

Averroes' Middle Commentary on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*

Translated, with notes and an introduction, by Lahcen
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Lahcen El-Yazghi Ezzaher offers the first English translation of Averroes's *Middle Commentary* on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. The book is divided into a brief introduction (1–19), the translated text (23–272), notes (275–290), a bibliography (291–297), and an index (299–310).

In the introduction, Ezzaher provides a short overview of Averroes's life and work that is based on the work of the thirteenth-century bibliographer and biographer Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a (d. 668/1267–70). Nonspecialist readers may feel disappointed to read that “for more biographical information” they will have to turn to Ernest Renan's *Averroès et l'averroïsme*, published in 1852 (275 n. 4). More recent references could have been given here to shed light on the text and especially its philosophical background. Averroes (d. 595/1198) is one of the *falāsifa* philosophers—such as al-Kindī (d. ca. 256/870), al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), and Avicenna (d. 428/1037)—who built on the heritage of Greek philosophy. Following the Alexandrians, the *falāsifa* envisaged Aristotle's *Rhetoric*—along with the *Poetics*—as a logical work and a constitutive part of the *Organon*. More details here would have been tremendously helpful in interpreting Averroes.

An impetus central to Averroes's project of writing commentaries on Aristotle is his endeavor to go back to the sources and to explain Aristotle from Aristotle by ridding the Arabic philosophical commentaries of his predecessors' Neoplatonist slugs. The genre of a *talhīṣ* (middle commentary or paraphrase) aims to make the Arabic version of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* readable and smoother, especially since the Arabic translation on which Averroes relied is old and was produced before the translation movement—that is, the coordinated effort of translating scientific Greek texts into Arabic that took place in Baghdad during the Abbasid period (see Gutas 1998). This larger context is, unfortunately, nowhere to be found in Ezzaher's introduction. The scattered bits of information given in these first pages are confusing and do not help the reader get a clear idea of the role of Averroes's *Commentary on the Rhetoric* either in the history of Arabic philosophy or in the history of rhetoric and its transmission to the Western world, to say nothing of its importance for Western political philosophy.

With regard to the choice of Arabic text for the translation, Ezzaher's methods and premises are open to criticism. He writes: “Regarding Averroes' commentary

tradition on the *Rhetoric*. . . , we have a middle commentary [*talkhīṣ*], which is available in two Arabic traditions, one prepared by Muḥammad Salīm Sālim in 1969 and another by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī in 1959” (8).¹ It is a surprise to see Aouad (2002) omitted (although it is included in the bibliography and mentioned in the introduction). Even more baffling, Ezzaher chooses Badawī’s text as the basis for his translation, providing the following explanation: “Choosing which edition to adopt can be a matter of personal preference, and the encyclopedic character of Badawī’s work has been instrumental in encouraging me to adopt his edition” (18). Is the choice of critical edition really just a matter of personal taste? And is the encyclopedic character of Badawī’s work a pertinent criterion for judging the quality of his edition? Aouad’s critical edition, which takes into account the extant Arabic manuscripts and the indirect transmission, provides a list of the readings of Badawī’s and Sālim’s editions (Aouad 2002, 1:265–77)—a list that clearly shows that Badawī’s work is inadequate, especially because of the frequent occurrence of *homoeoteleuta* (grammatical rhymes) in his text, a fact that shows the deficiency of a critical edition that does not provide a text that should be as close as possible to the original.

Ezzaher creates another methodological problem when he chooses to delete certain parts of Averroes’s text. He writes: “I also made the very difficult decision [*sic*] to cut down on the number of occurrences of the expression *Qāla* (Aristotle said). This decision was largely motivated by the need to render the style less repetitive, especially for an English-speaking audience” (19). Yet the entire structure of Averroes’s commentary is organized by means of the expression *Qāla*, which punctuates the commentary, provides a frame for reading and understanding the text, and recalls the authority of Aristotle. Thus, to delete the phrase is a serious error of method that ends up distorting the text and its meaning.

In what follows, I offer some remarks on the portion of Ezzaher’s translation that corresponds to *Rhetoric* 1354a1–17. Following Ezzaher, I cite Badawī’s edition.

