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

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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 counterpart the Kitāb al-tashbihāt by Ibn Abī 'Awn.¹ We also have other sources for the development of Andalusian poetry during the eleventh century, namely the Kitāb al-dhakhīra by Ibn Bassām² and the Qalāʾid al-iqābat by al-Fatḥī 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 'Unwān al-murqiṣāt wa-al-muṭrijāt («Patterns of verses which make dance and sing»),⁴ the Rāyāt al-mubārizin («The banners of the Champions»),⁵ and the Kitāb al-mughribi fī huld al-Maghribī («The relator of extraordinary things about the jewels of the West»).⁶ In these and even later anthologies such as al-Maqṣūrī’s Naḥṣ al-ṭib⁷ (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 introduction to Andalusian history and poetry) we often see the same poems being quoted.

Apparently the quoted poems were regarded as the best poems by contemporaries 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 information 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 reception 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 Tammān, al-Mutanabbī, and al-Ma'arrī. 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-tawāfīf). I want to base myself principally on Ibn Bassām's Ḍhakhīra.

The Ḍhakhīra 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 Ḍhakhīra 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 (nasībah), then madāḥī, and finally various kinds of descriptive poetry (as did Liṣān al-Did in his Iḥāṣah later on). 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 doves, chameleons, pens, flies, the Pleiades, and lights. Below I will try to give some samples of Ibn Bassām's view on the Oriental origin of motifs as used by Andalusian poets of his time.

A well-known topic is the distinction between the two kinds of love: the so-called chaste love, sometimes called 'Udhri, and impudent love. Part Two, 1: 141 deals with poetry on «chaste love» (al-ḥubb al-ṣālih) by Andalusians, Part Two, 1: 144 with poetry on al-ḥubb al-majīn. ('Impudent love'). The reason behind this excursus is Ibn Abbār's impudence, which is dealt with in Part Two, 1:150. Interest in this distinction also occurs in other contemporary sources. In an unedited part of his Dhakhīra for example Ibn Khafāja also amply deals with this distinction.

In the section about Idrīs ibn al-Yamānī (Part Three, 1:336 sqq.) two famous wine lines belonging to a laudatory poem rhyming in ḥā' composed by this poet are discussed. The lines go as follows:

1 Cups which come to us empty are heavy until they are filled with pure wine.
2 Then they have turned light, yes, they almost fly away with their contents. Thus are bodies light with souls.

The fact that Hebrew imitations of these lines were composed by the Hebrew Andalusian poets Moses ibn Ezra10 (no. 72, lines 22-23) and Yehudah Halevi11 (various poems, no. 45) proves the popularity of these lines, which were quoted in Arabic anthologies like the Rūyāt al-muḥārībīn (no. 264) and the Mūrqiṣāt (pp. 20-21).

Moreover, in the section about Idrīs ibn al-Yamānī (especially Part Three, 1: 345) poems about doves by various poets are quoted along with selections from the letters of the Eastern poet al-Ma'arrī in rhymed prose. The author of the Ḍhakhīra seems justified in quoting al-Ma'arrī in this respect, since this motif often occurs in his poetry and rhymed prose, as Margoliouth remarked in his edition of the Letters12. Other examples of dove descriptions, such as the one by Ibn Khafāja (Part Two, 2: 578) and the one by 'All ibn al-Ḥiṣn (see below) also occur in the Ḍhakhīra.

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 cannot 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 shoeleces;
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-Rabi' al-Qudā'ī, 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 'All ibn al-Ḥiṣn begins with the same formula as Ibn Hānī's poem. 'All ibn al-Ḥiṣn's poem is mentioned in the Dhakhīra (Part Two, 1: 146) and several other anthologies such as some by Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribī. We quote his famous description which shows a mosaic of colours:
1. Nothing moves me like the son of a grey dove crying on a branch between the island and the river;
2. His collar is pistachio coloured, he is azure blue of breast, embroidered his neck; his forefeathers and his back are dark green.
3. He turns around the rubies [of the eyes] eyebrows of pearls; on his hair he has forged a ring of pure gold.
4. The iron of the point of his beak is dark as if it was the point of a pen of silver provided with ink.
5. 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.
6. And when he sees how my tears are shed, then he is moved by my weeping and takes possession of the green branch.
7. 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.

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

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 Abü Ayyūb Solomon Ibn al-Mu'allim, begins with a description of his colleague's poem. Thereupon follows the pen description:

6. 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 [1 Sam. 17: 4, 23];
7. Although a foot-warrior, it smells the battle with chariots from afar, and is well equipped for it,
8. Speaking without tongue and taking without finger yet running as a gazelle without feet.
9. 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.
10. 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];
11. It is as an arrow, and when Solomon throws it, the darkness of a stupid man will be covered with a mantle of lights;
12. [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'aradat 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 Râydî al-Mubdrîzin), ed. Emilio García Gómez (Madrid: Instituto de la Enciclopedia de Don Juan, 1942).

