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THE CHANGING VALUE OF *ALF LAYLAH WA LAYLAH*
FOR NINETEENTH-CENTURY ARABIC, PERSIAN,
AND ENGLISH READERSHIPS

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Abstract

This article traces the social and cultural circumstances of nineteenth-century compilations and translations of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* into English, Arabic, or Persian, in particular to gauge what cultural value these modern editions were thought to hold for their readerships. Through an examination of the critical discourse around the text, it can be shown how the text's cultural value was transformed through "transactions"—the translations and appropriations. The transformation of the value of the text during this period illuminates the changing social role of literary practice and consumption in these societies.

On a wintry February night in 1929, at a meeting of the Iranian Literary Society, Ali Asghar Hikmat, the Iranian Minister of Education and Religious Endowments, offered a lecture on the history of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, or *Hizar u Yik Shab*. His aim was to assess the merits of the text for a modern Iranian readership. Hikmat began his talk with a generous genealogical reflection on the value of the text:

The book that has come to be known in the East and West as *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* is one of only a few books that speaks of the conditions of antiquity, and is the finest remaining reminder of the customs of the ancient nations of the Eastern Lands (*mashriq-zamin*).¹

Hikmat continues by remarking on various historical and literary lessons inherent in the text, as well as the many moral (*akhlaqi*) ones. He believes that the stories date back two millenia, since they have benefited from the "finer customs of the ancient races of the East," such as "India and Iran and the Arabs and the Turks."² Yet, simultaneously Hikmat's lecture shows an

¹ *Hizar u Yak Shab*, trans. 'Abd al-Latif Tasuji and Shams al-Shu'ar Isfahani, ed. Mohammad Ramazani, vol. 1 (Tehran: Kolaleh Khadar, 1938), i. Unless otherwise indicated, I am the translator of this and further English translations.

² *Hizar u Yak Shab*, ii.

ambivalence about this expansive range of social and historical roots for the text, as he then endeavors to locate the text at the center of Iran's own Persian literary heritage. He believes the tales deliver codes of moral or honorable behavior that are peculiarly Iranian, and bespeak the richness of the ancient Persian literary imagination. Late in his talk, he mentions the nineteenth-century translation of the text into Persian, carried out by 'Abd al-Latif Tasuji (with poems composed by Mirza Surush), and notes the translation's "innovating" effect on Persian prose writing.³ Yet, he does not note the irony of the fact that this text, whose relation to an ancient Persio-Iranian heritage he has just proclaimed, at the time of his speaking was available to modern Persian readers only through a translation of quite recent vintage. In fact, given Hikmat's glossing over of the circumstances of the text's production, his audience could be forgiven for thinking that the Persian text was itself as old as the conditions he believed it described. This glossing can be seen as a feature of nationalist discourse, which famously 'invents tradition' as part of its claim to an ancient legacy.⁴ Hikmat, as a high functionary of the Persian nationalist regime of Reza Shah, was heavily invested in the propagation of such traditions for the modern nation of Iran, particularly in the field of literature. Yet to attempt to appropriate a complex text such as *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* to nationalist discourse with a knowledge of the text's history would be difficult; the text's own rich history would eventually prove too problematic for such co-optation. Thus, the text for Arabic and Persian readerships was limited to the nineteenth-century re-evaluation.

With only very few exceptions, little effort has been made to understand the social and cultural circumstances around the nineteenth century compilations and translations of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* into Arabic or Persian. While some studies have advanced the understanding of material circumstances around the development of nineteenth-century Arabic and Persian editions of the text, few have addressed the question of what cultural value these modern editions were thought to hold for their readerships. What is at stake in these questions is a more nuanced understanding of how *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* came to occupy a position of increasing cultural value for nine-

³ *Hizar u Yak Shab*, vi. Ulrich Marzolph reports "although Turkish translations from the Arabic already existed before Galland's French adaptation, Persian translations apparently were not prepared before the beginning of the nineteenth century." Other than fragmentary translations, Tasuji's translation appears to be the first attempt at a complete edition, and was the first to be printed as a book. See: Ulrich Marzolph, "Persian Translations of the 1001 Nights," *Mipaku Anthropology Newsletter* No. 16 (2003). Also, Muhammad Ja'far Mahjub, "Tarjumih-yi Farsi-yi Alf Layla Wa Layla," *Sokhan* 11. No. 1 (1962), 34-53.

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions", from *The Invention of Tradition*. Edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1-15.

teenth- and twentieth-century readerships in the Arab and Persian-speaking worlds. The transformation of the value of the text over the course of this period illuminates the changing social role of literary practice and consumption in these societies.

Alf Laylah wa Laylah as a Transactionary Text

This article will articulate the formidable role *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* and the various Persian, English and French translations of it played in the staking out of a new space in the cultural dynamics of literary practice of the nineteenth century. This new ‘space’ may be termed a field of autonomous cultural production, in accordance with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital. The manner of the development of this field is not generalizable across the various social arenas the text traversed in the nineteenth century. Similarly, the claim of the establishment of such a field is open to debate. Rather than open these general debates, I would prefer simply to establish that the incarnations of texts variously called *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, *Mille Nuits et Nuit*, *The Arabian Nights*, or *Hizar u Yik Shab* over the course of the nineteenth century significantly affected the concept of literary autonomy in each of the social spheres in which they circulated.⁵

This autonomy is best illuminated through the critical value discourse surrounding the production of various editions, translations, and series of this group of texts. The value discourse produced when nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics and readers of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* have argued for or against the merits of the text shows that the power of the text is derived from its ability to sustain a system of legitimization outside of both monarchical and religious spheres. The critical discourse on *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* constitutes, as a body, the inception of an autonomous system of legitimization of literature—this effect derives largely from the transactionary nature of the text.

