The Figure of the Jew in A Thousand and One Nights

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The world of the Arabian Nights, also known as A Thousand and One Nights, presents us with a rich mosaic of peoples. To the geographical variety of the tales, which take the reader on voyages from India to Italy, Africa to Iraq, and Persia to the Sunda Islands, must be added the cultural diversity of the medieval Muslim world, a fundamentally multiethnic world, as reflected in the tales. Contrary to the situation in Christian lands, in which the Jews represented the only religious minority in uniformly Christianized regions, the Jews of Islam were one religious minority among others. The Jews were tolerated in the Islamic world—without exclusion discriminatory measures, applied different according to countries and periods. But by and large the chance the Muslim world offered its Jewish minorities to survive, and even to prosper, was unquestionably superior to that offered by Christian countries. The Jewish figures in the Arabian Nights reflect that cultural, social, and religious complexity.

The role of the Jews in the composition and dissemination of the work

Given that the Arabian Nights were the product of a long process of amalgamation unfolding over several centuries and countries, it is natural to pose the question of a Jewish contribution, alongside other sources: Indian, Persian, Arabian, Egyptian, and so on. This is especially the case given the density of the cultural exchanges between the Jewish and Muslim communities during the medieval period. Some European orientalists of the nineteenth century liked to imagine a Jewish origin for the Arabian Nights, being particularly attentive to the mythological motif of the heroine who saves her people. That hypothesis of the biblical origin of the

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Nights immediately became the object of a spirited debate in scholarly circles. Victor Cousin, reflecting on the similarities between the frame prologue of Nights (Scheherazade’s ruse of telling one tale each night to King Shahryar, thereby succeeding in saving the young women from certain death) and the biblical story of Esther (who succeeds in saving the Jewish people from the massacre to which the Persian king Assuerus, advised by his minister Aman, consented), goes so far as to consider the possibility of a Jewish origin of the frame prologue.1 This hypothesis was adopted by a number of critics, and even found its way into the Encyclopaedia Britannica, but it was refuted by another eminent scholar, the folklorist Emmanuel Cosquin, who countered with an Indian origin of the frame tale.2 Besides the frame tale, several short narratives seem to come from the Talmudic tradition, as we will see below. They stage Jewish characters of admirable piety and are part of the repertoire of professional storytellers; naturally, they have become acclimatized to both the structure of the Nights, the flexibility of which is open to the most variegated narratives, and the spirit of a collection, for which the *adab* or exemplary narrative intended for edification is a major source.

The collection also contains legendary motifs of Jewish origin, which were blended into the Persian, Indian, or Arabian stories, as in the legend about Solomon’s power over rebellious genies. The oldest source of that legend is the biblical Book of Wisdom [Wisdom of Solomon] or yet again the Antiquities of the Jews by Flavius Josephus; the legend passed into Qur’anic folklore and turns up in some of the most famous tales in the Nights, such as “The Merchant and the Genie,” “The Fisherman,” and “The Brass City,” in which the genies are imprisoned in vases as punishment for disobeying Solomon; an echo of this belief is recognizable in “Aladdin,” in which the genie is imprisoned in a lamp.

From the beginning, the book seems to have been well known in the Jewish milieu. The earliest known mention of the book by its present title of “A Thousand and One Nights” goes back to the eleventh century: “The Thousand and One Nights” is listed in the catalog of a Jewish library in Cairo around 1150; the manuscript is presently kept in the Bodleian Library of Oxford. There are two manuscript frag-
ments of Judeo-Arabic versions of *A Thousand and One Nights* dating back to the seventeenth century, one in the Firkovich collection of Saint Petersburg and the other in the Taylor-Schechter collection of Cambridge. The only complete Judeo-Arabic manuscript of the *Nights* that we have dates from 1866 and was written in Calcutta, a city that had a strong Iraqi-Jewish immigration in the 1930s; today, this manuscript is kept in Jerusalem.

The representation of Jewish characters

The Jews, an integral part of the society of the *Nights*, are also very much in evidence, though generally in a marginal way, in the tales. The Burton translation is the richest in Jewish characters. It is also the longest, with ten volumes, followed two years later by six supplementary ones. The stories that depict Jews are often unfavorable toward them, but not always, as we shall see. The Jews are rarely main characters in the *Nights*, with the exception of a few heroines, such as Zayn al-Mawassif, the wife of the Jewish merchant (see below). Their representation in the tales is stereotyped (this should not surprise us in these narratives, in which all the characters, including the heroes, are one-dimensional actors rather than characters endowed with psychological depth) and, by and large, rather negative. Moreover, this is just as true of the other ethnic minorities (Bedouins, blacks) or religious ones (Christians). The Bedouins are dirty and brutal; the blacks are lubricious. The Christians, too, are caricatured, often as drunkards, since the Quranic ban on alcohol does not apply to them. Thus, in “The Hunchback’s Tale,” a drunken Christian beats the Hunchback, whom he takes for a thief, and is about to be executed for the murder of a Muslim.5 By and large, Christians play the role of the villain. An old Christian woman, disguised as a dervish, assassinates two kings.4 The hero, Grain-de-Beauté, kidnapped by a Christian pirate ship, is enslaved in Genoa for fifteen years.3 The beautiful slave Zumurrud is drugged and kidnapped from her master by a Christian.6

