

## Narrative Strategies in Popular Literature: ideology and ethics in tales from the *Arabian Nights* and other collections

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ULRICH MARZOLPH

### Abstract

This essay compares some of the tales from the *Arabian Nights* with corresponding versions in other sources, above all the fourteenth-century collection known as *al-Ḥikāyāt al-ʿajība* (Wonderful Stories). The aim of this comparison is to identify and analyse the different narrative strategies used by the authors or compilers of the tales to convey specific messages. Against this backdrop, the essay discusses three tales as examples for three different types of narrative adaptation: The tale of *Abū Muḥammad Lazybones* as an example for different interpretations in vaguely contemporary versions; the tale of *Ḥullanār* as an example for an Eastern tale gone West; and, finally, the tale of the *Forty Girls* as a highly adaptable scheme preserving its main idea even in reduced versions.

### Introduction

Research in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manuscripts of the *Arabian Nights* has unveiled their curious characteristics.<sup>1</sup> Although the history of the *Arabian Nights* can be traced back to the ninth century CE,<sup>2</sup> ‘anything likely to be regarded as a Vulgate text of the *Arabian Nights* was not created until late in the eighteenth century’. Moreover, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Arabic manuscripts were compiled ‘in direct response to the European demand for complete editions that had been initiated by the enthusiastic reception’ of Antoine Galland’s first translation of the *Arabian Nights* into a European language (1704–1717). In order to create ‘complete’ redactions of the text, the subsequent compilers of these manuscripts have exploited a large range of sources additional to the previously available ‘basic’ stock of *Arabian Nights* tales, whatever that might have been.<sup>3</sup> As David Pinault in his study *Story-Telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights* points out, the redactors of those manuscripts followed a practice that had been approved for centuries of storytelling.<sup>4</sup> The range of material these compilers exploited is vast, besides anecdotes and stories of all kind comprising geographical and historical literature. So far only parts of the narrative repertoire of the *Arabian Nights* have been studied in relation to their sources, such as—most recently—the small corpus of fables inserted after the tale of ‘Umar ibn al-Nu‘mān.<sup>5</sup>

Among the hundreds of anonymous narrative compilations in Arabic manuscript tradition preserved in libraries in the West and the Near East that might have served as a source of inspiration for the Arabic compilers in one way or other, one is of particular

Ulrich Marzolph, *Enzyklopädie des Märchens, Friedländer Weg 2, 37085 Göttingen, Germany*

importance. While most relevant texts bear comparatively recent dates, the unique manuscript published in 1956 by Hans Wehr under the title *al-Ḥikāyāt al-ʿajība* ('Wonderful Stories') is different. According to paleographical evidence it was probably compiled as early as the fourteenth century.<sup>6</sup> If this dating holds true, it would make the *Ḥikāyāt* older than the oldest extant manuscript of the *Arabian Nights*—the Galland manuscript that is supposed to date from the fifteenth century.<sup>7</sup> While some scholars have seen the *Ḥikāyāt* as a fragment of the monumental compilation of narratives attempted by the tenth-century author al-Jahshiyārī,<sup>8</sup> otherwise lost, it is highly interesting to note that they contain a number of tales also encountered in later redactions of the *Arabian Nights*. Rather than dealing with al-Jahshiyārī's authorship, which to my opinion is rather far-fetched, I propose to discuss here some of the tales common to both the *Ḥikāyāt* and the *Arabian Nights*.

Of the eighteen tales contained in the *Ḥikāyāt*'s only preserved first volume, four correspond directly with tales included in the *Arabian Nights* or, to be exact, in the Macnaghten edition (Calcutta II) as well as the so-called 'Zotenberg's Egyptian recension' (ZER).<sup>9</sup> These are the tales of the *Barber's Brothers*,<sup>10</sup> *Jullanār the Sea-born*,<sup>11</sup> *Jubayr ibn ʿUmayr and the Lady Budūr*<sup>12</sup> and *Abū Muḥammad Lazybones*.<sup>13</sup> A fifth tale—the *Story of the Forty Girls*—is represented in the *Arabian Nights* in an abridged form.<sup>14</sup> Yet another tale from the *Ḥikāyāt*—the *Story of Şūl and Shumūl*—is known both from a sixteenth-century Egyptian manuscript and from a Tübingen manuscript probably dating from the fourteenth century. In the latter the story is broken up into nights, probably so as to be inserted into a redaction of the *Arabian Nights* then under preparation.<sup>15</sup> Of these tales, I have chosen three that relate to my topic in different ways.

As a disclaimer, I should mention that I understand the term *strategy* in a wide sense. In the following, the term is employed to denote a relation between textual arrangements and the effects they have on the meaning of a given tale, whether intended or implicit. I will discuss these textual configurations as resulting from narrative strategies employed by the storytellers. An analysis of the development of a given tale originating from a cultural area and historical period different from that of the tale's readers may reveal narrative strategies crucial for our present access to understanding the tale, such as has been superbly demonstrated by Patrice Coussonet in his detailed study of the tale of *ʿAlī the Cairene and the Haunted House in Baghdad*.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, a comparison of details in different versions may uncover the ideological intentions these narrative strategies work to propagate, or the political or moral 'messages' inherent in the tale. In cases where the objectives of storytellers are impossible to know—all the more so since the story-tellers concerned here remain anonymous—close scrutiny of narrative strategies may help us to begin to infer some of the objectives hidden in the texts. With these theoretical remarks in mind, I propose to discuss different versions of three tales as examples for three different types of narrative adaptation: the tale of *Abū Muḥammad Lazybones* as an example for different interpretations in vaguely contemporary versions; the tale of *Jullanār* as an example for an Eastern tale gone West; and, finally, the tale of the *Forty Girls* as a highly adaptable scheme preserving its main idea even in reduced versions.

