

Arabesque



Narrative Structure and the Aesthetics
of Repetition in *1001 Nights*

SANDRA NADDAFF

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I have often thought that one of the hidden lessons of the *1001 Nights* is the importance of family. From her father, the wazir, who provokes Shahrazad into action, to her sister, Dunyazad, who is instrumental in carrying out Shahrazad's plot, to her children who are in a sense the end result of her thousand and one nights of storytelling, family plays a significant role in the unfolding of the *1001 Nights*. My own family has been equally significant in the making of *Arabesque*. My mother and father have given so often in so many different ways that I would need a thousand and one nights of my own to thank them for everything they've done. My various siblings have generously donated their time and counsel. And my sons, Nathaniel and Benjamin, have from the beginning reminded me of just what's important in our lives. But it is my husband and friend, Leigh Hafrey, who deserves the greatest credit in all this. For all the times he has urged, encouraged, and loved, I thank him.

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Arabesque

Chapter One



Flexible Borders and Mutable Texts

A wise man has said: "Writing is a spiritual geometry wrought by a material instrument."

—al-Āmulī, *Nafā'is al-Funūn*

The case with them (viz. some legendary stories) is similar to that of the books that have come to us from the Persian, Indian, and the Greek and have been translated for us, and that originated in the way that we have described, such as for example the book *Hazār Afsāna*, which in Arabic means "thousand tales," for "tale" is in Persian *afsāna*. The people call this book "Thousand Nights." This is the story of the king and the vizier and his daughter and her servant girl; these two are called Shīrazād and Dīnāzād.¹

So runs the earliest known extended reference to the work entitled *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah*, the *1001 Nights*. It is a work that, like most works deriving from an oral folk source, possesses no fixed or privileged textual identity. From its Persian incarnation recalled above by the Arab historian al-Mas'ūdī in A.D. 947 to its early eighteenth-century embodiment in

Antoine Galland's famous translation as *Les mille et une nuits: Contes arabes*, from its Grub Street dubbing as the *Arabian Nights* to its first appearance as a "complete" printed Arabic text in 1835, the *1001 Nights* has spoken both of the difficult metamorphosis from oral to written text and, perhaps even more eloquently, of the forced translation from East to West.

The result is an unusually long and complicated literary and textual history. As with all works of popular and folk literature, one cannot locate the origins of the collection of stories we call the *1001 Nights*; indeed, once the transmission from oral to written has been made (and there is evidence that a manuscript of *Alf Laylah* existed as early as the ninth century), one cannot even accurately speak of the fixed text of the *1001 Nights*. One is instead confronted with a multiplicity of editions, ranging from the so-called first Calcutta edition of only the first two hundred nights (vol. 1, 1814; vol. 2, 1818); to the Breslau edition spuriously claimed to be based on a Tunisian manuscript (1824–43); followed by the famous Bulaq edition of 1835, noted by the scholar Duncan Black MacDonald in his classic *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article to have the dignity of a vulgate; up through the second Calcutta edition, published in four volumes in 1839–42.²

The most recent edition of *Alf Laylah* proves also to be the definitive one.³ Based on a fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript meticulously edited by Muhsin Mahdi, this edition is the first to have received careful scholarly attention. This Syrian manuscript is the oldest one extant; like the other manuscripts of *Alf Laylah* derived from this branch, it contains only 282 nights. Mahdi has made the corrections and emendations necessary for a scholarly edition, while at the same time allowing the text to preserve its original oral flavor. In short, he has refrained from forcing the text to assume a "literary" guise as every past editor has done, and in so doing has brought into being a kind of urtext of *Alf Laylah*. This edition promises to be the one on which all future studies of the *1001 Nights* will be based, thereby re-

placing the earlier "classic" Bulaq edition. It is this new edition that has supported the present study.

The history of both the manuscripts and the editions of the *1001 Nights* has been discussed at length by scholars over the past century. Duncan Black MacDonald and Muhsin Mahdi, in particular, have exhaustively analyzed both the different manuscript families from which the printed versions of the *Nights* derive and the history of the editions that have ensued.⁴ What the subtext of this history tells of most interestingly is that this originally oral popular narrative has, perhaps more than other works in the same category, been subject to innumerable transformations and metamorphoses. The text of the *1001 Nights* possesses no fixed boundaries beyond the limits of its frame story. Although certain story cycles recur in all recensions of the *Nights* (e.g., "The Story of the Merchant and the Jinni," "The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies," "The Story of the Hunchback"), they alone do not constitute the *sine qua non* of *Alf Laylah*. To a large extent, the metamorphic value of this text is due to its original status as oral folklore, and the consequent circumstances of its performance and transmission. But I would suggest that the *1001 Nights* is particularly prone to textual transformation, that its boundaries are particularly flexible, its content, its language, particularly malleable even after it is "fixed" in print, for two reasons.