As for their place in society, the Jews are represented in a realistic manner. In the tales, as in the historical reality, they practice various trades, always urban: merchants, money changers, pawnbrokers, goldsmiths, physicians. It is a Jewish physician who tries to treat the Hunchback. A tenacious prejudice depicts them as grasping, motivated solely by profit, dishonest. The Jewish physician in the story of the Hunchback falls down the stairs as a result of his greed: he is in such a hurry to open the door of a patient he believes to be rich that he rushes down the stairway without waiting for the light. Another dishonest Jew is the merchant who takes advantage of Aladdin’s ignorance to buy treasures from him for a ridiculously low price.7 The stereotype would also have it that they are rich: in the caliph’s story of the fisherman, we see a poor fisherman trade his monkey (which, without his knowing it, symbolizes his fate) for the Jewish lender’s monkey; thanks to this exchange, the fisherman gets rich at the expense of the Jew.8
A more hostile image is that of the Jewish magician. A sinister Jewish sorcerer inflicts three animal metamorphoses on his Muslim prisoner, and requires him to perform degrading and dangerous tasks. In a just turn of events, he is punished by the successive loss of his daughter and of his own life. Several stories contain a motif that would later be adopted by Shakespeare in The Merchant of Venice in contrast to the Jewish father, who is afflicted with all the defects, a daughter (or sometimes a wife), who is endowed with all the perfections, falls in love with the hero and converts to Islam. This religious motif also has a practical narrative value in that it permits a polygamous denouement, as in the story of Ali, in which the hero ends up marrying both the young Muslim girl and the converted Jewess. As for the Jewish fathers and husbands, they usually don't measure up to the Muslim hero, and are killed if they attempt to resist or refuse to convert (see again the story of Ali). The husband of Zayn al-Mawassif is a brute who beats his wife and ends up buried alive (or imprisoned for life, in Mardrus, who for once attenuates the original), while the lovers, exonerated by their adherence to the true faith (or their conversion to it, in some versions), abandon themselves with impunity to the pleasures of love.

Sometimes the Jewish characters are treated in a cavalier fashion by the justice of the country. Zayn al-Mawassif's husband (though he is in the right) is forced to confess under torture that he is not legally married to her. There are some scenes in which the Jewish protagonists are summarily executed without further ado. Having succeeded in escaping from prison in Baghdad with the help of the head guard, Grain-de-Beauté is surprised by two Jews, very wealthy money changers, and well known to the caliph. The two troublesome witnesses are stripped and their throats cut forthwith, without the least scruple. In general, the negative image of the Jew is integrated into the economy of the tale in that, poetic justice having most often been done in the end, the reader is invited to rejoice at the defeat of the Jewish protagonist, and to look on it not as a misfortune that strikes the victim of religious persecution but as the deserved punishment of an obstinate guilty party. The inferiority of the unbeliever, in contrast to that of the woman or the slave, is entirely voluntary in the view of medieval Islam, since all he has to do to end discrimination is embrace the one true faith.

A positive image?

Some rarer tales, on the other hand, offer a positive image of Jews. These tales are not found in Galland or Mardrus, but several, which highlight the piety of a Jewish character, appear in the editions from Bulaq and Calcutta, and have been collected by Burton and subsequently by Bencheikh and Miquel. Thus, in “The Devout Israelite,” the generosity of the Jewish weaver, who gives all his day's earnings to the beggar, is rewarded when he finds a pearl in the rotten fish that was all he had left for his meal. He exchanges the pearl for a large sum of money, and tries to give half of it to the
beggar, but then the latter reveals his angelic nature and leaves him in possession of all the money. In “The Island King and the Pious Israelite,” a pious Jew, having lost his entire fortune, sets sail with his wife and his sons. They are shipwrecked and each lands on a different island. The man discovers treasures on his island, of which he becomes king. In the end, his reputation for piety grows, and he finds his family. “The Jewish Qadi and his Pious Wife” is reminiscent of the biblical story of Susanna: the woman falsely accused of adultery becomes a recluse whose reputation for miraculous holiness draws crowds; she ultimately confounds her accusers.

