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Schippers, A.

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CONVENTION AND ORIGINALITY IN THE
POETRY OF ELEVENTH-CENTURY MUSLIM SPAIN:
RECEPTION OF EASTERN POETRY IN THE WEST

ARIE SCHIPPERS
(University of Amsterdam)

It is possible to follow the development of Andalusian poetry up to the tenth
century by means of anthologies such as the Kitāb al-tashbihāt by Ibn al-Kattānī,
a book which rivaled its Eastern counter-part the Kitāb al-tashbihāt by Ibn Abi
'Awn.¹ We also have other sources for the development of Andalusian poetry
during the eleventh century, namely the Kitāb al-dhakhira by Ibn Bassām² and
the Qalā' id al-'iqāb by al-Faṭḥ ibn Khāqān.³ These books give a good impression
of existing opinions about eleventh century Andalusian poetry, since they
are almost contemporary sources.

Later sources include the anthologies compiled by Ibn Saʿīd al-Maghribī,
such as 'Unwan al-murqisāt wa-al-muṭrībāt («Patterns of verses which make
dance and sing»)⁴, the Rāyāt al-mubārizān («The banners of the Champions»)⁵
and the Kitāb al-mughrib fi ḥulū al-Maghribī («The relator of extraordinary things
about the jewels of the West»).⁶ In these and even later anthologies such as
al-Maqqārī's Naḥf al-ṣib⁷ (which, as we know, was originally meant as a kind
of biography of Līsān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb, of which the first part is an intro­
duction to Andalusian history and poetry) we often see the same poems being
quoted.

Apparently the quoted poems were regarded as the best poems by con­
temporaries of these eleventh century poets. They were found to be the most
original poems, although the anthologists were not blind to the fact that the
themes and motifs of Andalusian poetry were deeply influenced by the
models of the East. The Eastern models were often quoted in the context of
a passage devoted to some original lines by a poet from the West, in this
case Andalusia.

In addition to the Arabic anthologies, we possess another source of infor­
mation about eleventh century poetry. That is the secular Hebrew poetry which
flowered during the eleventh and beginning of the twelfth century and then
virtually died out. Hebrew Andalusian poetry was a poetry based on Arabic
motifs and Biblical Hebrew. This type of poetry is a good example of the re­
ception of Classical Arabic poetry in Moslem Spain itself. In most cases we
find conscious imitations of the great poets of the East such as Abū Tammām, al-Mutanabbī, and al-Maʿarrī. In some cases we also find translations of successful lines of contemporary Andalusian poets.

In this paper I wish to give a brief survey of some of the successful lines and themes of the period, which is called in political terms the period of the « petty » or « party kings » (mulūk al-tawaʿif). I want to base myself principally on Ibn Bassām’s *Dhakhīra*.

The *Dhakhīra* is divided according to geographical regions. Part I comprises Cordoba and surrounding territories; part II the Western regions of al-Andalus including Seville; part III includes the Eastern region, i.e. the region of Murcia, Denia and Valencia; part IV includes an anthology of poets who came from foreign lands who praised Andalusia. There are also sections dedicated to Eastern poets who visited Andalusia. Ibn Bassām was also interested in commenting upon the poems in his anthology. The four main parts of the *Dhakhīra* are split up into sections dealing with individual poets. In many places narrations of historical events of the eleventh century are inserted, which are based on the authority of the contemporaneous historiographer Ibn Ḥayyān.

In most cases Ibn Bassām first lists love poetry (nasīb), then madīḥ, and finally various kinds of descriptive poetry (as did Ṣālāḥ al-Dīn in his *Ihāṣah* later on).6 Often he tried to determine the origin of a certain motif within Arabic literature. As a result his book contains many excurses on themes of poetry as treated by Oriental Arabic poets and other predecessors. The subjects of these kinds of excurses include poems about down on the cheeks of boys (the be-
tails of the birds), which was a rather common motif. The dove description by Idrīs ibn al-Yamānī has the merit of making the

description of the sadness of his heart into a visual element of the external description of the dove, namely the red colour in her eyes. The dove’s own cooing is responsible for the colour of its face. This descriptive technique perhaps constitutes the originality of the lines and the innovative nature of the motif. The poem goes as follows:

1 The grey dove whose neck is surrounded by a lace of silk brocade, whose texture can not be copied by the weaving of an imitator;
2 She coos on the green branches with [such] sounds that her face is coloured without a (colour or kuḥl) stick;
3 It is as if her deep-red feet are clothed with shoes of pearls without shoelaces;
4 It is as if she is painted with the kuḥl of the fire of my heart, so that you see your inner flame in her eyes.

According to Ibn Bassām, Idrīs ibn al-Yamānī took this motif from a line by Ibn Hānī al-Andalusī, which goes as follows:

1 Nothing moves me like the crying of the son of a grey dove in whose eyes burn live coals from my chest.

According to Ibn Bassām another poet, Abū al-Raḥīm al-Qudāʿī, also tried to follow the path of Idrīs, but went astray. Ibn Bassām reproaches this poet for his coolness instead of charm in his descriptions. Ibn Bassām thinks that the verses that follow are too cool, and he does not want to belong to the ones that relate these lines.

The famous dove description by ‘Alī ibn al-Ḫiṣān begins with the same formula as Ibn Hānī’s poem. ‘Alī ibn al-Ḫiṣān’s poem is mentioned in the *Dhakhīra* (Part Two, 1: 146) and several other anthologies such as some by Ibn Sa`īd al-Maghribī. We quote his famous description which shows a mosaic of colours:
Nothing moves me like the son of a grey dove crying on a branch between the island and the river; his collar is pistachio coloured, he is azure blue of breast, embroidered his neck; his forefeathers and his back are dark green. He turns around the rubies [of the eyes] eyebrows of pearls; on his hair he has forged a ring of pure gold. The iron of the point of his beak is dark as if it was the point of a pen of silver provided with ink. He leans on the branch of an arak tree as if it was a kind of couch and bows with his neck towards his folded wing. And when he sees how my tears are shed, then he is moved by my weeping and takes possession of the green branch. Then he urges his wings and strikes them flying and my heart flies away to where he is flying, but I do not know [this place].

Perhaps here the combination of colours was appreciated. The innovation must be the use of colour as part of the description of the dove as reflecting the poet’s mood.

Another famous descriptive motif is the pen riddle by the poet Ibn Khafaja. This type of poetry has many antecedents in Abbasid poetry (see Ibn Bassam, Part Three, 2:580). A further excursion is devoted to a riddle about the pen (no. 274, 342). The poet addresses himself to a friend evoking the pleasant life they shared in the past.

Those were the days that the necklace of the rendez-vous was strung between a branch of splendid freshness and a full moon of beauty. It was becoming morning whereas the camphor of the forehead was moist and the musk of the hair was black. The myrtles of the juvenile down did not really appear yet in his garden [on the beloved’s cheek], but were on the point of doing so. We went around a Ka‘bah of temptation in which there was a Zamzam well for our benefit.

After this introduction Ibn Khafaja offers a riddle to his addressee.

Here you have a riddle. It is nodded at by the poem which speaks incoherently. What is one who is shedding tears without being sad and a moon fading away which never becomes full. It is telling lies without knowing it; knows a lot of things without being conscious of it. You will meet in its chest the spearhead of Rabi‘ah ibn Mukaddam [a warrior] and the tongue of Aktham ibn Sayfi [an arbiter]. When its lightning flies, the face of the morning is darkened by him and clouded. It marches without a raised foot and does not walk but it speaks [without talking]. You see it as the sixth of five, which express themselves clearly by speech whereas it is dumb. There where no ear can contain speech nor anyone opens a mouth.

Some of Ibn Khafaja’s images are borrowed from the Eastern poet Abu Tam-mamū (no. 129, line 30; 3:123), who addressed his Maecenas:

He is eloquent, when you want him to speak while he is riding on horseback; he is speechless when you speak to him, while going on foot. When he is riding on the thin five, whereas the gulfs of thought are poured out over him and they are abundant, Both little fingers support him and [other] three fingers press from three directions. You see how his situation is glorious, while he is thin from weakness, whereas his conditions are fat, and he himself meager.

As I said at the beginning of this paper, Hebrew Andalusian poetry is a good example of the reception of Classical Arabic poetry in Moslem Spain itself. The Hebrew Andalusian poet Moses ibn Ezra composed a pen description similar to the one mentioned above. It looks very much like a riddle. Poem 95, a laudatory poem on Abu Ayyūb Solomon ibn al-Mu‘allim, begins with a description of his colleague’s poem. Thereupon follows the pen description:

Although [the pen] is weak, those who are girded with swords in the struggle are too weak for the edge of his teeth like a champion [I Sam. 17:4, 23]; Although a foot-warrior, it smells the battle with chariots from afar, and is well equipped for it, Speaking without tongue and taking without finger yet running as a gazelle without feet. Although it is dumb, the inhabitants of the islands of the sea as well as the land of Sepharvaim hear the purity of its sayings. It gains understanding of the thoughts of all the learned men of a book; it is a calamity for the stupid without a book and a smiting together of the knees [because of fear]; It is as an arrow, and when Solomon throws it, the darkness of a stupid man will be covered with a mantle of lights; [Solomon], on the neck of whose book it arranges necklaces, with which the gold of the Indians from Parvaim can not be compared.

In the above mentioned examples appear some of the themes which were popular in eleventh century Andalusia. These themes were not only popular...
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in Arabic but also in Hebrew Andalusian poetry. The poetical descriptions have in common frequent references to colours and comparisons with precious metals and clothes. Furthermore, paradoxes are stressed, such as «the pen is weak, but its power enormous.»

It is clear that Andalusian poets had Oriental examples in mind as is shown by the Arabic Andalusian anthologies which appear immediately after the eleventh century. In this paper I have tried to deal in a general way with the selection of themes popular in the eleventh century. If we would go deeper into the question of tradition and innovation, or convention and originality, we need to make a difference between conscious mu'adhad or imitations of oriental Arabic poets by Arabic as well as Hebrew poets, and mere elaborations of well-known motifs.

NOTES


5 Ibn Sa‘îd al-Maghribî, El libro de las banderas de los campeones (Kitâb Râdî al-Mudhrîzîn), ed. Emilio García Gómez (Madrid: Instituto de la Comunión de Don Juan, 1942).

6 Ibn Sa‘îd al-Maghribî, El libro de las banderas de los campeones (Kitâb Râdî al-Mudhrîzîn), ed. Emilio García Gómez (Madrid: Instituto de la Comunión de Don Juan, 1942).


9 Ibn Khafâja, Dîwân, Leiden MS. Or. 14.056, 8 ab.

10 Moses ibn Ezra, Dîwân (Shi‘r ha-Holl), ed. Hayyim Brody (Berlin: Schoken, 1935) vol. 1.


