Editor's Note

The twelfth volume of *Cultural Intertexts* includes contributions by fifteen scholars from eleven countries around the world. The points of view adopted, developed and justified, though multiple, converge towards the idea that cultural texts are repositories of data pertaining to the spatial and temporal contexts they are generated by, revealing the mechanisms of formation, the strategies of dissemination and the practices of reception. Legend, folk tale, literary writing, film, hagiography, political discourse and photography are all brought centre front in significant case studies revolving around the notions of intertextuality and interculturality.

Aithihyamala (Garland of Legends) reflects, in Sabina Zacharias' opinion, the politics of rewriting history and the manufacturing of truths servient to local power structures. *One Thousand and One Nights* is read by Sima Aghazadeh as impacting the transnational crossroads and undergoing cultural transformation.

The literary ground covered includes twentieth-century novels and short stories, as well as contemporary poetic and prose texts: Robert Lance Snyder looks into the cultural relativism of Patricia Highsmith's *The Tremor of Forgery* (1969); Lidia Necula analyses geographical and mental displacement in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996); Francesca Pierini selects three short stories from A. S. Byatt's collection *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998) to illustrate discursive intertextuality; Mandy Beck focuses on the coexistence of the insular and the cosmopolitan in Brexit poetry signed Armitage, O'Brien, Clarke, Duffy and Commane; Ana-Maria Iftimie interrogates (re)fictionalization in Jude Morgan's *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare* (2012).

Film is addressed from the standpoint of adaptation, transformation and disfigurement – with reference to the Indian cinema landscape (by Sony Jalarajan Raj and Adith K Suresh) –, and individual productions are re-read (by Yidan Hu and Dina Pedro) as subverting happy endings and Victorian ideals of family – *The Piano* (1993) and *Barbe Bleue* (2009), and *The Irregulars* (2021), respectively.

Hagiographic works translated from Greek by Euthymius the Athonite are considered by Irakli Orzhonia in view of highlighting the function of their

intertext. The political discourse of the interwar Caucasian Union is tackled by George Gotsiridze to underline regional competing logic and geopolitical threat. War photography, in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, is approached by Eva Jonisová, who focuses on the trauma of warfare and the heavy price of wartime photojournalism. Lastly, the classroom as intercultural space is placed under the lens by Katherine Ruprecht, a Fulbright lecturer with Eastern European teaching experience.

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Michaela Praisler

One Thousand and One Nights at the Transnational Crossroads

Sima AGHAZADEH*

Abstract

One Thousand and One Nights - *also known in English as the* Arabian Nights - *is a compilation of folkloric tales, with anonymous author(s), dating as far back as the 14th or 15th century but assumed to be rooted much earlier, perhaps the 10th century in its Arabic version and even earlier in its lost Persian embodiment. This authorless work was introduced to the West first in the 18th and later in the 19th century by its French and English Orientalist translators by whom it was brought to life reborn in an alien environment with radically different perceptions and receptions. Since then, The Nights has become one of the most global and yet misunderstood works across various artistic versions besides literature. The narrative framework tells us tales that are widely varied and spread in various regions with their historical and cultural backgrounds, including Persia, Arabia, India, Egypt, China, and so on. On this account, this paper aims to highlight that the multiplicity and hybridity of voices, histories, and cultures position the work at a transnational crossroads. Without dismissing the Oriental aspects of the work, this paper emphasizes that the adaptation and appropriation of such an elusive work with a convoluted history cannot be discussed authoritatively (either through Western Oriental or Post-Colonial or Islamic perspectives) when there is no one author or manuscript or no one culture and nation as a reference point. Each translation or adaptation helps the work expand its transnational network, interconnect old and new, East and West together, bridge differences and continue to address the questions of cultural transformation.*

Keywords: *One Thousand and One Nights, transnational literature, Orientalism, cultural multiplicity, interconnection*

Introduction

The One Thousand and One Nights, also known in English as the *Arabian Nights,* is, without a doubt, an Oriental work that travelled to the West, went through complex and multiple processes of translation, adaptation, and appropriation and became a fertile ground for innumerable scholarly studies from different perspective [1]. In its original Arabic manuscript form, it is a compilation of oral folk tales, with anonymous author(s), written in the 14th or 15th century - but assumed to be rooted much earlier, perhaps the 10th century, in its Arabic version and even earlier in its lost Persian version

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(*Hazar Afsan* or *Thousand Tales*). Therefore, even the original manuscript is an adaptation from oral folklore into a written work, and obviously with no guarantee on the originality or accuracy of the tales. The original Arabic manuscripts branched off into main versions: "the Syrian & the Egyptian" (Haddawy, 1990: xii). According to Haddawy, the former is more authentic and homogenous; the latter more fluid with newer tales added by different writing hands from different sources.

