



## "يَرْذِي ءامِلُ عَلَابِ رَعْشَلَا الْوَلْوَ | "Were it not that poesy tarnished scholars"

### Text Information

Author | Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiī

Language | Arabic

Period | 8th Century, 9th Century

Genre | Poetry

Source | Dīwān al-Imām Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiī, ed. Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm Haybah. al-Qāhirah: Maṭba'at al-Taqaddum, p.18

Collection | What Makes A Good Life? Poetic Reflections from the Premodern World

URL | [https://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/al\\_shafii\\_were\\_it\\_not\\_that\\_poesy/](https://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/al_shafii_were_it_not_that_poesy/)

Translation and introduction by Sherif Abdelkarim.

### Introduction to the Text

"Were it not that poesy tarnished scholars" amounts to some of the most famous lines in Arabic poetry. The poem comes from the collected works ascribed to Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiī, better known as al-Imām al-Shāfiī (767–820). We have no extant manuscripts from his period that include his poetic works, which appeared in various anthologies since the Middle Ages. Only relatively recently, at the turn of the twentieth century, was the poetry ascribed to him published in a single *dīwān*, or poetry collection. These poems were penned by different hands at different points in history. In the preface to his second edition of the *dīwān*, Dr. Mujāhid Bahjat notes that the majority of poems ascribed to al-Shāfiī may be ascribed to other poets or are otherwise unconfirmed as his own; he traces only twelve directly to him, whereas a given edition may include over 160 poems and poetic fragments [Bahjat, 3-4, 19-20].

Although primarily recognized as the namesake to one of the four main jurisprudential schools (or *madhāhib*, sg. *madh'hab*) in Sunni Islam, al-Imām al-Shāfiī equally distinguished himself as a master of language and *adab* (*belles-lettres*). Growing up, this descendant of the prophetic line of the Banū Hāshim tribe lived among the Hudhayl—a clan known for the purity of their Arabic—in order to immerse himself in the study of the language. This training made his reputation as a poet and poetic critic. Years later, in Baghdad, the famed philologist and grammarian al-Asmaī (d.828) would visit al-Shāfiī to take Hudhayl poetry from him. As did all eminent scholars who sought him out (there were many), he marveled at his double command of language and poetry.

al-Imām al-Shāfiī was born in Gaza in 767. With the death of his father, he and his mother moved to Mecca two years later. His pursuit of *ṭalab al-ilm* (knowledge) brought him at a young age to Medina, where he studied *hadīth* (prophetic narrations) and *fiqh* (Islamic law) under al-Imām Mālik ibn Anas until the latter's death in 795. He then accepted a post in Yemen as governor of Najran, although a revolt in 803 prematurely ended his political career when it led to his arrest and summoning to the court of the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d.809) in al-Raqqah, a city in Syria. There, he would meet the jurist Muḥammad al-Shaybānī (d.805), who helped secure his acquittal. Under al-Imām al-Shaybānī's tutelage, al-Shāfiī relocated to Baghdad. Among al-Shāfiī's most important students there was al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d.855). al-Shāfiī would make one more major move in 814 for Egypt, where he continued to study and teach a variety of subjects, primarily jurisprudence, until his death in 820 at the age of 54.

The verses ascribed to al-Shāfiī probably reflect a lifetime's worth of occasional compositions and pronouncements, and certainly reflect their author's erudition, fine manners, and familiarity with classical meters. Precise and brief, the poetry employs a range of sophisticated rhetorical strategies nevertheless, from *ṭibāq* (contrariety) to *bayān* (eloquence), to *jinās* (paronomasia), to additional instances of *bādī* (ingenuity)—stylistically unique tropes and schemes [Bahjat, pp. 29-37, 42-43]. Thematically, the poems touch on the matters of wisdom literature, including personal comportment, friendship, the pursuit of knowledge, and the cultivation of virtues.



Muhammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiī. "Were it not that poesy tarnished scholars" | "لو لا الشعر بالعلماء يزدري". Trans. Sherif Abdelkarim. *Global Medieval Sourcebook*. 2021. [sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/al\\_shafii\\_were\\_it\\_not\\_that\\_poesy/](https://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/al_shafii_were_it_not_that_poesy/).

### Further Reading

Bahjat, Mujāhid Muṣṭafā, editor. "Muqaddimat al-Ṭab'ah al-Thāniyah" ["Preface to the Second Edition"]. In *Dīwān al-Shāfiī: al-Imām al-Faqīh Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiī*, Dimashq: Dār al-Qalam, 1999.

Chaumont, E. "al-Shāfiī", In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, and E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, 2012. Consulted online on 25 August 2020 .

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van Gelder, G., editor. *Classical Arabic Literature: A Library of Arabic Literature Anthology*. New York: New York University Press, 2012.



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### "Were it not that poesy tarnished scholars" | "لو لا الشعر بالعلماء يزري"

Were it not that poesy tarnished scholars  
I would have now Labīd<sup>1</sup> outshine,

Shown more courageous than every battle-lion,  
The House Muhallab,<sup>2</sup> the Banī Yazīd.<sup>3</sup>

Were it not for fearing al-Rahmān,<sup>4</sup> my Master,  
I would have counted the people—all  
people—my slaves.

لُكْنَتِ الْيَوْمِ أَشَعَرْ مِنْ لَبِيدٍ

وَآلْ مَهْلَبْ وَبْنَيْ يَزِيدْ

حَسِبْتَ النَّاسَ كُلَّهُمْ عَبِيدِي

وَلَوْ لَا شِعْرَ بِالْعُلَمَاءِ يَزِيرِي

وَأَشْجَعُ فِي الْوَغْيِ مِنْ كُلِّ لَيْثٍ

وَلَوْلَا خَشِيَّةُ الرَّحْمَنِ رَبِّي

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### Critical Notes

*Note 1* The great Arab poet (d.c.660)

*Note 2* A powerful Arab family of generals and governors.

*Note 3* The storied ruling tribe.

*Note 4* A name of Allāh that encompasses the very possession of mercy.