

## TALKS FROM THE CONVENTION

## Thomas Munro and the Politics of Translation

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In *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context*, Tejaswini Niranjana argues that translation generates a “conceptual economy” (2), or a systematization of colonial knowledge, about the colonial subject.<sup>1</sup> In her estimation, the colonial act of translation is a process that changes how the colonial subject comes to be understood, rendering translation a tool for colonial domination through (linguistic) access. This process “fixes” colonized peoples and cultures, “making them seem static and unchanging rather than historically constructed” (3), which in turn objectifies them and leads to violence against them (2). Her examination troubles paradigms in translation studies that “still operat[e] under the aegis of the transcendental signified” (57), especially the binary of the original and its translation—that is, the process of rendering the original legible and accessible for a target audience, to the extent that the translator’s task is largely defined by approximating the original meaning of the text in an alternative linguistic register (Bassnett 21–44). This orientation, Niranjana maintains, reanimates the colonial project because it implies cultural homogeneity and presumes a singular origin to which the colonial subject is reduced (39–40, 127–28; see also Gopal 204). The concept of the original in the colonial context helps cultivate a conceptual economy that translates the colonial subject into a knowable object.

In this essay, I build on Niranjana’s provocation by examining how agents of the colonial enterprise employed the Persian language as a means for colonial domination. Though Persia/Iran has never undergone formal colonization by Western powers,<sup>2</sup> it is a cultural and literal landscape that has a history of being translated by people not native to it according to their desires and designs, aligning its past and present with the effects of imperialization (Ghaderi 456). As a veritable lingua franca in the early modern period, despite its non-Western status, Persian

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transcended geographic boundaries and gave anyone who learned it linguistic access to neighboring regions.<sup>3</sup> Persian-speaking European colonists gained entry to an expanded geography through acts of translation that implied linguistic mastery as well as exhibited intimate knowledge of people, places, histories, and cultures that were unified under the Persian language. Consequently, these agents assigned an imagined homogeneity to people regardless of cultural, ethnic, or geographic affiliation, engendering a conceptual economy that materialized fantasies of empire. By imagining the Persian language as a monolith in this way, colonizers could more readily imagine exercising authority in the region. The deployment of Persian in colonial acts of translation implicated Persia and Persian in the colonizer's imperial design, as a means through which to achieve colonial domination.

My discussion centers on a codex I encountered at the Folger Shakespeare Library during a short-term fellowship in 2017. The text, S.b.122, "Copy in the hand of Sir Thomas Munro of *The Mussulman and the Jew*, a Persian MS [manuscript], 1786,"<sup>4</sup> contains three disparate but interrelated documents:

- A transcription of a narrative in the Persian language in the hand of Sir Thomas Munro, a Scottish officer in the army of the East India Company (EIC) who learned Persian and other languages while abroad. The date, author, and cultural origin of the story is unknown. It is also unclear what led to its composition and what regional significance it held. The codex does not include a translation of the transcription.
- A copy of a letter dated 1786 by Munro to Andrew Ross, a Madras merchant, in which Munro announces that he has included a copy of the narrative in his letter and alludes to a common acquaintance who "understands the Original" to whom Ross may forward the narrative. Munro briefly adds that he purchased the "Book from which I copied it . . . from a Moorman at Madura." He also explains that he has sent the narrative without a translation because "it would be thought as if I wish'd to appear as a Persian Scholar, which I am very far from being."
- A copy of a letter from Ross to Eyles Irwin, an Irish poet and writer who was born in Kolkata while

his father was in service with the EIC, also dated 1786. It is possible that Irwin was the acquaintance to whom Munro referred in his letter, but Ross's letter to Irwin does not confirm this conjecture. Ross's letter indicates that he enclosed "a Translate of a Persian MS . . . containing the story of Shakespeares Shylock" from Munro who "has made a proficiency in the Persian Language." Ross explains that he has sent the story "as a curiosity" to Irwin, especially because he believes it "will prove acceptable to the lovers of Sheakespear."

