The Thousand and One Nights: Monica Mishra

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"The Thousand and One Nights"

Author: Unknown

Publication Date: A collection from the Islamic Golden Age; translated and compiled for a Western audience in 1704

Original Manuscript Language: Arabic (Syrian manuscript) and French (translation of the Syrian manuscript with new tales added in)

Overview of the Text

The Thousand and One Nights or The Arabian Nights in colloquial English, or the Alf Layla wa Layla in Arabic, is an "endlessly flexible world of collection of stories (Puchner)", stemming from the Middle East, Persia, Turkey, and India. The majority of the stories take place during the Golden Age of the Arab Empire, ruled by the fifth Caliph Harun al-Rashid in 786 CE-809 CE. Though the authenticity of some of the inner tales is questioned (most notably the tales of Aladdin and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves), they are all linked to the larger frame story of King Shahryar and his wife Shahrazad (commonly spelled Scheherazade).

In the frame story, King Shahryar is aggrieved by the infidelity of his sister-in-law and his wife. He embarks on a journey to extract revenge on the womankind by marrying, sleeping with, and executing every virgin in his kingdom one by one every night. Finally, there are no more marriageable women left, so the vizier's daughter, Shahrazad offers herself. In an effort to save herself and earn herself more than one night of life, Shahrazad begins telling the King stories, ending each night on a cliff hanger. Shahrazad's stories are meant not only to entertain and astound the king, but also to provide him an education. There is essentially a crisis of state at hand due to the King's blind hatred for women, so Shahrazad's stories subtly attempt to cure him of his misogyny and teach him of the world.

The exact number of inner tales is unverified, as to date, only one Arabic manuscript containing roughly 280 nights has been found. The number, one thousand, is a significant number in Arabic, colloquially used as infinity. Thus, some scholars argue that the title of the work should not be taken literally, but rather, akin to an infinite plus one number of nights. Because the authenticity of only 280 nights can be verified, the frame story has no ending. 19th century Western translations gave it a happy one, however, it is unclear what the original work had in store for Shahrazad.

This work is essentially one of the first true examples of the amalgamation of Eastern and Western influence on a piece of literature, both in its content and in its preservation. The characters, customs, and cultures depicted in the tale are very much of Eastern origin, but the rush to preserve, compile, and translate the stories was a very Western process. The Turkish writer, Orhan Pamuk, once said The Thousand and One Nights is "a sort of a book which heavily comes from Indian tradition going through Arabic and Persian influences, and then as a sort of a text, an ocean of stories, which was given a shape and an understanding and elevated to a higher stature by the French and English." Even the content is influenced as the text moves from East to West in determining which themes are brought out more in translations or filling in plot gaps with a Western understanding of the way the story should continue. Some of the later orphan tales are even written down for the first time by the French translator Galland.
Fascinatingly, some scholars believe that the core stories of the text began to be told in ancient India until the 9th century when they were translated from Sanskrit into Persian and modified to fit the Persian landscape. During this time, these tales also reached the courts of Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad, who was so delighted with their contents, he modified them again to insert himself in the works as a character. These tales, though delivered orally at first, cannot be considered to be derived from a pure oral tradition. As trade between Persia, India, Egypt, Syria, Turkey, etc opened up, the stories began to travel from cafe to cafe where storytellers would often have to come up with clever ways to supplement or add to the core stories in order to maintain cafe business for longer periods of time. As a result, many of the stories were derived from other written works at the time. This middle class audience has been considered part of the reason these tales were never written down in classical Arabic and contain somewhat licentious subject matters.

Finally in late 1200 CE, the collection was written down into a lengthy Syrian manuscript wrapped up in the familiar frame story of Shahrazad. At this time, another necessary technology that aided the spread of the text was paper. As such, these tales were able to be carried around further and further, but also modified to be more elevated. The introduction of Arabic poetry in the tales is indicative of polishing done by scribes to elevate the work from a collection of rudimentary folktales to a piece of true literature. The poetry in the Thousand and One Nights also serves to slow down the narrative, and would likely have been accompanied by music when told by professional storytellers (Lyons xi).

The work reached the Western world in 1704 through a multivolume French translation by Antoine Galland—a disgraced court writer in desperate need for a steady income. Working through the Syrian manuscript, Galland found significant success in his translation until the manuscript ran out. By a stroke of luck, he was introduced to a Syrian boy, Hanna Diab, who recounted nearly 3-4 volumes worth of stories from the Thousand and One Nights from memory.
In 1884, Richard Burton translated the work into English, bringing back the poetry that Galland had left out. In 1984, Harvard professor, Muhsin Mahdi released the first critical edition of the work, meant to "remove the 'grime of translation". Thus this so called "authorized" version of the tales only contains roughly 280 nights, no ending, and no orphan tales such as Aladdin.

