heard above the refrains of generous praise for one or another predecessor or confrère. But although there is no strand of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thought that can be shown to be derived from the North African school, he does occasionally quote sayings of Abū Madyan (not always without criticism), and in the present article we will examine the unique case of an entire poem (qasīda, ḡazal) attributed to Abū Madyan which has been elaborated into a longer, stylized genre (called a taḥmīṣ) by the younger writer.

The Ṣayḥ al-Ṣuyūḥ and the Ṣayḥ al-Akbar

The view that Abū Madyan stood to Ibn al-‘Arabi as “master par excellence” even though the two never met “except in the spirit” has been ably represented in the ground-breaking studies of Claude Addas. In developing this position she has done a great service to our understanding of formal Akbarian doctrine since, it cannot be gainsaid, this is the pretense cultivated in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s own testimony, especially in the Ḩuttūḥāt al-makkīya and the Muḥāḍarat al-abrār. That the impres-

3 Knowledge acquired through “published” writings I regard as first-hand, however, and here I do not doubt that Ibn al-‘Arabi’s teachings will eventually be better understood in the context of their various literary and doctrinal antecedents, such as the works of (to name just a few) Abū Yazīd al-Bīštāmī, al-Hakīm al-Tirmīdī, ‘Abd al-Gabbār al-Nīfārī, al-Husayn b. Maṣṭūr al-Hallāq, Abū Hāmid al-Gazzālī, the Ḥwān al-Ṣafā and, in the West, those of Ibn Masarra, Ibn Barraġān and Ibn al-‘Arīf. But it is not likely that works in manuscript attributed to Abū Madyan were current prior to Ibn al-‘Arabi’s departure from the Maṣūb in 598/1201-02.

4 See the English translation of her lengthy study, Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ‘Arabi (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p. 45, 60-61, 66, 89-90, 112-14. N.132 lists references to Abū Madyan in some of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works (to which may be added these references to the Cairo, 1911 edition of the Ḩuttūḥāt al-makkīya: vol. I, p. 102, 251-53, 356, 571, 590, 629, 634-55, 666; vol. II, p. 11, 22, 216, 318, 505, 683; and vol. IV, p. 498; as well as those to the Muḥāḍarat al-abrār given in the next note).

5 Muḥāḍarat al-abrār wa-mūsāmārat al-ḥyyār (The Conference of the Righteous and the Converse of the Excellent) is briefly described by Osman Yahia in Histoire et classification de l'œuvre d'Ibn 'Arabi (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1964), p. 396-97, répertoire général no. 493; and, more extensively, by Addas in Quest, p. 95-96 and 100-02. Vol. I of the Muḥāḍara was re-edited in 1972 by M.M. al-Ḥawlī (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb