Sexuality, nationalism and the other: the Arabic literary canon between orientalism and the Nahḍa discourse at the Fin de Siècle

Article  (Accepted Version)

Alkabani, Feras (2020) Sexuality, nationalism and the other: the Arabic literary canon between orientalism and the Nahḍa discourse at the Fin de Siècle. Middle Eastern Literatures, 23 (3). pp. 111-139. ISSN 1475-2638

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/97268/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk
Sexuality, Nationalism and the Other: the Arabic Literary Canon between Orientalism and the Nahḍa Discourse at the Fin de Siècle

Feras Alkabani

School of Media Arts and Humanities (MAH), University of Sussex, Brighton, United Kingdom

Email: f.alkabani@sussex.ac.uk
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4507-9387, Twitter: @ferasalkabani

Abstract

This article examines the dual and paradoxical conception of the Arabic literary canon in Orientalist and Nahḍa discourses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – an era of great change and closer mutual cultural awareness between Europe and the Arab world. What Arabic literature had long signified to European scholars since Antoine Galland’s eighteenth-century translation of The Arabian Nights (mysticism, Romanticism and a platform to explore sexual taboos) was very different from how the nationalist-minded Nahḍa intellectuals wanted to reconfigure it as the hallmark of the rational “Golden Age” of Arab civilization. Sexuality became a site of contestation between certain Orientalists who praised Arab literary “frankness” and an anxious class of Arab scholars who wanted to “cleanse” the Arabic literary canon and reconfigure it in line with modern, European standards of “respectability” and “politeness.”

Keywords: The literary canon, Nahḍa, Orientalism, sexuality, nationalism, comparative literature

Introduction: Nationalism and Literature
Historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers are to heroin-addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market. Nations without a past are contradictions in terms. What makes a nation is the past, what justifies one against the others is the past, and historians are the people who produce it.¹

“Nations are narrations,”² curated and put together through a delicate process of selective historiography that yields the national canon, the epitome of the nation’s finest contribution to civilization, which sets it apart from (and almost always above) other nations. As Edward Said points out, “[…] students who are taught to read their national classics before they read others are expected to appreciate and belong loyally, often uncritically, to their nations and traditions while denigrating […] others.”³ The process of compiling the canon, often presented as objective acclaim of literature, is inherently political; it takes place within a complex continuum of historical power relations and international rivalry.

The emphasis on “originality” is paradoxical, for values and trends change in time and place and transcend national borders. “Culture” itself is never monolithic; the millennia-long history of human interaction, civil and otherwise, has meant that we are all participants in a global collective of human civilization to which and from which we are contributors and borrowers, partly due to imperialism: “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and un-monolithic.”⁴ Yet this inclusive understanding of “culture” goes against nationalist ideology and its myths of civilizational monopoly. “Culture”, as a concept, is not as innocent as it may seem; it has been appropriated in imperialist and postcolonial nationalist discourses alike.⁵ Said offers two overlapping meanings of “culture” and shows how it can quickly turn from that which incorporates and celebrates the aesthetic (the arts and other creative forms of representation) into a “combative
source of identity” – a theatrical stage, “where political and ideological causes engage one another”: culture, in this sense, “comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates ‘us’ from ‘them,’ almost always with some degree of xenophobia.”

Said notes the irony in the way in which Western imperialism and postcolonial nationalisms “feed off each other”; one of the peculiar consequences of European imperialism has been “the interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized coexisted and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives and histories.”

To dismiss the cultural hybridity of our globalized world today is to ignore the history of colonialism and resistance. Yet “hybridity” is at odds with nationalist ideology, for we are “still the inheritors of that style [of thinking] by which one is defined by the nation, which in turn derives its authority from a supposedly unbroken tradition.”

The relationship between nationalism and culture has been studied extensively; Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Partha Chatterjee are some of the pioneering scholars in the field. While Gellner asserts that “nationalism invents the nation” and, therefore, precedes it, Anderson regards nations as “imagined communities” conceptualized in nationalist discourse; Chatterjee, on the other hand, provides a postcolonial perspective that critiques the Euro-centricity of theories of nationalism and sheds light on the complex relationship between colonialism, nationalism and culture.

What theorists of nationalism agree on, however, is the selectivity of the national narrative and the complex role “culture” plays in its construction. “High culture” is adopted as the official civilizational narrative of the nation’s past and present; its codification – e.g. compiling a national canon – is intrinsically political, for it serves an agenda beyond its aesthetic values. Yet the canon is often presented as an impartially selected body of “great texts” that bind the nation together, carry its “immortal
message” and evidence its “undisrupted” historical continuity. In so doing, it helps sustain the illusion that the nation has always existed in its current form, under a “fixed” set of eternal values.

Literature in this sense is weaponized; its compilation, an act often triggered by socio-political crises, is rarely an independent, academic exercise. Nadia al-Baghdadi observes the paradoxicality of the process:

A universal feature of literary history and the literary canon seems to consist in their dual attempt to maintain literature conservatively, as a repository and memory of literary traces, while assuring its mobility by being based upon the changing consensus of the interpreting community of scholars and readers.12

This tension between conserving the heritage while remaining open to newer trends that ensure the continuity of the nation’s creativity and relevance to contemporary geopolitical shifts can be best seen in the Arab Nahda (renaissance) movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which witnessed the transition from manuscript-copying into book-printing as the dominant form of knowledge reproduction, ultimately deciding on the texts that became the essence of the Arabo-Islamic canon.13 In this article, I shed light on the reconfiguration of the Arabic literary canon in the anti-Ottoman Nahda discourse, Arab nationalism, which coincided with the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the encroachment of European imperialism in the region and an unprecedented growing awareness of modern Western scholarship on the Islamic world, Orientalism. I focus on the way in which medieval Arabic literature’s depiction of sexuality in general and homoerotic desire in particular became a site of contestation between Orientalists and Nahda intellectuals. I juxtapose the proliferation in Orientalist writing about Arab-Muslim “sexual otherness” with Nahda intellectuals’ effort to censor and “clean up” certain strands and genres in Arabic writing on sexuality.
and same-sex love.

**Homoerotic desire and Arabic literature**

Portrayals of homoerotic desire in Arabic literature date back to the eighth century, which saw the emergence of *adab al-ẓarāfa* (wittiness/entertainment literature) in the Abbasid Period (750-1258), the so-called “golden age” of Arab-Islamic civilization. The poetic subgenre of *ghazal al-mudhakkar* (male-love poetry), a lyrical rendition of the theme, proliferated at the time and was refined and mastered by the Abbasid poet, Abū Nuwās (756-814), whose name became (in)famously synonymous with that tradition. Literary portrayals of same-sex love continued across the centuries and enjoyed popularity among Arab literati, imams and high-ranking officials. From the *khamriyāt* (wine poetry) of Abū Nuwās to al-Jāḥiẓ’s (d. 868-9) *Mufakharāt al-jawārī wa-l-ghilmān* (The Boastings of Slave Girls and Slave Boys), and the *Maqāmāt* of Bāḍī‘ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 1324) and the treatise of al-Tīfāshī (d. 1253), *Fī nawādir akhbār al-lāja wa milḥ ash`ārihim* (The Most Unusual Facts about Homosexuals and the Most Entertaining Poems Written by Them), medieval Arabic literature boasted a sophisticated lexicon to categorize, describe and celebrate homoerotic desire and sexuality in general.

*Mujūn* (bawdiness, depravity and the unabashed seeking of pleasure among other things) is the generic label that encompasses this subgenre of writing dedicated to celebrating desire, pleasure and other “decadent indulgences” (drinking, singing and dancing). Its documentation continued since its proliferation in the Abbasid era, which witnessed new literary innovations such as the evolution of *khamriyāt* (wine-poetry) as an independent subgenre dedicated to celebrating wine-drinking, singing and courting concubines and youths – as opposed to the *jāhilī* (pre-Islamic) referencing of wine in
praise of generosity.\textsuperscript{17} The period also saw the decline of the older tradition of the 'udhrī (platonic-love) poetry – associated with the “cleanliness of the desert” – in favor for sensual and amorous forms of ghazal (courting/love) poetry for both women and ghilmān (youths) as well as ghulāmiyāt (cross-dressing concubines: women dressed up as boys), which coincided with a move from the traditional majālis al-adab (literary symposia) into the new “entertainment venues” of signing and chanting in urban Abbasid palaces and taverns.\textsuperscript{18}

Bashshār bin Burd, Waliba bin al-Hubāb and Abū Nuwās are some of the libertine poets, whose names became synonymous with the Abbasid spirit of khalāʿa (licentiousness), fuğur (debauchery), tahattuk (shamelessness) associated with celebrating the physical pleasures of life,\textsuperscript{19} or simply, mujūn, a term whose semantic significance has changed with those who documented it across the centuries.\textsuperscript{20} Wen-chin Ouyang shows how the modern and contemporary meaning of mujūn is largely associated with “moral depravity”; its pre-modern, classical connotations had been more “ambivalent”, however, and did not necessarily refer to sexually explicit depictions of desire as it does in modern Arabic.\textsuperscript{21} Importantly, pre-modern accounts of the term had not been condemnatory of such anecdotes of joie de vivre:

It is clear that these bon-vivant poets flouted all norms of propriety in their poetry and even amorous behavior, as many anecdotes attest, but it is not entirely obvious that the classical authors condemned their literary expression or social conduct in the similar vein as the twentieth century cultural and literary historians, or blaming the ‘Abbasid age of decadence’ on the Persians or their influence.\textsuperscript{22}

Not only has the traditional, more ambivalent meaning of mujūn – which had originally implied “buffoonery, clowning and impudence” – been narrowed down to refer
disapprovingly to “deviance” and “moral corruption” in modern and postcolonial accounts of Arab historiography, but the very “ethnic origin” of such literary motifs, especially male-love poetry, would now be blamed on “foreign”, especially “Persian”, influences on the umma.  

Attitudes towards same-sex love started to change in the nineteenth century as European, particularly Victorian, conceptions of propriety and Orientalist representations of Arab sexuality began to infiltrate nahḍawi literary circles. It is difficult to come up with a unanimous definition of the Nahḍa that encompasses all of its various intellectual pursuits and diverse sociopolitical agendas; this is not surprising considering the different aims, goals and approaches of the scholars, including printers, who helped shape the current canon of Arabic literature, thanks to their selective reproduction of what became the classical texts of the Arabo-Islamic canon. As Ahmed El Shamsy shows, some scholarly agendas were in direct opposition to one another: some aimed to resurrect “the established scholarly tradition” when others wanted to “undermine it”; certain authors stressed relevant social messages revealed in older classical works and others “fused on their aesthetically superior form”; some deliberately incorporated Orientalist methodologies of editing and archiving while others “sought to excavate an indigenous Arabic philology to counterbalance Orientalism in its claims to privileged expertise.”

There has been a plethora of approaches and sociopolitical agendas; my interest, however, lies in the particular trope of the Nahḍa discourse that adopted an agenda of modernization to incentivize those who spoke Arabic to “rise” from the “shackles of ignorance” and “backwardness” that allegedly befell them under centuries of Turkish-Ottoman rule. This strand of the Nahḍa discourse underpinned the culturalist narrative
of anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism in the nineteenth century. Its impact can even be traced in early twentieth-century Arab Romanticism, which, despite being a “rejoinder” to the Nahda’s modernizing and positivist hegemony, would still be carry its “epistemology” in relation to concepts of “Western rationality” vis-à-vis “Eastern spirituality”.

The product of shifting geopolitics and power relations (European imperial encroachment in the region and Ottoman military decline), this strand aimed to “salvage” the Arabic-speaking peoples of the Ottoman empire from their current “decline” under what came to be regarded as “despotic foreign rule” and a “misinterpretation of the message of Islam”. Many Nahda scholars looked back to a “golden age” of Arab civilization (mainly the Abbasid period) and contrasted it with their “deterioration” under their Ottoman present, which came to be known as ʿâṣr al-inḥīṭāt (the age of degeneration), conveniently forgetting the formidable power of the Ottoman empire, which reached its zenith in the seventeenth century. Like all nationalisms, nineteenth-century anti-Ottoman nationalism selectively narrated certain episodes of the past and erased others.

The “solution” for these nationalists lay in rejecting their Ottoman-Turkish present and resurrecting the “golden age” of Arab civilization; however, this had to be combined with importing and adopting certain tropes of European modernity, which had proven its civilizational worthiness in major scientific advances, civil bureaucracy and growing military might — elements that Islamic civilization had boasted about in the medieval period. Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt (1798-1801) was an important catalyst in changing pre-modern Arab attitudes towards modern Europe. As part of his Orientalist endeavor to map Egypt, Napoleon installed the Institut d’Egypte, a cultural hub for French scholars and scientists, who not only studied Egypt, but also showcased their scholarship and shared it with interested Egyptian scholars. Historian, Ibrahim
Abu-Lughod, places great importance on this cultural encounter and considers it a turning point in so far as Arab attitudes towards Western culture are concerned. He shows how the Arab subjects of the Ottoman Empire had previously dismissed Europeans as “barbarians,” tracing this anachronistic attitude to the Crusades and the “savagery” displayed by the European invaders:

The Arabs of the eighteenth century suffered from the legacy of their glorious past which had coincided with Europe’s darkest age. That legacy made the isolated Arab of the eighteenth century feel […] certain smugness toward all Europeans whom he judged as barbarians, or at least, somewhat dull and backward boors. This anachronistic attitude […] was that European society had nothing of worth to offer.29

Early nineteenth-century Europeans were regarded differently, however – Napoleon’s invasion symbolized a tangible shift in power relations between the Muslim Caliphate (the Ottoman Empire) and Christian Europe, for it was the first Christian invasion of central Muslim lands since the Crusades.

The Euro-Arab cultural encounter instigated Arab curiosity towards Europe and modernity itself; this is evident in Muhammad Ali Pasha’s sponsorship of the translation movement in Egypt in the nineteenth century. Ali, who declared himself Khedive (viceroy) of Egypt after defeating Napoleon and driving the French out of Egypt, wanted to build a European-style modern nation in Egypt.30 Ali sponsored Egyptian scholars to study in Europe and bring back translated works of European scholarship, so that the public could benefit from this scholarly endeavor. This opened the door to a new academic interest in European science and culture.

Egyptian scholar, Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ al-Ṭahāwī (1801-1873), who was the founder and Head of the School of Languages in Cairo, remarked on the aesthetic and thematic
differences between Arabic and European literatures. Al-Ṭaḥtāwī wrote a book, *Takhliṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīṣ Bārīs aw al-dīwān al-naṣīs bi-īwān Bārīs* (The Extraction of Gold in Summarizing Paris, or the Valuable Collection in the Drawing Room of Paris), on his sojourn in France in 1826-31, in which he documented his experience laying the foundation for what later became his modernization project in Egypt. One of his notable observations was the strict gendering of love and desire in French literature; he also noted how Orientalists would often change the lovers’ gender when they translated an Arabic source depicting same-sex love:

[...] one of the better attributes of their language and poetry is its refusal of the flirtation of one kind with the same kind [jins], for it is not allowed in the French language for a man to say, ‘I have fallen for a male juvenile […],’ as this is considered abhorrent […] which is why if one of them translated one of our books, he would twist the words to say, ‘I have fallen for a youthful girl’, or he would get rid of the sentence altogether, as they see in this a corruption of morals, and they are right, as one of the two kinds [of people] has in those who are not of his kind a characteristic to which he is inclined just like the attraction of a magnet to iron, […] or that of electricity to attract objects, […] as, if the same kind united, this characteristic would disappear, and it [this kind] would have departed from the natural state. For them, this would be one of the worst abominations […] and one never hears conversation about it in the first place.

Al-Ṭaḥtāwī’s comparative analysis is crucial: not only does it shed light on the early nahḍawīs’ awareness of the “difference” in European constructions of sexual morality, but it also offers an insight into his personal views on this intercultural discrepancy. The not-so-subtle praise of the European model that frowns on same-sex attractions is evident in his use of “pseudo-scientific” language: from commending the “better [heteronormative] attributes” of the French language to likening its logic to physics (“magnet” and “electricity”), al-Ṭaḥtāwī’s narrative reminds the reader of the religious
and scholarly purpose of his sojourn in Europe, which he describes as “rihla fī ṭalab al-ʿilm” (a journey in search of knowledge). Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s conclusive championing of the “natural state” of European sexual mores is paradoxically “unnatural,” for it is admittedly at odds with the literary traditions of the author’s own culture. His employment of such terminology (“natural” and “unnatural”) recalls the subjectivity with which Orientalists judged and reflected on the significance of “cultural difference” while sojourning in the East.

Around the time al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was in Paris, prominent British Orientalist and one of the major translators of *The Arabian Nights*, Edward Lane (1801-1876), was in Egypt collecting materials for his book, *An Account on the Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians*, in which he provided anecdotes on Egyptian women’s alleged “lewdness” and “debauchery”, much of which was based on tales from *The Arabian Nights*, which, nonetheless, cemented European stereotypes about Orientals’ “loose” sexual mores. In line with al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s observation on European translators’ modification of gender in certain accounts of Arabic literature, Lane explained how he would occasionally change the pronoun “he” to “she” in his translation of certain literary works, indicating Arabic literature’s alleged tolerance of such “abominations.” Anxiety over Orientalist perceptions of Arab sexual morality became the driving force to purge Arabic literature from what came to be seen as signs of “moral corruption.” As Abu-Lughod shows, “[a] by-product of the translation movement was the respect for western scholarship it generated among Arab men of letters, respect which was generalized to many other fields of learning;” consequently, “[…] the works of western orientalists began to be translated into Arabic. […] Thus Arabs not only viewed the West through western eyes but also began to view themselves through those same eyes.”
It is precisely this act of self-reflection through the mirror of Orientalist literature that seems to have caused one of the most significant changes in certain strands of Arabic literature and culture, across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the gradual demise of the poetic subgenre of ghazal al-mudhakkar, which celebrated pederastic and homoerotic desire and had prevailed for centuries and been composed by many poets, including imams and religious scholars.\textsuperscript{41} Khaled El-Rouayheb and Joseph Massad warn against conflating the poetic tradition of ghazal al-mudhakkar with what many Orientalists have assumed: reading this literature as evidence for Islam’s “tolerance” (if not celebration) of sodomy or homosexuality, for sexual morality in Arabic literature had been conceptualized differently.\textsuperscript{42} Despite Islam’s Abrahamic prohibition of liwāṭ (sodomy), Arab-Muslim poets, scholars and imams recognized a difference between celebrating the beauty of a youth in poetry and committing the sinful act of liwāṭ.\textsuperscript{43} Thus intimating one’s admiration of (and even attraction to) the beauty of a handsome youth was seen as an act of expressing aesthetic appreciation in the form of art. This poetic articulation of desire did not automatically denote a willingness to commit a sinful transgression on the part of the poet. An illicit transgression would occur only if a “transcendence” took place from the realm of the “poetic” to that of the “physical”, hence the acceptance of ghazal al-mudhakkar in pre-modern Arabic literature.\textsuperscript{44}

The emphasis on poetic aestheticism provided a unique space for poets to express homoerotic desire without risking accusations of sinful transgressions. Yet it would be naïve to assume that all of those who composed ghazal al-mudhakkar poetry had had no inclination for same-sex liaisons; some may have harbored homosexual feelings and desires, and others may have been involved in physical relations in private. Being caught acting on these longings, however, would have been a different matter.
altogether, hence the unique literary platform of this special poetic subgenre that permitted the aesthetic praise of the love of boys in literature without violating the fundamental principle of the unlawfulness of liwāṭ in the Islamic tradition.

