

The Maritime Adventures of *The Count of Monte Cristo* as a Modern Arab Epic The Translation of Bishāra Shadīd (1871) and its Reception

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Abstract

This article analyses the 1871 translation of *The Count of Monte Cristo* printed by the Egyptian private press Wādī al-Nīl and undertaken by the translator Bishāra Shadīd. Unlike the previous Arabic translation of the novel (Beirut 1866), which aimed to recreate the original novel in its full length, structure and even word order, Bishāra Shadīd radically reshaped Dumas' novel into an abridged version that wears the clothes of an Arabic *maqāma*, which is a text in rhyming prose. This article argues that the success of the 1871 Arabic translation by Bishāra Shadīd was due to several factors: the specific rhymed prose form that echoed the oral narratives of Arabic epics; the adventurous character of the story; and the values of revenge and long-awaited justice that underlay it. These values appealed to readers across the Eastern Mediterranean and were embodied in the phantasmagoric protagonist of Dumas' novel, Edmond Dantès, and in Napoleon, the overarching political hero in Dumas' works. Through an analysis of the translation strategies adopted by Bishāra Shadīd, the article also suggests that the work can be regarded as an example of 'popular literature' (*letteratura popolare*) as defined by Antonio Gramsci. It is, above all, a translation that conveys the political and social aspirations of a social class through a process of "domestication", through which a nineteenth-century European novel finalized for individual reading became a rhymed prose text, possibly used for collective reading and listening.

Key words: literary translations – Alexandre Dumas père – modern *maqāma* – Saj' – Mediterranean translations – Nahḍa translations

Introduction

The first Arabic translation of Alexandre Dumas père's *Le comte de Monte-Cristo* (first serialized in French between 1844 and 1846 in the *Journal des débats*) was made by Salīm Ṣa'b and first appeared in 1866 in the magazine *al-Shirāka al-shahriyya fī Bayrūt* with the title *Amīr jazīrat Mūntū Krīstū - The Prince of the Island of Monte Cristo* (MOOSA 1970: 216; ID. 1997: 97; DE TARRAZI 1913 I: 68). It is a literal, almost verbatim, translation, which was made under the supervision of the editor and owner of the magazine, Yūsuf al-Shalfūn.¹

¹ On the figure of Yūsuf al-Shalfūn and his role in supervising the translation see HOLT 2017: 40-63, and JOHNSON 2020: 108-11 and 126-31.

Despite the success of Dumas' novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* across the world, this first Arabic translation was not a profitable enterprise: the length of the text obliged the editor to abandon the work, and eventually the magazine *al-Shirāka al-shahriyya* closed (JOHNSON 2020: 127). Yet, the editor of the magazine, Yūsuf al-Shalfūn, was convinced about the potential fortune of the novel in Arabic and soon he commissioned a continuation of this translation. His newly established magazine, the Beirut bi-weekly *al-Najāh* that he launched with Luwīs Šābūnjī, was the venue for this follow-up translation project. The translation was completed in 1873 with a new title, *Amīr Mūntī Krīstū – The Prince of Monte Cristo*, and signed by a new translator, Naṣrallāh Misk (JOHNSON 2020: 127-134).²

During the same period, in 1871 to be precise, another translation of the same novel appeared in Cairo with a slightly different title: *Qiṣṣat al-kūnt dū Mūntū Krīstū (The Tale of the Count of Monte Cristo)*. The translation was printed by an Egyptian private printing press called Wādī al-Nīl (The Nile Valley) and was signed by a different translator, Bishāra Shadīd. This Cairo version of *The Count of Monte Cristo* is particularly fascinating for a number of reasons related to its textual form and its circulation. First, it is an abridged and radically transformed version of the French original that wears the clothes of a *maqāma*, that is, a text written in Arabic rhyming prose (*saq'*). Unlike the Beirut version by Naṣrallāh Misk and supervised by Yūsuf al-Shalfūn, which aimed to recreate the original novel in its length, structure and even word order, the Cairo translation by Bishāra Shadīd reshaped the original French *Le comte de Monte-Cristo* into a different literary product altogether, and thus speaks to questions of translatability and of textual transformation. Third, in contrast to the Beirut translation, which apparently had a very limited circulation, Bishāra Shadīd's version circulated outside Egypt across other Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. It was, in fact, the model for another version of the same novel, the *Qiṣṣat al-Kūnt dī Mūntū Krīstū – The Story of the Count of Monte Cristo* translated by Nakhla Qalfāt and published in Beirut in 1883. The specific rhymed prose form of Bishāra Shadīd's translation, its publishing house, and its possible public, will be the object of the present study.

This article participates in the current scholarship that considers translations produced in Arabic during the long nineteenth century as texts that should be analyzed in their own right, rather than expressions of an immature literary stage that prepared the ground for the future rise of the novel.³ Similar to what was happening in other 'peripheries' of the world,⁴ translations produced during the Nahḍa/Arab Renaissance deserve to be seen as original productions rather than in contrast with previous models or as incubators for future literary developments. Translations relied on material factors, such as the establishment of private and semi-private printing presses or the network of translations in other languages, and resulted in original and fascinating works that bear the sign of both global literary movements but also very local practices and literary tastes.⁵

2 Luwīs Šābūnjī was probably also involved in the translation with Naṣrallāh Misk. See JOHNSON 2020: 243 n.21.

3 Recent scholarship on the topic includes SELIM 2019, JOHNSON 2020, HILL 2018 and 2020, BOOTH 2019.

4 I here use the concept of 'literary peripheries' as opposed to the 'centers' as it is developed by Franco Moretti in his *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (MORETTI 1998) and Pascale Casanova in *La République mondiale des lettres* (CASANOVA 1999).

5 On the networks of translations across the Ottoman Empire, see STRAUSS 2002 and 2003.

The Arab fascination with Dumas has the distinctive features of a local and global phenomenon or, better to say, a local phenomenon that should be read in relation to a global trend. Dumas' work was read and appreciated across different regions of the world because of the theme of revenge against injustice, the call for social redemption, and the political reference to republican ideals in a time of rising national and patriotic feelings. These characteristics make Dumas' characters, and particularly Edmond Dantès, the hero of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the embodiment of the social and political values of the Arab Nahḍa and, more generally, of the global nineteenth-century revolutionary spirit.

