

The Shapers of Memory: The Theatrics of Islamic Historiography

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Abstract

This paper employs and describes an experimental methodology of viewing medieval Arabic authors through the lens of stage actor performance theory. In particular, it argues that semi-canonical writings, such as al-Ṭabarī's *History of the Prophets and Kings*, become the "script" that later authors, such as Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr "perform" as actors. This methodology is novel, and argues that by examining the changes authors made to narratives presented in earlier Arabic texts, we can draw important conclusions about the authors' opinions of the relative importance of narrative elements, the authors' literary-narrative strategies for endowing memories with meaning, and establish each author's "super-objective" (his primary thematic or narrative concerns).

Keywords

History, Historiography, Performance Theory, Memory, Mnemohistory

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Cover Page Footnote

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**THE SHAPERS OF MEMORY:
THE THEATRICALS OF ISLAMIC HISTORIOGRAPHY**

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ABSTRACT:

This paper employs and describes an experimental methodology of viewing medieval Arabic authors through the lens of stage actor performance theory. In particular, it argues that semi-canonical writings, such as al-Ṭabarī's *History of the Prophets and Kings*, become the "script" that later authors, such as Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr, "perform" as actors. This methodology is novel, and argues that by examining the changes authors made to narratives presented in earlier Arabic texts, we can draw important conclusions about the authors' opinions of the relative importance of narrative elements, the authors' literary-narrative strategies for endowing memories with meaning, and establish each author's "super-objective" (his primary thematic or narrative concerns).

INTRODUCTION

The academic study of Islamic historiography has reached a transitional period, and is currently occupied by a number of competing (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) approaches. The days of categorizing texts as part of an uncomplicated "Iraqi school," or a "Medinese school," or a "Syrian school" are long gone.¹ The important works of historiographical analysis of the 1980s and 1990s, including those of Leder,² Noth,³ Donner,⁴ El-Hibri,⁵ and Khalidi,⁶ demonstrated the ways in

¹ A. A. Dūrī, *The Rise of Historical Writing Among the Arabs*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad and Fred M. Donner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

² See Stefan Leder, "Authorship and transmission in unauthored literature—the akhbār attributed to al-Hayṭam ibn 'Adī," *Oriens*, 38 (1988): 67-81; "The literary use of khabar, a basic form of historical writing," in L. Conrad and A. Cameron (eds.), *Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992), 277-315; "The Paradigmatic character of Madā' inī's *shūrā* narration," *Studia Islamica*, 88.2 (1998): 35-54; and "The use of composite form in the making of Islamic historical tradition," in Philip F. Kennedy, *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 125-148.

³ Albrecht Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Survey* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993).

⁴ Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998).

⁵ See Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the 'Abbasid Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: The Rāshidūn Caliphs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁶ Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

which texts may be read between the lines to discover kernels of historical truth, or discussed the benefits of approaching them more as works of literature than works of history. This scholarship has been followed by the works of Malti-Douglas,⁷ Hirschler,⁸ Khalek,⁹ Borrut,¹⁰ Keshk,¹¹ Keaney,¹² and others. Much this scholarship explores the significance and memory of specific events or individuals within the Islamic narrative. Even more recently, the study of Islamic historiography entered the digital age, as the “Kitab Project,” headed by Savant,¹³ provides a new tool for determining the intertextual genealogy of a growing number of texts, including the historical work that is of interest here. The potential of tools like Kitab Project, and whatever computerized approach comes after Kitab Project, to shed light on the Islamic textual tradition is beyond present reckoning.¹⁴ While Kitab Project’s potential to yield new insights into individual texts at present seems to be limited to tracing their genealogies and cataloging later texts as descendants, it has an important, and perhaps decisive, role to play in the mapping of the overall Islamic textual tradition.

Each of these approaches, analog or digital, takes the *text* (the work itself) or the *event* (the moment in the narrative, or “site of memory”) as the critical element to be examined. The “events” are fixed as well-known components of a famous story, and as such are immune to significant purposeful alteration; even the doubtful or contested events are well-understood, and typically exist within what

⁷ See Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Texts and Tortures: The reign of alMu‘taḍid and the Construction of Historical Meaning,” *Arabica*, 46.3 (1999): 313-336.

⁸ See Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors* (London: Routledge, 2006); and “Studying Mamluk Historiography: From Source-Criticism to the Cultural Turn,” in *Ubi sumus? Quo vademus? Mamluk Studies-State of the Art*, ed. Stephan Conermann, (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2013), 159-186.

⁹ Nancy Khalek, “Early Islamic History Reimagined: The Biography of ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz in Ibn ‘Asākir’s *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 134.3 (July-September 2014): 431-451.

¹⁰ See Antoine Borrut, “Remembering Karbalā’: the construction of an early Islamic site of memory,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam (JSAI)* 42 (2015): 249-282; and *Entre mémoire et pouvoir: L’espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbasides* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

¹¹ Khaled Keshk, “How to Frame History,” *Arabica* 56 (2009): 381-399.

¹² Heather Keaney, *Medieval Islamic History: Remembering Rebellion* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹³ Kitab Project is “a digital tool-box and forum for discussion about Arabic texts” that compares digitized versions of those texts to each other, which is useful for “discovering relationships between these texts and the also the profoundly intertextual circulatory systems in which they sit.” See www.kitab-project.org.

¹⁴ The tool is still in its relative infancy and has only limited capabilities; but the obstacles to its growth exist in the realms of computer programming and funding.

Borrut calls a “vulgate.”¹⁵ Events include specific episodes from within the wider narrative. Examples include “the Hijra,” “the Battle of Uḥud,” “the *shūrā* of ‘Uthmān,” and so on. As for the texts, as the “rediscovered manuscripts” that represent the Holy Grail of the field remain undiscovered (or, we fear, may in fact be forever lost), the lack of new texts to examine forces contemporary scholars to make do with the texts they have. For the field to continue to innovate, scholars must explore new methodological approaches to these texts, beyond the very real digital opportunities that are currently in development. This paper offers one such methodology which, unlike the text-centered or event-centered studies mentioned above, focuses on the authors themselves. Specifically, it focuses on what we can understand about their decision-making process, and what that understanding can reveal about their priorities. This approach uses both the text and the memory of the event as the keys to understanding the thought processes of the authors—after all, we are all still limited by the finite (if vast) Islamic textual corpus. But if we wish to “get into the heads” of these historians, we must think about the texts we have differently. Rather than the massively “zoomed-out” big data-approach Kitāb Project offers, the present approach “zooms in” to the texts as closely as possible. At its core, the process of writing history in this tradition is simply a string of authorial or editorial decisions that get recorded in written narrative form. When texts are as closely related as Ibn al-Athīr’s (555/1160-630/1263)¹⁶ *Al-Kāmil fī ta’rīkh* and Ibn Kathīr’s (700/1300-773/1373)¹⁷ *Kitāb al-bidāya wa-’l-nihāya* are to their evident source—al-Ṭabarī’s (224/839-310/923) *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-’l-mulūk*—the standard tools of historiographical analysis (selection and use of sources, intended audience, historical context) are of limited and proscribed use. If Ibn al-Athīr essentially copied al-Ṭabarī, with light changes almost exclusively of omission,¹⁸ then examining his choices of primary sources reveals much more about al-Ṭabarī than it does about Ibn al-Athīr. We are left in the dark about Ibn al-

¹⁵ Antoine Borrut, in his study of Umayyad historical memory, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir: L’espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbassides* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2011), describes a vulgate [translation by the author of this article]: “Ultimately, the [base] material [ie, the vulgate text] elaborated and imposed what can basically be termed a framework, a grid through which to read Islamic history. All [subsequent] narratives, in effect, provide a reading based upon a limited number of key events, which are shared by all authors of every stripe; unfortunately, many other episodes, which would be of interest to the modern historian, are passed over in silence. More than a historical canon, this group of works forms a well-established historically canonical body of material. This framework does not rule out new interpretations [of the events described], but seeks to contain them in a field of fixed possibilities.” See esp. pp. 102-3.

