

Penguin  Classics

TALES FROM
THE THOUSAND AND
ONE NIGHTS

*Tales from the
Thousand and One Nights*

TRANSLATED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
N. J. DAWOOD
ENGRAVINGS ON WOOD FROM
ORIGINAL DESIGNS BY
WILLIAM HARVEY



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N. J. DAWOOD has also translated *The Koran* for the Penguin Classics. Born in Baghdad, he came to England as an Iraq State Scholar in 1945 and graduated from London University. He is a director of Contemporary Translations Ltd and managing director of The Arabic Advertising and Publishing Company Ltd, London. He has edited and abridged *The Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun*, translated numerous technical works into Arabic, written and spoken radio and film commentaries, and contributed to specialized English-Arabic dictionaries. He has retold for children a comprehensive selection of tales from *The Arabian Nights*, which will be published shortly in an illustrated edition.

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INTRODUCTION



THE folk-tales which have collectively survived in what is known as *The Thousand and One Nights* owe their origin to three distinct cultures: Indian, Persian, and Arab. They can be regarded as the expression of the lay and secular imagination of the East in revolt against the austere erudition and religious zeal of Oriental literature generally.

Written in a simple, almost colloquial style, and depicting a unique world of all-powerful sorcerers and ubiquitous jinn, of fabulous wealth and candid bawdry, these tales have little in common with the refined didacticism of Classical Arabic literature and have therefore never been regarded by the Arabs as a legitimate part of it. Yet it is a remarkable paradox that to the non-Arab world, and particularly to the West, the *Nights* is today the best known and most widely read book of Arabic authorship, while the more serious works of Classical Arabic literature, for the most part untranslatable verse, remain quite unfamiliar. In fact, in the course of the past two centuries the *Nights* has attained, mainly through the medium of translation, the status of a universal classic and has come to be recognized as such.

This is not surprising. The tales themselves are masterpieces of the art of story-telling. In inventiveness and sheer entertainment value they stand supreme among the short stories of all time. And in their minute accuracy of detail and the vast range and variety of their subject-matter they constitute the most comprehensive and intimate record of medieval Islam. For despite the fabulous and fantastic world they portray, with its emphasis on the marvellous and the supernatural, they are a faithful mirror of the life and manners of the age which engendered them. They are the spontaneous products of untutored minds, which would reach out in search

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of the most imaginative and extravagant fancies and then relate them to the universal constants of this life.

The original nucleus of the *Nights* was derived from a lost Persian book of fairy-tales called *Hazar Afsanah* (A Thousand Legends), which was translated into Arabic about A.D. 850. The Arab encyclopaedist Al-Mas'oodi (d. A.D. 956) makes a casual reference to this book in his *Murooj al-Dhahab* (The Golden Meadows). He tells us that 'the people call it "A Thousand and One Nights"' and goes on to give a brief account of the Prologue which resembles that of our *Nights* in outline. Modern scholarship has traced this Prologue, which contains the framework story, back to Indian folk-lore. But there is no evidence that this 'Thousand and One Nights' of Mas'oodi contained the same stories that have come down to us in the manuscripts of the *Nights*, except the framework story. Several of the tales were undoubtedly taken, in some shape or form, from *Hazar Afsanah*; for they have unmistakable parallels in Indian and Persian folk-lore. The Arab *rawis*, or professional story-tellers, knew how to add local colouring to the foreign tale and how to adapt it to native surroundings. In the course of centuries other stories, mainly of Baghdad and Cairo origin, gathered round this nucleus, and, to make up the number of a thousand and one nights, more local folk-tales, generally of poor composition, were unscrupulously added by the various scribes and editors.

The final revision of this heterogeneous material was made in Egypt, probably in Cairo, by an unknown editor towards the end of the eighteenth century. Written in a language which constantly borders on the vulgar dialect, and in which the original marked differences of style and idiom are still apparent, this version has come to be regarded as the 'standard' text of the *Nights*. The present translation follows Macnaghten's Calcutta edition (1839-42) of this text, but the generally parallel first Bulaq edition (1835) has also been consulted wherever the Macnaghten text seemed faulty. Aladdin follows Zotenberg's text (Paris, 1888).

The Thousand and One Nights was first introduced to the Western world by Antoine Galland (1646-1715), a French

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orientalist and gifted story-teller who had travelled widely in the Middle East. His *Mille et une Nuits*, published in twelve volumes between 1704 and 1717, had a great popular success and was itself almost at once rendered into several European languages. Galland was by no means a faithful translator. He selected his materials and skilfully adapted them to contemporary European tastes, emphasizing the fantastic and the miraculous and carefully avoiding the candid references to sex. Nevertheless the Galland version possesses a vigorous narrative style and can still be read with enjoyment.

It was during 1706-8 that the first English rendering of the *Nights* made its appearance. Known as the 'Grub Street version', it was translated from Galland's French by an unknown hack-writer. This version, stilted and dull as it may well appear to the modern reader, established the popularity of the *Nights* with successive generations of Englishmen and was read with delight by the English Romantics in their childhood. For it was a very long time before an attempt to render a direct translation from the Arabic was made. In 1838 Henry Torrens published a literal translation of the first fifty Nights in which he tried to give the feel of the original. But today his version makes tedious reading. It was followed by E. W. Lane's translation (3 vols., 1839-41), a bowdlerized selection intended for the drawing-room. His notes are very valuable and show his deep knowledge of Egyptian life in the early nineteenth century. The first complete translation was made by John Payne (9 vols., 1882-4) and published in a limited edition of 500 copies. The rendering of this version is in sophisticated archaic English and its style is even more ponderous than that of any of its predecessors. In 1885-6 the last, and most celebrated, of the direct translations was published. This was Sir Richard Burton's (10 vols., with five supplemental vols.).

