

## Stranger Fictions: A History of the Novel in Arabic Translation

**Rebecca C. Johnson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021). Pp. 288. \$47.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9781501753060**

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He who has missed out on translation knows not what travail is: None but the warrior is scorched by the fire of war!  
 I find a thousand notions for which there is none akin  
 Among us, and a thousand with none appropriate; And a thousand terms with no equivalent.  
 I find disjunction for junction, though junction is needed.

Early in her innovative study of translation and the 19th-century Arabic novel, Rebecca Johnson quotes these verses by Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, a luminary of the Nahda whom Johnson describes as “one of the nineteenth century’s best-known Arab writers and least-known translators” (4). Both her pithy description of al-Shidyaq and his own verses on the difficulties of translation speak to the book’s central questions: How did translation catalyze modern Arabic literature? Why has literary translation been so deeply disregarded by prior historians of the Arabic novel? And how did the translators in question understand their own practices? To address these questions, Johnson turns to the Nahda-era litterateurs who creatively and reflectively confronted the challenges of the “new age” (*al-‘aṣr al-jadīd*). Whereas previous scholarship dismissed them as “bad translators” and deemed their efforts amateurish and deficient, *Stranger Fictions* recuperates them as “translation theorists and informed commentators on literary history” (5) engaged in complex cultural and linguistic mediation and aware of the unequal global power structures within which they operated. Further, the book argues that the emergent Arabic reading public “read in translation,” with readers moving between languages and seeing themselves as participants in a transnational print network. Building on the work of scholars such as Samah Selim and Margaret Litvin, Johnson jettisons the static and narrow view of translation as direct transfer beholden to standards of “fidelity” in favor of a dynamic and expansive understanding of translation that includes cultural adaptation, rewriting, and mistranslation; the book “tracks the choices, errors, and innovations in their translations as essential elements in the development of the Arabic novel” (15). Translation, formerly relegated to the historical footnotes of the Arabic novel, is in this retelling its very locus of becoming.

Rippling outward, *Stranger Fictions* also makes a case for the relevance of Arabic literary history to the study of world literature and literary modernity writ large. Johnson situates Arabic literature in a global history of 19th-century technological advancement, imperial circuits of transmission, missionary activity, and Saidian Orientalism. Al-Shidyaq’s verses on the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of translation illustrate one of Johnson’s corollary arguments concerning translation and modernity: in an era of new transportation and information technologies that stimulated global integration, but were prone to frequent malfunction and breakdown, translation was “yet another underlying technology understood to bridge communication problems as well as cultural and linguistic difference, even when such junctures were impossible” (5). *Stranger Fictions* locates the Arabic novel—and indeed, the novel more generally—in a transnational history of exchange that plays out through junction and disjunction, connection and disconnection. In sum, Johnson offers a counternarrative of



Arabic literary modernity as a phenomenon that arises through its progenitors' wry appraisal of the value of the Western aesthetic forms and content they mediated; through their heightened consciousness of error as a constant aspect of translation and all translingual negotiation; and through their recognition of a consumer base for romance and popular fiction in Arabic.

The resulting counterhistory of the Arabic novel in translation unfolds in six chronologically ordered chapters covering nearly a century of translations published in Beirut, Cairo, Malta, Paris, London, and New York. Johnson's analysis moves fluidly between the translated novels and the periodicals that serialized them; the book offers a study of discourse that embeds readings of key translated novels within broader conversations and social contexts. Following an engrossing general introduction, the book is divided into two sections, each with its own short introduction. Part 1, titled "Reading in Translation" (Chapters 1–3) situates the first translated novels within the Nahda-era history of printing, language reform, and drive to foster an Arabic reading public, as well as surrounding debates; Part 2, "The Transnational Imagination" (Chapters 4–6) carries the reader into the latter half of the 19th century, when such translations proliferated. These chapters explore questions of technological connection and glitches, of "worlding"—when translation enables readers to imagine themselves as part of a unified, connected world—and of the rising popularity of "bad books," that is, lowbrow genres of melodrama and detective fiction.