First, a number of Arabic terms are imprecisely translated. For example, *ishtaraka*, “to share, to take part,” is rendered as *concerned, related*; *bi-al-ṭab‘*, “by nature,” is rendered *ordinarily* in a sentence that actually refers to the *natural* capacity for language use shared by humans.

If such choices do not reflect major Aristotelian concepts, they also can lead to simplifications and inaccuracies, let alone serious misunderstanding. Such is the case, for example, when, following Aristotle, Averroes claims that rhetoric and dialectic are not sciences since they do not deal with particular matters; in fact, they deal with any matter, and, as soon as they deal with a particular subject, they lose their essence (*dāt*) and become a science. Ezzaher translates: “And things are such because neither of the two arts constitutes by itself an independent science” (23). A more precise translation would read: “This is only so because neither of the two arts is a science among the sciences, separate [*mufradan*] by itself [*bi-dātihi*], that is, according to its essence.”

Ezzaher provides a surprising translation for *balāgha*, rendering it as *rhetoric* (23), with the justification: “Averroes uses the term *al-balāgha* as an equivalent to the

term rhetoric. In fact, the two terms *al-balāgha* and *al-khaṭāba* are used interchangeably in reference to rhetoric” (277 n. 4). Not only are these two terms not interchangeable in Averroes or any medieval philosophical Arabic text; they are used by Averroes precisely in order to shed light on the relation between *balāgha* and *ḥiṭāba*. *Ḥiṭāba* refers to the “philosophical rhetoric” (as defined by the Greek philosophical tradition, including its political uses); *balāgha*, usually translated as *eloquence*, usually refers to any reflexive production derived from Arabic poetry and especially the Quran that aims at the aesthetic value of discourse. Maroun Aouad (2002, 1:7–9) again offers in this regard illuminating remarks.

Likewise, the expression *al-ta’līm wa-al-irshād* is translated with the single word *instruction* (23). Ezzaher provides an obscure explanation: “The two words *al-ta’līm* and *al-irshād* constitute a polysemy [*sic*]; therefore, they can both be rendered as ‘instruction’” (278 n. 6). There is no polysemy here. I suggest translating the two words as *the instruction* and *the guidance*.

The term *al-aqāwīl* (23) should be rendered *statement*, not *argument*, which is too narrow, especially since it refers here to different kinds or genres of discourse.

The translation is often imprecise, as, for example, when Ezzaher omits words, as in: “And that is mostly in cases of special topics, such as accusation and defence, and all the other arguments used in particular matters. . . .” (24). The expression *bi-hāḍihi al-ṣinā’a* is left untranslated; the sentence ought to read: “And, in most cases, in the topics that are particular *to this art*, such as accusation and defense, and all the other discourses related to particular matters. . . .” On the same page, the Arabic term *sabab* is not translated at all, although it plays a major role in the Aristotelian definition of what an “art” is (Greek τέχνη, Arabic *ṣinā’a*), following *Metaphysics* A 1, 981a1–b10. A more precise expression would be “the one who produces this art through a stable faculty and a knowledge *of the reason why* he produces his act [*bi-al-sabab alladī bihi yaf’al fi lahu*].”

Again on the same page, a note would have shed light on the important concept of *taṣḍīq*,² usually rendered as *judgment* or *conviction* but not *belief*, as in Ezzaher’s text. In the Arabic passage on the necessary part of rhetoric, Ezzaher translates neither *fi hāḍihi al-ṣinā’a* nor *al-kā’in*. The translation ought to read: “[A]nd these are the things that induce rhetorical *conviction* [Arabic, *taṣḍīq*], especially syllogisms, which *in this art* are called enthymemes; they are the pillar of the *conviction* [*taṣḍīq*] *that is produced* [*al-kā’in*] in this art.” More importantly, Ezzaher’s translation of *taṣḍīq* as *rhetorical proof* and the following *bi-dālika* in the next sentence are misleading: “These predecessors have not spoken about the things that induce rhetorical proof in general, or about the enthymemes, which are most proper to this art” (24). The Arabic *taṣḍīq* refers to (rhetorical) “conviction” (in the *Rhetoric*, the “means of persuasion” or “proofs” are usually designated with the term *al-taṣḍīqāt*). The sentence actually means that the predecessors did not speak about the things that induce “rhetorical conviction [*al-taṣḍīq al-ḥuṭbī*]” or “about the enthymemes that are more proper *to this* [Arabic, *bi-dālika*],” that is, rhetorical conviction (and not “proper to [this art],” where the Arabic text would have read *bi-hā*).

