Al-Jawa‘ib Press and the edition and transmission of Arabic manuscript texts in the 19th century

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The Danish scholar Johannes Pedersen, in his standard work on Arabic book production in the manuscript era,1 devoted a final chapter to the transition from manuscripts to printing. In it he considered the nature of the Arabic books printed in the Middle East in the initial period, corresponding roughly to the 19th century. In pursuance of the main theme of his book, he paid particular attention to printed editions of classical texts, from manuscript sources. His view of them was not favourable: “the exterior appointments of books printed in the Orient are often very poor. The paper, commonly yellow in color, is often coarse and loose, and the type is frequently indistinct. As a rule the words are set very close together, which makes reading difficult.” Furthermore “the procedure adopted for the publication of early literature has quite simply been the same as for the copying of a manuscript. The book would be set according to a single manuscript, the typesetter taking the copyist’s place and the publisher the corrector’s. When the corrector found something that seemed to him to be wrong, he corrected it. For this reason many divergences can sometimes be found between different editions of the same work.”2 Probably few would dissent from this general assessment of 19th-century Arab text editions. But he then went on to say that “only in recent years [writing in the 1940s] have there appeared some indications of a change in this,” and he cites as one of the first such manifestations the 1927 edition of the Kitāb al-Aghani, published in Cairo, which he considered “a great advance.”3

What follows is an attempt to show that the beginnings of this advance are to be found somewhat earlier. In 1870 a new Arabic press was started in Istanbul, entitled Masā‘ul al-Jawa‘ib, and this, I shall seek to demonstrate, played in some respects a pioneering role in the development of new standards for the publication of classical texts in the Middle East.

There was a general tendency in the Arab and Muslim world in the mid-19th century to regard printed editions merely as mechanically reproduced manuscripts. In the early catalogues of the Egyptian state (Khedivial) library, for example, manuscript and printed texts were not usually distinguished.4 This practice was no doubt reinforced by their appearance and presentation. As Pedersen

2 Pedersen 1984, The Arabic Book, 139-141.
and others have observed, early printed editions in the Arab world generally followed the traditional styles of presentation established for manuscript texts. A typical example (fig.1) is the Maqāmāt of al-Hariri, with the commentary of al-Sharifī, printed at the Bīlāq press in Egypt in 1867. The text of the maqāma appears in the outer margin, with the commentary in the inner text block. The words being commented upon appear in brackets, which would correspond to rubrication, or other form of emboldening, in a manuscript. In other 19th-century printed editions, as Pedersen pointed out, the layout could be rather more complex than this; sometimes the text and commentary were both printed in the margin, with a supercommentary in the main text-block; or the former might appear within parentheses embodied within the text of the latter. Another not uncommon practice was to place in the margin not a commentary but a quite separate work related only by its broad subject-matter.

The number of words on the page illustrated in fig. 1 is 542; the size of the page is 462 cm². This gives a density of about 1.17 words per cm². For Arabic this is quite high; it is achieved by minimizing the spaces between words and restricting the blank margins to fairly small widths. The paper used is quite coarse, and this has prevented a really clean impression from the types: the overall effect is rather blotchy and indistinct: although readable, it is not easy on the eye. These characteristics were repeated across most of the books printed at the Bīlāq press and other contemporary presses in Egypt, Turkey and elsewhere. These books were acceptable to dedicated readers reared in the scholarly scribal tradition, to which they presented a reasonably familiar appearance.

But the multiplication of texts by printing was creating the possibility of a new kind of reader, perhaps educated in the new schools, which were also being created in the mid-19th century. These readers were not ʿulamāʾ: they were part of a new, more secular kind of reading class, which turned to literature, both classical and modern, for entertainment and information. They needed a new kind of book, which would use print technology to transform manuscript texts into something easier to read, assimilate and consult. At the same time they wanted texts that were reliable and conveyed as nearly as possible what the original authors had written. Only in this way could a new educated Arab and Muslim public recover and reassimilate its literary heritage.

