

# THE ARABIAN NIGHTS AND ITS INFLUENCES

CPLT BC3351 / 4 CREDITS / FALL 2020 / MONDAY 10:10-12:00

PROF. HISHAM MATAR / hmatar@barnard.edu



*The Painter's Children in the Japanese Room, 1874. Oil on canvas, Mariano Fortuny y Marsal*

*Morning now dawned and Shahrazad broke off from what she had been allowed to say.*

*—The Arabian Nights, Night 295*

*A major event in the history of the West was the discovery of the East.*

*—From Seven Nights by Jorge Luis Borges*

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## Overview

*The Tales of a Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights* opens with a terrible premise. Maddened by marital jealousy and betrayal, the Sultan vows to marry a virgin every night and cut off her throat by dawn. He does this to many, but one bride, Shahrazad, manages to hold off his blade. She recounts to him such fabulous and tantalising tales that every morning, unable to resist her narrative gifts, he grants her another day in the hope that she will finish her story.

Shahrazad's tales succeed not only because they leave the Sultan at a cliff-hanger, but rather because they are tales that are contained inside other tales, a technique well borrowed by many writers since: from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to *A Sister to Scheherazade* by Assia Djebar.

*The Arabian Nights* contains stories that are often about the fabulous and the magical, but the book itself has also had a long and adventurous literary career. It influenced a surprisingly wide range of authors: from Robert Luis Stevenson to Jorge Luis Borges; from Hanan al Shaykh to Naguib Mahfouz. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it altered the course of literary history and helped develop the art of narrative fiction. This class is interested in charting aspects of this development.

The history of *The Arabian Nights* makes it just as much a part of Persian, Arabic and Eastern heritage as of European culture. The first time the tales were compiled in a book was in an 18<sup>th</sup> century French translation. It became hugely fashionable in Europe at the time and this was in large part because it offered an antidote to the Enlightenment's insistence that all matter of things could be explained by reason alone. It is not only a work that has influenced Western Literature, but also how the West thought of and engaged with the orient.

The stories involve us into ideas that continue to preoccupy our contemporary culture. Aware of the Sultan's misogynistic views, Shahrazad at first uses the stories to confirm his prejudices that women are indeed traitorous, but as the Sultan is lured into

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her narrative, she begins to smuggle in examples of faithful and valiant heroines. She covertly promotes to him ideas of mercy, justice and the benefits of acting honourably. Shahrazad's purpose, therefore, is not only to buy time but also to change the Sultan's mind. She is after his conversion. The book is, therefore, interested in the redemptive nature of art, that stories might just save us.

This course examines the enduring power of *The Arabian Nights* and some of the wide range of literary authors, genres and variations that it has influenced. The focus is, therefore, on this marvellous work—one of the earliest examples of the short story and the novel, for it flirts with both forms—but also on a selection of classical and contemporary works of fiction from around the world that have been informed by it. In this regard, this is a class interested in literary influence, reciprocity and exchange across time and languages.

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## Structure

This will be a seminar class, one focused on discussion and where student contribution is essential. Every week you will be assigned reading material. Strong emphasis is placed on close reading.

Most weeks, two students will give a short presentation, responding to the work read that week. These are to be no shorter than 7 minutes and no longer than 10 minutes and will be judged on how effectively they highlight the themes and characteristics of the work in focus. These presentations are to contain your carefully-considered first thoughts, questions and ideas on the work. They are brief; meaning, concise rather than casual. Good presentations are often illustrative of an elegant summation of your initial reactions, effectively highlighting some of the themes and characteristics of the work, as well as offering your original insights. They are not meant to be mere plot summaries. A handout of the presentation, which could include illustrations and addendums, if applicable, will be required on the day of your presentation.

Furthermore, three papers will be required. Papers one and two (between 1150 and 1250 words each) and paper three (between 1300 and 1500 words) will all be submitted by email on the designated dates. Essays should be intelligently argued, exhibit original thought and be well written. Essay topics as well as criteria will be given.

All written material is to be in the following format: Word doc., Times font size 14 and double-spaced. Each sheet of paper is to have on the top the title, your name and the date. Please also make sure to number the pages.

Overall assessment will take into consideration the following: weekly presentations (12.5%); in-class participation (12.5%); paper one (25%); paper two (25%); and paper three (25%). Paper extensions are rare, and can only be given in exceptional circumstances and with advanced notification and explanation in person; emails, notes or voicemail messages do not count. Otherwise, late papers will be

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penalized one notch per day; for example, A- to B+ and so on. No revisions accepted— for a changed grade—once paper has been handed in.

## Written Material Assessment Criteria: Essays and Responses

- Exhibiting the ability to read comparatively: comparing and contrasting two different texts; finding common ground between them as well as distinctions; making juxtapositions that might help clarify and explain elements in each text.
- The quality of the writing: the clarity and precision of the sentences; the way each paragraph advances the overall thesis.
- The rigour and elegance of the argument: the clarity and authenticity with which the student allows her intellect to question and enquire; the logical construction of the observations; and the thorough analysis of assertions and conclusions.
- Originality of thought: it is imperative that the student demonstrates evidence of independent thinking.

## Learning Outcomes

- Demonstrate knowledge of the structure, narrative characteristics and themes of *The Arabian Nights*
- Exhibit evidence of comprehending and drawing out common literary as well as historical threads between *The Arabian Nights* and later works.
- Comparing and contrasting different cultural modes of narrative interpretation and responses.
- Write clear essays that succeed in analyzing key concepts and issues in assigned readings as well as develop a clear and persuasive argument supported by textual evidence.

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## Required Texts

- *The Arabian Nights*, Norton Critical Edition, Selected and Edited by Daniel Heller-Roazen • **ISBN-13:** 978-0393928082
- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll. Penguin Classics. • **ISBN-13:** 978-0141439761
- *The Djinn In The Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories*, A S Byatt • **ISBN-13:** 978-0099521310 (
- *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino, Translated by William Weaver • **ISBN-13:** 978-0156453806
- *Amy Foster*, Joseph Conrad
- *A Sister to Scheherazade*, Assia Djebar • **ISBN-13:** 978-0435086220
- *Arabian Nights and Days*, by Naguib Mahfouz • **ISBN-13:** 978-0385469012

## Recommended Text

- *The Author and His Doubles: Essays on Classical Arabic Culture*, Abdelfattah Kilito
- *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said
- "Recollections of the Arabian Nights", Lord Alfred Tennyson
- *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth
- *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Mikhail Bakhtin

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## **The Honor Code**

*We, the students of Barnard College, resolve to uphold the honor of the College by engaging with integrity in all of our academic pursuits. We affirm that academic integrity is the honorable creation and presentation of our own work. We acknowledge that it is our responsibility to seek clarification of proper forms of collaboration and use of academic resources in all assignments or exams. We consider academic integrity to include the proper use and care for all print, electronic, or other academic resources. We will respect the rights of others to engage in pursuit of learning in order to uphold our commitment to honor. We pledge to do all that is in our power to create a spirit of honesty and honor for its own sake.*

## **Wellness Statement**

It is important for undergraduates to recognize and identify the different pressures, burdens, and stressors you may be facing, whether personal, emotional, physical, financial, mental, or academic. We as a community urge you to make yourself--your own health, sanity, and wellness--your priority throughout this term and your career here. Sleep, exercise, and eating well can all be a part of a healthy regimen to cope with stress. Resources exist to support you in several sectors of your life, and we encourage you to make use of them. Should you have any questions about navigating these resources, please visit these sites:

<http://barnard.edu/primarycare>

<http://barnard.edu/counseling>

<http://barnard.edu/wellwoman/about>

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## **Academic Accommodations**

If you are a student with a documented disability and require academic accommodations in this course, you must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) for assistance. Students requesting accommodations will need to first meet with an ODS staff member. Once registered, students are required to request accommodation letters each semester to notify faculty. Accommodations are not retroactive, so it is best to contact ODS early each semester to access your accommodations. If you are registered with ODS, please see me to schedule a meeting outside of class in which you can bring me your faculty notification letter and we can discuss your accommodations for this course. Students are not eligible to use their accommodations in this course until they have met with me. ODS is located in Milbank Hall, Room 009/008.