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Alexander Korda and his “Foreignized Translation” of
The Thief of Bagdad (1940)

Jessica C. A. Wiest

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

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The Thief of Bagdad (1940)

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Adaptation studies has recently turned an eye towards translation theory for valuable discussion on the role of movie-makers as translators. Such discussion notes the difficulties inherent in adapting a medium such as a book, a play, or even a theme park ride into film. These difficulties have interesting parallels to the translation of one language into another. Translation theory, in fact, can shed important light on the adaptation process. Intrinsic to translation theory is the dichotomy between domesticating translation and foreignizing translation, the two major styles of translation. Translation scholar Lawrence Venuti, the author of these two terms, argues that while the former is an “ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to receiving cultural values, bringing the author back home,” the latter is “an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” (15). Venuti suggests that foreignizing translations, ones that maintain distinct cultural difference within the translated target text, are more desirable and ultimately commit less violence on the source text and language.

This paper analyzes the 1940 film *The Thief of Bagdad*, a British remake of a 1924 Hollywood film by the same name, for its elements of foreignizing translation. Producer Alexander Korda, acting as a kind of translator, made this film during the height of the British national film movement. Supported by this movement, and inspired by his own personal vendetta against Hollywood, Korda took an American blockbuster and re-vised it with distinctly British thematic elements. Because his ultimate audience was an American one, however, I argue that his film took an American source text, *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), and foreignized it, hoping, in the process, to establish British cinema as a major player in the international film world.

Keywords: adaptation theory, Alexander Korda, translation studies, foreignizing translation, *1001 Arabian Nights*, British national film movement, Hollywood

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Introduction

In 1991, when American troops invaded Iraq, the Western world got first-hand television coverage of a Middle East unlike anything they had been taught to imagine. The televised images of the “real” Baghdad clashed with Hollywood’s white-domed, snake-charmer, magic carpet world of the Arabian Nights. This sharp contrast between perceived reality and Hollywood fantasy redoubled the investigation into the Western cultural appropriation of the Middle East begun by Edward Said in the 1970s. The US invasion of Iraq led to a renewed burst of scholarship, and the past two decades have seen new analyses of the culture, historiography, imperialism, anthropology, literature—and especially the film adaptations—that created and perpetuated the stereotypes of a fictionalized Middle East.

Edward Said gives important and useful context for examining such Eastern stereotypes with his seminal work *Orientalism*, and any analysis of the relationship of West and East is incomplete without acknowledging his groundwork. But, as Susan Nance argues in her 2009 publication, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, scholars need to use Said’s ideas as a springboard rather than the final word. She actually chastises those who are hesitant to push his scholarship further:

[T]hese writers pay lip service to “Orientalism” but do not actually engage with the full theoretical implications of Said’s arguments with respect to *how* subconscious discursive power has supposedly worked through cultural texts and *how*, precisely, this is connected to the formulation of foreign policy and military or diplomatic action. Instead common scholarly interpretation sees a predatory

inevitability in American engagement with the Muslim world because authors tend to focus analysis on cultural “texts” in isolation from the moment of production or live display. (7)

An analysis of what Nance calls “the moment of the production” potentially sheds light on the proximate rather than the overarching motivation behind Orientalist stereotypes. What, for example, were the specific cultural and political environments in which a text was produced? How do the history and personality of the author or translator perpetuate cultural stereotypes? If one is to understand a text that crosses language and culture borders, then it is essential to recognize these specific and often personal contexts. Intercultural works typically have translators, and these translators are situated in their own cultural and historical contexts. Translation studies, therefore, provides a fitting dimension for examining the relationships between East and West, even in terms of film adaptation, because in understanding more about the translation process we recognize that the translator (or adaptor) heavily influences how a text is represented.

Translation Theory

As any translator can attest, there are no exact translations. Unlike math, the process of translation is contextual, not formulaic. *Repondez-vous s'il vous plaît* does not translate directly into “please let me know if you will be attending,” just as *adios* doesn’t simply mean “goodbye.” The words “a dios” represent a phrase with deep religious and historical meaning very different from the American phrase “see you later.” In the translator’s preface to Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Spivak gives an important point of view on the translation process. She discusses the common situation of a word being *under erasure* during translation. She defines this as “to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. . . . In examining

familiar things we come to such unfamiliar conclusions that our very language is twisted and bent even as it guides us. Writing ‘under erasure’ is the mark of this contortion” (xiv, qtd. in Niranjana 48). Spivak suggests that the work of a translator is agonizing, since any given word might have dozens of simultaneous meanings. The simultaneity of these meanings gives language its nuance and richness, but it also makes the process of translation more difficult, especially for the knowledgeable translator.

Because language is ambiguous, the process of translation occasionally results in cultural casualties. According to Tejaswini Niranjana, translation often acts as a colonizing influence, particularly when languages are not on “equal” sociopolitical footing. “In creating coherent and transparent texts and subjects,” she argues, “translation participates—across a range of discourses—in the *fixing* of colonized cultures, making them seem static and unchanging rather than historically constructed” (3). This is precisely the problem with the English translation of *adios*. The cultural, historical, and religious contexts of this one word are all but lost when it is translated as “goodbye.” The richness of *adios* is lost, flattened into one dimension in which the new meaning belongs to the translator rather than to the author or the source language.

