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A Cultural Median: One Thousand Nights and a Night before 1700

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ABSTRACT

With tales that date as far back as the ninth century, *One Thousand Nights and a Night* is one of the earliest seminal texts to first expose the West to Eastern life and culture. Following their translation, their extensive influence upon Western literature became an established fact. However, though direct referencing to the tales prior to their translation is lacking, there is evidence to indicate they were widely received and circulated even before the time when the lengthy crusader wars and their accompanying intervals of peace opened a field of folkloric interaction between East and West. Through a historical analysis, this article examines the reception and impact of *The Nights* on European narrative, poetic, and dramatic productions before 1700 to highlight its significance as a cultural median and reveal how apparently disparate cultures share similarities in at least in one essential part of human development; the folkloric. Edward Said's claim that "in general it was the West that moved upon the East, not vice versa" (73) is textually justified only during the period of British imperialism since one text had already made its way into Western folkloric tradition well before its translation. In the process, this article also draws attention to the tales' neglect among the Arab literary tradition and, in so doing, exposes the political and religious institutionalization of literature. Thus, the following historical overview contributes to the field of literary anthropology and to reception theory.

Keywords: Borrowing, Culture, Folklore, Orientalism, Reception.

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... and mine is a tale which, if it were written upon the eye-corners with needle-gravers, were a warner to whoso would be warned².

1. Introduction

No other work has received as much global attention and has had as much influence upon world literature and cultures as "*Alf Laylah wa- Laylah*," "*The 1001 Nights*," or what has come to be known as *The Arabian Nights*. The profound impact of the Orient upon eighteenth century travel

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² Burton, Richard. (1888). *One Thousand Nights and a Night*. "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad." Vol. I. P. 104.

literature and nineteenth century European and American literature is now an established fact firmly established by Robert Irwin's (2006: ix) affirmation of the ease with which it is possible to mention eighteenth and nineteenth century writers that were not affected and inspired by the tales compared to those that were. However, one cannot ignore or underestimate is *The Nights'* inspirational power upon European literature before the middle-ages. The following study traces such an impact while rendering questionable the originality and creativity of major European narratives.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* postulates that "knowledge about the Orient, intercourse with it... is an academic [and] an instrumental attitude" (Said 1979: 246) carried out to create an image, a myth that would maintain its subordinate, childish, and inferior position to the West. Said also provides detailed evidence of the damaging Orientalist project by mentioning prominent British and French authors whose works would essentially have been futile without the East as a foil, and refers to Kinglake's defamatory judgment of *The Arabian Nights* as "too lively and inventive a work to have been created by a 'mere Oriental, who, for creative purposes, is a thing dead and dry – a mental mummy" (Said 1979:193). Indeed, by adopting a Eurocentric stance, Said ignores the East's pre-colonial literary, philosophical and scientific influence on Western literature and fails to give a voice to the Orient. Hande Tekdemir (2017: 151) effectively argues that "almost the entire book seeks to understand Orientalism without responses from the Orient that actually partakes in the creation of this discourse ... Said's analysis is incomplete not because he underrepresents the Orient and betrays his Palestinian origins as some critics argue, but because he fails to study the interaction between the subject and the object, between the Occident and the Orient." Consequently, this study attempts to fill this gap by focusing on one among several inspirational Arabic works, *The Arabian Nights*, on the basis of its historical influence and enduring attraction.

Another motive for carrying out this historical survey is the need to establish an oral transmission of the tales prior to colonization that was most probably instigated from trade routes and during the crusader wars. In fact, the existence of certain Arabian tales among Danish and Scandinavian folkloric stories indicates that regardless of spatiotemporal influences the tales have remained true to the original. One particular proof of oral circulation and reception is found in Evald Tang Kristensen's 1881-1887 collection of *Stories from Jutland* in which "The Rope Maker's Misfortune" (Badman, 2014:116-121) is almost a direct retelling of *The Nights'* (1995) "The Story of Cogia Hasan Al-Habbal" (Burton, 1888: Vol. III-341). Since Kristensen's are "stories recorded as told" (Badman, 2014:11), they have been circulated orally at a time parallel to their discovery and translation by French and English travelers. Furthermore, Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Engebretsen Moe's 1800 collection of Norwegian folktales include, "The Three princesses in the Blue Mountain" shares an identical plot and similar motif with *The Nights'* "The Three Princes and the Genius Morhagian" (Marzolph et al., 2004: 417). In both tales, when the hero rescues the princesses and is about to be pulled out by his two companions in the search, they let go of the rope. In the Norwegian tale the hero is brought back to land by an eagle while in the Arabian tale he is rescued by a Roc. Moreover, the flying creatures in both tales have to be constantly fed on meat.

It is historically acknowledged that the period before the Middle-Ages had witnessed an 'inter-verbal' atmosphere encouraged by what has come to be known as The Silk Roads. These second-century trade routes linked the East to the West and played a major "role in bringing cultures and peoples in contact with each other, and facilitating exchange between them. On a practical level, merchants had to learn the languages and customs of the countries they travelled through, in order to negotiate successfully."³ Moreover, Christa A. Tuczay (2005: 278) declares that "Transmission of folklore between Christian Europe and the world of Islam flourished during the Moorish occupation of Spain (from 711 to the fifteenth century), as a result of the Crusades (1095 to the fifteenth century), and during the Turkish Wars." Consequently, the exposition of such early influences serves to subvert the claim that western translations of the texts were primarily undertaken to further exploit and colonize the East. Indeed, its strong impact upon the literature and imagination of the West is founded upon a Western attraction to, and a fascination with the East or the Orient long before their translation. The

³ The UNESCO Social and Human Sciences Sector, Division of Social Transformation and Intercultural Dialogue, Section of History and Memory for Dialogue provides a map of the trade routes and a detailed account of their historical significance in promoting cultural and religious diversity <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/about-silk-road>

following historical exploration therefore seeks to expose instances of Western borrowing prior to *The Nights*' translation into French and English with the aim of revealing whether such evidence renders the geographically and politically marginalized Orient or the East a pivotal position in the collective unconscious of both East and West.

