Observations on the style of the Andalusian poet Ibn Khafaja in the light of some recently discovered poems

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Observations on the Style of the Andalusian Poet
Ibn Khafaja in the Light of Some Recently Discovered Poems*)

Ibn Khafaja, the Andalusian poet whom we know as 'the Gardener' (al-Janndn), lived between 1058 and 1139 a retired, but happy life in the neighbourhood of Valencia. He has already been the subject of several discussions by students of Andalusian poetry. His poetry is usually taken as representing an exceptionally original form of Andalu-

sian poetry which, from the eleventh century onwards developed separately from the Oriental Arabic poetic tradition). The recent article by Bürgel deals at length with Ibn Khafaja's style and also gives a brief survey concerning the question how original Andalusian poetry has been previously discussed by Kudelin, Schoeler and others. Bürgel also mentions a recent contribution by the Soviet scholar Shidfar (1970), who tried to characterize Ibn Khafaja's poetry by 'the contrast of colours' and 'the brightness of dyes').

I, for my part, wish to deal with the question of Ibn Khafaja's originality of style by explaining some of his hitherto unpublished poems. I shall discuss the style of two poems: one short and the other longer. I intend to demonstrate that Shidfar's remarks about the 'colour-basedness' and Bürgel's remarks about the 'humanisation' in Ibn Khafaja's poetry are still valid.

The poems of Ibn Khafaja are characterized in general by a high frequency of stylistic devices: he consciously uses stylistic ornaments and tries to accumulate them. This method of composing poetry was initiated by poets of the eighth century, like Bashshār ibn Burd and some of his contemporaries, the so-called 'Modern Poets'. As Heinrichs, Badawi, Schoeler and others have correctly described, this poetical development can be explained by the social circumstances of these poets and changes in the Arabo-Islamic society at that time. Ibn Khafaja was born three centuries later, so that the ornate style had had time to develop, becoming more embellished; accumulating metaphors; personifications; antithesis and paronomasia.

We shall show Ibn Khafaja's ornate style by discussing two of his unpublished poems, nos. 335 and 368. The Arabic text of poem 335 (folio 4a) goes as follows:

"(1) Give (the wine) round, because the mouth of the Companionship shines brightly, clearly and polished, and the eye of Time is drowsy and sleepy; (2) and because only roses had already been resplendently uncovering their cheeks, whereas a laughing mouth of the white blossom was kissing them; (3) in the morning every rain comes to them and makes moist the garden, (a rain), nourished abundantly by a tenderly loving mother of the rainclouds; (4) the white flowers are scattered around her sides (sc. 1. the roses) "as if coins were thrown on a bride".)"

Poem 335 is a colour based poem with a quotation from a war poem of al-Mutanabbi in the second hemistich of line 4 (kamā nuthirat fa'auqā-l-artist-d-darāhimū). The short poem starts with the wine which has to be passed around in honour of bright drinking companionship and sleeping Time. In this passage drinking companionship and Time have been personified. However, it is difficult to determine what is really alluded to by the mouth or the white teeth of the companionship or by the eye of Time. And perhaps this is one of the main difficulties of Ibn Khafaja's poetry. It is often very difficult to identify the meaning of the metaphor. Sleeping Time perhaps indicates that there are no misfortunes, but it is also possible that most human beings are sleeping; or that it is night, or the last quarter of the night, just before dawn. Time in the sense of misfortune would also fit here: Fate is sleeping, so it is a happy occasion.

The wine is described in line 2. The red roses which represent the red colour are shining from the wine's cheeks, which represent the surface of the wine, because it is kissed by a laughing or splendid mouth consisting of white flowers. Because of the equation white flowers = white teeth = white pearls = splendid dew drops = white bubbles, we can conclude from this antithetic sentence, in which red and white are contrasted, that the wine is mixed with water so that the surface of the wine becomes white instead of red by the multiplicity of the bubbles. Line 2 can also be considered as a description of a garden because many wine drinking scenes took place within such a setting.

Then, in the following line 3, the morning rain is falling onto the garden, making it moist. Also the raincloud is described which is hanging over the garden and personified as a tenderly loving and succulent mother. In line 4 the flowers are scattered around the wine or the roses like al-Mutanabbi's bridal coins. In the original poem by al-Mutanabbi, the horses which have been scattered in the mountains during a war expedition are compared to
The poet shows how personifications and 'colourbased-ness' can be used as leading devices in wine and garden poetry. Now we are going to show how humanisations and personifications occur frequently in the second poem. Poem no. 368 is connected to an anecdotal story, in prose, by which it is preceded. In Ibn Khafaja's diwan combinations of poetry and prose often appear, but the prose which preceded other poems is usually rhyme prose directed at patrons with whom Ibn Khafaja is corresponding; the prose which precedes poem 368 is of a different character: it is story telling; a love story. From the prose sections of the manuscript, and also from poems which we find amongst those already published by M. Ghäzi, we find several opinions and attitudes of the poet towards love. At the beginning of the manuscript there are several passages in which the poet is discussing passionate love, and rejecting the kind of love called 'udhri, the love passion that kills the lover'). In his diwan, he alludes to several love adventures of his own, in which young boys or young girls are involved. He often says that he is old and impotent, stressing his enforced chastity. In one poem a girl calls him uncle and he calls her daughter, stressing the fifty-one years difference in age between lover and beloved (the girl is only fourteen years old) 11). In the story preceding poem no. 368, the poet is not the protagonist. The story runs as follows: one day the poet is going out in the streets and meets a young man in travelling dress, who wishes a favour from him. The poet asks him what he wants. Then the young man tells about his tragic love and he wants Ibn Khafaja to make a poem about it. His tragic love involved a thirteen-year old girl whom he met for the first time in the streets when he was going out for his work. The girl was accompanied by an old woman, who turns out to be her mother. There were certain indications that she was rich, whereas he was impoverished. He fell in love with her as if she was thrown into his soul. His eyes are following her. To describe her appearance, he quotes two lines of a poem which we can trace back to a Bedouin story of al-'Utbi'). After he had said these lines of poetry, the young man followed the girl, ignoring her mother's wishes. She turned away from him. The poet thinks that the girl will repentance but the mother allowed her neither to go to him nor to greet him. The poet considers that she has made a mistake in obeying her mother's wishes.

Below, we will give the Arabic text of poem no. 368 (folio 31 ab) followed by its tentative translation into English:

"(1) O what I never thought would happen, has happened; and a lover has been disloyal whom I could not imagine would be disloyal. The girl was attracted to the young man and wanted to marry him instead of her mother's refusal. The young man, in his turn, was quite overcome by the good education the girl had enjoyed. She had been educated amongst the qiyâdan, well versed in Qur'anic recital; poetry; calligraphy; playing the lute and dancing. The young man became so infatuated that he neglected his business and became even more impoverished. The girl's mother defamed his character to the extent that the girl turned away from him.

After having delivered the poem (see below), Ibn Khafaja adds another anecdote regarding the problems of the young man. Once, the young man saw the girl and her mother coming from the opposite direction. The girl showed repentance but the mother allowed her neither to go to him nor to greet him. The poet thinks that the girl will eventually realize that she has made a mistake in obeying her mother's wishes.

Below, we will give the Arabic text of poem no. 368 (folio 31 ab) followed by its tentative translation into English:

"(2) I laid down my hand upon my heart because of the pain of love for her (lift. him). It looks as if I am unable to imagine what I never thought would happen; and a lover has been disloyal whom I could not imagine would be disloyal. The girl was attracted to the young man and wanted to marry him instead of her mother's refusal. The young man, in his turn, was quite overcome by the good education the girl had enjoyed. She had been educated amongst the qiyâdan, well versed in Qur'anic recital; poetry; calligraphy; playing the lute and dancing. The young man became so infatuated that he neglected his business and became even more impoverished. The girl's mother defamed his character to the extent that the girl turned away from him.

After having delivered the poem (see below), Ibn Khafaja adds another anecdote regarding the problems of the young man. Once, the young man saw the girl and her mother coming from the opposite direction. The girl showed repentance but the mother allowed her neither to go to him nor to greet him. The poet thinks that the girl will eventually realize that she has made a mistake in obeying her mother's wishes.

Below, we will give the Arabic text of poem no. 368 (folio 31 ab) followed by its tentative translation into English:

"(3) I did not know what Humiliation or Love was: they happened; and a lover has been disloyal whom I could not imagine would be disloyal. The girl was attracted to the young man and wanted to marry him instead of her mother's refusal. The young man, in his turn, was quite overcome by the good education the girl had enjoyed. She had been educated amongst the qiyâdan, well versed in Qur'anic recital; poetry; calligraphy; playing the lute and dancing. The young man became so infatuated that he neglected his business and became even more impoverished. The girl's mother defamed his character to the extent that the girl turned away from him.

After having delivered the poem (see below), Ibn Khafaja adds another anecdote regarding the problems of the young man. Once, the young man saw the girl and her mother coming from the opposite direction. The girl showed repentance but the mother allowed her neither to go to him nor to greet him. The poet thinks that the girl will eventually realize that she has made a mistake in obeying her mother's wishes.

Below, we will give the Arabic text of poem no. 368 (folio 31 ab) followed by its tentative translation into English:

"(4) She (litt. he) left preferring separation above a friend, in spite of her mother's refusal. The young man, in his turn, was quite overcome by the good education the girl had enjoyed. She had been educated amongst the qiyâdan, well versed in Qur'anic recital; poetry; calligraphy; playing the lute and dancing. The young man became so infatuated that he neglected his business and became even more impoverished. The girl's mother defamed his character to the extent that the girl turned away from him.

After having delivered the poem (see below), Ibn Khafaja adds another anecdote regarding the problems of the young man. Once, the young man saw the girl and her mother coming from the opposite direction. The girl showed repentance but the mother allowed her neither to go to him nor to greet him. The poet thinks that the girl will eventually realize that she has made a mistake in obeying her mother's wishes.

Below, we will give the Arabic text of poem no. 368 (folio 31 ab) followed by its tentative translation into English:

"(5) I did not know what Humiliation or Love was: they happened; and a lover has been disloyal whom I could not imagine would be disloyal. The girl was attracted to the young man and wanted to marry him instead of her mother's refusal. The young man, in his turn, was quite overcome by the good education the girl had enjoyed. She had been educated amongst the qiyâdan, well versed in Qur'anic recital; poetry; calligraphy; playing the lute and dancing. The young man became so infatuated that he neglected his business and became even more impoverished. The girl's mother defamed his character to the extent that the girl turned away from him.

After having delivered the poem (see below), Ibn Khafaja adds another anecdote regarding the problems of the young man. Once, the young man saw the girl and her mother coming from the opposite direction. The girl showed repentance but the mother allowed her neither to go to him nor to greet him. The poet thinks that the girl will eventually realize that she has made a mistake in obeying her mother's wishes.

Below, we will give the Arabic text of poem no. 368 (folio 31 ab) followed by its tentative translation into English:

"(6) I did not know what Humiliation or Love was: they happened; and a lover has been disloyal whom I could not imagine would be disloyal. The girl was attracted to the young man and wanted to marry him instead of her mother's refusal. The young man, in his turn, was quite overcome by the good education the girl had enjoyed. She had been educated amongst the qiyâdan, well versed in Qur'anic recital; poetry; calligraphy; playing the lute and dancing. The young man became so infatuated that he neglected his business and became even more impoverished. The girl's mother defamed his character to the extent that the girl turned away from him.
- (5) I could not imagine that money is one of the essential equipments of love, while wealth is a precious necklace of it.
- (6) (And I could not imagine) that a girl who swore a sacred oath towards a lover, would wish to forsake it.
- (7) (And that she wants to forsake) such a friendship which she had repeatedly confirmed by being a friend, on the morning when a languor came upon me because of (our) separation.
- (8) On the morning that she went away without saying a word. "You should not believe the oath of those with coloured fingers (sc. 1. women)".
- (9) As if in keeping with the oath there was no absolute and certain guarantee for the love-pact, and no hands stretched out to take the oath.
- (10) The distances bent her away from deceiving, and although her house is near to me, it is far away.
- (11) May God bestow upon me a relationship which is known Arabic poets.
- (12) I could not imagine that Time wished to fill me with suspicions about her nor to suspect that the kindness of beautiful women was unreliable.
- (13) How could it be that within her met both a cruelness of heart and a supleness of her body — may God forgive her! —.
- (14) For me each night lasts a month; sleep never follows; my tears fall down as heavy rain, which can not be contained by my eyelids.
- (15) How can I cease thinking about her, when there is a word. "You should not believe the oath of those with coloured fingers (sc. 1. women)".
- (16) Is it not that (my) love for her is a generous Oath, whereas the Oath loves her too, and the Conversation is sadness?! As often happens in Arabic poetry, the writer only alludes to the real story behind the poem. The clearest allusion is perhaps in line 5, where the poet speaks of the money apparently being one of the equipments of love. The mother turned her daughter away from the lover because of his low descent and poverty. Within the poem we identified one quotation, namely in line 8b where a hemistich has been cited which also occurs in the famous Kitāb al-Muwashshāh, in a chapter where the zurafāʿ (gallants) are counseled to avoid love-passion and to enjoy only young women.)13 But the men should know that women are treacherous. The zurafāʿ, as represented in the Kitāb al-Muwashshāh, are therefore the counterpart of the passionate lovers of whom we are told in the Maṣāʾir al-ṭashḥīḥ (The Battlefields of the Lovers). The two points of view are dealt with in the above mentioned poem, expressing the doubts of the passionate lover, and perhaps also the attitude of the poet himself, who rejects passionate love.

As for the style of the poem, its most striking aspect is its personification of abstract concepts. Two abstracta are personified in line 3: Love and Humiliation which have taught the poet who he really is. The poet likes to play with abstracta, especially when they are opposites such as in line 13, where we find cruelty as the counterpart of supleness: in this line, the moral and external qualities of the girl have been mixed together. In line 16, the personification is more sophisticated: as twentieth-century readers we are not familiar with the form of humanisation of human actions such as the Oath. In lines 17 and 18 the dove has been humanised: especially the dove's mourning is a well known motif in Arabic poetry. In line 21, human beings are equated with kisses. In other poems Ibn Khafaja equates kisses with horses running on the surface of the cheek. Here the kisses take a human form because of their identification with human beings.

Looking at the above mentioned poems nos. 335 and 368, we can confirm the remarks by Bürgel and others about the characteristics of Ibn Khafaja's poetry: 'coloured-basedness' and above all personifications; both of which can be found in these hitherto unpublished poems). Other characteristics of his poetry are genitive-metaphors16), quotations from his own poetry and from that of other well known Arabic poets.

For a thorough analysis of the style of Ibn Khafaja — especially if we wish to discover his originality with respect to Oriental poets such as al-Buhturi — we need not only to take a careful look at his figures of speech, but also at the way in which his poems can be subdivided; the way he quotes himself and the lexicon he uses). A concordance of his poetry which I intend to make, would give us an instrument by which we would be able, not only to restore the difficult and illegible passages which are still in manuscript form, but also to obtain a clearer understanding of the original nature of this Andalusian poet.

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15) See above, notes (1) and (2).

16) Cf. Diwān Ibn Khafaja (Ghāzi, 1960), no. 72 (pp. 122-123); Schoeler (1979), pp. 62 sqq.

17) Schoeler who made a thorough study of Oriental Arabic poets, especially where garden and nature poetry is concerned (Cf. Schoeler (1974)), told me that he had the impression that the device of personification occurs less frequently in al-Buhturi’s poetry than in Ibn Khafaja’s poems.


Abu-t-Tayyib Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn Yahya al-Washsha‘, *Al-Muwashshā‘ aw-i-i-z-zarf wa-i-z-zurafā‘*, Beyrouth (Dār Sādir), 1965.