¹⁶ For a biography of Ibn al-Athīr, see D.S. Richards, “Ibn al-Athīr and the Later Parts of the *Kāmil: A Study in Aims and Methods*,” in *Medieval Historical Writing in the Christian and Islamic Worlds*, ed. D.O. Morgan (London: SOAS, 1982), 76-108.

¹⁷ For a biography of Ibn Kathīr, see Henri Laoust, “Ibn Kaṭīr Historien,” *Arabica* 2 (1955): 42-88.

¹⁸ Aaron Hagler, “Unity through Omission: Literary Strategies of Recension in Ibn al-Aṭīr’s *al-Kāmil fī l-Ta’rīkh*,” *Arabica* 65 (2018): 285-313.

Athīr; although a later figure, Ibn al-Athīr himself remains veiled behind the words of al-Ṭabarī. In turn, al-Ṭabarī is himself obscured by the limited sources *he* chose to use. Perhaps the level of insight provided by textual analysis should be sufficient for us, but new perspectives offer different, but worthwhile, insights. If we focus tightly on the changes themselves—each of them the marker of a specific authorial choice—we require a methodology that focuses on the decision-making process: its impetuses, motives, tactics, and goals. For that, standard historiographical tools are inadequate. Far more useful are the tools of the stage actor, whose entire creative process is centered around understanding (and creating) an explanation for why and how people choose to do and say what they do.

For this task, the existing literature is insufficient. This statement should not be read as a criticism of the field giants and pioneers listed above, but rather as a statement of the purposeful limitations and aims of their methodologies. Focusing on sites of memory (like Borrut), kernels of truth (like Donner), the narrative as parable (like El-Hibri), and so on: these approaches provide tremendous insight, but they constitute impersonal approaches to a textual tradition that was produced, in the moment, by individual humans making individual decisions. The Islamic historiographical corpus was not produced by computers copying and pasting blindly, but rather by skilled compilers who were not blind to the implications of their editorial decisions. Furthermore, while the “big data” approach of Kitab Project can map out sources and genealogies of texts and sections of text, it cannot reveal anything about the individuals making decisions at the time without returning to the texts themselves.

TOWARDS A NEW METHODOLOGY: HISTORIOGRAPHY, PERFORMANCE, AND MEMORY

The methodology that is being proposed in this paper has its theoretical grounding not only in the theatre, but also in the field of mnemohistory. Therefore, before examining how this methodology may be deployed in practice, some words about the applicability of Performance and Memory are in order.

Konrad Hirschler’s excellent case study of two medieval Syrian historians, *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors*¹⁹ does not mean to imply any theatricality to the texts created by Abū Shāma (d.665/1268) and Ibn Wāṣil (d. 697/1298). The approach described in this paper, by contrast, imagines historical texts as a “performance” of earlier material, created by these historians.

From a methodological standpoint, it makes sense to treat historians, from major figures like al-Ṭabarī, Ibn al-Athīr, and Ibn Kathīr to more minor ones like Abū Shāma and Ibn Wāṣil (Hirschler’s examples), as “actors.” The term is not used here in the sense that (as Hirschler defines it) they possessed individual agency

¹⁹ As cited above, n. 8.

within their societies (although this is no doubt true: after all, they were, as the title of this article contends, shapers of memory). Rather, the term is used in the sense that the decision-making that went into the compilation of their final texts was a process quite similar to that undertaken by actors in possession of the script of a stage play or screenplay. The analogy may seem strange at first. One might reasonably object that the process of adapting an earlier text to a later text would be more aptly compared to the process of updating a script for performance in a new genre (such as, for example, the adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* into Lerner and Loewe's musical *My Fair Lady*) or the rebooting of original material. However, historians like Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr, when they created their narratives, put the work into what they consider to be its final form. Playwrights (with the notable exceptions of Shaw²⁰ and Bertolt Brecht) and screenwriters unambiguously write in the hopes that their works will be performed or screened before an audience. There is, in other words, a further genre adaptation to be made before the work reaches its intended audience. When Ibn Kathīr put the final touches on *Kitāb al-bidāya wa-ʿl-nihāya* and the first copy was put into the hands of his first reader, no further changes to the work would be possible. Obviously, further edits to works of history may be made in the form of a revised edition or a *mukhtaṣar*, but even these can be understood as further performances of previously published material.

Of course, “theatre” is not an undifferentiated, monolithic activity. For the analogy to apply, the authors must have the same goals as the actors do. A *Three Stooges* skit has little in common with *Hamlet*, at least in printed form, and the actors who undertake to perform them have different tools at their disposal. Genre matters, and, in this case, the most apt analogy is Bertolt Brecht's “Epic Theatre.” Epic Theatre, as Brecht describes it, differs from “Dramatic Theatre” in its goals, aims, and form. While Dramatic Theatre “incarnates an event,” “helps [the audience] to feel,” and “communicates experiences,” the Epic Theatre “relates [an event],” “compels [the audience] to make decisions,” and “communicates insight.”²¹ While it makes little intuitive sense to apply a 20th-century German's philosophy of theatre to 13th- and 14th-century Arabic work of history, in terms of these goals there is a considerable degree of alignment. Both, our authors and the Brechtian actors, wish to argue, persuade, teach, and communicate information. Brecht describes the development of Epic Theatre into “Didactic Theatre.”²² Even

²⁰ George Bernard Shaw, “How to Make Plays Readable,” in *Shaw on Theatre*, ed. E. J. West (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), 90-95, which encourages playwrights to include as many details as one would include in a novel so that his famously didactic plays need not be produced and physically performed.

²¹ Bertolt Brecht “Theatre for Learning,” trans. Edith Anderson, in *Brecht Sourcebook*, ed. Henry Bial and Carol Martin (Florence: Taylor and Francis Group, 2014), 23.

²² *Ibid.*, 24.

though the “theatre” set-up had been initially constructed to entertain,²³ that didactic purpose had been there since the beginning. It should not be forgotten, either, that the relationship between performance and history is long. Oral performance has been used to explain the structure of Herodotus *Histories*, and it is widely (though not universally) accepted that Herodotus composed his narrative with the express purpose of performing it live.²⁴ And if it is not a big a methodological sin to apply Homeric scholarly strategies for engaging with pre-Islamic poetry,²⁵ both of which contained elements of historical recording—and it is not, because the tools and output of the creators are similar—then the decision-making tools of an actor (acting in the context of a Brechtian stage) provide a useful analogy for the decision-making tools of our historians.

Some additional discussion about the analogy is in order. If we are going to treat these authors as actors in a performative sense, understanding the tools actors possess as they seek to make the words in a script into the maps of their performances is critical. In other words, by what means do the authors shape the memory of the events they describe in the way that seems best to them, and what use may modern scholars make of those tools? The first, and most necessary, element is the script itself. For this, we need not look far: whatever earlier sources the later historians utilize constitute their “script.” This simple picture is complicated by the fact that no historian worth his salt draws his entire history exclusively from one source, but rather from many. This is true even in heavily “Ṭabarized” histories like those of Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr. However, at the end of the process, it is often not difficult to determine (and here Kitab Project has the potential to be particularly useful) at least some of the genealogy of any given piece of text, if not its original authorship. Sometimes our historians are kind enough to provide us with *asānīd*,²⁶ and sometimes, even without an *isnād*, the fidelity of a

²³ Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre” trans. John Willett, in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 180.

²⁴ See J. L. Myres, *Herodotus, Father of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 20-31 and Richmond Lattimore, “The Composition of the *History* of Herodotus,” *Classical Philology* v. 53, no. 1 (Jan., 1958): 9-21. Cf. William A. Johnson, “Oral Performance and the Composition of Herodotus’ *Histories*,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 35 (1995): 229-254.

