THE LADY GAZELLE AND HER MURDEROUS GLANCES

I

One of the major topoi of traditional Arabic love poetry is the comparison of the beloved with a gazelle and, developing from this nucleus, the image of a gazelle that turns into a hunter, pursuing the lover apparently with the purpose of capturing or even killing him.

My intention in this paper is to present and discuss a number of examples from early poetry and to try to trace the possible origin of this image and analyze its deeper meaning within the cultural framework to which it belongs.

I would like to begin with a verse in the mu‘allaqah of Imru’ al-Qays where he uses this comparison. It is in the long description of the beauty of an unnamed beloved (verse 34):

\[ \text{wa-jīdin ka-jīdi r-ri’mi laysa bi-fāḥishīn} \]
\[ \text{idhā hiya nasṣathu wa-lā bi-mu’āṭṭalī} \]

And a neck like the neck of a young gazelle (fawn), not ugly when she stretches it, nor bare of adornment.

The same comparison occurs in a description of a lady called Salma in one of the other long qaṣīdahs of this poet:

\[ \text{layāliya Salmā idh turika munassaban} \]
\[ \text{wa-jīdan ka-jīdi r-ri’mi laysa bi-mi’ṭālī} \]

The almost identical wording suggests that the comparison was already a topos at the time of Imru’ al-Qays.

The negation “not bare of adornment” (lā bi-mu’āṭṭalī or laysa bi-mi’ṭālī) is a distinction throwing into relief the difference of a woman’s neck from that of a gazelle, a device early noted by Arabic rhetoricians. ʿUmar b. ʿabī Rabīʿa devoted a whole sequence of lines to this difference between girl and gazelle in a short love poem:

\[ ʿĀ’ishah, daughter of the Taymite, has \]
\[ a safe place in my heart. Should I not guard it?! \]
\[ A young gazelle grazing upon a meadow high \]
\[ on even hills reminds me of the Taymite’s daughter. \]
\[ I said to it/her, feeling some apprehension in my heart — \]
\[ for I had never seen such a similarity — \]

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\[ 1 \text{Diwān, ed. M. Abū l-Fadl Ibrāhīm (Dhakhā’ir al-ʿArab 24), Cairo 1969, 16.} \]
\[ 2 \text{Ibid. 28.} \]
How you resemble her! but for the leanness of your legs, and that your flanks are not like hers, that you are bare and naked while she is not naked, nor are her hands bare. And that you have no hair, whilst hers is blackest flood upon her shoulders clothing her.

Remarkably enough, the poet does not end here, but adds another animal comparison to the detailed gazelle one. He goes on to close the poem with the following three lines:

Were she to stay, inflamed with no more love than I’m inflamed with now, that would suffice me! 
As often as I speak to her, I feel as though I’m speaking to a snake subdued by charm. 
At night, when people are asleep, she sneaks towards me. But I have ceased by now to fear her sneaking.3

To compare the beloved with a snake is rather unusual, if I am not mistaken; at least, I can think of no other example from Arabic poetry. A combination of the two images strikes me as even more extraordinary. We shall return to these verses later on.

Let us now proceed to a story connected with a poem by Majnūn, in which the likeness of a gazelle to his beloved Laylā leads to an unexpected consequence, giving the lyric beginning a dramatic turn. The story, as it is told in the Majnūn chapter of the Kitāb al-aghānī, is indeed the story of a peculiar event, attesting to this poet’s strangeness. I shall not retell it but, instead, give a translation of the poem and then add some details from the prose version of the story.

God has forbidden that mirth should last in any living being! So patience with what He has willed for me, patience! I beheld a gazelle grazing in the midst of a meadow and said: Laylā has come into view, turning her back on us. O young gazelle! Eat at ease and with appetite! Don’t be afraid! Sure, I am your neighbour! Don’t fear fate! I have for you a strong castle and a sharp sword which, if I ply it, is expert at striking!. But I was taken by surprise when a wolf appeared and dug his fangs and his claws into her bowels. Yet I aimed my arrow at the wounds I glimpsed and the arrow penetrated the wolf’s heart and breast, assuaging my ire and cooling the glow in my heart. Verily, the free man taketh revenge!

The prose version tells how, after shooting the wolf, Majnūn split its belly, took out the pieces of the deer it had devoured, united them with

3 Abū l-Faraj al-İsfahānī, Kitāb al-Aghānī, (Turāthunā), Cairo undated, I, 199.