



PHYSIOGNOMY AND ITS APPLICATIONS:  
A STUDY AND AN ANNOTATED TRANSLATION  
OF AL-RĀZĪ'S *KITĀB AL-FIRĀSAH*

BY

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the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Islamic Civilization

International Institute of Islamic  
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## ABSTRACT

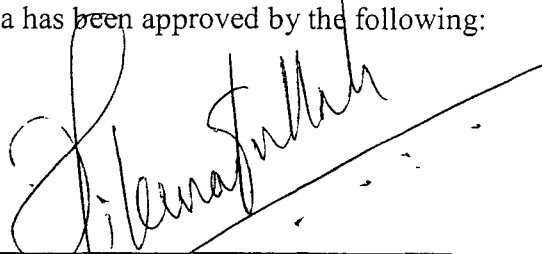
This dissertation attempts to study Razi and his work on physiognomy or *firāsah*. It begins with a historical study of physiognomy from the Ancient to the time of Razi and beyond. In view of this, the dissertation aims (1) to justify the need for a critical and an annotated textual translation<sup>1</sup> contextual analysis, of the two versions of Rāzī's *Kitāb al-Firāsah* to establish his authorship or lack of it over them, (2) to compare his *firāsah* with Aristotle's "*Anima*" to probe their similarities and differences, (3) to critically analyze Rāzī's assumptions and interpretations of *firāsah* in the light of the advances made in the various related sciences, (4) to examine the position of physiognomy in the scheme of knowledge, and (5) to assess its reliability and continued validity. The research also contributes the first English translation of *Kitāb al-Firāsah* from the original Arabic version. In translating the text the researcher has endeavored to capture the spirit of the original contents without compromising the text to accommodate the various semantic and linguistic nuances that may differ between both these languages.

## ملخص البحث

يستهدف هذا البحث دراسة فخر الدين الرازي وعمله الفيزيولوجومي "كتاب الفراسة". ويبدأ البحث بتتبع المراحل التاريخية لعلم الفراسة عبر قديم الزمان إلى عصر الرازي وبعده. وعلى ضوء هذا، يهدف البحث إلى: (1) تبرير الحاجة لإجراء ترجمة نصية انتقادية وحواشية، وتحليل سياقي للنسختين المترجمتين من كتاب الفراسة للرازي، لإثبات تأليفه أو عدمه لكليهما، (2) مقارنة كتاب الفراسة مع كتاب أرسطو "أنيميا" لبحث أوجه الشبه والاختلاف، (3) تحليل نقدي لافتراضات الرازي وتفسيره للفراسة على ضوء التقدم المحرز في العلوم المختلفة ذات الصلة، (4) دراسة موقف علم الفراسة من مخطط المعرفة، و (5) تقييم موثوقية الفراسة واستمرارية صلاحيتها. هذا، ويسهم البحث أيضا بترجمة النسخة العربية الأصلية لكتاب الفراسة، ولأول مرة، إلى الإنجليزية. فإبان ترجمة النص سعى الباحث إلى بذل أقصى الجهد في دقة قبض روح المحتويات الأصلية - مراعيًا في الترجمة أن تكون طبق الأصل من أسلوب الرازي في التعبير من نص اللغة العربية - دون تعريض النص لاستيعاب الفروق الدقيقة المختلفة الدلالية واللغوية التي قد تختلف بين هذه اللغات على حد سواء.

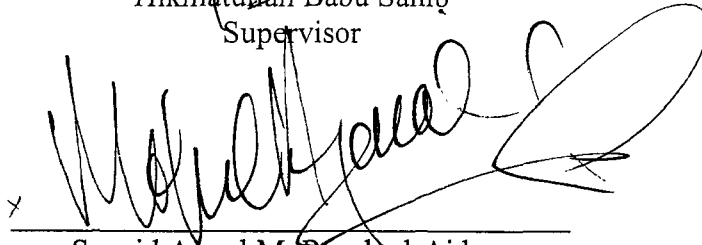
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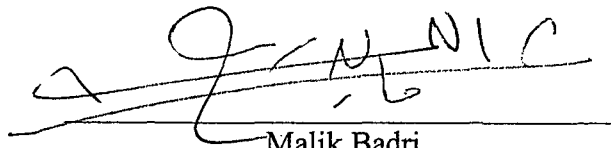
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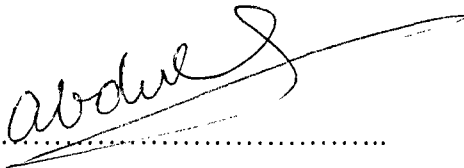
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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the results of my investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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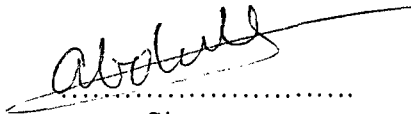
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**PHYSIOGNOMY AND ITS APPLICATIONS: A STUDY AND AN  
ANNOTATED TRANSLATION OF AL-RAZI *KITĀB AL-FIRĀSAH***