²⁵ See Michael Sells, *Desert Tracings: Classic Arabian Odes by ‘Alqama, Shānfara, Labīd, ‘Antara, Al-A‘sha, and Dhu al-Rūmma* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 3-4 and n. 3.

²⁶ *Asānīd*, (singular, *isnād*) are chains of transmittance of individual reports. They function as a kind of in-text footnote, designed to establish the authenticity of a report, and are comprised of a list of names of transmitters, from the most recent to the alleged originator of the report. Although it is beyond the bounds of the present study to discuss the veracity of these chains of transmittance, an excellent summary of the vast corpus of scholarship surrounding the *isnād* may be found in R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 81-83. As Humphreys puts it, “The question is whether *isnāds* (at least those produced by reputable scholars) represent genuine lines of transmission, or are

narrative fragment's language to earlier versions of the story is unmistakable. Whatever collection of texts the historian chooses to consult becomes his script. Although he selects the included parts of the script himself, the wording of the selections he collects are not his original work.

The theoretical underpinnings of this approach lie in the expanding academic field of Memory. The works of (among others) Nora,²⁷ Rigney,²⁸ and especially Assmann²⁹ have offered, as an alternative to historicity, the study of the way the past is remembered. It is the context of this alternative approach that the texts that constitute their sources (most particularly al-Ṭabarī's) may be treated as scripts. As Assmann puts it, "Texts are speech acts in the context of extended communication situation."³⁰ Performance need not necessarily be live, nor physical.

In his introduction to his important book *Moses the Egyptian*, Egyptologist and noted mnemohistorian Jan Assmann wrote the following:

"The past is not simply 'received' by the present. The present is 'haunted' by the past and the past is modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present. To be sure, all this implies the tasks and techniques of transmitting and receiving, but there is much more involved in the dynamic of cultural memory than is covered by the notion of reception."³¹

Assmann is unambiguously correct: understanding the relationship between the remembered past and one's biased view of a present is a fundamental goal of the field of mnemohistory, and that relationship is far more complex, nuanced, and interdependent than a model of mere reception can alone serve. If the past indeed

instead forgeries intended to legitimize statements first circulated at a later period. The problem is extraordinarily complex, and no cut-and-dried rules of *isnād*-criticism can be given; it is enough to say that no *isnād* should be accepted at face value. Medieval Muslim scholars were of course aware of this and ultimately evolved a very elaborate science around the subject." See esp. p. 81.

²⁷ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-1998)

²⁸ Ann Rigney, "Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory," *Journal of European Studies*, 35 (2005): 11-28; and "The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts Between Monumentality and Morphing," *Cultural Memory Studies* (2013): 345-53.

²⁹ Jan Assmann, "Form as a Mnemonic Device: Cultural Texts and Cultural Memory," in *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory and Mark*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper, and John Miles Foley (Fortress: Minneapolis, 2006); and many others. For a full bibliography of Assmann's work, as well as other pioneers in the field of Memory Studies, see Marek Tamm, "Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies," in *History Compass* 11.6 (2013): 458-473.

³⁰ Assmann, "Form as a Mnemonic Device," 75.

³¹ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 9.

“haunts” the present, the writers of important historical narratives seek to name, shape, and limit the powers of the historical ghosts that inhabit the collective memory of a group. In the context of Islamic historiography, the retelling of the formative story of Islam, covered by the well-known narrative of the Prophet Muḥammad, his immediate successors (the “*rāshidūn*” or “rightly-guided” caliphs), and the beginnings of the Umayyad dynasty, takes the form of collating and reproducing earlier versions. The shaping of such a narrative, in other words, involves deliberate individual decision-making on the part of the authors. It is not enough for the authors to simply retell a version of the past off the top of their heads; they are required by the intellectual and scholarly conventions of Arabic historiography to rely upon the historical works of ages past (the authority of some of which borders on canonical, even if only by virtue of their ubiquity as sources for later texts) and then to pick and choose which versions of the story they prefer. Often, such narratives are reproduced word-for-word (we would have no compunction about condemning it as plagiarism today), or only minimally altered before they reach their final form.

The result of this dynamic is that we may be in possession of a work like Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-’l-mulūk* (“History of the Prophets and Kings”)—the near-canonical 3rd century AH/9th century CE history that focuses on Islamic history up until that point—and also be in possession of the same topical material, in nearly identical form, from narrative histories that were compiled four or five centuries later. Works like Ibn al-Athīr’s *al-Kāmil fī al-ta’rīkh* (“*The Complete History*”) and Ibn Kathīr’s *Kitāb al-bidāya wa-l-nihāya* (“*The Book of the Beginning and the End*”) are obviously heavily reliant on al-Ṭabarī’s account. They are not, however, identical: although both Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr have different strategies for how to treat elements of the story that they perceive to be problematic or inconvenient, they have in common the fact that the small changes from al-Ṭabarī’s work to theirs provide scholars of memory with important insights into their concerns, literary-narrative strategies, and perhaps even (to a limited extent) their personalities. Of course, after Barthes, making assumptions about an author’s personality based on his written work is a fraught exercise.³² Despite his announcement of “the Death of the Author,” “the author” does not disappear, either in a work of fiction or a work of history: the author himself or

³² Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 1967. Roland Barthes (1915-1980), the French literary theorist, posited “The Death of the Author” in his essay of the same name: “It will always be impossible to know [who is speaking in a text], for the good reason that writing is itself [a] special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices. . . literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin.” In other words, Barthes argues (correctly) that literary material is not a fair reflection of an author’s individual psychology. However, Barthes goes too far when he says that “literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes.”

herself remains present within the authorial voice, at the very least.³³ In any event, when we are dealing with a literary tradition that is as interrelated as the Islamic historiographical tradition is, while we may not be able to achieve a psychological portrait of these authors themselves, we will at least be able to make statements about their intentions and methods relative to each other.

A further complication with treating an earlier history, like that of al-Ṭabarī, as a script is that the written narrative was never intended to be “performed” as such. Most histories that have come down to us were meant to be read, not performed, although the notion of historical narrative as performance certainly has a longer tradition in human history than does historical narrative as an exclusively literary enterprise. The Vedas and the Homeric epics, for example, both contain historical narratives, and existed in oral form for an indeterminate, but certainly large, number of years before finally being recorded as written texts. In the field of memory, Ann Rigney has pointed out that “cultural memory can...be described as ‘working memory,’ *which is continuously performed by individuals and groups as they recollect the past selectively through various media* [italics added].”³⁴ Of course, Rigney does not mean theatrical performance. It is nonetheless clear that Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr, their histories long treated merely as collections of excerpts from al-Ṭabarī, produce something more than a copy: they produced rewritten narratives, albeit greatly reliant upon on al-Ṭabarī’s, whose messages were meant to be received, understood, and accepted by the readership, just as a live performance creates a similar transaction between performer and audience. So historical narratives and performance scripts have much in common. In fact, the only distinction between “text” and “performance” is the gap caused by the delay made necessary by the exigencies of publication and distribution. The process of the author’s/actor’s reading of the source/script, his act of interpretation in writing/performing his version of the work, and the communication of his interpreted history/character to a readership/audience is indistinguishable from a performance in terms of the transmission of meaning, which is what concerns us here.³⁵

A script, however, is only one tool of an actor. The main reason why performance theory is so apt in this case is that acting is essentially the study of

³³ For further criticism of “The Death of the Author,” see Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New York: Vintage, 1990) and especially Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

³⁴ Rigney, “Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory,” 17.

