

## An Obscure Prologue to the History of Lust and Foul Thoughts<sup>1</sup>

Adam Talib

Realist narratives trade in verisimilitude, but verisimilitude is not a depiction of what readers experience as reality, rather it is a depiction of what they understand reality to be. This fine difference is often lost on readers who understand verisimilitude as an empirical judgment, rather than as a product of ideology. Ideologies are themselves constructed, in part, through narrative and are populated with tropes.

In this article, I discuss a few episodes in Classical Arabic historiography—which includes what are now called semi-fictional or hybrid narratives—that revolve around a trope that has not received much scholarly attention: the offense-causing marriage proposal.<sup>2</sup> I am aware that by discussing the effects of patriarchal structures that have characterized pre-modern and modern Arab societies, one runs the risk of culturalizing what are in fact political circumstances related to the control of economic, social, religious, and cultural resources.<sup>3</sup>

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1 The title of this article is a quotation from Shakespeare's *Othello* (II, i) cited in Greenblatt, *Improvisation and power* 69; the line is spoken by Iago.

2 The seminal study of the genre of text being discussed in this article is Leder, *The literary use of the khabar: A basic form of historical writing*.

3 Abu Lughod and Mikdashi, *Tradition and the anti-politics machine: DAM seduced by*

The challenge is thus to present plausible interpretations of what narratives intend to communicate despite the absence of comprehensive contextual information. Another challenge is to insist on the historical specificity of episodes that appear to reflect common or universal milestones in human life, especially when certain patterns of courtship behavior appear to have survived into the present day. One of the ways we interpret these apparent holdovers is that they are rituals: stations of social and cultural symbolism, which have become purely abstract for all but the most conservative segments of our societies. In this analysis, the content of notions like virginity, marriage, fidelity, and filial compliance becomes abstracted, or symbolic. Though many people may believe that all or some of these notions exist as moral values, we also understand them to be social constructs, categories created and sustained by an ideological system. The formal, inter-familial marriage proposal, which has long been a topos in Middle Eastern film and TV serials, is no less of a cliché for being a real and tenacious social ritual. For example, in contemporary Cairo some couples who eschew values perceived to be traditional (e.g. not having sex or cohabiting before marriage) will find themselves affirming notions of bridal virginity, filial compliance, and the social regulation of female sexuality and reproduction when the man and his family perform the ritual of visiting the woman and her family to propose marriage formally. In Cairene Arabic, it is said of a suitor: *"huwwa rāḥ yitʔaddim"* (compare the Classical Arabic verb *istāda* and the Persian term *khāstigārī*). The couples and families who perform these rituals today may indeed do so because they believe that they are preserving an ancient social and religious custom—even if

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the 'Honor Crime'; Khader, *The invisible link: Honor killing and global capitalism*.

they reject the suitability or advisability of arranged marriages in the present day—but, while the custom is no doubt old, pre-modern literary representations of offense-causing marriage proposals suggest that elite patriarchy has long struggled to maintain its prerogative of sexual ownership.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Another example is the 2015 Academy Award-nominated Turkish-language film *Mustang*, which begins with a lavish depiction of a mixed-gender group of adolescents playing in shallow water on a sunny day at the Black Sea. For the five orphan sisters who are the film's protagonists, those moments of play and delight lead their guardians—their grandmother and uncle—to impose new and comprehensive strictures on the girls' liberty, freedom of movement, and appearance, and to begin marrying them off. Certain tropes in the film—arranged marriage between young and naïve strangers; so-called virginity tests; a sexually abusive and controlling patriarchy; Sonay and her boyfriend engaging in anal sex before marriage, etc.—are part and parcel of both fictional and semi-fictional accounts of adolescent female sexuality in patriarchal societies. Many of these tropes are also familiar to me from my own lived experience: My grandparents married people who were more or less strangers; the Egyptian army has infamously subjected female protesters to so-called virginity tests; in a majority of cases, child sexual abuse in the United States is committed by adult males and in 34% of cases by a family member; and anyone who, like me, grew up in an American suburb during the age of abstinence can tell you that benighted adolescents engaging in oral and anal sex in preference to vaginal intercourse is more than simply fodder for pop parody (see Carr, *Sexual assault and the state: A history of violence*; Tabachnik and Klein, *A reasoned approach*

A standard example of the offense-causing marriage proposal in the canon of Classical Arabic literature is found in the ‘Udhri romances, which were first recorded in the early ‘Abbasid period.<sup>5</sup> In Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī’s (d. 356/967) account of the Majnūn Laylā legend, Majnūn approached Laylā’s father after poems expressing Majnūn’s love for his daughter began to circulate.<sup>6</sup>

I was told by al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī, who heard this story from Hārūn b. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Malik who heard it from ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān b. Ibrāhīm who heard it from Hishām b.

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14–16; Garfunkel and Oates, *The loophole*). As for social policing of sexuality, nearly every woman I have ever met has experienced that in one form or other during their lives; many of the women I know live with it on a daily basis. Deniz Gamze Ergüven, who co-wrote and directed *Mustang*, has herself said that the scandal in the film that was caused by girls riding on boys’ shoulders during play was inspired by events in her own life (*Canım İstanbul*, Interview with ‘Mustang’ Director Deniz Gamze Ergüven).

5 See Jacobi, ‘Udhri.

6 Al-Iṣfahānī [al-Iṣbahānī], *al-Aghānī* ii, 14–15. Compare also the story of the Umayyad-era poet Abū Dahbal al-Jumaḥī (d. after 96/715) (see Pellat, Abū Dahbal al-Djumaḥī). See too Motif To131.14.4§ “Public declaration of love for girl as obstacle for marriage” in El-Shamy, *Types of folktale*. Many other motifs in the stories discussed in this article share similarities with motifs identified by El-Shamy in his comprehensive motif-spectrum (e.g. To105.1§, To133.2, To053.8§).

Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Makkī who heard it from Muḥammad b. Saʿīd al-Makhzūmī who heard it from Abū l-Haytham al-ʿUqaylī, who said:

“When the news of Majnūn and Laylā went public and people began to repeat the poems he’d composed about her, Majnūn proposed to marry her, offering a gift of fifty [excellent] red she-camels. At the same time, Ward b. Muḥammad al-ʿUqaylī proposed to marry her and offered a gift of 10 camels and a camelherder. Her family told them, ‘We will let her choose between the two of you. Whomever she chooses will be her husband.’ Then they went into see her and told her: ‘By God, if you do not choose Ward, we will make an example out of you (*la-numaththilanna biki*).’<sup>7</sup> Majnūn uttered [the following verses in connection with that episode]:

Layla, if the decision (*khiyār*) of which of us [to marry] is yours,

then consider which of us is the best one (*khiyār*).