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*This dissertation is dedicated to my late beloved Parents,  
whose ceaseless encouragement and unflinching moral  
and material supports were the crucial factors  
in the completion of this work.*

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All praise be to Allah (SWT) for without Whose benevolence and mercy this work would not have seen the day light. The Prophet, on whom be the regard and salutation of Allah said:

“لم يشكر الله من لم يشكر الناس”

(One who has not thanked people has not thanked Allah).

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## INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, man has been concerned with knowing himself and others. He has strived to know why people behave the way they do. As such, he has tried many means to understand himself and others around him including studying human personality and behavior. This knowledge has benefited him in his dealings and interactions with his fellow human beings. He has also explored many methods and introduced multiple systems of behavioral studies, thus giving rise to the emergence of various approaches to the same field, each of which has its own philosophy and methodology. Nevertheless, all have their shared commonality in finding suitable ways to understand human beings.

Among the many sciences through which man has attempted to learn about personality and behavior is psychology. Under the fabric of this vast science lies the unique field of deciphering the inner qualities of man through the study of body contours and features. This field variously referred to as *character reading*, *face reading* or *physiognomy*<sup>1</sup> has created much interest among many great thinkers in the past. They saw the multi-dimensional linkage of this field to the multifarious avocations of man. They have used it to (a) check behavioral problems in young people; (b) select a satisfying career for one's self or one's children<sup>2</sup> (c) identify hidden talents;<sup>3</sup> (d) appoint right person for the right job;<sup>4</sup> (e) identify criminals;<sup>5</sup> (f)

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<sup>1</sup> Wehr, H., *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. J. M. Cowan (ed.), (Beirut: Librairie Du Liban, 1980), 704. See Fowler, L. N., *Revelations of the face: a study in physiognomy*, (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1895); Courtine, Jean-Jacques. *Histoire du visage: exprimer et taire ses émotions, XVIe-début XIXe siècle*, (Paris: Rivages, c1988).

<sup>2</sup> Linney, A., Perils of perfection, *New Scientist*, (2004), vol. 184, no. 2467.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

diagnose sickness<sup>6</sup> and even (g) choose a compatible partner.<sup>7</sup>

*Physiognomy* (Arabic *firāsah*)<sup>8</sup> is generally believed to be a tool to interpret a person's character and/or destiny through the examination of an individual's facial characteristics. The face has always been seen as the most expressive part of a person's emotional state and consequently reflects a character or innate nature. Shakespeare himself certainly heard of physiognomy, the medieval "science" of determining someone's character based on their appearance.

Physiognomy, known also as *physiognomics* (Greek *phusiognomonía*) from *phusis* "nature, character" + *gnomon* "judge", or the science of judging somebody's character by features, is also an effort to understand the mind and personality traits evidenced by evaluating various facial features — not by a simple "smiling-snarling" analysis, but also includes stuff like the length of one's nose, chin shape and angle of cheekbone. In short, judging people by their faces.<sup>9</sup>

Thus a physiognomist can read the character of a man from his physical specifications. In studying man, physiognomists have observed fundamental differences in character between a man and a woman which are accordingly reflected in their physical constitutions. Physiognomy mainly claims that the fixed, visible physical structures can furnish knowledge about the nature of an individual. The

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<sup>4</sup> Rice, D. R., et. al., Past and future lessons regarding the ethnic categorization of faces. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, (2003), vol. 17, no. 9, 1129. See also Katherine Melvina Huntsinger, Blackford, M.D., *The job, the man, the boss*, (New York: Doubleday, 1914).

<sup>5</sup> Goring, C. *The English convict: A statistical study*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1913).

