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Review Article



On a ‘World of Beasts’

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*A World of Beasts*¹ is the latest product of Anna Contadini’s long-running research program on Islamic paintings and illustrations, that began with her thesis on a Mamluk *Kitāb Manāfi‘ al-Ḥayawān*. And even a superficial glance at her publications demonstrates her long-lasting interest in several aspects Arabic zoography and its iconography. This study is striking in both its clear organization and wealth of information, but these two features do not exhaust its significance. Careful consideration of the nature of the text, its composition, the iconographic project, together with its close relation to the text, as well as its points of contact with comparable works offer a treasure trove of clues, which gives precious information for our understanding of the development of these textual traditions. The thorough analysis of the British Library manuscript Or. 2784 offers us a meaningful case study: an acephalous and mutilated text, nevertheless it still includes the compiler’s introduction and two ‘discourses’ from the two allegedly main sources Aristotle and Ibn Bakhtīshū’, close parallels but no direct antigraph ‘copies’, the original order of the folios dismantled and heavily disturbed.

This state of affairs could describe the condition of many Arabo-Islamic manuscripts and these points are the knots that we must seek to untie, if we are

1 Anna Contadini, *A World of Beasts. A Thirteen-Century Illustrated Book on Animals (The Kitāb Na‘t al-Ḥayawān) in the Ibn Bakhtīshū’ Tradition*. Brill, Leiden-Boston 2012. (ix, 209, 39 colour plates + 15 plates with the catalogue of paintings). ISBN 978-90-04-20100-2. Price € 99.

to reconstruct the tradition behind these texts. Contadini defines MS London BL Or. 2784, and the other manuscripts consulted for the sake of comparison, as 'hybrid' texts, since they deal with the same body of shared zoological lore, but it is not easy to trace more than a few mere parallels among them. Again this is a widespread condition for several manuscript traditions in Arabic (and in other Oriental languages) that we might term fluid as well as hybrid. The author brilliantly guides the reader along a path, that allows him to observe the manuscript—as a combination of both material artefact and transmitted text—from several different points of view.

In the introduction the innovative approach that has characterized Contadini's studies is once again restated: the illustrations should be considered an integral part of the text, the manuscript as a whole artefact, within which text and images operate in a complementary fashion as to convey complex messages. Contadini describes the controversial scholarly practice of analyzing the illuminations as separate elements, when not tearing them barbarically off the volume. Fortunately, just outside the field of Oriental studies, this is not so rare or unheard of. For example, Alberto Vàrvaro recommends both the philologist and the art historian to follow very much the same program, stressing the different role of illustrations and decorations.²

For both the illustrations and the text, the study is strengthened by Contadini's comparisons with other witnesses, coming either from the same painting workshop or painting 'school', and from texts belonging to the same genre. However, Contadini points out how intricate these relations can be, underlining that the illustrations find their best *comparanda* in illustrated volumes that transmit a different text; while the text of the *Na't* also finds its counterpart manuscripts that are not illustrated. The examples come not only from the Arabic tradition: Persian and Syriac texts and miniatures are considered as well. These broad references are fundamental in order to grasp the fluid context in which this tradition was formed, as well as the large span of time and the multiplicity of cultures, which contributed to the shaping of the Ibn Bakhtīshū's tradition.

The second chapter ('The Manuscript') describes the physical and material features of the artefact, also with the support of new technologies for the

2 'Le decorazioni dei margini [...] sono spesso belle e comunque utilissime per ricostruire la storia del codice. Diverso è però il caso dell'illustrazione vera e propria. In questo caso le immagini integrano il testo, ne sono parte altrettanto essenziale che le frasi o i versi, e devono essere quindi tenute in conto dai filologi'. Alberto Vàrvaro, *Prima lezione di filologia*, Laterza (GLF Editori) 2012, pp. 72–73.

analysis of the illustrations and their pigments (the first appendix is devoted to the results of a multi-spectral imaging analysis on inks and pigments, performed by a conservator scientist of the British Library). Contadini has reconstructed the history of the manuscript and its original foliation, pointing out the loss of some illustrations. The process of reconstruction is summarized in two different tables: the first closes the second chapter, while the second fills the second appendix. Both the current and the reconstructed foliation serve as sets of fixed coordinates for the schematic representations: the former concentrates on the relation between the textual contents and the paintings, while the latter offers a detailed description of the paintings. Contadini's accurate reconstruction of the original foliation is reported in detail and this is yet another good practice that the philologist may borrow from the work of the art historian.

