

Research Article

# The Indeterminate Palimpsest of the Arabian *Nights* and Its Unlimited Mirror Effects

El Mostafa Chadli\* 

Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Mohammed V University of Rabat, Rabat, Morocco

## Abstract

The text of the *Thousand and One Nights* has been the stuff of dreams for generations, throughout the Arab and non-Arab Orient, and since the XVIII<sup>e</sup> century throughout Western Europe, thanks to L. Galland's translation, based on a popular Egyptian edition. Since then, there have been countless translations and compilations of a legendary text that has no known authors, and those who assume it are, ironically, only copyists, compilers or translators. This is why it is presented as a palimpsest whose sources must be unraveled, authenticated versions established and the mirror effects of the stories that make it up analyzed. This is what we shall attempt to demonstrate in this study, based on the critical corpus duly established by R. Khawam. This study is divided into four successive stages: The fate of the Thousand and One Nights text, the question of manuscript and/or printed sources, an examination of the French corpora of Galland, Mardrus and Khawam, the indeterminacy of the archi-text or palimpsest, and finally the singularity of Khawam's corpus.

## Keywords

The Arabian Nights, Sources, Versions/Translations, Palimpsest, Mirror Effects

## 1. Introduction

It is difficult to approach a heritage text that is as dense as it is complex, given its genesis and its many transformations through the ages, the writers, the narrators and the languages adopted. The Thousand and One Nights, an allegorical text from the Arab-Persian East, has been written, rewritten, composed, recomposed and adapted many times over the centuries by copyists and storytellers, passed down from generation to generation by narrators and storytellers in public squares, not to mention translators, adapters and manuscript forgers. A major emblematic text in the Arab-Muslim imagination and cultural identity, it continually questions the reader about the very foundations of existence and the destiny of each and every person in a world of oriental magic and en-

chantment where all possible destinies are possible. Our textual approach will therefore focus, at successive levels, on the presumed arch-text of the *Thousand and One Nights*, raising the question of both manuscript and printed sources, and that of the French corpus, before subsequently focusing on Khawam's text, which we believe offers a meticulous and critical version of the texts making up the work as a whole.

## 2. The Destiny of the Nights

*"Books are like people. Some lead peaceful, respectable lives, tucked away in the well-trodden paths reserved for them by bibliographers. While others, rebellious to all order, con-*

\*Corresponding author: [chadli\\_elmostafa@yahoo.fr](mailto:chadli_elmostafa@yahoo.fr) (El Mostafa Chadli)

Received: 6 April 2024; Accepted: 7 May 2024; Published: 30 May 20244



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*tinue to live a hectic, adventurous, tribulation-filled existence over the centuries, as if their effervescent character, which even time could not overcome, prevented them from staying in place, from accommodating themselves to the narrow field to which decency, norm or fashion claim to confine them. And so it has always been with the Thousand and One Nights, the most stirring masterpiece of all, recognized and celebrated for almost seven centuries... and yet, until a few years ago, no serious edition (let's say, faithful to the ancient manuscripts, the only ones worthy of trust) existed anywhere in the world - not even in Arabic!"* [8] wrote René Khawam (1986: 9), at the start of his "Introduction" to the *Thousand and One Nights*, distributed in 4 thematic volumes.

Certainly, beyond the text itself - an unlimited artifact of stories rewritten, reconfigured or readapted, even counterfeited, depending on the period, cultural area and language - there is the major question of the imaginary that emerges from the trio of narration/listening/enchantment of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and it has to be said that the whole Arab-Muslim culture is strongly impregnated with them. Indeed, these tales, undoubtedly of Indian origin, stemming from oral tradition, transmitted and reworked by the Persians, go back a long way into the past of the peoples of this vast region of Little Asia and the Orient. They were augmented, enriched and developed over the centuries to form a monumental work built up in several layers. It's worth pointing out, however, that many of these texts, usually papyrus manuscripts, have since been lost.

Tawfīq al-Hakīm, a highly cultured Egyptian writer, saw the blossoming of popular art as an appropriate response to the elitist art of clerics and scholars. "This art only appears when official literature fails. It is, in a way, a cry of protest against the deficiency of the eloquent. This is how folk tales such as *Antara*, *Medjnoun Leila*, etc. were born. And as Islamic civilization continued to advance, and with it a literature of the imagination with a social bent, we had that pure masterpiece: *The Thousand and One Nights*<sup>1</sup>.

In the Arab world, the *Nights* were first mentioned in al-Mas'ūdī's work, *The Golden Meadows*, in the year 956. And among the many translations into Arabic of works from India, Roman Byzantium and Persia, we should mention the translation, of uncertain date, of Hazār Afsāna or Alf Ḥurāfa, *A Thousand Tales*. Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995) cites this work and confirms its Persian ancestry. He also mentions the astonishing fortune of an unfinished collection of four hundred and eighty nights (*Alf Samar*) by 'Abdūs al-Jahšiyārī (d. 942) using Greek, Persian and Arabic tales. Later, at the time of the Abbasid dynasty, with the mythical Baghdad, tales of Arab kings, princes, courtiers and merchants were added to the first texts translated from Persian.

Moreover, if we look back to well before the X<sup>e</sup> century, and more precisely to the second half of the VIII<sup>e</sup> century, we can see the dynamism of a significant translation movement, through secretaries of Persian origin, of several renowned

texts from Persian Eastern culture, such as the fables of *Kalīla and Dimna*, by the prose writer Abdallah Ibn al-Muqaffa (720-756), which thus made their remarkable entry into Arabic literature.

