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## Sex, crime, magic, and mystery in the *Thousand and One Nights*

In his book *The Unraveling of Secret Measures: What You Should Know about Hidden Treasures*, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Razzāq narrates the following story:

At the time of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hākim, there lived in Cairo a butcher named Wardān. Every day, a beautiful woman came to him. After wishing him a good morning, she gave him two gold dinars, bought a whole lamb from him, and asked him to chop it in two halves. Then she ordered a porter to carry it in his basket and walked away. This went on for a certain while.

One day, when Wardān wondered about this woman's story, he had a look at the gold coins that he had received from her. As he found them to be minted long ago, he was puzzled. At first he thought that she must certainly be a pimp. He went to see the porter who would carry her lamb and asked him who she was. The porter said: "By God, Sir, she is indeed a wondrous person! When she orders me to carry the lamb, she goes to a Christian monk in the 'Castle of Candles,' gives him two golden dinars, and buys two bottles of wine from him. Then she gives him another dinar which he changes to 20 dirhams, and for 10 dirhams she buys fruits, munchies, candles, and a little bread as well as other items needed for a meal such as vegetables, spices, and firewood. She asks me to carry all this to the vizier's garden in the vicinity of the mountains. There she blindfolds me with two layers of bandages, takes me by the hand, and leads me through garbage and rubbish for a whole hour. When I finally place the basket on a large boulder, I grab an empty basket from there, and she leads me back to the place where she had blindfolded me. She removes the bandages, gives me 10 dirhams in wages, and tells me to keep her secret so as not to endanger my livelihood." When Wardān heard this, he became even more certain that she was a pimp. He said to the porter: "My brother, by God you have told the truth! You are not going to lose your income! We are going to make her pay dearly for the damage she causes. Now you keep the secret to yourself!"

Wardān waited for the woman until she came again, bought the lamb as usual, and went away. He left his son in charge of the shop and followed her to the

other places she visited until she left the city, all the while being extremely careful so that she would not notice him. When she blindfolded the porter and led him by the hand, he continued to follow her until they reached that large boulder. Wardān hid himself behind another boulder until she returned from bringing the porter back to his original place. She took everything from the basket and suddenly disappeared. Wardān approached the boulder on which the basket was still standing and noticed the entrance to an underground vault at its side, with steps leading down. He went down until he reached a dark vestibule on whose far side he saw light. He went there until he came close to the light and found to his right side the door to a room that was brightly lit, even though he did not know where the light came from. He sat down in the dark at the threshold and looked into the room. Inside the room he suddenly noticed a black bear as big as a camel. The woman had taken one half of the lamb, and after cutting off the best bits she threw the rest of it to that bear. The bear devoured it to the last bite, breaking the bones with its teeth as if they were meat cleavers. The woman took a pot and boiled the meat that she had previously cut off from the piece she had thrown to the bear. She hung the lamb's other half onto a hook in a place where there was a draft of air, although Wardān did not know where this draft came from. When her food was ready, she poured it into a vessel of cream, ate her fill, and put the leftovers aside. She took the fruits and munchies, poured some of the wine into a crystal jar adorned with brilliant jewels, and drank it. She also gave wine to the bear who slurped every drop she poured for him. This went on until the first bottle of wine was finished. Then she got up, took off her trousers, and lay down. The bear mounted her and copulated with her. After the first time he ravished her a second time, and yet another time until he had done a full ten times in one go. All the while both of them had been moaning and groaning until they finally reached fulfillment. The bear fell to her side as if dead, and so did she.

Wardān said to himself: "Why am I sitting here? If the bear regains consciousness and sees me, it will certainly slit my belly open!" Since he was an experienced butcher, he had with him the sharp knife that he used to separate the flesh from the bones. Now he took that knife, grabbed the bear by the throat, and separated its head from its body. When the bear let out a final snort – like a cow's head when it is cut off – the woman woke up and screamed like mad. She saw Wardān on top of the bear's carcass with the knife in his hand, while the bear's head had been separated from his body. She let out a heartbreaking shriek and shouted at him: "Wardān! Why did you do this?" Wardān shouted back at her: "You slut! What made you do this terrible thing? Are there no more men on earth?" She responded: "Wardān! This has been written down as my destiny! Since my time has come now, you must slit my throat too, just as you have killed this bear! After this has happened, there is no point for me to live on in this world!" "You should fear God, the Almighty, and repent before Him!" said Wardān. "I will legally marry you. Together we

will live the rest of our lives while spending this treasure, and God will turn everything to the better!" But she said: "Don't be silly, Wardān, kill me and do not falter! If you don't do it, somebody else might come here one day! Besides – if you don't do what I ask you to do, I will destroy you. But if you do it, you will be saved together with all the treasures that are here!"

