

Interpretation

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Book Reviews

Alf Layla wa Layla, The Arabian Nights, translated by Husain Haddawy, based on the text of the fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript edited by Muhsin Mahdi (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), xxxii + 428 pp., cloth \$25.00, paper \$12.95.

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Long-time readers of *Interpretation* will remember Muhsin Mahdi's suggestive explanation several years ago of the frame-story and dominant theme in *The Arabian Nights*. Since then, he has provided readers of Arabic with a painstaking scholarly edition of these intriguing tales.¹ And now Husain Haddawy has used that edition as the basis for a masterful and thoroughly charming translation of these same *Alf Layla wa Layla*, that is, *The 1001 Nights* or *The Arabian Nights*.

Although Mahdi has already explained the basic structure of the tales, it bears repeating—if only to prepare the way for speaking of how much this new translation may contribute to our own reflections on politics and literature. The main character is Shahrazad, the vizier's daughter who proves herself an extremely gifted raconteuse. She speaks ostensibly to her younger sister Dinarzad, who serves as a prompter to Shahrazad either by beseeching her night after night to relate another tale or by complimenting her on the marvels of what she has just recounted, and to King Shahrayar, the one who must learn to see beyond the alluring appeal of Shahrazad's stories and come to understand human beings—their passions and their aspirations—better. Shahrayar is in need of these lessons because he has not learned yet how to overcome the deceit humans employ against one another.

It is his younger brother Shahzaman who first alerts Shahrayar to the deceitful ways of humans, especially women. And, to go back yet another step (an unfolding similar to what occurs in the tales themselves, one tale calling up another so that two or three smaller yarns are related before the larger story is completed), Shahzaman himself becomes aware of women's infidelity because of Shahrayar. Having ruled successfully over Samarkand far from his brother for ten years, Shahzaman is visited by Shahrayar's vizier, Shahrazad's father, and told of his older brother's longing to see him. Shahzaman eagerly makes all the preparations for the long journey and even camps outside the city on the eve

of his departure in order to get an early start. But towards the middle of the night he decides to return and bid his wife farewell. This solicitous gesture leads him to discover his wife in bed with a lowly kitchen helper.

Enraged, Shahzaman kills them both, throws their bodies out of the castle, and departs immediately. He travels relentlessly night and day until he reaches his older brother. Though Shahrayar notices that something is troubling Shahzaman, he cannot extract an explanation. To distract him, Shahrayar proposes a hunting expedition. But Shahzaman prefers to stay behind. Looking out the window of the guesthouse at the garden of his brother's palace quite by accident, he sees his brother's wife walking about with twenty of her female servants—ten white and ten black. Suddenly, they all take off their clothes, and Shahzaman discovers that the ten black servants are really men. Each of them promptly settles down to sexual pastimes with one of the women servants as the queen cries out for her own lover. The moment his name (Mas'ūd or "Lucky") is called, another black man jumps down from a tree and tends to her desires.

The realization that not even his brother is safe from betrayal relieves Shahzaman's depression, and Shahrayar notices the change upon his return. Lengthy questioning finally leads to Shahzaman's explanation of the reasons for his depression and its cure as well as to a plan whereby Shahrayar can discover for himself how his wife deceives him. Throughout Shahzaman's account of his own misfortune and then of the infidelity of his brother's wife, we see Shahrayar—both by his own admission and by the way he is portrayed—as consumed by immense anger. Whereas Shahzaman was content to slay his wife and her lowly lover, Shahrayar confesses: "By God, had I been in your place, I would have killed at least a hundred or even a thousand women. I would have been furious; I would have gone mad" (p. 7). And we are told that "when King Shahrayar heard what his brother said and found out what had happened to him, he was furious and his blood boiled." Thus, when the two brothers pretend to go off on another hunting expedition, only to slip secretly back to the guesthouse so that Shahrayar may observe his wife's conduct in the garden, the narrator explains: "When King Shahrayar saw the spectacle of his wife and the slave girls, he went out of his mind" (p. 8).

This rage does not yet lead Shahrayar to kill his wife and the slave girls nor to the decision that brings Shahrazad into the tale. Another experience is needed before he becomes so persuaded of the treachery or deceitfulness of women that he first wreaks his vengeance upon his wife and her servants and then concludes that the only way he can protect himself from the faithlessness of women is to kill them after having spent the night with them. But to step back a moment, his immediate reaction upon learning of his wife's infidelity—like the reaction of his younger brother—is flight. Unlike his younger brother, however, Shahrayar does not first kill his wife and her lover. Moreover, unlike Shahzaman, Shahrayar undertakes his voyage for the sake of learning: he wants

to find someone who suffers greater misfortune than they. Thus he proposes that if they find such a person, they will return and reestablish themselves; if not, they will roam the land “without need for the trappings of royalty.”

