Editors' introduction

Approaching Islamicate fictionalities

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In recent years, scholars of medieval literature have turned to questions of fictionality both as an interrogation of premodern discursive strategies and as a challenge to presentist approaches (Allen and Chen, 2020; Karnes 2020; Keegan 2021; Orlemanski 2019.) What power did fiction hold among various medieval audiences, and what was its material life? How can scholars today identify and characterise medieval fictionality, and how do these approaches differ from the writers and critics who composed and analysed this material in the past? In tangling with premodern fictionality, what critiques of modernity and its genealogies become possible?

Historically, much of the discourse around medieval fictionality in academic contexts has centered around canonical texts in western European languages, particularly Latin, Old French, and Middle English (Haug 1992; Green 2002). But with an increased recognition of the

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transregional interconnections of medieval societies has come a realisation that teleological narratives of 'the rise of fiction' that confine themselves to the arbitrary borders of western Europe are no longer tenable (Cullhed and Rydholm 2014).

This issue engages with the possibilities of medieval fiction outside of the West, in Islamicate contexts that span from Spain to India, from Tanzania to Armenia. Despite ongoing excellent scholarship, fictionality remains undertheorised in Islamicate premodernities, and there is a widespread misconception—particularly among European medievalists—of Islamic culture's antimony toward fiction *qua* untruthful representation. However, venues for exploring forms of Islamicate fictionality abound in a multitude of premodern genres, including prosopographies and anthologies (*tazkirāt*), picaresque stories (*maqāmāt*), histories (*tawārīkh*), reportage (*akhbār*), storytelling (*hikāyāt*) and epic and romance (*siyar, masnavi*), which bridge several languages, communities, and intertextual networks. Medieval works of rhetorical theory (*balāgha*), too, grapple with the question of fictionality and the figurative (*majāz*) in their own right, while category formations such as *adab* (morally edifying literature) stake out the limits of fiction's perceived worth in various social echelons. The articles and other discursive forms collected here consider epistemologies of fiction both within text and between text and experience, attending to issues of who is speaking and from where. Our contributors offer perspectives on Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, Armenian, Aljamiado, and other literatures, and draw on recent work on gender and sexuality, the sacred and profane, popular literature, the self and subjectivity, race and ethnicity, and book arts.

These themes open onto the medieval world as a whole, and speak to the choice of *postmedieval* as a venue for this work. Over the past twelve years, *postmedieval* has evinced a commitment to rigorous and provocative theoretical interventions as well as an openness to transregional medievalisms. However—and with notable exceptions—its content and readership have remained largely centered around cultures and languages reified as European, often via their relationship to specific forms of Christianity and, more atmospherically, westernness. Nonetheless, Islamicate literatures that we most commonly associate with West and Southwest Asia and North Africa are profoundly imbricated with European geographies. They dwelt and developed for centuries in parts of Iberia, Italy, and the Caucasus, twining their way around the Mediterranean and Black Sea as well as the Indian Ocean and beyond. By foregrounding Islamicate texts and contexts in this publication, we seek to draw upon the richness of these literatures for theoretical analysis; to emphasise their value in debates over premodern fictionality without recourse to Eurocentric models or comparanda; and to simultaneously

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bring these debates into conversation with parallel discussions occurring amongst Europeanists. In the process, the contributors to this issue assert the agency of authors, audiences, and literary cultures more broadly, who reveal themselves as not simply beholden to dogma, tradition, or antiquity. Rather than totalising hermeneutic schema, these forces become dialogic partners—sometimes adversarial, sometimes complementary—with various forms of literary activity.

The phrase 'Islamicate fictionality' evokes a set of entangled themes that we section off and tease apart below. Designed as a consciously plastic term, for Marshall Hodgson 'Islamicate' indicated a faint line between 'what we may call religion and […] the overall society and culture associated historically with religion' (Hodgson 1974, 57). It thus accommodated the many non-Muslim actors in majority-Muslim or Muslim-controlled domains. It has also has been trenchantly critiqued, though, for contriving a relationship between non-normative yet wholly Muslim ways of being in the world and Islamic doctrine in which the former is accident and the latter essence (Ahmed 2016). Studies of Islamicate fictionality have at times followed suit, pitting religious 'truth' against secular 'falsehood,' and walling off the *ʿulamāʾ*, or learned class of religio-legal scholars, from other cultural producers with whom they organically interacted. For our purposes, no such cordons exist; the articles in this issue take a holistic view of the Islamicate and of the identities of actors within it. With this in mind, we ask: what might it mean to have works that are at once fictional and Islamicate? If being 'Islamic' charts a system of values and practices that incorporate the normative, non-normative, and anti-normative, where might fiction be ethically and religiously positioned? What, across Muslim epistemologies, might characterise the threshold between real and unreal, between monstrous and all-too-human trespasses?

'Fictionality,' similarly, is a flexible term that aligns more with 'communicative strategy' than with specific 'genres and discourses' (Zetterberg-Nielsen and Zetterberg-Nielsen 2019). Each of the articles in this issue sets forth its own definitions of fictionality. Here a word is due about what that work facilitates. Islamicate literatures are frequently polygeneric, drawing together numerous forms and themes: poetry is enfolded in prose, panegyric buttresses perfunctory archivism, encyclopedias document the mundane and marvellous, and framed tales move between different worlds. Rather than being restricted to specific texts or sections thereof, explorations of fictionality help us interpret what occurs in the interstices. At the same time, theories of literature written and circulated in medieval Islamicate contexts contained vigorous discussions of genre, of pairing form and aim with rhetoric, of balancing plausibility and novelty to enhance pleasure, and more (Harb 2020). We begin below,

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therefore, with a discussion of genre and fiction as understood then and now. Then, we address how fictions on the page inform and reflect social imaginaries. Finally, we close with a contemplation of how one particular category of fictive intervention, the narration of fantastical or monstrous beings, constructs the edges of both text and society.

Genre and fiction

In an eighteenth-century treatise, an anonymous Ottoman author pens a long narrative made of invectives and curses targeting all people who don't fit in with his values or ways of life. His reference regarding people's reading habits gives us an idea about the historicity of the genre distinction between facts and fiction. This characteristically grumpy author curses the 'habitual liars who do not read the glorious Qurʾan and the treatise and also the history of Ṭabarī but the *Shāhnāmeh* and *Hamzanāmeh*' (Develi 1998, 32).[1] So, this eighteenth-century author had a clear distinction in mind when it comes to the appropriate reading material—and as an extension thereof, appropriate genres. Unsurprisingly, the Qurʾan is mentioned first. Another title definitely worth reading is the universal history of al-Ṭabarī (d. 923). Starting from Creation, al-Ṭabarī's *History* (*Ta'rīkh*) is an account of early Islamic history. It is not a single narrative of events but a record of alternative reports regarding each event. Relying on many sources, al-Ṭabarī's history became one of the canonical sources of early Islamic history (Bosworth 2012). As such, it is not surprising that an author concerned with proper conduct would recommend it, even as the historian's multiform accounts trouble the notion of a monologic truth.

The *Shāhnāmeh* and *Hamzanāmeh,* however, are treated in a completely different fashion by the same author. The *Shāhnāmeh* ('Book of Kings') is a long Persian epic relating narratives of the kings of Iran from mythical times up to the seventh century, completed by the poet Abu al-Qāsem Ferdowsi (d. c. 1020) in the early eleventh century. Since its completion, it has been copied, translated and adapted into many other works in the Islamicate lands and beyond. Its translations and rewritings were also available in Ottoman Turkish—and the cover image of this special issue is taken from a seventeenth-century *Shāhnāmeh* in Turkish produced for the Mamluk Sultan.[2] *Hamzanāmeh* refers to another set of popular works in the Islamicate realm, consisting of the folk tales about the wars and courage of Hamza, the paternal uncle of the prophet Muhammad (Albayrak 1993). While the modern division of genres will presumably put the *Shāhnāmeh* and *Hamzanāmeh* under different literary categories (an elaborate epic poem vs. anonymous folktales), for our

1 The author of this treatise is not known, nor is there a specific date. In the section quoted, it is unclear what the 'treatise' (*risale*) refers to in this context. Unless otherwise noted, the translations in this introductions are by the authors.

2 On 'translations' of *Shāhnāmeh* images into Turkish, see Bağcı, 2000.

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grumpy Ottoman author, they share a similar ground. While they are based on historical events, they are primarily concerned in narrating stories to their respective audiences. The author's concern here seems to be related to the narration of *tales* instead of a reliance on accuracy or facts. And that very concern regarding narration and factuality is at the heart of the discussion of Islamicate fictionalities.

