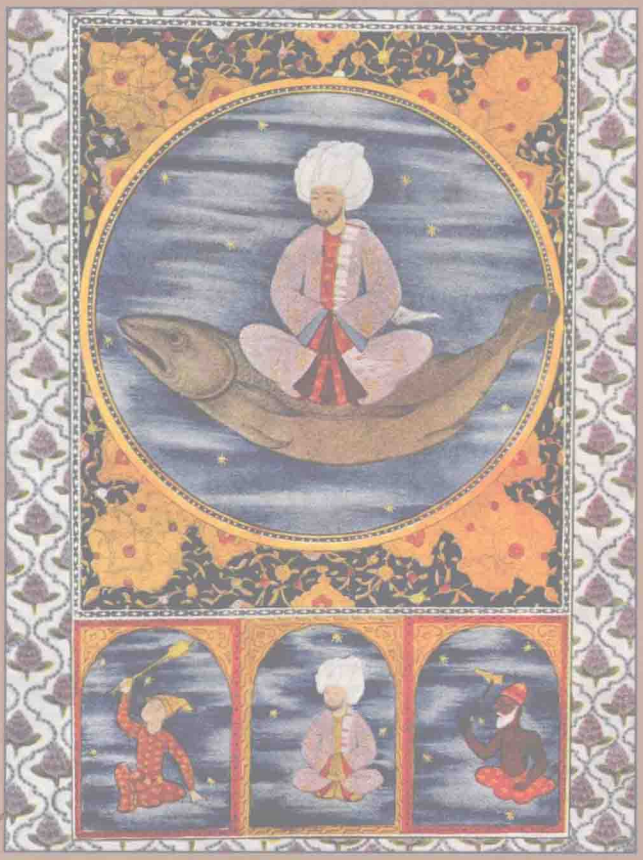
The Arabian Nights



Selected and Edited by
Daniel Heller-Roazen

Translated by Husain Haddawy
Based on the Text Edited by Muhsin Mahdi

A Norton Critical Edition

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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THE HUSAIN HADDAWY TRANSLATION
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CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Selected and Edited by

DANIEL HELLER-ROAZEN
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

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Preface

Few works of literature are as familiar and as beloved as *The Arabian Nights*. But few remain also as unknown. Everyone can call to mind an image of Aladdin and his magic lamp, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, Sinbad and his travels, and it is difficult to forget Shahrazad. But who can say from where these many figures came? In English, at least, *The Arabian Nights* is a literary work of relatively recent date. The first versions of the tales in our language appeared barely two hundred years ago. They followed the French edition of *The Thousand and One Nights* by Antoine Galland, which was published in twelve volumes between 1704 and 1718. Ushering into European letters a body of marvelous stories from the Middle East, Galland's version of the tales achieved almost instant success, and not only in France. His quickly become the first of many Western translations from the "Arabian," and by the end of the nineteenth century many of the languages of Europe had their *Nights*. The story of the proliferation of editions, re-editions, revisions, and renditions of this classic of translation is complex. Understandably, it has been studied more than once.[1] But the book that is the source of the many versions possesses a mystery all its own. Galland translated his *Nights* above all from a fourteenth-century manuscript, which he arranged to have sent to him from Syria to France. To this day, this medieval manuscript remains the oldest surviving edition of the work in any tongue. Muhsin Mahdi used it as the basis for his groundbreaking critical edition of the *Nights* in Arabic, which he published in 1984. Hussain Haddawy translated this authoritative text for the version of *The Arabian Nights* that Norton brought out in 1990, whose text constitutes the source of all but one of the tales printed in this Critical Edition.

