Book Review


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The Library of Arabic Literature (LAL)’s Young Readers (YR) Series offers collections of selected excerpts from premodern Arabic literary texts (https://www.libraryofarabicliterature.org/ar/young-readers). All texts in the series are presented exclusively in Arabic and made available for free online. In their accessible format and their minimal scholarly footnotes and references, the collections are similar to the LAL’s parent series of monograph Arabic editions and English translations. In something of a departure into new territory, however, the YR series takes up the LAL’s goal of expanding Arabic literature’s readership and focuses it on younger readers of Arabic.

The series editors seek to highlight the brilliance of original Arabic texts from the fourth/tenth century while also making them accessible to younger readers. The editors have also involved contemporary visual artists as coeditors in their project. The most visible product of this collaboration is the stimulating complement of interpretive illustrations. A limited number of excerpts from Ḥiyākat al-kalām (Weaving Words) have also been adapted into audio recordings in Levantine
Arabic by the storyteller Shalabiya Hakawatiya (https://soundcloud.com/lal-nyuad).

The series contains three titles thus far. Bilal Orfali and Maurice Pomerantz made selections for Mā līdhhat al-ʿishq illā li-l-majānīn (Love Is Only for Fools), while selections for Lima ishtadda ʿīshq al-insān li-hadhā al-ʿālam? (Why Did Humanity So Love This World?) and Weaving Words were made by Bilal Orfali and Enass Khansa. All three works acknowledge Philip Kennedy as general editor. Illustrations for Love Is Only for Fools, the sole work illustrated in color, and Why Did Humanity So Love This World? were provided by Ward Khalaf. Those for Weaving Words were provided by Jana Traboulsi.

For Love Is Only for Fools, the editors have selected excerpts from Ibn Habīb al-Naysābūrī’s (d. 406/1016) Ḥaqalāʾ al-majānīn (Wise Madmen). The collected selection of anecdotes, lexical treatises, and poetry, even in this abridged form, captures a complex meditation on ḫulūn (folly) and its prominent exemplars in premodern Arabic literature. The editors begin with selections that briefly reconstruct al-Naysābūrī’s exposition of the general meaning of majnūn (fool). This is followed by a colorful recounting of the tales of prominent majānīn (wise fools). Throughout, al-Naysābūrī withholds judgment and fosters an appreciation of the often humorous or poignant capacity of the majnūn to expose hypocrisy and symptoms of social contradiction. Despite the author’s apparent neutrality, readers are led to revel in the fecundity of the wise fool’s words and actions. The anecdotes selected suggest that wise fools such as Buhlul and Majnun Layla became important for their capacity to expose the limits of the social imagination, to pierce through appearances, and to expose the essence of social forms. Read in tandem with works of disability history, such as Kristina Richardson’s Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies or Sara Scalenge’s Disability History in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500–1800, the excerpts in Love Is Only for Fools allow access to stories of the historical person of the majnūn that point to the variety in approaches to social difference across history. An appreciation of the history of difference can lead to creative thought: How do our own societies treat nonconformity with predominant social norms? And can we imagine, perhaps with Buhlul’s help, a society whose formal mechanisms imply a more just treatment of all?

Weaving Words consists of selections from al-Muḥassin b. ‘Alī al-Tanūkhī’s (d. 384/994) anthologies al-Faraj baʿd al-shidda (Deliverance Follows Adversity) and Nishwār al-muḥāḍara wa-akhbār al-mudhākara (The Table-Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge). The text contains

1. The editors of the YR series drew their selections from the following manuscript: MS New Haven, Beinecke, Beinecke-L600 (740/1340). For additional information on this work, see Shereen el-Ezabi, “Al-Naysābūrī’s Wise Madmen,” Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics 14 (1994): 192–205.


