Scheherazade's Children

*Global Encounters with the Arabian Nights*

Edited by Philip F. Kennedy and Marina Warner

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The illustrations appear in two groups, following pages 176 and 224. For information about the illustrations, see the list of illustrations on page ix.
Echoing Borges's laconic description of the Arabian Nights ("Chance has played at symmetries"), Pasolini stresses the overwhelming presence of destiny in the tales: "the protagonist of the stories is in fact destiny itself." What I propose here is a kind of cross-reading—intersecting, as it were, several texts that deal with destiny, primarily seen through the prism of the late nineteenth-century pseudo-Arabian Nights tale by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "The Tale of the 672nd Night" (1895). In this early story, a wealthy merchant's son lives in luxurious isolation in a mansion, from where he sets out one day to the city, only to meet a brutal and apparently meaningless death.

The story, we shall see, plays on different generic models—the romance or adventure tale, the fairy tale, the morality tale, the ascetic renunciation tale, but also the dream narrative—setting up competing reading protocols that complicate our understanding of the story (and the role of destiny within it), thus frustrating the reader's expectations and testing the limits of its readability.

Intertextual Connections

Because Hofmannsthal's title makes a direct, explicit reference to the Arabian Nights, we can go directly ourselves to the intertextual model thus invoked. The number "672" does not point to any story resembling Hofmannsthal's in the translations that Hofmannsthal would likely have had at his disposal at the time of his story (Maximilian Habicht's 1826 version, based largely on Antoine Galland's version, or Gustav Weil's 1837 translation, with a definitive edition in 1866). Nor do we find conclusive affinities in connection with the number 672 in any of the major translations: Galland quickly abandons the numbering device as tedious after the 272nd night, while in Richard Burton's version the 672nd night contains part of "Gharib and Ajib," and in Enno Littmann's version it contains "Asma and the Three Maidens of Basra." Therefore, we can assume, as most critics have done, that the number "672" is used simply to suggest an Oriental reference.

Hofmannsthal's interest in the Nights is well documented, and this story was written in the years of peak involvement with the book. Other early texts also use the Nights as their intertextual background, notably a dramatic poem, The Marriage of Zobeida, as well as two unfinished texts, a variation on the Arabian Nights story of Amgiad and Assad, and the story "The Golden Apple." In addition, Hofmannsthal wrote an essay on the Nights in 1907–8, when Felix Paul Greve published his German rendition of the Burton translation, and in 1925, following his journey to North Africa, Hofmannsthal published a travelogue, "Fez" (on which more later). Furthermore, his lifelong interest in the Orient extended to the Far East: we know that his Oriental library included Hermann Oldenberg's authoritative life of Buddha, Henry Clarke Warren and Karl Eugen Neumann's translations of the main canonical texts of Buddhism, and all the books by Lafcadio Hearn. Like Jorge Luis Borges a little later, Hofmannsthal also encountered the key ideas of Buddhism through Schopenhauer. His interest in Buddhism is
noteworthy, since, as we shall see, both the destiny stories in the *Nights* and “The Tale of the 672nd Night” share motifs with the Great Renunciation story at the heart of Buddhism, the decisive episode when young prince Siddhārtha decides to venture out of the walled shelter of comfort and bliss that is his palace, to leave the gilded cage in which his father has raised him, and go out into the wider, cruel world. In Hofmannsthal’s case, this interest in the Buddha story meets his lifelong fascination with a Western avatar of it, the story of prince Segismundo, the hero of Spanish Baroque playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca in his famous play *La vida es sueño* (1635), a story Hofmannsthal rewrote in one of his last texts, the play *Der Turm* (*The Tower*). This highly syncretic understanding of Eastern cultures could be interpreted as typically fin-de-siècle “Orientalist,” since Hofmannsthal’s imagination appears to move effortlessly from Iraq to Japan, from India to Spain, blending cultural specificities into one vast Orient of the mind.

Quirks of Fate

My hypothesis in reading Hofmannsthal’s story is, likewise, that it amalgamates various “destiny” motifs diverse in geographic origin and generic focus, dramatically complicating the readability of the story as a destiny story in the process. The first recognizable motif can be traced back to the *Nights* itself—the explicit intertext—in which the plot of numerous stories hinges on destiny. Of particular interest in the context of the present study are stories featuring the characters’ vain attempts to thwart destiny.

Exemplary in this respect is the story of the third prisoner, which forms a part of the well-known cycle “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad.” Among the three mysterious mendicants who spend the evening as guests of the ladies, the third one tells one such story of fate inexorably fulfilled despite all possible precautions. A young merchant’s son is hidden away in a secret underground location because of a prophecy that foretells he will be killed before manhood by a certain prince. This prince is the future calender, who happens on the secret hiding place, befriends the boy, and accidentally stabs him on the appointed day. (The story of how the prince later loses an eye and becomes a mendicant forms the second part of the story and is unconnected to the accidental death of the hidden boy.)

