



Lithograph from The Illustrated London News (1857) of a Valletta street scene showing among others, a bearded Arab and a clergyman wearing a cocked hat.

Arabic Erotic Literature and Malta Fāris Al-Shidyāq's Novel

Simon Mercieca writes on one of the most notable authors and journalists in the 19th century Arabic journalism, Fāris Al-Shidyāq, who spent several years working in Malta, and wrote about it.

A Biographical Note

Fāris Al-Shidyāq is not a greatly known figure in Malta, yet, he is well known in the Arabic world and is considered one of the giants of nineteenth-century Arabic literature. This man spent a long period of life in Malta although until now, it was largely thought that his sojourn in Malta had only been from 1835 up to 1848. Recent research has shown that this great man of Arab literature had visited Malta before.

In fact, the first time that Fāris Al-Shidyāq came to Malta was in January 1827 after having left Beirut, his home city, for Alexandria whence he continued his voyage on the English ship *Mary*, arriving in Malta on 21st March 1827. He came here seeking refuge after having changed his religion and from being a Maronite Christian had become a Protestant Christian.¹ On his arrival, he identified himself as '*maestro di lingua araba*, that is, a language teacher. On arriving in Malta, he had to undergo quarantine at the Lazzaretto in Gzira.²

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The epitaph on Al Shidyāq's tomb. He died in Kadikoy, Turkey, but his body was taken for burial to Lebanon.



His visit to Malta was directly related to the work that the Protestant Missionaries were undertaking in Malta at the time, in particular, in establishing a press in Valletta in 1825 for publishing books. Primarily these books were in Arabic and intended for distribution in North Africa and the Near East. Before the granting of the Liberty of the Press in 1839, printing presses on the Island belonged either to the Protestant missionaries or to the British Governor.³

In Malta, Al-Shidyāq took up residence at the house of Mr. Temple, who was in charge of the American Missionary establishment in Malta. He also began to give private tuition in the Arabic language to Dr. Christof Schlienz, a Protestant German pastor who worked at the Church Missionary Society's press (CMS).⁴ For his services, Al-

Shidyāq was offered by the American Missionaries the salary of 33 dollars a month which was the same salary he would have received had he stayed on in Egypt. It was pointed out to Al-Shidyāq that such a salary, in Malta, carried lesser value than in Egypt. At the time, life in Egypt was already less expensive than Malta. Despite this apparent economic disadvantage, he still chose to come here, presumably attracted by the cosmopolitan atmosphere that reigned in Malta then.

However, in 1828, after having fallen seriously ill, his stay was interrupted for he left the island. He himself mentions this illness in one of his letters. The contracted illness was diagnosed as some sort of venereal disease - a hypothesis that is corroborated by his writings on his stay in Malta wherein he speaks of his encounters with Valletta prostitutes. However, one suspects that he had been misdiagnosed. He definitely did not suffer from syphilis for he lived to quite an old age. Most probably he contracted brucellosis (or Maltese or undulant fever) which was then being diagnosed by some doctors as a type of venereal disease. During this time, his health deteriorated as his host, Mr. Temple continually presented him with pork, which he refused to eat with the result that he subsisted on a diet of bread and cheese.⁵ Goat's cheeselets were a source of brucellosis disease.

In 1836, the American Missionaries once again sent Al-Shidyāq to Malta where he ended up working at the CMS press in Valletta, again collaborating with Dr. Schlienz. At the same time, his Protestant contacts helped him obtain a job at the Lyceum. He was chosen to put into practise the ideas of Sarah Austin, wife of one of the British Commissioners who came to Malta in 1835. Sarah Austin had compiled an independent report on how to improve education in Malta and among her suggestions was the introduction of the teaching of Arabic and that Maltese should be taught through Arabic. Al-Shidyāq was chosen for this job and taught Arabic from primary school

up to Lyceum level and in 1839, was appointed professor of Arabic at our University.⁶ He himself confessed that each day he worked four hours for the University of Malta - (the Lyceum was at this period part of the University establishment) - and three hours for the Governor.⁷ Perhaps he was one of the most important lecturers to have taught at the Lyceum (and our University) during the early nineteenth century.