The Jarāʾīl Press in Istanbul was one of the first in Muslim hands to attempt to provide these desiderata. The founder of the press was Ahmad Fāris Efendi, perhaps better known by his original Christian name of Fāris al-Shidyāq. He was born in Lebanon in 1805 or 1806 into a Maronite family of scribes, and worked as a copyist in his youth, cultivating a semi-calligraphic style for the purpose. This can be seen, for instance, in a copy of al-Zuwāriz’s commentary on the

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day-to-day running of the press; but we do not know whether he did any text editing. In fact, we know the names of only two editors who worked on classical texts published at Mattā'at al-Jawa'īb. One is the Palestinian scholar Yussuf al-Nabhān (1849-1932). His name appears in five of the text editions as editor (mudaffaf). He had been educated at al-Azhar in Cairo and worked for a time on the editorial staff of al-Jawa'īb. He was later to become a judge in Syria and Lebanon and a prolific writer on Hadith, Sufism and other popular religious subjects.19

The other is Rasiil al-Najārī, who is mentioned in only one case (the Diwan of al-Tughra'i, 1882); but his descendant Haydar al-Najārī nearly 100 years later insisted that he had edited others, including one of the largest and most important, the Diwan of al-Balātari, 1882.20

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Let us now consider some of the physical characteristics of these Jawa'īb press editions.

In the first place, all of them have title-pages. Not only was this not the normal practice in Arabic manuscripts, but title-pages in the modern sense were also unusual in 19th-century Arabic printed books up to this time. Those that did appear did not often present the information as systematically as the Jawa'īb Press normally did, that is: title – author’s name – edition (first, second, etc.) – name of the Press – place of publication – date. Faris almost certainly adopted this practice as a result of his acquaintance with European books, and with producing Arabic books for European publishers, earlier in his career. As already mentioned, some of the Jawa'īb Press books were majmu'as, and in those cases the title-pages were rather more complicated (fig. 2). Not only were the titles listed on the main title-page, but there were sometimes separate additional title-pages for each work, which might carry different dates, although they were issued together. In this particular respect the press fell short of modern bibliographical norms. Most of the editions also have tables of contents, with page numbers, often quite detailed. These helped readers to refer to books as well as just reading them, which had been much more difficult with manuscripts.

At the beginning of the text, many earlier printed editions had imitated manuscripts by including decorative munāsas, made from engraved blocks or elaborate combinations of fleurons or other typographic ornaments. But the Jawa'īb Press generally dispensed with these, leaving just a small blank area at the head of the text. This was more in accordance with modern book design, but individual owners could provide their own decorations if they wished.

Turning now to the appearance of the pages of text, we find that when Faris published his own lexicographical work (al-Jāzīs 'a'dh al-Qimās) he adopted quite

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16 Alwan 1977, “The history and publications,” 5. His bibliography, promised in this article, was never published. However, a catalogue was issued by the Press itself, at the end of its existence: Faris, Pasha, al-Jawa'īb, 1888.
a conservative appearance, with text border, words relatively closely set and
headwords overlined in the traditional manner. He does, however, provide run-
ning heads, with the title of the book and the title of the section: this was an in-
novative, modern aid to readers of Arabic books.

With classical texts he went further, and often adopted page designs which
marked a distinct break with the previous norms of both manuscripts and earlier
printed books. In the 1890 edition of the Rasa’il of Badr al-Zamín al-
Hamadhaní, for example (fig. 3), the margins are generous; so is the word
spacing, and so also is the line spacing. The density of words per square centimetre
here is 0.68—little over half that in the Bulqás press book mentioned above (fig.
1). The result is a balance of black and white on the page which is pleasing to the
eye. Furthermore the layout of text and headings is much more systematic and
easier to read and construe. This can reasonably be regarded as a forerunner of
modern Arabic book design.