#### **Different Interpretations in Vaguely Contemporary Versions: *Abū Muḥammad Lazybones***

The Tale of *Abū Muḥammad Hight Lazybones*, in Richard Burton's rendition, or *Abu Mohammed, the Sluggard*, in Gustav Edmund von Grunebaum's wording,<sup>17</sup> is essentially

the tale of an absurdly lazy young man who with the help of a magical monkey becomes incredibly rich. The tale begins with the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd looking for a large jewel to be put in a particular place of the new crown his wife (or, in the *Hikāyāt*, his sister) has had prepared. As Hārūn's treasury does not hold any fitting jewel, he is told that the only person likely to meet his needs is the said Abū Muḥammad. Summoned to the caliphal palace, Abū Muḥammad displays his riches and when questioned about the sources for his wealth, becomes what Tzvetan Todorov has labelled an 'homme récit';<sup>18</sup> he tells the caliph (and, by extension, the reader or listener) who he is by telling his story. The tale is then narrated in the first person, as Abū Muḥammad relates how he became rich in his youth.

Young Abū Muḥammad is so lazy as to drive his mother mad. He eats only when his mother brings him food, and he would rather burn in the sun than move into the shade. The one and only occasion on which he ever gets up is in order to ask a merchant about to depart for a journey to buy some goods for him. The merchant accepts but later forgets about his promise and only on the return journey buys a worn-out monkey for Abū Muḥammad. This monkey turns out to be a magical creature, who manages to accumulate tremendous riches in the name of Abū Muḥammad by fetching jewels (or pearls) from the bottom of the sea. The merchant, upon his return, hands everything over to Abū Muḥammad, who becomes the richest man in town. Abū Muḥammad soon realizes that the monkey is in fact a powerful demon (*mārid*), when the monkey makes him assist in acquiring a girl he has been unsuccessfully wooing for a long time. When Abū Muḥammad breaks the magical spell protecting the girl by marrying her, the demon abducts her. Only after a strenuous journey in search of her involving mention (and sometimes practice) of magical tricks, he is reunited with the girl and both return home.

This general outline fits both versions of the tale, but they also contain several differences. Generally speaking, the tale is constructed in four parts: (1) a prologue introducing the protagonist and the circumstances leading to story-telling; (2) a first part in which an apparently undeserving protagonist becomes rich with the help of a magical creature; (3) an interlude separating the lovers; and (4) a second part in which the lovers are reunited and the demon is destroyed. The *Hikāyāt* version, for example, starts with the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd strolling around town with his vizier Ja'far. When Hārūn witnesses Abū Muḥammad's tremendous wealth he returns home in an angry mood only to be faced with his sister's request for the large jewel. His wrath is increased further by the fact that his own treasury does not hold any fitting jewel and he is thus forced to ask Abū Muḥammad for help. This introduction enables the narrator to have Abū Muḥammad summoned to the caliph immediately. In the *Arabian Nights*, Abū Muḥammad rather entertains the messengers lavishly first, then takes up the caliph's friendly invitation.

Besides the variation in the introductory passage, there are a number of significant differences between the two versions: (1) in the elaboration of Abū Muḥammad's laziness, the *Arabian Nights* version has his mother deliver the money to the merchant, but he does this all by himself in the *Hikāyāt*. (2) In the *Arabian Nights*, the merchant is reminded of his promise to Abū Muḥammad in a conscious act of remembering; in the *Hikāyāt* the ship suddenly stops moving and is only released when the merchant remembers his promise. (3) In the *Hikāyāt*, the magical monkey dives for pearls in Oman, a place so near to Abū Muḥammad's hometown in Southern Iraq that the episode is directly followed by the merchant's return; whereas in the *Arabian Nights*, the

monkey dives for jewels at an unnamed island first and because the riches he acquires initially are comparatively modest, he is given another opportunity to accumulate wealth in compensation for rescuing the merchant and his companions from the cannibal Negroes in Zanzibar. (4) When his bride has been abducted by the evil monkey-demon, Abū Muḥammad receives help and advice from a friendly Muslim demon without any particular reason in the *Ḥikāyāt*; in the *Arabian Nights*, he instead earns the gratitude of a clan of magical white snakes by killing a black snake he finds fighting with one of them. (5) Most significantly of all, the final episode in the *Ḥikāyāt* is extremely short. Here, when Abū Muḥammad reaches the demon's palace after a short journey through magical realms, he finds the demon already destroyed and his beloved peacefully reading the Qur'an. In the *Arabian Nights*, Abū Muḥammad is by contrast submitted to a complicated procedure involving a magical flight on the back of a demon, an encounter with the mythical saint Khidr,<sup>19</sup> a journey to the City of Brass,<sup>20</sup> and the conscious application of a magical talisman.

