



Mamluk Popular Tales and Political Nostalgia

Khaled Shaikh Ahmad¹

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Abstract. Remarks on Jane Hathaway's "nostalgia" theory (see *infra*, n. 6) concerning the impression left by the Mamluk sultans left on historiography. Our remarks are based on manuscripts (especially the unpublished BNF arabe 3651) that did not become part of *The Arabian Nights* but help in understanding how that collection formed and took shape.

Keywords: Jane Hathaway, Mamluk, Arabian Nights, futuwwa shuṭṭār, nostalgia, tales.

[es] Cuentos populares mamelucos y nostalgia política

Resumen. Los comentarios sobre la teoría de la "nostalgia" de Jane Hathaway (ver *infra*, n. 6) sobre la impresión dejada por los sultanes mamelucos en la historiografía. Nuestras observaciones se basan en manuscritos (especialmente el BNF arabe 3651 no publicado) que no se convirtieron en parte de *Las mil y una noches* pero ayudaron a comprender cómo se compuso y tomó forma esa colección.

Palabras clave: Jane Hathaway, mameluco, mil y una noches, futuwwa shuṭṭār, nostalgia, cuentos.

Sumario: 1. Sobre *interreges* y *praefecti* municipales. 2. Sobre el *praefectus* único en el capítulo vigésimo quinto de las leyes de *Irni* y *Salpensa*. 3. Sobre los *praefecti* municipales en *Hispania*. 4. Referencias bibliográficas.

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¹ Institución: Tel Aviv University
E-mail: shkhaled413@gmail.com

1. The literary and fabricated historical background of the *Arabian Nights*

The story collection *The Arabian Nights* that has enchanted and influenced Arab and world culture contains a variety of different narrative materials. Scholars have attempted to use these in order to assess how the collection came into being and took shape in the course of time.² It is a well-known fact that the Mamluk period (1250-1517) was important for the later stages in the collection's development.³ In fact, the pace at which it changed and grew did not diminish until well into the following period, when the Ottomans extended their rule over Egypt (beginning in 1517). Throughout this time the collection underwent various changes.

Many of the collection's stories take place in the Mamluk period. A considerable number of them, for example, are ascribed to the reign of Baybars (al-Malik al-Zāhir Rukn al-Dīn Baybars al-Bunduqdārī al-Najmī; d. 1277) and to those of other important Mamluk sultans, who were immortalized in history as well as in these stories.

It should be noted that there exists a large number of fables and legends belonging to the time of Baybars which were published as an independent series of stories with rich prose materials.

The stories in question appear in two forms: A number of stories are part of *The Arabian Nights*, where they constitute a relatively modest proportion of the prose materials in that collection as a whole, and a complementary series, outside the framework of the *Nights*, very rich in narrative materials and entitled "Baybars' Biography" or "Le roman de Baïbars" (we note that the word "roman" corresponds more-or-less to the term "novel" in English, but is broader in compass than the latter term, which is in common use among students of modern literature).⁴

These stories about Baybars evolved and took shape as a fictional narrative quite far removed from, or at least with no close connection to the actual historical events during Baybars' reign. Here we shall naturally speak about tales whose plot and content differs in a number of respects from those of the more famous *Nights* collection.⁵

² Numerous books and articles have been written on this subject. Here I shall limit myself to referring the reader to Ulrich Marzolph's excellent entry "The Arabian Nights" in the online third edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

³ That is, with respect to the literary output that reflects it. See the previous note as well as note 6. M. Gerhardt (*The Art of Story-Telling: A Literary Study of the Thousand and One Nights*, Leiden: E.J. Brill) has analyzed fables and legends with a historical background. See also Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press), 1993 and J. Hathaway (see below, note 6). We also recommend a relatively old book: Suhayr al-Qalamāwī (with an introduction by Taha Husayn), *Alf layla wa-layla* (Dār al-Ma'ārif), 1976.