Though Ross's letter presents a discrepancy—he claims to forward a translation of the narrative even though one is not included in the codex—the documents in Folger S.b.122 underscore a flurry of discourse surrounding this narrative as well as the centrality of Persian as an access point not only to Eastern archives, cultures, and narratives but also, potentially, to Shakespeare.

This essay is concerned with the narrative, which I will refer to as "The Mussulman and the Jew," following the Folger. "The Mussulman and the Jew" is set "in a town of Syria," where "a poor Mussulman lived in the neighbourhood of a rich Jew" (Gleig 36). This Muslim character seeks his neighbor's help: he asks for a loan of one hundred dinars that he can use for trade, which he will repay from the profit of his mercantile transactions. The Jewish character, the narrator explains, is in love with the Muslim man's wife and sees the request as an opportunity that might benefit him. He issues a counteroffer, suggesting that the Muslim man repay the original one hundred dinars on loan within six months and stipulating that, "if the term of the agreement be exceeded one day, I shall cut a pound of flesh from thy body, from whatever place I choose" (36). Though unnerved, the Muslim man agrees. When he acquires the funds, he sends one hundred dinars within the requested time frame by way of a messenger. The money never reaches the Jewish man because the messenger keeps the money for his family. When the Muslim man returns from his trade, his neighbor asks for repayment. As a result of the misunderstanding, the two decide to settle the issue in court, launching them on a journey to the city of Emesa, where the

local judge ultimately rules in favor of the Muslim man.

I engage with two translations of this story in this essay. The first is a translation summary of the narrative, written by Munro in an undated letter to an unknown recipient in Glasgow, published in G. R. Gleig's 1849 biography of Munro, *The Life of Sir Thomas Munro*.<sup>5</sup> I classify it as a translation summary because it is a short synopsis in English of one portion of the story, which Munro notes to the Glasgow recipient: "I send you the story of Shylock, which I found in a Persian manuscript, with a literal translation of that part which concerns him" (36).<sup>6</sup> While Munro translates the familiar conditions of Shylock's bond—the pound of flesh as collateral for an unpaid debt—he excludes the misadventures of the Muslim man, who gets entangled in a series of unfortunate events during the journey to the judge. The story attempts a level of humor from plans gone awry and from racializing the Muslim and Jewish figures—the extent to which these features are inherent in the story itself or revised by Munro in his transcription is unclear. The second translation—included as an appendix to this essay—is one written by me in collaboration with my parents, Bahman and Soraya Mehdizadeh, whose facility with written Persian far exceeds my own. Our translation is based on the Folger's Persian-language transcription in Munro's hand and therefore is subject to the limitations of not having knowledge of the original story. Because our access to the story is through Munro's transcription alone, we cannot discern the extent to which it honors the original author's intention.<sup>7</sup> The text includes obscure references and terminology; it is unclear whether these discrepancies derive from Munro's limited knowledge of the language and culture, our unfamiliarity with regional specificities, or the original author's style and literary intention. Finally, we are unable to identify this story as Persian in origin and advise readers to categorize this narrative as a Persian-language story rather than as a Persian one.

Though the documents addressing Munro's facility with Persian provide a varied account of his mastery of the language, they emphasize his long-

held talent in learning languages (Gleig 2, 7). Additionally, these documents reveal his negative orientation toward the language and culture, which influenced his choices as a translator, both in terms of what and how he chose to translate foreign language material. For example, Munro describes his linguistic study in the letter to the Glasgow recipient, explaining, "I have been for some years past amusing, or rather plaguing, myself with the Hindostanee and Persian languages. I began the study of them in the hopes of their becoming one day of use to me" (Gleig 32). Gleig expands on Munro's view of learning local languages:

[H]e had early recognised the soundness of a principle on which the Indian government now happily acts—that to think of governing a people by functionaries who are unable to communicate with them except through the medium of an interpreter, is an absurdity. He therefore applied himself with diligence, from the day of his arrival at Madras, to the study of the native languages, and became, in consequence, one of the few Englishmen who in those days can be said to have made any real progress in them. (31)

