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THE ARABIAN NIGHTS AND THE ORIENTAL TALE Sustainable Enlightenment Texts

Malcolm Jack

The Arabian Nights or, as they were first known in Arabic, *The Book of the Tale of the Thousand Nights*, is a collection of folk stories that may already have been in circulation in the ninth century but, as Robert Irwin points out in his erudite *Companion*, that early collection is but fragmentary.¹ It is possible that the few pages of the manuscript which survived derived from an earlier Persian work, *Hazar Afsan*, but as no copy of that exists, it is impossible to establish a direct connection between them. Another source of the *Nights* may have been in classical Sanskrit literature where the technique of the embedded story (or story within a story) was used.

Through painstaking and difficult reconstruction, the Arabist scholar, Muhsin Mahdi has “excavated” what might be regarded as an archetype from

¹ Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: Allen Lane, 1994), 4.

Syrian manuscript sources of a later period, namely of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. These Syrian sources are particularly significant to my discussion of the Enlightenment *Nights* because they were used by Antoine Galland in producing his seminal French translation in 1704, a matter I shall discuss presently. Regardless of that use, as a result of this modern, scholarly research an authentic medieval version of the collection may now be read in Arabic.

An enduring characteristic of the *Nights* is how they changed, in form and content, and were added to over the ages. Individual stories were elaborated upon as each generation of story tellers, unknown narrators, relayed them to new audiences. The stories were part of popular, rather than high, culture and for that reason were overlooked by the Arab literati who scarcely considered them as serious literary works, excluding them from the classical canon. It may be that the telling of the stories orally (by those whom Borges in his lively essay on the *Nights* calls the “confabulatores nocturni”—men whose profession it was to tell stories in the night)² led to changes which were then incorporated into the texts. Alexander Russell, resident in Aleppo in 1756 opines:

The recitation of Eastern fables partakes somewhat of a dramatic performance. It is not a simple narrative; the story is animated by the manner and action of the speaker.³

Later, Henry Weber, in his *Tales of the East* (1812), concludes that variations would have resulted from oral transmission.⁴ The written texts themselves were certainly rewritten or added to as different versions were produced. Whatever the reasons for this continuous evolution, the tales are characterised by a great flexibility which has contributed to their sustainability over the centuries.

The most distinctive feature of their flexibility is that the *Nights* are told as stories embedded within stories – the lead story sometimes being called the “frame story.” The origin of this technique is told in a charming tale about Sheherazade, the daughter of the vizier at the court of the mythical king,

² Jorge Luis Borges, “*The Thousand and One Nights*,” trans. Eliot Weinberger, *The Georgia Review* 38 (Fall 1984): 564–74.

³ Quoted in Peter L. Caracciolo, ed., *The Arabian Nights in English Literature* (London: MacMillan, 1988), 97.

⁴ Caracciolo, ed., *The Arabian Nights*, 5.

Shahriyar. After discovering his wife's infidelity and executing her, the King had a habit of taking virgins to his bed for one night stands, invariably having them beheaded afterward. Sheherazade volunteered herself for his bed. After the King had had his pleasure with Sheherazade, she began to relate a story ("The Merchant and the Demon") but was careful not to have completed its telling before dawn so that the King postponed her execution in order to hear the rest of the story the following night. But on the following night, instead of concluding the story, Sheherazade began another story, "framed" within the first story. As dawn was breaking, this story too remained unfinished but Sheherazade promised an even more enticing sequel to it the next evening. This process continued for one thousand and one nights eventually earning the prolific story teller a well-deserved pardon from the death sentence and leading to the best known title of the *Nights*. According to Borges it also confers the idea of infinity upon the work since there is never an ending to the telling of the tales.⁵

Sheherazade's technique already displayed the complexity that would mark the *Nights* stories. Not only did she tell stories but some of the characters in her story tell stories and the characters in those stories also tell stories. The *Hunchback series* of stories most noticeably falls into this pattern – a tailor tells a tale told by a lame young man, and this lame young man's tale includes within it the tales of the barber, within which are the stories of the barber's six unfortunate brothers.⁶ The *Hunchback series*, with *the Merchant and the Demon* are among a "core" set of stories in the Syrian edition but later, for example in the Egyptian eighteenth-century collection, many more tales appear. Throughout the European versions, further stories were added or embellishments made to originals. These various collections may be seen as components of a great circuit of tales, with occasional loops, analogous to sustainable networks in circuit theory.

