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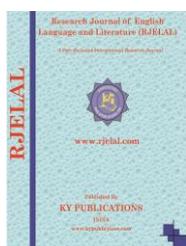
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THE EARLY EUROPEAN TRANSLATIONS OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

The chief focus of this article is not to tell the story of the Nights' history and its MS sources, but rather to consider what happened after the Nights reached Europe. Published in 1704-1716, Antoine Galland's *Les Mille et Une Nuits: contes arabes traduits en Français* (The One Thousand and One Nights: Arab Tales Translated in French) was nothing short of an international phenomenon. Galland's volumes sold out instantly and even appeared in English Grub street editions well before he was finished translating them in French. Then came the translations of two Englishmen, Edward Lane's *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, published in 1838-1840 and Sir Richard Francis Burton's *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments* Now Entitled *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, published in 1885- 1888. It soon became a rare works that appealed to both the common man and the cognoscenti alike. It's fair to remark that the *Arabian Nights'* western fame was due in large part, if not entirely, to Galland, Lane, and Burton.

Key words: Jinns (Genies), Orientalism, Burton's English

Introduction

The Thousand and One Nights (popularly known as the "Arabian Nights") is an account of alluring fables, fairy tales, romances, and historical anecdotes, basically of Middle- East or Arabic origin, though some of the tales show, very distinctly, the influence of oral Indian and Persian sources. It reminds us of the other famous compilations like *Kathasaritsagar* and *Aesop's fables*. The stories have a clear moral tinge, though they cannot be called, by any stretch of imagination, as religious literature. They are secular in tone and temperament. The collection of stories is more widely known in the world than any other work of Arabic literature. Stephen Arata, speaking about the popularity of the *Arabian Nights* remarks:

"As everyone knows, *The Arabian Nights* comprises a body of tales that, once upon a time, everyone knew. From *Rasselas* to *Finnegan's Wake*, the

stories associated with the name of Shahrazad permeate British literature so thoroughly that the difficult task is to identify authors who don't allude to them." (Available on Internet)

In the *Arabian Nights* the Arab people have been presented as belonging to a mysterious kingdom of boundless money and full of Jinns (or genies), demons, devils and hobgoblins, men flying in the air, flying horses, magical and supernatural birds, talking fish, and exotic scenes of harems, slaves, eunuchs, princes, and kings, along with wonderful stories. Most of the stories are folk in origin and belong to the oral tradition of Arabic Literature. Ellen Johnston McHenry remarks:

"The 1001 Nights is Asia's equivalent to Europe's *Canterbury Tales*. Both are collections of folk tales that have existed in the oral traditions of their cultures for hundreds (or even thousands) of years. In

the case of the Canterbury Tales, these stories were collected and retold by one author, Geoffrey Chaucer, at the beginning of the Renaissance (the early 1300s). The collection of stories found in 1001 Nights was started by an unknown author in the 800s AD, and continued by a series of unknown authors, all the way up to Chaucer's time (the 1300s)."

The *Arabian Nights* is a grand collection of ancient tales told by the Sultana Scheherazade, who relates them as entertainment to her jealous and murderous husband, in the hope that these stories will keep her alive until her husband changes his mind. These stories were compiled originally in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age, though Persian names remain sometimes in rather garbled form (Shahrazad, Sindbad). The Arabic text exists in many different versions. It seems that they were orally transmitted over many centuries. The individual stories were created over many centuries, by many people and in many styles, and they have become famous in their own right. Naturally, the tales bear the marks of many people and many styles. The work continued to be collected over many centuries by various people, including authors, translators, and scholars across West, Central, and South Asia and North Africa. Some tales themselves trace their roots back to ancient and medieval Arabic, Greek, Indian, Persian, Turkish and Jewish origin.

The impact of the *Arabian Nights* has been immense on the Western culture to this day. It has not only provided entertainment to the generations of readers as well as listeners, but has also provided inspiration to hundreds of authors for their creative activities. Further, it has contributed, asserts the *Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*:

. . . decisively to the West's perception of the "Orient" as the essential Other and, hence, to the West's definition of its own cultural identity. Yet the *Arabian Nights* were not primarily perceived and treated as alien. Rather to the contrary, they were integrated into various layers of Western culture and have managed to survive, thrive, diffuse, and gain additional momentum over the centuries ever since their introduction into Western

consciousness three hundred years ago. (Available on the internet)

Many sources are responsible for the coming of these tales to Britain. First the Crusaders, then voyagers, and finally missionaries from Britain began to reach Arabia from the eighth century onwards, yet these tales reached Britain rather late. Up to the time of Queen Anne and George I, people in England and France knew nothing about the *Arabian Nights*. It was during the early eighteenth century that these tales began to illumine the imagination of European people, comprising of common people as well as literary cognoscenti. In its various versions and editions, the *Arabian Nights* was held in high esteem by European and non-European literary critics, as one of the most valuable literary sources for the study of the characteristic customs and conventions of the society, social values, religious norms and cultural practices of the Muslims throughout the 'Orient.' As a result hundreds of British and French editors, linguists and historians claimed that the *Arabian Nights* provided a window into customs, manners, values and traditions of the 'height of Islam.' Because of its wide popularity and circulation, the *Arabian Nights* significantly contributed to the literary production of similar works in Europe and the Middle East. It is very uncertain to make a guess as to when the stories passed from the storyteller to the scribe or when they came in written form.