From this story we derive the motif of a hidden shelter, which, however, fails to protect the designated victim, because fate will fulfill itself regardless of efforts to prevent it. “However deep the beloved child is hidden from the death that has been foretold, however far the doomed victim runs, the appointment with fate will be kept.”12 Destiny stories in the *Nights* are an Arabic equivalent of the Greek Oedipus story.

Another variant of the destiny motif is that of the unsuccessful precaution. One exemplary illustration is found in the story of “Aladdin Abu Shamât,” also known as “Aladdin of the Beautiful Moles,” which is not in Galland or in the Dalziel brothers’ illustrated anthology but is featured in Burton and elsewhere (fig. 25).13 There the destiny motif is inserted in a long and meandering adventure tale featuring a long-desired son whose birth to aging parents is something of a miracle. The child is so beautiful that, in fear of the evil eye, the father decides to hide him in an underground room, where he spends the next fourteen years, emerging one day because a servant forgets to close the door behind him when bringing his meal. The boy’s intelligence and quick-wittedness match his extraordinary beauty; he immediately requests to be taken to the souk to learn the merchant’s trade, then demands to be allowed to travel and see the world. To his father’s fear of misfortune, the boy counters, convincingly, that no man may escape his fate: and thus the second part of the tale is launched, as the young man sets out with a caravan bound for Baghdad, where he plans to make a fortune in trade. Of course, the young man is inexperienced and rather spoiled; he refuses to heed the warnings about the Bedouin bandits, insists on spending the night in the desert outside Baghdad to admire the moon, and thus brings about the slaughter of his entire caravan at the hands of the Bedouins. Interestingly, he himself survives by the miraculous intervention of the saints he prayed to at the right moment: either his time had not yet come or prayer is stronger than fate.14 The rest of his adventures show a characteristic succession of high and low, fortune and misfortune—he is rescued by the same pedophile who had plagued him during the journey; fleeing this unwanted attention, he enters into an intermediary marriage in a divorce case, falls in love with the girl in
question, becomes fabulously wealthy and the caliph’s favorite, is falsely accused of theft and almost hanged. . . After a long and tangled series of breathless adventures and narrow escapes involving, among other devices, a flying sofa, Aladdin Abu Shamat ends up rich, respected, and blessed with children from three different wives. The motif of the unsuccessful precaution, in its varying forms, resonates within the circle of the Nights and outside it. The motif of the king, or prince, leaving the protective shelter of his palace and encountering danger as a result is also found in the Harun Al-Rashid cycle of the Arabian Nights stories. Every time the caliph exits his palace, he relinquishes the safety of his authority, guards, and palace walls, putting himself at risk for the excitement of seeking adventures in the streets of Baghdad. Several tales, including the “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad,” show the caliph in danger of his life because of his incognito (which entails a loss of social status) and curiosity (on which more later). In the two destiny stories just summarized, the threat coming from the outside world is severe, ending in death in the first case (the tale of the second calendar), while the happy ending of the Abu Shamat tale is due primarily to the optimistic logic of the romance plot (which has Fate guiding and organizing life’s events), and not necessarily to any intrinsic merit of the young hero, as Peter Heath has shown.

In other cultural contexts, the motif lends itself to similarly dramatic variations: Segismundo, Calderón’s hero, imprisoned in a tower until manhood, emerges raging and filled with bestial violence, which he will only learn to tame slowly (but we note that the imprisonment in his case is due, as in the Oedipus story, to a prophecy that he will kill his father, rather than to the father’s desire to protect him from a threat). In both La vida es sueño and the story of Abu Shamat, what is at stake is the young hero’s education and his difficult but ultimately successful quest to find his proper place in society. Another variant is the Buddha story: beyond tragedy and comedy, Siddharta’s momentous exit from the gilded cage leads to a series of life-changing encounters (the old man, the sick man, the dead man, and the ascetic) that will cause the young prince to leave behind the life of plenty of a king, henceforth dismissed as illusion, and embrace the more meaningful ascetic life of a hermit.
Helen Stratton, "Next morning he followed the bird as it flew from tree to tree," illustration of Qamar al-Zaman for the 1899 edition of Edward W. Lane's The Thousand and One Nights, p. 254 (© Arcadian Library, London)


Leaving the Palace

Returning now to the "The Tale of the 672nd Night," we see how the story of the merchant's son weaves together destiny motifs from a variety of intertexts and contexts. The unnamed young hero spends his life in luxurious isolation in his mansion, in the company of his precious collection of artistic objects and cared for by his four devoted servants:

As his friends meant little to him, and no woman's beauty had captivated him enough to make him consider it desirable or even tolerable to have her permanently by him, he grew more and more accustomed to a life of virtual solitude. . . . The beauty of his carpets, silks and fabrics, his carved and paneled walls, his metal lamps and bowls, his glass and his earthenware collection came to mean more to him than he would ever have imagined. Gradually he came to appreciate how his beloved objects contained all the shapes and colors in the world.