The literary adaptation of *The Nights* (as will henceforth be referred to) in the West started with the 18th and 19th centuries translations; some drew from different Arabic manuscripts and some from the already existing translations. Since then, it has become one of the earliest and most popular narratives from the East to attract the West towards the Orient (e.g., Turkey, Persia, India, and Central Asia) as they appeared either as real or imaginary references in the stories. *The Nights* has been introduced, adapted, sometimes misreported and distorted, yet it has become the most popular global work. Subsequently, much energy and scholarly work have been spent investigating the originality and integrity of the different versions as well as the postcolonial attempt of Muslim researchers (e.g. Mahdi, 1984; Haddawy, 1990; Haddawy et al., 2010) to de-colonize the European versions. Both Orientalist and Postcolonial attempts at reviving this work have improperly ignored or undermined its multi-cultural and transnational element, failing to acknowledge that it is impossible to pin down the text to a single history or culture (Habegger-Conti, 2011).

After providing a short summary of the most popular versions of *The Nights* from the mentioned binary perspectives, this paper aims to highlight that the multiplicity and hybridity of voices, histories, geographies and cultures have been placing the work at the transnational crossroads since its inception. Without dismissing the Orientalist aspects of the work, it emphasizes that *The Nights* is an elusive work with a convoluted history. Therefore, it cannot be discussed authoritatively (neither from Western Orientalist nor Post-Colonial or Islamic perspectives) when there is not one single author or manuscript or one single culture and nation as a reference point. Each translation or adaptation helps the work expand its transnational network.

Caught in the binary opposition of Orientalism/Post-Colonialism

Among many attempts at translating *The Nights*, the 18th-century and the 19th-century versions are the most popular ones and the most frequently referred to [2]. The 18th-century French translation was done by Antoine Galland, who translated from the original but incomplete Syrian manuscript

that he could gather while travelling in the East, where he came to know several languages, such as Turkish, Greek, Arabic, and Persian. Galland's *Les Mille et Une Nuits* (*The Thousand and One Nights*) in twelve small volumes was first published in 1704 and focused more on the fantastic and adventurous, rather than the cultural elements of the tales but it also freely added many enduring stories such as 'Ali Baba' and 'Aladdin' that have made it difficult for the modern reader to believe that they were never part of the original text. For instance, Malcolm and Ursula Lyons's translation (2008) contains stories of 'Ali Baba' and 'Aladdin' which are from Galland's version. Research by Aboubakr Chraibi (2004) on specific stories such as 'Ali Baba', first found in Galland, and their possible origins have also been similarly and significantly revelatory. These additions reflect a good deal of Galland's imagination rather than his authenticity (Larzul, 2004). Galland's translation indeed counted for other eighty English translations of *The Nights* (Haddawy et al., 2010).

The first English translation appeared in 1706 and was applied to Galland's version. Being anonymous, it is known as the Grub Street edition. Edward William Lane (1801-1876), Britain's most famous scholar of the Middle East of his time, did one of the most popular translations in the 19th century, based on one of the Egyptian collections, called the Bulaq or the Cairo edition. He was fascinated by Egypt and Egyptian culture. Lane included in his translation intensive notes on the Middle Eastern and Muslim customs and replaced some of the fantasy-like elements by his 'truths' of 'the Orient' (Ahmed, 1978).

Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890), who also translated the Indian *Kama Sutra* into English, gave the next version of the translation of *The Nights* in ten volumes, with five additional volumes of explanatory notes. His translation is based on another Arabic edition known as Calcutta II (1839-42). He added ethnographic notes, mainly about sexual practices, as well as his own anthropological notes, full of imaginative embellishment and creativity, which altogether made it very much about himself more than the literary translation. Burton's over-emphasis on sexuality in his translation of *The Nights* is perhaps his criticism and revolt against Victorian sexual conservatism, yet it is considered as the translator's subjective response to his audience.