In Malta, Al-Shidyāq became involved in a situation where religion was being used as a sort of political tool. His services were needed by the Protestant printing press in particular for the translation of religious texts, including that of the Bible into Arabic, aimed mostly at those Arab Christians who had converted to the Protestant faith. It should be noted that between the 1820s and 1844, Malta became a world centre for the printing of books in Arabic.

Al-Sāq āla al-Sāq

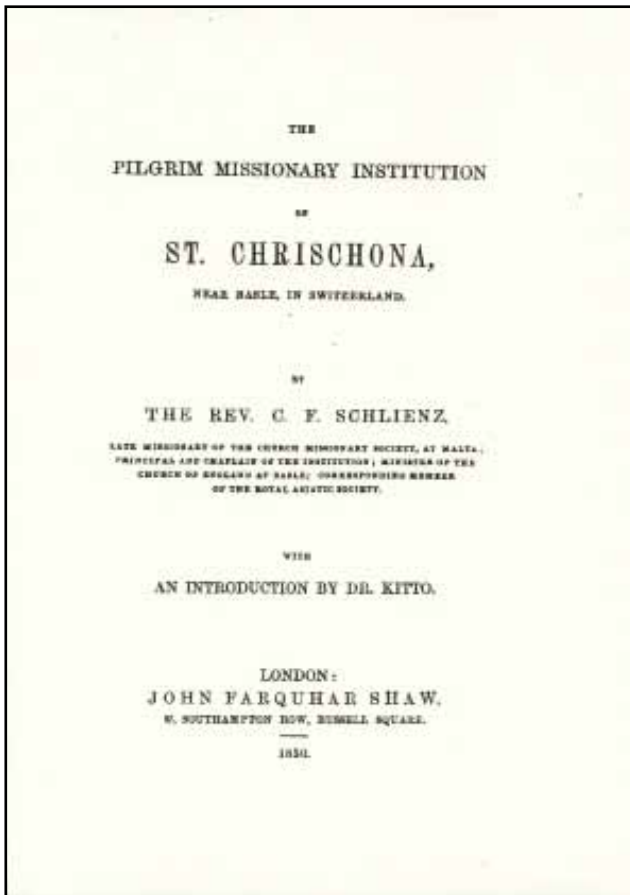
Al-Shidyāq's Arabic and in particular his knowledge of classical Arabic was exceptional to the extent that through his writings he is now considered to be one of the fathers of the Arabic 'nahda' or renaissance of the classical Arabic language. It is for his command of the classical Arabic language that Al-Shidyāq is mostly known today. The book *Al Wasita fi Malta* is perhaps the one best known in Malta and the author is mostly remembered for his rather nasty comments about Malta and the Maltese. But this is not the sole book by Al-Shidyāq containing references to Malta.

In Malta, the book *Al-Sāq āla al-Sāq fimā huwa al-Fāryāq aw-ayyām wa-šuhūr wa-a d'wām fi al-'arab wa-l-āğām* (*Legs Across: Chronology of the life of Al-Faryaq in the Arabic world and outside along the years*) is only known to a very close-knit literary milieu. Methodologically, it is a fictional work with short passages containing autobiographical references, some of which can be clearly



identified with the Malta period of Al-Shidyāq's life.⁸ In this book, he refers to Malta as *Island of scoundrels* and the *island of bad breath*. The last reference is a direct allusion to the Maltese language which he considered as a very poor Arabic language.⁹ At the same time, its historical and literary value is of greater significance than *Al-Wasita*, as the author selected and discussed those topics that he considered significant and of relevance to his contemporary society.

Al-Sāq was first published in Paris in 1855; seven years after Al-Shidyāq had left Malta for good. It was an immediate success and until today, it is considered one of the most important Arabic texts to be published in the nineteenth century. It is also the most popular book written by Al-Shidyāq and has gone through a number of editions



Title page of a publication by C.F. Schlienz, Shidyāq's close collaborator during his stay in Malta.

and publications.

