“The Past into the Present: Teaching the One Thousand and One Nights”

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The One Thousand and One Nights usually evokes a world of pointed shoes, flying carpets, magical lamps, despotism, female oppression, eroticism, exoticism, and orientalism for Western students to whom I taught excerpts of the tales. This piece is, therefore, an account of my experience teaching the One Thousand and One Nights outside its Arab context and into the Western context through the medium of translation. I taught the text in two different undergraduate courses at the University of Utah. The first was the World Literature class that I had taught for two consecutive years, and the second a course on “Women’s Voices: Egypt and Iran.” In both courses, the majority of students were non-Arabic speaking. The question of language did not pose a barrier, since we were reading the text in translation. The students’ different linguistic background, in fact, brought about a fresh cultural perspective.

I aim to show how the integration of the One Thousand and One Nights within contemporary Arab culture and media, with specific focus on Egypt, could be a helpful teaching tool that brings the Nights closer to students and helps debunk stereotypes. To this end, I join text-oriented models of teaching to media-oriented models through embedding the Nights in the culture it grew in. I begin with a brief overview of the historical and cultural context of the text, and its development in Egyptian culture across different social media, its relationship to the holy
month of Ramadan and the medieval tradition of storytelling, before I turn to the pedagogical method I follow to teach the text using the historical and cultural background mentioned. I end with the effect of the pedagogical strategy of embedding a medieval text in one of the contemporary cultures in which it grew on the students’ understanding of it, along with their reactions.

_The One Thousand and One Nights_ is of obscure origin and its history is difficult to pin down. Most probably, it was a collection of tales in Middle Persian called the “thousand stories” that had been translated or adapted from Sanskrit at the time of the Sassanid dynasty (226-652 A.D.), the last pre-Islamic Iranian dynasty. Personal names, such as Shahrayar and Scheherazade along with place names, such as Samarkand preserve the Perso-Indian origin of the tales. During the Translation Movement in Baghdad, which lasted from the middle of the eighth century to the tenth century, an ample amount of Persian literature was translated into Arabic. In the process, copyists “felt free to add local tales to the originals” (Lawall and Clinton, 1050).¹ From there “manuscripts of this original translation circulated to other parts of the Islamic world in various languages, especially Syria and Egypt,” where more local tales were added and where the earliest surviving manuscript, which dates from fourteenth-century Syria, was composed (Lawall and Clinton, 1050).² Subsequent manuscripts draw on the extant Syrian branch while others, such as those pertaining to the Egyptian branch, depart widely from it. Earlier manuscripts must have existed prior to the Syrian manuscript, as shown in the writings of the two tenth-century Arab authors, al-Mas‘udi and Ibn al-Nadim, who allude to a collection that seems to be the _Nights_. However, these earlier copies did not survive (Heller-Roazen, viii).³

In various capitals of the Arab-speaking world, such as Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, and Marrakesh, the _One Thousand and One Nights_ was recounted orally by storytellers well into the
early twentieth century. In Egypt, however, the *One Thousand and One Nights* stood out and occupied center stage in the media, in part, because of the cultural and literary renaissance in Egypt in the first part of the twentieth century, known as *al-nahda* (the Awakening), and in part because Egypt was technologically more advanced. The radio, for example, was an integral part of Egyptian social life as early as 1924, whereas the television became part of Egyptian social life in the 1960s. Both types of social media have been broadcasting the *One Thousand and One Nights* for over half a century now, and have contributed significantly to keeping the tradition alive in collective memory.

In the two classes in which I taught the *One Thousand and One Nights*, I used first *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* that includes excerpts from the text, some of which are translated by Husain Haddawy, before I switched to *The Arabian Nights: A Norton Critical Edition* fully translated by Hussain Haddawy. In particular, we read the *Prologue*, *The Tale of the Ox and the Donkey*, and *The Story of the Three Apples*. I find the Critical Edition more helpful because of the broadening perspectives that the critical essays at the end of the book offer, some of which I assign as secondary readings depending on the approach I adopt to the text.

