

# WORDS,

by *ABBAS EL-ZEIN*

One of the picture books on *Alf Layla wa Layla (The 1001 nights)* that I read when I was a child had a drawing of Sheherazade wearing light-blue garments, a veil hanging from the bridge of her nose, a diaphanous scarf covering her hair and the back of her neck, a long-sleeved, midriff top leaving her cleavage uncovered, and a pair of baggy hipsters gathered at the ankles. She was sitting on the carpet with her legs bent to one side, her back straight, beside the front leg of a divan where King Shahrayar was lying. Shahrayar had a rounded face with a curly beard, an embroidered turban worn sloppily on the head, and a shock of hair running over his vast forehead. He was staring at Sheherazade, his eyes full of fascination and aggression. The expression on his face could have been a broad smile or a fierce wince. The two faces were uncomfortably close, firmly locked onto each other, while a bunch of grapes dangled, neglected, from Shahrayar's hand.

The picture left me in no doubt about who was the more powerful personage in the story. But Shahrayar's power appeared to have been temporarily suspended by something Sheherazade had done. Turning the page and reading the frame tale of *The 1001 nights*, I understood what the picture meant: every night, Sheherazade, a cunning

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story-teller, entertained the king with a new story that she left unresolved until the next day. This she did in order to distract the king, seduce him and ultimately convince him to spare her—since he'd intended to kill her, as he had killed all the virgins of the empire after deflowering them. What better evocation of seduction than the game of disclosure and concealment that she plays so emphatically, covering her face while baring other parts of her body; giving away part of her tale while holding back the most crucial part? *The 1001 nights*, in other words, is an allegorical story about power, sex, seduction and story-telling. 'Sheherazade', in the words of a *1001 Nights* scholar, 'is quite literally trying to talk her way out of violent death at the hands of a husband who himself is dominated by mistrust and jealous rage.'

1. David Pinault, 'Story-telling techniques in *The 1001 nights*', in *Studies in Arabic literature: Supplements to the journal of Arabic literature*, p. 2

Or is she? Consider for a moment the following alternative interpretation. What if Sheherazade, rather than the desperate victim she is believed to be, is in fact the king's saviour, subjecting him to a therapy of story-telling and enacting his deepest fears in her tales in order to cure him of his destructive fixations? What if her power equals that of the king, because his fate rests in her hands at least as much as the other way round? For one, the drawing in my picture book would acquire a whole new dimension. Not only would Shahrayar's divan become invested with Freudian connotations, but the ambiguous trance on Shahrayar's face becomes an expression of sublimated aggression and emotional pain, and Sheherazade's veil a curtain drawn over her own emotions. The veil, rather than reflecting her weakness as an 'oriental' woman, highlights the advantage she has over the king, in a relationship where power derives from emotional strength rather than politics or sexuality.

In her new book, *Sheherazade through the looking glass: The metamorphosis of the thousand and one nights*, Eva Sallis develops an interpretation of the frame tale, an outline of which I have projected here onto my own picture book. Sallis argues that this interpretation is borne out by a close reading of at least one Arabic recension of *The 1001 nights*. Seduction, Sallis tells us, cannot be part of Sheherazade's arsenal:

The usual story of a journey which results in sexual gratification; attraction, desire, courtship and fulfilment, is irrelevant here. Any concept of conquest by flirtation and deferral is void from the start. Before Sheherazade begins her exploration of desire, sex is had and finished with on the first and every subsequent night.<sup>2</sup>

The therapeutic potential of fiction is at the centre of Sallis's reading of Sheherazade's predicament. She offers 'narrative desire' and the 'withholding of story', as opposed to sexual desire and seduction,

2. Eva Sallis, *Sheherazade through the looking glass: The metamorphosis of the thousand and one nights* (Curzon Press, London, 1999), p. 102.

as key elements in understanding the frame tale. Sheherazade the willing victim and Sheherazade the martyr, it transpires, are largely constructions of European imagination, translators and readers alike. For instance, the translation by the Victorian Edward Lane deliberately failed to mention that Sheherazade intended to kill the king, should her attempt to change him fail. This omission made Sheherazade more acceptable to Lane's readers, who had very particular ideas about what a woman does or doesn't, should or shouldn't, do.

But if the heroine who emerges from Sallis's reading is more agreeable to us in the late twentieth century, it is not only because the critic does not share eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prejudice towards women and the 'East'. Equally important is her access to a number of Arabic and European versions of *The 1001 nights* and her faithfulness to the text itself. That Sheherazade is 'educating' the king in some way or another and that she is heroically resisting male destructive drives as exemplified by Shahrayar's rampant id are not new ideas in themselves. Some commentators on *The 1001 nights* have even seen in Sheherazade a *feminist* heroine, a heroine offering a partial alternative to the male-constructed order, as opposed to a *feminine heroine* whose gifts and virtues are exceptional and therefore acceptable, as such, to that order. Sallis's originality lies precisely in her textual approach to these questions.

Stephen Albert, the English sinologist of Jorge Luis Borges' 'The Garden of Forking Paths' who is looking for ways in which a book can be infinite, considers 'that night which is at the middle of the Thousand and One Nights when Scheherazade (through the magical oversight of the copyist) begins to relate word for word the story of the Thousand and One Nights establishing the risk of coming once again to the night when she must repeat it, and thus to infinity'.<sup>3</sup> 'The Garden of Forking Paths', a story about time and the perception of

3. Jorge Luis Borges, 'The garden of forking paths', *Labyrinths: Selected stories and other writings* (New Directions Publishing, New York, 1964), p. 25.

time, is itself made of one story working as a frame for another, and Albert's own absurd fate is worthy of a character from *The 1001 nights*.

Borges' fascination with labyrinths and infinity within finite spaces, a fascination that recurs in his essays and short stories, was bound to hit upon *The 1001 nights*. The sheer size of *The 1001 nights*, its nested structures and variety of narrative techniques, have been seen by more than one scholar as a play on infinity, echoing Arabesque motifs and Arabic calligraphy. And if the magical device of infinite story-telling is accidental, due to the copyist's oversight, there is a lot more in the structure of the tales that is deliberate:

This collection of fantastic tales duplicates and reduplicates to the point of vertigo the ramifications of a central story in later and subordinate stories, but does not attempt to gradate its realities, and the effect (which should have been profound) is superficial, like a Persian carpet ... On [the six hundred and second night], the king hears from the queen his own story. He hears the beginning of the story, which comprises all the others and also—monstrously—itself.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the 'superficial' architecture of *The 1001 nights*—a multitude of tales, deferrals, tales within tales, tales reappearing in disguise—is contrasted by Borges with the more conventional story-telling techniques that consist in sustaining a single narrative effort towards a depth of character and action. In fact, as recent criticism has shown, *The 1001 nights* does 'gradate its realities' and does achieve a depth of character and meaning, albeit inconsistently between one story (or one group of stories) and another. Much of the recent interpretation of *The 1001 nights* consists in eliciting patterns of meaning by studying not just individual tales but groups of tales working together. However, the question of how to approach *The 1001 nights* and how to make sense of it remains open.

To the scholar interested in cultural studies and literary criticism,

4. Jorge Luis Borges, 'Partial magic in the Quixote', *Labyrinths: Selected stories and other writings* (New Directions Publishing, New York, 1964), p. 195.