One of the immediate questions that concern will elicit is that of the im/possibility of disentangling the factual and the fictional in narrating historical characters and events. Aksoy-Sheridan's article about fictionalised historical narratives of the Ottoman Empire approaches the topic by focusing on historical memory and popular imagination. This article also invites us to rethink the established categories of modern historiography. The sources Aksoy-Sheridan discusses bear titles such as *hikaye* (story), *menakıb* (legend/hagiography), *tarih* (history) or *risale* (treatise)—genres that a modern scholar may categorise separately. This fluidity of genres is visible in many contributions throughout the issue and shows how genre both defines and complicates the discussion of fictionality. For instance, in stories, *fictionality* is a characteristic that the modern reader may appreciate, while in a narrative on ancestral history, it would be deemed a negative feature, tainting its historical value.

The narration of historical characters and their respective audiences is also discussed by Alex MacFarlane. They revisit the Alexander Romance in the pages of a sixteenth-century Armenian manuscript by looking at thirty poems individually framing Alexander. Their translation and reading of the poems put Alexander in the limelight and show the impossibility of disentangling the historical Alexander from the fictional/ised character. MacFarlane's article also presents the flexibility of poetic expression through new reading strategies by cutting up the poems, reminding the readers of the role of the narrator and author throughout the centuries. The question of authorial intervention is also at the center of N. İpek Hüner Cora's article. Looking at the fictionalisation of a marvel in the hands of the famous Ottoman traveller and author Evliya Çelebi, her article encourages readers to think beyond the distinction between fact and fiction. Instead, her study focuses on the narration of a particular marvel and what this communicates about its audience. Another article problematising the readers' understanding of fiction and reality is by Ayelet Kotler. Using a Mughal-Persian translation of a Sanskrit treatise, *Jog Bāsisht*, her article discusses the role of narratorial authority in mediating the relationship of storytelling to reality in a complexly layered dream narrative.

If one thinks about Islamicate storytelling in a wider framework, the first work that an avid reader of world literature is likely to think of is *Thousand and One Nights*. In her contribution, Meriam Soltan discusses

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the visual and literary forms of *Thousand and One Nights*, not only by focusing on the text but on the entanglement of word and image but also fact and fiction. By taking visual narratives into account, this article encourages us to ponder different facets of fictionality and its implication with Orientalist narratives. Another set of world-famous stories, *Kalīla wa-Dimna,* is at the center of Karla Mallette's article. In a rather playful fashion, Mallette tackles the narrative, transmission history, and scholarship on *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. By using game theory, she situates these fictional tales in a broader context by looking at their Persian and Italian copies.

In 'Who Has Fiction? Modernity, Fictionality, and the Middle Ages,' Julie Orlemanski raises the question 'who has fiction' and continues by interrogating 'how people have it' (Orlemanski 2019). The richness of the genres represented in this special issue is an attempt to begin answering this key question. This issue also shows through many examples that the premodern Islamicate world had plenty of readers 'who can enjoy cognitive uncertainty' (Karnes 2020, 210). We hope that the readers of this issue will do so as well.

Social and sacred fictions

In 'The Possibilities of Medieval Fiction,' Michelle Karnes suggests that fiction is what happened when authors creatively maximised possibility, spurred on by the notion of God's creative omnipotence. If wondrous, unlikely, uncanny things in literature 'might be real,' then, 'unlike the objects of the realist novel, they might be worth all the wonder they can elicit' (Karnes 2020, 216). Though its possibilities were infinite, Creation was not understood to be arbitrary, and fictively probing the depths of its logic and ordering had religiously experiential value. Islamicate descriptions of wonder (*ʿajab*) in marvels traditions, for example, are at times likened to those of 'theophanic experience' in mystical ones (Grenier 2021, 187). Fictive exploration also had social value; the works discussed throughout this issue recurrently use the forms, genres, and signifying techniques introduced above to show that reality occurs within a set field of possibilities, which religious epistemologies help one to see and see past. Here, we therefore consider the connections between the social and the sacred in fiction, beginning with one medieval Muslim scholar's history of how fictive tales came to be.

