

Studies in Romanticism

Katharina Mommsen. *Goethe und die arabische Welt*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1988. Pp. 670.

This wonderful book is a major achievement in cultural history, comparative literature, and loving scholarly exegesis. From the same author's *Goethe und 1001 Nacht* (Berlin, 1960; expanded ed. Frankfurt, 1981) we learned of allusions to that mideastern narrative masterpiece in fifty of Goethe's works. Then in *Natur- und Fabelreich in Faust II* (Berlin, 1968) we saw how Goethe took plot elements and motifs from Scheherazade's tales and systematically "translated" them into Greek analogues or equivalents for use in the Classical Walpurga's Night and Helen episodes of

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Faust's journey. In this latest and most comprehensive undertaking, Professor Mommsen surveys the astonishing range of Goethe's involvement with Arab and Islamic culture over the course of many decades.

As an adolescent, Goethe studied both Arabic and Hebrew (24-25); he was still doing handwriting exercises in Arabic between his sixty-fifth and seventieth years, as surviving examples prove (45). In preparing his *West-East Divan*, Goethe transcribed passages from books on Arabic poetry, travel writings, anthologies, and other scholarly orientalia in Latin, English, French, Italian, German, and Arabic (44). He sympathized with Sir William Jones's ironical reflections on the obstacles placed in the way of Arabistics as an emergent discipline by authoritarian proponents of the primacy of (Greek and Roman) "classics" and by self-styled patriots who downgraded the achievements of non-European cultures (39). But Goethe was encouraged by the new, affirmative attitudes toward Mohammed that he found in the writings of the Dutchman Hadrian Reland, the Englishman George Sales, and his own countrymen Leibniz, Lessing, and Herder (161-64). Having lost his faith in an anthropomorphic God after hearing about the Lisbon earthquake at age six (167), Goethe was open to the widest variety of possible representations of what could never, after all, be definitively represented.

Perhaps not many of us are aware that there are world-class masterworks of pre-Islamic Bedouin poetry. Of these the *Moallakat* is considered the oldest as well as the best collection (51). Each "Kaside" in the collection opens with a conventional "Nasib" or love-elegy motif: the poet contemplates the traces of a vanished campsite in the sand, and he bemoans the loss of the lovely young woman he met there, now likely gone forever (53-54). Amralkais, said to have invented this motif, wrote a poem of which Goethe translated a portion from Sir William Jones's English version (53-58). It also inspired Goethe to write a lovely Nasib-lyric of his own:

LaBt mich weinen! umschränkt von Nacht,
In unendlicher Wüste.
Kamele ruhn, die Treiber desgleichen,
Rechnend still wacht der Armenier;
Ich aber, neben ihm, berechne die Meilen
Die mich von Suleika trennen, wiederhole
Die wegeverlängernden ärgerlichen Krümmungen.
LaBt mich weinen! das ist keine Schande.
Weinende Männer sind gut.
Weinte doch Achill um seine Briseis!
Xerxes beweinte das unerschlagene Heer,

Über den selbstgemordeten Liebling
Alexander weinte.
Laßt mich weinen, Tränen beleben den Staub.
Schon grunelt.

(67)

[Let me weep! embraced by night,
In endless waste land.
Camels rest, the drivers too.
Planning, the Armenian keeps quiet vigil.
But I, standing by him, reckon the miles
That keep me from Zuleika, reimagine
The frustrating, distancing meanders.
Let me weep! it is no disgrace.
It's good for men to weep.
Achilles wept for Briseis!
Xerxes bewept his undefeated army;
Over his self-slain beloved
Alexander wept.
Let me weep, tears enliven the dust.
Already the air feels fragrant.] (my translation)

The poem is really a meditation on the whole *Moallakat*-ensemble as Goethe has experienced it: he incorporates his impressions not only of Amralkais but also of Tarafa and Hareth (both of whom use the motif of meandering bends in the road), and he even includes the thoughts of Hartmann, the translator and explicator of *Moallakat*, who introduces the parallel with Achilles (70–73). What is more, Goethe has written a jewel of a poem—which he never published. But the process of creative assimilation that Mommsen analyzes here may serve as paradigmatic for the *Moallakat*-based lyrics that Goethe did choose to print, in the *West-East Divan* and in the *Mild Xenia* (79–133). Nor did Goethe confine his pre-Islamic poetry studies to the *Moallakat*. The Orientalist Stickel has described the fiery zeal with which Goethe, one year before his death, could still recite from memory the translation he himself had made, many years before, of the blood-revenge lyric by Taabbat Scharran from the rich anthology called *Hamassa* (or “Boldness”). This time Goethe got his poem from a Latin version (143–56). His translation is extraordinarily effective.

