



“La Princesse Scheherazade”, 1911, by Edmund Dulac;  
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## Sea of darkness, land of flowers

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Stories, like salt and silk, travel trade routes. They mutate as they migrate, as they are passed from mouth to ear, from memory to paper, from one tongue to another. Bruce Fudge’s erudite translation of *A Hundred and One Nights*, a slimmer relation of *The Arabian Nights*, compiled in the Maghreb around the ninth or tenth century and hitherto unknown in English, is a major contribution to the field and promises to intrigue and beguile the general reader as well as to become indispensable to literary scholars. Fudge’s introduction, meticulously footnoted and indexed translation and the parallel text give fresh insight into the origins and routes of transmission of narrative. *The Thousand and One Nights*, or *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainment*, first published in English in 1706, remains the single work of Arab literature that most European readers are likely to have encountered. The fantastical world of the tales has been a rich source of inspiration in literature from Coleridge to Borges and beyond. Scheherazade, Aladdin, Ali Baba and Sinbad the Sailor have become familiar characters in contemporary global popular culture from Disney’s *Aladdin* (1992) to Sega’s computer game *Sonic and the Secret Rings* (2007).

*A Hundred and One Nights*, a compilation of seventeen stories told in around three months, rather than hundreds told in close to three years, is

older by several centuries and slimmer by many volumes, but we are in familiar magical territory, in a labyrinth of stories within stories in timeless landscapes “of mirage where melancholy dwells”. The stories seem timeless but bear the hallmarks of the era when they were written. Although they were compiled in Abbasid times, there are frequent mentions of the previous dynasty, the Umayyad Caliphs. Islam doesn’t feature prominently and when it does, it doesn’t resemble its modern incarnation. In “The Story of King Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik”, when King Namariq accepts Islam there is a big celebration and “the wine flowed freely”.

Scheherazade the vizier’s daughter is the heroine of the framing narrative once more, telling tales to a murderous king at night-time in order to defer a death sentence. Although in this earlier version it is Scheherazade’s sister, Dinarzad, who sleeps with the king and Scheherazade who provides the postcoital entertainment. Every night we are cast adrift in fantastical topographies like the Sea of Darkness, the Land of Flowers, the Palace of the Eagle and the Valley of Strangers, where men roam “as ostriches do”. This is a landscape populated by kings, djinns and demons, often disguised as seductive warrior women with long black hair. Flying horses, animated statues, lions and lost heroes abound. Many motifs are familiar to us from tales retold by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. Here too we find a world of magic mirrors that determine who is the most beautiful in the land, gorgeous sleeping princesses, locked rooms the hero is forbidden to enter and flesh-eating ogres.

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There are striking similarities between *A Hundred and One Nights* and *The Thousand and One Nights*. Both are compendia of an eclectic range of tales with Sanskrit, Chinese and Persian origins, which predate the collections that contain them. These fictions were as exotic to their Arab readers then as they are to their international audience today. Asia, especially India, was a place of mystery and adventure. While their origins may derive from oral traditions of storytelling these anthologies are part of a popular literary culture. This can be determined by the fact that there are seven known manuscripts of *A Hundred and One Nights*, and despite differences in versions much of the text is identical, with a consistency that does not occur in orally transmitted folk tales. Written in Middle Arabic, that is neither classical nor colloquial, and falling far short of the canonical values of merit required of Arab literature, they have always been considered vulgar entertainments in the Arab world. The language of the manuscripts is repetitive, simple in syntax, limited in vocabulary and, Fudge notes, treats basic rules of Arabic grammar with “often breathtaking insouciance”. Nevertheless they were perennially popular and had a wide readership, as is evident in the number of different manuscripts and the widespread rewriting of the collections. Their readers were likely to have been, as the heroes of the stories so often are, young merchants dreaming of fame, fortune and beautiful women.

While Oriental fictions have inspired much Occidental erotic reverie, *A Hundred and One Nights* isn't conventionally sexy. Architecture is more lovingly evoked than the human form. The storyteller is given to long, loving descriptions of magical architecture, of palaces made of gems, fashioned out of marble, adorned with ebony and ivory, silver and gold, their domes freshened by fragrant breezes, their doors guarded by automata. There is also much sensual delight in feasting “to heart's content”. Yet despite an abundance of beautiful and bewitching beauties sex tends to be brisk, brief and from a feminine point of view rather unmemorable. In “The Story of the Prince and the Serpent”, the hero who finds a sleeping beauty in the Palace of Precious Stones “satisfied his every desire, while she lay there sound asleep”. Women are not always passive princesses, though. They are often shape-shifting demons or disguised as knights and are usually on the look-out for sex.

The central problem for the framing Scheherazade story, and for “The Story of the Prince and the Seven Viziers”, another framing story within hers, is how to deal with women's insatiable desire and diabolical capacity for mendacity and treachery. Nevertheless, however improbable it may seem, whether you are the hostage of a despot telling tales to save your life or a

Damascene adventurer who ends up married to a shape-shifting demon, there is always the reassurance of a happy ending, and a reminder of the inevitability of death. All the stories end with the sobering poetic incantation “until there came to them that from which there is no fleeing, and praise be to God, Lord of all being”.

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