The Thousand and One Nights

The Thousand and One Nights (Alf Laylah wa Laylah) or The Arabian Nights as it is commonly called in English, is a collection of stories of uncertain date and authorship that is very well known to readers worldwide. While the sources of many of the stories are unknown, most are considered to have Middle Eastern or Indian origin. The stories are set within a frame story with many stories embedded within. The tales have influenced and continue to inspire many well-known literary figures. As Louis Borges commented: "To erect the palace of The Thousand and One Nights, it took generations of men, and those men are our benefactors, as we have inherited this inexhaustible book, this book capable of so much metamorphosis".

History

Origins

In an article about the collection, Professor Daniel Beaumont writes: "Indeed, in recounting its history in the medieval period, there is no need to summarize; a fairly complete account will read like a summary, since most of its medieval history is unknown and is likely to remain unknown." His words illustrate a widely understood fact about the Arabian Nights: while some aspects of the history of the tales can be traced, a lot of it is undocumented and open to debate and speculation. Though the names of its chief characters are Iranian, the frame story is probably Indian, and the largest proportion of names in the internal stories are Arabic. The tales' variety and geographical range of origin—India, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, and possibly Greece—make single authorship unlikely. Critics comment on how this view is supported by internal evidence—the style, mainly unstudied and unaffected, contains colloquialisms and even grammatical errors such as no professional Arabic writer would allow.
In 1924, D.B. Macdonald's "The Earlier History of the Arabian Nights" divides the development of the tales into five stages: i. a Persian core "The Thousand Stories" (Hazâr Afsânah); ii. an Arabic version of the original; iii. the frame story of "The Thousand Stories" with new Arabic stories added to it; iv. a late Fatimid version (twelfth century); v. the Syrian recension whose sixteenth century manuscript was the basis of the first European translation by French archaeologist and orientalist Antoine Galland.

Versions and translations

The first known reference to the Nights is a 9th-century A.D papyrus fragment. The papyrus mentions two characters, Dînâzâd and Shîrâzâd—later to become Dunyâzâd and Shahrazâd—and has a few lines of narrative in which the former asks the latter to tell a story. Interestingly, there is also mention of a title that anticipates the title we now know: "The Book of Stories From the Thousand Nights." About a century later, the text is mentioned next in 947 by al-Masîd in a discussion of legendary stories from Iran, India, and Greece, as the Persian Hazr afsna, "A Thousand Tales". In his book, Meadows of Gold (Murûj adh-dhahab), Mas'ûdī says that it is the story of a king, his vizier, the vizier’s daughter and her slave, and that the last two are called Shirazad and Dinazad. In 987 Ibn al-Nadm also mentions a collection of 1,000 popular Arabic, Iranian, Greek, and other tales in his bibliographic work The Catalogue (Al-Fihrist).

In the following seven centuries, there are two brief mentions of the tales, once in the twelfth century in Cairo by a Jewish bookseller and later in the early 15th century by the Egyptian historian al-Maqrîzî.

By the 20th century, Western scholars agreed that the Nights is a composite work consisting of popular stories originally transmitted orally and developed during several centuries, with material added somewhat haphazardly at different periods and places. Several layers in the work, including one originating in Baghdad and one larger and later, written in Egypt, were distinguished in 1887 by August Müller. By the mid-20th century, six successive forms had been identified: two 8th-century Arabic translations of the Persian Hazr afsna, called Alf khurafah and Alf laylah; a 9th-century version based on Alf laylah but including other stories than current; the 10th-century work by al-Jahshiyr; a 12th-century collection, including Egyptian tales; and the final version, extending to the 16th century and consisting of the earlier material with the addition of stories of the Islamic Counter-Crusades and tales brought to the Middle East by the Mongols. Most of the tales best known in the West—primarily those of Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sindbad—were much later additions to the original.