2. Methodology

As the intention of colonizing missions was to 'own' or exploit other cultures, it can be surmised that *The Arabian Nights*' translation and adaptation was carried out with such an aim in mind. However, Western literature was already benefiting from the creative richness of style and plot by borrowing from that particular 'other' cultural work. According to Arthur Frank, stories "are reassemblies of fragments on loan' that "depend on shared narrative sources" (qtd. in Zipes 2012:4). Moreover, the tales' survival and global reception strengthens the notion of intersubjectivity which, according to Wolfgang Iser's reception theory (Shi 2013: 983) emphasises a phenomenological aspect in the reading process brought about by the interaction between the author's intention and the readers' understanding as influenced by external factors such culture, beliefs, age, gender and psychological factors.

Hence, the fact that the tales have been in circulation before nineteenth century imperialism points to a cultural interaction on the level of art and literature that strengthens Said's (1979:3) assertion that cultures are "hybrid and heterogeneous." More importantly, the tales' creativity and popularity are living testimony of the imaginative and creative genius of the East. Though the Eastern or Oriental cultural atmosphere has developed and changed, as cultures are wont to do over time, the tales remains proof of an Eastern attraction penetrating and inspiring Western minds as far back as the Middle Ages.

Furthermore, while the paper traces *The Nights*' literary and folkloric influence, it contributes to reception studies and asserts the foundation of literary anthropology which states that, "if a literary text does something to its readers, it simultaneously tells us something about them. Thus, literature turns into a divining rod, locating our dispositions, desires, and inclinations and eventually our overall makeup" (Shi 2013: 985). Accordingly, this article will proceed by first defining the cultural environment of the early Middle Ages to establish the Arabian origin of *The Nights*. It will continue by providing evidence of instances of Western borrowing during the middle ages and the sixteenth century. Afterwards, it will focus on the Arab reception of the tales to conclude by establishing the tales' global status and significance as a cultural median.

3. Arabian origin of the nights

The fact that the tales have crossed the geographical and cultural barrier and have continued to inspire media and literary productions is proof of humanity's fascination with the highly imaginative, the beautiful, and the strange. This exceptional and didactic collection of popular folk stories deals with practically every aspect of human nature including adultery, theft, murder, incest, homosexuality, bestiality and witchery. In a magical world of Djins (genies), angels, sages, mermaids, talking serpents, talking trees, devils and other strange creatures, they narrate stories of superheroes, princesses, slaves, adventurers and diverse characters, all in a tone and mood varying from the comic, satiric, tragic or erotic. It is against such an exotic background and a fantastic proto-scientific world of flying carpets, dream knowledge, medicine, precious stones, marble, and metal, that the artful Scheherazade saves her life and that of her kind. Certainly, such a brief account of the book's content does not give credit to the smooth, simple, narrative style of the tales which according to Mariner Warner (2012:7), not only form a book, "but also a genre which is still changing, still growing. The tales spill out from the covers of the volumes ... in different versions and translations, and escape from the limits of time that the narrative struggles to impose." She also compares *The Arabian Nights* to a genie who, streaming out of a jar, takes on many forms and answers to many masters (ibid.).

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979: 88) has painstakingly established that numerous and varied texts about the East, ranging from the geographical, anthropological, adventurous, poetic, or fictional have come to make up the bulk of the primary literary heritage in seventeenth century Europe. He even compares the Orient to the womb from which various fictional and travel stories, or what he refers to

as “textual children,” were produced and placed at the disposal of the seventeenth century western reading public. This serves as a fitting image of *The Nights* whose impact on Western literature both predates and postdates western imperialism. With evidence indicating a written form dating as far back as the ninth century (Abbott 1949: 130), tales from the *Nights* have been identified in various European texts as early as the twelfth century; that is, even before the fifteenth century manuscript was discovered by Jean Antoine Galland and first translated into twelve volumes from 1707 until 1717.

The Mediterranean ‘melting pot’ atmosphere of the seventh century during and after the crusader wars stands as major evidence of the Arabian origin of the tales. From that early period leading to the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire “many petty states establish[ed] themselves under Muslim rules in North Africa and Spain to the west and in Iran and lands further east” (Lindsay 2005: 17). In Edward Gibbon’s account, following Charlemagne’s defeat of the Saracens in Spain he “maintained a more equal intercourse with the caliph Harun al Rashid, whose dominion stretched from Africa to India, and accepted from his ambassadors a tent, a water-clock, an elephant, and the keys of the Holy Sepulchre” (Bury 2013: 290). Furthermore, in-between the crusades whose major battlegrounds were Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Spain, the Baltic, Sicily, Southern Italy, and Southern France there were long intervals of peace during which adventurers, warriors, and merchants migrated between Europe and Asia via Andalusia and Sicily which, during the tenth and eleventh centuries “reached the pinnacle of culture and civilization under Islamic jurisdiction” (Malveaux 2015: 222). Ivan Kalmar (2012: 38) also draws attention to the fact that “The famous fourteenth century Flemish-Burgundian manuscript ‘Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry’ pictured the Roman Emperor Constantine with typical scimitar associated with the Ottoman Turkish Warrior, and with an exotic piece of headwear.” In appears as a caricaturist representation of the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire, this image not only indicates a certain fascination with the Other, but also harbors the desire to identify with the exotic.

