

*Bless thee, Bottom! Bless thee! Thou art translated.  
A Midsummer Night's Dream*

# It has been some years now

since as a little boy in Baghdad I used to listen to tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*. It sometimes seems like yesterday, sometimes like ages ago, for the Baghdad I knew then seems now closer to the time of the *Nights* than to our own times. It was on long winter nights, when my grandmother was visited by one lady or another, Um Fatma or Um Ali, always dressed in black, still mourning for a husband or a son, long lost. We would huddle around the brazier, as the embers glowed in the dim light of the oil lamp, which cast a soft shadow over her sad, wrinkled face, as if to smooth out the sorrows of the years. I waited patiently, while she and my grandmother exchanged news, indulged in gossip, and whispered one or two asides. Then there would be a pause, and the lady would smile at me, and I would seize the proffered opportunity and ask for a story—a long story. I used to like romances and fairy tales best, because they took me to a land of magic and because they were long.

The lady would begin the story, and I would listen, first apprehensively, knowing from experience that she would improvise, depending on how early or late the hour. If it was early enough, she would spin the yarn leisurely, amplifying here and interpolating there episodes I recognised from other stories. And even though this sometimes troubled my childish notions of honesty and my sense of security in reliving familiar events, I never objected, because it prolonged the action and the pleasure. If the hour was late, she would, in spite of my

entreaties, tell either a brief story or one of normal length, summarising here and omitting there. If I knew the story, I would protest, reminding her of what she had left out, and she, smilingly, would promise to tell me the story in its entirety the next time. I would then entreat her to narrate at least such and such an episode. Sometimes my grandmother, out of love for me and her own delight in the story, would add her voice to mine, and the lady, pleased to be appreciated and happy to oblige, would consent to go on, narrating in a gentle, steady voice, except when she impersonated a man or woman in a moment of passion or a demon in a fit of anger, at times getting up to act out the part. Her pauses were just as delicious as her words, as we waited, anticipating a pleasure certain to come. At last, with the voice still steady but the pauses shorter and less frequent, she would reunite the lovers or reconcile the hero to fate, bringing the story, alas, to an end and leaving me with a feeling of nostalgia, a sense at once of fulfillment and of loss. Then I would go to sleep, still living with magic birds and with demons who pursued innocent lovers and haunted my dreams, and often dreaming, as I grew older, of a face in Samarkand that glowed with love and blessed my waking hours.

So has the drab fabric of life been transformed into the gossamer of romance, as these stories have been spun for centuries in family gatherings, public assemblies, and coffee-houses, in Baghdad, Damascus, or Cairo. Everybody has loved them, for they enchanted the young and the old alike with their magic.

In the *Nights* themselves, tales divert, cure, redeem, and save lives. Shahrazad cures Shahrayar of his hatred of women, teaches him to love, and by doing so saves her own life and wins a good man; the Caliph Harun al-Rashid finds more fulfillment in satisfying his sense of wonder by listening to a story than in his sense of justice or his thirst for vengeance; and the king of China spares four lives when he finally hears a story that is stranger than a strange episode from his own life. Even angry demons are humanised and pacified by a good story. And everyone is always ready to oblige, for everyone has a strange story to tell.(...)

The essential quality of these tales lies in their success in

interweaving the unusual, the extraordinary, the marvellous, and the supernatural into the fabric of everyday life. Animals discourse and give lessons in moral philosophy; normal men and women consort or struggle with demons and, like them, change themselves or anyone else into any form they please; and humble people lead a life full of accidents and surprises, drinking with an exalted caliph here or sleeping with a gorgeous girl there. Yet both the usual incidents and the extraordinary coincidences are nothing but the web and weft of Divine Providence, in a world in which people often suffer but come out all right at the end. They are enriched by the pleasure of a marvellous adventure and a sense of wonder, which makes life possible. As for the readers, their pleasure is vicarious and aesthetic, derived from the escape into an exotic world of wish fulfillment and from the underlying act of transformation and the consequent pleasure, which may be best defined in Freudian terms as the sudden overcoming of an obstacle.

Such an effect, which is contingent on merging the supernatural and the natural and securing a willing suspension of disbelief, the storyteller of the *Nights* produces by the precise and concrete detail that he uses in a matter-of-fact way in description, narration, and conversation, bridging the gap between the natural and supernatural situations. It is this quality, by the way, that explains the appeal of these tales to the romantic imagination. For instance, the shedemon is a serpent as thick as the trunk of a palm tree, while the demon is as thin as a spear and as long as two; the transparent curtain hiding the gorgeous girl in the bed is red-speckled; and the seductive girl from Baghdad buys ten pounds of mutton, while the pious gardener buys two flagons of wine for the mysterious lovers. Thus the phantasmagoric is based on the concrete, the supernatural grounded in the natural.