I propose the term “literary transaction” to discuss how interlinguistic exchanges of texts served to innovate literary practice and to revolutionize the systems of legitimization and evaluation of literature. Transactional texts mark the encounters and exchanges between social and cultural fields with differential value systems. In these encounters, and through these exchanges, the re-valuation of a text is calculated with a consideration of the cultural

⁵ In referring to the general phenomenon of the production of texts that are collected under these titles and similar other titles (e.g. *A Thousand and One Nights*) in this essay, I will use the Arabic title *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*. From the context, it should be clear when I am referring specifically to an Arabic edition, and when I am speaking of the general collection of texts.

costs of the encounter. By foregrounding texts that arise and are formed through their circulation between social and linguistic arenas, we may posit that textual *transaction* is an important catalyst in the development of categories of modern literature in Europe, Iran, and the Arab world.

Transactionary Beginnings: The European Thousand and One Nights

It may be instructive to begin with a gesture to the origins of the European versions of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*. Between Galland's 1701 'discovery' of a manuscript of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, through the nineteenth-century print editions in French, English, Arabic, and Persian, the various manifestations of the text would come to play an important role in the development of a new economy of mass produced books in Western Europe, Iran, and the Arab world. The transformation of this group of tales into a single coherent text, organized, printed, and consumed in an expanding market for books in Europe, is rather remarkable. This is especially so considering that these narratives are representative of what in pre-modern and early modern Arab and Iranian elite intellectual contexts would be considered a rather minor popular literary genre, despite evidence of the genre's longevity in the region.⁶ Yet, despite this, by 1929 this ragtag collection was held up by an Iranian minister of education as representing the moral traditions not only of ancient Persia but also of the "East" as a whole. From the time of Galland's first translations through to Hikmat's speech, *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* had been thoroughly revalued and had come to influence the frameworks of literary value of both "East" and "West."

By the early nineteenth century, the oriental tale coalesced into an elaborate franchise within the expanding English print-book market. Yet the development of this sector of the market was by no means a cause for comfort for British elites.⁷ By this time the diversity and wide range of oriental

⁶ The earliest known possible reference to a text of a similar name (under the Persian title "Hizar Afsanah") occurs in Ibn al-Nadim's (d. 955) canonizing survey of Islamic literary and cultural works, *al-Fihrist*. See: Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn al-Nadim, *Fihrist* (Gustave Flugel, ed.), (Bayrut: Khayats, 1964), vol. 1, 304. Fragments of this text are found on the papyri presented in Nabia Abbott, "A Ninth Century Fragment of the 'Thousand Nights': New Light on the Early History of the *Arabian Nights*," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, July 1949, 129-164. Abbott's transcription only includes 16 lines of text found on several scraps of papyrus, but nonetheless makes clear that in the ninth century the frame story for the *Thousand and One Nights* was used in Arabic scribal literature.

⁷ In this, it follows on the concerns by British elites for the dangers a mass reading public was thought pose to established class and gender roles. For more on this subject, see Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 49-68. Also, for an account of the gendering of reading in nineteenth-century England: Flint, *The Woman Reader (1837-1914)*, 209-230.

texts appealing to the English reading public presented concerns for many critics. Coinciding with the expansion of British colonial ambitions in India, competition between British and French interests in the Near East, and the threat of Russian imperialism in the Central Asian 'Great Game,' the dizzying range of these books well may have caused anxieties for intellectual and political elites who wished for common cause between the literary market and the political policies of the Empire. But given their popularity, critics were expected to offer the reading public criteria by which to judge the value of the oriental tale. One effort to organize and evaluate the body of available texts in the genre was carried out by Henry Weber in his 1812 anthology *Tales of the East: Comprising the Most Popular Romances of Oriental Origin: And the Best Imitations by European Authors*.⁸ The collection, made up of both excerpts from texts already published as well as new translations and selections, presents a framework by which the merit and value of the genre may be assessed.

Weber outlines his framework through a lengthy introductory essay, which recognizes the economic basis of the legitimacy of the Oriental Tale when he says that the history of the genre shows "how eager European story-tellers were to profit by the fictions of the eastern imagination whenever they could obtain access to them."⁹ In discussing the *Thousand and One Nights*, Weber initially replicates the criteria of value that earlier English writers had presented for the text, as exemplified in his restating Richard Hole's 1797 thesis on the value of the *Thousand and One Nights* as a repository of classical knowledge.¹⁰

⁸ Henry Weber, *Tales of the East, Comprising the Most Popular Romances of Oriental Origin: And the Best Imitations of European Authors* (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne & Co., 1812).

⁹ Weber, *Tales of the East, Comprising the Most Popular Romances of Oriental Origin: And the Best Imitations of European Authors*, xii.

