

Rachel Schine

Signs from Above: Towards a Comparative Symbology of Bird Imagery in Medieval Near Eastern Popular Prose

*This article presents excerpts from two near-contemporary works of popular prose from the medieval Near East: the Persian *Dārāb-nāme* and the Arabic *Sirat Banī Hilāl*. In each, birds or birdlike characters (the *sīmorgh* and the crow, respectively) that share in having had theriomorphic, mythic significance in regional pre-Islamic traditions dispense premonitory wisdom to Muslim characters. Comparing these passages, the article contends that the characterization of these birds brokers a pietistic shift in symbolism between the pre-Islamic and Islamic context, while still maintaining the birds' mystical significance and sustaining the trope of birds as winged, heaven-sent messengers. This modified association between birds and divine ministry is not only prominent in these two texts, but also in the *Qurʾān* and varied bestiaries, poetry, and belletristic works that comprise these texts' cultural network.*

Introduction

A vast number of cultures have assigned birds mystical import in custom and literature. Though the particulars vary, in broad strokes the rationale is this: being airborne creatures, birds come to embody an intermediary status between the earthly and the heavenly realms. Apropos this point, the late nineteenth century litterateur Charles de Kay begins his book *Bird Gods* with a critical inquiry into whether bird-worship may have served as a conduit toward more abstract cosmic considerations:

In his work on the origin of mythology (Berlin, 1860) Dr. Schwartz contemplates the movement as one from heaven to earth, as if men worshipped the heavenly phenomena first, then brought them to earth and personified them as animals. His favorite example is the lightening, symbolized as dragon or snake. Might not the movement have gone the other way?¹

This general notion of birds' intercessional capacity—a trait that is ascribed to many avian deities and totems in pre-Islamic Arabia²—is complicated, though far from suppressed, in medieval Islamic literature. Indeed, even in the *Qurʾānic* text

Rachel Schine is a PhD candidate at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago.

and apocryphal traditions related to it, avian imagery is at the root of several theological questions and controversies; the Prophet Solomon's avian companion, the hoopoe, evinces monotheism and calls the pagan Queen of Sheba to account (Q 27:22-26). In so doing, the creature calls into question the notion that human beings have a monopoly over and against animals on being "articulate," or *nāṭiq* (Q 41:21), an exclusive capacity that draws humans into direct similitude with the articulations of God in his scripture (Q 45:29, 23:62). The apocryphal "story of the cranes," or *qiṣṣat al-gharānīq*—wherein three astral goddesses of Arabia are accidentally designated as demi-divine intercessors by Muḥammad due to a Satanic interpellation in his speech—stands to this day as a much-reviled and rejected perturbation of the notion of *ʿiṣma*, or prophetic inerrancy.³ Even God makes use of birds in an ironic inversion of haruspicy, or the art of auguring using birds' entrails; when Abraham asks for a demonstration of God's ability to resurrect the dead, he is instructed to place the entrails of four birds on separate hills, and then call them. The birds, in a feat that confirms the inscrutability of divine power, come flying when asked (Q 2:260).

As such, among Islamic cultures, birds never fully slough off their primordial mystical and revelatory connotations. They famously form an ideal, fictive cavalcade of seekers in Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's long-form poem, *Mantiq al-Ṭayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*), the title of which again evokes the idea that birds, unlike other creatures, may share a speciated capacity for articulation with humankind.⁴ Much earlier, in the epistles of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (Brethren of Purity), their trademark combination of rationalism and naturalism colludes in creating an elaborate list of the ways in which birdsongs are in fact paeans to God. Song, according to Lenn Goodman, is held even higher than speech in the eyes of the Ikhwān, for it combines the rational elements of articulation with the emotive elements of music, thereby generating a more affecting aesthetic.⁵

Indeed, Islamic cultures continue to be so suffused with literary renderings of birds in personified and quasi-personified positions that one may wonder whether it is at all worth remarking on, or whether any attempt at defining this literary trope might simply be an exercise in identifying a universal human theme. However, it is noteworthy that this theme—inasmuch as it constructs birds as characters—engages at once in what some may call fantasy and what other literary critics may deem an impressionistic manifestation of "biophilia," that is, an innate affinity for nature expressed in literature. At its most fundamental, the literary theorist Joseph Carroll has reasoned that biophilia has "adaptive value" for humans, in that it acknowledges and centers one's natural environment as the necessary spatial medium through which personal experiences and identities are enacted.⁶ Birds are semiotic shareholders in this natural environment, so why not also in the literary world in which natural phenomena are reconstructed and through which they—and, according to Carroll, *we*—are explained? All the more so when a scriptural precedent for such literary encounters exists.

This paper will assess two instances of mystical avian activity in popular literary works from neighboring and near-contemporary Islamic cultures—one within what is often termed the "populist (or popular) romance" genre of Persian literature, and

the other within the more terminologically unstable category of what I will simply term “popular *sīra*” (*sīra shaʿbiyya*) literature in Arabic.⁷ Popular chronicles such as these offer a particularly fertile ground for exploring the evolution of traditional literary staples and clichés, because they are at once by nature preservationist and normative, designed to contain and transfer traditional lore but in a way that, at pain of obsolescence, is ever (re)fitted to the times; or, to use the words of James Monroe in describing oral, epic poetry, the signal characteristic of popular literature may be “the ease with which it absorbs the new while never ridding itself entirely of the old.”⁸

First, I will examine the character of the *simorgh* in the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* during an encounter between Alexander and the creature wherein the *simorgh* dispenses its premonitory wisdom. In a similarly premonitory fashion, a group of birds in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* engage not in acts of speech but in an inarticulate dramaturgy that signals the birth of the *sīra*’s hero, Abū Zayd al-Hilālī (also named Barakāt). Looking specifically at the concepts of avian articulation and the conscious re-envisioning of birds’ prophetic roles that Islam theologically necessitates, I argue that these two cases each demonstrate unique pathways towards maintaining the birds’ prescient and mystical status while still actively engaging Islamic pietistic discourse, and that these pathways are rooted fundamentally in discerning the distinct innovations on meaning and symbolism to which the pre-Islamic conceptions of these creatures lend themselves. In illustrating this, I will make reference to relevant bestiary and belletristic works, such as al-Jāhiz’ *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* and Ferdowsi’s *Shāhnāmeḥ*. These works are either styled as explicit preservation projects containing aspects of the pre-Islamic past, or else anthologize and respond to that *jābiliyya*-era content which was viewed as the most heuristically needful. In conjunction with our primary texts, they may be used to trace the shift, in the case of the *simorgh*, from a demi-divine entity *sui generis* to a humanoid entity that is hyper-competent in those most valuable arts of eloquence and transmission. It practices these arts to uncanny effect vis-à-vis its human counterpart, Alexander, who grapples inchoately with the *simorgh*’s existence and meaning. In the case of the crow, its pre-Islamic status as an unambiguously ominous mortuary symbol gives way in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* to a more ambivalent characterization befitting both a more complex Islamic eschatology and a more diverse geocultural outlook; the crow comes to roost in a story not of death but of birth, and because of its telltale black hue and associations with estrangement and desert wastelands, it somatically and symbolically hints at the racial liminality of the black Arab Abū Zayd.

In selecting the aforementioned pair of texts, I aim not only to point up these two contrasting modes of symbolic reconfiguration, but also to demonstrate the mutually illuminating potential of analyzing popular *sīras* alongside Persian romances. This potential has been indicated most recently in the work of Remke Kruk, who notes that the Persian influence on the narrative tradition of the *siyar shaʿbiyya* is “likely, but the exact connection has not yet been sufficiently researched.”⁹ In his account of Arabic and Persian editions of the little-known *Sīrat Firūzshāh*, Kenneth Grant declares that “the Persian equivalent of the Arabic *sīra* is the *dāstān*,” and that the

two traditions have a multitude of related characteristics with respect to form and narrative.¹⁰ The aim of this essay is not to establish a concrete narrative trajectory among these texts, nor is it to affirm a direction of “influence” between these two bodies of literature. Rather, in taking a comparative approach, this study aspires to apply a “methodology of thematics.”¹¹ It applies this methodology, though, to works that have significant interrelations—culturally and temporally—above and beyond the coincidence of themes, in the hopes of modeling how one might compare texts from a common or historically communalized cultural habitus with a view toward how popular themes evolve in relation to evolving sociocultural norms.

A Note on Sources

Whereas *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* has a monolingual and limitedly trans-regional footprint,¹² the portion of the twelfth century Persian text of the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* with which this essay is concerned is directly informed by a text of considerably more extensive reach, the *Eskandar-nāmeḥ*, or Alexander romance. While the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* is Persian by provenance, the *Eskandar-nāmeḥ* is best thought of as but one manifestation of a profoundly diffuse literary tradition. Alexander romances, in textual form, exist or once existed in some thirty languages. Alexander’s own peripatetic movement within the text, the way in which his narrative has admitted the incorporation of various host cultures’ own lore (cultures that are themselves often either migratory or in states of imperial expansion and contraction), and the movement of the romance’s texts themselves all conspire to create what Shamma Aharon Boyarin designates a “diasporic” work—one that “vigorously resists notions of a unified cultural association stemming from a single place.”¹³

The Alexander romance’s Persian version is difficult to fix in time, as is endemic to works with oral permutations that often coexist with and continually modify efforts towards their redaction and textualization. Accordingly, Julia Rubanovich cites a range of dates for the manuscript on which the only printed edition of the work is based, running from the eleventh century to the beginning of the thirteenth, while the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* of Ṭarsūsī, which incorporates Alexander and his ventures, was recorded in the twelfth century.¹⁴ *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, despite its more restricted geographical and linguistic ambit, shares in a similar set of problems with respect to pinpointing its date of origin. Danuta Madeyska traces the first mentions of the *sīra* to the twelfth century; these are not necessarily indications of its date of textualization, but rather of its diffusion amongst a sufficiently interested literate populace that the work merited mention in a textual medium.¹⁵ This places *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*’s *terminus post quem* in a near-contemporary period to that of the *Eskandar-nāmeḥ*, and we may note with even greater certainty that it is nearly contemporary with the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* itself.

In addition to the evident overlap in characters and their mutual preoccupation with the theme of kingly conquests and travels, William L. Hanaway notes that the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* directly follows the genealogical pattern of the *Eskandar-nāmeḥ*,

naming the two kings—Alexander and Dārāb—as half-siblings and offering a critical juxtaposition of the trajectories of these two heroic figures, the latter of whom is our sole focus here.¹⁶ As such, the broader popular tradition of Alexander romances looms in the background of this study, whereas in the heroic cycle of *Banī Hilāl* we will only be considering its main protagonist, Abū Zayd al-Hilālī (né Barakāt).¹⁷ The editions of the texts used below are by no means co-contemporary, yet this paper will assume that the themes and descriptions at hand are artifacts of an earlier era during which the texts were more closely coincidental.¹⁸

The “Bird” and the Man: Alexander’s Sīmorgh

The passage featuring Alexander’s initial encounter with the sīmorgh in the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* follows upon Alexander already having acquired one Prophetic companion in the form of Khidr, the “green man” alluded to (though not named as such) in the Qur’ān, who shepherds Moses on a quest for knowledge.¹⁹ Alexander’s encounter with the sīmorgh positions him not only within the network of prophets, but also within the hybrid domain of prophet-kings, a role typified in the Qur’ān by Solomon, who famously discoursed with the animal realm. Moreover, it positions the sīmorgh within this domain as well, though not as a direct supplier of succor and investiture to royals per its historical role; rather, the creature acts here as a channel for verbally relaying kingly status down the dynastic line. Their meeting is translated below:

Then the composer of accounts and keeper of secrets, Abū Ṭāher Ṭarsūsī narrated some portion of this tale, [saying] that [at the time] when Alexander had prevailed upon Khidr to go with him, among the thousands upon thousands of men that were in Alexander’s army, not a one was elderly. With this army, [Alexander] struck out from campsite to campsite until he reached a large meadow. Look [ing] around, he saw trees there that were so very tall that they were conspiring with the clouds [*bā abr rāz hamī goftand*]. Alexander’s troops dismounted and glanced around that space. [Alexander] saw a tree of such great [size] that there had never been seen a tree of this description with respect to largeness, and in the top of this tree he saw a room [*khāneh*] and a bird sitting in it like a mountain, and all of its feathers were so varicolored that your eye would have been blinded by them. And its face was like unto a human face, and its breasts like women’s breasts, and its face and tongue were red, and this bird had been dreaming. Alexander stood for a time, until that bird awoke and opened its eyes, as though igniting two candles. [The bird] looked upon one of the soldiers. Then, it alighted from its place in such a way that the entirety of the meadow fell under its shadow, and from the movement of its arms every tree was thrust onto its side. Then that bird came down from the air and sat before Alexander atop a stone and gave greeting to Alexander in an eloquent tongue [*be-zabān-e faṣīḥ*].

When Alexander saw that bird, he was amazed [*‘ajab dāsh*t]. Then, that bird began speaking to him, [saying] “O Alexander, may you pass through this land in travel with success [from] God almighty.” Alexander said, “What sort of bird are you?” The bird said, “Know that they call me *sīmorgh*, and my progenitors and ancestors have [found] shelter here, and God, glorified and exalted, created these trees [even] before man. Oh, Alexander, behold me such that you may see wonders.” This it said, then it withdrew jewels from the nape of its neck and cast them beside Alexander, so large that they were like pomegranates. It said, “Oh Alexander, keep this for yourself, [in order] that everywhere you go, you shall find victory.” Alexander took hold of these jewels and gave thanks to God. Then he turned to the *sīmorgh* and said, “How is it that, out of all the world, you have seized [upon] this trove [of jewels]?” *Sīmorgh* told a tale of fate and destiny, wherein *Jibrāʾīl* apprised Solomon with a story about the Caesar of Rūm, to whom a daughter was born (and today is seven days hence)—never would there be seen a countenance better than hers throughout the world—this daughter is now swaddled in her cradle, and the wet-nurses nourish her. That same night that this daughter came [into the world], the wife of Mahrāj, who was the king of Hindūstān, gave birth to a handsome son, and God arranged the world in such a way that the two [were fated to] come together. *Sīmorgh* said, “I said that this narrative was implausible to me [*īn ḥadīṣ marā bāvar nīst*], for Mahrāj was in the east and Caesar was in the west, and the two were one another’s adversaries. Then, when he told the tale of fate and destiny from start to finish before Alexander, [Alexander] went to speak, but [the bird] said, “From that period until now, this has been my place, and I have seen Solomon, peace be upon him, and I was made aware of your condition by Solomon: no man would come close to you, except Dhū al-Qarnayn. When I saw you, I would know [who you were].”

Alexander was amazed by this, and said, “How old are you?” *Sīmorgh* said, “My age is 1000 years.” Alexander said, “Do you give birth to offspring or lay eggs as other birds do?” [*Sīmorgh*] said, “O king, we give birth to children and milk flows from our breasts and we give the children the milk, and we wash their heads in the fashion of mankind.”²⁰

Although there is much here that bears analysis, I wish to isolate the following features: the *sīmorgh*’s physical description as a humanoid entity with capacities for articulation and social organization, which are posed in the text in consistent comparison with those of man; the bird’s prophecy; and, finally, the *sīmorgh*’s critical and interpretive reading of its own revelation to Alexander.

Even prior to the moment of the *sīmorgh*’s introduction to the text, its liminal status as a human-bird hybrid is evoked in the makings of its habitat: a room in a tree. The term *khāneh*, meaning a room or a home, evokes a more intentional and complex architecture than that of an accidental cleft in the wood or a nest, and yet its being situated in a tree renders the abode feral and primitive. This is enhanced

by the fact that the meadow itself is of such extreme and indescribable proportions as to suggest a lack of the human contact that is requisite to the evolution of a descriptive lexicon. The trees traffic in “mystery” (*rāz*), and the size of the *simorgh*’s own tree defies signification except through tautology; it is portrayed as a tree, “of such great [size] that there had never been seen a tree of this description with respect to largeness.” In this eerie space of objects at once familiar and unfamiliar lives the *simorgh*, at once human and avian.

Many of the *simorgh*’s qualities, though it is introduced first as a “bird,” are described through their likeness to the selfsame human features. Its face and breasts are humanlike and womanly, respectively, and it flies with arms rather than wings. Its speech is described using the term *fasīḥ*, or eloquent, and this designation suggests that the *simorgh* is educated according to human standards of speech. It may even indicate that the *simorgh* is capable of eloquence in Arabic, whence comes the term. Unlike the bird’s habitat, its capacity for articulation falls squarely within a human descriptive metric, and indeed the *simorgh*’s ability to articulate itself in a normative way is itself a thing of wonderment. We see this particularly when comparing the *simorgh*’s elaborate and diegetic speaking style with that of Alexander in these moments; Alexander is repeatedly described as “amazed” by the *simorgh*, and this stupefaction manifests itself largely in silences. When Alexander does speak, it is only to ask simple, jejune questions, like “what sort of bird are you?” or “how old are you?” or “do you lay eggs?” The tenor of Alexander’s questions often, in addition to being plain and brief, evinces a desire to reinforce the *simorgh*’s bird-ness. He does not ask the *simorgh* to thoroughly identify itself, but instead asks what sort of creature it is within the confines of the bird species. Likewise, he ends his question about how the *simorgh* reproduces with whether it behaves “as other birds do.” The *simorgh*, meanwhile, addresses Alexander consistently by name and does not inquire about his status, of which it is already fully aware. Alexander is described by the *simorgh*, via Solomon, as one who would be recognizable on sight. Whereas Alexander puzzles through his conversation with the *simorgh*, the *simorgh* uses a combination of revelation and syllogism to make sense of the situation at hand. It closes its statements to Alexander by saying that the *simorghs* treat their young “in the fashion of mankind,” maintaining their diets and hygiene. This implies that in addition to possessing human-like qualities at an individuated level, the *simorghs* also organize themselves in human-like social groupings, cultivating a “domestic” aesthetic through their childcare practices.

The *simorgh*’s revelation is a patchwork of third- and second-hand prophecy, which suggests that while the *simorgh* is well-embedded within a socio-spiritual network, it is decidedly not a primary or prophetic figure. First, it narrates a tale told to Solomon by the angel Jibrā’īl, and this is followed by the *simorgh*’s own interactions with Solomon. The *simorgh* evaluates the tenability of Jibrā’īl’s prophecy as it recounts its content, saying that it originally thought the revelation to be implausible because of the geopolitical gulf separating Hindūstān and Rūm. The *simorgh* also evokes Qur’ānic revelation in relating Alexander to the figure of Dhū al-Qarnayn, albeit ambiguously. Whereas often the two are thought to be one and the same individual, the *simorgh*’s

speech maintains the potential for their being distinct persons. The window is left open for one to reach as far as Alexander in accomplishments and travels, and in so doing this individual would enact his status as Dhū al-Qarnayn. In this fashion, the *simorgh* again offers a gloss on revelation by way of ellipsis. Alexander may himself be Dhū al-Qarnayn, as the reader might expect, but only time will tell. Alexander's stupefaction throughout this vignette gives greater weight to the *simorgh's* interpretive interjections, as these come to constitute the only textual evidence that the revelation the *simorgh* proffers is being processed analytically. Alexander, by contrast, executes a series of physical gestures that indicate his reception of the *simorgh's* word by taking up the jewels, offering supplication to God, and demonstrating awe.

This revelatory moment is not, of course, divine revelation per se. Rather, the *simorgh's* revelation to Alexander is a transmission of information whose revelatory status is a wholly subjective matter. From Alexander's perspective, the information is novel and its bearer even more so, yet the *simorgh* has already abided with this information for some time, formed an interpretation of it, and is now able to verify it through its encounter with Alexander. Although the revelation is not directly God-given, it bears the hallmarks of divine revelation in that it has a chain of transmission studded with an archangel and a prophet, it makes mention of an additional Qur'anic figure, and it is conferred to a worthy receiver. As such, the *simorgh* as a figure, by being at once on the periphery of humanity and prophecy, takes on a mystical persona that accords with other aspects of the *Dārāb-nāme's* deferential attitude toward normative Islamic rituals. Throughout the text, we find Alexander frequently prostrating himself in *rak'as*, thanking God using Arabic optatives and the divine names, and so on. Likewise, we find the *simorgh* using an adumbrated form of *isnād* citation, invoking God optatively, and conveying "revelation" in an eloquent (Arabic?) tongue.

