
Original Article

Motivated fictionality: Worldbuilding and *The Thousand and One Nights*

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Abstract Inundated with visions of domed desert kingdoms, tyrant kings, flying carpets, and shapeshifting jinn, the visual vocabulary that has come to be associated with *The Thousand and One Nights* can be traced back to the earliest illustrated translations of the stories, one of the first of which was British orientalist Edward Lane's three volume edition published between 1839–41. Interspersed with the 635 woodcut prints designed for the edition by illustrator William Harvey, this version developed an identity for the *Nights* rooted in ethnographically realist art and annotation. Since much of Lane's own travel research was folded into the *Nights* through choice commentary and renderings, key illustrations are closely read here as having channeled the translator's own scholarly motivations into the world of the stories. Embraced not just as a work of storytelling, but also of worldbuilding, the *Nights* are positioned in this essay as a world ripe with and receptive to interventions where the work of writing and visualizing fiction is indivisible from the construction and perception of reality.

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Rare are the titles that manage to capture the imaginations of readers across centuries, and even fewer are those whose influence has been as lasting as the tales collectively known as *The Thousand and One Nights*. While recognised in its European translations as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, a perhaps more evocative translation of *Alf Layla wa Layla* would be *A Thousand Nights*

and *A Night*. Borges rather powerfully states that ‘to say a thousand nights is to say infinite nights, countless nights, endless nights. And to say a thousand and one nights is to add one to infinity’ (1984, 566). Such a reading is especially indicative of the scope of the *Nights*, of the space it occupies in the collective global imaginary. Emphasised throughout this research not as a single, homogenous collection, but as a storytelling and worldbuilding tradition with roots in Persian, South Asian, and even Chinese folklore, the *Nights* are tales that have, for centuries, been told and retold in countless iterations.¹ And while few, if any, can claim to have read or listened to every such story, many possess some sense of what the world of the *Nights* looks like. To trace the worlding of that shared imaginary, this article analyses the making and meaning of some of the first visuals ever popularly associated with the stories, those featured in British Orientalist and translator Edward Lane’s extensively illustrated nineteenth-century edition of the *Nights*.²

Published with copious explanatory notes between 1839–1841 (Figure 1) and interspersed with 635 woodcut prints by British illustrator William Harvey (Figure 2), this edition is characterised by its dedication to the illusion of ethnographic realism, a style that set a major visual precedent for all subsequent work on the *Nights* during the nineteenth century. And although realised differently across either register, together, the annotation and illustration became the means through which Lane could layer onto his translated text colonial-era research and representation meant to offer an authentic vision of the East for unfamiliar readers. Both a product and producer of its time, this collage of fact and fiction belies a *Nights* that thus both shaped and was shaped by Victorian-era motivated fictionality, by fabulation born of colonial epistemology. An indispensable authority on the *Nights*, Robert Irwin reminds us that all storytelling has, for that matter, long been an ‘accepted means of transmitting religious, political, and moral ideas’ (Irwin 2010, 247). How such exchanges have been shaped with and through the *Nights* both textually and visually is of primary interest to this essay.

Investigating as much requires recognising that although the narrative character of the tales has preoccupied much of the scholarship on the *Nights*, work on the early imaging and illustration of the tales—what is of most interest to this article—has not been the subject of such voracious study. Beyond research like Irwin’s seminal survey of the *Night’s* most famous illustrators in *Visions of the Jinn: Illustrators of the Arabian Nights* (2011), Khalid Chaouch’s ‘Early Illustrators of The Arabian Nights and the Making of Exoticism’ (2011), Arnoud Vrolijk and Richard van Leeuwen’s joint work on *The Thousand and One Nights and Orientalism in the Dutch Republic*, and Marina Warner’s essay on the picturing of the *Nights* in ‘The Reality Bodily Before Us’ (2013), little scholarship exists on the tales’ early visual history.³ This article addresses that gap in research by foregrounding Lane’s illustrated edition as embodying a key

1 With many of the earliest tales lost to history and surviving referential manuscripts offering only a fragmentary set of stories, the *Nights* have long since been amended, adapted, and added to by scholars and creatives alike.

2 Although written editions of the *Nights* have existed since at least the ninth century, it was not until the arrival of the stories to Europe in the eighteenth century that there exists evidence of their illustration.

3 See: Robert Irwin (2011); Khalid Chaouch (2011); Arnoud Vrolijk and Richard van Leeuwen (2020); Marina Warner (2013).

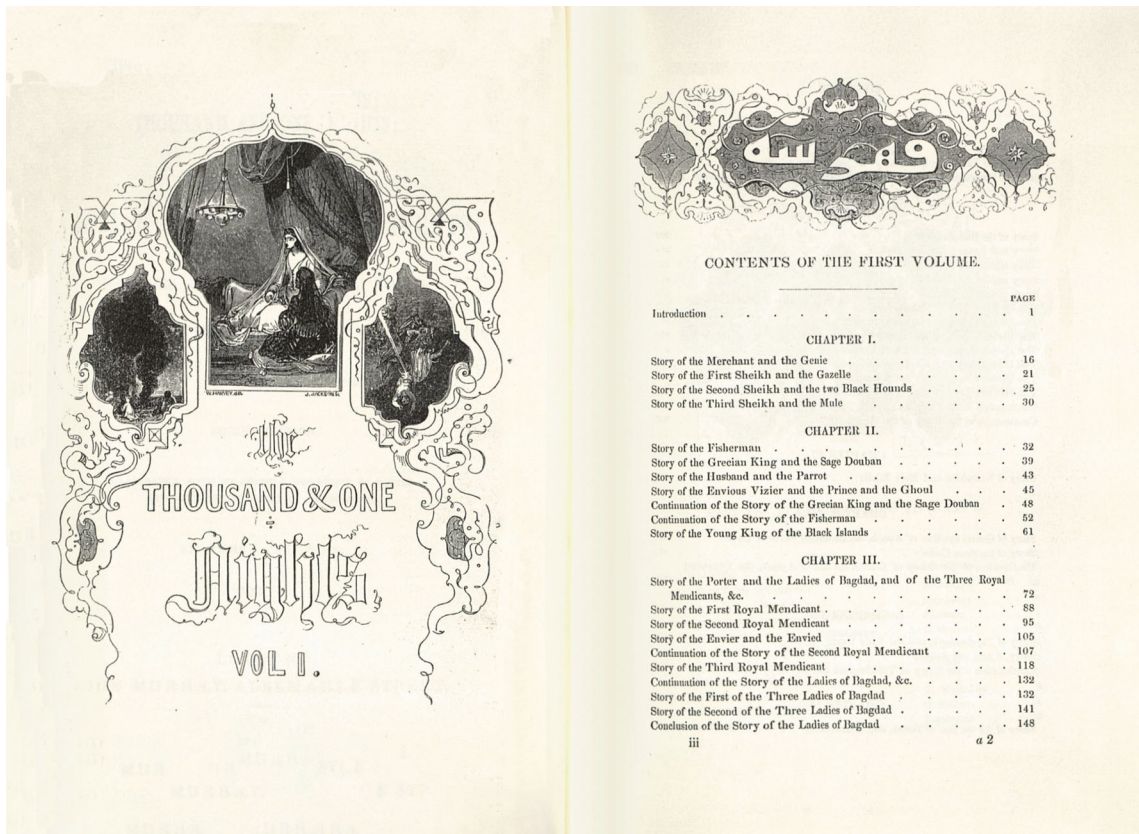


Figure 1: An illustration of Shahrazad storytelling featured alongside the first page of the Table of Contents. Owen Jones, *Illuminated Title* in Edward William Lane, *Nights* vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1859), ii; William Harvey engraved by Ebenezer Landells, *Headpiece to Table of Contents* in Edward Lane, *Nights* vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1859) xxv. Internet Archive, public domain.

shift in the legacy of the *Nights*, one that moved away from the telling and towards the worlding of the stories.