Do not accept a low one instead of me,

or a cheapskate—for the smell of cooking meat is something all desire.

He will rush into matters that are trivial,

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7 The verb *maththala bi-* means “to punish a. o. as an example. To mutilate (a sheep)” (Hava, *al-Farāʿid*, s. r. m-th-l). I have translated this with the English idiom “make an example out of you” because it manages to convey the same meaning while also sharing the verb’s etymological root.

but large strokes of fortune will render him useless.

Being married to him, will be like being a spinster,

enjoying his wealth, will be like being flat broke.

Under duress, [Laylā] decided to marry Ward.”

In a slightly different version of the rejected proposal episode, Majnūn’s family and relatives attempt to intercede with Laylā’s father on his behalf. His reply is both decisive and instructive:<sup>8</sup>

Majnūn’s father and mother, and the men of his tribe, went together to see Laylā’s father to warn him and implore him. “The man is dying,” they told him. “And before he dies, he’s in a state worse than death as he’s losing his mind. [By doing this to him] you are tormenting his father and his family, so we beg you by God and by kinship, to [allow him to marry your daughter]. For she is not, by God, nobler than he is, nor do you possess wealth the like of his father. He let you set the dower (*ḥakkamaka fī l-mahr*) and if you asked him to give you everything he owns, he would do so (*wa-’in shī’ta ’an yakhla’a nafṣahū ’ilayka min mālihī fa’al*).” But her father refused and he swore by God and upon his marriage that he would never marry her to him. “Should I

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8 Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 21. This incident is narrated by a number of authorities.

bring dishonor upon myself and my tribe and do something that no Arab has ever consented to before? Should I brand my daughter with the brand of shame?"

The aftermath of Laylā's father's rejection is well known, but it is worth pausing to consider how he reacts to Majnūn's tragic and subhuman death:<sup>9</sup>

Laylā's tribe visited [Majnūn's tribe] to pay their respects. Among them was Laylā's father, who was the most distressed and upset [by Majnūn's death]. "We never knew it would come to this," he said. "I was just an Arab man, worried about shame and vile talk like anyone else in my position. So I married her off [to someone else] and she was no longer mine to worry about. If I'd known that he would end up like this, I would never have taken her away from him and I wouldn't have done what I'd felt I had to do."

In the *Aghānī* version of the Majnūn Laylā legend, the young man and woman, who had spent their childhoods shepherding their families' respective herds together, were separated from each other when Laylā reached sexual maturity (*"ḥattā kabirā fa-ḥujibat 'anhu"*).<sup>10</sup> Their

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9 Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 90–91. This incident is narrated by the same person, Abū l-Haytham al-'Uqaylī.

10 Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 11.

tragedy is thus not merely a parable of sexual shame, morally suspect love poetry, and madness, but also a nostalgic warning tale about child-rearing and social order. This nostalgia is made explicit in the following couplet by Majnūn, which is cited to support the story of Laylā entering purdah:<sup>11</sup>

*taʿallāqtu laylā wa-hya dhātu dhuʿābatin*

*wa-lam yabdu li-l-atrābi min thadyihā ḥajmū*

*ṣaghīrayni narʿā l-bahma yā layta ʿannanā*

*ilā l-yawmi lam nakbar wa-lam takbari l-bahmū*

When I fell in love with Laylā she wore her hair in forelocks,

and there was no hint of shape to her breasts.

We were young; together we grazed our herds. How I wish

we'd stayed small, us and our beasts.

Parental intervention is key to another tragic story in *al-Aghānī* about another ʿUdhri love pair, Qays and Lubnā. In that story, after Qays and Lubnā make their mutual affection known to each other, Qays asks his father, Dharīḥ, to approach Lubnā's father on his behalf.

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<sup>11</sup> Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 11. Meter: Ṭawīl.



His father refuses and tells him to marry one of his paternal uncle's daughters instead.<sup>12</sup> Al-Iṣbahānī explains Qays' father's refusal matter-of-factly: "Dharīḥ was a very wealthy man so he didn't want to his son to marry a woman from outside the fold (*gharībah*)".<sup>13</sup> Qays attempts to enlist the help of his mother, but finds that she agrees with his father. Undaunted, Qays manages to outmaneuver his parents by seeking the help of al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī; a case of the Islamic dogma of intercession (*shafā'ah*) becoming reified in narrative.<sup>14</sup> When al-Ḥusayn accompanies Qays' to see Lubnā's father, her father tells him that he could never say no to the Prophet's grandson, but that it would be better if the proposal were to come from Qays' father:<sup>15</sup>

We could never disobey you, Son of our Prophet (*yā -bna rasūl Allāh*), and we do not prefer any other suitor to this young man, but we would prefer it if his father Dharīḥ were to come to ask us to give our daughter to his son in marriage and indeed for this to happen upon his initiative. We worry that the father's lack of involvement should shame and demean us (*an yakūn 'āran wa-subbatan 'alaynā*).

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12 Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ix, 182.

13 Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ix, 182.

14 One of al-Iṣbahānī's sources says that Qays and al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī were milk-brothers (al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ix, 181).

15 Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ix, 182.

Here again the bride's family cites shame as the reason for rejecting the marriage proposal. Al-Ḥusayn returns to Qays' father, who is sitting with the other men of his tribe, and insists that he marry Qays to Lubnā; Qays' father cannot bring himself to say no to someone with al-Ḥusayn's special social status. Yet this is an 'Udhri story, like the legend of Majnūn Laylā, so there can be no happy ending: Qays and Lubnā marry but when they fail to reproduce, Qays' parents put sufficient pressure on him that he feels he has no choice but to divorce her.<sup>16</sup>

#### Checkmating an-Nu'mān

These two stories are quite innocent when compared to another legend involving an offense-causing marriage proposal, which triggered the fall of an entire kingdom. The Lakhmid (or Naṣrid) king an-Nu'mān III b. al-Mundhir, who ruled al-Ḥīrah from 580–602 ad, is remembered in both Arabic and Persian poetry as having met an ignominious end.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, we might say that his legend was emblematic of the Arabic, and later Islamicate, cultural theme of the Wheel of Fortune, which inspired many works of literature and can be compared to the *vanitas* genre in Early Modern European visual art. In Khāqānī's (d. 1198) well-known

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16 Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 183–5.