Wardān challenged her: "What power do you have to destroy me?" So she turned towards a basin in the middle of the room that was filled with a little water. She murmured a spell, and suddenly the water gushed forth, and in the twinkling of an eye it already went up the circlet around her ankle. "Wardān!" she said. "Save your soul and kill me as I command you, or else you will drown!" And Wardān responded: "Stop this, you witch! I will do as you ask me to!" She pronounced another spell, and the water went back to its original state. Then she commanded him to do to her as he had done to the bear, and Wardān seized her by the hair, cut her throat, and left her to the side of the bear.

Then he took from the pearls and jewels as much as he could carry, put it into the porter's basket, covered it up with a few pieces of cloth, and went on his way. When he reached the city gate, the guards kept him from entering, saying: "Wardān, don't be afraid! You are asked to present yourself in front of the ruler!" When they had brought him to the ruler's presence, the ruler asked him: "Now then, Wardān, have you killed the bear and the slut?" Being perplexed (by how the ruler could know this), Wardān said: "Yes, o Commander of the faithful!" Then the ruler asked Wardān to show him the contents of his basket, had a look at it, and covered it up again, saying: "Wardān, this is what destiny has in store for you, and nobody will dispute this!"

After this, Wardān took his mule, and together with the ruler he went to the treasure. There he said: "O Commander of the faithful! Now step down and look for yourself how terrible the appearance of that bear is!" The ruler responded: "You are wrong here, Wardān! You are not going to see that bear and that woman again! They both sacrificed their lives for that treasure, so that you could take it easily. The treasure could only be taken by you, and nobody else can possibly go down there! Now go down and hand me everything there is, and do not pay attention to what happened on the bed!" Wardān went down and did not find a trace of either the bear or the women, nor was there any blood.

Wardān took from the vault all the treasures, jewels, and other goods, and handed them to the ruler. The ruler carried the treasures to a certain building and stored it there, hiding it deep inside a hidden vault whose remnants can still be seen today. To Wardān he delivered the basket full of jewels, giving orders that nobody should ever dare to dispute his ownership. Wardān invested the money in constructing all those shops that today are known as "Wardān's market stalls." And God knows best!<sup>1</sup>



Figure 10.1 After having killed the bear, Wardān slits the woman's throat. From the 1855 edition of the Persian translation of the *Thousand and One Nights*, illustrated by Mirzā 'Ali-Qoli Kho'i.

The tale of "Wardān the Butcher, the Woman, and the Bear" is remarkable for various reasons. To a modern reader, its most provocative aspect in terms of content is probably the vividly portrayed sexual encounter between the woman and the bear, including the prefatory meal and intoxication. Though

sex between human beings and animals is not alien to premodern Arabic literature in general, we may rightly presume that a premodern audience would have been as shocked by the revolting sexual act of bestiality as a modern one. Even so, the sexual encounter is not devoid of a certain crude humor, and the bear's sexual prowess might even have appealed to the audience (an audience that most probably was exclusively male). Provocative as it may be, it is a truism that sex usually makes a good story. The effect of this ambiguous attraction is even more striking when the sexual encounter is illicit, in other words when sex is considered a crime. In addition to sex and crime, magic as a third ingredient of a good story enters the stage. Magic is at work when the witch threatens to inundate Wardān, and magic might also be behind the ruler's secret knowledge. The tale's latter half makes it clear that the bestial encounter Wardān had witnessed had not been real. The ruler, who obviously has access to secret knowledge, knows that Wardān's experience had only been a phantasm, an illusion that had taken place for the sole purpose of attracting the protagonist's attention and enticing him to kill the treasure's guardians. Only in this manner was he able to fulfill the written destiny that he, and nobody else but he, was to become the treasure's owner. None of the living beings the hero encountered was real, as neither their dead bodies remain nor even a trace of the blood he spilled when killing them. And yet again, he himself experienced the sensual and physical dimensions of his encounter as perfectly real: the couple's groaning when engaged in brute sex, the bear's shrieking as he cut off his head, and the fright he himself went through when the witch threatened to drown him. Besides playing on sex, crime, and magic, the tale's multifarious levels of attractiveness also include mystery as a challenge to the limits of human intelligence and perception. Above and beyond its juicy ingredients, however, the tale's central message focuses on the working of destiny: each human being has a predestined fate that he or she has to fulfill, whether consciously or unconsciously, whether intentionally or not.