It is important, nonetheless, to distinguish between what is theologically unlawful and what the public, including high-ranking figures, may get up to behind closed doors. To assume that prohibiting something would put an end to its practice is rather naïve; this principle, of course, applies across all societal contexts, regardless of the culture, era or literary oeuvre under consideration. Yet the proliferation of such liberal literary motifs in the particular case of the Abbasid period sheds light on the era’s permissive attitude towards pleasure seeking; in other words, the focus here is not on Islamic jurisprudence per se – it is on the literary zeitgeist of the age, which sanctioned a celebratory discourse of hedonism.

Relevant to this is the paradoxical spread of wine-poetry: Islam’s official prohibition of wine-drinking did not put an end to its consumption, which continued throughout the Umayyad era and became more commonplace in the Abbasid period, thanks to its wider availability in taverns and monasteries.⁴⁵ Literary historian, Ḥanna al-Fākhoury, shows how, much like certain Umayyad caliphs who were known for enjoying wine (albeit mainly clandestinely), many Abbasid caliphs, poets and ordinary people now indulged in the practice more openly – some would even doubt its prohibition under Islam.⁴⁶ The fact that wine-drinking evolved into a sophisticated poetic subgenre (khamriyāt), featuring other luxurious indulgences (singing and courting concubines and youths), says much about the hedonistic zeitgeist of the era.

Literary portrayals of homoerotic desire continued beyond the Abbasid period and featured prominently in pre-modern mufīn literature. Medieval Arabic boasted a
rich, sophisticated homoerotic lexicon that distinguished between niches and nuances in same-sex desire and offered biological explanations for “illicit” sexual urges without demonizing or penalizing desire per se, for a punishable transgression would take place only if desire were to be acted upon. Terms such as mukhnath (an effeminate man), lūṭ (an active sodomite), ma’būn (a man who desires to be penetrated analy) and liwāt (sodomy) were certainly not synonymous with each other, nor could they be fully understood under “homosexuality” as an umbrella term. The intra-distinctions of these terms would resurface “[…] in judicial verdicts referencing the category of the act, the type of the perpetrator(s), and focusing on punishing actions but not desires or inclinations.” Desire in its theoretical form was not penalized and was accounted for in biological terms: a ma’būn’s urge to be penetrated was thought to stem from a persistent itch in the rectum that sought to be relieved, whereas siḥāq (lesbian sex involving rubbing the labia of two vaginas against each other) was also understood on a similar basis. Homosexuality, with its complex and rich prescriptive lexical repertoire, was regarded as complementary of heterosexuality – not a substitute to it – in Arab medieval culture, which accounted for the fluidity of human sexuality and rightly saw it as a spectrum, despite the religious prohibition of certain sexual acts.

Al-Jāhiz’s Mufakharāt al-jawāرين wa-l-ghilmān (868-869) is a good example of Arab culture’s liberal attitudes towards discussing human sexuality and homoerotic desire openly. The early-medieval book offers a modern-style debate between those in favor of keeping slave girls and those preferring slave boys and using them for sexual gratification. Those in favor of youths would argue that a “ghulām” (youth) would risk no unwanted pregnancy while providing a “more luxurious” erotic experience – although his years of sexual service would end as soon as he became a man; the female patrons, on the other hand, suggested that being intimate with a woman would not
violate Islamic law and that the female slave could offer her sexual services for over 40 years – although she might fall pregnant and a man would not be able to touch her when she menstruated.\textsuperscript{52} This explicit discussion of sexuality in its various fluid forms could not be more different from modern and postcolonial tropes on the matter, especially when it comes to same-sex desire, which is often portrayed as a “deviation” from the “heterosexual norm” as well as a sign of “failed national aspirations [and] dysfunctional Arab masculinity.”\textsuperscript{53} The fin-de-siècle disappearance of portrayals of same-sex love in Arabic literature has been linked to the advent of modernity and the influence of anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism, which coincided with the Euro-Arab encounter in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{54} The reconfiguration of sexuality in nationalist discourse is not exclusive to Arab nationalism;\textsuperscript{55} its circumstantial emergence in the wake of declining Ottoman power and the rapid encroachment of European imperialism is particularly interesting, however. The anti-Ottoman agenda of some of the nahḍa nationalist modernizers meant that certain modern European values would have to be adopted and assimilated if the Arabs were to distance themselves from what came to be regarded as the “dark ages” of Islamic civilization, which allegedly “deteriorated” under the “decadent” rule of the Ottoman-Turks.

This view is reflected in Yaʿqūb Ṣarrūf’s 1884 \textit{al-Muqtaṭaf} article, “al-naẓūr fī ḥādirina wa-mustaqa-balina (Looking into Our Present and Future)”:  

How many branches of the tree of civilization (\textit{tamaddun}) do we see that die when their trunk is unable to nourish them. There is no real future for Syria or for its civilization until it is interwoven with the threads of \textit{tamaddun} and can integrate aspects of European culture, sowing them in the ground, and watering them with the sweat of its toilers.\textsuperscript{56}

From geography to culture and politics, the terms \textit{sharq} (East) and \textit{gharb} (West) were
now acquiring a political meaning in Arab intellectual discourse in the nineteenth century.57 As Fruma Zachs puts it, “The nahḍa period was the time when observation and examination of the West became integral to the evolving process of Eastern self-discovery.”58 This interest in European culture is documented in a rich catalogue of Arabic writing about the West: from travelogues and multi-genre translations to public lectures and newspaper articles, topical themes such as “modernity, modernization, Westernization, liberalism” as well as gender relations were discussed and debated at length.59 Importantly, the discussion of these topics was not “monolithic” nor was it in favor of an alleged “superiority” of East or West; the general approach was that “civilization” should be regarded as “multi-cultural,” yet East and West should preserve their individual, respective “uniqueness.”60 Much of the nahḍa’s interest in classical works was indeed an effort to claim a sense of “indigenous modernity”.61

The seeds of this drive towards modernization may be traced back to one of the early Nahḍa’s towering figures, al-Ṭahṭāwī and his seminal work, Takhlīṣ, which, despite being essentially a descriptive account of his Parisian sojourn, did indeed lay the foundation for his modernization project in Egypt, which had been articulated in more detail over the course of his subsequent works.62 It was in this period that the essential literature of the Arabo-Islamic canon was being devised; its compilation is very much linked to the efforts of publishers, whose choices of what medieval manuscripts to print in book-format played a pivotal role in forming the classical basis of the canon.63 The motivations and aims of these publishers were diverse, complex and varied.64 Their efforts were nonetheless impacted by the increasing dearth of medieval Arabic manuscripts that were being stifled away to Europe – thanks to the intense activities of deep-pocketed European book-collectors, some of whom had been sponsored by their nations in a remarkable example of imperialist-Orientalist rivalry.65
Sex and the “Other”: a mutual fascination

Intercultural voyeurism into sexual mores and gender relations proved mutually fascinating for European and *Nahda* scholars alike. While Orientalists’ fantasies about Arab-Muslim sexuality are well studied, contemporaneous Arab configurations of European manners are comparatively less explored. Edward Said links the increase in Orientalist writing about Eastern sexuality to Europe’s imperialist expansion in the region at the time:

Virtually no European writer who wrote on or travelled to the Orient in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest: Flaubert, Nerval, “Dirty Dick” Burton, and Lane are only the most notable. In the twentieth century one thinks of Gide, Conrad, Maugham, and dozens of others. What they looked for often [...] was a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden; but even that quest, if repeated by enough people, could (and did) become as regulated and uniform as learning itself. In time “Oriental sex” was as standard a commodity as any other available in the mass culture [...].

There is no shortage of European works depicting Oriental sexuality, whose “commodification” has turned this subgenre of Orientalist writing into an accessible platform for sampling and fantasizing about “illicit desire”. Yet the interest in the “Other’s” sexual mores is mirrored in certain *Nahda* intellectuals’ observations of European society. These accounts, which date back to the early days of the Euro-Arab cultural encounter, vacillate between abhorrence and fascination as is evident in `Abd al-Rahmān al-Jabarātī’s (1754-1825) chronicle on Napoleon’s expedition in Egypt; the Egyptian historian, who admired French scholarship, was not too impressed by French social mores. In *Tārīkh muddat al-Faransīs bi-Miṣr* (1213 H.), al-Jabarātī observes:
[French] women do not cover themselves and have no modesty; they do not care whether they uncover their private parts. Whenever a Frenchman has to perform an act of nature he does so wherever he happens to be, even in full view of people, and he goes away as he is, without washing his private parts after defecation […]. They have intercourse with any women who pleases them and vice versa. Sometimes one of their women goes to a barber’s shop, and invites him to shave her pubic hair. If he wishes he can take his fee in kind.  