Because of its antiquity, the fourteenth-century manuscript edited by Galland and Mahdi possesses unique authority among the editions of the *Nights*. But in itself, the Syrian manuscript shows few signs of originality. In its day, it may well not have been unique. A document dating from the twelfth century found among the

1. For a synthesis of the scholarship, see Muhsin Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), pp. 11–86.

discarded papers of the Cairo Synagogue already refers to a book called *The Thousand and One Nights*.[2] Two Arabic authors of the tenth century, Al-Mas'ūdī and Ibn al-Nadīm, also allude in passing to a collection that seems by all appearances to be the *Nights*.[3] Al-Mas'ūdī calls this work *A Thousand Nights* (*Alf layla*), reporting that it is a translation of an older Persian text, titled *A Thousand Stories* (*Hāzar afsāneh*). Starting in the nineteenth century, several modern scholars availed themselves of the methods of philological reconstruction, taking it one step further. They argued that the Persian basis for the Arabic might also have been a translation. The first and framing story in *The Arabian Nights*, after all, is set in India. Could its first language, the modern scholars naturally wondered, not have been an older tongue, such as Sanskrit? Critical discussions of the genesis of the tales continue to this day. But this much is by now beyond all doubt: the origin of *The Thousand and One Nights* is impenetrably obscure. As far back as one looks, there are translations and retranslations; no absolutely primal version can be found. There is, moreover, no one author to whom one might attribute the whole collection; from edition to edition, the work remains obstinately unsigned. Finally, one cannot be certain of the language in which the anthology was first conceived. From its inception, so to speak, *The Arabian Nights* lacks any stable historical and linguistic point of inception.

Long before its entry into the languages of Europe, *The Thousand One Nights*, therefore, seems to have already possessed one fundamental trait that it retains today: that of being a work in movement, caught in the passage from territory to territory, culture to language, language to language. One might be tempted to construe this lack of a certain origin as a limitation to the integrity of this work, which, unlike some others, cannot reveal to its reader its first and ultimate literary and linguistic form. But that would be to misunderstand much of what is proper to *The Arabian Nights*. This work acquired its characteristically varied shape precisely in the process by which it was repeatedly compiled and recompiled in ever changing circumstances. Edited without ever being authored, it grew to its present form through a process closer to sedimentation than creation. It may be for this reason that the *Nights*, itself a universe of stories, has confronted its readers with the image of more worlds than one. For the European and American publics who discovered it thanks to Galland, the compendium long laid claim to offering the classic representation of the Islamic East. It was for them a collection not of

2. See S. D. Goitein, "The Oldest Documentary Evidence for the Title Alf Laila wa-Laila," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 78 (1959), pp. 301–2.
3. See Al-Mas'ūdī (p. 353 herein) and Ibn al-Nadīm (p. 354 herein). Cf., also in Horovitz (p. 386 herein).

A Thousand and One Nights, as the Arabic has it, but more pointedly of *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, as W. E. Lane's famous retranslation of the title read. Writers from Coleridge to George Eliot, Robert Louis Stevenson, Hofmannsthal, Proust, and Borges found in this book the privileged archive of the culture, mores, beliefs, and literature of "the Orient."[4] It is hardly surprising that Arabic writers, for their part, have rarely shared that view. A traditional judgment in the Arabic tradition, represented also by such a modern scholar as Francesco Gabrieli, maintains to the contrary that the *Nights* is neither especially "Arabian" in content nor particularly literary in form.[5] Several reasons may be cited for this claim. The *Nights* differs from the bulk of the great works of Arabic letters in lacking an author and, by extension, a single guarantor.[6] More crucially, awareness of a fact of language dominates the traditional criticism. *The Thousand and One Nights* is written in a simple and almost colloquial idiom, suggesting translation or folklore, if not both. In its literary texture, *The Arabian Nights* is essentially foreign to the eloquent diction and syntax of Arabic belles lettres.

The kernel of the collection can easily be identified. It is the tale of Shahrazad, the learned young woman who in the prologue to the work outwits King Shahrayar. When the *Nights* open, the monarch of "India and Indochina" has been cuckolded. Outraged, he has promptly executed his wife, determining never again to let himself be betrayed. He resolves, from now on, each day to wed a woman; he will spend one night with her and then have her executed at dawn. He puts his plan immediately into effect. Shahrazad, the daughter of one of Shahrayar's viziers, has learned of these happenings; resolving to do what she can to save the people of her land, she begs her father to offer her in marriage to the king. Her father ultimately does as she wishes. The wedding concluded, Shahrazad now puts a request to her new husband: she asks that her sister, Dinarzad, join them both in their private bedchamber. The king obeys. "When the night wore on," we learn, Dinarzad "waited until the king had satisfied himself with her sister Shahrazad and they were by now all fully awake. Then Dinarzad cleared her throat and said, 'Sister, if you are not sleepy, tell us one of your lovely little tales to while away the night, before I bid you good-bye at daybreak, for I don't know what will happen to you tomorrow.'" Thus the queen begins to recount a tale so captivating that the king finds himself compelled to hear it through to its end — even, or especially, if to do so takes more than a single night. At dawn,

4. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Thousand and One Nights," in *Seven Nights*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 42.
5. See Gabrieli (p. 426 herein).
6. On the function of authorship in classical Arabic letters, see Abdelfattah Kilito, *The Author and His Doubles: Essays on Classical Arabic Culture*, trans. Michael Cooperson, with a foreward by Roger Allen (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

the story still has not reached its final chapter. Desirous of hearing more, the king thus postpones the execution of his bride, if only by one more day and night. And, each dawn, he will do so again.

Although Shahrazad retreats from *The Arabian Nights* as a character after the prologue, her shadowy presence can be detected throughout the tales that ensue, and not only in the stories of despots outwitted by the young women they would master. By virtue of its form, the collection continues to remind the reader of the dire conditions in which its storytelling comes to pass. Between one night and another, the so-called frame narrative explicitly emerges. As dawn breaks, morning overtakes the queen, and she lapses into silence. The queen's sister, beneath the royal bed, then exclaims: " 'Sister! What an entertaining story!' Shahrazad replied, 'What is this compared to what I shall tell you tomorrow night if the king spares me and lets me live!' " Translators of the *Nights* have often omitted these lines, no doubt because, though minimally varying in diction, they are unmistakably formulaic. But the truth is that they are of capital importance. Recalling the shape of the work as a series of "nights" rather than "tales," these interjections attest to the narrative constraints that define *The Arabian Nights* as a whole. The most obvious among them is that imposed by the murderous and jealous king: in this collection, storytelling works to ward off death. As such, the act of narration here has a double role to play; simultaneously, it defers and anticipates an imminent execution. The figure of such a liberating if transitory speech returns more than once in the queen's wondrous tales. Often it comes to be doubled by its fatal mirror image; then we read not of a story that emancipates the teller but of a tale that, by contrast, puts to death the one who hears it. One might well ponder the relation between the two types of narrative. Who runs the greater risk in the *Nights*, the one who speaks or the one who listens, the writer or the reader, Shahrazad or Shahrayar? This much, in any case, is certain: from the moment the queen begins to speak, the end is always near. Nights must be counted, be it up to a thousand and one, because time, from the beginning, has grown short.

Shahrazad's recurrent appearances in the work bear witness to a fundamental law that defines the structure of the collection as a whole. It can be simply stated: starting with the first night, *The Arabian Nights* sets in motion at least two narratives, which are both simultaneous and noncoincident. At each point in the compendium, there is the tale of Shahrazad, which continues unabated from night to night. But there are also the tales she tells so as to continue living and speaking from day to day. These two levels of storytelling define the order of *The Arabian Nights*. In a sense, they are but one, for the narrative of Shahrazad's avoidance of her death is none other than the narrative of her storytelling and so, too, of the tales she tells. In

another sense, however, the two orders must be considered formally distinct. That the work insists on their separation can be gleaned from a simple fact: the narrative of Shahrazad can be divided into nights, which do not coincide with the queen's stories. In no edition of *The Arabian Nights* are these two units in any sense commensurable. *A Thousand and One Nights* does not equal a thousand and one stories. If one considers the fourteenth-century manuscript edited by Mahdi, one finds, for instance, two hundred and seventy-one nights; the count for the stories will vary, depending on one's reading, but the total tales will in any case be fewer than forty. One might cite a formal reason for this fact, which involves the structure of narrative in the collection. In *The Arabian Nights*, one story may be stretched over more than one night; conversely, in a single night one story can end and another can begin. But there is another reason for these facts, and it is to be found within the tale of Shahrazad itself. A moment's reflection allows one to understand why, as a rule, nights and stories in this work cannot—must not—coincide. If they did, Shahrazad, ending her tale at dawn, would leave her satisfied spouse but one course of action: to execute her forthwith.

