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Ibn Abi 'Awn (d. 322/934) is a little studied author of adab and some other works whose Al-ajwiba al-muskita is presented here in an admirable edition by May A. Yousef. The book earned her a well-deserved PhD from Bochum University.

The edition is preceded by an extensive study of the author, a reconstruction of his biography distilled from the few references to him extant in the sources, dates on his family background, his forefathers and their literary output, his ill-fated association with a well-known heretic of his days, Muhammad b. 'Ali ash-Shalmaghani alias Ibn al-'Araqir, and their joint execution in 322/934. There is precious little that can be questioned in this first chapter, constituting a seemingly complete survey of what is known about Ibn Abi 'Awn with judicious conclusions added.

Then follows an introduction to adab literature, very readable though not entirely new — how could it be otherwise —, and Ibn Abi 'Awn’s particular handling of the genre. Yousef reaches the conclusion that he belongs not only to the collectors of akhkhār, poetic fragments, nawādr etcetera, but that it can be proved from occurrences of the same stories in earlier and later comparable sources that he also extensively abbreviated the material he found, thus underlining the qualification muskita from the title: the 'answers' are presented as effectively 'shutting up' (imaginary) opponents by their eloquent brevity and conciseness. In so doing Ibn Abi 'Awn appears to have enhanced the expressiveness of the collected anecdotes.

A most interesting and thorough analysis of the contents of the book follows in the third chapter. The ad rem answers are by no means homogeneous: the nine sections of the text are unequal in length, the first section on serious riddles almost as long as the other eight put together, and the tone of the first few sections slowly eroding from the dead serious via the hilarious to — what may rightly be termed — the prurient and vulgar. This can be illustrated best by enumerating the respective qualifications given to the sections: the serious riddles, those of the philosophers, those of the Greek, those of ascetics and those of scholastics (mutabākīlīmān); then follow anecdotes describing the ready witt (or the lack of it) characterizing bedouins, women, homosexuals and a certain class of inhabitants of Medina (some of whom are of the Umar b. Abi Rabīa-type); all this is concluded by a number of quick-witted answers simply called 'humorous' (in Arabic ajwiba ḥulūliyya) which in this text virtually boil down to 'scabrous'.

In another chapter, a veritable tour de force, Yousef surveys with numerous examples the principles upon which the 'Aussagefähigkeit' in the anecdotes from the respective sections is based, most of which amount to various plays on words, such as paronomasia, antithesis and a number of other, neatly distinguished methods. Also the next chapter on general style characteristics contains a multitude of finely differentiated devices displayed by the originators of the anecdotes as well as by the collector of these anecdotes, Ibn Abi 'Awn himself, who appears to have had a hand in the modeling, if not simply the invention, of many. These two chapters constitute in my eyes a major contribution to the study of the literary techniques applied by early Muslim adab authors/collectors.

The book goes from strength to strength. The next two chapters deal with Ibn Abi 'Awn's sources and imitators respectively. Reading these one gains the impression that not a single stone was left unturned. Only first-class experts in the field of Arabic literary borrowing and transmission may be able to find something to quarrel with the data contained in these. The editor’s introduction is concluded with a (critical) appraisal of the work's first (partial) edition and the manuscripts on which the present edition is based. Then follow seventeen pages of bibliography testifying to the rare thoroughness of this edition and its apparatus.

Reading the text and (re)reading the introduction, I was struck more than once by the idea that what this publication needs most, indeed cries out for, is a neater presentation with proper Arabic and Roman types. Instructors of Arabic literature may be expected to find the book makes excellent teaching material for the advanced student. A new edition, with the introduction preferably in English translation, better produced and, if at all possible (for the editor must have piles of notes and textual comments within easy reach), provided with an extensive additional apparatus clarifying obscure words and expressions of this at times very difficult text, would in my eyes be a desideratum to be looked forward to. The editor is to be commended and hereby encouraged to undertake the publication of — in a purely technical sense — a much more readable, new edition.

The Hague, December 1989

G.H.A. Juynboll


In this book Jürgen Weil (in daily life a nuclear physicist, not an arabist, as so it would seem) deals with the third chapter of a book about "A Thousand and One Slave Girls", in which hundred names are presented in the form of riddles which are often explained at the same time by an explanatory text in prose (tafsīr). Weil begins with short chapters about the book which he studied from a Viennese manuscript (Nationalbibliothek, Wien, Flügel Katalog-Nummer 387). The Medieval author of the Al-fāriya wa-gāriya seems to be a little known poet named 'Ali ibn
Muḥammad ibn al-Riḍā ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī al-Muṣāwī al-Ṭūsī, also known as Ibn al-Sharīf Dārtarkhwān al-‘Ādhī (GAL (2) 1, p. 432; Kahālah, 1959, VII, pp. 197b-198a). He was born in 589/1193 in Ḥamāh (Syria) and died in 655/1257.