Having this briefly outlined background in mind is particularly useful for my teaching pedagogy. In both classes, I begin by asking the students to share perceptions that the title the *One Thousand and One Nights* evokes, and which I mention at the start of the essay. Their perceptions help shape the nature of the pertinent questions and issues that we discuss in relationship to the stories. To walk students through such a complex text, I resort to the following four pedagogical steps: 1) mapping the *Nights*, 2) discussing the text closely, and 3) embedding the text within popular culture, with emphasis on Egyptian popular culture, before 4) raising the
question of perceptions that the text evokes once more.

When it comes to mapping the *One Thousand and One Nights*, I show the students the map at the beginning of the Norton Critical Edition that traces the origin of the tales and their movement across various medieval cultures on a slide. Some of the questions the map raises that I bring to my students’ attention are: what kind of text are we dealing with? How is the medieval world map different from our modern day map? Moreover, how does it influence the text and our understanding of it?

The aim of mapping the *Nights* is not only to offer the necessary background, but also to highlight its nature as a travelling text, or as Heller-Roazen describes it: “a work in movement, caught in the passage from territory to territory, culture to language, language to language” (viii). The notion of a travelling text is crucial to the students’ understanding of the nature of the *Nights*, and the difference between the medieval world map and the contemporary world map in terms of the cultural borrowing and fluidity that characterize the Middle Ages. On the map, we trace the various ethnic origins of the text that range from Indian and Persian to Syrian and Egyptian, along with what each culture adds to or subtracts from the traveling tales. The diversity of cultures on the medieval map of the *Nights* highlights the vibrant cultural exchange at the time. Importantly, it also underscores for the students that the Islamic world, across whose lands the manuscript traveled, was made up of several mosaic-like cultures rather than one monolithic culture.

Prominently, mapping the text becomes a particularly helpful strategic tool in the class on “Women’s Voices: Egypt and Iran.” The question of mapping the text exemplifies a point of cultural convergence in the history of the two cultures – Persian and Egyptian – that allows me as a teacher and by extension the students, to pursue further moments of literary convergence.
rather than divergence throughout the course. Instead of evaluating each culture separately and applying the contemporary flawed perception that the two cultures are radically different based on political and religious divergences, I use the *Nights* as exemplary of the intersection between the two cultures. This sets the tone for the rest of the course and allows for the study of fruitful comparisons between feminist movements in Egypt and Iran, and the mutual influence of some ideas and literary works between the two cultures, such as the translation of Qasim Amin’s treatise *The Liberation of Women* into Persian in the early twentieth century.\(^5\)

Next, I move to a close reading of the excerpts of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. The close reading of the chosen stories entails dividing the students into groups to discuss various questions among themselves followed by a general discussion to compare notes. Questions I ask them are:

- How are both Shahrayar and Scheherazade presented?
- What is the relationship between the betrayal of Shahrayar's wife and his social position? How does this make us see his reaction in a different light?
- What do you make of Shahzaman's change of mood when he discovers his sister-in-law's betrayal? How do you view the initial reaction of both brothers and their decision to roam the world?
- Does Shahrayar become the mad man he said he would be if he finds out that his wife betrays him too?
- Why do we have Scheherazade's father's tale at the beginning? What is the significance of his tale? What function does it play?
- How many narratives do we have? And why?
• Do you see any importance to the recurrent interjection in the One Thousand and One Nights? Does it further our knowledge of the main characters?

• How does Scheherazade present her male and female characters?

• How far can we view Scheherazade as a psychotherapist? How is she trying to affect the king through her tales? How can we view the role of the act of narration or storytelling?

• Discuss the worth or lack thereof of human life in the tales.

• What is it that really saves Scheherazade's life? What do you think is her real motive behind marrying the king?

• Do the stories so far make use of certain motifs or images? Why?

