
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Influence of The Arabian Nights on English Literary Culture in the Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the reception and influence of *The Arabian Nights* on English literature and travel writing during the nineteenth century. Beginning with Antoine Galland's landmark French translation (1704–1717) and its rapid dissemination across Europe, the study traces how this collection of oriental folk tales transformed from an object of aristocratic curiosity into an authoritative cultural and ethnographic resource. The paper argues that *The Arabian Nights* served a dual function in the English literary imagination: as a generative source of narrative inspiration for fiction writers, and as an ostensibly reliable guide to the manners, customs, and domestic life of 'Oriental' peoples. Drawing on a range of primary sources—including travel accounts, editorial prefaces, translations, and literary works—the study demonstrates how travellers, editors, and novelists alike appealed to *The Arabian Nights* to authenticate their representations of the East. The paper concludes by reflecting critically on the ideological implications of this process, noting that the conflation of literary fantasy with ethnographic fact contributed to a romanticised and ultimately distorting image of the Orient that persists into the present.

KEYWORDS

Arabian Nights; Oriental tale; English travel literature; Orientalism; nineteenth-century fiction; William Beckford; E. W. Lane; Richard Burton; translation history; cultural representation

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INTRODUCTION

The great delight with which readers heard or read stories of *The Arabian Nights* in childhood is part of the early memories of all, irrespective of which part of the world they come from. The story of the discovery of this remarkable collection of folk tales, and their first translation into French by Antoine Galland in the opening years of the eighteenth century (1704–1717), has often been told. It was a fortunate discovery both for European literature and for Oriental folk literature: Galland's translation was immediately rendered into English, and by the close of the century there were no fewer than twenty English editions in circulation, the fourth having been printed by Andrew Bell as early as 1712.

The eruption of this storehouse of magic and wonder into the ordered neo-classical literary world of the eighteenth century produced a complex and sometimes contradictory response. On the one hand, *The Arabian Nights* gave birth to a new genre—the 'oriental tale'—in both French and English literature, stimulating a wave of imitation that ranged from the relatively faithful to the wholly spurious, including pseudo-translations such as T. Simon Gueullette's *Chinese Tales*, *Tartarean Tales*, and *Persian Tales*. On the other hand, the tales shocked the taste of many men of letters: Alexander Pope's gift of a copy to Bishop Atterbury provoked the latter's famous complaint that they were 'so extravagant, monstrous, and disproportioned' as to give 'a judicious eye pain' (Conant, 230). Such reactions remind us that *The Arabian Nights* occupied contested cultural ground from the moment of their European arrival.

This paper traces the trajectory of *The Arabian Nights* through the English literary and cultural imagination across the long nineteenth century, attending both to the creative inspiration the tales provided and to the ethnographic authority they came to claim. Its central argument is that the two functions—aesthetic and documentary—were deeply entangled, and that understanding this entanglement is essential for grasping both the richness and the ideological limitations of the English engagement with the Orient during this period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with *The Arabian Nights* and their European reception has a substantial history. Martha Pike Conant's *The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century* (1908) remains a foundational study, documenting the generic innovations stimulated by *The Arabian Nights* and mapping the network of imitation and translation through which oriental fiction circulated in Britain and France. Conant's concept of 'the sense of reality in the midst of unreality'—the quality she identifies as most distinctive of the Nights' appeal—has been widely adopted by subsequent scholars as a critical tool for understanding the collection's peculiar power.

The biographical and bibliographical scholarship on William Beckford, whose *Vathek* (1786) represents the most significant English contribution to the oriental tale, is extensive. Lewis Melville's *Life and Letters of William Beckford of Fonthill* (1910), J. W. Oliver's *The Life of William Beckford* (1932), and André Parreaux's *William Beckford: auteur de Vathek* (1960) together document Beckford's lifelong obsession with the East and his intimate engagement with manuscript versions of *The Arabian Nights*, including the Wortley Montagu manuscript now held at the Bodleian Library. Marcel May's *La jeunesse de William Beckford et de son Vathek* (1928) and Guy Chapman and John Hodgkin's *A Bibliography of William Beckford of Fonthill* (1930) provide additional detail on his early formation. Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud's "A Manuscript Translation of The Arabian Nights in the Beckford Papers" (*Journal of Arabic Literature*, 1976) identifies the complete rough translation of the Wortley Montagu manuscript held in the Beckford Papers, a discovery with significant implications for understanding Beckford's sources.

