The Umayyad poet al-Farazdaq, well known for an exacting and often laboured virtuosity, committed at one time a quite absurd breach of syntax in one of his verses. In a long poem rhyming in fa, he retained a rhyme word, an adjectival noun, in the nominative case, when its relation to the preceding adjective clearly necessitated the accusative. The verse in question is the following:

And a hard time (lit. the bite of a time), son of Marwân, which has left all wealth (property) either depleted or badly ravaged.

In al-Farazdaq's time, however, poetry was already becoming the standard norm among scholars and grammarians for the judgement of correct usage. Quotations from pre-Islamic poetry were indeed acquiring primacy as textual evidence. The unquestioned authority of Jahili poetry soon rubbed off on Umayyad and early Abbasid poetry as the closest to it in point of time. Poetry, it seemed, was not fallible. Humanum est errare. Was not poetry the inspiration of beings somewhat superhuman?

Be that as it may, the grammarians do not seem, to use a convenient cliché, to have called a spade a spade, and told al-Farazdaq that he had simply committed the poetic fault of iquâ in his verse, by changing the vowel ā, which should have followed the rhyme letter, into u. They could then have softened the blow for him by pointing out that a pre-Islamic master like al-Nabigha al-Dhubyānī had similarly violated poetic rules before him, although he and other Jahili poets had only allowed themselves the interchange of the i and u vowels following the rhyme letter. Instead of such a natural and simple course, the grammarians seem

1 See Diwan al-Farazdaq, ed. K. al-Bustâni, Beirut, 1960, vol. II, p. 26, where the editor reads ُتَرَكْتُ instead of ُتَرَكْتَ. I have retained this verse as it appears in Al-Aghiinâ, Beirut, 1965, vol. XIX, p. 29, and as it is quoted by Professor Anis Frayha in Tabîlat Qawâ'îd al-Lughâ al-'Arabiyâ, Beirut, 1959, p. 16.

2 This is in all likelihood a reference to the Umayyad Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwân. Cf. Diwan, loc. cit., n. 3.

3 For a reference to the ancient Arab poets being considered in league with supernatural beings such as the jinn or the shayta'în who inspired their productions, see R. A. Nicholson, A Literary History of the Arabs, Cambridge University Press, 1956, p. 72, and The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period, ed. Beeston et al., Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 40-41.

4 See Al-Aghiinâ, vol. IX, pp. 332-334, where it is reported that al-Nabigha was alerted to such faults in his verses when he heard them sung, and the final vowels of the rhyme letters were prolonged in the singing.
to have tried unremittingly to find a grammatical explanation or justification for the poet's obvious solecism, or his use of the nominative case ending in place of the accusative. They seem to have started from the premise that the poet must be right—the king must have clothes on.

But it is a salutary thought that not all the critics or commentators on Arabic literature have been scholars and grammarians. By a simple, and, one is tempted to add, serene statement, the perceptive Ibn Qutayba (828-889) seems to subvert all the edifices of the grammarians. Al-Farazdaq, he says:

"left the last word in the verse in the nominative out of poetic necessity, and he gave the grammarians a harrowing time in trying to find the (grammatical) cause of this. They postulated a lot of theories and gave various reasons, but did not suggest anything satisfactory (or that could hold water). And is there any discerning person who fails to see that all their postulations were mere apologies and false pretensions? One of the grammarians in fact asked al-Farazdaq why he had retained the (rhyme) word at the end of the verse in the nominative. The poet assailed him with abuse and said: 'I write what I write, and it is up to you to advance arguments and explanations.' "

According to another tradition, a contemporary of al-Farazdaq, the grammarian 'Abd Allah b. Abi Ishaq (d. 735), who was critical of other verses by the poet, asked him why he had given the nominative case ending. 'In order to spite you, and intrigue you', the poet is supposed to have replied, 'it is up to us to write and up to you to provide explanations.' Ibn Qutayba's statement, more than anything else perhaps, explains how it was that the Arabic dictum 'more flimsy than the arguments of a grammarian', came about.

About the old commentators on pre-Islamic poetry, it has been said that they were 'often groping in impenetrable shadows'. But did they approach this poetry with the same deference as the grammarians, and like them, perhaps, vitiate the clarity and the scope of their vision? Can

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2 As quoted by Professor Frayba, op. cit., p. 17. See also Al-Shir wa-`l-Shu'ara', loc. cit., n. 7, and the brief article by Ch. Pellat in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, (new edition), on 'Abd Allâh b. Abi Ishaq.