17 The standard work on the history al-Ḥīrah is Toral-Niehoff, *al-Ḥīra*. On Persian Arabs (incl. the Naṣrid or Lakhmid dynasty) and their place in Late Antique history, see Fisher and Wood, *Writing the history*.

ode on the ruins of Ctesiphon (*al-Madā'in*), the former capital of the Sasanian empire, he cites an-Nu'mān as a once mighty sovereign who was laid low by fate (*dōrān* and *taqdīr*):<sup>18</sup>

*pendār hamān 'ahd ast az dīde-yeh fekrat bīn*

*dar selsele-ye dargah, dar kowkabe-ye meydān*

*az asb piyādeh shō bar naṭ'-e zamīn neh rukh*

*zīr-e pey-e pīlāsh bīn shah-māt shode no'mān*

*nay nay ke chū no'mān bīn pīl afkan-e shāhān-rā*

*pīlān-e shab ō rūzash gashte beh pay-e dōrān*

*ay bas shah-e pīl afkan kafkandeh be shah-pīlī*

*shaṭranjī-ye taqdīrash dar mātgahe ḥermān*

*Mast ast zamīn zīrā khōrdast be-jāy-e may*

*dar kās-e sar-e Hormoz khūn-e del-e nōsharvān*

Julie Scott Meisami renders these lines as:

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18 Persian Text and an English translation by Meisami in Sperl and Shackle, *Qasida*

*poetry* ii, 162–69, ll. 22–6.

Imagine it is that very age, and look, with reflection's eye

On the chain before the court, the splendid assembly in the field.

Dismount from your house, and place your face upon the mat of earth and  
see

How great No'mān is checkmated beneath its elephants' feet

Nay, nay, see, like No'mān, those elephant-felling kings themselves

Slain by the elephants Night and Day in the winding turns of time.

How many an elephant-slaying king has been slain with a king-elephant

By the chess-player of his destiny, mated, deprived of hope.

The earth is drunk for it has drunken deep—instead of wine—

From the cup of Hurmuz's skull, the heart's blood of Anūshirvān

Several centuries before Khāqānī composed his poem, Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā, the pre-Islamic Arab poet, described an-Nu'mān's fall from grace in similarly fatalistic terms:<sup>19</sup>

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19 Ahlwardt (ed.), *The Divans* 101–2. The question of whether Zuhayr was the author of this poem is still unsettled; al-Aṣma'ī believed that it was attributed to him erroneously and that its true author was Ṣirmah b. Abī Anas al-Anṣārī (fl. 7<sup>th</sup> c.).

[من الطويل]

وَلَا خَالِدًا إِلَّا الْجِبَالَ الرَّوَاسِيَا  
وَأَيَّامَنَا مَعْدُودَةً وَاللَّيَالِيَا  
وَأَهْلَكَ لُقْمَنَ بْنِ عَادٍ وَعَادِيَا  
وَفِرْعَوْنَ جَبَّارًا طَغَى وَالنَّجَاشِيَا  
فَتَنَزَّكُهُ الْأَيَّامُ وَهِيَ كَمَا هِيََا  
مِنَ الشَّرِّ لَوْ أَنَّ أَمْرًا كَانَ نَاجِيَا  
مِنَ الدَّهْرِ يَوْمٌ وَاحِدٌ كَانَ غَاوِيَا

[١٠] أَلَا لَا أَرَى عَلَى الْخَوَادِثِ بَاقِيَا  
[١١] وَالْأَلْسَمَاءِ وَالْبِلَادِ وَرَبَّنَا  
[١٢] أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ أَهْلَكَ تُبْعَا  
[١٣] وَأَهْلَكَ ذَا الْقَرْنَيْنِ مِنْ قَبْلِ مَا تَرَى  
[١٤] أَلَا لَا أَرَى ذَا إِمَّةٍ أَصْبَحَتْ بِهِ  
[١٥] أَلَمْ تَرَ لِلنُّعْمَانِ كَانَ بِنَجْوَةٍ  
[١٦] فَعَيَّرَ عَنْهُ مُلْكُ عِشْرِينَ حِجَّةً

Can anything withstand time?

Anything but the unshakable mountains?

Or the heavens? Or the land? Or our Lord?

Or our days which are numbered? Or our nights?

Haven't you seen how God wiped out the king of Ḥimyar?

And Luqmān b. 'Ād and 'Ādiyā'?

And Dhū l-Qarnayn before you were born?

And Pharaoh—that ruthless tyrant? And the king of Ethiopia?

I don't know anyone, who's been blessed, whose blessings fate left intact.

Don't you see that al-Nu'mān was safe from harm—if a man can ever be safe?

Then his twenty-year reign was up-ended suddenly by a single—duplicitous—  
day.

History remembers an-Nu‘mān III b. al-Mundhir as the last Lakhmid king of al-Ḥīrah and his and his dynasty’s demise as a precursor to the sweeping political change that would soon transform the face of the Late Antique Near East. An-Nu‘mān III was deposed and imprisoned in 602 by Khosrow II Parvēz (r. 590–628), “the last great king of the Sasanian dynasty”.<sup>20</sup> The battle of Dhū Qār that followed only a few years later was a sign of things to come.<sup>21</sup> But the story of an-Nu‘mān’s downfall begins with the execution of another man, the poet ‘Adī b. Zayd, who was the Lakhmid king’s secretary, confidante, and—in some accounts—son-in-law. This story has recently been analyzed lucidly and perceptively by David Powers in a masterful article and I will not retell it here, except to explain that ‘Adī’s rivals at court—like those of Thomas Cromwell after him—succeeded in turning the sovereign against him and he came to an unbecoming end after languishing for several years in captivity.<sup>22</sup>

‘Adī is avenged by his son, who uses diplomacy and cultural translation to get the better of the Lakhmid king. An-Nu‘mān regrets having had ‘Adī killed and recognizes that he was wrong to do so. He then encounters ‘Adī’s son, Zayd, to whom he shows favor and to

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20     Howard-Johnston, Khosrow II.

