

The 1001 Nights in Arabic Literature, Comparative Literature, and World

Literature

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The Global History and Cross-Cultural Context of The 1001 Nights

Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995 or 998) famously wrote of the Arabic *Thousand Nights* (*alf laylah*) as a translation of a storybook originally written in Persian known as *Hazār afsān*, or a thousand stories which, he explained, were fictional tales (*khurāfāt*) told at night (*asmār*). By his time, in the 10th century, and by the time he compiled the catalogue, *Fihrist*, of the extensive holdings at his bookshop in Baghdad, Arabic writers, whom he described as versed in the literary arts (*bulaghā* and *fuṣahā*), had already “polished” its language and begun to write in a similar vein. *Hazār afsān*, the “first storybook ever,” written for a Persian princess by the name of Humani daughter of Bahman, begins with a king, who took a different woman every night and killed her at dawn, marrying a princess (a daughter of one of the kings) by the name of Shahrazād, who was both intelligent and wise (*lahā ‘aql wa-dirāyah*), and who started telling him stories at night but stopped mid-track at dawn. He stayed her execution so as to find out how the story would end the following night. This went on for one thousand nights, until she bore him a child. When she confessed her machinations, rather than punishing her for her deception, the king found himself in love with this wise woman and remained married to her. The king had a housekeeper (Qahrimānah) by the name of Dinārzād, who was in cahoots with Shahrazād.

Of course, Alexander the Great, Ibn al-Nadīm let it be known, was the first person in history who turned to storytelling at night during his military campaigns, and he used to have among his entourage clowns and storytellers, who were not there

to entertain but rather to help him stay awake and keep watch. Kings after him used *Hazār afsāneh* for similar purposes. The book contained less than two hundred stories, for each would be told over a period of few nights. It was written in an insipid language (*ghathth bārid al-ḥadīth*). Its “insipid” language did not prevent known literary figures, such as Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. ‘Abdūs al-Jahshiyārī (d. 942), the renowned 10th century author of the *Book of Viziers and Secretaries*, from emulating its form and collecting Arabic, Persian and Greek stories in one book, albeit eschewing the night-within-and-into-night structure of storytelling. Each night would rather contain a self-sufficient story. Al-Jahshiyārī collected 480 stories or nights, but he died before he could bring the number up to a full 1000.

Two other well-known works are mentioned in the same chapter (eight) and section (first of three) on nocturnal and fictional storytelling: *Sindbadnāmah* (aka The Seven Sages) and *Kalīlah wa-Dimnah*. He then defers the discussion of these until the following paragraph on Indian storybooks. These two books, though of Indian origin, were translated into Arabic from middle Persian, by writers known for the beauty of their style, such as Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ (d. 759), whose Arabic renditions of pre-Islamic Persian works are today considered an integral, even indispensable part of the classical Arabic literary canon, *adab*. Ibn al-Muqaffa‘’s works, whether considered translations or adaptations, including the animal fables in *Kalīlah wa-Dimnah*, have become so assimilated into the fabric of the Arabic literary language that it is not possible to even think of Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ as a mere translator and his works ‘foreign’ and as such uncanonical.

Ibn al-Nadīm’s survey of translated storybooks already drops hints of the divergent destinies of *The 1001 Nights* and *Kalīlah wa-Dimnah*. The anonymity of its translator and its “insipid” language seem to have relegated the former to the

“popular” field of Arabic cultural production, together with the “epics” (*sīrah*), while the latter, thanks to its famed translator and his “elegant” style, is elevated to “high” literature as the epitome of the “mirror for princes” genre. *The 1001 Nights*, despite its popularity even among the cultural elite, was of no literary consequence in Arabic until the 20th century, after *The 1001 Nights* had acquired canonical status in Europe, and when fiction, particularly the novel, rose to prominence in the Arabic field of literary production. The recent revisionist history of *The 1001 Nights*, whether theorized in fiction or argued in criticism, raises questions in regards to contemporary, perhaps even nationalist, canonization of classical Arabic literature and the attendant classification, or categorization, of pre-modern Arabic writings into a variety of discreet literary fields based in periodization—classical, post-classical and modern—or in language register—classical, middle and colloquial—where the post-classical and middle, more often than not aligned with the Ottoman rule of the Islamic Caliphate (1362-1924) and foreignized in nationalist historiography as non-Arab, are seen as a symptom of decline in Arabic letters.

