

THE SEDULOUS APE

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Almost the first word of Arabic that I learnt was *qird* (memory insists that the next was *atān* (she-ass), but here it may be at fault). A number of people will probably know the first version of *Teach Yourself Arabic*, by A. S. Tritton – a title, in this case, the justification for which seemed less well grounded the further one proceeded –, which, with youthful self-confidence I set myself to work through in the summer vacation of 1959. The introductory section concludes with a reading exercise, fully vocalized, with a phonetic transcription and translation. This begins:

kāna ḥammārun yusāfiru bi-ḥamrin labu wa-mā'ahu qirdun ...,
which is, not altogether felicitously, rendered as:

A wine merchant used to travel in wine he had and a monkey was with him ...

The merchant mixes his wine, half and half, with water. The monkey tries to stop him, and gets beaten for its pains. On the return journey, the monkey takes the merchant's purse, climbs the mast of the ship in which they are travelling and proceeds to throw one dirham into the ship and one into the sea until he has divided the proceeds of the adulterated wine into two¹.

It was only comparatively recently that I discovered that this moral tale was alleged to occur in a Prophetic *ḥadīṭ*. According to ad-Damirī it is transmitted in two versions: the first by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal from Abū Ṣāliḥ from Abū Hurayra that the Apostle of God said:

inna raḡulan ḥamala mā'ahu ḥamran fī safīnatin li-yabī'ahu wa-mā'ahu qirdun ...;

¹ London, English Universities Press, 1943, 23-4.

the second, in which we may perhaps see the hand of an early Bowdler, by al-Bayhaqī from Abū Hurayra that the Apostle of God said:

lā tašūbū l-laban bi-l-mā', *fa-inna rağulan kāna fī-man qablakum yabī^c al-laban wa-yašūbuhu bi-l-mā'*, *fa-štarā qirdan wa-rakiba l-baħr*
...²

I imagine that *laban* here must be yoghurt, rather than milk, which one would suppose ill-suited to distribution involving a sea-voyage.

I do not wish to go into the question of the authenticity of this *ħadīth* or, indeed, to linger on this not very interesting or remarkable story. It has merely caused me to wonder about the occurrence of monkeys in Arabic stories, since they do seem to appear fairly frequently, given that there cannot have been all that many of them in circulation, particularly at so early a period.

A plural, *qirada*, of course, occurs three times in the Qur'ān, in connexion with God's turning men into monkeys as a punishment, supposedly, for fishing on the Sabbath³. Just how much experience the Arabs of the Hijaz at this period could have had of monkeys it is difficult to tell. Baboons, and notably Hamadryas Baboons (*Papio/Comopithecus hamadryas*) are indigenous to parts of the Arabian peninsula, particularly the Yemen, and are common in Somalia and Ethiopia, where *Theropithecus Gelada* (Gelada Baboons) are also found; it is not impossible that some Indian Macaques were already being brought back to 'Umān by Indian Ocean traders. For the existence, alleged by F. Viré⁴, of native Macaques in Arabia, at least in modern times, there appears to be no evidence at all; a piece of *ħiğā'* by Bušayr b. Abī Ġadīma al-^cAbsī on the tribe of Hidyam may perhaps indicate that they did once exist there:

² *Kitāb ħayāt al-ħayawān al-kubrā*, Cairo 1330, II, 321-2.

³ II, 65; V, 60; VII, 166.

⁴ *Et*, IV, 131-4 [*ķird*].

a-taḥtīrū li-l-ašrāfi Hidyamu kibratan [yā qirda Hidyamin]
wa-hal yasta'iddu l-qirdu li-l-ḥaṭarāni
abā qīṣaru l-adnābi an yaḥtīru [taḥtīru] bihā
wa-lu'mu qurūdin waṣṭa [banī qirdin bi-] kulli makāni
la-qad saminat qirdānukum [qīdānukum] āla Hidyamin
wa-aḥsābukum fī l-ḥayyi ḡayru simāni

O [monkey of] Hidyam, do you wag your tail to the nobles arrogantly?

Is a monkey equipped to wag its tail?

They [you] are prevented doing so by the shortness of their [your] tails

and by the low regard in which monkeys [the monkey tribe] are held everywhere;

your camel-ticks [young riding camels] are fat, family of Hidyam, but your esteem in the tribe is not fat at all⁵.

Some Macaques are tailless or have only vestigial tails; Baboons, on the other hand, are always tailed. The Barbary Ape (*Macaca sylvanus*), a tailless relative of both the Baboon and the Macaque, is not, at an early period, a very likely contender, though later some may well have found their way eastward.

The actual identity of the kinds of monkeys that figure in stories is hardly important; indeed, it is probable that, in many cases, the storyteller had no particular kind in mind; for that matter, he might never have seen one. It is true that later there were *qarrāds*, such as Abū l-Faṭḥ al-Iskandarī turns out to be in *al-Maqāma al-qirdiyya* of Badī' az-Zamān al-Hamadānī. It is impossible to tell how common these

⁵ al-Ġāhiz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, ed. 'Abdassalām Muḥammad Hārūn, Beirut 1969, IV, 67. The variants in square brackets are the readings of Abū Tammām, *Dīwān al-ḥamāsa*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abdalqādir Sa'īd, Cairo 1322, II, 182. The implication of the first hemistich of line 3 is, in either case, said to be that Hidyam favour their beasts at the expense of their neighbours and guests.

were, however; the fact that even in the sophisticated capital a large crowd was attracted by a dancing monkey may perhaps be an indication of their comparative rarity.

Some of the supposedly factual accounts of monkeys are strange enough. The king of Nubia is said to have sent to al-Mutawakkil two monkeys, one who could sew (*ḥayyāt*) and one who could make either things in general (*ṣāniʿ*) or jewellery (*ṣāʿig*) – more probably one who could dye stuff (*ṣābiḡ*)⁶. Can one really believe this? It is, I suppose, just possible to believe that the Yemenis 'teach monkeys to serve them, and even the butcher and greengrocer teach monkeys to guard their shops until their masters return'⁷, but I find it incredible that, however intelligent and imitative a monkey might be, it would be capable of giving to any task the kind of undivided attention that it would require, and particularly something as delicate as sewing. Another monkey, in Zafār, in the Yemen, is said, in *Kitāb ʿaḡāʿib al-Hind* by Buzurg b. Šahryār ar-Rāmhurmuzī, to have blown the bellows for its blacksmith master all day for five years. Admittedly, it is because he regards this as remarkable that he recounts it⁸. I do not think it is possible.

Another story from *Kitāb ʿaḡāʿib al-Hind* is quite reminiscent of the accounts of tradesmen getting monkeys to guard their shops. It too is set in the Yemen:

The man bought some meat which he brought home. He made signs to the monkey telling it to guard the meat. A kite (*ḥid'a*) came along and seized the meat, and the monkey did not know what to do. In the [courtyard of the] house was a tree; it climbed to the top of this and raised its backside to the heavens, letting its head hang down and placing its hands on each side of its backside. The kite thought that its backside was some more of the meat that it had

⁶ al-Qazwīnī, *Kitāb ʿaḡāʿib al-mahlūqāt*, ed. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen 1849, 401 (*ṣāniʿ*); ad-Damīrī, *op. cit.*, II, 320 (*ṣāʿig*).

⁷ *Ibid.* (Q. & D.)

⁸ Ed. P. A. van der Lith (French tr. "Livre des Merveilles de l'Inde", L. Marcel Devic) Leiden 1883-6, 77-8.

taken, so it swooped on it and struck. The monkey, however, grabbed it with both hands, held it fast, took it down into the house and put it under the cooking-pot, which it covered with something heavy. The master of the house returned and, not finding the meat, advanced on the monkey, intending to beat it. But the monkey went to the pot and took out the kite. The man realised what had happened. he took the kite, plucked its feathers and crucified it on the tree⁹.

Clearly, the point of this story has to do with the erythropogy that characterizes certain types of monkeys, the Mandrill being the best known. It seems probable that a Macaque, rather than a Baboon, is indicated here, since the presence of a tail, although not an unsurmountable obstacle, might be thought to constitute a definite hindrance to the technique adopted.

Monkeys, you will observe, are always getting beaten. Here is another, in *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. There are a number of stories that feature monkeys in *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, but most of these are fables, in which the monkey or monkeys are merely substitutes for human beings. In this story the monkey is real:

They say that a monkey saw a carpenter splitting a piece of wood with two wedges; he sat on it like a rider on a horse and as he hammered in a wedge he would take out the other and bring it forward [i.e. he would keep moving forward, putting in a wedge in front of him and removing the one behind him]. Then the carpenter went away to attend to something else, and the monkey proceeded to meddle with what was not its business. It mounted the piece of wood and put its back against a wedge; its tail hung down in the gap [the medieval Spanish version has *cojones*; it seems more probable that our Arabic version has been diluted than that this is a Latin embellishment]¹⁰. It manipulated the wedge, in order to

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ I am indebted to Dr Robert Hillenbrand for the observation that in an illustrated text of the *Pañcatantra* it is clear that it is not the monkey's tail that is in question.

pull it out, and when it came out the wood sprang back on its tail, and it fell in a swoon. It remained thus until the carpenter returned, and the beating it received from its master as punishment was worse than what it had suffered from the wood¹¹.