¹⁰ Richard Hole, *Remarks on the Arabian Nights Entertainments, in Which the Origins of Sindibad's Voyages and Other Oriental Fictions Is Particularly Considered* (London: T. Cadell, Jr and W. Davies, 1797). This monograph, originally prepared as a lecture for the Literary Society in Exeter, presents one framework of late eighteenth-century English valuation of the *Thousand and One Nights*. While proposing that the *Thousand and One Nights* preserves elements from classical texts and traditions long forgotten to Europe, Hole also advances the thesis that the work's merits lie in its representation of contemporary oriental manners and customs, a claim that would provide the basis for most nineteenth-century English criticism of the text. The weight of his analysis is given to researching traces of antiquity within the *Thousand and One Nights*—through a close reading of the Sindbad tale, in particular. Hole begins with the proposition that the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights* may be based on ancient Greek (and a to lesser extent, Indian) myths and fables, and thus constitute a foundational text for European civilization. For more on Hole's defense of the merits of the *Thousand and One Nights*, see: Muhsin Jassim Ali (al-Musawi), *Scheherazade in England* (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1981), 24.

Yet, Weber often gives greater emphasis to the reading of the *Thousand and One Nights* as a representation of the “manners and customs” of the Orient.

As conveying in general a true and striking picture of the manners and customs prevalent amongst some of the most interesting nations of the earth, the value of these tales has not been disputed . . . by the perusal of the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments, and other collections of a similar nature, we obtain, in a manner the most impressive on the memory, and the most pleasing to the mind, a perfect insight into the private habits, the domestic comforts and deprivations of the orientals; we are led to participate in their favorite amusements, and acquire a knowledge of their religious sentiments and superstitions.¹¹

In Weber’s thesis, hints arise of a fundamental tension at the heart of much public discourse on the dangers of mass literacy and readership, relating to the intended audience of such genres as the romance, gothic novel, or oriental tale. In the midst of critical concerns for the effect of such literature on various social groups—women, the working classes, the young—Weber attempts to recover the oriental tale as a literary type endowed with a general, if still circumscribed, educational value. He makes this explicit by imagining the ideal setting for such reading: “A boy who has been indulged in the perusal of these ingenious fictions, is made well acquainted with the peculiarities of oriental manners, and the tenets of the Mahomedan faith, during the time of relaxation, as he is, during his school hours, with the customs and mythology of the Greeks and Romans.”¹² Reading these tales becomes neither a fanciful act befitting true leisure (i.e. diversionary reading, as some critics had claimed), nor the stuff of real academic enrichment. Instead, the oriental tale finds an intermediary value as a window on the manners of an unfamiliar setting not addressed in formal education (perhaps for good reason). By thus emphasizing the educational possibilities of the *Thousand and One Nights*, Weber rescues it from accusations of its powers of corruption, while allowing its proper setting—the “time of relaxation”—as a supplementary activity within a goal of good education.

This new valuation of the *Thousand and One Nights* articulates its social function as a literary utility in the quest for knowledge of the Orient. Still, while the study of the Hellenic sources needs no justification, Weber seems to fall short in fully justifying the need for the kind of knowledge the oriental tale was supposed to supply. This tendency was driven not only by the continuing competition between sacred and secular institutions for cultural

¹¹ Weber, *Tales of the East, Comprising the Most Popular Romances of Oriental Origin: And the Best Imitations of European Authors*, ii.

¹² Weber, *Tales of the East, Comprising the Most Popular Romances of Oriental Origin: And the Best Imitations of European Authors*, ii-iii.

legitimacy (and the role of assessing cultural legitimacy), but also by the incremental deepening of imperial concerns for the Orient as part of a comprehensive colonial vision of the world. Nonetheless, Weber's claim of the *Thousand and One Nights'* authentic, even mimetic, powers of representation is reproduced in numerous reviews and articles through the course of the next decades of the nineteenth century.¹³

Given the fact that this was very often the only text considered to be authentically of an oriental origin that the English common reader would encounter, it assumed a representative status for these readers, a burden that was clearly quite significant. Thus in public discourse, the value of the text derived from the perceived legitimacy of the social, historical and religious claims that could be distilled from it on supposedly transhistorical categories such as Arab society, Islamic practice, or Oriental manners.

Burton's Transactions of the Thousand and One Nights

Sir Richard Burton's 1885 edition of the *Thousand and One Nights* is introduced with a series of delicate images. In poetic and intimate terms, Burton leads the reader through a set of visual associations the tales bring forth in his own mind; they take him from his "'respectable' surroundings" to "the land of my predilection, Arabia."¹⁴ There, undifferentiated images of "diaphanous skies" and "the evening star, hanging like a solitaire from the pure front of the western firmament" materialize into the setting of a Bedouin encampment, where further images testify to the simple lives of its inhabitants, as night begins to fall.¹⁵ This is the theatre of Burton's mind, with himself as director, made clear by his announcement of "a change of scene." The curtain rises on a tribal gathering around the campfire, Burton himself among those gathered, now as an actor on the stage of his imagination. These images, triggered by his reading of the *Thousand and One Nights* feed back upon themselves, for sitting confidently among the Bedouin, it is *Burton* who is reciting the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights* to his hosts, as "a reward [for] their hospitality!" What better image exists of the transactional role of the *Thousand and One Nights*, than his description of the Bedouin women and children who "seem to drink in the words with eyes and mouths as well as ears"?¹⁶

¹³ Al-Musawi, *Scheherazade in England*, 71.

¹⁴ See: Richard Burton, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (London: H.S. Nichols), 1897. However, for ease of reference all citations from the Burton translation will be to the following, more widely-accessible, edition: Richard Burton, *The Arabian Nights, Tales from a Thousand and One Nights* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), xxiii.

¹⁵ Burton, *The Arabian Nights, Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, xxiv.

¹⁶ Burton, *The Arabian Nights, Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, xxiv.