Al-Jabarāṭī’s demeaning depiction of French sexual morality and social conduct stands in stark contrast with his commendation of French erudition. A similar attitude is echoed in al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s observation of French culture during his sojourn in Europe in the mid-1820s. As we have seen earlier, the Egyptian scholar championed French literature’s heteronormative regulation of desire as he contrasted it with Arabic literature’s fluid approach that sanctioned depictions of same-sex love. Yet al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was not blindly pro all-things European, especially French gender relations and sexual mores:

[Frenchmen] are slaves to their women and under their command […]. The Franks also do not suspect the worst in their women, although [the latter’s] lapses are many, as a man among them […] when his wife’s debauchery […] is proved to him, he leaves her altogether, and separates from her forever.  

This gendered rhetoric continues as al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s points out the “errors of the French”:

Among their worst traits: the dearth of chastity among many of their women […] and the lack of jealousy among their men compared to the jealousy of Muslim men […] how is this so when adultery […] for them is a vice and a shame but not a primary sin/guilt […]. [T]his city, like […] the rest of the great countries of the Franks [Europeans], is charged with abominations […], innovations […], and perdition […], although the city of Paris is the wisest of the entire world and the home of world-based […] science […].
Al-Ṭahṭāwī contends that the “issue” is rooted in a “major error” committed by French men: “[…] handing over leadership to women.”\(^7\) Al-Ṭahṭāwī’s criticism of European sexual mores and gender relations corresponds with his predecessor’s (al-Jābarātī); yet both Egyptian scholars are in awe of French erudition, which al-Ṭahṭāwī links directly to his project of “nation building” in his later works, especially in *Manāhij al-albāb al-Miṣriyya fi mabāhij al-ādāb al-ʾaṣriyya* (1869; The Paths of Egyptian Hearts in the Joys of the Contemporary Arts), and in *al-Murshid al-ʾamīn fi tarbiyat al-banāt wa-l-banīn* (1873; Guiding Truths for the Education of Girls and Boys).\(^4\) In her comparative study of al-Ṭahṭāwī’s discourse, Wen-chin Ouyang sheds light on the Egyptian scholar’s evolving articulation of modernization in his four main works since *Takhlīṣ*, and the emphasis he places on education, which he advocates for boys and girls.\(^5\) Al-Ṭahṭāwī’s “integration of women into his program of education” precedes the turn-of-the-century feminist reforms advocated by Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908), regarded by many as the “father of women’s liberation in Egypt”, despite the “ambivalence and the occasional misogyny” in his narrative as the citations above show.\(^6\)

Al-Ṭahṭāwī’s views on French women’s education are more nuanced, however: “In France, the women also have great literary ability […and] people enquire about the mind of a woman, her talent, faculty for comprehension and learning.”\(^7\) Despite his disapproval of the liberty with which women mix with men, al-Ṭahṭāwī admits that,

> […] the confusion with regard to the chastity of [French] women does not arise from whether they wear the veil or not. Rather, it is linked to whether a woman has a good or bad education, whether she is accustomed to loving only one man rather than sharing her love among others and whether there is peace and harmony within the couple... \(^8\)

Ouyang shows how this nuanced selectivity persists in his gendered discourse on labor
division in the building of the waṭan (homeland/nation) in Murshid, where he stresses the importance of the educated mother’s role in “the up-brining of the children”, which “begins at home”; yet “[i]n his vision, women are to be excluded only from political rule, for it is all too dangerous to entrust the management of the political community to ‘emotional’ women, even though history around the world has known many women rulers, whose biographies he happily includes in Murshid […].”

Al-Ṭahṭāwī’s rhetoric is representative of the general attitude of Nahḍa intellectuals towards the West, which was one of ambivalence, although they distinguished between “modernization” and “westernization,” favoring the former over the latter. In essence, European scholarship was praised and even admired, while Western approaches to “morality, humanity, religious attitudes and materialism” were viewed with “caution and suspicion”; the general consensus was that a blind “adoption of Western culture could endanger the existence of local culture.” While such views are reflected in al-Jabarātī’s and al-Ṭahṭāwī’s writings, the attitude is considerably different when it comes to the assessment of European configurations of sexuality and propriety in culture and literature. Arabic literature’s celebration of homoerotic desire proved problematic for an anxious Arab intelligentsia seeking the restoration of a “golden age” with the selective incorporation of certain elements of modern European civilization. More intellectuals picked up on the discrepancy between European and Arabic literary traditions: from al-Ṭahṭāwī’s early nineteenth century praise of the French language’s strict safeguarding of heteronormative desire to Muhammed aş-Şaffār’s mid-century observation of European ideals of propriety: “Flirtation, romance and courtship for [the French] take place only with women, for they are not inclined to boys or young men. Rather, that is extremely disgraceful to them.” The remarks of the Moroccan traveller, who was in Paris in 1845-1846, suggest that he came from a
culture, where such romantic pursuits were more fluid. This cultural discrepancy was not to last much longer, however; a systematic process of “cleansing” and rewriting the national literary heritage (turāth) had been set in motion.

**Reading the turāth against itself:**

The pedagogical effect that accompanied the surge in Arab interest in European scholarship and culture was to result in a crisis of conflict: the problematic encounter between the Arabs and the depiction of their image in Orientalist works, which were being translated and reflected upon by an anxious Arab intelligentsia. This had a major impact on modern constructions of sexual propriety in Arabic literature since the late nineteenth century; it also shaped the narrative of the Arabic literary canon in the twentieth century. As Joseph Massad points out, “[…] modern and contemporary Arab historiography developed to a considerable extent around the repudiation not only of men’s love for boys but also of all sexual desires it identified as part of the Arab past and which the European present condemns and sometimes champions.”

As a marker of “high culture”, literature is an invaluable resource for nationalist historiographers, who, at times of crises, tend to rewrite and reinvent the canon. Nadia al-Baghdadi identifies the “imaginative potential” of this process,

> [...] which derives from the endeavor to reconstruct the past for the needs of the present […] that allows us to study canon and literary history as historical products in their own right. […] Literary histories are vivid testimonies of the textual communities of the learned, who as a group display “a type of rationality inseparable from the text.”

Analyzing this “type of rationality” indicates that the root of the conflict lies in the Nahda intelligentsia’s adoption of Orientalist hermeneutical tools, themes and research methodologies at the turn of the century. This act of internalizing an alien set of critical
approaches was to have a significant impact on both: the way in which modern Arabic literature was produced and the selectivity with which episodes of the past cultural heritage were narrated, altered or suppressed altogether.\textsuperscript{86}

A war was declared on signs of “moral corruption”, which would now be conveniently blamed on the “foreign influences” that had allegedly seeped through the umma with the “infiltration” of non-Arab ethnicities (Persian, Turkish, Mameluke, etc.) since the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate (the last major Arab empire) in 1258. A theme of mujūn literature, ghazal al-mudhakkar fell under this category despite its emergence in the heyday of Arab-Muslim civilization in the eighth century. All the same, the “answer” lay in a process of selective modernization, which would assimilate certain strands of European modernity; any incompatibilities would have to be “airbrushed”.

Explicit portrayals of sexuality in general and homoerotic desire in particular became the ultimate signs of “civilizational decline” and had thus to be edited out from the new canon of the “ʿāsr al-jadīd” (new age).\textsuperscript{87} A major Nahḍa scholar, Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819-1883), whose Udabāʾ al-ʿarab (the Arabs’ Literary Authors) provided one of the first modern accounts of Arabic literary history, differentiated between two trends of early Arabic love poetry: the chaste tradition of the Bedouins and the “dissolute” poetry of townspeople, who invented a new type of it, reflecting the extent of depravity to which they had sunk, and this type is what is called “the love poetry of the male” (ghazal al-mudhakkar). The reason for its emergence was the mixing of Arabs with the rich non-Arabs, and the great number of slave boys from Turkish, Daylamite, and Byzantine areas.\textsuperscript{88}
Al-Bustānī’s disapproval of the theme indicates his unwillingness to envisage a more nuanced significance to the literary tradition; the fact that he sees it as evidence of “depravity” is a reminder of the era’s nationally-driven adoption of European views on “polite” representations of sexuality in culture and literature.89 Al-Bustānī’s chapter on Abū Nuwās is severely critical of the Abbasid poet’s “sick and depraved” character as well as his “dissolute self [that] turned him away from proper love.”90 Apart from his demeaning criticism of ghazal al-mudhakkar, al-Bustānī “hardly dealt with the topic at all,”91 so much so that “one would not suspect […] that there was a millennium-old tradition of chaste Arabic love poetry of boys […]”92. Al-Bustānī’s allusion to the “foreign origin” of this trend would become one of the standard justifications of the existence of ghazal al-mudhakkar (when/if at all acknowledged).

Ouyang traces the gradual shift in attitudes towards mujūn literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and shows how not only did the pre-modern “ambivalent” meaning of mujūn change to mainly signify “moral corruption” in modern Arabic, but its “ethnic origin”, especially vis-à-viz literary portrayals of homoerotic desire, was now being universally attributed to “Persian influences”.93 “Arab purity” versus “Persian decadence” would become a common trope in Arabic literary historiographies of the twentieth century, marking a new form of ethno-linguistic “othering” unprecedented in classical and Orientalist sources.94 As Reinhard Schulze points out, the “nahḍa required a concept of cultural decadence, for how else was the claim of culture renewal to be justified?”95 And it was precisely the long Ottoman era – the “Age of inḥīṭāt” (degeneration) – that had been singled out as the period of “civilizational decay,” which remains a problematic periodization issue, not just in relation to Arabic literary history, but also Arab history in general.96 Until the past decade or so, much of the literature of this period remained under-studied, which
underscores the political underpinning of the labelling of the era. As Massad puts it: “[i]t was by repudiating the more recent past and by reviving the ancient past that the Arabs of the present could chart their project for modern life.” The accuracy with which they narrated the “glorious past” was somewhat beyond the point: “If [...] nationalists must misread the historical evidence to produce an ancient Arab civilization in line with modern nationalist criteria, they, like nationalists everywhere, would not shy away from their mission.”