The first European translation of the Nights, which was also the first published edition, was made by Antoine Galland as Les Mille et Une Nuits, contes arabes traduits en français, 12 vol. (vol. 1–10, 1704–12; vol. 11 and 12, 1717). Galland’s main text was a four-volume Syrian manuscript, but the later volumes contain many stories from oral and other sources. His translation remained standard until the mid-19th century, parts even being retranslated into Arabic. The Arabic text was first published in full at Calcutta, 4 vol. (1839–42). The source for most later translations, however, was the so-called Vulgate text, an Egyptian recension published at Bulaq, Cairo, in 1835, and several times reprinted.

Meanwhile, French and English continuations, versions, or editions of Galland had added stories from oral and manuscript sources, collected, with others, in the Breslau edition, 5 vol. (1825–43) by Maximilian Habicht. Later translations followed the Bulaq text with varying fullness and accuracy. Among the best-known of the 19th-century translations into English is that of Sir Richard Burton, who used John Payne's little-known full English translation, 13 vol. (9 vol., 1882–84; 3 supplementary vol., 1884; vol. 13, 1889), to produce his unexpurgated The Thousand Nights and a Night, 16 vol. (10 vol., 1885; 6 supplementary vol., 1886–88). Richard Burton's The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night (1885) is one of the most popular translations of the stories in the English language. A complete list of stories in Burton's first ten volumes and subsequent supplemental six volumes can be found.

The impact of this English translation of Arabian Nights was strong. Burton comments on the comparison of Galland’s and the other translations:

"Without the name and fame won for the work by the brilliant paraphrase of the learned and single-minded Frenchman, Lane’s curious hash and Latinized English, at once turgid and emasculated, would have found few readers. Mr. Payne’s admirable version appeals to the Orientalist and the stylist, not to the many-headed; and mine to the anthropologist and student of Eastern manners and customs."

Plot Summary

Frame Story
The frame story of the Arabian Nights presents King Shahryar who after discovering his wife's unfaithfulness, kills her and those with whom she betrays him. As a consequence, he decides to marry and kill a new wife each day until no more candidates can be found. His advisor has two daughters, Shahrzad and Dunyazad; and the elder, Shahrzad, devises a scheme to save herself and others and so insists that her father give her hand in marriage to the king. Then each evening she tells him a story, leaving it incomplete and promising to finish it the following night. The king, eager to hear the end, puts off her execution from day to day and finally impressed by her intelligence and eloquence and also by the lessons from her stories decides to abandon his original cruel plans. Many of Shahrzad's tales are also frame stories, such as the story of the Porter and the Three Ladies or the Tale of Sindbad the Seaman and Sindbad the Landsman to name a few.

The story of the Porter and the Three Ladies

A Porter is hired by a woman who takes him to a wine-merchant, a fruiterer, a butcher, a grocer, a confectioner, a perfumer, a greengrocer, and then home. The door is opened by 'a lady of tall figure, some five feet high' who lets them in. Once inside the house, they come before a third lady, the eldest of the three, who pays the porter and tells him to depart. He persuades them to let him stay and join their feast, and they all start to drink wine and recite poetry together. When she is sufficiently drunk, the first lady takes off her clothes, washes herself in the fountain, then makes the porter guess the name of her vagina. He cannot, and is soundly beaten. The second and third ladies behave similarly, and finally he does too. The following night, the three ladies try to send the Porter away, but finally agree to let him stay if he observes their motto: 'whoever speaks of what concerns him not, lest he hears what pleases him not'(93).

The First Dervish's Tale

A Prince helps his cousin conceal himself in a tomb with a veiled lady. Afterwards he repents, but cannot find the tomb again. On returning to his father's kingdom, he finds that the Waizir Ja'afar who are wandering the city by night disguised as merchants. They too ask for lodging and are given the same warning as the Porter and the dervishes. The eldest lady has 'two black bitches with chains round their necks' (97) brought in. She beats each of them as hard as she can, then cries over them. After this the second woman plays three sad love-songs on a lute. Each song makes the portress cry out, showing the guests 'scars of the palm-rod on her back and welts of the whip' (99). The Caliph demands that Ja'afar ask for an explanation of these events. The latter demurs, but the other guests are all curious as well. When he does ask, the seven men are immediately seized by armed slaves and told to prepare for death. The Porter protests. The men are asked to start telling their stories if they are to be spared. The porter tells his tale and stays to hear the other stories.