### **Dissemination and Manuscripts**

The stories of the *Nights* are of various ethnic origins: Indian, Persian, and Arabic. In the process of telling and retelling, they were modified to conform to the general life and customs of the Arab society that adapted them and to the particular conditions

of that society at a particular time. They were also modified, as in my own experience, to suit the role of the storyteller or the demand of the occasion. But different as their ethnic origins may be, these stories reveal a basic homogeneity resulting from the process of dissemination and assimilation under Islamic hegemony, a homogeneity or distinctive synthesis that marks the cultural and artistic history of Islam.(...)

### **The Mahdi Edition**

It is one of the curiosities of literary history that a work that has been circulating since the ninth century, that has been heard and read for centuries by young and old everywhere, and that has become a world classic should wait until very recently for a proper edition. This is curious yet understandable as one of the anomalies of comparative cultural studies. While the history of textual scholarship in the West has been, since the Renaissance, increasingly one of keen accuracy and authenticity, its counterpart in the East, especially in the case of the *Nights*, has been one of error and corruption, at the hands of Eastern and Western scholars alike, the result of ignorance and contempt. It is all the more gratifying, therefore, that the most recent edition of the Arabic text of the *Nights* should be by far the best. After years of sifting, analysing, and collating virtually all available texts, Muhsin Mahdi has published the definitive edition of the fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale (*Alf Layla wa Layla*, Leiden, 1984). Mahdi fills lacunae, emends corruptions, and elucidates obscurities; however, he refrains from providing punctuation and diacritical marks or corrected spellings. What emerges is a coherent and precise work of art that, unlike other versions, is like a restored icon or musical score, without the added layers of paint or distortions, hence, as close to the original as possible. Thus a long-standing grievance has been finally redressed, and redressed with a sense of poetic justice, not only because this edition redeems all others from a general curse, but also because it is the work of a man who is at once the product of East and West. And it is particularly gratifying to me personally, because it has provided me with the text for my translation.

### Past Translations

What makes a coherent translation of the text possible is an eye familiar with Arabic prose and an ear attuned to the rhythm of the spoken language, ideally the eye and ear of someone who reads, writes, and speaks Arabic like a native. It is a wonder that foreign translators, like Edward Lane (1839-41), John Payne (1882-84), and Richard Burton (1885-86) made so few mistakes, yet no wonder that they made them... A misreading of the conjugation of the verb "to overtake," which also means "to realize," leads Burton to translate the refrain "But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence," as "And Shahrazad perceived the dawn of day and ceased saying her permitted say." This example would seem innocuous enough were it not that it is repeated one thousand times and were it not that it spoils the dramatic poignancy of the situation, when the morning, the hour of her execution, finally catches up with Shahrazad.(...)

The problem for the translators was compounded in that, as often as not, a given passage had already been altered by the editor of a manuscript or a printed edition or by both. For the tales, for all their popularity among the people, were regarded with condescension and contempt by the Arab literati of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These included the editors themselves, self-appointed men of taste and judgement, who, trained during the period of the decline of Arabic literature, had little judgement and no taste. They regarded these folk tales as entertaining in substance but vulgar in style, and they undertook to improve them according to their own light.

Their method was to condense, amplify, or alter. They took a given passage, summarized it, and recast it in correct, polite, or literary Arabic, often sacrificing vivid details vital to the art of the storyteller for empty academic phrases or poetic diction. For instance, "The Story of the Hunchback" opens with this passage:

*It is related, O King, that there lived once in China a tailor who had a pretty, compatible, and loyal wife. It happened one day that they went out for a stroll to enjoy the sights at a place of entertainment, where they spent the whole day in diversions and fun, and when they returned home at the end of the day, they met on the way a jolly hunchback. He was smartly dressed*

*in a folded inner robe and an open outer robe, with gathered sleeves and an embroidered collarband, in the Egyptian style, and sporting a scarf and a tall green hat, with knots of yellow silk stuffed with ambergris. The hunchback was short, like him of whom the poet 'Antar said:*

*Lovely the hunchback who can hide his hump,  
Like a pearl hidden in an oyster shell,  
A man who looks like a castor oil branch,  
From which dangles a rotten citric lump.*

*He was busy playing on the tambourine, singing, and improvising all kinds of funny gestures. When they drew near and looked at him, they saw that he was drunk, reeking of wine. Then he placed the tambourine under his arm and began to beat time by clapping his hands, as he sang the following verses:*

*Go early to the darling in yon jug;/Bring her to me,  
And fete her as you fete a pretty girl,/With joy and glee,  
And make her as pure as a virgin bride,/Unveiled to please,  
That I may honor my friend with a cup/Of wine from Greece.  
If you, my friend, care for the best in life,/Life can repay,  
Then at this moment fill my empty cup,/Without delay.  
Don't you, my tantalizer, on the plain/The gardens see?*