It has been noted by Kimberley Patton that, across the Abrahamic faiths, animals at times express piety "in ways that sometimes echo human religiosity but, often as not, are idiosyncratic to their own species."²¹ To this end, she notes the biblical case of the animals of Nineveh fasting in penitence alongside their owners, as well as the Qur'anic assertion that animals, like humans, are organized into an *umma*, a (often spiritually inflected) community (Q 6:38). The Qur'an further indicates that groups of animals are comparable to groups of humans not only in belief but also in disbelief. Regarding the comparison in Q 7:179 between cattle (*an'ām*) and unbelieving humans, Sarra Tlili notes that exegetes find three main similarities between unbelieving man and heedless beast, some of which have been previously discussed: "inability to understand language, enslavement to carnal desires, and lack of rationality."²² In the above case, the *simorgh's* religiosity and the rational and linguistic faculties that enable it are congruent with those of man. Moreover, due in part to the *simorgh's* astounding longevity, its religious knowledge is represented as being on a higher gnostic plane, with the *simorgh* able to bear Solomon's prophetic message to Alexander across time and space. That is, the *simorgh* is able to stand as a source for continuity of knowledge on behalf of several human generations that populate the lines of prophets and kings, lines forged not necessarily by blood but by spiritual affinity and a shared way of knowing.

The *sīmorgh*'s role as a vector for genealogically vital knowledge takes a more physicalized form in the text of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, in which the *sīmorgh* makes perhaps her most famed appearance. In the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, the creature instructs mankind on how to perform the first cesarean section, which enables the hero, Rostam, to be born. In order to perform the procedure, the *sīmorgh* admonishes, "bring a glittering knife, and a man familiar with spells."²³ She then explains how Zāl, Rostam's father, may go about concocting a balm for his wife Rudābeh's convalescence that, coupled with the topical application of the *sīmorgh*'s feathers, will heal her within a day's time. Even the rigors of surgery are imbued with the occult in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*'s description. This instance echoes the *sīmorgh*'s earlier intervention in the life of Zāl, in which the *sīmorgh* becomes a surrogate parent to the rejected infant.

Whereas in the case of Rostam the *sīmorgh* provides the medical advice that gives literal life to the hero, in the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* the *sīmorgh* offers counsel that lends pedigree to Alexander, who is summarily initiated in both word and deed into a mimetic relationship with Solomon, the Qur'ānic prophet-king who speaks with birds. In deemphasizing the physicality of the *sīmorgh*'s role as a wisdom-dispensing figure—whose very feathers heal wounds in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*²⁴—the text of the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* restores all forms of intercession to the divine, with the *sīmorgh* rendered as an articulate conveyor of God's words but not an agent of prophecy. This appears significant in the context of the *sīmorgh*'s displacement from the realm of pre-Islamic ideation, in which it conveyed esoteric knowledge to mankind, to that of the Islamic context in which its otherworldly knowledge can no longer be innate, but must now be related from other authoritative entities. Furthermore, in pointing up the almost banal humanoid physicality of the *sīmorgh* in the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* that enables it to sire, nurse, and clean young, the supernatural qualities that creature otherwise manifests—being a talking avian creature who lives for millennia—are counterbalanced. Through this, the *sīmorgh* is drawn closer to the earthly realm. It is this very closeness, though, which seems to so disturb Alexander, who desires to know what it is that makes the *sīmorgh* a bird, and not what it is that makes the *sīmorgh* like him.

In *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, we shall see that the agency of the crow in Abū Zayd's narrative is not diminished in the way of the *sīmorgh*. The level of the crow's involvement with, and even its signification of Abū Zayd is kept ambiguous; the reader cannot be entirely certain just how much influence the crow wields with respect to the corporeality of the yet unborn hero.

The Bird and the Self: Abū Zayd al-Hilālī and his Cousin Crow

While the *sīmorgh* in the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* may be read as being a character that stands in contrast with Alexander, Abū Zayd al-Hilālī and his avian counterpart are cast as being absolute parallels, with the black child Abū Zayd being widely regarded as a human embodiment of the black crow for both its color and its strength.²⁵ It is not Abū Zayd who interacts personally with the bird, but rather his mother, Khaḍrā', who is pregnant with him at the time. After spells of barrenness followed

by a female child, Khaḍrā' is desperate for a male heir to secure her place in the household of her husband, the tribal leader Rizq. According to several editions of the *sīra*, Khaḍrā' withdraws into the woods with another barren woman from the tribe, presumably to perform fertility rituals, where she sees a single black crow overcome and kill a single white bird.²⁶ In our text, she is simply out for a solitary stroll in a fertile field, not unlike Alexander's meadow, when her encounter with a group of birds that forecast her coming progeny occurs.

[W]hen Rizq finished his speech, the honorable Qirdāb returned to his territory, and the tribe of Hilāl went off to their territory. When they arrived the Emir Hāzim emerged to welcome them with drums and horns and trilling and they greeted each other. After a year, al-Khaḍrā' gave birth to a daughter whose name was Shiḥa, so the Emir Rizq took up supplicating God to supply him a male child. He said,

O Lord, o merciful, o hearer of calls
 O him alone to whom all servants plead
 O Lord, sustain me [*turzaqanī*] with a child
 Who may delight me,
 Who may keep my memory alive,
 And may attain achievement
 By David and Solomon, and Yaḥiya and Yūsuf
 By Moses and Jesus and the Chosen [*Mustafā*], Favored one!

After that, his wife became pregnant and she would ask Allah [often] to sustain her [*yurzaquha*] with a male child. And, once, they went out to the garden, then she saw a black crow driving off the other crows, subjugating them, and murdering them, so she said, "My God, I beseech you to bestow me a male child, for even if his color is black, perhaps he may grow to vanquish the cavalrymen and subjugate them like this crow." Then she recited:

O Lord, o merciful, o hearer of calls
 Sustain me [*turzaqanī*] with a male child, o almighty
 May he bear down upon the Bedouin horsemen, the lot of them
 That memory may loom large amidst the other lands
 Else my heart shall splinter, and my core, and my mind
 For I am an honorable [woman] from among the great houses.

Then, when she finished with her prayer, she returned to the dwellings. When she had come to term, labor came upon her. Thus she bore a young boy, brown of color [*asmar*], and the good news was brought to Rizq the Emir, and he was given the good tidings of the young boy, so he rejoiced at this and performed sacrifices, and the people observed his rejoicing and asked him about [the child's] name. [Rizq] said, "Barakāt" and they gave him to Bint 'Asjam that she may suckle of

him. After seven days, Ḥāzīm the Emir came to Rizq, as did Sarḥān and the remainder of the emirs to present him with gifts. They arrived before [the child], and when they saw him, Sarḥān bit his fingers and said to Rizq, “This child is black [*aswad*] like a slave,” then he versified, saying:

O, ‘mir Rizq, this is not your progeny
 This—his father is a black slave
 You named him “blessings,”²⁷ yet in his wake our God has vanished from us
 Joy has departed us, and the greatest unhappiness has come
 O Rizq, indeed you’ve forfeited your progeny, by the Prophet,
 And happiness has turned away, while your lucklessness persists.

