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But the *Thousand and One Nights* was not Shahrazād’s only literary appearance. She is also the heroine of the present work, the *A Hundred and One Nights* (*Kitāb Miʾat laylah wa-laylah*). At first glance the two works are similar: they share essentially the same frame story and the tales Shahrazād recounts are drawn from the same well of medieval Arabic narratives, stories of various genres generally intended for entertainment and excluded from the canon of “classical” or learned literature of the court and the scholars.  

There exist vast quantities of this type of Arabic literature. Libraries in Europe and the Middle East contain untold numbers of neglected manuscripts, often not even catalogued let alone edited or published. The *Thousand and One Nights* itself, in its most common form (the nineteenth-century editions), is composed of tales that existed independently of that great collection; we can say the same for much of *A Hundred and One Nights*. It is common to hear or read that the Arab literati considered the *Nights* aesthetically inferior and unworthy of serious attention, and certainly there is little trace of it in the “high” literary tradition. But as is often the case, that which is frowned upon by the literati enjoys great popularity with others (and, one suspects, more than a few of the literati themselves). The quantity of these manuscripts is such that, clearly, many people must have been reading them, and little wonder, given that even today the *Nights* remain a literary classic. But there are many other delightful tales out there, and the present work is an effort to bring more of this kind of Arabic literature to a wider audience. Other than the *Thousand and One Nights*, the only other example of this kind of story collection to have received scholarly attention is that known as *Kitāb al-Hikāyāt al-ʿajībah wal-akhbār al-gharībah*,

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only recently translated into English in its entirety as *Tales of the Marvelous and News of the Strange*. Despite its exclusion from the classical canon, this genre of semi-popular storytelling should be recognized as part of the larger corpus of Arabic literature. It deserves a much wider readership, whether in the original or in translation.

On the face of it, *A Hundred and One Nights* may appear merely a condensed version of the *Thousand and One Nights*. Beyond the shared form and genre, though, the two works are quite distinct. *A Hundred and One Nights* is a short work with a very pronounced character. While it is unfortunate that it must always reside in the considerable shadow of the *Thousand and One Nights*, it is nonetheless true that for the purpose of introduction, the qualities of the former are best brought out by comparison with the latter. The larger work is a rattle bag of tales of wildly different lengths, styles, and genres. Its diversity is one of its defining qualities: warrior epics of hundreds of pages are found alongside moralizing or amusing anecdotes extending only a few lines; there are travelers’ tales and poetic romances and stories of Indian kings and Muslim caliphs. In some stories a somber morality sets the tone; elsewhere a manic humor dominates. But the collection has a thematic unity that is particularly evident in the early sections. Shahrazād’s story, the “frame-tale,” raises moral questions, not just about the fidelity or treachery of women but also of power and its abuse, of punishment and justice, of the consequences of impetuous decisions. It is hard not to believe that Shahrazād’s tales contain lessons for the murderous king. These tales’ explorations of power, justice, and fidelity (not to mention the importance of narration, as storytelling frequently saves lives in these tales) add a degree of complexity to the suspense, romance, and humor of the stories themselves.

*A Hundred and One Nights* has a different type of unity. If the original core of the *Thousand and One Nights* has a thematic unity, the smaller work is characterized by a formal unity. With just over three months (as opposed to three years) to spin her yarns, Shahrazād tells fewer tales: seventeen, in the version here edited and translated, as opposed to about 260 in the Būlāq and Calcutta II editions of the *Thousand and One Nights*. Her selection has also an appropriate variety: tales of warriors and buried treasure, romances, and stories of clever ruses and spectacular good fortune are all present. But in the frame story of *A Hundred and One Nights*, Shahrazād has no pretentions of saving her community or reforming the king, and the implicit invitation to reflect on moral issues is absent. She tells her tales merely to save her own life (and that of her sister).
Instead, the primary quality of *A Hundred and One Nights* is its efficiency. In some respects this is conventional narrative economy. Nothing is wasted; nothing is superficial. All we have here are the absolutely essential elements of the tale. Moreover, the raw materials of the stories are also recycled. The reader cannot fail to notice the repetition of motifs, both within individual tales and throughout the collection itself. To a degree, this is simply part of the repertoire of motifs found in medieval Arabic narratives. Any reader of the *Thousand and One Nights* (or other similar collections) will soon enough ask: How many brass horsemen, desert palaces, rebellious demons, childless kings, forbidden doors, etc. can there be?

