The Prophet's Ascension

Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic *Miʿrāj* Tales

Edited by
Christiane Gruber and Frederick Colby

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Reading the *Mi'rāj* Account as a Theatrical Performance: The Case of *Ma'ārij al-Nubuwwa*

OZGEN FELEK

The story of the Prophet's *mi'rāj* can be analyzed from multiple perspectives as a telling of one of the most spectacular miracles of the Prophet. The present study aims to interpret the tale through a specific lens, namely through the form and mechanisms provided by theatrical dramas. In this endeavor, I have chosen to examine the *mi'rāj* section of *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa fī madarij al-futuwwa* (The Stages of Prophecy on the Paths to Magnanimity)[1] composed in Persian by Mu'in al-Dīn Muhammad Amīn b. Ḥājjī Muhammad al-Farahī al-Harawī, also known as Mu'in al-Miskīn (d. 908/1501–1502).[2] By examining the text through the methodological tools provided by the fields of narratology and performance, it will become clear that thanks to its highly presentational style and its sequential structure, the ascension narrative gives concrete and vivid substance to the otherwise abstract teachings of Islam. Likewise, it makes the existence of the otherworld immediate and tangible by catering to the expectations of its audience. This study aims to demonstrate—as Jerome Bruner effectively notes in his article "The Narrative Construction of Reality"—"how narrative operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality."[3] By presenting the Prophet's *mi'rāj* as the symbolic and performative enactment of the otherworld, this cross-disciplinary investigation aims to highlight the complex audience dynamics evinced by the telling of the *mi'rāj* narrative as well.

Ma'arij al-nubuwwa consists of an introduction, four main chapters, and a conclusion. After a brief introduction that focuses on the characteristics of the Prophet, the first chapter discusses the Prophet's primordial light (*nūr Muhammad*), which is believed to have been transmitted through the former prophets to the Prophet's mother, Āmina.[4] After recounting the events from the Prophet's birth to the first revelation in the second chapter, the author writes about the period between the Prophet's first revelation and the *hijra* in the third chapter, more than half of which also covers the ascension of the Prophet. In the last chapter, he discusses the period after the *hijra* to his death, while the conclusion is mainly dedicated to the Prophet's miracles.

The *miʿraj* section in *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa*, appearing in the third chapter (the Prophet Muhammad's prophetic career from its beginning through *hijra*), consists of about two hundred pages, and its extensive treatment of the subject allows us to analyze this section as a quasi-independent *Miʿrajnama* (Book of Ascension). Furthermore, its descriptions of exotic landscapes and locales in the heavens, paradise, and hell, allow us to read it as a kind of otherworldly *siyahatnama*, or travel account. It is also possible to interpret it as an *ʿaja'ibnama*, or book of marvels, because of the unusual creatures and places that the Prophet witnesses during his ascension through the skies.[5] Although it is a literary account that is meant to be read, it could additionally be understood as a highly visual experience, splendidly constructed and embellished with colorful and rich images. The multi-genre approach taken by Muʿin al-Miskin to present the heavenly journey of the Prophet could be compared to today's multi-media theatrical productions.

Indeed, Muʿin al-Miskin represents the ascension of the Prophet through a quintessentially dramatic structure. Although it is impossible to argue that he intended to present the story as a play, the text contains many elements that can be usefully analyzed through concepts and theories derived from narratology and dramatology, such as set design, plot, characters, and dialogues. This particularly dynamic approach may have been selected purposefully by the author, a devoted preacher, in order to convey the Prophet's ascent to his audience members, most of whom would not have read his text but would have had it read to them, in an especially vivid fashion. This kind of religious storytelling provides a hybrid form that mixes drama and written narrative, justifying the "lens" suggested in the present study. Taking this hypothesis as a starting point, in the analysis that follows I will look at particular narrative aspects of *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa* and examine the dramatic structure of its story line, with the aim to answer the question of how Muʿin al-Miskin "create[s] an illusion, an effect, a semblance of mimesis"[6] through his work, and how the story of the *miʿraj* helps him establish himself not only as a solid scholar, but also as a successful narrator.

There are many theoretical approaches to narrative, yet in analyzing the narrative aspects of the text, I will closely follow Mieke Bal's analytical approach used in her *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*,[7] a theory well suited to the study of narrative aspects of *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa*. In her study, Bal proposes a three-level division of narrative: the *fabula*, the *story*, and the *text*. Of these, the *fabula* is "a series of logically and chronologically related events caused or experienced by actors," which contains four main elements: events, actors, time, and location. The *story* refers to the several aspects that are the ways the text manipulates the presentation of those elements. The last division of narrative is the *text*, by which language signs are used to convey a story produced by an agent who relates the story. This last division is devoted to the narrator, non-narrative comments, description, and levels of narration. Bal's theoretical concept of narrative is particularly useful for the analysis of Muʿin al-Miskin's text, for it brings greater clarity to our understanding of the relationship between the well-known *miʿraj* story

and the way it is presented by this particular narrator, a preacher and scholar who seems to have been highly aware of the expectations and taste of his audience members, themselves especially receptive to textual and visual metaphor.

In addition to drawing upon Bal's narratological theories, I will also refer to studies dealing with drama and performance. Among these, our main guides will be *The Art of Drama*, by Fred B. Millett and Gerald Eades Bentley,[8] along with Edwin Wilson's *The Theatre Experience*.[9] In the last chapter of *The Art of Drama*, after briefly discussing substance and form, Millett examines dramatic work in terms of its plot, characterization, dialogue, and setting. Wilson's work deals with the roles and responsibilities of the audience, the performance, the director, the designers, and the playwright. He also clarifies the functions of other technical elements necessary in dramas. Elements from each of these theoretical works will help to explain key features in Muʿīn al-Miskīn's *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa*.

Maʿarij al-nubuwwa is not a work of drama, but rather a prose narrative, and the story of the ascension can be considered as an embedded narrative in the primary text, itself a *sīra* or biography of the Prophet Muhammad. Each one of these two narratives, both the *sīra* and the *miʿrāj*, has a unique *fabula* with its own independent and theoretically separate thrust. Yet, in analyzing the *miʿrājnama* chapter of *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa*, its *fabula* can be again divided in two main segments: the *isra*, which refers to the night journey of the Prophet from Mecca to Jerusalem, and the *miʿrāj*, his heavenly journey through the skies. In this study, I will focus on the *miʿrāj* chapter's *fabula*, which is presented as a piece of drama. However, since the *story* and the *text* are just as fundamental a part of a narrative as the *fabula*, it is also essential to also look at several aspects of the narrative—such as sequential ordering, rhythm, frequency, along with the transformation of actor(s) to character(s) and of a place to space—to analyze the *story*. I will introduce the *text*, dealing with its narrator(s), non-narrative comments, description, and levels of narration after providing some basic background on the author and the historical, literary, and artistic context in which he composed his text.

Muʿīn al-Miskīn and his *Maʿarij al-Nubuwwa*

Muʿīn al-Miskīn was a scholar of hadith and a preacher for about thirty-one years,[10] serving for some time as the leader (*imam*) at the major mosque of Herat, presently located in western Afghanistan.[11] In addition to his *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa*, Muʿīn al-Miskīn also wrote a number of other works, including the following: *Muʿjizat-i Musawī*, also called *Taʾrīkh-i Mūsawī* or *Qissa-yi Mūsawī*, a detailed history of the Prophet Moses; *Ahsan al-Qisas*, the story of Joseph (Yusuf) and Zulaykha, the wife of ʿAzīz, the king known as Potiphar in the Hebrew Bible; and *Tafsīr-i Hadaʾiq al-Haqaʾiq*, a commentary on Surat Yusuf (Qurʾan 12).[12] Muʿīn al-Miskīn also composed a collection of poetry (*dīwān*), which unfortunately does not survive today.