So when the Emir Sarhan finished with his words, Rizq chafed and proclaimed:

The youth said, “Emir Rizq, whence come the tears?”
 From my eyes to my cheeks are they dispersed
 O people, bear witness all of you!
 Khaḍrā’ will be a woman scorned— she leaves tomorrow!
 And as long as I live, no glimpse of her shall remain,
 Though my body may yet be fettered by passion for her
 [My body] has not returned to me directly; the surviving [portion] passes away
 While the heart indeed has returned, brimming with black [*makūdan aswadan*].²⁸

Here again we are confronted with an instance of avian prophecy, however, the extent to which the birds constitute “characters” is far less developed than in the case of Alexander’s *sīmorgh*. Rather, the black crow constitutes a revelatory unit of information, symbolizing the color of the child, his strength, and his future martial efficacy (against a predominantly “white” foe).²⁹ The way in which Khaḍrā’ visualizes her child’s existence through the birds is in tension with Rizq’s prior supplications, wherein he swears by several prophets and petitions for divine intercession. Whereas Rizq, in invoking the prophets, draws exclusively on the highest of human ideals in reference to his child, Khaḍrā’ couches her desire in the negative. Even if the child is black, she asks, please at least let him be a boy. The activity of the birds, each battling to cast the other down from the skies and assert dominance, acts as a refracting mechanism through which these successive petitions may be assessed: Rizq is oriented toward lofty hopes, while Khaḍrā’ is oriented toward the existential threat that her pregnancy poses. Whereas Rizq is concerned with legacy, and therefore asks for a child to “keep memory alive,” Khaḍrā’ venerates survival itself, regardless of cost, and thus dwells on the crow’s capacity for subjugating others. There is a gendered element underlying the tenor of each spouse’s supplications, in that pregnancy is itself a threat to survival above and beyond concerns over social and domestic position. Whereas Rizq stands to be temporarily denied the potential for an heir, Khaḍrā’ is concerned with survival on multiple registers. Another expression of this gendered dynamic lies in Rizq’s invocation of the homogeneously masculine cast of prophets, for which Khaḍrā’ can appeal to no feminine par-

allel. Instead, her condition relates to the animals she encounters in her passage through the garden.

It is not until her poetic recitation that Khaḍrā' elaborates on her desire for her son to have legacy in the fashion of her husband. She stakes her son's legacy on her own "heart, core, and mind." The contrast that her poetry strikes with her initial request indicates that the poetry is a genre of public dramaturgy apart from the thoughts that precede it, which, by virtue of their anteriority, read as a more authentic and personal expression. Though the birds do not themselves act as articulate characters, they give occasion to Khaḍrā''s articulations and contribute a framing device for the couple's related poetic recitations.

Despite not being endowed with the power of speech, the crows nonetheless augur events to come. Not only does Barakāt physically resemble the crow with respect to his blackness, but also from a young age he exerts an oppressive force that, though innate as a function of his skin color, reflects the more active enterprise of his feathered counterpart. Immediately, Barakāt's blackness afflicts his mother, destroying her reputation and causing her divorce. In an ironic reversal of the vanquishing and subjugation that the crows portend, Barakāt is ascribed as the progeny of the most subjugated of peoples: a slave. In this fashion, Barakāt's entry into the world is simultaneously an introduction into the competitive, high-risk environment exemplified by the crows, which attack and destroy each other rather than coexisting harmoniously with their peers. The crows' premonitory symbolism comes to be far more complex than a one-to-one signification of Barakāt's personal attributes, embodying the familial and tribal strife that Barakāt unwittingly causes and will eventually arbitrate. This strife is initially spurred by social anxieties provoked by Barakāt's very nature as a black child. Barakāt's predetermined status as an inevitable agitator is paralleled by the natural instincts that predispose the crows to their internecine behavior. Indeed, the inborn violence of the crow is attested in the text of the Qur'an, wherein God sends one of the creatures to physically demonstrate burial for Cain so that he may inter his brother, murdered by his hand (Q 5:31).

It bears remarking that this a priori attachment of violent tendencies to a black infant is rooted in the very racist discourse that also gives rise, according to Malcolm Lyons, to the figuration of black Arab heroes in the *sīra* literature as paragons of warrior-like "size and strength."³⁰ Abū Zayd's ultimate status as a warrior-poet is also latent in the image of the crow, which is associated with the eponym for a pre- and early Islamic cadre of black Arab poets who were grouped by their racial identity.³¹ The crows, so often the totemic entity invoked by Arabs to denote blacks (about which more below), incorporate all of these strands of meaning in a single, distilled moment.

Moreover, the crow in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* maintains a mystical ambivalence: is it the vector for a message to Khaḍrā' about the nature of her offspring, or an agent of her offspring's blackening? How, exactly, does this child come to be, if we are to regard Khaḍrā' as sincere in denying accusations of her perfidiousness? The performance of the crow, as such, exerts narrative forces that both reveal and obscure. In this fashion, birds participate in this portion of the *Banī Hilāl* narrative in a way that sim-

ultaneously evokes their erstwhile status as revered interlocutors carrying signs from on high and that confounds the very notion of humans being able to deduce meaning from these signs with certainty but by direct divine guidance, as in the Qur'anic verse, "Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations of your tongues and your colors. Indeed, in those there are signs for the knowers" (Q 30:22). That is, whereas the humanoid, knowledge-transmitting *sīmorgh* can be seen acting according to normative Islamic *praxis*, one could say that the inarticulately signing crows of *Banī Hilāl* embody an element of normative dogma.

As with the *sīmorgh*, the revamped symbolism of the crow in its Islamic context is best viewed via its pre-Islamic perceptions, a collection of which is to be found among Arabic bestiaries, the penning of which began in the early 'Abbasid era. As has been noted by Michael McDonald, the belletristic animal texts (as opposed to technical manuals on specialized skills such as falconry or equestrianism), have a variety of literary progenitors, some of which have already been mentioned: pre-Islamic Arabian animal lore and knowledge, the Qur'an, travelogues and chronicles of wonders (*ajā'ib*), and ancient Greek zoological items.³²

The celebrated early 'Abbasid-era belletrist Abū 'Uthmān 'Amir b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ, in addition to being an early pioneer of the Arabic bestiary with his *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* (*Book of the Living*),³³ was particularly assiduous among his peers in his incorporation of pre-Islamic materials.³⁴ He takes an almost anthropological interest in chronicling popular perceptions and superstitions concerning the animals that populate his text. This is in marked contrast to anthologists such as Abū Hayyān al-Tawḥīdī, who tend in their zoological works to separate the *ummah* of the animals from that of man, focusing on inter-animal relationships and rendering the human reader a voyeur to their discrete realm rather than a fellow community member. As such, we find much in Tawḥīdī's zoological portion of his *al-Imtā' wa-l-Mu'anasa* about the animosity between the crow and the owl and the way in which the crow treats his young, or the animosity between the crow and the bull and ass, at whom he pecks, but nothing about how man might respond to or interpret these tendencies.³⁵ For al-Jāḥiẓ and his sources, three main features distinguish the crow, namely its capacity for bearing often negative news through the impenetrable desert; its attendant link with the concepts of strangeness, foreignness, and exile; and its black hue, the significance of which compounds the crow's already fraught symbolism through its association with the much-maligned black race.