The questions lead to a rich discussion on issues of women’s power; the importance of the female voice; and the modern use of Scheherazade as an empowering figure by twentieth-century feminists such as Fatima al-Mernissi in her book Scheherazade Goes West. It also provides us with the chance to discuss the influence of the Nights on Western literature in terms of the frame within a frame narrative structure.

The strategy that grabs the students’ attention the most is contextualizing The One Thousand and One Nights in modern Egyptian popular culture during the holy month of Ramadan. As a way of connecting the past to the present, I introduce them to Ramadan and to the medieval tradition of storytelling related to the month, which constitutes one form of entertainment that has survived well into modern times. To be able to trace the changes from medieval to contemporary, I discuss with the students some helpful terms, such as phono-centric, scripto-centric, and body-centric, which apply to other works we read in the World Literature class, such as the Ramayana in the Indian tradition. I use the background I already gave them to
expand on the transmission of the One Thousand and One Nights and the different phases it has
gone through in Egyptian popular culture before we watch excerpts of the tales.

In the Middle Ages, the tales were transmitted orally and underwent interlinguistic
translation into other languages of the region. Later, the written and oral transmissions of the
tales intertwined as “oral versions were written down and written tales were memorized and
added to oral repertories” (Lawall and Clinon, 1050). Just like the Ramayana in the Indian
tradition, which in T.S. Satyanath’s terms, underwent a shift between phono-centric (oral
traditions) to scripto-centric (writing traditions) and body-centric (performing traditions), the
transmission of the Nights underwent a similar shift in its history of representations. Besides the
oral and written traditions, in Egyptian popular culture the Nights was broadcast on the radio in
the fifties, in my grandmother’s and my mother’s time, and continues to be broadcast. I take this
opportunity to show the students parts of the 1950s radio version available in Arabic on youtube.
We then move on to the later 1980s television series of the Nights common to my generation.
Borrowing from the original premise of the text, the annual television series of the Nights uses
some of the tales in the original text as the television series simultaneously invents others. I take
the opportunity to show the students excerpts of the Arabic television series on youtube, further
introducing them to the cultural context. Though not subtitled in English, the excerpts are easy to
follow for English speaking students in terms of the general outline of the story, the modern
adaptations of the Nights, and the cinematic effects that I draw their attention to. They provide
the students with a live example of the transmission of the Nights as an ongoing tradition. I
explain to them that the Nights have been broadcast on Egyptian radio and television mainly
during the month of Ramadan, the fasting month for Muslims, as part of the festivity that marks
the occasion, and unites all members of the family after they break their fast.
I further explain that Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It is considered holy because, according to tradition, Qur’an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad during this month. It is, therefore, the only month connected to fasting in the Qur’an. As a sacred ritual and the fourth pillar of Islam, fasting acquires more prominence. During this month, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. They abstain from food, drink, and having sex during the day, with the aim of purifying the soul, controlling their desires, and feeling for the poor (Heiligman and Yavari, 4-7). The whole month constitutes a period of atonement and forgiveness, and is a reminder of self-discipline and moderation. Ramadan brings families together and reinforces a sense of sharing through communal activities that include public worship, breaking the fast together, and entertainment (4-7).

Storytelling, whether religious or secular, is one type of Ramadan entertainment that has survived from medieval Islamic culture well into modern times, as we know from travelers’ accounts, which I discuss briefly with my students. Between 1183 and 1185, the Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr (1145-1275) travels to major cities of the Islamic world, such as Cairo, Jerusalem, Mecca, and Baghdad. He spends the month of Ramadan in Mecca where he witnesses the evening performances that take place, especially in the last ten days of the holy month. During these nights, Qur’anic recitations and storytelling are performed “with spectacular lighting and decorations to enhance the community’s religious faith,” as well as the theatrical and imaginary effects (Faik, 66-67). The performances included a high level of audience involvement and the interaction between the audience and the performers and they usually took place in the vicinity of the Ka‘ba (the site of Muslim pilgrimage).

On his travels to Baghdad, Ibn Jubayr comes across the renowned twelfth century storyteller and historian Ibn al-Jawzy, who was born in Baghdad and who performed for caliphs
and the masses alike. He employed his preaching and storytelling to affect social and political changes and performed during many occasions, including Ramadan nights (Faik, 48-56). In fact, Ibn Jubayr witnesses Ibn al-Jawzy’s last performance before the latter’s death in Ramadan in 1201 where “at the end of the meeting, he delivered some erotic verses, ardently mystical and emotional … [before] weakness overcame him and he sprang from the pulpit, sad and distressed, but leaving all repenting of themselves, weeping and sadly crying, ‘Alas, what a pity!’” (234). Ibn al-Jawzy receives Ibn Jubayr’s well-deserved attention, since he was “the wonder of all time, and the consolation of the faith …, renowned for his splendid triumphs of eloquence and learning, controlling the reins of verse and of rhymed prose, and one who dived deep into the sea of thought and brought forth precious pearls” (229-230). In addition to Ibn al-Jawzy’s last performance, Ibn Jubayr also attended the performance at the caliph al-Nasir’s palace at Bab Bader in Baghdad in 1184. The caliph’s mother and the women also watched from their belvederes and the public gathered in front of the palace gate to watch the performance. Ibn Jubayr notes how Ibn al-Jawzy’s discourse was “brilliant and superb” and that the electrifying effect among the audience induced “tears” and “great commotion” (232). For Ibn Jubayr, who witnessed other storytellers on his travels, he ranks Ibn al-Jawzi’s performance as “one of his most splendid marvels and great miracles” (230).

Other travelers note the entertainment and festivities characteristic of Ramadan too. The fourteenth-century Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta notes the Night of the Observation of the Moon in the city of Abyar in Egypt (modern day al-Mahalla), a tradition that ushers the month and announces its beginning. According to this tradition, men of religion and the main judge of the city head out to the desert followed by a crowd of men, women and children to observe the moon and ascertain the beginning of the month, using certain calculations. After the month is
announced, the procession returns at sunset to the judge’s house holding lit candles and lamps and all stores on the way light up their candles as well (Ibn Battuta 21-22). Between 1833 and 1835, the British Orientalist Edward William Lane records the same tradition of the Night of the Observation. In addition to the people carrying lamps, Lane describes “parties of musicians” and lines of spectators watching the “military display” on horses “handsomely caparisoned” (467). Night life begins after people break their fast at sunset as people listen to “reciters of romances or musicians, who entertain the company at many of the coffee shops every night of this month” (470).

The performative aspect of the cycle of Ramadan performances and storytelling that Ibn Jubayr and Lane in particular record on their travels carries on in modern times with the cinematic effects replacing the medieval spectacle and lighting. No wonder then that the Nights, which are heavily invested in storytelling and which were performed in medieval times, become a regular and popular feature of Ramadan nights. In modern times, the audience does not play an equally interactive role like its medieval counterpart. Yet, the tradition is still compelling enough to force its presence in different media, such as the radio and the television versions that I share with my students.

Treating the coexistence and continuation of such multiple representations of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, I aim to underscore the processes of historical formation, preservation, continuity, and transmission of the Nights that range from oral to written, and later from auditory to visual. The auditory radio version and the visual television version, in particular, show the students the still ongoing modern adaptations of the medieval tradition, a tradition alive in Arab popular culture until now.
The *Norton Anthology*’s claim that “Despite this great popularity, and despite its shaping influence on modern literature, traditional Arabic literary scholars have never recognized it as a work of serious literature, and it is still occasionally banned as immoral by Arab governments” inspired my teaching method of incorporating the contemporary cultural adaptation of the text (Lawall and Clinton, 1049). In contrast to this view, I show the students the significant cultural dimension that the *Anthology* leaves out altogether and the multiple ways the *Nights* is celebrated. Literary scholars did recognize the value of the text, especially in the twentieth century, as is apparent in Tawfik al-Hakim’s Egyptian play *Scheherazade* (1934), and Tāhā Hussein’s novel *The Dreams of Scheherazade* (1943). I use both modern works by the Egyptian authors as further helpful material to discuss the modern feminist adaptations of the *Nights*. Therefore, the original is not banned, but rather modified to befit modern sensibilities about sexuality, especially if the series is watched within a family setting. Unlike the original text, which describes the cheating scene between Shahrayar’s first wife and the black servant, as well as between the wife’s maids and other black servants in highly charged sexual terms in the preface, the series, for example, does not dwell on the incident, but mentions it in passing.

It is worth mentioning that at this point the discussion of the *Nights* within the context of popular culture steers it away from the stereotypical orientalist discourse apparent in some Hollywood movies and in some Western translations where the erotic aspect is played up. In fact, the European incarnation of the text at the hand of the French Orientalist Antoine Galland, among others, “played a central role in constituting the image of the exotic Orient in the colonial discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Zadeh, 148). As Heller-Roazen points out, “From Galland to Burton, translators, scholars, and readers shared the belief that the *Nights* depicted a true picture of Arab life and culture at the time of the tales and, for some strange
reason, at their own time. Time and again, Galland, Lane, or Burton claimed that these tales were much more accurate than any travel account” (xxi). Based on the students’ initial perceptions that I outline above, it is safe to claim that the exotic Orient is still alive in contemporary thought and ingrained in Western culture when the *One Thousand and One Nights* is first mentioned. Hence, it is important to reveal women’s role in the *Nights* along with the contemporary cultural dimensions of the text. Students by now see that if the orientalist view depicts a culture frozen in time in keeping with the travel texts of the nineteenth century on Egypt, such as Florence Nightingale and Gustave Flaubert’s, the modern adaptation shows the students a dynamic culture proud of its medieval heritage as it employs the progressive technology of the age to celebrate it.

After reading the text and analyzing Scheherazade’s character, we come full circle to the question of perceptions. I ask the students at this point the following set of questions:

- What does the title the *One Thousand and One Nights* mean to you now?
- What does Scheherazade symbolize in both the past and the present adaptations?
- What value do the contemporary versions add to our view of the *Nights*?

The answers I get this time from students focus on notions of creativity embedded in using storytelling as a life savior; female agency exemplified by Scheherazade’s taming of Shahrayar’s murderous intentions and by the female protagonists in the stories related; multiplicity of meaning and symbolism in the stories; cultural and literary adaptations; the relationship between the past and the present; and the power of knowledge. The difference between their initial perception of the *Nights* and what the text really is, coupled with the modern adaptations, becomes both an enlightening, as well as an exciting, experience. The insights the students come up with about the differences between their initial perceptions and their more knowledgeable ones after reading and discussing the material display their full awareness of the
feminist rather than the orientalist aspect of the Nights. Now the students place the Nights within a more complex and rich socio-cultural and historical context, especially as they note its modern adaptations in literature and in the media.

In conclusion, teaching the One Thousand and One Nights in translation means more than a linguistic shift. Translation entails what Umberto Eco calls in Experiences in Translation as “a shift, not between two languages, but between two cultures” (17).22 To facilitate such linguistic and cultural shifts, I accentuate the manner in which the text becomes an evolving tradition from its inception and until our present day. I resort to embedding the Nights within popular culture, but more importantly to personalizing the text in order to bring it closer to the students’ understanding and imagination by giving them an insider’s view of the Nights and the Egyptian culture it developed in. Why is this important to the course? Explain. To talk about the Nights and to teach it is to talk about a grandmother who followed the radio series closely, a mother who still prefers the radio series, and a little girl mesmerized by the television series during the festive Ramadan Nights.

Notes


2 Lawall and Clinton, The Norton Anthology, 1050.


4 Roazen, “Preface,” viii.


18 Lane, *An Account*, 470.


Bibliography


The One Thousand and One Nights, Youtube Video, 11:37, from a radio series by the Egyptian Media on 1956, posted February 16, 2016. Accessed June 15, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAirtywzqc&index=2&list=PLU-ZPntr7KxZkvwQOXiAunsd5dIZVgYsd