Perhaps, the choice of Paris was not only related to the presence of printing presses in this city capable of publishing books in Arabic characters but also to the content of the book. Indeed, it belongs to a genre of erotic literature, with a strong element of satire. Such type of literature embarrassed potential contemporary readers. In all this, one cannot fail to note the new influence that the Victorian Age was having on Anglo-Saxon works was also influencing Arab writers and publishers resulting in the suppression of a long tradition of erotic Arab writing.

Such a literary theme was widespread throughout the Orient and poetry verging onto the erotic was known as *g azel*. This form of poetry started to disappear in the nineteenth century. Major Arabic critics now consider Al-Shidyāq one of the last exponents of this tradition of erotic literature.

The Malta Incidents

An empirical research into this work will reveal at least two stories in this book with a Maltese connotation. Al-Shidyāq does not give the names or the localities where the episodes occurred. However, from historical research in the archives these facts can be easily traced to Malta.

The first reference is to be found in the female character

depicted in *Al-Sāq*. She is called Feryaqiya, a name certainly chosen on purpose. She has the role to speak about sex, particularly discussing the issue of extramarital relations. One can easily identify here the biographical aspects related to Al-Shidyāq's sojourn in Malta. In Malta, his wife betrayed him and went with a young Maltese boy. It seems that he literally caught her with this young Maltese when he returned back to Malta from England after one of his frequent voyages abroad. Al-Shidyāq communicates this sad news in one of his letters to his brother in Syria.

The story can, in part, explain why Al-Shidyāq was negative in his views about Malta as expressed in the book *al-Wasita*. However, he takes a different approach in *Al-Sāq* since in it he speaks about the rights of women to love somebody else. In his debate with Feryaqiya, he has a precocious attitude towards the position of women. To him, women were to be treated equally in terms of sex. If a woman is not contented, then she ought to have the right to go with another man.

Indeed, Fāris Al-Shidyāq was not an ideal husband. In one of his books about Malta, it clearly transpires that he had extra marital relationships and frequented Valletta prostitutes. His employers in Malta, the Church Missionary Society, protested that he frequented a particular 'locanda'.¹⁰ In *Al Wasita*, he shows inside knowledge of the workings of prostitutes, in particular when he refers to what happened in their bedrooms, including certain intimate customs, such as the one of turning any sacred image, present in their room, to face the wall before copulation. He further reveals that, in Valletta, prostitutes were taking up residence next to houses of respectable people, including those of judges and the bishop.¹¹

However, not all the members of the Missionary Society were of the same opinion on this issue of prostitution. This situation did not appear to give cause for alarm amongst one of the members of the Protestant community. According to John Kitto,¹² who came to Malta during this

Sarah Austin as portrayed in 1835. She was an intellectual who got interested in improving education in Malta. She suggested that Arabic should be taught in Maltese schools, as a result of which Al-Shidyāq was appointed to teach Arabic in schools and at the University of Malta.

period, and took up residence in Valletta, he advised against any alarmism among his fellow Protestant brethren:

‘I do not believe they (the Maltese) are inferior to other people, in the amiable and kind affections of our nature; neither does the city in which I live, strike me as being more immoral than any other city of equal population in England.’

The next tale, in *Al-Sāq*, related to Malta, is to be found in the chapter entitled “On Incitement to Nudism”.¹³ Geoffrey Roper, in his unpublished Ph.D thesis on Arabic printing, refers to Dr. Schlienzy, one of the missionary pastors, who on one occasion went out naked in the streets of Valletta and urging passersby to do the same. He had to be restrained.¹⁴ It was an event that embarrassed the Protestant Missionaries who regarded topics of moral rectitude and correct sexual behaviour a main issue in their religious mission. As a Methodist pastor, Dr. Schlienzy must have been a well-known figure in Valletta and was highly respected at the Protestant press.

‘Although I (Kitto) work hard enough for this climate, I by no means think I work hardest. I believe Mr. Schlienzy works, in another way, far harder than we printers do. He is at his Arabic, and Maltese and Italian, night and morning, early and late, learning, and translating, and correcting; and, besides this, he has opportunities, of which he always avails himself of preaching, almost every Sunday, and sometimes twice on the same Sunday, for the Missionary of another society, who has two chapels, one in Valletta, and the other in Bormola, on the other side of the harbour.’¹⁵

There is no doubt that his religious status made him wear a particular type of dress, which caused him to stand out amidst Valletta society and to be identified as one of Valletta’s personages.