Nowhere is this limited repertoire more conspicuous than in *A Hundred and One Nights*. Caves, disappearing brides or beloveds, secret nocturnal visits to the palace: these and many more appear and reappear. And it is not only motifs that repeat themselves: we have repetition on the lexical level as well. Some of this consists of well-worn phrases describing beautiful girls or lush gardens or heroic warriors. Sometimes it is even smaller units, as in the phrase “a steed of noble stock,” employed repeatedly to describe a horse. In this relatively short work, such repetition conveys the sense of an author or compiler with limited resources reworking the same material to fashion new and different narratives. But the result is a consistency—the sense of a unified work with its own character despite the variety of the tales being told. Indices of recurrent motifs and stock phrases at the back of this edition demonstrate how frequently the same material reoccurs.

So in addition to the fast pace and colorful, exotic components (and they were exotic to the original audiences as well), we have the pleasure of recognition. The repetition of motifs allows for the pleasure of recognizing the patterns of narrative combinations, and the skillful combination of recurrence and variation allows us to enjoy something familiar and something new at the same time.

The vast majority of our knowledge of premodern Arabic literary culture comes from those who belonged to the scholarly tradition: well-educated judges and jurists, courtiers and poets, and so on. These people were largely silent on the matter of semi-popular storytelling and as a result there are huge gaps in our understanding of the history of these texts’ transmission, circulation, and consumption.

There is, however, one aspect of the transmission of the *Nights* (whether the *Hundred and One* or the *Thousand and One*) that is beyond dispute and worth
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stressing here. It consists of a written transmission. These collections and the tales they contain were not part of an oral tradition. *A Hundred and One Nights* exist in seven known manuscripts, and despite a number of differences, sometimes quite significant, between the different versions of a given tale or in the overall contents, much of the material is identical, virtually word for word. Such consistency does not occur with orally transmitted folktales. In fact, recognized folklore motifs are not as prominent in the *Nights* as might be expected. 5

The features that distinguish *Nights*-style narrative from the classical and canonical are not to be confused with oral tradition. Abdelfattah Kilito has noted some of the qualities required for a book to attain “classical” status: it must be written down; it should have an author, preferably one whose *vita* is public knowledge; it should ideally have been composed for a patron; it should contain references to earlier books; one should need a commentary in order to fully understand and unlock its complexities.6 To which one might add: it should have a title. Obviously the *Nights* falls far short here. Their authors remain anonymous (though some manuscripts ascribe the entirety to one “Fihrās the philosopher”), they are often not copied carefully, and they never formed part of any curriculum of study. The language of these texts is usually very simple in syntax and vocabulary; basic rules of Arabic grammar are treated with often breathtaking insouciance. (The manuscript on which this edition is based is especially egregious in this regard.) But despite all this, the tales were read and reread, recopied and rewritten, and this type of literature was widespread. One should also add that its linguistic simplicity is one of several reasons why it is more accessible in translation than many of the “classics.”

The Origins of the Frame Story

One of the reasons that *Mi’at laylah wa-laylah* (*A Hundred and One Nights*) is of particular interest to scholars is because its frame story is believed to be older than that of its larger counterpart, and it should hold clues to the history of Shahrazād and her tales.

The origins of the *Thousand and One Nights* (*Alf laylah wa-laylah*) are murky. Two tenth-century Arabic works refer to a Persian book called *A Thousand Nights* that was translated into Arabic, and give brief descriptions of the story of Shahrazād. There is even a manuscript fragment dated to the ninth (third Islamic) century, and scattered references, usually disapproving, in subsequent centuries. But all these tell us virtually nothing of the stories she recounted;
for that we have to wait until the fifteenth century, the likely date of the oldest manuscript of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*, and even then the subsequent chronology of the collection and the relationship of the extant manuscripts to each other are far from clear.7

Yet the origins of *A Hundred and One Nights* are even more obscure. The extant manuscripts all date to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries AD, with one likely slightly older. Each is written in Maghrebi (North African) script. It is mentioned only once in the Arabic bibliographical literature (one should add that Arab-Muslim scholars were assiduous bibliographers), and that mention comes not from the Maghreb but from Istanbul. The seventeenth-century scholar Ḥājjī Khalīfah in his bibliographical work, *Kashf al-zunūn*, records the following:

*The Book of One Hundred Nights*, by Shaykh Fihrās (or: Firdās) the Philosopher (*al-faylāsūf*). It consists of one hundred stories.8

This is a precious piece of information, but his entry does not accord with any of our extant manuscripts. The title is missing a night. Also, in the manuscripts, each tale is spread out over several nights, so the number of nights in the title does not correspond to the number of stories. Finally, the author’s name differs from manuscript to manuscript.