The Second Dervish's Tale

A Prince is brought up to be very skilled in all branches of learning. On his way to show off his skills to the King of Hind he is overtaken by robbers, who take everything he has. He is advised to work as a woodcutter by a Tailor whom he meets in a nearby town. He discovers an underground cavern in the forest where a lady who was stolen by an Ifrit on her wedding day has been kept there by him ever since. She invites the prince to stay with her: 'of every ten days one is for the Ifrit and the other nine are thine' (118). He agrees; however one day, in a fit of drunkenness, he proposes to summon the Ifrit and slay him. The Ifrit comes and, seeing the prince's woodcutting gear, accuses the lady of entertaining a lover. She denies it, and is tortured by the jealous demon. The prince escapes, lamenting his foolishness, but is caught and brought back again by the Ifrit. When the lady refuses either to identify her lover or to cut off his head, the Ifrit mutilates and kills her. The prince asks for mercy with the:

The Tale of the Envier and the Envied
Two men lived in adjoining houses; and one of them envied the other. Realising this, the Envied one left the neighborhood and set up an oratory near another city. His fame as a holy man spread, until the Envier heard of it, and travelled to see him. Under pretext of having something to discuss, he drew the Envied to one side, and pushed him into an old well. The well was haunted by a group of demons who saved him and broke his fall. They also overheard them saying that the Sultan of the city would shortly come visiting to consult the holy man about the health of his daughter, who seemed mad but was in fact bewitched. She could be cured by fumigation. The Envied is saved by his disciples next day, and duly meets the Sultan and cures his daughter. He is rewarded with her hand in marriage, and is made Wazir, and (after his father-in-law’s death) Sultan. One day he comes across his old enemy the Envier, and rewards him greatly instead of punishing him.

The lift, unimpressed, turns the prince into an ape, and in this form he succeeds in finding a place on board a ship. The ship comes to a port whose King is looking for a calligrapher to replace his previous chief minister. The entire crew, including the ape, are made to write some lines on a scroll. The ape’s writing is the best, and the King purchases him from the ship’s captain. On showing his new acquisition to his daughter, however, she reveals that her magic arts tell her that he is actually a prince. The King’s daughter, at her father’s instigation, summons the lift in order to disenchant the prince. Their magical conflict is long, and she succeeds in killing the demon, but at the cost of her own life. The King is wounded, and the prince loses one eye from hot sparks. He is, however, turned back into a man. Afterwards the angry King banishes him from the city, and he takes on the robes of a dervish and travels to Baghdad. Dismissed like the others, he prefers to stay and hear the remaining stories.

The Third Dervish’s Tale

A Prince goes sailing, but his ship is overtaken by a storm. After some days, they come to a mountain which draws out all the iron in their hull and wrecks them. The prince survives, and finds a way up the rock. A voice tells the prince in his dream to shoot at the brass horseman on top of the dome at the summit of the rock, and thus rid mankind of this affliction. He does so and, as the dream predicted, the waters rise up the rock, carrying with them a skiff with a brass rower inside. After ten days, in sight of his destination, the prince forgets this prohibition, and is immediately thrown into the sea. He swims to an island, and there sees a youth taken ashore from a ship and put into an underground hiding-place. After the ship has left he uncovers the trap-door and talks to the youth, who has been hidden away by his father because of a prophesy that he will be killed by the prince who shot the brass horseman. The prince lives with him for forty days, but then killed by accident with a knife on the very day predicted. The ship returns, and the boy’s father is stricken with grief. The prince stays on the island until the tide subsides and it is possible for him to reach the mainland. There he finds an old Shaykh who lives with ten young men. He stays with them, and notices their habit of lamentation, which they will not explain. Finally they reveal to him a route to a distant place. He reaches the palace where he is welcomed by forty damsel. He lives with them in bliss, but they are forced to absent themselves for forty days at New Year, and accordingly give him the keys to forty chambers, with strict instructions not to enter the last one. He eventually does and is carried off by a winged horse which deposits him back with the old Shaykh, putting out his eye with its wing as it departs. The Shaykh and the young men refuse to let him stay, so he dresses as a dervish and sets out for Baghdad.