Emphasising this relies upon the distinctions that can be made between storytelling and worldbuilding. Although complementary in many ways, the building of a world can also exist apart from—and even at odds with—the telling of a story. Unrestricted to the linearity or continuity demanded of a well-told tale, of the beginning, middle, and end that defines the progression of a narrative text, worldbuilding is cyclical, expansive, and aggregative. Every addition is itself ‘a mini-world,’ as remarks Marta Boni, where each ‘...fragment, coming from localised spaces and origins, enter[s] the world bearing the language and the interpretation bestowed by its producer’ (2017, 18).

The *Nights*, as do other worlds (and as do we), thus exists in multitudes where consistency is not a prerequisite of coherence. Its storytellers champion female

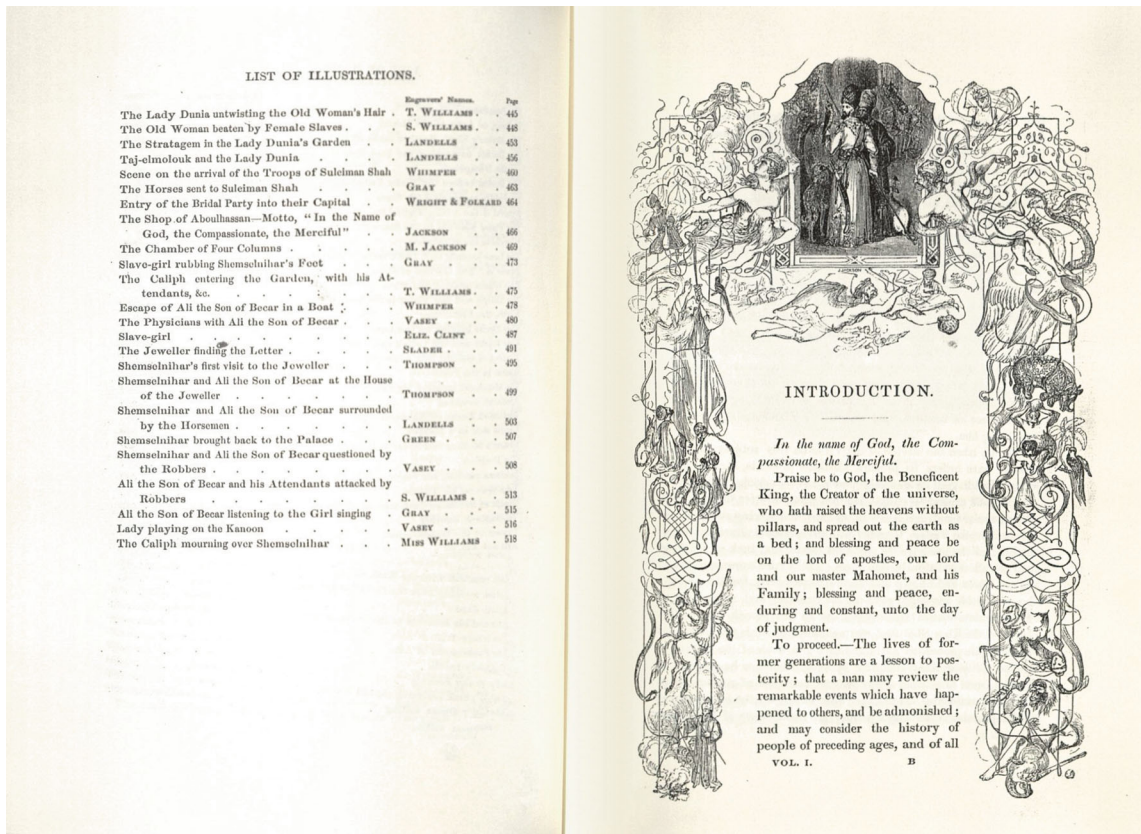


Figure 2: Spread from Lane's *Nights* showing end of 'List of Illustrations' and beginning of the frame story. William Harvey engraved by John Jackson, *Shahriar going out to hunt*, and *Ornamental Border* in Edward Lane, *Nights* vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1859) 1. Internet Archive, public domain.

agency through Shahrazad though the stories they tell through her are rife with misogyny. Her characters favour grace and piety in tales that have been interspersed with debauchery, and tell of times, kingdoms, and cultures that could not have intersected save for in the space of these stories. Not thus simply extant, worlds like the *Nights* grow, change, and are populated by the context, interests, and ambitions of those who choose to engage with them. So while the *Nights* is largely known to be a work of storytelling, this essay thus argues that Lane has, especially through illustration, worlded the *Nights* to scaffold ambitious representations of his own into existence.

A way of being in—and of—those worlds, worlding and worldbuilding is understood in this article as an active process, one anchored in the postcolonial theorisations of this practice offered by Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said. Spivak's ruminations on colonial-era worlding through mapping, writing, and traveling along with Said's on the construction of the world of the Orient have



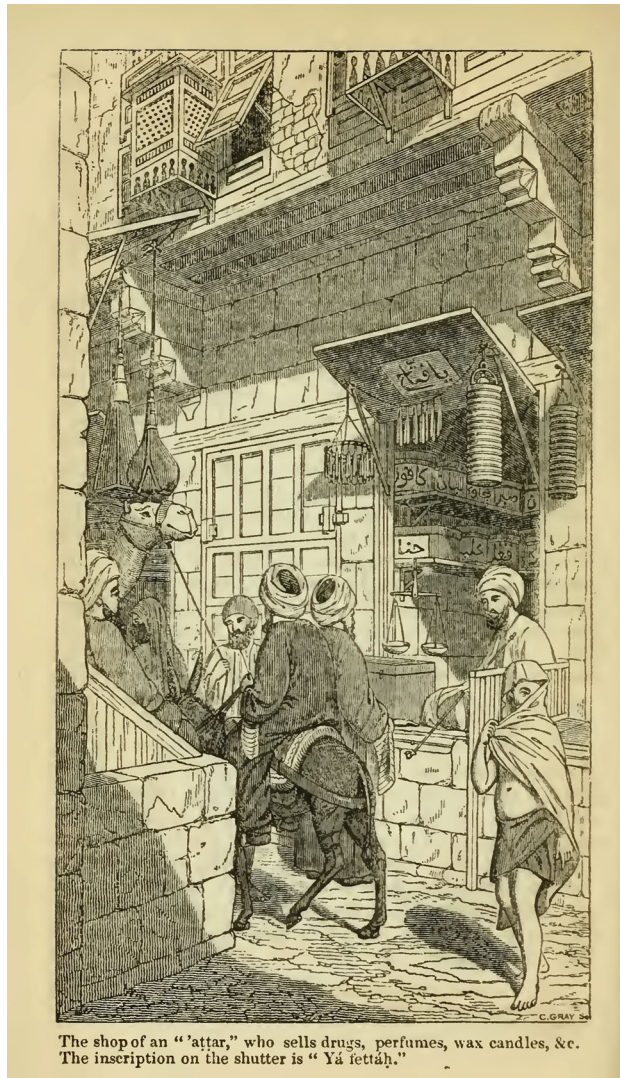
informed a definition here where fact can be made to answer to fiction and vice versa. Where Said's work helps posit texts and traditions like the *Nights* as 'having ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society' (1975, 4), Spivak's prompts the channeling of those factors into the production of 'alternative historical narrative[s]' to world worlds anew (1985, 247). Together with close readings provided of key images, these definitions and perspectives are employed throughout this article to thus frame the *Nights* as a world ripe with and receptive to interventions where the work of writing and visualising fiction is indivisible from the construction and perception of reality.