So the tale of "Wardān the Butcher, the Woman, and the Bear" contains several of the ingredients that make a fascinating story. But does this story of sex, crime, and magic belong to that fabulous and world-renowned collection called *The Tales of the Thousand and One Nights* – the collection that in English is known as *The Arabian Nights* or, as I will simply call it in the following, the *Nights*? The tentative answer to this question is both yes and no. No, because the above tale has been translated from a work dealing with the history of the Fatimid rulers in Egypt whose author, a certain Ibn al-Dawādārī, lived at the beginning of the fourteenth century CE. Before telling the tale, Ibn al-Dawādārī mentions that he found it in a book for

treasure hunters. That book in turn relates the narrated events to the reign of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hākīm, a ruler who was in power at the beginning of the eleventh century CE. The tale's documented history thus goes back at least some seven centuries, and its protagonist – the butcher Wardān – is even said to have lived about a thousand years ago. The tale's supernatural context makes us understand that the tale is history only in a wider sense. It embellishes a certain ruler's image while simultaneously supplying a wondrous and fascinating explanation for a certain location that is still known to the tale's present audience. The tale does not even pretend to be historically faithful; it is rather a *ben trovato*, or history as it "might have been." And yet, the answer might also be yes, since a version of the tale is also included in the *Thousand and One Nights*, or, to be exact, in the manuscript or family of manuscripts that served as the basis of the Bulaq edition published in 1835 and the following Calcutta II edition of the *Nights* published in 1839–42.<sup>2</sup> Those who make the effort to read the *Nights* from beginning to end would find the tale that in the Calcutta II edition is told in nights 353–5. Meanwhile, the tale does not belong to the usual suspects of tales from the *Nights* that would be published in the popular editions. Given its provocative content, it is particularly unlikely that the tale would ever be included in any of the innumerable selections addressing children and young adults. With their highly repetitive selections of tales from Galland's *Nights*, these editions certainly shaped the popular perception of the *Nights* as a collection of fairy tales more than the "complete" or even the "scholarly" ones.

Considering the above outlines of the tale's origins, various questions come to mind: How did the fantastic tale of "Wardān the Butcher, the Woman, and the Bear" end up in the *Nights*? Since when was it included in the *Nights*, and from which source did the compilers of the *Nights* copy it? Why did they judge it suitable for inclusion in the *Nights*? More generally we might even wonder: Why was it necessary to "compile" the *Nights*? Was there no complete and finished version of the collection available? Or otherwise: Why would it have been necessary to fill up an unfinished or incomplete version with tales from different sources so as to make it complete? In the following, these questions will guide the reader through the complex history of the *Nights*. By referring to this specific tale every now and then, the present chapter will discuss the origins of the *Nights* and the genesis of the collection as it is widely known today – a collection of tales of mystery and magic or, if you like, of fairy tales. At this point we need to remind ourselves that fairy tales are a European, a Western, and at best an Indo-European genre. In the context of the *Nights*, as in most non-European

contexts, the term fairy tale only makes sense if understood in a wider sense. Even though fairies make an appearance in various tales of the *Nights*, the fairy as a wish-fulfilling character is not a standard persona in the *Nights*. If we speak of fairy tales in the *Nights*, the term rather denotes a tale in which the supernatural, often a human being endowed with supernatural powers or a supernatural creature, intervenes in human matters. This intervention can work to a character's advantage, as in the tale of Wardān, but often it leads to damaging consequences.

A first attempt to fathom the role of fairy tales in the *Nights* must discuss our knowledge about the collection's genesis and early history. The actual origin of the *Nights* is not at all clear. Even though the *Nights* are mentioned in Arabic literature as early as the tenth century, available testimony does not supply more than a vague outline of the characteristic frame tale. In its full version, this frame tale tells us about two brothers, allegedly kings of the Sassanian dynasty, the last Iranian dynasty that ruled Iran before the Islamic conquest. When the younger brother prepares to visit his elder brother, he bids farewell to his beloved wife. However, since he has forgotten something important at home, he returns unexpectedly only to find his wife engaged in extramarital sexual activity. Having killed his wife and her lover, he falls into a deep melancholy when he reaches his brother. Since he does not divulge his secret, his brother remains in the dark about what happened to him. One day, however, when the elder brother is out hunting, the younger brother watches his brother's wife and a number of her entourage engage in a sexual orgy. Realizing that he is not alone in his affliction and that his brother's misfortune is even greater than his own, the younger brother regains his good spirits again. When he informs his brother about the events, the latter kills his wife and her entourage, and both brothers set out on wanderings in search of a faithful wife. One day, the two fall prey to a woman who is kept by her demon husband inside a chest, so that she will not betray him. Even so, when the demon is sleeping with his head on her lap, the woman blackmails both men into having sex with her, as she has previously had with a large number of other men. Finally realizing that women's wiles are endless, the brothers return home. Meanwhile, they draw different consequences from their experience. While the younger brother makes a vow of celibacy, the older brother takes to marrying a new wife every day, only to have her killed in the morning. When the kingdom is almost depleted of marriageable women, the vizier's daughter Shahrāzād (Scheherazade) promises to reform the king. She marries him, but before the king falls asleep at night, she has her sister (or her maid) Dīnāzād invite her to tell a tale. At the break of day, the tale is not yet finished, so the king permits Shahrāzād to live on until she can finish the tale. This continues for a total of one thousand and