_Ghazal al-mudhakkar_ continued to be edited out from the Arabic literary tradition. Even the mere discussion or referencing of what came to be regarded as “deviant sexuality” – now “incompatible” with the Arab “civilizational project” – became frowned upon. Fāris al-Shidyāq (1804-1887), a first-generation _nahḍawi_ who praised the Arab cultural heritage, was later to come under fire for discussing the sexual customs of medieval Arabs (albeit disapprovingly) in his work, _al-Sāq ʿala al-sāq_ (1855; _Leg over Leg_, 2013). In 1902, second-generation _nahḍawi_ Jurji Zaydān (1861-1914), reproached al-Shidyāq for including such “impolite” references; by 1946 the “credibility” of accounts of literary homoeroticism was being questioned.

Hanna al-Fākhoury’s mid twentieth-century comments on _mujūn_ in general and _ghazal al-mudhakkar_ in particular fall into this nationalistic rhetoric, where he blames Abbasid “decadence” on the mixing of Arabs with non-Arabs (Persians, Syriacs, Berbers, Kurds, Romans, Greeks and Africans), who were also “responsible for the increase in wine consumption”, thanks to their running of taverns, dotted around travel routes and frequented by the “unemployed” and “those seeking pleasure.” Wine-poetry, al-Fākhoury claims, went hand-in-hand with “sexual deviances” such as “courting _ghilmān_ (effeminate youths who are extremely witty and fully made-up) and
ghulāmiyāt (deviant, indecent concubines, taking on deceitful appearances, dressed up as boys, and participating in literature, poetry and music as well as wittiness).” Al-Fākhoury maintains that such “deviances” were “artificial” and “deceitful to the emotions, clearly pretentious, inept and depraved,” and that they could not have come out of “genuine love” or “true feelings” – despite admitting the poetic elegance and wittiness of some of the poetry written in this tradition, especially that of Abu Nuwās.

Al-Fākhoury insists that the proliferation of mujūn literature was a sign of the “moral depravity” of the age, which, could, nonetheless serve as a “morality tale” – a warning to what could happen to a great civilization if it indulges in “sin.” His discourse on Abu Nuwās is particularly interesting: while he acknowledges his poetic genius and erudition in matters of Greek and Indian philosophy as well as astrology and nature, he regrets his hedonistic lifestyle – his “instinctive inclination towards khalāʿa (indecency)” – and somewhat links it to his “obscure lineage” (his Persian mother, Julbān, and the humble origins of his father, Hānī, who was a soldier of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II). Al-Fākhoury contends that no degree of poetic genius, elegance of expression or literary wittiness could salvage Abu Nuwās’s oeuvre, for his […] fame, in reality, is shameful, for most of his poetry on this topic is full of deviance and extreme indecency, carrying with it in descriptions of sinfulness, shame and moral disease that which even art, with all of its refinement, cannot camouflage its outrageous ugliness, or elevate it to a true degree of refined adab (literature). No doubt, “this path, started by this mājin (bawdy) poet”, as stated by Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt, “was a crime against literature and a stigma (of shame) in the history of the Arabs.”

As Ouyang points out, twentieth-century modernizers’ rendition of mujūn added a pedagogical dimension to “their discourses […] which were articulated as lessons learnt
not only from the West but also the past, colored […] by Arab nationalism that swept through the Arab world at the time.”

From expurgating homoerotic references in new editions of classical works of Arabic literature, to disputing them or attributing their authorship to non-Arabs, fin-de-siècle and twentieth-century literary historians reconfigured the aesthetic value of the centuries-old tradition of male-love poetry in an act of “re-Orientalism”: Orientalizing their own culture by evaluating their literary heritage through a Eurocentric lens of criticism.

Homoeroticism in Arabic literature between Orientalism and the Nahḍa: a perfect paradox

A remarkable instance of this censorial effort is Khalīl Sarkīs’s “new edition” of The Arabian Nights (1883), in which he condensed the Oriental classic into three volumes and removed sexual references; the well-travelled publisher encompassed much of the Levantine Nahḍa spirit: his low-cost books (new editions of classical Arabic works as well as translations of Western scholarship) aimed at spreading knowledge and democratizing the inquisitive spirit of the period. Sarkīs’s edition of The Nights is cited in Sir Richard Burton’s 10-volume “Plain and Literal Translation” of the Oriental classic (1885-86), the first European edition to include the entire set of tales, with a special focus on sexuality as well as a 240-page “Terminal Essay”, in which he developed his infamous theory of the “Sotadic Zone”, a climatically-determined region, where the spread of homosexuality is allegedly higher than the global average. The pseudo-scientific contention further cemented the East’s sexualized image in Orientalist discourse and conflated the fictional and the anthropological through presenting the “theory” under the guise of a “scholarly” (sociological) argument.

Linguist, poet, anthropologist, sexologist, soldier, explorer, diplomat, imperial
agent, master of disguise and Orientalist extraordinaire, Burton (1821-1890) was an eccentric Victorian polymath, who rebelled against Victorian ideals of sexual propriety. Burton detested his society’s “hypocrisy” vis-à-vis matters sexual and used his “expertise” on the “Orient” in general and “sexuality” in particular to challenge such views and provide a counter-narrative. Burton had established his reputation as a sexologist through his translation of mainly Oriental erotica, the most famous of which was the *Kama Sutra*, an ancient Sanskrit love manual, which was published in 1883.111 His subsequent work on *The Arabian Nights* marked a turning point in the long history of the book’s reception in Europe since Antoine Galland’s first French translation in 1704-1711. Many European versions followed suit; the most notable of which in English were Edward Lane’s heavily bowdlerized version (1839-1841), Thomas Dalziel’s illustrated edition (1863-1865) and John Payne’s complete and scholarly account (1882-1884). Most translators applied self-censorship and omitted explicit materials, which were regarded as “unsuitable for polite European taste.” It took the work nearly two centuries to appear in its entirety in English, thanks to Burton’s “Plain and Literal Translation”,112 which emphasized the sexuality of the tales and brought the text’s medieval socio-cultural background to the foreground, displacing the generic and thematic significance of the otherwise familiar Oriental classic.113

What sets Burton’s edition apart from its forerunners is his inclusion of explicit materials that previous translators had deemed offensive as well as the rich repertoire of anthropological annotations and expansive footnotes running as a parallel subtext, whose main function is to interpret the ethnographic significance of Oriental sexuality offering, in the words of Muhsin Jassim Ali, a “panorama of Eastern life.”114 As Collette Colligan argues, “[i]n effect, [Burton] defamiliarized the Arab text that had been virtually adopted by British culture as its own. His translation violently disrupted
the British cultural presentation of the *Arabian Nights* – to such an extent that it was branded ‘pornographic’.”¹¹⁵ The term “pornography” itself was first “introduce[d] […] into literary criticism, popular culture, and legislation” in the wake of Burton’s publication of the Oriental classic, which also triggered “the first public literary debates” on the matter in England.¹¹⁶ It is perhaps not surprising that Stanley Lane-Poole’s criticism of Burton’s edition of the literary classic’s numerous translations should famously conclude that:¹¹⁷ “Galland [is] for the nursery, Lane for the library, Payne for the study, and Burton for the sewers.”¹¹⁸ As we have seen, Edward Lane’s mid nineteenth-century edition of the Oriental classic was heavily expurgated, where the British Orientalist made a point of censoring any accounts of homoerotic desire in his discourse on the East – in contrast to Burton’s late-Victorian edition, whose inclusion and exaggeration of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular has been behind much of its controversy.

The debates surrounding Burton’s private publication of the book, nonetheless, varied tremendously between those who accused him of “laboriously import[ing] the gigantic muck heaps of other races” from the “Mohammedan East,”¹¹⁹ and those who saw “nothing intentionally demoralizing.”¹²⁰ Colette Colligan and Dane Kennedy provide an overview of Burton’s reviewers, linking their polarized views on the worthiness of his translation to Britain’s perception of its own sexuality vis-à-vis the Arabs’. Colligan shows how despite its scholarly value, Burton’s work “[…] disclosed more about contemporary British sexual preoccupations than they did about Arab sexuality;”¹²¹ the underlying rhetoric was an anxiety about “British sexual inadequacy.”¹²² Kennedy, on the other hand, highlights the “competing uses of Orientalism,” which framed “the controversy created by the publication of Burton’s *Nights*.”¹²³ He draws on Burton’s critique of the “grotesque Orientalism [that is] drawn
from the depths of European self-consciousness” and shows how, ironically, despite Burton’s “intellectual odyssey” for distinction, his “preoccupations” and those of his various reviewers were largely drawn from a European self-consciousness, in spite of the wide range of their “intentions, convictions and competing agendas.”

