



# The Arabian Nights

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**Neil Philip** on the genesis of the tales.

In **BfK** No.133 (March 2002) we looked at the depiction of Muslims and of Arabs in contemporary children's fiction and picture books. At a time when the differences between East and West can be too easily polarised, it is salutary to remind ourselves of the exchanges that have long taken place between our cultures, of which one of the best known is that masterpiece of world literature, **The Arabian Nights**. Andrew Lang said of it: 'All the East has contributed to its wonders and sent them to Europe in one parcel?'. **Neil Philip** explores.<!--break-->

When Hans Christian Andersen was a boy, he used to visit the spinning-room of the local pauper asylum in Odense, where his grandmother was the gardener. He became something of a pet of the old ladies there, who were entertained by his childish prattle. In his autobiography, **The Fairy Tale of My Life**, Andersen recalls, 'They rewarded my eloquence by telling me tales in return; and thus a world as rich as that of the Thousand and One Nights was revealed to me.'

It may seem strange that Andersen, in order to emphasise his delight in Danish folk literature, should automatically compare his native folktales with those of Arabia, but the truth is that the stories of The Arabian Nights had become, over the previous century, a byword for the magic and wonder of storytelling.

## Entering Western culture

They entered western culture in a French translation by Antoine Galland, published between 1704 and 1715. Chapbook English versions of Galland's text began to appear almost immediately. Galland's tales captivated all Europe. Thrilling and exotic stories such as 'Aladdin' and 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves' appealed to the imaginations of young and old, while the framing device in which the beautiful Sheherazade (or Shahrazad, as her name is more properly spelled in modern versions) kept her husband captivated night after night by her storytelling, and thus saved her life, added a frisson of tension and even eroticism.

This last element in the Nights has proved the most controversial. Editions of the stories are divided not just between those aimed at adults and those aimed at children, but between those which seek to obscure the erotic undertow of the original, and those which seek to exaggerate it. So the standard Victorian translation by Edward Lane (1839-41) sought to omit all risky material, just as the first children's version by Richard Johnson (c. 1791) 'carefully expunged every thing that could give the least offence'. So concerned was Johnson's publisher Elizabeth Newbery to emphasize this point that the work was published under the title **The Oriental Moralist**, by 'the Revd Mr Cooper'.

## Discreet bookshelves

By contrast, Richard Burton's **Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments, Now Entitled the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night**

(1885-8) revelled in salacious details ? so much so that it was printed and distributed in exactly the same clandestine way as the pornography of the day. The title page claims it was printed in Benares, for the Kamashastra Society; it was actually printed in Stoke Newington, and the Kamashashtra Society was a polite fiction to avoid prosecution for obscenity by marketing the book by private subscription. But the veneer of respectability (and Burton?s very real scholarship) enabled the sixteen leather-bound volumes to take their place discreetly on the bookshelves of many a Victorian gentleman whose interest in Arabic folklore was, to say the least, somewhat tenuous.

A fin-de-siècle French edition by J C Mardrus, translated into English by E Powys Mathers and published in four volumes as **The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night** (1937), took Burton?s frankness one stage further by simply inventing erotic details and episodes wherever the Arabic text seemed too tame.

One curious truth about this extremely curious masterpiece of world literature is that its chief fame derives from these various western versions. As Robert Irwin, author of **The Arabian Nights: A Companion** (Allen Lane, 1994), writes in the introduction to his marvellous **Night and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature** (Allen Lane, 1999), ?the best of Arabic literature, by which I mean what has been most highly regarded by the Arabs themselves, is decidedly short on adventure or sex.?

Even more extraordinary is the fact that many of the tales we most associate with the Nights are simply not present in any of the manuscript versions. The classic fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript that was the basis for Galland?s translation does not contain ?Aladdin?, ?Ali Baba?, or ?Sinbad the Sailor?.

?Aladdin? and ?Ali Baba? are two of the stories Galland collected from a Maronite Christian Arab called Hanna Diab. Galland saw no reason not to flesh out the thousand and one nights with newly-gathered folktales or, in the case of ?Sinbad?, stories from other manuscripts. And the truth is that a similar process had probably occurred at various points since The Nights started taking shape in Arabic around the eighth century AD. The first surviving manuscript fragment is from the early ninth century: it is a single page, in which Sheherazade?s sister begs her to tell a story.

There is no way of knowing how closely this earliest version related to the fourteenth-century manuscript, and it in turn was evidently based on a lost Persian original. The Nights as we now know it intermingles Indian, Persian, Arabic, and even European sources in such a complex way as to mean there can be no definitive text. Hussain Haddawy?s lively and authoritative **The Arabian Nights** (Everyman?s Library, 1992) contains only 271 nights, the contents of the fourteenth-century manuscript as edited by Muhsin Mahdi; the same author?s **The Arabian Nights II** (W W Norton, 1995) adds a further four tales, two of which, ?Aladdin? and ?Ali Baba?, are translated from Galland.

Yet despite all this confusion and complication, The Arabian Nights is a whole book: one with a distinct flavour and atmosphere of its own, into which one plunges as avidly and utterly as a modern-day tourist into the noise and bustle of Djemaa El Fna in Marrakesh, to stand entranced if uncomprehending as a storyteller launches into his tale.

### **The power of story**

It is in the end the transforming and redeeming power of story that The Arabian Nights celebrates. The stories themselves have an almost hypnotic quality, unfurling themselves as stories-inside-stories-inside-stories until they begin to feel as if they had no beginning and will have no ending. In Burton?s edition, for instance, ?The Tale of King Omar Bin al-Nu?uman and His Sons Sharrkan and Zau al-Makan?, covering nights 45-145, fills 371 pages.

This sense of never-ending profusion is best expressed in the title of a similar Sanskrit collection made by Somadeva in the twelfth century: **Kath Sarit S·gara**, ?The Ocean of the Streams of Story?. This is the ocean on which we are set adrift when we encounter The Arabian Nights, and whose tides are charted in Salman Rushdie?s passionate defence of the primacy of storytelling, **Haroun and the Sea of Stories** (Granta Books, 1990).

The best we can hope for from a children?s version of such a protean work is that it gives us an authentic taste of the souk and the medina, that it makes us tremble with Sheherazade and wonder with King Shahryar, and that it leaves us just a little dizzy from the twists and turns of its storytelling.

## Contemporary retellings

The classic retellings on both sides of the Atlantic ? Andrew Lang's **The Arabian Nights Entertainments\*** (1898) and **The Arabian Nights: Their Best-Known Tales** by Kate Douglas Wiggin and Nora A Smith (1909) ? are both now showing their age. Luckily, several fine versions have appeared in recent years. Geraldine McCaughrean's **One Thousand and One Arabian Nights** (OUP, 1982, 0 19 275013 5, £4.99 pbk) is vigorous and sensuous; Brian Alderson's **The Arabian Nights** (Victor Gollancz, 1992, ill. Michael Foreman, o/p) is witty and spellbinding.

More recently, Fiona Waters has written a lively picture-book version of the story of one of the most unadorned folktales in the Nights as **The Brave Sister** (Bloomsbury, 1998, ill. Danuta Mayer, 0 7475 4129 9, £5.99 pbk). The story is a version of the international folktale ?The Dancing Water, the Singing Apple, and the Speaking Bird?, which is well-known in Arabic folklore. Readers may like to compare it with orally-collected versions, such as ?The Nightingale that Shrieked? in Inea Bushnaq's **Arab Folktales** (Penguin, 1987, o/p) and ?The Promises of the Three Sisters? in Hasan M el-Shamy's **Folktales of Egypt** (Chicago University Press, 1980, 0 226 20625 4, £13.50). These volumes show the enchanting story-world of The Arabian Nights still living in the mouths of Arabic storytellers. This is a feeling even more strongly present in Monia Hejaiej's intimate collection of tales from three women storytellers, **Behind Closed Doors: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunis** (Quartet, 1996, 0 7043 0231 4, £11.00 pbk). In this book, the shade of Sheherazade seems no more than a breath away. In the words of Laura Rice from her foreword, ?Within each tale-telling, an intricate shuttling between the teller and the tale occurs.? These women are not telling their stories to save their lives, but they are certainly telling their lives in story, just as Sheherazade did.

The wisdom of these female storytellers, who start each story with the reminder that ?God is omnipresent?, just as the Arabian Nights themselves constantly invoke ?Allah, the compassionate, the merciful?, is reflected in another recent children's book, **The Seven Wise Princesses** by Wafa? Tarnowska (Barefoot Books, 2000, ill. Nilesh Mistry, 1 84148 021 5, £14.99 hbk).

This is the first retelling for children of a complex twelfth-century Sufi allegorical poem, ?Haft Paykar? by Nizami, in which seven princesses teach the Shah how to be a just ruler. It is a daring publication, for the original is scarcely known in the west, and the mystical system of colours and numbers that informs it is hard to grasp, even with Tarnowska's clear explanation. But in the end the risk is one well worth taking, for publisher and for reader, for beyond the strangeness of the material is the simple truth that a well-told story will always transcend its author's good intentions. Both Shah Bahram and ourselves may be being lectured by the seven wise princesses, but it doesn't feel like it: instead, we are travelling with him to such magical destinations as the City of the Stupefied, ready to be enthralled by a beautiful but unobtainable queen.

No other work exudes such pure joy in storytelling as The Arabian Nights. Sheherazade saves her life by storytelling, as do many of the characters in her tales. Her stories are not just full of magic, they are a kind of magic.

**Neil Philip** is a writer and folklorist. His retelling of **The Arabian Nights**, illustrated by Sheila Moxley, was published by Orchard Books in 1994. His most recent book is **The Great Mystery: Myths of Native America** (Clarion Books, NY, 2001).

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