Burton's "reward" to his nomadic hosts is to tell them tales from a book that is their own; the transaction of the text takes on an almost literal reversal. But for Burton's narrative, the merit of the text is not only in its exchange-value, but also in its use as a representational archive from which to draw a specific way of reading the Arabian locale. From the sensuous experience of the dusk air, to the sighting of the evening star, Burton makes clear that the *Thousand and One Nights* played a central role in making this space, and the societies found there, legible to him. It is in this context that he explains that the *Thousand and One Nights* did him "noble service" not only as a payment for the kindness of Arabs he stayed with, but also for shaping an understanding of the lands he traversed in a way that could be shared by both himself and his hosts.

By 1885, Burton was to legitimize his addition of a new translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* to the large stack of preceding efforts by arguing that his predecessors "one and all degrade a chef-d'oeuvre of the highest anthropological and ethonographical interest and importance to a mere fairy-book, a nice present for little boys."¹⁷ Yet Burton equally bemoans the moralist's strain in the English approach to the *Thousand and One Nights*, thus attacking E.W. Lane's stately 1839 edition.¹⁸ Burton has no patience for such temerity—for he does not see the value of the *Thousand and One Nights* in the conflicted terms set by some of his predecessors. Unaffected by claims of their use as either leisure-reading, or as moral tales, Burton sets out criteria for valuing the *Thousand and One Nights* in very stark, absolutist terms. Burton sees his contribution to the textual body of the *Thousand and One Nights* as reflecting on its value within the logic of the colonial project.

This book is indeed a legacy which I bequeath to my fellow-countrymen in their hour of need. [. . .] Apparently England is ever forgetting that she is at present the greatest Mohammedan empire in the world. [. . .] He who would deal with them successfully must be, firstly, honest and truthful and, secondly, familiar with and favorably inclined to their manners and customs if not to their law and religion. We may, perhaps find it hard to restore to England those pristine virtues, that tone and temper, which made her what she is; but at any rate we (myself and a host of others) can offer her the means of dispelling her ignorance concerning the Eastern races with whom she is continually in contact.¹⁹

In Burton's narration, the *Thousand and One Nights* is a text re-introduced to Arabia from Europe; the matter of its origins are of lesser importance to him than use of the text by Europeans in their relationship with the

¹⁷ Burton, *The Arabian Nights, Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, xxvi.

¹⁸ Burton, *The Arabian Nights, Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, xxvii.

¹⁹ Burton, *The Arabian Nights, Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, xxxvi.

Orient. Burton calls for a rigorous engagement with the text, through which the English colonial officer (or adventurer—Burton was both at different times) could become equipped to unveil the text for his Arab audience, and in so doing, make legible their own world for themselves. The terms of the *Thousand and One Nights* were not only useful for the English reader to better fulfill his role in the empire, but also could assist in bringing the native oriental to better understand his or her own world as well.²⁰

Thousand and One Nights *Transactions in the Cairo Book Markets*

Burton was in fact simply being more sincere than his compatriots—such as Lane—who presented *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* as an ancient text authentically representing the cultural heritage of the Orient. Burton's more utilitarian approach to the text, and his antipathy for the transhistorical claims made about it, have some merit: the various manuscripts/recensions of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* used to produce the four nineteenth-century Arabic editions were all of recent vintage, the oldest perhaps only dating to the 1770s or later. Arabic print editions of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* appeared first in the early nineteenth century, and between 1814 and 1842, four were issued, named by scholars as the Calcutta (I), Breslau, Calcutta (II) and Būlāq editions. None of the first three was based upon a single manuscript—both Calcutta editions are thought to be compendia from different sources. The claim of authenticity of the Breslau edition has been shown to be false.²¹ The remaining Būlāq edition is likely derived largely or exclusively from a single manuscript, which has not been located. The major English translations of this period are based upon these four Arabic editions—in particular the latter two. Lane worked from the Būlāq press edition, while Burton relied largely on the Calcutta (II) for his translation. An important issue, which cannot be sufficiently attended to here, is the possible effect of the eighteenth-century European editions (which largely derive from Galland's text) on the contents or organization of the Arabic print editions. By what can only be a pure historical coincidence, Galland's manuscript has been shown to be the oldest most complete manuscript of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*.

²⁰ This of course marks another difference in perspective between Burton and E.W. Lane, whose work continuously returned to the idea of the *Thousand and One Nights* as providing an essential view on the ethnographic peculiarities of the Arabs. Where Burton saw the text as part of an active engagement with Arab society, Lane utilized it as a transhistorical window onto the typical characteristics and qualities of the Arab. See in particular: E.W. Lane, *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages; Studies from the Thousand and One Nights* (London: Chatto and Windus), 1883.

²¹ Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 96.

The first Calcutta edition of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* (printed in two volumes, 1814-1818) was a direct product of British colonial policy and its educational institutions in India. The editor of this work, Shaykh Ahmad Shirwani al-Yamani taught at the East India Company's Fort William College, and so had intimate knowledge of the English translations of the *Thousand and One Nights*. Mahdi states that the first Calcutta edition was produced by the college "as a textbook for teaching Arabic to Company officers" as part of colonial administrative duties "for the study and administration of Islamic (Mohammadan) law."²² Shirwani used an eighteenth-century Syrian manuscript (or, more likely, a copy of it made in 1811) for his edition.²³ Yet, in consideration of the purpose of the text—to instruct English colonial officers in Arabic—he "took the liberty of extensively editing the manuscript from which he was preparing the edition [. . .] with the overall intention of preparing a useful manual for teaching Arabic at the College and elsewhere."²⁴ The organization of the tales, and the inclusion of certain stories from the Galland edition (such as the Sindbad sequence) also show that Shirwani was directly influenced by the European editions, despite having access to an original Arabic manuscript.

