

KİTAP DEĞERLENDİRMELERİ

Ahmed El Shamsy. *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020. 295 pages.

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In his formidable account of the transformative power of the written word, Roger Chartier wrote that “If the French of the late eighteenth century fashioned the Revolution, it is because they had in turn been fashioned by books.”¹ Following his cue, many studies on book culture in the last two decades have sought to establish links between printed books and revolutions. In the Arab context, scholars have studied the way printing shaped the *nahda*, or Arab “awakening,” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often articulating the Arab revival as the culmination of Arab translations from European languages, adoption of European genres, and engagement with the modern sciences. More recent scholarship, however, has begun to question this assessment, and to attribute greater weight to homegrown factors. Ahmed El Shamsy’s latest monograph, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition*, falls into this latter camp. By unearthing the hitherto unknown Arab editors and intellectuals who used the new technology of the press to save classical books from oblivion, he argues for the emergence of an “indigenous modernity” in the Arabo-Islamic intellectual tradition (p. 171).

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¹ Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2004), 67.

El Shamsy's book is divided into eight chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. He begins his account by challenging our contemporary notions of "the classics" in the Arab intellectual tradition, suggesting that many works only became classics because they made it into print where others did not. Al-Shafi'i's *Umm*, for instance, is an indisputable source for studying Islamic law today, but a century ago it was not required reading even among Shafi'i jurists. El Shamsy argues that our perception of the Islamic intellectual tradition today is largely a product of the efforts to resurrect, edit, and print Arabo-Islamic classics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Transforming the broad literature of classical manuscripts into an essential canon of printed Islamic texts required the "marshaling of an array of philological, organizational, and financial resources" carried out by various individuals who "harnessed the multidirectional potential of print" to further their different agendas (p. 5).

The book begins in the early nineteenth century, when manuscript culture was still dominant. The literature in circulation at the time contained few of the early and classical works of Arabo-Islamic intellectual culture (from the ninth to fifteenth centuries). El Shamsy notes several reasons for this. Traditional libraries were in decline because of diminishing institutional support. European book collectors, mainly Orientalists and diplomats, also played a role, further depleting the pool of early classical manuscripts. Hence, in many cases, classical scholarship survived only in fragments and citations, often in distorted form.

Chapter 2 explores the "postclassical" period of Muslim scholarship, referring to the canonization of a particular group of classical books after the sixteenth century. El Shamsy argues that this small body of books and commentaries on them constituted the main teaching texts of the period after the sixteenth century; familiarity with these clusters was sufficient for one to be considered "educated." The proliferation of glosses on these texts produced a "self-contained referential universe in which earlier works were progressively sidelined and forgotten" (p. 35), a trend exacerbated by the "anti-bookish" attitude of Sufis who viewed inspiration, rather than book learning, as the key to true knowledge. Arabo-Islamic book culture was thus already on the wane at the threshold of the print era.

El Shamsy is aware of the proximity of these claims to the narrative of Islamic decline, according to which Islamic thought entered a period of stagnation after the classical era and found its lost vigor only much later, spurred by the influx of ideas from Europe. Even though he rejects the ideological label of "decline," he does not hold back from stating what he calls

the “facts” of this discourse. I find this position a much-needed corrective today, when many studies seem to have made it their business to romanticize so much of Islamic history as a counter to Orientalist discourse.

In Chapter 3, El Shamsy turns to the birth of the Arabic printing industry. He claims that from the 1850s, printing allowed reformists like Rifat al-Tahtawi to expand and diversify the scope of the books included in “the classics.” Driven by their vision of intellectual renewal rather than by the government school curriculum or concerns for profit, they utilized print to introduce “forgotten but valuable ideas to the Arabic reading public” (p. 78). But those preparing older works beyond the postclassical canon faced many challenges, including the need to survey the extant manuscripts of a single work, the lack of reliable reference works for specialized vocabulary, and the need for a critical philology. As El Shamsy discusses in Chapter 5, these problems were addressed by Ahmad Zaki, who established the model of the editor (*muhaqqiq*) as an expert scholar, one who used scholarly verification (*tahqiq*) to check “manuscripts and variants against each other and against the editor’s own knowledge” (p. 138). While his philological toolkit was inspired by Orientalist editing practices, Zaki engaged with the Arabo-Islamic heritage in an attempt to “root modern institutions of knowledge in their classical context” instead of simply adopting Western institutions, ideas, and terminology (p. 127). The implementation of a critical philology would become more imperative into the 1920s, when the books of the Arabo-Islamic heritage were becoming fairly accessible through print. Hence Chapter 8 describes how scholars such as Muhammad Shakir and Ahmad Shakir turned to resurrect a native philological tradition to address the particular problems of the field rather than simply following the Western methods. As this critical scholarship questioned the truth and authenticity of inherited texts, it also posed a challenge to the postclassical scholarly orthodoxies.