Rafaat Al-Bouhayri (1889: viii)⁴ points that the orientalists J. Gildemeister and J. Horovitz had attributed the tales’ odd-numbered title to the Arab’s inclination for oral musicality and their preference for odd numbers, while E. Littman had considered the element of exaggeration in Turkish and Arabic traditions as another probability. There are also those who claim that the title is borrowed from a pre-Islamic Persian book, Hazar Afsane, “A thousand Stories,” and its frame-tale structure assigned to Indian and Persian sources (Al-Bouhayri 1889: ix). However, regardless of whether some of the Arabian tales were borrowed from Indian, Persian, or Chinese stories, *The Nights* was essentially compiled in Arabic in the midst of a flux of rich and varied historical incidents and interactions. Significantly, by the middle of the tenth century, Arabic

...had become the preferred language of science and learning for nearly every ethnic and religious group, under Muslim rule. Arabic served to unite the educated elites in the Islamic world in much the same way as Latin did in medieval Western Europe or English does in the modern world. (Lindsay 2005:3)

John Payne (1884: 28) asserts that Antoine Galland attributed the work’s Islamic-Arabian roots to an “an unknown Arabic author” writing between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and supports Silvestre de Sacy’s affirmation “that no trace whatever exists of any considerable body of pre-Mohamedan or Non-Arabic fiction in the extant texts of The Thousand and One Nights” (Payne 1884:28). On a similar note, Hassan El-Shamy (2018:3) argues that “With the spread of Islam, Arabic language and culture, Arab ways of life were adopted by populations in regions extending from the shores of the Atlantic in the East to the borders of China in the west, and from northern Spain to the heart of sub-Saharan Africa.”

As for differing opinions concerning the naming of the book and its frame-tale structure, Al-Bouhayri (1889: x)⁵ asserts:

...from the oldest ages, the Arabs have known something quite similar or very close to the frame-tale... it is a practice that is specifically Arabian. Were it borrowed from India or Persia, it underwent many changes. It was transformed in Arabia until it acquired an Arab model that surpassed the manner in which others implemented them.

⁴ Translated by author

⁵ Translated by author

It is also relevant to mention that the number of tales anticipated in *The Nights* did not initially amount to that mentioned in the title and Galland, considering it an incomplete undertaking, took it upon himself to add tales he had acquired from various Oriental manuscripts and from the Syrian monk Hanna Dyab, from whom he first learned about the book (Payne 1884:8).

4. Borrowing and the early middle ages

What made borrowing a lawful act in those early days was the fact that it was carried out by dominant and unchallenged powers who according to Peter Fjågesund (2014:18) “tried to establish a cultural foundation and justification that are truly [their] own ... such borrowings are only reluctantly acknowledged, and as far as possible presented as invented by and unique to the culture in question.” On his part, Bruce Thornton (2000: 4-5) argues that multiculturalism as advocated by Anglo-American cultural-political communities “is at heart a species of anti-humanist and anti-liberal identity politics” further affirming that:

...no human society lives in a vacuum, untouched by the customs of other people with whom they war, trade and intermarry... More important ... is what the Greeks *made* of their borrowings. Consider the Greek alphabet, the elements of which were adapted from the Phoenician around the ninth century.

The same can be applied to the Arabian tales which, in spite of different assumptions as to their origin or affiliation, they have been creatively adapted to meet the concerns and entertainment of human nature throughout the ages regardless of age, gender, race, or cultural background.

Acts of borrowing therefore indicate both a maneuvering of power and an interest in the literary heritage of the conquered territories. Western interest in the East essentially goes as far back as the seventh century, to the time when the latter was beginning to establish itself as the major cultural, religious, industrial, artistic, and conquering power. In this respect, Said (1979: 98) argues that the conflict between East and West is as old as history and goes as far back as Aeschylus and Euripides. More importantly, the conflict was not only focused on material gain but also on the acquisition of textual or literary styles facilitated by cultural interaction.

The earliest evidence of borrowing can be traced to the existence of identical motifs in both *The Nights* and early western narratives. Christa Tuczay (2005: 272-273) provides interesting evidence for those scholars who “agree that there has been mutual interaction between *The Thousand and One Nights* and Western stories” and traces similarities between seven motifs in *The Nights*’ and ancient and medieval folklore. One identical motif she mentions is that of the magnetic mountain or rock which was “incorporated into medical treatises, especially by authors of the Salernian School” (ibid: 274). It is important to point out that at the tenth century “medical art flourished in the Italian school at Salerno. The physicians there seem to have first studied the work of the Arabians” (Whitelaw, 1862: 173). Tuczay (2005: 273) discovers this motif to have first been mentioned by the Roman author Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) with no direct evidence that attributes it to an Eastern source other than the certainty of Roman rule in the region. Moreover, the magnetic mountain appears in the anonymous romance *The Famous Trip of the Holy Father Brendan (Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis)* which is one of the oldest old-Dutch manuscripts dating back to the twelfth century (ca. 1150) that narrates the experiences of the sixth century Irish legendary traveler Father Brendan. Interestingly, the magnetic mountain myth and an episode with a whale appear in the romance and bear strong resemblance to incidents in “Sindbad the Sailor” (Tuczay 2005: 275). Though it cannot be firmly concluded as to who borrowed from whom, the content of these narratives is direct historical evidence of borrowing. Moreover, historical research draws attention to the fact that “at some time in the eighth century, and perhaps even as early as the seventh, Irish monks travelled and settled as far as the Faroes and Iceland” (Fjågesund 2014: 39-40) not far from the North Pole that was at the time considered the magnetic mountain or “the so called Lodestone Mountain” (Ibid: 19). According to the Marquesse of Bute (1893), the whale incident and,

... the attempt to join the tail to the mouth, which brings it into connection with the emblem of eternity, which is due, I believe, to the Phoenicians ... seems to bring it into connection rather with the idea of the Midgard-Worm, the great under-lying world-serpent which figures so

largely in the mythic cosmogony of the Scandinavians. I suggest that this is the notion, of which the romancer may have heard from Scandinavian sources.

