

After Rabelais

PATRICIA STORAGE

Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq

LEG OVER LEG

Translated by Humphrey Davies
 Volume One. 410pp. 0 8147 2937 3
 Volume Two. 456pp. 0 8147 6984 3
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Whatever its general maiden reception, the first publication in English from the Arabic of Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq's four-volume nineteenth-century comic masterpiece, *Leg over Leg*, will eventually be acknowledged as one of the most important translations of the twenty-first century, as the Garnett and Maude translations of Tolstoy were in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Humphrey Davies's virtuosic work (which he compared to climbing Mount Everest) gives English readers access at last to a quintessential novel of the era of Arabic literature's *Nahda*, or reawakening, and to one of the most profoundly humanist voices in literature. Al-Shidyaq called translation "dream-interpretation" – and it is an apt description of Davies's monumental labour on this labyrinthine novel.

Like both its Lebanese author and its Levantine sensibility, *Leg over Leg* is made up of multiple components, held together in a dynamic and precarious equilibrium. The author promises at the outset "critical examination of the Arabs and their non-Arab peers", and of himself, "what manner of creature might he be". Faris al-Shidyaq (who combines his names to form the name of the novel's hero, the Fariyaq) was born in 1805 in a village on Mount Lebanon to a Maronite family, a dynasty of clerks. Both he and his elder brother As'ad, in the course of working for American missionaries, converted to Protestantism. Faris would eventually become Roman Catholic, for exactly one day, in order to marry his

Syrian Catholic wife, and ultimately converted to Islam. As'ad, in a famous case (examined at length in Ussama Makdisi's excellent history, *Artillery of Heaven*), was imprisoned for his conversion by the Maronite Patriarch, and grotesquely maltreated until he died at the Patriarchal residence. Faris, fearing for his own life, fled to Alexandria, and began his extraordinary career of travel, writing and translation. Al-Shidyaq, fluent in Arabic, Turkish, French and English, would translate into Arabic, among other works, the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and *Robinson Crusoe*. In Cairo, he worked as a translator making Arabic versions of the Turkish language verse eulogies to the Viceroy, Muhammad Ali, featured regularly in Ottoman Egypt's official gazette, eulogies he soundly satirizes in *Leg over Leg*; the elaborate rhetoric of one of al-Shidyaq's mockeries fulsomely praises the depilation of the Viceroy's pubic hair.

Al-Shidyaq's work as a panegyrist for Muhammad Ali serves to remind us that Turkish was the language of the Viceroy's court and government. Muhammad Ali himself never learned Arabic; Arabs were both at a linguistic and social disadvantage, to the point of being forbidden promotion beyond the position of captain in Muhammad Ali's army. Al-Shidyaq writes with energetic anger of the humiliations suffered by Arabs at the hands of the Turkish elite in Egypt. We are accustomed to thinking of the *Nahda* as a movement influenced by a new awareness of European literature, but it was also a reaction to the domination of the privileged Turkish language. The *Nahda* was not only a renaissance, but also a reclaiming of Arabic's distinguished literary roots, an aspiration to speak and write fully and freely in a liberated Arabic.

As well as in Egypt, al-Shidyaq would live in Malta, Tunis, London, Cambridge and Paris. And alongside his literary renown, he is

considered the founder of Arabic journalism, establishing in Istanbul the first Arabic language newspaper published there, widely circulated throughout the Arab world. At the end of his life, he edited a twenty-volume critical edition of one of the great dictionaries of Arabic, Ibn Manzur's thirteenth-century dictionary, *The Arab Tongue*.

Leg over Leg reflects al-Shidyaq's infinite variety. Like the Levantine social, political, religious and geographical world, the author's mind is too rich and complex to be confined to one genre, one way of thinking and telling. The book's pages contain, among much else, dictionaries, poems, travel memoirs of Cairo, Alexandria, Malta, London, Tunisia, Paris. The novel overflows with passages of rhymed prose, as well as a witty, unsentimental and tender portrait of a marriage, social, political and theological criticism, sometimes ingeniously refracted through explorations of Arabic grammar and vocabulary, an elegant polemic against arrogant French Arabists, and an unforgettable account of the loss of a beloved child. There are fascinating portraits of the Protestant missionaries, a rare chance to see them through Arab eyes, instead of their own solemn memoirs. One of the tour-de-force passages in the novel is Davies's rendering of a pastor's attempt at a sermon in bad Arabic: "Be of good fart if you would be freed from the cabbages of fate. Respect your monsters and piss-offs, venerate them, and wallow in their footsteps. Observe everything they poo". This ranks with Rabelais's latinizing pedant from Limoges, "deambulating via the urbic carfazes and quadrivia", and the great Franglais tantrum of the chef Anatole – "Wait one half moment. Not yet quite so quick, my old sport. It is by no means all right. See yet again a little. It is some very different dishes of fish" – in P. G. Wodehouse's *Right Ho, Jeeves!*

At the heart of *Leg over Leg*, perhaps above all, is an invincible feminism, expressed through one of the most vivid, daring and expansive female characters in literature, the Fariyaqiyyah, who, it must be said, makes Molly Bloom seem like a sex toy, mechanically nodding her prerecorded "yes". The Far-

iyaqiyyah is based on al-Shidyaq's wife, who despite her obligatory premarital cloistering and enforced illiteracy, emerges, educated by travel and dialogue with the world, as a brilliant commentator on manners, men, women, sex and love, politics, imagination and language. We meet her as a naive young bride, charmingly mesmerized by her first sight of men and women dancing together, but she develops into an acute and lucid social critic. "How can it be", she asks, reflecting on England's working class, "that this sort of person creates the adornments of this world, makes it a delight to live in, and creates its prosperity, while they themselves are excluded from it?"

