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While working on his dissertation research at the Egyptian National Library, Ahmed El Shamsy stumbled upon the manuscript of a highly important book within the Islamic tradition that had been declared extinct at that time. A search for the book’s source, alongside tracing the unfamiliar names of the copier and the owner, led him to write the treatise – *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition*. El Shamsy proposes that classical Islamic texts that are considered canonical in the study of Islam today, and also formed the basis of Orientalist scholarship, would not have been so if not for the editors, correctors, copiers, reformers, intellectuals, and bibliophiles of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arabic-speaking Muslim world. These individuals – the protagonists of this book – went to extraordinary lengths to revive and print books that were rendered almost extinct by the postclassical tradition (which he marks from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in contrast to the classical period spanning the ninth to the fifteenth centuries). Muslim intellectual culture in “modernity” has not just been influenced by the translation and adoption of European scholarship; rather, there has been a reconnection with classical texts through print culture that formed the basis of an “indigenous modernity”, as the succinctly organized and accessible book shows. El Shamsy, currently associate professor of Islamic Thought at the University of Chicago, has traced the specific contexts that inspired the adoption of the printing press in the Middle East long after its introduction in the West, complicating the progressivist narrative that “Western” technologies are uncritically and passively embraced in the “non-West” without particular historical necessities and dynamic interaction between different cultures.

Among other things, El Shamsy identifies war, environmental decay, the steep decline of traditionally endowed libraries, the intellectual and financial investment of European collectors of Arabic books, and colonial theft as contributing factors to the dearth of classical Islamic books during the postclassical period. However, he suggests that the loss of classical literary heritage was a result of certain trends
in Muslim scholarly practices as well: postclassical academic textual scholasticism that advantaged secondary literature centered around commentary on the classics over primary texts (this trend itself could have been a result of the unavailability of books, admits El Shamsy), as well as the denigration of book-based learning in Sufi epistemological esotericism (which was partly attributable to the influence of Greek philosophers). Scholasticism’s undue focus on rhetorical, lexical, and Aristotelian logical analysis of a limited number of books often diverted scholars and students from critically engaging with the content and context of texts (35). However, even during this time, there were some scholars who attempted to revive classical scholarship and engage in critical philology while criticizing both scholasticism and esotericism – a significant nuance El Shamsy draws on, which correctly challenges the simplistic narrative of a total absence of critical scholarship during the postclassical period.

After laying out the socio-political contexts in the Middle East that gave rise to a need for the printing press, the book proceeds to discuss the birth of the Arabic printing industry and a rise in modern research libraries there. While printing did not necessarily replace the traditional manuscript tradition, there remained a need to ensure the presence of a reasonable number of interested readers of printed books for sustainability. This need prompted the rediscovery of long-lost classical works by a rising group of elite bibliophiles whose enthusiasm, social capital, and financial resources enabled them to fund the traveling needed to procure rare manuscripts and their printing. Some such attempts, in fact, included the use of photography to replicate rare manuscripts – a practice not very different from our present-day scanning technology. However, some almost-extinct manuscripts required extensive editorial labor, in addition to the work of correctors or proofreaders, to be preserved in their original condition without errors. For example, one editor, Ahmad al-Husayni, “reconstructed a seminal, all-but-forgotten ninth-century legal text from fragments scattered across several countries, thus accomplishing a philological feat that would have been entirely beyond the capacity of a corrector” (122). Charting significant influence of Orientalist editing and authorship practices in the emergence of the editorial role in the neo-classical revival and the contribution of editors in reconstituting fragmentary and corrupted texts, El Shamsy challenges the perceived insularity of “Eastern” and “Western” bodies of scholarship. In addition to editors, there were reformist intellectuals who were invested in recovering classical texts and simultaneously challenging postclassical practices that deviated from early Islamic tradition. Moreover, these reformers often aimed at ethical reinvigoration of Muslims through knowledge, something they insisted was not attainable through postclassical Islamic thought’s excessive reliance on either scholasticism or esotericism, both of which prohibited critical engagement with classical texts. El Shamsy ends
the book by highlighting the onset of philology and textual criticism in neoclassical Islamic scholarship, ushered in by the incorporation of print culture in the intellectual landscape of the nineteenth-century Arabic-speaking Muslim world.

