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Doing History at 90

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I begin with heartfelt thanks to all those who have made possible this gathering of friends and colleagues—the Department of History at Princeton, the Davis Center of Historical Studies, the Institute for Advanced Study, and Angela Creager and Francesca Trivellato especially. I carry, too, the memory of those who were part of my scholarly life at Princeton and are no longer with us: Lawrence Stone, Carl Schorske, Clifford Geertz, Suzanne Keller, Charles Gillespie, and now added to their number, Theodore Rabb.

I want to give you an inkling of the joys of doing history at age 90. Back in the 1980s, I was encouraged at such possibilities when the amazing Arnaldo Momigliano gave a lecture to the Department of History in Dickinson Hall. He was in his mid-seventies, though appeared older, like so many Europeans who had lived through World War II. As he held us enthralled by his new perspectives on ancient biography, I thought, “the historical quest goes on for us. It doesn’t stop.”

And lo, I’ve found this to be true even at 90. I am still fascinated by stories from the past, both those that have a familiar ring and those full of surprises. I am still engrossed in the sources left to us from the past—whether they be eighteenth-century plantation inventories, sixteenth-century travel accounts, or twelfth-century Latin and Arabic commentaries on Aristotle’s *Poetics*. I still love the challenge of trying to find evidence for difficult questions, such as what kinds of plays were put on by villagers in sixteenth-century Morocco—to cite a current concern. And I am still hoping to do history that matters, by which I mean not only history that might be useful for other historians, as theirs is so often for me, but also history that might bear somehow upon present day concerns, that might provide an interesting stance or perspective from which to view events in our own time.

As an example, I would like to tell you of my continuing work on the sixteenth-century Muslim known as Leo Africanus, and its move from the printed page to the theatrical stage. Hasan al-Wazzan, to give his birth name, was born in late fifteenth-century Granada just as that Muslim region was falling under the control of Catholic Spain. Brought up and educated in Fez, he became a diplomat for the Sultan of Fez and in that capacity traveled widely in North and sub-Saharan Africa and in the Ottoman empire. In 1518, captured by Christian pirates on the Mediterranean, he was taken to Pope Leo X, and imprisoned until he converted—at least on the outside—to Christianity, and was given the name Giovanni Leone (whence Johannes Leo Africanus). He spent the next decade in Italy, teaching Arabic and writing books about Africa and the world of Islam, the most important of which, *The Description of Africa*, eventually

became a European best-seller. He wove his own life into its story, comparing himself at one point to an amphibious bird, who flew between Europe and North Africa. In 1527, he returned to North Africa and Islam.

Wazzan appealed to me initially as an example of experimentation, cross-cultural and personal, which differed from that of the impostor Martin Guerre and my seventeenth-century “women on the margins.” Then happened the attack on the Twin Towers. The world was suddenly divided as it had been in the sixteenth century, when the Ottoman Turk, leader of the Muslim world, and the European Christians were at war. In the midst of that violence, Wazzan used his position to tell Europeans about a Muslim world that was not a dwelling for Satan, but a human place with the good and the bad. He tried to further a pattern in which Christians and Muslims communicated with each other rather than killing each other. After 9/11, it seemed to me that the story of Wazzan/Leo Africanus could really matter. His book had not stopped the violence, but it kept alive an alternate way of imagining a relationship. I wanted to tell that story. Moreover, as a Jew opposed to Israeli ethnocracy and occupation, I wanted to learn and write about the Arab/Muslim world of the sixteenth century.

So I plunged into the research and five years later appeared *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds*. I was especially happy when the book was read in Muslim lands. To be sure, there was a split in opinion when I presented the project early along at Bir Zeit University in Palestine, with the male historians doubting that I had a right to such a subject, and the women historians urging me on. But later I could have a lively discussion about the book, now available in French, with students at Rabat in Morocco, and could rejoice that the book appeared in Turkish and is now underway in Arabic translation. Like Wazzan, I sought a pattern of communication, not hostility.

