

# From Arabic to Persian and Halfway Back Again

## Pleasantries

Thank you all for being here. I'm especially grateful to the faculty and students of the NELC department for showing me such hospitality. It's a bit late to wish people a happy Nowruz, but I can at least say that I hope you're all enjoying a good start to year 1402 in the Solar Hijri calendar. And of course I want to wish everyone a blessed Ramadan. Finally, I dedicate this lecture to the memory of my Doktorvater, Franklin Lewis, who passed away last September.

## General introduction

My topic today is a medieval Persian rendition of *Kalīla and Dimna*—the book of animal fables that became one of the great phenomena in premodern world literature. The version of this book that is the focus of much of my current research was written around the year 540/1146 by Abū al-Maʿālī Naṣr Allāh Munshī, a bureaucrat at the court of the Ghaznavid sultanate, which was based in the region of modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Naṣr Allāh took it upon himself to translate *Kalīla and Dimna* into Persian from the Arabic text attributed to the eighth-century author Ibn al-Muqaffa<sup>c</sup>, and to produce, along with this work of translation, one of most adorned renditions of the fables ever written in any language. The result was, as far as we can tell, an instant classic—a landmark work of Persian prose literature.

*Kalīla and Dimna* was a book that had considerable appeal to begin with. It is a collection of captivating fables involving animal characters who speak and conspire against one another, and the stories could be read both for entertainment value and for the ethical and practical lessons that they impart (a duality known as *al-jidd wa-l-hazl* in the Arabic tradition).

The translation by Naṣr Allāh Munshī became the dominant version of *Kalīla and Dimna* in Persian—a position that it would hold for over three centuries. The text was copied frequently—we have two extant manuscripts from the twelfth century CE, and many from after that—and it was often illustrated.

But the story of this work—including Naṣr Allāh’s authorly program, the literary character of the text, and its reception—is not as straightforward as one might imagine. What I hope to accomplish in this talk is, at once, to give an introduction to Naṣr Allāh’s version of *Kalīla and Dimna*, and to discuss a few of the ways in which assessing its place in classical Persian literary history turns out to be complicated.

Before I can do that, however, I need to draw attention to a broader problem that has affected my field—that is, classical Persian literary history—which adds to the difficulty of contextualizing a work such as Naṣr Allāh Munshī’s *Kalīla and Dimna*.

## **Orienteering problems**

To put the problem simply, our field does not have a well-developed discourse for the history of classical Persian prose literature. And the boundaries of that category—perhaps even its validity—are far from clearly defined. This can be recognized by drawing a comparison to the stronger position of the history of classical Persian poetry.

Any well-trained Persianist should be comfortable reciting an overview of the development of the poetic tradition across the medieval period. We can trace an arc from Rūdakī, in the tenth century CE, to Ḥāfiẓ in the fourteenth. We can say that classical Persian poetry began with the age of the panegyric ode (*qaṣīda*), the quatrain (*du-bayti*), and epic or historical verse, exemplified by the *Shāhnāma*. We can then follow, from the twelfth century onward, the rise of

the verse romance (in *masnavī* form), practiced most famously by Niẓāmī Ganjavī; and the mystical verse narrative, as elaborated by Sanāʿī, ʿAṭṭār, and Rūmī. Finally, we can point to the emergence of the love lyric (*ghazal*), which began to rise to prominence in the twelfth century, and was developed to near-perfection by Saʿdī and Rūmī in the thirteenth century, and by Ḥāfiz in the fourteenth.

This brief outline could be the basis for a survey course in classical Persian poetry: the first five centuries, Rūdakī through Ḥāfiz. (In fact, Wheeler Thackston wrote a textbook that could be used for such a course.) It becomes more complicated to give an account of how the poetic tradition evolved from the fifteenth century onward; and there is, of course, endless room to debate the canonical perspective on the earlier periods. But at least we *have* a clear narrative arc to anchor our sense of the history of Persian poetry—a framework to build upon, or to build against.

No such standard arc exists for the history of classical Persian prose. It is worth emphasizing the starkness of this difference. On the side of poetry, I would expect any graduate student concentrating in Persian literature to be able to discuss the developments that I mentioned a moment ago. On the side of prose, however, it is an open question what kinds of text a trained Persianist will have studied. Many researchers in our field make occasional use of biographical anthologies (*tazkiras*) as sources on the lives of poets. Some scholars develop an interest in “mirrors for princes” texts. Some find themselves referring to historical chronicles. But there is little idea of a broadly agreed-upon canon, and, again, no “master narrative” of literary development rising above the level of a specific genre.

The reasons for this state of affairs are complex. To discuss the problem in detail would require a lecture in itself. For the moment, I will mention a few of what I see as barriers to a shared understanding of classical Persian prose literature.

### **Genre fragmentation**

First, there is a problem that we might call “genre fragmentation.” Is it possible to define an overarching category of prose literature in the premodern Persian tradition? I mean in the sense in which we can speak of Persian poetry in general, while acknowledging that there is a diversity of forms and genres. With prose, it is not easy to answer this question in the affirmative. The reality in our field is that prose works of different kinds are studied in largely separate niches.

Perhaps the dominant genre in Persian prose literature in the early medieval period is historical writing. We have, for example, Bal‘amī’s famous tenth-century adaptation of the history of al-Ṭabarī; and, from the eleventh century, the anonymous *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*. There is excellent scholarship on premodern Persian historiography, by such figures as Julie Scott Meisami and Sholeh Quinn—though researchers in this area are often working more in fields of history, rather than Persian literature studies.

Another key genre that exists from the earliest period is courtly advice literature—Louise Marlow’s specialty. Classic texts in this category include the *Qābūs-nāma* and, perhaps more famously, the *Siyāsat-nāma* (*Book of Government*) of the Seljuk court official Niẓām al-Mulk—both from the eleventh century.

(I know I’m moving quickly through these slides—because it’s just background. We can come back to this during Q&A, if there’s interest.)