Added to this, two anonymous German medieval works, the epic *Herzog Ernst* and the romance *Reinfried Von Braunschweig*, written around the twelfth and thirteen centuries respectively, give detailed descriptions of the magnetic mountain and of orcs identical to those found in “Sindbad” and “The Third Kalandar’s Tale” (Burton 1888: Vol. VI. 17- 139). It is thought-provoking that *Reinfried* includes motifs identical to those found in *The Nights’* tale with the protagonist being breathlessly carried from one adventure to another,

... an automaton, a genie in the bottle, and a mysterious walled city...*Reinfried* is in the congealed sea close by the magnetic mountain where the griffins nest. He demands to be sewn into an ox hide and is carried into the griffins’ lair. He kills the giant birds, climbs the mountain and enters by an iron gate guarded by an automaton, an iron man. The mountain is surrounded by an iron wall with a gate and an iron guardian at each corner. Subsequently the story of Vergilius ... who captured a Jinn or a Genie in a bottle, is related. (Tuczay 2005:282)

Likewise, in “The Third Kalandar’s Tale” an iron man in a boat rescues the desperate and helpless hero stranded on top of the magnetic mountain after being carried there not by the griffins, but by an automaton” (Tuczay 2005: 282). Readers cannot help but speculate on the motif of the automaton as an innovative technological twist to the tales at a time when such inventions were hardly thought credible.

Rocs, giant flying birds or ‘griffins’ are another shared and popular motif in medieval literature. The existence of these creatures remained mysterious or fantastical until Rustichello da Pisa penned Marco Polo’s accounts of these supposedly unreal creatures in his thirteenth century travelogue *The Travels of Marco Polo*. For such fantastical creatures to be found in what is professedly a real biographical narrative does not authenticate their existence, but rather lends credence to speculations upon the credibility of most of Polo’s adventures. Indeed “Professor Bianconi of Bologna, who has written much on the subject, concludes that it was most probably a bird of the vulture family. This would go far, he urges, to justify Polo’s account of the Ruc as a bird of prey, though the story of its lifting any large animal could have had no foundation, as the feet of the vulture kind are unfit for such efforts” (Polo, vol. II: 93). Prior to these adventures, Rocs are mentioned in the “Hasan of el-Basra” Arabian Tale and in “an Arabic work of the 10th century on the “*Marvels of Hind*” (Polo, vol. II: 93).

In addition to these controversial elements is Polo’s mentioning of the twelfth-century legendary Asian priest-king, Prester John who, during the crusader wars, is supposed to have sent a letter to the Pope describing his adventures which include his confrontation with ‘orcs.’ It should be noted however, that the “first authentic mention of Prester John is to be found in the ‘Chronicle’ of Otto, Bishop of Freising, in 1145. Otto gives as his authority Hugo, Bishop of Gabala” (Stockmann 2018).⁶ This Eastern priest king became popular at a most convenient time giving hope to a people whose faith in the crusader wars was on the decline. Alastair Lamb (2018) accordingly elaborated that “Medieval legend called him into being when it was felt that his presence would be of help in the struggle between Christian Europe and the Islamic world” which makes him an essentially propagandist figure who performed the same role as did “The Song of Roland” during the first crusade. As for the controversial adventures of Marco Polo, Giusto Fontanini, the Italian archbishop and historian (1666-1736) explains its title as having “been given to the book as containing a great number of stories, like the *Cento Novelle* or *The Thousand and One Nights!*” (Polo 2004, vol I, 112).

Travel narratives at the time were much in demand and highly appreciated by the reading or listening public of the early and late middle ages and authors went so far as to use the first-person narrative form to strengthen their claim to authenticity. Consequently, it is not surprising that plots or motifs from *The Nights* made their way into their narratives as did other elements from other sources. John Mandeville’s *Travels* written c. 1356/57 is a case in point. Aside from the fact that there are diverse critical opinions concerning the true identity of the author and the authenticity of the information (Verner 2005: 124), there are instances in which the *Travels* allude to other works and motifs. A particular case of such intertextuality is when the author not only refers to *The Letter of Prester John*

⁶ ‘Gabala’ is modern day Jbeil- Lebanon, then part of Greater Syria.

but also to the mysterious orcs. Even more so, Justin Glenn (1971: 141) argues that Homer must have borrowed from the Arabian tales stating that the “consistent sequence of motifs” reveals that he “shared this tale, borrowed and adapted it, rather than invented it” and that most probably such borrowing goes back to “two tales from *The Arabian Nights* ... [and] that closer to Homer’s version occurs in the Third Voyage of Sindbad” (Glenn 1971:135). Glenn (1971: 141) also provides a detailed comparative study of Sindbad and Homer’s *Kyklôpeia* in which the latter, like the tales, includes the recurring giant or roc motif, with “men trapped by an ogre, the cannibalism, the blinding ... and the escape with the help of sheep” feature prominently.

Another borrowed and entertaining motif that helps uncover a shared or common human collective memory is that of the external soul. It describes the strange incident found in Roman, Arabian, Celtic, and Norse folklore where a soul temporarily wanders from the body. Interestingly, this motif is found in the Roman version of “Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp,” in *The Nights’* tale of “Seyf el-Mulook,” in two Celtic tales recorded in the West Highlands of Scotland, and in the Norse tale of “the giant who had no heart in his body” respectively. All these stories give identical detailed descriptions of a princess captured by a giant whose heart has to be sought until it is found and destroyed, for the princess to be set free. Considering the close proximity of the regions and the historical warring events that brought these different peoples together, the practice of borrowing motifs is not only fathomable but is, in a sense, justifiable. Having ruled Britain, continental Europe, much of western Asia, northern Africa and the Mediterranean islands for more than a thousand years, the Roman Empire brought together people from different parts of the world until the time it was divided into East and West following the Western Empire’s defeat by Germanic tribes. A thousand years later, the Eastern Empire fell to the Ottoman Turks who took over as the empirical power of the region. Such an interconnected state in the region was bound to foster considerable cultural interchange.