Al-Shidyaq writes of men and women as innately equal in both talents and vulnerabilities. His sardonic account of his own wedding night makes it clear how much society encroaches on and disciplines his and his new wife's mutual intimacy and freedom, as men outside the bridal chamber chant mocking exhortations challenging his virility, while the bride's mother waits anxiously to display the blood-stained sheet proving both her daughter's virginity and the groom's manhood.

Much of the third and fourth volumes of the novel are narrated through the couple's playful Beatrice- and Benedick-like dialogues about everything from sexual equality and erotic wordplay to the Protestant Sunday and Parisian women. It is a book that widens from the monologues of its first two volumes into the dialogues of its third and fourth, reflecting the flourishing shared world of thought and feeling in marriage.

If his wife had been formally educated, al-Shidyaq wryly (and with self-mocking relief) observes, her passionate response to all aspects of experience, and the acuteness, eloquence and courage with which she describes what she sees, would have made her a better poet than himself. "I wish", he tells her, "that women would preach from the pulpits as men do." She replies, "Were they to do so . . . they would make them weep blood. But how unlikely it is that that will ever happen, for men

. . . have taken full control of all affairs, both mundane and spiritual, and all ranks of dignity and honor, and have forbidden women to share in them with them". She then presents a catalogue of Arabic words in the feminine gender: "heaven, earth, paradise, life, spirit, soul . . . courage, virtue, manliness, truth . . . the law of God". The language recognizes the qualities of women abundantly, where society does not.

The Fariyaqqiyah shapes her husband's life, his perceptions and poems; she is both his companion in reality and in imagination. She belongs both to the modern Ottoman and European worlds in which she travels, but also to the world of the classical Arab poets – she is a realistic figure as a nineteenth-century wife, but she is also al-Shidyaq's *qarin*, the jinn companion of the classical Arab poets, who collaborates in the making of his – or their – poems. In one instance he explicitly footnotes a conceit of a poem as "stolen from the Fariyaqqiyah". In his most touching poem to her, he writes: "If man's preoccupation is this world, / Then I am the one who is forever preoccupied with you. / In you may be found proof for the oneness of the Creator / Should the philosopher find it hard to come up with such a proof".

Davies's translation not only manages the feat of setting this oceanic book before the English-speaking reader, but also functions as a compelling portrait of Arabic for those without the language; in *Leg over Leg*, the Arabic language itself is almost an independent character, with its own idiosyncratic existence, a sort of tutelary genius leading us to new adventures, thoughts and experiences. Al-Shidyaq is always conscious of the intricate interplay between word and flesh; human creatures are also made of words, while words themselves are drawn from and reflect the human body and the physical world surrounding it.

The author guides the reader approaching his book: "The reader should, preferably, on opening this book, go though it page by page, from the beginning to the end, including the footnotes and the page numbers". He is telling the truth; the footnotes here are like subtitles to

a film, adding meaning and dimension to the experience, in addition to an introduction to the unfamiliar conventions of Arabic literature which al-Shidyaq by turns satirizes, pays homage to, and amplifies. Along with the rhymed prose, many readers will also encounter for the first time frequent featured lists of words presented as if they were a verbal equivalent of wine tasting. This is a practice with deep roots in classical Arabic literature; poets were connoisseurs of words, making pilgrimages into the desert to collect rare specimens from the Bedouin, who were thought to have the purest Arabic. Al-Shidyaq's lists include collections of words for the female and male genitals that would have made D. H. Lawrence chafe with frustration over the limitations of English; a kind of thesaurus of women, seen through groups of words for jewellery, clothes and different kinds of shelter; and a group of words describing children with exquisite delicacy and specificity, including words for the sound of rocking a child in the crib, and that of a child suckling at the breast. Such finely observed physical nuance brings to mind the importance of medical scholarship in Arabic letters.

At times the reader must work hard to embrace a novel that is formed as a kind of anthology. Al-Shidyaq has been justly compared to Rabelais and Sterne, whose work he knew, but one contemporary novel also comes



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to mind: Charles Dantzig's *Encyclopédie capricieuse du tout et du rien* (2009). Dantzig's novel is made up entirely of lists, its narrator only intermittently present; his consciousness is the novel's hero. Glimpsed in the interstices of all he observes and records, he casts a brilliant shadow.

Both of these works invite us to find new ways of reading. English literature has a long history of being influenced by theatre and, indeed, we often read it like theatregoers, with

the expectation that it will provide us with life-like scenes, decor, dialogue, costume and – at least before postmodernism – plot. *Leg over Leg* offers a different kind of performance; instead of providing us with a detailed description of his Paris garret, al-Shidyaq describes his life there through an anthology of the poems he chalked on the door during his lonely sojourn. Theatre is a negligible presence in Arabic literary culture. What seems to shape Arabic storytelling, instead of drama,

is memory. Classical Arabic writers were famous for their feats of memory. In Robert Irwin's anthology of classical Arabic literature, *Night and Horses and the Desert* (2000), there is a tenth-century description of a kind of archetype of the ideal reader, the Vizier Ibn al-'Amid, "the best clerk of his time", and his "command of the Arabic language with its rarities, familiarity with grammar and prosody, felicity in etymology and metaphor, retention by memory of pre-Islamic and Islamic collec-

tions of poems". Al-Shidyaq possesses that kind of erudition; *Leg over Leg* is so vast because it is not told only in the present, but through the heritage of a language in which memory, integral to narration, is a deliberate presence, embodied in words.

Al-Shidyaq's novel, and the Arabic works it will bring into English in its wake, including, one hopes, a biography of the author, are going to enlarge our ideas of what is possible in reading and writing fiction.