Lane's and Burton's versions contain supposedly anthropological, religious, and cultural 'truths' about Islam and the Arab World, yet the over-sexualized English versions plus the additional personal texts and footnotes have tainted *The Nights* in the inescapable Orientalist framework. What these two versions have done through the translators' comments is to relate *The*

Nights directly to Islam and Islamic traditions while the whole body of *The Night* has little to do with religion at all. Besides, they showcased it not as a marvellous work of literature from the East but as an anthropological work on the Middle East, in a clear attempt to extend European domination over the Orient, as Robert Irwin adequately states as "pretexts for their glosses or notes" (2004: xviii).

The wide range of adaptations and appropriations of *The Nights* across various artistic forms such as the visual arts, television, theatre, and specifically cinema apart from literature has placed it into the category of an 'Orientalist' work as defined by Edward Said (1995). Many critics, following Said's argument, claim that Western Orientalism as a "distorting medium' has seized upon the fictional stories of *The Nights* (e.g. Said himself; Coleman 2008; Irwin, 2004). Coleman states that *The Nights* stories, created by the Western Orientalists, "make up a purely imaginative geography of all those values which the West seeks to expel or disavow, such as irrationality, superstition, cruelty, sexual perversion, and effeminacy" (247). Similarly, the overestimated emphasis on fantasy and sex in different adaptations (esp. in visual adaptations) is a familiar pattern which associates the East (particularly Eastern women) to the world of superstition, mystery, sensuality, and of course erotica; and as a result, the West claims the superiority, rationality, and civilization as its own (Said, 1995).

In their attempt to promote a more faithful and authentic version of *The Nights*, two Arab scholars, Haddawy (1990) and Mahdi (1984) tried to purify and decolonize Burton's and Galland's versions and in doing so, by dismissing the earlier versions, they limited the narrative of *The Nights* to a unified and authoritative version. They both have gone to another extreme to claim the work as a part of Arab Nationalism while the original work contains and represents different layers of cultures, religions, and nationalities.

Muhsin Mahdi's *The Thousand and One Nights* (*Alf Layla wa-Layla*): *From the Earliest Known Sources* (1984) is his attempt at editing and publishing from the original manuscript but his focus is on additional commentary and textual history, as well as on critiquing the Orientalist versions, particularly Galland's translation. Therefore, he focuses more on the reconstruction of the Arabic original and sacrifices the artistic and narrative strength of the work for its postcolonial agenda.

Haddawy's English translation of *The Arabian Nights* (1990) claims to be the only authentic version based on the oldest manuscript of the story collection. He considers his translation as a careful mediator, using "colloquialisms and slang terms sparingly," and "literary ornament judiciously because what appealed to Arabic thirteenth- or fourteenth-

century literary taste does not always appeal to the taste of the modern English reader," and even cuts "the rhymed prose of the original because it is too artificial and too jarring to the English ear" (xxxi). This version is more the author's criticism of Burton's translation as "outlandish", "grotesque" and "totally alien both to the style of the Arabic original and to any recognizable style in English literature" (xxvi) by which he tries to declare his loyalty to a representation of a faithful original only. Therefore, Haddawy's attempt is another version of appropriation and sterilization of *The Nights*. Changing the fun rhyming puns of the original Arabic to a more self-consciously stiff and non-literary text appropriates the tales "under Islamic hegemony and as a more serious rendition" (xv).

Lane, Burton, Mahdi, and Haddawy have all brought *The Night* closer to its global prominence and popularity but at the same time, failed to see the essentially flexible and transnational nature of the work. Without dismissing the European interpolation and appropriation, it is also safe to say that without the French and English versions (though rightly placed as Orientalist), *The Nights* would be unlikely to have had the same successful response and influences in the world or might not have existed in the global mainstream literary list at all. What we know of *The Nights* today is the connection and interaction between the 14th-15th century Arabic compiled manuscripts, the 18th-century French translation, two very distinct 19th-century English versions among many others, around eighty Arabian Nights-inspired films, including Hollywood and Disneyland productions (Peterson, 2007), the Middle-Eastern scholarly research, and an endless list of artists and their works, intertextually influenced by the elements and characters of *The Nights*.

Caught between the two binary streams, most scholars and producers attempt to perceive and receive the work within their own perspective, overlooking that the work has always been hovering above flexible borders. *The Nights* is located in a truly transnational context without being fettered by one cultural, national, or ideological bias. In fact, the popularity and visibility of *The Nights* owe to its transnationality.