<sup>6</sup> Laycock, T. *Physiognomical diagnosis of disease. Lecture I: Introductory*, 1-3 (n.p. 1862); See also Berkenkotter, Carol. *Patient tales: case histories and the uses of narrative in psychiatry*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, c2008); Gregory, Richard. 1987. *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* (1862, January). (New York: Oxford), 618.

<sup>7</sup> Linney, A., *Perils of perfection*; see also Katherine Melvina Huntsinger, Blackford, M.D. and Arthur Newcomb, 1875- *Job, the man, the boss*, by (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, Page & company, 1921).

<sup>8</sup> Wehr, H. *A Dictionary of modern written Arabic*. Cowan, J.M., (ed.) (New York: Spoken Language Services, Inc., 2004). 825. *Firāsah* is termed as, perspicacity, discrimination, minute observation, keen eye (especially for traits of character), intuitive knowledge of human nature. *ilm al-firāsah* (physiognomy), *firāsāt al-yad* (chiromancy, palmistry); see also Tyan, E. "Firāsah", *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III. Bernard Lewis et al. (eds.). (Leidan and London: Luz AC, 1971), 517.

<sup>9</sup> *New Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

proponents of physiognomy tend to relate features, such as the spacing between the eyes and the shape of the forehead, to the assumed relatively enduring aspects of character, such as honesty, forbearance, and intelligence. This reference to relatively unchanging facial features may convey messages about any inner aspect of an individual's enduring character or temperament.<sup>10</sup>

It is believed that the most important aspect of physiognomy is that it gives us an understanding of humanity and human nature. It is closely related to a score of other fields including *Metoposcopy* (the interpretation of facial wrinkles)<sup>11</sup> and *Phrenology* (highly popular and a well developed system for examining the topology, or bumps of a person's head). It has also been included as a part of divination (that is, any of various methods of foretelling the future by means of oracles, omens or signs).<sup>12</sup>

A man generally thinks according to his formation, but he acts and works in accordance therewith. External appearance and the internal environment vary from person to person. That is where physiognomy derives its substance. Therefore physiognomy is claimed to be the interpretation of a person's character and/or destiny through an examination of some of their specific physical attributes. It not only covers their physical appearance, but also their color, contours and their texture.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Collins, A.F., The enduring appeal of physiognomy: physical appearance as a sign of temperament, character, and intelligence, *History of Psychology*, vol. 2 no. 4 (1999); see also Hassin, R and, Trope, Y., Facing faces: studies on the cognitive aspects of physiognomy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Washington: vol. 78, no. 5 (2000): 837; see too Evans, Elizabeth Cornelia, *Physiognomics in the ancient world* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1969).

<sup>11</sup> See Fuchs, Samuel, *Metoposopia & ophthalmoscopia*. (Argentinae: Excudebat Theodosius Glaserus, Sumptibus Pauli Ledertz, 1615).

<sup>12</sup> Spurzheim, Johann Gaspar. *Phrenology in connection with the study of physiognomy*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1836); see also <[http://www.sruweb.com/~walsh/intro\\_unit\\_five.html](http://www.sruweb.com/~walsh/intro_unit_five.html)> (accessed 5 January, 2009). also "Divination" <<http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/d/divination.html>> (accessed 10 February, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

## STATEMENT OF PROBLEM AND JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

Existing literature reviews reveal the contradictory nature of physiognomy as well as its limitation in applications. The scientific accuracy of physiognomy is also hotly contested by both its proponents and opponents who vehemently argued its continued relevance to modern science.

There is to-date no systematic study that is undertaken by any researcher or scholar on the early Muslims' contribution to the study of *firāsah* (physiognomy).<sup>14</sup> Studies that have been conducted in this context, thus far, are also not conclusive and further researches are, therefore, needed and recommended.

Another related and important aspect which needs to be addressed is the scope of physiognomy being either limited to the study of the face alone or extended to include the whole body as its Arabic term *firāsah* implies. Furthermore, the existence of two versions of the *Kitāb al-Firāsah* which gives rise to doubting Rāzī's authorship of the work has made it imperative for the present researcher to undertake a contextual and an annotated translation of both these versions for a thorough comparative study.

Moreover, serious allegation of Rāzī plagiarizing Aristotle's *Anima* is investigated through a comparative study to probe similarities and differences with the aim to verify the veracity of such allegation. Worthy for a comparative study also are some of Rāzī's scientific views and interpretations which apparently are incongruent with modern scientific discoveries.

In addition, there is a need to dwell on factors that contributed to the sharp decline of physiognomy, especially, the various criticisms and empirical data of

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<sup>14</sup> Though it is a fact that early Muslim scholars did pay attention and contributed to the science of physiognomy, the West chose to ignore their contributions by not giving due credit to the remarkable contributions of Muslims, nor did the West make any significant acknowledgement to the classical Muslims' scholarly works in this domain, such as Muḥammad Ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī (304/820), Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (339/950), Ibn Sinā (428/1037), al-Ghazālī (505/1111), and Ibn Rushd (595/1198).



modern psychology concerning the falsification of *firāsah* due its incorporation of elements that are spiritual or parapsychological in nature. This further augments the doubts on the validity and reliability of physiognomy from the perspectives of empirical studies, as they have resulted in contradictory findings that question the true scientific nature of physiognomy.

This Study is expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by furnishing historical information about the Islamic roots of physiognomy and its possible effectiveness and applications in the domains of psychology and sociology. It is hoped that the results of this study will be of use to educationists, school counselors and authorities in security. It is intended also to be useful to researchers interested in following the developmental trends in physiognomy contributed especially by Muslim scholars.

#### METHODOLOGY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Many studies have been undertaken on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī<sup>15</sup> and his systems of thought, ranging from his contributions to theology, philosophy and exegesis. Nevertheless, works specifically devoted to his work on *al-firāsah*<sup>16</sup> are very limited. In fact, none of these have critically analyzed his *firāsah* in the light of modern science. It goes without saying that some scientific analyses he addressed in his *Kitāb al-Firāsah* are flawed in comparison to modern science and medicine.

The nature of science is to constantly improve and advance by discrediting and discarding some previously upheld scientific discoveries or facts.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, it is

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<sup>15</sup> He will be referred to hereafter as Rāzī.

<sup>16</sup> *Al-firāsah* will be referred to hereafter as *firāsah*.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, the belief that the earth was the center of the universe, or that insane people could be cured by ostracism or digging a hole in their skulls to let out demons, are no longer acceptable according to modern advanced scientific discoveries.

quite remarkable that Rāzī's contribution to the science of *firāsah* is tremendous, though some of his explanations are refuted in this research by comparing them to the scientific facts at hand.

The thesis considers Rāzī's biography and scholarship and his rational approach to *firāsah* which can be regarded as a consequence of his enthusiasm and erudite mastery of philosophical traditions which had been developed and prospered during his time. Thus, basing himself on the assumption that *firāsah* functions as a guidance of man, Rāzī emphasizes that everything pertaining to it must be mastered because of its tremendous benefit to mankind. This basic assumption also explains the reason why he introduced in his *Kitāb al-Firāsah* such a variety of subjects, ranging from spiritual *firāsah* to natural ones, including human, animal characters, nature and climate. It could also be used to ascertain why a person's reliance on reason sometimes outweighs his dependence on revelation or Islamic teachings. Relying himself on these assumptions, he took scientific approaches available during his time to justify his ideas on *firāsah* as well as other methodological principles.

All in all, it is unanimously agreed that Rāzī contributed immensely in using rational and scientific approaches in quoting the Qur'ānic verses and various *aḥādīth* to support his scientific arguments. Yet, he could not avoid falling into errors which were common in his time, nor into fallacies which were considered during his time as facts of scientific discoveries. In many parts of his *Kitāb Firāsah* there are numerous assumptions about the various types of black and yellow biles, mixtures and elements the human body is alleged to have been composed of, as well as some scientific facts which have been refuted by modern science.

In conducting this research, the methodology I followed was principally a library-based analytical one. Since works on Rāzī's *firāsah* are very limited and even

those few were not critically analyzed in the light of modern science, as some of his scientific analyses in his said book are flawed from the perspectives of modern science and medicine.

