THE ARABIAN NIGHTS IN WESTERN LITERATURE: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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This paper presents a textual analysis of the story of King Shahriyar and his brother Shahzaman of the Arabian Nights in the English version of Burton and the French version of Galland as compared with the Arabic text. The story is identical in different manuscripts of the Arabian Nights and is considered as the base for the composition of the Arabian Nights.

The Thousand and One Nights, known to the reader in the West as the Arabian Nights, is mentioned in some Arab sources, but, in fact, the first to draw attention to these references were Western scholars and the Orientalists who interested themselves greatly in this major work. On the other hand, the efforts of Eastern scholars were concentrated on making copies of various texts and printing them in a number of editions, and, thanks to them, this work has been preserved.

The Arabian Nights comprises three elements: The first is the Indian element, the second is that of Baghdad and the third is the Cairene. The Indian element involved in the Arabian Nights was translated into Pahlavi in Iran before the Islamic era; it was then translated into Arabic from the Pahlavi version under the title of Hazār Afsānah which means 'one thousand stories' in Persian. The element in question is characterised by the existence of long sea-journeys and supernatural wonders, it mainly rests on the travels of Sindbad. The Arabic translation of this part of the work was very popular among the masses. Many Arab storytellers were influenced by this part of the book and it is reflected on storytelling. Paramount among those who were influenced by this part of the book is the famous author al-Jahshayrī.

The element related to Baghdad appeared later on and it reflected the pattern of the life of the middle class which included merchants, traders and the like. This part of the book is responsible for its feature of extravagance, richness and lavishness which is typical of the aspects of life represented by the Arabian Nights. To this part of the book is also attributed
the creation of the life of extravagance symbolised by the famous Hārūn al-Rashid. This picture however, is not a faithful portrayal of the reality of Muslim life.

The third element, namely the Cairene, was developed later during the establishment of the Fatimide state in Egypt. It focusses on the lower class which includes porters, cobblers and the like. This in fact reflects a more true picture of Cairene life than that of the life in Baghdad.

The most important edition of this book is that of Bulaq, which was printed in Egypt on the basis of an Indian text of Arabic origin which was printed in Calcutta in 1833. From this edition, a number of other editions were made, some lacking a few stories, and some having a different order of the stories, and so on. Among well-known editions are the Breslau edition prepared by Habicht in 1824 on the basis of a text from Tunis. There is a Bulaq edition based on this second Calcutta edition which was printed in 1835. There are many manuscripts of this book which are preserved in the world's libraries.¹

Among the labours undertaken in this field by Eastern scholars may be mentioned translations of this work into Hindi, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Malay, Chinese and finally Japanese.²

The discussion of the origin of this great book and the literary heritage to which it is related is a field of argument and contention among critics, writers and scholars. Some opinions affirm that it is of Arab origin, others say that it is of Indian origin, and some maintain that it is Persian. As for Western scholarly research, European scholars did not restrict their labours to translating and studying the Thousand and one Nights, for researchers were eager to discover the origin of this book, and the introductions to printed editions and translations into various languages deal with this subject, in addition to other studies produced by writers and critics,³ even if some of these studies are not based on very solid ground, since they did not realise the nature of this book, which in reality was not composed as a single work as is normally understood. Rather, the book is a collection of stories which were not meant to be read or preserved in libraries; it is a collection of unrelated stories, whose object was to amuse the general public verbally and orally. The story-teller carried his own copy of this book over the centuries, modifying, omitting and adding as he wished, until the time came when these stories were regarded as valuable and were either printed or preserved in libraries. This collection continued to meet its first objective, for centuries, that of pleasing its audience, during which the taste of the listeners was the dominant factor, so that the story-teller did not hesitate to modify the basic text to a very great extent. This was aided by the nature
of the work itself, which has no common theme or link, unified only by the framework story of King Shahriyar and his wife Shahrazad.

The order and details of these stories remained completely free until the West took an interest in the work, put an end to its freedom and transferred it from the ears and mouths of the common people to the shelves of libraries and printed texts. Thus ignorance of the nature of the *Thousand and One Nights* and the fact that it was folk-literature, made the research of these earlier scholars baseless, especially in the West.