The making of Lane's *Nights*

Despite their being told and traded around the world for over a millennium, the *Nights* would not take on distinctly Western imaginaries until their arrival to Europe in the early eighteenth century. Acquired on a research trip in manuscript form by royally appointed French antiquarian Antoine Galland, the stories found their first readers in the upper-class intellectuals and noblemen of Paris.⁴ They read as Shahrazad—heroine and primary storyteller of the *Nights*—spun nightly tales to stave off the death sentence imposed by her king, Shahryar. The tales of far-off magic and wicked grandeur narrated through her would prove so popular that Galland's twelve-volume French edition (1704–1717) would quickly be republished in every major language across Europe.

Lane himself came to the *Nights* a little over a century later as a skilled illustrator, engraver, translator, and learned authority on all things Egyptian. Cited by Leila Ahmed as 'unquestionably one of the greatest Orientalists Britain has ever produced,' Lane first journeyed to Cairo in 1825 where he spent years travelling and documenting Egypt's various monuments and familiarising himself with the country's social and material culture (1978, vi). Scholars and friends he met along the way like bookseller Ahmad Al-Kutubi and Azhari scholar Muhammad Al-Tantawi introduced him to the first Arabic printed

4 Galland translated his edition from a fifteenth-century manuscript of Syrian origins. Texts held at the royal library as well as conversations with storytellers like Hanna Diyab provided the historical context and inspiration necessary for Galland to repurpose the manuscript into a wildly popular set of 282 nights (40 stories).



5 Although the contributions of friends he met on his travels went largely unrecognised in the wake of his edition's publication, Lane relied heavily on the linguistic expertise of colleagues like Muhammad Al-Tantawi to translate and annotate his *Nights*.

Figure 3: Although Lane referred Harvey to the work of contemporaneous draughtsmen, he can himself be counted as an exemplary illustrator and capable technical surveyor. Edward Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: Charles Knight, 1846) 146. Internet Archive, public domain.

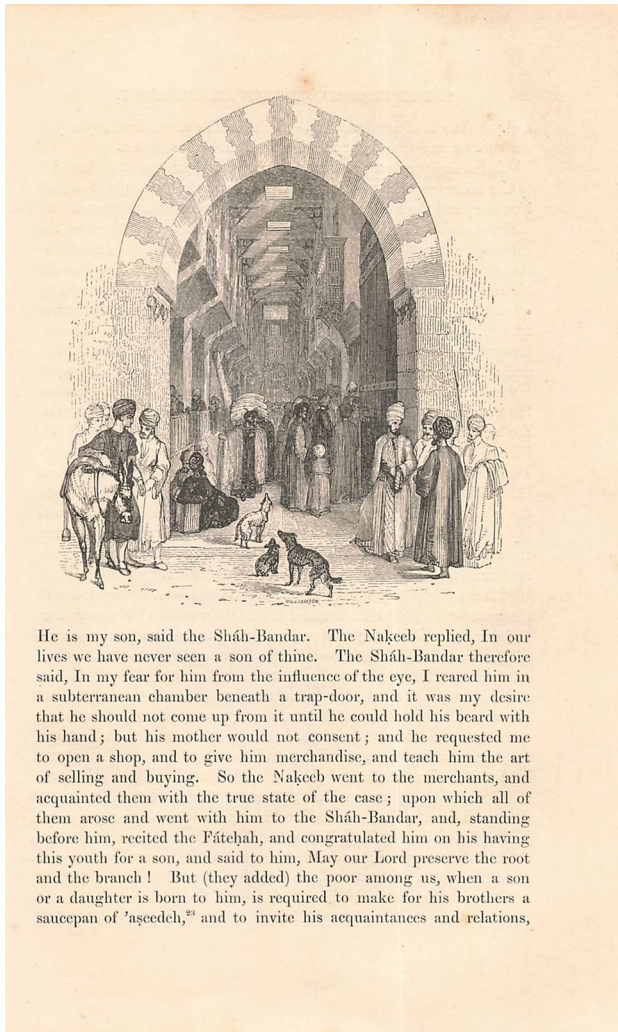
edition of the *Nights*, one newly being produced in Bulaq, Egypt.⁵ Thus would Lane go on to compile his own translation, the first European edition of the *Nights* translated directly from Arabic since Galland's more than a century



Figure 4: Early illustrations of the *Nights* associated with Galland's translation echo life in French court more than they do Islamic art and architecture. David Coster, *Frontpiece*, from Antoine Galland, *Les mille & une nuit: contes arabes* vol. 5 (The Hague: Pierre Husson, 1706). Google Books, public domain.

earlier.⁶ Treated as a conduit for the publication of his research on Egypt, Lane's *Nights* immediately 'gave way to an ardent search for exactitude in information and details concerning Eastern settings, customs, and national peculiarities' (Al-

⁶ Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century editions of the *Nights* translated into languages across Europe were retranslations of Galland's French edition. Lane was the first translator after Galland to refer back to Arabic source material. His *Nights* referenced the Bulaq (1835), Breslau (1824-48), and first Calcutta (1814-18) editions.



He is my son, said the Sháh-Bandar. The Naķeb replied, In our lives we have never seen a son of thine. The Sháh-Bandar therefore said, In my fear for him from the influence of the eye, I reared him in a subterranean chamber beneath a trap-door, and it was my desire that he should not come up from it until he could hold his beard with his hand; but his mother would not consent; and he requested me to open a shop, and to give him merchandise, and teach him the art of selling and buying. So the Naķeb went to the merchants, and acquainted them with the true state of the case; upon which all of them arose and went with him to the Sháh-Bandar, and, standing before him, recited the Fátchah, and congratulated him on his having this youth for a son, and said to him, May our Lord preserve the root and the branch! But (they added) the poor among us, when a son or a daughter is born to him, is required to make for his brothers a saucepan of 'aşcedeh,⁸³ and to invite his acquaintances and relations,

7 Upon his return to London in the 1830s, Lane spent years compiling his findings into his *Description of Egypt*. Lengthy and expensive to print, he would not see the tome published in his lifetime. It would however form the basis of his subsequent work on the *Nights*.

Figure 5: Market scenes could tightly pack many social, cultural, and material references into a single image, and were, as such, frequently featured throughout the three volumes. William Harvey engraved by Williamson, *Sooq* in ‘The Story of Ala’eddeen Abu Shamat,’ from Edward Lane, *Nights* vol. 3 (London: John Murray, 1859) 229. Internet Archive, public domain.

Musawi 1981, 37).⁷ Realising his scholarly interests within the *Nights* would call for an intimate integration of fact and fiction, one that would see the edition



go on to be the most widely published of the many versions of the *Nights* put into circulation at the time.⁸

Key to Lane's success was the confirmation of William Harvey as illustrator of the edition. Especially successful in his line of work, Harvey, by the time of his involvement with Lane's *Nights* in 1836, was 'at the height of his reputation, and for 26 years more... almost monopolised the illustration of books published in London' (Cundall 1895, 122). Having built a career on masterfully designed and meticulously detailed illustrations, he was thus invited to the *Nights* as an artist who Lane firmly believed could faithfully represent the Orient in all its material splendour. Although Lane did not himself work on the illustrations, he offered regular feedback and references to Harvey and their team of engravers. The great autonomy that Harvey as illustrator exercised in constructing the imaginary scenes was thus consistently mediated by consultations with Lane that served to firmly ground the entirety of that process in the translator's vision for the edition (Figure 3).