Or we could look at medieval Persian scientific writing—defined broadly to include philosophy, medicine, geography, and so forth. One of the earliest extant New Persian prose works in any genre is a book on geography, the *Ḥudūd al-‘ālam*, written in the late tenth century. Specialists in this area of Persian literary history include Ali Gheissari and Justine Landau.

We could go on surveying the landscape of classical Persian prose, but the main point should be clear: there are issues of fragmentation. Scholars working with these sources often seem to be in different spheres. Some of them might not consider themselves specialists in Persian literature *per se*. They may be political or social historians dealing with chronicles; or historians of science analyzing treatises; or specialists in medieval Islamicate philosophy.

It is doubtful to what extent all these kinds of text belong under a single umbrella. And I think that very few Persianists could claim a strong general knowledge of classical prose literature—perhaps a scholar like Īraj Afshār. In any case, my intention is merely to highlight the contrast between classical Persian poetry and prose in terms of their coherence as literary categories and as areas of study.

### **Authors still writing in Arabic**

A second, related problem is that it remained common throughout the premodern era for persophone authors to write prose texts in both Persian and Arabic. This was especially true in the Islamic sciences (for obvious reasons), as well as in the natural sciences. But, in the early period at least, it was a fairly broad phenomenon. Even in historical writing, we have, for example, the famous tenth-century history of Harāt by Narshakhī, which was written in Arabic under Samanid patronage.

The student of classical Persian prose—insofar as we consider that a valid category—will contend not only with a more dispersed variety of genres, but also with a situation in which

one must be aware of the activities of the relevant authors in two languages. (This will be important to consider when we turn to Naṣr Allāh Munshī's version of *Kalīla and Dimna*—a work that is difficult to understand without bearing in mind that the author was a keen reader of—and, in a sense, a participant in—the Arabic literary tradition.)

### **Privileging of poetry**

The third and final background problem that I wanted to raise is the proverbial “elephant in the room”: namely, that poetry has always been given a privileged position as the core of classical Persian literature. I do not mean to argue against this longstanding consensus (a losing battle, to be sure). It is simply a reality that the term “classical Persian literature” is used almost interchangeably with “classical Persian poetry.” Again, students in our field are expected to develop general mastery over the poetic tradition, whereas their exposure to prose sources is more *ad hoc*.

Scholars of Persian literary history have long recognized this imbalance and occasionally sought to counteract it. A century ago, E. G. Browne was quite purposeful in setting aside space in his *Literary History of Persia* for discussion of prose texts in various genres.

In the fourth volume of that history, Browne directly criticizes what he sees as a disproportionate focus on Persian poetry (and on a small corpus of canonical works of belletristic prose). One of Browne's goals is to draw further attention to texts in areas such as history, biography, and the sciences. That volume was published in 1924; and the imbalance that Browne perceived is still with us. In Persian-language scholarship, fortunately, the tendency to focus on classical poetry to the exclusion of prose has been less pronounced. One of the foundational works is Muḥammad Taqī Bahār's *Sabk-shināsī*, which offers a framework and interpretation of the development of Persian prose style across the premodern era. In

what I think is a telling phenomenon, however, Bahār's theories have been applied just as often to debates over the evolution of Persian *poetic* style.

There is, at any rate, an impression that classical Persian literature studies as a field is not primarily intended for prose. Looking at the quote from Browne, we see, in fact, a question of whether all forms of prose writing *qualify* as literature in the sense that we are interested in studying. Or is the work of a Persianist to focus only on poetry and perhaps “belles-lettres” (whatever that means)?

### **Concluding remarks**

Considering these barriers to a well-developed, shared understanding of classical Persian prose literature—genre fragmentation, the ongoing use of Arabic, and the lopsided focus of our field on poetry—it will be easier to appreciate the dilemma posed by a work like Naṣr Allāh Munshī's translation of *Kalīla and Dimna*. Here we have a text written in the mid twelfth century CE—not an extremely early date—and yet it has been viewed as *a* foundational (if not *the* foundational) work of belles-lettres in Persian.

Scholars like Mujtabā Mīnuvī and Mahmoud Omidsalar have credited Naṣr Allāh with effectively inventing a new prose style *ex nihilo*—with being the first practitioner of a kind of writing in Persian called “artistic prose” (*naṣr-i fannī*) or “ornamented prose” (*naṣr-i maṣnūʿ*). Naṣr Allāh is often treated as a singular figure. And this is, I think, partly because we lack an overarching framework for the development of classical Persian prose. It becomes more of a challenge to contextualize an author like Naṣr Allāh than would be the case for any medieval Persian poet.

I cannot solve these problems—least of all in a single lecture. What I hope to articulate today, however, is that there are a couple of ways in which we can set Naṣr Allāh's innovative,

influential version of *Kalīla and Dimna* in a productive context. To wit, Naṣr Allāh was self-consciously taking part in the textual tradition of the book of *Kalīla and Dimna* (which is almost a genre in itself). And he was, it seems, working in conversation with Arabic *adab* literature. These areas will be my focus.

### **Persian translations of *Kalīla and Dimna***

*Kalīla and Dimna*, as you may know, is a classic book of fables and one of the most widely disseminated and translated works of world literature. The origins of the book lie in the Sanskrit *Pañcatantra* (*Five Treatises*), as well as in the *Mahābhārata*. This collection of stories, which grew over time to have around fifteen fable-chapters, is thought to have been brought to Iran and translated into Middle Persian in the Sasanian period. The Middle Persian text is not extant (or at least is almost entirely lost), but it served as the source for further translations into Syriac and, crucially, Arabic. It was the Arabic rendering of *Kalīla and Dimna*, attributed to the eighth-century author Ibn al-Muqaffa<sup>ᶜ</sup>, which became the launching point for the spread of the book into dozens of other languages.