³⁵ None of this changes the fact that the media of theatrical communication are vocal and physical, while the media of textual communication are morphological and philological. Since the transmission of ideas is the focus of this study and the emphasis of the authors, this need not detain us. It is undeniably true that, in terms of genre, these “performed texts” will have more in common with the highly didactic works of Shaw and Bertolt Brecht than they will with the physical comedy of Charlie Chaplin.

why humans make the decisions to say and do what they do (and then the resulting performance). In the process of this study, actors mark a script for the moments when and how those motivations are performed, and ultimately, in their performance, are in possession of the opportunity to emphasize, change, omit, or add movement, actions, and words to give the script the meaning they choose to give it. Our historians are limited in their medium of expression to the written word, but they are no less powerful in their ability to imbue the narrative with their own intended meanings, and to emphasize, change, omit or add to the script.

Declan Donnellan's 2002 handbook for actors, *the Actor and the Target*,³⁶ sets itself the goal of helping creatively blocked actors achieve a successful performance. A relevant side effect of Donnellan's project is that it catalogues and describes the tools an actor has at his or her disposal. It then elucidates how the actor may utilize them to accomplish the same goal as our historians: the communication of true information from a source text, or script, through the intermediary of the self, to an audience or reading public. The main analytical tools Donnellan describes are "targets," "motivations," "stakes," and "the matrix." Since all apply to our authors' own processes of decision-making, they are worth discussing.

The first task an actor has is to determine, at every moment within the script, is his or her character's "target." This "target" is the character's goal at any given moment. Actors are encouraged to find either a direct or indirect object to which to direct their attention as they play a certain scene. It is not enough, Donnellan writes, for an actor to simply enact a death scene simply as "I die," but rather to focus on the target; he gives a number of better options, including "I welcome death," "I fight death," "I mock death," and "I struggle to live."³⁷ The target is indelibly tied to the ubiquitous tool of the actor: the motivation or intention. Put simply, the "target" is the goal as a noun, while the "motivation" is the goal as a verb.³⁸ For example, Ibn Kathīr may have as his "target" his Zangī patrons or God Himself; his motivation is to restore Syria's reputation and perhaps to correct what he perceives as the Shī'ification of Islamic History, whether it be for the benefit of his benefactors or to write in concord with his notion of pious behavior.

The "stakes," meanwhile, refer to the importance of any given moment to the wider story. Donnellan imposes two rules to the stakes:

"1. At every living moment there is something to be lost and something to be won.

³⁶ Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target* (Great Britain: Theatre Communications Group, 2002).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

2. The thing that may be won is precisely the same size as the thing that may be lost.”³⁹

While the handbook offers “stakes” as a tool to help actors escape from fear of a feeble performance, in the hands of our authors the stakes of a moment determine to what extent they are willing to challenge or reorder earlier material. Does it matter, for example, whether ‘Alī gave his allegiance to ‘Uthmān willingly or grudgingly on the occasion of the latter’s contested election? The existence of a difference of opinion on this matter amongst some historians suggests that the stakes of the moment were high enough to risk deviating from the original script.

In his discussion of the actor’s final applicable tool, “The Matrix,” Donnellan writes the following:

“[A character’s] biography is based on a past story; and past story is a form of history....History is permanently invented by the present. It is as if we are on a ship looking backwards at the wake that is constantly being expelled from beneath the stern....History is not a line bent under the weight of acquired factual knowledge. History is not only linear. History also is describable as a *matrix*.”⁴⁰

This description of a “matrix” is strikingly similar to Astrid Erll’s definition of cultural memory: “The sum total of all the processes (biological, medial, social) which are involved in the interplay of past and present within sociocultural contexts.”⁴¹ In Assmann’s terms, the type of cultural memory that is analogous to Donnellan’s “matrix” is “functional memory,” which is “group related, selective, normative, and future-oriented,” and operates (in part) in the canonization of tradition.⁴² As we seek to determine not only what changes (large or small) the later authors made to the texts in question, but also *why* those particular changes were made, there is a whole host of developments that must be borne in mind. Al-Ṭabarī wrote in a very different world than did Ibn al-Athīr, Ibn Kathīr, and the rest of the men (invariably men) who relied on him. The latter have the benefit (or perhaps the obstacle) of several centuries’ worth of theological, legal, philosophical, and literary elaboration, not to mention the technological advancements, wars, epidemics, and catastrophes that accompanied them (in short, the later authors

³⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 119.

⁴¹ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. S.B. Young (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 101.

⁴² Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 123. Assmann contrasts this with “storage memory,” which is the raw data of all accumulated memories, cultural mores, values, etc.

functioned in a context with a lot more cultural memory, both functional and storage, affecting their narrative choices). The later historians act of “performing” their scripts (that is, creating a work that reflects their own take on the narrative based on earlier sources) was not completed in a vacuum, but within the context of a *matrix* of changes that had occurred—changes that rendered their scripts/sources sufficiently obsolete, in their minds, as to require emendation.

An actor reads a textual script; he or she then makes performative choices using tools such as “target,” “motivation,” “stakes,” and “matrix.” Then, an educated audience sees the end result. The performative choices are the only pieces of that progression that are not available to an educated member of the audience, who may well have read the script or previously seen another performance of the same play. Similarly, we have these historians’ scripts in the form of earlier versions of the narrative (which their educated readership had presumably seen); we, like the educated audience member, see their performances reflected in the changes they make in their own versions. While an actor may use Donnellan’s tools of the stage to work forward from a script towards a final performance, modern scholars are necessarily cast into the role of the viewer. We can discover their script (if it is not obvious, as it is in this case, then Kitab Project will come in handy) and then work backwards, using the two pieces of evidence we have—the script and the final performance—to help us see what choices were made to get the authors from their sources to their works. Applying the concepts of “target” and “motivation” will show us their goals; applying the concepts of “stakes” and “matrix” will help us understand their tactics.

One other element must be borne in mind, and that is the intended audience/readership. Performance becomes meaningless without a performative transaction between the performer and the one watching a performance; so, too, does a narrative performance of a well-known story, such as the narrative of early Islamic history, become void if it is not read. Max Herrmann’s asserted that, in the making of a performance, “the spectator is involved as a co-player. The spectator is, so to speak, the creator of the theatre. So many participants are involved in creating the theatre as festive event that the basic social nature of its character cannot be lost. Theatre always involves a social community.”⁴³ Fischer-Lichte’s claim that “for a performance to occur, it is necessary that actors and spectators assemble for a particular time span at a particular place”⁴⁴ does not apply in this analogy. Even without a direct interaction between author and reader, the most critical of the qualifiers for a “performance” are present: “the spectators [readers]

⁴³ Max Herrmann, ‘Über die Aufgaben eines theaterwissenschaftlichen Instituts,’ Lecture given 27 June 1920, in *Theaterwissenschaftlichen im deutschsprachigen Raum*, ed. H. Klier (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981), 15-24, cited in Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2013), 22-23.