Its lack of canonical status, however, did not negatively impact its popularity and the steady rise of its esteem among Arab writers and critics since the 19th century. It inspired Mārūn al-Naqqāsh (1817-1855), the Beirut pioneer of Arabic theatre, who wrote and staged *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mughaffal and Hārūn al-Rashīd* as early as 1850. It is not clear whether he knew of the popularity of *The 1001 Nights* in Europe. He did spend a good number of years in Italy, and even though *The 1001 Nights* was translated into Italian only in 1949 by a team of Arabists headed by Francesco Gabrieli (1904-1996), he could have very well got caught up in the *Arabian Nights* fever spreading across Europe since Antoine Galland (1646-1715) translated, or rather adapted into French a body of stories from a 15th-century

manuscript and other sources in two volumes (1704, 1717). The regular appearance of *The 1001 Nights* in 19th-century Arabic print culture, which has yet to be studied and analysed, culminated in literary adaptations, such as Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's 1934 play, *Shahrazād*, Tāhā Ḥusayn's 1943 novel, *Ahlām Shahrazād* (Shahrazād's Dreams), and their 1936 co-authored novel, *al-Qasr al-maṣhūr* (*The Enchanted Palace*), and in serious scholarship, such as Sahīr al-Qalamāwī's 1943 book, *Alf laylah wa-laylah*, which was based on her 1941 Cairo University doctoral thesis supervised by Tāhā Ḥusayn. Since the second half of the 20th century, and in spite of occasional bans in Arab countries, *The 1001 Nights* has been increasingly seen as an important work of Arabic literature. It is subject to infinite evocation, adaptation and rewriting in poetry, fiction, theater, television and cinema in the Arabic speaking parts of the world.

Arabic scholarship today more readily accepts, or even owns *The 1001 Nights* as a significant work of Arabic literature. 'Abdallāh Tāj's 862-page *Maṣādir "Alf laylah wa-laylah" al-'arabiyya* (*Arabic Sources of The 1001 Nights*, 2006) sees it as the "library" of pre-modern Arabic literature, in which all genres of Arabic writings are represented. If Tāj's work reasserts al-Qalamāwī's earlier observations of the plethora of Arabic and Islamic themes and motifs in *The 1001 Nights*, he additionally shows, through comparative analysis, where *The 1001 Nights* overlaps with various genres of Arabic writing and diverges in their engagement with the same themes and motifs. This view of *The 1001 Nights* within the Arabic literary context is made possible by an unproblematized reliance on the "final" product of a long tradition of constant transformation, the so-called Zotenberg Egyptian Recension, which does contain 1001 nights and is reflected in print, with slight variations, by the editions known as the *Bulaq* (1835) and the *Macnaghten* or *Calcutta II* (1839–1842).

The development of the “text” into these two “full” versions, from Galland’s 15th-century manuscript and a variety of analogous manuscripts, is at the heart of a key corpus of international scholarship that attempts to map the pre-modern global network of translation, adaptation and creation, from East and South Asia to the Mediterranean, that produced the textual network, or the body of overlapping texts written in “middle” Arabic, that we can call *The 1001 Nights*. A parallel development in international scholarship tracks the post-Galland global proliferation of the “Oriental Tale,” including *Aladdin* and *Ali Baba*, two “orphan tales” traceable neither to oral nor written Arabic origins, and considers its impact on literature, the visual arts, music, theatre and popular cultures across the six continents of the world.

