

BOOK REVIEW

Ibrahim AKEL and William GRANARA (eds.) 2020. *The Thousand and One Nights: Sources and Transformations in Literature, Art, and Science [Studies on Performing Arts & Literature of the Islamicate World IX]*. Leiden–Boston: Brill. 343 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-42895-9

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The Thousand and One Nights is one of the best-known literary works of the Middle East. Since its first translation into French at the beginning of the 18th century, it has been translated into numerous languages, and its Arabic text has also been edited and published. The stories have been augmented, reworked as well as adapted in other genres of literature and even in other fields of art outside the domain of literature. Studies on the collection have been published ever since the first publication of its French translation. Philology, literary history, socio-cultural studies and comparative literary studies, among other disciplines, have paid attention to various aspects of the work. For all the long and rich history of past research, scholarly interest is not likely to diminish in the foreseeable future.

The present collection of nineteen studies is the most recent one in a long line of scholarly works that aim to provide either a specialist or an interdisciplinary perspective on *The Thousand and One Nights*. In this respect it can hardly aspire to produce fundamentally novel results in the field of *Nights* research. Nevertheless, edited volumes are essential to the dialogue of the various disciplines since this genre can provide a forum for a wide range of scholars not necessarily specialized in *Nights* research or even in Middle Eastern studies. There are numerous comparable volumes, some exclusive and others more inclusive in scope, and it is precisely the inclusiveness of the volume under review here that can be identified as its greatest accomplishment: it highlights significant facts about the *Nights* which could only be discovered by casting the net wider than before. By broadening the focus, *The Thousand and One Nights* can be examined with an eye to the interconnectedness of the various disciplines, and new observations can be made regarding the ways in which the *Nights* influences these diverse fields. Through this inclusiveness, the nature of the *Nights* as a concept – and not just as a literary work – can be fully grasped.

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The Thousand and One Nights is not a literary work in the strict sense; it is a phenomenon. As such, it is not a work liable ever to be completely understood. At best, one can only aspire to comprehend this unique work in a cumulative manner, approximating yet never quite reaching a comprehensive apprehension. It is precisely this aspect of the collection that the present work captures so perfectly. The collaboration of both Arabists and scholars of various other disciplines highlights the variety of approaches to the manifold aspects of the *Nights*. Furthermore, the individual essays and their particular methodologies of study provide a general understanding of the phenomenon of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

What the first part of the collection makes clear is that the *Nights* is an aggregation of different manuscripts. The title of this part reads “*The Sources of the Thousand and One Nights*”, which stresses right from the outset the well-known fact that there exists no complete manuscript of the *Nights*. What we know today as *The Thousand and One Nights* is only one version of the *Nights*. Any given variant of the collection represents a collaboration of compilers, editors and translators. It is only with the concept of the *Nights*, rather than a definitive work, that anyone can hope to be familiar. This understanding is explicit in the first part, but it is also implicitly present in the rest of the essays. The authors’ choices of their source-texts, be they manuscripts, Arabic editions or translations, determine their studies’ whole approach.

Of the four essays comprising the first part, three deal with specific manuscripts of the *Nights*, while the very first essay of the collection examines a possible source for the so-called ‘complete’ manuscripts. The opening paper by Ulrich Marzolph is a French translation of his ‘In the Studio of the *Nights*’, which was published in 2014. However, the underlying question that was raised in the English version is still relevant six years later. While various studies have been pursued on the relation of the *Nights* to classical Arabic literature, Marzolph argues that in order to identify the source material of the manuscripts of the 18th and 19th centuries, one should look for chronologically closer works, i.e. those of the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. Not only does he encourage the study of these (still mostly neglected) periods of Arabic literature, but he also argues that viewing these later works as possible sources for the collection as we know it today may significantly influence our reading of the collection and provide additional information on its history.

The rest of the papers in this part deal with particular manuscripts. Johannes Thomann’s study is similar to that of Marzolph in that both engage with the text itself. The main concern of the former is the frame-tale and the coherence of the collection’s prologue and epilogue. It is a study of interpretation based on different manuscripts. As opposed to this, the other two papers are more concerned with manuscript history. Ahmed Saidy and Ibrahim Akel’s studies are notable because of their subject being certain less known aspects of the study of the *Nights*’ manuscript tradition. The former’s discussion of Moroccan manuscripts is especially noteworthy since, by listing the extant manuscripts in Morocco, it provides a good basis for further research.