André Miquel<sup>21</sup> has identified the underlying message of this tale as dealing with the question of power. When destiny allows even such a ridiculously lazy person as Abū Muḥammad to accumulate riches larger than those of the caliph himself, the caliph's rule by analogy is shown to result from destiny. The central theme would thus be Fate: God's absolute capacity to decide whatever He wants, or, in Miquel's profane formula, the 'caprice du hasard'.<sup>22</sup> This theme is tackled in both versions, albeit with different tendencies, and it is here that one might ponder about the working of narrative strategies. In both versions of the tale, the prologue and the first part account for about half of the total text while the other half is occupied by the interlude and the second part. In the *Arabian Nights*, however, the tale's final part accounts for about a third of the total text (eight of twenty-three pages), compared to a sixth of the total text (three of eighteen pages) in the *Ḥikāyāt*. This gives the *Arabian Nights* version a climax towards the end, stressing the work of destiny in its incomprehensible and magical dimension. The narrator of the *Ḥikāyāt* version, on the other hand, has constructed the final part in a rather pragmatic manner: it is short, contains few details, and in having God kill the demon in response to the distressed girl's sincere prayer it stresses human responsibility in contrast to a fatalistic surrender to the incomprehensible working of Fate. Human responsibility is also pointed out in the tale's initial scene: while Abū Muḥammad leans on his mother to meet the merchant in the *Arabian Nights* version, he gets up and walks by himself in the *Ḥikāyāt* version. Similarly, in the *Ḥikāyāt* the forgetful merchant remembers to fulfil his promise not by chance, as in the *Arabian Nights*, but through the magical standstill of his ship, constituting a strong call to keep his promise and act responsible. The strategy of varying minor details such as these in the end adds up to major modifications in the tale's implicit message. While both versions accept God's ultimate authority and the inexplicable workings of Fate, the *Ḥikāyāt* version supplies the human factor with a higher degree of responsibility for action within the given frame.

A variation in tendency such as the one pointed out here does not, of course, generate a new literary genre, yet it might modify any given text to such a degree as to leave a different impression on its listeners and, hence, generate new levels of meaning. René Basset, the first one to study the tale of Abū Muḥammad (in its *Arabian Nights* version), regarded it as a recent and badly constructed concoction of motifs also appearing in other tales.<sup>23</sup> While the sheer fact that the use of many motifs is not restricted to this particular tale certainly holds true, Basset's evaluation misses the point that tales are never told without an intention. A version such as that of the *Arabian*

*Nights*, with its elaborate focus on the strange and the wonderful, may be regarded as stressing awe and admiration of the miraculous workings of God's creation—aspects that later formed the basis of a chiefly entertaining genre. The version of the *Hikāyāt*, on the other hand, in stressing human responsibility underlines the educative message that even the smallest amount of human activity and responsibility will be rewarded. In order to drive this point home, both the initial irresponsible laziness of the hero as well as the ensuing rewards are exaggerated in a fashion typical of popular literature. Stripped of these popular distortions and boiled down to its essential message, the *Hikāyāt* version becomes a pronounced didactic tale.

While both versions of the tale discussed so far are considerably ancient, it is interesting to note what the compiler of the so-called Wortley-Montague manuscript (now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford), which was probably produced in the eighteenth century, has made of this tale.<sup>24</sup> His version is both heavily abridged and stripped of the initial eponymous passages. Here, we encounter a young beggar who buys a dog-faced baboon with the little savings he has. Back home, the monkey changes into a handsome young man exclaiming (in Burton's antiquated English): 'Query me no questions, concerning whatso thou shalt see, for good luck has come to thee.'<sup>25</sup> After the hero Muḥammad has acquired the bride, here the sultan's daughter, and disabled the talisman protecting her from the demon, instead of her being abducted, it is he who is thrown out of his magnificent home and reduced to his former poverty. When strolling around town, a friendly North African (Maghribī) sorcerer hands him a magical note addressed to the Lord of the demons with the help of which the latter is persuaded to punish the mischievous *jinnī* and return Muḥammad to his wife. Besides abridgement, what has happened here can best be characterized by the term rationalization. The tale's essential elements are preserved, but while the initial argument—the hero's absurd laziness and his deserved compensation when acting responsibly—is flattened, the final reward—marriage with the sultan's daughter and acquisition of the rule—is heightened to extremes. Both tendencies, in contrast to the previous stress on either Fate or self-responsibility, work for a rational understanding of the tale inasmuch as the magical ingredients are neglected. The monkey's wonderful capacities, the destruction of the girl's talisman and even the young man's adventures in search of his bride are not elaborated. Instead of the workings of magic, the focus in this eighteenth-century version is on authority (of wealth, knowledge and power). Even the mischievous *jinnī* is not destroyed by magic. The helpful sorcerer does not activate his magical powers; instead, he practices his authority by writing a note to the Lord of the demons—notably of undisclosed content. The latter, in turn, rather than resorting to magic, punishes the *jinnī* within the framework of a rationalized hierarchy, a kind of justice system, that also reigns in the world of demons.