In his *Fihrist*, a catalog of all the Arabic books known to exist in his lifetime, the tenth-century scholar Ibn al-Nadīm (d. c. 990) attends to genres that have gained the greatest attention in modern Islamic studies as cousins to fiction. We might provisionally translate them as nighttime tales

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and legends (*asmār* and *khurāfāt*, respectively). Though the articles throughout this issue push us to consider fictionality well beyond the confines of *asmār* and *khurāfāt*, quoting at length from Ibn al-Nadīm is useful for illustrating questions of societal value that even these most patently unreal stories posed in his era:

> The earliest Persians were the first to compile legends (*khurāfāt*)—some of which are on the tongues of animals—and to fashion books of them and place them in libraries (*khazāʾin*). Then the Parthian kings—the third kingly dynasty of Persia—outdid them in the endeavor, and then they proliferated and expanded in the times of the Sasanians. The Arabs then transmitted them into Arabic and people of excellent and eloquent speech took them on; hence, they polished and embellished them and, in this manner, composed works of their ilk. The first book to be worked on in this fashion was the *Hazār Afsāneh*, meaning the *Thousand Legends* […]. The correct account—God willing—is that the first to engage in nighttime tales (*awwal man samara bi-l-layl*) was Alexander [the Great], and he had a coterie that would jest with him and regale him. He did not want pleasure from this, but rather desired to preserve and guard himself (*al-ḥifẓ wa-l-ḥars*). And successive kings did likewise.
>
> The *Book of the Thousand Legends* contains one thousand nights yet fewer than two hundred nighttime stories (because a single nighttime story may take a number of nights). I have seen the entire book multiple times, and in actuality it is a meager book of dull prattle.
>
> […] Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad ibn ʿAbdūs al-Jahshiyārī, author of the *Book of Viziers*, began to compose a book of a thousand selected nighttime tales (*kitāb ikhtāra fīhi alf samar*) from those of the Arabs, Persians, Byzantines, and others, with each section standing on its own rather than being connected to the rest. He met with the nighttime storytellers and took the best of what they knew and had perfected and chose from the arrangements of nighttime tales and legends that which struck him and was superlative. Thus he collected four hundred and eighty nights, with each night containing a full story taking up roughly fifty folios, but death caught up to him before he could fulfill his aim of a thousand tales. I have seen a number of these parts in the hand of Abū al-Ṭayyib, son of al-Shāfiʿī's brother. […] As for *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, there is some disagreement. It is said that [the original text] was produced by the Indians, and this account is given at the book's beginning. It is also said that it was produced by the Parthian kings and the Indians purloined it, and it is said that the Persians produced it and the

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> Indians purloined it, and [another] group says that it was the sage Bozorgmehr who produced parts of it. God knows best. (Ibn al-Nadīm 2009, vol. III 321–324)[3]

This description has mostly drawn attention for the specific works it recalls, the aforementioned *1001 Nights* and *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. In part this is because of their now-global fame, and in part because Ibn al-Nadīm blurs categorical divides between *adab*—Arabic letters thought to be refined and edifying—and the popular, vulgar narratives with which the label *khurāfa* became increasingly associated. Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's version of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* became synonymous with the former, elevated into a 'mirror for princes' in various Islamicate languages as well as Romance languages, via the court of Alfonso X of Castile (Wacks 2007). The text of the *1000 Legends*—later the *1001 Nights* and, later still and a world away, the *Arabian Nights*—epitomised the latter. Its later reception in Europe as the epitome of Oriental storytelling notwithstanding, the *1001 Nights* did not merit consideration as literature in the medieval commentarial tradition. To the extent that the Islamicate has been troped as 'medieval' and inimical to secular, Western modernity, the fate of these stories in their homelands has become a strawman, symbolising Muslim repudiation of creative innovation on the one hand and simple, effeminate fascination with idle lore on the other.