Like another merchant's son, Aladdin Abu Shamat, who has lived in gentle seclusion, knowing only his parents and servants, and also like prince Siddharta, who has been sheltered from all ugliness and all hardship by his overprotective father, Hofmannsthal's protagonist assumes, wrongly, that his small world of beautiful objects is the real world. Not surprisingly, the day the merchant's son wanders out of his "palace," he is in for a rude shock—in fact, the encounter with the brutal reality of the outside world proves deadly, as he loses his way in a strange and hostile part of the city and eventually dies a slow and ignominious death after being kicked in the groin by a soldier's horse. In agreement with the generic constraints of romance, we have a young hero on the threshold of active, responsible manhood, whose emergence from the safety of his hidden childhood leads him into adventures and dangers that are a test by fate, the stakes being the hero's conquest of a place in society. Departing from the first destiny plot (the third calender story, in which the merchant's son is killed accidentally by virtue of a prophecy and despite protective seclusion), Hofmannsthal's recluse, it appears, dies for having wandered outside the shelter, in a variation on our second destiny plot, the story of Abu Shamat and his ill-fated caravan attacked by Bedouins. But contrary to Abu Shamat, who ultimately
succeeds despite the accumulation of mishaps. Hofmannsthal's hapless hero never finds his way home, nor much less a place in society. The story is also a sinister variant of the Buddha plot, with the spiritual death experienced by prince Siddharta (who dies to the world after his three momentous encounters with age, illness, and death) replaced by literal death. In a wicked twist on the Buddha experience—in which the deeply shocking encounters ultimately work for the hero's greater good—the merchant's son in Hofmannsthal's story dies tormented by the thought of the straight causal line that fate appears to have traced from his earlier sheltered life to his untimely, gruesome death: "He looked back over his life with great bitterness and disavowed everything that he had cherished. He hated his untimely death so much that he hated his life for having led him to it" (63).

The Unhappy Prince

There is no redemption for Hofmannsthal's hero, who is a kind of reverse mirror image of his models. One key difference, perhaps, is that he is a voluntary recluse, unlike the sons in the other destiny stories (Abu Shamat, Siddharta), who are incarcerated on their fathers' wishes and who willfully go against their fathers' interdiction to exit the palace. Instead of pitting a father's heroic but failed attempt to stave off harm to his child against a son's forceful rebellion and choice of adventure and danger, Hofmannsthal's story presents us with an ineffective protector (a dead father) and a reclusive, inactive son. The passivity, even listlessness, of Hofmannsthal's hero is in stark contrast to so many merchants' sons in the real Nights, who exude confidence and energy, taking on the world as soon as they can escape from their confined circumstances, simply brimming over with lust of life. In the incipit of Hofmannsthal's story, the orphaned hero withdraws from the world because he feels no desire to take an active part in life outside his palace: "A very handsome young merchant's son, who had lost both father and mother, shortly after turning twenty-five grew weary of society and a life of entertaining" (47). Despite possessing the attributes that make him eligible for a typical tale of romance and adventure (youth, wealth, beauty), Hofmannsthal's merchant's son shows no desire for social or sexual pur-

suits. His pleasures are limited to contemplation of his precious collections—hardly a young man's occupation—and his erotic daydreaming about his younger servant girl is halfhearted at best. Rather than explore the world, he will only lose himself in it. Critics have by and large read this as Hofmannsthal's condemnation of the sterility of the aesthete's life, a refusal to engage with fellow humans and the life of the city, for which he is punished terribly, first: by the unexplained yet unanimous hostility of the people he encounters, then by the gruesome attack by the horse.  The anxiety over the aesthete's choice of life is a recurrent theme in Hofmannsthal's early work (as well as in works by other writers of the Young Vienna movement, of course): it is also the theme of his 1893 morality play Death and the Fool, in which the young protagonist is likewise punished for his estrangement from life by the untimely appearance of Death itself:

What do I know about human life?
True, I appeared to stand inside it,
But, at the most, I studied it,
Never was caught, but held aloof,
Never lost myself, but, alien, eyed it.
Where others give and others take
I stood aside, my inmost centre dumb.
From all those charming lips I did not suck
The true, essential potion, life by name.  

Isolation from his fellow human beings, lack of empathy for their plight, in particular those less fortunate than himself—the protagonist's social inadequacy is stressed more forcefully in the story than in the verse play, as the merchant's son meets his demise in the slums of the town. This social dimension of Hofmannsthal's rewriting of the Nights resonates with another palace story, by his contemporary Oscar Wilde, the fairy tale titled "The Happy Prince," first published in 1888. The happy prince lives out his life in blissful seclusion in the palace, but after his death, his statue discovers the ugliness and misery of the city around it. Not coincidentally, "The Tale of the 672nd Night," which betrays a very somber view of the tales, was written at the time of the
Oscar Wilde scandal, a few months before the actual trial, which greatly depressed Hofmannsthal. The dark story of an aesthete’s fall from grace is thus haunted by the tragic figure of Oscar Wilde.