Given this eclectic textual history, it is hardly surprising, therefore, to find a wide variety of types and styles in the *Nights*. While dramatic representation with much descriptive content characterises some of the stories, a formative or foreshadowing technique which enables the listener to anticipate what will unfold in the narrative, is also often used as a kind of choreography. The stories vary greatly in type—some are close to fairy or ghost stories, populated with a cast of jinns and other mythical figures. Extraordinary and magical happenings frequently occur in them. Others are tragedies or love stories while yet others are mainly comic or satirical in mood.

⁵ Borges, "*The Thousand and One Nights*."

⁶ Irwin, *Arabian Nights*, 4.

Dreams pervade some of the stories—sometimes complicated interconnections of the dreams of different people bring a surprising, serendipitous twist to the plot. Amid the traditional Arabic implications of destiny, there are in some tales of a lighter tone, suggesting chance happenings and the unexpected and surprising experience of creatures trapped in an existence they do not entirely comprehend. Finally there are tales that seem to be more serious histories, sometimes with passages of Islamic religion and philosophy interspersed among the episodes.

The different types of story are matched by different styles in their telling. Poetry and prose are mixed together; refined court lyrics can be interrupted by burlesque touches. These mixtures of style, matching colourful transgressions into the bawdy or out rightly immoral amused some scholars such as the tenth century al Masudi, but only added to the suspicion with which the tales were regarded by the orthodox.

* I *

In 1704 Antoine Galland published his first volume of the *Nights* which would stretch to twelve volumes, the last published in 1717.⁷ His work greatly influenced both the history of the *Nights* (for most eighteenth-century translations were from his French version rather than the Arabic originals) but also the development of the Oriental tale as a genre although this latter type had already been popularised earlier, for example in the Genoese Giovanni Marana's *Letters Writ by a Persian spy in Paris* of the 1680s.

Galland was a professor of Arabic at the Collège Royal in Paris where he himself had studied. His proficiency in Greek had led to his inclusion in the French delegation that visited the Ottoman Sultan in 1670. It was the beginning of a period of several years' residence in the Levant in the service of the Marquis de Nointel, French Ambassador to the Sublime Porte. During this time Galland travelled widely going as far afield as Aleppo and Jerusalem. The young Galland added Turkish, Persian, and Arabic to his array of classical languages. As "Antiquary to the King" his duties included collecting *objets d'art*, coins and medals and other items but significantly it also enable him to gather rare manuscripts. With these he began his career

⁷ Antoine Galland, trans., *Les mille et une nuits*, eds. Jean-Paul Sermain and Aboubakr Chraïbi, 3 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 2004).

as a serious Orientalist, translating and producing learned discourses on a range of Oriental texts.

In 1692 Galland became assistant to Barthélemy d'Herbelot who was engaged on the ambitious production of a vast dictionary which would eventually have over eight thousand entries on all aspects of Islamic culture.⁸ The *Bibliothèque Orientale* became a treasure trove for all eighteenth-century writers and scholars with an interest in the Orient including the precocious William Beckford as we shall see. The compilation of the dictionary involved taking material from Turkish, Persian, and Arabic chronicles which Galland was now equipped to do in his own right. When d'Herbelot died in 1695, Galland continued with the work until its completion two years later in 1697. By his involvement in the most important work on Oriental culture of the entire period, Galland established his credentials as the leading expert in the field, ensuring considerable attention to the publication of his version of the *Nights* in 1704.

Galland had begun his work on the *Nights* in 1701 during the same year in which he translated a set of the Sinbad stories, not themselves part of the original Arabic cycle of the *Nights*, from a manuscript he had acquired. The text he used for the *Nights* themselves was a three volume, Syrian version transcribed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries which is the oldest surviving manuscript of the tales, now lodged in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Scholars have found discrepancies in his translation and speculated as to whether additions he made might have belonged to a fourth, now missing volume.⁹ Moreover, Galland's collection includes stories—for example "Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp" and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" in addition to the Sinbad stories already mentioned. These new stories are not in the original Arabic cycle of the *Nights* although they may have been derived from other, unidentified Arabic sources. Some of these additional stories did subsequently appear in Arabic editions but may themselves have been translations of Galland.