Whereas all that has taken place until now is fully explicable within normal human norms, the tale that stands between us and the introduction of Shahrazad as the storyteller *par excellence* involves a being beyond human comprehension—an *‘ifrit* or a *jinn*, that is, a demon or supernatural being of suprahuman size and power. From this point on, we are confronted with the limits of our traditional skill and learning. Even religious knowledge is insufficient to counter the powers of these supernatural beings. At any rate, the wandering of a day and an additional morning having taken them to the edge of the sea, Shahrayar and Shahzaman are astonished to see an extraordinary being rise up out of the sea like a huge black pillar. Having seen the demon first, they are able to hide in a tree. As chance would have it, the black demon—carrying a large glass chest with four locks on it—stops beneath just that tree and takes from the chest a beautiful young woman. Then, speaking to her of how he snatched her away on her wedding night and keeps her for himself in this padlocked chest at the bottom of the sea, the demon lays his head on her lap and falls asleep.

The young woman happens to look up into the tree and see the two brothers. Gently placing the demon’s head on the ground, she beckons them to come down to her and insists they make love to her or else she will awaken the demon. Now, then, they find themselves in the position of the kitchen helper and Mas’ud with respect to the demon, both insofar as they are demonstrably inferior to the demon and insofar as they have had illicit sexual relations with a woman whose first allegiance should be to another.² Their guilt is completely passed over, however, in the emphasis the story places on the perfidy of the young woman with respect to the demon. Indeed, after satisfying what she refers to as her need,³ the young woman demands they give her their rings and shows them a small purse containing ninety-eight other rings of different shapes and colors. Each is from a man who has made love to her: although locked up in a chest with four locks and kept at the bottom of the sea by the demon since her wedding night only to be brought ashore when he deems it perfectly safe, she has still managed to betray him with a hundred different men! The explanation, as she puts it so succinctly to Shahrayar and Shahzaman, is that “when a woman desires something, no one can stop her” (p. 10).

Shahrayar’s condition has been met. They have surely found someone who suffers greater misfortune than they. Therefore they return to Shahrayar’s camp, and he sets about the task of ruling his kingdom. After bestowing robes of honor on those who had governed during his absence, Shahrayar orders his vizier—Shahrazad’s father—to put his wife to death. It is he himself, however, who puts the female servants to death. At this point he makes the decision that leads to the tutelary role played by Shahrazad:

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He then swore to marry for one night only and kill the woman the next morning, in order to save himself from the wickedness and cunning of women, saying, "There is not a single chaste woman anywhere on the entire face of the earth." (P. 10)

No further mention is made of his earlier anger, yet its very depth and the way it blinds him to the pursuit of his own good frame what follows. Indeed, after sending Shahzaman back to his kingdom, not to be mentioned again in the tales that follow, Shahrayar orders the vizier to find him a wife from among the daughters of the princes. Ordering the vizier to put this woman to death the next morning, he takes a daughter from among the army officers as a wife the next night and does the same. Then he turns to the daughters of the merchant class and eventually to those of the commoners, sleeping with each woman through the night and ordering the vizier to put her to death in the morning. However much this practice protects Shahrayar from the possible infidelity of his mates, it wreaks havoc among his subjects—mothers and fathers as well as daughters. Soon the whole kingdom is in an uproar, and everyone is praying to the Creator for help.

At this point, Shahrazad is presented to us. She is described as a well-read, highly cultivated, and thoughtful young woman:

Shahrazad had read the books of literature, philosophy, and medicine. She knew poetry by heart, had studied historical reports, and was acquainted with the sayings of men and the maxims of sages and kings. She was intelligent, knowledgeable, wise, and refined. She had read and learned. (P. 11)

She is, moreover, a woman with a clear understanding of her exceptional ability who wishes to try to save her people from Shahrayar's wrongful rule. Consequently, she asks her father to choose her as Shahrayar's next "bride." Though nothing has been said about her skill in telling tales, the account of how she counters her father's attempt to refuse her request illustrates her deep understanding of the narrative art.