The 1001 Nights is in current research a shape-shifting chameleon that survives and thrives in globe-trotting and crossing historical, geographical, cultural, linguistic, medial and generic boundaries, and as such can serve as a key site for the interrogation of the boundaries between the canonical and popular, classical and modern, global and local, sacred and secular, the oral and the written, and literary and other cultural expressions in multilingual and multicultural fields of production in literary and cultural studies. Its text(s), be it the work, as varying collections of stories, or each story within each collection, are born in migration across genres, historical eras and cultures. Intertextuality, whether with religious texts (including the Qur’an and *Tales of the Prophets*) poetry, *adab*, travel literature, geographical and historical works, and pious and courtly storytelling, is central to its composition and development. Its global history, the cross-cultural collaboration that went into its making, the intertextual fabric of its storytelling, and the diversity of the genres in which its stories are cast, make *The 1001 Nights* a convenient, in fact, key cultural and literary text for area-based, disciplinary or interdisciplinary inquiries in

undergraduate and postgraduate courses on language, history, culture and literature in the Arab world and outside. *The 1001 Nights* features in all the courses I teach at SOAS University of London. However, it has not been possible to offer a full course dedicated to the *Nights*. I will explain.

Pedagogical, Programmatic and Research Frameworks for Teaching the Nights

There is obviously more than one way of teaching *The 1001 Nights*. The academic programs within which the courses featuring the *Nights* are offered, their pedagogical objectives and learning outcomes, their academic levels, and the qualifications of the students all play an important role. The strength and diversity Arabic studies at SOAS has made it possible for *The 1001 Nights* to play an important part in its robust Arabic literature curriculum and at the same time contribute to its Middle Eastern Studies and Comparative Literature programs. Its role in Comparative Literature, however, remains rather small today. There are at present plans to expand the Comparative Literature and World Literature programs and courses. If and when this happens, *The 1001 Nights* will no doubt play a central role in the curriculum, for it offers one of the best examples of literary circulation across time and space along multiple overlapping networks outside the machinery of translation.

Equally importantly, the developments in the field of Arabic studies around the world have made a significant difference. I did not study the *Nights* growing up in Libya for it was a “forbidden” book, even though every educated family most likely had a copy at home, or at Columbia University when I was in graduate school. There have been a number of significant changes in the field in the past three decades. Theoretically, in the field of Arabic area studies, there is now recognition that *The 1001 Nights* does not consist of a collection of “folk” or “tall tales” by and for the

uneducated masses. Aboubakr Chraïbi has made a compelling argument in favor of considering the *Nights* as belonging to a body of written “middle” Arabic literature (*Arabic Manuscripts of The Thousand and One Nights*, 2016). This is accompanied by a more ready recognition of folk and popular literature as legitimate and valuable “literary” or “cultural” expressions as well. There is additionally the need to address a wider audience, including students of comparative literature and world literature. Within the field of Arabic area studies, even the most serious scholars give lectures about *The 1001 Nights* now.

Most important is perhaps the interest and knowledge of the teacher. For these inform that ways in which *The 1001 Nights* is used to address academic priorities of the programs, the learning needs of the students, and at the same time respond to the state-of-the-art research in Arabic literary studies and the theories being developed for comparative literature and/or world literature, and Arabic literature. All these come together in different ways, as I will show below, dependent on the immediate context of a course syllabus and the program within which it is offered. I teach the *Nights* in two types of programs: cross-regional area studies programs, such as Middle East Studies, and equally cross-regional but also interdisciplinary programs, such as Comparative Literature; and Arabic language, literature and culture courses. I adopt a world literature approach in the former, and redefine Arabic literature in the latter.

In the first instance, the framework of world literature opens the students’ eyes to formation and development of *The 1001 Nights* in the cross-cultural collaboration and global circulation, along multiple historical eras and across manifold linguistic, cultural and literary regions, through translation and adaptation of stories or a body of stories in world literary classics, fiction, and cinema and television. I refine the narrow definition of mode of circulation in world literature—along a linear trajectory

of translation from the national field outside Europe and North America to the international field located in London, New York and Paris—and introduce the Silk Road(s) as an alternative model of worlding. *The 1001 Nights* has taken shape in the cultural encounters at the multiple hubs of this complex set of overlapping networks of circulation connecting different historical eras, geographical regions and linguistic traditions. Robert Irwin’s book, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (1991), usefully gives students a sense of the ‘book’, its history, and its circulation outside Arabic writings. This global background of the *Nights* necessarily informs modes of reading of this foundational text, and at the same time prompts further reflections on familiar approaches to and readings of literary works. It shows how the chronologically ordered historical periods and the linguistically and culturally divided regions of both the Middle East and the world are connected and overlap in a networked fashion. Orientalism, as a body of knowledge about the Orient and complex intercultural discourse, is at the centre of this enquiry.