Marginal commentaries are conspicuous by their absence. Usually commen-
taries were omitted and these mainly literary texts were allowed to speak for
themselves. But if one was thought desirable, then it was generally printed as a
separate section of the book, following the main text, as in the 1882 edition of
Durrat al-ghawwází by al-Ḥarírí, which has the Sharh of al-Kháfí printed as an
appendix.

The type-faces followed Ottoman muhtásí norms, and avoided the "alien forms"
(shabí gháríb), as Fáris called them, of European Arabic books. But they are rather
more elegant than many of their contemporaries and predecessors; and the
printed words appear much clearer. One of the main reasons for this was the use
of higher-grade paper, allowing a cleaner impression. Also, Fáris had practical
experience of printing processes in his earlier career, and probably insisted on
high standards from both his compositors and his pressmen. In some texts in-
tended for use in schools, such as Maydaní’s Nuzhat al-tarf fi ‘ilm al-tarf (1881),
barakát (vocalisation marks) were used. They were skillfully and elegantly in-
serted, without excessive visual intrusion.

In one respect Maḥbúb at al-Jawá‘í did not break with tradition: every book has
the traditional tapered colophon, with statement of authorship, sometimes edi-
torship, and press and date of printing given in the time-honoured manner.

In his earlier days at the Malta press, Fáris nearly always provided, at the end,
a list of corrigenda, as in his edition of Farhát’s Babk al-mátálíb (Malta, 1836).
But they do not generally feature in his Istanbul editions of classical texts. It is
not clear why this is so — maybe he was so confident of the accuracy of his com-
positors, and of his proof-reading, that he believed that all errors had been
eliminated.

The Jawá‘í Press was one of the first in the Muslim world to adopt the Euro-
pean idea of a printer’s device or insignia (fig. 4). Incorporating the name of the
press and the date of its foundation, with the Ottoman crescent and star, it
generally appeared on the last leaf of the book, and also on the cover. Many of
these books were issued in publisher’s bindings of cloth or roan, gilt embossed.
This was yet another modernizing innovation, and it served to present books,
including the classics, as standardized, mass-produced consumer commodities —
a distinct break from scribal culture.

Let us now consider the texts themselves. How were they prepared for publica-
tion? In the way that texts were identified and edited, the Jawá‘í Press was some-
thing of a Janus: seen from our vantage point, it faced two ways, backwards and
forwards. As Witikam has observed, the manuscript exemplars used in 19th-
century printed editions generally remain unmentioned, or references to them
are so general that they cannot be identified.21 Nor is any apparatus criticus pro-
vided. The editing procedures cannot therefore be reconstructed, and such editions
are just another part of the chain of transmission, often contaminated by the
editorial merging of textual variants.

Many of the Jawá‘í Press editions, too, fall into this category. Fáris was not
trained in any of the European schools of scholarly editing, such as that of
Lachmann. Nevertheless, it does seem from external, and sometimes internal
evidence that he and his colleagues did take considerable care to establish sound
texts, even if they generally do not say how they did so. Often it is stated in the
colophon that two or more manuscripts were used and compared, but without
identifying them or their variations.22

But occasionally we do get a glimpse of their actual sources and methods.
Sometimes a manuscript is mentioned on the title-page: in the case of the Diván
of Bulũrus (1883), it is said to be a vocalised copy, of the “utmost accuracy and
no location is given (in fact it was in the Köprüli Library). A later editor of this
work, Hasan Kamíl al-Sayrání, who used no fewer than 15 manuscripts, from
the 40 of whose existence he was aware, was highly critical of this edition, which he
claimed was stuffed with al-taṣrif wa al-tahcríf, despite the accuracy of its exem-
plar.23 Fáris would have been mortified to read this; but perhaps the blame
should be laid at the door of Rasúl al-Najár, to whom, as we have seen, this edi-
tion has been attributed.24

More information was sometimes given in colophons. In that of the 1880 edi-
tion of the Maqámat of al-Hamadhaní (fig. 5), for example, Yusuf al-Nabhání
tells us that he edited the text accurately and precisely from a manuscript in the
library of Aya Sofya, written by Aynad b. al-Suhrawárdí in the year 692