Regarding the final sentences in the same passage, Ezzaher's translation of *mu'ayn* as *accessory* is not correct since the word means "auxiliary"; the Arabic syntagma *al-infi'ālāt al-nafsāniyyāt* designates the "passions (or emotions) of the soul" or the "psychological emotions," whereas Ezzaher's simple translation as *emotions* is much too reductive; *bayyana* should be translated as *to make clear* or *to make evident*, and it does not refer, as in Ezzaher's translation, to "proof or demonstration" (24); *mu'adda*, translated by Ezzaher as *used*, ought to be translated as *prepared*. All these inaccuracies should be corrected.

The last sentence of the translation (at 1354a18) reads: "These nonessential things pave the way for rhetorical proof, but they do not necessarily produce it" (24). This is another misunderstanding of the text. Following the Arabic, I would translate: "For this reason [*wa-li-dālīka*, not translated in Ezzaher], [the psychological passions] pave the way, so to speak [*ka-annahā*, not translated in Ezzaher], for conviction [*taṣḍīq*], but they do not produce it." This passage means that rhetorical passions are used in rhetoric because they make conviction easier, whereas the pillar of conviction is the enthymeme. Ezzaher's translation here is, again, misleading.

Finally, regarding Averroes's Commentary on *Rhetoric* 1.2 (Bekker 1355b26), where Averroes provides a definition of *rhetoric* that will enable him to give its specific difference, Ezzaher translates: "Rhetoric is a faculty that takes upon itself the task of producing persuasion that is possible in every individual thing. By 'faculty,' we mean the art that acts on opposites and whose purpose is not necessarily followed by an action. By 'takes upon itself the task,' we mean to make an effort to find the possible means of persuasion" (31). First, despite his initial claim, Ezzaher does not follow Badawī's text since he changes the attribution of the quotation when he translates *ya'ny* ("he means," edited as such by Badawī and Aouad) as *we mean*. The difference concerns whether these explanations are attributed to Averroes or to Aristotle. Second, *iqnā'* refers to *persuasion* (see al-Fārābī's *Enumeration of the Sciences*, chap. 2). Thus, *al-iqnā' al-mumkin* is the "possible persuasion" and not, as Ezzaher writes, "the possible means of persuasion" (*means of persuasion* being in Arabic *taṣḍīqāt* [see above]). By *possible*, Averroes means (as does Aristotle) the possible persuasion about the subject we are talking about, trying to produce at the highest degree what is possible in it (see the long explanation given in Aouad [2002, 3:32]).

In conclusion, in spite of its promises, Ezzaher's English translation is incomplete and often faulty and misleading. Greek words are occasionally spelled incorrectly. The underlying premises of Ezzaher's translation are not acceptable in view of the standards on which everyone in our discipline usually agrees. The reference text for Averroes's *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Rhetoric* is now the critical edition and exhaustive study provided by Maroun Aouad, and it should not have been overlooked. The philosophical context of Averroes's *Commentary on the Rhetoric* needs to be highlighted more clearly, and the bibliography is not up-to-date. In addition, the translated text is hard to follow because of the absence of the structuring *Qāla* and also because the Bekker pages are not included. The translation is imprecise and too often leads to misinterpretation. Whether interested in philosophy or in the

history of rhetoric, the reader should expect to receive the content of Averroes's text in English in line with the rules of translation and the accurate use of philosophical concepts.

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Notes

1. Ezzaher did not document the reference to these two editions, “one prepared by Muḥammad Salīm Sālīm in 1969 and another by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī in 1959.” If that information is correct, then the editions he used are not clearly documented in online catalogs and unfamiliar to me. My best guess is that he is actually referring to Ibn Rushd (1960, 1967).
2. “Throughout the history of Arabic philosophy, beginning with Alfarabi, works on Logic open with the formula that knowledge is divided into *taṣawwūr* and *taṣdīq*. These two terms lend themselves to various translations, of which ‘formation’ and ‘affirmation’ are closest to the original Arabic. The distinction, on the whole, corresponds to the distinction usually made by logicians between ‘simple apprehension’ and ‘judgement’” (Wolfson 1943, 114).

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