Meanwhile in 2007, I got a call from the Stratford Ontario International Shakespeare Festival: the directors wanted to commission an adaptation of *Trickster Travels* for production on the stage. I was thrilled, thinking how different Wazzan’s story could be from that of *Othello*. Soon after, I saw the play *Scorched* (or *Incendies* in its French original) by the Lebanese-French-Québécois playwright/director Wajdi Mouawad. *Scorched* is set during the war in Lebanon, though that country is never mentioned, and is a tragic exploration of violence and injustice and their costs. I knew Wajdi would understand why I had written *Trickster Travels*. Indeed, he did, and agreed to write a play for Stratford.

Once we met to talk of the project, Wajdi told me that since I had already written the historical book, there was no need to simply adapt it as a play. Instead, he was interested in me and why I had written *Trickster Travels*. He got me talking about my past, my politics, and my marriage to a non-Jew, which had caused such furor in my own family. My only request to him, whatever he wrote, was to include Wazzan and some Arabic in the play. Wajdi told me of his own mixed relation to his mother tongue, the fraught language of family quarrels. All his previous plays and poetry had been in French. But he would think about it, especially since he had a character tucked away in his mind for years, a beautiful young Arab-American woman living in New York.

Wajdi’s play, *Tous des Oiseaux* (*All of us Birds, Birds of a Kind*), opens in the library of

Columbia University where Wahida, a beautiful Arab-American woman is working on her PhD thesis on Hasan al-Wazzan/Leo Africanus. She is approached by a German-Israeli graduate student, Eitan, who has long been taken with her. They fall in love and approach his family for a blessing—only to receive a ferocious rejection from Eitan’s father David, a passionate Zionist haunted by the Holocaust. The action then moves to Jerusalem, where against the loudspeaker sounds of Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Wahida and Eitan turn to his grandparents—only to dislodge family secrets that complicate matters of identity even further. Wazzan appears at several junctures, conjured by Wahida’s imagination—first as a silent helper and facilitator, then toward the end in compelling speeches, using the image of the amphibious bird to urge David to embrace a self with mixed identities. The play ends tragically—spoiler—but not without a note of hope for the destiny and courage of the young.

I loved Wajdi’s scenario: we had talked of it as he wrote it, and I had made little suggestions here and there. I found it on the whole expressive of a spirit that we shared, especially in regard to the imbricating destinies of Israelis and Palestinians, of Arabs and Jews. Wajdi then made an exciting leap in the language of the play: he had written it in French, but decided to have it performed in the languages actually spoken by the characters to each other—in Hebrew, Arabic, German, and English—with French surtitles for the audience. He had the script translated into these languages and cast the play accordingly, with multilingual Israelis, Arabs, and Germans (only Wazzan—played by a Syrian refugee actor—spoke a single tongue). By now Wajdi had become director of the Théâtre de la Colline, one of France’s national theaters, and Stratford gave its permission for the play to premiere there.

I had wondered how a French audience would react to the play’s themes, with their contemporary political resonance. In fact, it was a huge success: full houses every night for the months of the run, rave reviews in the press from *Figaro* to *l’Humanité*, and voted the best play of the 2017–2018 season by the French theatre critics. How did we get away with it, I asked myself. Was it Wajdi’s staging? The convincing performance of the actors? (The grandmother was played by Leora Rivlin, one of Israel’s greatest actors. Never will I forget her look and cries of horror as she watches the massacres at Sabra and Shatila on the screen. The Lebanese-French newspaper at Paris named her woman of the year, along with a young Palestinian, imprisoned in Israel.)

Wajdi is now deep in other plays, but has reflected on how *Tous des Oiseaux* intersected with his own sense of identity—not fixed, centered inward on the self, but a constant movement outward. He recalled how he, a Maronite Christian, had been brought up with an *esprit de clan*, a spirit found throughout Lebanon, where the other was the enemy—and where one shed one’s own responsibility for wrongdoing. He tried to challenge this *esprit de clan* through his theatre, through his portrayal of Muslims in *Incendies* and now through Israelis in *Tous des Oiseaux*. Wazzan, who had become at least for a time a companion of his enemies, served him well.

As for me, a special joy of doing history at 90 is my association with this play and its author Wajdi Mouawad—and the thought that its story is reaching so many people. (A new production is now taking place through October at the Stratford Ontario Shakespeare Festival—called *Birds of Kind*—in case any of you are inclined to see it).

Has consulting on the play affected my historical practice? Collaborating on the *Martin Guerre* film years ago had made me think anew about how persons take on identity and encouraged me to experiment with my own historical writing. *Tous des Oiseaux* has had some of the same consequences. When I met Jalal al-Tawil at rehearsals, I had the uncanny feeling that Hassan al-Wazzan had come alive again. Jalal had been in a Syrian prison for his political activism, rather than a Vatican fortress, and was finally released and able to leave Syria without a public retraction of his views. But he took to al-Wazzan. I was struck by the calm dignity Jalal brought to the role, unleashing force only when he began to talk of the pleasure of moving between worlds.

Most of all, the play turned me toward theater history. I had talked of poetry in *Trickster Travels*, both the Arabic poetry practiced by Wazzan and that which he met in Italy once he learned Italian and Latin. But I never thought about theater, even though some of the most brilliant expressions of Renaissance comedy were on stage or much talked about during Wazzan's Italian years. I'm now finishing a little book entitled *Leo Africanus Discovers "Comedy"*. At the start I had a challenge: drama scholars and even modern Egyptian actors were claiming that Arabic theatre had begun only in 1847, when a play modeled after Molière's *L'Avare* was put on in Beirut.

I knew, as a long-time historian of popular culture, that this could not be true. Sure enough, more recent research has unearthed a long history of popular theatre, originating both in story-telling circles and in shamanic practice and expanding from pre-Islamic times despite the disapproval of some imams. At sultans' courts, jesters and buffoons mimed little playlets; at feast-days, costumed villagers acted out stories of marital discord; and actors put on plays in simple verse in courtyards, plazas, and city streets, sometimes hawking remedies and other goods as well. Along the way emerged shadow puppet shows, mounted at nights with sheets and torches. Indeed, this was the one genre that attracted a serious poet, Ibn Daniyal in the late thirteenth century, who used intricate verse forms for puppet plays quite astonishing in their frank sexual reach. Ibn Daniyal is an isolated example though: most Arab poets would think only of reciting or singing their beautiful *qasidas*, their odes, or their amusing *ahjiya*, poems of derision. Attacking the quality of another poet's verse, a fourteenth-century poet said it sounded like "the foolish jumbled verses in scenes from live plays and shadow puppet shows."

Wazzan says something of this theatre in his *Description of Africa*, using the Italian word *ciurmatore*—a current term for street actors/hawkers—to describe groups of performers in Fez and Cairo who seemed similar to those he had seen in the piazzas of Rome and Venice.

But let me conclude with two plays that Wazzan seems to have seen in Italy in 1520, quite different from those back home. The first is the Easter Passion play, put on in Rome every year at the Coliseum. As Arabic theatre had developed in indifference to the reproach of imams, so medieval Italian theater had emerged despite the critique Augustine had made of the pagan temptations of drama. Especially important were the *sacre rappresentazione* that lay people had created from their musical ballads, sometimes with the help of their priests. The annual Passion Play was mounted by the prestigious Confraternity of the Gonfalone. Wazzan's godfather, an important cardinal, would have insisted that Giovanni Leone (as he called Wazzan) come with

him for this sacred viewing. There Wazzan would have seen the actor playing Jesus scourged and somehow nailed to the cross, and then angels being lowered by an iron contraption from on high to remove him from the cross. He would have seen Gonfalone brothers flagellating themselves and throwing fruit and other objects at the actors playing the Jews. He would have seen the brothers leaving the Coliseum bearing Jesus and processing to the Jewish quarter to stone the houses there.