Ibn al-Nadīm's passage also reveals much about fiction as a social construction and its valuation in situ: non-verisimilar stories with talking animals and the like (though verisimilar ones existed, to be sure [Keegan 2021]) are cast as both foreign and familiar; many cultures have them and they have been the undertakings of kings. When Arabic-using authors acquired these genres, they domesticated them to their aesthetic sensibilities and categories. Eloquent wordsmiths added their turns of phrase and discerning minds edited choice anecdotes into anthologies. Scholars debated provenance and wanted to know where these tales came from; there was an intellectual investment in origins that coexisted with the practice of redaction. The term *naḥala*, which we've translated as 'purloined,' literally indicates falsely ascribing lines of poetry, which were treated as a form of intellectual property subject to a spectrum of creative 'stealing' and reuse (*sariqa*) (Heinrichs 1987–1988). Lastly, we see that the present author is concerned with getting this grand narrative right by balancing polyphony, assertion, and prevarication. If God wills it, Ibn al-Nadīm will have chosen the 'correct' (*ṣaḥīḥ*) entry point for this history of genre—like the stories themselves, his account self-consciously courts alternative possibilities. Ibn al-Nadīm's chosen elaboration of a literary category and its habitus conjures intimacies and rivalries between Arabic, Persian, Indian, and Greek corpora. It depicts imaginative literature as a

3 In manuscripts on which the cited modern edition of the *Fihrist* is based, including a copy of Ibn al-Nadīm's autograph version, two variant spellings of the term here translated as 'Parthians' occur, first *Ashghānī*, then *Ashkānī* (Ibn al-Nadīm 1934, ff. 264–265; Stewart 2014, 173–174).

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capacious signifying terrain in which people lay a variety of claims and derive a variety of benefits.

In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that in medieval Islamicate spheres and their postmedieval legacies, the rhetorics of possibility that Karnes references could be useful affective and political tools. This is especially stark in instances where imagination confronts the social present, pointing to its artifice and fictivity along axes of race, class, gender, ability, and so on by positing other worlds or futures. Arguably, this rhetoric is present in the Qurʾan itself. Its miraculous language is a 'wonder' that compels imagination and awe, and its inimitable style earned intensive theorisation in the medieval period (Harb 2020, 206–210). In 'Towards an African Qurʾanic Hermeneutics,' Michael Mumisa considers the social implications of the Qurʾan embedding semiotic obscurity. Qurʾanic descriptions of heaven as having aspects that no mortal has ever sensorily experienced, for example, suggest that Qurʾanic discussions of blackness and whiteness on the Day of Judgment transcend both our racial present and what the medieval exegetes often read as *majāz*, or figurative language, 'because majaz [sic] is something that can be understood here and now. These terms are used to refer to another world; a world that is beyond us' (Mumisa 2002, 73). Notably, what is at stake across medieval and modern commentaries is not the fictive possibility, or pleasurable uncertainty, of the unseen being real (it was known to be so)—but how one might undo one's analogical reasoning in the face of its deferred reality. Unknowability tells audiences something about their socialised imaginative limitations.

Across Islamicate narrative practices, worldly encounters with difference similarly led composers to play the sacred against the social imaginary. Thus, for example, the Arabic *sīra* (epic or romance) of the half-Abyssinian, pre-Islamic warrior-poet ʿAntara ibn Shaddād depicts him as a consummate monotheist who had 'certainty in the coming of the master of [prophetic] transmitters [namely, Muḥammad]' (*Sīrat ʿAntara ibn Shaddād*, v. II 292). 'Antara is shown consciously readying the earth for the Prophet's arrival—even praising him by name—despite constant resistance against his efforts on the part of his tribesmen and comrades because of 'Antara's racialised blackness and slave-born status. ʿAntara nonetheless prevails, becoming a noteworthy leader and exemplar; his children—prominently including his daughter—witness Muḥammad's message and fight in his wars (Kruk 2014, 146). Possibility here lies not in whether erstwhile heroes may have predicted and advanced the Prophet's cause (it was known that this was not so), but rather in the potential social and soteriological rewards of embracing pious Muslims who are othered both within and beyond the text. Its fictivity lies not only

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in its heroic, action-packed stories, but in the alternative sociabilities it displays.

Thus the religious epistemologies embedded in Islamicate contexts not only lent themselves to fictional cultural production by opening the door to possibility—they enhanced the enterprise's social worth. As Julie Orlemanski notes, often fiction and religion have been posed as opposites (Orlemanski 2019). In the paradigms she critiques, premodern Islamicate fictionality may seem a layered contradiction in terms. Yet, in the examples above, a scholarly account of fiction's history is fortified with divine appeal; scriptural sources destabilise social constructions; narrative transpositions of sacred time redress belonging in the community of the faithful.