Although he composed numerous works of both prose and poetry, Mu'in al-Miskīn, as he unabashedly claimed, seems to have built his reputation as a famous preacher through his private *majlises* in addition to his regular sermons at the mosque in Herat.[13] His reputation was cemented more as a preacher by biographers: for example, Mīr 'Alī Shīr Nawa'ī, in his *Majālis al-nafa'is*, praises Mu'īn al-Miskīn as a successful sermonizer. However, he calls our author and his followers "*dīwane*" ecstatic mystics, and asserts that they were always in a state of ecstasy.[14] According to Nawa'ī, "because [Mu'īn al-Miskīn] was a *dīwane*, he used to talk in the way that pleased himself while preaching from the pulpit; but none blamed him for his speeches, for nobody could hold a *dīwane* and *'ashik* [the ecstatic mystic who is deeply in love with the Divine] responsible [for anything]."[15] Nawa'ī also cites Kadi Mawlāna Nizamuddīn, Mu'in al-Miskin's brother, and his appreciation of Mu'īn al-Miskin's talent as a preacher.[16] According to Nizamuddīn, Mu'in al-Miskin was "a good young person, but he should not be at the pulpit, because his talent is being wasted."[17] Since the content of his message is rarely noted, we can assume that it was a special charisma that made him a renowned preacher rather than his ability as a scholar.

As Mu'in al-Miskīn himself states in the introduction to his *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, in addition to delivering sermons at the mosque, he held fifty sequential private gatherings (*majlises*) devoted to the life of the Prophet.[18] These gatherings were reportedly attended by both the learned elite and common people (*khāss u 'awam*), some of whom had traveled from a distance to attend his preaching sessions. Mu'īn al-Miskin reports that during these gatherings he read his text aloud, and that members of his audience would listen to him with great interest.[19] He also states that he included different stories (*hikayat*) and pleasant phrases (*latīf ibarat*), derived from the Qur'an.[20] As can be seen from his work, he seems to have invested his interest and energy in the stories of both pre-Islamic and Islamic prophets, which were among the topics favored by preachers and storytellers (*qussas*).[21] Furthermore, his use of pragmatic signals such as "*Ay darwīsh*" (O Sufi), "*raja'na ila al-qissa*" (we have returned to the narrative), and "*al-rujū' ila al-qissa*" (return to the narrative), as well as his very use of the term "*qissa*" (narrative) throughout both his *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa* and his *Tafsīr-i Hada'iq al-Haqa'iq* underlines his interest in stories and his particular affinity for storytelling.[22]

In *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa* as well as in his other works, Mu'in al-Miskīn's stylish use of language and visual descriptions allow him to create a fluency of expression that would have appealed to a varied audience attracted in the first instance by his talent as a preacher. Indeed, although his *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa* is a scholarly work containing quotations from the Qur'an and hadith, it is primarily an entertaining narrative enriched with colorful imagery and melodic harmonies. In reading *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, realism and immediacy in the descriptions and dialogues immediately strike the reader. I believe that the roots of this kind of realism could have derived from the artistic and cultural milieu in which the text was created. The sophisticated and lively cultural scene in later Timurid Herat, and especially

its court-generated visual culture, must have inspired Mu'īn al-Miskīn as well; he seems to have been engaged in a process of image-making much as artists were at the time. This trend toward evocations of immediacy and tactility can be seen in particular in the descriptive images of paradise and hell. However, he seems to have drawn upon his rhetorical talent to make his story more tangible by including any detail that might help his audience visualize the events narrated in the story.

During the time that Mu'in al-Miskīn was working on his *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa* (1461–1486), Herat served as the Tīmurid capital and thus was an important center of art and culture. By the time of Sultan Husayn Bayqara's reign (1470–1507), Herat had been already a cultural mecca in the area for some time.[23] In 1486, when Mu'in al-Miskin completed his *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa,* Sultan Bayqara's vizier and milk-brother 'Alı Shir Nawa'ī was the greatest Timurid patron of the arts. As a statesman and connoisseur, as well as a poet, musician, and author in his own right, Nawā'i created a vibrant courtly milieu of painters, poets, musicians, and calligraphers.[24] During this time, artists not only maintained a meticulous attention to detail but showed interest in depicting vignettes of everyday life with a new sense of realism.[25] This cultural oasis created a vast literary and artistic output, to which Mu'ın al-Miskin undoubtedly contributed.

One artist from this milieu whose work demonstrates such an approach to both detail and realism is Kamal al-Dīn Bihzad (1455–1535/6), who is widely acknowledged to have been the greatest painter of the Persian tradition.[26] Bihzad and his contemporaries worked within received pictorial conventions, but they also explored novel techniques and subjects, a late Timurid pictorial fusion that Thomas Lentz has called "New Painting." Bihzād and other painters contributed to illustrated texts that are contemporary to Mu'in al-Miskin's narrative, and therefore a clear dialectical relationship existed between authors and artists in Timurid Herat involving a new attention to realism.

For example, in an illustrated folio from a manuscript copy of Nizamī's *Makhzan al-Asrār* (Treasury of Secrets), produced in 1494–1495, a painting attributed to Bihzad shows traces of the New Style (Figure 13.1 and Plate 23). Here, the Prophet is depicted ascending above Mecca and the Ka'ba, and the vivid colors and the liveliness of the bright stars serve to convey a sense of tactility and immediacy not encountered in earlier Timurid art.[27] Even though the size of Ka'ba and the shapes and colors of the clouds are not "realistic," the painter clearly distinguishes between this world and the otherworld throughout which the Prophet travels by drawing them by means of different pictorial conventions; the evocation of three-dimensionality in buildings and spaces in the lower world stands in sharp contrast to the flat colors and ornamental shapes of the clouds in the heavenly realm.

Another key example appears in a different illustrated folio, dated to the same era, by Bihzad's contemporary Shah Muzaffar (Figure 13.2 and Plate 24). Shah Muzaffar was praised most especially for his ability to paint dainty portraits and to

FIGURE 13.1. The Prophet ascends above Mecca and the Kaʿba, Nizamī, *Makhzan al-Asrar* (Treasury of Secrets). Herat, 1494–1495. London, British Library, Or. 6810, folio 5v. See color plate 23.

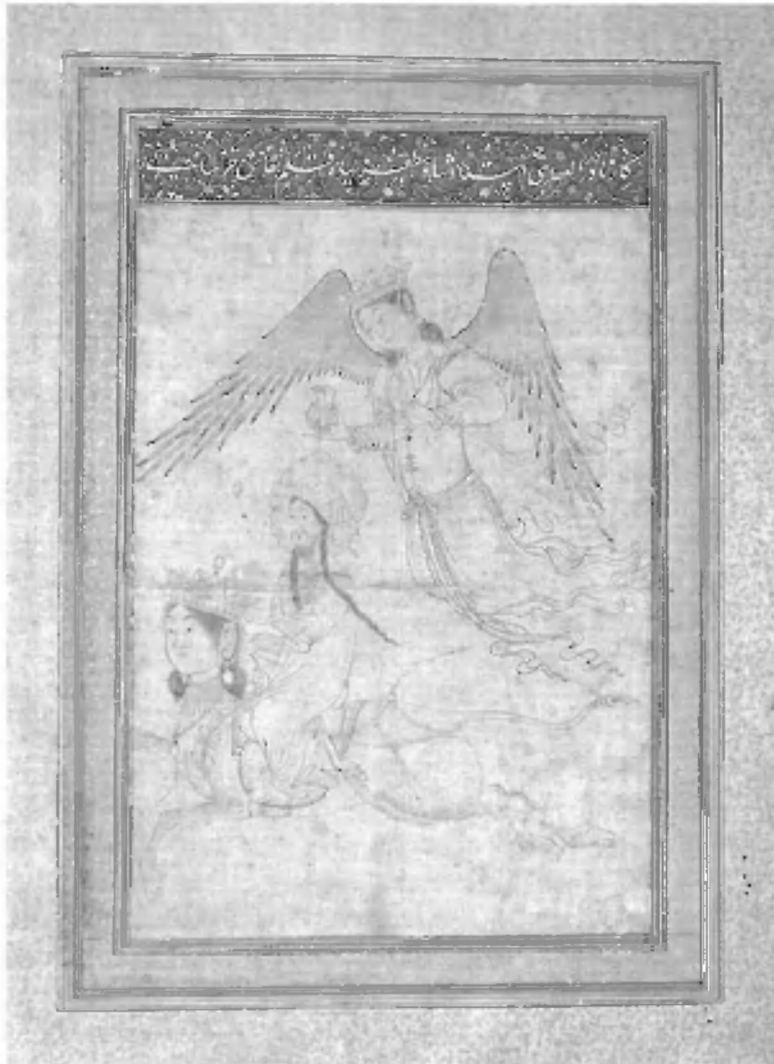

FIGURE 13.2. Shah Muzaffar (attr.), ink sketch of the Prophet ascending on Buraq, Herat, ca. 1475–1500. Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Library, H. 2154, folio 40v. See color plate 24.

represent hair very precisely.[28] As clearly seen in this drawing of the Prophet in mid-air on the back of his human-headed, winged steed Buraq, and accompanied by the angel Gabriel, the closely scrutinized details of hair, beard, and eyebrows of the principal figures together with the delicate rendering of their clothing all suggest Shah Muzaffar's care and diligence in providing a believable image that, like Bihzad's work and subsequent ascension paintings (Plate 25), provides a sense of immediacy and realism.[29]

This tendency toward realism that seems to have been quite effective in the pictorial arts at the time is reflected in the narrative of Muʿīn al-Miskīn as well. His emphasis on depicting scenes and costumes, as well as on making dialogues as lively as possible, suggests his familiarity with and interest in the detail and realism that was effectively exploited by contemporary painters.