24 Najár 1981, [Review], 54-55.
[1293], with the library mark of al-Malik al-Mu'azzam Zahir al-Din, and another in "old handwriting" in the Nuruosmaniye Library, which, although not of the first rank in terms of accuracy and editing, nevertheless contains magāmis omitted from the first one. He goes on to explain how he introduced these extra texts, while taking as much care as possible not to alter the original; also some extra anecdotes (mulāh) of the author found only in the Suhrawardi manuscript. The titles of the magāmis he says he invented himself, since none were found in either copy. He does not elucidate these matters in the text itself, nor does he provide any annotations to the text. Nevertheless we can perhaps see here the beginnings of a more modern scholarly approach to the editing and publishing of classical manuscript texts by Muslim scholars. It marked a definite departure from some of the earlier deficiencies which Pedersen and Witkam have described, and pointed the way to higher standards in the twentieth century.

Finally, we must consider briefly the effect which these editions had on contemporary and later readers and connoisseurs of classical Arabic literature. In the first place, it seems likely that they found a significantly wider readership than previous editions, and certainly much wider than for manuscript copies. Unfortunately we have no figures for the numbers of copies printed, but Alwan 1977, 7 suggests 3000 as a likely normal edition size. This compares with a range of 500-1000 for the classical texts published at Bulaq (which were mostly privately sponsored). The Jawālib Press editions were also better publicized and distributed, by announcements in al-Jawālib itself and through agents in Egypt and elsewhere. Prices were also moderate, generally not exceeding 30 piastres: in this respect also they compared favorably with Bulaq editions.27

This relatively wide availability and accessibility, to students as well as more prosperous readers, gave them a significant role in the revival of classical literature among both contemporaries and later generations. The writer and historian Muhammad Kurd 'Ali, for instance, wrote in 1922:

Fāris [...] published a number of books of adab, language and poetry, such as the works of [...] Tha'alibi, Tawhīdī, Tuhfāt, Badī' and other leading writers. He published them in the finest manner which gave pleasure throughout the Arab countries, and he offered them at very low prices, so that the benefit was widely spread, and students of literature began to vie with them in style. People have continued until this day to compete for the printed editions of al-Jawālib press, bibliophiles have collected them, and generations of readers have made use of them.28

More than forty years later, another Arab historian could still write: "the letters of that [al-Jawālib] press are distinguished by beauty, accuracy and the rarity of errors on the printed page."29

These editions thus gave a significant impetus both to the transition from scribal to print culture and to the revival of the classical heritage. In many parts of the Muslim world, there had been an intermediate stage: lithography. Lithographic copies were considered to be, and in many respects actually were, essentially manuscripts, of which multiple identical copies could be issued. As such, they were initially preferred by conservative 'ulama' and students. For most of the 19th century, this method had been prevalent in Morocco, Iran, South and South East Asia, and made some inroads also in Egypt and Turkey. But around the turn of the century typography began to reassert itself, and this was at least partly because of the increased prestige of the Ottoman, and later Egyptian typographic presses.30 This in turn was due to the higher standards of book production then introduced. The Jawālib Press, because of its pioneering role in adopting such standards, and the wide distribution of its products in the Muslim world, played a crucial part in this. Only when typographic editions had displaced lithographic copies could the scribal era be truly said to have ended.

In the pre-print era, much importance was given to the character and reputation of the transmitters of texts, whether orally or scribally; with printed books, this role passed to publishers, and trust in their reliability and accuracy became of equivalent importance.31 The Jawālib Press, by earning that trust, as well as by its innovations in making texts readable and attractive, helped to consolidate the place of printing as the normal means of transmitting sound classical Arabic texts hitherto available only in manuscripts.

Bibliography


29 Wheeler 1999, *Yunususumin*, 16; cf. also Mahdi 1995, "From the manuscript age," 5: "printed books came to represent a degree of solidarity and authority that went far beyond [that] of the manuscript copy or copies of the same book."


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