

Medical Poetry in the Arabic Tradition: A Glimpse

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Summary:

In the Arabic literature, didactic verse was a mnemotecnic device for easily remember basic concepts. For this reason verses were used in many medical treatises. In this paper some medical poems will be considered, with particular regard to ibn Sina's Urjuza fi al tibb (Poem on medicine)

Key words: *Arabic medical poetry, didactic poem, rajaz verse, Ibn Sīnā,*

Literary expression has always excited Arabs's admiration, which are moved by spoken or written words (1). Poetry is indeed considered along with calligraphy and architecture one of the major Islamic art forms. Among the different genres of Arabic poetry, didactic verses were devoted to supply an approachable and simply remembered epitome of a particular field of knowledge. These didactic poems were largely popular in Medieval literature and were generally written in rajaz verse, a metre employed in Arabic poetry, which is a kind of iambic metre whose pattern of syllabic repetitions produces a jingling sound that is particularly easy to remember (2). The rajaz metre has been in use since the earliest times of Arabic literature (3). Many authors consider as the father of didactic Arabic verse Abān b. Abd al-Hamad al Lahiqi, who established it as a genre of poetry. Numerous medical treatises, as well as essays on other subjects such as astronomy, agriculture, grammar, hippology etc. were written in verses to help learners imprint basic notions in their mind. Indeed the rajaz verse is quickly learned, because its stanzas are short and its rhythm light. The best known medieval Arabic didactic medical poem was the Urjuza fi al tibb (Poem on medicine), written in rajaz verse by Abū'Alī al-Husayn ibn 'Abd Allāh Ibn Sīnā, known in Europe as Avicenna. Urjuza fi al tibb (Poem on medicine) became very popular during the European Middle Age, thanks also to the Latin translation made in the middle of the 12th century by the Italian Gherardo da Cremona (who rendered the Arabic science available to European scholars through his Latin translations of the major Arabic works) and to that made, a century later, with the title of Avicennae Cantica, by the French Armengaud de Blaise (physician of the king James II of Aragon and of the Pope Clemente V) (4). It consists of two parts, the first on general medical principles and the second on regimen and therapeutics, and is composed by 1326 poetry lines. The poem confirmed the

basic of Avicenna's theory and practice: principles, observations, prognosis, suggestions on therapeutics by means of diet, drugs and surgical techniques. The opening phrase of the Ibn Sina's Urjuza: "The medicine is the art of health preserving and, in case, of the body diseases curing" could summarize, if it is possible, the Ibn Sina's medical theory. The poem, published in various 16th century printings, continued to be imprinted and read through the 17th century. It was very popular, as attested by the numerous manuscripts preserved today and has been the subject for various commentaries, the most famous written by the Spanish physician Abū al-Walīd Mu'ammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Rushd, known in Europe as Averroes. This commentary, most often known as "Sharh urjuzat Ibn Sina fi al-Tibb" (Commentary on Ibn Sina's Poem on Medicine) or Sharh manzumah fi al-Tibb (Commentary on the Poem on Medicine), is a prose interposed with Ibn Sina's poem.

Other Ibn Sina poem's commentaries has been written in the 15th century by Mūsā ibn Ibrāhīm al-Baghdādī (this commentary is the only al-Baghdādī's medical treatises preserved today) and by Alī ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Haydūr who is above all known as a writer on plague.

Ibn Sina is also considered the author of other didactic poems, as: Urjūzah fī ta'rīf al-nabwā-al-bawl (A Poem on the Knowledge of the Pulse and Urine) This is a short didactic poem written with the aim of indicating features of the pulse and urine which could be useful in medical prognostics.

Urjūzah fī amrā jafn al-'ayn (A Poem on Diseases of the Eyelid), a short didactic poem which includes many eye's diseases.

Urjūzah fī tadbīr al-ihhah fī al-fuṭūl al-arba'ah (Poem on the Regimen of Health in the Four Seasons), which circulated under several other titles, as urjūzah fī al-fuṭūl al-arba'ah (poem on the four seasons), urjūzah fī al-fuṭūl al-arba'ah al-da'ir fī al-sanah, (poem on the four seasons progressing through the year) (5).

Many other authors wrote didactic poems on various medical topics, as the case of the 14th century vizier of Granada Ibn al-Khatīb, also known as Lisān al-Dīn, whose poem in rajaz verse al-Manzūmah fī al-ibb (The Poem on Medicine) refers to diseases of different parts of the body and their treatment, beginning with headaches.

Subjects as venesection, the evacuation of humors, and circumcision are present in the rajaz poems of Shams al-Dīn Mu'ammad ibn Makkī, a medical writer which likely lived before or in the early 17th century: Urjūzah wajīzah fī 'adād al-'urūq al-maf'ūdah (A Short Poem on the Number of Vessels for Bloodletting) a 20-line didactic poem on bloodletting techniques; Urjūzah fī jadhab al-khil (Poem on the Evacuation of Humors) a 12-line didactic poem on purging and Urjūzah fī al-khitān (Poem on Circumcision) a 30-line didactic poem. To Ibn

Makkī is also attributed a poem which summarizes the Kitab al-Buthur (The Book of Pustules) also called Risālah fī al-Qa āyā (The Essay on the [25] Premises), that was falsely ascribed to Hippocrates (5).

The 12th century Arab physician, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Abd al-Malik ibn Muhammad ibn Tufail al-Qaisi al-Andalusi known in Europe with the latinized name of Abubacer, wrote a "rajaz poem on Medicine" containing many informations about diagnosis and therapeutics, which may shed considerable light also on other areas of medical history. Certainly Ibn Tufayl is best known today for his philosophical novel "Havy Ibn Yaqzzam, (Alive Son of Awake)", which is told to have inspired Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" (6).

The 14th century trader, rather than physician, Nāgawrī, Shihāb al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Karīm Qivām composed a Persian metrical compendium on therapeutics consisting of 164 chapters, known under two titles: Shifā' al-mara (The Healing of Disease) and ibb-i Shihāb-i (The Medicine of Shihab). This metrical therapeutical guide was one of the main sources for the Tuhfat al-mujarrabat, a later anonymous treatise of Persian medical prose.

The didactic poem Jawāhir al-maqāl (The Gems of Discourse) written probably in the 17th century by 'Alī ibn shaykh Mu ammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahmān covers all aspects of medical theory and therapeutics including, among other subjects, "the malady of the elephant" (da' al-fil, or elephantiasis) and varicosity (al-sifaq al-dawali).

Besides the above cited poems written by known authors, there are didactic anonymous poems dealing with various subjects, such as the following three short Persian poems: Bur' al-sā'ah manzūm (Cure in an Hour), most probably based on a treatise by Abū Bakr Mu ammad ibn Zakarīyā' al-Rāzī (d. ca. 925), known in Europe as Rhazes, deals with the ailments that can be speedily cured.

'Ilāj-i va-'alāmat-i dā' al-asad (The Treatment and Symptoms of Leontiasis) refers to the treatment and symptoms of a form of leprosy called da' al-asad (ailment of the lion).

Dar bayan-i narah va han (On the Explanation of Male and Female Genitalia), on sexual hygiene.

The use of medical didactic poems falls within the Arab tradition, which always paid a great attention not only to the clinical treatment of the patients, but also to the education of medical students and to the medicine development.

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