Whereas the tale of the queen's telling is divided into nights, the stories Shahrazad recounts, therefore, are ordered according to other rules of concatenation. Some tales last many nights; others emerge and vanish almost imperceptibly, like those enigmatic stories some characters in the stories name without ever recounting. But one constant can always be observed: the two levels of storytelling in *The Arabian Nights* run alongside each other without ever perfectly coinciding. Their complex relation of difference constitutes what one might name "the poetry of narrative" in this work. The term *poetry*, in such a setting, ought not to be misleading. For a precise definition of the word, one may turn to Jean-Claude Milner, who has proposed an enlightening account of the distinction between prose and verse. Milner has argued that poetry can be defined as a variety of discourse in which it is possible to contrast and even to oppose two types of limits: a syntactical limit, such as the end of the sentence, and a purely phonological limit, such as the end of the line.[7] Since *enjambment* is the term traditionally given to the occurrence of this opposition, one may also reformulate the thesis in the following manner: "there exists verse from the moment there exists the possibility of enjambment."[8] Where, in other words, a sentence may always momentarily be interrupted before its syntactic end, we are no longer in the terrain of prose. We are in the world of verse.

7. Jean-Claude Milner, "Réflexions sur le fonctionnement du vers français," in *Ordres et raisons de langue* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982), pp. 283–391, esp. p. 300, proposition 21.
8. Milner, "Réflexions," p. 301.

One need only recall the double order that defines *The Arabian Nights* to grasp the value of such an account of poetry for the structure of Shahrazad's book of tales. The two types of limits at play in verse correspond, in fact, to the two narrative series that define the *Nights*, each of which possesses a characteristic form and duration. There is Shahrazad's tale, which begins with the prologue; divided night by night, it lasts as long as the work itself. Then there are the tales she tells, which possess unequal lengths. Modern editions, such as Norton's, designate the secondary tales by chapter titles. The contemporary reader thus encounters such units as "The Story of The Merchant and the Demon," "The First Old Man's Tale," and "The Story of the Fisherman and the Demon." These are logical segments, introduced for comprehensible reasons by scholars; they reflect what one might term "narrative limits." But within the *Nights*, Shahrazad edits her tales by other means, dividing up her stories according to principles that are not those of action. Although the reader may discern the beginning and the ending of each story by the titles the modern editor chooses to include in the text, the readers inscribed within the book—Shahrayar and Dinarzad—perceive the tales, for this reason, as divided by a type of limit that in no way depends on narrated action. This is what one might call a *nonnarrative* or *metrical limit*. In *The Arabian Nights*, it is stable, no doubt because it is linked to the movements of the sun: it is dawn. Daybreak is the line by which Shahrazad breaks one tale in two, even—or especially—when the action of the tale is not yet complete. In the *Nights*, this is a structural necessity, which implies a preponderance of what one might well term *narrative enjambment*. Just as poetry may be defined as that discourse in which it is possible to oppose a syntactic limit to a nonsyntactic limit (the end of the line), so *The Arabian Nights* may be defined as that collection of tales in which it is possible to oppose a narrative limit to a nonnarrative limit (the end of the night). Where, in other words, a story may always momentarily be interrupted before the conclusion of its action, we are no longer in the terrain of mundane storytelling. We are in the wondrous world of Shahrazad.