*The 1001 nights* is a showground of story-telling techniques and narrative structures, and a treasure box of paradoxes. In *The 1001 nights*, such literary notions as authorship, formal unity, structure, canon and the demarcation between the literary and the performative are called into question. (While *The 1001 nights* has existed as both written stories and in oral tradition, and has generated periods of great scholarly and non-scholarly interest, it has rarely, in either the Arabic world or Europe, been considered as literature.) To the fiction writer, *The 1001 nights* offers a surreal world of action, which, while clearly Islamic in background and references, often transcends its particular geographical and historical context and explores universal human emotions, virtues, ills and anxieties. To the translator keen on such luxuries as formal unity, established historical context, completeness and finality of *oeuvre*, *The 1001 nights* can be a nightmare. Not only has the genesis of *The 1001 nights* spanned many centuries since the original *Hazar Afsaneh* (itself thought to have come from India) was translated from Persian into Arabic more than a thousand years ago, it has reached us in a number of different forms and has undergone transforming translation and commentary by European scholars since the early eighteenth century. As no single formal principle seems to have informed the process of inclusion, structuring and ordering of the tales, some basic questions about *The 1001 nights* remain open. Which Arabic manuscript is the most authentic one? What meaning or value does *authenticity* have in the context of *The 1001 nights*? Is 1001 hyperbole or a literal number? How should the relationship between the frame tale and the enframed stories be read? Which English translation is the most suitable? To what extent should these translations and their reception in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England be analysed in the context of the empire, and which of these translations comply least with the structures of Orientalism? And what is the most appropriate interpretative strategy for such a text?

Eva Sallis's book is a systematic reflection on these questions. She projects Edward Said's criticism of Orientalist scholarship, as well as twentieth-century reader-reception theories, onto the interpretation of *The 1001 nights*, as a cross-cultural text. She sets the scene for an interpretive approach by building a historical view of *1001 Nights* criticism in England from the eighteenth century onwards. She argues for text-based readings that treat *The 1001 nights* as a genre in its own right and redress the balance towards individual tales, away from the classification of types and generic studies of characters and motifs that have marked recent criticism. Her imagined reader is both European and Arab—as her usage of both Christian and Hegira dates clearly indicates. This is part of a conscious effort to steer away from narrow Eurocentrist interpretations. She denounces eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readings as unimaginative and deeply flawed, precisely because of their dogged blindness to the Other. Whether they looked for the exotic in the stories, or saw a literal description of the 'East' in them, or busied themselves with a search for genealogies of the tales, they missed the point:

the saddest joke of 19<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century scholarship is that a medieval fiction was seen to be fully representative of a contemporary culture, thereby blinding Europe both to the true text and to the real East.<sup>5</sup>

At least some nineteenth-century writers did have some conception of the historical context of *The 1001 nights*, a fact Sallis alludes to but does not dwell on. Jassem Ali, who has studied the reception of *The 1001 nights* in nineteenth-century England, points out that some scholars—notably Walter Bagehot—recognised that *The 1001 nights*, as a social or anthropological document, was relevant primarily to medieval Islam.<sup>6</sup> A discussion, however brief, of these exceptions would have benefited Sallis's argument, either qualifying it or con-

5. Eva Sallis, *Sheherazade*, pp. 9–10.

6. Mohsen Jassim Musawi, *Sheherazade in England: A study of nineteenth-century English criticism of the Arabian Nights* (Three Continent Press, 1981).

firming it in its original form. On the other hand, the 'sad joke' Sallis refers to is not, unfortunately, a thing of the past. Twentieth-century writers have not stopped making direct inferences about the contemporary Arabic culture and, worse, the 'Arab mind', from *The 1001 nights*. Malek Chebel, as recently as 1996, has attempted a psychoanalytical study of *The 1001 nights* in his book *La féminisation du monde: essai sur les mille et une nuits* [The feminisation of the world: Essay on the thousand and one nights]. The tales, he argues, are the work of the Arab woman reacting to the misogyny of Arab society and freely analysing male sexuality without rejecting the patriarchal social order. His psychoanalytical interpretation is far more ambitious than Sallis's and his analyses of structures, characters and motifs can be very illuminating, but he undermines his own insights by constantly referring to a contemporary psychopathology of the Arab-Muslim mind. The problem lies in his reliance almost exclusively on a translation from Arabic to French by Joseph Charles Mardrus at the turn of the century, which has been shown to contain serious flaws; Mardrus had a less-than-satisfactory knowledge of Arabic and his selection of tales favoured the sexual and the bawdy. Which prompts the question as to *which* mind exactly is represented by this version of *The 1001 nights*. Chebel fails to delimit the geographical and historical territory within which he is working, and uses expressions such as Orientals and the Arab Man without the slightest epistemological scruple (does the category include the Christian Arab or the non-Arab Muslim? How and where and to what extent do regional variations muddy this category? To what extent is this psychopathology shared by other cultures, say Mediterranean or African or Central Asian?).