With the loss of the Middle Persian *Kalīla and Dimna*, and with the transition from Middle Persian into New Persian in the age of Islam—which included, among other things, adopting the Arabic script and a great deal of Arabic vocabulary—the Ibn al-Muqaffa<sup>ᶜ</sup> version was also the reference point for bringing the text “back” into Persian. It was translated repeatedly, and from an early period. In the tenth century, under Samanid patronage, a New Persian prose translation of *Kalīla and Dimna* was written by Abū al-Faḏl Balʿamī—but it has not survived. In the same period, the poet Rūdakī—renowned as the first great classical Persian poet—composed a versification of the fables, snippets of which are extant.



By the mid twelfth century, when Naṣr Allāh Munshī decided to author a new and improved translation of *Kalīla and Dimna* at the Ghaznavid court, he was aware that he was not the first Persian adapter of the text. Naṣr Allāh discusses the work of Rūdakī in the preface that he added to the book (to which I will return shortly).

There was another Persian prose translation of *Kalīla and Dimna*, also from the Arabic, written in the same decade as that of Naṣr Allāh. This other version, titled *Dāstān-hā-yi Bīdpāy* (*The Fables of Bīdpāy*), was written by one Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, under the patronage of a Seljuk *atābeg* of Mosul. There is no indication that Naṣr Allāh and al-Bukhārī were aware of each other's simultaneous work. Also, al-Bukhārī's text did not find a wide readership; it survives in a single, very early manuscript. It would nevertheless be interesting (for another day) to juxtapose the translations of al-Bukhārī and Naṣr Allāh, since their styles have almost nothing in common.

As I have mentioned, Naṣr Allāh's rendition of *Kalīla and Dimna* quickly became *the* dominant Persian version. Not only was it widely disseminated in manuscripts, but it achieved a status such that several further adaptations and translations were based on it. In the mid thirteenth century, in Seljuk Anatolia, the poet Qānī'ī Ṭūsī produced a new Persian versification of the fables, derived from Naṣr Allāh's prose. In one of the more fascinating developments that ever took place in the textual history of *Kalīla and Dimna*, an Arabic "retranslation" of Naṣr Allāh's text was written by a scholar working at the Ayyubid court in Ḥamāh, toward the end of the thirteenth century. And there are early Ottoman Turkish renditions of *Kalīla and Dimna* that *may* have been based on the version of Naṣr Allāh (though these works are little-studied).

More important than any of these developments is the next (and, in fact, the final) major Persian version of *Kalīla and Dimna*, which was written at the end of the fifteenth century by

Ḥusayn Vā'iz Kāshifī, an author affiliated with the Timurid court. Kāshifī titled his work *Anvār-i suhaylī* (*The Lights of Canopus*). Much could be said about the *Anvār*. (I recommend reading Christine van Ruymbeke's monograph on this text.) The important point, for our purposes, is that Kāshifī used Naṣr Allāh's version as a starting point and again created something highly innovative. The *Anvār-i suhaylī* would serve, from that point onward—i.e., throughout the early modern period—as the premier Persian rendition of *Kalīla and Dimna*. And it would in turn inspire many further translations, including into Ottoman Turkish and languages of South and Southeast Asia.

There is, to the best of my knowledge, no language that saw as many distinct versions of *Kalīla and Dimna* as did Persian. The production of these works started more or less immediately with the beginning of patronage of New Persian literature under the Samanids. And three versions achieved a particularly high degree of fame: the versification by Rūdakī (though only parts of it survived); the rendition of Naṣr Allāh Munshī; and the *Anvār-i suhaylī*.

So Naṣr Allāh's *Kalīla and Dimna* was, between the mid twelfth century and the late fifteenth, the “go-to” version of these fables in Persian. It is, in a way, easier to situate Naṣr Allāh's work as a node in the graph of *Kalīla and Dimna* translations than within some postulated, broader tradition of classical Persian prose literature (returning to the problems I discussed earlier).

A final point to make here is that the relevance of Naṣr Allāh's work did not end entirely after the appearance of the *Anvār-i suhaylī*. In the nineteenth century, when there was a neoclassical turn in literary taste in Persian—among both Iranian scholars and European orientalisks—Naṣr Allāh's version of *Kalīla and Dimna* regained some popularity. But this, too, would be a topic for another day.

## Special features of Naṣr Allāh's version

It is one thing to state that Naṣr Allāh's text was an instant classic—that it was widely copied and read over a period of centuries. We must also ask *why* the work was so successful. On this point, I think the answer is clear: Naṣr Allāh created a stunningly rich text. It has everything. The fables of *Kalīla and Dimna* are presented in an elegant Persian prose style. Throughout the text, whenever a point arises—either in the narration or in dialogue among characters—and Naṣr Allāh is able to bring in a relevant quote from a qur'anic verse, a *ḥadīth*, or a line of Arabic or Persian poetry, he has done so. (The poetry alone amounts to hundreds of lines—much of it drawn from well-known poets, but some original.) Reading this version of *Kalīla and Dimna*, then, could provide someone with all the benefits of the fables themselves—which, again, have both an entertaining quality and practical ethical lessons—and additionally, the reader could enhance their familiarity with scripture, classical poetry in two languages, wisdom sayings, anecdotes about the early caliphs, and so on. That is to say, this is a quintessential work of *adab* literature—in Persian, but nearly bilingual by virtue of the many Arabic quotes.

The richness of Naṣr Allāh's *Kalīla and Dimna* is, in fact, so striking relative to what came before it in Persian prose literature that scholars have had difficulty hypothesizing how this text, and how Naṣr Allāh's style, could have developed out of a Persian literary tradition. Mahmoud Omidasalar gives a memorable statement of this problem: “The idea that all literary innovations must evolve over time, a relic of nineteenth-century habits of thought, underestimates the profound impact that an individual may have upon one or more aspects of his society. Naṣr Allāh was such an individual.” To be clear, my view is that we can do better in explaining Naṣr Allāh's work than to fall back on a kind of “great man” theory of literary achievement. (That is, as I have already hinted, we can interpret this rendition of *Kalīla and Dimna* as a project to create a Persian mode of *adab* literature by leaning into the Arabic tradition.) But I shouldn't

get ahead of myself. In any case, Omidsalar is addressing a legitimate difficulty in literary history.