However, despite its success, this literature was considered minor and dismissed as popular by Arab and Muslim elites, and was consequently neglected. It wasn't until Antoine Galland translated a truncated, popular version of the *Tales of the Thousand and One Nights* into French in 1704 that the work began to grow in popularity in the West, at a time when Romanticism was triumphant in Europe. The work has gone from strength to strength ever since, becoming one of the world's most translated and beloved texts, whose stories have been celebrated time and again in music, opera, dance and film. The *Thousand and One Nights* will henceforth be an integral part of the common imagination, that of all mankind. Didn't J. C. Mardrus (1899) write, at the end of his presentation of his *Thousand and One Nights*, this astonishing thing for a compiler-translator:

"And now..,

*I can promise, without fear of lying, that the curtain will only rise on the most astonishing, complicated and splendid vision that the fragile tool of the driver has ever lit up on the snow of paper."* [11]

So, in this short critical questioning of the text of the *Thousand and One Nights*, through its translations, I will retain, three hypotheses which are:

- 1) The text of the *Thousand and One Nights* is a palimpsest, constantly rewritten and reinvented.
- 2) The text of the *Thousand and One Nights*, far from being a mirror or image of any reality, if such exists, is an infinitely complex and polyphonic discourse on oneself, on others and on the world.
- 3) Beyond the bewitchment and exoticism of the Orient, the arch-text of the *Thousand and One Nights* has become universal, and has clearly permeated the imaginations of the societies hosting the migrant manuscripts, as well as those of distant populations receiving translations or adaptations.

As for my approach, I will tackle, firstly, the arduous question of sources, the compilations of French-speaking translators-compilers, secondly, and thirdly, the problem of the palimpsest or archi-text and its effects of reflection or generation ad infinitum of other texts in the same narrative vein or in a quasi-similar vein<sup>2</sup>.

### 3. The Question of Sources

A book, even a fragmentary one," writes M. Blanchot, "has a center that attracts it. The person who writes it writes it out of desire, out of ignorance of this center. The feeling of having touched it may well be no more than the illusion of having

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Khawam (1986: 15).

<sup>2</sup> The issue of plagiarism and counterfeiting of texts from the *Thousand and One Nights* is well established.

reached it. When it comes to a book of enlightenment, there's a kind of methodical loyalty in saying where it seems the book is headed" [1].

Indeed, tackling the complex question of sources, whether manuscript or printed, is a challenge that would be difficult to sustain. I will therefore confine myself to the essentials in what follows:

1. The *Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Arab folk tales, is far from a homogeneous corpus. Rather, it's a protean text, variable at will, with significant losses and certain additions, but above all a notable increase in volume at each period in the history of the countries of the Arab East, to reach the mythical number of a thousand and one nights.
2. In his research on Arabic sources, J. C. Mardrus (1899) selects two documents from the IX<sup>e</sup> and X<sup>e</sup> centuries that attest less to the authenticity than to the validity of this cycle of stories, whose substratum is Indo-Persian. One readily refers to the Persian prototype, in this case the Hazār Afsānah or *Alf Hurāfa*, e.g. the *Thousand Tales*. These texts are:
  - a. Murūj adh-Dhahab wa-Ma'ādin al-Jawhar, or Meadows of Gold and Mines of Precious Stones (H. 346), by the Arab historian Abu l-Hassan Ali al-Massoudi.
  - b. Kitāb al-fihrist (H. 987), by Mohammad ben Is'hak al-Nadim, man of science, scholar and bibliographer.
3. According to J. C. Mardrus, several printed editions and an indeterminate number of manuscripts exist as known "texts" of the *Alf Laylah* or *Laylah*. These manuscripts are more or less complete, and do not tally well with each other in terms of wording, scope and, sometimes, affabulation.
4. As for critical editions, we had to wait until the XIX<sup>e</sup> century to see editions that looked at the establishment of the texts listed. Here are the main ones:
  - a. the (unfinished) edition by Sheikh El Yemeni, Calcutta, two volumes, 1814-1818;
  - b. Habicht edition, Breslau, twelve volumes, the first of which appeared in 1825, the last in 1843;
  - c. Mac Noghten edition, Calcutta, four volumes, 1830-1842;
  - d. Boulak edition, Cairo, two volumes, 1835;
  - e. Editions de l'Ezbākieh, Cairo;
  - f. the shortened, revised and dislocated edition by the Jesuit fathers, Beirut, four volumes; Bombay edition, four volumes.
5. Three *unpublished tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, translated and presented by Aboubakr Chraïbi<sup>3</sup>, then published in 2015, from a rare manuscript known as the "Reinhardt Manuscript" [4]. Although late, this manuscript, kept at the Strasbourg University Library,

is no less voluminous, with around ten tales never before discovered in Europe or the Arab world.

6. The *Thousand and One Nights* first became known in England in 1706, in an anonymous translation known as the *Grub Street translation*. Grub Street, at the time, referred to a London district where so-called marginal or popular literature was printed.
7. As far as complete English translations are concerned, those retained by specialists are those by John Payne (1881-1884) and Richard Francis Burton (1885-1888), originally published in "private editions" (two or three hundred subscribers), and virtually impossible to find. A cleaned-up second Burton edition was later made public. In 1885, a new edition (10 volumes) saw the light of day, with the title: *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments*. A second title was proposed: *Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (17 volumes).
8. Spanish translations include the following versions:
  - a. Edition by Rafael Cansinos Assens (Mexico City, 1955) is the first complete and literal translation into Castilian, and was considered by Jorge Luis Borges to be "the best, most delicate and most rigorous translation of the famous book."
  - b. Edition by Juan Vernet (1964), considered the most philologically plausible. Another translation will follow in 1990, with an interesting introduction.
  - c. Edition by Juan Anotonio Gutiérrez-Larrava and Leonor Martínez (Arabists at the University of Barcelona), 1965. Reissued in 2014.
9. In Germany, Gustav Weil undertook the translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* between 1839 and 1842, following Maximilian Habicht's unsuccessful attempt in 1825 on a forged Tunisian manuscript. In 1895-1897, Max Henning produced another German translation in some 24 volumes, the first 7 based on Bulaq's Egyptian edition and the others on R. F. Burton's English edition.
10. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Enno Litmann presented the public with a complete translation (1921-1928) of the entire *Thousand and One Nights*, in 6 volumes, based on the Calcutta II manuscript. This was considered the most successful German translation by Isaak Filshtinsky and Robert Irwin.
11. In Russia, one of the first translations based on Galland's text (1763-1774) was Alexey Filatyev's 12-volume work, followed by others in 1889-1890, 1894 and 1902-1903, using the European translations by Galland, E. W. Lane and J. C. Mardrus as reference texts. Mardrus. However, the first translation of the Arabic text (Calcutta II) is only attested in 1929-1939 by Mikhail Salje, in 8 volumes.
12. In Japan, on the other hand, *The Thousand and One Nights* was published in 2 volumes in Japanese in 1875 by Hideki Nagamine, based on English translations by E. W. Lane and Jonathan Scott.