The curious feature of these stories, and, indeed, that about the fraudulent wine/yoghurt/milk-seller, is the inconsequential manner in which the monkey makes its appearance. Why should the wine/ yoghurt/milk-seller have bought a monkey, which could be of no conceivable use to him in his business? I suppose that it may be suggested that he has bought it to take home for his wife and children, or just as a pet for himself. However, he clearly takes it with him on his outward journey, while conducting his fraudulent transactions, and not merely on his return journey.

In the story of the monkey, the meat and the kite, there is no good reason why the man should leave the monkey guarding the meat. It would seem far preferable, particularly in a region where kites behave in this fashion – something that has been, I understand, commonly observed to occur in India – to take the meat indoors where, apart from anything else, it would probably be cooler; why not, indeed, put it under the cooking-pot? Are we to suppose the monkey to have other duties as well, besides this one, which it signally fails to carry out? The fact that the man desists from his intention of beating it, when he is made aware of the identity of the true culprit, implies that he thought that it had itself eaten it, in which case, there seems to be every reason for not entrusting it to its charge in the first place. The function of the monkey appears to be simply to display its ingenuity, stimulated by its fear of being beaten.

In the story of the monkey and the carpenter, there again appears to be no good reason for the carpenter to let a monkey, even a pet one, loose in his workshop, where it would almost inevitably cause some disruption. In the event, it does not do any harm that we are told of,

¹¹ Ed. L. Cheikho, Beirut 1977 (10th imp.), 63-4.

except to itself. There is no suggestion that the piece of wood is damaged, and there seems no reason for the carpenter to beat it.

The last story that I wish to examine here is a lengthy one, which falls into two parts. I shall deal with the second part only, the first having nothing to do with monkeys; the first part is, however, quite entertaining, and I commend it to the attention of anyone who is not already familiar with it. It is taken, again, from *Kitāb 'ağā'ib al-Hind*.

An amorous, not to say insatiable, young man visiting Baghdad is taken with the face of a woman, glimpsed briefly at a window, as he walks through the city. His companion, discovering that the face is that of the wife of a *wazīr*, attempts to dissuade him from pursuing the matter, but the young man is adamant: 'By God, I shall not desist, until I either achieve congress with her or am killed.' The old woman from whom his companion has learnt the woman's identity then intervenes:

'If I arrange for this, my boy, what will you give me?' The youth immediately opened a purse that was at his waist and counted out for her ten dinars. The old woman was pleased, wrapped herself up and, coming out [of her house], knocked on the *wazīr*'s door. The eunuch opened it for her and she went in. Coming out again, she said: 'I have arranged matters for you, for a consideration.' He said: 'What is that?' she said: 'Fifty *mitqāls* for her, five for overheads and five for the eunuch.' He gave her sixty *mitqāls*, and she went in again. She came out and said: 'Off you go to the baths and clean yourself up. Come to my door between the *magrib* and the 'iṣā' prayers and wait to be admitted.'

The youth went to the baths and spruced himself up; then he waited at the old woman's door at the time appointed. The eunuch came out and admitted him. He went into a reception room, which was perfectly fitted out. He was brought food, and he ate, then drink, and he drank. When the drinking session was over, he and the woman went to bed. They had just taken off their clothes when a monkey sprang out from behind a curtain and savaged the youth with its claws, wounding him in the thighs and the private parts, and causing him to bleed profusely. He put on his clothes again, and being rather drunk, fell

asleep, fully dressed. In the morning, the eunuch woke him up and said: 'Come on, get out, before it is light enough for faces to be recognised!' So he left, considerably depressed.

When the *ṣayḥ* [his companion] woke up he decided to visit the young man, to see if he had got on well. On arrival, he found him sitting at the old woman's door, with his chin in his collar. He asked him what had happened, and the youth told him. He called the old woman and told her about it, and she went in to the woman and asked her why things had gone wrong. She said: 'Well, we forgot to provide the master's monkey with its usual pound bag of sweets. However, if the youth wants to try again, we shall charge him tonight only half of what we charged him last night.' So the youth gave her thirty dinars, and he was told that when he came at the appointed time that night he should bring with him a pound bag of sweets for the master's monkey. In fact, he took several bags with him. He was admitted; he was offered food, and he ate, and drink, and he drank. Then, when he turned his attention to the woman, the monkey sprang out at him, so he threw it a bag [of sweets]. The monkey took it and retired, and the youth finished his business. Later, when he was about to resume, the monkey sprang out at him again, so he threw it another bag [of sweets], and it again retired. He made a number of payments to the monkey in the same way. Finally, when the youth was tired and rather overcome by drunkenness, the monkey emerged, woke him up and proceeded to drag him towards the woman and to place its finger in the palm of its hand indicating to the youth 'Go on!' It would not let the youth sleep, urging him to action with the woman, until morning, when the youth left and went on his way¹².