The first has to do with the essential fact that the all-important narrator of the *1001 Nights* tales themselves is a woman. (The frame story is, of course, narrated in a different voice.) Shahrazad is characterized by nothing if not her fertility—both narrative and otherwise—and it is a tribute to her legacy of potentially infinite narrative generation that the text possesses an ability, indeed a willingness, to accommodate ultimately any tale between its ever-flexible borders, in the interests of maintaining narrative variety. The second issue at hand is to some extent poised in counterbalance to this fact. No work of Arabic or even Islamic literature is as

well known to the Western world as the *1001 Nights*. No text has been so completely appropriated, remade, refigured, both literally and rhetorically, by its translators as the *1001 Nights*, the *Arabian Nights*, *The Thousand Nights and a Night*. Jorge Luis Borges's now classic article on the translators of the *1001 Nights* bears witness to the strong desire of any translator of this text to rewrite it in his own image (and all translators of *Alf Laylah* have up to now been men).⁵ This is something that could perhaps have been accomplished only with greater difficulty if the narrator were not, of necessity, so pliable, so accommodating, so fertile. As it stands, Shahrazad's narrative expansiveness knows no bounds even when it comes to crossing the literary, cultural, and political borders between East and West.

Nothing speaks so eloquently to this as Galland's recreation of *Alf Laylah*. Faced with a truncated manuscript and a number of nights far short of the necessary thousand and one, Galland tapped Hanna Diab, a Syrian man of his acquaintance, who provided his own oral rendition of various tales of the *1001 Nights* variety which Galland in turn outlined and rewrote for inclusion in his translated text. When even this human source ran dry, Galland searched the libraries of Europe for isolated Arabic manuscripts of suitable tales in order to acquire the requisite number of nights. There is a certain irony in the fact that the work that launched the tremendous vogue of the *conte orientale* and introduced the *1001 Nights* to Europe was, in some sense, textually illegitimate. And there is a further irony in the fact that those cycles that are best known today and that are thought of as quintessentially *1001 Nights* material, cycles such as "Sindbad the Sailor" and "The Story of Aladdin and the Magic Lamp," are not part of the original Arabic corpus of tales.

This textual mutability and malleability continue today. As recently as 1985 the Egyptian government confiscated a new, unexpurgated rendition of the *1001 Nights* and allowed

only a censored, Islamically “correct” version of the text to be sold. And yet *Alf Laylah* persists as one of our fundamental examples of narrative art, precisely because of the work’s ability to accommodate so graciously any tale within its all-encompassing frame. But the degree to which the text has been repeatedly rewritten and refashioned also speaks to the narrative art of infinite variation and re-creation which Shahrazad so artfully manipulates in order to sway the king through her storytelling powers.

This study limits itself to an examination of one specific cycle within the *1001 Nights* corpus. Precisely because of the enormous narrative variety embraced by the frame tale of *Alf Laylah*, the exercise of speaking about the *1001 Nights* as an entity quickly becomes futile. A study such as Ferial Ghazoul’s *The Arabian Nights: A Structural Analysis* expertly avoids the problem of generalization by looking at the way the frame story influences each tale that filters through it. But except for Ghazoul’s book and the general introductory work by Mia Gerhardt, studies that focus on a particular cycle or cycles have been more successful in giving the reader a sense of the texture and technique of this paragon of narrative art.⁶

“The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies” is a particularly rich cycle on which to focus, in part because it is present in a relatively stable form in all recensions regardless of date and origin. This suggests a story cycle that was already well developed and coherent before it was fixed in literary form, which allows the reader to make more easily certain assumptions and deductions about both its narrative form and the larger narrative of which it is a part. But it is also an important cycle to study because it is undoubtedly one of the most complicated of the *1001 Nights* narratives. Like those other cycles that are instigated solely by the act of storytelling, “The Story of the Hunchback,” for example, or “Sindbad,” “The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies”