*... when the tailor and his wife saw the hunchback in this condition, drunk and reeking of wine, now singing, now beating the tambourine, they were delighted with him and invited him home to sup and drink with them that night. He accepted gladly and walked with them to their home.*

I have deliberately chosen this lengthy passage in order to show how drastically the Egyptian editor reduces and excises (in this case two entire poems) and to show the extent of the substance and flavour the reader misses as a result. Payne's translation is accurate, but he uses the edited version:

*There lived once in the city of Bassora a tailor, who was open-handed and loved pleasure and merrymaking: and he was wont, he and his wife, to go out by times, a-pleasuring, to the public places of recreation. One day they went out as usual and were returning home in the evening, when they fell in with a hunchback, the sight of whom would make the disappointed laugh and dispel chagrin from the sorrowful. So they went up to*

*look at him and invited him to go home and make merry with them that night. He consented and accompanied them to their house. (...)*

Burton declares in the introduction that his purpose is to produce a "full, complete, unvarnished, uncastrated copy of the great original". That original, as I have mentioned earlier, uses a style that modulates between the colloquial and the literary. The literary is marked by metaphors and similes, formulaic epithets, parallelisms, and rhymed prose, and Burton literally preserves all this including the jingling rhymes, merrily telling the reader that he has "carefully Englished the picturesque turns and novel expressions of the original in all their outlandishness." And outlandish, indeed grotesque, they appear, both to English and to Arabic eyes. Having gone so far, Burton is unable to retrench in his rendering of the colloquial passages; therefore, he renders them in a pseudo-archaic style dear to the heart of many a Victorian translator, a style that is totally alien both to the style of the Arabic original and to any recognizable style in English literature. One may suppose that Burton follows a general Victorian tendency to archaize and make more colourful the "rude" works of primitive times and places... (...)

Thus Burton's translation (...) is not so much a true translation of the *Nights* as it is a colorful and entertaining concoction. For instance, a passage that reads:

*The curtain was unfastened, and a dazzling girl emerged, with genial charm, wise mien, and features as radiant as the moon. She had an elegant figure, the scent of ambergris, sugared lips, Babylonian eyes, with eyebrows as arched as a pair of bent bows, and a face whose radiance put the shining sun to shame, for she was like a great star soaring in the heavens, or a dome of gold, or an unveiled bride, or a splendid fish swimming in a fountain, or a morsel of luscious fat in a bowl of milk soup,*

becomes in Burton's hands:

*Thereupon sat a lady bright of blee, with brow beaming brilliancy, the dream of philosophy, whose eyes were fraught with Babel's gramarye and her eyebrows were arched as for archery; her breath breathed ambergris and perfumery and her lips were sugar to taste and carnelian to see. Her stature was*

*straight as the letter I and her face shamed the noon-sun's radiancy; and she was even as a galaxy, or a dome with golden marquetry or a bride displayed in choicest finery or a noble maid of Araby.*

Another passage, which reads:

*When I saw that he was dead and realized that it was I who had killed him, I let out a loud scream, beat my face, tore my clothes, and cried, "O people, O God's creatures, there remained for this young man only one day out of the forty, yet he still met his death at my hand. O God, I ask for your forgiveness, wishing that I had died before him. These my afflictions I suffer, draught by bitter draught, 'so that God's will may be fulfilled.'"*

becomes almost a parody or rather a self-parody:

*When I saw that he was slain and knew that I had slain him, maugre myself, I cried out with an exceeding loud and bitter cry and beat my face and rent my raiment and said, 'Verily we be Allah's and unto Him we be returning, O Moslems! O folk fain of Allah! there remained for this youth but one day of the forty dangerous days which the astrologers and the learned had foretold for him; and the predestined death of this beautiful one was to be at my hand. Would Heaven I had not tried to cut the water melon. What dire misfortune is this I must bear lief or loath! What a disaster! What an affliction! O Allah mine, I implore thy pardon and declare to Thee my innocence of his death. But what God willeth let that come to pass.'(...)*

For the translator, who stands astride two cultures, possesses two different sensibilities, and assumes a double identity, a translation is a journey of self-discovery. And the road to truth is, like the road to fairyland, fraught with perils and requires an innocent suspension of disbelief in the self and what it creates. By translating the work, one translates oneself; the little Arab boy who listened to the *Thousand and One Nights* has become the English storyteller. He may have produced a strange creature, a man with an ass's head, or may even, like Bottom, sport an ass's head of his own. What does it matter, so long as he has dreamed, in one Baghdad or another, a dream in the lap of a fairy queen.

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