

Thousand one nights



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Do you see *The Thousand and One Nights* as essentially an entertainment?

Antoine Galland was the man responsible for the introduction of 'the thousand and one nights' to the western world. This bizarre combination of magic, love, hate, evil and the uncanny did not begin its literary career based on its highly valued scholarly merit but rather on its ability to delight and entertain.

This enormous collection of oriental tales whose origins range from Persia to Syria begin with the story of the wife of king Shahryar who in a bid for survival tells him stories in order to survive the night. This element of a tale within a tale runs throughout the whole of the Arabian night tales which at times creates confusion for the reader who finds himself struggling to keep up. Although eighteenth century readers merely saw the tales devoid of any substantial literary value one can see that from the very beginning of this massive volume of tales, certain allegories concerning life are depicted. Scheherazade's way of talking herself through danger can be analysed in two different ways. The first being that Scheherazade, is merely depicting the most common and universal human trait when dealing with danger. This could be easily seen as 'talking one's way out of trouble'. The second would be that through Scheherazade, a certain statement is being made regarding the nature of a successful marriage. Communication, it is implied, is the key to the survival of a marriage.

With such allegorical implementations regarding life conveyed in only the very beginning of 'The Thousand and One Arabian Nights' it is then only

wise that the tales should be read keeping in mind that entertainment may not be their only contribution to the reader.

One point that I believe should be made early on regarding 'the thousand and one nights' is that since the tales were introduced during the Victorian period they would have been 'fumigated' thus effectively removing any erotic and highly graphical offensive material from the text. The term 'Lost in translation' would not be out of place in this case, as not only would have offending material been dispersed but certain elements regarding life in the east would have easily become distorted or have lost their value during the process of translation. As in effect this would have created a loss of important material perhaps of high scholarly value. It is then perhaps not surprising that it wasn't till the beginning of the twentieth century that scholars and critics begun to recognise more than just mere entertainment within the pages of the 'The thousand and one Arabian nights'

Stories if narrated well enough have always found ground to delight, yet rarely are they told with out the narrator implying a certain meaning. In that sense they become didactic. Scheherazade is not the only story teller within 'the thousand and one tales'. Many characters within the tales contribute towards this didactic theme. An example would be Scheherazade's own father the Wazir who in an effort to warn his daughter against the foolishness of marrying the Sultan begins to tell the tale of 'The bull and the ass'. These extravagant tales that are a resort of wanting to deliver a certain kind of message are similar to those used in fairytales. One could suppose these to be the oriental fairytales equivalent and as heavy in social history as the western fairytales. Also by allowing different characters of different

backgrounds to deliver these messages there is an underlying idea that all people, regardless of who they are have a contribution to make in this life. This is an example of how these Arabian tales are able to not only represent life and the experiences that surround life itself but to do so whilst at the same time managing to bypass any cultural and linguistic boundaries. These messages become universal, addressing all important aspects of human life such as love, death good and evil and the constant search for immortality. The repetitive development of these values throughout the subsequent tales within the Arabian nights only helps to strengthen and highlight the weight they command on every aspect of human life.

Other than parallel life the Arabian tales are rich in material regarding the life and beliefs of the Arabic world. The oppression of women is shown in the sultan's ability to wed a virgin each day and then kill her in the morning. His actions are not judged nor to create any kind of opposition whatsoever showing both the immense power that was placed in the hands of the king whereas at the same time also portraying the notion that the fates and lives of women lay in the hands of their husbands. Even so characters like Scheherazade are crucial at conveying that a woman was not completely powerless . A woman's power lay in her cunning and ability to successfully manoeuvre and shape instances so that to achieve her own goal. Scheherazade's ability to remain alive night after night is a prime example of this.

If we were to consider tales such as ' The bull and the ass' certain other motifs become apparent. There seems to be an ongoing repetition throughout the Arabian tales concerning the theme of wit. This would point

to the belief that wit and cunning were valued highly as characteristic elements, able to allow survival in the cruelty people faced everyday in their lives. Such beliefs are shown through the advice the ass gives to the bull. The ass begins by advising the bull to feign madness in order to escape the harshness of the plough. Yet once the ass realises his actions have merely jeopardised his own happiness he reverts to wit in order to save his skin. Later on the words of the cockerel are crucial in saving the merchants own life as he realises his wife's stubbornness in wanting to know his secret will only lead to his demise. Other than the importance of cunning and wisdom there is also numerous religious references leading to the conclusion that religion was carried great value in the Arabic world. As the religious references are many and at times devised of lengthy quotations this would also point towards the notion that not only did religion feature daily in the Arabic world but that most people had an extensive knowledge of it, in fact so extensive that they were able to quote extracts on the spot. The 'A thousand and one nights' are written in a simple language, this leads me to believe that the religious proverbs must have been widely known and not restricted to 'holy' or 'religious' men. Such was then the hold of religion upon the eastern Arabic world.

All the above themes as well as others can be seen through another tale within 'A thousand and One nights' this being 'The Fisherman and the Jinni'. Cunning and wisdom again are emphasised with the life of the fisherman relying on his abilities to outwit the Jinni.

'This is a Jinni; and I am a man to whom Allah hath given a passably cunning wit, so I will now cast about to compass his destruction by my contrivance

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and by mine intelligence; even as he took counsel only of his malice and his forwardness'

Within the above quote the importance of intelligence is clearly seen as is also the theme of how brute force and malice are not always effective in overcoming another. Something else that can be perceived throughout the 'Tale of the Fisherman and the Jinni' is the same notion seen through Scheherazade, that good communication skills were regarded as vital within the Arabic world. So vital, that they could have secured your life.

Communication and the art of language is a characteristic that sets us above the mere existence of beasts, for the ability to structure speech goes hand in hand with the ability to think.

The themes of good and evil as also that of kindness and cruelty are seen clearly within his tale. There is the underlying message through the Jinni's harshness that cruelty breeds cruelty. The injustice and cruelty that the Jinni suffered in being imprisoned in a jar for thousands of years turns him cruel. This could be parallel to the belief that it is society in itself that breeds evil rather than a person being born evil. Something also seen in King Shahryar who is seen as a noble honest king at the beginning of the tales only to turn harsh and cruel once he experiences hurt and injustice.

With such elements as the themes of justice, honour, good and evil and the ability of the 'A thousand and one Nights' to parallel life in itself we cannot suppose them to be merely delightful entertainment for they provide much more than that. They are as mentioned before the equivalent of the western fairytales as they incorporate all the elements expected in a fairytale as is

simple language, morality and magic they are also proof that the need for man to teach and relate morality and certain life values was not limited to what was supposed the western 'civilised world' but was a reoccurring phenomenon that stretched across the globe.

Bibliography

Primary Reading

Sir Richard F. Burton, *Tales from 1001 Arabian nights*, Ed & translated by F. Burton, Jaico Publishing house