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## “At Least Like a Dog Treat me”, Says Not the Sufi: The Use of Animals in Poetry as Didactic Tools, T-S Ar.40.204

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### Introduction

Animals are often deployed in literature, including poetry, for the purpose of education, particularly virtue education. One intriguing aspect of this is how animals are used to convey meaningful insights relating to character-formation, typically through metaphors and comparisons. In the Judaeo-Arabic and Arabic fragments that I am specifically analysing, there are usually snippets of mention regarding animals, subsumed in larger pieces. Although, understandably most of the fragments in the Cairo Genizah are written in Hebrew script, either Hebrew language or Judaeo-Arabic (that is Arabic transliterated in the Hebrew alphabet), a sliver of them are also written just in Arabic. The fragment we are concerned with here belongs to the latter type. However, unlike the previously analysed *Kallia wa-Dimna*, the present poem is relatively laconic and therefore will attract greater contextual analysis.<sup>1</sup>

### Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī and Muslim and Jewish Sufism

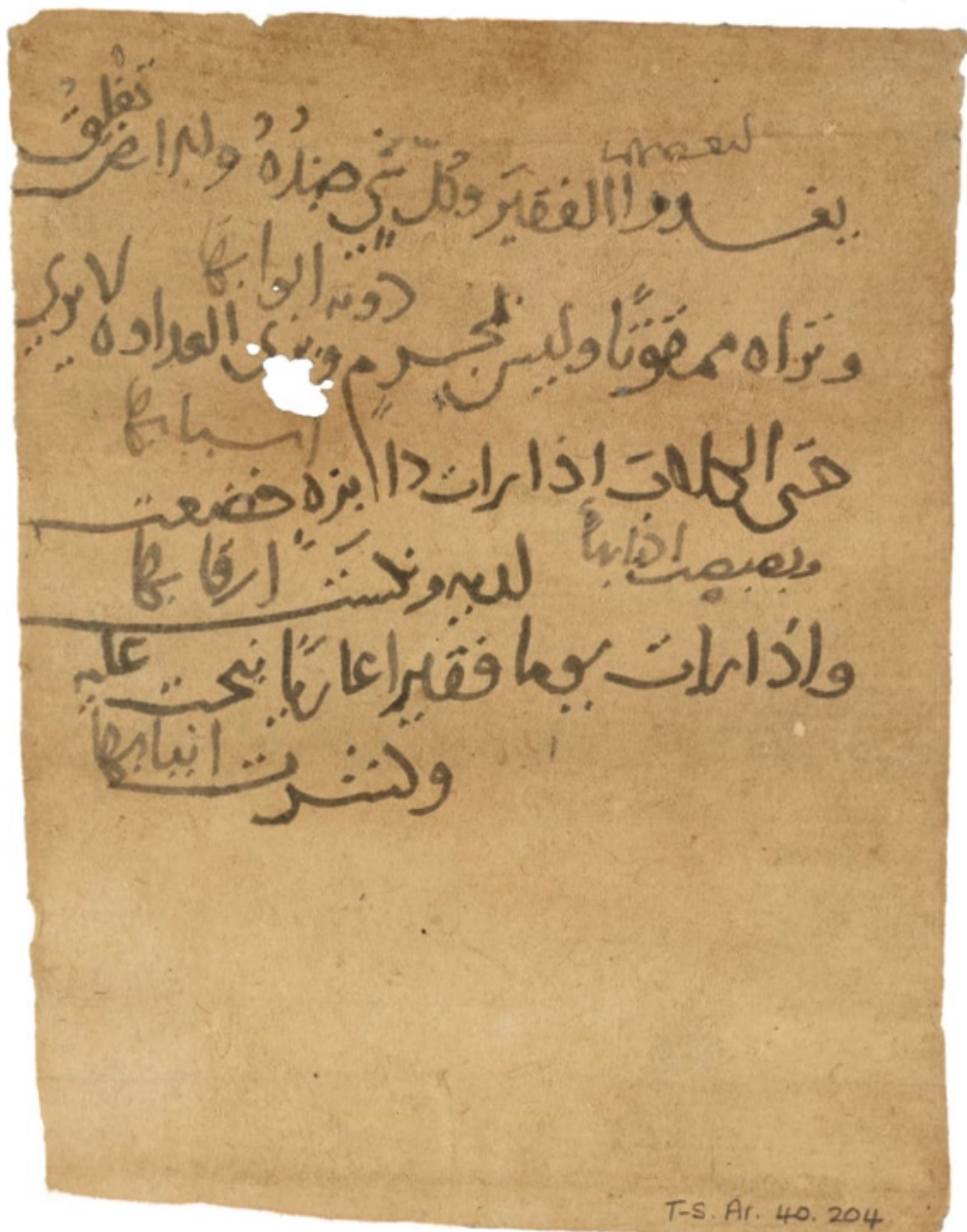
The particularly poignant fragment (below) contains the poem of the famous Fatimid litterateur Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d. 1057 CE), a deist poet-philosopher who lived an ascetic lifestyle advocating anti-natalism, and who was blinded in early childhood after suffering from smallpox.<sup>2</sup> Given the humanist and moral background of the poet, it is unsurprising that his poetry may have appealed to Jews, not that Jews were averse to references even more Islamically substantive. However, even though al-Ma‘arrī was not considered to be a Muslim, and was critical of Judaism, Islam, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, he was an advocate of social justice. Due to the spiritual feel of the poetry we may be tempted to ascribe its composer as a Sufi, although al-Ma‘arrī was unlikely to be inclined towards Sufis, not even an orthodox contingent of them. He said:

I find that the group of Sufis is a wicked group. Say unto them – how contemptible indeed is *huḷūl*!<sup>3</sup> “Did God say to you while you were worshipping Him: ‘I want you to eat like an animal and dance?’”<sup>4</sup>

Among the controversial Sufis who mention dogs is Abū al-Husayn al-Nūrī (d. 907 CE), about whom it is said that when dogs would bark, he would say: “Here I am at Your service” (*labbayka*).<sup>5</sup> The irony is that al-Ma‘arrī may have culturally imbibed Sufi tropes, even though he was unimpressed by either Islam or Judaism, and yet, his teachings were favoured by Jews, since they probably resonated with Jewish Sufi thought, a phenomenon which evidences the cross-pollination of Muslim Sufi ideas and practices in the Jewish milieu of Cairo.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Egyptian Jewish pietism has been explicitly acknowledged through unearthing precisely such Genizah fragments, which detail the influence of the increasing crystallization of Sufi practices and the adoption of parallel initiation and formalisation rituals; Jewish Egyptians thus “drew openly from the spiritual matrix of Sufism.”<sup>7</sup> This does not always mean that matters were cordial, or at least that intercultural *faux pas* were frequently committed. A Jew complains in a letter to a prominent notable about how he was snubbed by the son-in-law of a gentile who complains: “When I came to his door, he shut the door to my face; I stood at the door like a dog” [Proverbs 26:11]. The gentile will almost certainly have trespassed the norms of affable conventions in committing this slight and caused injury to his fellow’s feelings, as the latter mentions he stood there continuing to knock embarrassingly, while other gentile neighbours looked on.<sup>8</sup>

### Teaching Morals through Poetry

Some of the above insights about al-Ma‘arrī give us a sense of why such poetry would be meaningful to him. The pauper’s tale below of being ill-treated is regarded as being worse than that which the dog encounters. The dog it seems is at least able to elicit a neutral reaction from people (if not a favourable one, it is not clear which it is) when it displays contrition by wagging its tail and lowering its head. The pauper, on the other hand, is not fated the same, for the pauper removes his clothing, an act of vulnerability, and like the dog, attempts to curry favour with people, in the way a dog succeeds to, but to no avail for the pauper. This is the case despite no untoward conduct on his part, and nothing which he can reasonably fathom.