The articles in this issue radically rethink Islamicate fictionality and its social worlds. Samantha Pellegrino undoes modern divisions between the occult, religion, and rational sciences, en route to showing how magically-modified gender in textual representation demonstrates the fictivity and performativity of gender in life. Allison Kanner-Botan demonstrates how the 'mad' Majnūn relates to the world of animals in ways that elicit embodied emulations from his human peers in the text, and perhaps discipline readers' comportments as well. Elizabeth Spragins and David Wacks respectively demonstrate that Aljamiado fiction enabled morisco readers to ideate the perfectibility of their religious practice in a society where this was impossible, and to access on their own terms a religious vernacular common also to their Christian and Jewish peers. Sylvia Wu traces how different lines of affiliation came together to construct a narrative of ancestral linkages between Iran and the East African coast. Following the tenth-century litterateur al-Tawḥīdī, Matthew Keegan theorises fiction as latent in relaying experience. This latency at once opened avenues to imagination and literariness in nominally 'eyewitness' accounts, and—alongside religious scholars who collated manifold chains of reportage to formulate tradition—recognised the fragmentariness of any individual instance of authorship or transmission. Turning to the present, S.J. Pearce showcases the entanglement of medieval narratives, the modern historiography that queries them, and contemporary novelisations that (re)inhabit 'queer medieval time.'

These essays treat liminal figures and estranging experiences that have pushed the boundaries of imaginative representation. Their arguments locate fiction not only in shared pleasure in manifold possibility, but in critical engagement with the attendant contingency of the social order and collective sensibility across time.

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The possibilities of impossibilities

Fictionality thus emerges in a dialectic between margin and center, between the power to articulate communal norms and the power to critique them. These negotiations often center the unsettling modes of being that fiction is uniquely able to articulate. In an often-quoted passage from his *History*, the Ghaznavid chronicler Bayhaqi (d. 1077) decries the masses of people who, instead of sober accounts, 'prefer impossible falsehood, like reports of the demons (*div*) and fairies (*pari*), and the ghouls of the desert and mountain and sea' (Bayhaqi 2004, 637). He adds to this disreputable catalog a story known from wondertales across the medieval world, of sailors who land on an island and begin to cook a meal, only to realise that they have disembarked on the back of an immense sea beast. For Bayhaqi, 'impossible falsehood' (*bātel-e momtane'*) is characterised by the fantastical entities it conjures. These include both parahumans who resemble proper historical subjects but possess uncanny qualities or abilities and monstrous animals that surpass the limits of observable nature.

Yet for all his lauded rationality (Yūsofī 1988), Bayhaqi was unable to keep such creatures out of his works. In a passage from a lost volume of his *History*, quoted by the later historian Jovayni (d. 1283), Bayhaqi describes an immense creature whose skin Sultan Mahmud (d. 1041) brought from India back to his capital of Ghazni (Jovayni 2003, 44). The word he uses for this animal is *azhdahā*, a term that the epic poet Ferdowsi had recently popularised to describe chimeric monsters. While the quoted length of the beast—thirty *gaz*, roughly sixty to one hundred feet—far exceeds the length of any living reptile, Bayhaqi insists that doubters need only visit the royal citadel of Ghazni to confirm this wonder with their own eyes. But the fortress already lay in ruins by the time Jovayni relayed Bayhaqi's report. Without the possibility of eyewitness validation, Bayhaqi's *azhdahā* slips back into the same category of beings he so denigrated: those whose existence is inseparable from verbal expression.

Scholars of the monstrous and supernatural have observed that fantastical creatures are essentially linguistic, intertextual, or cultural beings (Cohen 1996, 4; Jakobsson 2017, 62; Ron-Gilboa 2021, 78). They are fictional not merely in the sense of 'imaginary' but also in being constituted by, and in turn constitutive of, texts that transgress the orderly limits of quotidian experience. These boundaries are often represented as spatial, temporal, or both. Bayhaqi's impossible creatures inhabit 'desert and mountain and sea,' border zones that have historically resisted incorporation into state structures. Islamicate encyclopedists and romancers represented the denizens of the Indian Ocean and its islands as proof

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of creation's infinite capacity for wonders. In epic poems, popular tales, and authoritative histories alike, the past becomes a realm resistant to the rational standards that govern human perception of the present (Khan 2012, 542–544).