⁴ In the near future I intend to publish a paper on the debate in the Arab world concerning the definitions of the terms "novel" and "roman" in light of Roger Allen's work (*The Arabic Novel*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), in which he claimed that novels did not exist in Arabic literature before the nineteenth century. I mention this because in French the word "roman" can refer to a biography or a series of tales, such as those about Baybars. The latter were translated a number of times into French, notably G. Bohas' multiple volume *Roman de Baïbars* published by Éditions Sindbad in 1995 (the series was subsequently published by Actes Sud in Arles beginning in 1998). Anyone interested in translations of *The Arabian Nights* into French realizes that the word "roman" has been used to describe books and stories that date to before the nineteenth century. My interest here is less in the literary issue than in the enriching serious debate on this matter among Arab critics. See also: Peter Heath, "Romance as Genre in the Thousand and One Nights", *JAL*, 18 (1987), pp. 1-21, 19 (1988), pp. 2-26.

⁵ See: Jacqueline Sublet (et al.), *Trois vies du sultan Baïbars*, Paris (Imprimerie Nationale), 1992.

2. Nostalgia for the Mamluk period and the theory of Jane Hathaway

Nostalgia for one's land or the past is quite common in literature in general, and especially so in Arabic literature. Here we point to the theme of "nostalgia for one's homeland" which appeared in relatively ancient Arabic poetry as well as in prose texts composed by al-Jāhiz (d. 869; he wrote a letter on "Nostalgia for the homeland"). However, in the present paper my focus will be on nostalgia for the period of Mamluk rule in Egypt, which is associated with specific features, a specific time period and specific people who live at the time.

In what follows we shall therefore discuss "nostalgia for the past", specifically for a specific part of the Mamluk period, to wit Baybars' reign. Our discussion will use so far unpublished prose materials similar in their nature to the narrative sections of *The Arabian Nights*, and may therefore be justly named "*Arabian Nights*-like materials".

For some reason these stories were not as fortunate as to be included in the *Nights*.⁶ Still, they constitute a literary treasure that reflects to a certain degree the general popular disposition in various periods and provides an image of the people's position on the political and social situation at the time. This is so because the stories were born in the bazaars, out of sight of the royal court and beyond its supervision, and grew where the common people gathered around the *Hakawātī* or storyteller. The coffee shops of the Ottoman period were the most appropriate locations for these tales that we called "*Arabian Nights*-like materials"; for they contain sharp and quite candid criticism of the Mamluk sultan, so much so that these texts can be considered a clear challenge to the establishment represented by the sultan, the army and the judiciary.

Jane Hathaway wrote an article about a wave of longing and nostalgia for the Mamluks and their rule that swept Egypt in particular after the end of their reign and the establishment of the Ottoman state. The feelings were not merely of nostalgia but of actual veneration, respect and love for the sultans of the Mamluk period.⁷ This is an interesting interpretation, making it possible to perceive the literary environment of these stories in both their senses, as written art and as oral narrative, since obviously at least one enterprising storyteller took the trouble to write down the tales and legends (in language that deviates to some extent from the rules of Standard Arabic), thus giving rise to the manuscripts that have made these materials survive to our day.⁸

I have no doubt whatsoever that Hathaway was right in her analysis and the connection she found between the audience and the storytellers who used their tales to convey their respect and admiration for personalities of the past. We know that the listening public was influenced by the stories just as the stories themselves were influenced by life as the listeners experienced it. And if below I shall present narrative materials that differ in spirit from those about which Hathaway speaks, this does not mean that I disagree with what she wrote. I merely show that a new way exists to view the reality of those times when seen through narrative materials bearing popular messages that can give us what may be called a "balance", in the sense that the

⁶ See: J. Sadan, *Et il y eut d'autres nuits... Contes inédits des Mille et une nuits*, Paris (Entrelacs), 2004.

⁷ See: J. Hathaway, "Revivals and Mamluk Nostalgia in Ottoman Egypt", in: M. Winter, A. Levanoni (eds.), *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, Leiden (E.J. Brill), 2004, pp. 387-406.

⁸ See: D.F. Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes; Ethnography of Performance in Arabic Oral Epic Tradition*, Ithaca (Cornell University Press), 1995.

latter stories shed light on a different aspect of the past and provide additional detail and useful viewpoints, even when these are in conflict (in the case of criticism leveled against the Mamluk rulers) with the nostalgia that characterized the period in question.

