

THE
ARABIAN NIGHTS

ILLUSTRATED

*With an Introduction and Notes
by Muhsin al-Musawi*

George Stade
Consulting Editorial Director



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS
NEW YORK

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FROM THE PAGES OF THE *ARABIAN NIGHTS*

The grand vizier, who was the unwilling agent of this horrid injustice, had two daughters, the elder called Scheherazade, and the youngest Dinarzade. The latter was a lady of very great merit; but the elder had courage, wit, and penetration in a remarkable degree. She studied much, and had such a tenacious memory, that she never forgot any thing she had once read. She had successfully applied herself to philosophy, physic, history, and the liberal arts; and made verses that surpassed those of the best poets of her time. (from "The Introduction," page 9)

"Oh sister," said Dinarzade, "what a wonderful story is this!" "The remainder of it," said Scheherazade, "is more surprising; and you will be of my mind, if the Sultan will let me live this day and permit me to continue the story to-night." Shahriar, who had listened to Scheherazade with pleasure, said to himself, "I will stay till to-morrow, for I can at any time put her to death, when she has made an end of her story."

(from "The Story of the Merchant and the Genie," page 13)

"The enraged Genie tried his utmost to get out of the vase, but in vain; for the impression of the seal of Solomon the prophet, the son of David, prevented him." (from "The History of the Fisherman," page 31)

"That you may know, madam, how I lost my right eye, and the reason why I have been obliged to take the habit of a calender, I must begin by telling you, that I am the son of a King."

(from "The History of the First Calender," page 62)

"Take this knife: it will serve you for an occasion that will presently arise. We are going to sew you up in this skin, in which you must be entirely concealed. We shall then retire, and leave you in this place. Soon afterwards a bird of most enormous size, which they call a roc, will appear in the air; and, taking you for a sheep, it will swoop down upon you, and lift you up to the clouds: but let not this alarm you. The bird will soon return with his prey towards the earth, and will lay you down on the top of a mountain. As soon as you feel yourself upon the ground, rip open the skin with the knife, and save yourself free."

(from "The History of the Third Calender," page 103)

"A man scarcely ever succeeds in any enterprise if he has not recourse to the opinions of enlightened persons. No man becomes clever, says the proverb, unless he consults a clever man."

(from "The Story Told by the Tailor," page 170)

"What contributed, perhaps, more than any thing else to the embarrassment of Nouredin's affairs"

was his extreme aversion to reckon with his steward.”

(from “The History of Noureddin and the Beautiful Persian,” page 230)

“You judge unjustly, and in a short time you shall yourself be judged.”

(from “The History of Noureddin and the Beautiful Persian,” page 262)

“He did not, however, dare to explain his real sentiments to the king, who could not have endured the idea that his daughter had bestowed her heart on any other than the man whom he should present her.”

(from “The History of Camaralzaman,” page 291)

“He who is poor is regarded but as a stranger, even by his relations and his friends.” (from “The Sleeper Awakened,” page 334)

“I am no longer your son, nor Abou Hassan, I am assuredly the Commander of the Faithful.” (from “The Sleeper Awakened,” page 359)

“I assure you that my sufferings have been so acute that they might deprive the greatest miser of his love of riches.”

(from “The History of Sindbad the Sailor,” page 477)

“Three or four days after we had set sail we were attacked by corsairs, who easily made themselves masters of our vessel, as we were not in a state for defence. Some persons in the ship attempted to make resistance, but their boldness cost them their lives. I and all those who had the prudence to submit quietly to the corsairs were made slaves. After they had stripped us, and clothed us in rags instead of our own garments, they bent their course towards a distant island, where they sold us.”

(from “The Seventh and Last Voyage of Sindbad the Sailor,” page 513)

“All these fatigues being at last surmounted, I arrived happily at Baghdad.”

(from “The Seventh and Last Voyage of Sindbad the Sailor,” page 516)

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Though the composition date of *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night* is uncertain, the Arabic text was first published in four volumes from 1839 to 1842. The current text is based on H. W. Dulken's edition—serialized between 1863 and 1865—of the English version of Antoine Galland's pioneering French translation.

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Introduction, Glossary of Names and Terms, A Note on the Translation, Notes, History of the Book: An Overview, Aladdin and Ali Baba: An Introductory Note, and For Further Reading
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The Origin and Evolution of the *Arabian Nights*, The World of the *Arabian Nights*, Inspired by the *Arabian Nights*, and Comments & Questions
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THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE *ARABIAN NIGHTS*

According to legend, the stories that make up the *Arabian Nights* are the episodic narrative of an extended, interwoven tale told by Scheherazade to her new husband, a king named Shahriar. His first wife had committed adultery and, stung by her betrayal and now mistrusting of all women, Shahriar has married several times since, each time executing the new bride the morning after the wedding. But the clever Scheherazade's story telling so captivates the king that he repeatedly stays her execution and finally abandons it altogether. This tale frames an entire collection of stories that intertwine with one another while, by means of meandering, tangential detours, they hold the audience in suspense just as they did the unwitting king.