It is not only challenging for the historian of Persian literature to identify a *prior* context for this version of *Kalīla and Dimna*. The reception of the work during the medieval period, when it had its heyday of popularity and influence, also seems to have been surprisingly complicated. Naṣr Allāh went so far in enriching his text—in particular, by pursuing a deep integration of Persian and Arabic material—that the book was difficult for some people to read. I will return to this problem later. At this point, I hope that I have offered enough background discussion and general characterization of Naṣr Allāh’s *Kalīla and Dimna*, that we can delve into the text.

In what follows, I will focus on two sections of this book: the preface added by Naṣr Allāh, in which he explains the goals of his translation project and argues for the high value of *Kalīla and Dimna*; and one of the fable-chapters, which features the extensive ornamentation that I have just outlined. While discussing the preface, I will show examples of Naṣr Allāh’s use of quotes from the Qur’an and *ḥadīth*. And in the fable, I will highlight the inclusion of lines of Arabic and Persian poetry.

### **Naṣr Allāh’s preface**

Over the centuries, it became something of a tradition for new versions of *Kalīla and Dimna* to add new prefatory chapters. There are, for example, a preface attributed to Ibn al-Muqaffa’; a chapter describing the journey of the Iranian physician Burzūya, who was (supposedly) sent to India by the Sasanian court to retrieve the book of *Kalīla and Dimna*; and a chapter that presents Burzūya’s autobiography. Still other prefatory passages appear in different versions of the text. The important point here is that, while the first actual fable in *Kalīla and Dimna* is the story of “The Lion and the Ox,” this often occurs after four or five introductory chapters. Naṣr

Allāh contributed to this tradition, and with great flair: his preface is unusually substantial. (I should note that I have a forthcoming, unabridged English translation of Naṣr Allāh’s preface, which is intended to complement Prof. Thackston’s recent translation of the book as a whole. In his rendition, which needed to appeal to a more general audience, the preface has been abridged.)

The *fact* that Naṣr Allāh wrote an original preface is not as noteworthy as its content. He uses this chapter to fulfill a few purposes. For one, Naṣr Allāh dedicates the work to his patron, the Ghaznavid sultan Bahrāmshāh. (This version of *Kalīla and Dimna* is, consequently, sometimes referred to as the Bahrāmshāhī version.) Another goal of the preface is to explain how Naṣr Allāh decided to translate *Kalīla and Dimna* into Persian, and how he approached that task. Perhaps most prominently, however, Naṣr Allāh takes the opportunity of this chapter to argue for the value of *Kalīla and Dimna* as a work of wisdom literature, with important lessons for people of all social classes—especially those in positions of power. And Naṣr Allāh goes out of his way to clarify that the messages of *Kalīla and Dimna* are in accord with Islamic teachings. This involves copious quotation of qur’anic verses and *ḥadīth*, woven into the Persian text.

(By the way, I’ll be showing mostly images from this late-thirteenth-century manuscript of Naṣr Allāh’s text, which features interlinear Persian translations of many of the Arabic quotes. And I’ll speak more about the manuscript later.)

### **Central argument**

In showing excerpts from the preface, I will begin with the religio-political argument, since that is how Naṣr Allāh begins. After an opening passage with conventional praise of God and the Prophet Muḥammad, Naṣr Allāh notes that it was necessary for the Prophet to exercise temporal authority in order to carry out his religious mission. This was because it became clear

that the deniers of revelation would not be won over except through force. Of course, the Prophet did manage to spread his message and to establish a strong community. And the political authority that was vested in him passed to his successors (*khulafā'*). Naṣr Allāh explains that those early leaders were charged with bringing to fruition the following *ḥadīth*: *zuwiyat lī al-arḍ fa-ra'aytu mashāriqahā wa-maghāribahā wa-sa-yablugh mulk ummatī mā zuwiyā lī minhā* (“The earth was shown to me, and I saw its east and its west, and the kingdom of my community will reach what was shown to me”). Naṣr Allāh also quotes the “obedience verse” from the Qur’an, i.e., verse 59 of Sūrat al-Nisā’: *yā ayyuha lladhīna āmanū aṭī’u l-lāha wa-aṭī’u r-rasūla wa-ūli l-amri minkum*.

The main idea that Naṣr Allāh develops in this passage is that it was never possible for Islam to thrive in the world without being linked to political power. He states that the fearsomeness of rulers is necessary for the civilization of the world, and that, for most people, “the sweetness of worship cannot in any sense have the same effect as fear of the sword” (*bi-hīch ta’vīl ḥalāvat-i ‘ibādat rā ān aṣar na-tavānad būd kih mahābat-i shamshīr rā*). The most pithy statement of this idea comes in what Naṣr Allāh identifies—falsely, as far as I can tell—as a *ḥadīth*: *al-dīn wa-l-mulk taw’amān* (“religion and kingship are twins”). (There are various sources for this statement, among them the *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* of al-Ghazālī.) In another emphatic statement, Naṣr Allāh concludes that “religion without rule will go to waste, and rule without religion is baseless” (*dīn bī-mulk zāyi’ ast va mulk bī-dīn bāṭil*).

Having demonstrated, with reference to scripture, that political rule and religion have a necessary complementary relationship, Naṣr Allāh proceeds to the next stage in his argument, which is that the most important virtue for a ruler to develop is justice. He points to the example of the prophet David, arguing that it is David’s capacity for justice that explains God’s decision to assign him vicegerency (*khilāfa*)—a distinction which, in the Qur’an, is granted only

to David and Adam among all the prophets. Naṣr Allāh also devotes some discussion to verse 90 of Sūrat al-Naḥl: *inna l-lāha ya'muru bi-l-ʿadli wa-l-iḥsāni wa-ītāʾi dhi l-qurbā, wa-yanhā ʿani l-faḥshāʾi wa-l-munkari wa-l-baghy; yaʿizukum, laʿallakum tadhakkārūn*. The relevance of this verse is, of course, in its mention of justice (*al-ʿadl*). One of Naṣr Allāh’s key observations in this passage is that, unlike other virtues that a ruler can practice, justice does not need to be rationed. Granting favors will eventually exhaust the treasury. Treating one’s subjects justly, on the other hand, can be applied limitlessly.