We may observe here that research into the origins of the *Iliad* had a strong influence upon research into the *Thousand and One Nights*, not because both are folk-literature, but because they were both subjected to development, distortion and alteration.

Those who examine the studies which have been carried out on the origin of the *Iliad* and compare them with the studies on the origin of the *Thousand and One Nights*, as in the works of Lane, for example, will find a clear influence from the former, which is concentrated upon the idea of the author, and whether he is one person or more than one, and upon the idea of modifications which have affected the text, and whether they took place at one time or in several different periods. Whatever the case maybe, the first person to offer anything of scientific value about the origin of the work was the Austrian orientalist von Hammer, who states in the preface of his translation, which appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century, that the origin of these stories was Indian, basing his claim upon the statement of al-Mas'ūdi in his *Murāj al-Dhahab* that a book translated from Persian but originally Indian and called the *Thousand and One Nights* was known in his time, that is, the fourth Hijrah century or the ninth century CE. Despite this, the search continued for the origin of this work, and disputes dragged on until von Hammer, in 1839, produced another work supporting his first point of view about the origin of the *Thousand and One Nights*, having found proof for this in the *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm. After this the contentions on this issue began to die down and efforts were directed towards the study and translation of the book. There is no doubt that the *Thousand and One Nights* had a great influence upon the West and the Westerners, which we shall summarise in the following paragraphs.

It is worth noting that the Europeans did not show much interest in the *Arabian Nights* until the eighteenth century, the century which was said to have started as classic and ended as romantic. That is to say, the Europeans came to know this book at the age of enlightenment. This age witnessed the revolt of the European's taste against the classical heritage in an attempt to build its own identity which was later known as the romantic movement.
The European's taste discovered a continuous source in the *Arabian Nights* for the art of story-telling in the West for what is mysterious. The *Arabian Nights* created a strong fondness for the life of the East and rushing for emotions, in addition to portraying the feelings of the lower classes towards the upper ones. The *Arabian Nights* satisfied the desire of Westerners for realism in the field of fiction, this in turn reinforced the impact of realism of the *Maqâmât* which spread from Andalusia of the Muslims into Europe.

The Europeans developed a mania, which exceeded all bounds, for folklore stories. It is remarked that Voltaire did not practise writing fiction until he had thoroughly read the *Arabian Nights* fourteen times. It is also said that Stendhal wished that Allah may erase the *Arabian Nights* from his memory so that he can restore his zest for reading it again and again. When one reads Edgar Allen Poe's fiction, one finds picture of buildings, palaces, houses and fine descriptions of curtains, furniture, lanterns, lamps and the flaring up of flames of fire. This makes one's memories delve back to the Arab stories with its Arab imagination, its extravagance and figments. There is also an unceasing feeling that Poe was strongly influenced in making his plot juxtaposition with creating the atmosphere of his stories by the phantoms of the *Arabian Nights*.

The *Nights* opened the door wide to the profound study of the East, and this is apparent in the interest of Western scholars in collecting the largest possible number of manuscripts, preparing indices for them, and undertaking studies of the East, its languages, its customs, its tradition, its natural history, its climate and its religions. This aroused an eagerness among Westerners to collect Eastern folklore and to write about the East, and thus began the fashion for writing travel-books, produced by those who travelled to the East, in which are portrayed the countries and cities of the East. These books about the East, which describe journeys, gradually became more literary in form, until they came to be pure literature. However these books were not greatly influenced at first by the *Thousand and One Nights*, because the interest of the West was primarily a commercial one. After this the West came closer to the East for political reasons, since the West began to be aware of the importance or this vast area, with which the Ottoman Empire was the means of contact in that period. The Westerners were in contact with the highest levels of the commercial class in the cities of the East, and as a result they had direct experience of the life of the kings and the other social classes. This contact had a great influence on the West and its literature, especially French literature, because of the political situation in France at that time.

