

Scheherazade's Children

Global Encounters with the Arabian Nights

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The Porter and Portability

Figure and Narrative in the Nights

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For good reason, *The Thousand and One Nights* conjures travel. Not only do many of the stories of the Arabic text tell of journeys across the territories of Islamdom and beyond, but the history of the text's reception and circulation is also one of extraordinary voyages between continents, languages, cultures, and historical periods. In this sense, the text invites us to consider portability as a problem of literature. But which elements of a literary text are most likely to travel?

The modern literary reception of the *Nights*—the many translations, adaptations, and rewritings of the text—provides some answers to this question. Of the many features of the oldest Arabic versions of the *Nights* that have traveled into other languages and literary traditions, the structures of the embedded-tale form seem to be those transported most intact.¹ While the frame tale has sometimes been removed from translations and adaptations of the *Nights*, this has not been the rule but rather an exception granted almost entirely to works intended for

younger audiences.² Likewise, certain motifs and archetypes of the *Nights* have also traveled far and wide. It seems that no translation of the *Nights* fails to include jinn. Similarly, unfaithful wives and wily viziers seem to be essential citations in modern literary works inspired by the *Nights*. In this regard, those elements of the *Nights* cleared for travel would form a long list that would include sultans and garrulous barbers, eunuchs and automata, Rukhs and giant serpents, enchanted cities and flying carpets, desert isles and subterranean vaults.

The idea of the *Nights* as a global text is also a dominant theme of scholarship. In this literature, it is sometimes difficult to imagine that the *Nights* could ever belong, even for a moment, to any one culture, let alone that of the Arabo-Islamic world. This is in no small part because the *Nights*—even as an Arabic text—has so often been studied either through translation or as a problem of translation.³ In recent decades, study has largely engaged with Galland's translation,⁴ histories of the manuscripts, redactions and editions,⁵ and considerations of the *Nights* as a motor for the production of modern European narrative and Orientalist knowledge.⁶ Less often is the Arabic text—in any of its versions—studied in its own right and independent of its other lives in other languages.⁷ With the recent rehabilitation of world literature as a critical field, the *Nights* is now perhaps approached not so much as a particular text (let alone *Arabic* text) but as a continually evolving—continually traveling—literary *project*, with multiple polyglot renditions and various unfinished itineraries.

Where does this leave the particularities of the versions of the Arabic text known as *Alf layla wa-layla*? The point of asking this is not to suggest that the text be considered as solely or primarily Arab(ic). Nor is it to suggest that recent accounts of the *Nights* have been misplaced. Rather, it is to highlight the challenges of seeking to read versions of the *Nights* closely as Arabic texts—that is, as single, discrete texts composed in a very particular and problematic Arabic that straddles the idioms and rhetorics of both formal and colloquial registers. Why, we might ask, are there so few close readings of the Arabic language in the *Nights*? Part of the answer is connected to longstanding biases against the language and themes of the text within scholarly institutions in the Arab world; part to the fact that the large holes in the manuscript history—and the gaps between the oral and written families of the text

—render particular historical claims about the text close to impossible; and part also to the fact that critical studies of the *Nights* in Arabic have long privileged colonial-era redactions of the text that were born in the shadow of Orientalist translation and adaptation and that strongly invite the reader to return to European horizons of reading.

Yet, even when the *Nights* has been read in the way I am suggesting, as an Arabic text, critics have still tended to focus on those aspects that are most global and generalizable—formal narrative structures,⁸ genre conventions,⁹ and recurring folkloric archetypes¹⁰—rather than those elements of the Arabic text most marked by cultural particularity and linguistic inalienability. Or, put differently, critical emphasis has been on questions of portability rather than of nonportability, travel rather than nontravel.

Though celebrated, the metaphor of travel raises more questions than it settles. The traveler, when she packs her bags, never takes everything, and no traveler ever arrives wholly intact. Travel suggests forms of movement that entail loss as much as gain. Addressing this issue with regard to the translation and circulation of critical theory, Edward Said wrote,

Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. Having said that, one should go on to specify the kinds of movement that are possible, in order to ask whether by virtue of having movement from one place and time to another an idea or theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation.¹¹

Said's essay "Traveling Theory" describes histories of reception and dissemination, in which particular sets of ideas gain and lose meaning when resituated in new contexts and new languages. Said's emphasis context is key for our purposes here, because it reminds us that the

travel of text is not merely an issue of language and ideas. The *situations of reception* include contexts of language and literature but also institutions, periods, and ideological investments. It is in the spirit of this that I want to consider those aspects of *The Thousand and One Nights* that have not traveled.

To ask which parts are less portable involves considering textual elements that are least likely to survive in translation or those that lose their source significance even in the most carefully translated target text. These are not minor issues when it comes to the travels of the *Nights*. Two examples will suffice to give an indication of how broad this problem is even in translations that cleave closely to the original. The first example has to do with how the particular literary topos of jinn appears when translated out of an Arabo-Islamic cosmology. The *Nights*, as is well known, is filled with references to jinn, afreet, and ghouls—supernatural beings that, for medieval Arab audiences (and for many even in the present day), would belong to a realist description of the world. In the Arabic text, the existence of such beings is taken as a given, as is the notion that the physical world has multiple planes of reality.¹² In this universe, encounters with jinn may be strange, startling, or unusual, but they do not connote magic or exoticness. This stands in stark contrast to the post-Enlightenment reception of the text in Europe. In that context, jinn connote a sense of elsewhere—both as an outdated time of folk superstition and as an outlandish realm of Oriental otherness. Even with elaborate footnotes and critical framing devices, the meaning of jinn in modern European translations of the *Nights* will share little with how the Arabic text has long been received in its Arabo-Islamic contexts.

The second example has to do with the status of particular usages of language whose cultural meanings are not purely semantic. The Arabic text of the *Nights* contains many pious phrases whose meanings, in Arabo-Islamic societies, are not solely linguistic. For instance, formulaic oaths and utterances regarding the will of God may express an interior set of pious beliefs, but not necessarily so. The meanings of such formulas are subtle and have to do with the articulation of status and place within a complex set of social signs and practices. Their meaning is often ambiguous, sometimes ironic, and always embedded

within a fluid rhetorical context in which norms and values are asserted and negotiated, revised and undermined.¹³ For good reason, translators have been unsure about how to render these particular aspects of the text. In some translations, they are rendered into a familiar archaic register (mimicking that of the other most popular work of translated Semitic literature in the English language, the King James Bible).¹⁴ In this style of translation, piety is broadcast with a flatness and volume that does not square with the Arabic text of the *Nights*.¹⁵

This essay explores a particular feature of the Arabic text—the elaborate use of figurative language—that becomes largely illegible even when translated. While the narrative forms of the *Nights* have enjoyed multiple lives in other traditions, the same is not true of figure. Indeed, metaphor and pun in the *Nights* have proven not only to be quite resistant to translation and adaptation in other literatures, but they have been marginal as a subject of scholarly study.

This essay briefly addresses this issue within one particular story cycle, “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies” (*al-Hammal wal-sabaya al-thalath*), within one particular rendition of the text, the Muhsin Mahdi edition, which is based on the oldest (and only premodern) manuscript of *Alf layla wa-layla*.¹⁶ The figure of the eye plays a very central role within this story cycle and recurs in surprising ways through the text, through puns, metaphors, and allegories. The deliberate turns of these plays suggest that the figure of the eye is more than ornament in the text. The figure is, in fact, a deep part of the narrative structure itself.

To introduce this figure, we could start on night thirty-six, at the moment when “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies” takes a dangerous turn. The caliph Harun al-Rashid and his vizier Ja’far are there, as is his imposing executioner and bodyguard, Masrur. Three one-eyed dervishes are also there, along with an unnamed porter. The hostesses of this gathering are three ladies of considerable beauty and means, known only as the shopper (*al-hawshkasha*), the doorkeeper (*al-bawwaba*), and the beauty (*al-maliha*). The men have just witnessed the strangest of spectacles: after enjoying much wine, poetry, and conversation, their hostesses interrupt the party to perform a series of cruel spectacles. In one act, the mistress of the house whips two black dogs

with chains, then embraces the poor beasts, sobbing and kissing each in turn. In the second act, the shopper picks up a lute and three times sings a ballad about the pains of love. In one, she sings,

Your brilliant *eyes* have wasted me
 Your jet-black hair has me in thrall
 Your rosy cheeks have vanquished me
 And told my tale to all. (81)

In another, she wails,

You, who have long been absent from my *eyes*
 Will in my loving heart forever stay
 Was it you who have taught me how to love
 And from the pledge of love never to stray? (82)

At the end of each recital, the shopper's sister, the doorkeeper, tears off her dress and swoons—three times laying bare a body beaten black and blue. Each time, the caliph and his companions watch on in silence, even though they gradually decide they can stand it no longer. As a condition of their entrance into the home, they all have taken an oath not to speak or to ask questions about what they might see. The condition of their staying is that they “will be *eyes without tongues*.” As the ladies put it, “you will not inquire about whatever you see. You speak not of what concerns you not, lest you hear what pleases you not” (79).¹⁷

Yet the men are overwhelmed by their curiosity and begin to ask questions among themselves—they want to know the story behind the spectacle. When their hostesses learn of this, they grow furious, and suddenly seven black slaves appear out of the wings. The slaves knock the men to the ground with their swords, then tie each one up. Their lives now in danger, the men are granted a reprieve only if each tells his story. If not, he will be decapitated. If before they had been asked to be eyes without tongues, now they are asked to be tongues telling the stories of eyes. And so one of the dervishes begins, “It was an amazing event and strange mischance that caused me to lose my *eye*. . . . Mine is a tale that, if it were engraved with needles at the corner of the *eye*, would be a lesson for those who would consider” (85). In this way erupts the

first enframed tale of the cycle. And in this way we are introduced to one of the more memorable lines of the *Nights*, whose peculiarity survives even in translation.

Abdelfattah Kilito has argued that the figure of the eye and the needle in this phrase invites us to think about page and pen, reading and writing. For Kilito, the figure suggests the reading of lessons, or *'ibar*, contained in the story and the rewriting of these same lessons as *i'tibar*, not on pages but within one's contemplative mind.¹⁸ Thus, in a sense, the image underscores the two different kinds of seeing that happen, or fail to happen, with the various characters in the story cycle: the first kind of seeing is tied to the act of being direct witness to events, and the second, a kind of seeing that involves the ability to see in one's imagination what one has heard second- or thirdhand in stories. Arguably, this then is what the figure of the needle and the eye teaches—that one might learn not just from what one directly sees but also from what one hears.

But this is only one of the many figures of eyes at play in this one scene: in addition to the eye and the needle, there are the eyes of lovers whose praises are sung in the poetry, and then there is the oath to be eyes without tongues. In short, we find eyes abounding throughout this scene alone—and throughout every page of the broader story cycle: there are the bewitching eyes of cloistered girls drawn straight from the classical poetic tradition; there is the language of eyes through which silenced lovers communicate; there is the eye of the calligrapher turning spoken language into silent image; there are the gluttonous eyes of party crashers and boors who impose on generous hosts; there is the eye of *fudul*, that is, the eye of curiosity, which causes trouble wherever it looks; and there is, most of all, the evil eye (*'ayn al-hasud*), the embodied-disembodied locus of an economy of envy that permeates the entire cycle.

But to appreciate the pregnancy of the figure, we need to consider the one-eyed dervishes themselves, whose figure very economically binds together two other key themes of the story cycle: retributive justice and sexual innuendo. The theme of justice is relatively straightforward, since each of the dervishes' tales tells the story of corporeal punishment—very literally, an eye for an eye. What is less obvious, perhaps, is how these characters extend the lusty sexual-linguistic romp that

takes place earlier between the porter and the three ladies. According to 'Umar ibn Muhammad al-Nafzawi, author of the celebrated fourteenth-century work *The Perfumed Garden*, "the one-eyed man" was one of the many medieval euphemisms for the penis.¹⁹ Burton translates Nafzawi's entry for this word, *al-a'war*, in this way: "the one-eyed, . . . it has but one eye [whose] eye is not like other eyes and does not see clearly," and "its one eye presents the peculiarity of being without pupil and [without] eyelashes."²⁰ Thus, some of the men in this story become, by way of this other set of eye motifs, phalloi with stories to tell. This pun grows more tumescent with each story. As each dervish narrates his tale, he cries copiously, which brings to mind other names from Nafzawi's list, such as *al-damma'* (the weeper) and *al-bakkay* (the crier), "so called on account of the many tears it sheds; as soon as it gets an erection, it weeps; when it sees a pretty face, it weeps; handling a woman, it weeps."²¹ This certainly helps to explain how they are rewarded with the more than slightly lewd phrase, "Stroke your head and go." Once these ludic seeds are planted in our reading mind, we might return more suspiciously to the porter himself. The common translation of *al-hammal* is "the porter," which comes from the verb *h-m-l*, "to carry." Yet, since the same verb also connotes pregnancy and conception, his name suggests another slang term for the penis, "the impregnator."

Yet, because the play of pun is deeply rooted in the particular polysemic possibilities of the Middle Arabic of the text, none of it has ever traveled in translation. This is not because of faults in the translation (here Husain Haddawy's excellent rendition) but because of limits to literary portability. It is not a question of determining semantic meaning and finding equivalents in the target language but rather of grasping that the sort of indeterminacy allowed by the Arabic language of the text is part of its structure. The common translation of this story cycle provides some clues to how typically these aspects of the language are read. Almost universally, *al-hammal* is rendered as the title for the character, and it functions as his proper name: The Porter. The same is true of *al-a'war*. By reading these words as names rather than attributes, the figurative aspects of the text disappear from view. In a sense, the Arabic text provides a descriptive theory of sorts insofar as it contains a commentary on how idiomatic usage flattens the metaphors contained in common words by reactivating them through extended associations.

It also comments on the polysemic chaos of language. In the Arabic, the ludic connotations of these figures are not those necessarily most associated with their literal or conventional uses. Sometimes it is a secondary or tertiary connotation of a word that sets the play in motion. Which is to say, the text situates words in such a way that their conventional senses are disrupted by minor senses—and in this way, the order and seriousness of linguistic performance is replaced by chaos and play. Such play is obscure and, more importantly, deniable. And because it takes a dirty mind to recognize a dirty pun, there are incentives for silence around this aspect of the text. But ludic punning is only one part of the text's figurative play. The figure of the eye also serves to articulate the three dominant affective themes of the story cycle: courtly love, envy, and indiscreet curiosity.

First is the eye and the figuration of courtly desire. From the outset, the porter's encounter with the ladies takes place in the shadow cast by the classical poetic figure of the eye of the beloved. The story begins, "[Once] there lived in the city of Baghdad a bachelor who worked as a porter. One day he was standing in the market, leaning on his basket, when a woman approached him. . . . When she lifted her veil, she revealed a pair of beautiful dark eyes graced with long lashes and a tender expression, like those celebrated by the poets" (66–67). When this shopper takes him home, the porter sees "a full-bosomed girl, about five feet tall . . . [with] eyes like those of a deer or wild heifer, [and] eyebrows like the crescent in the month of Sha'ban" (68). The two girls admit the porter into a hall, where a girl emerges from behind a curtain: "She had an excellent figure, the scent of ambergris, sugared lips [and] Babylonian eyes with eyebrows as arched as a pair of bent bows" (69).

From the earliest of times, the eye has had a privileged place in the conventions of Arabic poetry.²² As Richard Ettinghausen put it,

In [Arabic courtly poetry] one reads that the ideal Arab woman must be so stout that she nearly falls asleep. . . . Her breasts should be full and rounded, her waist slender and graceful, her belly lean, her hips sloping, and her buttocks so fleshy as to impede her passage through a door. [Her neck is said to be] like that of a gazelle, while her arms are described as well rounded, with soft delicate elbows, full wrists, and long fingers. Her

face [has] white cheeks, . . . and her eyes are those of a gazelle with the white of the eye clearly marked.²³

Far from expanding creatively on this set of classical formulas, the figures of feminine beauty in the *Nights* often repeat them mechanically. This story cycle is filled with over a dozen derivative poems that repeat, in cliché terms, this same image of the beloved's eye. At times, it even admits to the conventionality of the reference, as it does at the outset when it says the shopper "had eyes like those celebrated by the poets." In this story cycle, as in the poetic tradition, the eyes of the beloved hold a power over the lover who gazes on them. More exactly, the eye is pictured in a set of elements drawn from archery: in this image, the eyebrow of the beloved serves as the bow; the eyelashes, as a quiver of darts; and glances, as arrows that pierce and wound the lover.²⁴

We might then consider lines from "The Third Dervish's Tale." Soon after arriving at a palace filled with forty beautiful women, the dervish chooses one to sleep with. He describes her by way of one of these poems:

She bent and swayed like a ripe willow bough,
O more lovely, sweet and delicious sight!
She smiled and her glittering mouth revealed
Flashing stars that answered light with light.
.....
How can such fledgling thing such beauties show,
.....
Such wide eyes that with the arrows of love
The tortured victim pierce? (127)

The following evening, he chooses another girl, whom he describes the same way:

I saw two caskets on her bosom fair,
Shielded with musk seals from lovers' embrace.
Against assault she guarded them with darts
And arrowy glances from her lovely face. (128)

This convention of the beloved's eye does not discriminate along gender lines. During "The Tale of the First Lady," it applies also to a male beloved:

By his enchanting eyelids and his slender waist,
 By his beguiling eyes so keen, so fair,
 By his sharp glances and his tender sides,

 By eyebrows that have robbed my eyes of sleep. (138)

At the same time, the eye serves as a figure of envy. Indeed, the centrality of the figure of the evil eye suggests that the moral economy of envy is the cycle's most pervasive, if disguised, theme. Like jinn and fate, the *Nights* assumes the existence of the evil eye and assumes some familiarity with its conventions. The tales are filled with both explicit and oblique references to such conventions. Strangers and disfigured men—and one-eyed men most especially—appear throughout this cycle, all of whom might be viewed with suspicion as conventional agents of the evil eye. Like the eye of courtly love, the covetous eye is also said to throw arrows and darts at its victims. The tales are also stuffed with many well-known examples of counter magical practices that protect from, offset, and undo the magic of the eye, such as symbolically gouging it out or piercing it with a horn or arrow.²⁵ And this in fact is what one man in "The Second Dervish's Tale" wishes he could do to the eyes that have afflicted him. Following the foretold death of his young son, the man recites a long poem—much of which describes the workings of the evil eye:

we [once] lived together in one home
 A life of bliss that did no hindrance know
 Until with parting's arrow we were shot,
 And who can of such arrow bear the blow?

 On me and mine did envy fix his eye,
 O son, I'd have given my life for you.

Some evil eyes on you have had their feast,
 Would they were pierced or black[ened] or blind did grow. (122)

There are less dramatic ways of combating the eye than poking it out. In this story cycle, characters are hidden away in underground chambers and distant palaces or disguised so as to hide them from envious eyes. Calligraphic talismans and charms are drawn up and worn to neutralize or deflect the envious eye.²⁶ Some scenes involve elaborate fumigations of burning wood and incense—rituals designed to hinder the sight of the evil eye or to purify people unfortunate enough to have been victims of its power.²⁷ It is well known that even just the representation of a hand or eye is, in itself, useful in this regard, since the likeness of the eye, or the fingers that might gouge it, are conventionally powerful counteragents. We might remember also that at the heart of “The Second Dervish’s Tale,” which is arguably the heart of the story cycle itself, is a strange exemplary tale titled “The Envious and the Envid.”²⁸

Finally, let us briefly consider the eye as a locus of curiosity. Importantly, the theme of curiosity, *fudul*, is always in this cycle, as elsewhere in the *Nights*, understood to be a form of heedlessness, or *jahl*. In that sense, it is always contrasted to discretion. As noted earlier, discretion features early in this cycle, as the ladies admit the dervishes into their home only on the condition of their absolute discretion. Earlier, they had posed this same rule to the porter, saying, “Whatever we do, and whatever happens to us, you shall refrain from asking for any explanation, for ‘speak not of what concerns you not, lest you hear what pleases you not’” (76). The porter’s reply, his pledge of discretion, brings us back to the eye. “Yes, yes, yes,” he says. “Consider me eyeless and tongueless” (76; *ana bi-la ‘ayn wa-la lisan*, 136).²⁹ Discretion is, in this model, a tongue that never tells what the eye sees. But inordinate curiosity poses a problem that is larger than mere indiscretion. The aspects of this are developed most fully in “The Third Dervish’s Tale.” After accidentally killing the young cloistered boy, this dervish walks and walks until he comes to a copper palace inhabited by ten one-eyed men. As the dervish demands to know the story behind the loss of their eyes, they tell him more than once, “We would be sitting pretty but for our curiosity” (125) (*Kunna bi-tulna ma-khallana fudulna*; 190). As it turns out, when the dervish asks these men about their story, he sets in motion a series

of events that ends with the loss of his own eye. Returning to this palace after having his own eye gouged out, the men tell him, “because of our curious eyes, we lost our eyes” (132). We should not lose the irony: it is his obstinate curiosity about the consequences of their curiosity that brings about his misfortune. But this story, more than any other, seems to comment directly on the pleasure of consuming narrative—for what is the dervish’s curiosity but the demand for a story that would explain the unusual and make sense of the amazing? In other words, what is this but the mirror of ourselves as readers of the *Nights*, seeking, demanding more and more stories to satisfy our own curious eyes?

The eye may serve as the privileged figure by which these three affects—love, envy, and curiosity—are developed. But are these the same eye? The brief answer is no. The differences between them are salient for understanding each affect: in the elaboration of envy, for instance, the evil eye figures as the lens that focuses a disembodied force on its objects; in the elaboration of courtly love, it is just the opposite—it is the very embodied eye of the beloved, the object of desire, that is said to wound the subject of that love, the lover; finally, with curiosity, it is never fully clear where the center of that affect lies—with either the subject of curiosity or with the object that draws people to look at it. Is something curious because of a quality within it, or is the curiosity of the dervishes a fault of their character? The figure of the eye asks but does not answer this question. To confuse matters even more, the eye is not just the figure for these affects; it is also as the privileged figure for an exploration of their consequences. Indeed, retribution—the taking of an eye for an eye—appears to be the same for envy as it is for curiosity and possibly also for love. In other words, by yoking together these affects in a single, shared figure, the story suggests that the similarities between love, envy, and curiosity might outweigh their differences.

In light of this reading, we might return to Kilito’s reflections on the slogan of this cycle: “Mine is a tale that, if it were engraved with needles at the corner of the eye, would be a lesson for those who would consider.” The language seems to suggest that this eye, of reading and writing, might be the most effective charm against the ills that attend these affects. But it would be naïve to say that the meaning of this figure is self-evident. A conventional reading of needles and eyes might lead us to dismiss the figure as mere hyperbole, expressing something like this:

it is as rare, and even marvelous, to write on eyes as it is for people to consider and take to heart the stories they hear. Yet the phrase makes some associations and puns that demand untangling. First, it needs pointing out that the tie between needles and eyes is not particularly odd. On the one hand, one can speak of “the eye of the needle” in Arabic as in English. On the other hand, needles, like hands and horns, are useful, everyday charms against the evil eye. But writing on the eye or, rather, on the corner of the eye—that is unusual. And what about the pun between needles and lessons—*’ibar* and *ibar* in the Arabic? The pun, possible in colloquials such as Egyptian, in which the letter *’ayn* is lightly pronounced, invites retranslation: “Mine is a tale that, if it were written in lessons at the corner of the eye, would be a needle for those who would consider”—or “for those who would be pricked.”

And where does this writing take place anyway? What kind of eye are we speaking about—is this just another figure for yet another theme? *Miq al-’ayn* in the Middle Arabic of the *Nights* refers to the inner corner of the eye—neither inside nor outside the body but on the edge of one of its edges. Yet in this phrase, it is not *’ayn*, “eye,” that appears but rather the word *basar*, which conventionally means “vision” or even “perception”—the mind’s eye—and refers as much to the concept of discernment and judgment as it does to visual organs. So perhaps this writing is taking place not on an actual eye but rather in one’s mental faculties. In this reading of the phrase, the process of consideration is not the consequence of writing but rather its condition: the learning of lessons is itself the needle, and it is the consideration of story that etches it in the imagination. Thus, the figure pulls us back into the argument for the serious consideration of narrative and the value of *adab* and story in the frame tale of the *Nights*. In this regard, we should not forget to recall how eyes and eyesight figure so importantly in Shahriyar’s reckoning—a process which accords authority to narrative when grounded in eyewitness but which withholds it in the case of secondhand tales. The telling of stories is thus redeemed not through the tongue but through the association with eye. But that cannot be the whole of the story. The very figure by which the value of story is expressed here—the eye—suggests that narrative itself might share in the pleasures and punishments associated with envy and curiosity and the like.

The consideration of the eye as a shifting figure leads us into the smallest details of poems embedded within embedded stories and then pitches us back again into the broadest organizing polemic of *The Thousand and One Nights* as a whole—but now with questions. This story cycle builds and then binds itself to the frame tale of Scheherazade and Shahriyar not just through the repetition of fixed motifs but by developing organizing figures that ambiguate as much as they clarify.

To conclude, we should emphasize that figure in the *Nights* is not reducible to the kind of fixed and stable motif described by folklorists and that the movement of figure is as complex as its shifts of narrative frame. The slipperiness of figuration has been the topic of just a fraction of the scholarship on the *Nights*, almost exclusively in the work of Kilito, Sandra Naddaff, and Ferial Ghazoul. In an exemplary reading of “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies,” Ghazoul describes how the narrative redeploys motifs that had already appeared in two earlier cycles, “The Merchant and the Demon” and “The Fisherman and the Demon.” Ghazoul shows how each cycle develops a different possibility of embedded narrative—what she calls subordination, coordination, and superordination. Yet, as she notes, these repetitions among enframed narratives borrow “motifs without hardly any elaboration. The relationship can be summed up as a figure which cannot be contained and keeps slipping from one narrative to another.”³⁰

Building on Ghazoul’s insight, we might argue that while figures provide the thematic ligaments that hold the narrative boxes together, they are a stretchy kind of connective tissue. The figure of the eye serves to articulate the main themes, situations, and problems within the story cycle of “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies” and thus suggests that our accounts of the *Nights* not only need to consider figure in the text but need to consider figure as an aspect of narrative structure. In the case of “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies,” the figure of the eye is what connects and develops the main themes of the story cycle—courtly love, sexual hint, indiscreet curiosity, inordinate appetite, retributive justice, and envy. But the kind of organization offered by this figure is one that is not free from ambiguity. The reason for this is simple: if each of these separate themes—love, desire, curiosity, justice, and envy—finds expression through this single figure of the eye, then

what does that tell us about their differences? How are these themes distinct if they are produced by the same figure? In this sense, the figure of the eye provides us with an opportunity to explore the sense of articulation offered by Stuart Hall—that is, an instance of speech that joins together elements and themes generating from separate moral spheres, while also keeping them separate and distinct.³¹

NOTES

1. By this, I am referring to the experimentation with the frame tale as a narrative form in the works of writers as diverse as Mir Amman, Jorge Luis Borges, Isak Dinesen, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Jan Potocki.
2. See, for example, *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, trans. N. J. Dawood (New York: Penguin, 1993).
3. See Muhsin Jassim Ali, *Scheherazade in England: A Study of Nineteenth-Century English Criticism of the Arabian Nights* (Boulder, CO: Three Continents, 1981); Ros Ballaster, *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East in England, 1662–1784* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jorge Luis Borges, “The Thousand and One Nights,” in *Seven Nights: Lectures*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 1984), 42–57; Peter L. Caracciolo, ed., *The Arabian Nights in English Literature: Studies in the Reception of the “The Thousand and One Nights” into British Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1988); Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions: Europe’s Myths of Orient* (London: Pandora, 1988); and Kamran Rastegar, “The Changing Value of *Alf Laylah Wa Laylah* for Nineteenth-Century Arabic, Persian, and English Readerships,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 36:3 (2005): 269–87.
4. See Mohamed Abdel-Halim, *Antoine Galland: Sa vie, son oeuvre* (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1964); Claude Hagège, “Traitement du sens et fidélité dans l’adaptation classique: Sur la texte arabe des *Mille et une nuits* et la traduction de Galland,” *Arabica* 27 (1980): 114–39; Rida Hawari, “Antoine Galland’s Translation of the *Arabian Nights*,” *Revue de la littérature comparée* 54 (1980): 150–64; C. Knipp, “*The Arabian Nights* in England: Galland’s Translation and Its Successors,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 5 (1974): 44–54; and Muhsin Mahdi, “Antoine Galland and the *Nights*” and “Galland’s Successors,” in *The Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 11–86.
5. See Nabia Abbott, “A Ninth-Century Fragment of the ‘Thousand Nights’: New Light on the Early History of the *Arabian Nights*,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 8 (July 1949): 129–64; Heinz Grotzfeld, “Neglected Conclusions of the *Arabian Nights*: Gleanings in Forgotten and Overlooked Recensions,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 16 (1985): 73–87; D. B. MacDonald, “The Earlier History of the *Arabian Nights*,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1924, 353–97; Muhsin Mahdi, “Four Editions: 1814–1843,” in *The Thousand and One Nights*, 87–126; David Pinault, “Bulaq, MacNaghten, and the New Leiden Edition Compared: Notes on

- Storytelling Technique from the *Thousand and One Nights*," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 32:1 (1987): 125–57; Dwight F. Reynolds, "A *Thousand and One Nights*: A History of the Text and Its Reception," in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, ed. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards, 270–91 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
6. See Michael Cooperson, "The Monstrous Births of Aladdin," *Harvard Review of Middle Eastern and Islamic Affairs* 1:1 (1994): 67–86; Muhsin Mahdi, "Retranslation: An Arabic Version of 'Ali Baba,'" in *The Thousand and One Nights*, 72–86.
 7. Three notable exceptions to this are Ferial J. Ghazoul, *Nocturnal Poetics: The Arabian Nights in Comparative Contexts* (Cairo: American University Press, 1996); Abdelfattah Kilito, *L'œil et l'aiguille: Essais sur "Les mille et une nuits"* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992); and Sandra Naddaff, *Arabesque: Narrative Structure and the Aesthetics of Repetition in the "1001 Nights"* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991). Less often still has it been studied as an Arabic text marked by oral and literate structures of organization. Two exceptions to this are David Pinault, *Story-Telling Techniques in the "Arabian Nights"* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); and Suhayr Qalamawi, *Alf layla wa-layla* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1966).
 8. See, for example, Mia Gerhardt, *The Art of Story-Telling: A Literary Study of the "Thousand and One Nights"* (Leiden: Brill, 1963); Tzvetan Todorov, "Narrative-Men" and "The Grammar of Narrative," in *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 66–79, 108–19; and Mark Turner, "Bedtime with Shahrazad," in *The Literary Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3–11.
 9. See Andras Hamori, *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); Hamori, "Notes on Two Love Stories from the *Thousand and One Nights*," *Studia Islamica* 43 (1976); Hamori, "A Comic Romance from the *Thousand and One Nights*: The Tale of the Two Viziers," *Arabica* 30 (1983): 38–56; Hamori, "The Magian and the Whore: Readings of Qamar al-Zaman," in *The 1001 Nights: Critical Essays and Annotated Bibliography* (Cambridge, MA: Dar Mahjar, 1985), 25–40; Peter Heath, "Romance as Genre in *The Thousand and One Nights*" (in two parts), *Journal of Arabic Literature* 18 (1987) and 19 (1988); Malcolm Cameron Lyons, *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-Telling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
 10. Examples of the motif study of the *Nights* include Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004); Bruno Bettelheim, "The Frame Story of *Thousand and One Nights*," in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 86–90 (New York: Knopf, 1976); Stephanie Dalley, "Gilgamesh in the *Arabian Nights*," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1991): 1–17; Hasan El-Shamy, *A Motif Index of "The Thousand and One Nights"* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); James E. Montgomery, "Al-Sindibad and Polyphemus: Reflections on the Genesis of an Archetype," in *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic Approach*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Birgit Embaló, Sebastian Günther, and Maher Jarrar (Stuttgart:

- Franz Steiner Verlag, 1999); Roy Mottahedeh, "Aja'ib in *The Thousand and One Nights*," in *The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic Literature and Society*, ed. Richard C. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh, 29–39 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Gustave E. von Grunebaum, "Creative Borrowing: Greece in the *Arabian Nights*," in *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation*, 294–319 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).
11. Edward Said, "Traveling Theory," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226.
 12. See Amira El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009); and Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).
 13. See Niloofar Haeri, *Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
 14. Richard Burton's translation is perhaps the best example of this style.
 15. Rasheed El-Enany has made similar observations concerning the translation of religious discourse in Naguib Mahfouz's novels. See "Mahfouz: A Great Novel and a Wanting Translation," *Third World Quarterly* 13:1 (1992): 187–89.
 16. Muhsin Mahdi, ed., *Kitab Alf layla wa-layla*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1984) (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text). Unlike later, colonial-era redactions of the *Nights*, the Mahdi edition preserves the nonstandard, or Middle Arabic, register of the text in its oldest form. My transliterations reflect the spelling of the edition. English translations are taken from Hussein Haddawy's translation of the Mahdi edition, *The Arabian Nights* (New York: Norton, 1990) (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text).
 17. Muhsin Musawi explores the place of writing in this story cycle and emphasizes the visual aspect of this phrase, which is inscribed above the door. See "Scheherazade's Nonverbal Narratives," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 36:3 (2005): 338–62.
 18. Kilito, *L'œil et l'aiguille*, 105–7.
 19. 'Umar ibn Muhammad al-Nafzawi, *al-Rawd al-'atir fi-nuzhat al-khatir*, ed. Jamal Jum'a (London: Riad al-Rayyes Books, 1993); Shaykh Nefzawi, *The Perfumed Garden of the Shaykh Nefzawi*, trans. Richard Burton (London: Granada, 1963).
 20. Nefzawi, *Perfumed Garden*, 178.
 21. *Ibid.*, 179.
 22. See J. C. Bürgel, "Love, Lust and Longing: Eroticism in Early Islam as Reflected in Literary Sources," in *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*, ed. Afaf Lutfi Sayyid-Marsot, 81–118 (Malibu, CA: Undena, 1979), 81–118; Lois Griffen, *Theory of Profane Love among the Arabs* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972).
 23. As quoted in Irwin, *Arabian Nights: A Companion*, 166.
 24. By way of comparison, we might think of the English saying "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Nothing could be more different from the conventions of Arabic poetry, in which it is the eye of the beheld that captivates and wounds the beholder. These metaphors have apparent distant cousins in English, yet when

we speak of arching brows, sharp glances, and looking daggers at someone, we are speaking of enmity rather than desire.

25. See Edward Westermarck, "The Evil Eye," in *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1926), 1:414–78.
26. See *ibid.* James Trilling has pointed out how the origins of interlace, along with Arabesque ornament, might be in the desire to hide objects from the evil eye or to confuse its sight. See "Medieval Interlace Ornament: The Making of a Cross-Cultural Idiom," *Arte medievale* 9:2 (1995): 59–86.
27. See the relevant essays by Leonard W. Moss and Stephen Cappannari and Brian Spooner in *The Evil Eye*, ed. Clarence Maloney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).
28. In an article on the place of exemplary tales in the *Nights*, Mahdi comments on the ill fit of these stories and their failure to perform rhetorically. Mahdi suggests they were likely inserted by scribes who treated such stories as filler. While it is indeed true that this embedded story makes little sense according to the narrative logic of the cycle, thematically, it could not have been added in a more appropriate place—in terms of ring composition, right at the very heart of stories about envy. See Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 156.
29. This is slightly different from the oath soon taken by the three dervishes, who agree to be "eyes without tongues," not inquiring about what concerns them not (79). These oaths share the connection between the eye and tongue.
30. Ghazoul, *Nocturnal Poetics*, 92.
31. Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, ed. UNESCO (Paris: UNESCO, 1980).