In the second instance, the very notions of “literature” and “literary canon,” as secular, fixed, authoritative and based in “high” Arabic language, are explored through the prism of intertextuality and the attendant theories of textuality and intertextuality, orality and writing, genres, genre ideologies and generic boundaries. I use different editions, including the Bulaq, Macnaghten, and Mahdi. Two lines of enquiry, both grounded in a common set of recurring, inexorably bound up aesthetics, ethics and politics, are pursued: what the intertextuality between *The 1001 Nights* and other classical genres of writing tells us about pre-modern literary cultures of the Middle East; and what the proliferation of pre-modern popular stories in contemporary fiction and cinema tell us about the abiding relevance of the set of recurring aesthetics, ethics and politics today.

Literatures of the Near and Middle East

This is a first year undergraduate course aimed at students of BA Middle Eastern Studies, which is an interdisciplinary degree that offers single as well as multiple language pathways with training in cultural and literary studies. Students are not required to learn the Arabic language. This course looks at ancient “Near Eastern” literatures, particularly those written in Akkadian, Hittite and Sumerian, comparatively with medieval “Middle Eastern” literatures in Arabic, Hebrew, Persian and Turkish focusing on the city, cultural encounter, individual identity and imagined communities, gender and representation within writing systems, literary traditions, and genres of storytelling in the region. *The 1001 Nights* is taught in translation as a pre-modern Arabic “literary work” produced in a regional collaboration within a broader global history. Attention is drawn to the role of Orientalism in elevating it to the status of world literature in the 18th and 19th centuries and then to that of a “canonical” compendium of storytelling in Arabic literature in the 20th century.

More importantly, through its overlap with the “tales of the prophets,” “epics” and “animal fables,” its relationship to biblical folklore, Indian and Persian traditions, such as *Kalīlah wa-Dimnah*, and Islamic legends are considered. A close reading of the “The Mock Caliph,” for example, allows for the exploration of the relationship between urban space and the architecture of the story. In this story of Harun al-Rashid’s nocturnal wandering in the medieval city of Baghdad, the planning of the round city serves as the blueprint for its narrative movement (see in this volume Roth, “The Thousand and One Nights as Urban Literature.”) More important, al-Rashid’s encounter with the mock caliph on the river (Tigris) gives us a spatial configuration in *The 1001 Nights*: the land, or city, as reason and control, and the sea as passion and

lawlessness. Through the interplay between what goes on at sea and what happens on land, the notions of just rule and good citizenship are defined, tested and confirmed.

Introduction to Arabic Literature

This 2nd year course in the BA Arabic degree program at SOAS offers a survey of pre-modern and modern conceptualizations of literature and its role in society based on reading original texts at the appropriate level. The course is equally interested in the development of Arabic literature and its genres of writing from pre-Islamic times to the present and in the role of cultural encounters in this development. *The 1001 Nights* is read in Arabic, to give a sense of the heteroglossia of the Arabic language, and comparatively with contemporary works and intertextually with modern works. The “Ox and the Donkey,” the story Shahrazād’s father tells her in admonishment in the “frametale,” is read comparatively with “The Ox and the Lion” in *Kalīlah wa-Dimnah*, and against the background of Ibn al-Nadīm’s *Fihrist*, to highlight their shared history as translated texts, and their common purpose as “education of the king” and “mirror for princes,” which inform and underpin classical Arabic *adab* and its multicultural and multi-faith sources and fabric. This is accompanied by an interrogation of the very categories into which they have been classified: popular storytelling expressed in middle Arabic and canonical literature written in classical Arabic.

The “frametale” informs readings of gender politics in writings by modern Arab men and women. Gender politics culminate in Salwa Bakr’s short story, “Nūnah al-Sha‘nūnah” (1999), in which a “servant girl” rebels against patriarchal control and servitude, and runs away from the marriage her father arranged for her and the “home” where she was indentured, in order to pursue her dreams of freedom and

education. Bakr's short story is responsive to the female stereotypes pervading in classical and modern Arabic writings, such as the educated, eloquent poetess or storyteller, like Shahrazād, the wily home-wrecker or innocent symbol of the nation. It shift focus to the underclass in their agency, and shows that a "subaltern" subject like Nūnah al-Sha' nūnah, uneducated and downtrodden, can think for her self and exercise her agency.

Culture, Society and Politics in Classical Arabic Literature

This is a 4th-year course within the same degree program as *Introduction to Arabic Literature*, and is similarly based in reading literary texts in the original Arabic. It picks up the generic and didactic threads and expands on the ways in which *The 1001 Nights* engages dialogically with the "tales of the prophets" and mystical meditations through rewriting biblical folklore. It is seen as a site of confluence of diverse cultures, religions and literary traditions of the Middle East, and of transformation during its travels from one cultural sphere to another, and across different genres in one cultural sphere. Solomon legends permeate *The 1001 Nights* stories, for example, and they give the "The Fisherman and the Demon," "The City of Brass," and "The Queen of Serpent" their fantasy, mysticism and adventure not to mention their genies, demons, and treasures. Beneath these discourses on and allegories of political power, from model kingship in "The Fisherman and the Demon" to power's ephemeral nature in "The City of Brass" and "The Queen of Serpents," is a pious, mystical meditation on the wonders of the universe and God's creative powers.

These stories bring together Arabic literature's internalization of its pre-Islamic literary traditions—Arabic, Greek, Persian, Sanskrit and Syriac—and cultural

heritage and religions—Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, to say the least—as well as its deployment of these to negotiate the tension between formal Islam and Sufism, between what is portrayed as mindless performance of prescribed religious duties and as transcendental contemplation of God’s might and grace. What are the ethics of good living? These are not defined by the exemplary conduct of the king or his subjects around political authority or their meticulous execution of religious instructions in their quotidian behavior, these stories suggest, but by going beyond structures of power and prescribed piety in order to experience the omnipresence and beauty of divinity.

Politics and Aesthetics in Modern Arabic Literature

The syllabus of this other 4th Arabic literature course, dependent on the topical focus of the year in which it is taught, can pick up the threads from *Introduction to Arabic Literature and Culture, Politics and Society in Classical Arabic Literature*, and explore the modern responses to pre-modern “imaginings of community” exemplified by *The 1001 Nights*. Naguib Mahfouz’s (1911-2006) allegorical novel, *Layālī alflaylah* (1979; *Arabian Nights and Days*, 1995), in which he re-writes many of the *Nights* stories, serves as an important locus for tracking the development of modern Arabic literature from a twined perspective of politics and aesthetics. It points to areas where changes in worldviews, themes and modes of representation in literary expressions are responsive to the transformation of economical, political, and social structures in the Arabic speaking world in the interstices of colonialism and nationalism in the long 19th century then globalization and nationalization through the 20th century. At the same time it makes visible the cross-cultural dialogues that take place in and give shape to the literary work. The novel, for example, borrows its from

Europe but fills its text with local concerns and colors derived from the politics surrounding Arab modernization, including political authority, class and gender, and from interrogation and adjustment of the Arabic literary tradition.

Arabic Popular Literature

This MA Arabic Literature course escalates modernity's interrogation of the Arabic literary tradition. It takes advantage of students' assumed proficiency in the Arabic language, and invites them to read more and longer stories from *The 1001 Nights* comparatively with texts from pre-modern history (*tārīkh*), tales of the prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*), relief after hardship (*al-faraj ba'd al-shiddah*), travel (*riḥlah*) and cartography (*taqwīm, khiṭaṭ*), epic (*sīrah sha'biyyah*), and Arabic picaresque (*maqāmāt*), as well as modern short story, novel and drama, to explore questions of genre ideologies, generic boundaries, and overlapping fields of literary production, while tackling the major issues debated in Arabic literature both past and present, such as ideal kingship, justice and law, the role of the individual in society, friendship, masculinity and femininity, and tradition and innovation.

A comparative reading of al-Ṭabarī's rendition of Solomon legends, with focus on the loss of his ring and kingship for the duration of 40 days, al-Tha'labī's (d. 1035) *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, and "Bulūqiyyah" in "The Queen of Serpents," shows the workings of genre ideologies in giving shape to each rendition of the story, or how form has content according to Hayden White (1987), as well as transformations of biblical folklore in Islamic writings, from condemnation of idolatry in al-Ṭabarī (839-923), to a prophet's repentance as and expression of piety in al-Tha'labī (d. 1035), and the transience of worldly power, including that of a prophet as mighty as Solomon, in "Bulūqiyyah." Reading the 4th voyage of Sindbād the Sailor

intertextually with al-Tanūkhī's (d. 994) "the meeting between a Byzantine Christian grandfather and his Arab Muslim grandson" (*Al-faraj ba'd al-shiddah* 2: 29-31) showcases the inter-generic traffic in pre-modern Arabic writings, between the sacred and secular and classical and middle, and the role of endurance and individual agency in the unfolding of destiny (on this intertextual link see also Marzolph and Pomerantz in this volume). Stories of adventures at sea, including "Sindbād the Sailor" and "Jullanār of the Sea," respond to religious discourses on passion, particularly desire, and its potential to unravel reason, therefore piety, as articulated in *Dhamm al-hawā* (In Censure of Passion) by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201). Reading "Dalīlah the Wily" in the context of historical portrayals of its underworld "knight-errant"-like figures (*shuttār* and *'ayyārūn*), who come to the rescue of the wronged populace against corrupt and tyrannical officers of the state, and of their contemporary counterparts, such as the story of "Ḥasan and Na'īmah" in Egyptian Ballads, provides an opportunity to explore the limits of the law in guaranteeing just rule in the pre-modern Islamic religious community (*ummah*) or modern secular nation-state (*dawlah*). Brotherhood, comprehended as the bond of loyalty defining the relationship among men, emerges in such instances as an alternative structure for community in the Arabic literary imaginary.

Gender and constructions of masculinity and femininity, so pervasive in discourses on community structured around sexual desire, understandably come to be central in any reading of classical and modern Arabic literature. Mafhouz's national allegory, *Arabian Nights and Days*, generates meaning by turning the paradigm of educating desire into love familiar in *The 1001 Nights* into tales of misdirected desire and unrequited love. Hanan al-Shaykh's (b. 1945) *One Thousand and One Nights: a Retelling* (2014), as an example of Arab women's response to centuries of male-

centered Arabic and Middle Eastern writings, by contrast, completely eschews “national allegory” and instead dwells humorously on the pleasures of quotidian gender politics. In this al-Shaykh cleverly picks up on *The 1001 Nights*’s capability in irreverence and makes fun of all the earnest readings of religious, political and moral discourses presumed inherent in its stories, just as these mock *adab* and its pretenses. Even as the telling of stories in *The 1001 Nights* relies on language games to generate allure, it does not hesitate to parody the performativity of language exemplified by the picaresque *Maqāmāt* by al-Hamadhānī (969-1007) in which the protagonist, Abū al-Fath al-Iskandarī, exchanges his eloquent words for money and worldly goods, and shows in “The Hunchback’s Tale” that words, however eloquent they may be, are ineffectual prattle.

