

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57397-9 - The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic literature and society

Edited by Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Presentation of award to twelfth recipient,

ANDRE MIQUEL

GEORGES SABAGH

University of California, Los Angeles

Professor André Miquel is the distinguished recipient of the twelfth prestigious Giorgio Levi Della Vida Award in Islamic Studies. This award is in recognition of his many insightful and celebrated contributions to the study of Arabo-Islamic literature, society, and civilization. The conference theme selected by Professor Miquel provides him, and the other invited scholars, with an opportunity for new interpretations and appreciations of *The Thousand and One Nights*, that jewel in world literature.

André Miquel is Professor of Arabic Language and Literature at the Collège de France. Appointments to this highest academic institution are an honor reserved for France's most illustrious scholars. Before this appointment in 1976, he was Professor of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Paris. In common with so many outstanding French intellectuals and scholars, he is a graduate of the Ecole Normale Supérieure.

In addition to his distinguished academic career, he was general administrator of the Bibliothèque Nationale. He has been very active in cultural activities in the Arab world. He served as head of the French Cultural Mission to Egypt, the French Institute of Arab Studies in Damascus, and the French Institute of Oriental Archeology in Cairo. He is also a member of the French Mission to UNESCO.

In a way that few others have managed to achieve, Miquel has written brilliantly and extensively, both as a social scientist and as a poet, about Arabic literature and medieval Islamic society. His multiple volumes on *La Géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du XIe siècle* are a rich source of information about and analysis of the human geography of the medieval Muslim world and the medieval Arabic literature on geography. In his *Islam and its Civilization*, he is a bold and keen interpreter of Islamic cultural

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57397-9 - The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic literature and society

Edited by Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Presentation of award

history from the seventh to the twentieth century. This book was awarded a prize by the Académie Française and translated into many languages. When Professor Miquel turns to *The Thousand and One Nights* he remains a keen analyst, but at the same time it has inspired him to become an eloquent poet and novelist as witnessed by *Majnun et Leyla* and *L'Amour poème*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57397-9 - The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic literature and society

Edited by Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

FEDWA MALTI-DOUGLAS

Indiana University

What a happy day it is for Arabic literature when the most coveted senior prize in the field of Middle Eastern studies, the Giorgio Levi Della Vida award, can go to a highly deserving scholar, André Miquel, and that this scholar should choose *The Thousand and One Nights* as the topic for the award conference. It is a happy day indeed because the career of the award winner and the literary trajectory of the award subject converge in odd but interesting ways.

Born in Languedoc in 1929, André Miquel's academic star has risen constantly since he graduated in 1953 from France's prestigious and highly competitive Ecole Normale Supérieure. His overseas experience has been extensive and impressive: from Secretary General of the Mission Culturelle et Archéologique Française in Ethiopia in the 1950s to Chief of the Mission Universitaire et Culturelle Française in the United Arab Republic in the 1960s. Professor Miquel now holds one of his country's most coveted academic positions as a Professor in the Collège de France. Many American researchers at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, for whom the Arab world might be something that only exists on television, would have met Professor Miquel when he was the head of France's national public library not knowing that he was at the time France's most visible cultural critic of the Arab world.

It is not only the East and West that come together in André Miquel's career but the classical and the modern. André Miquel's prolific career has led him down the byways of Arabic literature and culture. His ground-breaking multi-volume study of medieval Islamic human geography is enough to keep Miquel's name on the lips of every Middle Eastern studies specialist for decades to come. The marvelous, the unusual, the historical, the literary all come together in *La Géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du XIe siècle*. Human geography becomes a variegated and complex cultural map

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57397-9 - The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic literature and society

Edited by Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

with which scholars no matter what the discipline can learn to navigate the medieval Islamic world. The jump from many of the works treated in *La Géographie humaine* to *The Thousand and One Nights* seems in retrospect an easy one. After all, did not both types of texts, despite their superficial difference, exploit a common cultural space? But in the critical world in which Miquel was operating – that of the medieval Muslim imaginary – this cultural proximity that would allow the high literary tradition to sit alongside *The Thousand and One Nights* would be at best unusual. The medieval Arabs considered the *Nights* to be marginal when compared with the tradition of high literature that so dominated the medieval textual corpus. And in a contemporary dialogue with the medievals, all too many twentieth-century scholars of Arabic literature until recently also considered the *Nights* an unworthy subject of serious literary study. We owe much to André Miquel for helping to break this taboo.