### The poem in Arabic, T-S Ar.40.204, recto

	بعد الفجر وكان شئ منهذء والأرض تغلق
The pauper leaves in the morning and everything opposes him while the Earth closes	تونه ابوابها
On him her doors	وتراه ممقوتاً وليس بحرم ويرى العادء لا يرى
And you see him loathed, and yet he is not a wrongdoer, and he sees enmity whose	اسبابها
Causes are unknown	حتى الكلاب لنا راء ذاء بزهء خصمت
Even the dogs when they see that they are defeated, they feel subdued	لذنبها انبىء ونكتت ارقبها
And they wag their tails to him and subdue their necks	نكتت عليه وانا راء يوماً فقراً عزاء <sup>10</sup>
Yet should a pauper one day be seen naked, he is barked at	ونكتت ابوابها
And with their fangs they grimace	

This didactic poem is aimed at teaching morals, that is, how discrimination in favour of an animal may relegate a human to an inferior status. This continues to be the case when the human imitates the subordination of the dog by undressing, thereby showing vulnerability and meekness. It is unclear whether the humiliation suffered by the pauper is at the hands of people who “bark” at him (and is thus a zoomorphic reference, that is humans showing animal qualities on account of their irascible reaction),<sup>11</sup> or whether the contempt of the pecunious man is projected by the dog. If even the dog expresses dislike for him, it underlines al-Ma‘arrī’s contention that everything on Earth does in reality disdain the pauper, thus neatly referring back to the initial point outlining the unremitting plight of the indigent.

Nevertheless, there is an expectation created by the poet that the pauper in reality is superior to the dog, but this may be a false equivalence for the Sufi. For those suffering social disdain this may be a reasonable expectation, which is perhaps why the poem appealed to its Jewish amanuensis. We may here question whether a human has the right to believe that he is superior to the dog or indeed any animal? A narration by Mu‘ādh b. Anas al-Juhani (d.c. 699–704? CE) sheds some light on this. He passed by some people who were sitting on their mounts, the Prophet Muhammad encouraged them to sit upon them graciously (*salimatan*), and disembark them graciously, and for them not to take them as seats to converse in the streets and the markets. The reason for this was stated by him thus:

فرب مركوبة خير من ركابها وأكثر تكراً لله تبارك وتعالى منه

“As the one mounted may be better than its rider and more copious in the *dhikr* (remembrance) of God (Blessed and Exalted) than him”.<sup>12</sup> This highlights the tension between philosophically considering points exclusively rationally, as captured by al-Ma‘arrī, which may have been embraced in the intended spirit by the Jewish copyist. It also allows us to consider the strong currents of Islamic and Jewish Sufi mysticism, which afford us an alternative perspective and in which it is not unequivocal that one may deem himself better than a dog. An aphorism which resonates with this is stated by the renowned Sufi, Ahmad Ibn Muhammad ‘Aḷāullah al-Sakandārī (d. 1309 CE): “whoever [س] regards himself as being humble, he is assuredly arrogant”.<sup>13</sup> This is why Tayfūr b. Isā al-Bisṭāmī (d. 875 CE) said in his commentary on this point: “whoever [س] believes that there is someone in creation worse than himself, then he is deemed to be arrogant”; he was asked at one point how may someone then be considered to be humble, to which he replied: “When he does not see for himself either status, or an elevated spiritual state”.<sup>14</sup> While the thrust of the above prophetic tradition seems to grant non-human animals the opportunity to spiritually outdo their human counterparts, it is acknowledged that this is not the general understanding in Islamic theology. The same point may be iterated for the aphorism and its explanation. However, the conceptualisation of animals in Islamic thought as being ontologically superior was definitely influenced by Sufi thought. Often times, the superiority of animals was not expressed absolutely, but was premised on them being better than certain individuals. Mālik b. Dīnār would often sit upon rubbish heaps with dogs, clarifying: “They are better than evil companions”.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, when contextualised such poetry grants to us a vantage point from which to consider such compositions and their ostensibly varied reception among different groups within the Islamicate milieu: applied to the above example, it is at once sympathising with the pauper’s emotion critically as well as uncovering his deficiencies from an alternative, albeit mystical, angle.