An Unprecedented Image of Al-Shidyāq?

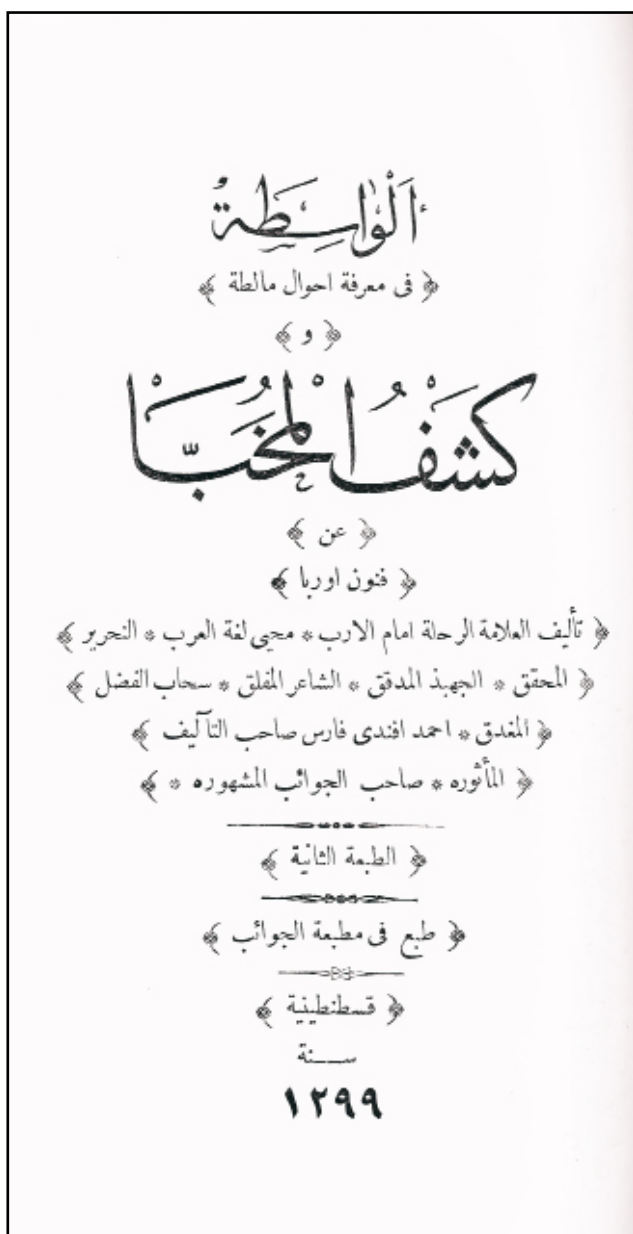
Al-Shidyāq too was a character in Malta, easily recognizable in Valletta and who could have easily caught the attention of artists, lithographers and cartoonists who happened to be in Malta or were employed at the CMS Press.

In 1857, *The Illustrated London News* published two lithographs accompanied by a caption of the problems which were to be expected by prospective travellers on their way to Malta. The first lithograph is a scene of the life on the deck of a steamer plying between Malta and Alexandria, Egypt. The second lithograph is a collage of the different characters that one expected to see in Valletta. This second lithograph sought to catch the cosmopolitan environment that was present in Valletta at the time, whilst making a pun of it.¹⁶

Here the artist appears to have based himself upon well-known characters who roamed the streets of Valletta, presenting them as a caricature or in a rather theatrical



The transliteration of the title-page reads: Shidyāq, Ahmed Fāris al-: *Al-Wāsita fī ma'rifat ahwāl Māltah wa kashf al-Mukhabba' 'an funūn Urubbā* [The means of knowing the affairs of Malta; and the disclosure of the secrets of the arts and sciences of Europe] 2nd ed. Istanbul 1299 [1882.] (Courtesy University of Malta Library).



manner. In this lithograph, I am mostly interested in the two personages at the left hand corner: the man in the foreground is wearing a three-cornered hat and the one

behind him is in Arab dress.