The *Arabian Nights* originated in the oral folk traditions of several cultures, including those of India, Iran (Persia), Iraq, Egypt, and Turkey. The original compilation may have been an Islamic adaptation of an earlier Persian manuscript called *Hazar Afsanah (A Thousand Tales)* that was translated into Arabic in the ninth century. Although the manuscript is now lost, tenth-century Islamic scholars mention such a work, which had notable similarities to the *Arabian Nights*. By the end of the thirteenth century, the principal tales were compiled and written down. The book's Arabic title, *Alayla wa layla*, means *Thousand and One Nights*; over time, the collection's anonymous editors added new tales to justify that title.

The popularity of the *Arabian Nights* in the West began with a French Orientalist named Antoine Galland. In 1704 his translation of the work into French introduced the exotic tales to a welcoming European audience and gave rise to a cottage industry of translations and imitations to feed Europe (especially England's) newly stimulated appetite for the Orient. Several notable translations into English followed, one by Edward William Lane in 1841 and John Payne's in 1884. Sir Richard Burton's translation (1885-1888) is the most renowned, in part because it retained the explicit erotic quality of the original. The *Arabian Nights* comprises a variety of genres, from adventure tales to love stories, from comedies to tragedies, from spiritual legends to historical accounts. Through the ages, painters, novelists, poets, composers, and filmmakers have drawn inspiration and material from its pages. Indeed, many of the *Arabian Nights* stories have merged with Western folklore and are now as familiar to readers as the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and the stories of Hans Christian Andersen.

THE WORLD OF THE *ARABIAN NIGHTS*

- 224 C.E.** The Sassanid dynasty is established in Persia.
- 330** Under Constantine, the Roman Empire moves its capital to Constantinople.
- 570** Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, is born in the Arabian town of Mecca.
- 614** Persian armies capture the city of Jerusalem.
- 622** Persecuted for his preaching, the prophet Muhammad is forced to flee Mecca for Medina, a neighboring town. This flight, known as the *hijra*, marks the beginning of the Muslim era.
- 632** Muhammad dies. His Arab followers spread Islam by persuasion and conquest under the first caliph, Abu Bakr.
- 634** Abu Bakr dies and is succeeded by Omar I, who conquers Persia, Syria, and Egypt.
- 637** The Arabs capture Jerusalem.
- c.640** Arabs reconquer Persia, ending the Sassanid dynasty. Islam replaces Zoroastrianism as the established religion of Persia.
- c.670** Arab armies continue their conquest of North Africa, spreading Islam.
- 691** Construction is completed on the Dome of the Rock, an Islamic temple in the heart of Jerusalem.
- 712** Under Caliph Walid I, the Arabs establish Samarkand as the cultural capital of Islam, with Damascus as its political center.
- 749** The Abbasid dynasty becomes dominant in the Islamic world.
- 762** Abbasid caliph al-Mansur initiates construction of Baghdad and makes it the Islamic capital.
- 786** Haroun Alraschid [Harun al-Rashid] becomes the fifth caliph of the Abbasid dynasty; his caliphate marks an artistic flowering for Islamic culture. He is an important character in the *Arabian Nights*.
- 800** Haroun Alraschid sends an envoy to meet with the Frankish king, Charlemagne.
- 809** Caliph Haroun Alraschid dies.
- c.845**

- 846** Arab armies capture Rome
- c.850** *Hazar Afsanah*, a book of Persian folk tales that serves as an early source for the *Arabian Nights*, is translated into Arabic as the *Thousand Nights*. According to legend, coffee is discovered by the Arab goatherd Kaldi.
- 915** The great Arab poet al-Mutanabbi is born.
- c.950** References to *Hazar Afsanah* by the scholar al-Mas'udi (896-956), author of a world history titled *Meadows of Gold*, support the link
- 965** between the *Arabian Nights* frame tale and the now-lost Persian manuscript. Bandits murder the Arab poet al-Mutanabbi.
- c.1048** Omar Khayyam, a mathematician, astronomer, and the poet of the *Rubaiyat*, is born.
- 1099** European Christians pillage Jerusalem, killing the city's Muslims and Jews; the attack, known as the First Crusade, marks the first European Christian offensive against Muslims in the Middle East.
- 1187** Jerusalem is recaptured by the Islamic general Saladin.
- 1189** Richard the Lion-Hearted leads the Third Crusade into the Holy Land.
- 1258** The Mongols, nomadic tribes from Asia, sack the city of Baghdad, ending the Abbasid dynasty. The stories in the *Arabian Nights* exist in manuscript compilations; they include folk tales, historical anecdotes, and religious legends added over time by the collection's anonymous editors.
- 1453** Ottoman Turks under Mehmed II capture Constantinople and establish the seat of the Ottoman Empire in the former Byzantine capital.
- 1520** The reign of the Ottoman sultan Suleyman the Magnificent begins.
- 1704** Antoine Galland, a French Orientalist and Louis XIV's antiquary, publishes the first European translation of the *Arabian Nights*. Galland's translation, *Les Mille et une nuits*, consists of twelve volumes based on a rare thirteenth-century Arabic manuscript.
- 1706** A "Grub Street" (that is, hack writer's) edition of the *Arabian Nights* in English is published based on the French translation by Galland; it quickly popularizes the *Arabian Nights* in England and fuels an interest in the Orient.
- 1838-1840** Edward William Lane completes his three-volume translation of the *Arabian Nights*; in copious footnotes, he pays particular attention to contemporary Muslim culture.
- 1882-1884** John Payne publishes the first translation into English of the complete *Arabian Nights*.