### Footnotes

- Ahmed, M. (2021). *Kallia wa-Dimna: T-S Ar.6.32 part of the Arabic book Kallia wa Dimna, story nine – Ṭlād, Balāḡ and Lirāḡt*. [Genizah Research Unit, Fragment of the Month, February 2021].
- Britannica, *Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Maarrī> [accessed 17 December, 2022].
- This refers to the belief of the indwelling of God in His creatures; its incarnationist nature meant it was generally scorned by Muslims (except usually some heterodox sects), and seen to represent something of Christian beliefs where the union of Divinity with humanity is represented in the form of Jesus Christ as depicted in John 1:14. See: Mats Wahlberg, ‘Divine Revelation’, *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2020 [accessed 19 December 2022].
- Helmut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din ‘Attār* (trans. by John O’Kane), (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 510.
- Arin Shawkat Salamah-Qudsi, *Sufism and Early Islamic Piety: Personal and Communal Dynamics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019), p. 140.
- See: Paul B. Fenton, “A Pietist Letter from the Genizah”, *Hebrew Annual Review* 9 (1985), pp. 159–167 (p. 159). Of course the tale in the Qur’an that mentions a dog (*Surah al-Kahf* 18:9–26) is also connected to the Christian culture of the late antique Near East. Theodosius mentions Ephesus as the city of the seven sleeping brothers and dog Viricanus at their feet. Mehdi Azaiez et al, *The Qur’an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur’anic Passages* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016) p. 217.
- Elisha Russ-Fishbane, “Fellowship and Fraternity in Jewish Pietism of Medieval Egypt”, in *Ethics and Spirituality in Islam: Sufi adab* (Leiden: Brill, 2017) 356–378 (pp. 356–357).
- Shelomo D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Genizah*, Vol II The Community (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 291. The word used to describe the neighbours in the letter is the Hebrew loanword *goyim*, גוים, meaning specifically ‘the Muslim [neighbours]’.
- This word is likely to be مرءء (see reference below), in which case it refers to the handler of the dog.
- In *Dhayaṭ ṭarikh al-Baḡhdād*, the word mentioned is مءءلا, and the poem is attributed to Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Uḡbarī, at other times as being that of Muhammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī. However, in checking the *Diwān al-Shāfi‘ī*, this poem was not found. Nonetheless, the final line of the poem in the *Dhayaṭ* states:

إنا راء يوماً فقراً مءءلا مءءلا حرت عليه ونكتت ابوابها

This, in fact, demonstrates the difficulty in the task of transcribing the Arabic from original manuscripts where they are careworn and translating them faithfully without interpolating them, even when there are words missing and one cannot, as in this instance, trace the original poem. In this case, ignoring the controversy of who originally composed the poem, the extra words help the reader to arbitrate who it is that is revealing their teeth, it is of course a dog, since it growls, revealing its canines (نكتت ابوابها). See: Ibn Najjār al-Baḡhdādī, vol 17 of 24 (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-Ilmiyya, 2011), p. 25.

- See: Muhammad Imran Khan, “Seclusion: An Ethical Imperative Driven by the Hadīth?”, in *Hadīth and Ethics through the Lens of Interdisciplinarity*, ed. by Mutaz al-Khatib (Leiden: Brill, 2023), pp. 170–97 (p. 175).
- Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Ahmad b. Hanbal*, vol 6 of 15 (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2011), p. 3330 (15869).
- Ibn ‘Aḷāullah al-Sakandārī, *Sharḥ ḡkam Imam Ibn ‘Aḷāullah al-Sakandārī* (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2002) p. 226.
- Ibid., p. 227. The relative pronoun, هو, is typically reserved for intelligent beings which excludes animals. However, since the Qur’an declares: “To God, prostrate all [س] that are in the heaven and earth” (Q 13:15), the س may be considered to be inclusive of animals. This is germane to Sufi thinking and may very likely have been the intention of the above mentioned Sufi personalities, who thought it necessary to humble themselves even before animals.
- Abd al-Ghani al-Nābulsi, *Takmil al-nu ‘at fi luzūm al-buyūt*, MS Istanbul, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Celbi Abdullāh 385, fols. 357b-376a (1096/1685), 360a.

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