

## The *Arabian Nights* in Contemporary World Cultures

The stories in the *Thousand and One Nights*, or the *Arabian Nights*, are familiar to many of us: from the tales of Aladdin, Sindbad the Sailor, Ali Baba and his forty thieves, to the framing story of Scheherazade telling these stories to her homicidal husband, Shahrayar. This book offers a rich and wide-ranging analysis of the power of this collection of tales that penetrates so many cultures and appeals to such a variety of predilections and tastes. It also explores areas that were left untouched, like the decolonization of the *Arabian Nights*, and its archaeologies. Moreover, it expands a narrative grammar, a grammatology which theories of fiction need. Unique in its excavation into inroads of perception and reception, Muhsin J. al-Musawi's book unearths means of connection with common publics and learned societies. Al-Musawi shows, as never before, how the *Arabian Nights* has been translated, appropriated, and authenticated or abused over time, and how its reach is so expansive as to draw the attention of poets, painters, illustrators, translators, editors, musicians, political scientists like Leo Strauss, and novelists like Michel Butor, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust, among others. Making use of documentaries, films, paintings, novels and novellas, poetry, digital forums, and political jargon, this book offers a nuanced understanding of the perennial charm and power of this collection.

Muhsin J. Al-Musawi is Professor of Classical and Modern Arabic Literature, Comparative and Cultural Studies, at Columbia University in New York. He is the editor of the *Journal of Arabic Literature* and the recipient of the Owais Award in Literary Criticism in 2002 and the Kuwait Prize in Arabic Language and Literature in 2018. He is the author and editor of numerous books, including *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (2003), *Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition* (2006), *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict* (2006), *Arabic Literary Thresholds: Sites of Rhetorical Turn in Contemporary Scholarship* (2009), *The Islamic Context of the Thousand and One Nights* (2009), *Islam on the Street: Religion in Modern Arabic Literature* (2009), and *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (2015).



Figure 0 Edmund Dulac: Scheherazade frontispiece.

The *Arabian Nights* in  
Contemporary World Cultures

*Global Commodification, Translation, and the  
Culture Industry*

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Muhsin J. Al-Musawi  
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Was it an enchanting cap, or just Abdou's blue hat of wonders, somewhere in Saint Germaine, in Paris, with so many charming tales, that keep on unfolding as if vying with Marrakech storytellers, and those of Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo, wonder upon wonder, an endless treasure?

Jabra

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## Acknowledgments

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The story of my engagement with a *Thousand and One Nights* requires a book of its own. In 1975–76, I found myself involved in researching its place in French and English literatures and cultures. It took me away from my interest in Arabic narrative, poetry, and poetics. By then I had published books and articles, and the coming of the *Arabian Nights* was a surprise to those who were aware of my interests. By 1978, I had submitted and defended my doctoral dissertation on eighteenth- to nineteenth-century English criticism of the *Nights*. I continued my other interests, but the *Nights* has a compelling hold on one's mind, and I found myself entangled again in exploring its early genealogies, borrowings from other Arabic, Indo-Persian, and Greek sources. My focus turned, however, to its structure, semiotics, and extensively on its social dimensions as spaces that generate and define narrative, while getting impacted by the contours of performance and storytelling as a powerful discursive space with a storyteller whose survival depends, as always, on an excellent craft. I noticed soon after that there is a need for a third project on the Islamic context of the *Nights*; for no matter how narratively engaging, the *Nights* happened to grow in translation, appropriation, or borrowing, and creation in a specific milieu. By the 1990s, scholarship on the *Nights* began to multiply, and this rise in culture industry invoked another participation to encapsulate, synthesize, and theorize the nature and future of a collection that has been passing through ups and downs without losing some attraction. In one of the significant developments in this culture industry, the *Nights* found its place in academia. While this book is more focused on critical shifts and intellectual conversation since its appearance in Europe, it aims also to set the stage for further studies of the presence of the *Nights* in the Global South.

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