The *Story*

Having looked at the biography of Mu'in al-Miskin and the cultural and artistic environment in which he lived, preached, and produced his text, we now turn to a very brief and introductory analysis of the *story* and the *text* of his *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa* by following the analytical methods espoused by Mieke Bal, who defines a narrative level as distinct from text and *fabula*. According to Bal, "if one regards the *fabula* primarily as the product of imagination, the *story* could be regarded as the result of an *ordering*."[30] In dealing with the story aspects, she differentiates the features that distinguish the structured story from the *fabula*. These features, which she calls the *aspects*, are sequential ordering, rhythm, transformation of actor(s) to character(s), transformation of a place to the space, and focalization.

Bal's theory of narrative level can be examined in three parts: time-related aspects, which are sequential ordering and rhythm; space/place/setting-related aspects; and character and focalization. Of the time-related aspects, sequential ordering refers to the relationship between the sequence of the events in the story and their chronological order in the *fabula*. Following the way Bal describes the characteristics of story in her argument, one can see that in the narrative of *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, events are demonstrated in sequential ordering, all related in the past tense. Since there is no internal thought or emotion reflected to the audience, the narrator simply follows a sequential order in the past tense form.

As for rhythm, Bal argues that in narrative there are five distinguishable, different tempi, and "every narrative can be divided up into pieces which each correspond to one of these five tempi":[31] ellipsis, summary, scene, slow-down, and pause. Of them, in *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, the summary appears especially during travels over vast distances. For example, in a single instant, the Prophet travels vast distances from one level of heaven to another one, which normally would take someone five hundred years to travel. Even though a five-hundred-year distance is mentioned to only indicate the vastness of the heavenly realm, this still suggests the existence of such a vast distance between different levels. These distances endow the ascension narrative with a distinct tempo.

Pause also is often used in establishing rhythm in Mu'in al-Miskin's text. Pauses occur mostly between the different levels of the Prophet's journey. When he enters a new place, first the place is described in detail. This slows down the speed of the event and yet gives enough time for the actor (and the audience) to become acquainted with a place. The descriptions provided during these pauses will be discussed to a greater extent while analyzing the *fabula* under the subsection of *Setting*.

To Bal, another aspect of the story related to time is frequency of events, which refers to "a real *repetition* when an event occurs only once and is presented a number of times."[32] The rhythm of the narrative in *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa* is created through alternative presentations of events that the Prophet experienced during his heavenly journey. The same event is narrated repeatedly according to different

hadith accounts from different hadith transmitters. Yet the repetition is not systematic, due to the numbers of hadith accounts relating different events. Some events are narrated only once or twice, whereas others are mentioned several times thanks to the existence of numerous accounts of the same event.

Bal also underlines the relations between place and space. Place is a physical shape of spatial dimensions, whereas the space is what is seen in relation to its perception. Thus, in determining the space, three senses in particular (sight, hearing, and touching) allow the actor to experience the place. In terms of its functions, place is either a place of action, or an object of presentation by becoming an acting place. That is, it is either a steady space in which events take place, or a dynamically functioning space that allows the actor to move.[33]

In *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, space appears to be both a dynamically functioning space and a steady space. It is not only a "place of action" in which events take place, but it is also thematized by becoming "an object of presentation itself," turning into an "acting place." Thus, space functions dynamically by allowing the Prophet to move when he has to travel through a vast array of different places. Between his departure and his return to Mecca, he moves from one space to another, and these spaces are sometimes arranged in opposites, such as sky vs. earth or paradise vs. hell. The relation between space and events is set in accordance with "fixed combinations"[34] presenting the characteristics of these spaces. For example, there are no scenes of people happy in hell, just as there are no scenes of grief in heaven. As it will be demonstrated in detail in analyzing the *fabula*, under the subsection of *Actors*, all the characters are properly situated in the literary space devoted to them.[35]

Bal also emphasizes that an actor with distinctive characteristics creates the effect of a character,[36] thereby transforming a mere actor into full character. The term actor refers to the abstract meaning of "the agent that acts," whereas the character is the actant with his/her own individuality.[37] In *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, characters are constructed either through direct definitions and/or adjectives that name their trait(s), or through indirect presentations that display the characters by using actions, speech, external appearances, and the environment in which they are situated.[38] The Prophet, the main actor, is determined on the basis of data provided in the previous chapters of *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*. His traits are thus not given explicitly in the *mi'rāj* tale, mainly because his characteristics have already been established in the larger story, embedded within the *sira*. Therefore, the audience is already familiar with his identity. Yet, Muhammad's status as a prophet serves to continue to build his identity, and the narrator keeps constructing this characterization process by displaying, for example, the Prophet's meeting with God, his treatment and respect by angels, and the environment in which he appears.

Not only are the traits of the Prophet known; those of the archangels, previous prophets, and God are as well, based on the data presented in the *sira*. In the same way, for example, God's being *God* is continuously expanded throughout the primary narration. The remaining characters, such as the thousands upon thousands

of angels or the individuals encountered in hell or in paradise, could be labeled, in Bal's terms, as *referential* characters, who, because of their obvious slots in a frame of reference, act according to a given pattern.[39] The audience thus can easily predict their traits and behaviors. For example, we do not see any prophets or angels rebel against God or cause chaos.

The last aspect of the story is focalization, which is described by Bal as "the relationship between the vision, the agent that sees, and that which is seen."[40] She argues that the narration is determined by both the narrator and focalization, which she understands as "the relations between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented."[41] In *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, both Mu'īn al-Miskīn and the Prophet serve as focalizors. Yet, Mu'īn al-Miskīn functions, borrowing Bal's term, as an "external focalizor" who is not a character but rather a conveyor of the events that happen to this "internal focalizor," the Prophet, who narrates his own visual experiences through numerous hadith accounts. This situation is best expressed through the author's statement: "I [Mu'īn al-Miskīn, the preacher] say that the Prophet says, 'I saw.'" This also gives the narrator the freedom to switch from an external focalizor to an internal one. Focalization thus alternates between these two predominant narrators: Mu'īn al-Miskīn and the Prophet. On the one hand, the Prophet, as the internal focalizor, seems to have the advantage over Mu'īn al-Miskīn, who watches the events through the eyes of the Prophet and consequently needs to refer to him for details. On the other, by locating himself at a point above the object(s) of his perception, Mu'īn al-Miskīn yields a panoramic view of all the events that happen during the journey of the Prophet, and he makes the Prophet his "focalized object." Thus, in the end, it is not the focalizor who changes, but the focalized.[42]

The *Text*

In addition to what one can learn about Mu'īn al-Miskīn's ascension narrative by examining its elements on the level of *story*, one can also learn a great deal by analyzing the narrative on the level of *text*. Since a narrative text is a text in which a narrative agent tells a story, then the narrative agent or narrator is, according to Bal, "the linguistic subject, a function, and not a person, which expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text."[43] One way that the narrator creates the *text* is through non-narrative comments, which are the commentary of the external narrator that "may far exceed the function of *narrating*."[44] In addition, Bal sees different types of descriptions as part of the *text*, since only motivation can make the contents of the narrative believable, and this motivation can be provided via speaking about (or describing) or looking at what the actor sees.[45] This motivates the actor(s) to act and move on. She also argues that levels of narration, which deal with the relationships between speakers in a narrative, cannot be separated from the *text*. In particular, relations between primary and embedded texts shape the *text* to a great extent.[46]

The complexity of the ascension text in *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa* rests on its being narrated in a story with many narratives, most with more than one narrator. By allowing the Prophet to narrate his story in the first person, along with Gabriel, Muʿin al-Miskīn turns his narrative into a narrative within narrative(s).[47] Moreover, he enables the Prophet to repeat the episode by providing different hadith accounts on the same event. At times, he also allows God to intervene in the narrative by bringing in verses from the Qur'an. Muʿin al-Miskin needs these other narrators' voices in order to establish himself as a reliable narrator[48] in the eyes of his audience;[49] in turn, this authorial blending also changes his text into a polyphonic narrative when it expands to include many other voices: of hadith transmitters, the choruses of angels and prophets who recite verses from the Qur'an and sing prayer invocations to God, and great poets such as Rumī or ʿAttar who participate through their poetical verses. In the narration, the voice belongs to Muʿīn al-Miskin, the preacher. As the speaking agent, although he does not mention himself, it is he who narrates what the Prophet describes as the first-person narrator.