one nights. When Shahrāzād finally presents a number of children to the king, he admits that he has been reformed and promises to end his ruthless practice.

Referring to this frame tale, modern analytical research has variously argued for the collection's Indian or Iranian origin. A commentary to the holy scriptures of the Jains mentions a tale in which a royal concubine tells a story or a riddle to the ruler for several nights, usually delaying the story's ending to the following night. Shahrāzād's action in the *Nights* thus echoes a stratagem already known from ancient Indian literature. Analogies in ancient Indian literature have also been documented for the story of the demon who keeps his human wife imprisoned in a chest and for the story of the man who understands the language of animals, a tale the vizier narrates to prevent his daughter from marrying the cruel king. One of the major obstacles in determining the relation of these texts to their later versions in the *Nights* is, however, the difficulty in dating early Indian literature. Be that as it may, ancient Indian literature abounds in tales of extramarital sexual activities. And since the narrative compilations of pre-Islamic Iran draw to a certain extent on Indian precursors, this argument might to a certain extent also be valid for the early version of the *Nights*.

The collection's Iranian origin is corroborated by two short passages in tenth-century Arabic sources. More or less agreeing with each other, Arabic historian al-Mas'ūdī (died 956) and Baghdad bookseller Ibn al-Nadīm (died 995) mention a Persian book named *Hezār afsān* – a title that can be translated in English as “A Thousand Wonderful Stories,” or in Arabic as *Alf khurāfa*. This book is quoted to be known as *Alf layla* (A Thousand Nights) – a title that outlines a certain duration without, however, indicating the number of tales narrated during this period. The collection's frame tale as sketched by Ibn al-Nadīm is identical to that of the *Nights* as we know the work today. An additional argument for the collection's Iranian origin has been seen in the fact that the frame tale suggests an Iranian context. King Shahriyār (whose name means “hero”) is said to belong to the Sassanian dynasty. Shahriyār's brother Shāhzamān (whose name means “king of the period”) is introduced as the ruler of the city of Samarkand in Middle Asia. Furthermore, the name of the collection's narrator, Shahrāzād, is also Iranian, meaning “of noble appearance or ancestry.” The collection's sheer existence is thus documented for the tenth century, when an (adapted?) Arabic translation of the Iranian original is known to exist. Ibn al-Nadīm even mentions having seen various manuscripts of the work. It is quite unfortunate for us that he did not bother to supply any details, since he regarded the collection's tales as dull and boring. The collection's Persian origin is also mentioned by a certain 'Abdallāh b. 'Abdal'azīz who – in his mid-ninth-century



book on secretaries – attributed the translation of the *Nights* into Arabic to Ibn al-Muqaffa<sup>2</sup>, the translator of the Arabic version of the well-known tales of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* from Persian to Arabic.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the oldest documentary evidence testifying to the collection's existence even pre-dates the tenth-century testimonies in Arabic literature. The first page of a paper fragment found in the Cairo Geniza clearly shows the Arabic title *Kitāb hadīth alf layla* (A Book of Narratives of a Thousand Nights).<sup>4</sup> The fragment's second page contains the beginning of the well-known frame tale in which the unnamed narrator's servant asks her to tell some tales. Additional scribbling on the sheet of paper dating to the year 879 serves as a convincing argument to date the fragment of the *Nights* to before that date. This evidence indicates that the originally Persian work had already been translated into Arabic before the eighth century CE. Moreover, the "striking examples of the excellencies and shortcomings, the cunning and stupidity, the generosity and avarice, and the courage and cowardice" of human beings the narrator is asked to tell in the fragment indicate a content that does not converge with the later *Nights* in which, after all, tales of magic play an important role. Therefore, we presume that different versions of the *Nights* might already have existed at an early stage.