Upon publication, Harvey's 635 woodcut illustrations for the *Nights* would be hailed as his best work and would be the subject of praise that overshadowed even the reception of the text itself (Kobayashi 2006, 176).⁹ In a feature from the *Dublin Review*, critics laud the 'splendid woodcuts, sufficient of themselves to redeem even an indifferent translation'—ones that 'all but tell the story without the aid of the letter-press,' and with a 'vividness and distinctness which all the description in the world could never reach' (1840, 127).

A medley of unfamiliar places, peoples, and creatures, these illustrations were especially renowned for their meticulous visualization of the *Nights*: a world rooted, for the first time, in the material character of Islamic art and culture (Figures 4 and 5). A self-made authority on such styles and on 'the ways of the Arabs,' Lane supplemented his illustrated text with notes that, in a review from *The Athenaeum*, were described as the book's 'real value' (1838, 739). If the illustrations were the edition's most entertaining aspect, his notes, they declared, were its most instructive and important contribution. Although the translation itself was regularly dismissed as unreadable, the additional commentary layered into the edition would be the subject of much admiration. Informed by his travels through Egypt, the notes carefully integrated copious ethnographic detail into a translation that he framed as offering 'admirable pictures of the manners and customs of the Arabs' (Lane 1839, xxiv).

To firmly foreground the scholarly merit of his work, Lane emphasises in the preface to his first volume that he has supplied Harvey with the requisite dresses and materials necessary to accurately visualise his translation of the *Nights*. Diverse and varied, the materials Lane offered his illustrator drew, for example, from the 'great works of Murphy on the Arabian remains in Spain,' as well as from the 'very accurate and very beautiful...drawings...of Arabian architecture in and around Cairo executed by M. Pascale Coste' (Lane 1839, xxi–xxii). That these documents together visualised wildly divergent built and cultural

8 Not only was Lane's translation appropriated throughout the nineteenth-century as a backdrop for subsequent sets of illustrations, but Harvey's illustrations for Lane's *Nights* were themselves the subject of 22 later reprintings. The famous *Nights* art of Maxfield Parrish come in second at 13 printings.

9 Harvey was first apprenticed to Thomas Bewick whose development of boxwood engraving would help yield extravagantly detailed prints at a fraction of the prices associated with those of metal plate etching. This development allowed for the inclusion of hundreds of illustrations in Lane's *Nights* at a relatively affordable price.



Figure 6: Technical drawing showing view of mihrab and minbar at a mosque in Cairo. Pascal Coste, *Architecture arabe: ou, Monuments du Kaire, mesurés et dessinés, de 1818 à 1826* (Paris: Fermin Didot Frères, 1839). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain.

traditions gathered from across various ages and territories did not seem to invalidate, for Lane at least, their relevance in helping illustrate what he believed to be the inherently Egypt-centric nature of the *Nights*. His grandnephew Stanley Lane-Poole affirms as much in his preface to an 1883 reprint of Lane's edition by emphasising that '...it is of Egypt that the *Thousand and One Nights* have most to tell. Indian or Persian as many of the tales are in their origin, their setting is almost purely Egyptian...For a minute picture of Arabian society as it was in the Middle Ages, the *Thousand and One Nights* have no rival...' (Lane-Poole 1883, x). Upon publication however, the pastiche of imagery featured throughout the edition would complicate Lane's efforts to accurately represent Egyptian life, and more broadly, that of the Arabs, and only further amplify the anachronistic collage of narrative, textual, and cultural references already associated with the stories.

Visually, these complications are made especially explicit in illustrations like the headpiece for the 'Story of the Porter and Ladies of Baghdad,' where the

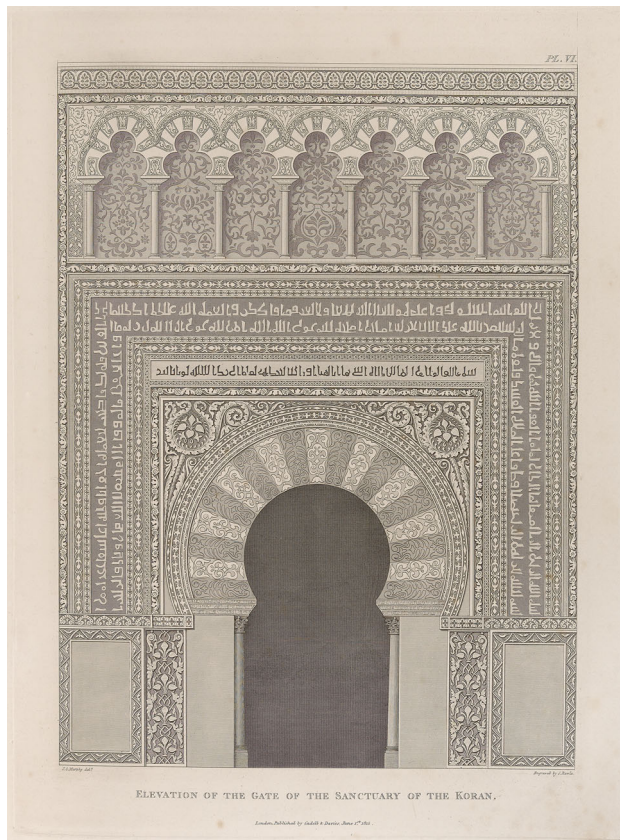


Figure 7: Mihrab of the Great Mosque of Cordoba. James Cavanah Murphy, 'Plate 6: Elevation of the Gate of the Sanctuary of the Koran, Mosque of Cordova' in *The Arabian Antiquities of Spain* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1815) © Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London. Photographer: Prudence Cuming Associates Limited.

Great Mosque of Cordoba's *mihrab* (a niche that indicates the direction of prayer) is, for example, adapted into a residential threshold (Horta 2017, 169). Elsewhere, the Red Fort's Lahori Gate populates the city of Khitan of Tartary in tales like the 'Story of Marouf,' and Cairo's Great Mosque of Muhammad Ali Pasha becomes the Palace of Kosh in the 'Story of the City of Brass' (Warner 2013, 155). Designed to substantiate a factual basis for the fictions of their respective stories, these images draw on a long and distinguished legacy of antiquarian illustration, on an archaeological energy that Richard Maxwell frames as having consistently saturated the objects and artifacts that populated much of nineteenth-century literature: 'As powerful repositories of historical and social memory,' these illustrations become especially commanding in their ability to 'express multiple contradictory things simultaneously' (2002, xxvii).