The narrator of the *miʿrāj* story not only relates what his actor, the Prophet, has experienced, but also offers information and explanations, such as verses from the Qur'an and their explanations, outside of the *fabula*— these are what Bal would call "non-narrative comments." These statements function in different ways. Even though they cause a pause in the narrative and slow it down, they are necessary for the narrator to clarify what is happening in certain scenes, or to support his own reliability in the eyes of his audience. Besides, as discussed above, these pauses and slow-downs provide a rhythm to the narrative.

In examining *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa*, one of the most striking aspects of the text rests on its levels of narration, due to the textual interference that shapes the text to a great degree. The primary text of the narrator, Muʿīn al-Miskīn the preacher, and the embedded text of the main actor, the Prophet (embedded through hadith accounts transmitted through several hadith transmitters, each of whom also adds his own voice at certain points), are so closely related that these two texts at some points can hardly be distinguished from each other. Adding to the mix and complexity of authorial voices, embedded text creates a hierarchical structure among the narrators.

The *Fabula*

As mentioned above, the *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events caused or experienced by actors. It contains four main elements—events, actors, time, and location—and, in turn, the story is determined by the way in which the *fabula* is presented.[50] Therefore, the presentation style of the *miʿrāj* story's *fabula* is important. The wider story told in *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa*, as the primary narrative, has its own *fabula* based on the accounts of the Prophet Muhammad, a real-life person, and on his relations with real-life characters, such

as his companions and opponents. Yet, the story of the *miʿrāj* is another narrative, embedded in the primary narrative, which has its own distinctive *fabula* that employs unusual characters, such as Buraq and angels as well as previous prophets who are not even alive any more, occurring in an unknown and unearthly sphere.

However, the *miʿrāj* narrative itself is divided into two parts: the *isra* and the *miʿrāj*. In the subsection "Dramatic Style in the *Miʿraj*," I will analyze the *fabula*, following this division by mainly looking at how this *fabula* is presented by the narrator(s) as a dramatic performance. In this analysis, I will treat the frame *fabula* of this entire chapter as a series of events that occur "backstage" and the second *fabula* as a series of events that occur "on stage." In examining the second *fabula*, I will mainly examine the plot (events), actors (and dialogues), and setting (location).

Dramatic Style in the *Miʿrāj*: Setting as Backstage

In almost all *sīras* and *miʿrāj-nāmas*, the Prophet's ascension is narrated in a two-part fashion: first from Mecca to Jerusalem, and then from Jerusalem through the heavens toward God. My reading of the story follows this split structure by dividing the story into two parts: first the Earth, and second the Sky. The Earth provides the foundation before the play is enacted, whereas the Sky serves as a stage on which the main action of the play is performed.

The first five chapters of the *miʿrāj* section of *Maʿārij al-nubuwwa* serve as introductory chapters to the story. In a sense, the narrator informs his audience that he will tell them a true, but bizarre, story and attempts to clear doubts that his audience may have about both the authenticity of the story and the reliability of its narrator. After addressing the issues on the meaning behind and the reasons for the *miʿrāj* in the first chapter, Muʿin al-Miskīn explains to his audience why this heavenly journey happened during the night, instead of daytime, in the following chapter. The third chapter offers ten proofs, discussed in detail, for the possibility of such travel. In the fourth chapter, the audience is given information about where and when this play on the *miʿrāj* is performed, and the Prophet is described as being prepared for the play by the archangel Gabriel. In the fifth chapter, both the audience and the protagonist, the Prophet, are introduced to the previous prophets and archangels Gabriel, Michael, and Israfil, who will perform later on stage as well. In what follows, the preliminary preparations of the "play" depicted in the fourth and the fifth chapters of the text will be analyzed as the play's backstage.

Our story begins at the house of Umm Hani', which one might interpret as the backstage where the angel Gabriel helps the protagonist to prepare for the upcoming play (Plate 17). First the Prophet performs his ablutions or bathes (*ghusl*) in pure water (*kawthar*).[31] Next, Gabriel clothes and adorns him. His vestments consist of vibrant colors—a cloak of light, a belt of ruby, a whip of emerald, and a pair of emerald clogs:

He was dressed in a cloak of light (*nūr*) and a turban of light was put on his blessed head [. . .], then Gabriel, peace be upon him, put a cloak on his blessed back and put green emerald clogs on his blessed feet and wrapped a belt of ruby around his blessed waist and gave him an emerald whip that was decorated with four hundred pearls. Each pearl shone like the star Venus.[52]

Buraq is also described in polychromic terms:

Its chest shines like ruby, its back is white like silver, its feet are of emerald, its tail is of red coral, and its neck is of ruby.[53]

While the main actor is being prepared for his celestial journey and is described as awash in color, the supporting characters and the technicians involved in the production prepare themselves in a different dimension (the Sky) as well. By putting Gabriel in charge, God, in a role similar to that of a stage director, manages the backstage and the technicians. First, silence and calm are obtained both backstage and on stage by this Director's divine command:

Bejewel [your] wings again with the gems of paradise and put on the belt of service and put the crown and mandate (*firman*) on and tell Michael to stop the distribution of daily sustenance, and tell Israfil to stop blowing his trumpet (*sur*) for an hour, tell ʿAzraʾil to abstain from catching the souls, [. . .] admonish Malik to close the doors of hell with the key of calm and quietness, [. . .] and the ocean and winds to be still and not to move, [. . .] let even the spheres delay turning and rest, tell the demons of hell not to move, [. . .] go to earth, and stop the torment of all the graves in the east and west.[54]

After these preliminary preparations, the lights on stage are turned on by God's proclamation, "Command the angels of light (*nūr*; divine illumination) to fill the skies with lights."[55] The supporting actors are ordered to get ready for the play by taking their places on stage and by holding the props they will need in their respective roles:

Have the *huris* in paradise dress up and take plates in their hands to distribute gems, let them stand in rows in the palaces of paradise. [. . .] Call Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, blessing be upon all of them, and perfume their glorious souls.[56]

Finally, the heavenly stage itself is decorated:

Tell *Ridwan* to decorate the eight heavens, [. . .] tell the servants of the throne to put the blessed clothes on the sky of satin and put the blessed crown on the throne.[57]

When all the preparations are complete, time is suspended and all movements are brought to a halt.[58] Once the whole universe is silently ready to watch the drama of the ascension unfold, the archangel Gabriel is sent to invite the Prophet to appear on stage.

On his way from Mecca to Jerusalem (Plate 10), an unidentified woman attempts to stop Muhammad, but he does not pay attention to her, for he was already admonished by Gabriel to carry on.[59] In Jerusalem, he meets a number of secondary actors, the earlier prophets, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. There, he serves as prayer leader, at which time all other prophets arrange themselves behind him (Plate 11). Then, he climbs the stairs, or in the author's words "*miʿrāj yaʿnī narduban*," and he arrives in the heavenly realm (see Plate 22).[60] In essence, the *curtain* has been raised, allowing the *play* proper to move full speed ahead in the domain of the Sky.

Before describing the *play* itself, a few words on its conclusion must be offered here. At the very end of this play, the Prophet returns to the dressing room, i.e., the Earth. When he returns to the backstage location, everything reverts back to normal: it is nighttime and dark, of course, as it should be. The colorful, lavishly textured, and imposing scenes disappear, and a great silence reigns over the night. Compared to the dazzling show presented in the skies, the Prophet's return is fairly plain—one might even say earthy:

> Then, parting from them, I went to Jerusalem. I saw Buraq tied at the ring of the mosque. I entered the *masjid* and performed a two-*rakʿat* prayer of *shukr* [being grateful for the blessings of God]. I thanked God for the miracles and blessings [that He gave me]. Then Gabriel showed me a vision of the prophets, peace be upon them. I saw my own face among them, and Abu Bakr was on my right and ʿUmar, may God be pleased with them, was on my left. Then I went out, and Gabriel, peace be upon him, told me to ride on Buraq, and I did. I found myself back in Mecca in the blink of an eye. My bed was still warm.[61]

The next day, when the Prophet relates his night journey, not surprisingly, his greatest companion Abu Bakr believes him without hesitation or doubt, whereas Abu Jahl, his lifetime opponent, ridicules him for his claim (Plate 9). He is even tested by the disbelievers of Mecca.[62] Life carries on in its own natural way, devoid of extraordinary visual and rhetorical flourishes.

