The Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights
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Reviewed by Hasan El-Shamy, Indiana University
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This is a masterful treatment of the celebrated classic known as *The Thousand and One Nights* (henceforth, the *Nights*) in its Eastern home of origins, and as *The Arabian Nights* in Western literary and artistic circles. Al-Musawi is an eminent scholar, professor of Arabic and comparative studies at Columbia University, and editor of *Journal of Arabic Literature* (including a special issue commemorating Antoine Galland's edition: vol. 35 no.3, 2005). He applies his diverse expertise and vast knowledge of Eastern and Western literatures and culture histories to the analysis of the *Nights*—a major literary phenomenon that until recently received only scant attention from Arab scholars. The result is a rich and thought-provoking tome shedding needed light on various facets of a substantial portion of its contents and the social and cultural processes that accompanied its birth, growth, and other aspects of its life history as a book. It also addresses by way of comparison numerous early and medieval Arabic-Islamic narrative arts in their diverse literary and social milieus. This latter category includes such early works as ¿Abdullah ibn al-Muqaffa¿'s (d. 759 C.E.) Kalîlah wa-Dimnah/the Arabic version of the Indian *Panchatantra* (8, 46-47, 225), Abû al-Faraj al-'Isfahânî's (d. 967 C.E.) *Kitâb al-'aghânî/Book of Songs* (102, 108, 113-114, 126), and Abû Bakr ibn Tufayl's (d. 1185 C.E.) philosophical and visionary narrative *Hayy ibn Yaqzân* (233, 244). These and other Arab classics receive analytical and comparative treatments that add significantly to their historical and literary narrative values, especially in connection with the *Nights'* themes—such as "education," which became a "weapon in the hands of slaves, barbers, and professionals" (14), the educated females (25, 56, 112, 120) along with the occurrence of social settings comparable to the European "salon" and "its highly refined *salonniers* and attendants" (7, 182-183), and tolerance and accommodation in various aspects of social and legal systems (104, 185). Other forms of medieval popular culture are also addressed. These include the *maqâmât* (literally "assemblies," a literary poetic genre that contains some narrative elements) of Badî¿ al-Zamân al-Hamadhânî (d. 1008 C.E.), and Abû al-Qâsim al-Harîrî''s (d. 1122 C.E.).

However, the initial message this volume conveys is embedded as a nonverbal narrative element on its elegant dust jacket. It is a copy of a modern painting showing a young woman: unveiled, pensive-faced, with body and limbs indicating wellness and fertility, sitting cross-legged on the floor—the traditional posture for household taletelling. Yet, her minuscule right foot visible from underneath her gown in shades of red color betrays incapacity to move or travel—a condition shared by a colorful, long-plumed bird perched on her right palm while its visibly tight cage is nearby, ready to receive it back into captivity. All three constituents of the drawing are enframed within a luxurious Arabesque/Islamic style chamber with an open arched window (or perhaps wall painting) showing a lush garden. This portrait—presumably unrelated to the *Nights*—by a female elite artist may be seen as a visual paradigm of how the legendary (or—more likely—mythical) raconteuse Sheherazade and her arts, verbal and nonverbal, are currently perceived (cf. El-Shamy: 1999:414, "drawing [...] suggesting" Tale-type 123C§ as animal tale instead of 123C with human persona).

In the introduction (1-19) al-Musawi posts as title for the opening segment the question: "Is There an Islamic Context for *The Thousand and One Nights*?" An emphatic and resounding "Yes!" has already been given as the answer in the book's title. He then begins his study by identifying critical areas where scholarship on the *Nights* has been deficient. Two things are "glaringly missing in most studies, old and new": first, the Islamic factor, including institutionalized religion, state institutions, and faith or mass religion as "a religious *sentiment* that can constitute and operate strongly on *structures of feeling*" (4, italics added; cf. 29, 65); and, second, the underlying narrative unity in the tales as brought to us since the "late eighth and early ninth centuries."