The complexity of translating thus creates two related problems. First, readers tend to ignore the role of the translator and imagine that the translated text is the original text. Second, readers usually fail to recognize that translation always involves multiple acts of interpretation, even with a single word. As Niranjana puts it, translation often functions in our society as a seemingly “transparent presentation of something that already exists” (3). She is quick to point out, however, that “the ‘original’ is actually brought into being through translation” (3). Thus when we read the English translation of Derrida’s work we are not reading Derrida. We are instead reading a new “original” created by Spivak. Translation scholar Lawrence Venuti has, for

over a decade now, led the discourse on these translation problems. “By producing the illusion of transparency,” he claims, “a fluent translation masquerades as a true semantic equivalence when it in fact inscribes the foreign text with a partial interpretation, partial to English-language values, reducing if not simply excluding the very differences that translation is called on to convey” (Venuti 16). In other words, what Venuti calls “domesticating translation” assumes that the target language—often the colonizing language of English—can effectively communicate exactly and precisely what the original did. It assumes that the word “goodbye” is a perfectly adequate equivalent to *adios*. Not only is this assumption presumptuous, it’s “ethnocentric violence,” according to Venuti (16). Venuti argues that domesticating translation can and ought to be replaced with a very different strategy that he calls “foreignizing translation.” While the former, he argues, is an “ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to receiving cultural values, bringing the author back home,” the latter is “an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” (15). Thus, instead of translating *adios* into “goodbye,” it might instead be translated into the distinctly foreign sounding phrase, “I commend you to God.” Such a phrase is slightly jarring in English, because it is not a typical English phrase. This translation, although arguably not an exact literal translation of *adios*, attempts to capture some of the religious and syntactical uniqueness of the original phrase, and in doing so foreignizes by privileging the Spanish source language over the English target language.

Wenfen Yang, in his 2010 article “Brief Study on Domestication and Foreignization in Translation,” has called for the dispute between these two translation strategies to be “viewed from a brand new perspective—social, cultural and historical.” He claims that the “conflict between domestication and foreignization as opposite translation strategies can be regarded as

the cultural and political rather than linguistic extension of the time-worn controversy over free translation and literal translation” (77). In other words, Yang advocates defining both domesticating and foreignizing translations more broadly to include cultural and political contexts. My analysis uses Yang’s broader definitions to deal with the complicated situation in which a foreignizing work goes beyond simply privileging the source text and instead serves the political purposes of the translator. Such biased translations occur when translators promote, enlarge, or in any way change the meaning or nuance of particular passages in order to create more colorful, more interesting, or more politically charged works based on their foreign status. Foreignizing translations occasionally include calculated differences from their source texts in order to meet political or social agendas, a fact that problematizes Venuti’s assertion that foreignizing translations commit less violence to a source culture than do domesticating translations. But even Venuti admits that the translation of a foreign text must be read “as an interpretation that imitates yet varies foreign textual features in accordance with the translator’s cultural situation and historical moment” (124). Understanding the translator’s situation, then, illuminates the process of manipulation and stereotyping.

In *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Venuti spends a chapter analyzing the translation projects of Italian writer Iginio Ugo Tarchetti (1839-69). Tarchetti belonged to a dissident political group during his day: the Milanese movement *scapigliatura*, “a loosely associated group of artists, composers, and writers who contested bourgeois values . . . [and] were at variance with the highly conservative realism that had dominated Italian fiction since . . . 1827” (125-26). As a member of this group, Tarchetti actively did political work with his writing and translating. According to Venuti, Tarchetti was not above tweaking his translated works in order to produce social change in nineteenth century Italy. He “adapted fantastic motifs,

reproduced scenes, translated, even plagiarized—yet each discursive practice served the political function of interrogating ideologies and addressing hierarchical social relations in Italy” (126). One of the texts that Tarchetti used in this manner was *The Arabian Nights*. He rebelled against the dominant political ideal of conservative realism by using the backdrop of “Arabia” to create his own alternate social vision.

Venuti claims that “Discourse produces concrete social effects: the novel can alter subjectivity and motor social change” (128). Through his translated texts Tarchetti felt that he could produce such social change, “transforming foreign texts to function in a different cultural formation” and molding them to fit his political agenda (126). Venuti translates a passage from Tarchetti’s work *Tutte le opere* to illustrate:

The Persians and the Arabs drew from the variety of their nomad life, and from their virgin nature, and from their burning sky the first novelistic narratives, hence the laws and customs of the Arabs’ social and domestic community have been well-known and familiar to us for a long time, and Strabo lamented that love for the marvelous rendered uncertain the histories of these nations (qtd. in Venuti 132)

According to Venuti, “the passage shows him [Tarchetti] actively rewriting his cultural materials so as to transform the Orient into a vehicle for his democratic social vision” (132). The construction of this “virgin nature” ostensibly contrasts a weak Eastern femininity with the dominating Western culture. This representation of Arabic culture, again according to Venuti, has two different facets—a utopian image, as well as picture of the exotic and phantasmagorical, but both representations “aim to make Persia and Arabia perform a European function, the regeneration of Italian fiction and society” (132), creating a new foundation on which to

construct conversations about literature. And really, though this translation may be performing a “European function,” as Venuti claims, it is more overtly serving Tarchetti’s personal political agenda.

Niranjana’s and Venuti’s ideas about translation and the role of the translator offer a useful metaphor for exploring transnational film adaptations. As Cutchins and Albrecht-Crane argue in their introduction to *New Beginnings for Adaptation Studies*,

Rather than seeing adaptations as taking one thing (a novel’s imagined “essence”) and placing it into another context, we should recognize that the “essence” is neither knowable, nor directly representable. A novel’s imagined essence remains elusive and ambiguous; what one does achieve in reading, or in adapting a text, is thus always more, less, or other than what the novel or the author wanted to express. (n. p.)