In Chapter 1, on the Arabic *Robinson Crusoe*, Johnson frames her reading of "the first novel in Arabic" (as opposed to "the first Arabic novel") within a fascinating transnational history of missionary translation. The chapter detours into al-Shidyaq's ambivalence toward missionary translation practice—doubts he developed into tacit theories of comparison in his famous work *Leg over Leg* (*al-Saq 'ala al-Saq* 1855). Reading the Arabic *Crusoe* (published in Malta by the Church Missionary Society Press in 1835), Johnson shows how the translation, which culturally Arabizes the narrative and displays the linguistic polyglossia of Ottoman-era Arabic, inaugurates the mode of "reading in translation" for the Arab public. Chapter 2 discusses the formation of social structures and concerns undergirding the Arabic novel: the public sphere, emergent Arabic periodicals and readers, debates over language, and the multilingualism of Arabic periodicals. Here Johnson shows that "the emerging *nahḍa* reading public that the newspapers created was one that read overwhelmingly and knowingly in translation" (82). Chapter 3 traces the rise of the translated novel in Arabic, typically serialized in Beirut-based periodicals such as *al-Jinan* and *Hadiqat al-Akhbar*. It follows attendant anxieties surrounding translation and reading practices as these serialized novels—whose content was often at odds with the lofty reform agenda of the Nahda—gained in popularity. By the last part of the century, the Arabic print market was saturated with serialized translated novels, far outnumbering original Arabic novels.

Part 2 turns to the transnationalism of translated Arabic literature in the late 19th century, with attention to economics, technological connectivity and breakdown, world-making, globality, and imperialism. Chapter 5 compares multiple Arabic translations of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and their differing approaches to the negotiation of French and Arabic: these translations "raise questions of economic and literary value as problems of translation in a global network of exchange" (128). Chapter 6 brings us to Jules Verne's thematizations of the world and their Arabic translations, arguing that whereas Verne presents an image of the world as "single and traversable," the Arabic translations understand global unification as an "effect of the imperial project" (161). The final chapter, "The Melodramatic State," explores popular subgenres (melodramas, detective fiction) and the public concerns about their moral influence. This chapter also centers women as literary subjects, consumers, and translators, highlighting the persistent interest in representations of foreign women's lives. While characterizing such novels as outlets for the excess of popular emotion, Johnson argues for including them within the understanding of the national canon formation. The book concludes with the question of how the national canon and literary

historiography dealt with the specter of foreignness in the origins of the Arabic novel, reiterating that the history of these translated novels is always a history of comparison.


*Stranger Fictions* is enriched by its thorough, methodological research of Nahda-era journalism and literature, supported by an impressive bibliography of theoretical, historical, and literary scholarship. This is a sprawling study that deftly weaves between theories of nationalism, the public sphere, modernity, world literature, and translation as well as prior Nahda scholarship, while at the same time providing a wealth of data drawn from the 19th-century Arabic press. For example, the introduction to Part 2 offers a bibliography of 45 Arabic translations made between 1859 and 1919 that list one of the Dumas figures as author (to which, incidentally, we could add Esther Azhari's 1893–94 translation of a Dumas story based on *The Lady of the Camelias*; Azhari (aka Esther Moyal) also is overlooked as an Arabophone translator of Émile Zola [172]). Given its theoretical orientation, *Stranger Fictions* is best suited for sophisticated readers beyond the undergraduate level. Fortunately, Johnson's illustrative readings of the novels, articles, and readers' letters keep things lively for the reader while following the book's course of argumentation.

The last fifteen or so years have seen a boom in Nahda scholarship, with a still-growing body of work revealing the richness of a 19th-century corpus once passed over in favor of 20th-century prose fiction that more clearly served national(ist) literary agendas. *Stranger Fictions* profits from the growing body of work on the Nahda while steering it toward comparative conversations on translation, world literature, and transnationalism. Ultimately, the story it tells—that of emergent reading publics who read in translation and of serialized translated fiction as the progenitor of literary modernity—is not unique to the Arabic sphere; many of the book's arguments and findings will resonate with other case studies. For this reason, beyond its necessary and important work of rethinking the origins of the Arabic novel translationally and transnationally, *Stranger Fictions* also has much to offer to literary scholars on similar trajectories of textual recovery and revisionist historiography in the lesser-studied languages; thinking along with this book has enriched my own comparative understanding of the relationship between translation, reform, and modernity in the 19th-century Global South.

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## Ibn ʿAsakir of Damascus: Champion of Sunni Islam in the Time of the Crusades

**Suleiman A. Mourad (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2021). Pp. 160. \$30.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780861540471**

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This concise book on Ibn ʿAsakir (d. 571/1176), the foremost scholar of hadith in medieval Syria, is the result, as the author Suleiman Mourad states, of thirty years of engagement with the world and the work of its biographee. The author's primary concern is to demonstrate the centrality of Ibn ʿAsakir and his heirs to the revival of Sunni scholarship in 6th-/12th-century Damascus. Mourad's opening chapter paints a picture of a depressed Damascus, "a grim reality" as he states (p. 3). In addition to the political instability under the Seljuks (468/1076–498/1104) and Burids (498/1104–549/1154), religious scholarship institutions and networks had substantially declined. In Mourad's view, the poverty of