

Surviving the Silence: *The Arabian Nights* and its Readers.

Claire Tye

University of Essex

Abstract

Robert L. Mack, in his own introduction to one of the many translations of this wonderful collection of stories, asserts that: “few works have had such a profound and lasting influence on the English literary tradition as the *Thousand and One Nights*” (Mack, 1995). This essay seeks to address the possible reasons for such enduring influence and reader enthusiasm for the *Nights* across time and space, focusing on the *Nights* after its arrival in Europe in the early eighteenth century. The *Nights* came to Europe through trade, and it is the trading of stories, both within the *Nights* and of the *Nights* itself, which leads to a discussion of what is arguably the underlying reason for the passionate enthusiasm we as readers have for the *Nights*. It is a question of survival: surviving the silence. Akin to Scheherazade’s battle against silence – the silence of death by which she is threatened if she stops telling her stories – is the battle of the reader, as we trade our own stories with that of the *Nights*, in our own eternal battle not to be silenced.

Keywords: Thousands and One Nights, literature.

Essay

There are, inevitably with a collection of stories of this magnitude, infinite reasons for a reader’s enthusiasm for “*The Book of the Thousand and One Nights* or, as it is called in the English version ... *The Arabian Nights*, a title that is not without mystery, but is less beautiful” (Borges, 1986: 42).

Jorge Luis Borges clearly identifies the beauty in the title¹ of the *Nights*; a beauty which arises from its sense of infinity; an infinity which mirrors the infinite reasons for the enthusiasm for the *Nights*. Nonetheless, there is one particular source of this enthusiasm that this essay will discuss, one which arguably underpins the general enthusiasm: the element of survival. Survival and storytelling are intrinsically linked, an essential connection which A.S. Byatt recognises: “Narration is as much a part of human nature as breath and the circulation of blood” (Byatt, 2000: 166). The circulatory nature of storytelling and its bond with survival, especially in regard to the *Nights*, can be imagined in the image of a tree: a tree with its rich roots embedded in the minds of the readers; drawing life from the roots, circulating through the branches which extend around the world; branches with seemingly infinite, lustrous, leaves; the leaves of the *Nights*. The stories of the *Nights*, especially that of Scheherazade, are stories of survival and have become more so as they survive throughout time, surviving in the minds of readers, the very minds which constitute the fertile ground for its many roots.

The frame story of the *Nights*, the very same frame which “suggests a perspective from which the collection as a whole should be read” (Marzolph and van Leeuwen, 2004: 371), is the story of Scheherazade’s plight. Scheherazade marries Schahriar in an attempt to stop the “unparalleled barbarity [of the king Schahriar, which] occasioned a general consternation in the city, where there was nothing but crying and lamentation” (Mack, 1995: 10). The king, his previous wife proving to be unfaithful, swears to marry a new woman each day, and kill her in the morning, due to his reasoning that there be “no wickedness equal to that of women” (Mack, 1995: 9). The city suffers until Scheherazade, against her father’s pleas, becomes Schahriar’s wife. It is the stories she tells to prolong her life (leaving a story on a cliffhanger as dawn approaches, so that the king must hear the end the following night) which form the body of the *Nights*. Scheherazade fights against silence, she fights not to be silenced and for women not to be silenced; she fills silence with stories. Thus, Scheherazade’s own tale being “a statement about storytelling and its relation to death” (Marzolph and van Leeuwen, 2004: 371), should remain in the reader’s mind throughout and beyond the

¹ There are numerous collections of the *Nights* and almost as many ways for the wonderful compendium of tales to be referred to: *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*; *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Mille et une nuit*; and *The Arabian Nights*. Thus, following the approach of other critics and to aid my own consistency, I will use the term ‘the *Nights*’ to encompass all of these titles, even though this regrettably loses some of the beauty which Borges so rightly identifies in the title itself.