From our study of these “*Arabian Night*-like” stories and the events related in them we believe that we have arrived at such a “balanced” view of the image they give of the spirit of the society in which they were created.

3. “*Arabian Nights*-like” stories and the image of Mamluk sultans which they convey (ms. BNF arabe 3651: *The Story of the Young ‘Alī al-Az’ār*)

Previously I made a comprehensive study of a group of stories (mostly from manuscripts in the French Bibliothèque Nationale) which for one reason or another did not make it into *The Arabian Nights*.⁹

These tales that lives so long only inside manuscripts, may be deemed to constitute a continuation of the genre and narrative style found in the *Nights*. In other words, the tales in question were indeed qualified to enter the *Nights* collection which, as we know, evolved and took form over time (perhaps through a coalescence of several distinct sources), but fortuitously were not incorporated into it. The sheer quantity of such stories makes it imperative to compare them to the stories that did make it into the collection.¹⁰

Among the narrative materials which I perused and studies there were some that drew my attention because of reservations and even, as we noted above, derision towards the Mamluk rulers, leading us to conclude that there were in existence various distinct images of the Mamluk period in fictional historical memory among Arab storytellers and among their listeners, especially in Egypt.¹¹

People heard these stories in the bazaars and coffee houses, so clearly they were willing to accept a scornful depiction of some Mamluk rulers at least to some extent. Furthermore, the stories are full of respect and public sympathy towards the protagonist, who belongs to the margins of society, to the class given names such as *ayyārūn* (“scoundrels”),¹² *aḥdāth* (“delinquents”), *zu’ār* (“brigands”) or *shuṭṭār* (“cunning villains”). Other names with negative social connotations that were given to this class by various writers are *awbāsh* (“rabble”), *awwām* (“common people”) and *ru’ā’* (“riffraff”), because of their frightening behavior. Members of this class naturally referred to each other by names with more positive connotations, such as *ikhwān* (“brothers”) and *fityān* (“youths”), that is, fellow members of a *futuwwa* (“brotherhood”) movement or group. In a number of Turkish-speaking regions or in areas under Ottoman Turkish control such people would address each other as *akhī* (“my

⁹ See note 6 above. This refers to my Ph.D. thesis, “Edited Love Stories Resembling the *Arabian Nights* from Unpublished and Unexplored Manuscripts - The Romantic Story before the Birth of the Modern Arabic Novel”.

¹⁰ This gave rise to numerous “additions” to *The Arabian Nights*. See: Aboubakr Chraïbi, *Contes nouveaux des Mille et une nuits*, Paris (Maisonneuve) 1996; idem, *Les Mille et une nuits: Histoire du texte et classification des contes*, Paris (L’Harmattan), 2008; idem, *Trois contes inédits des mille et une nuits*, Paris (Éditions Espace et signes) 2015; Amir Lerner, *The Ju’aydiyya Cycle*, Dortmund (Verlag für Orientkunde), 214; Sadan, op.cit. (note 5 above).

¹¹ See Reynolds, op.cit. (note 7 above).

¹² See note 14 below.

brother”).¹³ As time went on, this class lost much of its unique character and came to include merely those living on the margins of society.¹⁴

The historical and social aspects of this class were comprehensively and satisfactorily described by Claude Cahen. He thought that this was a group which aspired to local dominance or which was driven by an unconscious desire for local control, because Europe in that same period saw the emergence of such local movements (with great differences among them, however) in Italy, Belgium and small commercial city-states such as Venice, whose influence spread throughout the known world.¹⁵

These ‘*ayyārūn*’ were a cohesive group (that is, they possessed a common bond of “brotherhood”) that lived outside the law and practiced theft, robbery and expropriation of the property of the rich in defiance of the ruling authorities and the wealthy class itself.¹⁶ The behavior of this class and the sympathy it was shown by the people serves as an indicator of a certain degree of anger towards the central authority. The ruling regime and its army, supposedly responsible for maintaining public order, are shown in a scornful and ridiculous light, enabling us to form humorous images. No one who listens to the anecdotes and adventures of these outlaws can help but laugh at the authorities’ naivety, weakness and lack of understanding the basics of governance.¹⁷

We may thus conclude that the audience felt sympathy towards and identified with these tales which criticized the authorities and poked fun at them. This is understandable in light of the fact that the people clearly were oppressed, at least to some extent, by the ruling Mamluk class, especially in times when the Mamluk central government was powerful and cohesive.