As we know, Galland's translation changed attitudes towards the East, and this affected the life of the Westerners, through the literature of
the *Thousand and One Nights* and the wonderful rich resources of imagination which it contains, and which offer an attractive alternative to the tradition of classicism, of which the West was beginning to tire. The translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* influenced writing and literary production in the West. A tradition began of composing stories in imitation of the *Thousand and One Nights* of which we may mention, for example, the well-known work of La Patis de La Croix entitled *Mille et un Jours*. Thanks to the *Thousand and One Nights*, there developed a children's literature which was rewritten or copied to amuse children. Among them are the stories of Ali Baba, Aladin and the Lamp, Sindbad, and the Little Princess. All of these stories became a part of children’s literature in the West.⁹

Equally, the translations of the *Thousand and One Nights* in the West helped the development of satire, of which the best-known example is the work of the French writer Montesquieu entitled *Letters Persanes* (Persian Letters). This influenced Voltaire, who imitated Montesquieu when he wrote his *Letters d’Amabed*. The *Thousand and One Nights* had a direct influence when it entered Western literature bringing with it such topics as the jinn, magic and animal fables. It also influenced music, dancing, painting and sculpture; we may mention here Lord Tennyson’s *Recollection of the Arabian Nights*.

The first thing which drew the attention of Westerners to the *Thousand and One Nights* was the translation made by Antoine Galland, the French scholar, who had specialised in Oriental Studies, and who also translated the Qur’ân. Many Western scholars ascribe the great success enjoyed by the *Thousand and One Nights* in the West to Galland’s translation, to which he lent a touch of his own story-telling ability, modifying the work to some extent in order to adapt it to the European taste of the day.

During the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Galland’s translation continued to provide Europeans with their conception of the *Thousand and One Nights* and the East. Most European nations translated the book from Galland’s French version into their own languages; the work was translated into English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Dutch, Icelandic, German, Greek, Swedish, Russian, Polish and Hungarian.¹⁰

Galland’s version was reprinted more than thirty times between 1810 and 1885. More than one translator in France tried to follow Galland’s footsteps in translating the *Thousand and One Nights* but they were not successful. If one looks at the translation of Mardus, one finds that although his version is beautifully produced and has excellent illustrations, the translation is not accurate, is full of banal additions and is more a travesty than a translation.¹¹ For this reason, among others, which distinguish Galland,
his translation continued to be the outstanding version in French. As regards English, the *Thousand and One Nights* continued to be translated from the French version of Galland for over a century until British orientalists became active in this field and translated the work from the Arabic original. Macan’s acquisition of a manuscript of the book provided a great incentive to its translation into English. The first person to translate it was Jonathan Scott (1818), although there is some doubt whether his translation is taken directly from Arabic or not. After Scott came Henry Torrens, who produced a serious translation in 1838, then followed Lane’s version between 1830 to 1840. Translations followed in succession, until we came to the immense and labarious work of the translation of Burton, who published it in 1885 in ten volumes with seven appendices. In this work, Burton maintains the division of the book into “nights”. It is also remarked that “With Antoine Galland’s version of the *Arabian Nights* in twelve volumes (1704 ff.), a new veritable storehouse of exciting, fabulous and exotic tales was opened up for European poets and readers. Although many tales of this frame story known as early as the tenth century, but probably collected in the fifteenth century, had been known in the Middle Ages through Spanish intermediaries (in the *Conde Lucqner* by Don Juan Manuel, *Shiro de Buen Amer* by Juan Ruig the archpriest of Hito and others) and even more known in the form of European analogies in Baccaccio and Chaucer, the French translation of the complete collection was something fascinatingly new for eighteenth century bibliophiles. English translations extended from the *Arabian Nights Entertainment* of 1705 up to and beyond the masterful version by Sir Richard Burton (1885).12

The basis of this paper, with its general introduction, is a comparison of the Arabic text with the French text of Galland, and the English text of Burton. We have taken, as an example, the introduction to the stories of the *Nights*, the story of King Shahriyar and his brother Shahzaman. It contains some general observations upon the translations of Galland and Burton which will be mentioned below.

Galland’s translation was not a translation which was faithful to the original, although he enlisted the help of a Maronite from Aleppo to assist him with the translation. The final text (which appeared in twelve volumes between 1710–1713) is a combination of what his assistant told him orally and his own translation which he made from the manuscript which he had at his disposal.13 Galland was very free in his translation, and omitted, added and altered in his text so that it would suit French taste. In the first two parts of his translation, Galland was careful to divide the stories into separate “nights”, but later abandoned this practise. It may also be noted that Galland abandoned the traditional expressions with which Shahrazad begins her stories, “It has reached me, O fortunate King”, and with which they are
concluded: “Then Shahrazad was overtaken by the dawn of day, and she ceased to say her permitted say”. Galland sometimes writes, “sire, quand le marchand. . .” or “Grand Prince des génies” or “Grand Sultane. . .”.\(^{14}\) And in the story of Shahriyar and his brother, there are three passages of verse, all are left out untranslated by Galland, which is the case with poetry in his translation in the whole text of the *Nights*.\(^{15}\)

As we have mentioned earlier, Burton was extremely careful in his translation of the *Thousand and One Nights*. His translation appeared in seventeen parts, the first ten parts were translation of the text, and the other seven notes and appendices. He inserted long notes and explanations, because he believed that his British readers had a great need to understand the social life of the East. He kept to a literal translation of his text, apart from the poetry, which he tried to render in a musical way, using English rhymes and metres; this made some of the words differ greatly in meaning from the basic text.

In both translations (i.e. Galland’s and Burton’s), Shahzaman found his wife committing adultery with one of his slaves. The English translation describes his reaction in this manner:

So he drew his scimitar and, cutting the two in four pieces with a single blow, left them on the carpet and returned presently to his camp without letting anyone know of what had happened.\(^{16}\)

The French translation had a slightly different version:

. . . et d’un seul coup fit passer les coupables du sommeil à la mort. Ensuite les prenant l’un après l’autre, il les jeta par la fenêtre dans le fossé dont le palais etoit environné.\(^{17}\)

According to the French translation, Shahzaman threw the slain bodies of his wife and the lover out of the window. The English translation went on to dramatise the effects of the unfaithfulness of his wife. It depicted Shahzaman as being stricken with sickness. It went on to describe how his malady prompted a delay in his journey with his entourage. The French version however did not elaborate on Shahzaman’s sickness and its resultant causes of delay on the trip.

King Shahriyar’s wife, according to both versions, entered into the private part of the palace overlooking where Shahzaman sat accompanied by twenty others. The English translation states ten of them to be white slaves and the other ten to be the King’s concubines. The French translation gave the same figure but with certain variations:
Mais il fut dans un extrême étonnement de voir que dans cette compagnie qui lui avait semblé toute composée de femmes, il y avait dix noir qui prirent chacun leur maîtresse.18

Here, the French translation claimed that the ten males accompanying him were blacks rather than the white slaves stated in the English translation.

The two translations carried the same theme as stated earlier but the French version was done with a slake without interpolating Arab and Islamic phraseology as with the English translation. It should be noted that none of the versions are very close to one another. Galland uses the Aleppo text. The much longer version of Burton is based on the Bulaq edition of the second Calcutta version.

Arabic versions of the Nights vary considerably. There can be no definitive version of an oral text. Individual story-tellers modified the texts in accordance with their own taste and the requirements of the particular audience.

The technique of the two translators vary considerably, Galland’s text is not so much a translation as a retelling for Western readership. He is faithful to the basic plot and the spirit of the story, but in order to harmonize it with eighteenth century French taste he has added and removed material quite freely. The result of this process is a work which recognisably belongs to eighteenth century European literature; this without doubt led to its great popularity in the West and assisted its assimilation into the mainstream of the European literary tradition. We should also draw attention to the fact that Galland very successfully transformed the Nights from a work of oral literature to one of written literature. However his treatment of the Nights lacks the vitality of the original and transforms it into something more like a collection of fairy tales. Galland’s version has literary merit in its own right and it is this, in the final analysis, which has assured the Nights its place in European literature.