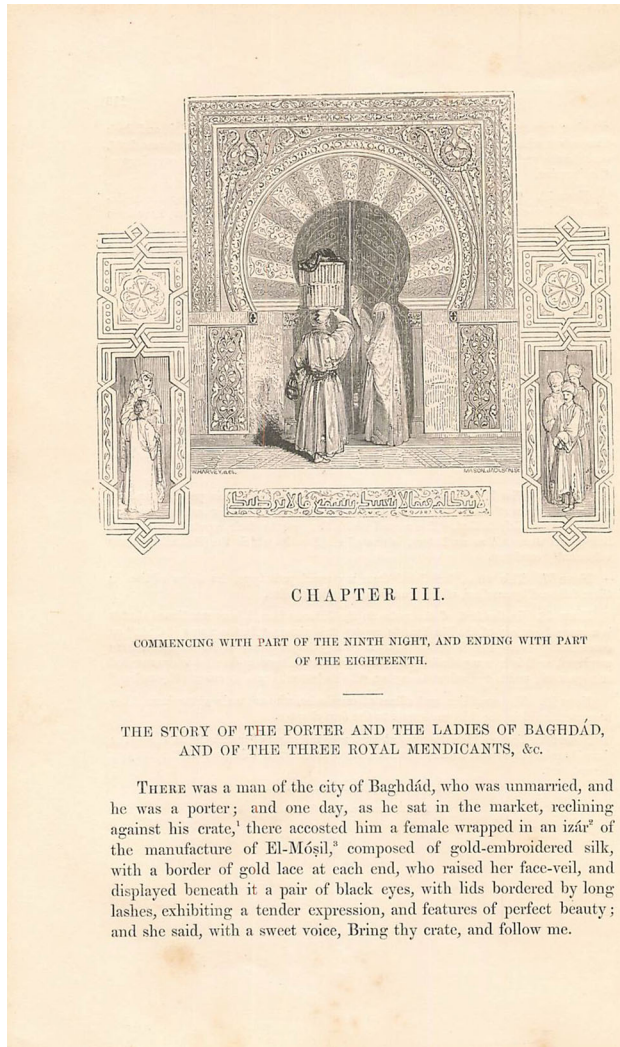


Figure 8: Mihrab as residential entryway. William Harvey engraved by Mason Jackson, *Headpiece*, in 'The Story of the Porter and the Ladies of Baghdad,' from Edward Lane, *Nights* vol. 1, (London: John Murray, 1859) 120. Internet Archive, public domain.

As a purveyor of such incongruous works of representation, Harvey's prints collage trishul finials (a three-pronged, trident-like ornament affixed to the apex of a roof, canopy, or similar built structure), trefoil arches (a three-lobed arch, two of which are positioned at either side of the third's apex), onion bulb domes (one wherein the diameter is larger than that of the structure it sits on), and *ablaq* stonework (masonry characterised by an alternation of light and dark stone) across the whole of Lane's three volumes in a move to comprehensively incorporate into the *Nights* every aspect of Islamic building tradition made



known to him. As Richard van Leeuwen observes, Harvey was ‘[Interested] in decorative details and faithful renderings of material culture that helped locate narrative scenes firmly in a realist setting,’ (2010, 8) thus designing illustrations that expanded the world of Lane’s *Nights* beyond its existing narrative boundaries.

Illustration as documentation

Victorian-era illustrations of the *Nights* owes much to the contemporaneous surge in British and French surveys of Al-Andalus. The sudden proliferation in documentation of monuments like the Great Mosque of Cordoba, Pedro I of Castile’s palace in Seville, and the fortress of Alhambra offered a robust repository of Islamic architectural motifs and backgrounds from which illustrators could sample and populate their scenes (Figure 6) (Irwin 2011, 27). Works like James Cavanah Murphy’s *The Arabian Antiquities of Spain* (1815) and Girault de Prangey’s *Mosquée de Cordoue* and *La Giralda et l’Alcazar de Séville* (1837) were referenced by translators like Lane who hoped to work their editions of the *Nights* into prestigious legacies of antiquarian scholarship and illustration.

Because surveys documenting the architecture of southern Spain were also designed to visualise the flow of daily life in and around the monuments, drawings could easily be adapted into the *Nights*, often by simply switching out images of civilians lounging around the mosque and palace grounds for *jinn*, princes, and other such characters. Some of this most explicit sampling is featured in Harvey’s illustration for the headpiece of the ‘Story of the Porter and the Ladies of Baghdad.’ A story dedicated to the misadventures of three wealthy sisters and their hired help, the headpiece visualises two characters poised at the threshold of a *mihrab* borrowed from Murphy’s survey of the Great Mosque of Cordoba (Figures 7 and 8). Elegantly carved wooden double doors transform the prayer niche into the sisters’ residential entryway, with scrolling plasterwork, Corinthian columns, and an *ablaq* horseshoe arch framing what is otherwise offered as a picture of medieval Abbasid architecture.

Within that same headpiece (Figure 8), a figure peers out at the visitors from behind doors which have been pulled slightly ajar while, off to either side of the central image, patterned ornamentation become alcoves from within which trios of characters face off across the scene. An inscription written out in stylised Kufic script between them warns: ‘Do not speak about what does not concern you, lest you hear what does not satisfy you.’ It is in such instances that Lane’s edition further complicates the relationship between word and image. Unintelligible to the average English reader, word becomes image here in a nod to rich traditions of decorative Arabic calligraphy—the form of which Lane and his contemporaries took an interest in reproducing. Together with the figures, these

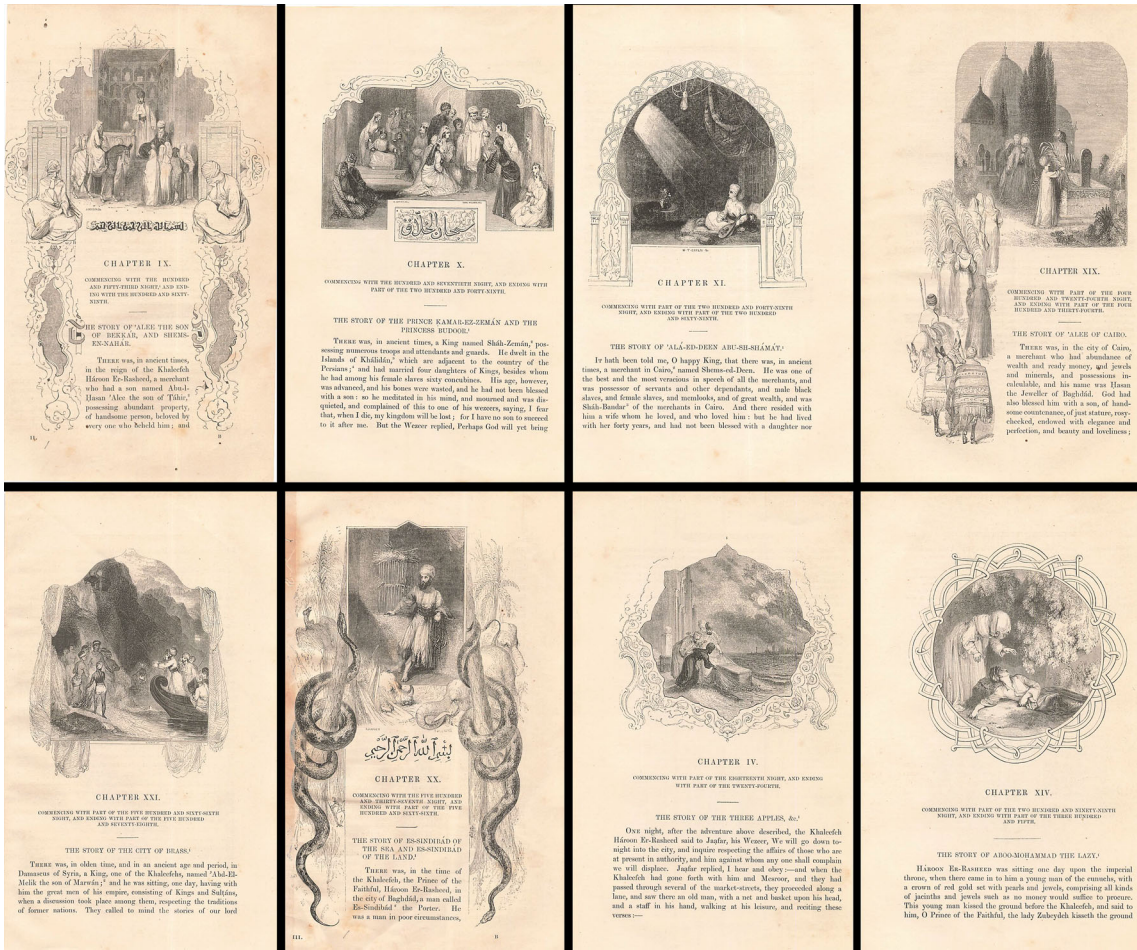


Figure 9: Headpieces to various chapters featured throughout Lane's *Nights*. William Harvey, *Headpieces*, from Edward Lane, *Nights* vol. 1–3 (London: John Murray, 1859) Source: Internet Archive, public domain.

various components frame and foreshadow the threshold as an invitation into the unknown—into a world, it is implied, that only Lane can help readers make sense of.