Through an analysis of the 1871 translation, this article argues that the success of the Arabic translation of *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Bishāra Shadīd was due to a combination of several factors: the specific rhymed prose form that echoed the oral narratives of Arabic epics; the adventurous character of the story; and, finally, the values of revenge and long-awaited justice that underlay it. These values appealed to readers across the Eastern Mediterranean and were embodied in the phantasmagoric protagonist of Dumas' novel, Edmond Dantès, and in Napoleon, the overarching political hero in Dumas' works (KHURI-MAKDISI 2013: 30).

The article also suggests that the Arabic translation by Bishāra Shadīd can be regarded as an example of 'popular literature' (*letteratura popolare*) as defined by Antonio Gramsci in his *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (GRAMSCI 1996: 181-248). It is, above all, a translation that conveyed the political and social aspirations of a social class through a process of "domestication".⁶ A "domestication" that, interestingly enough, seems to have also transformed a text in prose, originally intended for individual reading, into a rhymed form that was possibly used for collective reading and listening.

The press and the historical context

The translation of *The Count of Monte Cristo* analyzed in this article was published by Wādī al-Nīl printing press (Maṭba'at Wādī al-Nīl) in 1872. A short overview of the history of the press might help to contextualize the translation and to identify the book's possible readership.⁷ The pioneering bi-weekly newspaper *Wādī al-Nīl* and its related press, Maṭba'at Wādī al-Nīl, started in 1867. According to some scholars, Wādī al-Nīl was subsidized by the Khedive Ismā'īl (1863-1879) as a semi-private journal in support of the government, while according to others it was the "first independent Arabic newspaper" (SADGOVE 1983: 73; MESTYAN 2017: 133; COLE 1992: 127; BARAK 2013: 117). The founder of the press, 'Abdallāh Abū l-Su'ūd, was trained as translator in the translation office founded by the Shaykh Rifā'a l-Taḥṭāwī in the 1820s (al-SHAYYĀL 1951: 27).⁸ When he founded Wādī al-Nīl, he used the press of his son Muḥammad Unsī, who previously owned another press with

6 On the concept of "domestication", see VENUTI 1995.

7 An overview on the activity of Wādī al-Nīl printing press can be found in MESTYAN 2017: 132-145. See also SADGOVE 1983: 71-73.

8 Al-Shayyāl also notes that Abū l-Su'ūd helped Rifā'a al-Taḥṭāwī in his translations of works of ancient history and philosophy, such as the famous *Bidāyat al-quḍamā' wa-hidāyat al-ḥukamā'* (Cairo 1838). See al-SHAYYĀL 1951: 148.

Latin and Arabic types in Cairo as well as a lithographic press for popular mystical and theological texts (MESTYAN 2017: 133). ‘Abdallāh Abū l-Su‘ūd and Muḥammad Unṣī were both the editors of the journal and the directors of the press (MESTYAN 2017: 132 ff). As is often the case for Arabic periodicals of the time, the publishing of books was an activity attached to the newspaper and it issued books across various genres.⁹

The single volume books published by Wādī al-Nīl had often been previously serialized in the journal, which was the case also with *The Count of Monte Cristo*. According to the journal’s first issue, its literary content was to cover “useful scientific material and literary anecdotes (*nukāt*), meaning by that everything which is clearly of general benefit, with no bad consequences, in prose or verse (*manthūr wa-manzūm*) in all the arts, literature (*ādāb*) or sciences, taken directly from their sources or coming to us faithfully related by the authorities, from the established scholars among the ‘*ulamā*’, from the admirable poets and men of knowledge educated in profound eulogies (*madāyih*), the right requirements, seances (*maqāmāt*) and other parts and excerpts written about useful materials and successive aims and the like” (*Wādī al-Nīl* 1: 1867).¹⁰

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Wādī al-Nīl belonged to the constellation of the private presses (*maṭba‘a ahliyya*, pl. *maṭābi‘ ahliyya*) that started to flourish during the reign of the Khedive Ismā‘īl (1863-1879), when the production of written knowledge underwent a radical change. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, two sharply distinguished realms of textual production existed: the Būlāq press (the government press, also known as al-Maṭba‘a al-amīriyya) produced only texts devoted to administration and civic education, whereas the devotional, religious and legal sphere remained in the hands of the ‘*ulamā*’. However, by the second half of the nineteenth century, these two domains started gradually to merge with the rise of the private presses that first emerged as branches of Būlāq Press.¹¹ One can also note a sudden and nearly simultaneous growth of a literature of entertainment for an emerging middle class that was interested in translations of European fiction, as well as in the ‘rediscovery’ of medieval *adab* literature.

As the case of Wādī al-Nīl press indicates, the introduction of the private presses and the diffusion of translations of European fiction did not bring a complete change in literary tastes, nor a rupture with the tradition of reading and producing books. What private presses undoubtedly marked was the transition from the notion of *adab* to that of *belles-lettres*, a transition that characterized the culture of the time.¹² The publications issued by Wādī al-Nīl witness indeed the presence of a newly emerging public eager to ‘devour’ both classical Arab literature and European literature, in this last case a type of European literature compatible with the Nahḍa ethos of the time.¹³

The volumes published by Wādī al-Nīl press, often released in multivolume editions, are a mix of works on Quranic exegesis, calendars, opera librettos translated into Arabic,

9 According to Ami Ayalon, Wādī al-Nīl published 79 books from 1867 to 1883. See AYALON 2016: 50.

10 I could not access the original. The translation is provided in SADGOVE 1983: 74-75.

11 A good overview on this phenomenon can be found in DAYEH 2019 and SCHWARTZ 2017.

12 On the topic, see TAGELDIN 2012 and ALLAN 2016.

13 For a good overview on the change in literary tastes and the negotiation of changing values and notions of literature, see HOLT 2009.

medieval Arabic literature and translations of European literature. The list of titles expresses this fascinating plurality, as it includes among others: the publication of the twelfth-century author ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baġhdādī’s *Kitāb al-īfāda wa-l-ītibār* (published in 1870); a translation of two lectures by the Egyptologist Heinrich Brugsch (published in 1870), the Arabic translation of Auguste Mariette’s guide to the Egyptian Museum (published in 1869), two volumes containing Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s *Rihla* (published between 1870 and 1871), and the fourteenth-century commentary of al-Taftazānī on al-Zamakhsharī (published in 1870). Between 1871 and 1872, along with the translation of Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Wādī al-Nīl press also published the translations of the librettos of *Les Huguenots* by Eugène Scribe and Emile Deschamps and of the *Aida* by Antonio Ghislanzoni.¹⁴ As Adam Mestyan points out, the publishing activity of Wādī al-Nīl “created a form of Modern Muslim memory through printing and serializing selected medieval Arabic works and modern works” (MESTYAN 2017: 132). Some of the translations, like the opera librettos, were done by the founder of the press Abū al-Su‘ūd, whereas other translations, like Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo*, were signed by less well-known translators, like Bishāra Shadīd. It might be also worthwhile to note the variety of the commissioners of these translations: in the case of the opera librettos, for instance, the translations were explicitly done under the request of the Khedive Ismā‘īl, whereas the translation of *The Count of Monte Cristo* was published at the expense of the translator, as specified in the colophon of the book (Shadīd 1871: 232).