The Būlāq edition, which follows Shirwani's by some eighteen years (1835), seems to represent a more autonomous work, in that it was issued by an Egyptian government printing press with little direct interaction with European interests. Yet, as Mahdi has argued, "the widespread interest in the *Thousand and One Nights* in France and Great Britain did concern not the text of the first Būlāq, but rather the production and composition of its exemplar."²⁵ The Būlāq edition comes at a time when European travelers were making Cairo one of the most popular destinations for travel outside of Europe.²⁶ Among these, not a small number of book antiquarians and collectors were arriving in the manuscript and book market with requests for manuscripts of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*. This dynamic, Mahdi further argues, influenced the manuscript trade of late-eighteenth century Cairo.²⁷ The recension of the *Thousand and One Nights* that is thought to have been the basis for the Būlāq press edition was of a line of a quite recent vintage, perhaps dating to 1770s or later. In addition, the continuity of content between

²² Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 89.

²³ Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 91.

²⁴ Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 91.

²⁵ Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 97.

²⁶ Derek Gregory, "Scripting Egypt: Orientalism and the Cultures of Travel," from *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, edited by James Duncan and Derek Gregory (Routledge Press: London, 1999) 115-149.

²⁷ Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 98.

various recensions of the *Thousand and One Nights* were notoriously uneven—as Heinz Grotzfeld has noted:

In Egypt, complete sets of the recension directly preceding the one known as Zotenberg's Egyptian Recension (henceforth ZER) must have been extremely scarce in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In consequence, there was a need to compose a new recension—ZER. This new recension, of which complete copies could be easily purchased in Cairo at the beginning of the nineteenth century, became scarce in the late 1820s (Lane, *Manners* 420), hereby again prompting a new recension—the Reinhardt manuscript in Strasbourg. In the course of some forty to fifty years, a new recension disintegrated and was replaced by a new composition prepared both from parts of the preceding recensions and additional materials that were not included previously in a recension of the Nights. In this manner, the development of manuscript tradition prevented the formation of a canonical repertoire of *Alf Laylah*.²⁸

Grotzfeld comments on the transformation of the repertoire of *Alf Laylah* within different rescensions, but does not offer a view on the reasons for these changes.

Eva Sallis has argued that the transformation in nineteenth-century Arabic recensions was due to what was seen as a need to “improve the story art” of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* in comparison to earlier manuscripts.²⁹ Muhsin Mahdi argues that this need for improvement likely reflects the desires of late-eighteenth century European manuscript buyers in the Cairo markets.³⁰

It is therefore possible to suggest that the common exemplar of the late Egyptian recension was compiled in 1775 to meet the demand created for a ‘complete’ *Nights* copy. But it may also have been commissioned by European travelers, or by dragomans or other functionaries in the consulates and embassies of the European powers in the Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire, acquainted with Galland's *Nights* and wishing to acquire a more complete manuscript of the original.³¹

Muhsin al-Musawi further elaborates on this issue, by emphasizing the role of European values in an articulation of the Arabic cultural revival of the mid-nineteenth century. “Even the publication of the Būlāq edition in 1835 should be seen in contexts of expediency and acquiescence to the prevailing European enthusiasm for the tales . . . the publication of the collection could be seen as catering to the European interest in the tales,

²⁸ Heinz Grotzfeld, “Creativity, Random Selection, and *pia fraus*: Observations on Compilation and Transmission of the Arabian Nights” *Marvels & Tales*, 18.2 (2004) 219.

²⁹ Eva Sallis, *Sheherazade Looking through the Looking Glass: The Metamorphosis of the Thousand and One Nights* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 37.

³⁰ David Pinault, “Būlāq, Macnaghten and the New Leiden Edition Compared,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* Vol. 32, No. 1 (1987), 125-57.

³¹ Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 103.

while simultaneously appropriating them to the growing [Arab] revivalist tendency.”³²

Al-Musawi’s comment that *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was appropriated by the *nahḍa* intellectuals of the late nineteenth century as part of the “revivalist” (or neo-classical) movement is quite provocative, and is a point that few scholars of the text have followed up on. An examination of nineteenth-century cultural periodicals shows that the relationship of Arab intellectuals of this period to *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* hardly was organic, but rather reflected how, as European fascination with the text began to register within the Arab literary classes, an educational endeavor was begun within Arab, and later Iranian circles, to reclaim *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* from Europe.

This is the context for a question appearing in the October 1st, 1894 issue of *al-Hilāl* magazine, sent by the Aleppo-based Hikmat Bey Sharif to the Cairene offices of one of the most influential Arabic cultural and scientific publications of the late nineteenth century: “I request that you enhance [our knowledge of] the merits of the famous book *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*: Who wrote it, and at what time? Because it is not an exaggeration to say that this shows that the Arabs [may still excel] in the art of story and narrative.”³³ The editors of the journal respond at length, by outlining different theories on the origins of the *Thousand and One Nights*, the anonymity of its author or authors, and by giving a brief categorization of the kinds of tales found within the text. The answer makes clear the presumption that the readership of *al-Hilāl*, while being literate, educated, and engaged with current debates of literary and cultural import, had little real knowledge of *Alf Laylah* beyond a possible familiarity with its title and some of its more popular characters. *Al-Hilāl*’s typology implies a valuative framework for assessing the text: “The contents of the book are of two sorts: The first are the superstitions and fantasies (*khuz‘ablat*) such as demons and genies and similar beings, and the second are manners (*‘awā‘id*) of the Arabs in the height of Islam and their morals and their traditions and the description of the court of the caliphs and their feasts and related issues.”³⁴

The division of the text into the fantastical and the historical follows the same general valuative outlines as some of the English criticism already discussed, in contending with “superstitions” in the text, while elaborating the use of the text as a window onto the “manners,” “morals,” and “traditions” of the “height of Islam”—in essence imagining the text as a document of the achievements of classical Islamic thought. Therefore, while the framework is familiar, the valuative context is different. Where Hole and Weber

³² al-Musawi, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence*, 71.

