Fathers and Husbands

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Visual perception depends in large part on contextual information. Our brains naturally and instantaneously fill blind spots in our vision with information gleaned from prior knowledge and supposition. Stories are equally reliant on contextual supplementation—for example, tropes—though they usually strive to disguise their condition. Realism seeks to hide any narrative imperceptibilities under a cloak of the familiar.

In this essay,[1] 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.[2] 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.[3] 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

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1   I would like to express my sincere thanks to both editors of this volume as well as to Professors David Powers and Dwight Reynolds for their incisive and charitable comments on an earlier draft of this essay. I would like also to thank the anonymous peer reviewer for feedback. A very congenial audience at Harvard discussed with me some aspects of this essay in March 2016 and I thank them for their input.

2   The seminal study of the genre of text being discussed in this article is Leder, The literary use of the *khabar*.

3   Abu Lughod and Mikdashi, Tradition and the anti-politics machine; Khader, The invisible link.

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*" ("He is going to propose," 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 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.[4]

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4 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 patriarch; 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; Tabachnik and Klein, A reasoned approach 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 her life; 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).

A standard example of the offense-causing marriage proposal in the canon of Classical Arabic literature is found in the ʿUdhrī romances, which were first recorded in the early Abbasid period.[5] In Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's (d. 356/967) account of the Majnūn Laylā legend, Laylā's father felt compelled to reject Majnūn's proposal after poems expressing Majnūn's love for his daughter began to circulate:[6]

> I was told by al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī, who heard this story from Hārūn ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Malik who heard it from ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Ibrāhīm who heard it from Hishām ibn Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Makkī who heard it from Muḥammad ibn 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 ibn 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).'[7] 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 best (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,
>>> but large strokes of fortune will render him useless.

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5   See Jacobi, ʿUdhrī.

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 T0131.14.4§ "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 study share similarities with motifs identified by El-Shamy in his comprehensive motif-spectrum (e.g. T0105.1§, T0133.2, T0053.8§).

7   The verb maththala bi- means "to punish a. o. as an example. To mutilate (a sheep)" (Hava, al-Farāʾid, s. v. 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.

> 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:[8]

> 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. "Though he may still be alive, his current state is 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's. 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 shi'ta an yakhla'a nafsahū 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 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 his reaction to Majnūn's tragic and subhuman death:[9]

> 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 childhood shepherding their families' respective herds

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

9 Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 90–1. This incident is narrated by the same person, Abū l-Haytham al-ʿUqaylī.

together, were separated from each other when Laylā reached sexual maturity (*ḥattā kabirā fa-ḥujibat ʿanhu*).[10] Their 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:[11]

> taʿallaqtu laylā wa-hya dhātu dhuʾābatin
>   wa-lam yabdu li-l-atrābi min thadyihā ḥajmū
> ṣaghīrayni narʿā l-bahma yā layta annanā
>   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, we and our beasts.

Parental intervention is key to another tragic story in *al-Aghānī* about another ʿUdhrī 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.[12] His father refuses and tells him to marry one of his paternal uncle's daughters instead.[13] Al-Iṣbahānī explains Qays' father's refusal matter-of-factly: "Dharīḥ was a very wealthy man, so he didn't want his son to marry a woman from outside the fold (*gharība*)."[14] 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 ibn ʿAlī; a case of the Islamic tenet of intercession (*shafāʿa*) becoming reified in narrative.[15] When al-Ḥusayn accompanies Qays to see Lubnā's father, her father tells him that he could never say no to the

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10   Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 11.

11   Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 11. Meter: *Ṭawīl*.

12   See Powers, *Studies*, Appendix B. Over email, Professor Powers drew my attention to the striking structural parallel of this story and that of Zayd and Zaynab's marriage.

13   Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ix, 182.

14   Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ix, 182.

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

Prophet's grandson, but that it would be better if the proposal were to come from Qays' father:[16]

> 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, Dharīh, 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 ʿāran wa-subbatan ʿalaynā*).

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 ʿUdhrī 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.[17]

Pawn versus King versus King

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 al-Nuʿmān III ibn al-Mundhir, who ruled al-Ḥīra from 580–602 AD, is remembered in both Arabic and Persian poetry as having met an ignominious end.[18] 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 ode on the ruins of Ctesiphon (*al-Madāʾin*), the former

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16   Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ix, 182.