The date 1871, when the translation of *The Count of Monte Cristo* was released as a volume, marks a momentous period in the history of Egypt. It was just two years after the opening of the Suez Canal, and the proliferation of private presses, such as Wādī al-Nīl, reflected the burgeoning intellectual atmosphere of urban centers like Cairo and Alexandria. In this period, the cities of Cairo and Alexandria saw the growing establishment of private entrepreneurs, sometimes attached to the Egyptian government or to French or British investors, sometimes independent, profiting from the money circulating through shipping investments and naval businesses. Broadly speaking, the beginning of the 1870s was a moment during which Egypt was integrated within a global network of communications (especially with the establishment of the telegraph) and commerce. It was a time of intense internal reconfigurations of the society and of the state, during which the space of foreign interference and dominance, which culminated in the British Occupation of Egypt in 1882, magnified the changes in the society (KHURI-MAKDISI 2013: 3).¹⁵

The concurrent opening of the Suez Canal and the new Cairo Opera House in 1869 was representative of this moment. The former was financed by a French consortium and constructed over a period of ten years. Its inauguration, a ceremony to which the Egyptian Khedive Ismā‘īl invited the Ottoman sultan and European royalty, was one of the most grandiose events of the century. In the same year, a new opera house was opened in Cairo, where the first opera played would have been Verdi’s Egyptian-themed opera, *Aida*.¹⁶

14 For a list of titles, see Table 13 in MESTYAN 2017: 134-40.

15 On the wave of globalization starting from 1870 see, among others, BAYLY 2004, HOPKINS 2022, OWEN 1993.

16 The completion of the *Aida* was delayed, and *Rigoletto* was performed instead. *Aida* had its premiere in Cairo two years later.

The fact that the Arabic translation of the *Aida* and of *The Count of Monte Cristo* were published by the same press and in the same year is emblematic. Readers were exposed to two versions of the same celebration of the values of the ‘Renaissance’ / Nahḍa / Risorgimento: a love story set in ancient Egypt that celebrated the patriotic feeling of both Egypt and Italy and the story of Edmond Dantès, an avenging hero for justice crossing the Mediterranean at the acme of its intense commercial activity. It might have been just a coincidence but the translation of a maritime and adventurous novel such as *The Count of Monte Cristo* epitomizes the symbolic value that Egypt acquired during that period, a country open to commerce with the other port cities of the Ottoman Empire and, in the meantime, with its gaze directed toward Europe, an amphibian creature like Edmond Dantès, the Count of Monte Cristo, belonging to the Eastern Mediterranean and to Europe.

The translator and the translation

The quite copious amount of information that is possible to gather about the publisher Wādī al-Nīl counterbalances the lack of data about the translator, Bishāra Shadīd. Bishāra Shadīd Taqawwāī is a rather obscure figure indeed. We do not have many clues about his life, apart from those he gives in his introductory remarks and in the conclusion of his work. The name and his title (*khawāja*) suggest that he could have been a Christian with origins in Greater Syria, and the fact that his name is mentioned among the founding members of the Syrian Scientific Society in 1859 strengthens this hypothesis (JOHNSON 2020: 243 n. 22). In the conclusion of his translation he mentions the city where he was living when he completed his work in 1869, Alexandria (written with the curious graphic of Skanripeh), but he does not give other personal information (SHADĪD 1871: 231).

The lack of information about Bishāra Shadīd’s identity, however, is compensated by the abundance of interesting clues he gives, in the preface of the work and in its conclusion, about his role as a translator and his technique of rendering this famous literary work. In the conclusion, for instance, he describes himself as the translator (*mutarjim*), revisor (*mu-naqqih*), and refiner (*muhadhdhib*) of the work. A few lines after, he defines his work as a translation (*tarjama*), Arabization (*ta’rīb*), revision (*tanqīh*), correction (*tahdhīb*), exposition (*tafṣīl*) and ordering (*tartīb*) (SHADĪD 1871: 231). These multiple definitions of the acts that comprise a translation hint to the changes that took place by the second half of the nineteenth century. Translations made until a few decades before, for instance those works produced within the Translation Office founded by the famous shaykh Rifā‘a al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, were collective works, realized by multiple persons. They often involved a chain of labor that consisted of a first translator/interpreter (*mutarjim*) who produced a draft of the text, a corrector (*muṣaḥḥih*), and a revisor (*muḥaqqiq*) (HEYWORTH-DUNNE 1940: 341).¹⁷ Bishāra Shadīd undertook all these tasks himself: by the end of the nineteenth century, the translator was becoming the new author of the work and the translation was now a single, entirely individual, production from beginning to end.

¹⁷ On the editorial practices during the rise of the private presses in Egypt, see DAYEH 2019.

Some of the expressions that Bishāra Shadīd uses in describing his translation also indicate the complete responsibility he took for his own work. For instance, the insistence on the novelty of the work and the fear of possible mistakes and of the criticism of the readers, despite being rhetorical features present in many translations of the time, can be interpreted as expressions of a certain level of insecurity in his task, justified by the length and the difficulty of the work. For instance, he seeks protection from the critics because their gaze is insightful (*al-nāqid baṣīr*) (SHADĪD 1871: 231). He is conscious of the fact that “the work is not free of faults” (SHADĪD 1871: 231), but he also describes the accomplishment of his work with a tone of self-gratification:

Not all translators succeed * not all those who Arabize are able to unveil the [intended] meaning (*murād*) * I looked after the Arabization * I took the most difficult road to get to the structure (*tarkīb*) * I avoided to penetrate too deeply into linguistic expressions * I just mentioned the well-known expressions even if colloquial (*‘āmmiyya*) * in order to meet both the learned (*al-‘ālim*) and the ignorant (*al-jāhil*) * the favourite and the virtuous * although I am the first to translate this book * and to remove the husk from the kernel * until I reached—thanks to God—the accomplishment of the intention * from the beginning to the end * in a way which sounds better than the *Rannāt al-mathālith wa-l-mathānī*.¹⁸ (SHADĪD 1871: 231)

