DISCUSSIONS

CONNECTIONS: PAST AND PRESENT
THE VALUE OF CLASSICAL ARABIC LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

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What is the value of teaching Classical Arabic Literature–hundreds of years old–to today's college students in the U.S. or in Egypt? I have taught Arabic literature in English translation to students in the U.S. and Cairo. Whether they were students of Arab heritage at Rutgers University Newark (RU-N), Arab or American exchange students in Cairo, college students today have many attitudes in common. Modern Arabic Literature is easy for them–the common concerns of this age group, such as adulthood, marriage, work, children–appear universal. For three or four years in the 2000s I taught both classical and modern Arabic Literature in English Translation at RU-N, then I taught at the American University in Cairo.

In Fall 2002 I first began teaching classical Arabic literature in English translation at RU-N. It is extremely culturally diverse with a large Arab-American population. Rutgers drew students not just with Egyptian background, and Copts as well as Muslims. In my first weeks there, I saw posters for a bake sale to benefit Coptic orphans. Rutgers students vary widely in their commitment, but they are generally from a blue-collar background that requires them to work during the year. Many of them do not have the time to do the required reading or to write essays. The Honors class, on the other hand, surpassed all these students and learned well, with a solid group dynamic. The students were receptive to literature with an Arab cultural component and it fulfilled the literature requirement.

From Rutgers, I went to the American University in Cairo, where I also taught these courses. In many ways, teaching Classical Arabic Lit in English at AUC resembled teaching at Rutgers in terms of the students' commitment. The students in my class were mostly Egyptian, or Arab, although many of them had grown up overseas and did not read Arabic. They tended to be upper-class and rich; maybe they didn't speak Arabic because they grew up in another country where their parents were diplomats.

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However, like the Arab-American students at Rutgers, they could generally pronounce the Arabic names beautifully (influenced by oral family experience), and they were relatively interested in the texts. We read the Qur'an for its stories, and this was almost less problematic in Cairo than in Rutgers, where the students were more religious. Few of the students in Cairo were obviously religious. They did not appear offended at the idea of reading the Qur'an as literature. This may be due to the fact there were more upper-class sophisticated students in Cairo than in Rutgers

Although Modern Arabic Literature resonated with them at RU-N, the Classical Literature was a harder sell. In the Honors class we reversed the usual order and read the Modern Lit–the easy, fun stuff–first semester. When the readings moved back to classical Arabic lit, a period that could range from before 622 A.D. (or 1 A.H.) to the 16th or 17th c., this is a very different world. It left us slogging through the Classical Arabic Literature in the spring semester. So in addition to highlighting the differences–war, sectarianism, different rights for women–I emphasize what we have in common: family, country, religion, work, adventures and so on. We read the law treatises of Ibn Rushd whose writings show lawyers functioned much as they do today; 'Ala al-Din Juvaini (in his *History of the World Conqueror*) who showed that the Mongols of the 13th century were extremely bloodthirsty, by any standards; and in *The Arabian Nights* we read stories of love and lust showing that the relationship between the sexes remains problematic. We read selections from early autobiographies of a legal scholar, a mystic, and others.

I also included a wide variety of texts, ranging from pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'an to legal, theological, and autobiographical texts. My selection was based on my own training in classical Arabic lit while a graduate student. In graduate school we read various selections of literature known as *adab*. *Adab* refers to the whole courtly, mannerly way of life connected with the classical culture, of which literature is one expression. "Classical" here is used in contrast with modern, and should be thought of as pre-modern. It may include pre-Islamic (before 622 A.D.) to the 18th or 19th centuries. Although the course is "Arabic literature," I also included writings from the greater Islamic world, originally in Persian or Turkish. In English we do not have a good set of terms to convey this idea, but I mean the cultural sphere influenced by the Islamic empires.

In reading classical literature beginning with the pre-Islamic poetry, the students will find themes carried through to the post-Islamic literature. For example, nature appears in the poetry and in the Qur'an. In the (pre-Islamic) *qasida* Imru al-Qays says, "the dark ridges of Thabiran Mountain got water-logged, like a sheikh wrapped in a striped mantle" (Nouryeh, 61). New flowers sprinkling color on the dunes are compared with the colorful cloth sold by Yemeni merchants (Nouryeh, 61). Nature is accepted and appreciated in itself; the eye feasts on its beauty and makes playful comparisons. However, in the Qur'an the purpose of the appreciation of Nature is different. Nature shows the signs of God's existence and power. For example, in "The Splitting" (S. 82) the sky splitting, the stars scattering, the oceans overflowing, and graves opening are signs that the world is ending and the last judgement is upon humans (S. 82: 1-4).