⁴⁴ Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 23.

contribute to the creating of a performance...by their perception, their responses.”⁴⁵ Both Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr were quite aware of their readership. Like the audiences of theatrical performances, their readership was not a unified, undifferentiated group. The only commonality we may comfortably assert is that they were (mostly) literate, and thus, educated. In fact, these works exist as performances to multiple levels of audience, and the authors were aware of shaping memory to different demographics at different moments in the text. First, and perhaps foremost, there was the level of their patrons, who gave these scholars their positions and paid for their work. At the highest level of education were other scholars; these men would have been aware not only of the basics of the narrative, but also prior works and competing opinions. The performance of the narrative to this audience is quite nuanced: an elided word here, an altered passage there, and this audience—aware as it is of the work of al-Ṭabarī and others—could read and understand the message of those changes, even if they are not expressed. The level below that is the non-scholar educated person. Such intelligent members of the population would have been aware of al-Ṭabarī’s account and the basics of the narrative. To this crowd, Ibn al-Athīr would probably seem indistinguishable from al-Ṭabarī. Ibn Kathīr occasionally calls al-Ṭabarī out (by name)⁴⁶ when Ibn Kathīr feels that al-Ṭabarī is egregiously wrong on an important moment. At this level, the reader is familiar with the story, though probably not the details of the texts. A further level down is the uneducated, illiterate or mostly-illiterate person. This person may not read the work himself, but he or she may have it explained to him by a member of the literate scholarly community, an *‘ālim*. For this person, each author provides an internally consistent, “properly” Sunnī presentation of the narrative—one that corrects the pro-‘Alīd “errors” present in al-Ṭabarī,⁴⁷ although at this level of reception, the reader/listener would not be aware of any such

⁴⁵ Ibid., 23. There is no doubt that Fischer-Lichte and Herrmann both would strongly disagree with this definition of a “performance.” Their definitions fundamentally emphasize the semiotic need for a physical, live interaction between actor and spectator. The relevant element of “performance” for our purposes is not any physical interaction. Rather, the key to the analogy lies in the choices an actor/author makes in preparing his or her work for its final form, with the goal of (as Fischer-Lichte puts it) “represent[ing] and express[ing] the meanings conveyed in the text...to transmit them to the audience” (25). The analogy also asserts the applicability of the decision-making tools available to a stage actor for the transmission of an intended meaning or interpretation of a written script/textual source(s). Because this transmission of meaning is the applicable goal, whether or not there is a live performance of the material is irrelevant to this particular methodology.

⁴⁶ For example, on the question of whether or not ‘Alī gave the *bay‘a* to ‘Uthmān willingly on the occasion of ‘Uthmān’s accession to the Caliphate, Ibn Kathīr specifically mentions that “Ibn Jarīr [al-Ṭabarī] do not know [that ‘Alī was the first to give the *bay‘a* to ‘Uthmān].” See Aaron M. Hagler, “Sapping the Narrative: Ibn Kathīr’s Account of the *Shūrā* of ‘Uthmān in *Kitāb al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47.2 (2015): 315.

⁴⁷ See above, n. 46.

corrections. Although there is regrettably no data on literacy rates in their eras, it may reasonably be assumed that the vast majority of people would have fallen into this last category.

With these tools in mind, we may proceed by selecting moments—sites of memory—to examine. Usually the authors themselves make this selection process for us. In the cases of Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr, the tendency is to avoid challenging al-Ṭabarī unless necessary. The latter’s reputation is such that in most cases, during most episodes within the narratives, Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr do not alter even a grapheme of al-Ṭabarī’s account. When they do, and when the change is not in the form of a synthesized summary of an episode in which al-Ṭabarī presents multiple versions of the same account (a stylistic convention that dropped out of style in the intervening centuries, in favor of a synthetic, unified, linear narrative), the changes are invariably in the orbit of important sites of sectarian memory. The definitive example of this dynamic in Islamic historiography is the *ḥadīth* about Ghadīr Khumm. Shī‘a claim that the Prophet Muḥammad designated ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib as his rightful successor at a place called Ghadīr Khumm. Sunnīs claim the entire report is fabricated, denying that any such appointment ever took place, and even denying the existence of such a place as Ghadīr Khumm.⁴⁸ The historicity of the event is not important in the present context. What is important is only that Ghadīr Khumm became a site of memory, the presentation of which, one way or the other, carried decisive stakes for competing Sunnī and Shī‘ī claims of correctness. Not every site of memory is as important or as definitive as are Ghadīr Khumm or Karbalā’. However, the meanings of the important moments of the early Islamic narrative are particularly tied into those two. It is often not the critical moment itself that motivates Ibn al-Athīr or Ibn Kathīr (or, indeed, any other historian working on the same material) to alter the authoritative al-Ṭabarī; rather, it is the context of those critical moments. For example, the slaughter of ‘Alī’s son al-Ḥusayn, at Karbalā’ (10/661), has come to be remembered as a point of no return in the Sunnī-Shī‘ī divide (about which, more below). However, the moment of his death is relatively uniformly presented. The *meaning* of his death, however, changes when given a different context, and this need to present the moments “correctly” necessarily draws in earlier moments. In order for al-Ḥusayn’s death to have the proper meaning, for Sunnīs like Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr, the caliph Yazīd *must* have some legitimacy; in order for the caliph to have legitimacy, his father Mu‘āwiya, the first Umayyad caliph, *must* have a right to his position as well. For Mu‘āwiya to have a right to his position, he *must* have remained a Muslim despite rebelling against his apparently rightful caliph, ‘Alī, at Ṣiffīn; for that to be

⁴⁸ To which some Shī‘a point out Ghadīr Khumm’s location between the cities of Mecca and Medina; some Sunnīs reply by claiming that Shī‘a fabricated the name of that particular location. And so it goes. See S. H. M. Jafri, *The Origins and Development of Shi‘a Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1-28.

true, he *must* have had a legitimate grievance against ‘Alī when ‘Alī refused to turn over the killers of ‘Alī’s predecessor and Mu‘āwiya’s cousin, the caliph ‘Uthmān. This “drawing in” of the narrative continues, encompassing the character of ‘Uthmān; his politically dubious election, known as the *shūrā*, which might or might not have been inappropriately influenced by nepotism;⁴⁹ the repeated failure of ‘Alī to receive a fair consideration from many of the other early Muslims, and his associated exclusion from office; the question of succession to the Prophet; in short, the entirety of the early Islamic narrative, from just before the death of the Prophet Muḥammad onwards. However, it is worth noting that the death of al-Ḥusayn *itself*, and the murder of ‘Alī *itself*, and the assassination of ‘Uthmān *itself* do not change significantly from al-Ṭabarī to Ibn al-Athīr to Ibn Kathīr. The memory of the moments that motivate the action of the story, and that spur its *characters* forward, is not contentious. It is in the molding of the memory of the *contexts* of the important events, rather than the events themselves, that these authors are able to generate meaning (at a variety of levels) to their readers.

As an aside, it is important to remember that this approach to interpreting history might not work as well in most languages, or in other historiographical traditions, because linguistic evolution can obscure both the connections and the differences between a source text and a later version. While spoken dialects of the Arabic language have been subject to the same evolutionary pressures as other languages and their dialects, the written, scholarly, *fushā* Arabic has remained mostly static (relative to the forces changing other languages) since the compilation of the Qur’ān at the very latest, and in particular within the writing of history. While Arabic historical writing certainly evolved in terms writing style and poetry over time,⁵⁰ the grammar of a 3rd/9th century Arabic (mostly prose) text like al-Ṭabarī’s would not have been out of place in a 7th/14th century (mostly prose) text like Ibn Kathīr’s. Indeed, altering the grammar would be unthinkable. The rules of Arabic grammar were unnaturally (or perhaps supernaturally) frozen by the Qur’ān—after all, the word of God Himself, and God Himself would never forget to include desinential inflection or place a noun at the beginning of a verbal clause. This invariability of the written language means that the linguistic developments that might obscure the authorial decisions in the updating of other languages and historiographical traditions are left bare for us to see in Arabic. Arabic authors were just as bound to the language of their sources as an actor is to his script: authors came to confine changes to important moments, and thus our authors created new meanings by narrative choices of amendment, emendation, truncation, omission, or faithfulness to the source text/script.

⁴⁹ See Hagler, “Sapping the Narrative,” 303-321.

⁵⁰ See Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) for a description of the development of Arabic historiographical styles.