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer and researcher at Inalco, Paris. Responsible for the project "The *Thousand and One Nights: sources and functions in medieval Arab Islam*" at France's Agence nationale de la recherche.

Since then, other Japanese translations have been made, but the first complete Japanese translation of Arabic, *Arabian Naito*, was published in 1976-1992 by Shinji Maejima and Ikeda Osamu in 19 volumes.

13. Finally, as far as Hebrew translations are concerned, we should mention the monumental work, in the years 1947-1971, of the Arabist Yosef Yoel Rivlin, who produced a 32-volume Hebrew translation, based mainly on the Bulaq edition. Subsequently, a selection of tales from the *Arabian Nights*, translated by Hanna Amit-Kohavi, appeared in two volumes, in 2008 and 2011, under the title *Leylot Arav*.

It's almost a fact that many rare or unexplored manuscripts are still preserved in the world's great libraries. Copied in the 15th century, the three volumes used by Antoine Galland for his translation are the oldest. Often copied late in Egypt or Syria, they do not always contain the same tales. Some, like those of the priest Dom Chavis<sup>4</sup> or Sabbagh, were even deliberately forged. Contrary to popular belief, there is no single, definitive text.

#### 4. The French Corpora of Galland, Mardrus and Khawam

One of the first translations of the *Arabian Nights* in the West was by Lionel Galland. These began in 1646 and were completed in 1715, in 3 volumes of differing composition. The first volume comprises 39 tales, the second 9 tales and the third 10 tales of unequal length<sup>5</sup>:

1. Volume 1 includes the Story of the Three Calenders, the Story of Sindbad the Sailor (7 voyages), which is not part of the original corpus of the *Arabian Nights*, and the Story of the Barber (3 stories).
2. Volume 2 includes the History of Aboulhassan Ali Ebn Becar and Schemselnihar..., the History of Beder, Prince of Persia and Giauhare..., and the History of Princess Dervabar, as well as the beginning of the Tale of the Awakened Sleeper.
3. Volume 3 includes the sequel to *Le Dormeur éveillé* Les aventures d'Aladin, les aventures du calife Haroun al-Rashid, l'Histoire d'Ali Baba et de 40 voleurs and l'Histoire d'Ali Cogia<sup>6</sup> merchant of Baghdad.

However, these digressions and additions to texts attributed to the *Thousand and Nights* do not seem to bother the preface writers and commentators of Lionel Galland's corpus, as Charles Nodier does in his "Notice sur Galland" (1949: 13):

"Galland's translation is, in this genre of literature, a classic work, so to speak; and if it has suffered some re-

*proaches from certain orientalist superstitiously faithful to the original texts, it's because they had more regard for the interests of this exotic erudition than for the spirit of our language and the needs of our national literature. This was not to resolve the issue, it was to displace it. We are convinced that, on the contrary, we should be grateful to the translator's intelligence and taste for having pruned from these charming compositions the outrageous figures, tedious details and parasitic repetitions that could only weaken their interest in a brilliant but exact language, which seeks to reconcile pleasure and precision everywhere."* [12]

However, it has been proven that many of these tales, of Arabo-Persian origin, such as Aladdin, Ali Baba or Caliph Haroun al-Rashid, are not part of the original corpus of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and others are borrowed either from the repertoire of Turkish tales, translated in part by Pâris de La Croix, or from the repertoire of Syrian storyteller Hannah Diab. René Khawam, in his Introduction to *La Saveur des jours* (1986: 10) reports the account of Galland critic and biographer Mohammed Abdel-Halim, who writes as follows:

"Hanna loved storytelling, Galland loved listening to her tales: as early as March 25 (1709), he notes that his friend narrated to him "some very beautiful Arabic tales" and promised to put them down in writing. On May 4, during a visit to Paul Lucas [translator of the Turkish tales], Hannah, among other subjects, probably began "L'histoire d'Aladin", completed the next day (reference to Galland's diary). On the 6th, it's the "Arab tale of a cousin and a cousin, Camar-eddin and Bedre el-Bodour, who were raised and eventually married together. From that day onwards, Galland carefully recorded a summary of his friend's tales in his diary." [8]

This was followed by a long list of additional tales considered inauthentic. The set of tales was redesigned to be redistributed into Nights/sequences and reach the mythical number of a Thousand + 1, and to be distinguished, presumably, from the Persian corpus of the *Alf Hūrāfa* or Thousand Tales.

That said, Annie Vernay-Nouri (2021), a curator at the Bibliothèque Nationale specializing in Arabic manuscripts, believes that:

"Many manuscripts are still preserved around the world. Copied in the XV<sup>e</sup> century, the three volumes used by Antoine Galland for his translation are the oldest. Often copied late in Egypt or Syria, they do not always contain the same tales. Some, like those by Chavis or Sabbagh, have even been deliberately forged. Contrary to popular belief, there is no single, definitive, unanimously accepted text." [15]

She adds: "In the XIX<sup>e</sup> century, a later Egyptian manuscript recension became the vulgate on which the first Arabic editions were printed in Beirut, Cairo and Calcutta. These served as the basis for new English translations by Edward William Lane (1838-1841), John Payne (1881-1884) and Richard Francis Burton (1886-1888). The XIX<sup>e</sup> and XX<sup>e</sup> centuries saw

4 Manuscript no. 3637 by the Syrian priest Diyānisi Šhāwis, Frenchized as dom Chavis, "a priest of the Congregation of Saint Basil who taught Arabic at the Collège Royal.