The Vienna Manuscript seems to be one of the most beautiful possessions of the Arabic collection in the Austrian National Library. It contains 255 folia (20 × 14 cm.) which are subdivided into eight chapters dealing with respectively 250, 50, three times 100, 211, 45 and 145 epigrams about slave girls. The Medieval author of the Alī ḥāriyah wa-ḥāriyah seems to have first written a book on A Thousand and One Male Slaves (Alī ḥawālum wa-ḥawālum; see GAL I, p. 352) from which he drew the inspiration to write the present book. Each chapter of the book presents a different characteristic of girls: e.g. their qualities, their clothes, class, religions, tribes or countries of origin, their arts and professions, and name-riddles (the third chapter).

Since 1963 Jürgen Weil has published several articles on chapters or individual poems belonging to the above manuscript (see his bibliography, pp. 179 sqq. and introduction, pp. 4-5). In a few pages, Weil gives an impression of the genre of poems in the other chapters of the book, many of which have already been discussed in other articles by Weil. However in this introductory chapter he has only given translations, not the Arabic original (‘da es sich dabei nur darum handelt, einen allgemeinen Eindruck zu gewinnen, beschränken wir uns auf die Übersetzung’).

Weil also gives an analysis of the riddle principles. He distinguishes various levels: optic, graphemic, phonologic, lexemic, psychologic. This is a different form of explanation than Lausberg’s two levels, i.e. “Spielebene” and “Ernstebene”1), or the definitions quoted by Smoor in a recent publication on riddles2). Weil distinguishes in total 16 categories of riddles.

The name riddles of the slave girls are presented in the next section. These constitute the bulk of the book (pp. 26-170). Each of the 100 riddles starts on a new page; sometimes riddle and explanation require more than one page. Weil gives a full transliteration of the text of the poems which each consists of three lines; then he gives a translation in German; followed by a transcription of the tafsīr (‘explanation’) in the manuscript. If it is not given, the notion of wādīh has been written in the margin of the manuscript to indicate that the riddle is clear and needs no comment. Thereupon Weil indicates metre and rhyme, and gives his own comment. Finally, he indicates in numerical form which categories of riddles are involved (see the previous chapter). From a poem in the manuscript reproduced in facsimile on p. 25, it would appear that the poem itself and the comment is almost entirely vocalized. This of course facilitates the interpretation of the poems. The interpretation is also made easier by the fact that the solution is given in the introductory line of every poem, e.g.: ‘And he said about a girl whose name was Ghāziyyah...’. In many cases, however, the tafsīr is good enough to solve far-fetched word and letter plays which would have otherwise remained unsolved.

Although the main solution of the name-riddles is given at the beginning and comments are available on passages which could otherwise be puzzling, the reader will sometimes still be confronted with problems in the lines of poetry and might occasionally prefer translations different from those given by Jürgen Weil. Nevertheless, because of the transcription from the Arabic the reader can check for himself the translations, should he so wish to do.

At the end of the book (pp. 181 sqq.) Weil provides a glossary with technical literary and metrical terminology, and a bibliography.

It is possible from this book for the reader to gain a good impression of a late genre of Arabic poetry which possibly developed from the description of ghilmān and jāwārī in the wine drinking scene in which cup-bearers are depicted who were frequently non-Arabic taken from foreign countries, or religious minorities. Since the cup-bearers were often described as gazelles, with whom the drinkers were in love, love motifs frequently occur. However, in the short poems represented in this collection, references are seldom made to the wine scene. Ghilmān and jāwārī books also seem to exist as an independent genre in Persian and Turkish literature.

Amsterdam/Leiden, 9 September 1989

Arie Schippers


La Maison Meiner, dont l’intérêt pour la philosophie et la théologie est en particulier documenté par le nombre de volumes de sa série consacrée à ces thèmes, est décidée à apporter à l’Islam un intérêt spécial, ce qui se traduit aussi par d’autres travaux de présentation et de traduction. Le traducteur de ces deux petits livres les a choisis non seulement parce que tous les deux appartiennent à la dernière