One "extra" source of Galland's stories came from Hanna Diab, a Maronite Christian Arab who came to live in Paris from Aleppo and is reputed to have recited stories from memory. Galland was one of the Parisian for whom Diab performed; even so once the stories Galland heard from him

⁸ Barthélemy d'Herbelot de Molainville, *Bibliothèque orientale ou Dictionnaire universel contenant généralement tout ce qui regarde la connaissance des peuples de l'Orient* (Paris, 1697).

⁹ See Irwin, *Arabian Nights*, 16; also, Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (London: Vintage, 2012), 13.

appeared in print, they differed considerably from the note he took down, in some cases indulging in criticism of French society, a use of the Oriental tale which was to become regular among French writers. The method of transmission—from an oral recital—again raises the whole question of how literary texts may mutate in traditions of oral story telling.

The authenticity of Galland's tales was queried throughout the eighteenth century by knowledgeable readers. James Beattie, an important authority on the subject, comments in 1780:

Whether the Tales be truly Arabick, or invented by Mons. Galland
I have never been able to learn with certainty.¹⁰

Part of Beattie's criticism was that the style of Galland's tales was entirely French—polished in the extreme for the delectation of salon society. He regards this as an “unwarrantable latitude”¹¹ of translation, with terms of politeness and ceremony typical of the court of France rather than of an Oriental caliphate.

The sophistication that Beattie rightly detected was no accident for Galland's intention, as of other early eighteenth-century translators, was to produce entertaining and amusing works, not necessarily to worry overly about accuracy. Moreover Galland was writing within a highly polished French tradition of the fairy story started by Jean de La Fontaine, Charles Perrault and Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy in the 1690s. The influence that his *Nights* had was undoubtedly aided, even based upon, reception by a highly sophisticated literary readership.

There can be no doubt that a veritable craze for the Oriental Tale followed the publication of the *Nights*, which, after the appearance of a Grub Street rendition of Galland's work in 1706, swept across the channel to England. Within a short period the English version went through a number of editions. Swift, Pope and Addison were among its early readers. Addison included oriental tales in his *Spectator* essays and Pope was intrigued by the “Persian fable.” Later eighteenth-century readers included Sterne and Gibbon. By 1793 the English Galland had reached its eighteenth edition.

As to whether Galland had invented stories of his own, the evidence is not conclusive one way or the other. None of the “additional” stories, other than the Sinbad set, have yet been traced to an Arabic manuscript source that

¹⁰ Quoted in Irwin, *Arabian Nights*, 17.

¹¹ Irwin, *Arabian Nights*.

predates Galland's own edition. Robert Irwin sums up the controversy by saying wryly that Galland:

played so large a part in discovering the tales, in popularising them in Europe and in shaping what would become regarded as the canonical collection, that, at some risk of hyperbole and paradox, he has been called the real author of the Nights.¹²

For her part, Marina Warner, in her compendious tome on the *Nights* and other "charmed stories," is in no doubt, whatever the conclusion about origins of some of the tales, that Galland should be celebrated as a great contributor to Western fiction who "wrote with gaiety and grace" in Oriental guise.¹³

* II *

After the first frenzy of lighthearted Oriental tales, the genre was increasingly used as a way of launching a satirical critique of French society by writers largely unfamiliar with Arabic or any other Oriental language. In 1721 Montesquieu adopted an Eastern motif in his *Lettres Persanes*, using his exotic foreigners to criticise the political and social structure of France. His intention was deliberately polemical but it also echoed the sceptical, *moraliste* tradition of the seventeenth century in which human motivation was dissected and the notion of man as a rational being held up for lampoon and ridicule. Only incidentally was he concerned with the details of life in Persian society, caricaturing its louche "otherness" and ascribing some of its languor to the effects of climate, a dominant theme of his writing.

Montesquieu's use of Oriental imagery in this manner was echoed by Voltaire, whose Eastern play, *Mahomet: Le fanatisme* (1742) and his novel *Zadig ou la destinée* (1748) achieved immense popularity. In the play, the prophet is presented as an imposter and a tyrant who has his critics murdered. Voltaire makes no pretence to historical accuracy, insisting that his work is a warning against the dangers of fanaticism. Elsewhere, however, he praises the Prophet for his qualities as a leader. This praise of Islam was, of course, a weapon to be used against the pope and the entire Christian establishment,

¹² Irwin, *Arabian Nights*, 14.

¹³ Warner, *Stranger Magic*, 17.

echoing earlier anticlerical writing disguised in oriental wrappers by the likes of the Comte de Boulainvilliers in his *Vie de Mahomet* (1730).