Munro's perspective on language learning, as reported by Gleig, speaks to translation as a device for colonial rule, and Munro's own reflection in his letter indicates his interest in learning Persian and other languages for their "use" (32)—that is, for the extent to which the investment in learning languages would yield a return on the investment by keeping imperial fantasies in circulation, such as through occupied land, drained resources, or accrual of wealth. If the colonial enterprise aimed to maintain power through land, resources, and wealth, then having agents with foreign language skills was an asset for trade companies like the EIC. These agents could facilitate the acquisition and maintenance of imperial power by dealing directly with the natives on behalf of and to serve the interests of the company, granting it a position of power in negotiations. Munro's "diligence" in learning languages ensured the redundancy of an intermediary (31), offering assurance to the company and to the crown that their aims would be prioritized.

Munro's service with the EIC came at a time when England and France had successfully secured control of settlements and trading posts in India, and part of his duty was to help Britain maintain its territories against French interests (Marshall 119). This success in imperial expansion through the EIC is in direct contrast with the failures that characterized England's earliest expeditions to Persia under Safavid rule (1501–1722) and delayed its already belated attempts to extend its imperial and mercantile reach. During the early modern period, Spain and Portugal had already established trade routes to the West and East Indies, respectively. To set England apart from their competition, English monarchs—beginning with Mary I—sought to establish a northern passage into Eastern lands through Persia in order to secure an exclusive Anglo-Persian trade agreement. Based on contemporaneous translations of classical and biblical accounts of ancient Persia, agents of the Muscovy Company (chartered in 1555) and then the EIC (chartered in 1601) had expected to find an inert empire whose time had come and gone with the fall of the Achaemenid dynasty (559–331 BCE) at the hands of Alexander the Great.<sup>8</sup> Instead, English emissaries encountered a lively empire ruled by protective Safavid shahs who were unwilling to accept these proposals.<sup>9</sup> The Safavids had spent six decades since the inception of the dynasty reuniting territories ravaged over two centuries of invasions by Mongol and Turkic invaders (Babayan 287). With their own desires for imperial restoration and growth, these Safavid rulers denied English emissaries the exclusive agreement they had been seeking (see Grogan; Mehdizadeh, “Robert Sherley”).

Despite these failures to gain access to Persia, England was able to draw on agents' facility with Persian to find new pathways to the East, where the use of the language was widespread. In many ways, the language became a substitute for Persia, and mastery over the language implied an opportunity to discover new ways of becoming masters of the land. My use of “mastery” in this context is deliberate and follows the work of Julietta Singh, who problematizes the term in *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Singh argues that its

deployment in decolonial projects reanimates colonial violence, as opposed to what she calls “dehumanist solidarity,” a mode of “relational being” that eschews such power differentials (1). She suggests that “mastery” can never be untethered from the violence that it conjures because it is constitutive of colonial domination and enslavement. By employing “mastery” with this argument in mind, I aim to emphasize the inextricability of colonial violence from colonial acts of translation. The violence that such fantasies of “mastery” in linguistic study engender recalls Niranjana's claim: if the colonial subject can come to be understood through the colonial act of translation, the colonizer can inscribe and authorize new meaning to the native (Mehdizadeh, “Cosmography” 67), imposing an inextricable mark on the colonial subject. This “historically constructed” version of the native, then, becomes “fixe[d]” according to the desires of the colonist (Niranjana 3).

England's evolving relationship with Persia and Persian since the early modern period displays this violence, as a region not formally colonized by Western powers but surreptitiously colonized through overwriting and erasure. Munro's facility with Persian and his subsequent attempts at translating Persian for English consumption participated in this process. The intimacy Munro had cultivated with Persian brought the cultures, territories, and people associated with the Persian language into closer proximity to him and to England. His acquired language skills had transformed the once-elusive Persian empire into an entity that could come to be known. Because Munro represented a seemingly definitive perspective on Persian-language cultures and peoples, his orientation toward Persian exposes the ideological maneuvers that reinforce colonial domination through language. He is the subject that acts on and for Persia and Persian as knowable objects: by making Persian legible, he could make Persia accessible to England. This strategy had two significant results: it facilitated the cultivation of a colonizing and racializing rhetoric with which to assign meaning to Persia/Iran and its people, culture, and history from a Western perspective and it utilized this rhetoric as a tool for formal colonization of neighboring Persian-speaking territories.