The axes (or foci) around which data analysis and interpretation cohere are identified. One of these axes may be characterized as motivation within a religious context/law (or sharia), such as explaining the "religious borders of obligation and the irresistible temptation of physical beauty, wine, and music" in the story of "Nûr al-Dîn and Anîs al-Jalîs" (6). As illustrated at a later stage of the book (169-170), this inquiry deals with dodging these obligations in a manner constituting narrative data that parallels a trickster's artifices (cf. new motifs: U249.0.1§, "Motivation: no action (behavior) without reason (stimulus)"; C1.1§, "al-ḥarâm: sacred (religious) tabu. The illegitimate (illicit, not permitted)—opposite of: al-ḥalâl (the licit or legitimate, permitted by God)"; and K289.9.3.1§, "Religious prohibition of having to do with liquor deceptively evaded") (El-Shamy 2004, 2006). Related to this practice is the theme of hisbah/moral and legal market inspector's duties (although it occurs only once peripherally in an extratextual poem, it is a cardinal motivator, and al-Musawi treats it as such)—(cf. motif P770.0.1§, "Market's shaikh" (head of chamber of commerce, syndic)" (El-Shamy 2004, 2006). Two more arguments, according to the author, "hold the book together": one relates to the philological and textual questions that have been in the minds of many scholars since the early appearance of the Nights as a book in Europe (6). The second relates to the reception in France of Galland's 1704 translation (7, 9), and the unbridled zeal with which the Parisian public received it (49).

It may be assumed that the appeal of Galland's anthology in Europe can be viewed as part of the broader Romantic philosophy, especially its fascination with exoticism (El-Shamy 1990:67-68). Yet, a significant proviso mitigates the Nights' affiliation with Romanticism and its far-reaching nationalistic, political, and egalitarian ideologies. Al-Musawi concludes that the "[s]o-called European romanticism is not concerned with an Islamic life or social and religious ways and customs. To this romantic mind, it is enough to lose oneself in a tale pure and simple"(50-51). He then draws a parallel between this viewpoint and what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the *interior infinite*, with its professed desire for the "boundless, the free, and also the dangerous, challenging, and tyrannical, where the repressed soul finds its opportunity to fly high as a spirit unquell'd" (51, 286 n.91).

An additional axis may be detected in the first chapter (25-51), which is dedicated to the frame-story (designated as new Tale-type: 1426A§, "*Cuckolded Husband Kills a New Bride each Night* so as to avenge self on women. (Shehryâr)." It is a composite type that incorporates other tale-types (see El-Shamy 1995:435, 2006:666). Following Emmanuel Cosquin's view, al-Musawi holds this frame story to be borrowed from Indo-Persian sources. This premise leads him to assign to it a controlling effect on the "Arab-Islamic" Nights, for it "built around itself a good number of stories." This new creation—superorganic as it seems—"quickly caused it to become the most celebrated work in other cultures" (cf. motif Z119.0.2§, "Word believed to have capacity (power) to create. Blasphemous belief"). Determining how and why this occurred constitutes another axis of research (7-8).

Beside the introduction and conclusion the contents are grouped into seven (a traditional formulaic number) chapters, each dedicated to a major topic within the postulated Islamic foundations of the Nights. Each topic is further subdivided into constituent themes as subheadings. A total of eighty such subheadings are treated in the work. Each chapter and topic is thematically interrelated to the others. Succinct accounts of stories or major episodes thereof serve to support certain viewpoints offered by the author, and at the same time sketch salient narrative situations. The topics addressed range from the mainly theoretical to the descriptive (historical and demographic). The theoretical includes such issues as the "Multiple Approaches to the Frame Tale" (35), the transformation process "From Transmission to Narration" (61), and "The Islamic Narrative Function," a role that may be clarified as characteristic of the genre termed "exemplum"(67). The most descriptive include entries on such topics as "Knowledge and the Growth of Empire" (117), "Tropes for Imperial Growth: Race and Acquisition of Slaves" (132), "Professions and Crafts" (159), "Food Semiotics" (273), as well as the art of narrating (or narratology) discussed under the headings "The Unwritten Tale" and "What Is Nonverbal Narrative?" (209 and 251, respectively). Only chapter 6, dealing with "The Public Role in Islamic Narrative Theorizations" (228-249), with obvious thematic links to theory and

demography, is addressed as a single theme.

The chapters are logically arranged to present a sequence of historical and sociocultural developments as depicted in or inferred from the *Nights* as literature rather than folklore, written or oral. Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 7 address the Islamic Factor: in "Global Times" (25), as "the Unifying [...] Factor" (52), its role in "the Age of Muslim Empire and the Burgeoning of a Text" (106), and in "Scheherazade's Nonverbal Narratives in Religious Contexts" (250), respectively. In this context, "Global Times" signifies fraternity beyond ethnic and similar social distinctions (21). Meanwhile, chapter 5 discusses "Nonreligious Displacements in Popular Tradition," emphasizing the dichotomous patterning between the court and street or the rich and the poor (197), and between the secular and the religious (214, 231, cf. 224 where the fantastic partakes of the religious). Two chapters (4 and 6) are dedicated to the influence the population exerted on the formation of this narrative anthology; they bear the titles "the Role of the Public in *The Thousand and One Nights*," where the "readers" and their preferences are discussed (145), and "The Public Role in Islamic Narrative Theorizations" (228), respectively. Al-Musawi labels this cultural phenomenon associated with a readership the "urban mind," and points out that it distinguished Baghdad from the eighth to twelfth centuries C.E., and Mamluk Cairo later (6, 8, 22).

It is that "urban mind" and its desire to read *'asmâr* (nightly entertainments) and *hikâyât* (tales) that motivated the movement among some elite to gather and re-write oral traditional folktales that came to be attributed to Sheherazade's oral tale-telling skills. Al-Musawi explains:

> "The effort to address a reading public is central to the [narrative] art, however, for it manifests both the damage done to the oral tradition... and the desire among some of the literati to dig into the marginalized culture or to refine it through acceptable embeddings and translated framing narratives" (230-231).

He also adds that this process "serves a different purpose... for it demonstrates the intervention of compilers, editors, and redactors in matters relating to the Islamic context of the tales" (5, also 37, 71). It also generates additions that show the "desire of *storytellers* [*via the written medium*] and redactors to promote their art" (261, italics added). (See "The Perception of Folktales as Literature," and "The Writer-Redactor-Collector as Narrator" in El-Shamy 1990:70-83; also see "levels of Arabic speech," below).

One of the multitude of issues discussed deserves a closer look; it may be labelled levels of Arabic speech (currently classified into three levels: classical/*fushâ*, "newspaper" or common, and vernacular or dialectical). An insightful example—though highly speculative—is al-Musawi's view on the patterning of speech style and its *symbolic significance* as expressed in the tale of the "Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad" (where erotic dallying "but no actual intercourse" occurs; designated as new Tale-type: 1425B§, "*Seduction: Putting the Bird (or Animal) in its Natural Habitat*" [El-Shamy 1990:69-71; 1995:435; 2004, 2005:247–48; 2006:665]). Al-Musawi observes: "Narrative is released from its mystique, shorn of its fantastic dimensions, and relocated in a present of stark reality, where the porter and the three ladies use every kind of language and where the porter uses the *vernacular* to approach mundane reality" (163, italics added). His argument continues: "Nudity in the bath scene symbolizes the act of stripping language of its polite mannerisms in the discourse of the porter and the interventions of the ladies" (163). This interpretation is extended at a later stage of the study to encompass a broader spectrum of the *Nights'* constituents: beyond its language (or parlance). Al-Musawi elaborates on this event by concluding that "*storytellers [by committing the oral tales to the written form] invade and raid tradition, appropriating it to make it available for their new enterprise*" (202, italics added).

Here we must differentiate between two distinct processes to which the verbs "narrate" or "tell" are applied: (1) orally/aurally: from mouth/memory to ear, and (2) visually: from eye to brain/mind or from memory to paper (i.e., writing for a reader) to be perceived visually. A reciter/reader of a written/printed text only simulates the former process. The first is the standard process for communicating oral traditions, while the second is the typical medium of

written/printed literature (e.g., the *Nights* and its printed/literary likes). Insightful as al-Musawi's conclusion may be vis-à-vis *elite* literature and the behavior of the "literati," it is incongruent with the evidence already given concerning the oral folktale (see El-Shamy 1990:64-65; 2004b:9-10; 2005:236-237; 2006:1-2). With the exception of a number of literary accounts that have no currency in oral circulation (e.g., King Jalî¿âd and Shimâs; Basra Girls in Poetry Contest; Ishâq al-Mûsilî and Khadîjah bint al-Hasan), the majority of the *Nights'* narratives were a product of oral folk cultures and are still narrated/told (communicated) today orally in vernacular—not in written or spoken classical Arabic (El-Shamy 1980:lxviii-li; 2004b; 2005; 2006). The rendering of these narratives into classical Arabic in the *'inshâ*-style characteristic of the classical level (El-Shamy 1999:10-11; 2005:246), with residuals of their original folk-speech level is a subsequent process. This contrived style was reported to have characterized ancient Egyptian written literature (El-Shamy 2002:xxv-xxvi). An example of this latter development where *aurally* perceived folk texts were converted into visually perceived literary ones is Galland's adding of "Aladdin," "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," and "The Sisters who Envied their Younger Sister." Scores of the *Nights'* tales have been identified as international tale-types still current orally in Arab and other Middle Eastern countries and beyond. El-Shamy's indexes (1995:416-441 under "Chauvin"; 2004; 2006) identify and analyze more than 400 such tale-types.