The research considers Rāzī's biography and scholarship and his rational approach to *firāsah* as a consequence of his enthusiasm and erudite mastery of philosophical traditions of his time. Assuming *firāsah* functioning as the guidance of man, Rāzī emphasizes that everything pertaining to it must be mastered due to its benefit to mankind. This basic assumption also explains the reason why he introduced in *Kitāb al- Firāsah* such a variety of subjects, ranging from spiritual *firāsah* to natural *ones*, including human, animal characters, nature and climate. This may also explain why a person's reliance on reason at times outweighs his dependence on revelation. Because of this he took scientific approaches of his time to justify his ideas on *firāsah* and other methodological principles. But, he could not avoid falling into *errors* which were common in his time, fallacies which were considered during his time as facts of scientific discoveries but are refuted as fictitious by modern science. Thus the objectives of the research are:

- To delineate the physiognomy in the Western & Muslim writings by classifying science with reference to physiognomy and its position in the scheme of knowledge, and
- To illustrate the claims of physiognomy usage in various disciplines such as phrenology, face reading, palmistry, iridology, sclerology, forensic science, spousal selection, law, management and security studies.

Furthermore, this research undertakes a study and annotated translation of Rāzī's with analyses and commentaries in English for the first time by relating it to

the advances made in modern science and to textually comparing Rāzī's *Kitāb al-Firāsah* with Aristotle's "*Anima*" to examine the issue of plagiarism. Before embarking on this comparative study, I had serious reservation about the allegation of Tāsh Kubrā Zādā who pointed out that among the important books authored in this science include, the *Kitāb* of al-Imām al-Rāzī which, according to him, is the "gist or summary of Aristotle's book with some useful additions".<sup>18</sup> Indeed after my comparison between the *Anima* and *Kitāb al-Firāsah*, I found that the similarity and congruence are so little that they are seriously negligible.

### OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The objectives of the research are to:

- 1) delineate the physiognomy in the Western and Muslim writings by classifying science with reference to physiognomy and its position in respect of the scheme of knowledge,
- 2) illustrate the claims of physiognomy usage in various disciplines such as phrenology, face reading, palmistry, iridology, sclerology, forensic science, spousal selection, law, management and security studies,
- 3) critically analyze Rāzī's assumptions and interpretations of *firāsah* in the light of the advances made in the various related sciences.
- 4) textually compare al-Rāzī's *Kitāb al-Firāsah* with Aristotle's "*Anima*" to probe their similarities and differences.
- 5) examine the position of physiognomy in the scheme of knowledge, and
- 6) assess physiognomy's reliability and continued validity.

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<sup>18</sup> Tāsh al-Kubrā Zādah.

## PLAN OF THE STUDY

The study fulfills the objective by comparing the writings of the Western and Muslim scholars on physiognomic research. The reason for undertaking this research is due to the fact that:

1. Existing literature reviews reveal the contradictory nature of physiognomy and its limitation in applications.
2. The scientific accuracy of physiognomy is doubted and its relevance to modern science is hotly debated.
3. To-date there is no systematic study done on the early Muslim contribution to the study of *firāsah*.
4. Few studies thus far conducted are not conclusive and further researches are needed and recommended.
5. The question of should physiognomy be limited to the study of the face or the whole body as its Arabic term *firāsah* implies?

This Study shall contribute to the existing body of knowledge by furnishing historical information about the Islamic roots of physiognomy and its possible effect and applications in the domains of psychology and sociology. The results of this research may be of use to educationists, employers and authorities in security

I have, therefore undertaken the study in two parts: Excluding the introduction and the conclusion of my research, the work is divided into two parts, part I consisting of three chapters from Chapter 1 to 3 wherein a brief account on historical development of Western and Eastern scholarship on physiognomy is given. That takes into account the scientific trends on physiognomy from the later part of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and its stand vis-a-vis science. Moreover, being historical in nature this part also assesses the significant contributions of prominent pioneers like Lavater, Galton,

and Lombroso towards physiognomy.

Chapter 1 concludes with rejections of physical appearance as an indicator of intelligence and character and elucidates the revolutions in personality assessment via mental testing as an alternative outlook. This is followed by Chapter 2 wherein an attempt has been made to outline the relationship between physiognomy and other fields of knowledge including arts and science, as well as the technical advances made in the form of digital physiognomy. Chapter 3 lays the foundation for discussion on the relation between Islam and *firāsah*. It begins with defining *firāsah* and its role in its *persona* according to the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. Furthermore it expounds *firāsah* before Rāzī and chronologically outlines scholarly works of prominent Muslims.