Going further back in time, one particular pre-Islamic location from which many folkloric tales, poems, gender roles, and much of the sexually implicit scenes must have been acquired is ‘Souk Oukaz’. Arabs used to meet and spend twenty days in this famous souk in Mecca, trading, spreading culture, literature and poetry. This souk lasted until early Islamic expansion in the eighth century, following the defeat of the fourth Umayyad Caliphate⁷. It played a major role in the spread of Islam and culture to Greater Syria, Iraq, Egypt and other major cities and had economic, cultural and political significance. The most influential role of the souk was its mingled cultural atmosphere that attracted merchants and poets from neighboring Arab countries and beyond to participate in poetry competitions, give eloquent speeches and narrate tales. It also accounts for *The Nights’* diversity of stories from pre-Islamic features to post-Islamic ones. Furthermore, the book’s attention to trade and the material benefits genes bestow on their masters makes it, in Warner’s opinion, (2012: 216), “a story of international trade [that] literally animates the goods that form part of that trade.”

5. Borrowing during the middle ages

In her article “Shahrazade is One of Us,” Suzanne Enderwitz (2007: 262) affirms that “whatever common grounds the *Nights* and the foundation myths of Judeo-Christian culture may have, there is no doubt that before they were even translated into French, English, and German, the *Nights* made their mark on European literature, in particular on the literature of renaissance Italy.” With a similar conception, the Italian Professor, Francesca Maria Corrao (2007: 284) provides concrete evidence of narratives in both Italian and Sicilian folklore that are parallel to those in the *Nights* and affirms that, “the close relationship between oral or popular and written or literary tradition is responsible for the worldwide existence of numerous tales originating from *The Arabian Nights* in oral tradition.” What establishes this claim are the obviously identifiable signs of European borrowing from *The Nights*. Giovanni Boccaccio has even fallen within such a scope of borrowing. Considering that he spent his adult years in Naples, (southern Italy), he must have fell under the influence of the great number of romantic and fictitious works “imported into Italy by the dispersion of the Constantinopolitan exiles... It is certain that many oriental fictions found their way into Europe by means of this communication” (Warton 1871: 308). Moreover, the fact that his father was a merchant provided him with ample opportunity to meet with travelers or merchants from the East. Though it has been acknowledged that

⁷ Translated by author from <https://www.almowaten.net/2018/06/ا-تاريخ-المملكة-وا-عكاظ-محطة-مهمة-في-تاريخ-المملكة-وا>

his major influential source is *The Seven Sages of Greece* by the French Minstrel Hebers (circa 1200), the conformity of *The Decameron's* plotline and themes to those of the *Nights* (Marzolph 2007: 501/502) serves as substantial evidence of a familiarity with the Arabic text.

Further evidence of the tales' influence and circulation is found in the sixteenth century Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto's epic poem *Orlando Furioso* (1516-1532) which begins with an almost identical frame story as that of the *Nights*. Moreover, Giambattista Basile's 1634 *Il Pentamerone*, or *Tale of Tales* not only follows an identical frame-style but some of the tales appear as transformed versions of those in the *Nights*. Corrao (2007: 286) exposes the parallelism between "The Magic Ring" and the second part of the Aladdin story and draws attention to the similarity between the plot of Basile's "The Twelve Thieves" and that of "Ali Babba and the Forty Thieves," and to that between "The Lost wife" and the *Nights'* "Hasan of Basra." Though she speculates upon the origin of Antoine Galland's translation of the Aladdin story, whether it goes back to the *Il Pentamerone* or to the Syrian storyteller Hanna Dyab's recitations, she nevertheless quotes Basil's acknowledgment "that Italian literature has learned from Oriental tales the ability to create equilibrium between didactic and sententious purpose on the one hand, and playful entertainment on the other" (Corrao 2007:287). As a matter of fact, even if Galland's translation was inspired by that of Basile's, both writers owe credit to the same source. On her part, Midori Snyder (2007) has traced the oldest version of "Sleeping Beauty" to that of Basile's modified version "Sun, Moon, and Talia" which "Despite an exotic Eastern setting ... begins with familiar conflicts" as those of the *Nights'* "The Ninth Captain's Tale." Zipes (2012: 16) also recognizes influence in the tales of Giovan Francesco Straparola's "Constantino Fortunato" in *Le piacevolinotti (The Pleasant Nights, 1550/1553)* stating that "while many of the tales are related to Italian customs, laws, and rituals, others can be linked to tales from the medieval Arabic *Thousand and One Nights*."

Considering the intricate conflicts and political and economic interchanges taking place in the region and the fact that the West was gradually regaining political and economic power during the renaissance, the circulation of both oral and written tales was facilitated by the invention of the printing press which in turn encouraged the practice of borrowing. The renaissance spirit inspired the circulation and translation of books from different parts of the world, even the East, and it is in this learning environment that the Arabic treatise "*The choicest Maxims and Best Sayings (Mukhtar al-Hikam wa Mahasin al-Kalim)* became one of the many books to cross the cultural and religious divide "via successive Spanish, Latin and French translations" and together with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, is part of "the foundation of English print culture" (Andrea 2017: 22).

