Review: The Arabian Nights Reader

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emancipation” (6). In short, wonder tales predictably induce “wonder” (5). And while Zipes recognizes that the literary fairy tale sprang from the wonder tale, he adds that the newer genre has established “its own conventions, motifs, topos, characters, and plots” (3). This means, of course, that the literary fairy tale can no longer be defined in terms of Proppian functions. Still, Zipes insists that fairy tales have inherited from wonder tales the power to “induce wonder,” which is, ultimately, the definition of both genres (7). So, then, what Pinocchio, Neverland, and the Oz stories share with a writer like Hesse, as well as with wonder tales, is the superimposition of a fantasy realm upon a realistic situation (Hesse, too, “sought to blend the worlds of reality and imagination” [250]), which allows the status quo to be transcended and keeps hope alive. Again, we reach the utopian core of this book.

In essence, what Zipes says incidentally about a fairy tale by Salman Rushdie—that it urges readers to question authoritarianism and to become inventive, given that Rushdie provides hope for solutions without supplying definitive answers (30)—might be said about Zipes himself. He ascribes to the best fairy-tale writers the belief in the power of the imagination to make a better world—and this is a fitting description of his own work. Indeed, When Dreams Came True celebrates imagination and provides hope for solutions without supplying definitive answers. For its vigorously utopian spirit and solid scholarship, this jewel of a book is a must-have and a pleasure to read.

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Reading the essays selected for inclusion in The Arabian Nights Reader will take some readers on autobiographical journeys of their own development as Nights scholars. I found myself transported back to graduate school as I reread the essays from the 1970s and 1980s, those studies I had immersed myself in as I was finding my own voice and path through the Thousand and One Nights as a young academic. Nights scholars will all find themselves in one essay or another in Marzolph’s representative sampling of twentieth-century scholarship. The original publication dates for these studies range from 1942 (Gustav E. von Grunebaum’s “Greek Form Elements in the Arabian Nights”) to 1997 (Fedwa Malti-Douglas’s “Shahrazad Feminist”), and just as far-ranging are the paleographical, critical, and theoretical approaches these writers take to the Arabian Nights.

The Arabian Nights Reader is perhaps best suited, however, to the new scholar or curious reader who will have the pleasure of indulging in some of these essays for the first time. One learns some of the basics, such as the
fact that the frame story of the Arabian Nights (better known as Alf Layla wa-Layla among Arabic scholars) dates from at least the ninth century of the common era and was most likely adapted from a Persian tale titled Hazar Afsana (Thousand Tales) from relatively early essays by Nabia Abbott (1949) and Solomon D. Goitein (1958). Abbott’s “A Ninth-Century Fragment of the ‘Thousand Nights’: New Light on the Early History of the Arabian Nights” not only sheds light on the provenance of the Nights, but also describes one of the earliest (if not the earliest) fragments of a “paper book outside the ancient Far East” (73) and explains how the material itself indicates much about the source of the fragment.

How much of the history and transmission of the Arabian Nights scholars do not yet agree on or know for a certainty is demonstrated by Heinz Grotzfeld’s “Neglected Conclusions of the Arabian Nights”; his “The Age of the Galland Manuscript of the Nights”; and Muhsin Mahdi’s “Sources of Galland’s Nuits.” The first of these essays outlines the various ways in which the conclusion has been cast in the various versions of the Nights, explaining how Shahrazad’s gender and fertility were chosen by some redactors as more significant than her storytelling prowess, some of which Malti-Douglas returns to in “Shahrazad Feminist.” The Grotzfeld and Mahdi essays on the Galland manuscript demonstrate one of the many mild controversies regarding this work in that each dates the Galland source manuscript by different means and comes to a different conclusion. For the general reader, the difference between a fourteenth- or fifteenth-century manuscript might be negligible, but for Nights scholars steeped in the exciting and frustrating history of a lack of documentary evidence for so much concerning this work, the debate continues to fascinate.

Amid all the discussion of the various Arab, Persian, and Indian sources of the Arabian Nights, von Grunebaum (“Greek Form Elements in the Arabian Nights”) and Peter Heath (“Romance as Genre in The Thousand and One Nights”) bring out the parallels between some of the form and content of the Nights and those of Greek romance genres. While “the very nature of the Greek contribution formed the greatest obstacle to its discovery” (von Grunebaum 138), various hints of Greek influence are apparent in the structure of some of the shorter embedded tales as well as in their character development.

Readers who are more interested in studying the content of the Arabian Nights will be more interested in the second half of The Arabian Nights Reader, which includes several studies from the ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s that delve into psychological and structural criticism as well as historicism and mythical interpretations. In his essay “From History to Fiction,” Mahdi uses his depth of knowledge about the history of the Middle East to interpret the content of “The Tale Told by the King’s Steward” as well as to draw several convincing conclusions about its origins.
Jamel Eddine Bencheikh also uses the play of history and imagination to delve more deeply into the love stories in the Nights in her 1997 contribution, “Historical and Mythical Baghdad in the Tale of Ali b. Bakkar and Shams al-Nahar.” Her analysis of the role of caliph Harun ar-Rashid in this love story illuminates his role throughout the Nights as both historical personage and mythical symbol. The question of whether the audience was accepting the romance of Ali and Shams as historical fact or dreamy fiction rests in their understanding of the reality and myth of Baghdad itself, much as Western news audiences today must balance their own preconceived notions of the Iraqi capital with what they see on their televisions each night.

Tzvetan Todorov (“Narrative-Men”) and Peter Molan (“Sindbad the Sailor”) both use structure to explore deeper meanings of embedded tales in the Arabian Nights. Todorov, one of the first to demonstrate the link between narrative and survival in the Nights shows how the proliferation of embedding allows the characters more life than the language used to describe them: “Only the coldest travel narrative can compete with Sinbad’s tales in impersonality” (227). Molan’s analysis of the highly complex structure of repetition and embedding in the Sindbad the Sailor tale shows the power of story pattern among the tales of the nights, each lending additional significance to the next and revealing an “ethics of violence” that Shahrazad subtly communicates to Shariyar through her telling of these tales.

The tercentenary anniversary of Antoine Galland’s 1704 translation of the Arabian Nights heightened academic interest and expanded scholarly production on this well-known work of murky provenance. Ulrich Marzolph’s selection of sixteen essays in The Arabian Nights Reader will satisfy much of that academic interest by bringing together some of the twentieth century’s very finest Nights scholarship in English, but as Marzolph himself indicates in the introduction, serious scholars will avail themselves also of the many studies available in French, German, and, of course, Arabic. I hope that the essays contained in The Arabian Nights Reader will inspire even more of this level and diversity of scholarship on this most important international work of literature.

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Although Lies That Tell the Truth: Magic Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction from Britain is not primarily about folklore or fairy tales, this text is worth the attention of scholars who are interested in the hybridity of contemporary literary fairy tales. It also points in interesting directions for discussions of the intersections of magic realism and contemporary fairy-tale texts.