- ~~1885-1888~~ Sir Richard Burton publishes his translation of the *Arabian Nights*, including *Supplemental Nights*; the popular book becomes the most renowned translation into English, thanks in part to its inclusion of the original's erotic episodes.
- 1944 A film version of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, directed by Arthur Lubin, opens.
- 1958 *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad the Sailor*, a popular film adaptation, opens.
- 1974 Italian auteur Pier Paolo Pasolini releases *Il Fiore delle mille e una notte*, a film adaptation of the *Arabian Nights*.
- 1992 Disney Studios releases the animated film *Aladdin*, starring Robin Williams as the voice of the genie.

INTRODUCTION

See the Glossary of Names and Terms on page xli for further information on important dynasties, individuals, and Islamic terms used in this essay.

The title *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* was first given to *The Thousand and One Nights* by an anonymous Grub Street English writer who translated it from *Les Mille et une nuits, contes arabes* (*Thousand and One Nights, Arabian Tales*), a French translation by Antoine Galland (1646-1715). Galland, a French Orientalist, translated most of the text from the original Arabic during the period 1704-1712, with volumes 11 and 12 appearing posthumously in 1717. Galland's collection was published almost simultaneously in French and English—there was certainly an English edition in 1706, and by 1713 there were four editions, evidence of how the tales cast a spell on the English general reader; at the same time it caught up writers, critics, philosophers, and journalists in a debate on the nature and purpose of literature. There is no better evidence concerning the vogue of these tales than their serialization in early-eighteenth-century England, a time when the publishing industry was still undeveloped and literacy was by modern standards rare. Beginning on January 6, 1723, the thrice-weekly *London News* serialized the tales for three years in 445 installments.

The tales' framing story has intrigued readers from the beginning. In it, the female storyteller Scheherazade dissuades the melancholy and ruthless sultan Shahriar from pursuing his cruel design to marry a new wife every night and kill her the next morning so as to prevent what he believes will be her inevitable betrayal. Scheherazade, the young daughter of the Sultan's vizier, surprises her father by requesting to marry the Sultan, despite the risk. As resourceful as she is courageous, Scheherazade draws upon her wit, wisdom, and store of anecdotal literature to entangle the Sultan in a web of tales that entertain him, awaken his imagination, and in the end broaden his sympathies. After the framing story's setup, each of the stories that Scheherazade tells leads to the next. By putting off each story's conclusion until the following night, Scheherazade forestalls her own murder; the Sultan is so enthralled by her storytelling to kill her. And as she concludes one story, she begins another—only to hold off its conclusion until the following night. Scheherazade's storytelling continues thus for one thousand and one nights, at the end of which Sultan Shahriar is divested of his cruelty and arrogance and given new perspectives on life, its complexity, variety, and color; convinced that Scheherazade could continue telling her stories forever, he pardons her from his original cruel condemnation. Quite literally, storytelling saves Scheherazade's life. As G. K. Chesterton put it, "Never in any other book has such a splendid tribute been given to the pride and omnipotence of art."¹

Historical Background

The frame story around which other tales circle and cluster relates part of the history—the deception of two brothers by their wives—of the Sassanid royal house, a pre-Islamic Persian dynasty that ruled a large part of western Asia from 224 until 651 C.E. (In this essay, dates are C.E., unless noted otherwise.) In Persian, the name Scheherazade (or Shahrazad) means "descendant of a noble race" and the name of Scheherazade's younger sister, Dinarzade (or Dunyazad), means "of noble religion."