Meanwhile, in England the Oriental figure became familiar through his appearance in the immensely successful *Tatler* of Addison and Steele. Here the purpose was strictly moralizing: foreign observers would be used both to criticise (in the French manner) but also to trumpet the successes of polite, English society. The benefit of “polite” living in commercial society with its distinct, if limited freedom, contrasted favorably with the backward existence of the unfortunate subjects of Eastern despots.

This rendition of the form in English is highlighted in Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759). Johnson’s first connection with the subject seems to have been in translating a French version by Joachim Le Grand of the Portuguese Father Lobo’s *A Voyage to Abyssinia*. Le Grand’s translation of the original appeared in 1728; Johnson’s translation of Le Grand came out anonymously in 1735.

As Galland had done in rendering his *Nights*, Le Grand added other material to Lobo’s original but he did retain the central story that Abyssinian heirs and princes were exiled to a “barren rock” in the Kingdom of Amhara until they came of age or succeeded to the throne. In the original accounts, their exile is to a dreary and desolate place but Johnson, in adapting the ancient story, makes Rasselas’s “Happy Valley” an Edenic place of a pampered, sybaritic existence, even if ultimately it came to be felt of as a prison by the princes banished there.

The actual character of *Rasselas* seems to have originated in another source, namely Hiob Ludolf’s *Historia Aethiopica*, the English version of which was in Johnson’s library. In that work, the fourth son of the ruler manages to escape from the valley just as the Johnsonian prince, also the fourth son of the ruler, was to do. The detailed description of Rasselas’s place of imprisonment, a valley on top of an unusually shaped mountain, containing a lake teeming with fish and meadows of fruit trees, resembles Father Luis de Urretta’s *History of Ethiopia* (1610) a work which Johnson refers to in his own rendition of Lobo’s *Voyages*.¹⁴ The more concrete, Egyptian imagery in *Rasselas*, who himself passed through “vaults of marble”¹⁵ where the bodies of former rulers are buried like the ancient pharaohs, would most likely to have come from Richard Pococke’s *A Description of the East* (1743–5) which contained

¹⁴ Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas and Other Tales*, in the Yale Edition of *Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. G. J. Kolb, vol. xvi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xxvii–xxix.

¹⁵ Johnson, *Rasselas*, 117.

information about the pyramids as well as describing geographical aspects of the Nile.¹⁶ Over and above these specific sources of reference for Oriental imagery, Milton's shadow, in *Paradise Lost*, hangs over the Johnsonian version of the Garden of Eden.

Johnson had dabbled in the genre of the Oriental Tale before writing *Rasselas*. In numbers 204 and 205 of the *Rambler* essays, he had depicted another Abyssinian Prince, one Seged, who resolves to retire from the burden of public duties to a house of pleasure in Lake Dambea for ten days of unalloyed happiness. Ordering only subjects who could suppress any look of discontent or sorrow to attend upon him, the Prince nevertheless finds a new source of disappointment or annoyance at each turn so that the much sought after total felicity eludes him. The moral of this *Rambler* essay—that there can be no lasting happiness on earth—is the same moral as the one set out in *Rasselas*, for the protagonists of both stories seek to find, and then capture, the secret of eternal happiness on earth. Both are thwarted in this vain quest.

Although Johnson uses Oriental imagery and has woven details of Abyssinia into his tale, it is essentially a moral lesson in ethics, “full, not of actions but of axioms” as David Nokes, his recent biographer pithily expresses it.¹⁷ Nor does *Rasselas* have anything of the mood of an Arabian or Persian tale in which a sequence of thrilling episodes, magical happenings and exotic figures takes forward the dramatic action. Quaint in its link to a distant, exotic locale, it is distinctly Enlightenment in tone, its dénouement that of a philosophic essay rather than an Eastern drama.

The moralizing tendency, wrapped in an Oriental cover, which Johnson represented after Steele and Addison's earlier example, was most notably continued by his friend and fellow Club member, Oliver Goldsmith in *The Citizen of the World* (1762). Goldsmith's mouthpiece is the imaginary Chinese philosopher, Lien Chi Altangi who, over more than a hundred letters, comments on English life and manners in a whimsical, sometimes sardonic, tone. But before dealing with the English, some disparaging remarks are made about their Continental neighbors, the Portuguese and the French—the burning of heretics in Lisbon and the services Madame de Pompadour provides for the King's bedchamber in France—are cited for their horror and indelicacy respectively.