After the Caliph, Ja’afar and Masrur have repeated their story of being merchants, the eldest lady lets them all go. Next day the Caliph send for the three sisters and demands that they tell their stories.

The Tale of the First Lady

The two dogs are her elder sisters by one mother and the other two women are her younger half-sisters. The two older sisters made unfortunate marriages, and had to be rescued by her on two or three occasions. Eventually they persuade her to go on a trading voyage with them, and they reached a city where all the inhabitants have been turned to black stones with the exception of one young man. The eldest lady brings the youth back with her, but her two sisters, jealous, throw them both overboard. She swims to an island but he is drowned. On shore, she saves a serpent from a Dragon, and the former turns the two wicked sisters into bitches in gratitude. She also tells the eldest lady to beat them three hundred times every day in order to avoid being punished by her.

The Tale of the Second Lady

She married young and was left a young widow. One day she is invited by an old woman to attend a wedding but when she reaches her destination, it turns out to be the palace of a young lady who tells her that her brother is in love with her. The brother is attractive, so she agrees to marry him. After a month of bliss she is persuaded by the old woman to kiss a young merchant who will not accept her money. He bites her on the cheek, and her husband, refusing to accept her explanations and excuses, has her beaten nearly to death and thrown out of the house. She has not seen him since, but now lives with her sisters in seclusion.

The Caliph has the eldest lady summon the Jinniyah, whom he commands to disenchant the two bitches. She also tells him that the second Lady’s husband is his own son Al-Amin, so he commands him to take her back. He marries the eldest lady and her elder sisters to the three Dervishes, and finally marries the third Lady himself.

Major Themes and Motifs

The Role of the Supernatural

There are several fantastical elements that play a major thematic role in the Arabian Nights. Traces of supernatural creatures like flying carpets, automatons and genies, living islands, underground rivers, magnetic mountains, flying griffins amongst others are present throughout the tales. For example, the following episode from the Sindbad tales seems to reflect motifs of classical Greek literature in addition to traditional supernatural elements found in Arab and Persian folktales. In his second voyage Sindbad comes to a diamond valley where he tumbles over a slaughtered animal and becomes aware of the trick used by some merchants to obtain precious stones:

[...] that in the mountains of the diamonds are experienced great terrors, and that no one can gain access to the diamonds, but that the merchants who import them know a stratagem by means of which to obtain them: that they take a sheep, and slaughter it, and skin it, and cut up its flesh, which they throw down from the mountain to the bottom of the valley: so, descending fresh and moist, some of these stones stick to it. Then the merchants leave it until midday, and birds of the large kind of vulture and the aquiline
The reference to the "great terror" and "large kind of vulture" are examples of the fantastical situations and elements that make a large proportion of the tales. Genies are another illustration of this theme as they are present and play significant roles in several of the stories with different kinds and forms of them. In stories like The story of the Porter and the Three Ladies and Aladdin's Lamp the genies are generous and compliant. In other stories, like The Fisherman and the Jinni however, the genie is bitter and resentful. This genie also implies the existence of a larger society of supernatural beings since he has a king that is cruel and punishing. The use of these supernatural elements in the tales is important and significant for a number of reasons. Firstly (and often most obviously) they serve as plot devices that further the plot by creating or resolving hurdles for the major characters. Secondly, given the nature of the tales and their popularity in the West, it is expected that tales with a mention of the fantastical and exotic would gain more popularity than those that were more commonplace and realistic. Thirdly, the frame story of the tales makes it easier for the stories being told to include fantastical and supernatural elements. The reader knows that the stories being told are the creation of Shahrazad's mind and her imagination - it is cathartic and enjoyable for the listener or the reader to immerse oneself in a world that is far from reality where genies and automatons exist and the supernatural is nothing far from the expected or ordinary. In doing so, the stories are often able to talk about a plethora of themes and ideas more freely since they are not restricted to any perception of reality.