consists of a frame story within which unroll at all levels of narrative remove the tales of its main characters. In this it is unlike such companion pieces as "The Story of the Three Apples" or "The Story of Nur al-Din Ali ibn Bakkar and the Slave Girl Shams al-Nahar," cycles in which the presence of narrative-men and -women (Todorov's *hommes-récits*) and the consequent narrative act is limited. Storytelling is, in fact, the main activity of "The Porter and the Three Ladies." Although the characters fall in love, die, are transformed from humans into animals, and journey to faraway places, it is ultimately only the narrative act, the ability to tell about these various experiences, that has value within this particular narrative universe. Indeed, with the exception perhaps of the Hunchback's tale, no other cycle provides so many levels of narrative embedding, so many tales within tales. In this, the series mirrors the original frame story of the larger work within which it is itself embedded. In both narrative and thematic terms, "The Porter and the Three Ladies" speaks of its progenitrix, the tale of Shahrazad, and amplifies the larger narrative issues sketched before the first of the 1001 Nights begins.

But it is not only in its acrobatic manipulation of the narrative act that "The Porter and the Three Ladies" imitates the frame story—something the two brief cycles that intervene between it and the tale of Shahrazad do as well, albeit to a far less complicated degree. "The Porter and the Three Ladies" is an important cycle to examine for the way in which it reenacts the sexual tensions inaugurated in the frame story. As I will argue in the following chapter, "The Porter and the Three Ladies" is premised upon a kind of gendered opposition. The initial tension in this cycle between male and female develops into an opposition between different kinds of discourse and, consequently, different ways of viewing the world; and in this, again, the cycle develops the all-important connection between the sexual and the textual initiated in the frame story. It is because of such

correspondences and their subsequent complication and elaboration that "The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies" becomes a particularly important cycle to examine. Again, this is not to say that the mechanisms of narrative and the issues of gender raised by this cycle are present in every cycle of the *1001 Nights* as a whole, for not every cycle operates according to the constraints and concerns apparent in this one. But given its close narrative connection to Shahrazad's tale (as well as its relatively close proximity), we can't help feeling that the narrative concerns and tendencies exhibited in their most complicated form by this cycle are particularly significant. If a careful examination of "The Porter and the Three Ladies" doesn't provide us with a kind of all-purpose guide to the *1001 Nights*, it can at least provide us with a detailed road map of the territory covered by this Baghdadian porter and his three female companions. As it happens, this is territory inhabited by other narratively generated cycles within the text as well.

My aim here is to isolate and explain these narrative concerns and tendencies, to define the basic narrative development of this particular cycle, to understand why "The Porter and the Three Ladies" undercuts those expectations surrounding narrative structure and plot development which we typically bring to our reading of narratives and which are indeed met in other cycles within the *1001 Nights* itself. Why does reading this and other cycles premised upon the act of narration resemble more the descent into an underground cave (a space that figures prominently in these tales) rather than the journey along a road, however winding (a cycle like "Qamar al-Zaman," for example)? How does the presence of women in these narratives influence this descent? Why does the narrative move backward to a time preceding its opening rather than into the future in order to arrive at its conclusion? Why do the individual tales repeat almost obsessively themes, motifs, characters, and actions both within and without

their immediate purview? These are issues that have significance within a larger literary theoretical context; indeed one of the interests of a cycle like “The Porter and the Three Ladies” is that in its own insistent narrative self-reflection, it easily opens up, almost seems to demand, a dialogue with issues of narrative theory, and thereby allows the possibility of an interface between the narrative itself on the one hand and a kind of theoretical questioning on the other. What one hopes to come away with is not only a new narrative context for thinking about issues of narrative development but a larger theoretical context within which to think about narratively generated, self-referential cycles of “The Porter and Three Ladies” kind within the *Nights* as a whole.

Although the status of the *1001 Nights* as a work of folk or popular narrative is certainly important to an understanding of the work, it is not to the particular questions and concerns of folk literature per se that I wish to address myself. Those questions of folk literary creation, transmission, and performance, while interesting and important, are, for my purposes, subsumed into the larger issues of narrative structure and development addressed in this study. Issues revolving around the role of narrative repetition, for example, or the function of the narrator or storyteller within a particular society, though foregrounded in folk texts, are not limited to them and can offer significant insight into issues of narrative development and technique in later, fixed texts. The further reaches of my examination extend to the function of metaphor as a trope that helps to engender narrative as well as to the function of repetition as a mode of narrative development. The final attempt of this study is to interpret these functions in the light of the development of the Islamic ornament of arabesque, to explore the way in which the aesthetic behind the arabesque and its pattern of development offers us another way of understanding how and why such cycles as “The Porter and the Three Ladies” within