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

18   The standard work on the history of al-Ḥīra 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.

capital of the Sasanian empire, he cites al-Nuʿmān as a once mighty sovereign who was laid low by fate (*dōrān* and *taqdīr*):[19]

> pendār hamān ʿahd ast az dīde-ye fekrat bīn
>   dar selsele-ye dargah, dar kowkabe-ye meydān
> az asb piyādeh shō bar naṭ ʿ-e zamīn neh rukh
>   zīr-e pey-e pīlash bīn shah-māt shode Noʿmān
> nay nay ke chū Noʿmān 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:

> 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 Noʿmān is checkmated beneath its elephants' feet
> Nay, nay, see, like Noʿmān, 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 ibn Abī Sulmā (d. 609), the pre-Islamic Arab poet, described al-Nuʿmān's fall from grace in similarly fatalistic terms:[20]

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19 Persian Text and an English translation by Meisami in Sperl and Shackle, *Qasida poetry* ii, 162–9, ll. 22–6.

20 Ahlwardt (ed.), *The divans* 101–2. The question of whether Zuhayr was the author of this poem is still not settled; al-Aṣmaʿī believed that it was attributed to him erroneously and that its true author was Ṣirma ibn Abī Anas al-Anṣārī (fl. 7th c.).

[من الطويل]

[١٠] أَلَا لَا أَرَى عَـلَـى ٱلْحَوَادِثِ بَاقِيًا   ولا خَالِدًا إِلَّا ٱلْجِبَالَ ٱلرَّوَاسِيَا

[١١] وإِلَّا ٱلسَّمَاءَ والبِـلَادَ ورَبَّنَا   وأَيَّامَنَا مَعْدُودَةً واللَّيَالِيَا

[١٢] أَمَّ تَـرَ أَنَّ ٱللّٰهَ أَهْلَكَ تُبَّعًا   وأَهْلَكَ لُقْمٰنَ بْنَ عَادٍ وعَادِيَا

[١٣] وأَهْلَكَ ذَا ٱلْقَرْنَيْنِ مِنْ قَبْلِ مَا تَرَى   وفِرْعَوْنَ جَبَّارًا طَغَى والنَّجَاشِيَا

[١٤] أَلَا لَا أَرَى ذَا إِمَّةٍ أَصْبَحَتْ بِهِ   فَتَتْرُكُهُ ٱلْأَيَّامُ وَهْيَ كَمَا هِيَا

[١٥] أَمَّ تَرَ لِلنُّعْمَانِ كَانَ بِنَجْوَةٍ   مِنَ ٱلشَّرِّ لَوَ أَنَّ ٱمْرَأً كَانَ نَاجِيَا

[١٦] فَغَيَّرَ عَنْهُ مُلْكَ عِشْرِينَ حِجَّةً   مِنَ ٱلدَّهْرِ يَوْمٌ وَاحِـدٌ كَانَ غَاوِيَا

Can anything withstand time?

    What endures 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 ibn ʿĀd and ʿĀdiyāʾ?

And Dhū l-Qarnayn before you were born?

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

I've never known fate to leave the blessings of any blessed man intact.

Didn't you think that al-Nuʿmān 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 al-Nuʿmān III ibn al-Mundhir as the last Lakhmid king
of al-Ḥīrah and his and his dynasty's demise as a precursor to the sweep-
ing political change that would soon transform the face of the Late Antique
Near East. Al-Nuʿmān III was deposed and imprisoned in 602 by Khosrow II
Parvēz (r. 590–628), "the last great king of the Sasanian dynasty."[21] The battle
of Dhū Qār that followed only a few years later was a sign of things to come.[22]
But the story of al-Nuʿmān's downfall begins with the execution of another
man, the poet ʿAdī ibn Zayd, who was the Lakhmid king's secretary, confidant,

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21	Howard-Johnston, Ḳosrow II.

22	Landau-Tasseron, Ḏū Qār.

and—in some accounts—son-in-law. This story has recently been analyzed lucidly and perceptively by David Powers, and I will not retell it here, except to explain that ʿAdī'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.[23]

ʿAdī is avenged by his son, who uses diplomacy and cultural translation to get the better of the Lakhmid king. Al-Nuʿmān regrets having had ʿAdī killed and recognizes that he was wrong to do so. He then encounters ʿAdī's son, Zayd, to whom he shows favor and to 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.[24] This expiatory kindness sets off a chain of events that will end with al-Nuʿmān's downfall as Zayd ibn ʿAdī 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 ibn ʿAdī manages to convince the Sasanian emperor to write to al-Nuʿmān ibn al-Mundhir, requesting that he send one or more suitable unmarried women from his household to the emperor to be married to him:[25]