Thus, just as the process of translation showcases the difficulty of language parameters (think Spivak’s contortions), film adaptations demonstrate the complexity of the word-into-film process, as well as the potential for foreignizing or domesticating translations. The similarities between literary translation and film adaptation in this process revolve around the idea that the intermediary (either translator or adaptor) plays a key role in the balance between source and target texts. Yang gives a good context for this idea: “In his famous lecture *On the Different Ways of Translation*, Friedrich Schleiermacher demanded that translations from different languages into German should read and sound different: the reader should be able to guess the Spanish behind a translation from Spanish, and the Greek behind a translation from Greek” (78). This notion, one of the roots of the idea of foreignizing translation, is completely compatible with adaptation theory. Assuming that adaptations should be foreignized, then a movie based on

a video game (for instance, the recent release *The Prince of Persia* 2010) should have a different feel from a movie based on a novel (*Pride and Prejudice* 2005) which in turn should have a slightly different feel from a movie based on a play (*Chicago* 2002) or a movie based on a theme park ride (*Pirates of the Caribbean* 2003). The idea of foreignizing translation provides valuable context for discussing films—not in terms of their fidelity to a source text but in terms of their dissonance to films from other sources. As Yang puts it, “foreignization advocated by Venuti and his followers is a non-fluent or estranging translation style designed to make visible the presence of the translator by highlighting the foreign identity of the ST [source text]” (Yang 78). Taking a cue from the translation theories of Venuti, Niranjana and Yang, I want to examine the role of the producer of the 1940 film *The Thief of Bagdad*. Alexander Korda, I argue, was a translator of sorts, remaking the tale of Aladdin as well as the 1924 American film *The Thief of Bagdad* into a distinctly British film. In so doing he was “maintaining a refusal of the dominant” language of early twentieth century cinema—that of Hollywood—by “developing affiliations with marginal cultural values,” in this case British values (Venuti 125).

This was not the first time that the *Arabian Nights* had been used in this manner. Like Tarchetti’s translations, the early literary translations (and ensuing film adaptations) of the *Arabian Nights* were often political vehicles for translators, with the adapted culture having little say about its own representation. As John Eisele argues, “At the beginning of the twentieth century, Arabs were not regarded as a threat to the interests of the United States” (72), and thus had little means of defending themselves against the onslaught of Western stereotypes or of offering effective counter narratives. Middle Easterners were essentially defenseless against the Western translation of their culture. And *The Arabian Nights* were certainly at the center of many of these cultural translations. It is difficult to trace the genealogy of the Western retellings of

these stories, for they went through their own series of both domesticating and foreignizing translations. Richard Francis Burton (1821-90), one of the preeminent translators of the *Nights*, candidly admitted he had an agenda with his translations. Burton decried the earlier “unsexed and unsouled” translated versions (which were themselves a product of their era), claiming he wanted to present English readers with a “full, complete, unvarnished, uncastrated copy of the great original” (qtd. in Shamma 54). He made it very clear that his text was translated from the original Arabic rather than from Antoine Galland’s French interpretation, which was the first widely circulated Western translation and the source text for many successive translations. With this cry for authenticity, however, came a subversive social agenda: that of using *The Arabian Nights* to reform what Burton saw as Victorian sexual hypocrisy. “The England of our day would fain bring up both sexes and keep all ages in profound ignorance of sexual and intersexual relations; and the consequences of that imbecility are peculiarly cruel and afflicting,” he said. “I proposed to supply the want in these pages” (qtd. in Shamma 54). Though his work wasn’t as politically charged as Tarchetti’s, Burton’s version of the tales nonetheless had a definite social agenda that fueled his translation, and the stereotype of the passionate Arab provided a useful vehicle for the social reform Burton wanted to accomplish. According to Venuti, “Burton’s Orientalism was deployed in an effort to upset the hierarchy of moral values in Victorian Britain. In this respect, especially when set against Lane’s domesticating version, Burton’s translation can be called foreignizing in intention” (269).

***The Thief of Bagdad* (1924)**

Because *The Arabian Nights* were a popular source text for film adaptation as well, it wasn’t too surprising when in 1924, Douglas Fairbanks, a member of Hollywood’s elite, decided he wanted to produce a silent film version of the *Nights* called *The Thief of Bagdad*. This film,

though it claims to be an adaptation of the *Nights*, straddles an interesting line between the fantasy world of the Middle East and the dusty streets of the Old West. As director Raoul Walsh candidly admits, he had only made American Western films up until that point: “most of the productions I had directed dealt with cowboys and gangsters and pimps and prostitutes and the dregs of the American West” (163). Consequently, Walsh’s notions of “authenticity” to the original tales are questionable. He claims that his plot is true to the “general themes of *A Thousand and One Nights*,” and that the artistic sets were “great enough to convince me that I was walking the streets of old Bagdad” (163). But it is doubtful that Walsh had ever visited Bagdad or even read the *Nights*. His claims for authenticity rest on already established Orientalizations of Middle Eastern culture. This is especially exemplified in his comment that the place to find extras for his film was “In Mexican town,” because “A dark-faced Mexican with a head-rag hiding everything except his eyes and nose and mouth will pass for an Arab any time” (Walsh 164).

While Walsh may have been somewhat haphazard in his approach to the tale, Douglas Fairbanks, as the producer and star actor, had a concrete agenda for his film. According to an unnamed scenario writer, Fairbanks said, “Our hero must be Every Young Man—of this age or any age—who believes that happiness is a quality that can be stolen; who is selfish—at odds with the world—rebellious toward conventions on which comfortable human relations are based” (qtd. in Cooperson 271). This same writer claimed that the entire foundation for the film came from one sole quatrain of Burton’s translated *Nights*:

Seek not thy happiness to steal,
 ‘Tis work alone will win thee weal.
 Who seeketh bliss sans toil and strife,

The impossible seeketh and wasteth life. (Cooperson 271)