Multilingual World Literature and Global Humanities

In the itinerary of the particular journey I guide, *The 1001 Nights* serves as a key site that opens out to an extensive intertextual network and brings into focus the conversations taking place among divergent texts in Arabic and between Arabic and world literature. More important, it marks the flexible entry points into this global textual network. It has been possible for me to offer this guided tour because of the strength of language training and literature program at SOAS. As I write, the sinking feeling I have known for the past five years, perhaps even more, turns into a punch. This world of possibilities for which I moved to London has been disappearing slowly but surely at pace with the growing crisis in modern languages and the falling number of students interested in the humanities. The recent Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked further havoc in our world of languages and humanities: it has accelerated funding cuts and low recruitment into a furious pace. The combination long decline and

immediate crisis is having a devastating effect on the size and shape of teaching and research in area studies, cultural and literary studies, and comparative literature.

Outside the privileged enclaves of Cambridge and Oxford in the UK, small languages are fast disappearing from our curricula, and literature programs are being reduced to the bare minimum, driven by belligerent staff cuts and redundancies. The Arabic language has survived but it has been scaled down. The long-term consequences are not difficult to imagine. Students will no longer be able to access the authentic Arabic texts we teach in our culture and literature courses at the planned stages of developing in an escalating fashion their lingual and critical skills combined with language-based cultural and disciplinary literacy. Many of the Arabic literature courses I teach have been withdrawn, reduced in scope or put on the back burner. Acquisition of transferrable skills is deferred to general courses on culture, literature and film (of the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and South East Asia) taught in English and through English translation. As academics are being pushed back into this Anglophone silo, our students are similarly being deprived of lines of escape from the isolation of Anglophone worldview and the attendant monolingualism. Yet, paradoxically, the Covid-19 pandemic is showing us that multilingualism is the norm and through it we live a global life, and that the decline of the humanities has diminished our capacity to manage the conundrum in our ethics of living generated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Dare I be optimistic? The diversity of *The 1001 Nights* gives me hope. I do not think that it is the best representative of Arabic literature or the value of the humanities, not at all. Rather, it offers numerous ways to enter multiple literary traditions not least the world of Arabic letters. Arabic literary tradition may seem foreign at first glance, but with the *Nights* as introduction it can quickly become

familiar and even meaningful. At the same time the *Nights* shows how multiple literary traditions around the world are connected and brought into dialogue with each other. As such it provides a firm ground from which we can interrogate the conceptual categories and paradigms underpinning the division of labor in academic institutions and in regional or disciplinary approaches to research and teaching. Moreover, it opens our eyes to the centrality of languages, particularly multilingualism, and global humanities in how we work out the ethics of living for our everyday.

Standing before the ruins of the Arabic programs at SOAS I dream of a better future in which the *Nights* serves as the backbone of a theoretical rigorous course in global humanities that celebrates creativity in multilingualism and cultural encounters and at the same time brings together the core values of global humanities. The intercultural context of the formation, circulation and transmogrification of the *Nights* will be our point of departure from the silos of current teaching practices structured, as it were, by national imaginings of community and monolingual definitions of language and literature, into a global vision of multilingual world literature. The dialectics between reason and passion in the *Nights* stories, through which men and women work out individual and collective rights and responsibilities, will be our thematic mooring that anchors four inquiries. In the first instance, we look at the inter-generic textual network of pre-modern Arabic literature within the multilingual textual network of, let us say, ancient literatures of Asia, Africa and Europe. We home in on the formation of a moral universe and an ideal community in the dialogues among Arabic poetry, *adab*, history, philosophy of love, the Qur'an and Prophetic Tradition, and between these and literary traditions from earlier and surrounding cultures, including the local biblical folklore, Greek, Indian and Persian traditions of knowledge. In the second, we will look at the proliferation of the *Nights*

in the world through translation, while investigating the creative impulse behind translated works. The third part explores the multilingual poetics of modern and contemporary literary re-writings, adaptations, imitations and satires of the *Nights* narrative techniques, poetics, identity politics and ethics of living. And, finally, a fourth inquiry into trans-media aesthetics, ethics and politics in order to expand our understanding of multilingualism as that which is inherent in any language and that it at the same time encompasses word, image, sound and embodiment, and of ethics of living as a collaborative global project.