This world conceals one final marvel, which has not always been perceived as such. It can be grasped most readily with respect to the characteristic trait of verse. Developing Milner's definition of poetry, Giorgio Agamben has drawn a simple yet astonishing conclusion, whose consequences for *The Arabian Nights* are numerous: "If poetry is defined precisely by the possibility of enjambment, it follows that the last verse of the poem is not a verse."[9] That the last

9. Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 112.

phrase of a poem cannot be interrupted by the metrical break that ties one line to the next line seems clear enough. But if one accepts that there can be poetry only as long as there may be line breaks, can the last line truly be considered a line? Agamben's statement presents the end of the poem as an impossible point of nonverse in verse, to which each poetic composition, in unfolding, grows ever closer. This point, too, has its precise *pendant* in *The Arabian Nights*. It suffices to recall that the collection is structured in such a way that each story, as a rule, is interrupted at daybreak, day after day, before being carried on again for many, many nights. To be precise: for a thousand and one nights. But what happens on the thousand and first night? If one admits that in *The Arabian Nights* it is always possible to oppose a narrative limit to a nonnarrative limit, such that each tale may be interrupted at daybreak before its end, one will be obligated to concede a strange and perplexing fact: the last night of *The Arabian Nights* cannot be one of *The Arabian Nights*! The thousand and first night must be a night that knows no end, a night that will never reach dawn—not so much "another night," one might assert, as something other than any night at all.[1] More than one troubling consequence follows from this simple fact. Doubtless, the first involves an apparently straightforward question of arithmetic: if the thousand and first night cannot be a night, how, one might well ask, could one ever count a thousand and one of them?

Each edition of *The Arabian Nights* has had to confront the bewildering question of how it might be possible for this near endless work properly to conclude. Not all editors have granted that it could. In the "Terminal Essay" to his translation of the work, Richard Burton records one "popular superstition" concerning the *Nights:* "no one can read through them without dying."[2] But that seemingly decisive dictum is hardly unequivocal. Are we to infer that someone (Shahrayar or Shahzarad?) did read the work to its end, paying the price, or that, instead, no one but a genie or a demon could accomplish such a feat? It is perhaps no accident that the fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript falls so dramatically short of *The Thousand and One Nights* announced by its title. Truncated at the two hundred and seventieth daybreak, it delivers little more than a quarter of the promised goods. Later readers and writers, storytellers and retellers, had to advance unaided toward the point that the queen had simultaneously anticipated and deferred. Some would later claim that the king listened to the end, was delighted, and so commanded that all the tales of the

1. On the last night, cf. Abdelfattah Kilito, *L'Œil et l'aiguille: Essais sur "les Mille et une nuits"* (Paris, La Découverte, 1992), p. 27; Michael Wood, "The Last Night of All," *PMLA* 122:5 (2007), p. 1396.
2. Richard Burton, "Terminal Essay," *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, vol. VI (New York: The Heritage Press, 1934), p. 3722.

past nights be recorded. This would have been the genesis of our earthly book, the copy of the unwritten original. To be transcribed, our text would then have required but one supplementary event: beginning anew, so that all the stories might regularly be recorded, night after night. Others instead maintained that the king listened to the end and, satisfied at last, uttered his ultimate command: the queen was to be executed, the stories forgotten. Might our book, incomplete and secondary, have emerged from this act of willful oblivion? Poe's "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" offers its own answers, as do Proust's great novel and Tāḥā Ḥusayn's *Dreams of Scheherazade*. Borges, for his part, once suggested that the true end lay in the middle—in the tale of the six hundred and second night: "This is the night that the king hears from the queen his own story. He hears the beginning of his story, which comprises all others and also—monstrously—comprises itself."[3] Monstrous or marvelous, perhaps monstrous and marvelous at once, *The Arabian Nights* in any case always conceals one final mystery. It is no less unknown in its end than in its origin and still, like the storytelling queen, no less beguiling.

3. Jorge Luis Borges, "Partial Magic in the Quixote," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, preface by André Maurois (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 193–196, p. 195. Cf. "Garden of the Forking Paths," in *Labyrinths*, pp. 44–54, p. 51.

A Note on the Text

All the texts from *The Arabian Nights I* have been translated from the oldest existing edition of *The Thousand and One Nights*, the fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript edited by Muhsin Mahdi.

"The Story of Sindbad the Sailor," from *The Arabian Nights II*, has been translated from the Bulaq edition (1835).

For a discussion of the Arabic texts, the reader may consult the two introductions by Hussain Haddawy (*The Arabian Nights I*, pp. xiii–xxxiv, esp. xiii–xix; *The Arabian Nights II*, pp. ix–xvii).

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