Stories subsequently related by each of the three ladies and the mendicants are nested into each other throughout the remainder of the main tale, with many of the illustrations interspersed throughout the following pages collaging props and characters into drawings framed by a variety of scalloped arches and semidomes. Concluded with a customary return to Shahrazad's primary storyline and the commencement of a new night, the following cycle of stories is again prefaced by an illuminated headpiece, one meant to re-anchor this journey into the larger framework of the *Nights*.

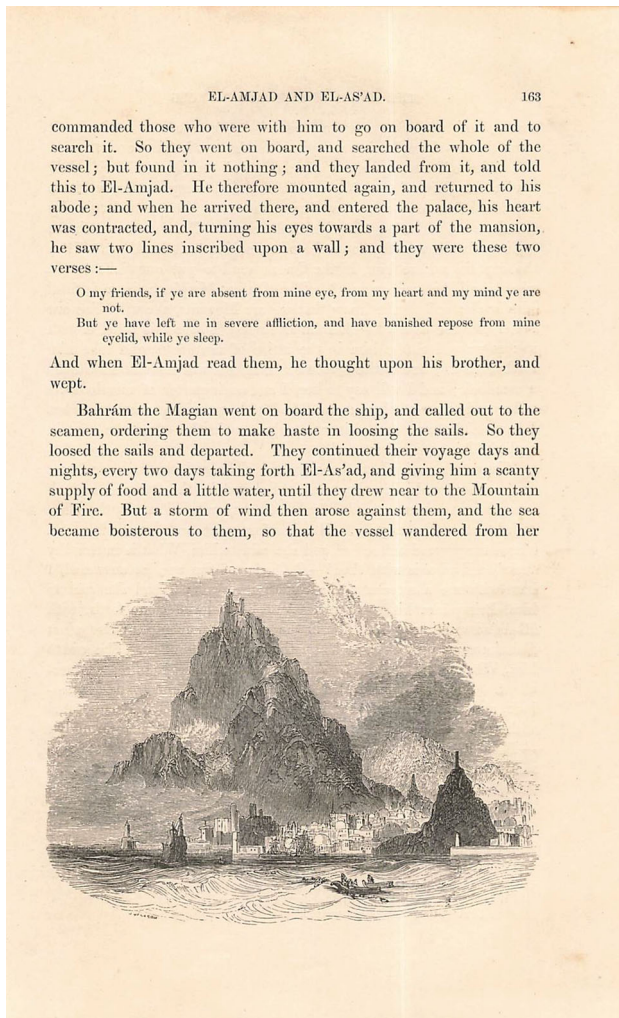


Figure 10: Travelers see a city in the distance. William Harvey engraved by Smith, *City of the Queen Margiana* in 'Story of the Two Princes' from Edward Lane, *Nights* vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1859), 163. Internet Archive, public domain.

It is here that it becomes important to note that Lane's reliance on headpieces to signal the beginning of new stories speaks more to the chapter-based layout of contemporaneous literature and research publications than it does to the structure of the *Nights*.¹⁰ Rather than begin each story with Shahrazad's typical opening lines (requesting permission to tell a story), an illustration is instead offered below which the number of the night in question is recorded. Meant to limit textual interruptions, this tallying of the nights is the only allusion to Shahrazad's authorial presence until she reappears in the very final, 1,001 night. By removing the *Night's* primary storyteller, which is a significant omission,

10 Beyond contemporaneous literature, chapter-based layouts were also favoured in popular ethnographic studies featured in, for example, The Library of Entertaining Knowledge (1829-38). Books in the series included George Lillie Craik's *The New Zealanders* (1830), Lane's *Modern Egyptians* (1836), and John Francis Davis' *The Chinese* (1836).

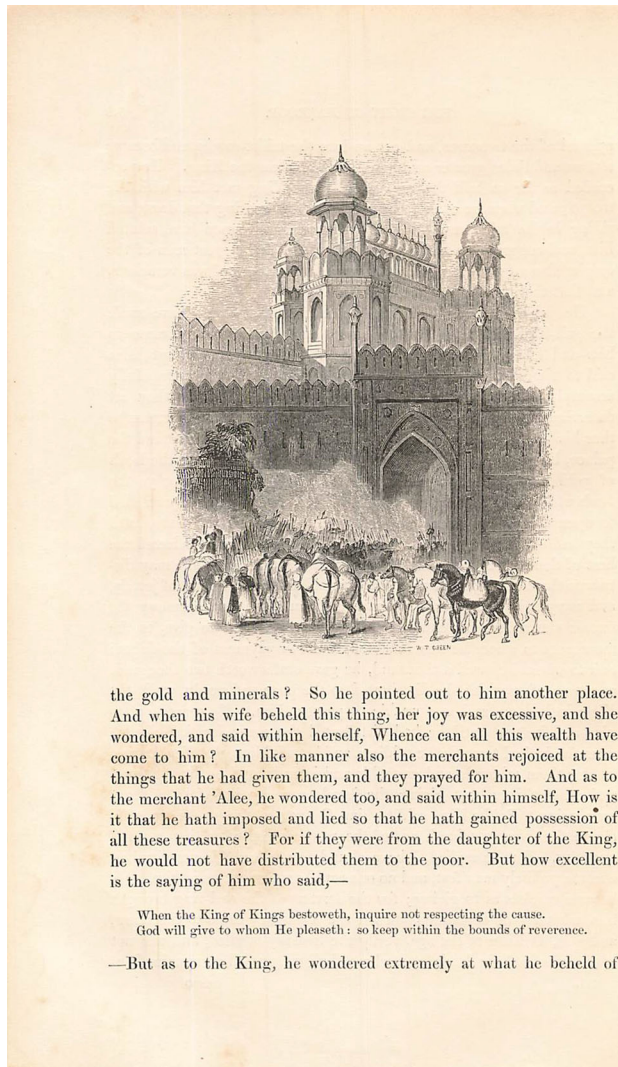


Figure 11: *Marouf Entering the City*. William Harvey engraved by Green, in 'The Story of Marouf,' from Edward Lane, *Nights* vol. 3 (London: John Murray, 1859) 650. Internet Archive, public domain.

Lane centred his own voice and presence. As Husain Haddawy notes, Lane exercises his authorial liberty because the original wording did not otherwise 'suit his sociological purpose. He is an orientalist or a sociologist, rather than a storyteller' (1992, xxii).