³³ “Alf Layla Wa Layla,” *al-Hilāl*, October 1, 1894, 107.

³⁴ “Alf Layla Wa Layla,” 107.

speak of the book as a repository of knowledge about antiquity, or of the ancient East—they emphasize Hellenic, Persian, and Indian civilizations—*al-Hilāl*'s commentator finds the book a testament to an entirely different historical and social context, that of 'Abbasid Islam, and in particular, the Arab identity of that caliphate.

In the following years *al-Hilāl* published a number of other pieces on the *Thousand and One Nights*. An announcement in the May 1, 1901 issue announces a new book publication:

Alf Laylah wa Laylah is an Eastern fictional narrative (*riwāyah sharqiyyah*), representing the customs of people and their morals and traditions (*adab*) in the Islamic middle ages in Iraq, Syria and Egypt [. . .] and represents the traditions of people in their gatherings and their stories and their economic and legal and family transactions. It explains the conditions of women in those days in a faithful manner. And *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* has been published numerous times, and has been translated into most European languages. . . . However, in it there are terms and words that would make a cultured man embarrassed, much less the (virgin) modest woman (*al-'adhrā'*). And we are now in an age where both sexes are reading literary books. And this fictional narrative (*riwāya*), despite its faults is of the most beautiful books of customs and traditions . . . And able scholars in Beirut have addressed this problem and have abridged it and have published it twice [. . .] It has undergone a thorough abridgement so that no modest woman could be embarrassed by reading it.³⁵

This announcement presents several points central to conceiving of the merits of the text for early twentieth-century Arab readers. First, there is the announcement's articulation of the merits of the text for its representation of "customs" and "moral traditions" in the Islamic middle ages—closely related to European claims about the text, if differentiated for its historical perspective. The book's value is furthermore attested to not only by its several printings in Arabic, but also by its translation into European languages. Finally, this edition foregrounds its concerns for the text's transgressive elements, and promises a careful abridgement, suitable for "the modest woman"—a matter of new concern for the new definition of reading as a social activity for both sexes. Here, the *al-Hilāl* article alerts us that with the transformation of the *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* into a popularly accessible text, new segments of society may benefit from its merits, but also must be protected from its excesses.

These debates in *al-Hilāl* present a picture of the value of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* for Arab readerships over the course of the nineteenth century. The terms are generically similar to those proposed by the English critics: the text's value relates to historical information furthering factual knowledge of

³⁵ "Alf Layla Wa Layla," *al-Hilāl*, May 1, 1901, 446.

Arab classical achievements; the text also contains fantastical material the value of which is dubious; there are elements to the text that are dangerous, therefore modern editions are best when expurgated, given transformations to the social practice of reading.

From Arabic discussions concerning the cultural value of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, it is clear that European claims to the popularity of the text *as such* within an Arab context were overstated, if not purely fabrication.³⁶ As Mahdi and al-Musawi both indicate, the exemplar for nineteenth-century Arabic editions of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was likely prepared in response to European demand for Arabic manuscripts of the text. Even the late nineteenth century *nahḍa* intellectuals were still engaging in an elementary discourse about the text, as the articles in *al-Hilāl* show. This indicates that the text did not figure centrally in previous conceptions of canonical Arabic literature.

What can further be determined from these articles is that the value of the text for a nineteenth-century Arabic context largely rests on its double legitimacy. This legitimacy is based on the association with a classical heritage, as well as on translation and popularity in European contexts. By being both a reflection of classical literary heritage, and of a contemporary European adoption, *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was uniquely situated to play an enabling role in the transformation of categories of cultural legitimacy into ones that affirmed the autonomy of the literary field. Figures such as Jurjī Zaydān are precisely those who invested in such a move, with their fastidious observation of the power and significance of a classical heritage (coded, most often, as Islamic) as well as their own participation in institutions that promoted the autonomy of literature from its previous legitimizing elements.

Producing the Persian Thousand and One Nights

We here return to ‘Ali Asghar Hikmat, and his lecture on that winter night in 1929, addressing the history of *Alf Laylah/Hizar u Yik Shab* and its import within the context of Persian literature. As noted, Hikmat does not contextualize the social and cultural dynamics, less than a century before him, which led to the translation and publication of *Hizar u Yik Shab* from Arabic into Persian, thus bringing into being the earliest known Persian text of the tales. What is also quite telling about this fact is that the Persian text

³⁶ For example, Gerhardt reports that since “for centuries, cultured Oriental readers did not count [the *Thousand and One Nights*] as literature at all, the European enthusiasm about it seemed a slightly painful and comic misunderstanding.” Mia Gerhardt, *The Art of Story-Telling* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 2-3.

of *Hizar u Yik Shab* was intimately related to the development of a concept of literature as an autonomous cultural field, outside of sacred or royal systems of legitimization—the text perhaps acted even as a primary catalyst for this development.

