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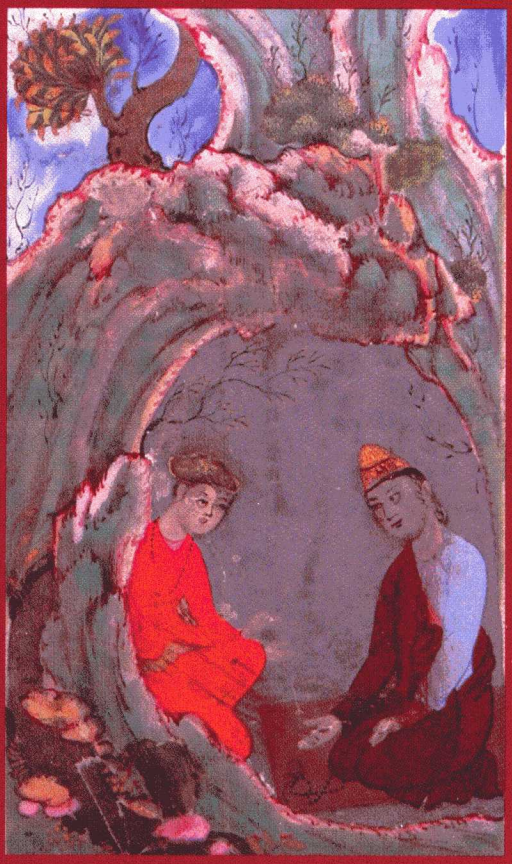

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The Serendipity of the Three Princes of Serendib: Arabic Tales in a Collection of Italian Renaissance Short Stories[1]

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Allow me to begin with a disclaimer. As a scholar of Italian literature I have only indirect knowledge of the Arabian narrative tradition. Thus I will concern myself with an Arabian topic connected with Italian culture. My focus is an episode found at the very beginning of the *Peregrinaggio di tre giovani figliuoli del re di Serendippo*, a collection of short stories first published in 1557 in Venice and translated from Persian—as the title page expressly states—by an author simply known as Cristoforo Armeno.[2]

Strange as it may seem, this collection is almost unknown, even to scholars of Italian literature. And yet, the *Peregrinaggio* is one of the most widespread Italian books outside of Italy. One could even go so far as saying that its influence on western literatures is unparalleled by other Italian Renaissance fiction. Even Bandello, whose *Novelle* were partially known to French readers through the re-writing of Boaistuau's *XVIII Histoires tragiques* (1559), and to English ones through Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1566-1567), did not have such success as the *Peregrinaggio*. Translations and re-writings include the German version (1583), the French one (1719), and then, from the latter, the English (1722) and the Dutch (1766). From a later German translation (1723) derives the Danish one (1729).[3] This is not to mention what is perhaps the most important re-writing of the *Peregrinaggio*: *Le voyage des princes fortunez* by Béroalde de Verville.[4] No doubt, the *Peregrinaggio* owes its popularity to the explicit exoticism of the plot. And no doubt, such an exoticism could flourish in no other Italian city than Venice, because of its geo-political position. But there is one more reason for the success of the book. The collection

[1] I thank professors Frédéric Bauden, Aboubakr Chraïbi, Antonella Ghersetti, Ulrich Marzolph for their suggestions. I also want to express my gratitude to professors Pier Massimo Forni and Victoria Kirkham for revising my English text.

[2] I will refer to the following edition: C. Armeno, *Peregrinaggio*, ed. Bragantini. For the identification of the author (or rather the authors, since in the dedicatory letter Cristoforo says he has been helped for the translation by a friend of his), see there the *Introduzione*, pp. XIX-XXIII.

[3] See *Reise*, ed. Fischer and Bolte, pp. 192-197; E. Cerulli, *Raccolta*, pp. 341-346.

[4] See I. Zinguer, *Roman*, pp. 97-128.

is based upon the outstanding sagacity of the three princes. While the exoticism made the *Peregrinaggio* popular in France, the combination of exoticism with sagacity met with the tastes of a public like the English, accustomed to the detective novel.

In the entry *Serendipity* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* we read that the word was "formed by Horace Walpole upon the title of the fairy-tale *The Three Princes of Serendip*, the heroes of which 'were always making discoveries, by accident or sagacity, of things they were not in quest of' ". Thus, it is defined as "The faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident". It is not very surprising that the dictionary does not mention the *Peregrinaggio*. However, *The Three Princes of Serendip* is a fairy-tale that surely derives from it. Much more surprising is what we read in the *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, as an etymological explanation of *Serendipità*: "from the English *Serendipity*, a word created in 1754 by H. Walpole in his novel 'Three princes of Serendip' (where he tells the story of three youngsters who have a natural gift for discovering rare things without looking for them)". Needless to say, Walpole never wrote *The Three Princes* (which, by the way, is not a novel). It is odd that the Italian dictionary seems to be unaware that the origin of the word dates back to the Italian book, that is to say to the *Peregrinaggio*. Even odder is this negligence if we consider that the *Peregrinaggio* is among the sources of the same dictionary.