3. The editors of the series made their selections from the following manuscripts of al-Faraj baʿd al-shidda: MS Istanbul, Fatih Millet Kültüphanesi, Fatih 4013 and MS Istanbul, Nuruosmaniye Kültüphanesi, Nuruosmaniye...
twenty-one selected anecdotes, each two to nine pages in length. Some of these fall within the *faraj baʿd al-shidda* ("deliverance after adversity") genre, which centers on the tropes of piety in the face of hardship and serendipitous, if at times implicitly divine, deliverance. Those anecdotes that do not fall within the *faraj* genre are no less enthralling. Read in tandem with academic works such as Julia Bray’s article “Reading ‘the Exotic’ and Organising the Production of Knowledge” or Philip Kennedy’s chapter on the *faraj* genre in *Recognition in the Arabic Narrative Tradition*, the collected anecdotes might be discussed in a classroom setting in terms of recurring formal components such as the structure of the *isnād* and the organization of the text around the element of recognition. Such discussions might also take their cues from the titles given to the three sections by the editors. The first section is entitled *Tirḥāl: al-Kashf wa-l-waʿd wa-l-manām* (“Travel: Recognition, Oath, and Dream”); the second, *Faḍāʾāt mutashābika: al-Ṣawt wa-l-ḥajar wa-l-qadar* (“Interconnected Spaces: Voice, Stone, and Fate”); and the third, *Liğāʾat wa-aqniʿa wa-adwār mutaghayyira* (“Encounters, Masks, and Changing Roles”).

*Lima ishtadda ʿishq al-insān li-hādhā al-ʿālam? (Why Did Humanity So Love This World?)* contains selections from *al-hawāmil wa-l-shawāmil*, a collection of correspondence between two prominent contributors to intellectual life in the Islamicate world in the fourth/tenth century. The first of these is the *adīb* Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023), who poses questions (including that which gives the work its title) to the second author, the philosopher-historian Abū ʿAlī Miskawayh (d. 412/1030), who answers them. The collection includes thirty-four questions and their answers, separated into three sections under the titles *Asʾila muqārina* (“Comparative Questions”), *al-Insān: al-ʿIshq wa-l-naqṣ* (“Humanity: Love and Lack”), and *Masāʾil īl jadaliyya* (“Controversial Issues”). The dialogue between the two authors touches on philosophy, religion, science, and language. The text is presented as a reflection of the debates and interests of its time and a mirror of the spirit of rationality that defined it, which found its common thread in a celebration of humanity’s desire for understanding. A reading of the text may be supplemented by a discussion of the genre of *risāla* in early Arabic prose and enriched by comparison with other epistolary works and dialogues of the time.

The LAL Young Readers Series makes a timely suggestion: that the re-presentation of works of premodern writing, in this case in abridged, curated, and illustrated form, might facilitate and enhance an invigorated practice of reading in the present. In making this suggestion, the series has set


5. The editors of the YR series drew their selections from the following manuscript: MS Istanbul, Süleymaniye Kültüphanesi, Ayasofya 2476.
itself at odds with contemporary culture, which considers premodern literary texts eccentric. The series defiantly asserts the value of premodern Arabic writing for projects of self-reflection and creativity today.

However, without significant pedagogical scaffolding, the difficulty of the texts will likely pose a significant obstacle to the types of reading practices the series editors hope to encourage. Perhaps another way of putting this is that the series has yet to define exactly what it wants to be, preferring instead to be many things at once. The editors of the YR Series will do well to ask themselves the following questions: Is the YR Series in fact a more a valuable contribution to the Arabic classroom than it is to “story time” at home? And if so, could the benefits of an editing process more intimately in touch with pedagogy justify a departure from the LAL’s customary evasion of a pedagogical routine, perhaps in the form of investment in the development of lesson plans or other material to supplement the YR texts? In an environment of staunch competition from publishers of children’s books and young adult fiction, could the energies of the YR Series be more effectively spent on a concerted effort to facilitate Arabic language and literature pedagogies, or perhaps even multiliteracy and digital social reading?