Discussion

The oldest surviving manuscript containing some of the stories and the Shahrazad motif, which is now in the "Bibliothèque nationale de France", goes back only to the 15th century. It was this manuscript that the French antiquarian, Orientalist and classical scholar, Antoine Galland (1646-1715), discovered and translated into French as *Les Mille et une nuits*, between 1704 and 1717, thus launching the *Arabian Nights'* brilliant career in Europe and the Americas. To satisfy the public craze for Arabian tales, he added the so-called "orphan" stories such as "Aladdin" and "Ali Baba" that he said he had had from a Syrian gentleman. In the next century, which was interested in establishing texts in eastern languages in the manner of the Latin and Greek classics, versions of the *Nights* were printed at

Calcutta in 1814-18 ("Calcutta I"), in Cairo in 1835 ("Bulaq") and in Calcutta again in 1839-42 ("Calcutta II").

This translation, *Les mille et une nuit*, became an instant success. English translations of his translation were published in 1706, just two years after Galland's first volumes were published. By 1720, his work was re-translated in many other European languages (English (1712); German (1706); Dutch (1719-1724); Italian (1722); Danish (1745); Greek (1757-1762); Russian (1763-1771) and became the foundation of the European tradition of the *Thousand and One Nights* and the entry of the work into world literature. Galland's translation appealed to a wide and varied audience and resulted in an Orientalist vogue in literature, which continued throughout the eighteenth century, and has remained a structural phenomenon in European literature until the present day. These translations were very popular and sold like hot cakes. Rachel Kurlander says:

It's even said that the French public loved Galland's stories so much that admirers would often stand outside of his apartment in Paris at night and throw rocks at his window, waking him up and refusing to leave until he told them a story (93). Despite its popularity, Galland's *Nuits* received lukewarm reviews at best, was utterly ignored at worst, and on the whole was not considered of any literary value by critics. Furthermore, high society men in particular found the *Nuits* to be unrefined and too feminine. In fact, Galland himself came to deeply resent this work in spite of the fame it brought him, since he believed that the project distracted him from more scholarly pursuits much more worthy of his talents. (Available on the Internet)

Muhsin Mahdi opines that one of the greatest defect of the work of Galland is that he "exaggerates, elaborates, embellishes, or glamorizes the stories in his manuscript" (44), but argues that he mostly does so out of necessity because he's working from a single MS source. When Galland came across gaps, defects, or inconsistencies in his MS, he wasn't able to check them against another source; rather, he was forced to improvise. Antoine Galland, is thought to have created two of the most

famous stories, Aladdin and Ali Baba, himself. However, Rachel Kurlander says:

"The purpose of Galland's *Nuits* was not merely to entertain. The foreword to the *Nights* states, "I should like to inform the honorable gentlemen and the noble readers that the purpose of writing this agreeable and entertaining book is the instruction of those who peruse it, for it abounds with highly edifying histories and excellent lessons", and Galland evidently took these words to heart –he used the very same principles to guide his own translation: to entertain, to please, and to instruct."

Translations into English were made by Edward William Lane (from Bulaq), and John Payne and the traveler Richard Burton.

One hundred and thirty seven years separate the publication of the first volume of Galland's *Nuits* in 1704 and the final installment of Edward Lane's *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment* in 1841. Over the course of that period, many Orientalists came on the scene who called the movement "Orientalism." Before the mid-eighteenth century, interest in the Orient was mainly confined to the biblical lands, so that "by and large... Orientalists were Biblical scholars, students of the Semitic languages, Islamic specialists" (Edward Said, on the Internet). This is not altogether surprising, it's easy to see why the biblical languages and lands might, from a European standpoint, be considered the most culturally and historically relevant aspects of the Orient, holding the key to both the historical and linguistic origins of Christianity and to the study of Islam.

Edward William Lane (1801-1876), a famous British Orientalist, a scholar and a lexicographer, was born in Hereford, England on September 10, 1801. He was the third son of the Rev. Dr Theophilus Lane, his father oversaw his early education, but after his death in 1814, Lane attended schools first in Bath, then in Hereford. Lane excelled in his studies and showed a great aptitude for learning; yet, despite his ability, his education was cut short when he dropped out of Cambridge. Thus, while Lane was extremely intelligent, he was, by no means, a scholar and a

learned man like Galland. After Lane left Cambridge, he went to live with his brother in London, where he would go on to study engraving. It was around this time that he secretly took up studying Arabic, and in 1825, Lane set sail for Egypt to learn about the culture of that ancient country. Thus, he got great knowledge about Arabia culture, civilization and related literature.