21     Landau-Tasseron, Dhū Qār

22     See Powers, Demonizing Zenobia. See also Toral-Niehoff, *al-Ḥīra* 98–9; and Talib,

Topoi and topography.

whom he even apologizes for having had his father killed. Then—in large part to assuage his guilt—he sends the young man to the Persian emperor, recommending him as a suitable replacement for his father.<sup>23</sup> This expiatory kindness sets off a chain of events that will end

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23 Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 121. In the version of this story preserved in an-Nuwayrī's *Nihāyat al-ʿarab* xv, 326, the letter of introduction an-Nuʿmān sent to the Persian emperor reads as follows:

*inna ʿAdiyyan kāna mimman kāna ʿuṯna bihī l-maliku fī naṣīḥatihī wa-raʿyihī  
fa-nqadat muddatuhū wa-nqaṭaʿa ajalahu wa-lam yuṣib bihī aḥadun ashadda  
min muṣibatī wa-ʿinna l-malika lam yakun li-yafquda rajulan min ʿabidihī ʾillā  
jaʿala -llāhu lahū minhu khalafan wa-qad adraka lahū -bnun laysa huwa  
dūnahū wa-qad sarraḥtuhū ʾilā l-maliki fa-in raʿā ʾan yaqʿalahū makāna ʾabīhi  
wa-yaṣrifa ʾammahū ʾilā ʾamalin ākhara faʿal.*

ʿAdī was one of those the emperor turned to for advice and counsel, and now that he has met his fate no one feels the pain of his loss more than me. But God would not deprive the emperor of one of his servants without providing him a replacement. One of ʿAdī's sons, who is no less [skilled] than he was, has come of age and so I send him to the emperor forthwith so that the emperor may—if he so chooses—install him in his father's [former] position and move his uncle into another position.

(Note the parallel construction between the phrase “*illā jaʿala -llāhu lahū minhu khalafan*” in

with an-Nu‘mān’s downfall as Zayd b. ‘Adī will use his new influence to take revenge for his father’s death. In a further twist on the trope of the offense-causing marriage proposal, Zayd b. ‘Adī manages to convince the Sasanian emperor to write to an-Nu‘mān b. al-Mundhir, requesting that he send one or more suitable unmarried women from his household to the emperor to be married to him:<sup>24</sup>

وكانت لملوك العجم صفة من النساء مكتوبة عندهم فكانوا يبعثون في تلك الأرضين بتلك الصفة فإذا وجدت حُملت إلى الملك غير أنهم لم يكونوا يطلبونها في أرض العرب ولا يظنونها عندهم ثم إنه بدا للملك في طلب تلك الصفة وأمر فكتب بها إلى النواحي ودخل إليه زيد بن عدي وهو في ذلك القول فخاطبه فيما دخل إليه فيه ثم قال «إني رأيت الملك قد كتب في نسوة يُطلبن له وقرأت الصفة وقد كنت بآل المنذر عارفاً وعند عبدك النعمان من بناته وأخواته وبنات عمّه وأهله أكثر من عشرين امرأة على هذه الصفة» قال «فاكتب فيهن» قال «أيها الملك إن شئ شئت في العرب وفي النعمان خاصة أنهم يتكرمون زعموا في أنفسهم عن العجم فأنا أكره أن يغيبهنّ عنّ تبعث إليّ أو يعرض عليّ غيرهنّ وإن قدمت أنا عليه لم يقدر على ذلك فابعثني وابعث معي رجلاً من ثقاتك يفهم العربية حتى أبلغ ما تحبّه»

The emperors of Persia kept a description of the ideal woman in writing, which they would send out to the various territories and if a woman fitting this description were found, she would be taken to the emperor. They did not, however, go looking for this type of woman in the lands of the Arabs for they did not expect to find her there. One

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the letter and the well known *ḥadīth*: “*man lazima l-istighfāra ja‘ala -llāhu lahū min kulli hammin farajā*”). It is no coincidence that ‘Adī was himself recommended to the Persian emperor for service after his father’s death (al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 101).

24 Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 122. The version of the story of an-Nu‘mān’s downfall that includes the offense-giving marriage proposal was transmitted by Abū ‘Ubaydah Ma‘mar b. al-Muthannā (d. 209/824) (see Landau-Tasseron, *Dū Qār*).



day, it occurred to the emperor that it was time to send out a call for this type of woman so he gave the order and the description was duly sent to the neighboring territories. Zayd b. ‘Adī went in to see the emperor when he was in the middle of giving that order and after telling him what it was he’d come to tell him, he said “I see that the emperor has sent out a request for women. I’ve read the description of the ideal woman [that was sent] and as I’m well acquainted with the descendants of al-Mundhir [I can tell you] that your servant an-Nu‘mān has more than twenty women fitting this description among his daughters, sisters, paternal cousins, and other relatives. “In that case, write to him about it”, the emperor replied. “My lord, the worst thing about Arabs—especially an-Nu‘mān—is the pride they take in being, so they say, superior to non-Arabs. I wouldn’t like to see him hide these women from your emissary or indeed show him women other than them. If I were to go, he wouldn’t be able to do that, so send me and an emissary whom you trust who speaks Arabic so that we can fulfill your desire.”

Zayd b. ‘Adī succeeded in laying his trap by deploying two strategies, though it is unclear whether he considered these strategies to be outright deceptions, half-truths, or convenient truths. His first strategem was to whet the emperor’s sexual appetite by claiming that women fitting his criteria for the ideal royal bride could be found in an-Nu‘mān’s household. Having dangled that alluring prospect in front of the emperor’s eyes, his second stratagem was to snatch it away by claiming that an Arab noble would never deign to marry his female relatives

to a non-Arab (exogamy). This story is also related in the 10<sup>th</sup>-century chronicles of aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 311/932) and al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956), but in Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Balʿamī's (d. 363/974) chronicle—a purported translation of aṭ-Ṭabarī's into Persian—Zayd's first claim is presented as an outright lie:<sup>25</sup>

پس زید بن عدی مر کسری را گفت من در جهان کس ندانم و ندیدم بدین صفت مگر دختر نعمان  
بن منذر نام او حدیقه پیارسی بستان باشد و روی آن دختر چون بستانی است و او دانست که دختر  
بدین صفت نیست ولیکن او را یقین بود که کسری هرگز آن دختر را نبیند که او دروغ زن شود و  
هرگز نعمان آن دختر را بزنی بکسری ندهد که عرب هیچ دختر هرگز به عجم ندهد پس کسری را  
دل به دختر نعمان میل کرد و زید بن عدی را گفت نامه بنویس به نعمان تا آن دختر را با خادمان  
سوی من فرستد پس خادم را گفت چون سوی نعمان روی نامه بدو ده و تو به روم رو تا تو باز آیی  
او برگ دختر ساخته باشد و تو او را با خویشان بیاوری پس زید مر کسری را گفت: اینچنین  
کنیزک در روم بسیار است و اگر تو دختر نعمان را نخواهی روا باشد که عرب مردمانی بی ادب  
اند و دختر را به عجم ندهند [....]