Around the year 1150, a Jewish bookseller in Cairo lent a book titled *Alf layla wa-layla* (A Thousand Nights and a Night) to one of his customers and kept a note of this transaction in a little booklet.<sup>5</sup> This incident has preserved the earliest documentary evidence for the collection's extended title. We do not know when or for what reason the thousand-and-first night was added to the thousand nights of storytelling the collection is said to last. At any rate, the change in title follows a schema that is already attested in Arabic literature of the tenth century.<sup>6</sup> As an ingenious move, the new title extends the previous notion of unfathomable multitudes (a thousand) into a notion of sheer infinity (a thousand and one) that promises endless variety – just like the English "forever and a day."

Up to this stage, besides the collection's sheer existence, we do not know anything about the actual content of the *Nights*. This content only begins to reveal itself with the oldest preserved text in a fragmentary manuscript dating from the fifteenth century. The manuscript consists of three volumes and contains the text up to the beginning of night 282, breaking off in the middle of the love story of *Qamar al-Zamān and Budūr*. The stories or cycles of stories of this old manuscript are today regarded as the core corpus of the *Nights*. Most of these stories share two features. First, their content links them to the frame tale, since the characters in the tales have to tell stories in order to save their own lives or rescue another character, just as Shahrāzād does in the frame tale. The ability to tell a story thus

becomes tantamount to survival or life.<sup>7</sup> This feature plays an important role in the manuscript's very first story, the tale of "The Merchant and the Jinnī," in which the Jinnī threatens to kill the merchant for having killed, albeit inadvertently, the Jinnī's son by carelessly throwing away a date stone. One after the other, three old men pass by and each of them convinces the Jinnī to spare a third of the merchant's life in exchange for the wondrous stories they tell. Second, several of the stories in the old manuscript are not told in a linear manner. They rather constitute diligently structured complex narratives changing between various layers that are, in their turn, told by different narrators. This feature is particularly evident in the "Story of the Hunchback," with several layers of embedding. The *Nights* thus present themselves as a story told by an anonymous storyteller in which Shahrāzād tells a story in which somebody tells a story that frames the story of yet somebody else.

In terms of genre, the stories of the old manuscript are tales of unusual and wondrous events, and several of them involve magic. The story of "The Fisherman and the 'Ifrīt" together with its sequel story of "The Semi-Petrified Prince" mentions a sorceress who has transformed the inhabitants of a certain city into fishes of various color by putting a spell on them; moreover, she has petrified the lower half of her husband's body since he had mortally wounded her demonic lover. The stories of the three old men embedded in "The Merchant and the Jinnī," as well as the stories of the second and the third dervish and "The Story of the Lady of the House" embedded in "The Porter and the Three Ladies," tell of the (temporary or permanent) transformation of human beings into animals. "The Story of the Third Dervish" moreover narrates the protagonist's experiences in a supernatural realm in which he enjoys the favors of forty beautiful maidens but is magically transported back to the ordinary world when he transgresses the taboo not to open a particular door. The dynamics of several tales, and not only those involving magic, result from illicit sexual activity, whether real or imagined. Just as sex and crime play a major role in the frame tale of the *Nights*, so they do in the embedded tales. The main genre of the core corpus of the *Nights* is thus not the fairy tale or tale of magic, but rather a didactic tale in which magic serves to teach proper behavior in various unusual, and sometimes outright fantastic, circumstances. Since the text addresses the inherent messages of its tales to the king, the *Nights* are at times regarded as a mirror for princes – a literary genre whose best-known representative is the originally Indo-Persian collection that in the West is known as *The Seven Sages (of Rome)*.

When talking about the *Nights* after the stage of the old manuscript, we need to distinguish which *Nights* we actually mean. The main reason for

this necessary distinction is Antoine Galland's creative intervention in tradition. On the one hand, this intervention established a European tradition of the *Nights* that was cultivated in numerous translations and adaptations and that resulted eventually in transforming the *Nights* into a playground for European fantasy. Founded on previous Arabic tradition, this European tradition would regard a liberal embellishment of the *Nights* as legitimate, even up to and beyond the point of recognition. On the other hand, Galland's translation created a growing demand for Arabic manuscripts of the collection. This demand, in turn, contributed to the establishment of a new family of manuscripts whose repertoire would be enlarged from a variety of sources. Both strands of tradition would take the core corpus of tales as documented in the fragmentary fifteenth-century manuscript for granted.