### **An Eastern Tale Gone West: *Jullanār***

The second tale to be discussed, the story of the mermaid *Jullanār*, will be considered from a different angle. As both versions of the tale in the *Hikāyāt* and in the *Arabian Nights* are more or less identical, instead of comparing their realization in the Arabic versions, I propose to discuss a late eighteenth-century German version as an example of narrative strategies adapting the Eastern tale to the Western value system. The tale of *Jullanār* is composed of two parts. *Jullanār* is only the protagonist of the first one, while the second part elaborates on the adventures of her son *Badr* (*Hikāyāt*) or *Badr*

Bāsim (*Arabian Nights*). Because the tale's second part does not feature in the European adaptation, we may leave it aside for the present discussion.

Shahriyār (*Arabian Nights*: Shahrīmān), king of the northeastern Persian province of Khurāsān, is childless despite his many wives and concubines. One day he is offered an extremely beautiful slave-girl who refuses to speak. He falls in love with her and, while neglecting his other wives, dedicates all his time to her. She finally speaks to him when she becomes pregnant and informs him that she is the daughter of the king of the ocean. As she is about to give birth, she summons her family by ways of magic. Soon after the boy's birth Jullanār's family returns to the sea, and the child is initiated into the life under water by his uncle. The boy grows up, is educated in the arts, and after his father's death becomes king. From this point onward, the Arabic versions focus on the young man's adventures in finding (and, as one might say, winning over) his bride.

The German version I propose to contrast with the Arabic versions is contained in an anonymous collection published in 1801 under the title of *Feen-Mährchen*, or 'Tales of the fairies'.<sup>26</sup> It introduces the young ruler as an Oriental named Ahmed who, although his harem is full of beautiful women, is craving for love rather than sensual pleasure. One night Ahmed overhears a female voice lamenting the separation from her beloved, and finds out that he himself is the object of her love. The young woman, Geldena (a distortion of Galland's 'Gulnare'), a princess of an underwater kingdom, is at first forced to return to the sea with her companions. She returns to land the next day, is caught and immediately brought before Ahmed. Even though Geldena does not speak, Ahmed falls madly in love with her. He sets all his wives free and marries her. Only when she gives birth to a son does she summon her family. Her father, the king of the underwater world, then releases the magic spell that made her speechless. In a lengthy passage, her father explains that Geldena has transgressed the rules of their world by falling in love with a human. Accordingly, her family has been forced to repudiate her. Now that her human husband has proved his true devotion to her, they are allowed to accept her again. Ahmed and Geldena's newborn son is then taken away by his uncle for an education under the sea. He is returned to his earth family two years later when Geldena is giving birth to a second child, a daughter. Another year later all of them visit the dying king of the underwater world, and while Ahmed marvels at the abundant wealth of the marine realms, he is bewildered by not noticing signs of grief among the dying king's family. After their return to the world above, they live—as the text makes us understand—'happily ever after'. Geldena never visits the underwater world again.

In the Arabic versions this story has a second part, which is about twice as long and, hence, goes into much more detail.<sup>27</sup> In consequence, the first part is reduced to a mere introduction, and the only time when the initial protagonist Jullanār enters the scene again is towards the end of the story's second part, when after numerous magical encounters her son appears to be finally subdued by his female opponent, leaving his mother no recourse but to go to war in order to free him. Even though the introductory passage is linked to the following part in several other ways, one might easily imagine the second part as an independent story. The German adaptation, in contrast, develops the introductory passage into a fully-fledged story in its own right. Moreover, it introduces a number of traits and arguments, which root the tale firmly within the contemporary German value system. At the beginning of the eighteenth century Galland had introduced the *Arabian Nights* into the French world of feudal order and courtly manners. A century later, and in a bourgeois German context, the value system is different: instead of considerations about the feasibility of arranged marriages, the

concept of individual love is now key; instead of chance, it is her love that brings Geldena to the king; it is her love that causes her to be repudiated by her people; and it is her husband's love that makes her family finally accept the situation. The recent comparison between Galland's original French text and its German translation by Johann Heinrich Voss (1781–1785), vaguely contemporary with the *Feen-Mährchen*, has extracted similar tendencies ruling the German translation.<sup>28</sup> Whenever Galland would elaborate on courtly atmosphere, as his work addressed the French readers at court, Voss would transfer the like passages to the context, manners and intellectual horizon of the German urban citizens constituting his own audience. Similarly, instead of wealth in the *Arabian Nights*, it is now social responsibility that counts in the *Feen-Mährchen*. The wonders of the marine world are depicted with a certain awe, but eventually they serve only as a matrix for further reflections: the inhabitants of the underwater world dwell in gold and silver, yet they part with their wealth freely (notwithstanding in exchange for food); moreover, they do not grieve for things gone by. The latter trait—found also in another tale of the *Arabian Nights*, the tale of 'Abdallāh the Fisherman and 'Abdallāh the Merman<sup>29</sup>—is stressed repeatedly in other tales of the German collection in which human foibles, above all exaggerated emotions, are criticized. These characteristics are typical of the literature of the time, which was imbued with the culture of the Enlightenment. Other tales in the collection explicitly contrast the 'former dark ages' with the present (1801) 'enlightened days'. Obviously, the Oriental tale, like its contemporary European literature, serves as a background against which other ideas may be tested and developed.<sup>30</sup> In this particular case the German narrator introduces and underlines moral as well as social concepts in order to develop the underwater world into a kind of future vision for humanity, as a utopia built on the value system of Humanism.<sup>31</sup>