The Night Star (S. 86), the dawn (S. 89), and the earth (S. 90) are all called on to witness to God's power. The throne verse (S. 2. 255) also describes God's power: "His throne (*kursi*) extends over the heavens and the earth, and He tires not protecting them; He alone is all high and supreme." (Translation by Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur'an*) While Nature is portrayed as powerful in the Qur'an, this is because of God's status as the creator or as working through Nature, rather than Nature itself. In pre-Islamic poetry, Nature is seen as beautiful or remarkable in itself, not as a reflection of God. Nature is part of life, there are many descriptions of Nature. But its importance is in itself, it does not lead the poet to think of God, although it may lead him to reflect on the passing of time, death and his extinction from the world.

What makes people (fictitious or real) interesting is their human reactions to the world. In one of our autobiographies, we find a prince, al-Simnani, who begins as a boon companion to Prince Arghun, an Ilkanid ruler of northern Iran. Al-Simnani has a conversion experience on the battlefield to Sufism. He hears a voice calling for his attention during battle and sees a vision, including the Afterlife (*Interpreting the Self,* 190). Al-Simnani remains in this state for part of a day and a night, thereafter he changes his life. Al-Simnani (d. 1336 A.D.) is later tempted to return to his old ways, which he expresses by saying that Satan tempts him. Satan whispers to him that he is wasting his youth and beauty, and while he may regain the money and position he has given away, his youth will be gone forever. I asked the students how they would express this idea and they had no trouble translating what al-Simnani describes as Satan's temptations as being the lure of old habits tempting one part of a personality against the part seeking self-improvement. His ideas are completely comprehensible, only the expression differs.

The fact that al-Simnani lived 700 years ago and half a world away in the Ilkanid empire is curious, the correlation is that we still struggle in our own lives to keep resolutions we make, to be better people, to look for God or a greater meaning in life and not only immediate pleasure.

A different treatment of Nature is found in the Persian poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273 A.D.) Rumi uses Nature in metaphors for the soul's relationship with God. The sea represents the infinity of God's love and the image of the sea is constantly employed. For example, his image of nature found in the lines "The Beautiful One handed me a broom and said,/ 'Sweep the dust from the sea!' " is wildly evocative and paradoxical (*Stranger*, 33). His poetry is an excellent example of Sufism, and while it can be very foreign to contemporary readers, in terms of materialism and Reality, it is in some ways very accessible. At least in Kabir Helminski's translation, the language is very sharp and clean, resulting in brilliant images. The images evoked may be contradictory but these images–mud, straw, birds, mirrors, nightingales, reeds, a ruby–are clear. This helps the students discuss Rumi's poetry; while some of the metaphysical images are dense, at least the physical images are imaginable. The tension in Rumi's poetry is partly between the Real/ the real, where the Real refers to God and the unseen world. The idea that the unseen can be more Real than the visible world, which most people consider the real world also catches students' attention. Perhaps because sex and love are so foregrounded, one may read his poetry as love poetry to a human. Since many of the poems were addressed to Shamsi Tabriz, the students are also curious if he was gay. These kinds of questions serve to bring Rumi into the sphere of people they might be interested in and can imagine dealing with. I was amazed to see students reacting well to poetry. These days poetry is notoriously difficult to teach, but Rumi was popular. For the discussion, each student chose a poem they like from the assigned reading, then we read it out loud and discussed it. Since poetry is one of the more personal forms of expression, this was a non-intimidating and useful way to approach Rumi.

In teaching literature courses in translation, I have found it very important to use the clearest translations available. Issa Boullata develops ideas about "resistant translation" which he sees as translation that follows the original as much as possible, even if the expression in the target language becomes awkward. As long as it's not incomprehensible, Boullata finds it acceptable. For example, he mentions the translations of pre-Islamic poetry by Charles Lyall. As Boullata says, the advantages of Lyall include: his extensive experience with both Arabic and war. (Lyall was a civil servant in the British empire, stationed in India.) However Lyall's vocabulary and grammar is somewhat archaic: words such as "abode," "hearth," etc. appear and the students have no idea of their meaning. Although Boullata's opinions are interesting for the experienced reader, such translations may be too esoteric for undergraduates, who have less experience in such texts. He also assumes the reader is comfortable with vague texts, requiring much interpretation.