The man in the three-cornered hat represents a Protestant missionary, as these missionaries were the only persons expected to dress in such manner at this period. The Arab definitely represented one of the Middle Easterners who began to make it to Malta due to the British presence. After all, Valletta under the British became an important staging post between Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean.

I am inclined to think that these two individuals can be identified as Schlienzy and Al-Shidyāq respectively. Thematically, the artist places them next to each other. This in itself is significant. Moreover, the style and language used to describe Malta and the Maltese are very much in line with Al-Shidyāq's idiom seeking to make fun of the natives.

As the above stories demonstrate, both Schlienzy and Al-Shidyāq had a particular characteristic that definitely attracted the attention of others. There should be no doubt that Schlienzy, being a Methodist pastor, went out dressed in what may have appeared bizarre to many. Unfortunately, until now, no image of Schlienzy has been found to enable us to compare.

In Malta, Al-Shidyāq also went out dressed in an unorthodox way and from his own writing, it is known that during his second sojourn in Malta, at first he went out dressed in Egyptian garb. Then, he exchanged it for a Lebanese dress after importing Lebanese attire¹⁷ and kept a beard, even if, Al-Shidyāq did not go out dressed, as the man in the lithograph, in Bedouin garb.

Since this lithograph was printed in 1857, there are two possibilities which can link it to Al-Shidyāq. Foremost, one is tempted to think that it was drawn after Al-Shidyāq had left Malta and had published his *Al-Wāsita* and *Al-Saq*. The second possibility is that this lithograph is the work of someone within the CMS press, which was eventually taken over years later and printed in *The Illustrated London News*.



French translation
(1991) of Al-Shidyâq's
novel Al-Sâq âla al-Sâq.

Incidentally, the opening of the Protestant Press in Malta in 1825 and eventually the granting of Liberty of the Press in 1839 created a local market for lithographers who began to be employed to illustrate publications amongst whom were important nineteenth-century landscape painters such as C. von Brockdorff.

Conclusion

There should be no doubt that Al-Shidyâq had experienced a great delusion in Malta but this should not be interpreted to have been linked to his personal and private life. In the preface to his Arabic primer and reader, (published in Malta in 1839), he had rightly pointed out the role that Malta should play in the Mediterranean. "Since they (the Maltese) are Arabs by language and Europeans by custom and circumstances" they are in an ideal position to "take from Europe those important sciences which have become scarce in our country" to transmit and help in the evolution of the Arabic world.¹⁸ Unfortunately, the political and cultural climate at the time was not receptive to such an ideal.

Notes

- 1 Geoffrey Roper, *Arabic printing in Malta 1825-1845: its history and its place in the development of print culture in the Arab Middle East*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Durham, 1988, p. 207.
- 2 Santo Spirito, National Archives Rabat, CUS K24, p. 108. I would like to thank Mr. Andrea Pace for bringing this reference to my attention.
- 3 J.E. Ryland, *Memoirs of John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A.* (Edinburgh, 1856), p. 264.
- 4 Roper, p. 208.
- 5 Ibid, p. 210.
- 6 Ibid, p. 221.
- 7 Simon Mercieca, "Fâris Al-Shidyâq in Malta: A Comfortable Livelihood or a Disappointing Experience?" Forthcoming.
- 8 Roper, p. 206.
- 9 Ibid, p. 221.
- 10 Ibid, p. 211.
- 11 Ahmad Fâris Al-Shidyâq, *El-Wasita fi ma rifat ahwal Malta*, trans into Maltese by Francis Xavier Cassar (Centru Kulturali Islamiku f' Malta (Malta), 1988), 38.
- 12 Ryland, p. 271.
- 13 Roper, p. 200.
- 14 Roper, p. 200-1.
- 15 Ryland, p. 263.
- 16 *Antique Malta 1842-1885 A Topographical and Historical Catalogue of Engravings and Articles as depicted in the Major English Magazines of this eventful Period*, compiled by A. Nicolas with preface by J. Galea and A. Ganado, (Valletta, 1982), 12-13.
- 17 Roper, p. 220.
- 18 Roper, p. 222.