5 We refer here to the 1949 Paris edition of *Mille et Une Nuits*, published by Garnier frères, in 3 volumes (Tome 1, 434 p.; Tome 2, 431 p.; Tome 3, 431 p.) of equal pagination.

6 We reproduce the translator's exact transcription of proper names.



a proliferation of translations in many languages, based on the original Arabic text or French translations". [15]

As for the 8-volume translation by J. C. Mardrus (1899), a well-known orientalist and Arabist, based on the Egyptian Arabic edition of the Boulaq, is considered by its author to be a rich version of the Arabic terroir, containing everything that Antoine Galland's version eliminated, such as poetry, local idiomatic expressions, anecdotes or scenes not in keeping with the taste of the time [11].

Indeed, according to Aboubakr Chraïbi, Ilaria Vitali (2015: 5), "at the end of the XIX<sup>e</sup> century, the French 'torch' for the Nuits passed to Doctor Mardrus, who further expanded the Nuits universe with unexpected additions, drawing on French collections of Arab (Artin Pacha, Spitta-Bey) and Hindustani (Garcin de Tassy) tales. Its fin-de-siècle version is still a success, and its visual richness invites illustration". [5] The latter, it should be remembered, is presented, right from the start of the title, as an authentic and literal version, something that A. Kilito (2013: 27) who believes that the two presumed qualities of Mardrus's version are being lied about, since the fact of mentioning it is not fortuitous and insinuates doubt [9].

In any case, the translation was a huge success, as evidenced by the many illuminated and illustrated versions, as well as artistic and choreographic adaptations, such as Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's ballet *Scheherazade* (1888).

We now turn to more recent translations from the XX<sup>e</sup> century, by R. Khawam (1986) and J. E. Bencheikh - A. Miquel (1991-1996).

The text of J. E. Bencheikh's *Nights* is divided into 3 volumes. The first volume (Nights 1-327) begins with the framework tale of King Shāhriyār and his brother King Shāh Zāmān, followed, as in Galland's translation, by the Tale of the Donkey, the Ox and the Ploughman, the Tale of the Merchant and the Devil, and the Tale of the 3 Old Men, and then departs from these with other tales. The second volume (Nights 328-719) begins with the Tale of the Love of Budūr and Jubayr, the Tale of the Yemenite and his Six Slaves, then the Tale of the Caliph, Abū Nuwās and the Young Slave, and ends with the Story of 'Alī Vīf-Argent. Volume 3 (Nights 720-1001) opens with the Tale of Prince Ardāshir and Hayāt an-Nuḥās, and closes with the Tale of Ma'rūf the Tinker. The appendix to this repertory includes 2 well-known texts, even though they are not part of the original corpus of the Nights, namely the Story of Aladdin, or the Wonderful Lamp, and the Story of Ali Baba, and forty thieves, exterminated by a slave girl.

This translation has the merit of including a brief presentation of each tale, a glossary of the characters quoted in the work and a geographical map indicating the spaces and places visited. As for the writing style, Bencheikh and Miquel have succeeded in making it attractive and, stylistically speaking, in sublimating elements of language considered vulgar, sometimes crude or inappropriate, such as insults, threats of death or mutilation and erotic allusions.

René R. Khawam's text is presented as a complete edition in 4 volumes, enriched with verses and tasty prose, distributed in thematic poles, without the counting of the Nights, and with an enunciative device slightly different from the framework narrative of Shāhriyār and Shāhrazāde, since it is entitled, *La tisserande des nuits* (The Weaver of Nights) and opens, consequently, the continuation of the tales. Preceded by an Introduction, the texts are arranged as follows:

1. *Dames insignes et serviteurs galants*: *La tisserande des nuits* (2 tales), *Le marchand et le Djinn* (3 tales), *Le pêcheur et le Djinn* (4 tales) and *Le portefaix et les dames* (6 tales).
2. *Les Cœurs inhumains*: *La femme coupée* (2 tales), *Les cœurs jumeaux* (2 tales), *Le bossu récalcitrant* (12 tales) and *L'amour interdit* (2 tales).
3. *Les Passions voyageuses*: *Compagne au doux langage* (1 tale), *Un mariage par ouï-dire* (2 tales) and *Visages de l'amour* (2 tales).
4. *La Saveur des jours*: *Le dormeur éveillé* (1 tale), *Le sage persan* (1 tale), *Le Khalife et le fou* (2 tales) and *La force de l'amour* (1 tale).

It's worth noting that the tales marked "2 contes" actually duplicate, at their own level, the general structure of tale within tale, in a kind of quasi-illimited narrative perspective known in Rhetoric as 'mise en abyme'.

As for the scale of the task, combined with the complexity of the sources and their reliability, always called into question by compilers and translators, the author sums it up in this passage from the Introduction to Volume 2:

"For our part, we remain convinced that a scrupulous edition of *The Thousand and One Nights* (or any other work of equivalent antiquity) can only be established on the basis of a comparative study of the various existing manuscripts. We have devoted exactly thirty-nine years to this study [...]. A tedious but necessary task, from which it is abundantly clear that the most trustworthy Arabic sources, in other words those closest to the initial state of the work, are all the manuscripts not of Egyptian but of Eastern origin (Baghdad, Syria, for the most part), foremost among which is the one Galland himself received from the East (traditionally known as manuscript A) [...], which was copied at the end of the XIII<sup>e</sup> century - around the time the *Nuits* were being written. Whenever there were gaps or deficiencies in the manuscript in question, we referred to the lessons of the other manuscripts in the same group (scattered between Istanbul, the Vatican, Manchester, London, Oxford and Barcelona, for the main ones) or to the later, but on the whole very faithful, lesson of manuscript C copied in Baghdad in 1703. Only exceptionally, and only when the 'oriental' sources as a whole were insufficient to enlighten us on a particular point or passage, have we drawn on the versions from the 'Egyptian' recension" [8] (1986: 19-20).