The names reflect the Indo-Persian origin of the frame story. Later Arabic-speaking Abbasid bibliographers and historians mentioned this frame story and the collection in its early form. During the Abbasid dynasty, the heyday of the Islamic empire, there was geographical, economic, and an enormous cultural expansion, especially during a first period of expansion and prosperity (750-945) followed by another of political, though not cultural, decline (945-1258). Arab historian Abu al-Hasan al-Mas'udi mentioned, in his *Meadows of Gold*, which he wrote in 947 (and reedited in 957) that the prototype tales for *The Thousand and One Nights* have been passed on to us as translated from the Persian, Hindu, and Greek languages. Similar works, such as *The Book of Ferzeh and Simas*, contain anecdotes about the kings of India and their wives. There is also *The Book of Sindibad*, among other collections of the same type. Of no less significance is the renowned Baghdadi bibliographer Ibn al-Nadim's (died 998) index of books, *Kitab al-fihrist* (written in 987); in it he wrote:

The first book to be written with this content was the book *Hazar Afsan*, which means 'A Thousand Stories'. The basis for this was that one of their kings used to marry a woman, spend a night with her and kill her the next day. Then he married a concubine of royal blood who had intelligence and wit. She was called Shahrazad and when she came to him she should begin a story, but leave off at the end of the night, which induced the king to ask for it the night following. This happened to her for a thousand nights.²

In their originating habitat, the stories were basically meant as entertainments for coffeehouse audiences and urban communities at a time when storytelling was a central entertainment. While the frame story and a few tales have a non-Arab Islamic origin, most are Islamic or Islami in size, especially the ones set in Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus. The frame story was used by storytellers as a kind of magnet to draw in "one thousand and one tales"—a term that indicates an unlimited number of stories.

But the elite of tenth-century Baghdad had other readings to cherish. Their bibliographer Ibn al-Nadim described the book as a collection of loathsome and insipid tales. It seems that the educated classes of urban centers then, as 800 years later, looked down on popular literature. It is understandable that European neoclassicists rejected writing that did not correspond to their standards of composition, but their disdain did not keep the tales from becoming popular, given their appeal to perennial sentiments and human needs. Writers and poets in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and America received the tales with joy and admiration. There were, for example, the enthusiastic responses of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville in America and of Samuel Johnson, Horace Walpole, William Beckford, Samuel T. Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, John Keats, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and George Meredith in Britain. Robert Chambers, in his 1883 article "What English Literature Gives Us" describes the collection as similar to "things of our own which constitute the national literary inheritance."³ These tales, according to critic William E. A. Axon, came at a time when the European reading public was sick "of sham classical romances of interminable and portentous unreality." The tales, he concluded, "may perhaps have had some share in encouraging the novelists when they did come to deal with homely scenes and common life."⁴ This learned response may not have been the popular one, for the tales that gathered around the frame story are full of extravagant characters, exotic locales, and impossible occurrences.

Indeed, while some tales in the *Arabian Nights* are realistic, others operate by means of magical machinery and supernatural agency. The natural and the supernatural fuse in many tales, something

that appealed not only to the Romantics but also to their late-nineteenth-century descendants. *Mille et une nuits, contes arabes*, in its first translation in French and then in English, was next to the Bible in popularity among readers in England, France, and other countries. In 1889 C. H. Toy wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* on the vogue of the tales in France. He emphasized their Oriental garb, the charming sentiments, the mystery they conveyed of a “strange life,” and their delicacy of humor. Galland’s version of the tales “were opened the doors of unlimited and delicious romance. All Paris was full of the wonderful stories; it was a triumph resembling that achieved by the Waverley Novels [of Sir Walter Scott].”⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, for *Longman’s Magazine* that the collection was “more generally loved than Shakespeare,” for it “captivates in childhood, and still delights in old age.”⁶

Narrative Techniques

There are many sides to the enormous popularity of the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*. Its early critical and scholarly readers were aware of their multifaceted appeal. Some have commented on how the episodic plots were specifically designed to generate suspense, especially in Galland’s translation⁷—a point E. M. Forster would repeat a century later in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). The episodic strategy so lends itself to melodrama that the *Times* of April 5, 1825, described the *Arabian Nights* as “a work to which our melodramatists are deeply indebted.”⁸ To trap the Sultan in an enchanted web of suspense, the knowledgeable and witty Scheherazade has to intrigue the morose king not only with entertaining narratives, but also with ones that disarm him and change his negative disposition to life and women. In the introduction to the frame story, we are told that she “has successfully applied herself to philosophy, physics, history, and the liberal arts; and made verses that surpassed those of the best poets of her time.” There is also a purpose behind her venture, for she would like “to stop the course of that barbarity which the Sultan exercises upon the families of the city” (p. 9). In other words, knowledge becomes power when it is exercised; Scheherazade resorts to storytelling and suspense to captivate the Sultan, keeping him thereby from further brutality.

Knowledge should address the need for security and safety in the first place, but it also works on what is behind knowledge: curiosity. Scheherazade’s father warns her that she must listen to his warnings, and not risk her life, or the “same thing will happen to you that happened to the ass, who was well off, and could not keep so” (p. 9). Her father’s warning becomes part of the whole design. Scheherazade, for each question leads to a story, and each story leads to another. Scheherazade knows that curiosity charges situations and is a form of suspense—as when she says to the Sultan: “But, sir, however wonderful those tales which I have related to your Majesty may be, they are not equal to that of the fisherman” (p. 24).