Munro demonstrates his knowledge of and intimacy with Persia and Persian through his discussion and treatment of “The Mussulman and the Jew” and through his letters. Indeed, his interest in the narrative is centered on his discovery of it, his access to it through language, his assessment of the Persian language through his examination of the text, and its possible associations with Shakespeare, not on the story itself. In engaging with “The Mussulman and the Jew” at this molecular level, in a way that serves his intellectual investments and desires, Munro further objectifies Persia and Persian. He anatomizes the text, not only in his partial translation summary but also in his orientation toward the Persian language and Eastern archival methods, further emphasizing the fantasy of fragmenting and subsuming Persia and Persian according to England’s imperial aims:

Books are very dear in the East, and the barbarous character in which they are written occasions a thousand errors in transcribing; so that the generality of people can afford to buy but few, and these few, from their incorrectness, they read with much difficulty; but then they have this advantage that by the time they finish a book, they have the greatest part of it by heart, and are enabled to dispute more successfully. If they have any correct copies, they are confined to the libraries of princes and great men; but even these cannot be read without hesitation, as there are thousands of words in Persian that are written in the same manner, but have different meanings, and are differently pronounced.

(Gleig 35)

Munro uses “barbarous character” not only to refer to the non-Roman alphabet in which books in the East are written but also, and more importantly, to associate primitivism with Persianness as its essential quality. Central to Munro’s classification is the lack of a firm copytext in Persian-language writing because, in his estimation, a text that exchanges hands physically is reshaped narratively by the people who circulate it, which makes the idea of an original or singular Persia (or Persian) impossible. Munro turns to translation to animate a corrective process in which he seeks to homogenize and

contain a linguistic culture defying uniformity despite its ubiquity (Niranjana 6–11). In doing so, he emphasizes the delineation between self and other (Said 31–35), classifying Eastern modes of knowledge production as deficient and unreliable—an assessment he makes from his assumed position of authority.

Munro’s discussion likewise advances premodern modes of racial formation through his use of “barbarous” to describe Persian-language writing and the peoples and cultures associated with it. Ian Smith identifies the early modern period as the origin of these associations, arguing that humanism, with its roots in the classical works of ancient Greece and Rome, stands in contrast to “debased, incompetent or vulgar speech—barbarism,” which “had an inverse relationship to rhetoric that was elevated as the central canon in the humanist curriculum to emphasize the evolving role of linguistic eloquence in English self-definition” (1). Smith continues by emphasizing an inextricable link between this view of “barbarous” speech and the classification of the people who use this speech as barbarous in nature (5–9).<sup>10</sup> The racialization of peoples and culture through the racialization of rhetoric that Smith’s work illuminates provides a helpful framework to examine Munro’s letters. Munro’s use of “barbarous character” associates Persian—that is, the system of writing and the culture—with primitivism, racially marking the Persian language and its people.

Munro extends his assessment of Persia and Persian to the literature he examines during his time abroad, particularly Persian-language classical poetry. Inspired to visit local archives after hearing high praise of Persian-language writing by his European contemporaries, Munro, in his conclusions about his findings, contested the predominant view of this archive. He shares his disappointment with the Glasgow recipient, stating he was “unlucky enough not to have yet found any of these treasures” and continues by summarizing and ridiculing both the content and style of the poetry and prose accounts he examined (Gleig 32). For example, Munro characterizes poets like Nizami and Saadi as “extravagant,” “absurd,” and “insipid” (33), relaying nothing more than “heaps of proverbs and wise

sayings, to illustrate what every body knows” (34). The lack of sophistication that Munro perceives in Persian-language literature suggests for him an underdeveloped cultural framework rooted in the “barbarous character” that he applies not only to the alphabet but also to the culture of the peoples utilizing it. The only exception he has found in his studies are Persian-language “tales” (36), of which “The Mussulman and the Jew” is one, yet he praises the story only as it potentially relates to Shakespeare. For Munro, these tales are the “best style of writing” within the Persian-language archives of the East (36), a striking claim, when one compares the high status of Persian poetry to the baser form of writing exhibited by “The Mussulman and the Jew.”