Despite the polarized views, which centered on the “scholarly value” of Burton’s work, his supporters and detractors were united in what they perceived as “the essential otherness of the society portrayed in the Nights;” even those who praised Burton’s translation and regarded it as an important “repository of orientalist knowledge” would take the casual view that “licentiousness of language and life […] [was] inseparable from Orientals.” Burton himself relied on the “cultural difference” argument and cited a number of “Orientalist authorities” to support his rationale for the uncensored translation. His main intention, however, was to present a counter-narrative to his society’s rigid views on sexual propriety and highlight its temporal and contextual relativity, reminding his late-Victorian audience that even the pillars of the English literary canon have dealt with similar now-taboo themes:

[…] grossness and indecency, in fact les turpitudes, are matters of time and place; what is offensive in England is not so in Egypt; what scandalizes us now would have been a tame joke tempore Elisa. Withal The Nights will not be found in this matter coarser than many passages of Shakespeare, Sterne, and Swift, and their uncleanness rarely attains the perfection of Alcofridas Nasier, “divin maître et atroce cochon.”

Burton would also link the significance of his magnum opus to imperial operations, highlighting the “strategic need” for Empire to better understand its new geopolitical presence in the Arab-Islamic world: “This book is indeed a legacy which I bequeath to my fellow-countrymen in their hour of need. […] ‘Semitic’ studies […] are the more
requisite for us as they teach us to deal successfully with a race more powerful than any pagans – the Moslem. Apparently England is ever forgetting that she is at present the greatest Mohammedan empire in the world.”

Burton takes pride in his “perfect rendering” of the Arabic original text, which unlike any of his predecessors’ versions, shows “what ‘The Thousand Nights and a Night’ really is. [...] by writing as the Arab would have written in English.”

The crucial question is: to which “Arab” is Burton referring: the medieval or the contemporary one? Burton came across a contemporary Arabic edition of The Nights that better reflects the cultural changes in nahḍa discourse. Providing bibliographic details on the Arabic editions on which he worked, Burton mentions a “Bayrut [edition of] ‘Alif-Leila we Leila’ (4 vols. gt. 8vo, Beirut 1881-83).” The “Text,” Burton writes, “is a melancholy specimen of The Nights taken entirely from the Bulak Edition by one Khalil Sarkis and converted to Christianity; beginning without Bismillah, continued with scrupulous castration and ending in ennui and disappointment. I have not used this missionary production.” Burton’s dismissal of Sarkīs’s bowdlerized, most recent Arabic edition of The Nights is significant considering his emphasis on the sociological benefits of his translation, which, he argues, would be invaluable to the “student of Arabic,” who, after reading his edition, “will not only be competent to join in any conversation, to pursue the popular books and newspapers, and to write letters to his friends, he will also find in the notes a repertoire of those Arabian Manners and Customs, Beliefs and Practices, which are not discussed in popular works.”

Burton’s account does not seem compatible with the cultural trajectory of the Nahḍa towards the fin de siècle. Sarkīs’s expurgated edition of The Nights, on the other
hand, is representative of the period’s growing tendency to eliminate references to what came to be seen as “deviant sexuality,” including depictions of homoerotic desire, especially those “highlighted by Orientalists.” An 1836 Arabic edition of *Alf layla wa-layla* included the story of Abū Nuwās’s violation of the three youths; the reprinted 1930 version of the same edition edited out the tale, along with a few other explicit stories. These examples show the paradox in Burton’s supposedly “enlightening” endeavor, which is meant to shed light on contemporary socio-cultural aspects of the Arab East through a literary translation of one of the most fantastical texts of the Middle Ages. Burton conflated the fictional with the anthropological and came up with a remarkably anachronistic account of “Oriental manners”, to which he somehow justified attaching a global theory of homosexuality, the “Sotadic Zone,” despite the fact that homoerotic desire rarely features in the text. Burton’s work reaffirmed old Orientalist stereotypes about the alleged moral and sexual otherness of the Arab East and omitted to reference the critical structural changes reshaping the conceptualizations of sexual morality in the contemporary literary circles of the region. The fact that *Alf layla wa-layla* was systematically shrinking in the original Arabic, and paradoxically expanding in the European translations (to reach full size in Burton’s edition) says much about the irony at hand.

**The Arabic Literary Canon? Whose canon, when, where and in relation to whom?**

It is interesting that Burton chose not to translate any contemporary Arabic literature: all of his Arabic translations are characteristically anachronistic, dating back to the medieval period. His Arabic translational oeuvre consists of a carefully selected set of texts, which had never been regarded as “high art” in Arabic literature; *The Arabian Nights*, in particular, has traditionally been considered a folkloric, somewhat “vulgar” collection of popular tales by Arab belletrists. Arabic literature of the medieval period is
divided into two strands: “high” or “elite” and “popular;” the former is based on pre-Islamic poetry and the Quran, whereas the latter is mainly oral. Only “high literature” is referred to as “adab” – a complex concept referring to elite literature, which also encompasses connotations of culture, decency and good manners. *Alf layla wa-layla* belongs to the second strand, which did not qualify as “adab,” and was therefore excluded from the “canon” of Arabic literature. It was ironically this type of medieval non- *adab* (popular) literature, embodied by the iconic text of *The Arabian Nights* that was, until recently, best known to Western readers. Interestingly, the text’s growing popularity in Europe since Galland’s eighteenth-century translation was behind much of the surge of interest in the tales among modern Arab and Iranian readers and critics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Egyptian literary critic, Ṭaha Ḥusayn, re-evaluated the Oriental classic’s critical and aesthetic significance praising its timeless contribution to world literature.

Meanwhile in England, the debates over Burton’s “importation” of “Oriental muck heaps” resulted in further ramifications vis-à-vis the canonical value of certain classics in the “garden of Western literature.” Burton’s reliance on “cultural difference” did not silence his critics such as John Morley, who “repudiate[d] Burton’s claim that his work aim[ed] to instruct the student of anthropology and orientalism;” in denouncing Burton’s “scholarship”, Morley asked “Students! Students of what? Does anyone need to be told that the vast majority of them are simply students of what I shall call […] Pornography?” Morley’s initial attack was soon followed by a more elaborate criticism in a famous article, “The Ethics of Dirt,” which itself became subject to numerous responses. 

I am not prepared to formulate a complete “Ethics of Dirt,” but it seems to me clear that there is […] a vast difference between the obscenity of our
own classics and that of the Mohammedan East [...]. In the garden of western literature there are many foul quagmires which must be faced by the explorer; but we have a legitimate – nay, an imperative – interest in wading through them. Is there any reason why we should laboriously import the gigantic muck heaps of other races, place them très curieux, and charge a high price for the privilege of wallowing in them? I think not.

Morley believed that Burton’s “Arabian Nights was an insidious threat to the British moral and national character. It threatened the ‘unsullied’ sanctity of British domesticity [...]” Morley’s reaction came as a result of a deeply entrenched perception of Oriental sexual otherness; his subsequent article stressed the particular “offensiveness” of Burton’s book because of its “focus on Arab sexuality.” Morley’s selectivity highlights the hypocrisy of nationalist ideology, which informs the configuration of the canon.

What appears to be a shared interest, however, is the mutual fascination in intercultural notions of “propriety” and its impact on literary historiographies in Victorian and nahḍawi discourses at the turn of the century. Sexual morality becomes a prominent identity marker; consequently, literary representations of sexuality turn into a site of contestation, shaping the national literary canon in relation to the nation’s construction of itself versus the “Other.” The late-Victorian moralistic debates that ensued in the wake of Burton’s edition of The Nights are reminiscent of certain arguments in nahḍawi literary circles. Determining what to narrate or not to narrate as well as the origin and the orientation of the narrative itself – its “nationality” and “sexuality” per se – becomes a matter of national interest, pride and identity. Morley’s blame of Burton’s choices is evocative of the aforementioned controversy concerning Jurjī Zaydān’s criticism of al-Shidyāq’s discussion of medieval Arab sexuality:
We cannot proceed beyond our description of [al-Shidyāq’s] book […] before mentioning something that we had hoped God would spare us looking into, namely that he [al-Shidyāq] had mentioned in that book terms and expressions intended to express bawdiness [mujān] but went beyond its limits so much so that no man of letters could recite it without wishing that it had not occurred to our Shaykh [i.e. al-Shidyāq himself] and that he had not included it in his book in order to steer the pens of writers away from what would cause a young man, not to mention a [female] virgin, to blush [khajal].

A comparative reading of both cultures’ contemporaneous attitudes towards literary portrayals of sexuality reveals a remarkable similarity. It also highlights the irony in Burton’s supposedly “enlightening scholarly endeavor”: Burton prides himself on his exceptional knowledge of the Arab East – a knowledge he admittedly wants to pass on to his fellow countrymen: “[t]he student who adds the notes of Lane […] to mine will know as much of the Moslem East and more than many Europeans who have spent half of their lives in Orient lands.” It is clear, however, that Burton’s account did not reflect an accurate image of the latest changes on the literary scene in the contemporary Arab East. Burton did not lack the linguistic abilities to learn about the changing discourse of literary depictions of sexuality in the Nahḍa. The discrepancies in his selective portrayal of Arab-Muslim sexuality (carefully chosen from archaic sources) and his emphasis on its irredeemable otherness (despite contrary evidence) pose interesting questions on his motives, which appear to be more concerned with challenging the moralist hegemony of his late-Victorian society than presenting an accurate image of the Arab Orient.

Motives are political – so is the construction of a “national literary canon”, whose main purpose is to propagate myths of cultural exceptionalism. The nature of our
centuries-old human interaction dictates a different reality: one that disturbs and disrupts the artificial homogeneity propagated by the national narrative. As Matthew Arnold states: “[…] everywhere there is connexion, everywhere there is illustration: no single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures.” Despite claims of “originality”, no nation’s literary oeuvre exists in isolation.