Jorge Luis Borges, in his 1952 essay on Buddhism, "Forms of a Legend," refers to Oscar Wilde’s children’s story “The Happy Prince” as a variation on the Buddha motif: “At the end of the 19th century Oscar Wilde proposed a variation: The happy prince dies in the seclusion of the palace, without having discovered sorrow, but his posthumous effigy discerns it from atop his pedestal.” Curiously, Borges all but ignores the obvious social dimension of the Oscar Wilde story, which is set in the context of late Victorian England, obsessed with charitable works and social progress. The duty of being a good king, attentive to the plight of the people, generous toward his less fortunate subjects, falls to the statue. The statue gives away all the gold and the jewels that adorn it to the poor, including its sapphire eyes, feeling belatedly guilty that, during his lifetime, the prince never cared to look past the walls of his palace:

“When I was alive and had a human heart,” answered the statue, “I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. . . . Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness. So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep.”

While the young merchant’s son in Hofmannsthal’s “Tale of the 672nd Night” treasures his exotic collections and disdains human affection, in Wilde’s story the statue of the happy prince (his good self—the reverse of the Dorian Gray plot, in which the picture is charged with evil) conversely dismisses exotic valuables, does not want to hear the swallow’s tales about Egypt, and prizes only deeds of kindness: “Dear little Swallow,” said the Prince, “you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery. Fly over my city, little Swallow, and tell me what you see there.” In a final miracle, the statue atones posthumously for the prince’s self-centered life by a radical displacement of values from the aesthetic to the ethical realms, with the statue’s leaden heart and the dead bird being declared by God more valuable than all the riches of the palace.

Another contemporary children’s story, Rudyard Kipling’s “Miracle of Purun Baghat,” the third story of The Second Jungle Book (1895), also features a “king” (the Brahmin Purun Dass, prime minister of an unnamed northern Indian state) turned hermit, like the Buddha, at the height of his powers. “Now he would let these things go, as a man drops a cloak he needs no longer.” The protagonist leaves his powerful and wealthy lifestyle, takes up the walking stick and begging bowl of a wandering mendicant, and disappears into the Himalayas, leading the life of an ascetic (under the name Purun Baghat) in an abandoned temple for years, fed by the people of the village below. One night in the rainy season, alerted by his animal companions, Purun Baghat goes down to warn the villagers of an impending landslide, sacrificing his life in the process. Both children’s stories (“The Happy Prince” and “The Miracle of Purun Baghat”), in true Victorian fashion, are highly moralistic and didactic, focusing on duty to community and the best way to fulfill it.

In Hofmannsthal’s story, however, no such atonement seems to be available to the merchant’s son, who dies rejecting everything he valued (including, presumably, his former aesthete’s life) but without any sense of peace or wisdom, since he ends up taking on the grimacing features of his enemies, the sullen girls and the mad horses: “He looked back over his life with great bitterness and disavowed everything that he had cherished. He hated his untimely death so much that he hated his life for having led him to it. The wild inner frenzy consumed his last remaining strength.” The merchant’s son sleeps, wakes up, and finding himself alone, tries to scream. “Finally he vomited gall, then blood, and died, his features distorted, his lips so mangled that his teeth and gums were exposed, giving him an alien, evil expression” (65).

What then is the meaning of this tale? It imitates the major destiny tales in the Arabian Nights but departs from both their philosophical message (fate is inescapable, as both the story of the third calendar and the story of Abu Shamat illustrate) and their moral message (a cautionary tale against the dangers of curiosity in the calendar’s case, a warning
against stubbornness and vanity in the tale of Abu Shamat), while it also appears to stray from the spiritual message exemplified by renunciation stories of the Buddha type, as well as from modern morality tales such as Wilde’s or Kipling’s. In fact, the trajectory of the Hofmannsthal hero remains highly problematic—one cannot even compare it with the linear, processional sequence of high and low, success and failure characteristic of a romance plot such as we see in the tale of Aladdin Abu Shamat; it rather resembles a series of unfortunate events (to paraphrase a recent success of children’s literature) that lead to disaster through fortuitous paths. The merchant’s son’s exit from the palace is entirely serendipitous, motivated not by a lust for adventure but by the vague desire to investigate the unnamed Oriental servant’s past after the hero receives an anonymous letter alluding to mysterious crimes committed by the man. The distress exhibited by the hero upon receiving the threatening letter seems quite disproportionate to the event, as he imagines being stripped of his possessions (his servants) and compares his anguish to that of a great king deprived of his empire: “And he understood why the very great king from the past would have been bound to die if he had been deprived of the lands he had traversed from coast to coast and conquered, the lands he had dreamed of ruling but which were so vast he neither had power over them nor received tribute from them beyond the satisfaction that he had conquered them and that nobody but he was their king” (54). This anguish at the thought of losing his “empire” prompts his departure from the mansion; without notifying the servants, he goes off alone into the city to try to gather information about the accused butler. But this half-hearted attempt at detective work fails ludicrously—the Persian embassy is closed. Instead, he finds himself falling from one misfortune into another, at loggerheads with any kind of revelation narrative, Buddhist or otherwise, and at cross-purposes with the reader’s expectations of closure, poetic justice, or reasonable comeuppance.

Character and Fate

Ten years after “The Tale of the 672nd Night,” Hofmannsthal published his essay on Wilde, “Sebastian Melmoth” (1905), which offers a hermeneutic clue for interpreting the earlier story. In the essay, he strove to reunite the two aspects of Oscar Wilde, the happy, successful, lighthearted aesthete of the early years, and the tragic, fallen, and broken convict of Reading Gaol, who lived out his final destitute years in Paris under the name Sebastian Melmoth, “the name of a ghost, a half-forgotten Balzacian character.” The point Hofmannsthal makes repeatedly in his essay is that it is wrong to separate character and destiny. Instead, he insists on an essential and profound continuity between the “Happy Prince” period of Oscar Wilde’s life and the postscandal—or postmortem—darker years:

Oscar Wilde’s character and Oscar Wilde’s fate are one and the same. He walked toward his catastrophe with the same steps as Oedipus, the seeing-blind one. The aesthetic was tragic. The dandy was tragic. Incessantly he felt the threat of life directed towards him. He kept challenging life unceasingly. He insulted reality. And he sensed life lying in wait in order to spring upon him out of the darkness. (302-3)

The statue of the happy prince, we recall, asked the swallow to pluck out its sapphire eyes to give to the poor; in similar fashion, Oedipus and the one-eyed calendar from the Nights were maimed and made wiser by misfortune. The moment of truth for Wilde came when, in his tragic folly, he decided to denounce Queensberry and provoke fate. This fateful decision fused his earlier laughing persona with his tragic mask: “for then the mask of Bacchus with its full, beautifully curved lips must have been transformed in an unforgettable manner into the mask of the seeing-blind Oedipus. . . . At that moment he must have worn round his magnificent brow the band of tragic fate, so rarely visible” (304). The encounter with Queensberry, a terrifying father figure who inflicted a ruthless punishment, echoes the fatal encounter with the horse that punishes the merchant’s son so terribly.

“The Tale of the 672nd Night” also consists of two strikingly disparate parts, a first part describing the beautiful and rather vain lifestyle of a Dorian Gray lookalike, and a second part that brings to pass the ignominious fall of the handsome hero. “We must not degrade life,” Hofmannsthal urges, “by tearing character and fate asunder and separating [Wilde’s] misfortune from his fortune” (“Sebastian Melmoth,” 304). Oscar Wilde’s refined dandy’s life is not separate from the ignominious

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Perhaps even more important than the Oedipal plot favored by Dorrit Cohn (according to her, the hero is punished for a transgression connected to his desire for the mother, represented by the beryl necklace he drops under the horse's hoofs), what seems clear is that the horse in this context doubles as an image of destiny. The threat emanating from the horse is illuminated by Hofmannsthal's own personal difficulties in controlling his mare, Fuchs, which was given to him by his father when he left for his military service. Hofmannsthal's letters reveal ambivalent feelings for the horse: on the one hand, affection for the beautiful and spirited animal, as well as a sense of pride in his horsemanship, which he considered indispensable to a real gentleman; on the other hand, fear of his "wild, uncanny horse" and shame at his own deficiencies. On at least one occasion, he was nearly killed; thereafter the mare went lame, and Hofmannsthal was never able to cure her completely. The feelings of helplessness, combined with a sense of incompetence, are a poisonous mix of physical and social anxieties. The protagonist revealingly refuses to look at the saddlebag ornaments in the jeweler's shop because, he claims, "as a merchant's son he had never much had to do with horses, indeed could not even ride" (56). Later, the malicious horse that will kill him reminds him of the thief whose "face was contorted with fear because people were threatening him, because he had a large gold coin and would not say where he had come by it" (62): not unlike the thief, it would seem that the merchant's son too has a guilty conscience concerning the source of his gold.

The young man who daydreams about the "great king" and his cavalry but cannot ride a horse is killed by a horse that reminds him of a man guilty of possessing ill-gotten gold. Unlike the merchant's sons in the real Nights, who are legitimate and proud heirs to the paternal fortune, the Arabic equivalent of princes in European tales, our modern merchant's son does not feel entitled to his fortune or his horse and thus cannot control this image of his destiny.