To “prove” his stance, Munro turns to Shakespeare and “the story of Shylock” as evidence (36). By the time Munro encountered “The Mussulman and the Jew” while in service with the EIC, Shakespeare had gained an “exemplary status” in England (Ritchie and Sabor 7). He was a beloved and familiar icon who had accrued cultural capital with the recirculation of his art, whether through adaptations of his plays or publications of his writings. Munro’s keen interest in “The Mussulman and the Jew” responds to this status by locating Shakespeare outside England and within Eastern lands, particularly those territories through which England hoped to build an empire. This association aligns with the playwright’s fixation on empire and globalization. His vision of empire, as Noémie Ndiaye argues, mirrored the imperial ambition of England’s monarchs: both he and they perceived the world to be “open to England for colonial plunder, rivalry, and conquest—a world where expansion was driven by trade, lucre, and interests” (158). Munro’s translation summary emphasizes this proto-colonial past: by restricting his translation summary to “a literal translation of that part which concerns [Shylock]” (Gleig 36), Munro creates an “open,” pliable space (Ndiaye 158) for that which remains untranslated—the portion of the story unrelated to Shakespeare. The story’s relationship to the playwright becomes “fixe[d]” (Niranjana 3) and mediated through Englishness while the

remainder of the story can continually come to be understood through colonial acts of translation.

The narrative’s proximity to Shakespeare likewise elevates the story’s value in Munro’s estimation, especially as compared with the classical Persian-language poetry he had criticized and racialized. By classifying “The Mussulman and the Jew” as “the best style of writing” in the Persian language (Gleig 36), Munro elevates his status as someone with the linguistic mastery and, therefore, the authority to make such assessments about Persian-language writing. As a result, the aim he conveys to the Glasgow recipient that Eastern languages may “becom[e] one day of use to me” proves successful (32). Because the Persian language of the story provided an access point into the Eastern archives as well as the Eastern landscape, it becomes something that can be translated according to his (and ultimately English monarchs’) desires. By forging new access points to the East through the Persian language, Munro establishes linguistic contact zones between a Persian-language narrative with his English-speaking readers (Pratt 8), whether they were the “lovers of Sheakespear” that Ross mentioned in his letter to Irwin, employees of the EIC, or members of the monarchy.

Munro’s allocation of value—that is, what counts as good or bad literature—between the two writing traditions participates in a rhetoric of empire rooted in early modern modes of racial formation and othering. This rhetoric was emboldened by Munro’s attempt to extract the portion of the narrative that “contain[s] the story of Shakespeares Shylock” to maintain and preserve the imagined purity of Shakespeare within English-language-serving archives and institutions. Indeed, Munro recovers it from the archives of the East to transplant it into English knowledge-production regimes. His orientation toward these documents while in service with the EIC—an institution that was largely responsible for the earliest colonizing efforts of Eastern realms by European countries (Marshall 128)—points to a rhetorical mirroring of the empire building unfolding at the time of his so-called discovery (Ndiaye 158). Munro’s facility with Persian not only gave him access to Persian-language histories and literature but also

afforded him the opportunity to make Persia and Persian legible to English readers, cultivating a conceptual economy that could affect how Persia and Persian would come to be understood in England in the eighteenth century.

