

Frederick's Menagerie

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A Conference paper

Read at the Second Annual Robert Dombrowski Italian Conference

Storrs, Connecticut

September 17-18, 2005

Exotic animals have been emblematic of the cultural differences between the European, African and Asian continents since before the time of Alexander, and to this day their presence in our zoos marks the nature of diplomatic relations and cultural exchange between sovereign states. Our fascination with an animal's habits, with its size, with the strangeness of its appendages, with the markings on its body, with its smells and its cries, is a human universal and a reminder of our own membership in the animal kingdom. If barnyard animals, despite their familiarity and their reliable domestication, still provoke in us a childlike wonder and wary respect of teeth and hooves and claws, is it no wonder that a ferocious beast from the jungles of a far-off land terrify and thrill the child-self within each of us as we gaze upon it from the safe side of a pen or a cage?

The survival of a large number of medieval bestiaries is just one testimony to the irresistible power of animals in our systems of symbolic representation. For scholars of the history of medieval Italy, the career of the Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick the Second represents another. Most of us in this room probably know what we know about Frederick from the pages of Dante: we recall how his denial of the immortality of the soul earned him a tomb in the circle of the Epicureans in canto 10 of the *Inferno*, or we think of Frederick's indifference to the misery of Pier della Vigna after the latter's fall from the emperor's favor and his subsequent suicide (*Inferno* 13). Perhaps we have learned from Dante to view Frederick as a great patron of the arts, whose court attracted leading artists and intellectuals from all over Europe and gave birth to poetry in the Italian vernacular. Or perhaps we remember how Frederick's interminable battle with the papacy provided Dante with a rationale for the separation of church and state. It was typical of Dante to portray his great heroes in the pages of the *Comedy* as complex individuals with character-defining weaknesses and conflicting motivations.

Indeed, Dante's awe for this second Augustus extends to Frederick's illegitimate son Manfredi, whom Dante meets on the shores of Purgatory, thanks to a deathbed conversion. I love the lyrical simplicity of Manfredi's appearance in *Purgatorio* 3: "biondo era e bello e di gentile aspetto," [blond he was, and handsome, and of noble mien]. Saved, despite his horrible sins and excommunicate status, because Dante wished to begin his narration of the pilgrim-poet's ascent of the mountain of Purgatory with an unforgettable emblem of the infinite mercy of God. But while God's mercy remains inscrutable, readers of the *Comedy* should recall that Manfredi was an accomplished musician and a fellow poet as well as a fortunate scapegrace. What's more, according to contemporary chroniclers, Manfredi was handsome, gracious and well-mannered. In politics, as in most other professions, it always helps to be both generous *and* beautiful.

Any consideration of Dante's enthusiasm for the Hohenstaufen emperor and his son should take into consideration the exiled poet's urgent need of a generous patron. In fact, Dante's praise for their "nobility and rectitude of soul" in the pages devoted to the Sicilian dialect in the *De vulgari eloquentia* focuses on the emperor's ability to recognize and reward natural talent despite one's social origins, a recurring theme in *dolce stil novo* poetry, having as much to do with the conduct of the emergent merchant classes who were governing the communes as with the quality of one's poetry and artistic excellence.

Siquidem illustres heroes, Fredericus cesar et bene genitus eius
 Manfredus, nobilitatem ac rectitudinem sue forme pandentes, donec fortuna
 permisit, humana secuti sunt, brutalia dedignant. Propter quod corde nobiles
 atque gratiarum dotati inherere tantorum principum maiestati conati sunt, ita quod
 eorum tempore quicquid excellentes animi Latinorum enitebantur primitus in
 tantorum coronatorum aula prodibat.

Those famous heroes, King Frederick and his excellent son Manfredi,
 demonstrating the nobility and rectitude of their souls, conducted themselves as
 true men for as long as fate permitted, refusing to live like animals. For this
 reason all those who possessed a noble heart, who were men of quality, sought to
 live in their majestic presence (*DVE* 1.12.4) –trans. mine.

Only rarely does Dante express such praise for contemporary political figures.