It would therefore come as no surprise to discover that the father of English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer had also imitated certain aspects from *The Nights*. Certainly, he must have made the acquaintance of Arab, Italian, or other European merchants during his travels abroad on diplomatic missions and his "*Canterbury Tales*" with its convenient frame-tale offers a panoramic picture of the England of the Middle Ages not so different from the manner in which the Arabian tales are structured. Moreover, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (Marzolph et al. 2004: 158) provides specific evidence of Chaucer's borrowing from the tales:

The Squire's Tale features a mechanical flying horse of brass that is reminiscent of the mechanical horse in *The Ebony Horse*; the same tale's episode about a female falcon telling of its desertion by a male hawk appears to derive from the stories of *Ardashir and Hayat al-Nufus* and *Taj al-Muluk and Dunya*. The Pardoner's Tale shows parallels with *The Merchant and the Two Sharpers* and, more directly, with the *Tale of the Three Men* and *Our Lord I'sa* in the Breslau edition. The Merchant's Tale has a precursor in the *Tale of the Simpleton Husband* [1] and [2].)

Moreover, "The Nun's Priest's Tale" which begins with the fable of Chanticleer and Pertelote is identical to that of *The Nights'* "Tale of the Bull and the Ass" where Shahrazad's father tells her the story of a merchant who "had in his out-houses some fifty hens under one cock... Chanticleer" and his "Dame Partlets" (Burton 1888: 21). Such marked similarities establish that a written version of the text must have existed during the middle ages. In this context, Luther Luedtke (1989: 56) claims that it was "probably brought to Europe by Italian Merchants" while Carol F. Heffernan (2003: 29) asserts,

In the light of the growing long-term commercial ties between the Latin west, especially Italy, and the nearby Islamic world which began in the early middle ages and reached their height during the lifetimes of Chaucer, Gower and Boccaccio, readers should be...less surprised ... by the presence of merchants in Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale."

Therefore, together with the claim that Boccaccio's *Decameron* inspired Chaucer's frame narrative, the titles and content of some of his tales are indicative of an *Arabian Nights* influence and borrowing. Consider how the structure of Chaucer's titles follows a similar pattern as that of *The Nights*, notice Chaucer's "The Cook's Tale" or "The Merchant's Tale" and *The Nights*' "The Story Told by the Tailor" and "The Story told by the Christian Merchant." Even more significant, is Chaucer's allusion, in his prologue and "Tale of the Merchant" to Constantinus Africanus the 11th century North African Arabic scholar who translated "a great number of Arabic and Greek medical works into Latin" (Masi 2005:18). This was carried out for the benefit of the medical school at Salerno which was the most famous in the 11th century and to which doctors from all over Europe travelled (Barber 2013: 31). In this respect, one cannot but speculate upon the possibility of there having been a Latin translation of *The Nights* as early as that period. More significantly, Chaucer's profuse digressions on medicinal practices suggest close contact with scientific circles from which he acquired the elaborate and varied medical information he vividly describes in the tale of the "Doctour of Physik."

6. Sixteenth-century borrowing

The most popular sixteenth-century playwright, Shakespeare, is not exempted from acts of borrowing and from adapting certain plots from the Arabian tales as he deemed fit to the taste and pleasure of his audience. Researchers have long sought to identify Shakespeare's inspirational sources, and though nothing has firmly been established, some plausible deductions have been made. One such assumption is that of Ernesto Grillo's (1949) *Shakespeare and Italy* which takes into account Italy's position as the pivotal center of the renaissance and the cultural mediator of the time. Grillo argues that the precision of Shakespeare's geographical knowledge of Italy together with his deep familiarity with the Italian culture and language as reflected in his Italian plays indicate an insider's knowledge of the traditions and even of the families of the time (1949: 146). He rightfully assumes that the playwright must have spent "the autumn of 1592 and the summer of 1593 – the period in which the plague was so prevalent" in Italy (1949:133). Hence, while there he must have become familiar with tales from *The Nights*, considering Italy's proximity to Arabian culture and its influence, and also to Ariosto and Giraldo Cinthio's works which are themselves suspect of borrowing from the *Nights* (Malveaux 2015: 494). Essentially, whoever Shakespeare had borrowed from or had been influenced by, the sources always point to an essentially Arabian source.

Othello's jealousy upon seeing the handkerchief he had gifted his wife with his friend is similar to the tale of "Kamar Al-Zaman and the Jeweller's Wife" in which her husband sees the knife and watch he had bestowed upon her with his friend (Burton 1888: 279). On his part, Augustin Daly (2000) affirms the similarity between *The Taming of the Shrew* and "The Sleeper Awakened" stating that it not only rests upon the use of a framing device, but also on the induction scheme story where Christopher Sly becomes an English version of the *Night's* "Abon Hassan." He further posits that the story must have been made available to Shakespeare from the French Simon Goulart's 'Admirable and Memorable Histories,' which was translated into English by E. Grimestone, in 1607. Should this be confirmed, then French story-telling this far back in history must have also fallen under the influence of *The Nights*.

Looking upon *Othello* with its unquestionably Venetian setting and Arabian plot, one cannot fail to recognize its affinity to the *Nights*' "The Three Apples." In spite of slight alterations, the major plot pattern is identical, with the main character killing his wife after being deceived by a black slave into believing she has been unfaithful. Moreover, both crimes are propelled by a husband's special gift: a handkerchief in the Western play and an apple in the Eastern tale. E.A.J. Honigmann (2003) provides a detailed and direct comparison of *Othello* to "the seventh novella in the third decade," or "Un Capitano Moro" from Cinthio's short story collection, *Hecatommithi* of 1565/6 (2). In spite of Cinthio's claims of the authenticity of his stories, it has been established and acknowledged that he borrowed from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Consequently, the possibility or certainty of adapting from *The Arabian Nights* cannot be overlooked.