Despite such textual omissions however, the headpieces do ultimately take over the task of rupturing the continuity of the stories. Consistently repeated throughout the entirety of the edition, their scrolling illumination and framing, elaborately detailed arches, and stylised doorways are integrated into the stories



THE STORY OF THE MERCHANT AND THE JINNEE. 39

The merchant, on hearing these words,⁶ exclaimed, Verily to God we belong, and verily to Him we must return! There is no strength nor power but in God, the High, the Great! If I killed him, I did it not intentionally, but without knowing it; and I trust in thee that thou wilt pardon me.—The Jinnee answered, Thy death is indispensable, as thou hast killed my son:—and so saying, he dragged him, and threw him on the ground, and raised his arm to strike him with the sword. The merchant, upon this, wept bitterly, and said to the Jinnee, I commit my affair unto God, for no one can avoid

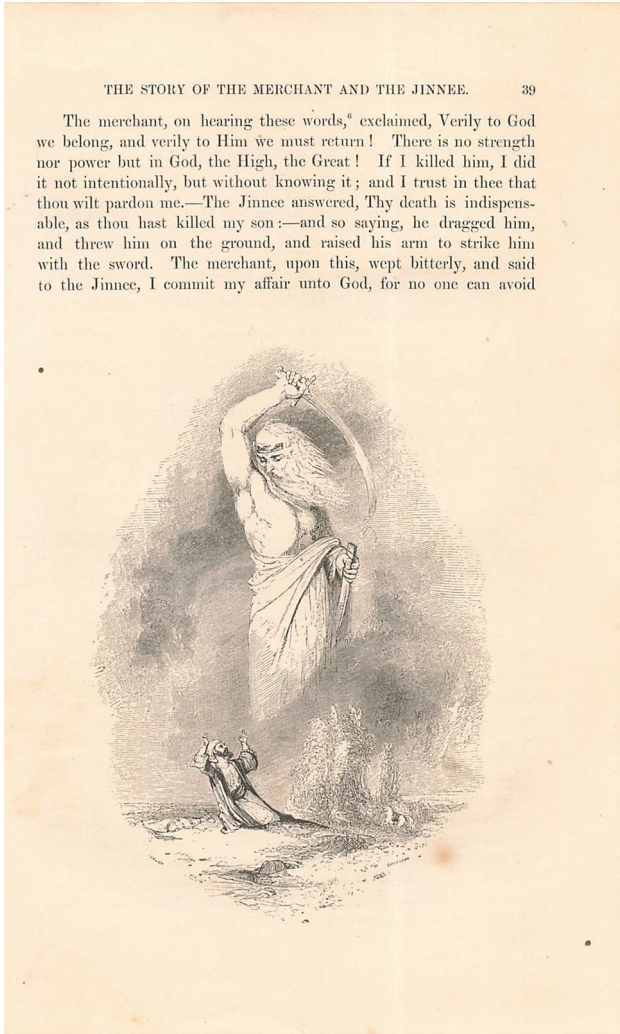


Figure 12: *Merchant and Jinnee*. William Harvey engraved by S. Williams, in ‘Story of the Merchant and the Jinnee,’ from Edward Lane, *Nights* vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1859) 39. Internet Archive, public domain.

not just as inert, peripheral thresholds, but as transportive portals designed to instantaneously move both readers and characters across narrative space and time (Figure 9). As windows into the world of the *Nights*, they make it possible to leap across temporally disparate scenes through their suggestion of a larger landscape. Together with the text and Lane’s notes (although all three are often at odds with each other), they ‘create in their sum an image of a single, coherent world’ (Ahmed 1978, 149). Only made fleetingly legible through a series of disjointed vignettes, the concretization of this world relies, paradoxically, on its



Figure 13: Ornate vase featured at the end of volume 2. William Harvey engraved by Lee, in ‘Notes to Chapter XIX (Arabian vase copied, by permission, from the Great Work of Messrs Goury and Jones),’ from Edward Lane, *Nights* vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1859) 578. Internet Archive, public domain.

elusiveness, on its insinuation of a vastness too great to be wholly known to either character or reader.

At work in the space between these illustrations is a consistent narrative mobility that van Leeuwen asserts is an ordering force central to the logic of the stories (2011, 13). Stringing together any major plot development is travel across land or sea undertaken by characters often visualised as silhouettes navigating geographically ambiguous scenery. Parades of troops and merchant



Figure 14: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Moorish Bath*, Oil on Canvas, 20x16 inches, 1870. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

caravans featured in tales like ‘The Story of the Humpback’ and ‘The Story of Ali Son of Becar and Shamselnihar’ march through backdrops of anonymous, vaguely scrolling linework—that is, until a kingdom appears over the horizon (Figure 10). If the doorway, or arch or frame, is to be thought of here as a portal, the city gate then becomes a threshold between the real and the abstract. It is only upon a character’s crossing into distinctly urban territory, into cities that can be populated with the decorative motifs and artifacts gathered into Harvey’s repertoire that the illustrations can once again most forcefully project Lane’s ethnographically realist aspirations for the text (Irwin 1994, 121). Whether it is Harun al Rachid’s Baghdad, Mamluk Cairo, or the imaginary *City of Brass*, city space determines how the *Nights* is experienced by characters and readers alike. The liminal spaces between any such territory merely exist as filler space to be traversed off-page and out-of-frame.

This shift in legibility is substantiated in reviews of Harvey’s work that consistently cite ‘the decorative and topographical examples, the glimpse of bazaar and street, of mosque and turreted gate and latticed *meshrebeyeh*



Figure 15: Jean-Leon Gerome, *The Snake Charmer*, Oil on Canvas, 41x56 inches, 1879. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

(intricately carved wood window or balcony screen),’ as being ‘superior to the picturesquely grouped but expressionless figure subjects,’ interspersed throughout the edition (Dobson 1884, 215). The preference for the former expressed by readers with an interest in exploring the East, explains Richard Maxwell, can be attributed to the inability of purely narrative illustration to effectively authenticate fictional works (2002, 2). While, for example, an isolated portrait of Marouf the Cobbler in his namesake story would not necessarily imply the possibility of his having existed, drawings of him entering the Northeast Asian province of Khitan through precisely rendered city gates allows certain aspects of his (narrative) space to match up to ours (Figure 11). Offset by towering city walls, an arcade of *chhatris* (elevated dome-shaped pavilions), and a lone palm tree, the crowd of soldiers and stallions in the foreground are contextualised by an adaptation of the Red Fort’s Lahori Gate, by a vision of the built environment that readers can trust to be located somewhere in real space and time. That this referencing be historically or geographically accurate was of little consequence.



After this they departed, and they continued their journey until they arrived at a palace; whereupon the sheykh said, Advance with us to this palace, which presenteth a lesson to him who will be admonished. So the Emeer Moosà advanced thither, together with the sheykh 'Abd-Eş-Şamad and his chief companions, till they came to its entrance. And they found it open, and having lofty angles, and steps, among which were two wide steps of coloured marbles, the like of which hath not been seen: the ceilings and walls were decorated with gold and silver and minerals, and over the entrance was a slab, whereon was an inscription in ancient Greek; and the sheykh 'Abd-Eş-Şamad said, Shall I read it, O Emeer? The Emeer answered, Advance and read. May God bless thee! for nought hath happened to us during this journey but what hath been the result of



Figure 16: The viewer of this image is positioned above and afar, with characters in the foreground dwarfed by the monumentality of the palace. William Harvey engraved by Miss Williams, *The Palace of Kosh the Son of Shedad*, in 'The Story of the City of Brass,' from Edward Lane, *Nights* vol. 3 (London: John Murray, 1859) 114. Internet Archive, public domain.

On the contrary, it was the diversity in representation and stylistic nuance featured throughout Lane's three volumes that became one of his edition's most highly regarded qualities. The rich range of material culture featured throughout the entirety of the work scaffolds a sense of realism commanding enough to be extended even to the most supernatural of its constituents. Anchored into the real by virtue of the objects they are associated with, *jinn*, for example, spring forth from stoppered brass bottles in 'The Story of the Fisherman.' And not

unlike their human counterparts, these spirits swing precisely curved scimitars in illustrations featured throughout ‘The Story of the Merchant and the *Jinni*,’ (Figure 12) and don patterned textiles and loosely flowing robes and tunics in prints made for tales like that of ‘The Three Apples.’