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The translator’s insistence on the linguistic effort in the Arabization and his choice to reach a level of language capable of meeting the expectations of different segments of population (the learned and the ignorant), combined with the choice of the rhymed prose, that will be further discussed in this article, point to the fact that the book was meant to reach a large emerging reading public, capable of enjoying the story in this familiar Arabized form. The rhymed prose form of the novel evokes the works of *adab*, as the author suggests with the parallel with the *Rannāt al-mathālith*, and more probably also works of popular literature such as the maritime adventures of Sindbad the Sailor, a story contained in the *Arabian Nights* that mirrors the maritime adventures of Edmond Dantès.¹⁹

The book opens with a frontispiece and ends with the characteristic colophon. The *mise-en-page* vaguely resembles that of a manuscript, a detail that gives a clear indication of the process of familiarization of the text to a readership that was experiencing a transitional phase from manuscript to printed formats. The frontispiece gives some general information about the identity of the translator: “This is the story (*qiṣṣa*) of the Count of Monte Cristo (*al-kūnt dūmuntūkrīstū*) translated from the French to the Arabic language by the sagacious, eminent, brilliant, Khawāja Bishāra Shadīd Taqawwa‘ī.” This information is followed by generic prayers. The frontispiece also gives the date of publication of the work according to the Hijri calendar, 1287 (1870). On the following page, the translator, writing in the first person,

18 The *Rannāt al-mathālith wa-l-mathānī* is the title of an anthology made from the *Dīwān* of the fourteenth-century poet Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī. I am deeply grateful to Hilary Kilpatrick for her valuable help in find out the text al-Shadīd was referring to.

19 On the parallels between *One Thousand and One Nights* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, see ALLEN 2000 and al-MUSAWI 1981. On the importance of the model of *One Thousand and One Nights* for the development of Modern Arabic narrative, see HOLT 2009.

addresses the benevolence of the readers. After requesting a blessing, he thanks God “who gave the knowledge of the secrets of speech, in regard to the difference of languages between Arabs and foreigners (*‘ajam*)” (SHADĪD 1871: 2). Then he starts his description and praise of the book in rhymed prose:

This is a literary story (*qiṣṣā adabiyya*) * an Arabic narrative (*riwāya ‘arabiyya*) * for the literati (*udabā’*) the most wonderful and pleasant of stories * delightful and exciting * that contain no extravagancies (*al-kalām al-hadhayān*) * nothing adverse to religion * that includes all civility and good manners (*tamaddun wa-ādāb*) * devoid of any deviation and shameful content * when I looked into its accuracy and finesse of style * and its content of wonders and marvels * I regretted its absence in the Arab libraries * and the fact that it is never mentioned among our literary books * so I desired to ask the permission of its distinguished author * the famous Monsieur Alexandre Dumas * to give an abridged translation from French * and pour it in the mold (*qālab*) of Arabic language * so I undertook this work with the help of God * dividing it into twelve chapters * elucidating the translation (*ta’rīb*) through simple expressions (*‘ibārāt ‘ādiyya*) * so it will be easy to understand for the majority of people. (SHADĪD 1871: 2)

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This short introduction is interesting in several respects. First, the author-translator demonstrates his awareness of the meaning of transferring a text from one language into another, an awareness that Bishāra Shadīd expresses through the beautiful image of pouring the French language into the mold (*qālab*) of the Arabic language. As Rebecca Johnson has noticed, this familiar, though not too frequent expression, which figures both in Bishāra Shadīd’s translation of 1871 and in the Beirut version by Nakhla Qalfāt of 1883, indicates that the translators were conscious of their “role as shaping the text into a preexisting form, according to rules established outside their own tastes and inclinations” (JOHNSON 2020: 135). If the first Arabic translation supervised by Yusūf al-Shalfūn tried to render the French version word by word, creating the illusion of equivalence and total translatability between the two languages, Bishāra Shadīd expresses his awareness of the impossibility of equivalence between two different language systems such as French and Arabic.²⁰ The translator is conscious that he has produced a completely new and different literary work through a process that required a rethinking of the linguistic choices. Bishāra Shadīd’s insistence on his adoption of simple expression (*‘ibārāt ‘ādiyya*) and on the clarity of language underlines this process.

Bishāra Shadīd presents his work as new, emphasizing the fact that this novel (interestingly defined as a *qiṣṣa* and immediately afterwards as a *riwāya*) does not figure in any of the Arabic libraries yet.²¹ This statement proves that the version promoted by al-Shalfūn did not circulate much, at least not outside the Beirut circles attached to the journals *al-Shirāka al-shahriyya* and *al-Najāh*. Bishāra Shadīd goes as far as to write that he asked permission from Dumas himself, a note that implies his consciousness of creating a product

²⁰ On this topic, see also TAGELDIN 2011.

²¹ On the history of the concept of *riwāya*, see GUTH 2011.

that is at the same time new but also constrained by the limiting presence of an original author and an original text. The translator seems also particularly concerned that the story fit the refined literary standards of *adab* (*qiṣṣa adabiyya*) and the canons of civility and culture (*tamaddun wa-ādāb*), and that it does not offend the morality of Arab readers. Despite the fact that such rhetorical tropes were present in almost all translations of the time, the reference to the canon of *adab* demonstrates Bishāra Shadīd's awareness of the demands of the Arab public and his determination to offer a product that accommodates to the tastes and the morality of the recipient society.

The choice of rhymed prose

An element that indicates even more clearly the translator's decision to "domesticize" the French novel as an Arab(ic) literary product is his formal choice of rhymed prose. The entire novel is translated in rhyming prose, interspersed (rarely) with verses authored by the translator himself or taken from classical literature. The scattered verses appear mostly to articulate the emotional state of the characters. The quasi-poetic form of rhyming prose was familiar to Arab readers of the time accustomed to the genre of the *maqāma* and, more generally, to the literary form of *ṣajʿ*, or rhymed prose.²²

Early nineteenth-century translations and works of popular literature, such as the first printings of *One Thousand and One Nights*, for instance, were in rhymed prose. However, a widespread modern Orientalist prejudice against *ṣajʿ* saw these literary products as amphibian forms that did not fit into the 'safe' Western dichotomic categories of poetry vs. prose. Despite the popularity of this literary form, nineteenth-century texts in *ṣajʿ* had often been dismissed as anachronistic attempts prior to the rise of the Arabic novel, and a long tradition of critics, starting from Jurjī Zaydān in his *History of Arabic Literature* (1914) or Sulaymān al-Bustānī in his *Introduction to the Iliad* (1904), relegated them to the category of late manifestations of a dying pre-modern literary tradition.²³