## 5. The Indeterminate Palimpsest of the Arabian Nights

"Every work is a palimpsest - and if the work is successful, the erased text is always a magical text." Julien Gracq.

I'll start by trying to identify the multiple definitions of the notion of palimpsest, which was a common practice with copyists working on faded or outdated parchments.

According to the CNRTL<sup>7</sup>, palimpsest has as many meanings, presented as follows:

- i. Etymology (1542) "Sheet of papyrus, handwritten parchment from which the first writing has been erased in order to be able to write a new text".
- ii. "Manuscript on parchment of ancient authors that medieval copyists erased to cover it with a second text."
- iii. "By analogy. A medium on which one writes, likely to be erased after use", as was the case in the traditional Koranic schools of the Muslim world.
- iv. "Work whose present state may suggest and reveal traces of earlier versions."
- v. [By extension]. "Psychological mechanism such that newly memorized facts substitute for those that pre-existed them in memory." [6]

Thus, if we exclude psychological meanings by analogy or extension, the semantic core of the term remains virtually identical to its etymology, e.g. it is a manuscript composed on parchment that has already been used to transcribe other texts, and whose previous writing styles have been erased. However, residual signs of writing may remain. This sums up the tortuous history of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and the numerous and tedious searches for sources it has given rise to, in order to find the original manuscript *in extenso*, or the one supposed to be. A mythical text, moreover, that we had considered as an arch-text in an intertextual approach, faithful in this to the polyphonic conception of discourse where we consider that following the perspective of a Sollers (1982: 75): "Every text is situated at the junction of several texts of which it is at once the rereading, the accentuation, the condensation, the displacement and the depth. In a certain sense, a text is only as good as its action in integrating and destroying other texts" [14].

Indeed, Khawam suspected as much, arguing that "it is equally likely that, after the work was written (e.g. from the end of the XIII<sup>e</sup> century onwards), storytellers drew inspiration from the written text circulated by the copyists of the time, to recount particular episodes in their own way - in much the same way as Homer's successor aedists had to put their own spin on the Iliad and the Odyssey to meet the demands of their audience" [8] (1986: 15-16).

And this confirms our first hypothesis, which states that the text of the *Thousand and One Nights* is a palimpsest, constantly rewritten, reinvented and readapted to suit different

eras and cultures.

As for the second working hypothesis, which holds that the text of the *Thousand and One Nights*, far from being a simple mirror or image, more or less exact or even distorted, of any reality, is a discourse, infinitely complex and polyphonic, on oneself, on others and on the world, I consider that it is admissible, without being decisive.

Here are just a few of the critical assessments of the *Thousand and One Nights* text by historians, anthropologists and text commentators:

1. According to P. Boucheron & A. Chraïbi (2009), "The *Thousand and One Nights* are seen [by historians] as a true mirror of the history of Islam as it was experienced and felt by society, and as it influenced culture and social representations. Aboubakr Chraïbi focuses on the details of a tale about a barber in mid-13<sup>e</sup> century Baghdad, in other words, in the terrible years preceding the fall of Abbasid Baghdad to the Mongols" [2]. In the same vein, he points out the extreme fragility of the societies of the time, due to the despotism of kings, princes and rulers, whose violence is extreme, and he gives as proof the framework story of the *Nights*, where Shāhriyār kills with impunity every day the virgin married the day before.
2. To illustrate this absolutism, A. Chraïbi (2009: 547) turns to the encyclopedic work *al-Mustatraf fi kul fan mustatraf* by Shihab al-Din Ahmad al-Ibshihi (XV<sup>e</sup> century), which reports this verbal exchange between two fictional characters: "You who are so learned," he was asked, "why do you flee the company of kings? - Because I've seen them, for nothing, enrich men and, for nothing, cut off their heads". [4]
3. The despotic absolutism of kings and princes is confirmed in Amin Maalouf's *Samarcande* (1999), in which the author follows in the footsteps of the scholar and poet Omar Khayyām across the Orient in a fictionalized biographical history.
4. When it comes to the presence of learned women in the *Thousand and One Nights*, the first to come to mind is Shāhrazāde, a young woman presented as beautiful, even if no physical portrait accompanies her, intelligent, refined and learned, who read the learned treatises of her time (literature, poetry, astronomy, medicine, etc.). Another woman, Tawaddud, is also present, although in a different register. A young slave with a wealth of knowledge, she tackled theology and excelled in the art of verbal jousting and debate.

We also remember the story of King al-Rashid's concubines, who engage in a lively exchange of words, punctuated and argued by Hadiths from the Prophet, to designate the one who will have the privilege of sharing the king's bed in the evening.

In another story, the rivals use poetry to gain the upper hand and share the prince's favor.

But alongside these sublime, cultured and intelligent ladies,

<sup>7</sup> CNRTL is a National Center for Textual and Lexical Resources. Center created in 2015, in partnership with the University of Nancy and the CNRS (France).

most of whom were even cunning, there was a whole population of women who were forced to work at mercy and whose roles were reduced to procreation, domestic work or petty trade and child-rearing. Others, courtiers at will, participate in the entertainment of princes, viziers and rulers through poetry, which they learn by heart, dance, music and song.

1. From a psychoanalytical point of view, Malek Chebel (2015), in his essay on Psychoanalysis of the Thousand and One Nights [3], attempts to demonstrate that the confinement of women in "gilded palaces" or lush mansions, not open to the outside world, merely confirms male fear of "the overflow of their libido" and is, therefore, a social response to female sexuality. Conversely, the Nuits, symbolized by the figures of Shahrazade and Douniazade, can be seen as the revenge of sexuality against male power. Indeed, Shahrazade excels in her role as conductor of a narrative and erotic score, peppered with poetry, savory anecdotes and vulgar words, where refinement and cruelty, decay and sublimation, threats of annihilation and survival, constitute the main menu of a role-playing game that consecrates, in reality, the triumph of femininity and therefore of woman over man.

This being the case, an important detail is overlooked as the trigger for the *Nights*, namely the marital betrayal of Shahrīyār's and Shahzaman's wives. We know nothing of the motives of the sultanas, who knowingly deceived their husbands and sovereigns with court servants and slaves. The scene of Shahrīyār's wife's orgy with her attendants and servants is a distant echo of Greco-Roman feasts in honor of Dionysus/Bacchus. According to the chroniclers and historians of the time, this can only be explained by their state of abandonment and weariness in the face of their husbands who, every evening, surround themselves with a multitude of dancers and singers to brighten up their evenings, in the company of bellissima concubines, brought or brought from the most distant lands.

A duly attested fact of history is the killing of the Barmakid vizier family by Haroun al-Rashid, whose tragic heroine was none other than his own sister, al-Abbāsa<sup>8</sup>.

2. In the same vein, Margaret Sironval (2008), a researcher at the CNRS, studying the image of the star-narrator of *Les Nuits* in English editions, writes: "Like a figure of rhetoric, Scheherazade wants to convince through the stories she tells day after day. She does everything in her power to achieve this; she is a virtuoso manipulator of amplification: her first tales are of odious women, ghouls and evil magicians. She enthralls her audience by arousing interest, as well as pity and indignation. This is how she brings human feelings back to the sultan, and manages to elevate the debate. But she pays the price:

every night, Scheherazade risks her life. Early in the morning, the king desires something more than the death of this wife of the night. He will have her die the next day: he wants to know another ending, to the story begun, so deftly interrupted at dawn by Scheherazade [13]".

But is it simply a story about couples and harmonious male/female relationships, in a fantasized East, with Western eyes? One might reasonably doubt it.

3. There is certainly a marvelous quality to storytelling, which explains why it has become so popular with audiences across time and continents. It's all down to the magic of the story, both the initial situation that frames and reframes all the stories told, and those that will follow sui generis through relay storytellers. This marvel of an original and recurring story, repeated night after night, hangs by a thread, that of the storyteller's voice, obliged to tell and hold in suspension her story and the direct recipient of this story, Shahrīyār, the husband of a night that should last a thousand times longer, reaching the magic figure of a thousand and one complete nights! The exchange is difficult to maintain: to stop storytelling is tantamount to death, and in order not to die, she must tell and excel in storytelling to always have the ear and the good disposition of her husband, the king.
4. If we now turn to the description that accompanies the storytelling machine, we can see that it works on fiction in a completely different repertoire. Indeed, description in *The Thousand and One Nights* (relating to characters, clothing, architecture, places and gardens, etc.) is quite significant, both in volume and stylistic quality. Edgar Weber draws our attention to an aspect relating to gardens in the text, often overlooked by commentators and analysts. The theme of the garden in *The Thousand and One Nights*, he explains, "takes on a very special dimension and importance if we consider that, in the Arab-Muslim imagination, its mention, and all the more so its luxuriant and lush description, cannot but refer the listener to the mention of the heavenly garden so abundantly recalled in the Koran as a reward for those who do good on earth. It's as if the storyteller were embroidering on a well-known theme through a pleasant story, fictitiously put into the mouth of a woman" [16]. And Weber gives ample examples, drawing parallels between the description of gardens and palaces in *The Thousand and One Nights* and Paradise, evoked by the Muslim sacred text.

All things considered, the themes are numerous and overlapping. However, what dominates, in our opinion, beyond the question of wealth and poverty, good and bad stars, the dominant and the dominated on earth, or the secular male-female conflict, which impacts all the stories told, with the questions of fertilization/sterility, consanguinity, incest, endogamy/exogamy, is the ambient imaginary; an imaginary of passions overdetermining the whole and generating a singular, hieratic vision of the world. The imaginary world of the

8 Tragic story of the Vizirian caste of the Barmecides under the Abbasid Caliphate of Haroun ar-Rachid put into fiction and popularized by the Lebanese writer and historian Jorge Zaidan. Literary work published in 1906 by Editions Dar al-Hilal in Cairo. Not translated.



*Thousand and One Nights* also includes the problem of destiny and its unpredictable twists and turns, inducing in the protagonists an irrational fatalism tempered by an unshakeable faith in an omniscient, all-powerful God.

## 6. The Flavor of Days

In volume 4 of R. R. Khawam's *Thousand and One Nights*, entitled *La saveur des jours* (*The Flavor of Days*), we have chosen two of the four tales: "Le sage persan" (The Persian Wise Man), which does not appear in the Galland and Mardrus collections, and "Le dormeur éveillé [ou Histoire d'Abou l-Hasan]" (The Awakened Sleeper or Story of Abu l-Hasan), also present in the said works, and which will shed some light on the inner workings of the structuring imaginary at work in the tales of the complete collection.

In "The Persian Wise Man", we are presented with a delightful tableau of customs, with surprising role reversals and stage amplification, ranging from the fabulous to the hilarious:

1. Lady Lune-des-Lunes, daughter of the Khalifa, transported daily by djinns from her princely bed to the bed of her beloved Al ʿā al-Dine, despite the guards posted outside her room. The merry-go-round lasted until her pregnancy.
2. Al ʿā al-Dine's palace protected by giant waves of water preventing the sultan's soldiers from reaching it.
3. Attempted execution of the young man by decapitation, failed twice. Death, in his place, of two emirs present.
4. Dja'far the vizier, washed up on a deserted shore, transformed into a young woman and married to the son of the fisherman who took him in. A marriage consummated with seven children over a similar period of time.
5. The Khalife met the same fate on an unknown shore. He established himself in a caterer's shop as a liveried waiter, then became a precious stone broker, only to be condemned to death by a rope for swindling.