It is the next step in Naṣr Allāh’s argument that brings him to *Kalīla and Dimna*. He claims that a ruler can be instructed in the path of justice by heeding the wisdom contained within this book of fables. Naṣr Allāh does not mince words in describing the virtues of *Kalīla and Dimna* in terms of its applicability to just Islamic kingship. He states, for example, that “after the books of religious law, in the span of the life of the world, they have not made a book more beneficial than this” (*pas az kutub-i sharʿī, dar muddat-i ʿumr-i ʿālam, az ān pur-favāyid-tar kitābī na-karda-and*). He then specifies that *Kalīla and Dimna* could help (among other things) “the governance of kings in controlling their domains” (*siyāsat-i pādshāhān rā dar zabṭ-i mamālik*). The high point of Naṣr Allāh’s praise comes when he asks rhetorically, “What excellence could be higher than this, that [the book] passed from religious community to religious community, and from nation to nation, and was not rejected?” (*Kudām faẓīlat az īn farā-tar kih az ummat bi-ummat va millat bi-millat rasīd va mardūd na-gasht?*)

Such is the sequence of Naṣr Allāh’s argument for the importance of *Kalīla and Dimna*. Islam needs rulers in this world; those rulers must conduct themselves with justice; and, in order to cultivate justice and the practices of sound governance, one should study this uniquely excellent book of fables. The example passages that I have shown here also begin to give an idea of Naṣr Allāh’s prose style, in which he weaves continually between the main text and

references to other sources—so far, mostly the Qur’an and *ḥadīth*—which he uses to strengthen specific points. That is, he uses quotes as *shawāhid*.

### **Ghaznavid panegyric**

As I mentioned earlier, one purpose of Naṣr Allāh’s preface is to dedicate this version of *Kalīla and Dimna* to the Ghaznavid ruler Bahrāmshāh. In fact, the panegyric content is linked in fascinating ways to the arguments about just kingship and *Kalīla and Dimna*. For reasons of time, however, I will move on to show a couple other aspects of the preface that will be important later in this talk; namely, Naṣr Allāh’s discussion of his process in translating *Kalīla and Dimna*, and his mention of other literary works (particularly in Arabic) which he has used as sources.

### **Naṣr Allāh’s translation process**

In the second half of the preface, Naṣr Allāh briefly discusses his own biography. He notes that much of his education was a solitary process of reading whatever texts he could find; and, in this connection, he quotes a famous hemistich from the Arabic poet al-Mutanabbī: *wa-khayru jalīsin fī z-zamāni kitābū* (“the best table-companion of the age is a book”).

Naṣr Allāh then mentions that a friend gave him a copy of the Arabic *Kalīla and Dimna*, and—although he had previous familiarity with the work—this gift caused him to look upon it anew, and he became convinced of its preciousness and of the imperative of producing a translation. To explain the need for a Persian version of the text, Naṣr Allāh points out that people have lost interest in studying Arabic books. (This turns out to be ironic, given the Arabic-inflected style of Naṣr Allāh’s translation.)



Naṣr Allāh does mention the earlier Persian versification of *Kalīla and Dimna* by Rūdakī—though it is not clear whether he actually had access to it. (Rūdakī’s poem was, at some point, lost as a standalone work.) More to the point, however, Naṣr Allāh clarifies that he intends to do something with his version of *Kalīla and Dimna* beyond merely translating into Persian the Arabic text of Ibn al-Muqaffa<sup>6</sup>. He is convinced that the valuable messages contained within these fables can be conveyed more effectively if they are adorned with quotes from relevant qur’anic verses, *ḥadīth*, lines of poetry, etc. Summarizing his approach, Naṣr Allāh states that *Kalīla and Dimna* “should be translated and, in the explanation of its speech and the unveiling of its allusions, a sufficient measure should be reached” (*tarjuma karda āyad va dar baṣṭ-i sukhan va kashf-i ishārāt ishbā<sup>6</sup>-ī ravad*). He then expresses his overarching goal with the project; namely, that “this book, which is the choice extract of a few thousand years, might be revived, and [that] people will not be deprived of its uses and benefits” (*tā in kitāb rā kih zubda-yi chand hazār sāl ast iḥyā<sup>7</sup>-ī bāshad va mardumān az favāyid va manāfi<sup>6</sup>-i ān maḥrūm na-mānand*).

### **Mention of Arabic sources**

Finally, at a few points in the preface, Naṣr Allāh mentions sources that he has consulted, usually in support of an argument. For example, he cites al-Tha‘ālibī, the scholar who is most famous for having written the *Yatīmat al-dahr*, an Arabic biographical anthology of poets. In this case, Naṣr Allāh mentions a different work by al-Tha‘ālibī, the *Ghurar al-siyar*, a historical chronicle written under Ghaznavid patronage. But it is hardly farfetched to hypothesize that Naṣr Allāh would have been familiar with the *Yatīma* as well. Another text that he mentions explicitly is the *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik* (*Book of Routes and Realms*)—presumably the one by al-Iṣṭakhrī. Naṣr Allāh refers to this while listing the regions that had been conquered by the Ghaznavids.

There are, furthermore, sources that Naṣr Allāh *probably* drew upon for the references that he has woven into the preface. He relates a series of anecdotes about the wisdom of al-Manṣūr, effective founder of the Abbasid caliphate. Having looked for sources for these anecdotes, I consider it likely that Naṣr Allāh culled them from the history of al-Ṭabarī—or from Bal‘amī’s adaptation thereof. Separately, as I mentioned earlier, the pseudo-*ḥadīth* to the effect that “religion and kingship are twins” may have been sourced from al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*.

