

THE SEXUAL WORLD OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS

From the stories of wives and their lovers to those of kings and their conquests, to the overarching story of Shahrazad and Shahryar, the tales of the Arabian Nights have offered countless audiences entertainment and enjoyment as well as serving as cautionary stories. An outstanding piece of world literature, the Arabian Nights provide a lively and interesting way of exploring aspects of sexuality, romance, gender, culture, wealth, and politics.

Examining a wide range of the tales with an extensive comparative perspective, David Ghanim offers a rigorous exploration of their profound sexuality: looking at both the context in which they were written and organized, as well as their legacy. By including accounts of heterosexuality, homosexuality, cuckoldry, insatiable lust, promiscuity, rape, incest, bestiality, demonic sexuality, and erotica, Ghanim highlights the complexity and dynamism of medieval sexuality, the active role of women in sexual activities, and the prevailing positive outlook on sexual liaison and gender mixing.

Born in Baghdad, David Ghanim, Ph.D., is a senior scholar of Middle East and gender studies whose previous books include *The Virginity Trap in the Middle East* (2015), *Iraq's Dysfunctional Democracy* (2011), and *Gender and Violence in the Middle East* (2009).

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You have created beauty as a temptation to us
And said, O my servants fear me and abstain
Behold, you are beautiful and love beauty
How, then, your creatures from loving refrain

The Arabian Nights

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PREFACE

My personal journey with the tales of the Thousand and One Nights, also known as the Arabian Nights or the Arabic *Alf Layla wa Layla*, is a long and interesting voyage. We share the same place of birth, Baghdad, the legendary medieval city where these tales were first narrated and written. In my childhood, many tales of this collection gave me immense pleasure and stimulated my wild imagination. Later on, when I became a scholar of Middle Eastern studies, I had a pleasant and surprising thought-provoking re-encounter with the Arabian Nights. While I was at the University of London conducting research, I had access to the original Arabic Bulaq edition of these tales. I borrowed the two volumes from the university library for bedtime reading. Surely, the narrative gave me a tremendous pleasure every night, but it has also introduced me to a new world of the Arabian Nights; an adult world that was very different from the world I accessed in my childhood. When gender studies became my main research focus, I started to use some aspects of these tales in my work, particularly the agency of Shahrazad symbolizing gender resistance to an authoritarian, patriarchal order. In the end, I was so totally intrigued by the strong appeal and significance of these splendid tales that I undertook a comprehensive and systematic reading of the entire collection in all its forms and editions, both original and translations, and both expurgated and unexpurgated. I have a great pleasure in establishing the study of the Arabian Nights as a strong area of research in my academic life extending to lecturing, research, and writing. While my reading of these tales proves that the Arabian Nights is a valuable treasure for studying gender and sexuality, it is regrettable to say that in the Middle East this narrative is still disparaged as either bawdy tales or silly tales for children. Yet, the way a culture treats its literature is a function of the nature of society. It is time to re-internalize and appreciate this collection of tales celebrated as one of the

outstanding world literatures. After all, these tales are a cultural and literary product of the same region.

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