Zayd b. ʿAdī told the emperor that he did not know, nor had he ever seen, a woman who fit this description except the daughter of an-Nuʿmān b. Mundhir, whose name was Ḥadiqah (“Garden” in Persian) and whose face was like a garden. He knew that the girl did not truly fit the description but he was certain that the emperor would never see her and thus would never know that [Zayd] had lied. [He knew] that an-Nuʿmān would never marry the girl to the emperor because Arabs never gave their daughters to non-Arabs. [Having heard her described,] the emperor fell for an-Nuʿmān's daughter so he said to Zayd b. ʿAdī “Write to an-Nuʿmān telling him to send the girl to me in the company of his servants.” He then told one of his servants, “Since

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25 Balʿamī, *Tārīkh* ii, 1111–12. On Balʿamī's chronicle more generally, see Meisami, *Persian Historiography*. Other versions of this story include al-Ṭabarī, *The history* v, 351–8 (see also for other accounts of an-Nuʿmān's downfall) and al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj* ii, 225–7.

you're going in an-Nu'mān's direction, give this letter to him, and you, [Zayd,] go to Byzantine territory (*Rūm*) and by the time you return, they will have prepared the girl's trousseau and you can bring her here yourself." Zayd said to the emperor, "There are lots of girls like this among the Byzantines. If you don't want to marry an-Nu'mān's daughter, that's no bad thing because the Arabs are an uncouth people and they don't marry their women to non-Arabs."

Unfortunately for an-Nu'mān and his dynasty, the story unfolds exactly as Zayd had hoped it would. He travels to al-Ḥīrah at the emperor's bidding to deliver the imperial bridal specifications and an-Nu'mān's response, while diplomatic, is true to the stereotypes of Arab ethnic chauvinism and male sexual possessiveness on which Zayd's machinations depended. In an interesting twist on Zayd and his deceased father's roles as trusted translator-secretaries at court, Zayd seals an-Nu'mān's fate by deliberately mistranslating his answer:<sup>26</sup>

فلَمَّا دَخَلَ عَلَيْهِ أَعْظَمُ الْمَلِكِ وَقَالَ: «إِنَّهُ قَدْ أَحْتَاجَ إِلَى نِسَاءٍ لِنَفْسِهِ وَوُلْدِهِ وَأَهْلَ بَيْتِهِ وَأَرَادَ كِرَامَتَكَ  
بَصْهَرَهُ فَبَعَثَ إِلَيْكَ» فَقَالَ: «مَا هَؤُلَاءِ النِّسَاءُ» فَقَالَ: «هَذِهِ صَفَتُهُنَّ قَدْ جِئْنَا بِهَا» وَكَانَتْ الصِّفَةُ أَنَّ  
الْمَنْذَرَ الْأَكْبَرَ أَهْدَى إِلَى أَنْوَشِرَوَانَ جَارِيَةً كَانَتْ أَصَابَهَا إِذْ أَغَارَ عَلَى الْحَارِثِ الْأَكْبَرِ بْنِ أَبِي شَمْرٍ  
الْغَسَّانِيِّ فَكَتَبَ إِلَى أَنْوَشِرَوَانَ بِصِفَتِهَا [...] فَقَبِلَهَا أَنْوَشِرَوَانُ وَأَمَرَ بِإِثْبَاتِ هَذِهِ الصِّفَةِ فِي دَوَائِيقِهِ فَلَمْ  
يَزَالُوا يَتَوَارَثُونَهَا حَتَّى أَفْضَى ذَلِكَ كَسْرَى بْنُ هَرْمَزٍ فَقَرَأَ زَيْدٌ هَذِهِ الصِّفَةَ عَلَى النُّعْمَانِ فَشَقَّتْ عَلَيْهِ  
وَقَالَ لَزَيْدٍ وَالرَّسُولُ يَسْمَعُ» أَمَا فِي مَهَا السَّوَادِ وَعَيْنَ فَارَسٍ مَا يَبْلُغُ بِهِ كَسْرَى حَاجَتَهُ» فَقَالَ الرَّسُولُ  
لَزَيْدٍ بِالْفَارَسِيَّةِ: «مَا الْمَهَا وَالْعَيْنُ» فَقَالَ لَهُ بِالْفَارَسِيَّةِ: «كَأَنَّ» أَيْ الْبَقْرَ فَأَمْسَكَ الرَّسُولُ وَقَالَ زَيْدٌ  
لِلنُّعْمَانِ: «إِنَّمَا أَرَادَ الْمَلِكُ كِرَامَتَكَ وَلَوْ عَلِمَ أَنَّ هَذَا يَشُقُّ عَلَيْكَ لَمْ يَكْتُبْ إِلَيْكَ بِهِ» فَأَنْزَلَ لَهَا يَوْمَئِذٍ عِنْدَهُ  
ثُمَّ كَتَبَ إِلَى كَسْرَى: «إِنَّ الَّذِي طَلَبَ الْمَلِكُ لَيْسَ عِنْدِي»

26 Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 122–4.

When Zayd approached the king, he exalted him and then said, “[The emperor of Persia] seeks women for himself and his sons and other male relatives, and he would like to do you the honor of marrying into your family. That’s why he sent me to you.”

“What women [does he seek]?” [an-Nu‘mān] asked. “We’ve brought a copy of the desired characteristics,” [Zayd] replied. The [story behind this] description is that al-Mundhir the Elder sent Anūsharwān [Khosrow I] a description of an enslaved woman whom he had taken captive during a raid against the Ghassanid al-Ḥārith the Elder, son of Abū Shamir, and whom he had given to Anūsharwān as a gift. [...] Anūsharwān accepted it and ordered that the description be recorded in his archives. [The emperors of Persia] passed the description down the generations and that was how it came into the possession of Kisrā b. Hurmuz. Zayd read the description out to an-Nu‘mān, who was troubled greatly by it. “Can the emperor not find what he seeks among the wild cows (*mahā*) of Lower Mesopotamia and the wide-eyed ones (*ʿīn*) of Persia?”, an-Nu‘mān asked Zayd and the emperor’s emissary. “What do *mahā* and *ʿīn* mean?” the emissary asked Zayd in Persian. “*Gāvān*”, he answered, that is “Cows”. The emissary said nothing. “The emperor wanted to do you the honor of joining your families in matrimony,” Zayd explained to an-Nu‘mān, “but if he’d known that it would trouble you so, he would never have brought the issue up.” [An-Nu‘mān] hosted them for a couple of days and then sent his reply to Kisrā: “I do not have what the emperor seeks.”