Part 2 of the research includes a further three chapters. Chapter 4 deals with Rāzī's biography and relation to Ghāzalī and the connection to Aristotle in a way to explain away the apparent similarity in their works and to refute the charge of plagiarism leveled against Rāzī by some of the later Muslim scholars. Chapter 5 studies and analyses Rāzī's *Kitāb al-Firāsah*. This chapter also describes the manuscript of said *Kitāb al-Firāsah* that is shelved in the Library of Cambridge University no 468, of 30 pages), London, which has been used in the research. The author of this Cambridge manuscript and the date of the book are unknown, though the authorship could probably have dated back to 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, there are indications that Rāzī could not have been the author, neither could the manuscript have been authored during Rāzī's life time either. This is attested by expressions in it like '*the Master may Allah illuminate his grave*), *said*.' It is also doubted whether the original text is the edition of Rāzī himself. It could rather be observations compiled by a student of his who might have published it after his demise. This manuscript is

compared with another manuscript of 55 pages from *Dar al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah*, No.: 12 *Tal'at*, Egypt. The manuscript is beautifully calligraphed, each page accommodating 19 lines. It is titled, “*Book of Physiognomy: Your guide to knowing the characteristics of people and their natures as if they were an open book*”. This is the basic text used in this research, for it is the researcher’s strongest belief this version (Egypt’s Manuscript) must have been the one authored by Rāzī himself. This is attested by the fact that reading this edition, one feels that Rāzī must have been the author. This is explained by the author’s expressions like: “*I say*”, in the first person singular term. Chapter 6, which is the main focus of the research, is the annotated translation of the Arabic text plus footnoted comparisons to Aristotle’s *Anima*<sup>19</sup>.

Examining the text of Rāzī’s *Kitāb al-Firāsah* one can find significant discrepancies in his explanations of human body anatomy from the perspective of modern sciences. Care is shown in footnoting *Qur’anic* and *sunnaic* texts along with scholarly commentaries that are at variance with modern scientific facts. Moreover, I have exerted my effort in elaborating further the *terminologies* which Rāzī mentions without defining them, not taking into consideration the reader’s full comprehension or lack of it pertaining to such ambiguous terms. Some of the other conventions I have observed are:

1. Adding references of the Qur’ānic verses and Prophetic sayings.
2. Elaborating further the numerous terminologies which Rāzī mentions without defining them, not taking into consideration the reader’s full comprehension or lack of it pertaining to such ambiguous terms.
3. Explaining vocabularies that need more information.

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<sup>19</sup> See Mortimer J. Adler. *Great Books of the Western World: The Works of Aristotle*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) vol 1-2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago), 1991. We relied on His *historia animalium* (History of Animals), translated by D’rcy Wentworth Thompson, pp. 7- 160.

4. Making connections between *firāsah* and modern theories, ethics, politics and psychology and sociology.
5. Outlining discrepancies between *Kitāb al-Firāsah* and modern sciences.
6. Adding subtitles that clarify the features of the book.
7. Making critical and annotated studies between two manuscripts to ascertain the authenticity and authorship of Rāzī.

As mentioned above, I have made use of two sources in this annotated translation: the Egypt's manuscripts hereinafter referred to as Book A) and the Cambridge manuscripts hereinafter referred to as Book B). Prior to comparisons, I had to translate both manuscripts and compared them by using Book A as our primary source to which Book B is compared as a reference in footnotes. Any discrepancies or missing sentences or words are referred to in the said footnotes. Effort is made especially to compare such a scholastic style with his other books which he authored, especially his *magnum opus* "The Greatest Commentary" where Rāzī did present issues on the principle of religion, such as cosmology, theology, ethics, prophecy, eschatology and imamate.

Translation was done on two columns: In Column 1 the Arabic text of Rāzī's *Kitāb al-Firāsah* whilst in Column 2 its English translation is given side by side so as to facilitate easy reading. In maintaining the structure of the text, I have assigned shaded coloring to distinguish Article, Chapter and Sections.

The principal Egypt's edition is structured in three 3 articles. Each of these articles consists of several sections. In the course of my study of the text I found that Rāzī, despite his scholastic erudition has fallen prey to human frailties of being judgmental. He has not been careful with racially sensitive remarks and gender matter.