Burton’s aim is seemingly very different. In the first place, he aims at an accurate translation. In addition, he tries as much as possible to reproduce the stylistic flavour in the original. This is clearest in his handling of the Arabic stylistic feature known as saj, a series of rhymed and rhythmical phrases, and an important element of rhetorical embellishment in Arabic. His treatment of the poetry is similar. He attempts to preserve the original rhyme-scheme, and to find appropriate English metres to suit the Arabic; in order to do this, he will sometimes treat the ideas expressed in the poetry with some freedom, as is very obvious in the following examples:
Tell whoso hath sorrow
E’en as joy hath no morrow.

Rely not on women
whose joys and whose sorrows
Lying love they will swear thee
Take Yusuf for sample
Iblis ousted Adam.

Although Burton has made great efforts to clothe his translation in a good literary style, the limitations he has imposed himself tend to result in a stilted style. Formal Arabic expressions are always translated literally, he makes few concessions to English narrative style, and his keenness at preserving the feature of Arabic rhymed prose results in frequent use of rare or archaic English words, or in a few cases, words which he himself seems to have made up. As a result, the style is stiff and cannot be said to be read fluently.

Burton retains, as he always does, breaks between each story of the Nights, the standing formula or the little repetition that serves to pick up the thread of narration, and this is more true to the text. As seen above, Burton gives his own rendering of the verses. Apart from these features it may be observed that Burton’s version is sometimes excessively literal, to the extent of spoiling the English style, so that he writes head hair for hair, an ivory comb for a comb of ivory, yet for but etc. In the title, both writers chose an inappropriate adjective, but Burton strays further from the mark than Galland. At certain points, both misunderstood the Arabic grammar, as a result of which their texts can occasionally be lacking in clarity.

Matters are made worse at times by Burton’s sometimes intrusive pedantry, and, of course, by the feature which most offended the nineteenth
century reading public, his insistence upon graphic sexual details. This is
dwelt on particularly in his notes, but it also pervades the text thus ensuring
that the translation could never have a wide circulation in Victorian England
or, indeed, in later, less puritanical periods.

This translation is clearly addressed to scholars and specialists, not
to the general reading public, and consequently, it has never had the same
influence upon European literature as a whole.

It should, of course, be pointed out that Galland's translation came
at precisely the time when Europe was beginning to turn from classicism to
romanticism, and indeed it was able to influence the Romantic movement
in a number of ways. Burton's translation, coming at a time when Europe
was turning to realism, could never have rivalled the influence of Galland,
even if it had not had the limitations mentioned above.

The fact is that the conception of the "Thousand and One Nights"
current in Europe today still bears the stamp of Galland, and it is Galland
who more than any other single writer has formed the Western concept of
the East, at least until the twentieth century with the appearance of writers
such as T.E. Lawrence. However, Galland's importance as a medium be-
tween East and West deserves to be given all due recognition.21

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Mia I. Gerhardt, The Art of Story-Telling, a Literary study of The Thousand and One Nights
2. Examples of these translations are the Hindi translation (anon) Saharsa-Rajani-Cariua
   (Lucknow: Nawal Kashore, 1886), the Malay translation (anon) Hikayat Saribu Satu malam
   (Singapore, 1891), the Bengali translation by Dinendra Kumar, The Arabian Night's Enter-
tainment (Calcutta, 1899), and several Turkish and Persian translations. We may also mention
   the translation into Hausa by Frank Edgar, Dare dубu da daya (Lagos, 1924).
5. ‘Ali ibn Husayn al-Mas'udi, Mra'j al-Dahab Wa Ma'adin al-Jawahan (Cairo: al-Maktabah
9. A. J. Arberry (tr), Scheherazade Tales from the Thousand and One Nights (London: George
10. For a comprehensive list of European languages translation of the Arabian Nights see
    Gerhardt, Art of Story-Telling, pp. 67–68.
11. Powys Matters, The Book of the Thousand and One Nights Rendered into English from the
    also Gerhardt, Art of Story-Telling, pp. 67–68.


Ibid. p. 17.


Ibid. p. 13.

Select Bibliography


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