One of the first examples of sagacious detection in Italian fiction is found in one of the first tales of the *Novellino*, a collection of short stories assembled in the last quarter of the thirteenth century by an anonymous Florentine.[5] In the fourth story of this collection, a king named Philip (probably Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great) keeps in prison a wise Greek man. When the king is presented with a horse, the Greek tells him that the horse has been fed with ass's milk. Having found out that the Greek is right, the king rewards him with a daily half a loaf of bread. Later, the king asks the Greek's opinion on a precious stone of his, and the Greek answers that it has a worm inside. Again the king finds that the wise man is right, and rewards him with a loaf of bread. Later on, the king has doubts about being a legitimate son, and he urges the man to tell him the truth about his birth. The Greek tells him that he is son of a baker. Having asked his mother, the king must acknowledge the sagacity of the prisoner. Finally, he asks him how he managed to discover the truth in all instances. Here are the answers: 1) The horse was fed with ass's milk because, unlike other horses, its ears were bowed; 2) The stone had a worm inside because, whilst stones are usually cold, that stone was warm, and this can only happen if something is living in it; 3) Had not the king been the son of a baker, he never would have rewarded him with bread. The legitimate son of a king would have rewarded him with the gift of a city. The chastened

[5] See *Novellino*, ed. Conte (especially the *Introduzione*, pp. XV-XVI, and the *Nota al testo*, pp. 281-284).

king finally acknowledges his miserliness and presents him with precious gifts.[6]

Although it does not coincide perfectly with the frame-tale of the *Peregrinaggio*, this story has elements in common with it. There is the detail of an animal fed with the milk of another, but, even more important, the fact that the investigation's final result directly concerns the king (unlike the *Novellino*, however, in the *Peregrinaggio* there is no doubt about the legitimate birth of the emperor Bahram). Much closer to the opening story of the *Peregrinaggio* is the first story, *De sapiensia* (*On Wisdom*), of the *Novelliere* by Giovanni Sercambi. The *Novelliere* was written between the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries, and we can absolutely exclude that Cristoforo Armeno knew it, since until the nineteenth century the author was completely unknown as a writer of fiction. Furthermore, only one incomplete manuscript of the *Novelliere* is extant. We must then assume that both Sercambi and the author of the *Peregrinaggio* drew from the same source. As far as I know, the real source has not yet come to light, even if many scholars think that it could be found in some adaptations of Arabic tales, which so frequently appear in medieval Spain. This indeed may be the case. Consider *La prima veste dei discorsi degli animali* by Agnolo Firenzuola, written in 1541 and published in 1548. The *Prima veste* is the re-writing of one of the five books of *Pañcatantra*, already adapted in the thirteenth century by Giovanni da Capua, in his abridged Latin version (the *Directorium humanae vitae*) from a Jewish translation of Ibn al-Muqaffaᶜ's *Kalīla wa Dimna*.[7] Firenzuola doesn't depend on the Latin of Giovanni da Capua; rather, he closely follows the Spanish adaptation of the *Pañcatantra*, first published in 1493 at Saragossa (the *Exemplario contra los engaños y peligros del mundo*).[8] Something similar could have happened in the case of the *Peregrinaggio*, although there is, up to now, no evidence of it.

At the very beginning of the *Peregrinaggio* one realizes that the narrative material comes from the Arabic legend of the sons of Nizār, as told by Mufaḍḍal b. Salama, al-Masᶜūdī, Ibn al-Ǧawzī and others. However, many changes occur in it.[9] Gia'far, king of Sarendib, summons his three sons (who

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[6] See *ibid.*, pp. 10-13, 170-173. For the sources of this tale, see there, pp. 303-306.

[7] As well known, the *Pañcatantra* spread over the western world through *Kalīla wa Dimna*: besides the Jewish version, due to Rabbi Joel (twelfth century), directly from it derive the Greek (Simeon of Seth, about 1080), and the Spanish one (see the following note). For the Greek translation see L-O. Sjöberg, *Stephanites*; for Giovanni da Capua see the still unsurpassed L. Hervieux, *Fabulistes*, particularly the fifth volume (*Jean de Capoue et ses dérivés*).