It's clear that all these transformations are the result of the magician's work of the Persian sage, who worshipped the young man and wanted to fulfill his wishes by marrying the reclusive princess in a palace. The Khalife, on the wise advice of his vizier, had to consent to the said marriage and keep the wise magician with him to benefit from his occult powers. To explain these powers, the narrator links them to Hebrew teachings, with the astonishing detail that the story mentions the mausoleum of the prophet Daniel:

You can trust me, says the Persian sage to the young man: "I know all the sciences, as a good Sage that I am, and I can even be said to be an expert in more than one. I've had my fill of both Eastern and Western teaching, not to mention my familiarity with the elements of Knowledge that are tightened under the dome of Daniel's mausoleum<sup>9</sup>."

Let's turn now to the tale of the Awakened Sleeper. According to Sylvette Larzul (1995), "*L'Histoire d'Abû l-Hasan, ou le dormeur éveillé* [is] one of the most elaborate and pleasing tales in the corpus. It is characterized, according to the author, by "the length of the text: around twenty pages in the Beirut edition, probably more in older manuscripts, which distinguishes it from the brief anecdotes - pleasant or not - often borrowed, at a later date, from *adab* literature to forge a collection in a thousand and one nights. What's more, this tale is entirely oriented towards the comic, which distinguishes it from narratives in which amusing scenes are included, but which are not frankly humorous compositions. The "Story of Abû l-Hasan" is based on a remarkable gradation, with the comedic element constantly increasing as the story unfolds. [10]"

The story is composed in three parts, like a burlesque comedy play:

1. A prologue in which Abû l-Hasan squanders half his fortune on revelry and feasting for the benefit of his friends and acquaintances. The result is ingratitude and mistrust.
2. A plot with comic twists and turns, worthy of a multi-faceted farce. In the beginning, Abû l-Hasan is mystified by the Khalifa, who lulls him to sleep, transports him to his palace and, unbeknownst to him, makes him play the role of Sultan for a whole day. The next day, the character finds himself back in his ordinary home, in the company of his mother, with the feeling that he is still the Sultan. His excessive behavior later leads him to the insane asylum. In the final act, he plays dead and takes his revenge on the Khalifa. *It's clear that this episode*, comments S. Larzul (1995:34), *is worthy of the best anthologies, is the work of an inventive storyteller who has created a veritable farce using a multitude of devices: situational comedy, misunderstandings, puns (...). While Abu l-Hasan is initially the Caliph's dupe, it is the Caliph who later becomes the butt of the joke, and the commensal's revenge is all the more masterful for the comic relief it brings.* [10]"
3. An epilogue in which everyone wrings their hands in laughter, especially the Khalifa and his wife Lady Zoubayda, and which ends with the marriage of Abû l-Hasan to Fācitā, the latter's favorite servant, embellished by the Sultanian couple's largesse.

S. Larzul considers the tale of the "Sleeper awake" to be one of those comic or burlesque pieces that underline the singularity of the *Thousand and One Nights* as "intermediate literature", quite different from the classical genre of *al-Adab*, prized by Arab scholars. She concludes that "this same 'intermediary literature' can also, it seems to us, be the receptacle of an unorthodox thought, which cannot manifest itself openly,

(Reported by Khawam, 1986: 124). For the Persians, Daniyal's (or Daniyyel's) tomb is in Khūzistān in Susa (modern-day Iran), and is revered by Shiite Muslims. Other sources indicate that the mausoleum is located near Samarkand, in Uzbekistan.

9 With a translator's note, mentioning that this is the prophet of the Hebrew Bible



and which is covered, in our tale, by the double mask of fiction and comedy." (*Id.*: 38).

The author's remark is a wise one, as it takes us back to the teachings of French anthropologist C. Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss, who believed that storytelling opens the doors to the world of the desired, the enviable and the possible, on all social and economic issues relating to men, women, sexuality, social interactions, economic activities and the world, as well as relationships with other living kingdoms, domination, equality, sharing and otherness.

What these two tales have in common, as well as the other two in the same volume, "The Khalife and the Madman" and "The Power of Love", is that they depict a world of unheard-of possibilities, in which love triumphs (Ghânim, a wealthy merchant, but a stranger to Baghdad with Seduction, the Khalife's favorite concubine), the Khalife is fascinated by the tale of a presumed madman, and finally, the magical prowess of the Persian Sage, who transforms the khalif into a caterer's apprentice and the vizier into a wife, married by a peasant, son

of the fisherman who took him in on the shore.

If we use one of the mechanisms of narrative grammar to review the different contents, posited or inverted, as well as those associated with them, in fairy tales, it's quite possible that a second layer of meaning, not perceptible at first glance, will emerge.

Indeed, the principle of Greimasian narrative grammar is to link and articulate the contents of the initial narrative situation (inverted content) with those of the final situation (posited content), in accordance with the semiotic postulate of the pre-eminence of the final narrative structure, which emerges at the end of the story, following the completion of the transformations, over the intermediate narrative structures. This evolution takes place along the axis of discursive temporality, from a "before" that generates tension and hence adventures, to an "after" that resolves the tension and brings to a close the actions and adventures of the characters involved.

Here is a brief schematic:

	Before	After
	Reverse content	Content
Contents	Topical content declared	Implied topical content
Narrative macro-sequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sleeper awake</li> <li>- Persian wisdom</li> <li>- Crazy stories</li> <li>- Impossible love</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Illusions of power</li> <li>- Despotism neutralized</li> <li>- Obscure realities</li> <li>- Triumph of love</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.** Diagram of the topicalization of narrative content.