APPLICATION: THE PERFORMANCE OF TWO MOMENTS

A pair of brief examples may serve to illustrate this point. While the analysis of what follows necessarily discusses specific events, the focus is on how the authors treat the events, rather than the events themselves. Authors such as Ibn al-Athīr, who is associated with the “Sunni Revival,” and those who come after him, like Ibn Kathīr, have different strategies for challenging their source text, which (at least for the early Islamic period) is al-Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-’l-ulūk*. Ibn al-Athīr usually chooses simply to omit material from al-Ṭabarī that he finds problematic. Similarly, Ibn Kathīr has a tendency to keep his text very close to al-Ṭabarī’s, but he then interjects long harangues at moments where he perceives the stakes to be particularly high. Borrut has pointed out the importance of Karbalā’ as a “site of memory;”⁵¹ sure enough, Ibn Kathīr agrees on the importance of the moment, and interrupts his narrative with the following monologue, which, in theatrical terms, can best be described as an aside to the reader that breaks the fourth wall:

“Every Muslim must feel grief at [al-Ḥusayn’s] death, may God be pleased with him. He is one of the great Muslims, one of the wisest of the companions, and the son of the most excellent daughter of the Messenger of God [Fāṭima]. He was pious, valiant, and moving. But it is still unseemly what the Shī‘a have done with him in terms of their demonstration of grief and sadness. Likely, most of it is a sham and hypocrisy. After all, his father was more excellent than he, and he was killed, but they do not put on the same kind of annual funerary display for him that they do for the killing of al-Ḥusayn. His father was killed on a Friday as he went out for morning prayers on the seventeenth of Ramaḍān in the year 40 AH. By the same token, ‘Uthmān was more excellent than ‘Alī, according to the people of the Sunna and the consensus, and he was killed while besieged in his home in the twenties in the month of Dhū al-Ḥijja in the year 36 AH. He was sliced from ear to ear, and the people do not make a ceremony of his death. Onward, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was more excellent than ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī both, and he was killed while he was praying the morning prayers in a prayer niche and reading from the Qur’ān, and the people do not make a ceremony of his murder. Similarly, al-Ṣiddīq (Abū Bakr) was more excellent than he, and the people do not make the day of his death a ceremony. Like this, the Messenger of God, the greatest of men in the world and the hereafter, was taken by God, just as all the Prophets before him had died, and nobody celebrates their deaths the way these ignorant

⁵¹ Borrut, “Remembering Karbalā’,” *passim*.

Rāfiḍīs⁵² do on the day of al-Ḥusayn’s slaughter. And none of them mentions that it should have been obvious that it going to be the date of their deaths, and that the death of al-Ḥusayn was announced from those matters we discussed before, like the eclipse of the sun, the sky turning red, and all of that nonsense.⁵³

Most authors do not lay their thought process out for us in the way that Ibn Kathīr does here; most pieces of text are far more nuanced than this. Ibn Kathīr, however, was never noted for the subtlety of his writing. His “target” is clear: using the active-verb requirement stipulated by Donnellan, Ibn Kathīr is undermining the rationale for the Shī‘ī observance of ‘Āshūrā’, describing it as “a sham” and “hypocrisy” by pointing out that the Shī‘a do not engage in similar displays of extreme passion for others Ibn Kathīr deems worthier, including al-Ḥusayn’s father ‘Alī. The “matrix” of this moment (or, the active functional cultural memory of the moment) is revealed by Ibn Kathīr’s choice of language when describing those worthier individuals, namely the four *rāshidūn* caliphs and the Prophet Muḥammad. In particular, his description of ‘Uthmān as more excellent (*afḍal*) than ‘Alī, a claim sure raise the hackles of any Shī‘ī reader, was defended as being the opinion “of the people of the Sunna and consensus” (*inda ahl al-sunna wa-l-ijmā’*). These terms are unambiguously Sunnī *iṣṭilāḥāt* (“specialized terms”) that are the product of a variety of Sunnī intellectual efforts that were refined only after al-Ṭabarī’s time.⁵⁴ Finally, the stakes of the moment, while not explicitly present in this piece of text, are nonetheless quite clear from context: Ibn Kathīr objects to the ‘Āshūrā’ commemoration because of its (to him) unfair vilification of the Umayyads,⁵⁵ whose reputation he wishes to defend—the defense of the Umayyads being a larger, more abstract “target” of his historiographical performance.⁵⁶ Ibn Kathīr’s assault on Shī‘ī over-veneration of ‘Alī and his descendants is presented in a series of diatribes, not just at this juncture. He also takes a narrative aside to criticize this over-focus on ‘Alī in the midst of his discussion of the earlier Battle of Ṣiffīn and elsewhere. In addition to this criticism of the rituals of ‘Āshūrā’, Ibn

⁵² Literally “rejecters,” used by some Sunnīs to vilify all Shī‘a; while it might have other meanings in other contexts, it is meant here as term of opprobrium, plain and simple.

⁵³ Ibn Kathīr, *Kitāb al-bidāya wa-’l-nihāya*, vol. 8 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutūb al-‘Ilmiyya, 2009), 210.

⁵⁴ See Moshe Sharon, “The Development of the Debate Around the Legitimacy of Authority in Early Islam,” in *The Articulation of Early Islamic State Structures*, ed. Fred M. Donner (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012), esp. 127-139.

⁵⁵ As opposed to, for example, the Khārijīs, who—while certainly not exculpated by the Shī‘a of Ibn Kathīr’s time for their historical role opposing ‘Alī—do not have their memory annually subjected to ritual abuse the way, as Ibn Kathīr sees it, the Umayyads do.

⁵⁶ Aram Shahin, “In Defense of Mu‘āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān: Treatises and Monographs on Mu‘āwiya from the 8th to the 16th Centuries,” in *The Lineaments of Islam: Studies in Honor of Fred M. Donner*, ed. Paul M. Cobb (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2012), 177-208.

Kathīr also discusses how, in the Būyid state, the Shī‘a “really overdid it” (*asrafa*) in their commemoration, which was accompanied by “beating drums...scattering ashes and straw in the alleys and markets, and hanging sackcloth on the stores. The people were driven to grief and weeping, and many of them did not drink water that night in solidarity with al-Ḥusayn, who died thirsty. Then the women went out unveiled, wailing, striking their own faces and bosoms, going barefoot in the markets and other things because of their horrid false doctrine, abominable opinions, and their invented divisiveness. In fact, they want by this and similar things to defile the good name of the Umayyads, because he (al-Ḥusayn) was killed by their state.”⁵⁷ But, as Ibn Kathīr protests shortly thereafter, “It is not that the army wanted what happened as a result of his death, nor indeed did Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiya [the Umayyad caliph of the time] want this, and God knows best.... If Yazīd had been able to, he would have restrained his men before they killed him, as his father had advised him. As was clear to him, it would have been better for his soul to do this.”⁵⁸

By inserting these asides into his narrative, Ibn Kathīr is able to alter the meaning of the Karbalā’ story he presents. The narrative of the battle itself is strikingly similar to al-Ṭabarī’s, as most of the changes made are cosmetic and stylistic (such as a habitual inconsistency with whether or not to include the *isnād* of a copied *khavar*). This gives us critical insight into Ibn Kathīr, not just a historian, but as a person; it is particularly useful to use what we know of his targets and matrix, and what we can glean from what elements of the narrative he values as high stakes, to gain an insight into his personal goals.

When we compare his firebrand “performance” of al-Ṭabarī’s script with the more conservative performance of Ibn al-Athīr, we also gain an insight into each man’s authorial voice. Ibn Kathīr’s literary persona comes across as conversational, vehement, and argumentative, while Ibn al-Athīr’s persona, with essentially the same script *and* the same goals, appears more genial, conflict-averse, and—due to the regrettable relative lack of his own original words—mysterious.⁵⁹ For example, al-Ḥusayn, on his way to Kūfa to join his followers, is intercepted by an Umayyad cavalry force of about 1,000 men. It is under the command of al-Ḥurr ibn Yazīd al-Tamīmī (d. 61/680), who would later become famous for his heroic death fighting alongside al-Ḥusayn, but at this point is acting as a representative of Yazīd’s governor of Iraq, ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād (d. 67/686). His sympathy for al-Ḥusayn’s plight is clear in each of the sources, but he strictly adheres to his orders to make sure that al-Ḥusayn make it all the way to Kūfa (then to be brought before ‘Ubayd Allāh). Al-Ḥusayn, naturally unwilling to go, curses al-Ḥurr, who, seeking a way to discharge his duty without getting directly involved, tells al-Ḥusayn in an

⁵⁷ Ibid., 209.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 210.