Despite the late date of the manuscripts, there are a number of clues within the tales suggesting far earlier origins. The most important of these concerns the frame story itself. In 1909 Emmanuel Cosquin published an important article on the *Thousand and One Nights’* frame tale, in which he suggested that the frame story of Shahrazād and the murderous king was composed of three sections, each originally independent and traceable to South Asian tales of relative antiquity. In the first section of the frame story as it appears in the *Thousand and One Nights*, the king Shahriyār invites his brother, whom he has not seen for many years, to visit him. The brother, Shahzamān, sets out to make the journey, but turns back almost immediately because he has forgotten something at home. Entering his house he finds his wife in bed with another man. He kills them in a rage and resumes his journey. However, he is so distraught at his wife’s betrayal that his health and physical appearance decline drastically. His brother asks the cause of his malady, but he refuses to speak of it. Then Shahzamān sees his brother’s wife cavorting with a black slave in circumstances even more outrageous than his own wife’s infidelity. Seeing that even a great and powerful king
like his brother is not exempt from female treachery, Shahzamān takes heart and regains his strength and his healthy countenance. His brother, in turn, demands to know what has prompted his recovery, and thereby learns the truth about his own wife. The brothers conclude that women, by their very nature, are never to be trusted.

Cosquin pointed out the similarity of this tale to one in a Chinese Buddhist work held to have been translated from Sanskrit in the third century AH. The Sanskrit version, long lost, was supposedly of much greater antiquity; Cosquin knew the Chinese version via a French translation, *Cinq cents contes et apologues: Extrait du Tripitaka chinois* (trans. Chavannes, Paris 1910). This story begins quite differently. Instead of two brothers who had not seen each other for some time, there is a king who holds an annual beauty contest of sorts in which he demands to know if there is anyone in the world more beautiful than he. Informed that, yes, there was an extraordinarily handsome youth living far away, the king has him summoned. It is this youth who, returning to fetch something he has forgotten at home, finds his wife *in flagrante delicto*, and whose anxiety and distress cause his beauty to fade. When he reaches the court, the king demands to know the reason for his changed appearance, and the youth eventually informs the king of his own wife’s debaucheries and how he had come to realize that if even a great king could be cuckolded, then his own position was not so bad. The two men head to the mountains to live as ascetics.

Excluding the final scene in which the two men depart for a life of renunciation, this is the same version of the story we find in *A Hundred and One Nights*. Cosquin was also aware of three manuscripts in Paris containing a version of this story. Two were Arabic collections entitled *Les cent nuits* and the other a Berber version of this same work.

Cosquin argued that the “beauty-contest” motif provides a more convincing motivation for bringing the two cuckolds together than what happens in the *Thousand and One Nights*, where a king suddenly desires to see his brother. The similarity between the Chinese-Sanskrit version and the frame story of *A Hundred and One Nights* led Cosquin to believe that the latter’s version must be more ancient than that of the *Thousand and One Nights*.

Another intriguing piece of the puzzle is the fact that the beauty-contest version of the story is found in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, an Italian epic of the early sixteenth century. However, to date there is no plausible explanation of how the story might have reached Italy.
The second section of the *Alf laylah* frame has the two brothers Shahriyār and Shahzamān encountering a woman held captive by a demon. As the demon sleeps, she forces the two men to have sex with her, and, taking Shahriyār's signet ring, shows them her collection of rings, each taken from a man with whom she has cuckolded the demon. The brothers are somewhat consoled by the fact that even a powerful demon is no match for the deviousness of the gentler sex. This passage too has its Asian precursors. This narrative does not appear in *A Hundred and One Nights*, though, which passes directly from the first section to the third.\footnote{13}

In the third and final section of the *Alf laylah* frame, the two men return home. The King Shahriyār eventually adopts a policy of taking a virgin each night and having her killed in the morning, which he continues until, suitable virgins in increasingly short supply, he demands the daughter of his own vizier, and thus meets the formidable Shahrazād. Cosquin asserted that the “fabric” of this motif was Indian, and he gave various instances in which a young woman delays a dreaded event by telling a succession of stories.\footnote{14}

Subsequent research over the past century has found no reason to challenge this conclusion. What subsequent research has revealed, though, is the great difficulty in saying anything more specific as to how these motifs traveled and how the frame stories of the Arabic *Nights* developed over time. The earliest extant manuscript of *Alf laylah* dates to the fifteenth century; it contains only 282 nights. This was the manuscript acquired by Antoine Galland and the basis for the first European translation. The “complete” versions we know today were compiled in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, and appear to be reworked and bulked-up versions of that of the Galland manuscript.