The third chapter ('Text and Sources') deals with the complex issue of the sources and the composition of the text. The *Na't* is an original composition drawn of a host of different materials, deriving from both Ibn Bakhtishū's tradition as well as a pseudo-Aristotelian one. More remote possible sources are presented and analysed as well, such as the *Physiologus* and the Syriac medical tradition. In this chapter it is possible to find many clues for the philological study of this textual tradition. The composite structure of the text suggests two different levels of authorial intention: the first represented by the original sources, the other by the compiler of the *Na't*. Likewise, the title is not certain, not only because of its inclusion in two later annotations, but also because it is the result of the juxtapositions of different combinatory elements, common to many other works of this genre: 'manāfi', 'na't', 'ṭabā'i'. Bearing in mind that the common zoological lore is an entangled mass, where everything is similar but nothing the same (as stressed by Remke Kruk), and where consequently every manuscript represents a *unicum*, there is still the hope that the mechanisms of transmissions and variants could be better understood, thanks to the knowledge of a larger number of texts. Moreover, the second level of authorship may turn out to lie in the material's choice and its organization.

The following chapter ('The Frontispieces and Other Human Figures') concentrates on the four illustrated front pages, two with images of scholars and two with princes, allegories of the knowledge's transmission and the representation of power. Their iconographic language is presented through the analysis of single elements as attested in the painting tradition of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the explanation of the dynamics of their interactions.

The fifth chapter ('The Animals in the *Na't*') opens with a sketch of the classification implied by the internal structure of the *Na't*. The order of the entries can be traced back to Late Antiquity and, apart from marking the

difference with the Persian tradition of the *Manāfi'*, the internal order of the work has served as a guide for the reconstruction of the now lost original foliation.

Then some significant textual samples follow, in order to give the reader some idea of the average chapter's structure and so as to specify the contents of the sections devoted either to *na't* or *manāfi'*. The second section of this chapter deals with the narrative elements embedded in the *Na't*. The author has chosen three entries, namely the swan-phoenix, the unicorn (already analysed by Contadini as a case-study)³ and the viper. These examples have been selected largely because they exhibit a combination of textual elements that are derived from different sources. One of them is the *Physiologus*, considered also as a possible link to the Western tradition. The attempt to combine the analysis of the iconographic elements with related contents, tracing parallels with other traditions, is interesting and intriguing, although it does not actually provide much help with defining the textual connections, nor with clarifying the riddle of the sources. The examples have been effectively chosen, as some of the most suggestive animals mentioned in the tradition. However, it could be pointed out that a similar arrangement of narrative elements with their heterogeneous origins can be found also in almost all the chapters, even in the ones referring to more 'common' animals.

The close relation between text and images is always present in Contadini's book, even in its layout: the descriptions and the analysis of the illuminations are always accompanied by high-quality reproductions. Moreover, the volume is crowned by simply fascinating colour plates of high definition, easy to reconnect to the text thanks to a clear system of cross-references.

This book, so apparently devoted to art history, actually offers a wealth of information for the philologist as well, while at the same time providing some suggestions as to how to deal with the complex textual challenges offered by this and by many other textual traditions in Arabic. The study of the manuscript MS London BL Or. 2784 raises the thorny question of how to define these kinds of tradition and also of what would constitute a suitable methodology for handling them. If we turn to Romance philology, with due caution, we may be able to find some useful indications as to how we can move forward in applying the field of the textual criticism to Arabic texts.