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

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

    inna ʿAdiyyan kāna mimman kāna uʿīna bihī l-maliku fī naṣīḥatihī wa-raʾyihī fa-nqaḍat muddatuhū wa-nqaṭaʿa ajaluhū wa-lam yuṣab bihī aḥadun ashadda min muṣībatī wa-inna l-malika lam yakun li-yafquda rajulan min ʿabīdihī illā jaʿala llāhu lahū minhu khalafan wa-qad adraka lahū bnun laysa huwa dūnahū wa-qad sarraḥtuhū ilā l-maliki fa-in raʾā an yajʿalahū makāna abīhi wa-yaṣrifa ʿammahū ilā ʿamalin 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 I do. 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 the letter and the well known *ḥadīth*: "*man lazima l-istighfāra jaʿala -llāhu lahū min kulli hammin farajā*"). It is no coincidence that ʿAdī was himself recommended to the Persian emperor for service after his own father's death (al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 101).

25   Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī* ii, 122. The version of the story of al-Nuʿmān's downfall that includes the offense-giving marriage proposal was transmitted by Abū ʿUbaydah Maʿmar ibn al-Muthannā (d. 209/824) (see Landau-Tasseron, *Ḏū Qār*).

وكانت لملوك العجم صفة من النِّساء مكتوبة عندهم فكانوا يبعثون في تلك
الأرضين بتلك الصِّفة فإذا وُجِدت حُملت إلى الملك غير أنَّهم لم يكونوا
يطلبونها في أرض العرب ولا يظنُّونها عندهم ثمَّ إنَّه بدا للملك في طلب
تلك الصفة وأمر فكتب بها إلى النَّواحي ودخل إليه زيد بن عديّ وهو
في ذلك القول فخاطبه فيما دخل إليه فيه ثمّ قال «إنّي رأيت الملك قد
كتب في نسوة يُطلبن له وقرأت الصِّفة وقد كنت بآل المنذر عارفًا وعند
عبدك النُّعمان من بناته وأخواته وبنات عمّه وأهله أكثر من عشرين امرأة
على هذه الصِّفة» قال «فاكتب فيهنَّ» قال «أيّها الملك إنَّ شرَّ شيء في
العرب وفي النُّعمان خاصَّةً أنَّهم يتكرَّمون زعموا في أنفسهم عن العجم فأنا
أكره أن يغيّبهنَّ عمَّن تبعث إليه أو يعرض عليه غيرهنَّ وإن قدمت أنا
عليه لم يقدر على ذلك فابعثني وابعث معي رجلاً من ثقاتك يفهم العربية
حتَّى أبلغ ما تحبُّه»

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 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 ibn ʿAdī 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 al-Nuʿmān 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 al-Nuʿmān—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 other women. 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 ibn ʿAdī 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 al-Nuʿmān'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 10th-century chronicles of al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/932) and al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956), but in Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Balʿamī's (d. 363/974) chronicle—a purported translation of al-Ṭabarī's into Persian—Zayd's first claim is presented as an outright lie:[26]

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 بپارسی بستان باشد
وروی 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 وزید
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 وتو به
روم رو تا تو باز آیی او برگ دختر ساخته باشد وتو او را با خویشتن
بیاوری پس زید مر کسری را گفت: اینچنین کنیزک در روم بسیار است
وآگر تو دختر نعمان را نخواهی روا باشد که عرب مردمانی بی ادب اند
ودختر را به عجم ندهند [....]

Zayd ibn ʿAdī told the emperor that he did not know, nor had he ever seen, a woman who fit this description except the daughter of al-Nuʿmān ibn Mundhir, whose name was Ḥadīqah ("Garden") and whose face was like a garden. He knew that the girl did not truly fit the description but he

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

was certain that the emperor would never see her and thus would never know that [Zayd] had lied. [He knew] that al-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 al-Nuʿmān's daughter so he said to Zayd ibn ʿAdī, "Write to al-Nuʿmān telling him to send the girl to me in the company of my servants." He then told one of his servants, "Since you're going in al-Nuʿmān'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 al-Nuʿmān'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 al-Nuʿmān and his dynasty, the story unfolds exactly as Zayd had hoped it would. He travels to al-Ḥīra at the emperor's bidding to deliver the imperial bridal specifications and al-Nuʿmān's response, while diplomatic, is true to the stereotype 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 al-Nuʿmān's fate by deliberately mistranslating his answer:[27]

