Notes & Queries

[As contributions to this section, the Editors welcome small items of traditional materials, inquiries designed to elicit information about such materials, and announcements of significant folkloric events. Discussion should be brief.]

Reconsidering the Iranian Sources of a Romanian Political Joke

ULRICH MARZOLPH

In a recent contribution to *Western Folklore*'s "Notes and Queries,"[1] Mahmoud Omidsalar identified in 12th century Iranian sources what he takes to be early variants of a Romanian political joke collected and annotated by Banc and Dundes.[2] Those of us engaged in the field of comparative literature appreciate references to and discussions of sources difficult to access. The value of Omidsalar's paper in this respect is limited, however, as it lacks recourse to the standard works of reference and leads to far-fetched and superficial conclusions. Let me once again quote in full the joke under discussion:

A man is running down a Bucharest street. A friend stops him.
—Why are you running like this?
—Didn't you hear? They have decided to shoot all camels.
—But, for heaven's sake, you are not a camel.
—Yes, but these people shoot first, and then they realize you are not a camel.

Omidsalar's presentation of three 12th century Iranian sources takes as a starting point the mention of Sa'dī's (d. 691/1292) *Gulistān* in H. Schwarzbaum's *Studies in Jewish and World Folklore*,[3] cited by Banc and Dundes in their annotations. As far back as 1965, Muḥammad Khazā'ilī's standard commentary on this famous work of Persian literature pointed to Anvarī's (d. ca. 565/1169) verse rendition of the tale, given by Omidsalar as the second item, a "possible source" of Sa'dī's version.[4] (Omidsalar does not, incidentally, quote Khazā'ilī's commentary.) The third Iranian version cited, the one in Rūmī's (d. 672/1273) *Mathnavī*, had already been indicated in the Addenda

1. M. Omidsalar, "A Romanian Political Joke in 12th Century Iranian Sources," *Western Folklore* 46 (1987): 121–124.
2. C. Banc and A. Dundes, *First Prize: Fifteen Years (An Annotated Collection of Romanian Political Jokes)* (London and Toronto, 1986), 33–34.
3. H. Schwarzbaum, *Studies in Jewish and World Folklore* (Berlin, 1986), 92.
4. Muḥammad Khazā'ilī, *Sharḥ-i Gulistān ("Commentary on the Gulistan")* (Tehran, 1344/1965), 196, 268, note 430.

to Schwarzbaum's erudite notes,[5] a fact that Omidsalar as well as Banc and Dundes seem to have overlooked. So, all of the variants presented have long been known and, with the exception of Anvarī's poem, have been easily accessible in fairly reliable translations.

The prose version of the joke by Rūmī, quoted by Omidsalar with reference to a paper by Mujtabā Mīnuvī,[6] is none other than the prose heading immediately preceding the versification in Rūmī's work, a procedure he quite often employs and easily verifiable by checking either the text or translation in Nicholson's edition.

The aforementioned are minor points of criticism; the major shortcoming in Omidsalar's presentation is the problematical conclusion he reaches towards the end of his paper. By deducing that Anvarī—the earliest of the mentioned poets—"must have heard and learned the story in his adult life," Omidsalar feels encouraged to "safely" push back the "prevalence of the story in the Iranian oral tradition . . . to the 11th or maybe even the 10th century A.D."[7] This statement requires a distinct correction.

Omidsalar neglects the well-known fact that a considerable amount of the narrative material elaborated by the early Iranian poets, especially those of a mystic nature such as Rūmī, originates from Arabic sources. Literature in the Persian tongue was still a quite recent phenomenon and Arabic continued to be the language of learning for some time to come. So it was a matter of course for 12th century Iranian authors to possess a solid knowledge of Arabic, enabling them to integrate and assimilate material of Arabic provenance directly from the primary sources. Besides these general considerations, which might have led Omidsalar to question his own conclusions, the consultation of yet another standard commentary—by Badīᶜuzzamān Furūzānfar dealing with the sources of the tales mentioned in Rūmī's *Mathnavī*[8]—would probably have helped to correct the author's limited perspective. Furūzānfar, besides quoting Saᶜdī's version, in the first place gives a full rendition of what he considers, carefully, to be the ultimate origin (*ma' khadh*) of the tale. It is found in the book formerly regarded as appendix (*dhayl*) to *Zahr al-ādāb* ("Blossoms of Refinement") by the North African author Ibrāhīm al-Ḥuṣrī, nowadays published separately under the specific title of *Jamᶜ al-jawāhir* ("Collection of the Jewels").[9] Ḥuṣrī died in 413/1022, 140 years before Anvarī. His version of the tale runs as follows:

> This [i.e., the aforementioned anecdote in Ḥuṣrī's book] is similar to what is told about the poet al-Ḥusayn b. ᶜAbdassalām al-Miṣrī [d.258/872], commonly known as "The Camel."