These were the attributes of the emperor and his illegitimate son that fired the imagination of Italy's greatest poet; modern readers must venture beyond Dante to discover other aspects of Sicily's fascinating polyglot cultural mix that placed the island during Frederick's reign on the cutting edge of European cultural development. Unfortunately, the *De vulgari eloquentia* makes no reference to what interests me most about medieval Sicily, i.e., the influence of Islam on Sicily's Norman, Italian, Greek, and German cultural traditions. Especially now, as we are forced by political events to reconsider Europe's relations with the Middle East, does Frederick's respect for and understanding of Islamic culture appear unique. It is significant, for example, that Frederick may have learned to speak Arabic while growing up in Palermo. And while his Saracen bodyguards, his harem, his correspondence with Mohammedan rulers about mathematics and philosophy, and his interest in Islamic studies in natural science, did not merit commentary on Dante's part, they did catch the attention of many contemporary chroniclers, and they certainly did not escape the notice of Gregory IX, Innocent IV, and Honorarius III, whose invectives against Frederick fill the pages of ecclesiastic history during Frederick's rule. Behind Rome's vicious attacks on the emperor, in all probability, was Frederick's appropriation of ecclesiastical revenues in the South and his insistence on oversight of church appointments, and not the papacy's hatred of Islam or Frederick's failure to set out on his promised crusade. Be that as it may, what these three popes generally took issue with, at least publicly, was Frederick's semi-Arab habits of leadership.

Indeed, it appears that styling himself as an Arabic sultan was a key element in Frederick's public relations campaign. I say this not because of the obstreperous, in-your-face nature of his decision to travel around Italy (for Frederick kept his court constantly on the move) with a harem and Saracen bodyguards, but most particularly because he also insisted on traveling with a zoo.

Yes, he traveled around Italy with a zoo. The practice of maintaining a private menagerie in order to display one's wealth and power apparently originated in the Middle East, probably in Persia. The idea was to keep a number of rare or ferocious animals in cages as a reminder of a ruler's ability to subdue unruly elements and maintain profitable commercial relations with far-off lands. These were important lessons that Frederick wanted to instill in the imagination of his subjects in Lombardy, Tuscany, and Emilia-Romagna in particular, who remained more or less in constant rebellion throughout his reign. What's interesting about this zoo, however, is that at least one and possibly two of the animals in it were gifts from Arabic rulers in the Middle East, an elephant from the sultan of Egypt, Al-Kamil, and possibly a giraffe from his brother, Al-mulik a Mu'azzam, ruler of Damascus. According to Kantorowicz, the emperor gave the sultan a polar bear in exchange for the elephant, and for a white cockatoo from India, a white peacock (181).¹

The first record of Frederick's traveling menagerie that I was able to find refers to a stopover he made in Ravenna in 1231: according to Haskins, the menagerie included "elephants, dromedaries, camels, panthers, gerfalcons, lions, leopards, white falcons, and bearded owls (254). Salimbene reported seeing an elephant in Frederick's entourage when the latter entered Cremona in September of 1236. There was a square tower on its back full of Saracen warriors, with banners on each of its corners, and a huge standard on top.² What happened to the other elephants I was unable to find out, but according to the *Chronicles of Piacenza*, an elephant had appeared in Cremona at least once before, in the company of two camels and a group of imperial emissaries from Puglia (152). Salimbene reported on the same event, which he dates in 1235, perhaps embellishing it a bit, as in addition to the elephant there were not two but "pluribus dromedaries et camelis" and "multis leopardis and "multis gerfalcis et asturbus [hawks]," which he insists that he saw

¹ His source for the story of the polar bear is As-Safadi in Amari, *Append.*, p. 20; Roger Wend., *Monumenta Germaniae historica. Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum ex monumentis Germaniae historicis separatim editi* (ottavo series), XXVIII, p. 61. For the white cockatoo, see *De arte venandi*, (ed. Schneider, Lipsia 1778-89) I, c 23, p. 29. For the report on the giraffe see Charles H. Haskins, *Studies in the History of Mediaeval Science* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1927) 255. Haskins cites Albertus Magnus as one of his sources, and later notes that Manfredi's menagerie also included a giraffe (270).