It seems that whatever happens on the surface of the Earth should remain simple and different from the world of the heavens. The author's use of sensory details and descriptive language full of images and colors for the Sky contrasts with his rather unadorned language for the Earth. Thus, Muʿīn al-Miskīn clearly distinguishes this world from the other world in the skies, in a manner similar to the pictorial techniques used by artists, who adorn the heavenly realms in their paintings with swirling clouds of gold (Figure 13.1 and Plates 23 and 25).

Dramatic Style in the *Miʿrāj*: On Stage

Having discussed the pre-play (chapters 1–5) and post-play settings (chapters 23–24) that collectively serve as a backdrop for the play's main action, let us move on

to the essential aspects of the drama (chapters 6–22) that forms the heart of the *miʿrāj* story. After briefly reviewing key concepts of drama theory and re-structuring the outlines of the plot, I will look at the set design, the characteristics of the protagonist and other actors, and the dialogues among these characters, in order to see how Muʿīn al-Miskin dramatizes the story of *miʿrāj*, combining his knowledge and skills to produce especially appealing images in his narrative. In doing so, I will draw upon Fred Millett's analysis in *The Art of Drama* and Edwin Wilson's approach in *The Theatre Experience*, along with various theories drawn from other works in the field of dramatology.

Among the different types of dramatic structures, Wilson introduces three different forms of plot: the climactic plot, the episodic plot, and the combination of the two. The climactic and the episodic plots differ from each other in terms of their approaches to the fundamental elements of a play. The climactic plot begins quite late, almost toward the climax, itself the crisis of maximum emotion and tension,[63] whereas the episodic plot begins relatively early and moves through time frames. As opposed to the extended span of time, the numerous locations, and a large cast of characters in the episodic plot, the climactic plot usually occurs in a limited time period (a few days), with a limited cast. Yet, these two plots, as often seen in modern dramas, can be combined, sometimes by allowing one of them to dominate the other.[64]

Actors and characters are key elements of dramatic structure. Wilson offers four types of dramatic characters: extraordinary characters with historical importance such as kings and queens; prototypical characters who are exceptional in the way they embody the characteristics of an entire group;[65] stereotypical or stock characters, always the same and one-sided insofar as they symbolize some particular type of person or characteristic; and finally non-human elements, which are richly employed in the *miʿrāj* tale—for example Buraq, angels, scorpions, serpents, worms, and snakes of fire.[66]

Plot

The text consists of twenty-four main chapters (*fasls*) numbered by the author, and each chapter includes several subdivisions (*latīfa* or *hikmat*). Although it is possible to examine all chapters, they best fit into three major acts, through which narrative tension escalates until the story's climax. Examining this play in three acts will help to show how tension is built up in the story and how it moves from beginning to end.

The Prophet's ascent through the skies forms Act I (chapters 6–12); his journey from the seventh sky up to his meeting with God and the archangels forms Act II (chapters 13–18); and his journey back through paradise and hell en route to earth forms Act III (chapters 19–22).

The tension that captures the audience's curiosity begins in Act I. Here, the Prophet encounters several unusual beings and witnesses strange phenomena. These many otherworldly elements create suspense for the reader-listener as he ponders where the hero will go and just what he will encounter next. At the end of Act I, the Prophet stands at the Lote Tree of the Limit (*sidrat al-muntaha*), a cosmic tree mentioned in the Qur'an (53:14). This cosmic tree is depicted as standing on the boundary of the existing universe and the divine realm that begins after the seventh heaven, where the Prophet is about to meet with God. After a significant amount of tension builds through the expectation of this upcoming divine encounter, the curtain drops on Act I.

Act II opens at the *sidrat al-muntaha*. Here, the Prophet waits to be presented to God, once again heightening the tale's dramatic suspense. First, the Prophet passes through thousands of curtains to reach God's throne. When he reaches it, he is placed on the throne; and once a drop (*qatra*) falls into his mouth, he is able to start speaking to God. The author's tale reaches a climax not only due to the auspicious nature of this encounter but also because the audience wonders whether the Prophet can actually see God face to face (Plate 14). This dramatic climax functions to present the narrative's central scene: the Prophet's meeting and conversation with God.

Act III, the last part of the narrative, prolongs the vector of the narrative with the Prophet's visits to paradise and hell. Coming after the play's climax, it functions as the denouement by presenting both the literal and symbolic action of falling. Act III keeps the tension high to some degree, though it is not as crisp as it was in the scene at the *sidrat al-muntaha*. At the very end of this act, however, the tension rises once again when the Prophet meets Moses, who declares that the number of daily prayers that God demands of the Prophet's community is excessive (Plate 18). Moses advises him to beseech God for a reduction in the number of prayers required each day. The Prophet begs God for leniency several times until the number of prayers is decreased from fifty to five. Watching the drama unfold, the audience waits to see how this process of negotiation between God and the Prophet will be resolved. By rejecting Moses's last recommendation to return to God, the Prophet ends this ongoing series of negotiations. This episode serves as an instructive story that functions as a moralizing anecdote with practical consequences: the five daily prayers that Muslims traditionally observe are explained and taught to the audience by the narrator, a devoted preacher, through the ascension tale.

Actors

Certainly, Muhammad, as the tale's chief protagonist, is an extraordinary character due to his position as Prophet. Yet the story is populated by a variety of actors, such as God, who is in the play but never shown nor physically described to the audience; the previous prophets; the four archangels (Gabriel, Michael, Israfil, and

ʿAzraʾil); the *huris* of paradise; and thousands upon thousands of angels who can be labeled as stereotypical or stock characters.

God, who serves as the director and stage manager before the play, appears in the climax, but only through His voice, intensifying His mysteriousness. The audience is not given any description of Him, due to the common practice of avoiding endowing God with anthropomorphic features.

During his travel through the heavens the Prophet encounters the previous prophets, who are introduced to the audience right before the play, when the Prophet is about to enter on stage. These prophets are briefly introduced to the audience with their prophetic merits, rather than their physical descriptions, in a sense reminding the members of the audience what they already know about these characters. For example, Moses is remembered by the story of his parting of the sea, and Abraham is mentioned in connection with Nimrod and the fire.[67]

As opposed to other secondary characters, the angels are clearer to the audience because of the narrator's descriptions, although these descriptions are mostly limited to the numbers of their wings. As the chorus characters they serve as dramatic devices, originally a convention in drama, which are not involved directly but rather comment on angels or events.[68] By chanting in unison, they either salute the Prophet or recall God, adding the dimension of music as well as of dialogue. Additionally, we encounter different groups of individuals who appear to be pantomimic actors with no voices or identities. Not only the Prophet but also other characters to whom we are introduced during his journey are constructed by their physical surroundings, though they are not meticulously described: the denizens of hell are not good, whereas those in heaven are good. In fact, their external descriptions speak for them, despite the fact that in *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa* their traits are never explicated by the narrator. They function in the plot as prototypical characters. I would contend that these characters in paradise and hell are left underdeveloped in this fashion because this vagueness allows the audience members to project themselves (consciously or not) into these roles as the drama unfolds.