To reinforce the “human” component of his account, El Shamsy also devotes a chapter (Chapter 4) to the extended coverage of a growing body of intellectuals and bibliophiles who also began to take an active hand in discovering, disseminating, and consuming them. With “one foot in the old scholarly tradition and the other in the [...] modernizing Egyptian state” (p. 93), these intellectuals and bibliophiles commanded both social and financial capital, and they put both to work in the search for long-forgotten classical texts, including histories, ethical advice literature, and early works of poetry and prose, which they deemed the “cultural lifeblood of a modernizing Egypt” (p. 100). They collected significant manuscripts, prepared

them for publication, and widened their circulation through literary salons and publications in the new media.

For some, this effort went hand in hand with a reformist mission, reviving forgotten works from classical tradition to be harnessed as exemplars. Chapter 6 shows that reformers such as Muhammad Abduh and Tahir al-Jazairi were well aware of the impact disseminating classical works could have “at a historical moment at which large-scale literacy was transforming Muslim publics across the Arab lands” (p. 170). Their focus on the rediscovery of ethical, historical, and literary works aimed to contribute to “the edification of Muslim society” and its “social improvement” (p. 165). The search for and publication of writings on religious thought and practice is taken up in Chapter 7, where less-visible reformist ulema such as Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi and Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi take center stage. Seeking to revitalize Islamic thought, these figures concentrated on classical works penned by the likes of Ibn Taymiyya, Avicenna, Ibn Miskawayh, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Arabi. In addition to attacking the postclassical canons and scholastic orthodoxy, they also challenged established literary and religious practices rooted in esoteric Sufi ideas, as exemplified in shrine veneration.

Each of these chapters is an engaging read. And taken as a whole, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics* is a first-rate analysis of a particular thread within Arabo-Islamic scholarship that prioritizes engagement with Islamic classics as a way for Arab intellectuals to construct their own pasts and reckon with the challenges of modernity. While El Shamsy integrates the printing press into this account, he is concerned with it more as a “site” and a “means” for this transformation than as a technology (p. 5). It is written from the perspective of the “producers” of the printed texts rather than the consumers. One of the greatest strengths of the book resides in its long discussion of various individuals associated with book learning, collecting, and editing. In different ways, all of these actors engaged with books to settle accounts with their own classical heritage or to meet the encroaching political, economic, and cultural challenges of Europe. These discussions further illuminate the intellectual origins behind the printing of classics. One must also note El Shamsy’s expertise in and former studies on manuscripts in Islamic legal history. This background places him at a great advantage while dealing with the resurrection of classics in printed form, and his command of extensive primary literature is evident throughout the book.

One objection I would raise concerns the title of the book: *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an In-*

tellectual Tradition. This title suggests that the book speaks to the wider tradition of Islamic book printing, but the book's geographic scope is limited mostly to Egypt, with a few extensions into the Levant, Syria, and Iraq. While El Shamsy offers incidental references to the Ottoman Empire and the libraries of Istanbul in different chapters (i.e. pp.136-37), he provides no satisfying account of the state of publishing in Istanbul, a city where many Islamic classics were printed in Arabic, often in multiple editions. Without an evaluation of editorial practices in Istanbul, any general conclusions about "Arabo-Islamic" scholarly practices thus seem premature. In this context, a wider discussion of the Lebanese Arab writer, journalist and intellectual, Faris al-Shidyaq could have been especially informative. As a key figure of the *nahda*, he also established in Istanbul the Jawa'ib Press in 1870 and published a long series of Arabic books.

I should also make a few remarks about the organization of the book. The timeframe of the book extends from the early nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. As a result, El Shamsy provides only a general sketch of certain periods, such as the early years of printing in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Similarly, the thematic nature of chapters 4–8 does not leave much space for a discussion of the political, economic, and cultural developments of the era. Even the broader framework of the *nahda* is missing. This lack of context makes it hard to follow the accounts of numerous individuals, including Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, and makes it seem as though publishing activities happened in a vacuum. These occasional weaknesses in the historical context may become confusing for readers, especially non-specialists. At other times, he is very careful to explain his choice of terminology as in the case of the usage of "postclassical" and "scholasticism."

These points aside, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics* makes a substantial contribution to the literature on the transformation of Islamic thought in the nineteenth century. In a more distinctive fashion, it makes a welcome turn towards the intersection of this field with the history of printing.