Orientalism underpinned and was inspired by the Romantic movement in Europe. A.S. Byatt states: “[i]n British Romantic poetry The Arabian Nights stood for the wonderful against the mundane, the imaginative against the prosaically and reductively rational.” She shows how The Nights influenced the childhoods of Wordsworth and Coleridge as well as that of Dickens; for all of them the classic symbolized an escapist dream world and a source of literary inspiration. Canonical English works such as Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1798) and Kubla Khan (1816) as well as Wordsworth’s “Dream of the Arab” in The Prelude were directly influenced by images from (and imaginings of) the East. Marina Warner notes that “[t]he 1817 version of the ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ […] strikes the same cold thrill as the Nights because it too conveys ‘the inadequacy of human morality to comprehend the world in which we live.’” William Beckford’s Vathek (1782) is another example of Orientalist-Gothic literature that was originally presented as a translation of the “Thousand and Second Nights” from a fictitious “lost Arabic manuscript.”

The popular Oriental classic in particular is the product of a rich history of cross-cultural fertilization: not only do the tales originate in a vast span of the Oriental world (North Africa, the Levant, Turkey, Persia, India and China), but some tales were
in fact retranslated back from European editions. Antoine Galland may have introduced new tales from other sources which were retranslated back into Arabic. The final four volumes in Galland’s edition were informed by oral recitations from Ḥanna Dyāb, a Maronite-Catholic Syrian resident of Paris, who spoke Arabic, Turkish and French and possessed “a large repertoire of stories.” In Marina Warner’s words, “The book’s history has been a fabulous muddle, and it is fair to say, without colonialist aggression, that the work that appears in French as Les mille et une nuit, and in English, two years later, as Arabian Nights’ Entertainment, is a hybrid, formed through cross-fertilization over time between Europe, Asia and the Middle East.”

The meaning of “literature” in Arabic today – adab versus non-adab – has evolved out of a long history of intercultural dialogue between European and Arab critical discourses, which have impacted its canonical configuration not only in content, but also in genre. Adab is a problematic term to translate: not only does it encompass multilayers of meaning including “manners,” “etiquette” and “high culture,” but traditionally it also includes non-literary genres of writing. Nadia al-Baghdadi explains the dichotomy between the modern and pre-modern meanings of adab highlighting the role of European modernity in aligning the term’s meaning with that of the West’s (literature as “belles-letters”): “Before the advent of modernity, Arabic literature was not so much confined to specific genres of text, each with a fixed stable nature, but referred to a variety of forms and functions of literary expression, subsumed under the name adab.” History, for instance, was traditionally classified as adab. The first European accounts of the history of Arabic literature appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century and applied “methodologies and parameters of German and French literary studies to Arabic poetry […].” German Orientalist, Carl Brockelmann (1868-1956), best known for his multi-volume Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur (1898-
1902), was aware of the dual-meaning of “literature” in the peculiar case of the Arabic tradition: “[…] the historian of Arabic literature […] may only in the modern period, which gradually aligns the world of Islam […] to European culture, restrict himself to art of literature (Wortkunst) proper.”

It was such studies of Arabic literature that impacted its perception in nahḍawi literary circles, leading to a closer alignment of adab to the European definition of literature as “belles-letters”. In his four-volume Tārīkh ādāb al-lughā al-ʿarabiyya (1910-13; The History of the Literature of the Arabic Language), Jurjī Zaydān referred to the post-‘inḥīṭāt (post-degeneration) era as “al-ʿaṣr al-jadīd” (the “New Age”), indicating new Western-derived “categories and aspects that did not apply to the previous periods” and drawing on European literary histories. By mid-twentieth-century, Arabic and European bibliographic references appeared side-by-side in newer treatises of Arab literary historiographies; Hanna al-Fākhoury’s Tārīkh al-adab al-ʿarabī (1951) references Jurjī Zaydān, Carl Brockelmann and many others without distinguishing between classical (indigenous) and modern (European) categories of adab. Issues of categorization and periodization have always occupied the minds of Arab scholars and critics since the early Islamic period. Globalization is not new to Arab-Islamic culture, which, has been, at times, an unparalleled intercontinental hub for cross-cultural fertilization. This was certainly the case of the truly cosmopolitan literature written during the “Golden Age” of Arab civilization in the Middle Ages: from the Umayyads, whose dynasty continued in al-Andalus in the West to the Abbasids in Baghdad in the East. The types of literature produced on either side of the vast multicultural Arab-Muslim Empire was open to all sorts of regional literary influences: Greek, Persian and Indian in the East, and Latin-European and Hebrew in the West. Intercultural influences have always been exchanged between Europe, the
Arabic-speaking world and beyond; literary trends, motifs, themes and even modes of thinking and rethinking “literature” are in a state of flux.

So what is the “national canon,” and how “original” and “exclusive” is it? Nationalism has made a vicious comeback, and, given the turbulent global political climate today, certain romanticized myths of “ethno-cultural purity” are becoming increasingly commonplace in political discourse. For some, “literature” may have a “nationality” – perhaps even a metaphorical “passport” – to signify its patriotic and exclusive belonging. But what happens when intercultural literary trends blend, mutate and give birth to new creative novelties: motifs, themes, genres and styles (as they have indeed done throughout history)? Who claims the creole literary offspring? Can it be “naturalized”? Needless to say, these are rhetorical questions intended to illustrate the absurdity of such futile attempts to impose a “nationality” on what should otherwise be celebrated as a human collective: a treasure of intercultural interaction. This is not to take away from the genius of any nation or culture; to be sure, genres, styles, motifs, themes and ideas in general have to originate somewhere, but the processes underpinning their inspiration, conception, creation and evolution are larger than any one canon can account for. In her detailed study of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s travelogue (Talkhīs) as a prelude for his subsequent discourse on modernization, Ouyang highlights the often-overlooked “ideological content” of travel writing.¹⁷⁰ She shows how, in al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s case, “it is possible to locate departure in the moment of return […] where this departure is not for another destination outside the homeland, but the homeland’s for a new destiny.”¹⁷¹ This is indeed what Burton and many other Orientalists were hoping to achieve through their travel writing.

Borders cannot curb our innate desire to hear and tell stories; the current surge in
wall-building in many parts of the world has paradoxically created more pressing stories to be told and inspired new themes and collaborative platforms for story-telling. The interconnectedness of “literature” is at odds with the concept of a “national canon;” a close analysis of any “national literature” is bound to transcend the disciplinary confines of literary research and the geopolitical borders of a given nation.

Comparative literature, as an interdisciplinary field of scholarship, is better equipped to study the formation and configuration of canons – not to support nationalistic agendas, but to dismantle their myths of exclusivity. As the case of the fin-de-siècle Arabic canon shows, “national texts” need to be studied comparatively: in relation to wider texts and contexts; only then can we compile a bigger, more comprehensive and more accurate understanding of canonicity and patterns of literary mobility: what “literature” means in a given context, where that meaning has been derived from and what new trends it might set. Assuming a wider interdisciplinary stance is key: before examining the aesthetic and critical value of the “chosen texts” of a given canon, we ought to consider important contextual questions as to when the canon is being configured, by whom and in relation to what; only then can we arrive a better understanding of the complex processes at hand.

Notes:

1 Hobsbawm, “Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today,” 3.
2 Cited in Said, Culture and Imperialism, xiii.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., xxv.
5 Ibid., xxi-xxii.
6 Ibid., xii-xiii.
7 Ibid., xx.
8 Ibid., xxv.
10 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
15 Also known as “ghazal al-ghilmān” (the courting of youths).
16 Al-Jāḥiẓ’s *Muḥakharāt* is a modern-style prosaic debate discussing the advantages and
disadvantages of keeping slave boys and girls and using them for sexual
gratification. In his *Fī Nawādir akhbār al-lāṭa*, al-Tifāshī had to change some of the
names of the high-ranking officials to “protect their reputation”. See Al-Samman,
18 Ibid., 387-391.
19 See Ibid. 349-756 (“The Abbasid Era in the East”) for a survey of the characteristics
of Abbasid literature.
21 Ibid., 9-12.
22 Ibid., 10-11.
23 Ibid., 9-12. See Ouyang’s chapter for more details on the etymology of the term,
mujūn, in Arabic.
25 Ibid., 4.
26 Broadly speaking, anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism can be divided into two main
strands: Islamist, which called for restoring the Caliphate to “Arab hands”, and
secularist, whose objective was to build a modern Arab nation following a selective
assimilation of European modernity. Although ideologically different, both strands
of the movement converged in their praise of the Arabic language and Arab cultural
and literary heritage. See Choueiri, “Cultural and Political Arabism,” 56-100.


Muhammed Ali Pasha (1769-1849), who was Albanian, declared himself Khedive of Egypt and ruled between 1805-1848; he is credited with reforming the military and the economy as well as modernising education. He is often regarded as the founding father of modern Egypt.


See Ouyang’s “Return or Departure?” for a detailed analysis of al-Ṭahṭāwī’s discourse on modernity and modernization in Egypt.

Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 32-33. The Arabic word, “jins,” now meaning “sex” or “coitus”, did not acquire this meaning until the twentieth century. Originally, the word meant “kind” or “type,” hence Massad’s choice of translating it in its historical context. Al-Ṭahṭāwī uses it to refer to the “sexes” (male and female) as the two “kinds/types” of people.


Ouyang, “Return or Departure?,” 98-90. His official role was an “an imam in waiting”, to accompany the 42-strong 1826 delegation of Egyptian scholars, which would later expand to 114 delegates.

El-Rouayheb, “The Love of Boys,” 16. Lane arrived in Egypt in September 1825, while al-Ṭahṭāwī was in Paris in 1826. Lane’s book was published in 1836 by the Society for Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.