We read the pre-Islamic poetry for its vividness and connections with later literature. The Qur'an is read as literature, in the same way an English student might read the Bible. In the Middle East authors use the Surah of Joseph frequently in both classical and modern Middle Eastern Literature to discuss motifs of beauty, prophecy and betrayal. While the action is similar to the Bible story–Joseph is thrown in a well by his jealous brothers and winds up in Egypt, the emphasis is different. In this surah Joseph is the most beautiful human, but we understand that beauty can be a trap as well as an asset. Joseph, who is an innocent, suffers for the lust of the Potiphar's wife; it results in his being thrown into prison to protect society from the social disruption caused by his beauty.

One of the most interesting questions to investigate using the Qur'an is the social disruption caused by extreme beauty. Initially Joseph's brothers plot against him because he is his father's favorite. They throw him down a well. Why is he the favorite? No doubt his beauty, his youth and his intelligence are all factors. After being sold into slavery by the merchants who rescue him from the well, Joseph winds up as a servant in an official's house. The Potiphar's wife in whose household he lives first tries to seduce him, going so far as to tear his shirt from the back when she grabs his fleeing form. It is the very fact that his shirt is torn *in back* when he is fleeing that proves he is innocent. If the shirt were torn in front, this would be evidence that he was attacking the woman as she claims. The rip shows he was fleeing from temptation.

In the details given, the reader believes the woman cannot help herself, she is so overcome with desire on account of Joseph's beauty. Later, she gives a banquet for her women friends, so they will understand her enchantment. Indeed, the other women at her table are so captivated by Joseph's beauty that they cut their hands with the knives they are holding, presumably while peeling fruit, in a distracted moment. "When they saw him the women were so wonderstruck they cut their hands..." They call him an angel, not a mere human. (S. 12. 31) Here beauty is considered as an ambivalent blessing. Joseph is beautiful, and while this may be a mark of God's favor, it will ultimately help him advance to the Pharaoh's court and to fulfill the destiny that God has in mind for him. However, at the same time, his beauty has caused envy from his brothers leading to his exile, and an attempted seduction of his master's wife, which leads to his imprisonment. The wife says Joseph should be imprisoned for refusing her bidding (i.e. the seduction) and Joseph agrees he would rather be imprisoned than fall into temptation (S. 12: 32). There is a tension here between human fairness—everyone agrees Joseph is refusing to do the wrong thing, although the wife does not phrase it like this—and God's justice. We might tend to think it is unjust that Joseph is sent to prison; but Joseph believes in God's

will and justice and goes to prison without complaint. While eventually Joseph is vindicated and, indeed raised to a high level, it does not necessarily correlate with our sense of justice, especially in the early scenes. The Joseph story continues to resonate in the Middle East. The movie "Theeb" (2014) directed by Naji Abu Nowar includes the scene of a 12-year-old boy who falls into well, from which he rescues himself. Like Joseph, he was isolated and alone, in this case after his brother's death.

The narrative structure in the Surah of Mary (S. 19) demonstrates parallelism in the stories of Zachariah and Mary. First the listeners are told Zachariah asks God for a child, although he knows it is impossible because he and his wife are both old. His prayer is answered, he is to be given a child, and he is told as a sign from God he will not speak for three nights. The child John is addressed, and told to be kind to his parents The verses around Zachariah are bracketed beginning with the injunction to commemorate him and at the end with the benediction, "peace on him the day he was born and the day he will die, and the day that he will be raised from the dead." The next section is Mary's which is bracketed the same way, beginning with the commemoration and ending with the benediction. Mary is told of a son to be born and she questions this because no man has touched her. Her son will be a sign, and the action follows Zachariah's verses, although attaching to Jesus, the son of Mary. Together Mary and Jesus form a topos in this surah. The pattern consists of: the announcement of a child, a sign of God's favor and remarks about the blessed life the child will live. We should notice that Mary is discussed in a chapter with many other prophets, all of whom are male. After Zachariah, they are: John, Mary and Jesus, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and others. She is the only woman named in the Qur'an. Both the repetitive structure of the surah and Mary's association with prophets in this surah give the reader pause to consider her ontological status.