Caught up in the rich labyrinth of the Nights, these stories, which come from the Jewish tradition, passed into the Muslim tradition of edifying tales intended for the populace; they have become narratives of universal wisdom. Beyond the religious allegiance of the heroes, what counts in these stories is their moral dimension. They celebrate the human virtues—generosity, piety, uprightness, patience—common to all religions. Their presence in the Nights is living proof of the cultural commonality, the rapid circulation of the stories through time and space, and the shared traditions that characterize this gigantic narrative amalgamation.

**Jewish readers and translators of the Nights**

The same complex linguistic and cultural symbiosis may be seen in the reception of the Nights by the Jewish culture. In the Middle Ages, the Jews played an important role as intermediaries in the transmission of the stories between the East and the West, particularly the Jews from Spain and Italy who knew Arabic. This could explain the resemblance between certain tales from the Nights and certain stories by Chaucer and Boccaccio of the fourteenth century. Later, the Thousand and One Nights regained its popularity in the Jewish culture thanks to Antoine Galland’s translation. The Ashkenazi world was the first to welcome the work. By 1718, there was a Yiddish version—a sort of adaptation of the German translation of Galland, dating from 1712. Hence, that version was incomplete, since we know that the full Galland translation was not published in its entirety until 1717. Its title is not recognizable and the name Scheherazade does not even appear. It was not until 1796 that a true Yiddish translation was published in Frankfurt.

In the Sephardic culture—despite the proximity of the Arabian sources—the book was also filtered through the Galland version. The first Judeo-Arabic translation based on the Galland version (in Arabic, written with Hebrew letters) appeared in Oran in 1882. Just before the First World War, in 1913, a partial translation in Ladino or Judeo-Spanish was published in Izmir, Turkey; it is another retranslation by Galland.

**An emblematic figure: Rafael Cansinos Asséns**

Rafael Cansinos Asséns, the first translator of the Nights into Spanish (from Arabic, that is, since an anonymous version based on Galland had been circulating
in Spain since the eighteenth century, subsequently followed by a translation of Weil's German version, and the Mardrus version had been translated by the novelist Vicente Blasco Ibáñez by 1916), published his translation after the Second World War. 15 Cansinos, in his preface, wonders about the paradoxical absence, in the Spain of the three cultures, of a translation of the Nights into Judeo-Spanish, the language of medieval Spain of the three cultures, a language still maintained by the Sephardic populations originating in Spain. Why, when everything in multicultural Spain seemed destined to give the Nights a privileged place, was there no translation of this book? After all, medieval Spain had translated other Arabic works, such as the Book of Kālidā and Dimna and the Forty Vizirs, and King Alfonso X, known as "the Wise," welcomed scholars of all three cultures at his court. Furthermore, all medieval Spanish literature, romancero first and foremost, is steeped in Moorish influence. This dream of a Judeo-Spanish version of the Thousand and One Nights that would be the incarnation of the religious and cultural symbiosis of the Spain of Al-Andalus was lived, in a sense, by the Sevillian Cansinos in his very flesh. Cansinos converted to Judaism, translated the Talmud, the Nights, and the Qur'an, and was one of the first to highlight in his writings the contribution of Jewish and Muslim cultures to the historical legacy of Spain. His translation claims to bear witness to a bygone era of harmony, a late substitute for a text (lost or nonexistent) produced by the confluence of the three cultures. We find this same idealized vision in Renan, who, in his famous Averroes et l'averroïsme (1861), nostalgically evokes the brief and blessed days of the convivencia, when Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived in peace, when languages, texts, and ideas circulated freely, and when "all worked harmoniously together to produce the oeuvre of a common civilization." Jorge Luis Borges, a reader of Renan and a disciple of Cansinos, a great aficionado of the Nights, pays homage to this most multicultural of works, this wayfaring work par excellence: 16 if the Nights symbolized the Orient for Borges, it was not in the vague and vaguely pejorative sense that the word carried in the time of Proust, for example—in whose work the qualifier "Oriental" is applied indistinctly, in virtue of a constant slippage between two exoticisms, the Jewish and the Arabian, so that a painter who wanted to represent Ali Baba, for example, would give him the traits "of the heaviest 'punter' at the Balbec tables" 17—but in a deeper and more universal sense. If the Nights embody the Orient, it is because they give us a glimpse of the crossroads of cultures that, beyond the division that has been made during the modern era between the Jewish and the Muslim worlds gives all of us "Those beloved marvels / That were Islam's and that are yours / And mine today" ("Metaphors of One Thousand and One Nights"). Setting out from the humble shop of a Jewish
bookseller in Cairo, this cosmopolitan book pursues its path from Argentina to Japan—its stories belonging to everyone and no one, effortlessly passing through borders, languages, and religions.

1. Victor Chavant, Le Recueil égyptien des "Mille et une nuits" (Brussels Office de Publicité, 1899).