Gyöngyi Oroszi

The Interpretation of Literary Works in Pre-Modern Arabic Literature: Theoretical Framework for Interpretation and Critical Analyses of the Short Narratives of *The Thousand and One Nights*

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Prof. Miklós Maróth

(supervisor)

Pázmány Péter Catholic University

Doctoral School of Linguistics

(Head of the Doctoral School: Prof. Balázs Surányi)

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1. *The State of Research*

After about three hundred years of research, it would seem that there is little left to say about *The Thousand and One Nights*. Indeed, many an avenue had been opened, researched, and exhausted. The most obvious example concerns the history of this widely popular collection, the research of which was the very first inquiry ever made. This process is natural in the life of any manuscript whose provenance has to be explored before further questions can be raised. It is ever so relevant in the *Nights*' case since there has never been a complete authoritative manuscript discovered which would have limited the speculations about its origin. The interest in the history of the collection was fueled for centuries by its dispersed nature. Research of the *Nights* has not been propelled by the question of the comparative study of various manuscripts, which could have finally brought the inquiries to a satisfying conclusion regarding authorship and age. On the contrary, the gradually realized futility of such endeavors steered scholars throughout the centuries towards discovering and examining details that could not, in essence, complete our knowledge of the collection, only deepen our understanding of it.

This observation stands true for every aspect of the *Nights* research. Whether historical, cultural, or literary, the sum of its results cannot provide a complete picture of the collection. It can certainly not answer the most fundamental question of 'What is *The Thousand and One Nights*?'. Many answers exist to the question. They are always right, but, at the same time, they are always lacking. However, this dichotomy cannot be kept against the research method. It is simply in the nature of the *Nights*. Precisely, it is why there is still a lot to discover about the collection after three hundred years of research.

Historical inquiries have been exhausted, that is true. However, the cultural relevance of the stories is still present. It is an astonishing characteristic of the *Nights* that it can redefine itself according to the changing times and the various cultures.[1] This resilience is evident in its ability to become part of the culture it encounters, further widening its research horizons. Folklore studies, translation studies, and even literary studies are good examples of this flexibility of the material. While folklore studies attempt to bring this material into the fold of Western folklore and regard the material as part of a common heritage, translation studies

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[1] For an exhaustive bibliography concerning the *Nights*, one may consult Ulrich Marzolph's *The* Arabian Nights *Bibliography*, which is updated regularly: https://wwwuser.gwdg.de/~umarzol/arabiannights.html (last accessed on 10th September, 2023) In 2016, the bibliography was also published. (Marzolph, U.: The Arabian Nights International Bibliography, in: *Arabic Manuscripts of the* Thousand and One Nights*: Presentation and Critical Editions of Four Noteworthy Texts; Observations on Some Osmanli Translations*, dir. A. Chraïbi, Paris (espaces&signes), 2016, 493–564.)

concentrate on the question of adopting an unfamiliar material written, in most cases, in a fundamentally different language, into the language of the target audience and also adapting it into its culture. Moreover, there is the future of the collection to consider since, over time, it also considerably influenced the literature of the target culture. Richard van Leeuwen is one of the leading scholars whose names are connected to the study of contemporary literature and the influence the *Nights* exert on it. Traces of the *Nights* can be recognized both in literature and art in the general sense. For example, numerous studies provide information on the influence of the collection on music or film-making. Till the present day, the *Nights* has not ceased to exert its influence both in Eastern and Western cultures, effectively producing newer and newer material for research.

Besides its legacy, the original material may still provide for scientific research, be it as varied as it is. The literary interest in the material was relatively late to appear, but it proved to be growing steadily in the last couple of decades. More specialized inquiries have taken over the discussion of particular stories. Folklore research, which has definite literary relations, has already been mentioned. There are also such inquiries that concentrate on specific elements within the stories, such as slave-girls or supernatural beings. Furthermore, various ideological concepts within the work are examined. Political or religious considerations and social relations are common subjects in these cases. These approaches have strong socio-cultural allusions and are more concerned with the text's connection to reality and handle the text as more of a cultural product than a literary work.

More text-centered studies explore, for example, the allegorical and metaphorical allusions or the narrative techniques of the collection. However, interestingly enough, genre studies have not been given much consideration. That is not to say that genre did not or does not concern scholars, but it seems to be more of a given than a problem to be scientifically approached. Classifications are made but not questioned any further. My present study joins the *Nights* research at this point, with the definite intent to compensate for the lack of a theoretically based generic study of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

2. *Problems and Observations*

The present inquiry grew from my preoccupation with the question of generic classification and its apparent dichotomy of strict regulation and flexible application concerning the stories of the *Nights*. In Western research, there is no shortage of generic terms applied to the stories of the collection but what is missing is any consensus regarding the application of these terms. Lacking such consensus raises concerns regarding the validity of this kind of classification in the literary study of the collection. Thematic, cultural, and historical considerations are just as likely to be regarded as good classificatory categories as stricter generic terms such as *fairy-tale* or *exemplum*. Thus, my discussion of the *Nights* is based on the idea of *genre* as it ponders its relevance in the context of pre-modern Arabic prose literature. However, instead of a strict classificatory approach, the present study takes a more theoretical stance and attempts to build a framework in which the collection's content can be read.

Scholars tend to assume one of two approaches when discussing *genre* in connection with the *Nights*. One is when a general systematization is intended for detailed examination or general descriptive purposes. Mia I. Gerhardt's seminal work[2] is an excellent example of this approach. Enno Littmann also took a similar approach.[3] The other approach does not strive to systematize the content of the collection. It takes a particular work, or a group of works, and discusses them under the umbrella of one specific generic term. They are either general discussions of particular works or comparative studies. Be it as may, these studies into the various fields of genre share a great degree of subjectivity. Furthermore, they both employ many genre-denoting terms meant to categorize but, in reality, only achieve to represent different approaches to the works. Lacking a theoretical background, these attempts at classification remain isolated and fail to account for a generic system in the framework of which the stories of the *Nights* can be critically evaluated. The result of this lack of a theory that would support a unified and competent literary approach is that not only the specific genres included in the collection are not determined, but it also remains uncertain to which genre a specific story belongs.

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[2] Gerhardt, M. I.: *The Art of Story-Telling: A Literary Study of The Thousand and One Nights*, Leiden (E. J. Brill), 1963.

[3] Littmann, E.: Zur Entstehung und Geschichte von Tausendundeiner Nacht, in *Die Erzählungen aus den tausend und ein Nächten: Vollständige deutsche Ausgabe in sechs Bänden: Zum ersten Mal nach dem arabischen Urtext der Calcuttaer Ausgabe vom Jahre 1839*, VI, transl. E. Littmann, Leipzig (Insel-Verlag), 1921, 681–771.

However, it is not only the lack of a solid theoretical foundation for generic classification regarding the *Nights* which results in a somewhat chaotic state of affairs. The terms used to designate generic categories also originate outside Arabic culture and are mainly based on Western concepts of literature. All these attempts at classification ignore the Arabic context of the stories discussed. They all present viable approaches in some instances, but they ignore an important aspect of these works: their origin.

All things considered; genre classification seems to fulfill the role of familiarization on the part of the Western reader. Genre classification allows the reader to place the unfamiliar into the context of the familiar, which, in this case, means that the work is read against a cultural background that is not its own. Although the text becomes interpretable in this way for the foreign reader, the interpretation is based on concepts alien to the work and is placed into a literary convention that is independent of that of its own. Thus, reading becomes a kind of cultural appropriation on the part of the Western reader. Any reader has to be mindful of this cultural appropriation and displacement of any foreign work and the limitations and possibilities of such approaches.

Any interpretation is then influenced by the literary traditions and cultural knowledge of the foreign culture through which the work is read. This interpretation, however, greatly affects our generic understanding of these stories since we do not see the short pieces as reports written in the *khabar* form, for example, but try to grasp them through more familiar concepts like anecdotes in general or fables, religious stories, crime stories in particular. Similarly, it is not enough to refer to longer pieces about love as entertaining stories; we are compelled to call them a love-stories, fairy-tales, or even novellas.

There are questions that this approach may answer, and thus, it cannot be ignored, but there are questions to which it cannot prove an answer. For example, it cannot account for the place of a particular piece of writing within the history of Arabic literature. It cannot determine its relation to other similar works, or it cannot describe the reasons for its presence in particular collections and the way it was adapted to be able to be included in this collection. Despite these questions not bearing any significance in the chronological examination of the history of the *Nights'* stories, they do possess great relevance in the life of the individual stories.

The above-described processes of familiarization and cultural appropriation may be the reason behind the apparent lack of studies about the shorter narratives of the *Nights*. While Western research abounds in studies of the fantastic stories of love and adventure, the shorter pieces suffer from neglect. The shortage of critical discussion regarding the short narratives in the collection shows well for the dominance of Western approaches in the *Nights'* research.

Strange as they might be, such stories as *'Alā' al-Dīn and the Marvelous Lamp* or *'Alī Baba and the Forty Thieves* remain the most famous stories in the collection. The strangeness of these stories – Galland's orphan stories in this case, nonetheless – is easier to familiarize with than that of the short stories, which are more closely embedded in Arabic culture.

3. *Proposed Questions and Theses*

1. The examination of the short narratives of The Thousand and One Nights *and their comparative analysis within pre-modern Arabic literature*

The present study intends to supplement the meager research that exists concerning the short narratives of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Research concerning these shorter pieces mainly concentrates on a comparative perspective which places these stories into a Western perspective by comparing the two literary traditions. Short narratives are considered, for example, when the connection between the *Nights* and classical Greek or Roman literature is discussed. If the studies attempt to put the discussion into Arabic context, they remain more socio-cultural than literary in their inquiry. As opposed to this state of affairs, the stories under discussion in the framework of the present study are brought into relation with the short narrative forms of pre-modern Arabic literature that are primarily found in compiled *adab* works in an attempt to put the discussion of these stories in an Arabic literary context.

2. Terminological considerations and the problem of the concept of genre in pre-modern Arabic literary tradition

Nights-research is predominantly characterized by the utilization of Western terms for genre description. However, if applying Western terms to an Eastern work proves problematic, it also has to be pointed out that using Arabic terms is just as likely to pose difficulties. There are a lot of problems concerning the genre conception of pre-modern Arabic literature, which is all due to the fact that pre-modern Arabic literature does not have the same understanding of *genre* as Western literature does. If it is possible at all to talk about genre in this tradition, it does not form such a fundamental and strict classificatory category. This literature is more intentional than classificatory which becomes apparent when one examines the Arabic genre-denoting terms that are to classify short narratives. These terms are arbitrary, concentrating on special aspects that correspond to various intentions of the person using these terms. The definitions of the various genre denoting terms are so varied and so dependent on context that they cannot be regarded as genres at all. They may help the description of the thematic or other aspects of particular works, but there is something else informing the understanding of the work. In my

opinion it is the narrative form and its close examination of its characteristic features which facilitate this understanding.

3. Synchronic approach to the material to aid the discussion of genre and provide

The present study is based on the synchronic examination of the material under discussion. Although this approach does not provide for a historical examination of the short narratives within the *Nights*, it does provide for another way to supplement out knowledge of the collection and its material: it helps to establish their connection to similar material within pre-modern Arabic literature, in this case, Mamluk literature and thus, to be able to make observations within the boarder context of this literature.

One of the cornerstones of this synchronic approach is the way how one understands and handles the works under scrutiny. In a pre-modern Arabic context, *text* should be understood as the source material, be it only a concept or a particular account preserved in cultural memory. This source material is used and reused time and time again, thus becoming a literary work with every new expression of it. While diachronic considerations play an important role in studying the various manifestations of these materials, the *literary works* and their presence in the literary tradition are perceived not along the vertical line of history but on the horizontal one, alluding to their coexistence in tradition as well. Thus, synchronic approach facilitates the understanding of the examined works not only as texts the meaning of which is historically and culturally contextualized but as literary works whose understanding presupposes a more complex system of contextualization based on intention and interpretation.

Keeping in mind this complex system of intention and interpretation, and the observations made during the terminological examination genre-denoting terms, it is not genre or the relating terms, but narrative forms that provide the basis for the present study of short narratives since it is the narrative form that carries those pieces of information which can decidedly determine both intention and interpretation. Although it is still the classificatory aspect of *genre* that characterizes the *Nights* research, in modern theory, interpretation is interlinked with genre theory, which, going beyond the traditional ideas, recognizes and discusses the hermeneutical problems of *genre*. This attitude gives us the tools to revisit *genre* and the related problems which arise during the discussion of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

4. Khabar *as a narrative form*

As the present study is mainly concerned with the short narratives of *The Thousand and One Nights*, it is necessary to place these narratives into the appropriate literary context as far as narrative form is concerned. Although *khabar* is not the first term that the mention of the *Nights*

conjures in the mind, by using the *khabar* form as the central point of comparison, the study can place the short narratives in the collection into the context of Arabic literature since *khabar* is such a fundamental part of pre-modern Arabic prose literature.

Furthermore, the method of approaching literary works as literary forms can be demonstrated through the narrative analysis of the *khabar* form. Based on contemporary sources, *khabar* is definable in three ways in contemporary Arabic sources, one of which is as a narrative form. According to this idea, the widely recognized structural definition of *khabar* may be supplemented with a definition connected to the narrative form. Based on Gérard Genette's understanding of narrative,[4] *khabar* is understood as *story*, *narration,* and *narrating*, all three terms highlighting a different aspect of the Arabic term. As a result, not only structural but discursive and communicational attributes can also be discussed.

5. Narratology has to be supplemented

Although textual analysis is a fundamental part of examining any narrative form, it cannot account for certain aspects of pre-modern Arabic literature. As mentioned earlier, Arabic prose literature is contextual and intentional, which, by default, presupposes active participation on the author's part for expression and that of the *reader* for interpretation. Recognizing the author and reader's role in interpreting a text is why it is essential to go beyond textual analysis and determine a more extensive theoretical framework in which critical analysis may be possible.

6. Literary communication and its terminology

In the context of the study, intention and interpretation are conceptualized in the framework of literary communication in which text loses its central role in meaning-making as the process becomes subjected to both authorial intent and the reader's interpretation within a shared literary convention. Discussing the role of communication and, more precisely, that of literary communication as a framework for literary analysis is not widespread, even though much of pre-modern Arabic literature is based on some kind of exchange between writer and patron, student and teacher, or, in general, *sender* and *receiver*. Both communication and literary communication are based on strict rules which have to be observed for a successful exchange and it is with these rules in mind that the examination of the text mediated between the two parties can be discussed.

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[4] Genette, G.: *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Ithaca, New York (Cornell University Press), 1980, 25–26.

However important a role communication plays in pre-modern Arabic literature, the literary aspect of it is mostly ignored. Discussions of individual texts are conducted based on such exchange and they also provided literary analysis as well but the role of literary communication in the wider sense of literary conventions and how they are formed are not touched upon. Stefan Leder discusses the subject in his study, *Conventions of Fictional Narration in Learned Literature,* in connection with the question of fiction. According to his observation, the fictitious nature of a text can only be understood in context, the interpretation of which is dependent on the relationship between narrator and receiver in any given convention. The nature of this relationship and, indeed, the nature of all the participants have to be determined for the interpretation to work.

The present study recognizes the role communication plays in pre-modern Arabic literature both in a practical and a theoretical way. It claims that literature is heavily based on communication which is understood as a special kind of exchange between author and reader which is based on convention. Literature is a result of interpretation which is highly contextual, depending on the author's intentions within a literary convention and the reader's process of meaning-making which is determined by the same literary convention.

7. Pre-modern Arabic literature and modern literary theory

The present study does not aim to examine how the proposed questions were handled in the context of pre-modern Arabic literary theory. Although the problems are definitely worth being discussed in that respect, the questions proposed do not suit for that kind of inquiry. Instead, it remains preoccupied with modern ideas and theories, and attempts to describe how this context is able to bridge the gap that seems to exist between two literary cultures. In this respect, Arabic works that could be considered theoretical are not taken into consideration during the present discussion. Nevertheless, my purpose is to be as mindful of the original pre-modern Arabic context of the works under discussion as possible within the framework of modern literary theory. I take this approach because I am convinced that, although it is important to understand how pre-modern Arabic literary theory worked, it is just as much pertinent to be aware of how modern literary theory can handle this foreign tradition in a way that does not alienate it from its original context and makes something of it which, in fact, it is not.

4. *Methodology and the Structure of the Study*

The present discussion is primarily based on the close reading of the short narratives of the *Nights*. They are either discussed in particular groups or they are compared to the wider literary output of pre-modern Arabic prose literature. As a first step, however, it is pertinent to talk about the social, historical, and literary context in which the *Nights* and the additional works lived. First of all, however, the history of *The Thousand and One Nights* has to be discussed. All these subjects are delt with in Chapter 1 (The Thousand and One Nights*: History, Methodology and Some Preliminary Remarks*).

Since its manuscript tradition and its history in European literature are discussed extensively in secondary sources, I decided to give only a short report of it in Chapter 1 (1.1.1.). While striving to be comprehensive, the account of the history of the *Nights* emphasizes the more problematic points of this history. It is in light of these points that the methodology of my study is explained. Although I omit to discuss the methodology in the *Introduction*, it is to provide it with a place where it can be freely elaborated and its intrinsic nature to the history of the collection can be fully appreciated (1.1.2.). Only after this can the collection be placed into the context of pre-modern Arabic literature (1.2.). The rest of Chapter 1 is dedicated to the designation and discussion of the material used in the analysis (1.3.). Furthermore, a section of concluding remarks is also added (1.4.), which brings together all the diverse observations made in the chapter and makes a statement about the general aim of the paper and the methods used in the discussion.

Chapter 2 (*The Short Narratives of* The Thousand and One Nights*: Recognizing the* Khabar *Form and Its Transformations*) provides the starting point of the discussion of the short narratives with the textual analysis of the *khabar* form. Based on Gérard Genette's work,[5] *khabar* is defined as a *narrative* and discussed from three angles: *khabar* as story, *khabar* as narration, and *khabar* as narrating. Through the close examination of the *khabar* form, this chapter is to bring attention to the shortcoming of a purely textual approach to the short narratives and to propose a more comprehensive approach: literary communication.

It is in Chapter 3 (*The Framework for Reading Pre-Modern Short Narratives and the Role of Literary Communication in Their Interpretation*) that the theoretical background of literary communication and its relevance in the study of short narratives are discussed. Relying on the result of modern literary theory, I argue that literary communication is a suitable framework to

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[5] Genette, G.: *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Ithaca, New York (Cornell University Press), 1980.

circumvent the problems *genre* is posing in our understanding of pre-modern Arabic prose works. After the theory of literary communication is presented, the definition of *genre* is revisited through which the rationality behind the shift from classification to interpretation is explained. In the last part of the chapter, the exact definitions for the necessary terms are provided for the rest of the analysis.

Chapter 4 (*Author, Reader and Text in Interpretation: Reading the Short Narratives of* The Thousand and One Nights *in the Framework of Literary Communication*) brings together all of the above remarks in various case studies. The specialized analyses of particular groups of stories from specific aspects provides the opportunity to describe literary communication, the relationship between *author*, *reader,* and *literary work*, and how interpretation is formed during the reading process. While the first part of Chapter 4 concentrates on the relationship between the various parts of a collection (chapters, entries, accounts, stories), the other two provide a more in-depth analysis of particular narratives.

In the first section (4.1.), based on the results of earlier research, it is shown how the more or less fixed narrative tradition of the *khabar*, which relies on authentication, can be used to express the various intentions of the authors and can be applied in the different fields of literature, all the while influencing the meaning-making process of the readers. During the examinations, it is also explained that not only the above-mentioned aspects are influenced by the organization of a collection and the arrangement of its material, but the way how one can perceive the short narratives as belonging to the *khabar* form, or, in certain cases, deviating from it and transforming into the more complex form of a story (*ḥikāya*).

Following this line of thought, the transformation from the *khabar* form into the more complex form of the *ḥikāya* is elaborated upon in the following section. Although the main focus remains on the process of literary communication, this second part is organized along the lines of narrative analysis, that is, the stories examined in this part are discussed according to Genette's definition of the narrative as *story*, *narration,* and *narrating*, already picked up in Chapter 2. The reason for this kind of organization is that it provides a systematic way of discussion. This chapter focuses on individual narratives instead of the broader focus of the previous section. Using the *khabar* form as a starting point, this section examines what kind of textual changes are implemented by the author and how these changes may be interpreted by the reader on the one hand, and how they guide the reader in recognizing the narrative form on the other.

The third section of Chapter 4 offers a more particular view of the meaning-making process through two specialized analyses. As opposed to the previous chapter, it does not aim to demonstrate how the form is changing and how this change facilitates interpretation, but it concentrates on the meaning-making process itself and explains how specific characteristics of the text – the creative choices the author makes – influence the interpretation of it.

The two chapters discussing the thematic shift in interpretation and the role of descriptions in interpretation stress the active role of both author and reader during this process. Interpretation depends on the correspondence between these two participants in the framework of literary communication, which provides the context to interact with the text as a literary work. This communication is the focal point of pre-modern Arabic literature in which the dependence on an established tradition, which rests on authentication, can make allowances for individual expression while supporting the interpretation of these individual expressions.

5. *Publications*

Az *Ezeregyéjszaka* és a görög regény kapcsolatának lehetősége: szerelmi történetek az Ezeregyéjszakában, in: *FARĪQ Tanulmánykötet; A Fiatal Arabisták és Iranisták Konferenciájának* előadásai, Piliscsaba (Avicenna Közel-Kelet Kutatások Intézete), 2013, 161–170.

Az *Ezeregyéjszaka* és a tündérmesék világa: a hős alakjának vizsgálata a tündérmese szerkezeti felépítésének szempontjából, *Keletkutatás*, 2013/ősz, 63–84.

Műfajok találkozása az *Ezeregyéjszaká*ban: Tündérmese és szerelmi történet a „Qamar az-Zamán története" című mesében, in: *„Közel, s Távol" III; Az Eötvös Collegium Orientalisztika Műhely éves konferenciájának előadásaiból 2013*, Budapest (Eötvös Collegium), 2014, 57–78.

A műfaj mint fogalom a középkori arab irodalomban, in: *Az Avicenna Közel-Kelet Kutatások Intézete évkönyve 2013/2014*, Piliscsaba (Avicenna Közel-Kelet Kutatások Intézete), 2015, 173–184.

Mamlúk kori arab prózairodalom: Az irodalmi antológiák és egyéb gyűjtemények felépítésének szerepe az egyes művek értelmezésében, in: *Az Avicenna Közel-Kelet Kutatások Intézete Évkönyve 2015–2017*, Piliscsaba (Avicenna Közel-Kelet Kutatások Intézete), 2018, 57–80.

A szerzői szándék és az értelmezés kérdésének vizsgálata a középkori arab irodalomban: életrajzi beszámolók az arab irodalom különböző területein, in: *Az Avicenna Közel-Kelet Kutatások Intézete Évkönyve 2018–2019*, Piliscsaba (Avicenna Közel-Kelet Kutatások Intézete), 2020, 41–57.

Az utazás motívumának szerepe az *Ezeregyéjszaka* értelmezésében: Qamar az-Zamān és Budūr hercegnő története, *Keletkutatás*, 2021/ősz, 75–94.

Reading Biographical Accounts in *The Thousand and One Nights*, in: *Conflict and Coexistence: Proceedings of the 29th Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants, Münster 2018*, eds. M. Springberg and Th. Bauer, Leuven, Belgium (Peeters Publishers), 2022, 95–106.

Mimesis as Narrative Mode in Medieval Arabic Prose Literature (forthcoming)