Chebel's is an unreconstructed Orientalist prose. Ironically his writing, although shot through with vast amounts of seminal and menstrual fluids, is sometimes reminiscent of the writing of many Islamic revivalists who build a rosy image of Islam by borrowing freely from the scriptures, unconcerned about the fact that it is often

possible to borrow another set of references from the same source to refute the very argument they are making.<sup>7</sup>

All of this highlights the urgency of text-based readings, which is the point Sallis stresses. She proposes a reading attitude rather than a reading strategy, since text-based readings must, in principle, be open to change of focus and direction during the act of reading. This reading approach does not tell the reader how to go about reading, what to look for in the text, or how to understand *The 1001 nights*; rather, it warns about possible pitfalls and failings, and stipulates one fundamental condition for a creative reading: the readiness of the reader to be changed by the text, and to have his or her view of the world altered. In the end, it is the spectacular *mise-en-oeuvre* of this reading attitude and Sallis's own critical skills that argue the case best, by illustrating its creative potential.

Sallis's readings of 'Aziz and Aziza' and 'Abdallah the Fisherman and Abdallah the Merman' are particularly illuminating in their exploration of the many layers of the tales. The first is a story about male-female relationships and different images of the female, and the second deals with cultural differences and cultural encounters. While Sallis shifts critical focus to individual tales, she does not lose sight of their overall place in the collection, striking a fine balance between *The 1001 nights* as an integral book with its own narrative language, and *The 1001 nights* as a collection of tales. This is how she describes the dreadful character of Aziz:

A *1001 Nights* hero or heroine can do a terrible thing and still retain our liking and even respect. Examples spring to mind: Sindbad; Ali

7. Some writers have pointed out that many European Orientalists and contemporary Muslim fundamentalists share a common view of Arab societies, one that is defined primarily by Islam, i.e. a more or less monolithic, largely unchanging version of it. See chapter 7 of Halim Barakat's *The Arab world: Society, culture, and state* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993) and Aziz Al-Azmeh's beautifully titled 'Assalatu'l Istishraaq' (The authenticity of Orientalism) in his *Atturath Bayna' Sultani Wa' Tarikh* (Dar Attalee'a, Beirut, 1987).

Nur al-Din who gives away his love, Anis al-Jalis; the husband who kills his wife in the Three Apples; Budur and Hayat al-Nufus' love for each other's sons ... None of these, however, is quite the anti-hero we find in Aziz, a character made enjoyable, although not really likeable, precisely because he violates the rules and expectations and fails utterly according to the standard of story heroes.<sup>8</sup>

Sallis's work combines late twentieth-century criticism from within the English literary tradition with a bicultural approach to *The 1001 nights*. It is bicultural because of the direct reference she makes to the Arabic sources of the tales and Arabic commentary on them, and because of her conscious effort to speak to the Arabic as well as the European reader. The looking-glass metaphor therefore brings up a mirror-question: what does contemporary literary criticism in the Arab world make of *The 1001 nights*? Where might it differ from contemporary European criticism? In other words, what can *The 1001 nights* tell the Arabic, post-Orientalist scholar about Arabic literature, a scholar who is less interested in *The 1001 nights'* reception in Europe than in its evolution within the Arabic culture—connected as the two are? Although this question does not fall within the field covered by Sallis's book, it emerges as a natural extension of her bicultural concerns.