From this single quatrain comes the rather rigidly enforced moral of the movie, a phrase that appears literally written in the stars on screen at the beginning and end of the film: “Happiness must be earned.” The plot embodies a typical moral rags-to-riches tale. Fairbanks plays the thief, a young man who lives on the streets and steals whatever he fancies, running from soldiers and rejecting religious reformation. He undergoes a transformation, however, when he sees the beautiful princess and decides to undergo a quest of bravery in order to beat out all the other suitors to win her love, marry her, and take her away on a fantastic flying carpet. According to Michael Cooperson, “Fairbanks’ *Thief* recuperates the anarchic foreigner by casting him as a convert to the rule of law and the Puritan work ethic. ‘By toil the sweets of human life are found,’ the holy man cries, reforming the thief and familiarizing the exotic characters as players in a Horatio Alger success story” (271). Thus, Fairbanks’ film is a classic example of a domesticating adaptation. It had an agenda that catered to the rugged individualistic and prohibitionist mentality of early twentieth century America, and it adjusted the source text accordingly.

Despite its domesticating sociopolitical agenda, however, Fairbanks’ movie, by all accounts, represented a breakthrough in technology and in sheer size. The number of extras and the extraordinary sets were unprecedented. *Guinness Film: Facts and Feats* recognizes it as the most expensive film produced up to that point, with a record \$2,000,000 in production costs at a time when the average Hollywood film cost \$300,000 (Robertson 38). In 1996, the National Film Registry assumed protection of Fairbanks’ movie, thus ensuring the film’s preservation for all time as one of the culturally, historically or aesthetically important films safeguarded by the National Film Preservation Act. Admittedly, these films “are not selected as the ‘best’ American

films of all time, but rather as works of enduring importance to American culture” (“Michael Jackson”). The 1924 *The Thief of Bagdad* thus became a kind of icon, *The Arabian Nights* fantasy film after which all successive ones were patterned.

Ironically enough, John Eisele claims that this film “did not make the grade,” because “unlike *The Sheik*, it did not lead to a spate of look-alike films. In fact, it may have actually slowed down the production of Arabian nights films for more than a decade” (79). Although Eisele’s facts are correct, I disagree with his conclusion that *The Thief* didn’t make the grade. In fact, the opposite is true: Fairbanks’s *Thief* was so big and so expensive that later producers shied away from attempting to compete with it. They knew that they could not muster the kind of financial backing that Douglas Fairbanks brought to the 1924 film. Any remake or look-alike would betray the disparity in budget.

As discussed earlier with the example of Tarchetti, “Foreignizing translation is a dissident cultural practice, maintaining a refusal of the dominant by developing affiliations with marginal linguistic and cultural values in the receiving situation” (125). Thus, in an analysis of the 1940 British remake of *The Thief of Bagdad*, it’s important to understand the dominant Hollywood film culture of the 1930s in order to analyze how producer Alexander Korda acted as a translator. Korda provided the cultural dissidence that Venuti advocates with translation, a politically calculated dissidence that required American audiences to reevaluate their movie expectations. The impetus behind the 1940 version of *The Thief of Bagdad* began two decades before the film, with a floundering British film industry. In the 1920s, in an effort to jumpstart the industry, the British government passed the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927, requiring cinema owners to show a certain number of British-made films. Known as the “quota,” this act resulted in a demand for British-made films, something that Nicholas Pronay claims “proved to

be a remarkably successful exercise in government intervention” (381). It increased the production of British-made major feature films from virtually nothing to making Britain, in 1936, “the second largest film-producer in the world, only exceeded by the United States, with 212 British-made feature films being registered in that year” (Pronay 381). Nevertheless, in 1931, when Alexander Korda arrived in Britain, the industry was still struggling. The films produced to fill the quota were vastly unpopular with audiences and producers alike, who saw them as mass-produced, bland films that had to be churned out on a regular basis. These “quota quickies,” were generally produced on a government subsidy of 4,000-6,000 pounds (in contrast to the £30,000 it usually took to make a feature film production in the 1930s) (Kulik 71). To make matters worse, the original intention of the law was soon subverted. American film companies quickly realized that they could simply set up shop in Britain and churn out films that fit the quota regulations, since technically they were produced on British soil. As a result, the British film industry in 1931 was suffering from not only Hollywood oppression, but also from its own government’s clumsy attempts to fix the matter.

Alexander Korda

Another key to understanding the foreignizing of the 1940 *Thief* are the social and cultural contexts of the adaptor. Just as translation “imitates yet varies foreign textual features in accordance with the translator’s cultural situation and historical moment” (Venuti 124), foreignized adaptation similarly imitates yet varies the film features based on the adaptor’s situation and historical context. Thus, an understanding of the foreignized elements of Korda’s 1940 *Thief* requires extensive background on the man himself in order to effectively situate his work. Alexander Korda had begun his movie-making career in his native Hungary, where he became a pioneer in film production in a country that was just beginning to enter the world of

cinema. He was appointed Commissioner of Film in Count Mihaly Karolyi's liberal government in 1918. When the Hungarian Communist Party took over one year later, Korda was apparently persuasive enough to keep his powerful position, though under a different title, as a member of the Communist Directory for the Arts. When the Communists lost power several months later, however, it was a little too much to ask that he successfully switch sympathies once again. Korda found himself in a rather sticky situation, because as a Jew, a liberal, and a filmmaker, he was a prime target for persecution in the new government. He fled to Vienna for a few years and from there went on to Hollywood.