In the case of the so-called 'hybrid', 'fluid' or 'active' traditions—those texts which show consistent fluctuations which do not depend solely on the accu-

3 Anna Contadini, 'A Bestiary Tale: Text and Image of the Unicorn in the *Kitāb Na't al-Ḥayawān* (British Library, Or. 2784)', in: *Muqarnas* 20 (2003), pp. 17–33.

mulation of errors in the process of transmission, but on a precise will of re-elaborated version of the text itself, strongly related to the cultural environment of production—we might simply consider each witness as a *unicum*.⁴

However, the intellectual and authorial behaviour of the scribe cannot be known *a priori*, and the phase of the *recensio* remains essential for any deeper understanding of a particular textual tradition. So the excellent work of Contadini on the *Na't* may well be advantageously extended to the other related witnesses.⁵

4 Every variant of a text can be considered separately for editorial purposes. However, a single variant cannot stand for the whole textual tradition, no matter what its particular value might be: ‘Esistono dunque testi che «vivono in varianti» e ci sono giunti in diverse redazioni, ciascuna delle quali è un individuo a sé stante che va trattato come tale dal punto di vista editoriale. Anche nel caso di normali testimoni può essere legittimo seguirne uno soltanto per ragioni particolari quali il suo interesse linguistico, lo studio non del testo in sé, ma del libro medievale nella sua fisionomia individuale ecc. Tutto sta, beninteso, a non contrabbandare l'edizione del testo «secondo un manoscritto» come se fosse l'edizione originale dell'opera in questione’. Alfredo Stussi, *Fondamenti di critica testuale*, Bologna (il Mulino) 2006, pp. 17–18.

In praise of the variant wrote Cerquiglini, and we would like to borrow his words as well to describe the ‘joyful excess’ of the Medieval traditions: ‘In the Middle Ages the literary work was a variable. The effect of the vernacular’s joyful appropriation of the signifying nature suited to the written word was the widespread and abundant enjoyment of the privilege of writing. Occasionally, the fact that one hand was the first was probably less important than this continual rewriting of a work that belonged to whoever prepared it and gave it form once again. This constant and multifaceted activity turned medieval literature into a writing workshop. Usually an anonymous literature, its anonymous state is a modern fantasy [...] or else an admirable medieval strategy.’ Bernard Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant. A Critical History of Philology*. Baltimore and London (The John Hopkins University Press) 1999, pp. 33.

Also Vårvaro has recently examined in depth this phenomenon in Romance literature and has coined the second of the two labels given above for those traditions in which the copyist plays an active role: ‘[...] anche prescindendo dalla problematica suscitata dagli interventi dell'autore, la posizione del copista rispetto al testo è infine assai meno rispettosa: un tipo di tradizione che chiamerei attiva.’ Alberto Vårvaro, ‘Critica dei testi classica e romanza. Problemi comuni ed esperienze diverse’ (1970), in Alberto Vårvaro (ed.), *Identità linguistiche e letterarie nell'Europa romanza*, Roma (Salerno) 2004, pp. 580.

5 Again, a reference to Romance philology might be of some utility: every witness is unique and the careful analysis of each particular version may provide important clues for the critical work. ‘I singoli testimoni non sono meri portatori di errori e varianti, ma hanno una loro specifica fisionomia culturale: conoscerli meglio come individui significa non solo fare storia della cultura, ma scoprire talvolta qualcosa di utile per la stessa critica testuale.’ (Stussi, *Fondamenti*, p. 28).

In this respect, we may quote Cerquiglini as well: ‘Variance is the main characteristic of

A good example of this may be found in one of Contadini's ways of restoring the perturbed original foliation: she rightfully claims that the reconstruction should call upon external sources, namely other books on animals pertaining to the same tradition. The first step towards the *recensio* has been carried out and from this perspective the order of the different witnesses becomes a key internal criterion. It may also offer several indications as to how we can delineate the evolution of the genre, particularly where the possible ways of organizing the material may have evolved in response to the changing needs of its readership. Furthermore, the classification and the structural organization of a particular text remains a precious feature in the grouping of different manuscripts that belong to the same tradition, as well as for wider groups of related texts.

In addition, the analysis of more and more witnesses might lead to a clearer definition of ambiguous categories such as 'manāfi', 'na't', 'tabā'i', categories whose boundaries, pertinences, and peculiar contents are still difficult to grasp.

The situation portrayed above concentrates on internal criteria and leaves little room for stemmatic considerations and mechanic (vain) ambitions; but it might be at the same time the allegedly non-existent remedy against the widespread phenomenon of textual contamination.

a work in the medieval vernacular; a concrete difference at the very basis of this object, it is something that publication should, as a matter of urgency, make visible. This variance is so widespread and constitutive that, mixing together all the texts among which philology so painstakingly distinguishes, one could say that every manuscript is a revision, a version. Setting forth what seems to be a conventionally unorthodox principle does not, of course, keep one from later proposing a typology of variants, if only to examine the degree and nature of variability specific to each work, or each type of work.' Cerquiglini, *In praise of the Variant*, pp. 37–38.