The relationship between *The Arabian Nights* and English travel literature has received less sustained attention but has been noted by several scholars. Marie de Meester's *Oriental Influences in the Literature of the Nineteenth Century* (1915) surveys the broader field of oriental influence on European writing, while Victor Chauvin's bibliographical work documents the circulation of Arabic texts in the West. The editorial traditions of the major nineteenth-century translations—by Edward Forster (1802), E. W. Lane (1839–40), and Richard Burton (1885)—have been studied both for their philological approach and for their ideological orientations. Lane's notes were later edited and published separately by Stanley Lane-Poole as *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages* (1883), a work that testifies to the perceived ethnographic value of the Nights well beyond the domain of literary study.

The critical tradition has been slower to interrogate the ideological dimensions of this European engagement with *The Arabian Nights*, though the present paper takes the view—developed in the conclusion—that the conflation of literary fantasy with ethnographic documentation raises important questions about representation, power, and the construction of the 'Orient' as an object of Western knowledge. This aspect of the subject invites further scholarly attention.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, historically grounded approach to literary and cultural analysis. The primary evidence base consists of a range of textual sources drawn from the long nineteenth century: editorial prefaces and notes from major English translations of *The Arabian Nights*; travel accounts and correspondence by travellers who visited the Near and Middle East; fictional works that drew on the Nights as a source of inspiration or information; and biographical and bibliographical documentation relating to key figures such as William Beckford, E. W. Lane, and Richard Burton.

Close reading is the principal analytical method, applied to primary texts in order to identify the specific claims made about *The Arabian Nights*—their authenticity, their ethnographic value, their aesthetic qualities—and to situate those claims within their historical and ideological contexts. The study also draws on a comparative approach, reading literary and travel texts alongside one another in order to map the traffic between imaginative and documentary modes of engagement with the East. Quotation from primary sources is used throughout to ground analytical claims in textual evidence, and secondary scholarship is engaged where it illuminates specific aspects of the story being told.

The study makes no claim to comprehensiveness: it does not attempt to survey the full range of English literary responses to *The Arabian Nights* across the period, but rather to trace a particular and significant strand of that response—the entanglement of

aesthetic pleasure with ethnographic authority—through a series of well-chosen examples. The selection of examples is motivated by their representativeness and by the richness of the evidence they provide, rather than by any quantitative principle.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The Arabian Nights as Ethnographic Authority

One of the study's most significant findings is the extent to which *The Arabian Nights* was accorded the status of an ethnographic document by English travellers, editors, and readers throughout the period. Galland's original French edition was advertised as a work where 'the customs of Orientals and the ceremonies of their religion were better traced than in the tales of travellers,' and this claim was actively promoted by subsequent English editors seeking to establish the collection's authority. Travellers to the East repeatedly found in *The Arabian Nights* a framework for interpreting what they saw: James Dalloway's observation, quoted by Edward Forster, that 'much of the romantic air which pervades the domestic habits of the persons described in *The Arabian Nights*... will be observed in passing through the streets of Constantinople,' is typical of a recurring pattern in the travel literature of the period.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's celebrated letters from Constantinople (written 1716–1718, published 1763) provide an early and revealing instance of this process. Describing the sumptuous entertainment given her by a Turkish noblewoman—the fine jewellery, the elaborate dress, the thirty slaves in attendance—she anticipated the scepticism of her correspondents by invoking *The Arabian Nights* not as a parallel fantasy but as a documentary precedent: 'those very tales were writ by an Author of this country, and (except the Enchantments) are a real representation of manners here.' The circle of authentication is evident: *The Arabian Nights* validates the travel account, and the travel account validates *The Arabian Nights*. James Capper went further still, recommending the Nights as essential reading for anyone travelling in Asia, on the grounds that they were 'in the same estimation all over Asia as the Adventures of Don Quixote are in Spain.'