At twenty-three Goethe wrote a lyric in praise of Mohammed; at seventy he included in an announcement to *West-East Divan* the coy statement that the book's author did not wish to reject the imputation that he himself was a Moslem (157). He plays on a Koran passage in

the *Ur-Götz* (172). Translating suras from the Koran, Goethe corrects Megerlin's German version with the help of Maracci's Latin (178). But he carefully selects suras that he can interpret in the light of the God-Nature concept he shares with Spinoza and Herder (183). Goethe's fragment of a Mohammed drama is the best tribute to the Prophet ever paid by a German poet up to that time (194). Called on to translate Voltaire's “Mahomet” for the Weimar court, Goethe cleans up the pejoratively biased text to make the Prophet look better (218–38). And the *Divan* repeatedly praises virtues that Goethe considers Islamic: faith in Providence; submission to what must be; benevolence; the sense of divinity in nature, of the endless contradictory attributes of God (the “hundred names” of Allah [274–324]).

Hafiz, too, was devoted to the Koran but at the same time managed to maintain a playfully skeptical distance from it: Hafiz is Goethe's role model in the *Divan* (264), and playfulness is everywhere. To take one instance: Islamic tradition had allowed ten animals into heaven; Goethe reduces the number to four and makes some substitutions. For example, he creates a new legend of a wolf which attains paradise by following the Prophet's command to leave the poor man's lamb alone and steal from the rich instead. “Wolf,” Mommsen adds, may also be taken to refer slyly to Johann Wolfgang (348–61). Such vignettes—and apt commentaries—make this book one of the most entertaining of scholarly excursions. Indeed, Goethe needs all the Hafizian humor he can muster up in dealing with some of the traditional Islamic strictures regarding wine, women, and song.

First, women. Tradition allowed four (!) women into Islamic heaven: the Prophet's wife, the Prophet's daughter, the Pharaoh's righteous wife Asija, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Goethe, in his poem on “Chosen Women,” keeps three of these but instead of Pharaoh's wife includes Suleika, the traditional Islamic name for Potiphar's wife. Why Suleika? For one thing, she is the heroine of the *Divan*, the beloved of the poet-persona “Hafiz,” who is Goethe's spokesman. For another, she serves in Islamic tradition as an example of sacred renunciation, her loss of Joseph having motivated her to pursue a higher, a divine love. And Marianne von Willemer (often designated by the code-name of Suleika in the *Divan*) likewise had to pursue renunciation, for Goethe, who was in love with her, respected the fact that she was already married! Thus Goethe intimates that he can rival Mohammed, putting into heaven any woman he wants. Indeed, Goethe concludes his poem by noting that whoever believes in lauding women also deserves to go to heaven—leaving us to conclude that surely the women so lauded all belong there too. Mommsen analyzes many more of Goethe's ever-varying strategies

for subtly undermining any potential Islamic barriers to the fullest exercise of his own faith in the Eternal Feminine (369–87).

Hafizian humor is rampant in Goethe's poems on wine; Persia was a major wine-producing country, and Goethe considers the Persian poet his superior in valuing the gifts of the earth (414, 419). But still more important for our understanding of Goethe vis-à-vis Islamic tradition are the poems on the nature of poetry itself. Mohammed, like Plato, reportedly preferred his own religious-metaphysical lyricism to the imaginings of mere "poets" (443–45). But Goethe, while he favored Mohammed's focus on ethics, insisted on freedom for imagination as well; both are as co-equally important (says Mommsen, using a Goethean metaphor) as inhaling and exhaling (451). And so—to give one example—Goethe versifies a "fetwa" or judgment of the liberal theologian Ebusuud, who simply and smilingly advises a would-be bookburner to savor and relish whatever passages in Hafiz express profound and established truth, while discounting any statements that might lead to eternal pain (464–67).

After one hundred years the first edition of the *Divan* still was not sold out (329): what Goethe had to offer was too "new" for people to comprehend. And it stays new. Goethe was a pioneer Arabist: the names of Motanabbi, Ibn Arabschah, Abu Ismael Tograi—all favorites of Goethe's—remain as unfamiliar to most of us now as they were to the *Divan's* earliest readers. Goethe is never predictable: he responds in ever-changing ways to his Islamic mentors. Ibn Arabschah's poem on Timur and the winter seems to Goethe so applicable to Napoleon that he versifies it rather faithfully (from Jones's Latin prose rendition). Tograi, however, is as much foil as model: his political wisdom is appealing, but his pessimism self-defeating. With him, therefore, Goethe carries on a polite but vigorous debate. One fact above all impresses me: Goethe is still educating us—with the help of such brilliant interpreters as Katharina Mommsen.

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