⁵⁹ Hagler, “Unity through Omission,” 12-14.

off-the-record tone, “I have not been ordered to fight you. I have only been ordered not to part from you until I bring you to Kūfa. Choose any road that will take you neither to Kūfa or Medina. . . . Perhaps God will cause something to happen that will relieve me from being troubled in your affair.”⁶⁰

The narrative lingers on the various exchanges between al-Ḥusayn and al-Ḥurr for what might seem an inordinate amount of time, were there no pressing need to demonstrate al-Ḥurr’s reticence to fight al-Ḥusayn before the heroic turn he takes, fighting alongside him once the battle is joined. At this point in the narrative, however, he continues to represent the Umayyad side, and as such, offers Ibn al-Athīr his typical challenge/opportunity: to emphasize the unity of the community, even as it is approaching its moment of greatest schism. The two men, followed by their armies, travel alongside each other, and over and over again, al-Ḥusayn’s truculence is answered with al-Ḥurr’s forbearance. A call-to-loyalty speech by al-Ḥusayn follows, in which he tells all those present, “In me you have an ideal model (*uswa*). However, if you will not act, but rather break your word and shirk your responsibility in the matter of the *bay‘a* that you have given, then you have not done so ignorantly. . . . Thus you have mistaken your fortune and lost your destiny.”⁶¹ Ibn al-Athīr’s account begins to differ from al-Ṭabarī’s, in that he omits a particularly vitriolic conclusion to al-Ḥusayn’s speech—“I can only regard death as martyrdom, and life with these oppressors as a real hardship!”⁶²—and a response by the galvanized Zuhayr ibn al-Qayn al-Bajalī, who exclaims his preference for “going with you [al-Ḥusayn] rather than staying in the world!”⁶³ While one must never discount a desire for greater brevity whenever a section from al-Ṭabarī’s narrative is missing from Ibn al-Athīr’s, the fact that, as is his standard practice, the material that has been removed is an expression of the depth of the schism that is underway demonstrates Ibn al-Athīr’s target and narrative priorities. In this section, the removal is certainly not increasing the drama.

Across all the narratives at this juncture, Al-Ḥusayn implicitly accuses al-Ḥurr of obedience to Satan. When al-Ḥurr cautions al-Ḥusayn against fighting when the odds are so stacked against him—“If you fight you will be fought, and the way I see it, if you fight you will be killed”—al-Ḥusayn takes immediate umbrage and accuses al-Ḥurr of threatening to kill him: “Do you mean to frighten me with death? What worse disaster could befall you than if you killed me?”⁶⁴ Even al-Ḥurr, evidently has his limits, and so when al-Ḥusayn yet again calls him cursed (this time in poem form), the conversation ends. In al-Ṭabarī’s narrative, al-Ḥurr

⁶⁰ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-ta’rīkh* vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutūb al-‘Ilmiyya, 2010), 405.

⁶¹ Ibid., 409; Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutūb al-‘Ilmiyya, 2012), 06; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 180.

⁶² Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 307.

⁶³ Ibid., 307.

⁶⁴ Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, 409; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 307; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 180.

“drew away from him. He and his followers traveled on one side while al-Ḥusayn traveled on the other until they reached ‘Udhayb al-Hujānāt.”⁶⁵ According to Ibn al-Athīr, however, even this is not enough dissuade al-Ḥurr, who (at the same exact moment of the narrative) simply “traveled alongside [al-Ḥusayn] until they reached ‘Udhayb al-Hujānāt,”⁶⁶ evidently in a kind of companionable silence. This is another of Ibn al-Athīr’s small performances of communal unity, inserted at a moment in the narrative when al-Ṭabarī’s script bespeaks disunity.

At this point in the narrative, four men from Kūfa approach, and al-Ḥusayn declares that they are his supporters. When al-Ḥurr objects that they did not come with his original party, and that he intends to either detain them or send them back, al-Ḥusayn asserts, “I will defend them the way I would defend myself. These men are my supporters.”⁶⁷ Al-Ṭabarī includes the following, which is omitted by Ibn al-Athīr: “‘They are just like those who came with me. Keep your faith regarding the agreement we have made [and let them stay]. Otherwise, I will have to do battle with you.’ At that, al-Ḥurr desisted.”⁶⁸ Ibn al-Athīr’s performance of al-Ṭabarī’s narrative, through just this type of omission, is a riff on the narrative that effaces as much effrontery, conflict, and discord as he reasonably can.

Another relevant example, and one that is better known than this relatively trivial conversation between al-Ḥusayn and al-Ḥurr—which nonetheless shows that even ostensibly insignificant events were not immune from performative historiographical competition—is the *saqīfa*, the event at which Abū Bakr was named the Prophet Muḥammad’s successor, the first Caliph. If one were to take a standard view of Islamic history, the question of succession to the Prophet would easily “outrank” Karbalā’ in terms of its stakes. After all, Karbalā’ was in fact only a minor one-sided skirmish, albeit with a famous casualty or two, while the *saqīfa* narrative treats the question of legitimate succession to the Prophet. That issue is the central question of the Islamic narrative. Such a “standard view” of the Islamic narrative (in its entirety) is one which approaches the events in question from a chronological perspective, understanding later events as manifestations of the results of earlier ones. In this way, the earlier events become more “important” than later ones because they become the supreme generators of meaning and context. Without the *saqīfa*, at which Abū Bakr was proclaimed the Prophet’s successor over the protests of ‘Alī’s supporters, or the *quid pro quo* appointment of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb to succeed Abū Bakr two years later, none of what follows—‘Uthmān’s caliphate and assassination, the war between ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya (and the assassination of the former), the Umayyad dynasty, Karbalā’—would have

⁶⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 307.

⁶⁶ Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, 409.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 409; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 308. Ibn Kathīr simply paraphrases this exchange; see *Bidāya*, 181.

⁶⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 308.

happened. Indeed, the question of proper succession to the Prophet is also at the heart of the Karbalā' story's importance, so it comes as no surprise that this moment of succession provides the authors with important opportunities to generate context.⁶⁹

Stories of political transition are rife with opportunity for authors to insert their target into the narrative. There are, in fact, three elements to the narrative of any political transition: the character of the old regime, the means of transition, and the character of the new regime. A Shī'ī author looking back on the succession to the Prophet, for example, would have little-to-no disagreement with a Sunnī author on the nature and character of the Prophet's life. The disagreement enters the picture really only when it relates to the succession (as it does, for example, in the case of Ghadīr Khumm, discussed above). By contrast, a Shī'ī view of the appointment of Abū Bakr by 'Umar and Abū 'Ubayda would naturally emphasize the iniquity and illegitimacy of the process of selection—indeed, as Jafri argues, this is precisely what happens to later Shī'ī accounts of the events, as known Shī'ī writers such as al-Ṭabarsī (d. 548/1153) and al-Majlisī (d. 1110/1699) “are mainly polemical in nature and give a very tendentious pro-Shī'ī account of no historical value.”⁷⁰ Such sources criticize Abū Bakr as a usurper of power, even if they might acknowledge his virtues. In such narratives, the later appointment of 'Umar is seen as an extension of the community's mistake in accepting Abū Bakr's caliphate in the first place.

