

1001 Arabian Nights: A Short History

1001 Arabian Nights or The Arabian Nights (and many other variations) is a collection of folk tales from all over the early Islamic world. The story is one that many know, even if they have not read the book – the images of the evil king who marries and kills a woman every day and the beautiful storyteller who ends this terrible violence by telling him stories, is mired in our cultural memory. There are countless written versions, ballets, operas, musicals, plays, poems, movies, and TV shows that re-tell the frame story and the stories presented by Scheherazade. We can't seem to stop reading it and watching it. Part of the fascination is the setting – a lush Oriental court and part if it is an enjoyment of the stories themselves. There is even a great scholarly interest in it as well. Scholars are interested in the textual history; the thematic history; and the elements of the stories. Studies of these topics help us understand the history of fiction writing itself.

First of all, the version of 1001 Nights that we are all familiar with is not a “true” telling. Stories have been added and subtracted with each re-telling. This is ok since the even the original texts were compilations themselves. The earliest mentions of the book occur in the 9th century. It is referenced in other documents, including a catalog of books written by Ibn al-Nadim. Evidently al-Nadim was not impressed by the rough and simple stories he read. There is also a receipt from a Jewish bookseller from the 12th century that references the book. These earliest mentions are just that though, only a quick mention.

The oldest surviving manuscript of the book is from the 14th Century. It is a Syrian manuscript and it is housed in a museum in France. That manuscript is a collection of folk tales from around the world: Persian, Indian, Turkish, Greek, Arabic, Jewish, and so on. This version contains the basics of the frame story and several interesting folk tales.

The stories continue to be told for many years in Arabic until the 1700s. At that point, Antoine Gallard translated an Arabic text of the book into French and combined that with other stories he heard during his travels of the Middle East. It is Gallard who added Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad. This version was 12 volumes long but still a best seller!

In the 1800s, translations of the French version appeared in Arabic, Polish, and India. The British East India Company even printed an Arabic version. In the 1840s, Edward William Lane published the first English language version. Lane evidently edited the stories quite heavily to remove any scenes or ideas that he found immoral or unhealthy. Then in 1880 Sir Richard Burton, an English explorer and adventurer, published his translation in 10 volumes. Burton was obsessed with the Orient and evidently focused his telling on what he felt were the erotic tones and scenes from the story. It caused such a stir that the Queen declared it obscene. It has to be sold privately via subscription instead of publicly in shops.

During the 1900s many translations came out based on the Gallard version or the Burton version. Then in 1984, Muhsin Mahdi went back the 14th Century Syrian manuscript and wrote a new version in Arabic that was more loyal to the source story. In the 1990s that version was translated into English to allow readers a chance to read a less embellished or less edited version of the story.

Despite all the varied versions and translations, there are a few key elements that stay the same. The biggest is, of course, the frame story of King Shahryar and Scheherazade. It is set in a glorious and wealthy eastern kingdom. King Shahryar is fabulously wealthy. His court is full of luxuries and he hosts lavish entertainments. This setting is one of the reasons people are attracted to the story. From the 1700s on to modern times, we have indulged in what historians call Orientalism. We are drawn to the idea of exotic courts filled with scantily clad harem girls and like Burton, believe there is some sort of secret eroticism in the whole setup. It is vastly different from our European and Puritan history. That very difference makes it interesting and tantalizing. It is not surprising that the Burton version of the story sold very well.

Another reason the book/story is so popular is that the stories themselves are interesting. Fairy tales have always been popular in Western Europe and America. The fantastical settings, creatures, and adventures in fairy tales are the perfect escape from the modern world. They invite our imaginations to fly unfettered and push us to dream of wild journeys. Also, Western Europeans and Americans tend to enjoy the righteousness of fairy tales. Villains are punished, the beautiful innocent girl marries the prince, the poor become rich, etc. – we like the justice of a good happy ending.

Literary scholars also appreciate the fairy tale elements of the stories. 1001 Nights is one of the earliest examples of science fiction. Scheherazade tells stories of ghosts and ghouls, mummies, ogres, dwarves, and mermaids. In some versions there are stories of brass horsemen, robots, savage Amazon-like societies, and even space travel and time travel. These incredible elements which seem so normal to us would have been quite exotic at that point. Since we have a good textual history of the book, we can use it to trace the evolution of science fiction literature.

There are also other important fiction elements that appear in the book such as the use of a frame story narrative; having a detective character solving a mystery; the use of fate as a character or a guiding hand to the story; using imagery to describe scenes or people; and even the philosophical theme of humanism. There are a vast number of items like these that we take for granted in our modern literature but was being developed at the time these stories came to light. The fact that they appear in this book is an important benchmark or guidepost in tracking the development of modern literary elements.

1001 Nights is a book that is loved, researched, and debated consistently. The exotic settings, the vivid characters, and the variety of fantastic adventures speak to the child in us all. The structure of the text, the modern literary elements, and the influences of earlier texts keep scholars interested in it. It is this popular and intellectual appeal that makes it a significant text and one that will continue to inspire people for centuries to come.

If you are interested in learning more on this topic, please check out the following:

The Atlantic: The Humanist Message Hidden Amid the Violence of the 1001 Nights

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/06/the-humanist-message-hidden-amid-the-violence-of-i-one-thousand-and-one-nights-i/277210/>

Life Writing Techniques Blog: Literary Themes in 1001 Nights

<https://memories2memoirs.wordpress.com/literary-themes-and-techniques-from-1001-nights/>

The Influence of Arabian Nights on English Literature:

https://www.academia.edu/1780309/The_Influence_of_the_Arabian_Nights_on_English_Literature_A_Selective_Study

Arabian Nights and Science Fiction Elements:

<http://www.scififantasynetwork.com/arabian-nights-sf-origins/>

Five Books to Take You Beyond 1001 Nights:

<https://www.tor.com/2017/11/14/five-books-to-take-you-beyond-one-thousand-and-one-nights/>

Arabian Nights and Fantasy Fiction:

<https://thestrangersbookshelf.wordpress.com/2013/06/29/on-why-the-arabian-nights-matters-so-much-to-fantasy-arabian-fantasy-literature/>

Middle Eastern Fiction Recommendations:

<https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/articles/new-arabic-fiction-15-must-read-books-from-the-middle-east/>