To dissuade her, he relates two tales about a merchant whose unusual gift for understanding the speech of animals almost leads to his death. It does so because for him to reveal this gift to others will bring about his death. But Shahrazad, seeing more clearly than her father the real impact of the tales, turns them against him in an unexpected manner. The first tale involves the merchant, who lives in the country and has a farm, overhearing a donkey tell an ox how to avoid work by pretending to be sick. When the ox follows this advice, the merchant has the donkey do the work normally assigned the ox. The donkey realizes that he has made a dreadful mistake by coaching the ox and will perish unless he can return things to their previous order. So, too, says the vizier, will Shahrazad perish by her mistake.

When she persists, he responds by threatening to treat her as the merchant did his wife. Walking through the stable later that night with his wife, the

merchant hears the donkey tell the ox that he will be slaughtered if he feigns sickness the next day. Amused by the donkey's guile, the merchant laughs aloud. His wife insists on knowing the reason for his laughter. Even when he explains that for him to reveal what he heard will lead to his death, his wife continues to insist on knowing what he heard. As he is about to reveal his secret and thus die, he overhears a rooster who satisfies fifty hens tell a dog that all the merchant needs to do is push his wife into a small room and beat her with a stick until she relents. The merchant heeds the rooster's advice and is saved.

But Shahrazad is not deterred by her father's threats to treat her in the same fashion. As Mahdi notes, the vizier's stories fail because he does not understand their real point (see Mahdi, "Remarks on the *1001 Nights*," pp. 159–60). He likens his daughter to the donkey in the first tale, saying that her meddling will lead to her demise. And he likens himself to the merchant in the second tale, claiming that he will beat her until she relents just as the merchant did to his wife. He does not understand that the key to both stories is the merchant's secret knowledge of the way animals speak. That knowledge brought about the donkey's misery in the first story and the wife's beating in the second.

The vizier misses the point of these stories because he does not appreciate the merchant's unusual gift. Shahrazad does, however. Even if she is not able to understand the secret language of animals, she is fully conversant in the secret language of human beings who resort to tales in order to communicate their ideas. Thus she sees that the real point of both stories is the donkey lying to trick the ox into resuming his work and the merchant substituting fear and pain for his wife's idle, even pernicious, curiosity. In keeping with her appreciation of these tales, she threatens her father by telling him that unless he gives her in marriage to Shahrayar she will accuse him of begrudging his sovereign a woman such as herself.

Shahrazad's appreciation of her own gift and desire to use it for the instruction of Shahrayar finds its first expression in the wily instructions she gives to her sister Dinarzad:

Sister, listen well to what I am telling you. When I go to the king, I will send for you, and when you come and see that the king has finished with me, say, "Sister, if you are not sleepy, tell us a story." Then I will begin to tell a story, and it will cause the king to stop his practice, save myself, and deliver the people. (P. 16)

Once she begins to spin tales, Shahrazad clearly demonstrates her unusual skill. She begins with the extraordinary or the superhuman, that is, the role demons and other enchanted beings play in our daily affairs, and moves to questions of strife between the religious communities as well as to the way rulers lose their power. Although the manuscript edited by Mahdi and translated by Haddawy contains tales lasting for only 271 nights, it is long enough to give us a view of the dangers lurking just beyond our immediate perception.⁴ The last tale of the

collection details how easy it is to fall under an enchantment or a spell and how hard it is to break that spell once it has taken hold of us. Several other stories show us—and, above all, Shahrayar—how prudent rulers can use disguise and elusive speech to present themselves as other than they are, thereby gaining better insight into what is going on in their kingdom.

The compiler of these tales indicates how easy it is to become spellbound by showing us what occurs to King Shahrayar in the course of these nine months as he listens to Shahrazad. In the beginning, almost every night ends with a notation about how eager the king is to hear the end of the story or about how he tells himself he will delay Shahrazad's death until it is over. Sometimes, he explicitly presses her to finish a particular story. As time passes, however, his thoughts and even his commands become less a part of the framework: Shahrazad's tales seem to take on a life of their own, and the king appears as content to hear her out as the rest of us; only rarely is mention made of his thinking to himself that he would like to hear the end of a particular tale and will then put Shahrazad to death.

It would have been difficult to silence Shahrazad at the very beginning, for every tale seemed to beget another, thereby leading to tales that are themselves tales within tales. Thus, in the collection as presented here, there are only seven major tales in addition to the tales of the prologue already recounted.⁵ Yet four of these major tales give rise to at least twenty-five smaller stories. Even those tales that do not have explicit excursions nonetheless contain little byways that must be followed before the major theme can be regained.