It has been established that the Persian edition of *Hizar u Yik Shab* was translated in the late 1830s from the Egyptian Būlāq Press edition, which itself was published in 1834.³⁷ The translator of the text, Tasuji, lived in Tabriz (northwestern Iran) and was trained as a cleric at a young age. Sadly, what is known of Tasuji presents an incomplete picture.³⁸ We do know that Tasuji became a religious authority in Tabriz, by following his father's vocation through seminary studies and eventually became the Imam of a mosque in the city. This position allowed him regular contact with high members of the royal court in carrying out his duties as cleric, which later led to his appointment as a tutor of the young crown prince Nasir al-Din, under the regency of Bahman Mirza.³⁹ Bahman Mirza's governorship of Tabriz was marked by wide-ranging reform programs, such as the sponsorship of students sent for study in England and France, and patronage of the literary arts. During this period, Tabriz became a major cultural center, a role also enabled by the city's geographic location at a crossroads of Ottoman, Central Asian, and Russian cultural influences.⁴⁰ The policies of Bahman Mirza would develop Tabriz into the most culturally progressive of Iran's cities.

For his work as a royal tutor, Tasuji gained the title of *Mulla Bashi* and a position within the court.⁴¹ His commission to undertake a translation of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* into Persian was made by Bahman Mirza sometime

³⁷ Yahya Aryanpur, *Az Saba Ta Nima*, 2 vols. (Tehran: Entesharat-e Zaddar, 1994), 183.

³⁸ For the most complete biographical study of Tasuji, see: Muhammad Jafar Mahjub, "Tarjumih-yi Farsi-yi Alf Layla Wa Layla," *Sokhan* 11. No. 1 (1962): 34-53. Mahjub, an exceptional Iranian scholar of popular and folk literature most active in 1950s and 1960s, undertook seeking out the progeny of Tasuji, and presents, from his grandson, more information than has been preserved from textual sources.

³⁹ Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 66. Also see 46-57 of this volume for more particulars on the struggle over the appointment of the young Nasir al-Din to the position of crown prince (*vali 'ahd*).

⁴⁰ The cultural legacy of 'Abbas Mirza, and his program termed *nizam-i jadid* (the new order) is described in: Monica Ringer, *Education, Religion and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran* (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2001), 15-51.

⁴¹ In his biography of Nasir al-Din Shah, Amanat makes no mention of Tasuji having gained this title, although he notes that Tasuji had been a tutor for Bahman Mirza's children. Instead he states that Tasuji was "part of Nasir al-Din's literary ensemble." (See: Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, 59-66). Indeed, a variety of sources agree that previous to Tasuji, Mulla Mahmud Nizam al-'Ulama served as the *Mulla-Bashi*. However, I am inclined to follow Mahjub's account that Tasuji came into the title later, and having carried the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, was known by the title *Haj Mulla-Bashi*. Mahjub, "Tarjumih-yi Farsi-yi Alf Layla Wa Layla," 36. This is corroborated by M. Qazvini, "Wafiyat-i Ma'asirin," *Yadgar* Vol. 5. nos. 8-9 (1949), 69.

around this same time. Tasuji most likely began his translation during the reign of Muhammad Shah Qajar, as the first volume manuscript bears a dedication to the latter; it is presumed that he completed it during the first years of Nasir al-Din's rule, as the second volume bears his name as patron. After accompanying the new shah to the capitol, Tasuji requested orders to leave his previous post so as to travel to Najaf for pilgrimage. When he was granted this wish, his family was entrusted to the court's care. Tasuji left, apparently never to return to Iran. It is reported that he spent his last years among the shrines of Najaf, in study and prayer. The exact date of his death is not known.⁴²

We may wish to focus on the question of Tasuji's specific social position, in particular by noting how his biography locates him as a transitional figure between religious and monarchical systems of legitimization, yet one who also was involved in a more autonomous arena for cultural production. This is attested to by the role of *Hizar u Yik Shab* in the development of a nascent Persian language printed-book economy. While Tasuji's translation was prepared for court use as a lavish manuscript accompanied by numerous illustrations, it was also soon prepared for lithographic printing and issued in book form—the earliest printing of the book is said to be around 1843.⁴³ The speed with which it entered the print market indicates that Tasuji likely had a book product in mind all along—as already noted, it is assumed that Tasuji worked from the Būlāq printed edition, and not from a manuscript, in his translation. In addition, the early history of the printed book in Iran coincides closely with the life of Tasuji, as the first printing presses were introduced in 1816-17, in Tabriz.⁴⁴ He was among the earliest Iranians to come in contact with this popularizing technology. It is worthwhile to note that Tasuji's translation enjoyed many reprintings, from dif-

⁴² Mahjub's efforts to seek out Tasuji's family also yielded details not often found in the conventional biographies of notables of the Qajar era—important among them is the assertion that Tasuji's wife, known as Kulsum Khanum, was highly literate and educated and "participated with her husband on the translation of *Alf Layla wa Layla*, and from what is said among Haj Mulla Bashi's family, she played a major role in this work." (Mahjub, 37) The daughters of Kulsum Khanum apparently followed in her footsteps, as one of them, Nusrat Khanum, was known at court for her wit and skills as a poet. The fame she enjoyed from her talents reportedly led to her marriage with Zill al-Sultan, one of the Qajar princes, and governor of Isfahan. Zill al-Sultan became a noted supporter of modern educational institutions in Isfahan, including schools for girls. See: Ringer, *Education, Religion and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran*, 127.