If the Night Mare serves as a vehicle for the expression of modern anxieties, in particular social anxieties, the hero's dreamlike wandering in the unknown city at nighttime also echoes another, later text, a description of Fez from Hofmannsthal's Journey in North Africa (1925). Here, however, the dream is euphoric rather than nightmarish, as the

prison bath that he was forced to use after ten other convicts and that, Hofmannsthal muses, was already somehow contained in the aesthete's love of luxury: "his limbs which toyed with orchids and lounged among cushions of ancient silks were in reality filled with an awful longing for the ghastly bath from which, however, at its first touch, they shrank in nauseated repugnance" (304). Likewise, we may infer, the squalid end of the merchant's son is not to be torn asunder from his beautiful beginning.

"It Was No Dream"

A different kind of reading protocol offers itself at this point. We can make sense of "The Tale of the 672nd Night" if, as we would with a dream, we listen to echoes and repetitions between its two different parts. Reading it like a dream enables us to see continuities: the happy prince period is not so happy as it first seems and contains elements that are replicated in the second, darker part; the story can be interpreted, as Dorrit Cohn has done, as a punishment dream.

The enigmatic feeling of the story is tied to its dreamlike quality. There is a logic to the hero's decisions that mimics the logic of dreams. The unfamiliar city the hero wanders into, ultimately to meet his death, is at the same time a generic Arabian Nights city and Hofmannsthal's own Vienna, albeit its poorer neighborhoods rather than its well-known landmarks. As in a dream, places are multiple and contradictory entities, identities are condensed and displaced, people resemble each other or animals. The hero's anguished stumbling through the dark greenhouse (58–59) replicates his earlier creeping under the branches of an overgrown part of his garden (51–52). The four-year-old child who terrifies him in the greenhouse and precipitates his subsequent demise (57–58) is also the sullen servant girl in his own home (49). The contorted face of the thief caught in his father's shop (62) is also that of the horse (the Night Mare), with whom the girl shares the same angry look and which the hero will come to resemble himself when in his death agony he bares his teeth and glares angrily.

The horse, obviously connected to the father in some essential way, is at the heart of the punishment dream since it delivers the fatal blow.
narrator describes an episode of leaving his palatial rented house and straying into the old labyrinthine streets, encountering characters that seem to come out of *The Thousand and One Nights*:

And this relation of all things to all, this concatenation of dwellings and places of labor, of markets and mosques, this ornament of the intricately woven lettering that is everywhere repeated a thousandfold by the life-lines entangled one with the other, all this surrounds us with a sensation, a secret, a scent, wherein there is something primordial, a memory of preexistence—Greece and Rome, the Arabian fairytales, and the Bible; yet at the same time it has clinging to it a touch of something quietly threatening, the true secret of the exotic, and this scent, this secret, this being in the core of the tangible and the faint awareness of the Forbidden that is never entirely absent, this today is still and maybe still tomorrow—Fez, Fez, until twenty years ago the great untrodden, the austere, most forbidden of all Islamic towns, whose aroma has not yet completely evaporated.¹⁸

The rational causality that would account for the sequence of events in a normal world is here substituted with an oneric causality in which architecture, writing, and destiny ("the life-lines entangled one with the other") are continuous and in some way interchangeable, as they would be in a dream or a poem.¹⁹

Of course, wanderings into unknown cities or neighborhoods, along with strange encounters, are very common in the *Arabian Nights*, especially in tales with an urban backdrop such as the Harun al-Rashid stories or the Cairo stories. But the difference here is that the merchant's son is pursuing an aimless course that eventually takes him to a pointless death. The urban labyrinth into which he ventures never leads him either to an exit (he stumbles across the barracks while trying to find his way back to "the wealthy part of town, where he would be able to find lodging for the night"; 60) or to a center, contrary to the centripetal movement of labyrinthine quests that traditionally bring the hero to a locus of revelation. The very notion of destiny—as meaningful teleology—is threatened: with a character whose early life held no special distinction (he is an aesthete rather than an artist, enjoying passively the fruits of others' labors, an unmarried and childless son, and an unfulfilled dreamer whose favorite book, the story of a great king, is cruelly parodied by his absurd death by horse kick)—it is not possible to see in this absurd accidental death a fulfillment of any sort of destiny, nor is it possible to read the story as a morality tale.

**Imperial Messages**

"The Tale of the 672nd Night," then, retains its enigmatic character. Reading it as a dream helps us understand it, but it only takes us so far, since it is not a dream but only dreamlike. There is no awakening from the dream: so readers are thrown back as it were to the morality tale, only to find themselves mystified as to the moral. Rewriting, as the story purports to do, a well-established tradition of wisdom tales or destiny tales that claim to impart some lesson to the reader, it veers away from this traditional, or traditionary, form, leaving the reader perplexed. From the mention of a "tale" and the reference to the *Nights*, the reader naturally anticipates a more straightforward narrative. One expects, for example, a modern morality tale, something closer to Oscar Wilde's children's story "The Happy Prince" or Rudyard Kipling's "The Miracle of Purun Baghat," with a rather unambiguous moral—the importance of being charitable or the superiority of the hermit's sacrifice in the service of the people. Or one expects a romance. But if this is a tale—as the title claims, albeit ironically—where are the typical features of the genre? Where are the princess, the hazardous prowess, the kingdom won, the treasure? Where is the joyful urge to life that Hoffmannsthal came later to celebrate in the *Arabian Nights*?²⁰ What, if this be a tale about destiny, is the character's destiny—to die of a kick in the groin, neglected by uncaring soldiers? What wisdom if any is taught or learned here? If this is a cautionary tale in the manner of the calendery story, what is it cautioning against? Curiosity—the desire to investigate his manservant's past? But curiosity, for which the calender is punished by the loss of an eye, while the caliph is simply warned, here receives a gruesomely excessive punishment.⁴¹ The punishment of the hero seems absurdly mismatched to his offenses (passivity? self-absorption? social disengagement?), and in any case, it is also most ironically mistimed, since he is struck precisely when he finally attempts to help others—reaching for money to give to the soldier, he drops his parcel and is
kicked by the horse when he reaches down to retrieve it. An evil twist indeed—he is, it would appear, punished for his good deed. Despite appearances to the contrary, then, Hofmannsthal’s “fairy tale” is no fairy tale. Hofmannsthal’s fellow writer Arthur Schnitzler, who insisted that his friend had written not a fairy tale but a dream, was closer to the truth. The merchant’s son, he recommended, should not be made to die but to wake up from his nightmare. The protagonist of Hofmannsthal’s earlier morality play Death and the Pool was allowed some such measure of consolatory self-reflection at the moment of his untimely death:

Dying, at last I feel that I exist…

So from the dream of life I now may wake,
Cloyed with emotion, to death’s wakefulness.44

No such death-awareness is granted to the merchant’s son. Not only does he not wake up—chastened or otherwise—but furthermore, the dream sequence, in which the protagonist encounters reality in the outside world beyond his palace, becomes the reality which makes the first part of the tale seem all the more unreal. Like Gregor Samsa, who could not wake up from his nightmare because “it was no dream,” the merchant’s son is stranded in a dreamlike story from which there is no exit, and a parablelike tale in which there is no clear moral. “The Tale of the 672nd Night” confuses generic boundaries and reading protocols like, later, Kafka, of whose parables Walter Benjamin pointed out that neither a natural reading nor a supernatural one could be satisfying options, since they would both miss the point.45

Commenting on the dreamlike quality of modern parables, such as those found in Kafka and Borges, Gila Safran Naveh, taking her cue from Heinz Politzer’s classic study Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox, argues that they are impenetrable because their relation to a decodable wisdom derived from a divine Law has become problematic.46 Like Kafka’s dying emperor’s last words, which are of such great importance yet will never reach their destination, these modern parabolic stories baffle interpretation. What is true of Kafka and Borges also applies to this Hofmannsthal story. The meaninglessness, the tongue-in-cheek despair exuded by the story, its perplexity, are strongly reminiscent of Kafka, in whose nightmarish universe this story belongs. While there is no evidence that Hofmannsthal ever read the stories of his contemporary Kafka, we know that Kafka was a great admirer of Hofmannsthal’s work. More importantly, what allows us to read this Hofmannsthal story of indecisive quest as “Kafkaesque” is the retroactive phenomenon described by Borges in his 1951 essay “Kafka and His Precursors.” In this reverse conception of influence, the precursor becomes a notion born of an act of reading, not writing: “our reading of Kafka,” Borges writes, “noticeably refines and diverts our reading” of, in this case, “The Tale of the 672nd Night.” Today’s reader now overlays Kafka—and Borges—over Hofmannsthal’s rewriting of The Thousand and One Nights.48

In Borges’s essay “The Translators of the Thousand and One Nights,” he laments the inadequacy of German translations. “There are marvels in the Nights which I would like to see rethought in German.” The greatly admired Enno Littmann, according to him, is solidly faithful but hopelessly tediou:s “In Littmann, who like Washington cannot tell a lie, there is nothing but the probity of Germany. This is so little, so very little. The commerce between Germany and the Nights should have produced something more.” Instead of this honest, unimaginative German translator, he dreams of a translation by Kafka, which could have yielded fantastic nightgares: “Chances have played at symmetries, contrasts, digressions. What might a man—a Kafka—do if he organized and intensified this play, remade it in line with the Germanic distortion, the Unheimlichkeit of Germany?”49 Perhaps “The Tale of the 672nd Night,” this story by Hofmannsthal—a Hofmannsthal who at least for a moment resembled Kafka—“is as close as we will ever get to realizing Borges’s dream of a translation of the Nights by Franz Kafka.

NOTES


12. As part of the original kernel of the tales, the story is to be found in all the different versions. It first appeared in Galland's translation: see "The Story of the Third Calender, a King's Son," in "The Story of the Three Calenders, Sons of Kings; and of the Five Ladies of Bagdad," in *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, 106–13.


15. According to Marina Warner, the fertility potion the merchant is given is simply a placebo, whose efficiency relies entirely on faith (*Stranger Magic*, 403); this is especially significant in view of the fact that the story is an illustration of the power of fate to gratify or thwart human volition.

16. According to Burton (4:45; 46).

17. On the motif of the flying bed (or sofa), see Marina Warner's analysis, which connects the device with the erotic sofa literature of the eighteenth century as well as with the psychoanalyst's couch (*Stranger Magic*, 405–24).


20. The recycling and recombination of various motifs and narrative units formally
connect Hofmannsthal's story with its primary intertext, since "the imaginative reuse of elements on all levels" is a key feature of the Nights themselves, as Daniel Beaumont points out (see his essay "Literary Style and Narrative Technique," in Marzolph and van Leeuwen, Arabian Nights Encyclopaedia).  


26. Borges, whose essays so often mention Kipling, does not comment on "The Miracle of Purun Bagh" in particular, but his view of Kipling, whom he greatly admired, displays the same indifference to the social, political, or ideological dimensions of the stories. Instead, he focuses on Kipling's formal virtues, his craft, the complexity of his narrative technique, dismissing the ideology as simplistic or unimportant. For example: "Kipling's prose and poetic works are infinitely more complex than the theses they elucidate. . . . in his seeming life there was no passion like the passion for technique" (review of Rudyard Kipling: *A Study in Literature and Political Ideas*, by Edward Shanks, translated by Suzanne Jill Levine, in *Selected Non-Fictions*, 251).  


29. Not all stories in the Nights display straightforward moral closure, of course. Andras Hamori discusses the moral perplexity at the heart of "The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad" in his book *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974). The various and morally capricious connections between actions and retributions, he claims, show "a structural coherence that ultimately speaks for a morally random universe" (164), one in which the final pairings in particular do not make satisfying moral sense for readers and frustrate our sense of justice, creating "a profound discomfort" (179). In the case of "The Tale of the 672nd Night," it could be argued that the ending frustrates both our desire for poetic closure and our desire for moral order.  


33. Dorrit Cohn points out the onericic structure of the plot, which tends to progress "along the kinds of non-sequiturs we sometimes refer to as 'dream-logic'" ("Kafka and Hofmannsthal," *Modern Austrian Literature* 301 (1997): 11).  

34. For Dorrit Cohn, the quartet of servants should be understood as a replica of the family group, with the protagonist himself represented by the angry girl, "a replica of his own angry childhood self" ("Als Traum erzählt," 291).  


36. Robert Lemon reads the episode as an ironic reversal of the relation between Alexander the Great and his legendary horse, Bucephalus (*Imperial Messages*, 34-35).  

37. "In the average '1001 Nights' story, wealthy merchants and merchants' sons are what kings and princes are in the average fairy-tale. They represent everything that is pleasant to hear about: opulence, refinement, a secured and honoured position. They are friends to caliph and sultan, connoisseurs in gentle living, the very pillars of society" (Gerhardt, *Art of Story-Telling*, 190). Conversely, Andrew Barker describes the conflicted feelings of the young Viennese artists: "Like the merchant's son, many of these young artists were able to lead their indulgently aesthetic lives thanks only to the despicable business efforts of their ambitious, forceful, and practical fathers" ("Triumph of Life," 343).  


39. Nina Berman takes a harsh view of this text, criticizing Hofmannsthal's

40. His 1907 preface to the German translation by Felix Paul Greve takes a far more optimistic view of the book: “Everything in us is revitalized and encouraged to enjoy” (quoted in Marzolph and van Leeuwen, Arabian Nights Encyclopedia, 2:590). It is perhaps not coincidental that this essay prefaced Greve’s rendition of Burton’s exuberant version and was published in the immediate aftermath of the Mardrus translation, by all accounts a joyful, even euphoric translation of the tales. Borges also praised Mardrus’s “laughing paragraphs” (“Translators of the Thousand and One Nights,” 108).

41. Daniel Beaumont discusses the “prohibition against knowing” at the heart of the stories that make up the cycle of “The Tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad” (Slave of Desire, 134). In the case of Hofmannsthal’s young merchant, however, the cautionary mechanism appears to go awry, preventing any gain of wisdom from the punishment.

42. According to Andrew Barker, “it is also disturbingly ironic that death should overtake the merchant’s son at this his first moment of genuine involvement in the plight of others less fortunate than himself” (“Triumph of Life,” 344).


44. Hofmannsthal, Death and the Fool, 135.


47. See Cohn, “Kafka and Hofmannsthal,” 4–5.


50. It is perhaps no coincidence that Hofmannsthal’s late work Der Turm (The Tower) is a rewriting of Calderón de la Barca’s La vida es sueño, which, conversely, affirms the power of human agency and free will over destiny and foils the Oedipal prophecy.