فلمَّا دخـل عليه أعظم الملـك وقال «إنَّه قد احتاج إلى نسـاء لنفسـه ووُلده وأهـل بيته وأراد كرامتك بصهـره فبعث إليك» فقـال «مـا هؤلاء النِّسوة» فقال «هـذه صفتهنَّ قد جئنا بهـا» وكانت الصِّفة أن المنذر الأكبر أهـدى إلى أنوشـروان جاريةً كان أصابهـا إذ أغـار على الحـارث الأكبر بن أبي شـمر الغسَّـاني فكتـب إلى أنوشروان بصفتهـا[....]فقبلهـا أنوشروان وأمـر بإثبـات هـذه الصِّفـة في دواوينه فلم يزالوا يتوارثونهـا حتَّى أفضى ذلك كسرى بن هرمـز فقرأ زيد هـذه الصِّفـة على النُّعمان فشقَّت عليـه وقال لزيد والرَّسول يسـمع «أما في مها السَّواد وعِين فارس مـا يبلغ به كسـرى حاجته» فقال الرَّسول لزيد بالفارسية «مـا المها والعين» فقـال له بالفارسية «كاوان» أي

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

البقر فأمسك الرَّسول وقال زيد للنُّعْمان «إنَّما أراد الملك كرامتك ولو علم
أنَّ هذا يشقُّ عليك لم يكتب إليك به» فأنزلهما يومين عنده ثمَّ كتب إلى
كسرى «إنَّ الَّذي طلب الملك ليس عندي»

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]?" [al-Nuʿmān] asked. "We've brought a copy of the desired characteristics," [Zayd] replied. The [story behind this] description is that al-Mundhir the Elder sent Anūshirwān [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 Anūshirwān as a gift. [. . . .] Anūshirwān accepted her 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 ibn Hurmuz. Zayd read the description out to al-Nuʿmān, who was troubled greatly by it. "Can the emperor not find what he seeks among the wild cows (*mahā*) of Lower Mespotamia and the wide-eyed ones (*ʿīn*) of Persia?", al-Nuʿmān asked Zayd as the emperor's emissary listened. "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 al-Nuʿmān, "but if he'd known that it would trouble you so, he would never have brought the issue up." [Al-Nuʿmān] hosted them for a couple of days and then sent his reply to Kisrā: "I do not have what the emperor seeks."

Zayd was doing his lord's bidding by traveling to arrange a royal marriage—like Tristan did for King Mark—but this bout of service also enabled to him to lay a trap for the man who was responsible for his father's death. In his version of events, Balʿamī is even more concerned with exonerating al-Nuʿmān and implicating Zayd ibn ʿAdī, the perfidious translator:[28]

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28   Balʿamī, *Tārīkh* ii, 1113–14. The figure of the perfidious translator calls to mind Fawwāz Ḥaddād's 2008 novel, *al-Mutarjim al-khāʾin*.

نعمان جواب داد که دختران عرب سیاه روی باشند و بی ادب وخدمت

ملوک را نشایند ودر جواب نامه الطاف نوشت وخصی راگفت: «ملک

را بگوی که این دختر را نه چنان یافتم که شایسته ملک بود» واندر

نامه نوشت: «أنّ فی مها العراق لمندوحة الملک عن سواد اهل العرب»

واین سخنی لطیف و نیکوست و لیکن زید بترجمه کردن زشت گردانید از

بهر آنکه مها بتازی گاوکوهی باشد ونیز گویند که اندر جهان از مردم و

چهار پای هیچ [چیز] را چشم از چشم گاوکوهی 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 وسیاه چشمان هستند که اورا بسیاهان عرب حاجت نیست زید

این معنی را بترجمه بگردانید ومها ماده گاوان باشند وسودان مهتران و

چنان باز نمود که ایدون همیگوید که ماده گاوان عجم ملک را چندان

هستند که مهترزادگان عرب او را بکار نیاید

Al-Nuʿmān 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 Zayd translated it, he 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 mountain cow so Arabs refer to cow-eyed women as *mahā*. [....]

The meaning of al-Nuʿmān'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 [al-Nuʿmān] 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 al-Nuʿmān's impertinent-sounding response. This incident, engineered by Zayd ibn ʿAdī who sought to avenge his own father's death, eventually leads to al-Nuʿmān's death (by elephant stomping, in some versions) after he failed to enlist the support of his Arab allies, presaging the fall of his dynasty and of the Sasanian empire a few years later. In one version of the story preserved in Ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣbahānī's (d. 297/909) *Kitāb al-Zahrah*, al-Nuʿmān'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:[29]

فكتب إليه فكتب النعمٰن: أيدع الملك بنات عمّه اللاتي كأنّهنّ المَها يخطب إليّ

And so the emperor wrote to him and al-Nuʿmān sent his reply: "Would the 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 al-Nuʿmān's perspective, however, because Zayd ibn ʿAdī—as in the other versions—uses his position as court interpreter to twist al-Nuʿmān's words:[30]

فقال كسرى لزيد: ما يقول النعمٰن فقال: يقول على الملك بنات عمّه اللاتي يتشبّهن بالبقر وأوهمه أنّ هذا على جهة العيب والنقيصة

"What does al-Nuʿmān 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 al-Nuʿmān had intended his comparison to be disparaging.