El Shamsy’s comprehensive and dense text challenges popular dichotomies regarding the so-called Muslim intellectual decline, which either outright negate any unevenness in Islamic scholarly tradition throughout the centuries to establish and valorize the possibility of a seamless transfer of knowledge from the early days of Islam to contemporary times, or ignore the wealth of postclassical scholarship to highlight a perceived intellectual stagnation during that period. While the first is understandably a defense against Orientalist accusations, the author suggests that it ends up perpetuating a harmful and flawed idealization of the Muslim past, ignoring both crucial challenges and impressive reforms that were prompted by the postclassical period. Notably, the criticism of postclassical tradition came not only from Orientalists, but also from Muslim intellectuals and reformers themselves. On the other hand, the tendency to promote the idea of a homogeneous decline – a Muslim equivalent of the “Dark Ages” – is problematic in the sense that it overlooks and undermines the centuries of postclassical scholarship, the immense value of which El Shamsy recognizes despite his preference for neoclassical scholarship’s resuscitation of crucial texts informing Islamic epistemology’s past and present. He argues that the very reason the rediscovery of Islamic classics is obscured in historical discourse is due to its deviation from the modernist binary that constructs “the East” and “the West”, tradition and modernity, and belief and knowledge as polar opposites. Problematizing these reductive notions for and against the decline gives El Shamsy’s project an epistemic decolonial value (Grosfoguel 2007), as it recognizes the intermingling of Muslim and Orientalist intellectual exchange in sustaining Islamic textual tradition, instead of constructing an image of insular knowledge systems.

One possible misreading of the book could be caused by El Shamsy’s trenchant criticism of institutionalized forms of saint worship that became part of Muslim life under the auspices of esoteric Sufis during the postclassical period. He argues that the emphasis on divinely inspired knowledge and hierarchical master–disciple relationship in Sufi esotericism undermined the value of reasoning in Islamic knowledge culture. About the work of Sufi thinker Ibn ‘Arabi, El Shamsy says, “it integrated Sufi ideas into a developed Neoplatonic philosophical cosmology within which the active intellect could directly inspire the elect with knowledge that is far superior to anything that can be obtained either through reason or through instruction by others” (44). Even though the criticism of such practices sometimes came from Sufi thinkers themselves according to the book, a stronger emphasis on the contribution of esotericist scholars to Islamic intellectual corpus and the
intermingling of the rational and the mystical in the Islamic worldview could evade such misinterpretation. However, considering the limits of an ambitious project as such, the expanse of relevant individual and institutional efforts addressed in the book is already commendable. Moreover, considering the anthropological debates surrounding “lived Islam” and “orthodox Islam” and the problematization of this binary (Fadil and Fernando 2015), as well as the academic discourse on power and authority in the Islamic tradition that calls for more than a mere theological critique of this issue (in the sense that valorizing Sufi practices as markers of popular/everyday Islam is in tension with the authority of Sufi leaders and implies a de-rationalization of everything public and ordinary), El Shamsy makes a significant contribution to ongoing debates in disciplines beyond Islamic studies and intellectual history.

Another notable absence in the book is women’s contribution in reviving classical Islamic scholarship since the early nineteenth century. In the coda, El Shamsy acknowledges that while he did not find any record of women editors in the temporal frame of his project, since the mid-twentieth century female scholars have been editors of various scholarly collections. However, whether such omission of women editors and intellectuals in the archives is representative of their lack of contribution or rather constitutes an erasure of women’s work (which has historical precedent – see: Alwani 2013) remains a question open for future explorations. Finally, as El Shamsy’s project focuses almost exclusively on Arabic texts, Islamic literature produced in other languages during the classical period is not included in this account, though occasional references to non-Arab scholars from places such as India are made. He attributes this omission to the fact that most printed works in the non-Arabic-speaking Muslim world were not associated with a revival of classical texts and were mostly reprints of postclassical works. Nevertheless, future engagements from scholars who have greater access to non-Arabic languages and archives featuring this body of scholarship has the potential of unearthing works that might complicate this categorization.

As Ahmed El Shamsy notes, the extraordinary accessibility of classical Islamic texts today – often available online in abundance and free – for researchers of Islam owe a great amount to the immense efforts of the individuals and initiatives highlighted in his book. In a way, his project is a tribute – a book-length acknowledgment to editors, collectors, bibliophiles, correctors, intellectuals, and reformers associated with the revival of the Islamic classics through print culture that radically altered the landscape of Islamic studies as a discipline to how we see it now. In the slow, yet growing, efforts to bring indigenous and premodern epistemologies and epistemic practices from the margins to the center of academic scholarship in recent years, El Shamsy’s book will hold a crucial place for future intellectual historians and Islamic studies scholars.
Works Cited