An immediate characteristic of the English which Lien Chi Altangi dissects is their famous reserve:

¹⁶ Richard Pococke, *A Description of the East and Some Other Countries*, 2 vols. (London, 1743–45). This work was also known to William Beckford.

¹⁷ David Nokes, *Samuel Johnson. A Life* (London: Faber, 2009), 178.

The English seem as silent as the Japanese, yet vainer than the inhabitants of Siam. Upon my arrival I attributed that reserve to modesty, which I now find has its origin in pride.¹⁸

The pride he detects is based on the Mandevillean thirst for approbation, a deep need to gain the approval of one's fellows and to avoid their contempt, a fear, observes the Mandarin that is stronger than the fear of death among the English! While criticism of things in Western society can have a sharp undertone, praise for the East rings slightly false in Goldsmith's letters and he reserves some of his most vitriolic criticism for writers of Oriental tales. They insist, he says that, "Eastern tales should always be sonorous, lofty, musical and unmeaning."¹⁹ Lien Chi Altangi continues the attack with detailed points on the style of these imitations:

Take, sir, the word of one who is professedly a Chinese, acquainted with the Arabian writers, that what is palmed upon you daily for an imitation of eastern writing, no way resembles their manner, either in sentiment or diction. In the east similes are seldom used, metaphors almost wholly unknown.²⁰

The kind of writing Goldsmith criticises here may well have been the type that another friend of Johnson's, John Hawkesworth, had produced the year before in his *Almorán and Hamet* (1761). This swashbuckling tale, with a protagonist who is able to change into any shape or form in pursuit of his adventures amidst giants and heroes, gained immediate popularity. A little later, in 1764, James Ridley produced his *Tales of the Genii*, strange and exotic fancies which brought him great success. Both his hallucinatory sequences and Hawkesworth's take their flavour from the *Arabian Nights*.

Nevertheless, if these writers tended to a flamboyant and perhaps not deep interest in the East, serious work on Oriental literature was about to be done by Sir William Jones, another member of Johnson's club aptly dubbed by his fellows as "Persian Jones." Jones was an extraordinary polymath—poet, translator of Eastern languages, grammarian, jurist and high court judge in India who revolutionised linguistic theory by recognising Sanskrit as a more refined sister

¹⁸ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World* and *The Bee*, introduced by Richard Church (London: Everyman, 1934), 13.

¹⁹ Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World*, 92.

²⁰ Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World*.

language to Greek and Latin. Jones's research into Sanskrit and other Eastern languages was intense, his inspiration was passionate as the words of his meditation upon the creation of an embracing Indo-European culture show.

His translations of two poems in particular—"A Persian Song of Hafiz" and "A Turkish Ode to Meshi" immediately reignited romantic Orientalism, a mode which would be later taken up by Byron, Southey and Moore enchanted by Jones's rendition of the opening stanza of the first poem:

Sweet maid, if thou would'st charm my sight
And bid these arms thy neck infold'
That rosy cheek, that lily hand,
Would give thy poet more delight
Than all Bocara's vaunted gold,
Than all the gems of Samarcand.²¹

But before the high Romantics seized upon Jones, a serious adolescent reader, inspired perhaps by another of Jones's translations—"The Seven Fountains, an Eastern Allegory" was beginning to indulge Arabic and Persian tales in his father's well stocked library in the fastness of Wiltshire.²² Before long he would become the leading exponent of the Oriental Tale in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

William Beckford (1760–1844) was the precocious heir to a vast fortune derived from the sugar plantations in the West Indies, based upon slave labour. His childhood was a solitary one since his mother whom he called the "Begum" decided on educating him privately at home.

While Beckford's family home displayed the outward appearance of a Palladian country seat, there were unusual features within it which must have first whetted his Orientalist tendencies. One of these features was a vast Egyptian Hall, gloomy and foreboding where the motifs were taken from oriental images. Another was the library, which was well stocked with exotic travel literature and, significantly, with Galland's edition of the *Nights*. Despite an emphasis on the usual staples of Greek and Latin in the education he received from his tutors, the young heir became an avid reader of travel literature and the particularly, of the *Nights* volumes.

²¹ Michael J. Franklin, *Sir William Jones: Selected Poetical and Prose Works* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), 186.