Bishāra Shadīd's choice of rhymed prose testifies to the important continuity and vitality of the *maqāma* in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Arabic literary tradition. This continuity has been emphasized by several scholars in the last decades. Peter Gran, in his famous work on the history of eighteenth-century Egypt, identified a resurgent interest in the study of al-Ḥarīrī and of the *maqāma* as a genre (GRAN 1979: 57-63), an interest that continued with the *maqāmāt* of Christian writers such as Niqūlā al-Turk (d. 1828) and Ḥannāniyā al-Munayyar (d. 1850) and, later on, in more famous texts such as Fāris al-Shidyāq's *Al-sāq ʿalā al-saq* (first published in 1855) or Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī's *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām*.²⁴ More recently, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila has listed over a hundred *maqāma* texts for the post-

22 The two originators of the genre of the *maqāma*, Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī, date back to the late tenth and eleventh centuries, respectively. Apart from them and except for a handful of other studied and translated *maqāmāt*, this genre had been largely neglected in the field of Arabic literature. Most recently, some scholars have devoted their attention to the large continuity of the *maqāma* form into the post-classical period. See HÄMEEN-ANTTILA 2002: 365-411.

23 On nineteenth-century *maqāma*, see MOOSA 1997: 121-55.

24 MOOSA 1997: 123.

classical period, a list that had been lately expanded by Max Shmookler for the period that goes from 1750 to present (HÄMEEN-ANTTILA 2002: 365-411 and SHMOOKLER 2020: 331-45).

Also, the relatively simple language in which this rhymed prose is written reminds us not only of the diffusion of this form across the nineteenth century, but also of the different forms that *sajʿ* assumed in different texts. As Peter Hill notes, “a whole series of adjectives (florid, ornament, rhetorical, etc.) is stacked up against the *maqāma*, along with a presumption that using *sajʿ* always means prioritising form over content” (HILL 2012:19). But the reality of the textual corpus reveals that what is defined as a *maqāma* or a rhymed prose text can take different degrees of complexity. In this regard, rather than simply dividing texts into *maqāma* and free unrhymed prose, one should ask which kind of prose or *sajʿ* prose an author is using (HILL 2012: 19). Bishāra Shadīd clearly preferred a simple rhymed prose that avoids baroque or complex grammatical constructions in favour of the aural effect, in line with his aim to address “the learned and the ignorant” (SHADĪD 1871: 231).

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The choice of a simplified rhymed prose suggests an audience that was not necessarily learned in classical Arabic grammar and that probably enjoyed reading but also listening to the adventurous story of *The Count of Monte Cristo* in its Arabic rhymed prose form. In the light of this, it is not difficult to imagine that the repertoire of a *ḥakawātī* (professional storyteller) in a coffee shop in Cairo or Alexandria would include also the story of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, along with other translations and epics such as the *Romance of Alexander*, the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, the *Arabian Nights* and many other adventurous popular narratives recited to listeners in rhymed prose.²⁵

Napoleon, the Mediterranean and the Orient in the Arabic Monte Cristo

After the preface, the novel opens with the first chapter, entitled *On the beginning of the account of a life that is famous for its virtues (Fī mabādī al-sīra allatī hiya bi-l-maḥāsin shahīra)* (SHADĪD 1871: 3). The translation begins with a specific location in time and space: we are in the year 1815 and on the island of Elba. Bishāra Shadīd introduces the use of the Christian calendar for narrating the events of the novel (whereas in the frontispiece he was using the Hijri calendar) and, more importantly, he radically changes the incipit of the original story. The original version of *The Count of Monte Cristo* famously opens with the arrival of the ship Faraon at the port of Marseille and the introduction of the novel’s young hero, Edmond Dantès, second captain of the ship. There is no direct mention of any political event, and Dumas evokes the spacious and bustling atmosphere of a Mediterranean mercantile port city. Shadīd’s translation, instead, opens with the figure of the exiled Napoleon on Elba Island and with the claustrophobic description of the small island, surrounded by ships that control every movement of the exiled emperor. This dramatic setting is combined with praise of Napoleon, described as “the valiant hero * who has might and magnanimity * kindness and goodness”, whose return “the people of France were awaiting *

²⁵ European reports on nineteenth-century oral story telling in coffee houses are numerous, cf., e.g., those of Edward W. LANE (1801–1876) or Johann Gottfried WETZSTEIN (1815–1905). See HERZOG 2012.

being sad for the separation * with their hearts full of affection and compassion * suffering his absence and full of love toward him” (SHADĪD 1871: 3).

In order to understand this depiction of Napoleon as a hero of the people, the object of their unconditional love, we have to imagine the symbolic value that the French emperor embodied during the long nineteenth century. By the time Bishāra Shadīd was writing his translation, for instance, the heroic representation of Napoleon already had been an established tradition in certain circles of Arab Ottoman society. A biography of Napoleon in Ottoman Turkish, the *Tārīkh-i Nābulyūn Būnābarth*, based upon his memoir of exile on the island of Saint Helena, figured among the first works produced by the translation school around Muḥammad ‘Alī.²⁶ Much closer in time to Bishāra Shadīd’s version of *Monte Cristo*, Louis Calligaris’ biography of Napoleon, translated into Arabic, described Napoleon as “the greatest democrat in Europe” and the only ruler who was able “to dismantle all the hatred privileges of the nobles and open the way to those who deserve [the power]” (CALLIGARIS 1865: 225).²⁷

After the praise to Napoleon, Bishāra Shadīd builds his version of the story, emphasizing the imprisonment of the French emperor and introducing the readers to the vicissitudes that brought Edmond to Elba Island:

The family of the Bourbons * the family of origin of the kings of France * put him [Napoleon] on that island * with around 700 men and famous heroes * deprived of any help * and they put cruel guards to watch them * but there were ships of the aforementioned people [the French] * who were sailing around encircling the island * and visited the prisoner * not caring about the guards * and this was coming from a strong love * a strong affection * and there was among these ships a big one * called Fir’awn coming from Izmir * and Trieste and Naples * which was the property of a certain Mūrīl [Morrel] from Marseille * and the first captain was called Dunkerk [Lecrère] * and the second captain was called Idmūn Dāntīs [Edmond Dantès] * and he was a kind and young man * with an uncommonly good character * lovely and gentle * he was around twenty-nine years old. (SHADĪD 1871: 3)

The immediate importance given to the character of Napoleon can be detected by the fact that the protagonist, Edmond Dantès, is introduced to the reader under the magnetic shadow of the French emperor. Napoleon is represented as an irresistible force that attracts people toward the island where he is confined. The important role that the figure of Napoleon plays in the translation is repeatedly stated in other passages of the text, where the characters express their affiliation to the Napoleonic party (*ḥizb Būnāpartī*) in a very direct way, especially when compared with the more nuanced political references in the original novel. In Dumas’ novel, Dantès does not show direct Napoleonic sympathies, and the good image of the Napoleonic party is built mainly via the contrast with the very negative image of those characters who support the Bourbon Restoration. However, in the version of Bishāra Shadīd,

26 *Tārīkh-i Nābulyūn Būnābarth*, Extrait du Mémorial de Saint-Hélène. Translated by ḤASAN Effendī, Būlāq 1832. See al-SHAYYĀL 1951, Appendix 1: 2.

