CONTAMINATION AND INTERLINGUAL CONTAMINATION
AS A CHALLENGE TO THE AVERROIS OPERA: THE CASE OF THE
JUDAEO-ARABIC TRANSMISSION OF AVERROES’ MANUSCRIPTS

Heidrun Eichner

Summary

Contamination and scriba doctus are among an editor’s worst nightmares. In the case of the edition of the Averrois opera this problem has specific relevance, since many works by Averroes were transmitted primarily in a bilingual Jewish scholarly milieu. The paper wishes to draw attention to the phenomenon of interlingual contamination between Arabic and Hebrew versions. Interlingual contamination poses a considerable challenge to the conception of an interdisciplinary editorial project which aims at reconstructing a series of separate archetypes for the languages involved.

I. Introduction: The Structure of the CCAA—Some Remarks on H.A. Wolfson’s Proposal

In 1932 the Medieval Academy of America—in association with the UAI—initiated the project for a Corpus Commentariorum Averrois in Aristotelem (CCAA), which was the first and so far the most comprehensive editorial project ever devoted to a medieval philosopher from the Arabic-Islamic tradition. The project proposes a very elaborate structure: Averroes’ commentaries follow the corpus of Aristotelian writings, and up to three (different types of) commentaries by Averroes (Epitome/short, middle and long) can be associated with one work by Aristotle. Moreover, the core of the CCAA consists of three series of critical editions (Arabic, Latin and Hebrew).¹

¹ In the following, I am referring to the revised version (1963) of Wolfson’s proposal. The relevant passages quoted here are all identical to the wording in the original version of 1931. Wolfson, Revised plan, 95 describes the role of the three languages as follows: “The object of the plan, therefore, is to prepare an edition of the commentaries of Averroes simultaneously in the three languages—the language in which they were originally written, the language in which they have been most thoroughly expounded and most completely preserved, and in the language through which they became known to Western philosophy.”
accompanied by a series of translations and studies. Thus, the very conception of the CCAA relies on a structure which assumes a clear-cut distinction and separation (a) between the three different types of exegetical efforts and (b) between the traditions in the different languages.

The three languages, Arabic, Latin and Hebrew, correlate with three cultural spheres that are largely dominated by a religion for which the respective languages form the basic *lingua franca*. By including independent series for these three languages, the editorial project of the CCAA is one of the very few that systematically do full justice to the importance of the role of medieval translations as textual witnesses for Arabic texts. However, the inclusion of the translations as testimonies for the constitution of critical editions is set in a framework that rests on more far-reaching conceptions about the role of Averroes in the context of the different cultures associated with the project.

The subtitle of Wolfson's proposal runs "Averroes as a naturalized Hebrew and Latin Author," and in fact Wolfson argues for the rather luxurious plan of editing up to three parallel versions by appropriating

---

2 As can be seen also from other passages from Wolfson’s introduction, this very much mirrors his conceptions of the respective cultural contexts: “In the original Arabic, the career of Averroism was brief. It came to an end with the abrupt disappearance of philosophic activity among the Arabic-speaking peoples, which synchronizes with the death of Averroes” (Wolfson, *Revised plan*, 88). The Hebrew translations, produced between 1232 and 1337, have another fate: “The popularity which these commentaries enjoyed among Jews is attested by the great number of manuscript copies that are extant to the present day” (Wolfson, *Revised plan*, 89). “The intensive study of these commentaries […] gave rise to critical and interpretative works which may be here referred to indiscriminately as supercommentaries. […] The writing of these supercommentaries continued for about three centuries. Some of the greatest names in Jewish philosophy are represented among the supercommentators.” (Wolfson, *Revised plan*, 89)

3 See Wolfson, *Revised plan*, 90.

4 Note however, that such a correlation is not pointed out by Wolfson. In the case of ‘Arabic’, he uses no other equivalent for ‘Arabic philosophy’ (e.g. p. 88). ‘Hebrew’ is used together with ‘Jewish’ (Cf. e.g. ‘Jewish philosophy’, ‘Hebrew philosophical text’ p. 89) while ‘Latin’ correlates with ‘European’ and ‘Western’ (‘European scholars’ p. 89, ‘Western philosophy’ p. 88). When I am going to use the terms ‘Arabic’, ‘Hebrew’ and ‘Latin’ I emphasize their linguistic aspects only. I use the term ‘Judaeo-Arabic’ for Arabic texts written in Hebrew letters, implying that these letters were typically used by Jewish scribes and readers.

5 For Wolfson, not only the Arabic but also the Latin tradition cannot compete with the quality of Jewish Averroism: “The incompleteness of the early Latin traditions of Averroes, the loss of the original Arabic texts of his commentaries, the spurious views attributed to Averroes by the so-called Averroists, and the fact that Hebrew literature, through translations, had fallen heir to the entire tradition of Arabic philosophy—all this tended to make European scholars dependent upon Hebrew for a complete and accurate knowledge of Averroes.” (Wolfson, *Revised plan*, 89)