

Arab Bibliophilia Meets Orientalism:

On “An Eastern Scholar’s Engagement with the European Study of the East”

Ahmed El Shamsy

During the year I spent in Berlin in 2014–15 starting to write my book *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics*, I organized a workshop whose purpose was to bring together scholars who worked on the history of printing in the Islamic world. One of the people who responded to the call for papers was Kathryn Schwartz, at the time still a PhD student at Harvard. I did not know Kathryn yet, but I was immediately intrigued by her proposal, which showed that she was grappling with the same materials and questions I was. The workshop launched a fruitful intellectual friendship between us; three years later she provided generous and insightful comments on my book manuscript, and I regret that I never had the opportunity to return the favor, as planned.

Shortly after the workshop, I shared with Kathryn my translation of a series of articles, originally written in Arabic, that the Dutch Orientalist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje had rendered into Dutch in 1883 and that I then translated from the Dutch into English, having been unable to lay my hands on the original Arabic versions.¹ The reason both of us were interested in these articles was that their author was Amīn al-Madanī, one of the great Arab manuscript collectors of the late nineteenth century, who had found himself in financial trouble and had traveled to the Netherlands to sell over his collection of more than six hundred very precious manuscripts. Failing to find interested buyers at the International Colonial and Export Exhibition in Amsterdam, he was alerted to the sixth International Orientalist Congress that was just then taking place in Leiden, and he decided to try his luck there. He was the only Arab scholar at the conference, and he successfully negotiated the sale of his manuscripts to the Brill publishing house, which then sold them onward to Leiden University.

¹ Amīn al-Madanī, *Het Leidsche Oriëntalistencongres: Indrukken van een Arabisch congreslid*, trans. Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (Leiden: Brill, 1883).



CATALOGUE
DE
MANUSCRITS ARABES

PROVENANT D'UNE BIBLIOTHÈQUE PRIVÉE

à EL-MEDÎNA

ET APPARTENANT A LA MAISON

E. J. BRILL

Oude Rijn 33a

RÉDIGÉ PAR

CARLO LANDBERG

Dr. Ph.

LEIDE. — E. J. BRILL.
1883.

In the end, I mentioned al-Madanī only briefly in my monograph—which I now regret, since my account of al-Madanī has subsequently been misinterpreted in various online fora to cast al-Madanī as a villain, a sell-out, and an accomplice to predatory Orientalism. Fortunately, Kathryn's much longer treatment of al-Madanī in her 2018 article "An Eastern Scholar's Engagement with the European Study of the East" provided much-needed nuance to the account of al-Madanī's role and legacy. She began her article with the insight that "the academic orientalism that Amin al-Madani participated in required collaboration and exchange between easterners and westerners. Yet the role that easterners played in shaping this orientalism has been little studied. Eastern scholars helped western scholars to read texts,

interpret them, and even acquire them.” Kathryn’s treatment of al-Madanī did not ignore the fact that he was an important vector in the flow of Arabic manuscripts to Europe, but it contributed to a historical processing of the phenomenon of Orientalism that goes beyond simple dichotomies of East and West, exploited and exploiter.

The articles that al-Madanī published in 1883 described his experiences at the Orientalist Congress in Leiden, and they were published in the Egyptian newspaper *al-Burhān*, which I found myself unable to access in North America. I thus had to rely on Snouck Hurgronje’s translation, but given his status in the field and his renowned expertise in the Arabic language, I did not think this a problem. Al-Madanī’s account is fascinating in many respects, but I found the following assertion particularly remarkable: “Truly, I fear, if this zeal in Europe continues thus, people from all regions will be drawn to go and get everything from over there, ultimately including even Muslim legal knowledge.” Al-Madanī predicted that Europe would soon become the sole source of all human knowledge! But Kathryn, in her response to my translation, provided a reality check: “This is not true (or not entirely!)—Snouck Hurgronje distorts Madani’s account of the congress which he ‘translates’ from al-Burhan!” It turned out that after our 2015 workshop, Kathryn had spent a few extra days in Berlin not sightseeing, as I had assumed, but burrowing into the collections of the Staatsbibliothek, which—unlike North American libraries—did possess copies of the journal in which the articles appeared. She shared with me a digital copy of the relevant article as well as her own translation of an important section of it, which did not make it into her article on al-Madanī. Al-Madanī wrote, in Kathryn’s translation:

If we turn our attention to the purposes that the Franks have in printing [Islamic] books, it is to sell them, and they print no fewer than 500 copies of each book. Despite my having worked in books for a period of many years, I had never seen most of them in the countries of the east, nor had I heard of their printing. I fear that the endurance of this practice in Europe will encourage men of learning to be drawn to [Europe] from all lands, even [those] pursuing Islamic religious sciences. Because when the Franks pursue learning, they do not desist but dive into its seas to extract a pearl from its depths with respect to it. Their kings are glorious in facilitating the path and their scholars are

generous with what they have, and their books are easy to exchange and borrow, and their countries [offer] a life of plenty, and the bodies in them are healthy, and the religions are free. So all of these reasons invite the learned to be attracted to [Europe].

ثم اذا صرفنا النظر عن غايات الافرنج في طبع هذه
الكتب فابن يبيعونها وهم لا يطبعون اقل من خمسمائة
نسخة من كل كتاب واني مع اشتغالي بالكتب مدة سنين
ما رأيت أكثرها في بلاد المشرق ولا سمعت بأنه طبع
واخشي ان دام هذا الاعناء في أوروبا أن تشهد اليها رحال
التحصيل من سائر الاقطار حتى في طلب العلوم الشرعية
الاسلامية لان الافرنج متى اشتغلوا بعلم لا يتركونه
ثم يعرضون بجوارهم فيستخرجون ذرة من طينته خصوصاً
وملوكم يحدون في تهذيب السبل وعلماؤهم هم أهنياء عالم
لديهم وكتبهم سهلة التناول والاعارة وبلادهم رغيدة
العيش والابنان فيها صحيحة والاديان حرة فكل هذه
أسباب داعية الى انجذاب العالم اليهم

So it is true that al-Madanī foresaw—correctly—that Europe would become an attractive destination for the pursuit of higher education, even in the study of Islam. But he did not, as the Snouck Hurgronje’s Dutch translation suggested, claim that it would become the fount of all knowledge.

I cherish this experience as a reminder, first, to always check my sources, following claims to their origins and avoiding shortcuts to the extent possible, and second, to make and keep friends who will catch my mistakes and not shy away from saving me from myself by pointing them out to me. Kathryn was such a friend, and although I will not be able to draw on her wit and learning anymore, I will try to be that friend to others.