⁴³ Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, 48. Amanat cites the date 1845 (see also Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, 66), although Mahjub views that date as improbable.

⁴⁴ Ringer, *Education, Religion and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran*, 34. H. Kamshad, reports the date to be 1812 in: Hassan Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose Literature* (Bethesda, Maryland: Ibex Press, 1996), 11.

ferent lithographic set-ups, in the decades that followed its completion.⁴⁵ Abbas Amanat comments that “the impact of the text [Tasuji’s *Thousand and One Nights*] on the Persian reading public can be gauged by the numerous editions produced in the nineteenth century.”⁴⁶

This confirms Tasuji’s position as a transitional figure in the movement away from a religiously codified system of knowledge, by way of royal patronage, into another less-defined, yet clearly more autonomous cultural arena. While the specific reasons for his choice to carry out the translation of *Alf Laylah* into Persian remain somewhat obscure, his work indicates an interest in the dual nature that the text held, as both exemplary of a classical heritage, and as innovation in its most recent form—the Būlāq edition which he worked from. In fact, it is notable that when comparing this work to other early products of the Tabriz printing presses, it is one of the first published that is of an entirely secular nature.⁴⁷ His exceptional literary achievement stands as a monumental, if unconventional testament to the complexity of the literary and cultural imaginations of this period of Iranian history. At the same time, the speed with which the Tabriz court appears to have gained access to a copy of the Būlāq press edition of *Alf Laylah* is evidence of exchange and contact between Persian intellectual circles and those of their Arab counterparts on literary and cultural levels. For the literary circles of Tabriz, enervated by the relative liberalism of the governor of the city, the Būlāq edition of *Alf Laylah* represented an innovative and modern text, which also bore legitimizing references to the idea of a classical heritage.

The Implications of a Critical Philology of Alf Laylah wa Laylah

From Burton’s potent image of the European colonialist-adventurer sitting in the center of a primitive Bedouin encampment, reciting tales of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* to his hosts as a repayment for their hospitality, it is clear that locating a starting point for the narrative of the *Thousand and One Nights* is a quest largely in vain. Just as the text itself is constituted by complex historical conjectures and coincidences, assessing the value of the text for the various societies within which it has been canonized is similarly an inexact science. In the Arab and Iranian contexts, *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* was constituted for a local audience through a transactional process. By this I mean that the text was translated under circumstances that were enabled by the circulation of textual materials from Ottoman Arab contexts, through a

⁴⁵ Ulrich Marzolph, “Persian Popular Literature in the Qajar Period” *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 60, no. 2 (Nagoya: 2001), 218.

⁴⁶ Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, 46, n. 22.

⁴⁷ Ringer, *Education, Religion and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran*, 34.

multi-lingual network of readers, to the Tabriz court. The text was also important as a product of European idealization of the text as authentic, since the text itself was a product of European colonialist discourse. In addition, the value of the text was assessed in dialogue with and in some ways in opposition to European criteria and values. If not for the nearly coincidental ‘discovery’ of a manuscript by Antoine Galland in 1701, it is uncertain that Arabic and Persian-reading audiences would have come to even know of the text’s existence, much less evaluate it as canonical to their literary heritage. Instead of the classical evocations of the text, the editing/translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* for nineteenth century Arabic and Persian readerships resulted in texts marked by innovation in style and autonomy from traditional forms of legitimization.

The basis for an authentic origin for *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* is a fiction. The book we know by this name (in its different editions and languages) was produced as a transactionary text in period already discussed. What is at stake in foregrounding the transactionary aspect of the *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* is on one hand a philological issue, and on the other a question with consequences for close readings of the text: what may be called the production of a *critical philology* of the text. For example, it is well known that many of the most popular of the *Arabian Nights* tales—the tale of Ali Baba or the Sinbad sequence—were in one case fabricated and in another misappropriated by Antoine Galland and inserted into his edition of the text. Western readers, especially of the nineteenth century, were uninformed about these questions, and so over the course of past centuries, countless commentators have used these tales to draw paradigmatic claims about Arabic literature, or of Islamic cultures or societies. At the same time, these tales have also been included in many Arabic and Persian editions of the text. As a result, many Arab and Iranian readers identify with these tales as representing their own literary heritage. This is a philological consequence of the transactionary nature of the *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*.

The consequence of literary transactions on the literary constitution of the various editions and translations of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* is a question for close reading. To understand the importance of close reading, we only need recall Eva Sallis’ comment that the nineteenth-century Arabic manuscripts “improved the story art” of the text. The improvements these transformations offered were valued through specific value frameworks that were transformed over the course of the century—to assess these issues carefully requires a close reading of the various manuscripts in order to ascertain the “improvements,” and how they have been valued. Transactionary texts were instrumental in innovations and transformations in literary practice over the course of the nineteenth century.

As a final indication of the implications of such a critical philology, by focusing on the transactionary quality of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, the nationalist paradigm that defines much of twentieth-century criticism, and which limits and distorts our perspective on nineteenth-century literary practice, through appropriating the works of this period for national-literature models can be destabilized. When 'Ali Asghar Hikmat attempted to recover *Hizar u Yik Shab* for use in an emerging nationalist framework, he necessarily limited and distorted the perspective of his audience for a complex text that confounds nationalist systems of value and legitimization. By returning our perspectives to the conflicted debates and circumstances that surrounded the production of the text for nineteenth-century English, Arabic, and Persian readerships, we begin realize the damage done by nearly a century of historical amnesia.