The old manuscript was the one that Galland was able to use for his adapted French translation of the *Nights*, the very translation upon which the *Nights'* immortal fame in world literature is founded. Galland's version of the *Nights* was published in twelve volumes between 1704 and 1717. Since Galland had previously translated the tales of Sindbād, the sea-faring merchant, he had taken the liberty of inserting those tales into his translation, a decision that had already been made by some of the Oriental compilers of manuscripts of the *Nights*. When Galland's manuscript material was exhausted, his audience asked for more of the tales they had come to love. Galland responded to this request by continuing his *Nights* with tales from a source that was altogether unconnected to the Arabic manuscript tradition of the *Nights*. Chance brought him into contact with the Syrian Maronite Christian Hanna Diyāb, who narrated to him a total of sixteen stories, ten of which he published.

It is exactly these tales, in particular the tales of "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp" and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," that determined the ensuing European and international perception of the *Nights* as a collection of "Oriental" fairy tales. To repeat, even though Galland presented Hanna's tales as an integral part of an "authentic" Arabic collection, Hanna's tales did not belong to the repertoire of the *Nights* before Galland included them in his version. It was Galland who transformed those tales from the oral performance of a gifted Syrian storyteller into the acme of the *Nights*, while never disclosing the tales' actual provenance to his audience. Still today, when asked about their memory of the *Nights*, even educated readers would usually name the tales of Aladdin or Ali Baba and would be perplexed if informed that these stories were only introduced by Galland and never belonged to the Arabic tradition of the *Nights*. It is important to stress this point again and again, since over and above the scholarly concern of

studying the history and genesis of the *Nights*, Hanna's tales are those that suit the European notion of a fairy tale best. In particular, the tale of "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp" follows the well-known fairy-tale pattern of "rags to riches" in that a boy from humble origins wins the favors of the princess and with the help of a magic lamp commanding a potent Jinnī eventually becomes rich and powerful. All this happens to him quite undeservedly, thus conforming to the European notion of the fairy tale as a genre that makes the protagonist's (and, by extension, the audience's) wishes come true. Since we do not have any traces of the tale's original version as told by Hanna, it has been presumed that Galland's reworking of Hanna's performance owes to Galland's own individual experience, since he himself rose from humble origins to the status of professor at the prestigious Collège de France. Magic as a means to the hero's undeserved success also plays a major role in a number of Hanna's other tales. In the tale of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," the poor woodcutter overhears the magic formula giving access to the robbers' treasure in the cave. In the tale of "The Ebony Horse," the magic flying horse constructed by a Persian magician plays a major role. And in the tale of "Ahmad and the Fairy Peri Banu," even a proper supernatural fairy makes an appearance helping the hero to overcome his adversaries. Beyond the scholarly discussion of provenance and authenticity, Hanna's tales satisfied the audience's expectations of what an Oriental tale should be like in terms of attractive strangeness and subliminal familiarity. To put it plainly, the audience appreciated familiar narrative concepts in an alien garb, thus laying the foundations for the appreciation of the *Nights* as a collection of "Oriental" fairy tales.

Even though Galland consciously mystified the origin of Hanna's tales, his method of including tales of an originally extraneous origin in the collection follows an age-old practice that had already been applied by the Arabic compilers of the *Nights* for many centuries. The textual history of the *Nights* before Galland strongly suggests that complete manuscripts of the *Nights* in Arabic had not been available at least since the date of the oldest preserved manuscript dating from the fifteenth century. As a matter of fact, we do not even know for certain whether "complete" manuscripts of the *Nights* in Arabic ever existed. The core corpus of tales preserved in the oldest known manuscript appears to have been stable. Beyond the core corpus, different compilers added tales from a broad range of sources in their effort to present a "complete" version; that is, a version that would actually cover a total of one thousand and one nights of storytelling, as the collection's title promised. This method of compilation had already been in vogue before Galland, but after the tremendous success of his translation it gained a different dimension. Now European researchers and adventurers traveled to

Egypt and the Levant in search of the collection's "complete" manuscripts. Since such manuscripts were in demand, even though they did not exist, it was a matter of course for them to be produced. Both before and after Galland, the Arabic compilers of these manuscripts took recourse to their traditional narrative heritage as it is preserved in numerous works, whether they be anonymous or written by authors known by name. Numerous tales, fables, and anecdotes were added to the collection's fragmentary corpus, and it is here that the tale of "Wardān the Butcher, the Woman, and the Bear" comes to the fore again.