27 See also JOHNSON 2020: 136 and ABU-‘UKSA 2019: 249-270.

the Napoleonic political sympathies are immediately and frankly expressed by the major characters who support and help Edmond Dantès, and also by Edmond himself. For instance, the first captain of the ship *Dunker* [Leclère] and the ship's owner Mūrīl [Morrel] are both defined by their political affiliation already on the very first pages of the novel (SHADĪD 1871: 2). In chapter seven of the translation, devoted to the clandestine encounter between Edmond and the Abbé Faria (*al-khūrī Fāriyā*), Edmond introduces himself by saying "I belong to the party of Napoleon * I helped his return from the Elba Island" (SHADĪD 1871: 32). In Dumas' novel, on the contrary, Abbé Faria clearly states his political stances in favor of the Italian unity, quoting Napoleon and Machiavelli, whereas Dantès declares to be quite unaware of the political events of his time.

The translation continues with captain Leclère's confession to Edmond about the important letter written by the hand of Napoleon that he was tasked with bringing to France, a task to which he now entrusts Edmond (SHADĪD 1871: 4). With a long direct discourse, Leclère addresses Edmond, manifesting his love and trust toward him; then he entrusts him with the ring that will allow him to be recognized by the Mārīshāl Murād [Bertrand], a sign that gives him access to the island of Elba where he has the chance to meet Napoleon in person (SHADĪD 1871: 3-4).²⁸

It is interesting to note that all these events related to the exile of Bonaparte on Elba Island and Edmond's contact with Napoleon are mentioned only in chapter seven of the original novel, after the reader has been introduced to the life of Edmond in France, his family, his beloved woman and the plot orchestrated against him. The characteristic style of Dumas creates a constant sense of suspense by weaving together the plot in different time levels and revealing the background of the events only after they have happened. The Arabic translation, in contrast, is a rather linear summary of the events, and the translator attracts his reading public's attention by emphasizing the specific episodes, like the description of Napoleon's exile, for instance, rather than enticing them through suspense and expectation.

The translation is divided in two parts. The first part includes eight chapters and covers the events until the death of Abbé Faria and the escape of Edmond from the Chateau d'If. The second part includes twelve chapters and goes from Edmond's discovery of the treasure hidden on the island of Monte Cristo to his final revenge and the marriage of the Count with 'Ā'ida al-Rūmiyya [Haydée]. The story unfolds as a summary of the original by eliminating of some parts and reducing many chapters into one. For instance, the alternate feelings of love and desperation that Edmond experiences in prison, his encounter with the Abbé Faria, his education inside the prison cell, the escape, all episodes that in the original cover around seven chapters (from chapter fourteen to chapter twenty), in the translation of Bishāra Shadīd are summarized in chapter seven and eight of the first part ("Description of the imprisonment of the brilliant Edmond" and "On the death of the imprisoned Faria and the escape of the young oppressed Edmond") (SHADĪD 1871: 27 and 44). The abridgement of the chapters, however, instead of quickening the narration, slows it down because of the excessive detail and repetition. The monotonous and overly detailed narrative is nevertheless mitigated by

28 The translator explains to the readers the meaning of the title of *mārīshāl*, as he writes that "it is the equivalent of Bāshā, according to the local usage" (SHADĪD 1871: 4).

the pleasant sound effect of the rhymed prose and by the insertion of the poetic verses, often used to explain emotional states.²⁹

Another distinguishing feature of the translation is Bishāra Shadīd's frequent addition of common expressions in Arabic, which contributes to the "domestication" of the novel. For instance, in order to express the idea of the complete and omni-comprehensive knowledge that Edmond receives in prison through Abbé Faria, the translator uses the Arabic expression *al-'aqliyya wa-l-naqliyya*, which refers to the traditional sciences deriving from transmission and revelation (*naql*) and the Islamic traditions relying on reason (*'aql*) (SHADĪD 1871: 38). This process of familiarization becomes even more evident in those parts of the novel in which Dumas refers to 'Oriental' and specifically Ottoman and Arab elements.³⁰ In these parts the translator stresses specific passages or adds elements related to Arabic or Islamic literature or culture, creating a process that we may term a 'hyper-Orientalization' of the novel.

One example of this practice can be found in the famous episode of the visit by Franz d'Épinay to the cave of Sindbad the Sailor, a name that the Count of Monte Cristo assumes as a disguise and which is one of the more famous orientalisating motifs in the entire novel. In the episode, which is narrated in chapter four of the second part of the translation, Frāndh [Franz d'Épinay] arrives on the island of Monte Cristo, attracted by a mysterious light that could have been "only lit by a Jinn" (SHADĪD 1871: 77). Once on the island, he is introduced by local sailors to the fantastic cave, a paradisiac place of splendour (*'arūs al-kanz * wa-jannat al-dunyā*), filled with 'oriental' pieces of furniture: Persian carpets (*al-sajājīd al-'ajamiyya*), Turkish chairs (*al-karāsī al-turkiyya*), silk couches (*al-furūshāt al-ḥarīriyya*) (SHADĪD 1871: 78).³¹ In the cave lives the Count of Monte Cristo/Sindbad the Sailor, who is dressed with a North African tarbush (*ṭarbūsh maghribī*), Arab trousers (*ṣirwāl 'arabī*), an Egyptian belt (*ḥizām miṣrī*) (SHADĪD 1871: 78).³² Even more interesting is the insertion of extra references taken from the repertoire of *One Thousand and One Nights* which probably were familiar to the Arab readership and that fit perfectly with the reference to Sindbad the Sailor of the original. This is, for instance, the case with the description of the moment when Franz wakes up in the cave feeling "like Abū Ḥasan al-Sa'īd with the sultan Hārūn al-Rashīd" (SHADĪD 1871: 80).

