

**IN THE
SHADOW
OF
WORLD
LITERATURE**

**SITES OF READING
IN COLONIAL EGYPT**

MICHAEL ALLAN

IN THE SHADOW OF WORLD LITERATURE

translation

TRANSNATION

SERIES EDITOR **EMILY APTER**

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IN COLONIAL EGYPT

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On my shelf when I was a child was a seemingly antique edition of a book whose contents I knew as much from the smell of its musty pages as from the fading gold lettering embossed on its cover. I recall that the book had color plates and an inscription written in ink acknowledging that it belonged to my grandfather. He was both a smoker and an avid reader, and all of his books seemed to possess the odor of the tobacco exhaled from his pipe. With its strong scent, yellowed pages, and leather cover, this particular book came to embody my grandfather for my young imagination. It spoke to his library and the manner in which he possessed and consumed books. Its pages contained stories that touched my eyes differently than his, and yet both my grandfather and I incorporated this book into our lives and our collections. Each of us let the book matter as much through how we loved it as through anything written on its pages.

That the musty book was a copy of *One Thousand and One Nights* only reveals the extent of a transformation from one generation to the next. This was a book that meant something quite different to my grandfather as a child in Montreal than it did to me years later in Northern Virginia. What I loved and what I held in my hands was an index of my grandfather and his library. The repository of stories contained on the pages was somehow eclipsed by the status of the book as an artifact, an object, and a trace of my grandfather's life. And years later, these pages came alive for me again as a sign of my grandfather and his imagination, his world, and his books, alongside my own voyage through language, literature, and philosophy in Canada, the United States, the Middle East, and Europe. Holding his book in my hands, I questioned what compelled my grandfather to this text and the stories on its pages. On shelves otherwise filled with Quebec and Canadian history, what did a book like *One Thousand and One Nights* mean to him? How did this text fit his collection?

In the Shadow of World Literature explores the relationship between readers and texts across traditions, but it relies as much on the terms in which books come to matter as on the primacy of writing. For my grandfather, a

collection of books bespoke the value of education, intellect, and curiosity beyond the scope of a linguistic or national tradition. Even if each particular book in his library had a story, its status as a book lent it significance within the broader collection and all that it stood for. Reading for my grandfather was a practice linked to his armchair and his pipe, and stories mattered as they allowed him to envision a world and its past—and to imagine his place within it. For me, reading as a practice has become the site of this study, and this basic framework shifts my attention from books to readers and from objects to interpretative communities. In the following chapters, I undertake an encounter with various sites for thinking about what literature means, for whom, and in what ways.

The learning that leads me to find value in these questions, to care about how literature matters, and to consider historical and linguistic formations as integral to the sensorium is something that derives from interactions with others. And in this regard, I am deeply indebted to those who have helped to form my relationship to texts, readers, and the world. From sunny days in Berkeley, Cairo, and Tangier to rainy days in Eugene, New York, and Berlin, this book has been shaped by almost a decade of conversations, collaborations, and friendships.

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My grandfather’s classic book reemerged for me as I packed boxes in the basement of my childhood home on the occasion of my mother’s death. If from my grandfather I inherited fragments of a library, then from my mother I inherited a manner of relating to the world. She passed away halfway through the completion of this book, and the break in chapters bears testimony to a sort of transformative loss that left me reading, feeling, and responding differently. Her friendship traverses the pages I write and inspires how I hope to relate to all that surrounds me. A concern for others, compassion in listening, and social awareness were all attributes that I admired deeply in her. She was selfless, determined, and quietly driven. She would undoubtedly recoil at this dedication, but I cannot help but credit her, thank her, and miss her in all that follows.

NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION

I have opted here for a system based on the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES)* for the transcription of Modern Standard Arabic. Across the various chapters, I follow the conventional spelling of names and titles readily available in English (e.g., Taha Hussein, Naguib Mahfouz), and I follow the simplified transliteration of characters' names available in published translations. I have also chosen not to transliterate lengthier citations and instead to quote directly in Arabic, particularly in chapters 5 and 6. Readers familiar with Arabic will find fully transliterated names and titles available in the notes and bibliography.

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