Zayd is doing his lord's bidding by traveling to arrange a royal marriage—like Tristan did for King Mark—but this bout of service also enables to him lay a trap for the man who was responsible for his father's death. In his version of events, Bal'amī is even more concerned with exonerating an-Nu'mān and implicating Zayd b. 'Adī, the perfidious translator:<sup>27</sup>

نعمان جواب داد که دختران عرب سیاه روی باشند و بی ادب و خدمت ملوک را نشایند و در جواب نامه الطاف نوشت و خصی را گفت: «ملک را بگوی که این دختر را نه چنان یافتم که شایسته ملک بود» و اندر نامه نوشت: «آن فی مها العراق لمندوحة الملك عن سواد اهل العرب» و این سخنی لطیف و نیکوست و لیکن زید بترجمه کردن زشت گردانید از بهر آنکه مها بتازی گاو کوهی باشد و نیز گویند که اندر جهان از مردم و چهار پای هیچ [چیز] را چشم از چشم گاو کوهی نیکوتر نباشد و عرب زنان گاو چشم را مها گویند [...]»

و معنی سخنان نعمان آن باشد که: ملک را به عراق اندر چندان فراخ چشمان و سیاه چشمان هستند که او را بسپاهان عرب حاجت نیست زید این معنی را بترجمه بگردانید و مها ماده گاو ان باشند و سودان مهتران و چنان باز نمود که ایدون همیگوید که ماده گاو ان عجم ملک را چندان هستند که مهترزادگان عرب او را بکار نیاید

An-Nu'mān replied that the daughters of the Arabs are wicked (lit. black-faced) and uncouth and that they are not suited to serving kings. He wrote a polite reply to the letter and he told the eunuch, “Be sure to tell the emperor that you didn’t think the girl was a suitable royal bride.” In his reply, he wrote: “The emperor can have his pick of the cow[-eyed women] of Iraq rather than take a swarthy Arab bride.” This is a polite and eloquent expression, but when he translated it, Zayd made it sound repugnant. In Arabic, *mahā* means mountain cow and it is said that out of all the people on earth and all the four-legged animals, nothing has prettier eyes than a

27 Bal'amī, *Tārīkh* ii, 1113–14. The figure of the perfidious translator calls to mind Fawwāz

Ḥaddād's 2008 novel, *al-Mutarjim al-khā'in*.

mountain cow so Arabs refer to cow-eyed women as *mahā*. [...]

The meaning of an-Nu‘mān’s reply was that there are so many wide-eyed and dark-eyed women in Iraq that the emperor has no need [of marrying] swarthy Arab women. Zayd translated *mahā* as cow and swarthy (*sūdān*) as lords, and with his explanation thus made it seem that [an-Nu‘mān] had said: “The emperor has so many Persian heifers that he does not to be supplied with the Arabs’ high-born daughters.”

In all versions of the story, Zayd’s plan succeeds and the Persian emperor is outraged by an-Nu‘mān’s impertinent-sounding response. This incident, engineered by Zayd b. ‘Adī who sought to avenge his own father’s death, eventually leads to an-Nu‘mān’s death and the fall of his dynasty. In one version of the story preserved in Ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣbahānī’s (d. 297/909) *Kitāb al-Zahrah*, an-Nu‘mān’s response is markedly defiant and addresses the issue of reciprocity directly as if appealing to the Persian emperor’s own feelings of sexual possessiveness:<sup>28</sup>

فكتب إليه فكتب النعمن: أيدع الملك بنات عمه اللاتي كأنهن المها يخطب إليّ

And so the emperor wrote to him and al-Nu‘mān sent his reply: “Would the

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28 Ibn Dāwūd, *az-Zahrah* 59.

emperor allow me to marry one of his cousins, who are as beautiful as wild-cows?”

The Persian emperor never has the chance to understand the issue from an-Nu‘mān’s perspective, however, because Zayd b. ‘Adī—as in the other versions—uses his position as court interpreter to twist an-Nu‘mān’s words.<sup>29</sup>

فقال كسرى لزيد: ما يقول النعمان فقال: يقول على الملك ببنات عمه اللاتي يتشبهن بالبقر وأوهمه أن  
هذا على جهة العيب والنقيصة

“What does al-Nu‘mān say?” the emperor asked Zayd.

“He says the emperor should marry one of his heifer-looking cousins instead,”

Zayd answered, leading the emperor to believe that an-Nu‘mān had intended his comparison to be disparaging.

In this version of the story, an-Nu‘mān’s attempt to appeal to the Persian emperor’s sense of *ghayrah* (jealousy or sexual possessiveness) is thwarted by Zayd b. ‘Adī; that same emotion is at the root of what Laylā’s father refers to when he speaks of branding his daughter with the “brand of shame” (*mīsam al-faḍīḥa*). Indeed in most versions of the story of an-Nu‘mān’s

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29 Ibn Dāwūd, *az-Zahrah* 59.

downfall, the villain is clearly perfidious Zayd, though his malice is modulated by his righteous vengeance. The Persian emperor is depicted as behaving imprudently—a grave sin among kings—having allowed Zayd to manipulate him through sexual temptation, but what of his lack of empathy? Are we to understand that the intended audiences of these semi-fictional narratives would have found fault with the Persian emperor not only for his lack of forbearance (*ḥilm*), but also for his inability to commiserate with an-Nu‘mān’s feelings of sexual possessiveness? Would they have understood an-Nu‘mān’s behavior in similar terms to those Laylā’s father used to justify his own?