Nights. The telling of stories is quite literally Scheherazade's only means of survival, as Robert Irwin states, "Scheherazade [is], night by night, talking for her life" (Irwin, 2004: 3). It is here that another important element of reader enthusiasm, and the content of the *Nights*, can be introduced: the element of trade, notable in Scheherazade's trading of stories for her life. Though there are more obvious examples of trade and commerce within the *Nights*, for instance 'The Story of Sindbad the Sailor', it is Scheherazade's story which serves as a prominent example of this theme. In the figure of Scheherazade one can see the interdependent relationship formed between stories, trade and survival. Scheherazade offers stories to the king in an attempt to preserve her life, there is a distinct plea for her to be heard. It is this trading of the self via stories that enables one to survive, will be discussed in this essay.

The issue of silence is crucial within the *Nights*; for if Scheherazade surrenders to silence, she surrenders to death. After all, silence is typically symbolic of death, as Ferial J. Ghazoul explains: "Death, the ultimate reality, is an all-conquering and all-silencing event. ... Survival becomes an unrelenting struggle against silence" (Ghazoul, 1996: 35). Scheherazade embodies this unrelenting struggle as she attempts to save her life, and the life of all the women to come who would have become the king's future wives, and makes this attempt by telling stories. However, Scheherazade's task is not simple, and as Borges highlighted, her task is seemingly endless, for her stories must go on and on. Her stories are beautifully woven from many strands, and each of her nightly stories, "the characters in that tale told other tales, and those too were unfinished at dawn, and before other dawns gave rise to other tales. And the prince's narrative curiosity kept the princess alive, day after day" (Byatt, 2000: 165).

An example of the telling of tales within a tale is that of 'The Story of Sindbad'. However, 'The Story of Sindbad' is also a wonderful example of the delicate fusion of trade, storytelling and survival being essential to the tale and its context. Sindbad mirrors Scheherazade as he also tells a tale every night to Hindbad, and maintains that he must continue the next day: "Sindbad, sent for a purse of one hundred sequins, and giving it to the porter, says, take this Hindbad, return to your home, and come back to-morrow to hear some more of my adventures" (Mack, 1995: 146). This repetitive refrain at the end of each of Sindbad's individual stories mirrors that of Scheherazade as she delays her execution – the bargaining power of stories made more explicit – her tales are paused and she interrupts the narrative flow in this, or a very similar, way: "if the sultan will suffer me to live to-

day ... what I have tomorrow will divert you abundantly more” (Mack, 1995: 24). Nonetheless, underlying this stylistic technique is the reason for the telling of stories. Some critics have argued that Scheherazade tells her stories to the king in order to educate and improve him, “Shahrazâd educates Shahriyâr by showing him in her stories the variety and complexity of human personality” (Marzolph and van Leeuwen, 2004: 374). Sindbad operates on a similar level, as he attempts to educate Hindbad by means of sharing his experiences, for Hindbad “could not but envy a man whose condition he thought to be as happy as his own was deplorable” (Mack, 1995: 141), and Sindbad wishes to alter his attitude. Thus, Sindbad trades the experience of his adventures with Hindbad.

The trading of experience is closely linked to commercial trade and there is evidence of a more complex relationship between trade and storytelling than may be first realized. ‘The Story of Sindbad’ brings the elements of trade and survival together very closely and in the structure of his story it is quite difficult to separate the two. On a surface level, Sindbad’s tales are quite obviously rooted in trade: he is “Sindbad, the sailor, that famous traveller” (Mack, 1995: 141), and he has gained his vast wealth – the wealth which caused Hindbad’s envy – from merchant trade. There is an undeniable presence of the mercantile world within the *Nights*, for instance, many of the characters, such as the famed Ali Baba, or the merchant from Scheherazade’s first tale, ‘The Merchant and the Genie’, are included in this world. However, lying slightly deeper in the story is the intrinsic connection between trade and survival. Sindbad’s individual journeys begin in search of some commercial gain, he is then subject to some form of peril, and is finally rescued or saved, for instance, at the end of the first story “his own ship comes to the port, Sindbâd makes himself known and is taken back to Baghdad” (Marzolph and van Leeuwen). Although Sindbad suffers for his involvement in commercial trade, is ultimately what saves him, and he gains more money and goods at the end of every voyage. The end of the fifth voyage makes this clear, for he “trades in pepper, cloves, cinnamon, and aloe wood before returning to Baghdad” (Marzolph and van Leeuwen, 2004: 386). Thus, it seems as though Sindbad gains a wealth of experience and in the financial sense, and interestingly, in the telling of his adventures to Hindbad, he passes both these on as gifts.

