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*Afghan Folktales from Herat: Persian Texts in Transcription  
and Translation* by Youli Ioannesyan (review)

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fairy-tale flavor (“wizards, enchantments, and magic objects”) is less beautiful and should be left to “simple young girls” (60). Calmo’s and Bargagli’s texts show that the Renaissance debate on storytelling, informed by a deeply Aristotelian perspective, did not overlook the presence of other, less canonical narrative forms, which, however, needed to be categorized according to the same theoretical guidelines. In this regard the introductory section of *Fairy Tales Framed* on Boccaccio’s *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* will be of significant help for all students of early modern debates on prose narrative.

In rare instances the reading of *Fairy Tales Framed* can be challenging, given primarily the complexity of the multilayered narratives in many French collections (tales within tales within tales) but also an unclear use of italics (see, for instance, pages 173–74). *Fairy Tales Framed* is an original and necessary volume that raises important and timely questions.

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***Afghan Folktales from Herat: Persian Texts in Transcription and Translation.***  
By Youli Ioannesyan. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2009. 300 pp.

Reading the eleven transcribed oral texts with English translations in *Afghan Folktales*, I remembered a 1975 comment by Abdul Salám, an accomplished Herati oral storyteller. I asked if he changed stories that he heard from others. He said, “I never change them. Sometimes I correct/repair them.”

Youli Ioannesyan, a careful and knowledgeable St. Petersburg-trained dialectologist, presents traditional tales that he recorded from three nonliterate men in Herat villages (western Afghanistan) in the 1980s, during the Russian occupation. He protects the integrity of the oral texts, transcribing them verbatim, including all the discrepancies of grammar and syntax. The printed production is excellent, with few typographical errors. Ioannesyan offers abundant, well-researched lexicographic, phonological, and grammatical notes juxtaposing other regional dialect studies. The author’s “explanations of cultural terms” are less illuminating in places, as are some mistranslations, resulting perhaps from occasional limited fluency in the sometimes telegraphic local folk narrative idiom. The volume includes a glossary of dialectal and common words (212 entries), notes, and a bibliography.

Ioannesyan’s analytic goal in a 1999 monograph in Russian was to locate Herati Persian dialect phonologically and lexicographically on the varietal map of Persian-speaking Afghanistan and Khorassan (a historically important cultural region encompassing much of northeastern Iran and northern Afghanistan). He offers these eleven texts, the “large amount” of “folklore texts” (x) not in the monograph, primarily as data for Persianists, linguists, and language learners. He disclaims the work as “by no means a study in folklore

literature or anthropology, [although] these texts containing ethnographic data may be useful to folklorists or ethnographers" (xii). The problem of genre fluency is theoretically and methodologically important for folklorists and other comparative narratologists and should also concern field linguists. Thus in this review I reflect on dialectology and folk narratology.

For folklorists the utility of the translations is limited (although not that of the transcriptions) by Ioannesyan's occasional mistakes in Afghan/Herati oral traditional narrative idiom (perhaps also by the limits of his native-speaker consultants, students "of Herati descent" at Leningrad/St. Petersburg University). Hence Abdul Salám and his "corrections." Drawing on my own contemporaneous collection of several hundred recorded oral narratives, mostly traditional folktales from more than a hundred mostly Herati speakers, male and female, I "hear" in the lacunae ellipses, ambiguous phonemes, false starts, and self-corrections in these eleven texts, things that help to "correct" superficially incoherent aspects of Ioannesyan's translations. Methodologically, what does such repair mean? How should it be evaluated as a listening practice addressing any single performed text?

The echoic corrective effect of juxtaposing other Heratis' recordings to these texts supports John Foley's theorization of immanent knowledge grounding performance competence (*Immanent Art*, 1991). It is one thing to agree with Foley that fluent performers and audiences hear in a global fashion, deploying prior knowledge of the discourse, making any one traditional "text" a locus of immanent meaning (like an auditory palimpsest), not an isolated speech event. The unsaid but immanently heard is crucial to understanding any performance and reperformance of a tale later. But how does a folklorist decide how (much of) our (or our consultants') unspoken hearing of the immanent in a performance can be rendered in translation or commentary? Details not spoken in the performance (but immanent in competent hearers' understanding) must be distinguished from what is surface-present in the text. Inferential translations or interpretations should be flagged as such.

Honest mistakes in translation or interpretation, as well as some English malapropisms ("cow shepherd" for "cowherd," "cauldron" throughout for "cooking pot") limit these translations' utility for non-Persianist narratologists or language students, although the lexicography is mostly excellent. Ioannesyan describes the three narrators as "not 'professional' but . . . average dialect speakers" whose tales are "characterized by features typical of common colloquial illiterate speech. They lack consistency and contain repetitive phrases and expressions. The narrator may drop the sentence in the middle and either leave it incomplete or start it again from the beginning. Sometimes he would go back a few sentences, breaking narrative logic, and retell the whole portion with a slight change in vocabulary. . . . [Preserving all such

details in transcription] I tried to reduce [in translation] ‘redundancies and repetitions’ . . . and to . . . diversify the words introducing direct speech . . . [interpolating] ‘said,’ ‘told,’ ‘asked,’ ‘replied’” (xi–xii).

It was almost impossible in Herat in the 1970s and 1980s to find any “professional” storytellers, but there were traditional performers, male and female, who were recognized as excellent and valued for their contributions to social gatherings. Ioannesyan’s storytellers, to judge by details in the transcriptions, might not be dining out on their performance abilities; in native literary criticism, some aspects of these performances fall short of excellence. Yet the stories are fully traditional magic tales and novellas about the exploits of clever, even rascally male underdog heroes. Furthermore, as Dell Hymes taught us, tellers’ repetitions and lacunae—not all flaws in performance—as well as repairs, are important for interpreting performed texts. Cleaning them up in translation, which includes introducing alien stylistic features, is analytically inappropriate. Such changes are justifiable in literary or oral retellings, where the reteller takes artistic responsibility for a new text, but not in ethnolinguistic translations, which may suffer aesthetically to keep all oral patterns and glitches strictly in place for analytic purposes. At the same time, the awkwardness of portions of these translations does not stem from awkwardness or ambiguity in the telling but rather in the English not quite doing justice to the tellers’ fluency.

Translation problems include the following: (1) Handling occasional storyteller inconsistency and repair resulting from plot or motif interference: “Is the hero an ordinary man or a prince?” (an interesting question for an Afghan under Soviet occupation narrating to a Soviet-identified scholar). In some cases the teller starts one story, then shifts to another plot line. Some heroes suddenly have unexplained access to magical objects or assistants. The teller repairs, but the translator does not always notice that this is a repair, or of what. (2) Handling storytellers’ at times unmarked, abrupt scene changes in which new or prior actors (re)appear. Sentence-level ambiguities too often arose because there is only one genderless third-person singular pronoun, /ú/ (he, she, it), in Herati Persian and because the verb *said* with no subject pronoun marks all kinds of utterances (questions, replies, interjections, etc.). Characters may be designated by intonation alone: “He said . . . (then) HE (or SHE) said.” Ioannesyan occasionally assigns a statement or act to the wrong character, destroying narrative logic. Familiarity with analogous motifs in other stories, and/or intonational deixis, eliminates ambiguities for fluent listeners.

Ioannesyan’s important contributions to Persian dialect lexicography and phonology are helpful but not sufficient for folk narrative analysis. He sometimes alleges inconsistency where a fluent listener would hear immanent coherence. He unjustifiably counts narrative incoherence as a general feature of “illiterate”

traditional narrators. These three tellers all tell traditional tales, but at times they show signs either of lack of narrative fluency or perfunctory performance. Are their occasional glitches, distinct from those introduced in translation, due to lack of skill or lack of interest? Are they perfunctory because they are performing a narrative genre not regarded as serious (folktales, *afšana*, are also called “lies,” *dorugh*), elicited in a nontraditional context by someone not considered an adept critical listener? Dialectologists have a lot to offer ethnolinguists and folklorists, but the opposite is also true. Sample size (a few speakers’ monologues versus larger full-text repertoire-focused collections) also matters.

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***World on a Maple Leaf: A Treasury of Canadian Multicultural Folktales.***  
*Edited by Asma Sayed and Nayanika Kumar. Edmonton: United Cultures of Canada Association, 2011. 102 pp.*

*World on a Maple Leaf* is a compilation of twenty-five folktales by twenty-four authors with the aim of fostering understanding and respect for cultural differences in the multicultural contexts of Canadian life. These stories are folktales in a generous sense of the term in that they include rewritings of published tales, oral tales from grandparents, and original compositions. The brief directive given to contributors was “to re-imagine . . . stories . . . heard from parents, grandparents, friends and families, and to write them for Canadian children” (vii). The first thousand copies are for free distribution to libraries; further sales will support children in need. The writers and editors show such idealism and the project is so manifestly worthwhile that any criticism may sound peevish, but from a folklorist’s perspective questions arise.

I had hoped, from the title, for a collection of newly recorded oral folktales from recent immigrants to Canada. Surprisingly, all but six of the contributors were born in Canada or the United States. All are highly literate, identifying themselves as storytellers (nine), writers (eight), academics (three), and graduate students (four), with three of the students studying comparative literature at the University of Alberta. I would have expected Edmonton immigrant communities to have been canvassed, and perhaps they were because the introduction mentions a call that elicited “an overwhelming response” and the “painful” rejection of some “fascinating” stories (vii–viii). It is not clear whether any of the included stories came as the result of inquiry among new immigrants. This is a pity, especially because the final contributor, Roxanne Felix, writes eloquently about the value of “ask[ing] about a person’s journey” (94). If this is just the first in a series, as the editors hope, it will be worth going to new Canadians and recording their stories directly, rather than relying on others, no matter how refined their storytelling skills, to speak for them.