While manuscripts take centre stage in the volume’s first part, the second part takes translations as its focus – to be more precise, the French translation of Antoine Galland (1646–1715). Both studies employ a socio-cultural approach to the subject. While one study is written by a professor of French literature (Anne E. Duggan) and the other by a scholar of Middle Eastern studies (Arafat Abdur Razzaque), both essays explore French socio-cultural history. *The Thousand and One Nights* is studied here in its manifestation as the *Mille et une nuits* of Galland, and it is its place within the French literature and culture of the 18th century that is under scrutiny. Abdur Razzaque’s study has a relevance to the first part of the volume as far as the sources of Galland’s translation are concerned, and it also puts the issue into the framework of French print culture.



Duggan's essay, on the other hand, anticipates the main concept of the third part of the volume, discussing as it does the afterlife of the *Nights* in French literature.

While discussing intriguing points in the history of *The Thousand and One Nights*, both studies raise important questions concerning the concept of the *Nights*. Abdur Razzaque puts forward the question of authorship in the context of French print culture of the early 18th century, all the while keeping the notorious eighth volume of Galland's translation in the spotlight of his inquiry. Thus in outlining the publishing history of the first French translation of the *Nights*, he also discusses the concept of authorship. Duggan invokes Madeleine Dobie's (2008) term, 'contact zone', to examine how Galland's translation plays its role in the formation of the Oriental tale; in so doing she also argues for a more far-reaching influence of the French translation than is observable strictly within the field of literature. While the more analytical passages of the essay are meant to emphasize the significant impact of the *Nuits* in French literary culture through translations, imitations and adaptations, the discussion of the philosophical tales and such topics as despotism, female sexuality and the relationship between knowledge and power offers a glimpse at the way the collection fits into the ideological fabric of the Enlightenment.

The third part of the volume provides a comparative perspective both within Arabic literature and in the broader context of world literature. The studies in this section, which constitutes the major part of the reviewed volume, are diverse and draw attention to the *Nights'* wide-scale influence on literature and on the arts in general. This collection of studies attests to the temporal and spatial dimensions of this influence and the wide range of methods through which this influence is expressed in other works of literature and art. Intertextuality is the pivotal point of this third part, titled *The Nights, World Literature, and the Art*. The presence of the *Nights* in French, Italian, and Polish literature is discussed in detail, and Arabic theatre and the classical *ghazal* are also examined within the larger context of Arabic literature. Furthermore, the fine arts may be underrepresented here in comparison to other collaborative volumes, but French animated cinema is discussed, which makes an interesting addition to the ever-expanding field of media studies within *Nights* research.

Michael James Lundell's essay is somewhat atypical within this section in that it does not address the intertextuality of the *Nights* but gives a comparative analysis of three of its English translations. It might have contributed more to the general concept of the reviewed volume if the second part had not been dedicated entirely to Antoine Galland and to French literary and print culture but to the history of translations in general. Be that as it may, the study offers valuable insights into the history of the collection's English translations.

Besides their varied individual focuses, the essays of this part serve to highlight the nature of intertextuality and its relevance to the *Nights*. It is through 'inspirations, allusions, and references', to use Magdalena Kubarek's words, that intertextuality is expressed in any work of art, and these may be manifested in different ways and to different degrees. The studies reviewed here provide an overview of this variety, ranging from the nuanced textual analysis of William Granara's study of *ghazal* to Daniela Potenza's discussion of the plays of Alfred Faraj (1929–2005) to studies of a more general or subtle imprint of the *Nights* on literary works, such as Rafika Hammoudi's examination of Arthur Rimbaud's (1854–1891) collection of poems, *Illuminations*. While Magdalena Kubarek takes a more inclusive look at the reception of the *Nights* in Poland, the rest of the studies are more specific in their approach to intertextuality, not only with regard to the work to be analysed but to their methodologies as well.



