THE USES OF CAPTIONS IN MEDIEVAL LITERARY ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS

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The study of medieval Islamic manuscript painting has benefited much in recent decades from the shift from the mostly stylistic considerations of previous studies to research on the more complex interactions of text and image. There is no text more intimately related to an image than its caption, a text that can perform several roles, including an intermediary one between the main text and the image. This paper will discuss some of the roles that captions played in medieval literary manuscripts, concentrating on three manuscripts whose captions were written by the calligrapher of the main text and are thus contemporary with it.

The evidence for the existence of illustrated literary manuscripts in the first centuries of Islam is scant. The best candidate might be the Kūlib wa Dinna of Ibn al-Muqaffa, for which we have the report of al-Ṭabarî that a judge in the Abbasid period had one at home. However, it does not seem likely, to judge from the surviving manuscripts, that they were ever plentiful, and the earliest surviving examples are only from the thirteenth century.

More prevalent earlier were scientific manuscripts, which also remained popular as a vehicle for illustrated examples. As a category, scientific manuscripts are ones that as a matter of course had illustrations provided with captions. The necessity to differentiate various kinds of shrubs that could be used as medicine, or snakes whose bites affected the nervous system in different ways, or parts of the body that could be operated on, was clearly an essential element of their function. The captions to these illustrations tended to be pithy, there being no need to elaborate an identification that was referred to and explained at greater length in the text. This did not stop the painters from adding superfluous detail, although the most celebrated examples of these, the Istanbul De Materia Medica manuscripts, have captions whose conciseness matches the text rather than the more elaborate paintings.

What was the case with literary manuscripts? First we should define what should be included in this category. The most obvious candidate is the Maqûmî of al-Harîrî, a work celebrated for its literary virtuosity to the extent that it has been wondered...

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1. As typified by the present volume and the conference on which it was based.
2. O’Kane 2003, p. 28.
why it needed any illustrations. However, the stories it contains, even if relying on verbal pyrotechnics, do have a variety of settings and on occasion a considerable cast of characters, all that was needed to spur the artists to create paintings ranging from the masterpieces of al-Waṣīṭī to the highly polished but more barren pictures of the text in the Vienna Nationalbibliothek. 6

The other main candidate for literary manuscripts would be *Kalīla wa Dimna.* 7 This is sometimes included within the category of mirrors for princes, but the amoral character of the stories, and the frequent illustration of the immoral ways of the world, such as those, for instance, that cause the pious ascetic to repent of his desire for worldly goods, suggest that the moralizing of which so much of the text consists was less an attraction than the racy side stories. 8 It was also valued for its literary qualities, Ibn al-Muqaffa’s translation being considered a model of prose.

What kind of information does, or should, a caption contain? There are a number of possible approaches, not only in medieval manuscripts but even within the modern context of providing captions for reproductions of paintings from manuscripts. 9 The answer may partly depend on who wrote the caption, there being three obvious possibilities. The first is the calligrapher of the manuscript, the second is the painter (but one should keep in mind that he and the calligrapher need not be two different persons), and the third is a later viewer.

Consider, for instance, the caption in a Mamluk *Kalīla wa Dimna* painting (Fig. 1) of the story normally abbreviated in contemporary art historical literature to ‘The Perils of Life.’ This, clearly the work of the calligrapher, starts in red ink in a larger size than that used for the main text. Translated, it begins: ‘image of the man falling in the well holding on to the branches while the rats...’—and here the calligrapher realized that for the long caption he wanted, the larger script in red that he was using would take up too much space, so he reverted to the smaller black script that was used for the main text, and continued on the next line, mentioning the dragon at the bottom of the well and the four snakes on which the man’s feet rest, squeezing in the last words by positioning them almost above one another. In this caption virtually everything relevant to the key elements in the painting is mentioned, except for the bee hive and its honey, which the man tastes.

One may contrast this with the caption from a Maqāmāt manuscript datable to the early thirteenth century, 10 illustrating the thirteenth maqāma, in which Abū Zayd poses as an old woman with malnourished children to gain the crowd’s sympathy (Fig. A).

The caption on the left beside the two figures reads surat al-‘aqīq wa-t-siyaa ‘image of the old person and the youths.’ This corresponds to the text, but ignores the painting in which only one child is depicted, and also does not refer to the crowd of people who are Abū Zayd’s audience.

How many literary manuscripts, like the two above, have captions that were written by the calligrapher? In addition to the Maqāmāt, Paris 3929 and the Oxford *Kalīla wa Dimna,* there is one in the British Library, Add. 24350, that has captions but whose paintings were never executed. 11 Only one of these, Paris 3929, has a caption for every one of its paintings. On a number of occasions 12 captions and chapter headings at the beginning of a maqāma appear together on the same page, easily permitting a comparison of their fine calligraphy and large script that confirm that the calligrapher of the text was indeed responsible for both.

Illustrations on two facing pages (fols. 58v–59r) from the same manuscript 13 of the thirty-first maqāma show al-Hārith and Abū Zayd embracing in the folio on the right, exactly what the caption describes, although the concluding folio on the page opposite the story simply summarizes the situation by the

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7 Another relevant manuscript is *Hadīth Bayād wa Rīyād,* Vatican Ar. Ris. 368, which has captions evidently written by the calligrapher in some of its paintings: see Ettinghausen 1962, pp. 125–31 and Robinson 2001, inc. pls. 1–3. As I do not have reproductions of all of the illustrations of this manuscript I have not considered it further here. However, even though it is in many ways a unique manuscript, it would be worthwhile comparing its uses of captions to those of the more popular Maqāmāt and *Kalīla wa Dimna* traditions.
8 This is dealt with more fully in O’Kane 2003, p. 26.
9 Unfortunately I have not found any medieval equivalents of the humorous-ironic category that makes reading Empire magazine such fun.
10 Following the dating of Ward 1985.
12 E.g. fols. 26r, 57r, 41r and 53r.