In translating *The Thousand and One Nights* Burton wrote, as he himself puts it, 'as the Arab would have written in English'. He 'carefully sought out the English equivalent of every Arabic word . . . and never hesitated to coin a word when wanted'. The result was a curious brand of English, a language which no Englishman has spoken or written at any time:

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But she rejoined by saying, 'Allah upon you both that ye come down forthright, and if you come not, I will rouse upon you my husband, this Ifrit, and he shall do you to die by the illest of deaths'; and she continued making signals to them.

Thus I did for a long time, but at last I awoke from my heedlessness and, returning to my senses, I found my wealth had become unwealth and my condition ill-conditioned and all I once hent had left my hands.

'This, then, is the rede that is right; and while we both abide alive and well, I will not cease to send thee letters and monies. Arise ere the day wax bright and thou be in perplexed plight and perdition upon thy head alight!' Quoth he, 'O my lady, I beseech thee of thy favour to bid me farewell with thine embracement'; and quoth she, 'No harm in that.' So he embraced her and knew her carnally; after which he made the Ghushl-ablution; then, donning the dress of a white slave, he bade the syces saddle him a thorough-bred steed. Accordingly they saddled him a courser and he mounted and, farewelling his wife, rode forth the city at the last of the night, whilst all who saw him deemed him one of the Mamelukes of the Sultan going abroad on some business.

What Burton gained in accuracy he lost in style. His excessive weakness for the archaic, his habit of coining words and phrases, and the unnatural idiom he affected, detract from the literary quality of his translation without in any way enhancing its fidelity to the original. The notes are far more entertaining than the text.

In spite of Torrens, Lane, and Burton, however, the average English reader's acquaintance with the *Nights* begins and ends with the nursery adaptations. And it is this fact, as well as the absence of a readable version, which constitutes, in my opinion, the best justification for a fresh translation.

It has been my aim in this selection (originally published in two independent volumes - in 1954 and 1957 - by Penguin Books) to present the modern reader with an unexpurgated rendering of the finest and best-known tales in contemporary English. I have sought to reconcile faithfulness to the spirit of the original with fidelity to modern English usage. I have sometimes felt obliged to alter the order of phrases and

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sentences where English prose logic differs from Arabic. As the Macnaghten text, on which this translation is based, has never been properly edited, I have often found it necessary to make my own emendations. In the tale of 'The Hunchback', for instance, I have substituted Al-Muntasir Billah (who reigned in the year of the Flight 247, A.D. 861) for Al-Mustansir Billah (whose reign was more than three centuries and a half later) to avoid an obvious anachronism. I have generally tried to do without footnotes by bringing their substance up into the text itself whenever it reads obscurely. The only Arabic words used in this translation are those which have been assimilated into the English language, such as Caliph, Vizier, Cadi, etc. The spelling of all Arabic words has been simplified.

Here I must also mention that the verses have been left out. Apart from the fact that they tend to obstruct the natural flow of the narrative, they are devoid of literary merit. Internal evidence consistently shows that most of the verses were injected at random into the text by the various editors. I have also ignored the divisions of the tales into nights.

And now a few words on the tales themselves. 'Sindbad the Sailor' dates back to the time when Baghdad and Basrah had reached the zenith of their commercial prosperity. Originally the cycle seems to have been an independent work. It has many touches which remind one strongly of the *Odyssey*. Like Homer's epic, its background is the sea. The tale of the 'Third Voyage' has much in common with Book IX; the Black Giant is Polyphemus the Cyclops seen through Arab eyes. Yet it is almost certain that the author or authors of these tales did not know Homer. What they did know was the Odysseus legend, which, in the course of centuries, had reached the Arabs in the form of a romantic tale of sea adventures.

'The Hunchback' and 'The Porter' are excellent examples of the framework system of the *Nights*: the interlacing of several stories, narrated by different characters, into an organic whole; a system which owes its origin to Indian folk-tales and which was later on to be adopted by Boccaccio in the *Decameron* and by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*. They present the reader

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with an admirable picture of social life in medieval Baghdad. 'The Hunchback' is full of social criticism, and above all it has, in the humorous figure of the barber, one of the most skilfully drawn characters in Oriental fiction.

'Aladdin' has been retold or otherwise presented to so many generations all over the world that it can perhaps be rightly described as the most renowned story invented by man.

'Judar' is of Cairo origin. Like 'Aladdin', it illustrates to a high degree the detachment with which the story-teller in the *Nights* treats the characters of his creation. The headstrong, idle, and worthless Aladdin makes good, but the kind and honest Judar is dispatched, with an utter disregard for 'poetic justice', unlamented to a foul death.

'The Fisherman and the Jinnee' combines Moslem superstition with Persian and Indian folk-lore. It is one of the oldest and simplest tales in the entire collection.

'Khalifah the Fisherman' is a humorous fantasy. It belongs to that group of Baghdad folk-tales which have Haroun Al-Rashid as their hero.

'Ma'aruf the Cobbler' is a sophisticated and elaborately thought-out social satire. It is one of the stories which were added to the *Nights* at a comparatively late period in Egypt.

'The Young Woman and her Five Lovers' and 'The Tale of Kafur the Black Eunuch' are short farcical skits, the first satirizing bureaucratic corruption, the second the extravagances of mourning in Islamic countries.

'The Historic Fart' and 'The Dream', which I have included in this edition, are typical of the amusing short folk-tales still current in the Middle East.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife for her research and for the invaluable help she has given me during the preparation of this translation. I should also like to record my gratitude to the late Dr E. V. Rieu, C.B.E., the founder editor of the Penguin Classics, for the keen personal interest he took in initiating this rendering for publication.

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N.J.D.