Al-Jāḥiẓ begins with following insights into perceptions of the crow: interpretations of the crow's role in instructing man on burial are of two kinds, with one side averring that the crow's role in Cain's plight indicates that "unto the crow is virtue and praiseworthy matters," and that it is elect among birds in this respect. On the other hand, in light of the fact that Cain was himself so lacking in virtue and honor, one could read his words, "woe is me for I have failed to be like this crow," as a declaration of how base the crow is by nature, with Cain all the more so, for the crow is a "scorched black, ugly of disposition, wicked of bearing [...] and the remainder of birds are vexed by him; he is an eater of corpses, a debaser of the hunt."³⁶ This tension on the part of the crow between its capacity to instruct mankind and to beleaguer them with its ominous pres-

ence has precedent amongst the pre-Islamic poets. Al-Jāhiz quotes al-Nabīgha on the informative nature of the crow for the desert traveler: “The strong wind avers that our journey shall be tomorrow / And the black crow apprises us of this.”³⁷

The crow bears forth a sign from a larger force of nature, namely the wind, carrying the gale’s message to the travelers. The crow is not always a welcome messenger, though, and indeed is often associated with bad omens. This is due in part, al-Jāhiz informs us, to the semantic relationship between the crow (*ghurāb*) and words indicating the strange (*gharīb*), the isolating or exilic (*ghurba*), and the dangerous (*ghurāb* can also mean the edge of a sword blade).³⁸ Thus, the pre-Islamic poet ‘Antara ibn Shaddād is quoted as saying,

Those whose departure was anticipated take leave,
And in their wake there comes the speckled crow
The flash of its wing is as if it were a head stripped clean by a pair of shears
It is tender and gleaming with the news
So I rebuked it, o may it never lay eggs! And let it become fearful and tormented!
Indeed those [over whom] you caw to me, in their separation
Remain awake for the entire night, suffering.³⁹

The crow again bears news, but it is news already known and still poignant for the poet—namely of his lover’s separation from him, and their mutual suffering in one another’s absence. The poet therefore curses the crow, whose sleek wings bring to mind the rawness of ‘Antara’s recent misfortunes. The crow’s caw, described by al-Jāhiz as a frightful sound, here is a source of annoyance for the poet. According to al-Jāhiz, the crow is also noteworthy for its piercing eyesight, and perhaps its role as a reader of cosmic signs and human movements in the aforementioned pre-Islamic texts adduces and elaborates upon this more mundane form of perceptiveness. We may distinguish the crow’s more naturalistic, sensory perspicacity from the more literary and rhetorical erudition of the *simorgh* detailed above, whereby it is able to hear, interpret, and convey prophecy. The crow, an omen in and of itself, is cast as a courier not of prophecy but of more mundane information: the patterns of winds, the movements of man, and periodic reminders of the inevitability of suffering and death. The symbology of the crow also, therefore, runs counter to the representation of the *simorgh* as a figure that nourishes and even parents; the crow of the *sīra* as well as al-Jāhiz’s crow occupies the precarious space between non-being and being, be it between pregnancy and birth or the potentially fatal desert wasteland, but it does not shepherd one through. It simply dispenses comment.

A portentous presence and a shrill caw are not the crow’s only defining attributes, or even its primary ones. The crow is, above all, black. This chromatic quality is sufficiently negatively inflected that al-Jāhiz—who famously penned a letter in defense of blackness, *Fakhr al-Sudān ‘alā l-Baydān* (*The Boast of the Blacks over the Whites*)⁴⁰—sees fit to interpolate a section into the portion on the crow’s color entitled “poetry in praise of blackness.”⁴¹ Notably, the first line of poetry that he cites, by the pre-Islamic poet Imru’ al-Qays, makes use of a word for blackness that is formed from the same

root as that of the crow (*ghirbīb*), though here it is used to describe a beautiful lover's skin color.⁴² This is in keeping not only with the semiotic relation in *Banī Hilāl* between black bird and black man, but also with a broader representative vocabulary of race in other pre- and early Islamic texts.⁴³

Such vocabulary is also manifest in the text of the Qur'ān, though its relation to race is allusive at best. In Q 35:27, when describing the color of tracts of mountain rock, three main color types are named: the whites (*bīd*), the reds (*ḥumr*), and the extremely dark blacks (*gharābīb aswad*). Though the modern scholarly consensus indicates that the Qur'ānic text does not grapple minutely with the topic of race,⁴⁴ these colors nonetheless correspond with the colors of the races of the world according to the early Muslims, and the material in which they are present, namely earth, is likewise the material from which man is said to be hewn.⁴⁵ Analogizing elements of nature—be it a bird's plumage or a stone's coloration—with melanin would certainly have been a descriptive technique familiar to the social context in which the *sīra* was produced, although of course the social attitudes tincturing these analogies with feelings of racial animus or affinity shift in accordance with a multitude of other factors.⁴⁶

So inseparable is the crow from the notion of blackness that one finds amongst al-Jāhīz's list of aphorisms about the crow the adage, "until the crow turns white."⁴⁷ This phrase was applied to impossibilities, sometimes fancifully, as with the Umayyad poet al-'Arjī's assertion that, "the heart shall never avert itself from love, nor shall the crow [turn away from] its color."⁴⁸ The evocative relationship between the crow and its blackness may explain its presence in the *sīra* not only from a literary but also from a mnemonic standpoint, in that the blackness of the crow may form a deployable unit of information for the reciter—a "formula," constituted by an irreducible trope rather than a single word—that a poet can then integrate or innovate upon in composing an orally declaimed piece, as the *sīra* would originally have been.⁴⁹ Attaching the black hero Abū Zayd to the image of the black crow seems to have been not only a natural narrative choice for the *sīra* composers, but also perhaps a useful tool for stabilizing one portion of the *sīra* across its inevitable and recurrent reconstructions. This element of symbolic stability, though, does not reduce the complexity of the symbol's underlying content and, as we see, the crow and its role as an agent of Abū Zayd's formation as a hero, as a black man, and as Khadrā's progeny remains ambiguous.

At the same time, the wider web of associations that coincide with the crow's blackness, as enumerated by al-Jāhīz, offers a symbolic map of attributes that the reader might anticipate will accrue to the black hero: like the desert-dwelling crow, he too may occupy an interstitial space, and indeed already does as a function of his black Arab hybridity and the doubts this casts upon his legitimacy. His blackness will lead many to assume, like Sarḥān, that Abū Zayd is the progeny of slaves, complicit in the same semiotic collapse that produces the consensus among medieval Arab philosophers that slavery was as natural to some races as color itself.⁵⁰ Like the mordant crow (rendered particularly deadly in the text of *Banī Hilāl*, in which it battles with other birds), Abū Zayd may become a harbinger of death. Although by the same token we may read Abū Zayd's black, slavish body as itself linked with a specific type of

bodily commodification that jarringly echoes the crow's habit of feeding on flesh. The content of the *sīra* bears out these impressions, but this of course means that they come into sharper view through retrospection rather than at a first glance. This is unlike in the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ*, where the *sīmorgh's* impression upon Alexander was both thoroughly aweing for its premonitory content and disruptive of Alexander's own humanity due to the creature's uncannily humanoid qualities. By contrast, in the *sīra*, the reader is left with a far simpler portrait of the crow that presents the creature almost as a simulacrum of the human whose existence it prefigures. Whereas the *sīmorgh* explicates its connection to Alexander and the whole of mankind on our behalf, we find ourselves left to puzzle over just how far the crow of the *sīra's* premonitory wisdom extends, and wonder at the depth of the connection between animal and man.