Ibid., 76. The first comprehensive historical work to be translated was Nihāyat al-arab fī tārīkh al-'arab, based on a work by the French orientalist, Sédillot, which appeared in Arabic in 1872; Sédillot’s original work, *Histoire des Arabes*, was published in Paris in 1854.

El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 154-160. The demise of the literary tradition did not happen overnight: even the renowned fin-de-siècle poet Ḥāfīẓ Ibrāhīm (d. 1923) composed poetry in the love of handsome youths, but this was certainly the
end of the centuries-long tradition. Even classical accounts of ghazal al-mudhakkar were becoming increasingly difficult to find or reprinted.

42 Ibid.; Massad, Desiring Arabs.
43 El-Rouayheb, Before Homosexuality, 3-5.
44 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 391.
48 El-Rouayheb, Before Homosexuality, 5-6
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 274-275.
53 Ibid., 277.
54 El-Rouayheb, Before Homosexuality, 154-160.
55 See Mosse, Nationalism and Sexuality (1988).
57 Ibid., 127-128.
58 Ibid., 128.
59 Ibid., 128-129.
60 Ibid.
61 El Shamsy, Rediscovering the Islamic Classics, 5.
62 Ouyang, “Return or Departure?,” 89-94. Even in the early nahda discourse, which proceeded (and could not have foreseen) the subsequent “contentions” of the Euro-Arab cultural encounter at the fin de siècle, “travel writing” was “not always empty of ideological content”, and that “the seeds of modernization are already sown in the descriptive landscape of Talkhīṣ, and that the modernization projects are already inscribed in its narrative agenda and trajectory.”
63 El Shamsy, Rediscovering the Islamic Classics, 5.
64 Ibid., 4.
65 See “Chapter I: The Disappearing Books” in Ibid., 9-30.


74 Ouyang, “Return or Departure?,” 101-105.

75 Ibid., 102.

76 Ibid., 103.

77 Cited in Ibid.

78 Ibid., 103-104.

79 Ibid., 104; see Marilyn Booth’s “May her kind be multiplied” for a detailed study of the gendered approach to nahḍawi modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

80 Zachs, “‘Under Eastern Eyes,’” 135.

81 Ibid., 130.

82 Cited in El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 2. (Originally cited in Miller, *Disorienting Encounters*, 161.).


84 Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 1.

85 Al-Baghdadi, “Registers of Arabic Literary History,” 441.

86 See Ouyang’s analysis of Ṭaha Ḥusayn’s discourse in “Orientalism and World Literature”.

87 Al-Baghdadi, “Registers of Arabic Literary History,” 445-446. The term is used by literary historian, Jurji Zaydān, to signify the end of ʿaṣr al-inḥihat (Age of Decline) under non-Arab rule, from which the New Age emerged with the arrival of Napoleon
Bonaparte in Egypt in 1798; the term is “adopted from political discourse,” although it “coincides with the emergence of new styles and themes.”

90 Ibid., 157.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
94 Ibid., 9. In Ouyang’s words: “It may be possible to assume that linguistic and ethnic othering was an integral part of the articulation of cultural difference in modern nationalist discourses surrounding these narratives, however, it is impossible to trace the origins of the explicit moral condemnation of mujūn to any particular classical Arabic source or any specific “Orientalist” discourse.”
95 Schulze, “Mass Culture,” 191-192
97 Ibid. There have, however, been multiple studies on the period in the past decade or so.
98 Massad, Desiring Arabs, 51.
99 Ibid., 112.
100 Ibid., 36-37.
101 Ibid.
102 Al-Fākhoury, Tarīkh al-adab al-ʿarabī, 362-390.
103 Ibid., 405
104 Ibid., 404-405.
105 Ibid., 392-396.
106 Ibid., 405.
The Sotadic Zone, according to Burton, is “bounded westwards by the northern shores of the Mediterranean (N. Lat. 43°) and by the southern (N. Lat. 30°). Thus the depth would be 780 to 800 miles including meridional France, the Iberian Peninsula, Italy and Greece, with the coast-regions of Africa from Morocco to Egypt. Running eastward the Sotadic Zone narrows, embracing Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Chaldea, Afghanistan, Sind, the Punjab and Kashmir. In the Indo-China the belt begins to broaden, enfolding China, Japan and Turkistan. It then embraces the South Sea Islands and the New World where, at the time of its discovery, Sotadic love, was some exceptions, an established racial institution.”

Burton’s translational scholarship on sexuality and “pillow-books” began with Indian erotica, the most famous of which are Vatsayana’s Kama Sutra, an erotic love manual written between the first and fourth centuries and the Ananga Ranga, a Sanskrit love manual written in the fifteenth or sixteenth century by the poet, Kalyan Mall; both translations, among others, were published by the Kama Shastra Society of London and Benares, an imaginary publishing house that was set up by Burton and Foster Fitzgerald Arbuthnot in 1882. His work on Arab erotica, on the other hand, was characterised with a special interest in “pederasty” and other accounts of “male-to-male sexuality”. The Perfumed Garden, a translation of a sixteenth-century Arabic sex manual attributed to a Tunisian Cadi named Sheikh Nefzaoui, was Burton’s third publication by the Kama Shastra Society; the work would gain further notoriety after Burton tried to retrieve an alleged missing chapter on pederasty.

Even Payne’s “complete” translation did not contain all the tales; it was seventy-eight stories shorter than Burton’s.

Stanley Lane-Poole was the great-nephew of Edward Lane, one of the main translators of The Arabian Nights in the nineteenth century.
118 Cited in Ibid., 66.

119 Ibid., 63-71. From John Morley’s “The Ethics of Dirt”, an article attacking Burton’s translation that appeared in the Pall Mall Gazette on the 29th of September 1885. See Colligan (Ibid) for a review of the various responses to The Nights in the press after its publication.

120 Cited in Ibid., 64. The first review of The Nights from the Standard on the 12th of September 1885; this was a positive review.

121 Ibid., 57.

122 Ibid., 58.

123 Kennedy, ““Captain Burton’s Oriental Muck Heap,”” 310.

124 Ibid., 339.

125 Ibid., 328.

126 Ibid., 327.

127 Burton, “The Translator’s Foreword,” xvi.

128 Ibid., xxiii-xxiv.

129 Ibid., xiii.

130 Ibid., xix-xx.

131 Ibid., xx.

132 Ibid.

133 Burton, The Supplementary Nights, 391.

134 Massad, Desiring Arabs, 72.

135 Ibid., 73.

136 Burton, A Plain and Literal Translation, 252-253. Homosexuality features in 3 tales only: a minuscule proportion in the larger-than-life Oriental saga. See Burton’s three-category classification of “pederasty” in the “Terminal Essay”. The second category is made in reference to the Abbasid poet, Abū Nuwās, who debauches three youths in one of the tales.

137 See Chapters 2-3 in Alkabani, Richard Burton, T.E. Lawrence, for a detailed study of Burton’s Arabic and Oriental erotica.

138 Starkey, Modern Arabic Literature, 2.

139 Ibid.

140 Ibid., 17.

C. Knipp, “The ‘Arabian Nights’ in England,” 48. Suhayr al-Qalamawi argues that it was the Oriental classic’s popularity in the West that led important Arab literary critics such as Ṭaha Ḥusayn to re-evaluate the text’s critical and aesthetic significance albeit belatedly. See Ouyang’s analysis of Ṭaha Ḥusayn’s discourse in “Orientalism and World Literature”.

Colligan, The Traffic in Obscenity, 64. Morley wrote his response in an article entitled “Pantagruelism or pornography” and published it on 14 September 1885 under the pseudonym of Sigma.

Ibid.

Cited in Ibid.

The article was published on 29 September 1885.

Cited in The Traffic in Obscenity, 64.

Ibid., 65.

Ibid.

Zaydān, Tarājim mashahir al-sharq fī l-qarn al-tāši’ ʿashar, 2: 90. Cited in Massad, Desiring Arabs, 35-36. Zaydān’s criticism of al-Shidyāq came despite the latter’s own critical views and disapproval of medieval Arab men’s sexual practices such as polygamy and taking concubines, which he regarded as the underlying reasons for the decline of Arab civilisation, as was the case for the Greeks, Persians and Romans before them.

Burton, A Plain and Literary Translation, xix.

For an analysis of Richard Burton’s discourse on Oriental sexuality, see Chapters Two and Three in Alkabani, Richard Burton, T.E. Lawrence, 53-125.


Ibid.


Beckford and Morley, The History of Caliph Vathek, Loc. 22. Henry Morley calls Vathek the “thousand and second night with the difference that it joins to wild inventions in the spirit of the East touches of playful extravagance that could come only from an English humourist [...]”
At the end of each chapter, al-Fākhoury lists a number of references, many of which are European works; the only distinction is the language in which each reference is cited. It is rather unimaginable to think of European works on European literature citing Arabic or indeed “Oriental” (non-European) scholarship, which is, of course, a reminder of the political power differential and its impact on the compilation of literary historiography.


Ibid., 448-452. See Nadia al-Baghdadi’s article (Ibid) for more details on the four phases of globalisation that impacted Arabic literature from late antiquity until now.

Ouyang, “Return or Departure?,” 94.

Qisetna.com is one such platform created by London-based Spanish artist, Juan delGado, to enable refugees to document and tell their stories, which have been translated into English by a team of volunteers. See www.qisetna.com for more details.

**Bibliography:**


Sheehi, Stephen. “Modernism, Anxiety and the Ideology of Arab Vision.”, Discourse,