An interesting aspect of the South and East Asian variants is that the young storyteller almost always has an accomplice, a servant or a sister who plays some part in the ruse. In the *Thousand and One Nights*, it is the sister, usually named Dīnārzād. Shahrazād contrives to have the sister join her and the king, so that she can request a story from Shahrazād and thus set in motion the plan to distract the king from his deadly routine. Here the variant versions of the frame of *A Hundred and One Nights* add to the puzzle. In two of the manuscripts, it is Shahrazād's sister who sleeps with the king. In the remaining five (as in the *Thousand and One Nights*), Shahrazād serves as both the king's wife and storyteller. The latter versions are much clumsier, and it does look like the figure of Dīnārzād has been deprived of her original role and left with little to do.\footnote{15}
Did Shahrazād’s sister originally have a greater role? It seems likely in the case of *A Hundred and One Nights*. Whether this applies to the *Thousand and One Nights* as well is less clear but in the state of current research remains a distinct possibility.\(^{16}\)

There are, then, two arguments indicating that the frame tale of *A Hundred and One Nights* represents an older version of the tale. First of all, it bears closer resemblance to the supposed Chinese/Sanskrit original. Secondly, the beauty-contest motif provides a much stronger motivation for setting the story in motion than that of a brother who suddenly wishes to see his sibling. But some precisions are necessary. One should not confuse the frame tale with the contents of the collections themselves. As is the case with *Alf laylah*, it is likely that the framing motif is much more ancient than both the stories themselves and this particular configuration of frame and stories as we know it today. As mentioned above, there exists a papyrus fragment of *Alf laylah* dating to the ninth century. What little can be gleaned about the stories it contains suggests something quite different from the collection as we have it, which took its definitive form several centuries later. A similar situation likely obtained in the case of *Miʿat laylah*.\(^{17}\)

The two *Nights* collections (*Thousand and One* and *Hundred and One* as presented here) have two stories in common: “The Ebony Horse” and “The Prince and the Seven Viziers.” “The Story of the Ebony Horse” is one of the most widespread of this sort of popular Arabic fiction, appearing in many versions of the *Nights* and countless other unpublished manuscripts. Probably of Indian origin, we know that from an early date it was in circulation in this type of story collection.\(^{18}\) The version presented here is more refined than in the Būlāq and Calcutta II versions of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and no doubt reflects an earlier stage of Islamization, in that the specifically Islamic references are fewer, and the geographical indications are less clearly Middle Eastern. “The Tale of the Prince and the Seven Viziers” is likewise a tale of Iranian or Indian origin, widely diffused in both Middle Eastern and European versions. With its tales embedded in a frame story in which characters recount anecdotes to save a life, the structure of the “Seven Viziers” shares much with that of *Alf laylah*. “Seven Viziers” too contains fewer clear instances of Islamization; and although it contains fewer embedded stories than *Alf laylah*, the frame story itself is lengthier and richer.\(^{19}\)

At least two other tales in *Miʿat laylah* are rudimentary versions of those in *Alf laylah*, suggesting an earlier phase of development: the first part of “The Story of the Young Merchant and His Wife” is clearly based on the same tale as “The Story
of the Three Apples,” one of the most carefully crafted episodes of the Thousand and One Nights. Similarly, “Gharībat al-Ḥusn” is a skeletal version of the story of “Nuʿm and Niʿmah” in the Thousand and One Nights.20

However, all of the manuscripts of Miʾat laylah date to the late eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. One (that of the Agha Khan Museum) is older, but almost certainly not dating to the seventh/thirteenth century, as has been suggested (see the following “Note on the Text”). Moreover, all are in Maghribi script, and some have posited a North African or Andalusian “origin” for the collection.21

It is surely significant that all of the known manuscripts are in Maghribi (or possibly Andalusian) script. Further, the manuscripts contain, in varying degrees, traces of Maghribi dialect and vocabulary. It is also curious that in all manuscripts the hero of Shahrazād’s first story is named Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdallāh al-Qayrawānī, i.e., “of Qayrawān,” or Kairouan in present-day Tunisia. This would be an unusual, though by no means implausible, choice of name for a story originating in the eastern part of the Arab-Islamic world. Such regional and dialectal features can creep into a tradition over time, but they are not definitive indications of the collection’s regional origins.

