



What are the Thousand and One Nights?

Recently I have been telling people that the Guild is doing an epic telling of the 1,001 Nights and it is interesting how so many people don't know what they are! I go on to say that they are the stories of Scheherazade, the Arabian Nights. Still they draw a blank. Though some might conjure up the wonderful overture of Rimsky-Korsakov, most can only relate to Disney's *Aladdin*.

The 1,001 Nights is a collection of tales set in the old Islamic world of Persia and Arabian Bagdad. The stories were arranged within a narrative framework. The Sultan, Shahrayar, convinced of every women's infidelity, takes a new wife each night and then has her killed the next morning. The key to survival for clever Scheherazade (and her sister, Dunyasade, who would be the next victim) was for her stories to never end. Tales meant to be told at night, waiting anxiously for morning. There was always something more to the tale, to keep the Sultan interested just one more night. Cliff hangers, digressions into other tales, or tales told within those tales. Princes and common people. Merchants and Harem Girls. Djinn and talking fish. Dilemmas, mysteries, adventures, tales of morals and sex and passion. Rumor has it, that Scheherazade became the mother of three of children while telling these tales. Presenting them and her love to him, finally the King relents.

Interestingly enough the stories most often associated with the 1,001 Nights were added later to the original collections: The Seven Voyages of Sinbad, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, Aladdin and his Magic Lamp. Flying carpets and Genies in Bottles are common stuff of modern media. "In the West today, the Nights chiefly serve as a reservoir of images and story-fragments that can be recycled in films for juvenile audiences – a visual clutter of oriental knickknacks." says Robert Irwin in *The Arabian Nights Companion*. Not so much the darker side of many of these tales – most were written for a decidedly adult audience. Perhaps shows like *Once Upon a Time* and *Grimm* are much closer to the original tone of these tales than the versions of Disney.

The tales are drawn from a vast storytelling ocean, lapping on the shores of many cultures and sources – not just the middle East – Persia, India, China, Greece. Generally there are said to be 264 tales of various lengths. There is no one original text, and much disagreement as to which translations are authentic. Most people are familiar with

the Fisherman and the Bottle. Perhaps not so well known are the Stories of the Three Apples, the Dervish's tales, and the Porter and the Three Ladies. Or The Hunchback's story, which among others, contains the Tailor's Tales, which then contains the Barber's Tales of Six Brothers.

These tales have had a wide literary retelling, There is the well known English re-telling of Sir Richard Burton's Six Volumes (1885-8) – said to be cursed so that no one would live to read it all – but that hasn't stopped such scholars as Joseph Campbell or Jack Zipes from revising it. There were works by Andrew Lang (1898), Robert Lewis Stevenson (1882), Alfred Lord Tennyson (1832), and Laurence Houseman (1907). Stories from the Nights found their way into the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales*. The Brothers Grimm admit to having lifted eight of their tales from the Arabian Nights. Stripped of oriental and Islamic features, the Nights orally circulated in Italy, France and Spain as well. Hans Christian Anderson, devoted to these tales from childhood, drew inspiration for some of his fairy tales from them as well.

The best current translation is by Husain Haddawy with two volumes: *The Arabian Nights* and *Sinbad*, said to best catch the Arabic. Dover Press has three massive volumes of about 900 pages each. Recent literary works range from Geraldine McCaughrean's delightful *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* to Hanan Al-Shaykh's racy feminist re-imagining of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

This is one epic that can never be fully told in one event! Our thirty four tellers will try to capture a sense of the Arab world and cultures from which they sprung and together we will celebrate that "prodigious store of interesting stories with which the Sultana whiled away the time for a thousand and one nights."

— Barry McWilliams