²² Michael J. Franklin, *Orientalist Jones: Sir William Jones, Poet, Lawyer, and Linguist, 1746–1794* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 78.

When the Begum and his guardians came to realise the intensity of his commitment to Oriental literature—which they hardly regarded as a suitable subject for an English gentleman to waste his time on—they tried to wean him off his addiction. Their efforts were thwarted, to a degree, by the appointment of Alexander Cozens as Beckford's drawing master. Cozens was a keen Orientalist who encouraged his young and refined ward in his Arabic and Persian tastes.

It was not long before the young Beckford began producing stories with Oriental themes. The first of these was written when he was just seventeen years old and was called *L'Esplendente*, a tale of youthful transgression and punishment. The Oriental theme of *L'Esplendente* is echoed in another story that Beckford wrote at about the same time. He called it *The Long Story* (later changed to the "Vision" by Beckford's biographer Guy Chapman).²³ In this story a young hero, driven by insatiable curiosity, leaves his family and friends to journey through a bleak, mountainous terrain on a cloudless, moonlit night. He finds himself exposed to frightening dangers on all sides, crossing passes with steep ravines and precipitous drops. Further adventures follow, both of a mystical and frightening nature.

These early experiments, much influenced by the mood of the stories in Galland's *Nights* were a prelude to what became Beckford's great Oriental story, *Vathek, An Arabian Tale*, first written in French and translated by his collaborator, the Reverend Samuel Henley and brought out in English in 1786 without Beckford's permission. Like *The Long Story*, *Vathek* is the story of a journey, this time the Caliph Vathek's journey to the halls of Eblis or Hell, spurred on, as in the earlier tale, by the protagonist's unquenchable thirst to discover knowledge and eternal truth. But there is a marked change in tone from the earlier work, a development that exhibits a maturity in literary style and sophistication. Although we are again presented with a series of dream-like visions, they are told in a confident, even detached "voice." The sense of naivety that hung over the earlier work has vanished, instead there is a polish and finesse of a mature artist.

While *The Long Story* may be seen as a prototype for *Vathek*, the *Arabian Tale* itself is a well-crafted work in which details of Oriental culture are supported by a series of learned footnotes, exhibiting a wide knowledge of Eastern folklore and religion. The character of Vathek himself seems to be a mixture of a real, historical person, Caliph al Wathik Bi'llah and the personality of a cruel tyrant, Mulai Ismail, a later emperor of Morocco with whom

²³ See Malcolm Jack, "Introduction," *Vathek and Other Stories* (London: Pickering, 1993), xvii.

Beckford was fascinated. The Emperor was “a ghastly sadist without a redeeming feature”²⁴ who, allegedly descended from the Prophet himself, could treat his subjects with impunity. His paranoid character is shown up by courtiers whom he has badly treated. Beckford’s source for the actual Emperor was John Windus’s *Journey to Mequinez* (1721).

The complex imagery of *Vathek*, its richness of mood and its lushness of detail have led to many interpretations of the text. The most obvious has been to emphasise the autobiographical nature of what was the story of a still young author. Different critics, finding this interpretation simplistic, search for more intellectual origins to the book. *Vathek* has been identified with Burkean ideas of the sublime, with the sensationalism of Locke (whom Beckford studied as a teenager) and even with the extravagant visions of Erasmus Darwin. When the concept of the Oriental Tale is the main conceptual reference, there is a tendency to emphasize its learnedness and dissociate it with what we might call the “decorative orientalism” of a Voltaire or a Hawkesworth. Devendra Varma found traces of Persian Sufism in Beckford’s tale.²⁵

Recently attention has been drawn to Beckford’s reading of the Egyptian manuscripts of Edward Wortley Montagu and the possibility that he may have been inspired by them to write his own Arabian tale. According to this theory, *The Episodes of Vathek*, written a few years later, may also be seen in the context of these manuscripts.²⁶

* III *

The pervasiveness of the *Nights* in the various forms of the eighteenth-century Oriental Tale may indeed justify Borges’s description of the work as infinite. In a recent essay Robert Irwin has explored what he calls a “plausible” relationship between the *Nights* and the early Western novel.²⁷ He says:

²⁴ Boyd Alexander, *England’s Wealthiest Son* (London: Centaur Press, 1962), 87.