---

5. Schwarzbaum, 460.

6. Mujtabā Mīnuvī, "Shīvā-yi fārsī-navīsī" ("The Manner of Writing Persian"), *Sukhan* 2(1945): 808.

7. All quotations from Omidsalar, 123.

8. Badīᶜuzzaman Furūzānfar, *Ma'ākhidh-i qiṣaṣ va tamthīlāt-i Mathnavī* ("*The Sources of the Tales and Parables in the Mathnavī*") (Tehran, 1347/1968), 179–180.

9. ed. ᶜAlī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī (Cairo, 1372/1953), 77.

He (once) passed near one of his friends at the (locality) "Pass of the Car-
penters," running as fast as he could. (His friend) said, "Stop at my place,"
because he feared that some calamity might have occurred to him. So he came
to his house, where (the friend) came out [to welcome him] out of view, saying,
"What happened to you, Abū ʿAbdallāh?" He answered, "Did you not know that
forced labor has been imposed on the camels? What can safeguard me against
somebody saying: This is 'The Camel'; so I would be caught and could only be
rescued by intercession!"

As we mentioned, this Arabic version precedes the others in time. It differs
so distinctly from any of the Iranian variants, however, that it can hardly be
regarded as a direct model for Anvarī, even taking into consideration that he
might have dealt quite freely with the original text. Obviously, a joke focusing
on such a strange and rare nickname as "The Camel" is most likely generated
by an adaptation of the general context ("a camel" fleeing) to the specific,
individual situation ("the Camel" fleeing). Thus, Ḥuṣrī's variant—an inven-
tion of a period posterior to the protagonist's actual lifetime—might be re-
garded as a case of anecdotal migration, provided a presumed point of origin
could be proved. That origin, not mentioned by any previous research, might
be the variant located in the encyclopedic work *al-Baṣā'ir wadh-dhakhā'ir* ("In-
sights and Treasures") by Ḥuṣrī's contemporary Abū Ḥayyān at-Tawḥīdī (d.
414/1023):[10]

A fox looked at a camel running (away) and asked, "What is behind you?"
The camel answered, "Oh, could I but sacrifice myself for you! The donkeys and
mules are being pressed into service."
—"What have you got to do with donkeys and mules?"
—"I am (just) afraid of the sultan's injustice."

Tawḥīdī's version, besides being much closer in content than Ḥuṣrī's to
the Iranian ones, is much more condensed than any of them, typical of the
medieval Arabic joke structure. Once taken up by Persian authors, un-
adorned tales such as this would be adjusted in content and polished in style
to become veritable refined gems. The highly artful presentation of this ma-
terial, however, must not obscure the fact that it was largely taken from
non-Iranian, in this case Arabic, sources. This point must be made very clear
if we are to arrive at a suitable appreciation of the Iranian author's literary
achievements.

Tawḥīdī's version of the tale and the variant quoted by Ḥuṣrī can both be
traced back to an even earlier treatment in *al-Ajwiba al-muskita* ("Silencing
Answers") by the author known as Ibn abī ʿAwn (d. 322/940), which pushes
the verifiable origin of the tale back another century. This text has only
recently been made available in a fragmentary and faulty edition,[11] so it is
safer to refer to one of the manuscripts as a source for translation:[12]

---

10. ed. Ibrāhīm al-Kaylānī (Damas, ca. 1960), vol. 2, 719.

11. ed. Muḥammad ʿAbdalqādir Aḥmad (Cairo, 1985), cf. 194.

12. Ms. Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, no. 8317, fol. 144 b.

A camel was seen running (away). It was asked about (the reason for) its running and answered, "The mules are being pressed into service." "Then why do you flee?" "I am afraid of the sultan's injustice."