Warnings increase curiosity, and may interfere with clear thinking, for the propensity to satisfy one’s curiosity can be more powerful than contravening considerations of comfort and security. In “The History of the Third Calender, the Son of a King,” the third calender is told: “Friend, sit down upon the carpet in the centre of this room, and seek not to know anything that regards us, nor the reason why we are all blind of the right eye” (p. 100). He cannot control his curiosity, no matter what the risk may be.

Oaths and promises are effective narrative devices, too; to breach them is to invite consequences. In “The History of the Greek King and Douban the Physician,” the physician who cures the King

promised wealth but instead receives death at the hands of the King (p. 34). For breaking his promise, the King himself suffers death. The same happens to the genie rescued by the fisherman in “The Story of the Merchant and the Genie”: He is imprisoned in the sealed jar again, and not released until he vows to serve the fisherman.

Finally, the *Arabian Nights* narrative celebrates the art of storytelling by celebrating itself: To tell a good story is to put yourself in the way of great rewards. The ransom motive (especially in the edition’s part two, the ransom frame) is central to Scheherazade’s initiative.⁹ Believing in her art, she not only encourages the Sultan to let her survive as queen and live happily ever after but also saves other women and influences a new social order of merits and punishments. Women writers noticed this mechanism and made use of it, as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) demonstrates. Like the *Arabian Nights*’s Shahriar, Brontë’s Rochester is divested of his imperiousness and admits his resignation as follows: “I never met your likeness. Jane, you please me, and you master me” (chapter 24). This primary narrative device—storytelling as an agent of change—is supported by subsidiary narratives in the *Nights*, as when the King of China tells the barber and others to tell a good story in order to save their lives (part six). A good story means survival; a bad one could mean death. Even when characters are not immediately implicated in threatening situations, and the stakes are not high for them, a good narrative can be a valuable commodity; for example, in “The Story of the Merchant and the Genie,” the genie is ready to forgive transgressions if he hears some tales from the volunteering merchants that satisfy his curiosity and thus compensate for his loss.

The presence of the wonderful and the fantastic works along with the appeal to curiosity and the evocation of suspense. It cohabits with the natural in such a way as to create a “willing suspension of disbelief,” as Samuel Taylor Coleridge used to say. Indeed, Coleridge had “The Story of the Merchant and the Genie” in mind when he justified the absence of a moral in his celebrated *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, for it “ought to have had no more moral than the Arabian Nights’ tale of the merchant sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well and throwing the shells aside, and lo! a genie starts up and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant, *because* one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie’s son.”¹⁰

The world of the *Arabian Nights* is a mad world, where the wonderful and the fantastic are plentiful and where causation is broken,¹¹ but it is one that is held together with the codes and systems that operate throughout its domains, from Baghdad to China. The combination and fusion of these elements have been noted by many writers. Charles Dickens, for one, “has put the spirit of the Arabian Nights into his pictures of life by the river Thames,” said George Gissing.¹² And this consummation of the wonderful and the mundane has become a frame of reference for writers who have argued for the need to reinvigorate literature, culture, and daily life with readings that, as Leigh Hunt said in his article on the *Arabian Nights* for his *London Journal*, “elevate our anger above trifles, incline us to assist intellectual advancement of all sorts, and keep a region of solitude and sweetness for us in which the mind may retreat and create itself, so as to return with hope and gracefulness to its labors.”¹³ This invigorating return to “labors” was a given in nineteenth-century writings, for without food for the imagination there is no promise of good and rewarding daily business, as Sissy Jupe tells us in Dickens’s *Hard Times*.

The Romantic Properties of the Tales

Although the tales have a composite nature that may engage the attention of any reading public, the Romantics especially found in them much to feed their hunger for the unlimited, the boundless, and the exotic. This appeal is of great significance, not only because it reveals the Romantic mind including its sense of abandon and freedom in the perusal of the tales, but also because it serves as an index of taste for other periods, sensibilities, and communities. While the neoclassicists of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, from Samuel Johnson to Walter Bagehot, were not ready to surrender to the imaginativeness of the *Arabian Nights*, finding them valuable instead as representations of life in the East (their term for the Middle and Near East), the Romantics found the primary appeal of the *Nights* to be their presentation of a world of dreams and desires.