[8] See A. Firenzuola, *Le novelle*, ed. Ragni, pp. 203-204. A previous Spanish version based on *Kalīla wa Dimna*, accomplished on demand of the then infante, later on king Alphonso X the Sage, dates probably from 1251; in addition to the Spanish translation, it has to be remembered the German adaptation (Anthon von Pforr, *Buch der Beispiele der alten Weisen*, 1480).

[9] See R. Blachère, *Histoire*, vol. III, pp. 758-760; al-Masᶜūdī, *Prairies*, transl. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, rev. Pellat, vol. II, pp. 414-417; Ibn el-Ǧauzi, *Adkijâ*, transl. Rescher, pp. 120-122. See also T. Fahd, *La Divination*, pp. 374-375.

remain nameless throughout the *Peregrinaggio*), pretending he wants to resign from the throne. Since none of them agreed to succeed him, Gia'far, under the false pretext of being angry with them because of their refusal, banishes his three sons from the kingdom. Entering the country of the emperor Bahram, the three youngsters meet a cameleer who, having lost his camel, asks them if they have seen it. Here begins the first episode of serendipity. The three princes ask the cameleer: 1) Isn't the camel blind in one eye? 2) Isn't it missing one tooth? 3) Isn't it lame? Having answered yes, the cameleer thanks the three princes and continues his search. Later, he comes back and accuses the three of duping him, since he has not found the animal. In the second episode of serendipity the princes assure the cameleer they didn't dupe him at all, as he may deduce from a new series of signs: 1) The camel was carrying a double burden, butter on one side, honey on the other (oldest brother); 2) The camel was also carrying a woman (middle brother); 3) The woman is pregnant (youngest brother). Definitively persuaded that the three princes have stolen his camel, the cameleer, determined to obtain justice, charges them with theft before Bahram. The emperor puts the three princes in prison, but later, once the cameleer has found his animal, the former frees them, and asks them how they managed to divine the camel's distinctive features and the peculiarities of its burden. Here are the answers to the first episode of serendipity: the camel 1) lacks one eye because the grass was gnawed on one side, untouched on the other; 2) it lacks one tooth because in its path were to be found many bits of grass, big enough to pass trough a missing tooth; 3) it's lame because from the tracks of the animal one could see that one hoof was dragged on the sand. The answers to the second episode of serendipity are as follows: the camel was 1) loaded with butter on one side, honey on the other, because one could see an incredible amount of ants from one side of the path, of flies from the other; 2) it was carrying a woman because, when the middle brother noticed that there was urine near some footsteps, he put his fingers in it and suddenly was overwhelmed by lust; 3) the woman is pregnant because from the traces left on the sand one could see that, after having urinated, she needed to use her hands in order to stand up again. Astonished by the serendipity of the three princes, Bahram invites them to remain with him for some time.

One day, secretly listening to their conversations, Bahram hears what they say about some wine and food with which he has presented them. Here takes place the third episode of serendipity: 1) the oldest brother says he has no doubt that the wine comes from a vineyard planted on a cemetery; 2) the second brother affirms that the lamb they are eating was fed with she-dog's milk; 3) the youngest brother says he has noticed that a councillor of Bahram wants to kill the king, who had previously sentenced to death his son because of a crime he had committed. Having inquired about the deductions of his guests, Bahram finds they are right again (of course he needs no inquiry about the third deduction). Then he asks the youngsters how they came to their conclusions: 1) The vineyard was planted on a cemetery because, whilst wine usually

makes men happy, the oldest brother became suddenly sad and melancholic; 2) the lamb was fed with she-dog's milk because, as soon as the second brother began to eat it, he felt his mouth salty and foamy;[10] 3) the councillor plans to kill the emperor because, during a meeting Bahram was having with his courtiers, the youngest brother noticed that the councillor's expression suddenly changed while Bahram was saying wicked people deserve punishment. The prince also saw that the councillor asked for some water to cool his liver. Hence he thought that only the death sentence on his son could hurt him this way. The emperor eventually banishes the councillor from the kingdom.[11]