¹² 79-85. I am indebted to Dr Arie Schippers for drawing my attention to an anecdote that has certain similarities to this one in at-Tanūḥī's *al-Farağ ba'd aš-šidda* (Cairo 1955, Vol. 1, 294-5). Here the monkey, which happens, again quite inconsequentially, to be on a journey with its master and his wife, bribes the narrator to turn a blind eye to its sexual relations with the woman. The narrator is eventually obliged by his conscience to reveal all, when a Jew is accused, at the instance of the monkey, of having stolen the money that constitutes the bribe. The monkey is killed; the woman is found to have fled.

Now, this story, which, to my mind, has distinct affinities with the story of The Tutor of Ephesus, in the *Satyricon* of Petronius¹³, is, on the face of it, a perfectly simple 'shaggy-dog' story, that is to say, a story of some improbability that is, or may be, considerably extended by repetition or the introduction of extraneous material, the end of which one can predict from an early stage but may have a final, unexpected twist. The element that requires explanation, when one thinks seriously about it, is the presence of the monkey. What on earth is it doing there? It may appear, at first, that it is an essential property for the execution of a confidence-trick – a 'rip-off' – on the youth. If this were so, however, one would not expect the offer of a half-price return visit the next night; it would be far simpler for the confidence-tricksters to content themselves with the two-thirds of the potential profit that they have already taken. Besides, it is not a trick that they could hope to practise frequently, in this form, since word would surely spread that one was well advised to take along a bag of sweets. If they simply bundled the disappointed, and shaken, clients out, they would be more likely to ensure silence, since the clients would hardly wish their humiliation to become common knowledge.

Nor is it very likely that the, presumably, absent *wazīr* has trained the monkey to act in this way to prevent his wife entertaining customers. It is true that this is suggested in the 'moral' that is appended to the story: 'that the bribing of servants will get one what one wants, in despite of their masters.' This moral, however, does not seem particularly appropriate to the story at all. The *wazīr* could surely devise better precautions to prevent the admission of clients in the first place; to have a monkey trained to behave in this way is a bizarre inner line of defence; and, in any case, as we see, it can be easily circumvented. Neither is it easy to see quite how it could have been trained to behave like this.

If, on the other hand, the monkey's behaviour is natural, surely the wife and servants would have contrived somehow to get rid of it, even

¹³ Loeb Classical Library, London & Cambridge, Mass. 1956, 168-73.

though it explicitly belongs to the master of the house; they do not seem to have a great deal of respect for his other property. To have this kind of performance on every occasion would be somewhat trying. It is clear, too, that the wife's prostitution is habitual, since the bag of sweets is referred to as a *rasm*. There are also other anomalies in the story, which one does not notice at first. What is the woman doing, while the youth is being savaged by the monkey? Why does he not leave the house then, rather than falling asleep, 'being rather drunk' (*atqalahu s-sukr*), having put his clothes on again after being injured? Is it not rather remiss of the woman to remember the bag of sweets only next morning? None of these things can really be explained.

As far as the monkey is concerned, however, it seems to me that its only real function is to act as an instrument for surprising both the youth and the audience, and discomfiting the former, in two separate and contrasting ways. It is difficult, too, to see what other instrument would have been half so effective in this situation.

It is tempting to fabricate elaborate theories concerning the importance of monkeys in the Arab psyche, based on memories of the early worship of them as tribal totems, and the later association of them, in the Qur'ān, with 'worshippers of aṭ-Ṭāgūt'¹⁴, identified as 'idol/devil', and the fact that the actual word *qird* is said to be used to mean 'devil' – a number of dictionaries give this sense, but I have been unable to verify it. Because of their quasi-human attributes, they have held a curious and somewhat sinister fascination for various peoples throughout history. The punishment for a parricide in ancient Rome was allegedly to be sewed up in a leather sack and thrown into the river or sea, together with a dog, a cock, a viper and an ape. This is a late description of a very early practice; the limited availability of apes in Italy would seem to cast doubt on the likelihood of at least one element of it. Parricide was, perhaps, an uncommon crime, but the inconvenience of maintaining an ape on hand, in case of its occurrence, would

¹⁴ V, 60.

have been considerable. The very fact, however, that the animal should be mentioned in such a context is significant.

Quite possibly such deep-lying feelings can be shown to play their part. It seems to me, however, that the frequent appearance of monkeys in Arabic anecdotes is, perhaps rather obviously, due to much the same factors as the equally or more frequent appearance of parrots. Both creatures, because of their possession of characteristics that are otherwise associated only with rational beings, can be assumed to display a degree of rationality or even complete rationality. They are both creatures that are extremely convenient to use as subjects of unexpected good or bad fortune, or as the cause of either for others, evoked, very often, by some timely or untimely application of skill or ingenuity, in circumstances in which it would be less appropriate, or at any rate less amusing, for a human being to play the same role.