By contrast, the accounts of Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr, Sunnī as they are, see no problem in the accession of Abū Bakr and 'Umar, and also no problem in the manner by which they came to hold their positions. Ibn al-Athīr, in fact, is dismissed by Jafri (along with al-Mas'ūdī (d. 344/955) Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 327/938) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505)) as adding “hardly anything substantially important to our knowledge of the event [i.e., the *saqīfa*].”⁷¹ Jafri also passes over al-Ṭabarsī (d. 548/1153)⁷² and al-Majlisī (d. 1110/1699)⁷³ as mere Shī'ī polemicists. Reconstructing the events described in the early Islamic narrative is a fraught exercise, and while Jafri is consistent (and logical) in his generally greater level of trust in earlier sources vis-à-vis later ones, the event was only recorded “not before the first half of the second century of Islam...[at] a time when the division

⁶⁹ Jafri, *The Origins and Development of Shi'a Islam*, points out that “the *saqīfa* became an event of keen historical interest right from the very beginnings of historical writing in Islam. This is evident from Ibn al-Nadīm and al-Ṭūsī's *Fihrist*s, Najashī's *Rijāl*, and other great many writers beginning from the second century onwards.” He also mentions that both Abū Mikhnaf and al-Madā'īni wrote independent works on the topic, many of which became al-Ṭabarī's sources. See pp. 29-45.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷² *Al-Ihtijāj*, ed. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Khursān (Najaf, 1966), cited in *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷³ *Bihār al-Anwār*, cited in *Ibid.*, 45.

of the Muslim community into Shī‘ī and Sunnī groupings had set deep into the hearts of Muslims, and both camps were accusing each other of deviation from the true path of Islam.”⁷⁴ All the sources, however early, are subject to the same historiographical contaminants. However, our interest here is not to discover what Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr may have to add to what we know about the *saqīfa*. On the contrary, it is to discover what the narrative of the *saqīfa* may have to add to what we know about those men.

Ibn al-Athīr’s account of the narrative is notable for an omission (which, given what we know about Ibn al-Athīr’s standard *modus vivendi* with al-Ṭabarī, at this point hardly comes as a surprise). In this case, he omits the entire account that al-Ṭabarī transmits on the authority of ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās, skipping over the contention of the *Muhājirūn* and the *Anṣār* reported by al-Ṭabarī on the authority of Abu Mikhnaf. The omitted material is a section entitled “the Account of the *saqīfa*” (*ḥadīth al-saqīfa*).⁷⁵ Ibn al-Athīr picks up the story in the same place al-Ṭabarī does, with some omissions:

“When the Messenger of God died, the Anṣār gathered in the *saqīfa* [roofed-building] of the Banū Sā‘ida, intending to give the *bay‘a* to Sa‘d ibn ‘Ubadā. Word of this reached Abū Bakr, so he came to them with ‘Umar and Abū ‘Ubayda ibn al-Jarrāḥ, and asked them, “What is this?” They said, “We should have a ruler from among us, and a ruler from among you.” Then Abū Bakr said to them, “The rulers will come from us, and the ministers will come from you.” Then Abū Bakr said to them, “I am pleased to offer one of these two men for you [to consider]: ‘Umar or Abū ‘Ubayda.” Then ‘Umar said, “Which of you would be willing to accept either of us, when the Prophet gave preference to [Abū Bakr]?” Then he gave him the *bay‘a*, and the people followed [‘Umar] in giving [Abū Bakr] the *bay‘a*. The *Anṣār*, or at least some of them, said, “We will not give the *bay‘a* to anyone but ‘Alī.”⁷⁶

The only pieces of this particular scene that Ibn al-Athīr has omitted from al-Ṭabarī’s account is a brief endorsement of Abū ‘Ubayda on the part of Abū Bakr: after his introduction of the two men, he adds *wa-ana arḍā lakum Abā ‘Ubayda*.⁷⁷ This sentence makes ‘Umar’s immediate endorsement of Abū Bakr seem a very cynical attempt to earn the *quid pro quo* appointment he will, two years later, receive. Ibn al-Athīr’s removal of it implicitly changes ‘Umar’s motives from

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

⁷⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, v. 2, p. 234

⁷⁶ Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, 2, 189.

⁷⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 2, 234.

scheming to sincere. It should be noted that al-Ṭabarī had included another *khābar* of more or less the same event, this earlier one on the authority of Ḥumayd ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥimyarī, in which, first, Abū Bakr tried to give ʿUmar his *bayʿa*, and then in which (future rebel) al-Zubayr was compelled with threats of violence to give the oath to Abū Bakr. Ironically enough, al-Zubayr was partial to ʿAlī.⁷⁸ None of that appears in Ibn al-Athīr’s tale of the moment. While the anger on the part of the *Anṣār* at the rejection of ʿAlī was not eliminated—being, as it is, absolutely essential to later events in the narrative—Ibn al-Athīr’s *saqīfa* narrative was as smooth and uncontentious as the event could be.

Ibn Kathīr, unlike Ibn al-Athīr, does spend time discussing the apparent disunity between the *Muhājirūn* and the *Anṣār* that the *saqīfa* narrative reveals, but like Ibn al-Athīr he emphasizes their unity, changing (for example) the moment where Abū Bakr emphasized that the “rulers will come from us, and the ministers will come from you [i.e., the *Anṣār*].” In Ibn Kathīr’s telling, it is Saʿd ibn ʿUbāda to emphasize: “We are the ministers, and you, the rulers,” a point made in the *Musnad* of Aḥmād ibn Ḥanbal.⁷⁹ Ibn Kathīr, rather, spends much more time discussing (and criticizing) the pro-ʿAlī faction.⁸⁰ He is also much more careful about using, and defending, the citation of *isnāds*, a convention he usually either ignores or abbreviates. In this case, the inclusion of a convention he typically omits tells the story: Ibn Kathīr wants the record for this politically-critical sectarian event absolutely clear.

CONCLUSION

Where Ibn al-Athīr’s performance of al-Ṭabarī’s script constitutes a nuanced, line-by-line attempt to gently nudge the narrative back into more comfortably Sunnī territory—but without alienating the Shīʿa—Ibn Kathīr is unhesitant in his overt confrontation of Shīʿī historical tropes and narratives, ritual and cultural practice, and theology. However, he does not bother with the smaller moments like the confrontation between al-Ḥusayn and al-Ḥurr, which in his account is essentially identical to al-Ṭabarī’s or to Ibn al-Athīr’s.⁸¹ It should be borne in mind that most of their presentation of the *fitna* period is identical to each other and to al-Ṭabarī. It is in their opinion of what moments must be changed, and by what strategy such

⁷⁸ Ibid., 233.

⁷⁹ Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 5, 269. See n. 4.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 270-77.

⁸¹ Whether he copied from al-Ṭabarī or Ibn al-Athīr, however, is of little consequence to this analysis. It is certainly likely that Ibn Kathīr had access to Ibn al-Athīr’s work (he often cites the work of “Ibn Jarīr [i.e., al-Ṭabarī] and others,” and Ibn al-Athīr’s work was widely available) and as such Ibn al-Athīr’s *Kāmil* merely would have constituted a piece of Ibn Kathīr’s original script. Since there is nothing in his presentation of this moment, and others like it, to suggest that Ibn Kathīr is performing something new, there are no coherent grounds for analyzing his choices at the moment of composition. For all we know, he was simply copying.

moments should be changed, that a picture of their literary thought processes and performed authorial voice become evident.

Applying this theatrical methodology to any Arabic history text whose sources are discernible has the potential to yield great insight into the authors' personalities, preferences, narrative styles, and religious, political, and social outlook. Though the texts will not always be as overt as the example presented in this paper, a focus on authorial decision-making has the potential to get us inside the heads of the authors, and so to come to a greater understanding of the texts they created. The literarily and methodologically consistent choices these later historians made, in their adaptation of al-Ṭabarī's earlier version, also emphasizes their awareness that their endeavor was a far more solemn endeavor than the mere revision of a text. They consciously and purposefully brought the presentation of the past into alignment with the exigencies of their political, legal, and theological predilections. In effect, Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr were shaping the most important sites of memory to conform to their present perspectives.

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