Given the incomplete nature of the collection, we do not learn how Shahrazad eventually succeeds in leading King Shahrayar to stop his practice. But we gain insight into difficulties between men and women that go far beyond sexual infidelity, and we see that Shahrayar's experiences were nothing compared to the deceptions that have befallen other rulers. We learn that some men discern the inequities in the practice of marrying more than one woman and urge against it (see p. 352). And we come to understand that both King Shahzaman and King Shahrayar acted too impetuously when discovering the infidelity of their wives, for each one failed to find out why he had been deceived by his mate. In sum, Shahrazad's tales prompt us to greater reflection on what goes on in the world around us—the seen as well as the unseen—and on why people act as they do.

No tale provides an explicit answer to these reflections or even the outlines of an answer. But taken in conjunction with the frame story, they remind us over and over again of how fleeting is our present contentment and how little deserved it truly is—how little deserved and, more importantly, how little appreciated until lost. In the end, then, we come to replace King Shahrayar by ourselves and to ask what Shahrazad's tales might teach us about rulership of ourselves as well as of others. Although we are, hopefully, not in as dire need

of lessons of statecraft as King Shahrayar, we can still learn much from the tales of this well-read and thoughtful woman.

Husain Haddawy's felicitous translation enlivens these tales and makes them more accessible than any previous English version. His rendering of the poetic verse is excellent, for it has both rhyme and meter. Shunning the older, Victorian practice of making the text mysterious or "oriental," Haddawy translates what is on the page. He uses precise terminology for spices, flowers, clothing, and sexual allusions. When the language is robust, even crude, in Arabic, Haddawy renders it in a similar English. Finally, footnotes are kept to a minimum, largely because in such a competent translation few things seem so arcane as to require learned explanation. Consequently, for the first time, one can wonder about how Shahrazad came to such an awareness of pleasantries between the sexes (see pp. 73–75) and thus appreciate how she holds Shahrayar's—and our—interest.

In sum, this is as much a book for reading as it is for teaching. To students of literature and of comparative culture, it provides a delightful introduction to a quite different world. For thoughtful readers desirous of learning more about the problems of statecraft and the tensions between politics and revelation, *The Arabian Nights* is also most instructive. Husain Haddawy has presented here a very faithful rendition of tales that have thrilled millions of Arabic speakers for centuries—patrons of coffee houses where these tales would be recited, as well as readers delighting in these tales at their leisure.

The text has been extremely well prepared, and only a few typographical errors have slipped through:

- p. 94, 9 lines from bottom—read "I" for "It"
- p. 169, line 14—read "by" for "my"
- p. 177, 15 lines from bottom—read "in" for "on"
- p. 305, 11 lines from bottom—read "and" for "ad"
- Inside jacket on hardback—read "Jewett" for "Jowett."

NOTES

1. Muhsin Mahdi, "Remarks on the *1001 Nights*," *Interpretation*, 3 (1973), pp. 157–68. *Alf Layla wa Layla*, ed. Muhsin Mahdi (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984).

2. Shahrayar, moreover, reverses the racial roles here: he is white and the demon black. The issue is not race, however, but color as a sign of the oppressed class. As Mahdi notes in his "Remarks on the *1001 Nights*," p. 158: "The declining fortunes of the royal house seem to be coordinated with the rising fortunes of a new religion, whose lucky star appears to signal a rise in the fortune of the unfortunate, the kitchen hand and the black man. In fact, the transformation of the slave ladies into men . . . indicates that the new conjunction of the stars is favoring the unfortunate in general, both women and black men, who are joining in a common rebellion against the conventions that had established their inferior position."

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3. Literally, her purpose (*gharaḍ*). For whatever reason, Haddawy avoids the philosophical speculation such a literal translation would entail.

4. The story related on the 136th night, that is, the central night of this collection, explains how a noble young man came to have his right hand cut off as punishment for a theft it turns out he did not commit.

5. Namely, “The Story of the Merchant and the Demon” (pp. 17–66), “The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies” (pp. 66–150), “The Story of the Three Apples” (pp. 150–206), “The Story of the Hunchback” (pp. 206–95), “The Story of Nur al-Din Ali ibn-Bakkar and the Slave-Girl Shams al-Nahar” (pp. 295–344), “The Story of the Slave-Girl Anis al-Jalis and Nur al-Din Ali ibn-Khaqan” (pp. 344–83), and “The Story of Jullanar of the Sea” (pp. 383–428).