Naṣr Allāh gives the impression that he is well versed in several genres of Arabic and Islamicate literature. He is able to dance between his narrative and the quotes that he incorporates, in a way that should be familiar to those who have studied the tradition of Arabic *adab*. (Through Naṣr Allāh’s influence, this style would also become characteristic of some genres of Persian prose.)

### **Concluding remarks**

This prefatory chapter is lengthy and dense, but paying attention to it is worthwhile, since it frames everything that follows. Naṣr Allāh argues for the importance of *Kalīla and Dimna*; explains his interest in carrying out a translation; describes his authorly process, in particular his decision to adorn the text; and shows off his prose style at its highest level. He has enriched the entirety of the book—every chapter has these features—but the preface is the largest wholly original section.

### **The Ascetic and the Guest**

Next I will discuss an example of a fable-chapter in Naṣr Allāh’s translation. My focus here is to show the extent to which poetry, in both Arabic and Persian, has been integrated into the text.

As you may know, the book of *Kalīla and Dimna* is presented as a dialogue between a king and his philosopher-advisor. (In Naṣr Allāh’s version, in a nod to the Indian origins of *Kalīla and Dimna*, the king is referred to as *rāy*, or “raja”; and the philosopher is instead called a Brahmin. In the Arabic, however, these characters are labeled *al-malik* and *al-faylasūf*.) Each chapter opens with a bit of dialogue in which the king requests a story on a certain theme, and the philosopher offers general commentary on that issue, before narrating a fable to demonstrate the lesson. The themes include the value of true friendship; the importance of not being deceived by an enemy; the need for someone in a position of authority to be careful in choosing subordinates; and the dangers of acting in haste. Most of the stories, but not all, are animal fables.

For the sake of conciseness, I will use the example of one of the shorter chapters in *Kalīla and Dimna*. It is the story of “The Ascetic and the Guest” (*al-nāsik wa-ḍ-ḍayf* in the Arabic, as well as in Naṣr Allāh’s version; he tends to leave titles untranslated). The lesson in this chapter is that a person should not try to abandon what has been appointed for them in this world—their station in society, essentially—in order to pursue a different way of life. And this is demonstrated through the story of a pious ascetic who is visited one day by a traveler. The guest hears the ascetic speaking Hebrew, and he is so taken with the language that he pleads with the ascetic to teach it to him. This is framed as a poor choice. The ascetic tells the guest that it is unlikely that he will be able to learn a new language to a high level, and that he risks losing his own first language in the process. To emphasize the point further, the ascetic tells a story to the guest—a fable within a fable—about a crow that wished to learn to strut in the manner of a partridge, and ended up not being able to walk at all. Again, this is a short chapter with a straightforward message—though, based on the density of quotes of poetry and other sources that have been woven into the text, Naṣr Allāh seems to be interested in the story. It

does have clear sociopolitical ramifications. In the concluding passage of this chapter, after narrating the fable, the philosopher returns to his conversation with the king and states that a ruler must maintain the social order and class distinctions, without which all authority will be threatened.

To understand the degree to which Naṣr Allāh's "adabized" style changes the text of *Kalīla and Dimna*, we can compare a representative manuscript of the Persian against a manuscript of the Arabic version of Ibn al-Muqaffa<sup>6</sup>. In the case of the Arabic, the pages that I am showing come from a manuscript at the British Library that has been dated to the fifteenth century. (This is the manuscript that Michael Fishbein used as the basis for his recent Library of Arabic Literature edition of *Kalīla and Dimna*.) The chapter of "The Ascetic and the Guest" is actually the last chapter in the book in this copy (chapter order varies from one manuscript to another). While it occurs over the span of three pages, the amount of text is more like two pages.

For the Persian, I will show the text of "The Ascetic and the Guest" as it is found in a manuscript at the University of Manchester Library. This is an early copy of Naṣr Allāh's translation; the colophon date is 616/1219, several decades after the authorship of the work and just at the beginning of the Mongol conquest of Greater Iran. (Keep in mind, any substantial Persian manuscript that survives from this period is something special. The famous Florence *Shāhnāma*, for example, also dates to the 1210s. What is incredible about Naṣr Allāh Munshī's version of *Kalīla and Dimna* is that the Manchester copy is only the third oldest extant—as far as we know.) In any case, in the Manchester manuscript, the chapter of "The Ascetic and the Guest" occurs across seven pages, with the actual text taking up close to six pages. Through the combination of translating the story into Persian, setting it in an elegant prose style (more ornate than the Arabic of Ibn al-Muqaffa<sup>6</sup>), and adding numerous quotes

from scripture and poetry, Naṣr Allāh ends up with a chapter that is almost three times longer than its source.

At this point I will return to using images from the Berlin manuscript of the Persian, since it features interlinear translation of the Arabic quotes. While there is quite a bit of poetry in this chapter—as can be seen in the full-page images—I will give just a few examples here: two Arabic lines from al-Buḥturī, and two Persian lines from Sanāʿī. (Sanāʿī was a Ghaznavid court poet and a contemporary of Naṣr Allāh. The two must have known each other; and Naṣr Allāh quotes from Sanāʿī frequently.)

The first line from al-Buḥturī is quoted by Naṣr Allāh after a description of the great piety and virtue of the character of the ascetic in this fable. The line is as follows: *mutahajjidun yukhfi ṣ-ṣalāta wa-qad abā ikhfāʾahā atharu s-sujūdi l-bādī* (“One who prays late at night hides his prayer, but the manifest sign of prostration belies that concealment”). (By the way, in both of the Arabic lines that I will show here, the copyist of the Berlin manuscript has made small technical errors—which the perceptive among you may notice.)