The other reason for the claim that Miʾat laylah has North African or Andalusian origins is the predominance of figures from the Umayyad caliphate (661–750). The Umayyads were overthrown by the Abbasids (750–1258), who founded Baghdad and presided over one of the most glorious periods in Islamic history. A scion of the Umayyads managed to escape and founded a counter-caliphate in the Iberian Peninsula, based in Cordoba (756–1031). In al-Andalus, a nostalgia developed for the glories of Umayyad power and for memories of Damascus. In most of the Abbasid lands, however, the Umayyads were viewed less favorably overall. Thus the fact that A Hundred and One Nights features a number of Umayyad caliphs and notables as heros might be seen a sign of an Andalusian attitude. This is possible. But this interpretation neglects the fact that A Hundred and One Nights also contains stories featuring the Abbasids in contexts that are not unfavorable. One might note as well that most of the tales here involving the Umayyads are set in the lands of jihād, along the Byzantine frontier, or at least stem from that milieu, and that stories of Arab heroics in the Umayyad period are known also in Eastern sources. This is the case even in the Thousand and One Nights. In the present work, for instance, “Story of Maslamah ibn ‘Abd al-Malik” (d. 121/738) is set on the Byzantine frontier, and the historical Maslamah was renowned for leading an assault on Constantinople in 98–99/716–18. Thus it is
possible, but far from assured, that the presence of these figures indicates Andalusian or Maghribi origins.\(^{22}\)

The mention by Ḥajjī Khalīfah of a book entitled *Hundred Nights* demonstrates that some version of the work was known in the East, but since the reference says nothing about the content of the collection, it is difficult to say more. There is one bit of evidence of a transfer from east to west. In all the extant versions of “The Young Egyptian and His Wife,” the merchant throws his wife into the Nile. This first part of this tale is a rudimentary version of “The Three Apples” from the *Thousand and One Nights*, in which the merchant lives in Baghdad and dumps the unfortunate spouse in the Tigris. In a now-lost manuscript of *A Hundred and One Nights*, also written in Maghribi script, the story is set in Baghdad. This suggests that this story at least existed first in a Baghdad version, but the setting was later changed to the only city in the North of Africa with a large river running through it.\(^{23}\)

None of this evidence is conclusive about where the collection was first written. In the absence of any Eastern manuscripts of *A Hundred and One Nights*, one should refrain from any categorical statement. What we can say is the following: The first part of its frame tale is almost certainly of great antiquity, as Cosquin claimed. However, the versions that we possess to date are probably not so ancient: they share a suspicious number of motifs with later recensions of the *Alf laylah* frame.\(^{24}\) There is a good, though not definitive, case to be made that the version where Dīnārzād sleeps with the king is the older one. A collection known as the *Hundred / Hundred and One Nights* was known in the East.\(^{25}\) The contents of this collection may or may not have been similar to the versions known today from the North African manuscripts. The stories have no specific geographical ties, but it is possible that the version as we know it was compiled in the Islamic West, even if the materials were of Eastern origin.

**The Tales Told by Shahrazād**

What of Shahrazād’s stories themselves? Some, as noted already, are well known and have their origins farther East; others are more clearly the product of an Arab-Islamic milieu. Most escape strict generic classification, although romance is certainly prominent. The most easily identified genre or style is that of the Arabic popular epic (in condensed versions, of course) in which warriors fight a series of battles against a variety of foes (such as “Najm al-Ḍiyāʾ,” “Ẓāfir ibn Lāḥiq,” and “Sulaymān ibn ʿAbd al-Malik”).\(^{26}\)
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But for all the variety, we can still identify three main components shared in varying degrees by all of the stories. First is the romance element, in which the conclusion sees the hero united with the beloved (or, in some cases, the beloveds). Second is what I will call “adventure,” in which the hero faces and overcomes threats and dangers to his life, be they in the form of enemy soldiers, malevolent demons, odd monsters, stormy seas, or the beloved’s overly protective male relatives. Third is an element of cleverness, in which some trick or ruse is employed in order to achieve the hero’s goals.