Besides translation of the *Arabian Nights*, he also wrote a work called *Manners, and Customs of the Modern Egyptian* (1836). It described very minutely the daily life of the Egyptians. He wrote about the infancy and early education of the Egyptians, to their death and funeral rites. It also dealt with details of the government, religion and laws, the bath, and the music. In this way, the book was meant to be read as a "lived experience", the way the Egyptians actually lived their everyday life. Of the three translations of the *Nights* that are discussed in this paper, Lane's *Arabian Nights* was by far the most-well received by the general readers and the congnoscenti. Lane himself saw the *Arabian Nights* as an edifying work, as he had expressed, earlier in a note in his preface to the *Manners and Customs*:

"There is one work, however, which represents most admirable pictures of the manners and customs of the Arabs, and particularly of those of the Egyptians; it is 'The Thousand and One Nights; or, Arabian Nights' Entertainments:' if the English reader had possessed a close translation of it with sufficient illustrative notes, I might almost have spared myself the labour of the present undertaking. (Available on the Internet)

The London and Westminster Review hailed Lane's translation as the most valuable:

"Mr. Lane's version is beyond all doubt a most valuable, praiseworthy, painstaking, learned and delightful work; worthy to be received with honour and thanks by all lovers of the 'Arabian Nights' and to form an epoch in the history of popular Eastern literature". (Available on the internet)

The *Eclectic Review* wrote that one could acquire "a much clearer notion of oriental

manners... than from the most judicious book... ever written" (Ahmed, on the internet)

Then we come to the last of the three impressive translators of Europe, Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890). Richard Burton was indeed an accomplished geographer, explorer, scholar, ethnologist, diplomat, linguist and celebrated author. Richard Burton was born in Devonshire, England. But soon he went to France and Italy. He matriculated at Oxford at the age of 19, but was expelled just two years later, at which point, he decided to become an officer in the 18th Regiment of the Bombay Native Infantry in India. He spent eight years in India, learning Arabic, Hindi, Punjabi, Sindhi, and various other Indian languages. After his discharge from the Bombay native Infantry, Burton returned to England, secretly making a plan for his return to the East. In 1853, Burton traveled to Cairo,, disguised as a Muslim and completed the forbidden pilgrimage to Mecca, detailing his travels in his successful book *Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Mecca*. Later he spent the next few years exploring Africa in an attempt to discover the source of the Nile River.

Burton's idea of translating the *Nights* goes back to 1852, and sometime soon after that, he began working in collaboration with his friend Dr. John Steinhaeuse. But John died without doing any substantial work on the translation. Then, after many years, Burton was able to complete *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (1885), subtitled *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments*, which is an English language translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* (the "*Arabian Nights*").

While translating the *Nights*, Burton attempted to invent an English equivalent of medieval Arabic. Therefore, he drew upon Chaucerian English, and Elizabethan English. According to British historian and a great Arabic scholar, Robert Irwin:

"Burton shared [John] Payne's enthusiasm for archaic and forgotten words. The style Burton achieved can be described as a sort of composite mock-Gothic, combining elements from Middle English, The Authorised Version of the Bible, and the Jacobean drama. Most modern readers will

also find Burton's Victorian vulgarisms jarring, for example 'regular Joe Millers', 'Charleys', and 'red cent'. Burton's translation of the *Nights* can certainly be recommended to anyone wishing to increase their word-power: 'chevisance', 'fortalice', 'kemperly', 'cark', 'foison', 'sootfast', 'perlection', 'wittol', 'parergon', 'brewis', 'bles', 'fadaise', 'coelebs', 'vivisepulture', and so on. 'Whilome' and 'anent' are standard in Burton's vocabulary. The range of vocabulary is wider and stranger than Payne's, lurching between the erudite and the plain earthy, so that Harun al-Rashid and Sinbadwalk and talk in a linguistic Never Never Land."

In a word, Richard Burton's is an outdated yet eccentric translation of the monumental Arabic work. But, all said and done, Burton's translation is unexpurgated, much different from the translations by Galland and Lane. Many people did not accept Burton's translation for the explicit sexual language used. Burton was conscious of such a charge, in advance. Thus he wrote in his "Introduction":

"For instance the European novelist marries off his hero and heroine and leaves them to consummate marriage in privacy... but the Eastern storyteller... must usher you, with a flourish, into the bridal chamber and narrate to you, with infinite gusto, everything he sees and hears."

Conclusion

Although the *Arabian Nights*, with the exception of a handful of stories, has ultimately become forgotten, even when it was a favorite of 18th and 19th-century European reader, one of those rare works that appealed to both the common man and the cognoscenti alike, it's fair to remark that the *Arabian Nights'* western fame was due, in large part, if not entirely, to the translations of Antoine Galland (French) , Edward William Lane (English) , and Richard Burton (English).

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