The second line of al-Buḥturī, from a different poem, is quoted by Naṣr Allāh at the point in the story when the ascetic asks the guest where he is from, and the latter describes a troubled, itinerant existence. The line, set here in the voice of the guest, goes as follows: *taqādhafu bī bilādun ʿan bilādī, ka-annī baynahā khabarun sharūdū* (“I am tossed from country to country, as if I were a rumor spreading among them”).

Naṣr Allāh incorporates Arabic and Persian poetry into his text with equal fluidity. Sometimes, as in the last example from al-Buḥturī, Naṣr Allāh allows a line of poetry to function as a line of dialogue. We will also see this phenomenon in both of the Persian examples from Sanāʿī. The first of these lines is quoted by Naṣr Allāh when the guest is in the process of pleading with the

ascetic to teach him Hebrew. The guest offers the following blandishment: *bi-gdākht ḥasūd-i tu chu dar āb shikar zānk, dar kām-i sukhan bih zi zabānat shikarī nīst* (“The one envious of you melted like sugar in water, for there is nothing sweeter on the palate than your tongue”).

The second line from Sanāʿī occurs after the ascetic has told the guest that it is a bad idea to try to leave the path of one’s forebears for a different lifestyle. The guest argues against this by noting that it would be wrong to follow one’s own people if they were in a state of ignorance or waywardness. And he recites this line from Sanāʿī: *ham-chu aḥrār sū-yi dawlat pūy; ham-chu bad-bakht zād u būd ma-jūy* (“Strive toward felicity in the way of noble people; do not seek the lot in life of the unfortunate”). (It may be worth noting that the first line that I showed from Sanāʿī comes from a *qaṣīda* in praise of a member of the Ghaznavid dynasty, while this second line is from Sanāʿī’s famous long-form mystical poem, the *Ḥadīqat al-ḥaqīqa*.)

Hopefully these examples begin to give a sense of how Naṣr Allāh has woven quotes from Arabic and Persian poets into his rendition of *Kalīla and Dimna*. Naṣr Allāh’s handling of shifts between prose and verse is quite supple. In my opinion, this style could be considered a form of prosimetrum—another idea that remains under-explored in scholarship on classical Persian literature. However we refer to Naṣr Allāh’s style, it was clearly novel in at least two contexts. Such an approach had not been pursued before in Persian prose writing, nor in earlier versions of *Kalīla and Dimna* in Persian or Arabic.

### **Problems in the reception of this text**

At this point, having seen enough of Naṣr Allāh’s text to have some idea of what he accomplished, we should be able to understand how this was a difficult work for many readers in the Persianate world—even though it was, as I mentioned earlier, an absolute classic—widely copied, used as a basis for further adaptations, etc. There are, despite this overall

success, various indications that the volume of Arabic references in the text, and especially the classical Arabic poetry, became an obstacle for readers to overcome. I will mention three forms of evidence for this problem.

First, there is at least one fairly early manuscript of Naṣr Allāh's *Kalīla and Dimna* that contains an interlinear word-by-word gloss for the Arabic quotes. I have shown many pages from this manuscript already. Again, it has a colophon date of 683/1284, and it is currently held at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. I should emphasize that the manuscript was clearly planned to include this gloss. The Persian words are set just below the relevant Arabic line, and space has been allotted for this. In the case of a marginal gloss, one could question whether it was added after the production of the manuscript; but that cannot be true with this kind of layout. Also, as I mentioned, it seems that the copyist of this manuscript encountered difficulties of their own with the Arabic poetry. In any case, the existence of a copy with deliberately integrated interlinear translations, from a relatively early period, is one data point suggesting a need for help among some readers of this text.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, at least a few commentaries (*shurūḥ*) were written in the generations after the appearance of Naṣr Allāh's version of *Kalīla and Dimna*, with the goal of clarifying the meaning of the Arabic sayings and lines of poetry. Two of those *shurūḥ* have survived—and have in fact been edited for publication, by Bihrūz Īmānī. (The scholarly literature on Naṣr Allāh's work is generally stronger in Persian than in European languages; and Īmānī has been one of the foremost experts in recent decades.)

It is not necessary here to discuss these *shurūḥ* in depth. The fact that they exist is, anyway, the important point for our purposes. There was an early and evidently substantial demand for

assistance in parsing the Arabic quotes in this version of *Kalīla and Dimna*. For the moment, I'll review the basic details of the texts that Īmānī has edited.

One of the *shurūḥ* is by an author named Fażl Allāh, referred to variously as Isfizārī or Isfarāyīnī. He is not an author about whom much is known, other than that he was active in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries CE. Several manuscripts of this *sharḥ* are extant; the earliest among them date to the mid thirteenth century—i.e., even a bit earlier than the copy of Naṣr Allāh's text with the interlinear gloss.

Here is one example of an explanation of a line of poetry from this *sharḥ*. It is the line by al-Buḥturī that we saw earlier, describing a person who prays late at night and cannot conceal having done so. This commentator, Fażl Allāh, quotes the line of poetry; provides the opening line (*maṭla'*) of the poem in question; translates the meaning (correctly) into straightforward Persian prose; and notes that there is a relevant verse in the Qur'an on the point of "the sign of prostration" (*athar al-sujūd*). This type of helpful explanation is given for nearly every non-qur'anic Arabic quote in the book—not just poetry, but also wisdom sayings and even *ḥadīth*.

The other *sharḥ* edited by Īmānī is by an unknown author, but we do have a year of composition: 621/1224 (again, quite early). And we know that the text was written in Kirmān and dedicated to a certain patron. This *sharḥ* survives in just one manuscript, copied in 707/1307–8. I won't show any sample passage; but the approach is broadly similar.