Tales of magic and mystery had been a substantial ingredient of the *Nights* from its inception. Therefore, similar tales offered a natural choice for potential additions to the fragmentary manuscripts. From the numerous sources the compilers exploited, many of which cannot be identified, a so far little known work of history appears to have played a special, if limited, role. This is the *Kitāb Latā'if akhbār al-uwal* (Subtle Stories from the Forefathers) compiled by a certain Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Mu'tī al-Ishāqī, who died in 1623. This work of history shares more than ten tales with the manuscripts (and printed editions) of the *Nights*, and a total of four of these tales were apparently integrated into the *Nights* by copying them directly from Ishāqī's previous compilation. Two strong arguments support this hypothesis. First, the wording of the tales in the *Nights* corresponds closely to that in Ishāqī's work. Second, even though Ishāqī quotes the tales at places wide apart, they appear in the *Nights* in exactly the same order as in his work. For our present considerations, it is revealing to see that two tales appear in both works even right after the other without any intervening passages or other tales. These are the tales of "Wardān the Butcher, the Woman, and the Bear" and the following one of "The Princess and the Ape," both of them elaborating on the theme of bestiality. This finding allows us a close glimpse into the studio practice of the compilers who appear to have sifted through various works while choosing suitable tales to integrate into the manuscript they were compiling.

While we can be fairly certain that Ishāqī's version of the story was the one the compilers of the *Nights* copied, we do not know exactly on which source Ishāqī relied. The oldest known text of the tale of "Wardān the Butcher, the Woman, and the Bear" in Ibn al-Dawādārī's historical work shows traces of colloquial language, a fact that might be indicative of an origin from oral tradition. We cannot tell whether the tale lived on in popular tradition or not. Meanwhile, there is a version prior to Ishāqī that in terms of text is so close to his version that it might well be the version he copied. It is probably not much of a surprise that this version is included in a treatise of sexuality, the book *Rujū' al-shaykh ilā sabāhu* (The Old Man's Return

to His Youth), attributed to a certain Ibn Kamāl-Bāshā (died 1533). In this version, the witch's magic conjuration of water has been deleted in favor of her unswerving faithfulness to her dead bear lover. One of the few changes Ishāqī made, if indeed he copied this text, was to delete the overt mention of the bear's sexual organ, which Ibn Kamāl-Bāshā quotes to have been as large as that of a mule.

Even though the fairy-tale elements of magic and mystery play a major role in numerous tales of the *Nights*, the tales' outcome according to the Muslim worldview is ultimately ruled by destiny and God's omnipotence. And even when destiny has eventually foreseen a happy ending, the tales' characters are not entitled to passively submit to a fate they cannot change. Quite to the contrary (and irrespective of the fact that a passive hero makes a poor story), the characters of the *Nights* are forced to engage actively in shaping or rather fulfilling their destiny. In their historical context, the *Nights* mainly addressed a bazaar audience of merchants and their customers to an extent that they have been labeled a "mirror for merchants."<sup>8</sup> Considering this audience, a recurring character of the *Nights* is the merchant's son. Born into a well-to-do family, the merchant's son could just continue his father's business while enjoying the moderate luxury the profit of his trading activities would yield. But since this action would hardly create an electrifying story, the merchant's son is often a spendthrift. After his father's death, he squanders his fortune by inviting friends to lavish banquets, only to find that his friends are not friends after all when he goes broke. Like the princes of European fairy tales, he must from then on undergo trials and live through hardships until he finally regains his deserved position.

Sindbād, the sea-faring merchant, is probably the best-known character of this type, even though Sindbād is not exactly a good-for-nothing but rather an adventurer who tests his fate again and again until after a total of seven adventurous journeys he is finally prepared to settle down. At any rate, Sindbād's career as a merchant's son made the originally independent cycle of his tales fit neatly into the *Nights*. About a dozen of the tales in the *Nights* begin with the trope of the merchant's profligate son, among them many well-known tales such as that of "The Sleeper Awakened," in which the caliph makes the protagonist believe that he has been caliph for a day.<sup>9</sup> Again, some of these tales award a major role in the plot to magic. A particularly elaborate example of this sub-genre of fairy tales in the *Nights* is the tale of "Abū Muhammad the Sluggard."<sup>10</sup> Here, the absurdly lazy son of a barber makes a fortune simply by actively engaging in the shaping of his fortune, even though the only thing he does is give a small coin to a merchant who is about to travel to far-away lands and ask him to bring back something for him. The only item the merchant manages to buy is a

rugged monkey, but this monkey earns his owner tremendous wealth by diving into the sea and securing the most precious pearls. The tale might well end here, but the lowly hero who becomes rich is in for yet more trials and tribulations. The monkey proves to be a demon who uses the hero to break a spell protecting a rich merchant's daughter from him, and when the spell is broken, he abducts her. Now the hero has to prove his worth first by finding his wife and then by conducting a complex magical ritual in order to annihilate the demon. Only when he has actively engaged in what destiny had in store for him is he allowed to live in peace, wealth, and happiness. The moral these tales teach is thus not the model of abandoning the self by passively trusting in a predestined, immutable future. Rather, the hero must engage actively in shaping his future so that his destiny can be fulfilled. Any kind of active engagement is praised and supported, often by magic, and will eventually lead to the fulfillment of the hero's (and the audience's) wishes in granting him wealth and status, as in a fairy tale.