But while the past may be a foreign country, it is not a secondary world. Its inhabitants, places, and events bear genealogical relationships, however distant or attenuated, to those of the presents. The past's uncanniness, monsters, and magic therefore linger in any world and any identities that emerge from its narration as history. These linkages troubled medieval Islamicate historians, who pursued various strategies of reconciling bizarre but authoritative accounts with their observable reality. For Amirak Balʿami (d. c. 997), the *div*—the sorcerous ogres of Persian mythology whom Bayhaqi disdained—were undeniable presences in the primordial past. Balʿami seems to have considered them a type of *jinn*, intelligent and ethereal beings of Arabic tradition whose existence is certified in numerous Qur'anic references. Yet crucial as the *div* had been to foundational events of world history, such as the rebellion of Iblis (the Islamic Satan) and the establishment of kingship in Iran, they had clearly ceased to play such an active role in human affairs. Bal'ami thus proposed that at some point they had 'become hidden' (*penhān shod*), retreating into otherworldly or imaginal realms (Bal'ami 1962, 121; Lasman 2021, 43–44).

Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh* proposed other solutions. This immense epic of the pre-Islamic monarchs of Iran was massively popular across premodern Iran, Central Asia, India, and Anatolia. But as mentioned above, it occupied an ambiguous position with regards to fictionality, recognised both as a historical chronicle and as a treasury of fantastical beings and events. Ferdowsi himself plays with this dual awareness. Recounting the story of the Akvān Div (illustrated on the cover of this issue), he inserts an unusual aside: 'By '*div*,' you should understand 'evil person,' one who has no thanks for God. Anyone who strays from the path of mankind, count him among the *div*; do not count him among humans' (Ferdowsi 1992, vol. 3, 296–297). Here, Ferdowsi seems to anticipate a critique like Bayhaqi's and to counter it with the assertion that imaginary beings provide a metaphorical means for discussing the complexities of human existence. The figurative potential of Ferdowsi's fantastical beings—particularly the *simorgh*, the gryphon-like 'king of birds'—became elaborated in later mystical works like ʿAttār's *Conference of the Birds* (1177) and the *Red Wisdom* of Sohravardi (d. 1191). In these texts, questions of the *simorgh*'s 'reality' are inconsequential compared to the divine truths the creature instantiates.

Unlike the Akvān Div, however, Ferdowsi's myriad other monsters and parahumans aren't explicitly allegorised. At times, the poet opts for

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embodied descriptions of the fantastical, even when other modes of narration might have been available. After Iblis kisses the shoulders of the budding tyrant Zahhāk, voracious brain-eating snakes burst from the king's flesh (Ferdowsi 1987, vol. 1 50–51). This is the moment in the epic when that chimeric creature *azhdahā*—a term whose etymological connection to 'Zahhāk' Ferdowsi likely knew—emerges, unleashing a new type of hybrid monstrosity upon the world.

Writing a century before Ferdowsi, the historian al-Ṭabarī had also told of Zahhāk's wickedness. But rather than brain-eating snakes, al-Ṭabarī's Zahhāk has a much more prosaic ailment: a pair of aching cysts on his shoulders, which he must salve with an ointment of human gray matter (al-Ṭabarī 1966, 196). The character of Zahhāk goes back to Avestan scripture, and it seems likely that al-Ṭabarī was providing a rationalising take on a story that Ferdowsi later restored to its full original body horror. But the historian's euhemerism or rationalisation represents another position in ongoing negotiations over Islamicate fictionality as mediated by the bizarre beings of ancient times and distant places. As Kaveh Hemmat mentions in his article in this issue, later epic poets sometimes adopted al-Ṭabarī's cysts in their accounts of Zahhāk, even as they surrounded the tyrant with other monsters of their own devising.

Euhemerism could be a strategy of domesticating fantastical elements and leeching them of disruptive unreality. But it could also be a way of asserting the relationship between the wondering human mind and the capacious wonders of the natural world, *ʿajāʾib al-makhlūqāt wa gharāʾib al-mawjūdāt* ('marvels of creations and bizarrities of beings'). Under this and related titles, an expansive genre of encyclopedic works offered readers accounts of everything from the motion of the heavens to the habits of birds to the occult properties of stones to the nature of sea monsters.