As one might expect of this famous preacher, Muʿin al-Miskin's target audience was largely his fellow Muslims. However, the inclusion of non-Muslims in the narrative suggests strongly that Muʿin al-Miskin's target demographic was not comprised exclusively of Muslims. Except for a few named individuals such as Nimrod, Pharaoh, and Qarun, the other non-Muslim inhabitants of hell are briefly referred to only as polytheists, Christians, Jews, and pagans.[69] Along with this very brief statement about non-Muslims, the author adds that all sinners remain tortured in hell *ad eternum*, thus responding to questions about hell and its duration, which may have been posed by his audience members.[70] This avoids any possible allegation that hell is reserved for non-Muslims alone. Most of these prototypical characters in paradise and hell are not given actual names; rather, they are subsumed under a general title, such as "group of people" (*jamaʿati*) with no mention of their religious background. For example, the characters we encounter in hell are

liars, adulterers, murderers, wine drinkers, flatterers of tyrants, gossipers, perjurers, rebellious wives, rebellious children, and hypocrites (Plates 4 and 5). It seems that it is more important for the reader-listener to recognize the classes of sins[71] rather than to know who precisely engaged in such wayward behaviors. All members of the audience, regardless of religious background, can see themselves potentially engaged in or drawn to such sins and make connections between the dramatic situations they observe and their own deeds. Consequently, the audience is given a part to play as the unnamed denizens of hell, thereby becoming actors in the *mi'rāj* tale. By bringing several lessons worthy of telling and hearing, the stories of sinners heighten the sense of drama and the "tellability"[72] of the story. Furthermore, the technique of audience-mirroring provides the audience's interaction with and projection into the narrative through emotionally identifying with, and empathetically experiencing, the emotions of those situated in these particular scenes. As Pavis cogently notes: "No creator of theater would ever really risk writing a text or constructing a performance without taking the conditions of the public's receptivity into account."[73] Therefore, it is clear that Mu'īn al-Miskīn constructs his dramatic performance with his audience in mind, particularly when it comes to his depiction of the Prophet's visit to heaven and hell.

Setting

Most playwrights have in mind the setting form of their works before they set out to write them down.[74] Even though our author, Mu'īn al-Miskīn, does not call himself a "playwright," the aesthetic understanding of his time reveals itself in the setting of his *mi'rāj* tale as well. Much as Timurid painting makes use of lavish pigment to paint a scene, the author Mu'īn al-Miskīn uses his pen to illustrate every item on his meticulously managed stage. He turns his written text into an artwork, painting it with words with the fastidiousness of an artist, not overlooking any detail that might contribute to the visual impact of his narrative. He carefully depicts colors, textures, and materials. For example, buildings in paradise are multihued and are described by the author with the cutting precision of a gemologist:

> The door of paradise was of red gold, [. . .] its nails were of pearls, ruby, and emerald. It had four hundred nails and in the middle of them was a big ring of ruby. [. . .] I saw the walls. One brick was of gold, one of silver, one of ruby, one of green chrysolite, and one of pearl. [Paradise's] soil was of musk and amber, and its plants were of saffron and redbud. [. . .] Emerald, ruby, and pearl were used instead of pebbles. [. . .] I saw kiosks, some of which had ruby eaves, some had pearl eaves, some had gems, some had emerald eaves, some had golden eaves, and some had silver eaves, and the sides of the rivers and springs were gold, silver, pearl, and ruby, while the stones in the rivers were gems, pearls, and rubies.[75]

Once the Prophet enters each scene, the stage is appropriately illuminated by props, precious stones, and rays of light. The spheres of the heavens themselves are decked out in valuable materials. For example, in one case the author describes the whole stage itself as a shiny and luminous pearl:[76] "When I entered [the third heaven] I saw that it was created of a bright and shining white pearl, and its door was of white light and it had a lock of light on it."[77] Consequently, the text becomes so resplendent from beginning to end that it dazzles the audience. This very sentiment is even articulated by the Prophet himself, when he steps on stage in Act I, Scene II, in the second heaven: "It was extremely bright (*nūrani*). It was so bright that it could not be looked at because the eyes would be dazzled."[78] This celestial resplendence comes together in the description of the sites in the vicinity of the *sidrat al-muntaha*. For example the *Bayt al-Maʿmūr*, the celestial prototype of the Kaʿba, is described as being made of ruby and provided with two emerald doors. Inside this sacred temple hang ten thousand red gold lamps filled with rubies and pearls, each one brighter than the sun. Next to the door, there is a pulpit of gold and a minaret of silver. Near the *Bayt al-Maʿmur*, there is also an ocean of light (*nūr*), in which angels wearing robes of light (*nūr*) are bathing or performing their ablutions.[79] The light emanates not only from the lamps in the *Bayt al-Maʿmūr*, but also from its doors, the ocean, and the angelic actors, and altogether these bright locations and actors function as a kind of "spotlight" to illuminate the episode.[80]

Just as divine light functions to illuminate the scenes of heaven, so fire functions in the scenes of hell. Yet in contrast to the description of the heavens, the description of hell in *Maʿārij al-nubuwwa* is brief. The dominant color in hell is a flaming red. Indeed, much as light and gems illuminate the heavens, hell is lit up by the fire emanating from fiery houses, valleys, mountains, rivers, oceans, and trees:

> [On the first level] I saw seventy thousand mountains of fire; on each mountain were seventy thousand rivers; in each valley were seventy thousand branches; in each branch were seventy thousand cities; in each city were seventy thousand palaces of fire; in each palace were seventy thousand houses; in each house was a chest and all chests were of fire; in each chest were many different torments. [. . .] I saw valleys where there were trees of fire with countless fruits of fire.[81]

These sharp and detailed descriptions of hell scenes appear in earlier ascension narratives and hadith reports as well.[82] Yet, compared to these earlier reports, Muʿin al-Miskin describes hell in an especially detailed way so that the audience can immediately visualize it. These notations help the audience envisage much more precise images. Furthermore, the next most frequently used props in these scenes are the scorpions, serpents, worms, and snakes of fire. Yet these innumerable scorpions and snakes are covered beneath a cloth of fire. By covering them, the dread that might emerge from the scene is, to some extent, mitigated: "I saw a valley there which was covered with a cloth of fire. Gabriel, peace be upon him, told me to remove the cloth. When I removed it, I saw so many serpents and scorpions

that only God most High knows their numbers."[83] In developing the setting, the generous use of gold (and silver) in painting palaces, doors, characters, and costumes with freshness and brightness reminds the audience of the illumination and palette of Timurid paintings. Furthermore, the meticulously described details, colors, and shapes, together with the inclusion of props, costumes, and lush sets allow the audience to envision the story as it is richly and vividly illustrated with words, thus activating the audience's imagination. This visual emphasis in the text bridges the gap between the *miʿrāj* account in the narrative of *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa* and its visual manifestation in *miʿrāj* paintings, thereby revealing how such methods of storytelling can effectively link text to image.

Dialogues

The ascension narrative in *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa* is a didactic piece full of "utilitarian" dialogues that present the *miʿrāj* as a workshop for the Prophet's instruction as well as for the believer's own edification. It is structured in such a manner as to inform the reader-listener about the otherworld. In addition to dialogues, Muʿīn al-Miskīn employs other narrative types: poetry, which Millett would call "non-utilitarian" but which attracts the audience's interest; verses from the Qur'an; and prayer invocations to God, often meaningfully uttered or sung by a chorus of angels or by the prophets, thereby providing musicality that is sustained throughout the narrative.[84]

The conversational structure of the text also maximizes audience participation. Although Muʿīn al-Miskīn occasionally addresses his audience members directly, he does not preach to them. Instead, he prefers to let the characters convey key messages through dialogue. For example, conversations typically occur between the following combinations of actors: a) Gabriel and the Prophet, b) Gabriel and an angel who is in charge of a particular location (the heavens, paradise, or hell), c) the Prophet and the other archangels (Michael, ʿAzraʾīl, and Isrāfīl), d) the Prophet and previous prophets, e) God and the Prophet, and f) God and angels.

The characters often speak directly to each other in one-to-one dialogues, not in dynamic conversations, even when they convene as a group. Most of the characters the Prophet encounters are silent and nameless, and Gabriel tends to speak on their behalf. A prominent exception is found in the character of Moses, who has more than one opportunity to speak and voices a strong opinion. During the play, we first encounter him in Act I, Scene IV, when the Prophet ascends through the heavens, and again later in Act III, Scene IV, when the Prophet returns to earth. In their first meeting, Moses appears as a mentor, offering honor to the Prophet; during their second encounter, he acts as a persuasive facilitator in reducing the daily prayers from fifty to five. Moses's character is more developed than other secondary characters in the narrative, and he speaks for himself rather than needing Gabriel as his go-between.

The Prophet's unfamiliarity with the heavenly realms is made obvious through his questions to Gabriel about the places they visit and people they encounter during the journey. However, in Act II, when he meets with the four archangels Gabriel, Michael, 'Azra'il, and Israfil, he becomes the knowledgeable one. The archangels ask him generally about salvation, and, after the Prophet responds to each question acting as a purveyor of eschatological knowledge, his answer is approved by God with the words "*sadaqta yā Muhammad* (O Muhammad, you said the truth)!"[85] Muhammad's superiority to Gabriel is thereby established, even though he continues to need his angelic guide to proceed upward.