At the transnational crossroads

The Nights is inherently a transnational narrative and the collection of essays in *The Arabian Nights in Transnational Perspective* (2007) rightly proves it in the modern and postmodern discourse. It is predominantly transnational through its bringing stories from different cultures, geographies, and nationalities of its own time together. In so doing, it assimilates them in the world of imagination in a meta-fictional structure of stories within a story

and communicates freely its message(s) without obligation to any particular nation or religion. *The Nights* has truly been circulated beyond cultures and nations and become a part of world literature. Therefore, studying different textual versions of *The Nights* or even its representations on the screen or canvas should not overlook or undermine its transnational scope, which results from its hybrid multi-cultural and multi-lingual nature, invigorated by its narrative framework and the voice of its narrator, Scheherazade. These elements make *The Nights* fit in Schulze-Engler's definition of a transnational literary work as one which is impossible to relate to one "particular national literary space" and instead it contains "the complex articulations that link individual works of literature not only to local or regional modernity with their specific social, linguistic, and cultural constellations but also to the worldwide field of literature and specific forms of communicative interaction and political conflict engendered by it" (2009: xvi).

The frame story of *The Nights*, common in different versions, is the story of King Shahryar (a Persian Sassanid king) who, disgusted by his wife's and his brother's wife's infidelity, kills his wife and then, loathing all women, marries and kills a new wife each day. Having devised a scheme to save herself and other victims, Scheherazade (Vizier's daughter) volunteers to marry the king. Each night, she tells Shahryar a story, leaving it purposely incomplete and promising to finish it the following night. Scheherazade's power of storytelling amuses the king so that he eagerly puts off her execution from one day to the next (figuratively for a thousand and one nights) until he finally abandons his cruel plan.

Scheherazade offers a multiplicity of themes, characters, and voices from different geographies and religions in her tales. The elements, names, characters, and traditions are taken from Persians, Indians, Greeks, Egyptians and Turkish, and so on and are blended in the form of fluid and continuous or even indefinite tales, as stories within the frame story. Such cultural and linguistic hybridity gives the work a transnational feature long before the term was even coined or applied. As Geert Jan van Gelder, an Oxford professor of Arabic, comments, *The Nights* "illustrates the hybrid nature of the work; it is part of Arabic and European literature, it contains stories and motifs that may be traced to Sanskrit, Persian and Greek literature, it hovers between the oral and the written, the popular and the highbrow, the pious and the scabrous, realism and fantasy" (in Khan, 2014). Just to name a few examples of such hybridity of voices, are the narratives of: "The Christian Broker's Tale"; "The Jewish Physician's Tale: The Young Man from Mosul and the Murdered Girl"; "Stories of Harun Al-Rashid'; "The Barber of Baghdad" and "The Goldsmith and the Cashmere Singing Girl" [3].

As already said, the framework is structurally a story within a story. Some are left incomplete or even untold (e.g. the third man's story in "The Tale of the Merchant and the Demon") enveloped by the frame story. Such narrative devices like the cliff-hanger by which Scheherazade breaks her stories at critical points playfully situate *The Nights* in no beginning or ending but in an indefinite time; the tales simply continue presenting more richness and diversity in the range and dimensions [4]. Each night introduces a new tale and a narrative voice, though all fostered by the main narrator (Scheherazade), in a lineage of narrators. For example, in "The Tailor's Tale" she tells: 'I heard, O happy King, that the tailor told the king of China that the barber told the guests that he said to the caliph…' (Haddawy, 272) which, as just one example, indicates a heterogeneous range of voices and places. Each night, then, she starts her story with "I heard, O king…' which invokes Scheherazade as only the narrator/reciter of the tales in which she seeks refuge. Such framing and narrating style mobilizes the multiplicity and mixture of voices which has also been cited by Cooppan as "the heterogeneous mix of Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian cultures, and Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Turkish, Syriac, and Byzantine Greek languages that constituted the cosmopolitan medieval world of *The Nights*" (2009: 35). One wonders how such a melting pot of a text can be labelled as of a single nation or culture!