To temper the last quotation, we would again suggest to read another passage of Vårvaro: 'The awareness of the very fertile variability of medieval and modern texts does not by any means imply simply unbridled enthusiasm for variability as such. To begin with, medieval variability (variance) is never the simultaneous presence of variants, but rather the instability of a text in different locations, environments, and times. There has never existed a simultaneous competition of variants except in the margins of the *editiones variorum*. Moreover, neither variability nor its absence constitute value; they are only to be considered circumstances. As textual critics, we look instead for meanings and values; and to do this, competence, preparation and knowledge are required.' Alberto Vårvaro, 'The *New Philology* from an Italian Perspective' (1999), in Vårvaro (ed.), *Identità linguistiche e letterarie*, p. 621.

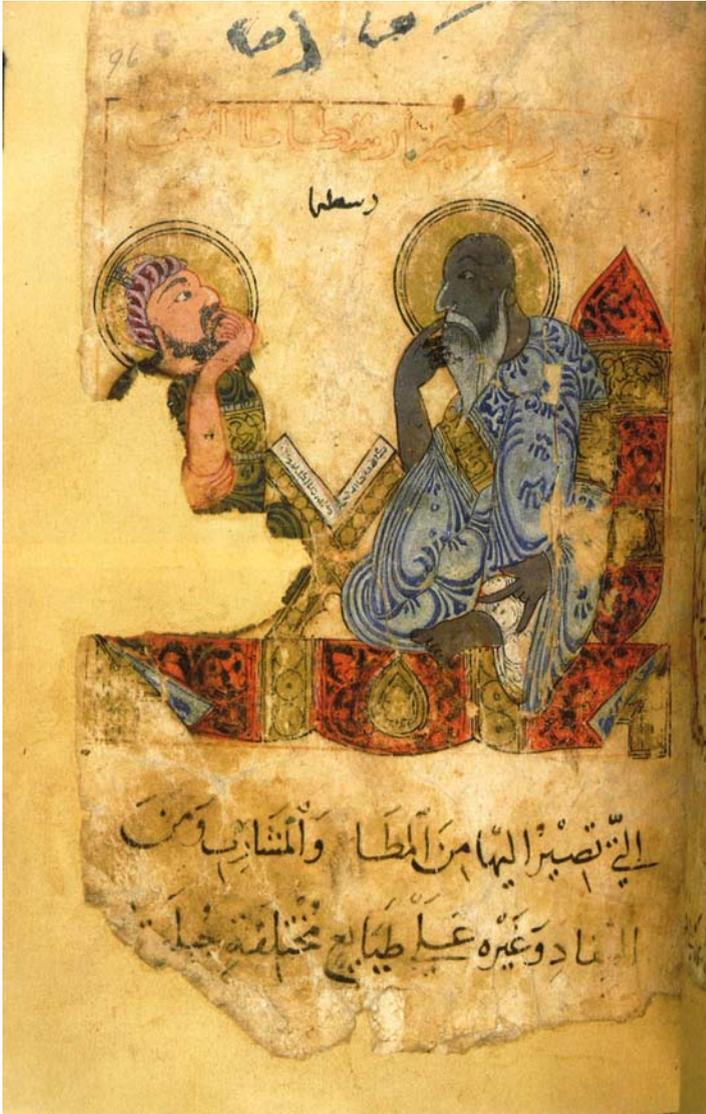


FIGURE 1 *Şūrat al-ḥakīm Aristāṭālīs* (*Image of Aristotle the Sage*), MS London BL Or. 2784, fol. 5^r (96^r). This illustration fills the fourth frontispiece of the London manuscript. The Greek philosopher is portrayed in a thoughtful attitude, while teaching a pupil. Between the two stands a book, as a symbol of the transmission of knowledge. Aristotle is represented with non-Arabic features (his complexion is dark and he does not wear a turban), while the general appearance of the pupil, his garment, and the book and its bookstand suggest an Arab-Islamic scholarly environment. (Plate 19 from Anna Contadini, *A World of Beasts*. 2012).