As seen in an earlier extract, Sindbad accompanies his nightly tales with the gift of one hundred sequins to Hindbad, and in the bringing together of stories and wealth, one returns home more

prosperous as a result of hearing the stories. This particular notion – of assimilating stories with commerce – is relevant in the discussion of reader’s enthusiasm for the *Nights*. To extend out from the inner world of the *Nights*, one may consider the importation of the *Nights* into Europe, especially “since Antoine Galland discovered and translated it into French in the early eighteenth century (1704 -1717)” (Ouyang, 2003: 402). As Anna Neill makes clear, the eighteenth century was a period which gave rise to travel and our enthusiasm remains: “eighteenth century British travelers have been much talked about in recent decades. The journal records of ... merchants, explorers, pirates, ordinary seamen ... have provided a rich archive” (Neill, 2002: 1) and Galland’s manuscript, although not strictly a journal, is part of this illustrious archive. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the manuscript of the *Nights* was not all that Galland returned with from his travels, as Borges asserts, he “came back from Istanbul with a diligent collection of coins, a monograph on the spread of coffee, [and] a copy of the *Nights* in Arabic” (Borges, 1999: 92). There is an undeniable association of the stories with regularly imported and exported goods, a link which Rana Kabbani also identifies: “the tales became yet another commodity from the East, which circulated around the world like the other commodities of spice and cloths, and were exchanged in humble sea-ports or in elegant *salons*” (Kabbani, 1986: 24). It is as though stories operate as their own fascinating form of currency, a currency which Scheherazade can be seen to use in an attempt to buy and preserve her life: once again, the ideas of trade, storytelling and survival are brought together.

It is the notion of preservation – in regards to the union of trade, storytelling and survival – which reinforces the enthusiasm of readers for the *Nights*. This idea of preservation however, must be split into two categories: general preservation and self-preservation, and it is the combination of the two which is arguably one of the main reasons for a continued enthusiasm for the *Nights*. Galland, in his relationship with the *Nights*, fulfills both categories of such preservation. Galland achieves the general preservation of the *Nights* in bringing back to Europe – from the East – the manuscript we as readers have come to know as the *Nights*. In his translation of the stories, and allowing them to reach further corners of the world, he has helped them survive; as Kabbani further explains, “[w]hen and why these stories were put into writing remains controversial, yet what appears clear is that they were recorded as a means of preservation” (Kabbani, 1986: 23). This general preservation is continued in the attitude of readers since this period, each time someone deigns to pick up a copy and read it, they open themselves to Scheherazade’s tale, keeping both Scheherazade and the *Nights* alive. The issue of trade, raised earlier in this essay, is once again prevalent: in the

modern day, we exchange money to possess a copy of the *Nights*. As readers, in the present day, we use money to buy these stories and Scheherazade keeps herself alive still by trading her stories with us. Thus, as readers we are subsumed within the story and almost become the figure of the king, we have a power to choose to prolong the life of Scheherazade and listen to her stories, or we close the book and, in effect, end her life and that of the *Nights*.