Scheherazade herself is a transnational identity: bearing a Persian name, narrating in Arabic (in the existing Arabic versions) and displaying her tales from different nations and geographies. What shapes the core form of *The Nights* is Scheherazade's marrying King Shahriyar and telling him (and the reader) stories night after night, taking us not only to various and multiform tales but also to a deeper level of resistance, transformation, and liberation. In fact, the tales illustrate the living examples of humanity swarming on the streets of Baghdad and Cairo and Bukhara, strategically and sometimes satirically representing the world engaged with infidelity and corruption, and subsequently the inherently flawed kingdom. For example, playing with the theme of sexuality repeatedly, the narrator tries to suggest that sexuality repressed under the patriarchal civilization would result in a stifling form of corruption. The story of the adulterous affairs of the queen and her sister-in-law, the tale of "The Porter and the Three Ladies", "The Tale of the Husband and the Parrot" featuring a cheating wife, "The Tale of the Enchanted King" with a cheating wife who drugs her rich husband every night so she can sleep with her lover, the jinni's captive woman's call for sex are just a few examples of the representation of un-tabooed and unhindered sexuality and its problematic interactions in a

falsely constructed human world. Thus, Scheherazade's tales are in a way the comical or satirical version of the real world in which sexes, classes, and races are mingled in a subversive quest for freedom [5]. In short, the narrator's creative art of framing stories within a story with the multiplicity of themes, narrative voices and audiences, and the overall cultural hybridity display the transnational element of *The Nights*.

While *The Nights* does not really have a thousand stories (perhaps about 200 plus), one thousand and one suggests the infinity, boundlessness, and fluidity that cannot be contained within any authoritative structure. It signifies that the art of storytelling never ends, and neither does the strong narrative energy of the tales which accommodates the elusive diversity of voices. In today's world, *The Nights* is the property of both the Easterners and Westerners, of natives and immigrants, of the literal and the literary alike. It carries a multinational and multicultural backdrop, pushing the boundaries towards transnational flexibility and cultural hybridity.

Conclusion

The essence of this study is to add a deeper understanding and interpretation to *The Nights* in our current time. Its goal is to position the work in a literary transnational setting, with a more flexible representation of its nature. Considering different translations, adaptations, and appropriations of *The Nights* in both its Eastern and Western versions, it is too simplistic to study it as just a reproduction of binary opposition of Orientalism/Postcolonial revisionism.

Each adaptation is a possibility by which the text can engage the complexities and non-essentialist demands of cultural and artistic transformations. The stories of *The Nights* travel through texts. Perhaps with some changes to suit the taste of a particular audience or bearing a different political stamp, they get a new life and become an example of a transnational text par excellence. Looking at it from such perspective, both in creation and reception, helps us to un-tie the obsessive notion of difference and dissidence, and instead appreciate and respect the diversity of different and probably opposite cultures intersecting and encountering in its artistic creation and recreation. It is safe to claim that it foreruns the contemporary literary transnationalism.

Being truly transnational in nature, *The Nights* seems more alive and inspiring in our era. Undeniably, we need more of Scheherazade's liberating voice, of the flying carpet, and of the magic password of 'open sesame' to seek refuge away from the current world of wars, isolation, oppression, and injustice into border-crossing imaginaries. The intertextuality of the Eastern

and Western versions of *The Nights* is a reminder of empathy towards an idea of a more interconnected world. This study wishes to highlight that *The Nights* is still an inexhaustible source of inspiration for artists and audiences from different backgrounds. The One-thousand-and-one-night recreated textual versions or screen adaptations help the work remain at the transnational crossroads, connect old and new, bridge differences of different kinds, and continue to address the questions of cultural transformation even after a thousand and one years in its figuratively infinite number as suggested by its title.

Notes

[1] For a history of the text of *The Nights* and the differences in its translations, see Frost (2001), available online. Also see Wikipedia entries under the *Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights*.

[2] Other major translations from Arabic originals into English by several well-known translators include Jonathan Scott (1811), Henry Weber (1812), Edward William Lane (1890), John Payne (1901), Sir Richard Francis Burton (1900), Andrew Lang (1898), N. J. Dawood (1950s), Husain Haddawy (1990), E. Powys Mathers (1996), and Malcolm & Ursula Lyons (2008).

[3] Taken from Burton's translation of *Arabian Nights*.

[4] See Makdisi & Nussbaum (2008); Robert Irwin (2004)

[5] Scheherazade represents a liberal and empowering feminist voice which subverts the cultural rigidity of her time and the patriarchal system (reflected in the cruelty and insanity of King Shahryar). Scheherazade's voice and narrative strategies are beyond the scope of this paper and would deserve a full article.

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