The most crucial dialogue that the audience has been promised is held between God and the Prophet in Act II. After having passed the *sidrat al-muntaha*, the Prophet comes before a curtain/veil with Israfil, and after Israfil's departure he is left all alone. The curtain/veil moves and an angel whose identity is not given takes him past seventy thousand curtains. In front of each curtain this unidentified angel is asked about his and his guest's identities. Eventually they pass through the last curtain and the angel places the Prophet on the throne. Although the text is full of images, colors, and props from the beginning, the scene in which God and the Prophet meet is a magnificent show using only one prop, the throne, which is made of white pearl with legs of red coral. All of a sudden, from behind the curtains, the Prophet hears a voice that calls out his name: "*yā Muhammad* (O Muhammad)!" He is so petrified by this voice that he almost falls off the throne. At this moment, a drop falls into his mouth; he opens his mouth and swallows it. He describes the drop saying that no one has ever tasted anything more delicious than it. Then, he becomes calm, relaxed, and able to speak, and his conversation with God commences.

The intense power of the conversation carries the entire scene and delivers its powerful message. Through hadith accounts, the audience is informed about the contents of the divine colloquy that comprises Muhammad's being informed of his prophetic status, so that his assertions on the Earth are confirmed by God himself in the Sky. The dialogue is rather extensive: it includes the *attahiyyāt*, a prayer recited in the last sitting of every prayer,[86] as well as the last two verses of the *Sūrat al-Baqara* (Q 2: 285–286). Mu'in al-Miskin interrupts narrating this dialogue to provide exegesis of these two verses, even dedicating an entire chapter to them (chapter 17). In chapter 18, the dialogue between God and the Prophet, which is mainly based on what the members of audience would apparently need to know about their relationship with and responsibility to God, continues as based on the reports of several hadith transmitters. This long conversation consists of topics such as intercession and forgiveness of sins and offers answers to questions about what distinguishes the followers of the Prophet Muhammad as superior to other communities of faith.

Even though *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa* is not just a purely educational exercise with little plot or tension, it nevertheless remains a didactic piece, intended to motivate the audience to action. For example, the angels who remain in the physical attitudes of prayer, *salat*, not only serve the author's aim of teaching the required parts

of one *rakʿat*, but also indirectly provide an opportunity for the audience to get involved in the play by indicating to them that their daily prayers are part of the angelic action they are watching unfold. The famous Islamic teaching that "*salat* is the *miʿraj* of every Muslim"[87] supports and legitimizes the spectator's involvement in the play. The teaching purpose of Muʿin al-Miskīn is achieved through the conversational structure built into the text in order to make it more energetic and animated. Instead of preaching directly to his audience, he prefers to let his characters carry the message forward. The dialogues are written in a relatively simple language compared to the descriptions of the decorative elements. The common point of all the dialogues is that they serve a specifically didactic function. We could say that there is almost no word said without an educational purpose. Finally, the dialogues are primarily constructed in a question and answer format, a structure that is suggestive of the author's educational aims.

In Muʿin al-Miskin's *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa*, the Prophet's ascension is presented as a marvelous and dramatic show full of light, colors, poetry, and music provided through cantillated invocations. These many descriptive and decorative strategies coalesce to form a rich narrative that is designed to appeal to a varied audience. The fact that Muʿin al-Miskīn was active in his position as a preacher in Herat for over thirty years certainly provides a strong indication that he was successful in his calling. In fact, he himself was, in his own way, always on stage in front of a large group of listeners.

Muʿin al-Miskin transforms the story of the Prophet's miraculous journey into a multi-media text that combines different stylistic ingredients, offering everything that an early-modern attendee would enjoy reading, listening to, and viewing.[88] For those who took pleasure hearing unusual and adventurous stories, the book offers a *siyahatnama* or an *ʿaja ibnama*. For those with an interest in the visual arts, it serves as a carefully constructed tale filled with colorful details, reflected in contemporary Timurid paintings produced in Herat by master artists such as Bihzad and Shah Muzaffar. For those drawn to poetry, the text is appealing thanks to its recurring melodies and choral refrains as well as the poetical verses composed by Muʿin al-Miskīn himself or quoted from great poets such as Rumī or ʿAttar. For scholars, who would be more interested in the ascension miracle per se and its pedagogical applications, the text closely chronicles the story in the light of the hadith. Muʿin al-Miskīn was a hadith scholar, and his analysis of the verses along with the ascension story turn his text into a practice of narrative exegesis not only for scholars but also in a form comprehensible for a more general audience.

The text also can be seen to include all the essentials of a drama, such as actors, a producer, a director, a stage, decorative elements that set the stage, and an audience interested in watching such a play, if only in their mind's eye. This dramatic dimension to Muʿin al-Miskin's text allows us to examine his opus as if it were a play that could conceivably be enacted on stage, thanks to its highly presentational

style and its sequential structure, as well as its use of actors performing directly in front of an audience. The narrative gives concrete and vivid substance to the abstract teachings of religion, especially with regards to the descriptions of the heavens, paradise, and hell. At the same time, just as all drama experiences are figurative representations of life, the Prophet's *mi'rāj* serves as the symbolic and performative enactment of the otherworld, thereby making its existence immediate and tangible to an audience receptive to textual and visual metaphor.

Notes

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1. Mu'in al-Din Muhammad Amin b. Hajji Muhammad al-Farahi al-Harawi, *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa fi madarij al-futuwwa*, Istanbul, Suleymaniye Library, ms. Ayasofya 3442, dated 898/1492. The translation of the title belongs to Felix Tauer in Jan Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1968), 450.

2. See E. Berthels, "Mu'in al-Miskin," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. 7, 481. In examining *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, I also consulted the *Dela il-i Nübuvvet-i Muhammedi ve-Şema'il-i Fütüvvet-i Ahmedī* (The Evidences of the Prophethood of the Prophet and the Description of the Virtuous Character of Ahmed), Istanbul: n.p., 1257/1841, an Ottoman Turkish translation of Mu'in al-Miskīn's text produced around 1620 by Muhammad b. Muhammad, known as Altiparmak (d. 1033/1623–1624). Although the translation retains the organization of the original text, there are some parts missing in the translation, such as poetry. For a thorough comparison of the differences between the original text of Mu'in al-Miskīn and the translation of Altiparmak, see Gottfried Hagen, "Translations and Translators in a Multilingual Society: A Case Study of Persian-Ottoman Translations, Late 15th to Early 17th Century," *Eurasian Studies* 2, no. (2003): 95–134.

3. Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Autumn 1991): 1–21. I thank Joshua Gass for bringing this article to my attention.

4. Uri Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light: Aspects of the Concept of Nur Muhammad," *Israel Oriental Studies*, 5 (1975): 62–119.

5. In the beginning of some sections, the author himself even describes the content of the section as *'ajā'ib* or *'ajayib u ghara ib*.

6. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), 108.

7. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

8. Fred B. Millett and Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Art of Drama* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1935).

9. Edwin Wilson, *The Theater Experience* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980).

10. Though he is said to have preached about thirty-one years, there is no indication of either the beginning or the end of this time period.

11. Little is known about Mu'in al-Miskin. His birth date is unknown and we have no information regarding his childhood. His father, Mawlana Sharafuddin Hajji Muhammad Farahī, was a preacher also interested in poetry, who also used the *makhlas* "Miskīn." His

brother Qadī Nizamuddīn Muhammad was a prominent judge in Herat. It is said that he was buried in the shrine of Haje 'Abdullah-i Ansari near the tomb of his brother. See Mu'īn al-Miskin, *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, folio 4v; Ja'far Sajjadi, *Tafsīr-i Hadā'iq al-Haqa'iq: Qismat-i Sūrah-i Yūsuf*, "The Biography of the Author" (Tihran: Mu'asasah-i Intisharat-i Amir Kabir, 1364), no page number; and 'Alī Shīr Nawa'i, *Majalis al-nafa'is, [The] "Galaxy of Poets" of Mīr 'Alī Shīr Nawa'ī: Two 16th-Century Persian Translations* (Tehran: Bank Melli Press, 1945), 269.

12. His other two books are *Bahr al-Durar*, a commentary on the Qur'an, and *Rawdat al-Wa'izīn*, a collection of sayings in the Forty Hadith genre (Ja'far Sajjadi, ed., *Tafsīr-i Hada'iq al-Haqā'iq*, "The Biography of the Author").