Certainly sexual possessiveness was a masculine value that ‘Abbasid society both respected and mistrusted as a number of ambiguous examples demonstrate. In his account of the Kharijite rebellions, al-Ṭabarī records that when the Umayyad commander ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s wife was captured by the Azāriqa and put up for auction as war booty “[o]ne of her kinsmen, a Khārijite leader named Abū l-Ḥadīd al-Shannī, feeling that his honor was at stake [...] beheaded [the woman].”<sup>30</sup> When he later encounters the woman’s family, they tell him “By God, we do not know whether we should praise you or blame you”.<sup>31</sup> In a far more famous example, the fall of the powerful Barmakid house is associated in ‘Abbasid historiography with the story of the caliph Hārūn ar-Rashīd’s ludicrous attempt to police the chastity of his half-sister ‘Abbāsah bt. al-Mahdī and his adviser Ja‘far al-Barmakī, a pair of

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30 Al-Ṭabarī, *The history* xxi, 220. NB: I have modified the text of the quotation in accordance with the transliteration system used in this article.

31 Al-Ṭabarī, *The history* xxi, 220.



adults whom he married precisely so they could all spend time together.<sup>32</sup> Again one's own lived experience interrupts, and perhaps distorts, attempts at analysis: sexual possessiveness as a laudable, and natural, characteristic of masculinity is one I know well. "*Bī-ghayrat*" ("lacking in sexual jealousy") is an insult in Persian; the same condition is also known as "*bī-nāmūsī*" (compare Ottoman Turkish *namussuzluk*). Indeed the trope of the sexually possessive and jealous Arab or Middle Eastern or Muslim man, which is well known and popular today, is an essential condition for the narrative logic of these offense-causing marriage proposals. It will not have escaped the reader's attention that these are stories of men taking offense at marriage proposals made by other men, taking offense at the emasculation or sexual dominance implied in such proposals; the actual or notional reactions of the women whom these proposals concern are irrelevant to the plot.

The analysis of this recurrent narrative trope is not particularly knotty if we accept that sexual possessiveness is a standard and universal masculine characteristic but that is reductive and unsatisfactory for obvious reasons. To illustrate why this is, let us consider two unrelated and disparate cases that suggest the unacknowledged influence this character type has had on contemporary historiography. The first example comes from the New Kingdom of Ancient Egypt; the second from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century reconstruction of the medieval Mediterranean.

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32 Much has been written about this episode in 'Abbasid history. See, *inter alia*, aṭ-Ṭabarī, *The History* xxx, 214–29; Sourdel, *Le vizirat* i, 156–81; Meisami, Mas'ūdī on love; Kruk, A Barmecide feast; Hamori, Going down in style.

### Example One

Furthermore you, my brother, when you wrote to me about not giving a daughter when I wrote to you for a daughter for marriage, saying “From of old a daughter of the king of Egypt has never been given to anyone,” why has one never been given? You are a king; you can do whatever you want. If you were to give a daughter who could say anything?<sup>33</sup>

This probing response is preserved in a fragmentary letter, which is part of the collection known as the El-Amarna Correspondence. This collection of 349 Akkadian letters written in Cuneiform comes from Tell el-Amarna in Middle Egypt, the capital established by Akhenaton (or Amenhotep IV), and includes correspondence addressed to both Akhenaton (r. 1352–1336 bc) and his father Amenhotep III (r. 1390–1352 bc). What is most interesting about this extract for our purposes is that—as in the example of an-Nu‘mān and the Persian emperor—it shows that the issue of elite marriage is especially sensitive for the family of the bride. In this case, an unnamed vassal of the Egyptian pharaoh is disturbed by the suggestion that the Egyptian royal family is somehow unique in not allowing its female members to be married to foreign royal houses. He attempts—one assumes unsuccessfully—to appeal to the pharaoh’s pride, juxtaposing royal protocol with ultimate pharaonic authority, and indeed goes on to threaten

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33 Rainey Z”L, *The El-Amarna correspondence* i, 73 (EA4, ll. 4–9).

not to send his own daughter to be married to the pharaoh unless he receives the quantity of gold, which the pharaoh agreed to pay him in exchange for undertaking some unspecified task. Marriage alliances as well as the Egyptian royal house's lack of reciprocity come up in many of the El-Amarna letters (e.g. EA 1–4, 11, 14, 19–22, 24, 27, 29, 31–2, 41). According to Anson F. Rainey, the letters concerning royal intermarriage are part of two clusters dating from the reign of Amenhotep III that were sent between Bablyon and Egypt and Mittani and Egypt respectively.<sup>34</sup> EA4 is believed to have been sent by the Babylonian king Kadashman-Enlil (r. c. 1375–1360 bc) to the pharaoh Amenhotep III.<sup>35</sup> Christer Jönsson suggests that “[t]he [Babylonian] king probably knew that his request for Pharaoh’s daughter would be refused [...]” but “[b]y reminding Pharaoh of his failure to maintain the customary reciprocity, he hoped to increase the compensation for offering his daughter in marriage.”<sup>36</sup> This game-theory informed analysis is credible, and it highlights the economic and political considerations that attend all questions of royal intermarriage. In fact, some historians of Ancient Egypt use the Egyptian royal family’s projection of patriarchal sexual possessiveness as a proxy for Egypt’s relative economic and political strength over time:

The marriage of a royal princess (perhaps a daughter of Siamun) to Solomon

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34 Rainey Z<sup>3</sup>L, *The El-Amarna correspondence* i, 16–17; ii, 1327–8.

35 Rainey Z<sup>3</sup>L, *The El-Amarna correspondence* ii, 1327–8.

36 Jönsson, *Diplomatic signaling* 198.

of Israel is a striking testimony to the reduced prestige of Egypt's rulers on the world stage. At the height of the New Kingdom, pharaohs regularly took to wife the daughters of Near Eastern princes, but refused to permit their own daughters to be married off to foreign rulers.<sup>37</sup>

This interpretation would also fit the well known case of the marriage of Tughril Beg (d. 455/1063), the founder of the Seljuq dynasty, to the daughter of the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Qā'im bi-Amr Allāh (d. 467/1073).<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, this view of social mores supposes that such values can only be valorized from a position of strength—in this case economic, political, and military—and that they will inevitably give way when those who uphold them find themselves weakened. By this logic, an-Nu'mān should never have hesitated to accede to the Persian emperor's request, let alone deny it. Even if we consider the story of an-Nu'mān's downfall to be a parable of Arab ethnic dignity, the behavior of an-Nu'mān's erstwhile Arab

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37 Taylor, *The third intermediate period* 327. In her commentary on EA4, the El Amarna letter cited above, Zipora Cochavi-Rainey writes that "The text is important since it documents the Egyptian policy of never giving a royal princess in a political marriage to a foreign power." Rainey Z<sup>37</sup>L, *The El-Amarna correspondence* ii, 1328. On Solomon's Egyptian wife, see Cohen, *Solomon and the daughter of Pharaoh*.