The third form of evidence for the difficulty caused by Naṣr Allāh's Arabic-inflected style lies in the later adaptation of *Kalīla and Dimna* by Vā'iz Kāshifī—i.e., the *Anvār-i suhaylī*. As I noted earlier, this rewriting of the book of fables was produced in Timurid Harāt around the end of the fifteenth century. To try to discuss Kāshifī's version in earnest would take us far afield. I would be remiss, however, not to mention that Kāshifī, in his own preface, describes his



motivations for revisiting *Kalīla and Dimna*—including his opinion that Naṣr Allāh’s text has serious problems. The key quote is as follows (using the nineteenth-century English translation by Arthur Wollaston): “By reason of the adoption of strange idioms, and of language immoderately overlaid with the beauties of Arabic expressions (*iṭrā-yi kalām bi-maḥāsin-i ‘arabiyyāt*), coupled with excessive use of metaphors and allegories of various kinds, added to glowing language and prolixity in words and obscurity in expression, the mind of the hearer is unable to derive any pleasure from the aim of the book, or to comprehend the object of its design (*khāṭir-i mustami‘ az iltizāz bi-gharāz-i kitāb va idrāk-i khulāṣa-yi nāfi-i albāb bāz mī-mānad*).”

There is some irony here. If you have ever tried to read the *Anvār-i suhaylī*, you will know that it is written in an exceptionally ornate style of Persian—such that the work was judged harshly after the neoclassical turn in the nineteenth century. And the *Anvār* was, by all accounts, reviled by British officers in India, who were forced to read it as part of their study of the Persian language. So there was a change in the preferred style of belletristic prose in Persian between Naṣr Allāh’s career in the twelfth century, and Kāshifī’s career in the fifteenth. But do not let Kāshifī fool you that the change involved a reduction in ornateness. In reality, it had much more to do with moving away from the practice of integrating quoted material in Arabic. That was not needed or wanted in later periods, when the Persian literary tradition was more mature and self-assured. But telling the remainder of this story will need to wait for either Q&A or a different lecture.

## General conclusions

To conclude: I have tried to highlight two different kinds of tension in the reception history of Naṣr Allāh Munshī's version of *Kalīla and Dimna*, or in the place that the book holds in Persian literary history.

First, there is the challenge of contextualizing Naṣr Allāh's work within some tradition of classical Persian prose literature. This is challenging in part because our field has never developed a unifying discourse or framework in which to study prose writing. What would the category of classical Persian prose imply? Is it valid? Which genres of text should be included? Can we identify a periodization of the development of Persian prose? All these questions remain open, to a greater or lesser extent. Even if we had a stronger overall discourse, however, there would still be the problem described so eloquently by Mahmoud Omidsalar: how are we to relate the style, the approach of Naṣr Allāh Munshī to what came before him in the Persian tradition? His rendition of *Kalīla and Dimna* seems like such a leap forward, such an idiosyncratic achievement. The text that he produced is, arguably, the first great work of belletristic narrative prose literature in Persian. It is easy to respect and, in a way, difficult to understand.

The second tension on which I have focused lies between the undeniable fame of Naṣr Allāh's *Kalīla and Dimna*—its status as a classic of the highest order—and, on the other hand, the impression that this was a troublesome text for many persophone readers. Naṣr Allāh writes in such an arabicized Persian—or, we could say, an almost bilingual register, in which the main structure is in Persian, but Arabic can be dipped into in an organic, seamless manner. Lines of classical Arabic poetry are quoted as simply as if they were ordinary sentences, or units of dialogue among characters in a story. This aspect of Naṣr Allāh's text soon created a demand

for a manuscript with an interlinear gloss for the Arabic quotes. It created a demand for *shurūh*, at least two of which are still extant. And we know that, by the Timurid period at the very latest, when Vā'iz Kāshifī set about writing a new adaptation of *Kalīla and Dimna*, the intensely referential and Arabic-inflected style of Naṣr Allāh no longer resembled the ideal form of Persian prose.

So we have a text in a complicated position, in terms of both its relationship to what came before it in Persian literature, and the way that it was received in subsequent generations with a mixture of admiration and frustration. My modest proposal, which addresses both sides of this tension, is that contextualizing Naṣr Allāh's work is facilitated if we recognize the degree to which he seems to have been influenced by the conventions of Arabic *adab* literature. And we know that Naṣr Allāh was well read in Arabic. He clearly knew a huge amount of Arabic poetry. He has numerous *aḥādīth* at his fingertips (setting aside the weakness of many of them). He mentions al-Tha'ālibī. Many of the lines that Naṣr Allāh quotes from early classical Arabic poets—and this is something that I have not been able to delve into in this talk—many lines appear to have been drawn from the ninth-century anthology *Dīwān al-ḥamāsa* by Abī Tammām. (Or perhaps Naṣr Allāh was using more recent Arabic anthologies which in turn draw on the *Dīwān al-ḥamāsa*; the point stands nonetheless.) What I wish we had from Naṣr Allāh is some explicit indication that he has read Ibn Qutayba, or Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, or the *Maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī. It would be nice to have further direct evidence of Naṣr Allāh's familiarity with classics of Arabic *adab*. But I think that we have enough to postulate a connection. Certainly I have not heard from any of the Arabists with whom I have discussed this text any doubt regarding its “*adabness*.” If anything, the impression that I have is that it may be easier to place the style of Naṣr Allāh's work from the perspective of classical Arabic literature than it is from the side of Persian.

I would like to close by noting that my goal is not to overturn the way that Naṣr Allāh Munshī's work has been characterized in our field. My view is that Mahmoud Omidshar's assessment of this book is still true. What Naṣr Allāh accomplished is a peculiar triumph. Through force of will, through extraordinary skill, he created this version of *Kalīla and Dimna* in a rich style of Persian, interwoven with Arabic—a style all his own. And his book made such a strong statement that it took on the status of a classic, even when some of its features proved difficult for readers. Our appreciation for Naṣr Allāh's achievement should only grow if we consider him as an author, working fairly early in the evolution of classical Persian prose literature, who saw an opportunity to advance an entire art form by drawing on the more established Arabic tradition. And paying attention to Persian-Arabic exchange in the medieval period can, of course, have broader implications for literary history. There is a great deal of research waiting to be done in this area.

Thank you for your attention.