These tales provide a historical echo of attempts to express criticism of Mamluk rule. Such criticism was rarely able to be heard publicly, because of the watchful eyes of official censors. The tales thus provided an indirect way to give vent to criticism, using elements and plots based on “scoundrels”. We may surmise that the stories took this shape after the end of the Mamluk period and the beginning of the Ottoman period in Egypt (despite the fact that early Ottomans did not abolish the Mamluk class).

¹³ See F. Täschner, “Die islamischen Futuwabünde”, *ZDMG* ([no vol.] 1933), pp. 6-49; idem, “Zünfte und Bruderschaften im Islam”, Zürich, 197. See also the next note.

¹⁴ See L. Massignon, “La ‘Futuwwa’ ou pacte d’honneur artisanal”, *Nouvelle Clio*, 4 (1952), pp. 171-198.

¹⁵ See Cl. Cahen, “Mouvements populaires et organisations”, *Recueils Soc. Jean Bodin* 7 (1955), pp. 273-288 ; idem, “Mouvements populaires”, *Arabica* 5 (1958), pp. 225-250, *Arabica* 6 (1959), pp. 25-56, 233-265 ; S. Sabari , *Mouvements populaires à Bagdad à l’époque ‘abbāsside* , Paris, 1981, pp. 77-100; cf. Fahmī Abd al-Razzāq, *al-‘Āmma fī Baghdād fī al-qarnayn al-thālith wal-rābi’ al-hijriyyayn*, Beirut (al-Ahliyya lil-nashr wal-tawzī’), 1983, pp. 297, 299; Muḥammad Abd al-Mawlā, *al-‘Ayyārūn wal-shuṭṭār al-baghādīda*, Alexandria (Mu’assasat shabāb al-jāmi’a), 1986; cf. the studies about the ‘*ayyārān*’ (‘*ayyārān*’ in Persian) in Iran: D. Tor, “Toward a Revised Understanding of the ‘*Ayyār*’ Phenomenon”, *Actes du IV^e congrès européen des études iraniennes*, Paris 2002-3, pp. 231-254.

¹⁶ See the references in the previous note, in particular Muḥammad Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Wālī.

¹⁷ Stories about scoundrels in popular Arabic literature usually concern thieves who do not respect authority and break the civil law for political, economic and social reasons, challenge the existing order and take vengeance on their own behalf and on that of their society using their unique devices, involving the use of cunning, abuse, brigandage, highway robbery and other similar means, with which they succeed in threatening those in power and extorting money in order to reestablish justice. For this reason such scoundrels became popular among the masses, who composed tales about their deeds, extolling their individual or national acts of heroism. These stories were then told by one generation to the next. See: Muḥammad Rajab al-Najjār, *Hikāyāt al-shuṭṭār wal-‘ayyārīn fī al-turāth al-‘arabī*, p. 419.

We may at the same time also surmise that popular feelings of nostalgia for the more prominent Mamluk rulers emerged after the end of their reign, just as the stories which express scorn towards these rulers probably also stem from after the end of Mamluk rule, since literary mentions of despotic rulers are to be found in every age and extant rulers were also exposed to expressions of derision.

Another factor which we and any student of literature must take into account is that the descendants of the Mamluk families remained in Egypt under Ottoman rule. It is quite possible that the presence of such families would provide motivation for the creation of narrative texts that would provide the simple man-in-the-street free scope for his feelings of anger at the ruling class.

4. Social “criticism” of officials and senior members of the ruling class

Using a different example, let us consider the appearance of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809 CE) in *The Arabian Nights*¹⁸ and in tales that were not incorporated into that collection (which we called *Arabian Nights*-like stories). We find that narrative materials of this kind evolved and took shape a number of generations after the death of the historical personage. Among such stories we find some that level indirect criticism at this “absolute ruler”, although the actual target of the criticism was the present ruler in their days.¹⁹ In other words, criticism ostensibly leveled at some king or sultan who ruled in the past does not necessarily refer to that ruler, who only serves as a proxy for the present one. Thus the storyteller who in his tale criticizes some Mamluk sultan may well have his contemporary Ottoman sultan in mind.