38 See Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī l-ta'rikh* x, 20–6; Richards (trans.), *The annals* 142. See also Van Renterghem, *Baghdad* 77–8.

allies is hardly inspiring. Indeed one might get the impression from the story that Arabs, while sexually possessive to a nearly suicidal degree, cannot be counted on to come to the aid of their allies in difficult circumstances. In the context of the ethnically plural and culturally vibrant 'Abbasid cities in which these versions of the story were recorded, it is no less likely that elite audiences, while deploring Zayd's treachery, would have scoffed at an-Nu'mān and the atavistic world-view he represented. Nevertheless the idea that certain groups prefer sexual possessiveness to economic and political gain is a tenacious one.<sup>39</sup>

### Example Two

Players of the computer video game *Medieval: Total War*, set in the period 1087–1453, vie for domination as various European and Mediterranean kingdoms, which are classified along religious lines as Catholic, Orthodox, or Muslim. In addition to warfare, players use diplomacy and espionage to further their political goals. One tool at players' disposal is royal

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39 The story of Astyages as told by Herodotus may demonstrate the extent to which endogamy was seen as natural and exogamy was seen as extreme, perhaps even ruinous. The Median Emperor dreamt that his daughter Mandane's child would overthrow him and his empire and so he chose to marry his daughter not to a Mede, but to a Persian. He later conspired to have the child killed, but his order was not carried out (Herodotus, *The histories* 1.107–1.112). That child grew up to become Cyrus the Great (c. 559–530 bc) and to fulfill the prophecy.

intermarriage, which is achieved by marrying one's princesses to other factions, yet, to quote the game manual, "[p]rincesses are only available to Catholic and Orthodox factions. There are no Muslim princesses in *Medieval: Total War*."<sup>40</sup> In the universe of this game, Muslim rulers are conceived as putting the value of patriarchal sexual possessiveness over the realpolitik gains of diplomatic alliances. Those who created the game and those who play it are likely unaware that in medieval Iberia, for example, there was significant intermarriage between Catholic and Muslim kingdoms, but the game's vision of civilizational differences is not the result of ignorance about historical situations.<sup>41</sup> It is the result of a cultural belief that cannot be shaken by academic history. Here, as everywhere, trope trumps truth. But what does this oft-repeated and resilient trope tell us about the story of Zayd b. 'Adī's dishonest revenge?

In a celebrated analysis of *Othello* entitled "Improvisation and Power", Stephen Greenblatt repurposes Daniel Lerner's conception of empathy to show that "[...] the Europeans' ability again and again to insinuate themselves into the preexisting political, religious, even psychic, structures of the natives and to turn those structures to their

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<sup>40</sup> *Medieval: Total war*, Game manual 18. The same limitation on princesses was upheld in the sequel *Medieval II: Total war* (2006): "Princesses cannot attempt to marry Generals from an Islamic faction (Egypt, Turks, Moors) or factions that do not have princesses." Game manual 35.

<sup>41</sup> "Intermarriage between Muslim and Christian Dynasties," an entry by Mohamad Ballan on his excellent blog Ballandalus, translates and summarizes a portion of Saḥar al-Sayyid 'Abd al-'Azīz Sālim, *al-Jawānib al-ijābiyyah wa-l-salbiyyah*.

advantage” was “essential” for the imposition of European hegemony in the New World in the early modern period.<sup>42</sup> Greenblatt calls this skill improvisation, that is:<sup>43</sup>

[...] the ability to both capitalize on the unforeseen and transform given materials into one’s own scenario. The “spur of the moment” quality of improvisation is not as critical here as the opportunistic grasp of that which seems fixed and established.

One thing that the different versions of the story of Zayd b. ‘Adī’s revenge against an-Nu‘mān agree on is that Zayd had no specific plan for taking revenge against the man who ordered his father’s death. Indeed it was not Zayd who brought up the subject of marriage to the Persian emperor, rather he happened on the discussion as it was taking place and only then was he able to improvise a plan that he hoped would bring an-Nu‘mān and the Persian emperor into conflict.<sup>44</sup> It is not simply that the authors of this revenge narrative failed to illustrate Zayd’s psychology. Nor can we say that, having failed to devise a plan for revenge, Zayd’s success was owed entirely to dumb luck. Rather Zayd accomplished the challenge as he met it, through an

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42 Greenblatt, *Improvisation and power* 60.

43 Greenblatt, *Improvisation and power* 60.

44 In al-Nuwayrī’s telling of the story (*Nihāyat al-arab* xv, 326–30), however, it may have been Zayd that instigated this conversation.

act of improvisation, which is arguably more difficult to execute than a calculated plan. Yet the improvisational faculty was only available to Zayd, who—like his father and other Ḥīran “agents of exchange”—occupied a liminal role in both courts, as Arab secretary to a Persian prince, an imperial dragoman, who had a unique insight into the psyches of both an-Nu‘mān and his Persian overlord.<sup>45</sup> It seems that missions such as the ones that Zayd and Tristan were sent on were prime opportunities for improvisation.<sup>46</sup> Zayd’s betrayal was all the more wicked for exploiting the confidence that only a courtier can enjoy. As Greenblatt explains:<sup>47</sup>

If improvisation is made possible by the subversive perception of another’s truth as an ideological construct, that construct must at the same time be grasped in terms that bear a certain structural resemblance to one’s own set of beliefs. An ideology that is perceived as entirely alien would permit no point

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45 I have borrowed the term agents of exchange from Toral-Niehoff, *Late Antique Iran* 120–2.

46 It was not always emissaries who took advantage of the situation to write reality in their favor. When Ibn al-Jaṣṣāṣ, the governor of Egypt’s representative, was sent to arrange a marriage between the governor’s daughter and the son of the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Mu‘taḍid bi-llāh (r. 892–902), he must have been surprised when the caliph decided arbitrarily that he would marry the girl himself (al-Ṭabarī, *History* xxxviii, 2–3).

47 Greenblatt, *Improvisation and power* 62.



of histrionic entry: it could be destroyed but not performed.

Only Zayd could have engineered the conflict without any indication of precognition. Only he understood how to provoke the pair's incompatible twin vices—a Persian emperor's sexual greed and an Arab king's sexual possessiveness. Zayd's treason succeeded because, like all timeless tales, it was built on tropes.

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