Korda's experience as a Hollywood director reveals a good deal about his personality. He insisted, for instance, on having his first contract translated into Hungarian before he would agree to sign it, but after it was translated he simply stated, "All right then, I'll sign. If they don't let me do what I want over there, I'll simply come back" (qtd. in Kulik 42). Arriving in Hollywood in 1927, Korda started with First National Studios at \$350 a week, where he established himself as a director, successfully producing a handful of films (mostly silent), including *The Stolen Bride* (1927) and *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1927). He rose quickly in the ranks and in 1930 signed a contract with Fox studios at \$100,000 a year. Though he was making more money than ever and establishing himself more firmly in Hollywood, Korda was also becoming increasingly disgruntled with the movies that Fox assigned him to make and the rigid corporate film hierarchy. His frustration finally came to a head in 1930 when he was assigned to make *The Princess and the Plumber*, a movie that he claims he "hated." When the film was almost finished, the top executives of Fox screened it and weren't completely satisfied. They claimed it needed some "menace" (Kulik 54-55). Korda refused to reshoot and the result was unpleasant.

He was summoned to the executive office and offered a quiet exit from his contract with a severance package of \$25,000. This was rather short of the \$45,000 remaining on his contract, so he refused. This refusal resulted in the studio writing him out a new contract that removed him from his nice office with its private bathroom and garden. The new contract stipulated that he sit in his new cubicle every day for nine hours with a one-hour lunch break. There were also strict rules about where he could and could not smoke. Korda had discovered Hollywood's infamous "demotion ploy," or "dog house" (Kulik 55-56). After two weeks of sitting it out, Korda returned to the studio heads and finally agreed to leave. The severance package, however, had dropped to \$15,000. Humiliated, Korda took the money and left, only to find that his name had been blacklisted at every major Hollywood studio (Kulik 56). Infuriated, Korda expressed his sentiments about Hollywood in a letter to his friend and scriptwriter Lajos Biro: "I am fed up to the teeth with Hollywood. I'm working very seriously on a plan – i.e. to get some money together (\$250,000) and start in Europe. I'm convinced that the European market is a good one and is going to get better" (qtd. in Stockham 12). Korda specifically wanted to be in England. In early 1930, while at a luncheon with Lajos Biro and British actor George Grossmith, he is reported to have claimed that, "England ought to be making the best pictures in the world." To which Grossmith replied, "Well, why can't we three—you and Biro and I—go to England and make them?" (qtd. in Kulik 54). Korda's disillusionment with Hollywood, the dominant film culture of the time, was foundational for his dissident work later on.

After leaving America, Korda ended up in Paris. He was just barely getting settled in his new environment when a call came from Paramount British; Paramount executives did not like their local manager, and they asked Korda if he would like the job. Korda literally dropped everything he was working on in Paris (which included a series of three films) and left

straightaway for Britain. In February of 1932, shortly after his arrival, a journalist for *Film Weekly* commented on the influx of foreign directors:

We should welcome American and Continental directors as long as they justify themselves by helping to make better and more widely acceptable British pictures. Men like Alexander Korda, Paul Stein, Mervyn Le Rooy, and Rowland V. Lee should not be regarded with jealousy and suspicion simply because they do not happen to be British-born. Their skill and experience are their passports. (qtd. in Kulik 70)

In Korda's own eyes, he was the potential savior of the British national film movement. Not only did he have the talent, but given his past experience in America, he was incredibly motivated to produce films that could rival Hollywood's best. His biographer Karol Kulik says, "Both the man and his film became the foundations of British hopes for waging a successful campaign against Hollywood's domination of world markets . . . 'audacity' and 'imagination' were the two qualities which British film people lacked and which Alex Korda had in seemingly inexhaustible abundance" (69-70).

When he decided to produce *The Thief of Bagdad* in 1939, Korda was at a political crossroads in his career. He had established himself in Britain and proved that he could make really excellent films—he'd gotten rave reviews for *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) and *The Rise of Catherine the Great* (1934). The *Dallas News* said, "It is no longer possible to disparage the technical method of British pictures. *Henry VIII* is extraordinary in photographic beauty and lavishness of investiture" (qtd. in Stockham 53). The *San Diego Sun* clamored that it "is an English picture which can be linked with the best American productions" (qtd. in Stockham 54). The following year's release of *The Rise of Catherine the Great* was a similar

success. “Another ace from England and out of the same deck, Korda,” claimed *Variety* (qtd. in Stockham 55). The *Baltimore Sun* noted that, “In the field of historical pictures it is evident that England is able to beat Hollywood at its own game. *Christina* [*Queen Christina* (1933)] is the best American made costumer turned out in California since the talkies and *Catherine* is superior in every respect” (qtd. in Stockham 55).

This praise was extremely significant because it came from American critics. Korda was so intent on proving himself against Hollywood that the American critics were the ones he wanted to please. So the positive reception that he got with his early British feature films was certainly significant. But Korda was not satisfied. He didn’t want to just beat Hollywood’s “historical pictures”—he wanted to dominate the very finest that Hollywood had to offer. Choosing to remake Fairbanks’ 1924 *The Thief of Bagdad* was a very calculated decision: for a producer interested in flexing his cinematic muscles, what better film to remake than *The Thief of Bagdad*, a film that had become so iconic that it had defied sequels or remakes? And Korda’s version was not going to be just any remake. His idea of an effective film was similar to that of an effective foreignized translation, one that is so distinct that it “cannot be confused with either the source-language text or a text written originally in the target language” (Albrecht, qtd. in Yang 78). This idea of taking a film and making it distinctly British parallels Albrecht’s notion of producing a translation that is not limited to either the source-language or the target language. Thus, though Korda was taking a film and making another film (same “language”), he took it from an American source and gave it a British makeover, intending to send it right back to America. The American film market, then, can represent both the source and the target, with Korda the translator acting as the intermediary and using “Britishness” to foreignize Hollywood’s dominant film culture. In a kind of parallel to Tarchetti’s foreignizing, *The Thief of*

Bagdad (1940) used the *Nights* text as a vague backdrop for the British nationalistic film movement.