When discussing this class of people on the margins of society it is necessary to determine just how much power they were able to wield over the Mamluk central government (including by force of arms). We know that their disdain of the people in power could even lead to curses (see above). Furthermore, occasionally clandestine “intelligence” relationships and plots were formed, with men of the royal court and the sultan’s army working hand-in-hand with the “scoundrels”, providing the latter with vital information, proof of just how deeply they penetrated into politics and how powerful they were, in contrast to the weakness of the Mamluk government.

As we noted above, in order to preserve the “balance” to which we referred we shall provide below an example of a story of a “scoundrel” who throughout the narrative never ceases to criticize the sultan Qalāwūn (full name: al-Malik al-Nāsir, Nsir al-Dīn Abū al-Ma’ālī Muhammad b. Qalāwūn, 1285-1340) and to harass his army. On the other hand, at the end of the story we see that he encounters the sultan after having earned the latter’s respect through his courage and strength. This is the “balance” that we spoke about above. It goes without saying, of course, that we are speaking of folktales and not real historical facts.

¹⁸ See A. Clot, *Harun al-Rashid and the World of the 1001 Nights*, reprinted, London (Saqi Books), 2014; Ulrich Marzolph & Richard van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara (ABC – Clio), 2004, pp. 585-587.

¹⁹ Thus, for example, there are several tales about Hārūn al-Rashīd that were composed some time after his death, but readers of these tales realized their objective. This is a very important and interesting issue, but considerations of space make it impossible to deal with it here.

I base my conclusions on one story that I chose in order to demonstrate the issue of “balance”. Of course, there are other stories that could have been used to make the same point.

The story in question is relatively long (BNF, Arabe-3651, folios 148r-174v) and could with some justification be called a “novel” of that century,²⁰ since it contains a love story and other elements found in novels. Because of its length, I shall present only its important highlights.

Digest of the story

The tale consists of three main threads, with an involved plot and numerous details and descriptions. The order of events and their development have a certain logic to them, although like folktales in general it is not lacking in marvels and imaginary beings. The storyteller tells up of the great love between the young brigand ‘Alī b. al-Rimāḥ and the beautiful girl Fāṭima, sister of the prince Nāfiq al-Majnūn. The young man begins a journey of provocations to prove that his love is legitimate in a society that sanctifies class differences and respects social distinctions. He had no choice but to snatch the princess and to lodge her in his home with his mother. This behavior, which may have been natural among the lawless, who were used to taking what they wanted by force, was clearly a challenge to the authorities, to the prince, and even to the Mamluk sultan Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn. The police and its investigators discover the princess’ whereabouts and succeed in returning her to her palace. However, they fail to catch the delinquent youth ‘Alī b. al-Rimāḥ, who flees the town and wanders about, fleeing from his love and the sultan’s troops.

Then begins a new love story, between prince Nāfiq, governor of Aleppo, and a girl he was given by maritime traders. The girl, a daughter of the Christian king Jarjūn, was kidnapped at sea on her way to a convent in the Middle East. But this is not the end of the story. The monk Qamṭūn, with the help of the demons who serve the ring on his hand, manages to return the girl and to imprison prince Nāfiq in the convent of al-Zarāzīr, where he is tormented day and night.

The narrator subsequently takes us into the story’s third thread. The youthful scoundrel ‘Alī b. al-Rimāḥ continues his journey and comes to a large palace in a green land with many streams and trees. He is surprised to hear a woman’s voice calling out his name and begging him to rescue her from the trouble that she is in. He learns that the girl is the daughter of an Arab prince who was imprisoned in a palace that had been taken over by a heretic fire-worshipper, who abducted her after he realized that he could not marry her because she refused to convert. The youth is told that the girl in her dream saw that God answered her plea and will send a man who will free her by the name of the “scoundrel” ‘Alī b. al-Rimāḥ. Her vision then came true and the youth succeeded in freeing her and returned her to her family.