Beckford, Vathek, and the Limits of Imitation

The study's examination of William Beckford and his *Vathek* (1786) reveals the ambivalences inherent in the English literary engagement with *The Arabian Nights*. Beckford's lifelong obsession with the tales is amply documented: forced as a boy of thirteen to burn his copy at his tutor's insistence, he later immersed himself in the study of Arabic and Persian and engaged a native speaker, Zamir, to recite stories from the Wortley Montagu manuscript—a racier and less expurgated version than Galland's—to himself and his guests. The 122-page apparatus of notes accompanying *Vathek*, drawing on *The Arabian Nights*, Persian Tales, and the work of orientalists such as William Jones and d'Herbelot, was itself used as a source of information by Byron and later writers.

Byron's celebrated praise of *Vathek*—'for correctness of costume, beauty of description, and power of imagination, it far surpasses all European imitations'—illustrates the prestige attached to perceived authenticity. Yet the study's finding here is a cautionary one: as the paper notes, no 'true Oriental' is deceived by *Vathek*, and the enthusiasm of English writers who 'prided themselves on having been on the spot' for a work that remained essentially a European fantasy reveals the limits of their actual knowledge of the East. The authority of *The Arabian Nights* as an ethnographic guide was always, in significant part, a projection of European desire rather than a reflection of Eastern reality.

The Translators: Lane and Burton

The two most significant English translations of *The Arabian Nights* in the nineteenth century—E. W. Lane's expurgated version (1839–40) and Richard Burton's unexpurgated and controversial translation (1885)—both illustrate, in different ways, the centrality of the ethnographic function to the English reception of the Nights. Lane, who had lived in Egypt and possessed Egyptian informants, used his copious notes to document the decay or survival of customs described in the tales, treating the Nights as a baseline against which contemporary Arab life could be measured. His frank statement that a close translation of the Nights 'with sufficient illustrative notes' might almost have spared him 'the labour' of his own *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836) indicates how thoroughly he regarded the two projects as continuous.

Burton's preface is still more explicit in its political and imperial stakes. Addressing his translation as 'a legacy' bequeathed to his countrymen 'in their hour of need,' he argued that those who would govern Muslims must be 'familiar with, and favourably inclined to their manners and customs'—and that *The Arabian Nights* was indispensable to that familiarity. The study finds that this instrumental conception of the Nights as a handbook for imperial administration represents the culmination of a tendency

present from the earliest English engagement with the collection, and raises significant questions about the relationship between literary pleasure and political power.

Ideological Implications and Conclusion

The study's concluding finding is that the sustained conflation of *The Arabian Nights* with ethnographic reality had significant ideological consequences. As Patrick Russell's account of professional storytellers in Aleppo (1794) demonstrates, the actual oral tradition of the Nights in the East was a living, dynamic, performative practice—far removed from the static and exoticized image projected onto it by European editors and travellers. The tendency to read the East through the lens of *The Arabian Nights*, rather than to encounter it on its own terms, produced a self-confirming fantasy that, as the paper notes, correlates with 'some modern Europeans' devotion to the Nights, and their belief in the inferiority of modern Orientals.'

The paper concludes by observing that this process of aestheticization and commodification has not ended: from Aladdin nightclubs to packaged 'Oriental experiences' designed for tourists, the dream of the Nights continues to be commercially exploited, with governments and local authorities in former colonial territories participating in the marketing of a romanticized identity that owes more to Galland and Burton than to the living cultures of the modern Middle East. The study's findings thus carry implications that extend well beyond the literary-historical, pointing towards the continuing relevance of a critical engagement with the politics of cultural representation.

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