

California State University, Monterey Bay

From the Selected Works of Bonnie Irwin

2012

Book Review: Eastern Dreams: How the Arabian Nights Came to the World

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/bonnie_irwin/5/

appearance of being a feminist text that promotes female empowerment, the film's profeminist plot elements actually represent a false feminist mentality" (174). Despite this downfall, Dong reminds us that Mulan does not end with Disney, because the tale will go through further transformations (187).

Lan Dong's monograph is a well-researched, informative, and provocative read. One gets the sense from this book that there is much more work to be done on Mulan, especially in terms of theorizing cultural criticism and sexuality. But this attests to the very strength and further potential of Dong's project. Although the sheer amount of source material in the text might be overwhelming for nonspecialists, the book's wide geographic, historical, and disciplinary scope and pertinent questions will give readers of all kinds something useful for their teaching and research.

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Eastern Dreams: How the Arabian Nights Came to the World. By Paul McMichael Nurse. Toronto: Viking Canada, 2010. 242 pp.

For years, scholars have grappled with the questions of which stories actually constitute the 1001 "Arabian" Nights and where they originated. In *Eastern Dreams*, Paul McMichael Nurse follows in the footsteps of British scholar Robert Irwin and tries to untangle these mysteries for a lay audience, translating decades of scholarship into readable, jargon-free prose. Scholars will find little new in this book, but for the general reader and fan of the *Nights*, Nurse tells a compelling story.

Because the questions of origin and provenance of the *Nights* remain unanswered to this day, despite centuries of speculation, Nurse makes choices about which theories to highlight and which to identify as untenable, but overall his approach is evenhanded. This tactic means, of course, that readers finish the book with no more answers than they started with, but at least the rich context of the mystery has been laid out before them in generous detail. Nurse also embeds synopses of the frame story as well as some of the tales to remind us of the general plot lines.

One of the greatest values of this book for the general reader is Nurse's discussion of the many analogs to the tales as well as the many sequels, re-imaginings, and paths of influence of the *1001 Nights*. More than twenty years after Peter Caracciolo's excellent *Arabian Nights in English Literature* (Macmillan, 1988), Nurse adds many more contemporary authors and texts to the vast list of those influenced by the *Nights*. He also provides brief discussions of postcolonial descendants of the work, such as Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days* and Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.

Because the sphere of influence of the *1001 Nights* has become so broad, Nurse convincingly makes the case that the work, although clearly “Arab” in many ways, has also become a classic of “world” literature. So many literary traditions have taken ownership of some version of the text in one way or another, “parented by multinational sires and a Muslim mother—literally, in Scheherazade’s case—[that] the *Nights* may owe at least part of its longevity to its development at a time and a place acting as a crossroads between cultures” (49). Nurse maintains, however, that most of this cultural exchange took place in the form of written texts passed back and forth, and he largely discounts the possible oral provenance and dissemination of the stories.

And, what indeed, constitutes the *1001 Nights*? Although Nurse holds out a note of optimism at the end that we may one day know, the idea of a single, authentic text remains a folly. Nurse clearly prefers the more comprehensive collections based on the Calcutta II manuscript to the more limited ones based on the medieval Syrian manuscript edited by Muhsin Mahdi (1984). Nurse’s argument is that the identity of the *1001 Nights* lies in, at least partly, *all* the tales that have been attached to it over the years. Translator Husain Haddawy, recognizing this same situation, followed his excellent translation of Mahdi’s edition (1990) with a second volume, *The Arabian Nights II: Sindbad and Other Popular Tales* (1995).

For an *Arabian Nights* scholar, the more intriguing parts of *Eastern Dreams* might very well be where Nurse wanders away from explaining provenance and goes into more creative directions, such as drawing parallels between the *Nights* and Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

Or perhaps as literary works, the *Arabian Nights* and Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* are not as far apart as we might suppose. If scholars can view the secular nature of the *Nights* as a legitimate window onto the social dynamics of classical Islam, then this work, fusing the visionary with the recognizable socio-historical times, is perhaps a dim, distant cousin to the professional historian’s attempt to define the structure of a bygone past through researched recreation. (115)

This parallel grows out of the way in which early Orientalists and translators used the *Nights* as a reference and repository of Arab and Islamic history, seemingly forgetting that as a work of fiction, the *Nights* was never imagined to be realistic but a work of fantasy.

Also compelling are the two chapters focused on translations: “The Coming of the *Nights*” and “The Victorian Rivals.” The first of these lays out how Galland came to translate the *Nights* and how he acquired the various stories he includes in his eighteenth-century French version. Although some readers

might think that Nurse includes too many biographical details in this chapter, the details do provide context for the translation and its integral role in the history of world literature. The same is true for the chapter on Richard Burton and John Payne. Did Burton actively plagiarize Payne's work, or was he merely a better salesman, keenly marketing a profane work while largely avoiding the watchful eye of Victorian censors and social police? Some of the controversy seems quaint today, but the story of how the *Nights* got out to the public in Victorian times is quite entertaining and enlightening.

Clearly expecting a general rather than a scholarly audience, Nurse dwells on the repeated attempts to create precisely 1,001 nights in the collection. He unveils at the end of his book what all scholars already know, that the number 1,001 was never meant to be taken literally. Rather, it was meant to evoke a sense of infinity. One thousand was an immense number; 1,001, immense plus one. By postponing this discussion until the end of the book, however, Nurse creates a situation in which he undermines his own authority before those who know this simple and essential fact.

As stated at the beginning of this review, however, Nurse's intent appears to be to translate the history and scholarship of a cherished work for the avid but nonacademic reader. *Eastern Dreams* is not a scholarly treatise or a complete history. It is rather the biography of a book that has charmed and entertained audiences around the world for centuries, and as a biography, it succeeds.

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The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics.
By Sadhana Naithani. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010. 160 pp.

We learn, on this fine book's last page, that the "story-time of the British Empire was *all* the time." Just as the sun never set on this global empire, the voices of the storytellers in its many realms were never silent, and these voices were perpetually gathered, in a remarkable fashion, at the empire's epicenter, in the corridors of London's Folk-Lore Society. It is the remarkable fashion of the gathering of these tales that concerns Sadhana Naithani, and she is at some pains to establish a few core realities of this process—to wit, that it reproduced the hierarchy of empire by erasing the "native" contribution to the enterprise and that it needs to be taken seriously as a distinctive practice of folkloristics that laid the foundation for subsequent folklore studies in Europe and North America.

The Story-Time of the British Empire works its way through four central themes. In Chapter 1 ("Fields"), Naithani establishes "colonial folkloristics" as a term of consequence, arguing for its inherently transnational character and