Miquel has also helped to break another taboo, and one that has operated predominantly on the American side of the Atlantic. This is the noxious habit of restricting scholars to one or another period of Arabic literature. One studied either the medieval or the modern – rarely, if ever, both. Miquel, like many European scholars for whom the Arab world is but a stone's throw away, never forgot that Arabic literature and culture are far from being dead artifacts. Rather, his scholarly path demonstrates the importance of the cultural continuity in the Arabo-Islamic sphere. So it is not surprising that Miquel's studies of modern Arabic literature should sit side by side with his studies of the medieval period.

Where in all of this does the text of *The Thousand and One Nights* fit? The *Nights* has had an uncanny ability to metamorphose itself across both geographical and chronological boundaries. It is perhaps the only text in all of world literature that can properly be considered to be as much a part of the Western literary tradition as it is of the Eastern one. After all, did it not lie dormant until its reassimilation into the world literary scene by Western translators? From their humble beginnings in the medieval Islamic imagination, tales from the *Nights* have gone on to charm readers and television and video viewers worldwide. Sexuality, murder, cannibalism, magical lamps: these are but a few of the elements that have contributed to making the *Nights* the text so beloved today among young and old alike. Merchants share the literary limelight with rulers and robbers. Historical characters familiar to readers from the more "serious" literature make guest appearances in this more entertaining environment. Other nonhistorical characters like Sindbad and Aladdin have

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57397-9 - The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic literature and society

Edited by Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

been immortalized not only by their presence in the text of the *Nights* but by their appearance on the silver screen.

But perhaps of all the characters who populate these adventures it is Shahrazād and her literary cohorts from the frame of *The Thousand and One Nights* who have captured the imagination of creative writers of both genders in both the East and the West. From the American John Barth to the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi, the medieval frame gets told and retold, manipulated and transformed by different writers for different ends. This testifies at once to the genius of the *Nights* and to the universality of its message. One wonders how such a text ever became marginalized. And had it not been marginalized, might it also not have suscitated rewritings and retellings by medieval litterateurs? Much remains to be done in tracing this oddity of literary history.

Suffice it to say that it is not devoid of irony that the literary text long considered marginal by many of the medieval compilers and modern Western critics should find itself the subject of an elevated gathering like that surrounding the Giorgio Levi Della Vida awards. It is a testimony to André Miquel's vision that this irony can now be transcended. That Professor Miquel should have chosen *The Thousand and One Nights* as the focus of the Levi Della Vida award conference is more than a happy coincidence. The chapters in this volume honor both Professor Miquel and *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57397-9 - The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic literature and society

Edited by Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 · *The Thousand and One Nights* in Arabic literature and society

ANDRE MIQUEL

Collège de France, Paris

Today I would like to express my emotion and gratitude for the honor you have bestowed on me. Your foundation, the name von Grunebaum, American hospitality: what could delight and hearten a man more? And then, you have given me the opportunity to meet dear friends once again and come here with a friend just as dear. For all this, let me express my deep and sincere thanks.

But I also want to tell you why I am especially happy to be in Los Angeles. First of all, you have transformed me. Until now, I was a man of the East. Be reassured! What I meant to say was the east of the United States. I have never been further than Lake Ontario, and for the rest, I had to be satisfied with dreams reinforced by Hollywood films. Today I can proudly say: California, here I am.

One more thing: born in Languedoc, on a farm surrounded by vineyards, I have never ceased to be a son of the vineyard and wine. Thank you all; your invitation to a country which has discovered the solution to phylloxera is a touching thought and makes me feel at home.

What has this got to do with *The Thousand and One Nights*? Since childhood, French people of my generation have always had two dreams: America and the Orient. America, for us, was New York and the Far West. The Orient, which started at the port of Marseilles, was the *Arabian Nights*: an odd, delicious, and fortunate coincidence which enables me to savor this double happiness.

It is true for everyone: the stories of the *Arabian Nights* are forever a dream paradise, since Antoine Galland proposed them as tales, leisure reading, and made them known to us by their title for evermore. Should we really hold it against him? Fortunately, no scholarly proof will ever prevent the *Arabian Nights* from being a wonderful storehouse of tales, a source to create ourselves afresh. That said, nothing stops us from asking ourselves if a tale exists independently

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57397-9 - The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic literature and society

Edited by Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic literature and society 7

of the society that produced it; in other words, if this recreational literature could have been produced elsewhere or in another age. The answer is, of course, no. But, in my opinion, this answer can and must be understood in several ways.