A writer in *The Spectator* of November 25, 1882, touched on what it is that the Romantics found so interesting: “In the *Arabian Nights* and in them alone of published books, can grown men enjoy the pleasure which children enjoy in story-telling, the pleasure of hearing exciting narratives without being called on for thought, or reflection, or criticism.” By “ministering endlessly to their insatiable luxury in wonder,” the tales offer the right model for “the power of Romance in its elemental form.”¹⁴ American Orientalist Duncan Black Macdonald, who had one of the best collections of editions and studies of *The Thousand and One Nights*, wrote of the book as depicting “a land of enchantment, whose like never existed, never can exist”;¹⁵ he added, “To the non-Arabist their world is out of space, out of time.” The careers of a large number of prominent Romantics attest to the captivating power. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), for one, associated his propensity for dreaming with this power; his mind “had been habituated to *the vast*, and I never regarded my *sensations* in any way as the criteria of my belief,” he explained in a letter of October 16, 1797, to Thomas Poole.¹⁶ He said: “I regulated all my creeds by my conceptions, not by my *sight*—even at that age; thus, whenever approaching the tales, he felt a mixture of dread and desire, an “anxious and fearful eagerness.”¹⁷ Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), who looked at the matter with the eye and vision of a contemporary, considered the *Nights* a Romantic initiator: “It might be said that the Romantic movement begins at the moment when someone, in Normandy or in Paris, reads the *Thousand and One Nights*. He leaves the world legislated by Boileau and enters the world of Romantic freedom.”¹⁸

The exchange and fusion between the commonplace and the wonderful that distinguishes the tales is one aspect of their romantic appeal. Another is what the late Romantic critic and brilliant littérateur Arthur Henry Hallam (1811-1833) called “the position of feeling,” their placing us in “one of those luxurious garden scenes, the account of which, in plain prose, used to make our mouths water for sherbet, since luckily we were too young to think about Zobeide,” in a reference to the wife of Harun Alraschid [Harun al-Rashid].¹⁹ This “position of feeling” became for years a mainstay of literary recollection; the late-nineteenth-century poet William Henley has said, “That animating and delectable feeling I cherish ever for such enchanted commodities as gold-dust and sandal-wood and sesame and cloth of gold and black slaves with scimitars—to whom do I owe it but this rare and delightful artist?”²⁰ This power once held poets and artists captive in realms where they identified with scenes and people. Henley and, earlier, John Keats and Coleridge, admitted, for example, their identification processes in their poetry and letters, especially in respect to the calenders’ stories (part three), their awakening from the exquisitely charming to the mundane and the real.²¹ Thus wrote Henley in his poem “Arabian Nights’ Entertainments” in reference to the aftermath of the second calender’s irresistible curiosity to open the forbidden door:

*I was—how many a time!—
That Second Calendar, Son of a King,
On whom 't was vehemently enjoined,
Pausing at one mysterious door,
To pry no closer, but content his soul
With his kind Forty. Yet I could not rest
For idleness and ungovernable Fate.
And the Black Horse, which fed on sesame
(That wonder-working word!),
Vouchsafed his back to me, and spread his vans,
And soaring, soaring on
From air to air, came charging to the ground
Sheer, like a lark from the midsummer clouds,
And, shaking me out of the saddle, where I sprawled
Flicked at me with his tail,
And left me blinded, miserable, distraught.*²²

The pleasure gotten by both poets and the common reader from the *Arabian Nights* should be seen too, in relation to a growing Orientalism that fed the colonial desire for lands and riches. More than any other book, the tales became for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers an unparalleled repository for images of the Orient (that is, the present Middle East) as sensuous, luxurious, rich, and dormant. Lord Byron advised Thomas Moore to “stick to the East” in order to gain popularity, and so did Dickens when he suggested to Miss Marguerite Power that she call her book *Arabian Days and Nights*.²³ More than any travel account or Orientalist piece of scholarship, Scheherazade’s tales inflamed, in the age of empire, the desire for an East that could be contained, appropriated, and possessed. Indeed, the tales worked strongly on that Romantic “*interior infinite*,” which, according to Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, rules sovereign, “unquell’d and high,” like Byron’s Giaour.²⁴ On the other hand, this Romanticized view of the East gave way to another—an East whose life presently is nothing more than a repetition within dormancy, an invitation to a Napoleon or Cromer to revitalize the land and bring civilization back to the domains of Scheherazade! Indeed, Scheherazade’s attraction became synonymous with her habitats—rich, tantalizing, and waiting for an imperial savior. As I argued in *Scheherazade in England*, Galland’s version proved popular for taking into account those very habits and predilections. While preserving the exotic and the outlandish in the dawn of colonialism, Galland made the East an available property to be possessed, accommodated, and plundered.

Although there remained a great deal of the mysterious and the veiled, Galland’s and other translations and adaptations made the East available to be analyzed, investigated, enjoyed, loved—and simultaneously repelled. While foreshadowing the Enlightenment’s taste for classification, comparison, and order, the tales also met with the Romantic aspiration for freedom and change inside their closed and hierarchal societies. In both cases, early European translations of the *Nights* were not foreign to the Manichean tendency to study the other and reach for its exoticism, to view it in relation to the so-called European tradition and to simultaneously appropriate its habitat for the sake of self-fulfillment against imaginary deprivations. The two impulses—intellectual analysis and imaginative embrace—were not at variance with the growing colonialist discourse that began with early missionary efforts to convert Muslims or combat Islam. More important, they were bound to provoke

philological, anthropological, and cultural studies that took the *Nights*, along with other literary and travel accounts in translation, as a starting point for the expanding imperial enterprise. The effort was so enormous that Romantics of a sensitive temper, such as Leigh Hunt, were seriously bothered by the disenchanting endeavor. They insisted, but to no avail, that the *Nights* be kept away from dissection and exacting scholarship, for it is no more than a collection of tales that manifests an “Orient of Poets,” as Hunt termed this imaginary world in an editorial in his *London Journal* of October 1834.

Thematic Patterns

While Romantic properties and certain narrative techniques account for a great deal of the tale's enormous popularity, these elements work in tandem with a number of thematic patterns and cycles. First, there is in the tales a recurrent human pattern that resists borders and limits, a “charm that renders the *Arabian Nights* acceptable to all countries,” emanating from the many themes that “speak of our common nature . . . a sprinkling of simpletonianism in a foreign shape.”²⁵ Second, there is a supernatural element, a mixture of the wonderful, the uncanny, and the fantastic. Muslim travelers and geographers used to speak of these elements as the *gharib* and ‘*jib*—the strange and the wonderful— a point that contemporary critics, such as Tzvetan Todorov in his study *The Fantastic*,²⁶ have examined. The borderline between the two is delicate enough to allow progression or transposition from one stage to another. In the tales the supernatural has a religious explanation, for the *jinn* (genies) are recognized in the Qur’an. Third, there are human concerns that relate to love, beauty, women, jealousy, travel, geography, business, social mobility, and culture; a feeling for these themes shapes the tales as a whole and give a reader the sense that the unifying subject matter is something immutably human.

Love and Beauty

Love and beauty—narrative motifs that span lands and times—are major themes in the tales. M. Gerhardt counts “twenty-odd full-length and short stories” that focus on love and beauty and “near as many brief pieces.”²⁷ The ones with realistic detail (though they may include suggestions of magic) are of Baghdadi origin, while the ones that focus on unknown partners who are conquered by love are quite likely Persian; these tales often include a motive of aversion to men or to women that Gerhardt and others associate with a Persian origin. The aversion motive is probably a way of charging the theme and motivating the action. Tales with fainting episodes and anguish are probably of Indian or Persian origin, and storytellers may name characters as such-and-such “the Persian” to emphasize the fact. Stories of anguish can be easily confused with Bedouin stories, but separation distinguishes the Arabic stories of love. There are different causes of this separation, but at times love itself entails it. The enduring passion of love itself demands separation and detachment.

There is always an association between love and beauty, for beauty in itself can arouse the love of music and singing—the more beautiful the better—are often part of courtship. Beauty defies space and persuades supernatural agents to bring together lovers who live apart, indeed as far apart as China and Baghdad. When the young prince Qamarazaman (the “Moon of Times”) resists his father’s wish for him to marry in “The History of Camaralzaman, Prince of the Isle of the Children of Khaleda and of Badoura, Princess of China” he is imprisoned in an attic, a procedure that repeats what happened to Badoura, the young princess in China, who is likewise not interested in marriage. Both suffer

confinement, but two genies, a male and a female, are keen on getting these young people together and the tale becomes a test of who will be attracted to whom, despite their early resistance to marriage. Upon waking one morning, the two find themselves lovesick and each wears a wedding band—without the presence of a partner, though both are sure there is a partner, a lover. The world of the real belies their claims until the supernatural entities ensure that they will get together.

But love can lead to death, for separation from one's partner drives a lover to languish in agony, a theme that always appealed to the Romantics. The English poet laureate Alfred Tennyson identified with these doomed lovers; in his poem "Recollections of the Arabian Nights," he captured the languish of the Beautiful Persian in "The History of Nouredin and the Beautiful Persian," in which the Persian is torn between her true love, Nouredin, and the caliph who takes her as his favorite woman singer. The poem evolves as a celebration of a land of bliss or, as J. H. Buckley argues, "realm of pleasance," for "Haroun's [the caliph's] Baghdad to the young Tennyson is essentially the city of eternal artifice, in a realm of self-subsistent reality beyond all movement and desire."²⁸ This topic drew the attention of many, including George Meredith, as it brought something new to the concept of love. Although the love affair ends with the death of the two lovers, in line with the theory of chaste love that was popular in medieval times in the Arab-Islamic world, the caliph strives to bring the lovers together, accommodate their wishes, and enable them to overcome obstacles. Although, however, this recognition of love, beauty, and art comes too late, and literary tradition dictates that the lovers languish in agony and death as in "The History of Aboulhassan Ali Ebn Becar, and of Shemselnihar, the Favourite of the Caliph Haroun Alraschid," which can be seen as exemplary of this kind of love. The late Romantics, like George Meredith, may use the latter story differently. In his poem "Shemselnihar" (1862; the name means "Sun of the Day"), George Meredith makes the Beautiful Persian pray not for the love of the caliph but for his hatred, so that she will be released from the overwhelming sense of guilt she feels, knowing she is supposed to repay the caliph's kindness and care with gratitude and love.

Beauty is exalted in terms that appear quite often in classical Arabic literature. Despite the tendency among Arab classicists to argue the beauty of all colors and races, the *Arabian Nights* is more attuned to such a description as the one in "The History of Camaralzaman, Prince of the Isle of the Children of Khaledan, and of Badoura, Princess of China," in which the male genie Danhasch is taken by a particular type of beauty:

Her hair is of a fine brown, and of such length that it reaches below her feet. It grows in such abundance that when she wears it in curls on her head it resembles a fine bunch of grapes, with berries of extraordinary size. Under her hair appears her well-formed forehead, as smooth as the finest polished mirror; her eyes are of brilliant black, and full of fire; her nose is neither too long nor too short; her mouth small and tinted with vermillion; her teeth are like two rows of pearls, but surpass the finest of those gems in whiteness, and when she opens her mouth to speak, she utters a sweet and agreeable voice, and expresses herself in words which prove the liveliness of her wit. The most beautiful alabaster is not whiter than her neck (p. 276).

Beauty is the focus of love in Arabic and Persian literature, and love at first sight abounds in the *Arabian Nights*. For example, in "The Story Told by the Tailor," the old lady looks at the young man and realizes he is lovesick despite the fact that he has only seen a young woman who "cast her eyes on [him]; and as she watered the flowers with a hand whiter than alabaster, she looked at [him] with a smile, which inspired [him] with as much love for her as [he] had hitherto felt aversion towards the rest of her sex." The young man had earlier argued his case as follows: "I will confess, perhaps to my

shame, that I carefully avoided the society of women.” Now, he says, “I returned home, agitated by passion all the more violent from its being the first attack” (p. 164). The old woman tells him, “You love one who delights in letting those burn with unrequited passion who suffer themselves to be charmed with her beauty” (p. 165). Despite the instances of love at first sight in many of the *Arabian Nights* tales, beauty is not just skin deep. Refinement, wit, education, and tact are always emphasized. Education bears some relation to the position of both sexes; in some stories women of high station resist men for no reason other than their impression that males in general neglect their partners. Men may also build their attitudes on some ancestral authority; Camaralzaman tells us, “I am well aware of the embarrassment and trouble occasioned by women; moreover, I have frequently read in our authors of their arts, their cunning, and their perfidy” (p. 269). Though he qualifies this statement—“I may not always retain this opinion”—it speaks of a body of literature that focuses on ruse and craft. The idea, as old as stories from the Bible, conversely demonstrates the dynamic and intelligent presence of women.

A contradictory and controversial attitude in the tales shows up in a number of old women, who either mediate between young men and women as go-betweens or practice deceit. In the first instance, the old women have easy access to households, and they know most of the families around them. “The Story Told by the Tailor,” an old woman tells the young man from Baghdad: “I could mention to you an infinite number of young people of your acquaintance who have endured the same pain that you now feel, and for whom I have obtained consolation” (p. 165). In “The History of the Barber and the Second Brother,” an old woman accosts the brother, we are told, in a “retired street” (p. 183) and invites him to a house where he suffers robbery, beating, and attempted murder. Pretending to be dead, he escapes and plans his counter-revenge on the old woman, the mistress of the house, and her slave—the attempted murderer.

Both adultery and polygamy are present in the *Arabian Nights*, and both help drive the narrative. The frame story derives its powerful cycle of trial, retribution, and reward from the garden episode, in which the King’s wife and her women companions enact a hilarious sexual scene with slaves disguised as women. The frame story is thought to be of Sassanid origin, but travel and anecdotal accounts relate similar tales that end in severe punishment. Polygamy, practiced against strict Quranic rules designed to maintain justice among wives, leads in the tales to jealousy, competition, and trouble.

Politics of Intrigue: Envy and a Good Caliph

Storytellers build their narratives on basic human frailties. For instance, they may resort to male and female stereotypes to depict envy. Indeed, even such a renowned polymath as al-Jahiz of Basra (died c.868), who was well known for his balanced views, could not restrain himself from identifying envy with women: “Someone has said, ‘Envy is female because it is contemptible, enmity male because it is noble.’”²⁹ The tales do not subscribe to this view; in them envy recurs as a human frailty regardless of sex. Most of the stories of domestic life or public politics make use of the motive of envy. In “The Story Told by the Jewish Physician,” the man from Mosul tells us how one of the Damascene sisters is so jealous of her young sister’s love for the young man that she poisons her (p. 157). Men are no exception. In “The History of the Old Man and the Two Black Dogs,” the old man’s brothers, to whom he has given money, are so jealous of his great achievement and wealth that they are driven to plan his murder (p. 21). Envy becomes at times a motive for internal politics; after the King in “The History of the Greek King and Douban the Physician” listens to his envious minister’s insinuations against the

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