## NOTES

1. On the intersection of translation studies and postcolonial studies, see Bhabha; Cheyfitz; Spivak.

2. The country of Iran was referred to as Persia by non-Iranians until 1935, when Reza Shah Pahlavi issued a formal decree that requested members of the international community to refer to the country by its true name. After the 1979 revolution, people began to associate “Iran” with the Islamic Republic and “Persia” with a past version of the country. These designations continue to evolve and are part of a broader discussion about terminology. When discussing premodern anglophone texts, I use “Persia” to reanimate the term mobilized by English writers in the Renaissance. In this context, it is a term that signifies English fantasies of Persia/Iran based on classical and biblical traditions rather than the people, culture, language, or land of Persia/Iran itself.

3. Persian poetry extended beyond Iran’s borders as early as the medieval period that followed the political and cultural upheaval of the seventh-century Arab invasion, which dispersed people native to Iran to neighboring regions (Hodgson 293; see also Choksy; Daryae 5–6).

4. The metadata is unclear about whether the codex was already bound when it was acquired by the Folger. I am indebted to Erin Brown at the Folger Shakespeare Library for assisting me in procuring additional details about the text’s acquisition during a time when the Folger was closed to the public.

5. According to Gleig, “The date . . . is not given. It was received in Glasgow in October, 1787, and was probably written early in the same year” (38).

6. According to Malone and Boswell’s collected works of Shakespeare, “The Mussulman and the Jew” is listed as a possible source for *The Merchant of Venice* and Munro is credited with its discovery.

7. While I was unable to locate Persian-language source texts of “The Mussulman and the Jew,” Gleig’s biography includes references to a story called the “Cazi of Emessa” or the “Qazi of Emessa” (36). Additionally, a nineteenth-century translation of *The Book of Sindibad* also refers to the story (Clouston 368).

8. See Grogan for more information on Persia and the English imagination.

9. Travels to Persia began in 1561, when the Muscovy Company sent their lead agent, Anthony Jenkinson, to Safavid Persia for the first time. He and other agents continued to try to secure an Anglo-Persian trade agreement for the next twenty years but failed with each attempt. For more information about these early expeditions, see Vaughn.

10. For more information about premodern racial formation and racializing rhetoric, see Hall; Hendricks and Parker; Heng; Grier; Rivett.

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## The Mussulman and the Jew

There once was a Muslim man who lived as a neighbor to a Jewish man in the city of Shaam.<sup>1</sup> One day, he asked the Jewish man for a loan of one hundred dinars, promising him that whatever profit he would make from this investment, he would share as repayment. The Muslim man had a beautiful wife, who the Jewish man had seen and fallen in love with, so he saw this request as an opportunity. He responded by rejecting the Muslim man's offer, saying that he would give him the loan provided that the Muslim man paid him in full within six months, and not even delay the payment by one day. If the Muslim man failed, then the Jewish man could cut a pound of flesh from his body, from any part that he desired. The Jewish man made this deal with the understanding that the Muslim man would not be able to return this payment, which would allow him to be in union with the Muslim man's wife. The Muslim man agreed to the terms and got permission to set off on his journey, and in this business he gained much profit.

The Muslim man, worried that he would fail to meet the terms of the loan on time, immediately sent one hundred dinars to the Jewish man through a trusted person as soon as he had acquired the money. This trusted person, upon receiving the one hundred dinars, remembered that his family

needed money to spend and kept it. Therefore, when the Muslim man returned home, the Jewish man confronted him, saying, "I want repayment of my gold by means of cutting the flesh from your body." The Muslim man replied that he had sent the gold within the allotted timeframe. But the Jewish man explained that he did not receive the payment and that he had even tried to investigate whether it was coming.

The Jewish man decided to take the Muslim man to a Qazi [judge], and the Qazi said to the Muslim man that he had to appease the Jewish man or prepare to pay him the pound of flesh. The Muslim man, unsatisfied with this decision, said they should present the case to a second Qazi. This Qazi ruled with the same decision, and with every Qazi they went to, they received the same decision. However, the Muslim man refused to accept these decisions. He consulted with a wise friend who counseled him, saying, "you should take him [the Jewish man] to the Qazi in Hams because he will work to your favor."<sup>2</sup> The Muslim man relayed this request to the Jewish man and added, "I'll obey whatever his decision is." The Jewish man agreed.