² "Et ante festum sancti Martini per duos dies venit cum exercitu apud Pontem Vicum. Tunc habuit imperator elefantem suum quem Cremona tenuerat, super quem erat turris lignea ad modum carrocii Lombardorum et erat quadratum et bene ligatum, haben banderias IIII, in quolibet angulo unam, et in medio magnum vexillum, et intus magister bestie cum multis Saracenis." *Cronaca*, Vol. 1, p. 134.

with his own eyes. He said nothing about the emissaries, but he did mention that they were on their way to Parma (131).

Matthew of Paris also reported having seen this elephant in Cremona, this time, however, accompanied by two lovely dancing Saracen maidens who performed acrobatic feats on top of four large balls, and singing and playing cymbals and castanets in time to the music.³ On another occasion the citizens of Cremona dragged the elephant out to impress the Earl of Cornwall, who was visiting Italy on a diplomatic mission at the time. Here he makes no mention of dancing girls, but the tower on the elephant's back contained a number of animal trainers who were blowing horns and clapping their hands.⁴ The poor animal appears to have remained in Cremona after Frederick's death, as it eventually died there "full of humors." The citizens of Cremona gave it an honorable burial, in the hopes that its bones would turn to ivory.⁵

The camels also made quite an impression on Frederick's subjects. In my favorite account of his traveling menagerie, which comes from the *Chronicles of Verona*, there were 24 of them, along with an elephant and five leopards. In 1245 Frederick and his court showed up on the doorstep of the monastery of Santo Zeno and apparently expected to be housed and fed. This visit is corroborated by some graffiti on the façade of the church of Santo Stefano.⁶ I can imagine the poor monks wondering what in God's name they were going to feed 24 camels and an elephant.

³ Et jubente imperatore, plures vidit et cum delectatione inspexit ludorum ignotorum ed instrumentorum musicorum, quae ad exhilarandam imperatricem parabantur, diversitates. Inter quas novitates obstupendas, unam magis laudavit et admirabatur. Duae enim puellae sarracenaе, corporibus elegantes, super pavimenti planiciem quatuor globos sphericus pedibus ascendebant, plantis suis subponentes una videlicet duos et alia reliquos duos, et super eosdem globos huc et illuc plaudentes transmeabant, et quo eas spiritus ferebat, volventibus sphaeras ferebantur, brachia ludendo et canendo diversi modo contorquentes et corpora secundum modulos replicantes, cimbala tinnientia vel tabellas in minibus collidentes et jocose se gerentes et prodigialiter exagitantes. Et sic mirabile spectaculum intuentibus tam ipsae quam joculatores praeberunt (147).

⁴ Appropinquant autem Cremonam veniebant elephantem imperatoris mirabiliter ornatum producentes, et portantem machinae ligneae propugnaculum, in quo quidam magistri bestiae residebant, tubis canentes, et manibus jocularando applaudentes (167).

⁵ In proximo mense januarii, Bestia que vocabatur elephans in Cremona obiit ex habundantibus umoribus, cujus corpus sepelitum fuit ut ossa ad effectum avolii pervenirent. (*Chronicon Placentinum* 215).

⁶ Nuovi materiali per la storia della venuta di Federico II a Verona" in *Nuovo Archivio Veneto* vi (1893) 128-129. The passage reads: "M^oCCX [. . .] federicus venit parmam usque vil [. . .] et altera die venit veronam et hospitalitus fuit ad monasterium sancti zenonis et duxit secum unum Elipantem. xxiiij camelos quinque leopardos. This "chronachetta" can be found the in Biblioteca Capitolare di Verona. The inscription on the church reads: die veneris secundo intrante Junio anno M.XX.XL.V, Indicione tertia venit imperator .F. in Verona ed duxit secum elefantem et eo mense" (128).

I was also impressed with the camels' stamina and adaptability, as they apparently served as pack animals on Frederick's trip over the Alps into Germany in 1235. On this occasion, the emperor also brought some monkeys, leopards and his Saracen bodyguards (Böhmer 2098a). Given the difficulty and expense of feeding, transporting, and caring for such an odd assortment of animals, it's likely that the decision to bring the animals along on a difficult trip over the Alps was a deliberate attempt to exploit their symbolic power—to cultivate Frederick's image as the *stupor mundi*—by styling himself as a “baptized sultan.” What an uncanny knack for image control. We can only try to imagine what the Germans thought of their first look at Ethiopian soldiers, monkeys and leopards in cages, and a camel train. Frederick's decision to use symbols of power from the Orient to impress his subjects, establish intellectual, diplomatic and economic ties with his Moslem allies, infuriate the church, intimidate his enemies, and win the support of the German electors, displays remarkable political instincts.

