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

3 Lāmiyat 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 girted 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.