The two set out for Hams, and along the way, they heard the sound of a man yelling for help



because his horse had run away. The Muslim man answered his request by throwing a stone at the horse to stop it, hitting it in the eye and blinding it. The owner of the horse yelled, "You blinded my horse! Now you have to compensate me!" The Jewish man told him that he and the Muslim man were on their way to a Qazi and he should join them to appeal his case. The three of them continued the journey.

At nightfall, they arrived at a village, and found [lodging]<sup>3</sup> where they could sleep; they woke up to a commotion. The Muslim man was startled and jumped from the roof to the ground and, as bad luck would have it, landed on the stomach of a person sleeping there, killing the sleeping man. This man's children seized the Muslim man in an effort to kill him for retribution, but the Jewish man and the man with the horse intervened, saying that they were taking the Muslim man to a Qazi and the children should join the group. One of the children agreed.

Along their journey, the group encountered a pregnant woman carrying a jug of water. As bad luck would have it, the Muslim man slipped, tripping the woman and killing her unborn child. Her husband seized the Muslim man with the intention to kill him, but the rest of the party explained that they were going to the Qazi and he should join them to plead his case.

The party continued on the journey, and they encountered a donkey stuck in the mud, his owner yelling for help. Each person in the party grabbed a corner of the merchandise on the donkey's back, but the Muslim man grabbed the donkey's tail and pulled it off. The owner made a move to attack the Muslim man, but the party intervened, explaining that they had conflict with the Muslim man, too. They explained that they were all going to the Qazi to share their problems and he should join them, which he did.

The group reached Hams, where they encountered a man sitting on a donkey, using his prayer rug as a saddle. He was wearing baggy clothes, and the end of his turban trailed all the way to his feet. His head was bowed forward, and he was vomiting. When the group asked who he was, they were told that he was the imam of the town. They replied, "Oh, be happy; if this is what the imam of the town looks

like, wait until we see the Qazi." They continued walking into town and reached the Qazi's house. There, they saw him on all fours with a child on his back, and the group was embarrassed to see him in this state.

Attached to the Qazi's house was a masjid [mosque], where townspeople were gambling. The group was shocked to see this. In some time, they received news that the Qazi had taken his place and was ready to hear their grievances. When the group stepped forward, he asked, "What is the problem so I can make a judgment?" The Jewish man stepped forward, saying, "Oh wise one, this man borrowed one hundred dinars from me and set one pound of flesh as collateral. Make a judgment so that he pays me back either way." It just so happened that the Qazi was friends with the Muslim man's father, and, owing to this connection, he gave his answer. He said that he agreed with the Jewish man, citing religion as support for his verdict. He called for a sharp knife. When the Muslim man heard this answer, he became speechless. Someone brought a knife, and the Qazi said to the Jewish man, "Arise! Cut flesh from his body so long as you don't remove even a sugar-cube size more or less. If you remove more or less, I will give the order to have you executed." The Jewish man responded, "I can't. I'll let this debt go, and I'll be on my way." The Qazi responded, "You may want to let it go, but it is uncharacteristic for a Jew to let something like this go." The Jewish man assured the judge, saying, "I'll call it even; his debt is cleared." The Qazi said, "No, you can't; either you cut his flesh or you pay the fees for his travels here." The onlookers counseled the Jewish man, telling him to go ahead and give the travel money and be done with this situation. He gave one hundred dinars to the Muslim man.

Next, the man whose horse the Muslim man maimed stated his grievance, saying, "This man blinded my horse." The Qazi responded by asking how much the horse's value was before the incident, to which the man stated, "one thousand dinars." The Qazi ruled that the horse be divided in half with a butcher's knife. The half of the horse with the blind eye should be given to the Muslim man in exchange for five hundred dinars. The man rejected this ruling, saying he did not want to do business in this way. He forgave the Muslim man for the event.