One other facet of Frederick's interest in Islamic cultural traditions remains to be touched on, albeit briefly. If we wish to know what the domestication of wild animals meant to Frederick and his contemporaries, we would do well to pay close attention to his Latin treatise on falconry, *De arte venandi cum avibus*. In her introduction to the Laterza 1999 edition of the treatise, Anna Laura Trombetti Budriesi reminds us that hunting was a means of teaching the nobility how to stomach killing and maintain their hold on power. “La pratica venatoria, intesa come «altro» aspetto della guerra, faceva necessariamente parte integrante del sistema educativo tradizionale dei giovanissimi aristocratici ed era finalizzata a trasmettere una severa morale guerriera” [The art of hunting, understood as the “other” side of war, played a fundamental role in the traditional methods for training the youngest members of the aristocracy and aimed to instill in them the harsh warrior code of ethics.—transl. mine] (ix).

In their commentaries on the falconry treatise, many scholars have noted its almost “scientific” attention to detail, the influence of Aristotle and Avicenna, and Frederick's discussion of the Arabic practice of hooding the hawk in training to render it docile rather than sewing its eyes shut. Anna Trombetti Budriesi, however, is the first to suggest that the methods Frederick recommends for teaching a hawk or a falcon to tolerate its domestication might serve as a metaphor for power relations in other contexts.

It is also interesting that, in addition to asking the Sultan to send him expert falconers who could teach oriental methods of raising falcons to his staff—in particular to show them how to train his birds with a hood—he also commissioned translations of two Arabic treatises on falconry. During the siege of Faenza (1240-1241) Frederick himself edited the translation of Moamyn's Arabic treatise on falconry, titled (in Latin) *De Scientia Venandi per Aves*. A Greek scholar of Jewish origin named Master Theodore, whom the Sultan had sent to Frederick sometime before 1236, had completed it, but according to Haskins, Frederick's Arabic was good enough to *correct* Theodore's translation as well as edit it (247). The second translation that Frederick appears to have commissioned was a falconry treatise of Persian origin (Haskins 320).

In conclusion, I would like to turn our attention away from Frederick as a point of contact between Islamic and Christian cultural traditions and return to canto 10 of the *Inferno*. Dante appears to have admired the sultan Saladin, whom he places in Limbo with the other pagan magnates, despite his adherence to Islam. Would Frederick have shared Saladin's better fortune, had he been a Muslim instead of an Epicurean? Scholars today disagree as to whether Frederick really disbelieved in the afterlife, and what his personal views on religion might have been. Ironically, medieval Islamic historians thought him a poor example of a Christian leader because of his respect for Islam. But perhaps it doesn't matter what he really believed, for Dante, by placing him in the tenth canto, turned his reputed skepticism regarding the afterlife into a perennial topic of discussion among Dante scholars, for whom the legends about Frederick have literary merit independent of the facts of his official biography.

I find Frederick's "absence" in canto 10 extremely significant. Just as our encounter with Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti in the circle of the Epicures stimulates our curiosity to know whether Cavalcante's son, the poet Guido Cavalcante, had also denied the immortality of the soul, so our encounter with Manfredi brings to mind the fate of his father. Manfredi, also a reputed epicure, was excommunicate at the moment of his death. But unlike his father, he appealed to God's infinite mercy and was saved. Here we can stop for a minute to admire yet another moment of inverse symmetry in the *Comedy*. In Manfredi's case we find ourselves wondering why the "absent" father, clearly the greater genius, has been damned, but in canto 10 it is Guido Cavalcante's fate, the absent son of our interlocutor that preoccupies us. Because of the degree to which the allusion to their common fate fires our imagination, Guido and Frederick are two of the most active "absent presences" in the entire *Comedy*.

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