#### **Elaborate and Reduced Versions of a Plot: the *Forty Girls***

The third tale from the *Hikāyāt* to be discussed is a peculiar one. It will serve here to demonstrate how the use of similar motifs in different contexts may express varying objectives and, hence, once more reveal the workings of narrative strategies. The tale of the *Forty Girls* features a young man, the youngest of three princes, who is repudiated by his father for having interpreted the latter's dream as an evil omen. Released by his compassionate executioner, the prince reaches a castle that is inhabited by forty warrior girls. At first, the prince hides in their castle and although they suspect his presence, they are unable to find him. In order to track him down, one after the other the forty warrior girls stay at home. When meeting him, each of them falls in love with him and fails to betray his existence to the others. Finally, their leader meets him, also falls in love and declares him her exclusive lover. One day, as the girls have to depart for some business, their leader entrusts to him the keys to the treasury so that he may divert himself. Only one of the doors is not to be opened. Needless to say, curiosity leads our hero to that particular door and when looking into the room through a crack, he notices a beautiful mare. He soon realizes that the mare knows human speech, as she invites him to free her. Even though at this very moment his beloved arrives, he follows the horse's advice and flees. This is as much of the story as is relevant for the present discussion.<sup>32</sup>

In the *Arabian Nights* the equivalent to this story constitutes the third and final episode in the *Third Qalandar's Tale*. After having been shipwrecked at the Magnetic Mountain and later having inadvertently killed a young man living in hiding, the

protagonist meets ten one-eyed men in mourning. When he asks the men about what has happened to them, instead of answering they sew him into an animal hide. He is picked up by a giant bird which subsequently drops him on a high mountain. From there, the young man reaches the palace of the forty girls with whom he lives a joyful life for some time. When the girls have to leave him for a period of forty days they entrust the keys to him, but forbid him to open the fortieth chamber. When he finally opens the forbidden door on the fortieth day, he finds a winged horse. Climbing onto the horse's back, he is transported back to the place of the ten mourning men, and the horse whips out one of his eyes with its tail before it leaves. Lamenting the lost pleasure, and not even permitted to compassionately join the group of mourners, he starts to roam the world.

Claude Bremond has pointed out closely related variants of the latter version in the first tale of the Persian poet Nezāmi's (died 1202) *Haft peïkar-e Bahrām-Gur* and in the fifth tale of the equally Persian *Sindbād-nāme*.<sup>33</sup> These tales, both of which are older than any of the Arabic ones, in their turn have given rise to numerous popular adaptations of the theme 'Repenting anything that cannot be changed is of no use', or, as the Persian saying goes, *Pashimāni-ye gozashte sudi nadārad*.<sup>34</sup> These tales usually follow this structure: (1) gain of a fairy wife, (2) transgression of taboo and (3) irretrievable loss of fairy wife. In Arabic, two of the tales collected by Enno Littmann in Palestine and Egypt contain closely related episodes.<sup>35</sup> In one of these, corresponding to one of the Palestinian folk-tales published by Hans Schmidt and Paul Kahle, the narrators do not contend themselves with having the protagonist submerge in eternal grief; rather, they have the king, who listens to his tales, feel perfectly justified to have the protagonist executed because of his stupid action.<sup>36</sup>

In another variation of the same theme found in the Būlāq edition—obviously resulting from a lacuna in the manuscript that served as the basis of this edition—the *Third Qalandar's Tale* appears in a highly reduced form in which the originally separated second and third episodes are merged.<sup>37</sup> In this condensed version the protagonist watches a group of people prepare an underground mansion, as in the second episode. As soon as they leave he uncovers the mansion's lid, enters, and then suddenly wanders through 39 beautiful gardens, as in the end of the third episode. When opening a door he encounters the magical horse that brings him to the ten mournful youths and whips out of one his eyes with its tail. Notwithstanding the weak motivation for the protagonist's mourning, this version by way of its Persian translation, prepared in the Qajar period, was also popular as a separate chapbook in mid-twentieth century Iran and might have given rise to further variations of the theme in oral tradition.<sup>38</sup>

As the available texts show, the motif of the horse hidden in the forbidden chamber offered itself predominantly in order to illustrate the particular theme of 'pleasure lost' or, as Claude Bremond has put it, 'Hélas sur le passé'.<sup>39</sup> The protagonist at first experiences what Robert Irwin terms a 'joyous [...] celebration of sex'<sup>40</sup> which in the narrator's perspective obviously consists of extensive sexual relations without feeling responsible for the consequences in terms of emotional bondage or offspring.<sup>41</sup> The protagonist's responsibility is then put to the test by pointing out a taboo and thus granting him the potential to transgress it, a test he inevitably fails (both for psychological and structural reasons). In the *Hikāyāt* version, the protagonist's unfaithfulness is balanced by the fact that the leader of the forty girls is in fact a witch who has unjustly held her own sister—the enchanted horse—prisoner. As the ethics of success (discussed in relation to the *Arabian Nights* by Peter Molan)<sup>42</sup> permit an unjust act to be countered by another one of the same kind, the hero not only escapes unharmed but also is



rewarded with women, children, wealth and power. In the *Arabian Nights* version, the protagonist's transgression is justified by nothing other than his own curiosity. In consequence, he is reduced to his former state of misery after living through the utmost joy in the castle of the girls.