7. Arab reception during the middle ages

Concerning claims that some tales from *The Nights*, and its frame-tale structure are of Indian, Persian, or Egyptian origin, it is important to draw attention to the fact that by 747 CE Saracen or

Muslim reign “extended from India to the Atlantic Ocean, over the various and distant provinces, which may be comprised under the names of, I. Persia; II. Syria; III. Egypt; IV. Africa; and, V. Spain” (Bury 2013: 410). Furthermore, after the surrender of Assyria, (Iraq) Bassora was founded as the trade center of the Persians where “the vessels of Europe still frequent the port of Bassora, as a convenient station and passage of the Indian trade” (Bury 2013: 413). Moreover, during the rule of Haroun al-Rashid, the fifth Abbasid caliph, Baghdad became the capital and the center of trade, learning and the arts. Consequently, the Baghdad tale of “Sindbad the Sailor,” the young adventurer who barely escapes with his life, might well belong to this interactive period, and with Iraq bordering most Islamic or Arab countries: Turkey (The Ottoman Empire) Syria (Greater Syria), Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iran (Persia), the common Arabic language and religion created an essential base for the development of shared cultural backgrounds, and allowed the compiler of *The Nights* to borrow or adapt tales at will.

Yet, *The Nights*’ strong and lasting impact upon European folktales and culture in the early and later Middle Ages stands in complete contrast to the indifference and evasion it was met with by the Arab literary tradition of the time. In fact, it is not until recently that the tales have gained recognition in the Arab world. Accordingly, Muhsin al-Musawi (2004: 353) states that “In Arabic classical literature, the recognition of the tales in their own right as popular literature came late, with the increasing awareness of the limitations of institutionalized culture and its accentuations of eliticism.” Though the tales were written in the generally acknowledged classical or standard Arabic, their informal or “hakawati” storyteller style is radically different from the high-handed lofty style attributed to educated and scholastic people. Essentially, pre-Islamic and medieval Arabic writers were more inclined towards the high-quality lofty language of the poetry of epics, eulogies, and poems of praise, and did not acknowledge prose as a major artistic achievement, especially one that harbors on the colloquial such as *The Nights*.

Another draw-back to the tales’ reception was the story-telling technique of the Abbasid period and the Middle Ages. What prevailed was the straightforward matter-of-fact style where conversations attributed to the prophet, or an Imam, were repeated with detailed references to the sources of information as handed down from one person to another in what is referred to as “hadith.” Contrary to this technique, the tales straight-forward description of events provide no detailed account of points or reference. Moreover, an authentic rendition of a characters’ feelings or emotions was deemed implausible, unconvincing or unreasonable since it was beyond the narrator’s immediate knowledge. Consequently, the tales were undermined and considered worthless and uncouth by the majority of the educate elite, especially Ibn al-Nadim (d.998) who described them as “loathsome” or “insipid” (al-Musawi, 2004:330) in the sense that they their highly imaginative and unconvincing characters impeded a profound identification with characters and events. However, Al Bouhayri’s (1889: xvii) introduction to the fourth Arabic edition rightfully asserts that were it not for the tales’ common language they would not have made their way into peoples’ hearts, would not have influenced their spirit... and were it not for the simple style, there would have been no justification for placing this book within peoples’ reach once, twice, thrice, and then again making it available in the market for the fourth time⁸.

Another major obstacle to the tales’ reception in the middle-ages and to some extent, even in modern times, resides in its subject matter. There are three major elements to consider: the female issue, the moral-religious principles, and the politics of Haroun Al-Rashid. It should first be noted that Arabs before Islam had their own culture which was modified, and to a certain extent renounced, for the moral ideals of the Shariaa law. At the time of *The Nights*, Islam was still in its early stages and the implementation of religious principles and laws was of secondary importance compared to the more immediate concern of geographical expansion.

As such, Arab pre-Islamic cultural aspects and ethics dominated peoples’ habits and narratives until the late middle ages. In fact, most have survived until the present and have blended with religion to the extent that it has sometimes become difficult to distinguish one from the other. Essentially, most Eastern readers found fault in the manner in which gender is portrayed in *The Nights* but as “with any cultural production, the tales unfold or appear in a climate that has been, and will be, divided between an Islamic ideology with an interest in a sustained power politics that justifies a powerful order” (al-Musawi 2009:1). Consequently, with the strengthening of the Islamic cultural environment, patriarchy dominated, and women’s roles and intelligence were drastically down-played. A western female reader

⁸ Translated by author

would admire the self-esteem of many female protagonists in *The Nights* while an eastern female would be protected from an exposure that might re-awaken their self-confidence and stimulate acts of revolt against a regressive, hegemonic, protected, veiled, and almost shadowy existence.

Though the collection of tales has been analyzed by Muhsin J. al-Musawi (2009) as a call to Islam, there are those who consider the book racist, obscene and immoral, with far-fetched and almost unimaginable ideas. There is serious objection to the manner in which women are portrayed as prostitutes, schemers, and adulterous deceivers. In 1985, for reasons of obscenity, Egypt banned the book leaving only censored parts for the reading public,⁹ but another request based on similar reasons made in 2010¹⁰. Issues concerning the politics of Haroun Al-Rashid have been another major cause for negative reception among certain circles. Al-Rashid came to power after manipulating Persian support and went on to implement strictly Sunni Islamic law during his rule. He is however disliked for his supposed role in the murder of the Shiite seventh Imam, Musa al-Kadhim Ibn Jaafar. Moughania endorses Sheikh Ja'far SubHani's claim that Harun al-Rashid's Abbasid rule was hypocritical and tainted by the persecution and bloodshed of the innocent. In spite of Al-Rashid's seemingly religious and devout nature, his actions contradicted this outward pious appearance; he spent the Muslim treasury's money extravagantly on personal desires and fancies such as the acquisition of one thousand servant girls of whom three hundred specialized in singing and dancing for him (Moughania: 2018). Such intense criticism is a plausible explanation for the reason Al-Rashid is at times favorably portrayed and at others is a frivolous womanizer spending the state's money in the pursuit of pleasure.

8. A prism of cultural interchange

In light of textual and historical evidence of a medieval interconnectedness, it is possible to acknowledge the influence of *The Arabian Nights* that pre-dates even its first collected form. Indeed, its largely favorable reception throughout the ages parallels, and to a large extent, moves beyond the West's imperial materialistic success. While the West was determinably gaining power with a propagandist colonial discourse intent on creating and fostering the image of a disoriented Orient, the latter had been confidently and proudly paving its way into the Occident's imagination. Though nineteenth century literature used it as a foil to Western rationality, this demeanor changed with globalization and its accompanying multicultural atmosphere that viewed their translation as "an adaptation of ancient stories ... those which relate cases from the desert, or the cities of Arabia, [which] are not obscene, and neither is any production of pre-Islamic literature" (Venuti 2012: 37). In fact, until today the western reader is not only fascinated by the exotic, but is also psychologically able to identify with Eastern phenomenology, motifs, plots and imagery, regardless of differences in cultural beliefs, age, religion and gender. According to Walter Burkert,

A tale becomes traditional not by virtue of being created, but by being retold and accepted; transmission means interaction, and this process is not explained by isolating just one side. A tale "created"—that is, invented by an individual author—may somehow become "myth" if it becomes traditional, to be used as a means of communication in subsequent generations, usually with some distortions and reelaborations." (1982:2)

This is precisely the case with *The Arabian Nights* from its inception until the present day. Moreover, Gallande's translation in the early eighteenth century was based on the certainty that, regardless of the tales' cultural background "Those who grew intimate with it experienced happiness and astonishment" (Venuti 2012: 35). Gallande and Burton had in effect discovered a literary treasure as priceless as the artifacts or national treasures his imperial nation had amassed. George Webbe Dasent is therefore justified in his expressive appraisal of the mingling of folkloric "traditions and tales of all times and counties," stating:

When we say, therefore, that in these latter days the philology and mythology of East and West have met and kissed each other; that they now go hand and hand; that they lend one another

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/05/20/world/egypt-bans-copies-of-1001-nights.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/7689312/Lawyers-in-Egypt-call-for-Arabian-Nights-to-be-banned.html>

mutual support; that one cannot be understood without the other,—we look to be believed.
(xlv-xlvii)

In a global multicultural world witnessing rapid developments in science and technology amid political and economic conflicts that have caused large scale immigration, it has become crucial to reduce the widening discriminatory gap. The best way to do so is by establishing an intercultural atmosphere in the educational sector that can bring people from varied backgrounds together. Considering the intercultural nature of *The Arabian Nights*, it is apparently an efficient cultural medium to help bridge the gap between cultures. Students can be exposed to interesting and culturally relevant tales with respect to motifs and plots, and through stories and dialogue. The result will be a naturally assumed inter-subjective identity as differences of color, religion, or ethnicity gradually recede giving way to a shared collective unconscious. Sofia Samatar in her introduction to the resource guide to teaching *The Arabian Nights*, states that the key component of her approach is to develop “An awareness of how easy it is to fall into ... stereotyping [and] help stave off a Disneyfied approach to the text and encourage students to develop a more nuanced perspective”

Furthermore, *The Arabian Nights*' rejection in most of the Arab world draws attention to the important issue of the extent to which culture or religion can influence the production and circulation of texts. In effect, should decisions to that effect be considered, allowance should be made for the globalized multicultural nature of the world. Institutionalized interference in society's reading material or education is akin to the denial of a historical epoch or context.

In point of fact, *The Arabian Nights* as an ultimately imaginary text should not constitute any danger to society, all the more since it reflects a distant temporal and cultural space. Ignoring the cultural atmosphere of that historical period on the basis of political or religious issues is detrimental to cultural identity and its accompanying sense of cultural pride. Ironically, while the text's translation gave the West a closer image of that particular epoch in the East, the latter's increased religiosity denied the creativity of the text thereby widening the rift between East and West. This does not suggest that the West's imperial endeavors did not follow a similar approach in spite of claims of the nonpolitical nature of the vast knowledge it has produced about the East.

According to Said (1979:10) “in practice the reality is much more problematic.” Though the West had not ignored the knowledge it discovered, it has produced its own counter “systematic” knowledge as is evident in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century “large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient” (Said 1979: 12). To answer back to the West's claims of superiority, future research into pre-colonial Eastern literature can highlight their creativity in order to “advance a little in the process of what Raymond Williams has called the ‘unlearning’ of ‘the inherent dominative mode’ (ibid. 28). Two examples of such studies is Clément Huart's *History of Arabic Literature* which establishes the fruitfulness of pre-Islamic poetry, fiction and philosophy, and Samar Attar's (2010) *The Vital Roots of European Enlightenment: Ibn Tufayl's Influence on Modern Western Thought*.

The Arabian Nights is also abundant with relevant material for feminist studies and for establishing the relationship between religion and culture; the tales' representation of women is sometimes misogynist and at other times feminist within an occasionally pre-Islamic or Islamic atmosphere.

Finally, together with the text's adaptations and appropriations, extensive Western intertextuality and borrowing establish its firm location within humanity's intercultural space. In fact, Philip F. Kennedy and Marina Warner's 2013 edited collection of articles *Scheherazade's Children: Global Encounters with the Arabian Nights* is evidence of the tales' ongoing reception and inspiration. It is therefore only fitting to conclude that the Orient or the “rising sun” has literally not set, and Jorge Luis Borges's statement: “os siglos pasan y la gente sigue escuchando la voz de Shaharazad” translated as “The centuries go by, and we are still hearing the voice of Scheherazade” (Fishburn: 143), holds exceptionally true.

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