Reconsidering the Iranian Sources of a Romanian Political Joke

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In a recent contribution to *Western Folklore*'s "Notes and Queries," 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. 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’di’s (d. 691/1292) *Gulistān* in H. Schwarzbaum’s *Studies in Jewish and World Folklore,* cited by Banc and Dundes in their annotations. As far back as 1965, Muhammad Khazā’ili’s standard commentary on this famous work of Persian literature pointed to Anvari’s (d. ca. 565/1169) verse rendition of the tale, given by Omidsalar as the second item, a “possible source” of Sa’di’s version. (Omidsalar does not, incidentally, quote Khazā’ili’s commentary.) The third Iranian version cited, the one in Rūmi’s (d. 672/1273) *Mathnawi*, had already been indicated in the Addenda

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to Schwarzbaum's erudite notes, 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 Anvari's poem, have been easily accessible in fairly reliable translations.

The prose version of the joke by Rumi, quoted by Omidsalar with reference to a paper by Mujtaba Minuvi, is none other than the prose heading immediately preceding the versification in Rumi'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 Anvari—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." 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 Rumi, 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 Badiuzzaman Furuzanfar dealing with the sources of the tales mentioned in Rumi's Mathnavi—would probably have helped to correct the author's limited perspective. Furuzanfar, besides quoting Sa'di'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 (dha'yl) to Zahr al-‘adab ("Blossoms of Refinement") by the North African author Ibrahim al-Husari, nowadays published separately under the specific title of Jam'al-jawahir ("Collection of the Jewels"). Huarsi died in 413/1022, 140 years before Anvari. His version of the tale runs as follows:

This [i.e., the aforementioned anecdote in Husari's book] is similar to what is told about the poet al-Husayn b. Abdassalam al-Misri [d.258/872], commonly known as "The Camel."

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5. Schwarzbaum, 460.
7. All quotations from Omidsalar, 123.
He (once) passed near one of his friends at the (locality) "Pass of the Carpenters," 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, Abu 'Abdallāh?" 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, Ḥūṣrī's variant—an invention of a period posterior to the protagonist's actual lifetime—might be regarded 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 ("Insights and Treasures") by Ḥūṣrī's contemporary Abū Ḥayyān at-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023).  

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 Ḥūṣrī'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, unadorned tales such as this would be adjusted in content and polished in style to become veritable refined gems. The highly artful presentation of this material, 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 Ḥūṣrī can both be traced back to an even earlier treatment in al-Ajuiba al-muskita ("Silencing Answers") by the author known as Ibn abī 'Awn (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, so it is safer to refer to one of the manuscripts as a source for translation:  

11. ed. Muhammad 'Abdalqādir Ahmad (Cairo, 1985), cf. 194.
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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 āAwīn 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 āAwīn or Tawḥīdī—to the specific context of al-Ḥusayn b. Abdassalām is an elaboration by Ḥusrī. 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 āAwīn’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 . . . uhh . . . 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!”

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The startling similarity of this modern variant to the Arabic literary versions dating from the 10th/11th centuries might easily be explained by the informant's being an (unnamed) "male university student," 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) implementation of a previously literary tale into "oral" tradition.

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15. Ibid.
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Die Quelle der Ergötzlichen Erzählungen des Bar Hebräüs*

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7. Literaturverzeichnis
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1 Baumstark 313.