This variant is even more compact than the one by Tawḥīdī, reducing the set of protagonists to an absolute minimum, as well as eliminating any wording not imperative for a definite grasping of the joke. Of course, this should not be regarded as an active procedure by Ibn abī ʿAwn in comparison to Tawḥīdī's version. Rather, the opposite has taken place. Tawḥīdī picked up an absolutely plain text and supplied it with what he apparently regarded as an unoffensive and necessary embellishment. In a similar, though more productive, way, the transposition of the joke—whether taken from Ibn abī ʿAwn or Tawḥīdī—to the specific context of al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAbdassalām is an elaboration by Ḥuṣrī. His variant, however, is only a sidetrack of tradition, the Iranian authors most likely depending on one of the simpler versions. The plainness of Ibn abī ʿAwn's variant strongly suggests its being very close to an original rendering of the tale. Even a most thorough search, conducted by the present author, for further variants of the tale in medieval Arabic literature, might at most have succeeded in documenting the tale a century earlier, probably in the works of authors such as al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868) or Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889); it did not, however, yield any such results.[13]

At any rate, we can prove the diffusion of the tale in early 10th century Arabic literary sources, thus contesting Omidsalar's assumption of a "northeastern origin for this tale" (123). When dealing with so-called "popular" literature, one has to keep in mind that (though many might have), not all fables and animal tales documented nowadays originated in Indian sources, however "reminiscent of common Indic tales" (Omidsalar, 123) their content and structure may be. For one thing, Arabic authors are known to have borrowed from ancient Greek sources to a large extent. And it does not seem advisable to neglect the possible existence of a vital indigenous Arabic narrative tradition in animal tales, even if today's preserved literary documents do not always allow an exact verification of their origin.

We noted with interest an Egyptian version of the tale, collected in 1964 from oral tradition and included in H. El-Shamy's *Folktales of Egypt*:[14]

A fox escaping from Egypt was running in the [western] desert. He met a camel going toward Egypt. The fox stopped and said to him [panting], "Uhh . . . uhhh . . . Don't go to Egypt! There they get hold of camels and work them to death!"

The camel [frowning in amazement] said, "But why are you running away? You are not a camel!"

The fox replied, "You know it and I know it. But I would have had a hell of a time [trying to produce the papers] proving it!"

13. U. Marzolph, "Motivindex der arabischen literarischen Anekdote," *Fabula* 24 (1983): 275–276.

14. H. M. El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt* (Chicago, 1980), 230, no. 66.

The startling similarity of this modern variant to the Arabic literary ver-
sions dating from the 10th/11th centuries might easily be explained by the
informant's being an (unnamed) "male university student,"[15] who could have
possessed an intimate knowledge of at least one of the early literary sources.
The item thus constitutes a revealing documentation of the (renewed) imple-
mentation of a previously literary tale into "oral" tradition.

Enzyklopädie des Märchens
Göttingen, Federal Republic of Germany

---

15. Ibid.

ULRICH MARZOLPH

Die Quelle der Ergötzlichen Erzählungen des Bar Hebräus*

1. Grīgōr Abū l-Farağ Bar 'Ebrāyā, in der westlichen Literatur allgemein bekannt in der latinisierten Namensform als Bar Hebräus, war von 1264 bis zu seinem Tode im Jahre 1286 Maphrian, d.h. Stellvertreter des Patriarchen und als solcher zweithöchster Würdenträger der jakobitischen Kirche. Er ist in die Literaturgeschichte eingegangen als einer der vielseitigsten und frucht- barsten Schriftsteller syrischer Sprache. Die von seinem Bruder Bar Ṣawmā erhaltene Liste der von ihm verfaßten Bücher zählt mehr als dreißig Titel. Seine vorzüglichen Sprachkenntnisse ermöglichten es ihm, auch auf Arabisch zu schreiben, ebenso wie er viel aus arabischen Quellen schöpfte. Dies teils so sehr, daß Anton Baumstark ihm in der maßgeblichen syrischen Literatur- geschichte eine »nicht selten den Charakter sklavischer Abhängigkeit oder bloßer Übersetzertätigkeit annehmende Arbeitsweise«[1] unterstellen konnte. Neben Werken theologischer, historischer und profanwissenschaftlicher Natur verfaßte Bar Hebräus auch »das im syrischen Schrifttum singulär dastehende Buch der ergötzlichen Erzählungen«[2].

1 Baumstark 313.
2 Degen, R.: Barhebräus. In: Enzyklopädie des Märchens 1. Berlin, New York 1979, Spalte 1238-1242, hier 1240.