It is through thematic correspondences that intertextuality is easiest to pinpoint. Certain tales of the *Nights* are sufficiently well-known among readers and popular among authors to be re-worked and adapted in different fields of literature and the arts (Abdelfattah Kilito, Adam Mestyan, Daniela Potenza). Structural and narrative characteristics are also easy to recognize, as are motifs or imagery connected with the *Nights* (Rafika Hammoudi, Marina Paino, Ilaria Vitali). Recognition of these correspondences certainly contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the works. For purposes of interpretation, however, they cannot be studied in isolation from the larger context which lends them their full range of relevance. It is in the context of politics that a message, often a critical one, can be expressed (Adam Mestyan, Daniela Potenza); and it is through the concept of story-telling that the self-referentiality of literature may be expressed (Marina Paino).

It is the fourth part of the reviewed volume that represents a truly unique take on the *Nights*. The previous parts represent traditional *Nights* research in that they base their discussion on philology, literature and other related fields, and social, cultural or even political questions tend to be raised mostly in relation to the work itself and to the ways in which the text expresses such ideas. However, in the last four studies of the volume, these ideas are examined from a different perspective. In the fourth part, entitled *The Nights, the Humanities, and the Sciences*, the Arabic collection is neither a subject of interpretation nor a source for inspiration. Instead, it is a theoretical framework for certain ideological expressions. These studies explore how the *Nights* fits into particular ideological currents and how it aids self-expression.

Rasoul Aliakbari examines the way post-Civil War America's print culture relates to the *Nights* – the way 19th-century America used the Orient to reflect on its contemporary history. While this study explores self-expression on a national level, Daniel Behar's essay does the same on the personal level. His paper on Jacqueline Kahanoff (1917–1979) is a study of how the *Nights* is utilized to make sense of one's own self. These studies illuminate the various ways the *Nights* is read and appropriated in contemporary cultural and social thought. This is an intriguing perspective that can provide yet another layer to the complexity of the *Nights*, a text capable of gaining new relevance in any given historical era and in a variety of cultural domains. An excellent example of this flexibility of the *Nights* is the very last study of the collection, which offers a rather unusual perspective on the Arabic work, which is utilized here to reflect on 20th-century economy. Even if the study does not easily lend itself to use by traditional research, it does provide a unique example of the *Nights'* myriad possible readings.

Dominique Jullien's essay is another excellent example of this malleability of interpretation evident throughout the collection. The exploration of the relation between frame-tale and embedded stories remains pertinent to the present day, and Jullien gives various examples of studies supporting this idea while citing Mia Gerhardt's seminal work (1963), *The Art of Story-Telling*, as an exception to an established tradition.

The underlying concept of the frame-tale and the relatedness of particular tales from the earlier nights in the collection – whether succeeding in conveying the appropriate message or failing to do so – cannot be disputed. However, given the history of the Arabic work and its unique nature discussed earlier, it is not feasible to maintain this internal coherence for the entirety of the *Nights*. There are later tales that may be examined in this context, but their presence in the collection is entirely arbitrary and cannot be explained by the assumption of a conscious narrative, which is so often attributed to Shahrazād. Some of the tales included in the *Nights* lend themselves well to the latter concept and can be read in this context. However, it cannot be assumed that the whole



collection represents a single entity in this respect. Even though the first part of Jullien's essay stands on uncertain grounds in that it does not consider any versions of the Arabic *Nights*, relying on the translation of Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890) instead, the fact that certain tales may correspond to the idea of *exemplum* in the context of the collection as a whole provides a solid enough foundation for the second part of the essay.

Although the present volume does not represent an unprecedented body of collaborative research, it does provide a nuanced perspective on the nature of *The Thousand and One Nights* and discuss pertinent problems in specific contexts. Besides the individual accomplishments of the papers, the reviewed tome highlights the ever-present difficulty that characterizes *Nights* research and results from a combination of the absence of a complete canonical manuscript and the creative freedom that compilers, editors and translators took in shaping the individual versions of the *Nights*.

The nature of the Arabic collection has been discussed in numerous studies and monographs. And yet, if one is to understand the weight of the problem summarized in the previous paragraph and to evaluate the many answers provided so far, the *Nights* and its individual stories also need to be discussed in a variety of individual studies that, even when not making any directly relevant point in and of themselves, may nevertheless provide significant insights when read in the context of a larger framework. The reviewed volume definitely succeeds in providing such a larger context for a diverse collection of studies.

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