In the same episode of the cave of Sindbad the Sailor, Bishāra Shadīd displays another aspect of his technique of translation: the rejection of suspense in favor of a much more

29 JOHNSON 2020: 140-42.

30 On the well-studied topic of Orientalism in the *Count of Monte Cristo*, see MILLER MCLEAN III 2017; SALIEN 2000, MARSANS-SAKLY 2018.

31 In the original: "Toute la chambre était tendue d'étoffes turques de couleur cramoisie et brochée de fleurs d'or. Dans un enfoncement était une espèce de divan surmonté d'un trophée d'armes arabes à fourreaux de vermeil et à poignées resplendissantes de pierreries ; au plafond pendait une lampe en verre de Venise, d'une forme et d'une couleur charmantes, et les pieds reposaient sur un tapis de Turquie dans lequel ils enfonçaient jusqu'à la cheville."

32 In the original he wears a: "Costume tunisien, c'est-à-dire une calotte rouge avec un long gland de soie bleue, une veste de drap noir toute brodée d'or, des pantalons sang-de-bœuf larges et bouffants, des guêtres de même couleur brodées d'or comme la veste, et des babouches jaunes ; un magnifique cachemire lui serrait la taille, et un petit cangiar aigu et recourbé était passé dans cette ceinture."

explanatory approach. For instance, all the events that transformed Edmond Dantès into the Count of Monte Cristo, masterfully distilled by Dumas in the course of more than 1000 pages, are dealt with by Shadīd in only one paragraph. The translator offers a detailed explanation of how the Count managed his fortune by selling in Istanbul (*madīnat al-Qusṭanṭīniyya*) the jewels he found in the cave on the Island of Monte Cristo, that he then lived in the Eastern Mediterranean (*al-bilād al-sharqīyya*), and eventually in Italy, where he bought the Island of Monte Cristo from the government and acquired the title of the Count of Monte Cristo. Back on the island, he furnished the cave with silk and other precious material transforming it into a marvellous palace (SHADĪD 1871: 76).

In order to explain this absence of suspense, one might argue that Shadīd did not work with the entire original text. As it was often the case with translations of the time, he probably rendered into Arabic an abridged intermediary translation, where the more complex passages of the story had already undergone a reduction and simplification. Yet, the different esthetics and taste of the recipient society should also be considered: the Arab public to whom the translation was directed probably drew more enjoyment from the rhymed prose than from the technique of weaving together different spatio-temporal levels, as in Dumas' original. In this sense, the translator activated a process of complete "domestication" of the text: he accommodated the taste of the public and selected some of the elements of the story of *The Count of Monte Cristo* that he, or some other translators before him, found most appealing, then he rendered the story into an enjoyable rhymed prose version, mixed with poetic verses.

This translation, with its frequent repetition, its rather linear plot and its rhymed form, suggests also something else, namely that it could have been directed not only to a reading public but also to an oral audience, a typology of public that, by definition, require a rather linear organization of the fabula. For instance, whereas in the original version the reader discovers only late in the development of the plot, with a coup de théâtre, that Albert de Morcef is actually the son of Mercedes, the first beloved woman of Edmond Dantès, in the translation the identity of Albert is revealed already in the title of chapter four: *On the casual meeting of Edmond Dantès with Albert, the son of Madame Mercedes* (SHADĪD 1871: 76). In other words, the linearity of the plot appears in contrast with the gaps in time and space that Dumas leaves empty on purpose.

The linearity of the plot is particularly evident in Bishāra Shadīd's treatment of the mobility of the Count of Monte Cristo. One of the aspects that characterize Dumas' character in the original novel, and that also explains its success, is the incredible—almost magical—mobility with which the author equips the Count. His swiftness, his ability to move across spatial and temporal boundaries, along with his Mediterranean network of contacts and helpers, makes him superior to all the other characters of the novel.³³ As has been noticed by scholars of nineteenth-century literature, the territorial compression of the Mediterranean as a space that can be easily dominated and crossed in a few hours made Dumas' novel "one of the first portraits of an imperial mode of globality" (JOHNSON 2020: 138).

The Arabic translation of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, however, emerged from a background that differs from that of this celebration of the imperial mobility. As Rebecca Johnson has acutely argued, "the [Arab] translators [of *The Count of Monte Cristo*] experienced

33 JOHNSON 2020: 138. See also BELL 2004: 130.

nineteenth-century transportation networks in ways that undermined the fantasy of travel in Dumas' text" (JOHNSON 2020: 138). The few pieces of information that we have about the translator Bishāra Shadīd, for instance, suggest to us that he was a Syro-Lebanese immigrant to Egypt who was living in Alexandria.³⁴ If that was the case, he too experienced the mobility across the same Eastern Mediterranean shores evoked in Dumas' novel, but probably he encountered all the limits that an inhabitant of a territory subjected to both the control of the Ottoman state and of the British Mandate faced.

It is probably for this reason, and also for the already mentioned tendency to withdraw elements of suspense and extra-ordinality, that the Arab translator radically reduces the Count's mobility. He also adds meaningful details that are totally absent from the original, such as the need for the Count to have a passport, a mark of belonging and a necessary document in order to move across the Mediterranean that began to be so important in the Ottoman Empire only at the end of the nineteenth century.³⁵

A conclusion: Global Dumas, Mediterranean Dumas and Arab(ic) Dumas

Rather than focusing only on the unfaithful relationship with the original French texts, this study contends that the specific version of *The Count of Monte Cristo* authored by the translator Bishāra Shadīd is an exemplary case of Arabization (*ta'arīb*) that fits both into the global and local literary trends of the time. Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of studying nineteenth-century Arab translations in order to rewrite the literary history of the Arab Nahḍa outside of the narrow frame of national history. Translations are expressions of a system of world literature where the balance of powers among the various national literatures, the local specificities and the colonial encounter played important roles.³⁶ Ultimately, translations help to locate the history of Arabic literature within a transnational framework, as they represent important cases of reception and refashioning of global ideas into different languages and literary forms.³⁷ The translation of works such as those of Daniel Defoe, Fénelon or Alexandre Dumas père, for instance, was the vehicle through which some important global social and political ideals of the nineteenth century entered Arab/Ottoman society of the time. Moreover, because of the success of these works, these ideas spanned a variety of social classes of the Ottoman world during the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the same time these works were not only vessels for global and transnational ideas but they were also responding to the request of a local literary market and to the formation of national languages and literatures, addressing a specific public and assuming forms that appealed to local literary tastes.