Fate and Human Agency

The themes of Fate and Human Agency are extremely significant in the Arabian Nights. On the one hand, many characters in the tales are at the mercy of their fate and are unable to fight their destiny. At the same time, human agency is given a lot of significance in many of the tales where readers are exposed to characters that are able to use their efforts and intelligence to achieve seemingly impossible success. The most evident example of this is Shahrazad in comparison to the many other women that are killed by the cruelty and wrath of King Shahryar. Those women are all unable to change their destinies and so are doomed to very young deaths. Shahrazad in contrast to them is able to use her creativity and intelligence to save not only her life but also the lives of the many women that the King would have continued to harm following her.

The tales within the frame tale are no different. The story of the Porter and the Three Ladies is an illustration of this, where the second dervish appears to accept the fact that he is powerless against his fate and acknowledges that there is a higher power which governs his daily life. In the same way, in the story of the third dervish, it was predicted that he would kill a man, even though he didn't want to kill him, and he did all in his power to prevent it. In spite of all of these preventative measures, he killed his friend by accident. This reinforced the concept of the all-powerful nature of God, and how no mortal can escape the fate that is ordained for him. However, in the same story, characters are shown to take charge of their fate when the porter and all three of the dervishes tell stories to avoid being killed by the three ladies, and when the second dervish tells the tale of the envied and envious to the demon. Much like Shahrazad, they are able to alleviate impending death by using creativity and intelligence.

Sexual desire and Eroticism

Eroticism and sexuality are a major theme and motif within the Arabian Nights. In the frame story, King Shahryar struggles with accepting his wife's sexual desires that lead to her unfaithfulness when he is away during war. The same is the case with his brother. The telling of the tales at night, in the sleeping chamber add to the theme of sexuality and eroticism that is prevalent in many of the tales. The couple are in an intimate space, where the reader is allowed to enter. The king spends a night with every woman before he kills her - his rage and wrath being channelled into sexual desire and lustfulness. Additionally, this same theme of lust and sexual drive is present in many of the tales. In the story of the Porter and the Three Ladies for instance, the porter's obsession with the beautiful women is obvious, as he engages in crude games with them and begs to stay longer. The long descriptions of the sexual foreplay - with elaborate descriptions of genitals and various crude sexual innuendos and activities form a large part of the story. This is significant on multiple levels. Firstly, it is obvious that the women as well as the porter are equally lustful and enjoying the sexual pleasure of their actions. At the same time, the reader is aware that these stories are being told to the king. The fact that a woman is telling these erotic, hyper-sexual tales is significant because this adds to the theme of a strong female sexual drive and ability to act on sexual desire be it through the creativity of her stories as in the case of Shahrazad or through foreplay and sexual activity as in the case of the three ladies and their crude, erotic games with the porter. Many of the men in the tales of the dervishes are also similarly seduced by women. The dervishes are all guilty of lust, and lack of self control. In one of the dervish's tale for instance, the man is seduced by a beautiful woman who is kept underground.

The Role of Women

The Role of Women is presented in a very subtle and nuanced way throughout the collection. On the one hand, there are many strong and intelligent female characters. On the other hand however, women are also depicted as oppressed, socially unequal and unfaithful or immoral. The frame tale for instance initially presents women as being untrustworthy and unfaithful, which justifies King Shahryar's decision to murder every woman he takes as a wife after the first night of the marriage. However in the same frame tale, Shahrazad is presented as the center of beauty, faithfulness and intelligence. In the conclusion of the frame tale, King Shahryar recognizes Shahrazad’s “eloquence, wisdom, purity, piety, sweetness, honesty and discretion” (p. 472). The countless women that die at the hands of Shahryar are helpless and lack the agency to control or alter their own fate. At the same time, Shahrazad is able to outsmart the king and change his wrath and bitterness into love and understanding.

Within the tales, similar examples can be found where the tales presents varying angles and perspectives on the role of women. In the Tale of the Bull and the Ass, for instance, the merchant’s wife is curious to the point of being careless about her husband’s death and only changes her mind after the merchant beats her and “let her out of the room submissive as a wife should be”. Here, the representation of the woman highlights several different aspects of the role of women in both the society and also in relationships. The woman's carelessness seems odd and out of place to the reader and in eliciting this sentiment from the reader, the story forces the reader (and also King Shahryar) to think about the virtues of compassion, care and understanding that is expected of women. Therefore, questions about the true nature of women and their natural tendencies to be kind or unkind are at the core of many of these stories. Additionally, the reference to the beating is extremely significant as it highlights the weakness of women in society where they are often subjected to the whims of men and have to bear their anger and violence. Even though Shahrazad is able to save herself from this, countless innocent women before her were subjected to violence and unwarranted wrath from the king. On the other hand, the story of the Porter and the Three Ladies is in complete contrast to this since even the Caliph under disguise is shown to be at the mercy of the Three Ladies that have the power to kill not only the other men in the room but also the most powerful man in Arabia. In doing so, the stories are able to highlight not only that women are human so they can be virtuous but also are prone to making mistakes just like men. At the same time, the stories reveal the status of women in society both in terms of how they are often treated by men and also how they are usually able to exercise power (through charm, beauty, intelligence and wit more than brute strength or political or physical power).
Embedded Narrative and the Importance of Storytelling

The Arabian Nights employs the use of a frame story or a framing device through which Shahrazad presents a set of tales to the King over many nights. Interestingly, many of the tales within the overarching frame story are also frame stories themselves. For example, The story of the Porter and the Three Ladies is a frame tale containing the stories of each of the major characters within it. This is also the case in Sinbad the Sailor where Sinbad relates the stories of his seven voyages. The concept of the frame tale relates back to early Sanskrit literature, most notably the Panchatantra and was also a prevalent aspect of Persian and Arabic literature in later years. This technique is significant not only from the perspective of the underlying frame tale where it is in the interest of Shahrazad to tell complex, intertwined stories so that she can keep Shahryar intrigued and hence postpone her own death. This literary technique also emphasizes the importance of stories and the human experience: the embedded tales within tales at every layer of the collection force the reader to think about how stories and seemingly trivial relations of events are at the crux of the human experience. In doing so, the Arabian Nights establishes its own importance and the embedded tales become symbolic of how integral and intertwined the stories of each human being, much like each character in the many layers of the Arabian Nights has a unique experience that is worthy of narration. The importance of storytelling is also emphasized through the plot of the frame story as well as the Shahrazad's stories as well. Not only do her stories save her life and also restore the sanity and peace of mind of the King, they have lessons for the readers. In the story of the Fisherman and the Jinni, for example, the genie is sinister, the fisherman's threat is inspiring, offering a message to readers that an average person of humble means can outsmart even the most powerful of beings with just a bit of clear thinking and resolve. When the genie emerges from the pot the second time, it is on the fisherman's terms. Much like Shahrazad, the old fisherman is able to save his own life and also temper the wrath and bitterness of the jinni. This is one of the many such lessons from the stories within the Arabian Nights that benefit not only the characters in the tale itself but also present important lessons for the readers as well.

Influence on Western Literature

The Arabian Nights have and continue to influence Western literary tradition where imagery and themes from the tales have been a significant part of English literature and entertainment. The themes of fables, fairy tales, romance and historical anecdotes have a very strong presence in several English literary works. The literary device of the frame tale for instance is seen in works such as Dante Alighieri's (1265–1321) Divine Comedy, Boccaccio's (1313–1375) Gesta Romanorum and Decameron, and Geoffrey Chaucer’s (c. 1343–1400) The Canterbury Tales. Taking Chaucer's Canterbury Tales for example, the reader can identify many similarities not only in structure but also thematically. For instance, the motif of the mechanical horse in the Arabian tale, The Story of the Enchanted Horse, is present in Chaucer’s The Squire’s Tale. Similarly, the frame story of The Sleeper Awakened tells the story of the merchant Abu Al-Hasan who is deceived to believe that he is the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad, Haroun al Rashid. The Caliph that is a major appearance in many of the tales in the Arabian Nights, including The story of the Porter and the Three Ladies, makes an appearance in many works that are at the heart of the Western literary tradition. This is testament to the influence and also the fascination of the west with orientalism viewed particularly from the perspective of the Arabian Nights.

Shakespeare's Othello can also be considered to represent the image of the Arabian slave Ubaydallah in the Arabian Nights story The Tale of Qamar al-Zaman. Both the stories deal with the consequences of strong jealousy where Othello, like Ubaydallah, suffocates his beloved wife to death. However, a noticeable difference between Desdemona in Othello and Qamar al-Zaman is that while the former is faithful to her husband, the latter is not. Similarly, the story of the Caliph Haroun al Rashid appears symbolically in William Shakespeare’s Awakened Sleeper in The Taming of the Shrew. In contrast with the Awakened Sleeper, there is a similarity between Shakespeare’s Christopher who substitutes Abu Al-Hasan and the Lord who has taken the role of Caliph Haroun al-Rashid. The Caliph of Baghdad together with Jaffar, his minister and Mesrour, his executioner, is celebrated in a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

One day, Haroun al-Raschid read
A book wherein the poet said:
Where are the kings, and where the rest
Of those who once the world possessed? They're gone with all their pomp and show, They are gone
the way that thou shalt go.
O thou who choosest for thy share
The world, and what the world calls fair Take all that it can give -or lend,
But know that death is at the end!
Haroun al Raschid bowed his head:
Tears fell upon the page he read. (Haroun Al Raschid, 1-12)
Many more thematic, symbolic and storyline connections can be drawn between the Arabian Nights and popular western texts to understand the depth and magnitude of the influence of this collection. For example, the inspiration of the Arabian Nights is remarkable in works such as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World*, and Johnson's *Rasselas* among many others. As an illustration of this, it is clear that *Robinson Crusoe* imitates the style of Arabian tales where Defoe portrays the life and adventures of Crusoe. The discoveries of Crusoe look very much like the discoveries of the Bagdadan Sindbad during his seven journeys as a merchant. Sindbad’s experience with the ‘Roc’, a giant bird that could lift elephants in its claws, is best shown in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Much like Defoe, Swift in *Gulliver’s Travels* sets out on an imaginary voyage to remote lands all over the globe much like Sindbad on his seven voyages. In the same vein, Charles Dickens for example is no different from many other nineteenth century English writers who were influenced by the Arabian Nights. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge exclaims, when seeing himself as a little school boy, “Why, its Ali Baba!” And later he says: “And what’s his name, who was put-down in his drawers, asleepe, at the gate of Damascus; don’t you see him I And the Sultan’s grooms, turned upside down by the Genii; there he is upon his head! Serve him right. I am glad to it. What business had he to be married to the Prince!” Similarly, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens has one of his characters, Richard Swiveller say, “If this is not a dream I have woken up, by mistake, In an Arabian Nights instead of London one”, and later, “It’s an Arabian Nights; that’s what it is ... I am in Damascus or Grand Cairo. The Marchioness is a Genie and having a had a wager with another Genie about who is the handsomest young man alive...” amongst others. It is clear therefore that the influence of the Arabian Nights on Western literature is significant and countless examples can be found across all forms of the literary tradition over time.

**The Orientalist Movement**

It can be argued that the Arabian Nights played a significant role in influencing the Orientalist movement in all of Europe. England was largely influenced by travelers and writers that were exposed to or interested in the Arab world. Edward Said in his essay *The discourse of the Orient* states that:

> ‘The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences’.

Similarly, Rana Kabbani, a contemporary researcher of Orientalism says that:

> “In the European narration of the Orient, there was a deliberate stress on those qualities that made the East different from the West, exiled it into an irretrievable state of ’otherness’. Among the many themes that emerge from the European narration of the Other, two appear most strikingly. The first is the insistent claim that the East was a place of lascivious sensuality, and the second that it was a realm characterised by inherent violence”.

A study of the Arabian Nights and many of the themes in some of the most popular stories show the truth and rationale behind her claim. The theme of sexuality and violence are very significant in the collection. Eighteenth-century England used the term "Orient" to describe the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Representations of these regions and cultures are prevalent in literary works as well as travel accounts and scholarly works in history, science etc. Edward Said is of the view that oriental tales and orientalist scholarship, particularly the reception and popularity of the Arabian Nights says more about Britain—its ideal self-definitions, its anxieties, its assumptions about world and cosmic order—than about "the Orient." This viewpoint is interesting and thought-provoking particularly in relation to the expansive influence of the tales in the West in comparison to its relative lack of influence on the literary tradition in the Arab world.
Modern References

Matisse’s "The Thousand and One Nights"

French Modernist Henri Matisse is best known for his experimentation with perspectives, color and figuration. One of the most famous and appreciated pieces the artist created during his last few years when he was confined to his bed is an abstract take on the Arabia Nights. The 1950 piece is a 4.5 by 12 foot cutout crafted from gouache-stained paper. Matisse’s “The Thousand and One Nights” is divided into five panels. The first panel shows a lantern with smoke seeping out of its spout and is interpreted as denoting dusk. The second panel is considered perhaps a reference to Shahrazad herself. Nightime is suggested through stars, and a second lantern that is black and without smoke denotes the approaching dawn. The final panel has been read as the rising sun but also as a reference to Shahrazad’s sexuality. The text translates to: “...as dawn approached she discreetly fell silent”.

Matisse’s modern interpretation of the Arabian Nights is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, Matisse’s illness meant that his life was similar to Shahrazad’s: he would stay up all night because his illness meant that he was in so much pain that it was difficult to fall asleep. He would use his creativity to create art at night as a way of staving off death. In the same way, Shahrazad’s stories that she would tell the king every night were her way of escaping death through her use of her artistic creativity. Additionally, his use of color and images in the piece is indicative of the stories embedded within the frame story. There are two images of lamps which seem like an obvious reference to the popular Aladdin’s Lamp. The hearts around the edges can be seen as a reference to love and sexuality that is not only a fundamental theme of the frame story but also plays a significant role in most of Shahrazad’s tales.

Disney’s Aladdin

Disney’s 1992 animated movie Aladdin is famously inspired by the Tale of Aladdin and the magic lamp from the Thousand and One Nights. Disney describes it the movie in the following words:

“In the heart of an enchanted city, a commoner named Aladdin and his mischievous monkey, Abu, battle to save the free-spirited Princess Jasmine. Aladdin’s whole life changes with one rub of a magic lamp as a fun-loving, shape-shifting Genie appears and grants him three wishes, setting him on an incredible journey of discovery. Through his adventures, Aladdin proves that he is a prince where it truly matters most – on the inside!”

The Disney adaptation is interesting on multiple levels. In terms of themes, several aspects of the original tales are captured. The "enchanted city" that Aladdin lives in seems to resemble one from an Arab country with its surrounding desert landscape, the clothes and names of the characters and the bazaars that feature extensively in the film. Yet, it is difficult to determine the geographical location of this city given the appearance of some of the animals in the movie from Jasmine’s pet tiger to Aladdin’s pet monkey both of which remind the audience of India immediately. Hence, much like the tales, this Arabian Nights inspired animated movie seems to be a mix of several geographical and cultural references making its location and origins just as ambiguous.

It is also interesting to look at another key difference in the representation of Jafar in the movie who differs drastically from the loyal vizier of Haroun al-Rashid in the actual stories. Disney’s depiction of Jafar is as a manipulative villain who seeks to overthrow his caliph by marrying his caliph’s daughter. In the traditional story, Shahrazad claims that Haroun al-Rashid forces his vizier Jafar to marry his sister so he can sleep with both of them at the same time. He forbids them from seeing each other outside of his presence, but eventually the two give in to temptation, which could possibly be the reason that Haroun has Jafar executed.

The Arabian Nights (1942 - Universal Pictures)

Arabian Nights is a 1942 adventure film based on the Thousand and One Nights. A closer look at the film however, reveals that the movie is more a work of imagination keeping in mind its western audience than a representation of the the Arabian tales. The film is one of series of "exotic" tales released by Universal Studios during the war years. Others include Cobra Woman, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves and White Savage all of which can also be attributed to being inspired by the the Arabian tales from the Thousand and One Nights.

Apart from this more well-known example, there have been countless other adaptations. For instance, a 1974 Italian film directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Its original Italian title is Il fiore delle mille e una notte, which means “The Flower of the One Thousand and One Nights”.

Disney's Aladdin
References

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