In this version of the story, al-Nuʿmān's attempt to appeal to the Persian emperor's sense of *ghayrah* (jealousy or sexual possessiveness) is thwarted by Zayd ibn ʿAdī; 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 al-Nuʿmān's downfall, the

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29   Ibn Dāwūd, *Kitāb az-Zahrah* 59.

30   Ibn Dāwūd, *Kitāb az-Zahrah* 59.

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 al-Nuʿmān's feelings of sexual possessiveness? Would they have understood al-Nuʿmān'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 ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz'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]."[31] 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.'"[32] 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 al-Rashīd's ludicrous attempt to police the chastity of his half-sister ʿAbbāsah bint al-Mahdī and his adviser Jaʿfar al-Barmakī, a pair of adults whom he married solely so that they could all spend time together.[33] 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;

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31   Al-Ṭabarī, *History* xxi, 220. NB: I have modified the text of the quotation in accordance with the transliteration system used here.

32   Al-Ṭabarī, *History* xxi, 220.

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

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 trope has had on contemporary historiography. The first example comes from the New Kingdom of Ancient Egypt; the second from a twenty-first-century reconstruction of the medieval Mediterranean.

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?[34]

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 Amenḥotep IV), and includes correspondence addressed to both Akhenaton (r. 1352–1336 bc) and his father Amenḥotep III (r. 1390–1352 bc). What is most interesting about this extract for our purposes is that—as in the example of al-Nuʿmān 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 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 are a concern in many of the El-Amarna letters (e.g. EA 1–4, 11, 14, 19–22, 24, 27, 29,

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34   Rainey, *The El-Amarna correspondence* i, 73 (EA4, ll. 4–9).

31–2, 41). According to Anson F. Rainey, the letters concerning royal intermarriage are part of two clusters dating from the reign of Amenḥotep III that were sent between Bablyon and Egypt and Mittani and Egypt respectively.[35] EA4 is believed to have been sent by the Babylonian king Kadashman-Enlil (r. c. 1375–1360 bc) to the pharaoh Amenḥotep III.[36] Christer Jönsson suggests that "[t]he [Babylonian] king probably knew that his request for Pharaoah'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."[37] 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 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.[38]

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-Qāʾim bi-Amr Allāh (d. 467/1073).[39] 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, al-Nuʿmān should never have hesitated to accede to the Persian emperor's request, let alone deny it. Even if we consider the story of al-Nuʿmān's downfall to be a parable of Arab ethnic dignity, the behavior of al-Nuʿmān's erstwhile Arab allies is hardly inspiring. Indeed, one might get

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35   Rainey, *The El-Amarna correspondence* i, 16–17; ii, 1327–8.

36   Rainey, *The El-Amarna correspondence* ii, 1327–8.

37   Jönsson, Diplomatic signaling 198.

38   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, *The El-Amarna correspondence* ii, 1328. On Solomon's Egyptian wife, see Cohen, Solomon and the daughter of Pharaoh.

39   See Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī l-tārīkh* x, 20–6; Richards (trans.), *The annals* 142. See also Makdisi, Marriage of Ṭughril Beg.

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 socially frenetic 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 al-Nuʿmān 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.[40]

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 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*."[41] 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.[42] It is the result of a cultural belief

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40   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.

41   *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.

42   "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 ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Sālim, *al-Jawānib al-ījābiyyah wa-l-salbiyyah.*

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 ibn ʿAdī'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 advantage" was "essential" for the imposition of European hegemony in the New World in the early modern period.[43] Greenblatt calls this skill improvisation, that is:[44]

> […] 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 ibn ʿAdī's revenge against al-Nuʿmān 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 al-Nuʿmān and the Persian emperor into conflict.[45] 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 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 al-Nuʿmān and his Persian overlord.[46] It seems that missions such as the ones that Zayd and Tristan were sent on were prime

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43   Greenblatt, Improvisation and power 60.

44   Greenblatt, Improvisation and power 60.

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

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

opportunities for improvisation.[47] Zayd's betrayal was all the more wicked for exploiting the confidence that only a courtier can enjoy. As Greenblatt explains:[48]

> 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 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 good stories, it was built on tropes.

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47   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-Muʿtaḍid 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).

48   Greenblatt, Improvisation and power 62.

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