Until recently, Arabic literary criticism has been remarkably uninterested in *The 1001 nights*. While twentieth-century novelists and especially playwrights have drawn on the tales in their works—since Tawfiq Al-Hakim first wrote his lyrical play *Sheherazade* in 1927—*The 1001 nights* had failed to draw significant critical attention. The book's characteristics—size, structure and varying literary merit—partly explain this omission.

One of the most striking facts about *The 1001 nights* is that it stands in stark contrast to the Islamic religious text, in its different forms.

8. Sallis, *Sheherazade*, p. 122

This is not because *The 1001 nights* lacks spiritual concerns—they are present, even if spiritual matters are not prevalent. Nor does *The 1001 nights* fail to conform, by and large, to the prevailing norms of Islamic philosophy and religion. The contrast lies somewhere else. The Islamic philological tradition, perhaps more than in any other religion, has devised intricate ways of verifying the historical accuracy of religious texts, in order to better transcend their historicity and put emphasis on their universal and essentially ahistoric nature. It has attempted to protect the text from history and historical corruption and preserve it in its original form, while proclaiming its teachings to be applicable to all times. The *Isnad*, for instance, has established a hierarchy of sources that aim to confirm or disprove the verity of the transmission of the Prophetic *hadith* or sayings.

*The 1001 nights*, with no claim to sacredness, belonging to many historical periods, written by many anonymous authors and therefore authorless, is perhaps that most metamorphic of texts, to use Ali Ahmad Said's famous equation of *Atthabit wa'l Mutahawwel*, The Static and the Metamorphic. In his study of the history of Arabic cultural life in the first three hundred years of Hegira, poetry in particular, Ali Ahmad Said (aka Adonis) viewed that history as a violent conflict between the religious-atavistic component of culture and what he calls (rather vaguely) the forces of change, which the former has invariably won. In Adonis's view, religious orthodoxy has imposed its ideology on poetic and literary production, an ideology that judges all writing by its conformity to *Al Asl*, the Origin, and therefore sanctions imitation and disapproves of creation. This view is arguably an oversimplification that is applicable in varying degrees to many cultures and not just the Arabic one. Its value, both as a conceptual tool of enquiry into Arabic cultural and literary life, and as a factual description of that life throughout Islamic history, is debatable. However, it has certainly allowed Adonis to shed new light on some Arabic literary works. Perhaps in this vision of perpetual conflict between reli-

gious orthodoxy and its various opponents may be found additional clues to the amazing energy that animates *The 1001 nights*.

In Don DeLillo's novel *The Names*, tension between reality as a stream of perceptions and our mental construction of it is highlighted during a trip that the character Owen Brademas takes through the chaotic streets of an Indian city. Brademas's ability to construct meaning is overpowered by the abundance of detail:

Who were these people, more strange to him than the millennial dead? Why couldn't he place them in some stable context? Precision was one of the raptures he allowed himself, the lyncean skill for selection and detail, the Greek gift, but here it was useless, overwhelmed by the powerful rush of things, the raw proximity and lack of common measure.<sup>9</sup>

*The 1001 nights* can have the same effect on the unsuspecting reader. Indeed, it must have that effect, at least initially, if it is to produce the defamiliarisation necessary for a good reading. But there might be more to this disorientation. If, as Adonis and others argue, Islamic orthodoxy has sought to reduce form to pure meaning—thus proscribing iconography and favouring abstract arts—then *The 1001 nights*, descriptive, multitudinous and often visual in its depiction of characters and scenes, certainly belongs more to the sphere of the visual than to the abstract. Sometimes, it seems to be acting precisely in the opposite direction, highlighting form above all else (such as when stories are interrupted by other stories, thus deferring resolution and interpretation). From this perspective, Borges' 'superficial effect' becomes more than a description of a narrative device or a tool of defamiliarisation. It reflects what may in *The 1001 nights* be an expression of the irreducible nature of reality—the 'powerful rush of things'—and its dogged resistance to abstraction and meaning itself.

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9. Don DeLillo, *The names* (Vintage Contemporaries, 1982), p. 280.