Nevertheless, it is the concept of self-preservation which draws the reader further into the *Nights* and, whilst increasing the enthusiasm for the *Nights*, also preserves the *Nights*. To once again take Galland as an example of this notion, he can be seen to trade parts of himself with the *Nights*, as Borges suggests: “some have suspected that Galland forged the tale [of Aladdin]. I think the word *forged* is unjust and malign. Galland had as much right to invent a story as did those *confabulatores nocturr*. Why shouldn't we suppose that after having translated so many tales, he wanted to invent one himself, and did?” (Borges, 1986: 55). Although this refers to the addition of ‘The Story of Aladdin; or, the Wonderful Lamp’, the inclusion of ‘The Story of Sindbad’ evokes similar doubts. *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* claims: “the first published version of the story of Sindbâd is the French version included in Galland's *Mille et une nuits*; the manuscript that Galland translated appears to be lost” (Marzolph and van Leeuwen, 2004: 387). Mack also implies that the story of Sindbad is an invention of Galland (Mack, 1995) yet, either way, there is an undeniable presence of Galland's own self within the first French translation of the *Nights*. The method of translation allows for someone to become part of the book, as Borges states, “the *Nights* will have other translators, and each translator will create a different version of the book” (Borges, 1986: 56). However, there is a possibility that the translator of the *Nights* does not have to be one of a literal kind, and this leads to a new consideration of the role of the reader, and their subsequent enthusiasm, in the *Nights*.

To return to the metaphor of the tree, which began this essay, the mind of the reader is that which keeps the *Nights* alive, but in some way, this is arguably a two-way process; the *Nights* may keep Scheherazade alive, but they also help us to survive. A.S. Byatt supports this view, claiming, “we are all, like Scheherazade, under the sentence of death, and we all think of our lives as narratives, with beginnings, middles and ends. Storytelling in general, and the *Thousand and One Nights* in particular, consoles us for endings with endless new beginnings. ... Stories are like genes, they keep part of us alive after the end of our story” (Byatt, 2000: 166.). The connection formed between

storytelling and survival is now no longer only pertinent within the *Nights* but also operates in the world outside of the *Nights*, as the reader has an enthusiasm not only for keeping the stories alive, but to keep themselves alive in the words of the stories: to write one's own story. It is in this sense that Borges's comment on the translators of the *Nights* can be reconsidered: each reader can be thought of as a translator; translating the *Nights* for their own needs, the ultimate need not to be left silent after death.

This aspect of survival and storytelling is present in one of Scheherazade's tales which occurs early in the sequence: an inset tale within 'The Fisherman and the Jinnee', 'The Tale of King Yunan and the Sage Duban'.² The silence of death, as earlier alluded to by F.J. Ghazoul, is echoed in the following passage:

The king opened the book, and found that the pages stuck together. So he put his finger to his mouth to moisten it, and he was then easily able to turn over the first six pages, but he found nothing written on them.

So he cried out, "Doctor, there's nothing written here!"

"Turn the pages some more," Duban replied.

The king continued to turn the pages, but the book was poisoned ... No sooner had the head stopped speaking than the king rolled over dead

(Burton, 1997: 52-53).

The last sentence reveals the disturbing connection between silence and death, for it is not simply a silence occurring after death, but a silence which precedes death. The blank pages are arguably symbolic of the silence after death, but the blank pages are also representative of the power of stories; the power over life and death. The blank pages of Duban's book are pre-emptive of the silence of death which will befall the king, quite unlike the full pages of the *Nights* which, albeit

² Although thus far I have used the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* when referring to the tales I have included in this essay, I will now use another translation of the *Nights* for this particular inset story: the Sir Richard Burton translation which has been adapted by Jack Zipes. Typically, I would usually refer to one translation, but in the case of the *Nights*, and in light of the points made within this essay, I feel it is not only fair, but somewhat fitting, to use more than one translation of the *Nights*.