A final point that needs to be mentioned with respect to the relation of the *Nights* to fairy tales is the collection's history and impact in world literature after Galland's translation. Even while Galland's *Nights* was still not finished, his colleague François Pétis de la Croix published the competitive collection *The Thousand and One Days* (1710-12). Pétis de la Croix mystified his work by pretending to translate from an old Persian manuscript accessible to him, while in fact he presented a selective translation of tales from an Ottoman Turkish manuscript in the Royal Library in Paris. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, Galland's *Nights* served as the ultimate inspiration for a whole new genre of orientalizing *contes de fées*, or fairy tales. Out of the numerous authors who contributed to this genre, we should at least mention Jean-Paul Bignon (1662-1743) and his *Aventures d'Abdalla* (1712/14) and Thomas-Simon Gueullette and his *Les Mille et un quarts d'heure* (1712), both of which profited from a longing for fairy tales in the "Oriental" mode. And the *Nights* themselves served as a source of inspiration for various fancy sequels, such as the *Continuation des Mille et une nuits* (1788) compiled by Dom Denis Chavis and edited by Jacques Cazotte. In the nineteenth century, when Edward William Lane (1839), John Payne (1882-4), and Richard Burton (1885, 1886-8) for the first time presented translations based on Arabic texts and manuscripts, the *Nights* had already become an "Arabian fantasy," and travelers to the Arab world would read the *Nights* as an ethnographic guide to an anachronistic fairy-tale world they expected to find. The ultimate equation of the *Nights* with the European notion of the fairy tale was the new "translation" (1899-1904) by Joseph Charles Victor Mardrus (1868-1949), in which the compiler did not shy away from masquerading Egyptian folktales collected at the end of the

nineteenth century as genuine components of the *Nights*. The fact that the Mardrus version of the *Nights* was widely acclaimed in France and enjoyed particular popularity with famous writers such as André Gide and Marcel Proust bespeaks, if anything, a European colonial attitude. Having been “discovered” by the West, the *Nights* were regarded as European property, a property that Europeans could tamper with at will – adapting, embellishing, and enlarging the texts that originated from a culture other than their own. Even though this attitude may be read as a tale of conscious disregard and playful exploitation, the *Nights* undoubtedly were and still are a major creative force on the international market of fairy tales.

## NOTES

- 1 Translated from Ibn al-Dawādārī, [*Kanz al-durar wa-jāmi‘ al-ghurar*] *Die Chronik* [. . .], vol. 6: *Der Bericht über die Fatimiden*, ed. S. al-Munajjid (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1961), 302–7.
- 2 For this and other details relating to the *Nights* mentioned in the present chapter, see Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clío, 2004).
- 3 See Aboubakr Chraïbi, *Les Mille et une nuits: Histoire du texte et classification des contes* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008), 24–6.
- 4 Nabia Abbot, “A Ninth-Century Fragment of the ‘Thousand Nights’: New Lights on the Early History of the *Arabian Nights*,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 8 (1949): 129–64; reprinted in Marzolph, *Reader*, 21–82.
- 5 Solomon D. Goitein, “The Oldest Documentary Evidence for the Title *Alf Laila wa-Laila*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 78 (1958): 301–2.
- 6 Chraïbi, *Mille et une nuits*, 30–2.
- 7 Tzvetan Todorov, “Narrative-Men,” in *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 66–79; reprinted in Marzolph, *Reader*, 226–38.
- 8 See Aboubakr Chraïbi, “Situation, Motivation, and Action in the *Arabian Nights*,” in Marzolph and van Leeuwen, *Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, vol. I, 5–9.
- 9 For a list of these tales see Marzolph and van Leeuwen, *Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, vol. II, 808, Motif W 131.1; see also Ulrich Marzolph, “The Story of Abu ’l-Hasan the Wag in the Tübingen Manuscript of the Romance of ‘Umar ibn al-Nu’mān and Related Texts,” in *Journal of Arabic Literature* (forthcoming).
- 10 Ulrich Marzolph, “Narrative Strategies in Popular Literature: Ideology and Ethics in the *Arabian Nights* and Other Collections,” in Wen-Ching Ouyang and Geert Jan van Gelder, eds., *New Perspectives on Arabian Nights: Ideological Variations and Narrative Horizons* (London: Routledge, 2005), 39–50: 40–3.



THE CAMBRIDGE  
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MARIA TATAR



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