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Muḥsin Jāsim Mūsawī. *The Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. x + 334 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14634-0.

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The 1001 Nights and Arabic Letters

Readers have long celebrated the *Thousand and One Nights* as a work that transcends cultural divides: during the last three centuries, it has been read and enjoyed as much in its translations into the European languages as in Arabic. The popularity of the English and French translations in particular perhaps accounts for the fact that it has been discussed in modern scholarship mainly from the perspective of Western culture and Western letters: its tangled translation history and its wide influence on European narrative have furnished especially popular subjects for scholarly study. Muhsin al-Musawiâs study on the *Nights* in the context of Islamic culture in general and Islamic letters in particular works as a magnificent corrective to this tendency. His unique contribution to scholarship on the text lies in his emphasis on two themes in particular. He studies âthe Islamic factorâ as it relates to the *Nights* (p. 4)–âas it appears in the *Thousand and One Nights*,â al-Musawi writes, âIslam is a way of life, a culture, and a context for aspirations, adventure, love, enterprises, and vicissitudesâ (p. 3). And he meditates on the âunderlying narrative unityâ in an early nucleus of tales, the editions that circulated during the eighth and ninth centuries of the Christian era (p. 4). For the most part resisting the urge to leap centuries in analyzing the narratives of the *Nights*, he consistently emphasizes the Abbasid environment in which the Arabic text was first recorded and the broader imperial context in which it was transmitted and elaborated. Given the vast historical and geographical reach of his material, his book has the feel of a scholarly shadow version of the *Nights*: a bursting portmanteau of intriguing details, a work of truly epic scope. This review cannot hope to do justice to the richness of the book; I will satisfy myself with pointing out some themes which I think may prove particularly suggestive for students and scholars.

Al-Musawi is particularly interested in the âurbanismâ (p. 3) of the tales in the *Nights*–a notion which he interprets in a very broad sense, embracing the urbane *adab* that informs the tales, the talesâ urban setting, and the metropolitan context in which they were first told and elaborated. Under this thematic umbrella, al-Musawi draws together an array of disparate mate-

rial: for instance, the topography of Baghdad as it appears in the tales–his discussion of charactersâ physical and social parkour from river boats to the banks of the city, between the roofs of residences, between market and mosque is particularly illuminating (pp. 127-31); the genre of *faáÄâil*, or celebration of the excellence of individual cities, as it relates to the *Nights* (pp. 152-53); and the curious absence of the sectarian disputes that were an inescapable part of urban life from a book that embraces so many of the aspects of premodern Islamic culture (pp. 184-89). The urbane, cosmopolitan setting of the tales in the *Nights* is undeniable (one might go so far as to say that a *rural* version of the *Thousand and One Nights* is unthinkable). Consider one of the first stories we encounter in the text, âThe Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdadâ: the Ladyâs prodigious shopping list in preparation for the nightâs revels–as she leads the Porter through the marketplace, heaping the fruits of the Mashriq on his back–uses the mercantile economy of the imperial emporium to set the scene for a tale that will create a short-lived cosmopolitan utopia in the ladiesâ private home. Al-Musawiâs discussion of the tale helps us to see the Porter as *á°arÄ«f*, a man of refinement and elegant manners who trades on his sophistication to earn the company of the three Baghdadi ladies. And he points out that the Porterâs skills would not be equally appreciated in all urban settings: Baghdad is unique, âthe metropolitan center where the Commander of the Faithful resides and imposes the combined authority of religion and the stateâ (p. 118). Al-Musawiâs elucidation of the finer points of distinction between intoxicating liquor (*khamr*) and less noxious wine (*nabÄ«dh*) adds a shade of nuance to the randy bath scene that follows (pp. 168-72). Most fascinating is the discussion of the liminal areas of the city as they appear in âThe Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdadâ (and more vividly in other tales, especially the âTale of the Enchanted Kingâ). The Ladyâs and the Porterâs shopping trip takes us through the heart of Baghdad: through the markets. With the evening of social bizarrerie which follows, we enter the precincts of a private home. At one moment in the story, however, we find ourselves on the edge of the city–at a rubbish heap at the edge of town–and hence at the borderline between cosmopolitanism and its opposite: the absence or refusal of the urbane. Here, al-Musawi argues persuasively, the skin of the city and of social order is ruptured, and we reach the limits of the urban ideal (pp. 197-98). On the whole, the Islamic city functions well in the *Nights* (even when it is obliged to play the sinister role of containing aberrant passions). In the tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies, Baghdad offers something of a cosmopolitan utopia: the Commander of the Faithful socializes amicably with mendicants and respectable women. In the rubbish heaps at the edges of the city, however, we encounter a dystopia where civilization breaks down and cosmopolitanism comes to an abrupt end.

Some of the most illuminating material that al-Musawi presents comes from the *á¥isbah* manuals used as guides by the *muá¥tasib*, the moral and legal market inspector. These guides, because they functioned as moral commonplace books for men whose job description included policing the urban public, are a uniquely useful source of information for the reader of the *Nights*. Al-Musawi points out that the command repeated a number of times in the tale of the Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad–âspeak not of what concerns you not, lest you hear what pleases you notâ–is in keeping with *á¥isbah* regulations that guarantee privacy within the home, as long as the speakers are out of earshot of the street (pp. 33-34). Al-Musawi cites the pledges and commitments recorded in the *á¥isbah* manuals to contextualize the pledges exchanged by characters in the tales (pp. 78-79). The *dhimmi* dress codes detailed in a twelfth-century Syrian *á¥isbah* manual elucidate the fish of four colors in the âTale of the Enchanted Kingâ (pp. 79-80), and the prohibition against mention of Shiâite sectarianism or of the life and martyrdom of Imam Husayn from the same manual help to explain the absence of references to Islamic sectarianism in the *Nights* (pp. 184-85). The *á¥isbah* manuals shed light on tales set in the pan-Arab metropolis–in Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo in particular–because âthe Islamic subtext of the tales works within the parameters of the ordering of good and the forbidding of evil as it is practiced and also stressed in *á¥isbah* manualsâ (p. 59).

In light of his astute discussion of premodern Islamic cosmopolitan civilization and of urban moral codes, al-Musawiâs defense of one of the least sophisticated characters in the *Nights*–the loathsome Barber from the âHunchbackâs Taleâ–comes as a surprise. The Barber seems to function as an inversion of the qualities celebrated in the *Nights*. The thoughtful ingenuity of Scheherazade, the perspicacity of the Porter, the cunning of the Fisherman who outwits the Demon, even the character of Jaâfar, who retains his charisma despite his frustrating fatalism in the âStory of the Three Applesâ: all of these laudable characteristics are inverted in the Barber. Garrulous to the point of obstructionism, obtuse despite his self-promotion as a man of discernment, the Barber seems according to the moral economy of the *Nights* itself thoroughly despicable. Al-Musawi redeems the fig-

ure of the Barber (like the Porter) as a symbol of the social utopianism of the *Nights*. He reads the Barberâs insistence on his own extensive education (âan astrologer and a physician, versed in the arts of alchemy, astrology, grammar, lexicography, logic, scholarship disputation, rhetoric, arithmetic, algebra, and history, as well as the traditions of the Prophet, according to Muslim and al-Bukhari â¦ I have tried and mastered everythingâ [p. 255, night 144]) as a kind of premodern upward social mobility (pp. 112, 153). Barbers and porters, whenever they appear in the *Nights*, become revolutionary heroes who fight to make their voices heard; âloquacity, which becomes another term for narrative, is the barberâs strategy to enforce his or her equal status as an educated person in many sciences and fields of knowledgeâ (p. 117).

Is this an accurate reflection of the Barber, as he appeared in the eyes of the first audiences of the *Nights*? The question is impossible to answer; yet al-Musawiâs reflections add substance to our understanding of the character. One might accuse the author of anachronism–depicting the Barber, for instance, as a class warrior who lived half a millennium before Marx–yet al-Musawiâs anachronistic observations are one of the genuine pleasures of the book. In the course of his discussion, al-Musawi finds occasion to observe that ânarrative for Arab audiences would have been like present satellite TV stationsâ (p. 55); that âterritorial and spatial contraction as narrated in the tales anticipates contemporary developments including the media and war industriesâ (p. 65); that âAli Babaâs âopen sesameâ is not that different from the workings of certain contemporary electronic devicesâ (p. 72); that women as a class in the *Nights* are allied to popular culture and to the risky or marginal behavior of the underworld, âlike the âdark ladiesâ of 1940s film noirâ (p. 209). Of course, al-Musawi is author of the authoritative work on the influence of the *Nights* on English literature (*Scheherazade in England*, 1981). His insights are the fruit of a profound knowledge not only of medieval Arab culture, but also of the afterlife of the medieval Arab text. And they contribute substantially to our sense of the book as superabundant repository of transhistorical culture and knowledge. On the rare occasion, they might strike the reader as off-target. At one point, for instance, al-Musawi discusses American soldiersâ use of Ali Baba to represent the child bandits of contemporary Iraq. But Ali Baba himself now has a history as a freedom fighter that stretches back at least three quarters of a century. *Chu Chin Chow* (1934), a British movie based on a successful London stage play, showcased Ali Baba as hero for the downtrodden, followed by *Ali Baba Bound* (a Porky Pig vehicle, 1940), *Ali Baba* (another product of wartime Hollywood, 1944), and *Ali Baba aur 40 chor* (a Soviet-influenced Bollywood riff, 1979). A scholarly discussion of the repackaging of Ali Baba and his thieves to represent brigandage and looting in twenty-first-century Baghdad should reflect Ali Babaâs twentieth-century career as revolutionary hero.

Al-Musawiâs study will, one hopes, inspire more vigorous historical engagement with the *Thousand and One Nights* in the context of Arabic letters and Islamic history. Al-Musawi points out the existence of a number of valuable historical works that can be used to illuminate the *Nights*: not only the *á¥isbah* manuals and the *faáẒâil* genre, but also histories of Baghdad (which he uses extensively to read the Baghdadi stories), travel narratives (particularly, but not exclusively, relevant to the tales of Sindbad; pp. 157-59), as well as âencyclopedic works, compilations, biographical dictionaries, linguistic studies, epistolographic manuals, and statecraft compositionsâ (to cite the works that al-Musawi uses to support his discussion of medieval readings of history as decline; p. 137). A next generation of scholars should rifle his bibliography to bring new eyes to this venerable and ill-understood text. For a number of reasons, the *Nights* is among a short list of imaginative narratives that possess seemingly infinite narrative elasticity and continue to inform new inventions despite being transported far beyond the time and place of their origin (al-Musawi discusses the murky Sasanid origins of the frame tale as well as the postmodern spawn of the *Nights*; see for example pp. 36-38, 42-43). Robust analysis of the broader literary, cultural, social, and economic history that informed the *Nights*, however, has lagged, largely because of the absence of monographs that systematically discuss the historical resources available to scholars. *The Islamic Context of the Thousand and One Nights* should be welcomed as an open door to a new generation of scholarship, an inspiration for graduate students in search of dissertation material and established scholars alike.

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