Although it is a distinctly British film, there are some problems intrinsic to the assertion that Korda's film was nationalistic. Venuti argues that nationalistic agendas are associated with domesticating translations. At face value, Korda seems to be simply domesticating an adaptation of the tales *The Arabian Nights* by translating it into a British film that privileges British actors and British accents. While this domestication is undeniably present in the form of Orientalist stereotypes, a more in-depth analysis reveals that Korda's main goal was to make a foreignized adaptation of the 1924 film, one that created dissidence for American audiences by exposing them to values other than their own. Venuti claims that "without such practices as foreignizing translations to test its limits a culture can lapse into an exclusionary or narcissistic complacency and become a fertile ground for ideological developments such as nationalisms and fundamentalisms" (20). Fairbanks' 1924 version of *The Thief of Bagdad* may be seen as a domesticating translation of the text *The Arabian Nights* because it created an Americanized translation of Middle Eastern culture made palatable for American audiences. Korda's work, on the other hand, though nationalistic for the British audience, is an example of a foreignizing translation rather than a domesticating one because of his treatment of the source text and the target audiences. The 1940 version of *The Thief of Bagdad* was calculated to revitalize British cinema, but it was not directed solely at British audiences. In fact, based on Korda's history and agenda, I would argue that this film was actually aimed primarily at American audiences. Thus, rather than "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to receiving cultural values," this film represents "an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the . . . cultural differences of the

foreign text” (Venuti 15). The foreign elements, in this case, being the British stylistic and plot elements, which were calculated to provide dissidence to the Hollywood-dominated film style.

Sarah Street, in her 2009 work *British National Cinema*, claims that current “ideas about national cinemas have developed to such an extent that for many critics we are now living in a ‘post-national’ period which acknowledges the need to examine cinema from perspectives that celebrate pluralities and the blurring of boundaries instead of seeking to locate an essentialised notion of national identity” (2). That being said, however, I feel that it is valuable to examine this 1940 film in the context of just such an “essentialized notion of national identity” that Street wants us to move away from because that’s how Korda would have treated it. Korda, in fact, argued in 1933 in defense of the nationalistic film as a method for creating an awareness of difference. “[T]he phrase ‘international film’ is a little ambiguous,” he said. “I do not mean that a film must try to suit the psychology and manners of every country in which it is going to be shown. On the contrary, to be really international a film must first of all be truly and intensely national” (qtd. in Kulik 97). Thus, for Korda, a film that had definitively British qualities was one that was worth sending into the international, and particularly the American market. He gives the example of American gangster films, which, he claims “are essentially American in every detail. . . . If a gangster in an American film is depicted drawing a gun from his hip-pocket, nobody in Britain is likely to object on the grounds that it is not a common practice for Englishmen to carry guns” (qtd. in Kulik 97). Korda wanted qualities of “Britishness” to be just as widely and unmistakably recognized. Arguably, Korda intended for such British elements to become as iconic as Hollywood’s portrayal of American gangsters. And, he claims, he—a Hungarian—was the man to produce such an intensely nationalistic film:

An outsider often makes the best job of a national film. He is not cumbered with excessively detailed knowledge and associations. He gets a fresh slant on things. For instance, I should hate to try to make a Hungarian film, while I would love to make one about the highlands that would be a really national Scottish film—and indeed I plan to do so. . . . I know there are people who think it odd that a Hungarian from Hollywood should direct an English historical film, but I can't see their argument. (Kulik 97-8)

Korda's claim gives voice to the idea that in order to effectively provide dissidence in the film industry, he had to give it a little push. His work was to take the "narcissistic complacency" (Venuti 20) of American cinema and test its limits by foreignizing one of Hollywood's iconic films and sending American movie-goers abroad.

The first image that audiences see when watching one of Alexander Korda's productions is his name in large print and the symbol of Big Ben as the trademark for the company (see fig. 1). Stockham claims that by the time he had settled in Britain, Korda was a "committed Anglophile," and he wanted his movies to open with "a symbol that would be the embodiment of British films" (20). Though he spoke with a Hungarian accent all his life, Korda was determined to make films that claimed Britishness right from the opening credits. With competition that included a lion (MGM) and a globe (Universal), Korda's Big Ben logo instantly localized his films: rather than an animal or planet, both of which are fairly generic and universal, his image distinctly claimed British authenticity. Just north of the Palace of Westminster in London, the tower that houses Big Ben is at the heart of the English capital, and has come to be the icon of London just as the Eiffel Tower is the symbol of Paris. The bell, the clock, and the tower have all come to be represented by the name Big Ben, tolling the time for all of London and, by

extension, the entire British Empire. As an icon for a film production company, this tower also very conveniently speaks to the era of the British nationalized film industry. Though his appropriation of such a monument might be questionable, one of Korda's contemporaries, British filmmaker Ian Dalrymple, gave his stamp of approval to Korda's trademark based on the quality of his movies: "the sort of films to which the infant Big Ben boomed forth its first introductions bore small resemblance to the worthless pound-a-footers [quota films] pumped out by upstart self-styled producers" (297-98).



Figure 1. The opening credits of Korda's 1940 *The Thief of Bagdad*.

***The Thief of Bagdad* (1940)**

The 1940 film *The Thief of Bagdad* is the story of young Prince Ahmed who is deceived by his trusted advisor Jafar into going among his people in the guise of a commoner, at which point Jafar has him apprehended and put into prison for some small matter. Ahmed escapes from the prison with the help of a young thief named Abu, and together the two go on an adventure that involves Ahmed falling in love with a princess and having to outwit Jafar to regain his throne. Korda uses his plot structure to create nationalistic dissidence in contrast to its American predecessor. While the 1924 American film starts with a young thief who aspires to become a prince by using his clever wit to eventually win the heart of the princess, the 1940 plot divides

the one character into two—a prince and a thief. The American version deals with themes of social mobility because Fairbanks' rise from thief to prince represents the potential of any ambitious dreamer (see fig. 11). Korda's version, on the other hand, begins with a prince who is betrayed by his royal advisor and has to work his way back up to his rightful place on the throne. The action of the British film focuses on Ahmed's struggle to regain his kingdom and win the princess, while the thief Abu, played by child actor Sabu, takes a secondary position as more of a comic relief character (see fig. 12). The American film is about meritocracy—the British film, about aristocracy. While both films have a thief and are titled *The Thief of Bagdad*, Korda's film relegates the role of the thief to a juvenile one, emphasizing its difference from the 1924 rags-to-riches, "American dream" story where happiness can be earned, and where every thief is a potential prince. In Fairbanks' film, the thief can earn a fortune, get a change of clothes and then become a prince. In reaction to this, Korda deliberately keeps his social classes more rigid. His film deals with the nuances of monarchical rule, the political balance of power, and the danger of corrupt advisors.



Figure 2. Douglas Fairbanks as the thief in the 1924 film.



Figure 3. Child actor Sabu as the thief in the 1940 film.

Another element of nationalistic dissidence is the ship imagery of the 1940 film. Following the opening credits, the first image of Korda's *Thief* is a giant ship (see fig. 2), an image that is referenced continually throughout the movie. This is in stark contrast to the 1924 film, which, true to its cowboy heritage, deals almost exclusively with more what could be considered the more American horseback transportation (see fig. 3). Thus, when Korda creates a naval reference right at the beginning of his film he's citing an image that almost can't get any more iconically British, particularly in its opposition to Fairbanks' film. The American film is completely landlocked, and while it does have a scene with an underwater search for treasure, it is done on a sound stage with Fairbanks "swimming" through the air supported by cables. Korda's version, in contrast, deals with ocean and ship imagery much more concretely: the princess is taken away against her will in Jafar's ship, the prince and the thief Abu travel the Arabic world by boat (see fig. 4), Abu dreams of becoming a sailor someday (complete with his own musical number "I Want to Be a Sailor"). The seafaring prowess of the Middle Easterners in this story is apparently second only to that of Great Britain itself, and is a decidedly foreignized element. The ship imagery, as one of the main focuses of Korda's adaptation, becomes a very

ostentatious reminder of Britain's historical maritime dominance in contrast to the horseback-riding Western feel to the American version.



Figure 4. The opening shot of the 1940 *Thief*.



Figure 5. Douglas Fairbanks on horseback in the 1924 *Thief*.



Figure 6. Prince Ahmed and Abu travel to Basra by boat in the 1940 *Thief*.

Another major element of scenic difference that Korda emphasizes is that of the garden imagery. Britain is well known for its gardens, and the British garden is an iconic part of the culture. Thus Korda jumped on the chance to create a gorgeous garden for his film. The garden setting of the American 1924 film has a few sparse bushes and one large rose tree (see fig. 5), but Korda's garden distinguishes itself with dark green foliage, large sweeping trees, a vast pool and a classical columned structure (see figs. 6, 7, 8). The 1940 film can almost be heard to scoff at its 1924 predecessor, "You call *that* a garden? We'll show you a garden," one complete with flamingos, bright flowers and lush greenery. Because Walsh had only directed American Western films up until this point, presumably the garden wouldn't have had very high priority in his mind. Furthermore, American film had frequently associated itself the cowboy image, and, by extension, the deserts of California and Kanab, Utah. Because the setting for the American cowboy film was most often the desert, Korda could easily highlight the difference between the lush, verdant England and the desert image of America popularized by cowboy movies. Because it was a weak point in the American film, it was easy to exploit in the British foreignization.



Figure 7. The garden scene of the 1924 *Thief* with the rose tree prominently in the center.



Figure 8. The garden scene of the 1940 *Thief*.



Figure 9. Another view of the 1940 garden scene. Note the live flamingos in the background.



Figure 10. A third angle of the 1940 garden scene, showcasing its immense size.

While Korda certainly foreignized scenic elements of his film, he also created foreignized characters. The differences between the antagonists of the 1924 and 1940 films is very telling. In the 1924 American film the enemy is represented by a Mongol Prince, played by the Japanese actor Sojin, who comes to Bagdad as one of the suitors for the princess (see fig. 9). When she refuses him, he decides to take over the city of Bagdad by force with his Mongol soldiers. This invasion of the “bad guys” and the ensuing conflict of sword against sword is an interesting spin on the American Western struggle between cowboys and Indians. Hollywood Westerns of the early twentieth century often contained some variation of the conflict between whites and Native Americans, with the latter often ostensibly attacking the former. The Mongol invasion of this film looks and feels a lot like the conflict between cowboys and Indians. While the *other* is different (the enemy is Mongolian rather than Native American), the dichotomy is the same. Fairbanks even had racially-determined stipulations of difference: his bad guy looked significantly different from the other actors.

The enemy of the 1940 British version, on the other hand, is not an exterior antagonist, but an interior one. And instead of a physical conflict, the main quarrel in Korda’s film it is a power struggle between a prince and his treacherous advisor (see fig. 10). The adjustment of the

plot here is significant, for it allows Korda to deal more heavily with themes of the royal right to power, complications of those rights, the idea of corruption in high places, and the image of noble royalty betrayed by evil advisors. Jaffar, played by Conrad Veidt, makes the ultimate European bad guy because he is an abuser of his political power. By 1940 Veidt had become known for playing Nazi spies. He played a spy in *I Was a Spy* (1933) and again in *The Spy in Black* (1939), and was later to play the German Major Strasser in *Casablanca* (1942). He was, at least for European audiences, a recognizable bad guy, and more importantly, he had played the usurper of legitimate political power. His physical appearance makes his espionage and subterfuge all the more insidious because, unlike the Japanese actor Sojin of the American film, Veidt blends in with the rest of the white British actors. Korda's 1940 version offered a sophisticated alternative to the Hollywood black-and-white conflict.