²⁵ Devendra Varma, “Beckford’s Treasures Rediscovered: The Mystic Glow of Persian Sufism in *Vathek*,” in *Vathek and The Escape from Time: Bicentenary Revaluations*, ed. Kenneth Graham (New York: AMS Press, 1990), 106.

²⁶ Laurent Châtel, “Re-Orienting William Beckford: Transmission, Translation, and Continuation of *The Thousand and One Nights*,” in *Scheherazade’s Children: Global Encounters with the Arabian Nights*, eds. Philip F. Kennedy and Marina Warner (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 53–69.

²⁷ Robert Irwin, “*The Arabian Nights* and the Origin of the Western Novel,” in *Scheherazade’s Children*, 152.

There are all sorts of superficial ways in which the eighteenth-century novel in western Europe was influenced by *The Thousand and One Nights*: The *Nights* licensed fantasy and a breaking away from classical constraints, it provided a precedent for the eroticism of the libertine novels; contrariwise it also spawned a lot of moral and didactic tales; its plots were borrowed; it stimulated a spate of mock Oriental romances by John Hawkesworth, Clare Reeve, James Ridley and others; it was often alluded to and often approvingly.²⁸

Moreover, two characteristics are shared between the *Nights* and the early novels. The first is in use of a density of detailed evocation of everyday life; the second is the use of multiple narrative threads.

Galland's assimilation of the *Nights* into demands of European sensibility was carried on by the nineteenth-century English translators who followed him. Thus Edward Lane, while accusing Galland of perverting the mood of the original Arabic, in fact himself censored out paragraphs that seemed too louché or were blatantly pornographic while working on his translation from 1838 to 1844. While John Payne restored the passages which Lane had removed in his 1882 edition, he continued to tone down the blatantly pornographic parts, translating much of the poetry left out by his predecessors. This trend was reversed by Sir Richard Burton who had a keen interest in pornography and regarded himself as an expert on sexual mores. Other European influences, such as that of Rabelais, can be found in Burton's edition which, extending to ten volumes, was published in 1885, and has been described by Husain Haddawy as a "literary Brighton pavilion."²⁹

That architectural image of Brighton Pavilion or the exterior of Sir Francis Cook's house at Monserrate in Sintra may be a good reminder of the paradox that Edward Said claimed is at the centre of Orientalism as a movement—namely that it is intrinsically Western, only incidentally decorated with imagery borrowed from another culture perceived in essence to be highly alien and "other."³⁰ Orientalism is in fact a variation of Occidentalism: the West remains obsessed with itself. Is that true of the European heritage of the *Nights*?

²⁸ Irwin, *Arabian Nights*, 145.

²⁹ Quoted in Irwin, *Arabian Nights*, 32.

³⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

I hope to have shown, in the course of this paper that there is no simple, single answer to that question. Galland's rendition of the *Nights* in an acceptable form to literate Frenchmen suggests that Said is right; yet as we have seen Galland was using historic Arabic sources. While some practitioners of the Oriental Tale we have considered—such as Voltaire in France or Johnson in England—have borrowed Eastern motifs either to disguise or enhance criticisms of their own society; others such as Sir William Jones and William Beckford were true Orientalists with a deep knowledge and considerable sympathy with the Orient. The history of the *Nights* in this period is a complicated mesh of European and Arabic literature; the Oriental Tale of the eighteenth century and other associated texts is both a European and a foreign creation. Mushin Mahdi expresses the paradox in this way:

For more than a century after Galland's translation, most readers of the *Nights* in European languages did not know or care to know that they were reading a translation or a translation of a translation.³¹

Nevertheless, the *Nights* have been one of the most widely read works of literature and however eccentric Galland may have been, Mushin Mahdi considers that the history of the *Nights* may profitably begin with his contribution.³² Marina Warner agrees, putting it this way:

The *Arabian Nights* hold out for scrutiny an extraordinarily productive case of cross fertilisation, retellings, grafts and borrowings, overwriting, imitation, and dissemination back and forth between Persia, India, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt and Europe, and then again into its home lands, over an extremely longue durée. The very concept of a sequence of narratives—the interlaced tales within the frame of a ransom tale—as well as individual story elements, become global nomads, travelled back and forth, camping and settling until they become indigenous throughout the world of literature.³³

Let me pause on the theme of the “global nomads” for it is beyond my power or that of any other person to bring a final end to the story of the *Nights*.

³¹ Mushin Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 3–4.

³² Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 11.

³³ Warner, *Stranger Magic*, 25.