One of the most crucial writing technologies that made it possible for the Thousand and One Nights to be so widely transmitted across political boundaries was the invention and popularization of paper. Harun al-Rashid (the historical version) was actually a significant patron of paper himself, and he ordered the development of a large paper making factory during his reign.

Plot Outline

The Porter and the Three Ladies

A lucky unmarried porter is hired by a mysterious yet beautiful lady to transport a litany of expensive purchases around Baghdad one afternoon. As he delivers them to his house, he realizes that she lives alone with two other young ladies, equally as beautiful. He convinces them to let him stay with them and together, the party spends the rest of the afternoon consuming the purchases of the day, especially the wine. In the evening, the party is completely intoxicated, both with wine, as well as with general poetical and sensual amusement. Disrobing and bathing in the fountain, the ladies take turns berating and beating the porter as he fails to correctly name their vaginas ("The Basil of the Bridges", "The Husked Sesame", and "The Inn of Abu Masrur", respectively). In turn, he disrobes and proclaims his penis is named "The Smashing Mule" which "grazes in the Basil of the Bridges, eats the Husked Sesame, and gallops in the Inn of Abu Masrur", much to delight of the three ladies. Despite his cleverness, the three ladies only decide to let the porter stay the next night if he agrees to abide by the inscription over their entrance: "whoever speaks of what concerns him not, lest he hears what pleases him not."

At this point, the three dervishes arrive, seeking shelter, as do the disguised Caliph Harun al-Rashid and vizier Ja'afar. All five men are sworn to the same oath as the porter. However, shortly after they arrive, they witness the first lady beating two chained, black dogs, followed by the second lady singing three sad love songs, which cause the third lady to scream with pain. Upon inspection, the third lady reveals scars and fresh welts from a whip on her body. The curious Caliph forces his vizier to question the ladies as a result of these proceedings.

The First Dervish's Tale

The first dervish was actually once a prince, driven out of his lands by his father's vengeful vizier. The vizier blinded the prince as retribution for a slingshot accident in which the vizier lost his own eye. The Prince seeks his uncle's help during this time of peril, and finds that his cousin is still missing. With his uncle, he discovers the tomb that the prince himself had helped seal previously, and within the tomb, the charred bodies of his cousin and a lady. His uncle falls to a fit of rage at the sight of the two bodies and explains to the prince that the lady is actually his cousin's sister. Both his uncle's children were deeply in love with one another and escaped their father's refusal to allow them to be together in the tomb where they met their death. Upon emerging from the tomb, his uncle's lands are taken over the same vizier, and after being blinded by the vizier, escapes into the desert, where he then finds the three ladies.

The Second Dervish's Tale
The second dervish is also a prince who was separated from his kingdom by bandits on his journey to visit the King of India. This skilled prince is forced to take up work as a woodcutter where he stumbles upon a magical stump in the forest. There he meets a beautiful lady who is prisoner to an Ifrit who stole her on her wedding day. He spends one out of every ten nights with her. The lady invites the prince to spend the other nine nights, but in a drunken impulse, he summons the Ifrit to kill him. He instantly realizes the error of his ways and leaves his woodcutting axe and shoes behind as he flees. The Ifrit, however, captures him and brings him back. He kills the lady, and is about to kill the prince, when the prince recounts the Tale of the Envious and the Envied. Despite this plea for mercy, the Ifrit still punishes the prince by turning him into an ape. After many months of voyage as an ape, the prince becomes the scribe and vizier of a King whose daughter recognizes that he is a man enchanted into being an ape. She banishes the Ifrit's magic and through a long embittered fight with the demon, perishes along with the Ifrit. The weakened king banishes the prince, now in human form again, to never come back to his kingdom. Thus he leaves and becomes a dervish.

The Tale of the Envious and the Envied

There once were two neighbors: the Envious and the Envied. The Envied flourished happily, until he became aware of his neighbor's jealousy. He thus moved across town and become a renowned holy man in the town. The Envious came to visit him, and the Envied, with the graciousness of a good host, agreed to accompany the Envious on a walk outside his house. The Envious took advantage of this by pushing the Envied down a well to his assumed demise. However, the Envied was caught by several demons who spoke of a visit from the King. The King's daughter was possessed by a demon who was in love with her. The only cure, they said, was to burn seven hairs of a black cat around the princess. The next morning, the Envied climbed out of the well and banished the demon from the Princess. In his gratitude, the King married the two, and in time, the Envied became the vizier, and then the King. He then provided the Envious with riches in lieu of punishment.

The Third Dervish's Tale

The third dervish is a prince whose ship gets blown off course due to a storm and then gets pulled apart by a magnetic mountain. He survives by shooting a metal horseman on the top of the rock, and sails to an island where he meets a boy in an underground hiding place. After staying with this boy in the underground hideout (the father has hidden him away because of a prophecy of his death) for forty days, the prince accidentally kills the boy with a knife, thereby fulfilling the prophecy. The prince is then able to reach the mainland where he meets a powerful Shaykh. The Shaykh gives directions to a palace occupied by forty damsels who happily accept him into their home. Their one condition is that he does not enter the last chamber of the palace. He does so and is transported back to the Shaykh on a winged horse which blinds him in one eye. The Shaykh does not allow the prince to stay with him a second time, and thus he goes on dressed as a dervish.

The Tale of the First Lady

Once, the first lady went on a voyage with her mother and her two elder sisters (the other two ladies in this tale are her half sisters) who were unlucky in matrimony. On this voyage, the first lady met a young man in a city of black stones, and they agree to be married. Out of jealousy, her two older sisters threw the couple off the ship. Though the young man drowned, the first lady survived and saved a snake from a dragon. In return, the snake turns the two older sisters into the black dogs that must be whipped everyday as punishment for their treachery.

The Tale of the Second Lady

The second lady was rescued from a young widowhood by an attractive, though jealous prince. After a month of marriage, the second lady kisses a merchant as part of a transaction, who then bites her cheek. Out of rage, her husband beats the second lady and throws her out of the house. She then moved in with her sisters.

At the end of this tale, the magnanimous Harun al-Rashid summons the Jinniyah who turns the black dogs back into the two elder sisters and reveals that Harun al-Rashid's own son is the husband of the second lady. The caliph commands the second lady return to his son, marries the first lady and her two elder sisters to the three dervishes, and himself marries the third lady.

Conclusion

In the 19th century Burton version of the Thousand and One Nights, Shahrazad brings her three infant sons in front of the king on the thousand and first night and pleads for her life for the sake of the children. The King, a reformed man, heartily grants her wish, saying that at some point in the thousand and one nights, he realized how pure she was and had resolved to pardon her from that moment. There is no verified manuscript that has emerged that supports or denies this ending. Thus, there is really no confirmed ending to Shahrazad's tale.
Historicity of the Characters/Plotlines

Harun al-Rashid: The 5th Abbasid Caliph who ruled during the Golden Age of the Arab Empire from 786CE to 809 CE. He was not a particularly innovative or prosperous caliph. In fact, his ambiguous will nearly destroyed the caliphate and plunged Baghdad in a brief civil war after his death. This sort of rash behavior partially explains why, even in the Thousand and One Nights, he acts impulsively. His close companion was his vizier, Ja'far al Barmaki.

Ja'far al Barmaki: Vizier to Harun al-Rashid who was executed after al-Rashid believed he was gaining too much power in 803 CE. He is credited with opening up a large paper factory in Baghdad, which undeniably aided the spread of the Thousand and One Nights globally. Ja'far is often depicted as a companion to al-Rashid in the text, sometimes taking on more significant roles such as detective. Interestingly, as al-Rashid's feelings towards his vizier steadily became more suspicious, Ja'far's roles in the stories become more villainic. This is most notable in the contemporary telling of Aladdin by Disney, in which the main villain is a vizier named Jafar.

Literary Devices

This work is unique not only in its content but also in its literary construction. While it is difficult to attribute any particular literary device as being faithful to the work due to its highly ambiguous origin story, there are three main literary devices that distinguish the Thousand and One Nights.

Frame Tale: The context behind the collection of stories, Scheherazade’s attempt to survive and save the kingdom by reforming King Shahryar, is possibly one of the best known frame tales in the world. This tale sets up an expectation of progression within the tale. Each successive story must be better than the last in order for Scheherazade to stay alive. Furthermore, it is expected that these tales will eventually reform the King. Thus, we understand that every story worth telling should have a significant purpose (entertainment, persuasion, diplomacy, etc). Even within the inner tales, there are tales, such as the three tales of the Three Dervishes within the Porter and the Three Ladies.

Frame tales serve to provide a convenient reason all the tales in the Arabian Nights are linked, and also a clear indication of the importance of stories and storytelling. When each character in the Porter and Three Ladies has a story, the reader gets a clear understanding that every single person has a story and the importance of that story in shaping that person's identity and our understanding of the world.

Narrative Perspective: Each tale in The Thousand and One Nights is told from the perspective of a different narrator. This lends itself to a wide variety of frame of references. On one hand, this allows us to understand the world uniquely and wholesomely by everyone who narrates through Scheherazade, on the other hand, we must understand that the information presented in the story is heavily colored by the person telling it. Furthermore, we must pay attention to when the stories are being told as it almost always changes the fate of the storyteller and the listener.

Magical Realism: Influencing Borges, most notably, the Thousand and One Nights is master at blending in the supernatural into everyday reality in its tales. From the pervasiveness of magical jinns to the dervish who was turned into a monkey to the daughter of a King who was able to sense witchcraft, this work broadens the reader's understanding of reality. More importantly, magical realism allows for the creation of a flexible imaginary world where institutions and figures in reality can be just abstracted enough and yet still connected enough to safely criticize. Certainly this is why Borges incorporates magical realism in his works.

Themes Between the Tales

Gender Dynamics: The status of women in this tale is a very complicated concept, as it cannot be categorized as strictly inferior or strictly superior to the status of men. In the beginning of the tale, we see King Shahryar and his brother set off on a journey prompted by their wives’ infidelity. In the desert, they both sleep with the wife of a demon who shows them her collection of 98 wedding bands. This woman is arguably empowered enough to sleep with whomsoever she pleases, despite staying in captivity. However, King Shahryar and his brother conclude that all women are calculating and evil, and thus decide to execute their wives. King Shahryar then proceeds to sleep with and marry all the marriageable virgins in the kingdom, showcasing the weakness of this entire gender in defending itself against one man.

And yet, Scheherazade is not a weak character. On the contrary, we see her amass enough power using her intelligence to completely reform the King. It is clear that she is also a better ruler than the King. When we ask ourselves where Scheherazade must have gotten her stories, we must realize that she must have read a lot of them. Thus, it is clear she was highly educated.

In the story of the Porter and the Three Ladies, we see this ambiguity again. The sisters are initially presented as strong and independent women, capable of living on their own (although the Porter’s surprise at learning this fact and insisting he stay with them does indicate that this was highly unusual for women at the time). However, by the end of the tale, they are resigned to marry the three dervishes, including the abusive ex-husband.
Court Culture: Interestingly in the stories of the three dervishes, all are former princes. Thus, we understand the broad expanse of geographic area the Thousand and One Nights covers. Much of the court life in these palaces are the same, however, thus indicating some sort of cohesion. All kingdoms in the work are ruled by a monarchial king who is advised by a vizier. There is a court scribe, as well as some sort of artist that depicts the King's legacy. Furthermore, there is a range of etiquettes and behaviors that seem to be common among the courts.

Modern Interpretations and Retellings

The Thousand and One Nights is more than a simple collection of stories. There is something within the tales that has the power to entertain, excite, and even inform over generations and cultural boundaries. Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges wrote, "The Nights are time, which never sleeps. Continue reading it as the day declines, and Scheherazade will tell you your own story." Indeed, many people found their own stories out of the work, as we see below:
Nobel Prize in Literature winning Turkish author, Orhan Pamuk has spoken widely about the influence of the Thousand and One Nights on his writing. Most notably, in *The Black Book* and *My Name is Red*, Pamuk borrows from the tale within the tale structure of the work along with employing a variety of narrative perspectives (in *My Name is Red*, in particular) to narrate.

Popular British Indian author Salman Rushdie also engages deeply with the Arabian Nights, particularly in his book *Midnight's Children*. The protagonist of the story, Saleem Sinai tells his fiancé "self referential" tales within a tale about various supernatural elements similar to the Arabian Nights.

Coming from a very popular 1980's Bollywood film, the Hindi movie *Alibaba Aur Chalis Chor* (Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves) sets the tale of Ali Baba in 1980s India, complete with disco dance floors. This sort of an interpretation emphasizes the more erotic undercurrents of the Arabian Nights, which plays into this concept of fetishizing the East, even by cultures that are considered part of the East, such as India. Bollywood in the 1980's experienced something akin to a sexual revival, which might explain why this particular retelling is so sexualized.

Video of the disco dancing forty thieves (with English lyrics). Jump to 1 minute and 12 seconds for the light up disco floor in the cave.

Op. 35 Scheherazade composed by Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in 1888 is a four movement piece based on the Thousand and One Nights. This is the composer’s most famous work. The first movement is "The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship", the second, "The Kalendar Prince", the third, "The Young Prince and Princess", and the fourth, "Festival at Baghdad". In the clip above, the piece is performed by the Gimnazija Kranj Symphony Orchestra in Slovenia.
In 1982, Warner Brother's released a compilation of Looney Tunes connected by a frame story as a movie. The frame story in this instance was a "story hungry sultan's child" (depicted as a white child with a smaller turban) who Bugs Bunny attempts to placate with 1001 stories. The use of this Thousand and One Nights inspired narrative serves as a convenient way to tie all the stories together, while also bringing in an exotic allure.

One of the most popular and well known retelling of one of the Arabian Nights tales is the Disney movie, Aladdin. Disney released its very popular retelling of the orphan tale Aladdin in 1992 (note the vizier named Jafar!):

Sources

- Humanities 12, Lecture 3, February 24th, 2015, Martin Puchner and Paolo Lemos Horta