In *The Thousand and One Nights* beauty is seldom a simple good. For example, in the story "Jullanar of the Sea" first the king falls in love with a female slave who is fabulously beautiful but will not speak, given to him by a merchant (*Arabian Nights,* 385) For a year he devotes all his energies to her, ignoring his harem, trying to reach her and get her to respond. She only speaks because she gets pregnant, indicating that she is an independent agent, not just a plaything. However, when she speaks she says she is moved by the king's kindness and attention. Yet since she has been impregnated by a man she refuses to speak to, the reader may also consider the balance of power according to gender and social status at the time. Throughout the *Nights* we find those with self-evidently lesser power consistently negotiating a more equitable position whether through beauty, intelligence or clever tricks. Part of the

success of the *Nights* is that the supernatural does not interfere with people's responsibility for their fates or their ability to strategize to a serious degree. Badr is turned into a bird, but another queen who meets him in the bird form veils herself in the presence of a man. Although her husband does not see that Badr is a man, only an exotic bird, she sees he is a man immediately. Here we see limits to the supernatural. Surely, if the spell were effective, she would be convinced too? One may also remember that the king wondered at this bird, which would only eat food meant for humans, steadfastly refusing the (bird-) food in its cage. Despite the fact that the king comments on the bird's appetite (*Nights*, 411), he does not consider it is anything but a bird.

The most shocking events in the *Nights* are human inspired, not supernaturally defined. The one-eyed dervish who walled his cousin and the cousin's sister in an incestuous tomb of love and left them to starve at their request, did so at his cousin's instigation, no jinn made him do it (*Nights*, 86-7). Of course, he was drunk at the time and made a promise to do whatever service his cousin asked. The supernatural adds spice, but if the supernatural ruled the *Nights* we would find it less compelling. Often we find that lying and deceit receive a swift punishment.

Among recent critics Eva Sallis (*Sheherazade Through the Looking Glass,* 85-107, esp. 103) has given the strongest analysis of the shifting balance of power between men and women in the *Nights*. Her theory is that Shahrazad is giving the king Shahrayar talk therapy to make him understand that one woman's infidelity does not prove that all women will be unfaithful. Shahrayar's rampage of marriage and murder was set in motion after he found his wife fornicating with a kitchen slave. At the time Shahrayar was supposedly away, which may explain the brazenness of his wife fornicating openly with a slave. Sallis points out that many of Shahrazad's stories center on infidelity–but, the men are as untrustworthy as the women. Sexual misdeeds and distrust take many forms. Indeed, the story of the jinn who keeps his kidnaped wife locked in a chest demonstrates that one cannot coerce either love or fidelity. Despite all the jinn's precautions–the locks, living in the sea, and even the huge, terrifying jinn–the wife has slept with a multitude of lovers–and she has their rings to prove it–99 in some versions, 500 in others. After she sleeps with a man, she coerces him into giving her a ring as proof that she was with him.

Later in "Jullanar of the Sea," their son Badr falls in love with a woman, Jawhara, after merely overhearing her physical description. "She has jewel-like teeth, sweet lips, black eyes a soft body, heavy hips and a slender waist. When she turns, she shames the deer, and when she sways, she makes jealous the willow bough." *(Nights*, 400) Badr has to go through many

miserable experiences, including changing into a bird (twice), being shipwrecked and then seduced by an evil and beautiful queen, who has "a face like the moon." (*Nights*, 418) In this culture the moon is the pre-eminent symbol of beauty. While in the Surah of Joseph external beauty emphasizes and symbolizes inner beauty, in the *Arabian Nights* a beautiful external mien frequently hides a malevolent, or at least troubled, inner persona. Eventually Badr wins Jawhara's love and evidently forgives her for turning him into a bird.

These stories can stimulate a classroom discussion about our social reaction to beauty. We can see how beauty is conceptualized, then and now. In the west it is accepted that many movie stars (particularly) women undergo cosmetic surgery, liposuction, Botox injections, etc. in an ill-conceived attempt to preserve their appearance as it was in their twenties. The full implications of this effort may only become apparent when the actor has a daughter the same age as she is trying to appear. Sometimes it seems anyone with enough money and a good plastic surgeon can purchase beauty, although in the Arabic literature beauty is viewed more as a natural phenomenon. In fact, the startlingly beautiful become forces of nature. There is the sense that nothing but prison can contain Joseph and prevent the social disruption caused by his beauty.