There is no doubt that this tale of the *Peregrinaggio* derives from the legend of the sons of Nizār. But does it derive directly from it? I do not think so. Apart from the fact that the Arabian legend lacks the second episode of serendipity, the most evident difference is that while in it the youngsters are four, since the story goes back to Nizār as founder of northern Arabian tribes, in the *Peregrinaggio* (as in Sercambi) they are three. One more conspicuous difference is that, unlike the host of Nizār's sons, Bahram is a legitimate son.[12] But this last variation has to be considered intentional for two linked reasons: 1) At the end of the *Peregrinaggio* the youngest prince marries a daughter of Bahram, and, after the death of the latter, succeeds to the throne. It would have been unseemly to show him as the successor of an emperor who is an illegitimate son; 2) especially in the Republic of Venice, renowned for combining Cæsarism and Papism, and for having literature constantly supporting political power, such a conclusion could sound shocking. Neither Sercambi nor Cristoforo, however, seem to derive their histories from the oral tradition. Had they followed it, it would have been difficult for them to be so perfectly faithful to the entire sequence of the narrative including both the serendipities and their clarification. As a matter of fact, a text does exist where some of the changes that occur both in Sercambi and in Cristoforo are to be found. As some scholars have shown, the *Peregrinaggio* seems indeed to be very close to Amīr Ḫusraw's *Hašt Bihišt* ("The Eight Paradises").[13] Four are the main peculiarities that on one hand unite *Hašt Bihišt* and the *Peregrinaggio*, and on the other distinguish them from the legend of the sons of Nizār, even if the latter has to be regarded as the remote source of both the works: 1) The father of the princes is the king of Sarendib; 2) the princes are three; 3) three also are the episodes of serendipity, and they coincide almost perfectly with those of the

[10] The three episodes of serendipity combine two close motives; see A. Aarne, *Types*, 655, 655A (p. 231). See also K. Ranke, "Brüder: Die scharfsinnigen B.", col. 874-87: Ranke indicates erroneously (col. 877) the date 1577 for the printing of the *Peregrinaggio*, 1557 being the right one.

[11] See C. Armeno, *Peregrinaggio*, I, §§ 1-99, pp. 9-33.

[12] Besides the *Novellino*, the illegitimacy of the host is to be found also in Sercambi.

[13] See A. Wesselski, "Quellen", pp. 106-119; S.V.R. Cammann, "Christopher", pp. 229-258; A.M. Piemontese, "Fonti", pp. 185-221, and "Otto Paradisi", pp. 317-417; Amir Khusrau da Delhi, *Le otto novelle*.

Peregrinaggio; accordingly 4) the answers the princes give to the king who hosts them almost perfectly coincide, too. The only difference between *Hašt Bihišt* and the *Peregrinaggio* is that the former, faithful to the tradition, shows the host of the princes as the illegitimate son of a cook. As we have seen, however, this difference has no real importance.

Given such affinities, can we say that *Hašt Bihišt* is the real source of the *Peregrinaggio*, apart from the episode that derives from the legend of the sons of Nizār? Not really, not only because the *Peregrinaggio* includes stories whose source still remains unknown, but also because other episodes in the collection have nothing to do with *Hašt Bihišt*. One of them, for instance, seems to go back to the Indian collection *Kathasaritsagara*.[14] We are compelled to conclude that the *Peregrinaggio* relies on different sources. Historical proof of multiple sources is still evident in some cases. The author of the *Peregrinaggio* seems to be acquainted, for instance, with Niẓāmī's *Haft Paykar* ("The Seven Images"). This is not surprising at all, since the latter poem is the main source for *Hašt Bihišt*. Some manuscripts where both poems appear opposite one another are still extant. They date not later than from the first quarter of the fifteenth century. Such historical evidence is still to be found for other tales included in the *Peregrinaggio*, and yet, as we have seen, it is not likely that the work is based on oral tradition. Until a textual source is found, the last word on its composition cannot be said.

One thing we can venture to say. Many scholars thought Cristoforo Armeno to be a fictitious name, among them, Theodor Benfey. Benfey also supposed the friend who helped Cristoforo to be Giovan Francesco Straparola, the author of the *Piacevoli notti*.[15] Looking for some proof of the real existence of Cristoforo, I found in the Venice State Archives that an Armenian proficient in many oriental languages (Arabian, Persian, etc.) was a close friend of Giuseppe Tramezzino, himself so skilled in oriental languages (among them Arabic), that he was regularly paid as an interpreter by the Republic of Venice. Giuseppe Tramezzino also happens to be the nephew of Michele, the publisher of the *Peregrinaggio*. The Armenian polyglot and his friend Tramezzino may well be, and I think they are, the authors/translators of this still elusive collection.[16]

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[14] See C. Armeno, *Peregrinaggio*, I, §§ 140-153, pp. 41-43. For a list of the hitherto identified sources see there my *Introduzione*, pp. XXXIII-XXXV.

[15] See Th. Benfey, "Ein alter", pp. 257-288 (especially pp. 257-270). Benfey, anyway, brings no real proof to support his supposition.

[16] See R. Bragantini, *Introduzione*, in C. Armeno, *Peregrinaggio*, pp. XXVIII-XXXI.

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