Whether the dominant element be romance or adventure, there is one common link: all the stories end well, with the hero wealthy and happily united with a suitable partner. There is an essential optimism, that however grim or hopeless the situation, all will end well. In premodern Arabic narratives, especially of this semi-popular variety, tragic endings are uncommon. A small but significant genre of “deliverance after distress” stories exists, known in Arabic as al-faraj ba’da l-shiddah. In this genre, it is ostensibly the hand of God that steers the protagonist towards salvation of various kinds, be it through sheer luck or coincidence or via his own wits and skills; though when God Himself was less obtrusive it usually made for a better story. This narrative paradigm appears to be at work in A Hundred and One Nights.

The world of the tales is a simple one. It is ostensibly a Muslim world, although in some tales, Islamic references have been added to more ancient tales (the case with the frame story, “The Seven Viziers,” and “The Ebony Horse”). Most of the remainder have some referent to Umayyad or Abbasid figures, even if they were likely composed well after those periods. Geography is hopelessly confused but generally reliant on well-known referents such as Cairo, Damascus, Basra, Khurāsān, and Baghdad. (And there seems to be a certain disdain for Persia and the Persians.) Heads of state are “kings,” even though in some cases they are historical caliphs (‘Abd al-Malik, Hārūn al-Rashīd, al-Mu‘taṣim); on occasion these caliphs are referred to more accurately as “Commander of the Faithful” (amīr al-mu‘minīn).

The heroes tend to be princes or merchants. The heroines may be princesses or faithful wives (or both). Though not especially misogynistic by medieval standards, A Hundred and One Nights has a view of women epitomized by a sentence from “The King and the Serpent”: “He satisfied his every desire, while she lay there sound asleep.” (§15.22)
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Medieval standards notwithstanding, the treatment of women in these tales does deserve comment. The Shahrazād frame and “The Seven Viziers” are premised on the assumption that women are possessed of an insatiable heterosexual desire that will cause them to betray their menfolk at any opportunity. The latter story cycle, known as “The Seven Sages” in its European versions, is one of the best-known examples of the “Wiles of Women” literature. Much of the humor here has not aged well, and it may be difficult to appreciate the tales of tricks and clever ruses against the backdrop of cruelty and casual rape. It is a misogynist world, and this cannot be excused or explained away. It is true that the frame tale and the “Seven Viziers” do invite reflection on the justice of such a negative portrayal of women, but that is certainly not the case for the rest of the tales in this collection.

Religion is less in evidence in A Hundred and One Nights than in the Thousand and One Nights or in the collection al-Ḥikāyāt al-ʿajībah, whether in terms of references to explicitly Islamic practices or to implicit moral codes. In one area, though, one finds an explicitly religious message, and that is in references, usually via poetic inscriptions, to mortality and the futility of worldly gain. These verses often put the greed of the treasure-hunters into perspective. The juxtaposition of vast ancient treasures with renunciatory verses has its apotheosis in the Thousand and One Nights’ version of “The City of Brass,” whose constituent parts are drawn from the same pool as our stories. Some manuscripts of A Hundred and One Nights include a “City of Brass,” but not that used for the present edition.29

If the world portrayed in A Hundred and One Nights is a simple one, it is also the case that the portrayal itself is exceedingly simple. The various versions of A Hundred and One Nights’ manuscripts seldom give polished or refined versions of their stories. The modern reader might be slightly surprised to see, for example, the way in which the narrator dispenses with the opportunities to create suspense or tension. Take the story of Shahrazād herself: she is telling stories to save her and her sister’s life, and their lives depend on her ability to keep the king entertained night after night. Admittedly this is more of a narrative conceit than a real occasion for suspense, but it is nonetheless surprising to find that in two of our manuscripts (T, B1) the end is given at the beginning: before Shahrazād utters a word of her tales, the narrator tells us that she successfully kept the king’s attention until he, seeing that one of the sisters was pregnant, decided to spare them both.30 Many such examples occur throughout the individual tales,
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in which the reader is presented with information that might have been better withheld.