In other words, depending on the medium chosen (audio/video storytelling or calligraphic or printed text), we are in the presence of stories that recount the untold or fabulous adventures of ordinary characters: the sleeping merchant who had been khalif for a night or two, the Persian magician who took under his protection a young man in love with the khalif's daughter, the confessions of a presumed madman and the love of a young man for the khalif's favorite concubine. The extraordinary thing about these adventures is that they feature the khalif Haroun al-Rashid himself and involve him, directly or indirectly, through his filiation, his concubines or his close entourage. This involvement is aided by the theme of the sovereign, just and equitable, retributor or punisher, who watches over the population and the legendary city of Baghdad, hence his nocturnal escapades, in the company of his faithful vizier Ja'far and his servant-guardian, Massoud.

However, underlying this first, unfurled content is a second content, subverting the first in deep structure, and proving to be a critique, albeit tempered, of despotism, arbitrariness and human vanity. In "The Waking Sleeper", the satire is strong, and the Khalifa finds himself in the burlesque position of the

watered-down sprinkler, whereas in "The Persian Wise Man", he is stripped of his Sultanic attributes and finds himself in livery as a waiter in a restaurant, in a dreamlike projection of rare intensity. His all-powerful vizier is metamorphosed into a young woman and given as wife to a rough peasant who knocks her up seven times in a row! This amplification is akin to caricature, as the lines are enlarged and the margins of interpretation almost extended.

When all is said and done, it's certain that *The Thousand and One Nights*, as the mythical text we hypothesized as the primary arch-text, has had a lasting influence on the collective human imagination. The *Thousand and One Nights* has become a universal cultural heritage, overdetermining all the texts produced and generated in the various cultural traditions of the Muslim world (Persia, the Ottoman Empire, Umayyad Syria, Abbasid Iraq, Fatimid Egypt, the Maghreb and the Muslim Far East), and then in the translations and adaptations carried out in Western Europe from the 17th<sup>th</sup> to the 21st centuries, which inspired most of the translations carried out worldwide.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to recall, in a few points, the following elements, which seem essential to me:

1. *The Thousand and One Nights* is far from being a finished and closed text. A collection of texts, with compilations, additions, deletions, translations and various adaptations, it bears the indelible marks of its evolution and constant recomposition. Moreover, the quest for sources and unpublished manuscripts has always been laborious, difficult and somewhat hazardous. I'll give just one example, that of R. R. Khawam, who spent 39 years of his life researching and authenticating texts to deliver us a 4-volume work, shaped around general themes, without the canonical distribution into Nights. This did not prevent J. E. Bencheikh and A. Miquel from proposing, years later, their own *Thousand and One Nights*.
2. As for the orality of the *Thousand and One Nights*, we can only observe its slow evolution. While the Indian and Persian sources were primarily oral, the written word of transcribers and copyists changed all that. However, the tales circulated orally, by word of mouth, in a kind of popular underground tunnel, much faster than the manuscripts and parchments of copyists, compilers and translators. The use of the printing press was to reverse this state of affairs, without completely neutralizing it, as theater, radio, television and cinema revived the oral genre. Today, we're witnessing a revival of orality all over the world, in public squares, fairs and *social media* such as websites, forums, blogs and their followers. One example is a website dedicated to *The Thousand and One Nights*, named: al-waraq<sup>10</sup> [Paper], which hosts a large number of Internet users who, according to the researcher K. Zakharia (2009: 16), still express strong opinions on the reception of the text according to the modernist/traditionalist grid, while not contesting its literary or even heritage dimension. She therefore considers that:

Internet users fall into three categories when it comes to their opinion of the work, whether they try to justify themselves with arguments or simply make apodictic judgements. First there are the two irreducible factions of unconditional supporters and opponents, and then, between the two, there are those who hold a position that can be summed up as "yes to the literary value, no to the moral deficiency of the work". While the book's admirers outnumber its detractors, the latter [...] devote more time and space to justifying their position [17].

3. On a general level, it is possible to consider, as M. Chebel does, *The Thousand and One Nights* as a general history of mentalities in the Arab-Muslim world, a kind of *weltanschauung* or worldview, in which destiny or fate, associated with the divine, is predominant.

4. In this excessively fatalistic vision of the world, what can women do? How can she make the world her own, or at least domesticate it? The answer is clear from the opening story of *Les Nuits*: by telling it. Shahrazade tells it wonderfully well, giving us a narrated, playful and feminized deliverable.

Moreover, this quality of storytelling is also assured by other storytelling characters (*Histoire des trois Calenders*, *Histoire des trois vieillards*, *Histoire des six frères du barbier*, *Histoire des cinq dames de Baghdad*, etc.). We're in the age-old tradition of *homo fabula*.

As a result, the story takes on several functions: not only does it entertain, but above all it frees energies, untangles existential and human anxieties, and helps to sublimate death and destruction instincts through love and compassion. Gilles Deleuze (1986:282), interested in both philosophy and fiction, wrote the following about storytelling in cinema:

*Fabulation is not an impersonal myth, but neither is it a personal fiction: it is speech in action, an act of speech by which the character ceaselessly crosses the boundary separating his private affair from the political, and himself produces collective statements* [7]. We can perfectly well apply this concept to the narrator of *Les Nuits*, in that her fiction is not a personal fabrication, invented from scratch, since it draws on various Indo-Persian and Turco-Anatolian traditions, while adapting to the Arab world. *Les Nuits* becomes a social and political act of speech, producing a powerful and unifying collective Arab-Muslim imagination.

5. The tale of the *Thousand and One Nights* can be seen as a fabulist chiaroscuro scene designed to rebalance social relationships and thus the world. In this respect, we can appreciate the tale of the "Sleeper Awake" as a metaphor for Shāhriyār's obsessive universe. From night to night, and from story to story, interspersed with the morning call to prayer, the king defers the execution of his wife, eventually forgetting her and curing his obsession with killing his wife to prevent adultery.

This story should be reconsidered as a general metaphor, and also as an edifying allegory, rich in narrative twists and symbolic echoes.

## Abbreviations

CRTL	Centre National des Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales, Nancy (France)
INALCO	Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris (France)

## Author Contributions

El Mostafa Chadli is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

<sup>10</sup> See the website: [www.alwaraq.net](http://www.alwaraq.net)

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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