Conclusion

This study has endeavored to offer an extended, comparative reading of vignettes from two near-contemporary popular literary texts. In so doing, it has sought to account for the way in which avian imagery operates in two iterations of Islamic literatures that each have different mythopoeic roots, but which both undertake the same type of negotiation in incorporating these mythemes into populist—and hence normative—contemporary works. The *sīmorgh's* mythic history in Persian culture significantly predates Islam, as is widely recognized, and it counts amongst its earlier mentions references in the Avestan *yašt's*, various Pahlavi texts from the post-Sasanian period, and a panoply—particularly in the Sasanian period—of decorative artworks.⁵¹ Between the fall of the Sasanian rulers and Ferdowsi's penning of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, the *sīmorgh* undergoes a symbolic transformation from a giver of seed and plants to mankind in the Zoroastrian conception to a more direct caregiver to man, as in the scene from the *Shāhnāmeḥ* mentioned above.⁵² While the significance of the crow as a particular symbol in pre-Islamic Arabia and areas to the west is more diffuse and difficult to pinpoint, this much may be surmised: often, the crow was regarded as ominous in pre-modern Mediterranean societies, and indeed the Egyptians came to associate it with widowhood. The pre-Islamic and *mukhadḍam* poets quoted by al-Jāḥiẓ indicate that early Arabic speakers took seriously the semantic relation between the crow and distance, foreignness, and exile, and moreover that this led the crow to be portrayed as a figure that could ferry news into the wastelands and from afar. Throughout ancient history, their association with the consumption of carrion lent to the negative characterization that crows and ravens shared, and Johannes Foufopoulos and Nikos Litinas, in their work on crows and ravens in Mediterranean literature, have affirmed that such associations persist even in modern Egyptian proverbs.⁵³ That is, the crow carries signs and messages, but most bespeak death and destruction.

During the pre- and early Islamic period, the crow came to be associated not only with death and the wilderness but also—via chromatic analogy—with black people, and resultantly with slavery, and all of these features together conspire to produce a

vision of the crow as alien and precarious. As noted above, so defining of a crow was its blackness that the crow's color becomes a sort of aphoristic lodestar; the idea of a crow turning white is as preposterous to the Arabs of al-Jāhiz's era as a flying pig is to us. This represents another contrast with the *simorgh*, whose coloration appears inessential and is only described in terms of plurality and luminosity: its feathers are so varicolored as to be blinding, and its eyes shine like candles.

Like the essential blackness of the crow, blackness is so essential to slavery that Abū Zayd is cast from birth as a violator of norms, the polysemy of which lies in the fact that Abū Zayd is at once a superhuman champion and a racialized interloper; his body both signals defeat for others and is itself marked as a target for violence and exclusion. As such, the crow has a discursive function in the text of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* that invites a layered reading. Rather than being a sign that indicates a single signifier, the crow is a "cipher" into which a number of symbolic meanings and portents may be read. A rather different reading practice is encouraged in the fabric of Alexander's encounter with the *simorgh*; in the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ*, the *simorgh* is portrayed as being capable of eloquent speech, and this eloquence is signaled to the text's audience before it even begins to talk. This prefigures the importance of the *simorgh*'s speech in such a way that the audience is invited to read its words deeply. This is similar to the close reading occasioned by the crows in *Banī Hilāl*, though the textual stimulus is dissimilar. In both cases, the birds register immediately with their audience as portentous. Moreover, in both cases the resonance of these creatures as portents relies on or responds to symbolic currency that predates the Islamic context.

Each of these birds' portents is outfitted in the text at hand, though, with the trappings of conventional Islamic pious discourse: the *simorgh* performs an act of oral transmission reminiscent of *ḥadīth* and periodically invokes well-known terms of praise for Allah, and the crows' acts are framed literarily by two poetic supplications that, though differently concerned, each draw on religious tropes and are regarded within the text itself as "prayers." In each case also, the birds modify humanity in uncanny ways, both through contrast and mimicry. The *simorgh* performs humanity in a way that seems to usurp Alexander's own humanity and cause unease, while the crows' bestiality forges an ambivalent parallel to both the perceived sub-humanity of the black infant Abū Zayd and his future violent, heroic, and even superhuman exploits. These perturbations of human identity recall the aforementioned debate raised by Solomon's hoopoe in the Qur'an about what, if anything, differentiates man from beast. Indeed, this philosophical debate undergirds manifold instances of inter-species relationships in literature, with birds occupying a uniquely liminal position as animals long regarded as being capable of "articulation" and freighted with signs from the lofty realm that they traverse.

Notes

1. De Kay, *Bird Gods*, ix.
2. A study of bird symbology in *jāhiliyya*-era sources has been conducted by Aida Gasimova as part of a more comprehensive work on "signs of fate" in the selfsame body of sources. See Gasimova, "Models,

- Portraits.” On the mordant symbolism of the desert owl in pre-Islamic poetry in particular, see Homerin, “Echoes of a Thirsty Owl”.
3. Ahmed, “Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses”.
 4. *Mantiq* may also be understood as “speech”, “articulation”, or “logic”.
 5. Al-Şafā, *The Case of the Animals*, 172 n. 193.
 6. Carroll, *Literary Darwinism*, 90-91.
 7. The term *sira* in this context is variously translated as “epic”, or “romance”, though works grouped within this genre also appear under other monikers such as *qiṣṣa* or *hikāya*, depending on their time and place of recording. In light of the difficulty posed by attempting to delimit the *sira* genre and map it directly onto a corresponding western literary type, I have elected to henceforth refer to the genre using the Arabic term. On the genre typology of the *siras*, see Heath, “Other *Siras* and Popular Narratives”; Heath, *The Thirsty Sword*; Lyons, *The Arabian Oral Epic*.
 8. Monroe, “Oral Composition”, 39.
 9. Kruk, *The Warrior Women of Islam*, 3.
 10. Grant, “*Sirat Firūzšāh*”, 525.
 11. I borrow this term from George Kurman’s work by the same title: Kurman, “A Methodology of Thematics”.
 12. *Sirat Banī Hilāl*, occasionally found in abridgement under the title, *Taghribat Banī Hilāl* (or the *Westward Migration of the Tribe of Hilāl*), because of its ethno-tribal concentration and its status as a mythic migratory account, is mostly of interest to an Arabophone, North African audience, and particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, and parts of the Sudan. For more, see Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*; Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes*; Slyomovics, *The Merchant of Art*.
 13. Boyarin, “Diasporic Culture”, vi.
 14. Rubanovich, “The Reconstruction of a Storytelling Event”.
 15. Madeyska, “The Language and Structure of the ‘Sira’”.
 16. Ferdowsī does likewise, and Hanaway and Julie Scott Meisami are in agreement that these three texts take their genealogies from a prior Greek source, pseudo-Callisthenes (c. 200 CE). See Hanaway, “*Dārāb-Nāma*”; Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, 39.
 17. It should be noted that Abū Zayd al-Hilālī is not the main protagonist in every iteration of *Sirat Banī Hilāl*. Studies conducted by Abderrahman Ayoub and Michelline Galley in Tunisia, for example, suggest that the characters Zazya and Dhiyāb each, in their turn, occupy the starring role. Susan Slyomovics has, moreover, demonstrated the flux of Abu Zayd’s character in modern recitations, wherein he implicitly or explicitly dons the identity of modern heroes and underdogs, at times brandishing a Kalashnikov instead of a sword or being transformed into an embattled Gamal Abdel Nasser warring against Sadat. See Galley and Ayoub, *Histoire des Beni Hilal*; Slyomovics, “Arabic Folk Literature”.
 18. The primary editions of the texts used throughout this paper are as follows; for *Sirat Banī Hilāl*: *Sirat Banī Hilāl*, Vol. 1 (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Thaqāfiyya, 1980). For the *Dārāb-Nāmeḥ*: Abū Ṭaḥer Muḥammad Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Mūsā al-Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-Nāmeḥ-ye Ṭarsūsī*. Vol. 2. Edited by Dhabīḥullah Şafā (Tehran: Bongāh-e Tarjomeh va-Nashr-e Ketāb, 1968). I have noted cases in which other editions have been consulted below.
 19. Cf. Q 18:65-82.
 20. Al-Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-Nāmeḥ*, 576-8.
 21. Patton, “He Who Sits in the Heavens Laughs”, 408.
 22. Tlili, *Animals in the Qur’an*, 127.
 23. Ferdowsi, *The Shabnāmeḥ*, 105.
 24. So physicalized was the simorgh’s relationship to knowledge transference in certain cases that one Ottoman-era illumination from the *Fālnāmeḥ*, or *Book of Fortune*, depicts the simorgh carrying Hippocrates on his back, en route to Mount Qāf to prepare medications. On this, see Sari, “The Simurgh”, fig. 3.
 25. The reading of Abū Zayd’s blackness as a mark that draws him in relation to his mother’s wished-upon crow persists in many analyses of the *sira*, beginning perhaps with Edward William Lane, who in his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* declares, “Emeereh Khadra ... saw a black bird