fictionally, are provided through the illustrious imagination of Scheherazade, an imagination (or memory) which ultimately saves her life. It is the opposite of the blank pages of Duban's book that the reader of the *Nights* grabs hold of, for there may be blank pages, but the reader has the opportunity to fill them up, an opportunity provided by the *Nights* in its very essence: the enthusiasm for its sense of the infinite. To end where this essay began, in keeping with the circulatory style of the *Nights*, one may return to Jorge Luis Borges and his impression of the beauty of the *Nights*. "I think it lies in the fact that for us the word *thousand* is almost synonymous with *infinite*. To say *a thousand nights* is to say infinite nights, countless nights, endless nights. To say *a thousand and one nights* is to add one to infinity" (Borges, 1986: 45). There is no visible limit to the amount of stories that can belong to the *Nights*, and to borrow from Robert Irwin another image of infinity: the reader "finds himself adrift on an ocean of stories, an ocean which is boundless, deep and ceaselessly in motion" (Irwin, 2004: 65). The infinite nature of the *Nights* implies that as long as there are readers to keep it alive, it will help to keep us alive, and to record our memories as we record within ourselves the memories³ of Scheherazade. The *Nights* are a living corpus of stories, where one story is embedded in another, and another, as though there can be no possible end: the reader feels "like getting lost in *The Thousand and One Nights*" (Borges, 1986: 50).

The reader – and the reader's own stories that they may trade with the *Nights* in order to help themselves survive the silence of death – is swallowed whole by the *Nights*. This notion is alluded to by Irwin, he states, "as the medieval Dutch proverb has it, 'Big fish eat little fish'. Individual stories are swallowed up in story collections, and these story collections are in turn swallowed up in yet larger collections of story collections" (Irwin, 2004: 67). This idea reverberates around the world of narrative, and the narrative of our world, and manifests itself literally in 'The Story of Sindbad the Sailor', for on one of his many adventures, Sindbad is warned "in a book that every

³ It has been argued by critics, including Robert Irwin, that "Sheherazade herself does not invent tales; she relates what she has heard. We should take it that she has been blessed with an excellent memory, rather than with a creative imagination" (Irwin, *Arabian Nights: a companion*, p. 87). Although it seems somewhat unfair not to credit Scheherazade with an imagination, it is clear that she "had such a prodigious memory, that she never forgot any thing" (*Arabian Nights' entertainments*, ed. Mack, p. 10) and it is this fabulous memory which saves her life, and a memory which we as readers may ultimately hope will save our own lives.

ship venturing into this sea will be swallowed by an enormous fish. A huge fish does indeed approach the ship, but it is devoured by an even larger fish” (Marzolph and van Leeuwen, 2004: 386). This is of course representative of the narrative structure within the *Nights*, but it is also suggestive of the way in which stories are consumed and how they survive wrapped up in other stories and thus, the memories of the reader can survive the ultimate silence of death by becoming part of the *Nights*. Through trading one’s own stories with those of the *Nights*, one can attempt to survive not only beyond the silence of death, but beyond the pages of a book: stories are a living force, a force which refuses to die. As Jorge Luis Borges, so beautifully and rightly claims, “*The Thousand and One Nights* has not died. The infinite time of the thousand and one nights continues its course” (Borges, 1986: 56).

Bibliography

- Borges, J. L. (1986). *Seven Nights*. London: Faber.
- Borges, J. L. (1999). Translators of 'The Thousand and One Nights'. In E. Weinberger, *The Total Library: non-fiction 1922-1986*. London: Penguin.
- Burton, S. R., & Zipes, J. (1997). *Arabian Nights: A Selection*. London: Penguin.
- Byatt, A. (2000). The Greatest Story Ever Told. In A. Byatt, *On histories and stories: selected essays*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Ghazoul, F. J. (1996). *Nocturnal Poetics: The Arabian Nights in comparative context*. Cairo: University in Cairo Press.
- Irwin, R. (2004). *The Arabian Nights: a companion*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Kabbani, R. (1986). *Europe's myths of the Orient: devise and rule*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Mack, R. L. (1995). *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marzolph, U., & Leeuwen, R. v. (2004). *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Surviving the Silence: *The Arabian Nights* and its Readers.

Neil, A. (2002). *British Discovery Literature and the Rise of Global Commerce*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Ouyang, W.-C. (2003, Vol. 66 No. 3). Metamorphoses of Scheherazade in Literature and Film. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* , pp. 402-418.

©Claire Tye. This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY).