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#### Publication date

2016

#### Document Version

Final published version

#### Published in

CLINA

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#### Citation for published version (APA):

van Leeuwen, R. (2016). European Translations of the *Thousand and One Nights* and their reception: Orientalist falsification or literary fascination? *CLINA*, 2(1), 29-41.  
<https://revistas.usal.es/index.php/clina/article/view/14551>

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# European Translations of the *Thousand and One Nights* and their reception: Orientalist falsification or literary fascination?

*Traducciones europeas de Las mil y una noches y su recepción:  
¿Falsificación orientalista o fascinación literaria?*

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Received: 7-3-2016

Accepted: 10-5-2016

**Abstract:** The reception of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and more specifically of its European translations, have often been analyzed within the theoretical framework of orientalism as a mechanism governing cultural exchange. In this contribution, it is argued that the framework of orientalism, as conceptualized by Edward Said, is insufficient to fully explain and describe the process of the incorporation of the *Thousand and One Nights* into European literature and subsequently into world literature. Since orientalism as a methodological instrument emphasizes the exoticizing elements within the process of translation and transfer, it highlights ideological aspects and neglects the textual mechanisms involved in the transition of texts across cultural boundaries. In this essay it is argued that the influence of the *Thousand and One Nights* on world literature should be sought more in these textual aspects, rather than in forms of exoticism and cultural appropriation. Only then can the impact of *Thousand and One Nights*, as a vital work of literature, be fully appreciated.

**Key words:** *Thousand and One Nights*; Literary fields; Translation; Orientalism; World literature.

**Resumen:** La recepción de *Las mil y una noches*, y concretamente de sus traducciones europeas, se ha analizado con frecuencia dentro del marco teórico del orientalismo como un mecanismo que regula el intercambio cultural. En esta contribución se afirma que el marco de orientalismo, como ha conceptualizado Edward Said, es insuficiente para describir y explicar en su conjunto el proceso de incorporación de *Las mil y una noches* en la literatura europea y, por consiguiente, en la literatura-mundo. Dado que el orientalismo, como un instrumento metodológico, hace hincapié en los elementos exotizantes dentro del proceso de traducción y de transferencia, incide en los aspectos ideológicos y no aborda los mecanismos textuales que participan en la transición de los textos a través de fronteras culturales. En este ensayo se mantiene que la influencia de *Las mil y una noches* en la literatura-mundo debería buscarse más en estos aspectos textuales que en las formas de exotismo y la apropiación cultural. Sólo así se puede apreciar plenamente el impacto de *Las mil y una noches* como obra fundamental de la literatura.

**Palabras clave:** *Las mil y una noches*; campos literarios; traducción; orientalismo; literatura-mundo.

In one of his most well-known stories, the Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges tells about Pierre Menard, who, as an author living in the 20th century, writes an exact replica of Cervantes' *Don Quijote*, not by copying the text, but by «inventing» it once again, producing an exact copy by sheer contingency. As in several other stories, Borges uses this motif to explore some elementary aspect of texts and literature. In this case, the main point that Borges wants to make is that Menard's text, in spite of its being a replica, should be considered superior to the original work. After all, Cervantes' novel is naturally embedded in its historical context, in harmony with the spirit of his age, and therefore relatively easy to conceive. It is a much greater achievement to write the same work in a totally different environment, in an anachronistic context in which the knowledge of the subsequent ages has accumulated and given rise to the radical reshaping of world-visions in the age of modernity. To write *Don Quijote* in the 16th century is an act of brilliance; to write it in the 20th century is an act of genius, perhaps even a super-human act, because the writer has internalized centuries of philosophical and scientific knowledge which would normally prevent him from identifying with the mental landscape of Cervantes' age (Borges 1988).

Through this simile Borges seems to suggest that the nature of a literary work is only partly vested in its textual appearance, and that it is perhaps predominantly to be found in its context. Texts may be exact copies, but they have different meanings in different temporal, spatial and cultural settings. Texts can never remain the same, it seems, even if their form does not change. The meanings, functions, implications, and understandings of

a text cannot be fixed in history, but are essentially fluid. As soon as a text is written, the author loses his or her control of it and relinquishes it to find its way in a contingent world. This idea of the fluid nature of texts and the «textual double» can be used to illustrate some important aspects of the translation of literary texts, since, translations, too, on the one hand aim to have a strong formal connection to a source text, but on the other hand, by definition, are situated in a different context. By being translated a text migrates from one domain to another and, even if the translation is painstakingly truthful to the original text, it takes on another, or, perhaps more accurately, a supplemental, meaning derived from its new environment. Perhaps we could even argue that by being translated the original text acquires not only a supplemental meaning, but, being read retrospectively, acquires a completely new meaning, since, in theory, it cannot be interpreted anymore without taking into consideration its new guises. Time brings forth new forms and new settings and thereby destabilizes anything that is considered «original» or anchored in a specific historical frame.

In this contribution we will use the motif of Pierre Menard to discuss a specific case of what may be called «transformation through translation», that is the translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* into European languages, from the beginning of the 18th century until the beginning of the 20th century. The main focus will be on the tension between textual and contextual aspects and the way in which it shapes our perception of the text and its translations. What were the main mechanisms that produced the translations as they turned out to be? How should we evaluate and conceptualize these translations within the process of the «migration» of the *Thousand and One Nights* from the Arabic to the European literary domains? How do perceptions of textual authenticity and fluidity influence our vision of the transmission of the work across cultural boundaries? For the sake of clarity two approaches will be juxtaposed: the emphasis on contextual aspects, exemplified by the notion of the appropriation of the text, which conforms to the model of orientalism as it has been developed by Edward Said; and the model of world-literature, which focuses more on the textual aspects of the process of transmission. As will be argued below, the interaction between the textual and contextual components in the process of transmission and translation is especially important for an assessment of what is usually represented as the «reception» of the *Thousand and One Nights* in Europe, and what might more properly be called a phase in the incorporation of the *Nights* into world-literature.

## 1. ORIENTALISM

In recent years it has been the trend to examine the European translations of the *Thousand and One Nights* within the conceptual framework of Orientalism, as it was developed by the Palestinian-American critic Edward Said. At first sight there are many arguments to support this approach. After all, the main translations of the *Nights*

appeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when communication between the European nations and the Arab world rapidly intensified and resulted in the culmination of European colonial expansion and cultural hegemony in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This would imply that any cultural interaction between the Arab world and Europe took place within a specific framework of power relations, which may have affected the transmission and perception of texts. Moreover, the European translators of the *Nights* in this period—mainly Galland, Lane, Burton and Mardrus—explicitly juxtaposed their translations with those of their predecessors, thus constructing a chain of texts which could form the basis of an orientalist tradition, or, as Said would say, an orientalist discourse. Therefore it seems that a coherent discursive formation which coagulated around the translations, can be linked to a specific, unbalanced, configuration of power (1978)<sup>1</sup>.

Another argument supporting an orientalist approach to the *Thousand and One Nights* translations is the explicit linking, by the translators themselves, of their translations to an external, exotic reality. In the preface to his *Mille et une nuits*, published between 1704 and 1717, Antoine Galland declares that the readers of his translation could acquire all information they might want about the habits of the Orientals, without leaving their arm-chairs, since the stories contain a truthful picture of life in the Orient. Edward Lane, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was primarily an ethnologist, who lived in Cairo in the local attire and had a local shaykh as his informant. His translation is supplemented with an elaborate set of footnotes, explaining the anthropological details contained in the *Nights*, thereby suggesting, of course, that the text gave a faithful representation of Oriental life and society. Apart from this, he applied a consciously archaic style, to enhance the sense of exoticism. Burton, finally, whose translation appeared towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, criticized his two prominent predecessors for presenting an incorrect image of the «temperament» and society of the Arabs and added his own representation, which laid an emphasis on the erotic and scabrous passages. He conceived a rather baroque idiom, which he legitimated by saying that this was the way Arabs would speak if English were their native tongue.

In the translations, therefore, there is a strong tendency to lay claim to authenticity, but it is an anthropological rather than textual authenticity that is desired. This tendency reached strange proportions in the translation of Mardrus, which is not an original translation but rather a reworking of previous translations supplemented by material

1 See also R. Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of the Orient*, Indiana university Press, Bloomington, 1986; for a survey of European translations of the *Thousand and One Nights*, see: U. Marzolph/ R. van Leeuwen (eds), *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, ABC-Clio, Santa Barbara, 2004; see also T. Shamma, *Translation and the Manipulation of Difference; Arabic Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*, St. Jerome Publishing, Manchester/ Kinderhook, 2009; M. Sironval, *Les traductions françaises des Mille et une nuits: étude des versions Galland, Trébutien et Mardrus*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1996.; R. Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: a Companion*, Allen Lane, London, 1994.

from other sources. Mardrus originated from the Caucasus and had lived in Egypt before he went to Paris, where he was seen as an «Oriental». He claimed that his translation was based on a manuscript in his possession, or, alternately, that he had heard the stories from his Caucasian grandmother. The translation was fiercely criticized by orientalist scholars, who considered it a fraud, but it was praised by literati, who indulged in its exotic atmosphere and erotic frankness. Remarkably, they argued that Mardrus' adaptations of the text enhanced its Oriental character and its authenticity. Apparently Mardrus' Oriental background ensured that his text was more authentic than the –any– original (Jullien, 2009).

The «tradition» of *Thousand and One Nights* translations in Europe thus unmistakably shows that the work was related to a hypothetical reality, by claims of authenticity, and were at the same time manipulated and re-shaped. From the beginning, this manipulation concerned not only references to the context, but also the textual material itself. Galland supplemented the translation of his manuscript with stories from other, even oral, sources, and his publisher added material sent to him by another orientalist; Lane delivered a bowdlerized version, omitting stories that were offensive to the Victorian taste, or that were too «bizarre»; Burton incorporated as many stories as he could find in various sources, while Mardrus unscrupulously pillaged all kinds of story collections. The European tradition was thus not only shaped to accommodate colonial, patronizing perceptions of the Other; it was also supported by an arbitrary selection of material, collected from different sources to be squeezed into an increasingly multiform corpus of the *Thousand and One Nights*.

This brief summary shows that there are strong arguments to examine the translations of the *Thousand and One Nights* within the framework of orientalism, as part of a discourse through which European visions of the Orient were constructed and reproduced. The work was ruthlessly appropriated by the translators to be reshaped according to their tastes, political interests, and ideological outlooks, and to fit in the broader colonial discourse shaping Europe's relations with its Other. Moreover, since the translations were a source of inspiration for numerous European authors, they became the solid foundation for the integration of stereotypical representations in European culture at large, dispersing their distorted, mutilated and prejudiced visions of the Orient. This may seem a convincing assessment of the main translations, but, as will be argued below, this approach only shows part of the story.

## 2. TRANSLATIONS OF THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS AND WORLD-LITERATURE

The orientalism paradigm, in connection with the *Thousand and One Nights*, has some important shortcomings. First, it is based on a primarily ideological perspective,

because it is so tightly intertwined with political frameworks. Second, although, from this ideological perspective, it condemns the Eurocentric element in Orientalism, it cannot avoid Eurocentrism itself, since the main, even the only, actors in the whole process of transmission are European intellectuals and literati. Although the way in which these intellectuals treated the *Thousand and One Nights* is criticized, the role of Arab intellectuals and of the original work, as an autonomous literary text, remains absent. Third, the approach does not acknowledge that some of the characteristics of the translations are not so much the result of specific ideological prejudices, but are rather inherent in the process of translation and in translations in general. It would seem that all three shortcomings are due to a disequilibrium in the assessment of the textual and contextual elements, resulting in the obfuscating of the dynamic forces contained in texts and textual transmission themselves.

Within the paradigm of world-literature, as it has developed in recent years, the ideological aspect of the migration of texts is not neglected, but some of the premises mitigate its significance and shift the focus from the contextual to the textual mechanisms which operate—to a certain extent—separately from the ideological discursive context. For instance, it presupposes that texts are inherently fluid, that translations are by definition hybrid texts, that cultural interaction creates a transitional zone in which literary works and translations are situated, and that a literary work that has been translated becomes part of at least two literary fields, discarding claims to single «ownership» or privileges as far as judgment and interpretation are concerned. What is important, apart from this, however, is that this approach accepts the vitality of literary works as texts, which obey the mechanisms of textual transmission, as a source of proliferation of textual forms and concepts, even independently from the ideological context. Literary works may contain a force which in itself at least partly determines their trajectory through the networks of different fields of literature.

The above does not mean that within the world-literature paradigm the context should be excluded. On the contrary, the infrastructures of cultural exchange, the role of intermediaries, the trajectories of transmission and proliferation, the institutions shaping the literary field, all these factors remain of decisive importance. However, since literary works are by definition part of textual networks which tend to cross all kinds of boundaries, the questions that are raised are less concerned with, for instance, authenticity, than with the dynamics of transmission and the transformation of texts in the course of time. A text is always related to other texts of all kinds; the relationship between texts, including translations, is always complex and oblique; and this relationship is shaped by textual elements and concepts and discursive frameworks as much as by social and ideological contexts. A text transforms because it is a text.

If we apply these observations to the history of the *Thousand and One Nights*, we should first look at the work as the centre of a huge and ever expanding network of texts, which is not inherently limited. This network contains various versions of

Arabic texts, translations, imitations, and original works inspired by the *Nights*, critical discussions, and works that, however incidentally, refer to the *Nights* in one of its many guises. It should immediately be clear that the enormous proliferation of the *Thousand and One Nights* cannot be explained solely by Orientalist prejudice. There is no ideological necessity to exploit the *Nights* in such a permanent and varied way and on such a wide scale. Other forces were at work, too, which pertained more to the work itself than to the ideological context, or, perhaps more accurately, in which the vitality of the text and its narrative concept played a role at least equal to the changing circumstances. After all, it required a change of contexts, the crossing of a boundary, to unleash the full literary potential of the *Nights*.

The most important phase of the interaction between the *Thousand and One Nights* and the European literary field occurred, of course, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century after the publication of Galland's *Mille et une nuits*. The translation appeared at an auspicious moment: contacts between Europe and the Arab world were increasing through trade, travel and diplomacy; the Enlightenment transformed Europe's view of the world and sought new sources of inspiration; the old polemical visions of the Islamic Orient, constructed by the Catholic Church, were challenged by more worldly perceptions of the Other; Classical Antiquity became increasingly supplemented by the Orient as a reservoir of moral and societal ideals; and, finally, new literary forms were required to give expression to these new visions of the world, a new rationalism and a new categorization of phenomena. It was in this intellectual and cultural context that Galland's *Mille et une nuits* emerged as a new discovery, a literary alien, or at least a hybrid text. It can partly explain the eagerness with which the work was explored by European literati. One of the main features of the *Mille et une nuits* was its apparent textual instability, that is, its resistance to be grasped and defined in coherent, well-circumscribed categories, as a specific type of text belonging to a familiar genre. This instability was already present in the Arabic versions of the work. Since we have only fragments of manuscripts left from the early Arabic tradition of the *Nights*, and no original or mother-text, still very little is known about the textual development of the work and even of its place in the Arabic literary tradition. We have no name of an author or compiler and very few references to the work, which makes it difficult to situate it in a specific historical context. The manuscript used by Galland, which dates from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, is not complete. Another problem is the status of the copies of the work made in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, not only because we do not know how they were (re-)constructed, but also because they were sometimes produced on European demand. However it may be, these manuscripts later became the basis for the printed Bûlâq text in the 1830s, which came to be considered a «vulgate» version in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Apart from the instability as a result of the lack of comprehensive versions in the Arabic manuscript tradition, the text is also destabilized by its concept. First, the work is



cast as a framestory, containing a chain of embedded tales, a form that always disturbs the direct relationship between the reality of the reader and the fictional reality of the stories. Second, the specific form of the *Thousand and One Nights* suggests that the storytelling may go on forever, that there is no inherently logical necessity for an ending. Third, the work contains a strangely diverse accumulation of stories, which seem to have been put together at random, without a structural coherence, thus emphasizing the essential contingency of storytelling as a confluence of stories. These conceptual characteristics hamper a clear-cut vision of what the *Thousand and One Nights* is, how it should generically and conceptually be perceived. That this ambivalence was part of the Arabic tradition is shown by the diverse 18<sup>th</sup> century versions, which contain a wide variety of stories from diverse sources.

This instability of the «original» versions was perhaps the main cause of Galland's method of compiling his *Mille et une nuits*. Galland made use of a manuscript containing only 282 nights—still the most substantial manuscript that we possess from the period before Galland—, but collected supplemental material from other sources, most notably from archives and from his spokesman Hanna Diyab. The publisher added stories sent to him by a colleague of Galland, Pétis de la Croix, which were taken from other collections of tales. The result was a work that had no original version in Arabic and that was strangely diverse in its contents. Although the translation itself was relatively accurate for the standards of its time, and its style was adequate to convey the literary merits of the work, the resulting text is a fine example of hybridity, or, as it is sometimes called, syncretism, combining the characteristics of the original work with the requirements of the new circumstances to which it was transmitted. It embodies the essential fluidity of texts, the tendency of texts to move, to cross boundaries, and to assume new shapes.

The translation by Galland is of course a landmark in the history of the *Thousand and One Nights*. By crossing the boundary that had separated the Arab cultural field from the European literary field, Galland's translation raised a whole set of new questions, ranging from the origins of the work to its generic properties and narrative potential. *Mille et une nuits* took its place in what could be called a transitional zone which was created by the intensified 18<sup>th</sup> century European interaction with the outer world. Perhaps we are justified in saying that this translated work contributed to creating this European literary transitional zone, or at least to shaping it and to making it visible. The hybridity of the *Nights*, essentially an «alien» text, enabled it to land firmly in this liminal ground within the European literary tradition, and from this incipient position Galland's *Mille et une nuits* was able to wedge open a space of negotiation between Arabic and European literatures, a space where the two cultures and literary fields met and explored each other's interests. This space could be visualised as a meeting point of hermeneutical horizons, or as a dialogical zone in the Bakhtinian sense (Van Leeuwen 2004; Dobie 2008).

The idea that Galland's *Mille et une nuits* opened up an intellectual space in which cultural boundaries became blurred is shown by both the tradition of Arabic manuscripts of the *Nights* and the way in which the translated tales affected the European literary field. The tremendous popularity of Galland's translation stirred a great demand for Arabic tales in Europe, which resulted in a resuscitation of the manuscript tradition. Remarkably, manuscripts were produced by Arabic scholars in Europe, such as Dom Chavis and Michel Sabbagh, who lived in Paris and whose texts were partly translated into French. Arabic texts emerged of the so-called «orphan stories», or apocryphal stories, which figured in Galland's translation but which he had derived from an oral source. At about the same time, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, manuscript copies were compiled in Egypt and Syria, mostly on European demand. These manuscripts became the basis for new European translations and for Arabic printed editions. On the other hand, Lane worked in Egypt with the aid of a local shaykh, while at the same time developing a new synthesis between exoticizing and naturalizing styles. Richard Burton, too, was eager to combine a sense of authenticity with the sensitivities of his age, while simultaneously collecting all the material that he could find.

These examples show that a new dynamics was engendered by the creation of an intermediate zone, in which the Arabic and European literary and cultural traditions began to overlap. It is my hypothesis that this dynamics was produced not only by contextual circumstances—increased interaction; changing interests—but also by the specific literary characteristics of the *Thousand and One Nights*, combined with what we have called the inherent instability of the work, both in its Arabic original and in its hybrid, European guises. Its instability, as described above, indicated a form of strangeness, which in turn elicited the desire, perhaps even the necessity, to draw it from its transitional zone and properly incorporate it into the literary canon. Conversely, it was the textual instability of the *Nights* which facilitated the process of incorporation, since it seemed to embody the idea of textual fluidity.

Representing Galland's *Mille et une nuits* as a hybrid work imposing, first, its own liminal zone upon the European field and subsequently a process of incorporation, throws a different light on what is usually called the reception of the *Thousand and One Nights* in Europe. The work is not a reservoir of stereotypical representations of an Oriental Other, but a literary text with specific properties which is incorporated in a receiving literary tradition with its own conventions, categories and mechanisms. The term «incorporation», more than «reception», suggests that during this process the work was transformed and re-evaluated, but that the literary field in which it was incorporated changed, too. Incorporating such a strange and unstable element as the *Thousand and One Nights* into the European literary canon implied not only an effort to harmonize the peculiarities of the work with existing literary forms, but also the destabilization of genre conventions and genre-boundaries in the receiving literatures, which were challenged by these peculiarities. Thus, as we will see, the *Mille et une nuits*

raised questions which touched upon the very foundations of the European literary debate.

The incorporation of the *Mille et une nuits* occurred on several levels. The first level consisted of deconstruction, imitation and experiments. The instability caused by the peculiar form of the framing story linked with the embedded stories through a plot-structure inspired authors to compose similar works, imitations, pseudo-continuations or variations on the *Thousand and One Nights*, or to experiment with the form of the frame-story in other literary forms. Some authors «rewrote» stories from the *Nights*, or contributed to the development of what was called the «Oriental tale». An important motif was the seemingly boundless nature of storytelling, both with regard to infinite continuation, and with regard to the diversity of the material, which seemed to be a new insight in the nature of literature as a form of narrative imagination and continuous narration. Apart from this, the form of the plot-construction, through interruption, through magic intervention, or through coincidence/fate, was explored, next to, of course, the great reservoir of exotic narrative material.

The second level of the incorporation was directed more broadly at the literary characteristics of the *Thousand and One Nights*. How should the *Nights* be evaluated as a work of literature? How did it relate to European literary conventions? It was especially the way in which supernatural forces were assimilated in the stories as a regular component of reality that was questioned, because, evidently, it seemed to clash with the rationalism which was deemed essential for the development of an «enlightened» perception of the world. Since the Enlightenment contained a strong didactic urge, the question was raised whether this kind of literature would be helpful, or even admissible, for the dissemination of a rationalist world-view. Should a fictional story, including its plot, not be more firmly rooted in reality? Should interventions by magical forces and djinns not be dismissed as being conducive to superstition? How should the relationship between fictional stories and reality be conceived?

The different stages of the process of incorporation are personified by the German author and philosopher Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813), who was a prominent exponent of the German Late Enlightenment (*Späterklärung*) and wrote poetry, novels and treatises. He was also a translator, most notably of the works of Shakespeare. He represented the spirit of his age and he was the literatus who introduced the *Thousand and One Nights* in German literature. Early in his literary career he reworked two stories from the *Thousand and One Nights* in verse, and later, in 1764, he published the novel *Don Sylvio von Rosalva*, about a youth who falls prey to his excessive imagination (*Schwärmerei*) due to reading fairytales, especially Arabic and Persian tales. He is finally cured by his friends who tell him more appropriate tales. Some years later Wieland wrote the mirror for princes *Der goldene Spiegel* («The Golden Mirror» 1772), a pseudo-translation in German of a Latin pseudo-translation of a Chinese pseudo-text. Here, a descendant of Shahriyar asks his vizier to tell him stories, not the «stupid fantasies»

that Shahrazad used to tell, but edifying tales. The vizier obeys, and what follows is a text modelled on the *Thousand and One Nights*, with a framing story, embedded stories, daily interruptions (when the king yawns three times), etc. Later in his career Wieland himself compiled a collection of fairytales, partly written by himself, partly edited translations of French originals. Some of the «original» tales were adaptations of material from the *Thousand and One Nights*.

Wieland's work exemplifies the various forms and stages in which the incorporation of the *Thousand and One Nights* in the European literary canon took place. First, he emulated the material in Oriental tales of his own, and, notably, reworked translations; second, he adopted the form and concept of the *Nights* for a work belonging to a different genre which was familiar in Europe; third, in his novels he combined themes and material from Classical Antiquity with Eastern settings and narrative material, to explore moral issues and illustrate moral and societal ideals; and, fourth, he provoked a debate about questions of genre and the functions of fictional literature, referring to the Oriental tales. His ambivalent attitude towards the *Thousand and One Nights* and similar works is shown in his novel *Don Sylvio von Rosalva*: Don Sylvio's «disease» is caused by reading Oriental tales, but he is cured by fairytales as well. According to Wieland, literary fairytales (*Kunstmärchen*) could endanger the rationalist world-view of the Enlightenment, and lead to belief in superstitions and indulgence in fantasies, but, if properly told, they could be accepted as a legitimate literary genre and even be helpful to fight superstitions.

As a writer and thinker, Wieland was a key figure in the development of modern German literature. He was a friend of Goethe, whom he introduced to the *Thousand and One Nights*, which would become a persistent source of inspiration for him during his lifetime. The formal experiments and the debate on literature he induced can be found all over the European tradition from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, often with references to the *Thousand and One Nights*. Even today writers are using conceptual and formal elements taken from the *Nights*, and exploring the boundaries between reality and fantasy by referring to the work as a symbol of imaginative storytelling. In these experiments and discussions the exotic character of the *Thousand and One Nights* certainly plays a role, especially since it was a work that was «alien» to the European literary landscape, but the conceptual characteristics seem to have been at least as important, since it mingled with the European genres and concepts, reshaping them and creating new forms. The exotic dimension gradually became less prominent, when, for instance in the work of Goethe and Hoffmann, it was internalized to such an extent that the conceptual and formal elements became a regular part of the writer's narrative tool-box.

The example of Wieland shows how influential the *Thousand and One Nights* was, on several levels, in a crucial phase in the development of modern European literature. In Arabic literature, too, the importance of the *Nights* increased. In the course of time,

the work became a focal point where the European and Arabic literary fields converged and in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after new manuscripts had been made and more printed editions had appeared, Arabic writers turned to the material as a source of inspiration, not only as a part of their literary heritage, but also as a model for literary renewal and modern literary forms. Stories from the *Nights* were reworked for the newly budding theatre and prominent authors such as Taha Husayn and Tawfiq al-Hakim drew on the *Nights* for several works of prose, essays and theatre. It cannot be said that the *Thousand and One Nights* was «rediscovered» by Arabic literati under European influence, since interest in the work is likely to have persisted all along, but it can be assumed that a re-evaluation of the work took place through European interest, and that the work somehow fitted in the new visions of literary reform, experiment and the debates about the cultural heritage which were characteristic of the *nahda*.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In the foregoing we hope to have shown that the enormous impact of the *Thousand and One Nights* in Europe should not be seen as an example of the appropriation of a literary work, within the context of colonial discourses, with the concomitant ideologically inspired distortions, but rather as a phase in the incorporation of the work in world-literature. The concept of world-literature emphasizes the fluidity and transformative potential inherent in literary texts, the centrality of translations, and the significance of crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries for provoking transformation, new insights, re-evaluation, and the convergence of literary fields. Within this process both textual and contextual factors are important, since it is the interaction between these which brings about the transitional zones in which literary traditions and canons can meet and merge. Contextual factors create the mechanisms of an interest in exchange; textual factors provoke processes of incorporation within the literary field. This process is never one-sided but always entails the transformation of the literary fields concerned, either to integrate the «alien» text, or to deal with its new, widened and diversified, interpretive context.

These components of the process of incorporation can be clearly perceived in the case of the *Thousand and One Nights*. The context of Galland's translation enabled it to carve out a transitional zone for itself and for a myriad of spin-offs inspired by unfamiliar work, necessitating strategies for defining and integrating the strange into the familiar. The intensity with which the *Nights* was explored by European literati can mainly be explained by what we have called its textual instability, both in its concept and in the forms in which it was available. This instability on the one hand enhanced the necessity to define and integrate the work, and on the other hand made this defining and integrating more feasible, because it could relatively easily be used for emulation,

deconstruction, reconstruction, *bricolage*, and experiments. The process contributed to the development of new literary forms, to structuring the literary debate in Europe, and to a reshuffling of the European literary canons. To what extent the Arabic and European literary traditions overlapped from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards is shown by the way in which the Arabic tradition of the *Nights* evolved, with new manuscripts, printed editions, and modern emulations of various kinds.

We hope to have shown that the paradigm of orientalism is insufficient to contain the elements we have described as being part of the incorporation process of the *Nights* in Europe. Of course, the attraction of exoticism and stereotypical visions of the Other played a significant role. Of course, the formation of a partly shared literary landscape cannot be detached from the power imbalances caused by colonial domination and cultural hegemony. Still, these factors cannot explain what actually happened, the deep penetration of the *Thousand and One Nights* into European culture and the enormous variety of its manifestations in European literature and culture. In fact, the rather narrow, ideological view fostered by the Orientalism framework tends to obscure the nature of the *Nights*' incorporation, because of its Eurocentrism and its focus on context: that in a decisive phase of its development European literature was profoundly influenced by an Arabic work of literature. Perhaps paradoxically, because the world-literature approach is not so much concerned with questions of authenticity, this view restores to the *Thousand and One Nights* the status that it deserves, as an autonomous, vigorous and conceptually rich work of Arabic literature.

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