

The Caravan Press

One Thousand and One Nights

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Introduction:

The legend of *One Thousand and One Nights* takes place over 1,500 years ago during the rule of the Sassanid empire. It begins with the Persian king Shahryar, who discovers the unfaithfulness of his brother's wife and, subsequently, the unfaithfulness of his own wife.

Having witnessed the scandals of two women in his very own family, Shahryar develops a distrust towards all women. So the king begins to marry woman after woman but he has each new bride executed the day after their wedding, before she has an opportunity to dishonour him.

Like this the king marries all the women until there is no virgin left for him to wed. The grand vizier, in charge of supplying the virgins, finally runs out and has none to offer. None except, of course, his very own daughter, Scheherazade.

Against her father's wishes, Scheherazade offers herself as the final bride of the pugnacious king. But being the cunning and intelligent vizier's daughter that she is, she has a trick up her sleeve.

On the night of their wedding, Scheherazade begins to tell the king an engaging tale that swallows his attention and engulfs his imagination. With the king on the edge of his seat and hanging onto her every word, the sophisticated new bride reaches a cliff-hanger... but she does not finish her story; instead she promises to finish it the following night.

Intent on hearing the story to its end, the king is reluctantly forced to postpone the execution of his latest bride.

But each night, Scheherazade completes the previous tale, only to begin a new one and offer an excuse not to complete it until the subsequent night. And like this, one thousand and one such nights (more than two and a half years) go by and the bride remains living and well.

The Stories of Scheherazade:

The story of Shahryar and his cunning bride, Scheherazade, serves only as a backdrop. It is really the stories of Scheherazade themselves that make up what we know as *One Thousand and One Nights*.

These stories run the gamut from comedies, to love stories, to tragedies, to poetry, to adventures and heroism, to thrillers and horrors, to satires and far beyond.

They are filled with actual scenes mixed with make-believe geographies; historical facts dowsed in legendry and fantasy; real people mingled with mythical heroes, genies, mermaids and aliens.

The stories are well known for their literary beauty and interesting features. In particular, the epic is replete with the concept of a story within a story; it is a device employed continually by Scheherazade to ensure her ongoing survival. We often find stories within stories, and even stories within stories within stories.

The epic is so rich and captivating, in fact, that it is not only the most famous anthology of literature in the Middle East and Asia, but it plays an enormous role even in Western culture.

It is from *One Thousand and One Nights* where the story of Sinbad comes. We follow Sinbad on seven voyages across the seas and are taken to magical places along the way. We meet man-eating monsters, giant elephant-eating snakes and men that turn into birds once a month.

It is also from here where we get the story of Aladdin. Largely popularized by Disney in the 1990s, this story tells of sorcerers and emperors and magic and the journey of a young boy from poverty to vast riches. It is also the source, to a large extent, of the Western understanding of genies.

Among the epic of *One Thousand and One Nights* is also the famous story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. This is a tale of one honest man pitted against a barrage of forty ruthless thieves with access to a cave of magic and wondrous treasures. And it is from this story that we get the passphrase "open sesame" (Arabic: "افتح يا سمسيم" / "iftaH ya simsim").

So famous are the *One Thousand and One Nights* throughout the world, in fact, that there is no one who hasn't heard at least one tale from the epic in some form or other. It has inspired translations in various languages, high-budget movies, musicals and so much more. The stories remain to be a rich source of folklore for many cultures.

Origin of the Stories:

The epic of *One Thousand and One Nights* is a collection of stories from Persian, Arab and North African cultures during a period of time between the 8th and 13th centuries during the Islamic/Arab golden age. As such, it is probably one of the most important anthologies in the entire world.

Compiled by various authors throughout the centuries, it has no fixed or authoritative form; various versions exist. The oldest manuscripts found date back to 9th century Syria, but even these only contain approximately 300 tales and it is asserted that the epic was an ever-evolving work to which new stories were added by various authors as the centuries went by.

Today, the epic exists as a ten volume set of 1,001 tales. Translations exist in many languages, including several in English - among them is one by the well-known E.W. Lane - and the collection is readily available for purchase as well as free download.

It goes without saying that every serious student of Arabic language and Arabic culture ought to become intimately familiar with one of the most influential literary works to emerge from the Middle East. To understand it is to understand Arabic and its influence. To deny is to fail to penetrate the surface of this beautiful language.

You can access many of the stories of the epic from Al-Hakawati:
http://www.al-hakawati.net/english/Stories_Tales/lailaindex.asp