From a folklorist's perspective, there is a research axis that is absent from this remarkable work: namely, recognition of the folkloric nature of the majority of the *Nights'* contents. Actually, the terms folktale/*Märchen*, novella, formula tale, etc. designating folk narrative genres do not appear in the entire work, while "folk and fairy tales" appears once in passing but within a European context (251); the genre known in folklore scholarship as "memorate" (personal experience narrative) is referred to as narrating in "the words and language of a speaker" (152). (See motif: J169.0.1§, "Personal experience narrative by story's character; (e.g., Ahura's, Lost Sailor's, Sinuhe's, Sindbad's, etc.)"; and Z201.1§, "Story told by tale-character(s) as an account of own personal experience—'I'-tale, 'We'-tale))" (El-Shamy 2004, 2006).

Yet, there is a high degree of concordance between the present work as a literary scholar's approach to the *Nights'* contents and a folklorist's motif analysis (El-Shamy 2006). Both stress motivation, intervening circumstances, and the eliciting of tales as responses: all basic blocks in the "cognitive behaviorism" approach (El-Shamy 1976b, 1979). Many key issues the book treats have counterparts in folkloristic research:

(1) With reference to the need for examining "sentiment that can constitute and operate strongly on structures of feeling" (cited above), El-Shamy's studies titled "The Traditional Structure of Sentiments in Mahfouz's Trilogy [...]" (1976a) may be pointed out as *the* pioneer for such a cognitive psychological approach. Also see my "Emotionskomponente" (El-Shamy 1981: 1391-1395).

(2) On the need for treating the "Islamic foundations" of the *Nights*, El-Shamy's motific analysis of the Nights (2006, cf. 2005) provides hundreds of instances under entries A (Mythology), C (Tabu), D (Magic), H (Test), N (Fate), V (Religion), etc.

(2-a) A companion theme is a Moslem male cleric's worldview as expressed in the writing down of the *Nights*. Motifs U248.6.1§, "Scribe's mental set (imagination, phantasy)"; Z70.6§, "To be like (as useless as) suspended grammatical rule..."; Z119.3.2§, "Rules of grammar as symbols of erotic actions"; and Z186.7.1§, "Symbolism: circumambulation (*tawâf*) of shrine—foreplay (or sexual intercourse)."

(3) With reference to the need for treating the Islamic legal system, an example may be found in the folkloristic treatment of the story of Hârûn, Slave-girl and Judge Abû Yûsuf (135; El-Shamy, 2006:662), identified as new tale-type: 919§, "*Exemplary Justice*. Stories about ideal application (by king, judge, etc.) of law." Its Islamic legal motifs include P522.0.2§, "Religious laws: jurisprudence based on sacred dogma (sharia, *sharî¿ah*)"; P174.2§, "Slave and owner's possessions (property)"; P174.3§, "Slave's marital affairs"; P529.5§, "*¿iddah*: required waiting period before a woman may remarry."

The relevance of these themes requiring scholarly attention, and others—such as the "salon" (181-182, n.77), "lesbian love" (183-184), "mental image" (250, 268-273), and "religious

tests" (75)—would have been expanded by relating them to their motific analyses. However, the absence of readily available folkloristic arguments and research techniques from academic literary studies on the *Nights* seems ingrained: each discipline is only faintly aware of the existence of the other's focal arguments, objectives and findings. Reviewing a 1992 publication on the *Nights*, the present reviewer noted: "[T]rue to its academic home in literature--[the study, a doctoral dissertation (1986)] seems to be oblivious to the discipline of folklore, as well as concepts, methods, and techniques used in the field of folk-literature research, especially the literary-treated folk narrative" (El-Shamy: 1996:186-189). This situation remains unchanged in 2010.

Setting this folkloristic/interdisciplinary issue aside, *The Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights* is an invaluable contribution not only to the library of traditional Arabic narrative literature but also to the cultural history of the Arab and Islamic East, Arab-European cultural relations and comparative literature as well. Its topical inclusiveness and sensible theoretical interpretations are truly refreshing.

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