While both versions employ similar motifs, the arguments they elaborate are different and so, consequently, are the narrative strategies employed. In the *Ḥikāyāt* version, the tale of the *Forty Girls* constitutes an integral part of the narrative. It is linked to the tale's introduction by the hero's wandering in the desert, which eventually leads him to the castle of the girls. Moreover, it is linked to the tale's further development in that the horse has a crucial role in advising and helping the hero. Any dramatic turn of events after the transgression of the taboo would hinder the tale's further flow. In fact, as in the *Arabian Nights* and other popular versions, it would lead to a final moral lesson and would thus prevent the narrative's continuation such as developed in the *Ḥikāyāt*. In the *Ḥikāyāt* version, the tale of the *Forty Girls* is rather less a tale of transgression but more a tale about the acquisition of a helpful animal. The actual method of acquisition is not exactly typical of the genre, where friendly behaviour towards the supernatural in need—as in the case of the fight between the black and the white snake in the tale of *Abū Muḥammad*—appears to be more frequent.<sup>43</sup> In the *Arabian Nights*, by contrast, the tale of the *Forty Girls* is but one of the general tale's three episodes that are not logically linked with each other but rather constitute single units. While the tale might exist separately, as in fact it does in the popular versions mentioned in both Arabic and Persian, it is linked here to the preceding episode by means of a common moral, whose overlapping point could read: 'Destiny cannot be escaped'. But while in the earlier episode, the hero unwittingly acts in order to fulfil the ordained Fate, in the third episode he suffers from a fated transgression. Even though it is tempting to interpret the protagonist's action as an individual act of unfaithfulness, the presence of the ten mourning youths in the frame story makes it clear that transgression of a taboo is an inevitable human characteristic.

### Conclusions

According to folklore theory, tales—whether written down or orally performed—gain their meaning in the individual performance.<sup>44</sup> In other words, each performance creates a different tale. While performance in oral tradition means the recitation of a tale to a listening audience, performance with regard to literature refers in the first place to a given tale being fixed in writing, and only in the second place implies the reading of a tale by a specific individual. A researcher's perspective in reading tales written down further complicates matters. Not only the producer's and the recipient's perspective matters, but also the researcher's gaze and expectation. It is the researchers' task to find a balanced judgement burdened as little as possible with presuppositions or biases. They have to remain aware that any of their readings is but one possibility of supplying meaning to a text whose context at the time of production is largely unknown.<sup>45</sup> For the producer, narrative strategies are one way of achieving meaning. In consequence, close examination of narrative strategies may contribute to an understanding of why a tale has taken the shape it has and, more importantly, of its 'meaning'. Similar readings have been undertaken earlier, and many more are needed in order for us to arrive at an adequate evaluation of the art of storytelling in classical Arabic tradition.

The medieval Arabic tales discussed above belong to collections whose authors remain unknown. Moreover, it is quite likely that the tales included in the collections originate from a variety of sources and that more than one author contributed to their final form. This situation makes it impossible to reconstruct an authorial intention at work throughout the whole collection. In particular, the *Arabian Nights* make it difficult to extract a coherent intention, as their heterogeneous character as an *omnium-gatherum* (Irwin) over the centuries has permitted the integration of just about each and every kind of tale, including myths, religious legends, historical anecdotes, romances of chivalry and love, folk- and fairy-tales, animal fables, humorous tales and jokes. That said, it remains possible to uncover the ideological agenda, be it political or moral, of a tale through an attentive scrutiny of narrative strategies employed. As for Arabic folk literature Western readers, with their specific cultural notions such as authorship, individuality, originality and plagiarism, need to be aware of the reign of different concepts in pre-modern Arabic storytelling. Even so, although the *Arabian Nights* may at times appear as a haphazard collection put together for the simple joy of numerical integrity, the narrative universe they offer is not only marvellous and attractive but also revealing and instructive. Close readings can help to decipher the rich layers of cultural notions embedded in its tales.