The story’s last pages tell of the end of the youth’s journey. He comes to the convent of al-Zarāzīr, where he encounters prince Nāfiq. Thanks to the youth’s cunning, strength and courage he succeeds in freeing the prince from his torment, kills the evil monk Qamṭūn, the wearer of the ring and the lord of the demons, after he used the ring’s magic to return to his country within minutes.

²⁰ See above, note 3.

Then all of them meet with the sultan Qalāwūn, who had heard the wondrous story about their disappearance and their return to Aleppo. The love story between the youth and the girl ends with their marriage with the sultan's blessings.

The central authority scorned and derided in the Mamluk period

The story's events of this tale, as narrated to us by the storyteller, take place in the reign of the sultan Qalāwūn, one of the most important Mamluk sultans. The storyteller clearly conveys his view that there is a powerful force in the state and in society, namely the class of "scoundrels" (*al-zu'ār wal-shuṭṭār*), who not only stand up to the central authority but also show their disdain for its army and police. Below I chose a few scenes from the story that demonstrate the existence of a different image, one that provides a kind of balance, as we called it, in the way that the public viewed the Mamluk period.

A. At the beginning of the story, after the youth falls in love, he is very distressed, so much so that his "scoundrel" friends take notice and unsheathe their weapons, declaring: "If a prince of Egypt has attacked you, we shall redeem you and make him drink a cup from the bathroom". Whereupon he them his frank reply: "O men, by the truth of the Great and Supreme One, had sultan al-Nāṣir, the sultan of Egypt, attacked me, I would have dealt with him and with his troops properly myself, but ..." [fol. 151v].

B. In a moment of honesty between the two lovers, 'Alī b. al-Rimāḥ and princess Fāṭima, sister of prince Nāfiq, the latter explains to the young delinquent just how powerful her brother is and how close to the sultan. She explained that her brother's high standing in the court meant that her abduction from his palace was such a violation of his honor that it would have dire consequences for his (the youth's) life and future. In his reply, however, the undaunted youth challenged even the highest position in the state: "O maiden, I heard about him and his character, but I swear by your beautiful eyes and your clear brow, even if your brother were not Nāfiq but king al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn himself, I would have dealt alone with him and all his troops" [fol. 153r].

C. In another scene we see how worried the commanders of the police and the investigators are after they learn that 'Alī "the scoundrel" was responsible for abducting the prince's sister. This can be seen in depictions and the dialogues between the police officers and the prince. Here are a few chosen passages: "... And when the colonel heard this (i.e., that the perpetrator was 'Alī "the scoundrel") he became very pale ... Then the governor said: 'What happened to you? When I mentioned the name of the cunning 'Alī your color changed and the blood left your face'. ... The colonel said: 'O knight, by the Ancient Immemorial One, if your hand could reach the heavens and reach this scoundrel ... you would be able to kill him only after a very long time, because he has no enemy in this world except for colonels and commanders of the police ...'" [fol. 154v].

D. The story also shows that some of the troops sympathized with the scoundrel. Thus one of the soldiers hurries to inform 'Alī about the governor's plan to arrest him after some time, with much support from sultan Qalāwūn's army. The knight said: "My child, ... sultan al-Nāṣir commanded them to bring you to him ... He sent an additional [one-hundred] of his Mamluks to them and they are coming to your chamber ..." [fol. 156r]. Then we are presented with the youth's assertive response:

“By the Forgiving Lord, even if king al-Nāṣir Muḥammad himself rode in and came to me, I would not be afraid...” [fol. 156r].

E. The storyteller himself clearly also disdains the rulers, as reflected in the humorous epithets he uses to name them, for example prince Nāfiq al-Majnūn (literally: “the Mad Nafiq”).

In the same vein we are presented with a humorous depiction of prince Nāfiq al-Majnūn, whose moustache dances in a strange manner, like a *zaflūt* fish, after he was told that his sister had been abducted from his palace and her guards killed. The narrator relates: “He went out of his mind and his moustache danced (like) *zaflūt* ...”.

A number of scenes in this story present us with a novel image of society, the feelings of the people in it, and their way of thinking. Indeed, the term “balance” of which we spoke above may well manifest itself in these scenes taken from the storytellers and preserved in manuscripts to this day.