Even if intrigued by the iron contraption, this would have been a shocking performance for Wazzan on several counts. It enacted a belief that no Muslim could accept: Jesus was a Prophet, not a son of God, and had not died on the cross, but was living with God until he returned with the Mahdi at the end of time. Furthermore, religious theatre was beyond the bounds for Sunni Muslims. Stories of Muhammad and the Prophets recited to a circle of listeners in the Fez square were fine. But the excess of re-enactment was unacceptable. (The heretical Shia, as Wazzan called them, had not yet developed their full-scale dramatic representations of the Battle of Karbala and the slaying of the Iman Husayn—so Wazzan would have thought of religious theater as an unfortunate Christian invention or perhaps associated it with the masked religious re-enactments he had heard about in sub-Saharan Africa).

A second theatrical surprise awaited Wazzan, but this one he would have enjoyed. In the fall of 1520, Pope Leo X arranged a performance of Machiavelli's *Mandragola* (The Mandrake Root) at the Vatican palace, and insisted that all his cardinals be in the audience with other notables of Rome. It seems likely that Wazzan came at his godfather's side. You'll perhaps recall the plot: how Callimaco, returned to Florence from his studies in Paris, is smitten by the sight of the beautiful Lucrezia, wife of the elderly lawyer Nicia; how the matchmaker Ligurio works out a plot to get Callimaco into Lucrezia's bed by the story of the mandrake root. Nicia, eager for an heir but unable to get his wife pregnant, is told by Callimaco that if she imbibes the mandrake root, she's sure to conceive. The only problem is that supposedly the first man who has sex with her will die. Nicia accepts the solution offered by Callimaco and the matchmaker: they'll find a lout to do the job, whose subsequent death will go unnoticed. Lucrezia is talked into taking the root by a bribed priest, Callimaco comes to her, and she is delighted by what goes on—"what my husband wanted for one night, I want to have forever." The tricked husband happily thinks of his future heir, gives Callimaco a key to the house, and the play ends with everyone in church.

Wazzan would not have found the story strange—he tells a tricked-husband story in his Africa book, and there are many more in the Arabic literature. What would have been new to him was "erudite comedy," as it is called by theater historians, that is, comedy written by literary men who follow the rules for classical drama—as contrasted with the popular plays and put on the piazzas. The *Mandragola* was one of the steps in a process that was not matched for several centuries in Wazzan's world, where lively theater remained the province of the actors and puppeteers and their improvisations. (To be sure, this meant that Arabic theater could be less dependent on the whims of sultans and political patrons.) In any case, Wazzan would have been struck by the elaborate setting for this funny story, with the painted backdrop of Florence, and by the eminent men gathered to see such a play. How would the cadis and imams of Cairo react to such an event?

Wazzan has not left us his thoughts here, but his *Description of Africa* did provide his readers

with an echo of *The Mandrake Root*. It's found in a botanical account which, in light of the success of Machiavelli's comedy, the trickster bird Giovanni Leone/Wazzan knew Europeans would love. At the very end of his 900-page manuscript, he wrote: The Surnag Root:

This root grows in the Atlas Mountains on its western slope. The people there say that the [Surnag] root has great *virtù* (one of Machiavelli's favorite words!) and gives an erection to a man's organ and multiplies the times he can have intercourse if he takes it in a potion. And they say that any maiden who happens to piss on this root suddenly loses her virginity through its *virtù*...But this author believes that such a story was made up by some ribald rogue, who had penetrated a virgin and used it as an excuse so as not to shame her before her parents when she got pregnant.

Wazzan bids farewell to his European readers with this account, and so I bid farewell to you, my dear listeners. But not before I report the final joy of doing history at 90. It is the immense pleasure of reading the work of the younger generations of historians—including those in this room. You are taking our historical understanding in directions of which I never dreamed, and I thank you for these gifts as will those that come after you.

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