#### Notes

1. For a survey of Arabic pre-eighteenth-century, hence 'pre-Galland' manuscripts, see Marzolph, Ulrich, 'Re-locating the Arabian Nights', in *Philosophy and Arts in the Islamic World. Proceedings of the Eighteenth Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants held at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* (September 3–September 10, 1996). ed. U. Vermeulen/D. De Smet, *Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta*, 87 (1998), 155–163 (for the following quotations); recent contributions on specific manuscripts include *Tausend und eine Nacht. Neue Erzählungen. Die in anderen Versionen von '1001 Nacht' nicht enthaltenen Geschichten der Wortley-Montague-Handschrift der Oxforde Bodleian Library*. Aus dem arabischen Urtext vollständig übertragen und erläutert von Felix Tauer. Frankfurt am Main, Insel, 1995; Chraïbi, Aboubakr, *Contes nouveaux des 1001 Nuits: Étude du manuscrit Reinhardt* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1996); Grotzfeld, Heinz, 'Proto-ZÄR-Handschriften von 1001 Nacht in den Gothaer Beständen: Die textgeschichtliche Bedeutung der Handschriften Ms. Orient. A 2638 und A 2637', in *Wilhelm Pertsch-Orientalist und Bibliothekar: Zum 100. Todestag*. ed. by Hans Stein (Gotha: Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, 1999), pp. 91–108.
2. Abbott, Nabia, 'A Ninth-Century Fragment of the "Thousand Nights": new lights on the early history of the *Arabian Nights*', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 8 (1949), 129–64.
3. For an interpretation of what 'basic' tales in the *1001 Nights* might mean see Mahdi, Muhsin: 'Exemplary Tales in the *1001 Nights*', in Campbell, Kay Hardy et al., *The 1001 Nights: Critical Essays and Annotated Bibliography* (Cambridge, MA: Dar Mahjar, 1985), pp. 1–24, also in Mahdi, Muhsin, *The Thousand and One Nights* (Alf Layla wa-Layla) from the Earliest Known Sources, Part 3: *Introduction and Indexes* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 140–63.
4. Pinault, David, *Story-Telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); see also id., 'Būlāq, Macnaghten, and the new Leiden edition compared: notes on storytelling technique from the *Thousand and One Nights*', *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 32,1 (1987), 125–57.
5. Osigus, Anke, *Ein Fabelzyklus in 1001 Nacht. Literatur- und textkritische Analyse*. PhD dissertation, Münster, 2000.
6. *Das Buch der wunderbaren Erzählungen und seltsamen Geschichten*. Mit Benutzung der Vorarbeiten von A. von Bulmerincq herausgegeben von H. Wehr. Wiesbaden 1956 (Bibliotheca Islamica 18) (edition of the Arabic text); *Das Buch der wundersamen Geschichten. Erzählungen aus der Welt von 1001 Nacht*, ed. U. Marzolph (München: Beck 1999) (complete German translation); see also Grotzfeld, Heinz & Sophia, *Die Erzählungen aus 'Tausendundeiner Nacht'* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), pp. 75–80; Irwin, Robert, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: Allen Lane, 1994), pp. 82–3.
7. For the divergent opinions concerning the dating see Grotzfeld, Heinz, 'The Age of the Galland Manuscript of the Nights: Numismatic Evidence for Dating a Manuscript?', *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 1 (1996–97), 50–64.

