

Book Review

Mā lidhdhat al-‘ishq illā li-l-majānīn [Love Is Only for Fools]. Edited by Philip Kennedy, Bilal Orfali, and Maurice Pomerantz. Library of Arabic Literature Young Readers Series (Abu Dhabi: University Bookshop, 2019). ISBN 978-99-4885-880-5.

Ḥiyākat al-kalām [Weaving Words]. Edited by Philip Kennedy, Enass Khansa, and Bilal Orfali. Library of Arabic Literature Young Readers Series (Abu Dhabi: University Bookshop, 2019). ISBN 978-99-4836-916-5.

Lima ishtadda ‘ishq al-insān li-hādhā al-‘ālam? [Why Did Humanity So Love This World?]. Edited by Philip Kennedy, Enass Khansa, and Bilal Orfali. Library of Arabic Literature Young Readers Series (Abu Dhabi: University Bookshop, 2020). ISBN 978-99-4825-962-6.

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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

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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 lidhdhat al-‘ishq illā li-l-majānīn* (*Love Is Only for Fools*), while selections for *Lima ishtadda ‘ishq al-insān li-hadhā al-‘ālam?* (*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) ‘*Uqalā’ al-majānīn* (Wise Madmen).¹ The collected selection of anecdotes, lexical treatises, and poetry, even in this abridged form, captures a complex meditation on *junūn* (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 *junūn*. 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 Scalenghe’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.² 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 ba’d al-shidda* (*Deliverance Follows Adversity*) and *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara wa-akhbār al-mudhākara* (*The Table-Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge*).³ The text contains

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

2. Kristina Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Sara Scalenghe, *Disability in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

3. The editors of the series made their selections from the following manuscripts of *al-Faraj ba’d al-shidda*: MS Istanbul, Fatih Millet Kütüphanesi, Fatih 4013 and MS Istanbul, Nuruosmaniye Kütüphanesi, Nuruosmaniye

twenty-one selected anecdotes, each two to nine pages in length. Some of these fall within the *faraj ba'd 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.⁴ 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-wa'd wa-l-manām* ("Travel: Recognition, Oath, and Dream"); the second, *Faḍā'āt mutashābika: al-Ṣawt wa-l-ḥajar wa-l-qadar* ("Interconnected Spaces: Voice, Stone, and Fate"); and the third, *Liḳā'āt wa-aqni'a wa-adwār mutaghayyira* ("Encounters, Masks, and Changing Roles").

Lima ishtadda 'ishq al-insān li-hādhā al-ālam? (*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.⁵ 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 'Alī Miskawayh (d. 412/1030), who answers them. The collection includes thirty-four questions and their answers, separated into three sections under the titles *As'ila muqārīna* ("Comparative Questions"), *al-Insān: al-'Ishq wa-l-naqṣ* ("Humanity: Love and Lack"), and *Masā'il 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

4135. For selections from the *Nishwār*, the editors turned to the printed edition: al-Muḥassin b. 'Alī al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara wa-akhbār al-mudhākara*, ed. 'Abbūd al-Shālji (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1971).

4. Julia Bray, "Reading 'the Exotic' and Organising the Production of Knowledge: Al-Tanūkhī on Indians and Their Elephants," *Asiatische Studien / Études asiatiques* 71, no. 3 (2017): 833–56, <https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2017-0003>; Philip Kennedy, *Recognition in the Arabic Narrative Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

5. The editors of the YR series drew their selections from the following manuscript: MS Istanbul, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, 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?