13. Ibid.

14. It is not clear in the text what Nawa'ī means by "his followers." It might refer to his disciples or simply to his audience. I have not come across any specific information on Mu'in al-Miskīn's affiliation with a specific Sufi path, but he is reported to have been a *zahid* (ascetic) and *'arif* (a gnostic Sufi), who withdrew himself from this world (Ja'far Sajjadi, *Tafsīr-i Hadā'iq al-Haqa'iq*, "the Biography of the Author"). In addition, the language Nawa'ī uses in reference to Mu'in al-Miskīn suggests that he might have been involved in a Sufi path, although he does not explicitly state it.

15. Nawa'ī, *Majalis al-nafa'is*, 269.

16. Nizāmuddīn was Mu'īn al-Miskīn's brother.

17. Nawa'ī, *Majalis al-nafa'is*, 269.

18. Mu'īn al-Miskīn, *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, folio 5r.

19. Ibid., folio 5r.

20. Ibid., folios 5r–6v.

21. Jonathan P. Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 40.

22. Mu'īn-i Miskin, *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, folio 4v; Nawa'ī, *Majalis al-nafa is*, 269.

23. Eleanor Sims with Boris I. Marshak and Ernst J. Grube, *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and Its Sources* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 57–58.

24. Agah Sırrı Levend, *Ali Şir Nevai, Hayatı, Sanatı ve Kişiligi* (Ankara: Turk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1965), 227–229; Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, *Islamic Arts* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997), 50.

25. Marie Lukens-Swietochowski, "The School of Herat from 1450 to 1506," in *The Arts of the Book in Central Asia, 14th–16th Centuries*, ed. Basil Gray (Boulder, Colo.: Shambhala Publications, 1979), 179–211; Thomas Lentz, "Changing Worlds: Behzad and the New Painting," in *Persian Masters: Five Centuries of Painting*, ed. Sheila Canby (Bombay: J. J. Bhabha, 1990), 39–54.

26. Thomas Lentz and Glenn Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1989), 285–292; R. W. Ferrier, *The Arts of Persia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Basil Gray, *Persian Painting* (Geneva: Skira, 1961), 109–125; Mohammad Ali Karimzadeh Tabrizi, *Ahval va asar-i naqqashan-i qadim-i Īran va barkhi az mashahir-i nigar gar-i Hind va 'Usmanī* (London, 1985), 106–120; and Norah M. Titley, *Persian Miniature Painting and Its Influence on the Art of Turkey and India* (London: British Library, 1983), 72–74.

27. For a discussion of ascension paintings and manuscripts, see Christiane Gruber's studies, in particular her review article "*Me'rāj* II. Illustrations," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Columbia University, 2008), www.iranica.com.

28. Babur (Emperor of Hindustan). *The Babar-Nama*, ed. Annette Beveridge (London: Printed for the trustees of the "E.J.W. Gibb Memorial" and published by Messrs. Luzac, 1971), 182a/181b; Babur, *Babur-nāme (Babur'un Hatıratı)* ed. Reşit Rahmeti Arat (Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlıgı Yayımları, 1985), 283; Lentz and Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision*; David Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image: The Writing of Art History in Sixteenth-Century Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) and his *The Persian Album* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); and Ebadollah Bahari, *Bihzad: Master of Persian Painting* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996). However, since he died at the young age of twenty-four, there are few examples of his paintings. For further information, see Mohammad Ali Karimzadeh Tabrizi, *Ahval va asar-i naqqashan-i qadim-i Īran*, 245.

29. I am grateful to Susan Babaie for her thoughtful comments in analyzing these two figures.

30. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 49.

31. Ibid., 71.

32. Ibid., 78.

33. Ibid., 92–99.

34. Ibid., 97.

35. For a thorough discussion on literary space, see Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1978) 96–106, 138–145.

36. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 79.

37. Bal, "Narration and Focalization," in *On Story-Telling Essays in Narratology*, ed. David Jobling (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1991), 86.

38. For characterization, see Rimmon Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 66.

39. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 83.

40. Ibid., 104.

41. Ibid., 100.

42. Ibid., 106–110; for "the focalized" also see her "Narration and Focalization," 75–108. This article is also available in *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

43. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 119.

44. Ibid., 127.

45. Ibid., 130.

46. Ibid., 142.

47. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 91.

48. Rimmon-Kenan describes the reliable narrator as "one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth." See Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 100. The story of the *miʿrāj*, of course, is not a *fiction* created by Muʿīn al-Miskīn; but, as a narrator/preacher, he needs to establish himself as a reliable narrator. Regarding the reliability of the narrator, see also Gerald Prince, *The Form and Functioning of Narrative: Narratology* (Berlin: Mouton, 1982), 12.

49. The narrator's effort to establish himself as a reliable narrator is clearly seen even in the last chapter of the *miʿraj* section of *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa*, when he presents the names of the thirty hadith transmitters who reported on the *miʿraj* tale. See Muʿīn al-Miskīn, *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa*, folio 294r.

50. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 93.

51. Muʿīn al-Miskīn, *Maʿarij al-nubuwwa*, folio 251v. Here, Muʿīn al-Miskīn provides different accounts on the nature of the cleansing. According to some accounts, he says, the Prophet performs ablutions, whereas in others, he bathes.

52. Ibid., folios 251v-252r.

53. Ibid., folio 252v.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid., folio 251v.

59. Ibid., folio 254r.

60. Ibid., folio 256r.

61. Ibid., folio 292r.

62. Ibid., folio 293r.

63. Millett, *The Art of Drama*, 193.

64. Wilson, *The Theater Experience*, 253–267.

65. Ibid., 225.

66. Ibid., 221–237.

67. Mu'in al-Miskin, *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, folio 255r.

68. Wilson, *The Theater Experience*, 264–267; and R. Kerry White, "Chorus," in *An Annotated Dictionary of Technical, Historical, and Stylistic Terms Relating to Theatre and Drama* (Lewinston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 26–27.

69. Mu'in al-Miskin, *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, folio 287r.

70. Ibid., folio 252r.

71. In this regard, see Roberto Tottoli's contribution to this volume; also see Brooke Olson Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns: The Legacy of the Mi'raj in the Formation of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 112–121.

72. See William Labov, "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax," in his *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 354–396; and Marie-Laure Ryan, "Virtuality and Tellability," in her *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 148–174.

73. Patrice Pavis, "Production and Reception in the Theatre," in *New Directions in Theatre*, ed. Julian Hilton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 25.

74. Millett, *The Art of Drama*, 230.

75. Mu'in al-Miskīn, *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, folios 282v–283r.

76. Material descriptions of each of the seven heavens, a common aspect of *mi'rāj* narratives, is not specific to the account of Mu'in al-Miskin. This description can be traced back to the ascension tales attributed to Ibn 'Abbas. See Muhyi al-Dīn al-Ṭu'mi's *Tatrīz al-Dibāj bi-Haqa'iq al-Isra' wa'l-Mi'rāj*, (Beirut: Dar wa-Maktabat al-Hilal, 1994), 12–22.

77. Mu'īn al-Miskīn, *Ma'ārij al-nubuwwa*, folio 259r.

78. Ibid., folio 258v.

79. Ibid., folio 261v.

80. For the further functions of light in drama, see Wilson, *The Theater Experience*, 179–193.

81. Mu'in al-Miskīn, *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, folios 286v–287r.

82. al-Tu'mī, *Tatrīz al-Dibāj bi-Haqā'iq al-Isra' wa'l-Mi'rāj*, 17–18.

83. Mu'īn al-Miskin, *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, 286v.

84. In its Ottoman Turkish translation by Altıparmak, although mostly loyal to the original text, all the poetic elements are lost. This could be explained by the difficulty of translating poetry, in particular classical Persian poetry. Moreover, it is also possible that the translator might have found poetry a frivolous element that diminishes the dignity of this specific miracle of the Prophet.

85. Mu'in al-Miskīn, *Ma'arij al-nubuwwa*, folios 276r–276v.

86. Ibid., folios 270v–271r. For a brief discussion of the nature of the gift(s), see Abu 'Abd al-Rahman Sulami, *The Subtleties of the Ascension: Early Mystical Sayings on the Prophet's Heavenly Journey*, trans. Frederick Colby (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2006), 44–45.

87. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 218–219.

88. Though Tauer points out "the greatest popularity" of the text in the past, I have been unable to determine whether the text still retains its popularity today. See Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, 450.