8. cf. Grotzfeld (as in note 6), 16 f., 74 f.; Irwin (as in note 6), 82.
9. The Alif Laila or Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night. Commonly known as 'The Arabian Nights' Entertainments', edited by W. H. Macnaghten, 4 vols (Calcutta 1839–42).
10. Wehr & Marzolph (as in note 6), no. 3 = Chauvin, Victor: *Bibliographie des ouvrages arabes ou relatifs aux arabes* (Liège: Vaillant-Carmanne), vol. 5, pp. 157–64, no. 81–6.
11. Wehr & Marzolph (as in note 6), no. 6 = Chauvin (as in note 10), vol. 5, pp. 147–51, no. 73.
12. Wehr & Marzolph (as in note 6), no. 10 = Chauvin (as in note 10), vol. 7, pp. 93 f., no. 374.
13. Wehr & Marzolph (as in note 6), no. 11 = Chauvin (as in note 10), vol. 6, pp. 64–7, no. 233.
14. Wehr & Marzolph (as in note 6), no. 5 = Chauvin (as in note 10), vol. 5, pp. 200–3, no. 117.
15. Wehr & Marzolph (as in note 6), no. 8 = Chauvin (as in note 10), vol. 7, pp. 107–12, no. 379bis; Grotzfeld (as in note 6) 80–2; Seybold, C.F., *Geschichte von Sul und Schumul. Unbekannte Erzählung aus Tausendundeiner Nacht* (Leipzig, 1902). A number of further correspondences between tales in *al-Hikāyāt al-'ajība* and non-ZER manuscripts of the *Nights* are mentioned in Marzolph, Ulrich and Richard van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004), s. v. '*al-Hikāyāt al-'ajība*'.
16. Coussonnet, Patrice, *Pensée mythique, idéologie et aspirations sociales dans un conte des Mille et une Nuits: Le récit d'Ali du Caire* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie du Caire, 1989) (Supplément aux Annales islamologiques 13).
17. Grunebaum, Gustave Edmund von, 'Greek Form Elements in the Arabian Nights', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 62 (1942), 277–92.
18. Todorov, Tzvetan, 'Les Hommes-récits', in *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), pp. 78–91.
19. Franke, Patrick, *Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginären im traditionellen Islam* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000).
20. Pinault 1992 (as in note 4), 148–239; a comprehensive survey of studies on the concept of the City of Brass is given in Marzolph, Ulrich, 'Messingstadt', in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* [henceforth EM] vol. 9 (Berlin/New York, 1999), cols 599–602.
21. Miquel, André, *Sept contes des Mille et une Nuits; ou Il n'y a pas de contes innocents* (Paris: Sindbad, 1981), pp. 143–63; id.: 'Histoire et société', in Bencheikh, Jamel Eddine et al., *Mille et un Contes de la nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 9–78, at 41–3.
22. Miquel 1981 (as in note 21), 148.
23. Basset, René, 'Notes sur les Mille et une Nuits. VI. Histoire d'Abou Mohammed al-Keslan', *Revue des Traditions Populaires*, 14 (1899), 20–37, at 20.
24. The quoted edition is *Arabian Nights*, with introduction and explanatory notes by Richard F. Burton. Reprinted from the original edition [...] 1885, 16 vols (Beirut: Khayat, 1966), vol. 9, pp. 165–88; Tauer (as in note 1), 34–42.
25. Burton (as in note 24), 38; Jonathan Scott has here 'Ask me no questions' (*The 'Aldine' Edition of the Arabian Nights Entertainments*, vol. 4, L. 1890, p. 221), while Felix Tauer renders the passage apparently quite literally as 'Erforsche nicht, was du siehst [...], denn das Glück ist schon zu dir gekommen!'
26. *Feen-Mährchen. Zur Unterhaltung für Freunde und Freundinnen der Feenwelt*. Textkritischer Neudruck der anonymen Ausgabe Braunschweig 1801. Herausgegeben und kommentiert von Ulrich Marzolph (Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: Georg Olms, 2000), no. 12.
27. For a discussion of the tale's Arabic versions see Walther, Wiebke, *Tausend und eine Nacht: Eine Einführung* (Munich: Artemis, 1987), pp. 95–104.
28. Wieckenberg, Ernst-Peter, *Johann Heinrich Voß und 'Tausend und eine Nacht'* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002).
29. Chauvin (as in note 10), vol. 5, pp. 6–7, no. 3; for interpretations of the Arabic versions of this tale see Gerhardt, Mia I., *The Art of Story-telling: A Literary Study of the Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), pp. 263–9; Miquel 1981 (as in note 21), 111–42.
30. Balke, D., 'Orient und oriental. Lit.en (Einfluß auf Europa und Deutschland)', in *Reallexikon der Deutschen Literaturgeschichte*, vol. 2 (Berlin etc. 1965), pp. 816–60.
31. See also Irwin (as in note 6), 211.
32. The further turn of events has the prince, with the help of the magical horse, marry another princess and find out that his former beloved, the leader of the forty girls, the enchanted horse, and the princess are three sisters. Later, he is reunited with his former beloved together with his forty sons, already grown-up, and eventually even meets his father who forgives him and entrusts his own kingdom to him.
33. Bremond, Claude, 'En deçà et au-delà d'un Conte: le devenir des thèmes', in Bencheikh et al., 1991 (as in note 21), 79–258, at 143–7.

34. See e.g. Marzolph, Ulrich, *Typologie des persischen Volksmärchens* (Beirut: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1984), nos. \*832 A, \*832 B.
35. Littmann, Enno, *Arabische Märchen und Schwänke aus Ägypten* (Mainz, 1955), pp. 31–5, no. 4; id.: *Arabische Märchen: Aus mündlicher Überlieferung gesammelt und übertragen* (Leipzig, 1957), pp. 42–56.
36. Littmann 1955 (as in note 35); Schmidt, Hans & Paul Kahle: *Volkserzählungen aus Palästina: gesammelt bei den Bauern von Bir-Zet* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1918), no. 50.
37. The only Būlāq-text currently available to me is an undated reprint from Cairo, where the passage in question is given on p. 56 (night 15).
38. Marzolph, Ulrich, *Dāstānhā-ye Širin. Fünzig persische Volksbüchlein aus der zweiten Hälfte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1994) (Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 50, 4), no. XLIV; see also id., 'The Persian Nights: Links between the *Arabian Nights* and Iranian Culture', *Fabula*, 45 (2004), 275–93, at 285–6.
39. Bremond (as in note 33).
40. Irwin (as in note 6), 164.
41. On this aspect, see also Marzolph, Ulrich, 'As Woman as Can Be: The Gendered Subversiveness of an Arabic Folktale Heroine', *Edebiyât*, 10 (1999), 199–218.
42. Molan, Peter D. 'Sindbad the Sailor: A Commentary on the Ethics of Violence', *Journal of African and Oriental Studies*, 98 (1978), 237–47.
43. See Lindahl, Carl, 'Dankbare (hilfreiche) Tiere', in EM (as in note 20), vol. 3, cols 287–9.
44. For a survey of folklore theory on performance see Ben-Amos, Dan, 'Kontext', in EM (as in note 20), vol. 8, cols 217–37; Braid, Donald, 'Performanz'. *ibid.*, vol. 10, cols 730–4.
45. See Honko, Lauri: 'Folkloristic Studies on Meaning', *Arv*, 40 (1984), 35–65; Röhrich, Lutz. 'Zur Deutung und Be-Deutung von Folklore-Texten', *Fabula*, 26 (1985), 3–28; Köttinger, Wolfgang: 'Hermeneutik', in EM (as in note 20), 841–5.