When allied with imperialist ideologies, however, euhemerism could lend itself to explicitly harmful readings of Islamicate texts. Arthur de Gobineau (d. 1882), a key founding figure in the development of 'scientific' racism and far-right racial politics, avidly collected Persian epic poetry, claiming that narratives about the *div* represented conflicts between Aryan invaders and inferior indigenous populations—a view that can still be found lingering within segments of Indo-European Studies and other academic fields.

De Gobineau's misappropriations are a stark reminder of the ways in which the fantastical elements of Islamicate literature have lent themselves to colonialist and Orientalist perspectives. Antoine Galland's *Les mille et une nuits* (1701–1717) and William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) are key texts in the development of European Romanticism. But they also perpetuated a view of Islamicate cultures as decadent, superstitious, mired

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in the past, and ripe for conquest and exploitation by the Enlightened powers of the West. These views—and the genie-filled entertainments that promulgate them—remain potent into the present.

There is thus an urgent need for rigorous re-engagement with the fantastical beings and tropes of Islamicate literature. In this issue, many contributors have turned to these topics to think through questions of fictionality, rooting their analyses in premodern sources while opening new vistas of interpretation. In 'A monstrous king and a forged prophecy: Parody, invention, and social hierarchy in the *Kushnāmeh*,' Kaveh Hemmat demonstrates how the horrific form of a tyrant king opens a space for parodic metatextuality within Persian epic. Samantha Pellegrino's 'The gender of magic: Constructions of nonbinary gender categories in the *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*' explores ways in which the *jinn* and sorcerous women of an Egyptian popular saga disrupt gendered hierarchies through their deployment of occult powers. Amber Peters's review of several recent publications on the South Asian *qissa* highlights how the fantastic elements of these tales lay at the root of contentions over sectarian identity and modernity. And an original piece of fiction, 'The Simorgh and the Celestial Conjunction' by Tariq Mir, dramatises the appearance of a mythical creature in the densely historicised world of Timurid Samarqand, and the political and intellectual shockwaves that result.

In each of these pieces, 'impossible falsehoods' are recontextualised as opportunities to rethink the nature of possibility and its limits. Disclosing nonhuman subjectivities and wielding reality-breaking magics, the fantastical beings of premodern Islamicate fictions challenge both dominant constructions of the historical past and limited imaginations of the future's potential.

Conclusion

The following pages present myriad approaches to Islamicate fictionality across a range of languages, societies, eras, and textual forms. Their dynamics of divergence and convergence are reflected as well in this issue's roundtable. There, a dialogue between four scholars adds to the range of associations conjured both in fiction and in thinking about fiction. Moving beyond the canard that fictional writings could only ever be received as dissimulation in medieval Islamicate spheres, the authors address how everyday dissimulation—be it smuggling goods in disguise, blandishing a ruler, or telling an interconfessional big fish story—was a very real part of premodern experiences and encounters with which fiction frequently plays. They moreover come together around the key features of ambiguity

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and difference: fiction as that which is knowingly multiply interpretable, or that which reveals our world and ourselves to be so. Lastly, *postmedieval* editors Shazia Jagot and Julie Orlemanski both offer short responses that frame the contributions here within broader conversations.

An everyday dissimulation in the academy is the myth that groundbreaking work is produced in isolation. This issue unambiguously illustrates the contrary. We wish to thank the *postmedieval* team, the issue contributors, and the anonymous reviewers, all of whose tireless efforts and insights have constituted essential aspects of this issue.

Memorial note

As our work on this issue neared completion, we were very saddened to learn of the death of Franklin Lewis. Frank was a teacher, mentor, and dissertation committee member for all three of this issue's guest editors and a center of our scholarly community. We will dearly miss our conversations with him, all marked by the depth of his knowledge of Islamicate literatures, his quiet wit, and an understanding that touched us deeply. His kindness, humility, and humour will remain an example for us in all of our endeavors—within academia and beyond. His work on a vast array of Persianate literatures is foundational to our engagement with Islamicate fictionalities, as researchers, writers, and educators. Frank was also an early supporter of and participant in the Great Lakes Adiban Society, a group which has served as an incubator for much of the scholarship featured in these pages. In honor of Frank's countless contributions, we would like to dedicate this issue to his memory.

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