Among the plethora of popular novels that were translated and adapted into Arabic during the second half of the nineteenth century, some of which are almost unknown today, the

³⁴ On the city of Alexandria during the nineteenth century see ILBER 1996.

³⁵ JOHNSON 2020: 139. On the topic of passport and mobility in the Ottoman Empire, see ABREVAYA STEIN 2016 and GUTMAN 2016.

³⁶ KHURI-MAKDISI 2013, TAGELDIN 2011.

³⁷ KHURI-MAKDISI 2013: 8-9. On this topic, see HILL 2018.

novels of Alexandre Dumas père were the most successful and the most popular.³⁸ In this sense, the Arab(ic) Dumas best represents the encounter between global and local literary trends. In light of these premises, one legitimate question would be to ask more widely who was the reading public of Dumas' work in Arabic at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century and to which extent we can apply the Gramscian category of 'popular literature' to the Arab(ic) Dumas and particularly to *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

We can divide the Arab reception of Dumas' works into two different periods: the first period characterized by a more popular and fluid reception, when the 'text' circulated in its written form and probably also in its oral form; the second period characterized by an intellectual reception, when the works of Dumas were used to express social and political messages. As for the first period, namely between 1860 and 1890, we see that Dumas' first translations circulated in urban centers like Cairo or Beirut, in social milieus where the borders between the acquisition of information, its oral circulation and the practice of reading were blurred. By the end of the Ottoman Empire, many more people had the capacity to read but the act of reading had lost some of its prestige: the reading of newspapers or magazines often happened collectively and information circulated fluidly.³⁹ Moreover, the Arabic-speaking areas where *The Count of Monte Cristo* was translated were part of a multilingual empire where information and books moved fluidly across diverse linguistic communities. As this collection of essays proves, for instance, the story of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, as well as other works by Dumas, had already reached the coast of the Ottoman Mediterranean by the 1850s and 1860s. By the time it was first translated into Arabic at the initiative of Yusūf al-Shalfūn, in the 1860s, *The Count of Monte Cristo* had already been translated into Greek, Armenian, and Turkish. This means that even before the first translation was published, in 1866, the plot of the story was well known and widespread across the Mediterranean. Slightly further outside the Ottoman Empire, on the other shore of the sea, namely in Italy, translations of Dumas were numerous and the author enjoyed a great success as his books were received in the wake of the struggle for Italian independence after the failure of the 1848 uprisings.⁴⁰

In light of this historical context, we can argue that the notoriety of the story's plot, its adventurous and maritime atmosphere, and also its social and political content that emphasized social justice and the figure of Napoleon were the source of the initial success of Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The adventurous story of Edmond Dantès and his transformation into a rich and powerful avenger fighting for justice and equality in the shadow of Napoleon was probably the material of individual reading but also of oral tales narrated in coffee shops, as suggested earlier in this article.

In the second moment, when the content of Dumas' work had already been absorbed and elaborated by a popular public eager to consume new stories, and when his name was already

38 According to Matti Moosa: "between 1888 and 1910, no fewer than twenty-five novels of Dumas père were translated into Arabic, including two which he wrote in collaboration with Emile Gaboriau and August W. Schlegel." MOOSA 1970: 216.

39 KHURI-MAKDISI 2013: 36-7. On the topic, see GEORGEON 1995.

40 On the Italian reception of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, see the [article of Cristina TRINCHERO](#) contained in this Themed Section, as well as Aa.Vv., *Alexandre Dumas e il Mezzogiorno d'Italia*, 2004.

established, his work was elaborated by intellectuals who emphasized the socialist and republican aspirations of Dumas' characters. Faraḥ Anṭūn (1874-1922), a radical socialist thinker and the founder of *al-Jāmi'a*, for instance, translated and adapted into a play *Kean, ou désordre et génie* (1836) and *Ange Pitou* (1850), one of Dumas' novels on the French Revolution.⁴¹ Ilham Khuri-Makdisi notes that according to major Egyptian intellectuals, like Salāma Mūsā, these plays had a transformative effect on the consciousness of the intellectuals of his time.⁴² In cities like Cairo and Beirut, at the end of the nineteenth century, translations and theater adaptations of Dumas' work were the vectors of political messages imbued with "social critiques calling for class equality" (KHURI-MAKDISI 2013: 79). Soon percolating into a vast readership through the mediation of periodicals, plays and novels, these political ideals contributed to the formation of an intellectual consciousness that spread across different intellectual milieus.

Contrary to what one would expect, the passage was not from the intellectual milieu to the vast popular readership but from a 'popular' public of consumers of novels to more radical and politicized intellectuals. The translation by Bishāra Shadīd published in Cairo marks the initial phase, when the popular renown of Dumas' work across the globe combined with a local reading public's desire to read the story in Arabic to make the novel a great commercial success across the Eastern Mediterranean.

The translation in rhymed prose, moreover, points to an oral or semi-oral diffusion and invites us to rethink critically the role of orality in the translation of European novels during the Arab Nahḍa. Rather than simply being an early stage in the novel's development toward its definitive European-like form, Bishāra Shadīd's version of *The Count of Monte Cristo* draws the reader into the suspended dimension of an adventurous and maritime romance. It is a modern, politicized *sīra* where Edmond Dantès and Napoleon are the heroes of a colonial space, the Mediterranean. Yet, it is also a superb maritime *sīra*, one that was able to offer to the Arab readers and listeners the same "narcotic that appeases the feeling of evil" that Antonio Gramsci identified in the Italian translations of *The Count of Monte Cristo*.⁴³

41 *Kean, ou désordre et génie* was translated in the form of a piece with the title *Ibn al-sha'b*, but it was also known by the title *Nubūgh wa-ikhtilāl, aw riwāyat fannān*. The piece was performed from 1905 to 1907 in Egypt and Syria.

42 Salāma Mūsā wrote, "(I did not) know of a single conscious person who did not read the story and who was not transformed by it and by the rest of Anṭūn's work". MŪSĀ, *Tarbiyat Salāma Mūsā*, 55-7, quoted in KHURI-MAKDISI 2013: 81.

43 In the words of Antonio Gramsci: "Nel Conte di Monte Cristo ci sono tutti gli elementi per cullare queste fantasticherie e per quindi propinare un narcotico che attutisca il senso del male, ecc." GRAMSCI 1996: 190.

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