Rendered into existence through these various artifacts, jinn, ‘*ifrit* (demon often associated with spirits of the dead), and the like are made legible across Lane’s *Nights* through the very same visual language intended to make known ‘the character of the Arabs’ he was so dedicated to educating his readers about. As Marina Warner explains, ‘[t]he effect is rationalising: the stories’ wild implausibilities and supernatural cast of characters are tamed and ordered in images furnished with historical props and managed with *verismo* care’ (2013, 146). Not thus necessarily always of substantial narrative value, illustrations of these miscellaneous objects, often presented in isolation, do more to authenticate the extent of Lane’s notes than they do the text (Figure 13). Although they are inessential to the progression of the plot, they help concretise qualities as abstract as manners and customs—the very same ones Lane had been writing about since his work on *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836). In either case, the presentation of precisely illustrated objects were key to materialising a parallel fiction—one curated by Lane as a reliably real vision of the Orient.

Because the images designed to concretise this fiction can summon forth historically discernable, albeit anachronistic, moments, they connect the stories to a fantastic lineage of legendary rulers and empires. Whether read as Mughal, Abbasid, Andalusian, or Mamluk in origin, the medley of precisely rendered artifacts and monuments emphasise within the world of the *Nights* the presence of history itself. At once illustration and documentation, they both visualise the goings-on of fiction and represent the manners, materials, and monuments of their real-world constituents. Locatable throughout time and across history, it thus becomes possible within Lane’s *Nights* to study orientalist visions of the past, to understand it in imagery constructed through a disciplined integration of the real into the imaginary and vice versa. Not simply supplementary to the text, Harvey’s drawings disguise instructional material within ostensibly pictorial imagery. They exist at the intersections of illustration offered as a drawn addition, and that which is meant as an example designed to prove or clarify. At stake in noting such nuance is a recognition of the distinctly active nature of the latter practice. It foregrounds authorial ambitions as motivated fictionality that can be traced throughout the entirety of Lane’s *Nights*.



Verisimilitude and the performance of history

While the *Nights* illustrations are often deemed ‘misrepresentative’ of the peoples and places they are associated with, it would be most provocative here to consider the subjectivity of any mode of representation, Orientalist or otherwise. Anne Godlewska asserts in her essay on the Enlightenment worldview that there is neither truth nor lies in representation, only ‘purposive iterations of, and commentaries on, the human and physical world’ (1995, 5). And ‘what is interesting about these interpretations,’ she elaborates, ‘is not their distance from reality, that they are errors or distortions...but that they are systemic...that they are inextricably part of a larger whole, of a body of literature, of a system of spatial understanding and of social organization’ (5).

Today, read more as an embodiment of colonial-era modes of knowledge production than as the didactic reference its translator hoped it be, Lane’s edition of the *Nights* thus says little about the subject matter in question, and everything about the circumstances of its creation. This channeling of context into artifact helps fortify the very essence of the Orientalist project as one that, like all other constructs, draws its most indomitable authority from exceptionally well-crafted storytelling and worldbuilding. Realised and upheld by the population of fiction with material sourced from the real, Lane’s *Nights* figure into a larger legacy of timeless Orientalist imaginaries explored by art historian Linda Nochlin in her seminal essay on the very same subject (1991).

In analysing Jean-Léon Gerome’s paintings, for example, Nochlin notes that (much like Lane, Harvey, and their team of engravers) Gerome was similarly famed for his attention to detail and extensive study of Arab architecture, furniture, costume, and the like. His interests would inform paintings like the *Moorish Bath* (1870) and *The Snake Charmer* (1879) ones that, in their essentialising Orientalism, remain renowned for their meticulous depictions of tiling, Arabic calligraphy, costume, stonework, and jewellery (Figures 14 and 15).¹¹ Works of masterful verisimilitude, these paintings are interspersed with what Daniel Beaumont describes as the prop work necessary ‘to make an imaginary scene more real’ (2005, 61). They work to manifest an absence of ‘art’ itself through the picturesque, through a style capable of positioning the paintings not as acts of representation (and therefore fiction), but as didactically rendered fact (Nochlin 1991, 37).

Lane and Harvey’s joint sampling of Orientalist painting and surveying substantiates a reading of Harvey’s illustrations as a mode of representation where the real with the imaginary could be mutually conflated. With authentically rendered artifacts used to extend credibility to the works in question, Orientalist works like Gerome’s, Lane’s, and the sources that inspired them rely on massive amounts of detail to make their elaborate imaginaries all the more real for their audiences. A collage of both the mundane and the

11 Although twentieth-century artists like Dali and Chagall would dedicate entire series to Shahrazad’s stories, nineteenth-century Orientalist artists never depicted the *Nights*. The only instance of intersection was the publication of Gerome’s *Moorish Bath* in vol. 2 of Richard Burton’s *Nights* (1885).

abstract, these *Nights*' images, when compared with paintings of the Gerome type, thus emphasise that to illustrate the *Nights* was also, in many ways, to represent the Orient.

That their co-visualisation also implicitly demonstrated how to interact with such places and peoples was ultimately key to the hold they were able to exercise on their audiences. In prints of palaces like that of Khosh the Son of Shedid in 'The Story of the City of Brass,' architectural proportions are adjusted in accordance with the desired degree of monumentality and lines of sight are designed to perpetuate an extravagant vastness imperceptible even to those that populate the foreground of the images (Figure 16). And although they are ambitiously varied in both form and composition, consistent throughout Harvey's 635 prints is the omniscient perspective readers are invited to assume in each scene. Viewed from above and afar, these are peoples and places very much other to the average (English) reader. A position particularly emphasised in the illustration of the several dozen opening headpieces, flourishes and embellishments around the central images come together in oriental *mise-en-scènes*—collages of disparate geometry, costume, and script that, together, are intended to evoke the exotic. The significance of these works as 'political documents,' as carriers of meaning, might, and ambition anchored in or beyond that mode of representation thus demands their being further read not merely as (fictional) textual supplements, but as artifacts made to both embody and project the material histories of their disparate components (Nochlin 2018, 56).

The speculative future potential of the *Nights*

Since the value of information often fades with age, time would ultimately see Lane's ethnographic annotation of the *Nights* obsolete. It would not, however, do away with the ahistorical pastiche of imagery that persists in depictions of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia to this day. Visual or textual, stories are known, instead, to 'gain weight and permanence with repetition' (Emmons 2017, 2). They enchant and iterate through space and across time in ways that intimately intertwine fact, fiction, the real, and the fantastic. As is evidenced by Harvey's illustrations, working at the intersection of these realms can concretise even the wildest of imaginaries. Their role in realising the Orient in western culture is a meticulous performance of fiction (and of fact) that we are made to contend with still. Works of colonial-era fabulation premised on accuracy and correctness of representation, Lane's illustrated *Nights* ultimately assert the possibility of engendering real-time intervention through rigorously motivated fictionality.

Recognising as much emphasises the *Nights* as lending itself especially generously to radical visual and textual manipulation in ways that very few other storytelling traditions do. Whether that is an incisive reimagining of the



past through visual intervention, or a more future-minded practice dedicated to reworlding existing Orientalist iterations of the tales through new storytelling, the *Nights* offers itself as a creative framework wherein the politics of the real are required to answer to the potential of the imaginary (White 1980, 8). Read together, these interventions unsettle the perceived impermeability of the past to instead reassert history as a project—one constantly in the making. If the illustrations for Lane’s edition of the stories made legible a world of the *Nights* through their visualization of the Orient, the creatives and scholars navigating that landscape today offer motivated fictionalities designed to reclaim and refashion that world in their own images. Together, they embrace a malleability of reality that invites speculation on the future(s) of the *Nights*, ones where the work of fiction is embraced as making the stuff of life.

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