



Cultural Encounters with the Arabian Nights in Nineteenth-Century Britain,
By Melissa Dickson.

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As the name suggests, in this book Melissa Dickson explores Britain's fascination with the tales of the Arabian Nights, focusing on their impact on the British psyche and the construction of British identity – with emphasis on the first half of the nineteenth century. While manifestations of the tales of the Arabian Nights are many and varied, having entered British consciousness initially via their translation into French as *Les Mille et Une Nuits* (The Thousand And One Nights) by Antoine Galland in 1704, they existed in various iterations – initially in an unexpurgated form unsuitable for young readers and, later, in shortened and censored volumes directed toward children. Dickson's approach to these multiple versions of the Arabian Nights is to consider them as both collections of stories or 'tales' and as an abstract concept or set of abstract concepts. She locates these in relation to specific British social and cultural experiences of literature, particularly children's literature, child psychology, archeology, travel writing, theatrical performances and the Great Exhibition of 1851, held in the Crystal Palace. It is worth noting that Dickson does not draw on the entirety of the Arabian Nights but chiefly limits her arguments to references to the 'magic' of the more well-known tales such as Aladdin and his Lamp, Ali Baba and The Forty Thieves and Sinbad the Sailor.

The volume consists of five chapters, each addressing one of the major themes around which Dickson considers British representations and reflections of the Arabian Nights. It explores some of the ways in which authors, explorers, and social commentators drew on the Arabian Nights in their reflections and meaning-making of new experiences and ideas in nineteenth-century Britain. Dickson argues that the Arabian Nights provided a lens through which seemingly inexplicable technological advances, flowing from the Industrial Revolution, could be understood by imbuing them with the transformative magic of the stories of magical flying carpets Aladdin's magical lamp and the "open sesame" of Ali Baba's cave. She concludes that Britain, viewed through the lens of the Arabian Nights, perceived itself as a "magical metropolis" (3).

In Chapter One the author focuses on the nature and circumstances of childhood encounters with the Arabian Nights in Britain via the media of story collections, pictures, and toy theatres. She argues that the Arabian Nights became a distinctive part of the British psyche through its operation as a material and psychological souvenir of childhood but, importantly, also acted as a metonymic of childhood itself. Drawing on writers such as Thackeray, Hardy, Robert Louis Stevenson, Tennyson, the Brontës, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Dickson uses individual memories and personal histories to demonstrate the power of the Arabian Nights to ignite the

childish imagination. From this she extrapolates its influence in the construction of national and regional histories. These she discusses in the context of other writing on children's literature and the influence of childhood reading on the construction of adult identity.

Chapter Two turns to some of the accounts of significant nineteenth-century discoveries within the realms of archaeology, paleontology, geology, and geography. Here Dickson reviews the manner in which the use of the language of the Arabian Nights in accounts of significant archeological discoveries of the nineteenth century was called upon to shape public understanding and interpretation of such finds.

Chapter Three investigates the seemingly endless adaptations of the Arabian Nights presented as plays, musicals, and pantomimes within the show-culture of nineteenth-century Britain, further emphasizing the penetration of the Tales into the British imagination. Chapter Four demonstrates the recourse to the language of magic contained within the Arabian Nights to represent the wonder generated by unfamiliar and foreign objects from India, China and elsewhere on display at the Great Exhibition of 1851. The author argues that this rhetoric was also incorporated into the amazement produced by the British technological advancements that transformed Britain's modern metropolis into an enchanted terrain that far exceeded what was possible in other nations. In the Epilogue Dickson discusses the 'new' Arabian Nights: Richard Burton's unexpurgated and erotic translation from the Arabic, and the attempts by authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson to transplant the stories drawn from the Arabian Nights into Western settings.

To sustain her arguments Dickson uses a wealth of primary sources to provide ample evidence of the penetration of the 'magic' of the Arabian Nights into the British imagination. These are as diverse as Wordsworth's childhood impressions of the Tales, and the recounting, by the archeologist Sir Austen Henry Layard, of the influence of his childhood encounters with the Arabian Nights on his search for the ruins of Nineveh.

As Dickson emphasises in the Introduction, her approach is not concerned with the content of the Arabian Nights *per se* but, rather, to illustrate the myriad ways in which concepts drawn from the stories informed British people's conceptualisation of their own changing world. A drawback to this approach is that her many references to the 'magic' of the stories may be lost to readers who are not familiar with their content. It is also somewhat unfortunate that in not providing an adequate context for the ready absorption of the Arabian Nights into British literature and culture, the author creates an impression of the Arabian Nights as the sole Middle Eastern influence on the British imagination in the first half of the nineteenth century. In fact, the Arabian Nights was only one aspect of the centuries of British fascination with the Ottoman Turkish world with its seraglios, sultans and enslaved women. Although few of the stories of the Arabian Nights were Ottoman in origin, this did not prevent them from being considered part the British vision of the Ottoman Turkish world.

Nevertheless, Melissa Dickson's *Cultural Encounters with the Arabian Nights* provides a well-researched and elegantly written Victorianist's insight into the magic wrought by Scheherazade's tales when transformed by nineteenth-century British sensibilities.

This volume is a welcome addition to the ever growing field of Arabian Nights scholarship.

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