Elsewhere, the action follows the pattern of a “stock scene”—whose outcome is already well known—which does little to create suspense. The most notable example is the recurrent scene in which the mighty warrior turns out to be . . . well, you will find out soon enough. In any case what this might tell us is that our storytellers had other goals in mind. For them, the pleasures of the tale lay elsewhere: exoticism, fear, happy endings, and fast-paced action.

Another curious feature is that some tales seem to be composed of two originally distinct stories. For example, “The Young Merchant,” Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Qayrawānī, consists of two separate and distinct narratives, the first involving a merchant’s ruse, the second more of a fairy tale or adventure with a demoness jinn and princesses. More than once does a tale start out in one direction and then depart in another with no attempt to provide explanation or tie up loose ends (notably, to my mind, in the case of “The King and the Serpent,” where there is no explanation or follow-up to the curious sequence involving the deranged camel; it serves only to introduce the next episode).

The reader may also puzzle over inconsistent naming, confused geography, unexpected changes in narrative voice, and various passages that need to be clarified by consulting another manuscript. Along with this, the language is very basic in terms of both syntax and vocabulary. A too-literal translation would be exceedingly monotonous, for two main reasons. First, there are very few subordinate clauses, and if this parataxis is not modified in some way, it quickly becomes tedious. Second, Arabic tends to use a single verb for “to say” where English would supply one of countless others that indicate something of the emotional or physical state of the speaker.

Virtually all translators of the Thousand and One Nights have faced this problem and dealt with it in several ways. In the recent French version published by the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, co-translator André Miquel describes how the minimalist Arabic prose needs to be “bulked up” in order to satisfy the needs of the contemporary reader and to maintain the pleasure of reading. In the Penguin translation of 2008, Malcolm C. Lyons takes a different tack. He sees this type of literature as meant primarily to be read aloud (he is not saying that this is oral tradition—an important distinction). In a brief but very perceptive passage, he outlines some of the Arabic text’s qualities that make it suitable for the ear: rhymed prose and poetry; repetition of names, details, and phrases (as the
audience cannot flip back a few pages to check); and parataxis. Lyons’ translation, then, attempts “to speed up the pace of the narrative to what is hoped to be more nearly adapted to the eye rather than the ear of the modern reader.”

Lyons also put his finger on one of the essential aspects of the Nights and its siblings. Despite the repetitive and simple language, despite the occasional clumsiness of the storytelling, the stories remain a pleasure to read. In Arabic, this is due in part to what Lyons refers to as “the decorative elaboration of the original, as well as the extra dimension of allusiveness it provides.” He continues:

In the latter case, it is not merely that one incident will recall another, either within the Nights themselves or, more widely, in the huge corpus of Arabic popular literature, but a single phrase, one description or one line of poetry must have served to call other contexts to the mind of the original audience.

The Arabic of A Hundred and One Nights, with its repetition of phrases and motifs, illustrates these features clearly; how well they can be rendered in translation is another matter.

The other feature mentioned by Lyons is what he calls “the fundamental patterns of the genre of storytelling.” What he intends here are the motifs and plot structures common to narratives everywhere, be they international folktales or more learned collections such as the Sanskrit Panchatantra, the Florentine Decameron or the Icelandic Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue. A Hundred and One Nights shares motifs and narrative elements with European folktales as well as medieval Indian legends; it is part of the vast circulation of narratives and their components. But at the same time it is equally rooted in the Islamic tradition, with references, poetry, and motifs common to that world. It therefore comprises the global and the regional in ways that much of the canonical “classical” Arabic literature does not.

As mentioned at the outset, the Arabic literary establishment has always professed to disdain or censure the reading of books like A Hundred and One Nights. There are a number of reasons to believe that this negative attitude has been exaggerated, for even while condemning these works the critics seem to be familiar with their contents, and there is good evidence that learned scholars played a crucial role in the creation of the Alf laylah as it is known today. But there is no denying that there is a long tradition of criticizing fictional stories. Critics cited the plain language and style, the fact that the books were composed of lies, and
in modern times, the obscene or pornographic elements. All good selling points, one would think. The fourth/tenth century author al-Tawḥīdī speaks disparagingly of stories such as the Nights that merely “provoke wonder and laughter without leading to any benefit or knowledge.”34 The present work certainly falls into this category. But there have always been those who felt that wonder and laughter were worthwhile goals in themselves. A Hundred and One Nights has much historical, linguistic, and literary value, but its main virtue is its pursuit of pleasure through the telling of stories.