- attack and kill a numerous flock of birds of various kinds and hues, and, astonished at the sight, earnestly prayed God to give her a son like this bird, even though he should be black. Her prayer was answered: she gave birth to a black boy". More recently, the work of Bridget Connelly has complicated this view, suggesting that amongst hearers of the *sīra*, Abū Zayd's blackness is a mark not merely of his origin story but of a more generalized social marginality in the place of which other types of marginality—poverty, illness, gender difference—may readily be interpolated. Dwight Reynolds notes, as does M. C. Lyons, that the "extraordinary circumstances of his birth" lead Abū Zayd to often be regarded by others as a slave, which ironically endows him with a capacity to disguise himself more efficaciously in enemy territory. On the conception of black Arab heroes in the *sīras*, see Schine, "Conceiving the Black-Arab Hero". See also: Lane, *Manners and Customs*, 389; Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*, 149–54; Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes*, 13; Lyons, *The Man of Wiles*, 216.
26. This version of the episode is in evidence in Dwight Reynolds' transcriptions and recordings of contemporary *sīra* recitations: Reynolds, "Sirat Banī Hilāl Episode 1.
 27. I have elected here to translate the child's name, Barakāt, because the oppositional device in this hemistich plays on the underlying meaning of the proper noun.
 28. *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, 37–9.
 29. On Arabs' self-perception as "white" during the medieval period and this phenomenon's development, see Lewis, *Race and Slavery*.
 30. Lyons, *The Man of Wiles*, 216.
 31. For more on these authors' lives and production, see Lewis, "The Crows of the Arabs".
 32. McDonald, "Animal-Books".
 33. I translate the title to al-Jāhīz's *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* in the style of James Montgomery in his masterful work on the subject. See Montgomery, *Al-Jāhīz*.
 34. McDonald, "Animal Books", 5.
 35. Kopf, "The Zoological Chapter", 413–14. On the owl's similarly ominous and hostile portent in the pre-Islamic period, see Homerin, "Echoes of a Thirsty Owl".
 36. Al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, 410–12.
 37. *Ibid.*, 442.
 38. *Ibid.*, 438–9.
 39. *Ibid.*, 443.
 40. Some have read *Fakhr al-Sūdān* as a piece of personally motivated, apologetic literature on the part of al-Jāhīz, who is thought to have had black ancestry. Others, such as Thomas Hefter, have read *Fakhr al-Sūdān* as more of a literary exercise. Hefter characterizes al-Jāhīz as a man who was self-consciously "of Baṣra" and who, because of his Mu'tazilite leanings, would have viewed the uneven distribution of faculties amongst the races of man as a manifestation of God's justice (*'adl*) rather than a product of social construction. In either case, for the purposes of this paper, we may note that the fact of *Fakhr al-Sūdān*'s existence and al-Jāhīz's inclusion of praise-poetry lauding blackness attest to—if nothing else—his enthusiasm for advocating the countercultural, which fortuitously aligns with a pro-black posture. See Ingram "Trials of Identity"; Hefter, *The Reader in al-Jāhīz*, 128–30.
 41. Al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, 426.
 42. The line is as follows, "The eye is piercing, the hand is graceful [lit. "floating", *sābiḥa*], the ear is attentive and the color deep black [*ghirbib*]" *Ibid.*
 43. On the use of this lexicon in other *sīra* works, see R. Schine, "Conceiving the Black-Arab Hero".
 44. Bernard Lewis highlights Q 30:22 as an example of the Qur'an acknowledging racial diversity (one of only two references to race that he finds in the Qur'anic text), but asserts that "the Qur'an expresses no racial or color prejudice". Chouki El Hamel, too, notes that "neither the Qur'an nor the Ḥadīth make any evaluative racial distinctions among humankind"; rather, racial prejudice is encoded in the apocryphal Hamitic myth. See Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 21; El Hamel, *Black Morocco*, 63.
 45. Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 9. On mankind being made from earth (*ṭīn*), cf. Q 3:49, Q 6:2, Q 7:12, Q 17:61, Q 23:12, Q 32:7, Q 37:11, Q 38:71, Q 38:76.

46. Lewis argues that the early Islamic period saw a “specialization and fixing of color terms”, with the Arabs becoming fully “white”, whereas previously their melanin had been more a relative or individuated construct (compared with Europeans or Persians, they might have self-designated as black, but white compared with Africans). With this fixing of terms there comes an increased rigidity or “canonicity” of the values assigned to given racial designations. This ideological change has the effect of further entrenching anti-blackness; Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 22–6.
47. Al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, 427.
48. Ibid.
49. On the application of the oral-formulaic theory to medieval epic and romance lyric, see Monroe, “Formulaic Diction”. Though critical of Monroe’s efforts to apply oral-formulaic analysis to pre-Islamic *qaṣīdas*, Gregor Schoeler is warm to the notion that the theory—if applied to any body of pre-modern Arabic literature—may be best used in a modified form to gain insight into *sira* composition. See Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written*, 110.
50. See Hardy, “Medieval Muslim Philosophers on Race”.
51. Harper, “The Senmurv”; Schmidt, “Simorg”.
52. Harper, “The Senmurv”, 100.
53. Foufopoulos and Litinas, “Crows and Ravens in the Mediterranean”.

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