In another direction, *Muslim Sects* by Shahrastani (d. 1153 A.D.) provides a ready example for those who think fundamentalism is a modern problem. Shahrastani is particularly famous for his attempts to portray various non-mainstream Muslim sectarian groups in a relatively neutral manner. I have assigned his chapter on the *khawarij* (Kharijites), the original radical fundamentalists of Islam. The *khawarij* believed that God appointed ʻAli the caliph after Muhammed. When ʻAli was finally elected caliph, as the fourth successor of the Prophet, they were relentless in their support. Muʻawiyyah, the governor of Syria, fought ʻAli in a civil war. When Muʻawiyyah's troops advanced with Qur'ans on their spears, ʻAli agreed to binding arbitration. At this point, the *khawarij* turned on him–they reasoned that if God appointed him caliph, he could not negotiate with humans over this office. They viewed this as negotiating over God's will; God's will can only be implemented. Thus they turned on ʻAli and one of them assassinated him. Thereafter they continued as an insular group, considering all Muslims except themselves *kufr* (unbelievers), refusing to intermarry with them or eat their slaughters. As an example of unflinchingly following your beliefs, and taking them to the final limit, the account of the *khawarij* is peerless.

Unusual for any age, Shahrastani sets the goal of impartially reporting on various religious sects in terms of their beliefs, not cursing them as unbelievers, the most common

reaction. While he does not always succeed; his attempt is sincere. History may give us some view of the past, but it too often reflects the prejudices and concerns of the time the author is writing in; thus a 19th c. history of the origins of Islam may tell us more about the 19th c. than about 7th c. Arabia. However, literature can be a mirror held up to one time, one place. The ideas it presents may belong to only one person, or may be representative of one class, but they are reflective of that person, that class. We do have to interpret the authors, but it can help us understand that similar problems have existed. When we read stories in the newspapers of young lovers from two communities ending in tragedy, we discover a story in the pre-Islamic poetry, where love is lost when the lovers' tribes fought in internecine strife. If we feel we live in a time of massive outbreaking of bloody wars–reflect on the Mongols who in the 13th c. destroyed Central Asia and parts of Persia, which have not recovered to this day. Tales of the Mongols' barbarism (for instance, slitting open women's stomachs looking for swallowed pearls) flowed before them, terrifying the population in their path.

The semester I taught Islamic philosophy (at AUC) I saw how thoroughly our attitudes inform our ability to understand earlier writers. Al-Ghazali's attitude in morality: things are morally right because God commanded them and wrong because God forbad them, rather than having an intrinsic moral worth is extremely hard for us to understand. We believe in our own agency, and we are so far away from considering God an intrinsic part of our lives, that for most of us, this idea makes no sense. We are used to the idea that laws and morals make sense because they try to impose the good, not because of the authority who creates them. Likewise the possibility that philosophy could discover Truth (with a capital T) that would apply to all objectively appears nearly incomprehensible. Today everyone is so used to thinking in relative terms that anything else is unimaginable. So again, we have the chance to explore new avenues of thought through reading a foreign literature.

In modern Arabic literature we see older themes informing the understanding of modern life. In *My Name is Red* (1998) Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk reappropriates the Joseph story for his story about miniature painters. The novel investigates a murder among the court painters; it begins with a painter murdered by being thrown down a well.

In Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra,* the narrator lives through the Lebanese civil war. Her feelings of hopelessness, unattractiveness, and inability to find a place in society resonate with us; she is fat and homely, deeply attached to her family. The sniper-lover shoots Zahra dead in the final pages, and we empathize with this woman, whom we originally found fat, lumpish and pathetic. However counterintuitive it might be, the civil war, shattering for

society, allowed her to grow. A. R. Munif describes the destruction of a close tribal society in *Cities of Salt*, but anyone who has worked for a large corporation can understand the alienation. The poor workers being mistreated by the company, abused, and denied benefits seem like Third-World unfortunates. We can find resonance today in the poor (American) workers who punched time cards at IBM or the San Diego (California) Municipal Government or Enron for 25, 30 years and then saw their pensions disappear up at the last minute. Colonial exploitation and capitalist exploitation–sometimes it all seems to be one.

Teaching Modern Arabic Lit (in translation) shows the students people living in Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria or other countries, but they live in our world. They deal with civil war, poverty, repressive governments, and personal alienation–their world is recognizably our world. Even the Mongol invasions, which we may find wildly brutal, appear to have more resonances with al-Qaida and Daesh in the current Middle Eastern. Students connect with the novelists' stories and find them relevant to their own lives.

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