The Qazi exclaimed, "Are you stupid? The blind half is the Muslim man's." The man replied that he no longer had an issue with the Muslim man and that he chose to leave it. The Qazi replied, "This will not do; you have to pay him for his travels." The onlookers counseled him to pay the fine, and he gave one hundred dinars and left.

Next, the children of the man who was killed at the inn told the Qazi about the incident. The Qazi said, "This is a big mistake; was the roof as high as this school<sup>4</sup> I'm in right now?" And they replied it was. The Qazi decided to have the Muslim man lie down on the ground below the school's roof, and the children could jump on him from the roof—as in accordance with religious practice for retribution—to see what happened. They replied, "This is impossible, because whoever jumps from the roof will die themselves. Even if we had one hundred lives, none of those lives will survive. We forgive the Muslim man!" The Qazi said, "This won't do. You can't let go of someone who killed your father. Therefore, you have to pay five hundred dinars." They negotiated the fee to two hundred dinars, and they left.

When it was time for the man whose pregnant wife fell and whose unborn child died, he relayed the story and showed the dead fetus to the Qazi. The Qazi said, "Have the Muslim man put another child back into your wife's stomach, so she can give birth." The man said, "I will never do such a thing! You must be happy with yourself for delivering this judgment!" The Qazi responded by ordering the man to be beaten. After he was slapped around for some time, the man agreed to forgive the death of his unborn child. The Qazi said, "This won't do. You can't overlook the spilling of blood of your own child, so you have to pay one hundred dinars." The man paid it and left.

When it came time for the owner of the donkey to express his grievance, the Qazi responded by calling for someone to bring his own donkey to them and told the man to attempt to pull the donkey's tail off. He obeyed, and the donkey responded by kicking him in the chest, making the man unconscious momentarily. "Ay, Molana [oh, wise one], I forgive the Muslim man." The Qazi responded, "This is not retribution; try to pull it again!" The man said, "Oh,

Qazi, my donkey never had a tail, even as a foal." The Qazi said, "I will not accept a denial after you've confessed." The man asked, "What must I do?" and the Qazi replied, "You have to pay three hundred dinars." The onlookers helped him negotiate the fee to one hundred dinars, which the man paid.

The Qazi took all the money he collected and split it with the Muslim man. He said, "This is for you; go spend it with your family." The Muslim man said he had seen strange things in this town and wanted to ask the Qazi about them.

First, the Muslim man said, "I saw an old man with a long turban, sitting on a donkey and vomiting." The Qazi said, "Yes, the wine house of this town every so often cheats its customers by adding water to the wine and selling it. This man is a wine inspector, and he goes to different wineries, tastes the wine at each place he inspects to discern which wineries are selling undiluted wine, and, as a result, he gets drunk." The Muslim man replied by saying, "Then, this is a good inspector."

Second, the Muslim man said, "I saw people gambling in the masjid!" The Qazi replied, "Yes, this masjid doesn't have a donor, and so I have given permission for people to gamble and generate income for the masjid."

The Muslim man continued: "The strangest thing I saw was a child who was misbehaving toward you." The Qazi said, "No, he was not misbehaving. I am the guardian of the town's orphans, and their inheritances are under my supervision. When they become adults, I give them their inheritance. This boy was arguing, and I had to assess whether his claim was sound, and when I assessed that it was, I gave him his inheritance."<sup>5</sup> The Muslim man responded by blessing the Qazi. He took his money, leaving the place, and after a few days arrived home, happy and fulfilled.

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## TRANSLATORS' NOTES

This translation is based on the transcription by Thomas Munro. I am indebted to my parents, Bahman and Soraya Mehdizadeh, whose Persian-language skills far exceed my own.

This text is a collaboratively written translation by the three of us.

1. A city in Syria.
2. Emesa is the pre-Islamic name for Hama, which is the term used in the Persian transcript in Munro's hand.

3. The term is obscure in Persian.
4. A better translation might be "masjid," but it is unclear from the text.
5. The narrative point about the boy misbehaving is obscure.