Figure 11. The treacherous Mongol prince (Sojin) and his advisor (1924).



Figure 12. Ahmed (John Justin) and his corrupt advisor Jaffar (Conrad Veidt) (1940).

One last significant element of difference is that of the representation of Arabic iconography. The 1924 version of the film established elements that came to be known as the iconic “Arabian” style. This includes large domed structures, giant pots in the streets, flying magic carpet, turbans and snake charmers. Korda, in his remake, kept almost all of these elements. However, he also threw into the mix an interesting variation on these themes, some of which that relied heavily on Hindu influences. The most striking example of this is the deadly “silver maiden,” a mechanical object Jaffar uses to do his killing (see fig. 13). This six-armed, blue-skinned “maiden” looks suspiciously like the Hindu goddess Kali, who is often portrayed with dark or blue skin and multiple arms. In Hindu mythology Kali is the consort of Lord Shiva, and is commonly associated with both time and death. Popular renditions of her often portray her as dark or violent. And though she would not have been a household name in 1940-era Britain, the image of a many-armed, blue-skinned female statue would undoubtedly be recognizably Indian. In 1940 India represented one of the last vestiges of British imperialism, the last crown jewel of the ailing British Empire. Bringing images from and allusions to India into the film highlighted the power of British Imperialism. Thus, though the portrayal of Middle Eastern

theocracy and artwork is just as misrepresented as it was in the American film, accurate representation was not ever the point. Korda was simply wielding British imperialism.



Figure 13. The silver maiden of the 1940 film, vaguely reminiscent of the Hindu deity Kali.

Conclusion

Korda's *Thief* won Academy Awards for Cinematography, Art Direction, and Special Effects. It was, as Korda had planned, a noteworthy representation of Britain's ability to rival anything Hollywood could produce. *Magill's Survey of Cinema* recognized it as "arguably the best Arabian Nights motion picture ever made, and a strong contender for the best fantasy film ever made as well. . . . Although [the 1924 version] was one of the most spectacular and imaginative of silent films, the 1940 remake surpasses it on all counts" (1703). The crowning moment for Korda personally came in June of 1942 when Alexander Korda became Sir Alexander Korda, the first person ever to be knighted for his film contributions (Kulik 258).

The 1940 film adaptation *The Thief of Bagdad* represents a timeless classic as far as fantasy films go. Directors Martin Scorsese and Frank Coppola, in a commentary track on the 2008 DVD release of the film, both comment on their childhood impressions of Korda's film and its influence in their own film careers. In a 2008 movie review, *Cineaste* reviewer Rahul Hamid notes that the 1940 *The Thief of Bagdad*, "Though merely the frothy entertainment of another

time, leads the viewer to the history of both England and the Middle East and to ponder the stakes of their representation” (69). This vague comment about the “stakes of representation” of both England and the Middle East is perhaps more insightful than Hamid intended. Because of its crucial place in British film-making history, the 1940 *Thief* is actually very much about the stakes of representation, though much less about representation of the Middle East than it is about that of the historical and cultural context of mid-twentieth century Britain and its nationalistic tensions. Such tensions provide a broader understanding of how Orientalist stereotypes were perpetuated and solidified. The exoticized, romanticized images of Arabia and Bagdad were vehicles for Korda’s foreignizing agenda, a background for his competition with Hollywood. Thus, though Korda may have contributed to the canon of domesticating adaptations of Middle Eastern culture, he was not doing so intentionally. Rather, his agenda with the 1940 *Thief* was targeted at the American cultural film environment. Understanding the film’s significance means not only understanding Orientalism and Western domination, but also recognizing Alexander Korda’s personal agenda, British nationalism of the 1930s, and the relevance of translation studies. Using the vocabulary of translation studies allows us to explore this film in terms of its domesticating and foreignizing elements, recognizing a complex set of agendas more dynamic and complicated than they have been given credit for being.

Translation theory and the politicization of translation are ideas that can—and should—increasingly be applied to adaptation studies. The transfer of one language to another has many nuanced similarities to film adaptation—which is, essentially, a translation from one language (literary) into another (film). Applying translation theory to *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940) showcases an exciting new approach to adaptations studies, helping us understand the nuanced work of the adaptor-as-translator in the process of film-making, as well as creating an

understanding and awareness of the casualties occasionally inflicted during the transfer and packaging of culture as a film commodity.

Studies of this kind remain important since the issue of politicized translation has not gone away. As recently as May 2010, *The Economist* featured a news brief about the political legal battle involving a new translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* recently published in Egypt. This new translation is “distinctly adult-oriented” (written in a similar vein as Richard Burton’s nineteenth century translation), and is causing a stir among an Islamist group called “Lawyers Without Shackles.” This organization is currently suing Egypt’s ministry of culture on the grounds of Article 178 of Egypt’s penal code, which punishes ““with imprisonment for a period of two years anyone who publishes literature or pictures offensive to public decency”” (54). Samia Mehrez, a professor at the American University of Cairo, claims that such a lawsuit is completely political, and is not about *The Nights* at all. “Cultural icons have been used as pawns in the political game between the state and the Islamists,” she claims. “It is the Islamists’ way of getting back at the state, by embarrassing it, for the violence it inflicts on them” (54). The cultural and political struggle revolving around this new translation of the *Night* shows that an analysis of cultural appropriation through politicized, foreignized translation deserves continued attention.

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