One explanation would be based on the contents of the *Arabian Nights*, and is the concern of historical criticism. It would consist of isolating the features that identify the *Arabian Nights* as a specific product of Arabo-Muslim civilization, taken not only for itself in reference to the major phenomenon of Islam which has created all its material, ideological, and component parts, but also as the heir or neighbor of other civilizations referred to in the corpus: pre-Muslim Arabia, the Egypt of the pharaohs, biblical or Mesopotamian antiquity, Iran, India, Greece and its heir Byzantium, the Western world of the Crusaders.

Islamic civilization expressed in Arabic encompasses a very long history. The *Arabian Nights* follows it over nearly ten centuries. It is now almost certain that the initial nucleus – the frame story of Shahrazād, Persian in origin with Indian borrowings – was Islamized and translated in the eighth century in Iraq and, perhaps, more precisely, in Baghdad. The initial nucleus was completed in Iraq, but now in a wider sense (I am thinking of Basra in particular) with tales concerning great persons such as the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd or sea adventures such as those of Sindbad. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries Egypt took over, essentially with tales of wonder and magic. The definitive compilation of the corpus and its final recording probably also took place in Egypt (or more precisely in the Syro-Egyptian area, if we consider the two great series of manuscripts studied with such competence and clarity by Muhsin Mahdi). Other stories were added to the collection, some of which were only fully developed in the early seventeenth century.

But there is more to the *Arabian Nights* than the discovery of past ages. All social classes are represented, from the Bedouin (then on the fringe) to the caliph, including scholars, poets, merchants, fishermen, bandits, and the idle, all assembled in accordance with contemporary taste for different types of presentation. These presentations are tonalities rather than literary genres in the strict sense: fantastic tales, epics, novels, tales of humor and trickery, anecdotes, tales of wisdom, and fables.

There are two factors at work in this Arabo-Muslim society: on the one hand the scribe concerned with awarding this reputedly but not originally popular literature a certificate of real literature, with the introduction of rhythmic prose and poetry; on the other the story-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57397-9 - The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic literature and society

Edited by Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

teller, who is habitually depicted as enchanting his audience with a drawn-out session late into the night (especially with stories with a moral), the *qāss – mādah* in North Africa – a preacher and sermonizer as much as a storyteller in the strict sense.

There is still the question of the division of the *Arabian Nights* and the title of the collection itself, noted in the tenth century by Mas‘ūdī and Ibn al-Nadīm. For the arrangement of the collection into different accounts, we possess examples that confirm the assertion of Ibn al-Nadīm, the most renowned of which was provided by Jahshiyāri who composed (in addition to his famous “Book of Vizirs”) a collection of a thousand extraordinary tales. The precise name “a thousand and one” is (we are told) Turkish in origin and means “a great quantity.” I should add that, to counteract the crudeness of the even number, “one” exemplifies perfection, superabundance, generosity, a homage to the little princess Shahrazād, like the bouquet of one thousand red roses with one extra, for her thousand nights of storytelling and passion, the last, odd, one without which (women have taught us) no bouquet is complete.

Another series of problems concerns the relation between the *Arabian Nights* and Arabic literature, particularly the system of cultural values (*adab*) governing it. From research in progress some major features can be drawn. Attested since the tenth century, the *Arabian Nights* comes from a tradition that possesses respectability: the moral tale, under the auspices of Alexander, is illustrated by that masterpiece of Arabic letters, the “Book of Kalīla and Dimna.” Very soon however (and in the writings of Mas‘ūdī and Ibn al-Nadīm) prejudices come to light. One clearly feels that the *Arabian Nights* is moving toward the status of second-rate literature, far from scholarly literature, that of the *honnête homme* (*adīb*). Three reasons might argue for this isolation. First is the oral, popular tradition of the tales and their teachings: what they teach might not always have complied with official moral standards. Here we are (J. E. Bencheikh would say) in an area of freedom which (in order to be free) operates outside official literature. Second, if the separation between the lesson to be delivered and the art with which it was delivered, between seriousness and pleasure, was then clearly held to be the golden rule of any exposition, the tale weighed strongly in favor of pleasure and so set itself outside the rules. Last, far from the literary cenacles, very important persons, and *beaux-esprits*, the tale, unconcerned with social hierarchy, presents and lets speak (without distinction) the rich and the poor, the powerful and the humble, the elites and the nonconformists – a reason for mistrust by the political and intellectual authorities, one must admit.

This would explain why, after being included in encyclopedias and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57397-9 - The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic literature and society

Edited by Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic literature and society 9

catalogues, *Arabian Nights* disappeared without trace, except for extremely rare references, before its rediscovery not in the East but in Europe. But if we postulate that popular literature at the same time as scholarly literature continued to flourish, discreetly on the side, outside official honors, it still needs to be explained precisely why the East, against elitist prejudices, retained what was not primordial for it.

The reasons, I think, should be sought in the immense moral crisis that shook the Arabo-Muslim world with the advance of the Turks in the eleventh century and of the Mongols in the thirteenth, which destroyed Baghdad and the Abbasid caliphate. Islam, more exactly Arabic Islam, owed its unity to the stability of this symbol at the head of a community of believers who, after the year 1000, saw it quiver little by little, then disappear: politically speaking the Muslim community had gone. Who could tell us if its heirs did not think it had gone for good? This was when (let us remember) the great Ibn Khaldūn explained that civilizations, like individuals, are mortal. One fact remains in any case: this was when the written treasures of Arabic were hurriedly recorded, when encyclopedias, dictionaries, biographies and textbooks were composed in their thousands; al-Suyūṭī alone drew up a list of more than 500 titles covering forty years of work. He and others, perhaps, compiled, without hesitation in order to preserve for future generations, at least a memory of what had been the Islamic civilization written in Arabic.

Egypt played a key role in this adventure. Was it a coincidence that Egyptian scribes recorded, rerecorded, collected, allocated the treasure of the *Arabian Nights*, not omitting either the stories invented on the spot or those written up at some time which did not belong to established literature, were not honored by an entry in a catalogue and which would not have survived except by word of mouth? It seems as if the scribes wanted to record everything that could be saved, even the Egypt of the eleventh–fourteenth centuries, I mean everything, including what was not or no longer considered to be worthy. Not only the final version of the text but also the intervention of scribes (with rhythmic prose or poetry) who apparently participated in a grandiose dream of rescuing an entire work, and they justified this rescue operation by turning it into a written work, a literary work in the full sense of the word.

We are eternally grateful to those anonymous compilers who, before us, knew that the *Arabian Nights* belongs to us as well.

From what I have said, it clearly emerges that the *Arabian Nights* is the product of a society over several centuries. This literature of

pleasure serves also (quite naturally) as a witness, meaning that it was a reflection of its society and not a deliberate act of the storyteller. Under the guise of our pleasure, we discover the world that produced it. But we may ask ourselves if the pleasure, at least for some tales, is as innocent as that, or is it instead merely following contemporary taste which consisted of imparting knowledge or teachings in an amusing way – a beneficial, colorful veil hiding something more serious, “something” for which the story was constructed. Let me try to clarify this point with three tales.

Everybody knows the story of Sindbad the Sailor, which is in fact a separate work composed of six chapters: Sindbad’s six voyages, the seventh added later. Like so many, this story reveals its origins – in this case the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad and, more precisely, the great merchants of long-distance trade to India and China. Beneath its coat of marvels, the “romance” of Sindbad is therefore a mirror romance – nothing more natural, and it could not be otherwise. Nevertheless, in this story where the extraordinary adventures of the hero clearly set out to please, I am not entirely convinced that the storyteller had no other goal in mind. It becomes clearer if one sees the Sindbad cycle as a textbook, a *roman à thèse*, and a breviary.

First a textbook or, if you prefer, a guidebook. A guidebook for those for whom Sindbad is a symbol. Behind the fantastic exists a series of concrete and real references – references to navigation techniques, various goods, countries; in short, the universe that merchants were invited to discover. As for the utilitarian purpose of the story, three pieces of evidence exist, I think. First, the sixth voyage (marking the real conclusion of the series) is followed by the appearance of a character who, in more than one story, assumes the essential role of the principal witness, the guarantor of truth: the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. When he had heard the account of Sindbad, what did he do? He ordered it to be written down and deposited in the official archives not as a beautiful story, a fine piece of literature, but so that its contents might be useful for knowledge about the sea and Eastern countries. Another proof: when, on more than one occasion, Sindbad found himself in an awkward situation, he was not bewildered but on the contrary he knew what was happening because, as he said, he remembered hearing about it from merchants. The third and last element of proof: there exists from the mid-ninth century an unromanticized version of Sindbad, a small book that Sauvaget has shown to be a sort of vade mecum for merchants traveling to India and China. It is the anonymous *Account of China and India* from which more than one fact is found in Sindbad’s story. In conclusion: