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JULLIEN, D. — Les amoureux de Schéhérazade; variations modernes sur les Mille et une nuits. (Histoire des Idées et Critique Littéraire 450). Librairie Droz, Genève 2009. (23 cm, 224). ISBN 978-2-600-01253-9. ISSN 0073-2397. € 47,06.

After the publication of the first French translation of the Thousand and one nights by Antoine Galland, at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Shahrazād's tales swiftly and

massively invaded European literary culture. Numerous reworkings of the tales appeared in the major European languages, mostly inspired by the curious form of the frame story, the smooth shifting between the real and supernatural worlds, the abundance of types and stereotypes of Oriental life, and the interplay between human ingenuity and fate. The tradition of the Thousand and One Nights in European literature was repeatedly revitalized and strengthened by other characteristic and influential translations, such as those by Maximilian Habicht (1825), Edward Lane (1838-1840), Richard Burton (1885-1888), and Joseph Mardrus (1899-1904). Each of these translations reflected or contributed to new trends, illustrating not only new perceptions of the work and the way it represented the Orient, but also ways in which these representations were incorporated into European literature.

Many studies have appeared on the influence of the Thousand and One Nights on European authors, especially in England, France and Germany in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but the field is far from exhausted. This is especially true for what may be called the 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' periods, which for several reasons show a remarkable revival of interest in the collection. This was partly due to the appearance of Mardrus' edition of the Nights, which generated a widespread vogue of Orientalism throughout Europe linked to the artistic currents created by the Ballets Russes and Art Nouveau. Moreover, the tales, with their layered representation of reality, its willful exoticism, and its textual complexity, were a suitable source of inspiration for all kinds of literary experiments, which was gratefully exploited by typical modernist and postmodernist authors such as Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Jorge Luis Borges, and John Barth.

An effort to increase our knowledge and understanding of the traces of the Thousand and One Nights in modern French literature is presented by Dominique Jullien in her *Les amoureux de Schéhérazade; variations modernes sur les Mille et une nuits*. In four chapters essays are presented about the roman-feuilleton, a typical genre of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, the translation of Mardrus, the feminist novels by Assia Djebar, and the novel *Portrait de l'artiste en jeune singe* by Michel Butor. The common denominator of these texts, apart from their being 'parodies' of the Thousand and One Nights, is their combination of educational intentions and narrative aesthetics: they are all intended to convey a political or social critique, or a form of initiation, hidden in new and sometimes experimental narrative forms. In this sense they fit neatly into the tradition of European reworkings of the Thousand and One Nights, which began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Through the way in which they are referring to the Thousand and One Nights, the texts that are analyzed show the varied imaginative power of the work. The emergence of the roman-feuilleton in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is linked to the figure of Hārūn al-Rashīd, who, on sleepless nights, wanders through the city to inspect the circumstances of his subjects. Likewise, in the roman-feuilleton, such as *Les mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue, which appeared in the 1840s, the protagonist roams through Paris to evaluate the situation of the people and criticize the authorities. Curiously, the social criticism expressed in the story attracted the disapproval of Karl Marx, who deemed this kind of literature 'reformist' instead of 'revolutionary', too much based on notions of charity instead

of radical change. In any case the novel shows how motifs and narrative models taken from the Thousand and One Nights lend themselves to inspire a new literary genre, which was typical for modern life in the European metropolises.

The fin de siècle aestheticism is treated in a discussion of Mardrus' famous — or notorious — translation of the Thousand and One Nights, which first appeared in 1899-1904 in the *Revue blanche*, a journal epitomizing the main artistic currents of the period. The translation was praised in literary circles, but fiercely criticized by scholars, who were outraged by the many liberties that Mardrus afforded himself with the text. It is clear that Mardrus' version was in harmony with the temperament of his age, which was hungry for a new vocabulary and aesthetic form for its taste for exoticism. Paradoxically, according to Alfred Jarry the changes made by Mardrus in the original text did not harm the work, but rather enhanced its '*esprit arabe*'. It is clear that in this case the taste of the public triumphed over scholarly accuracy. For Mardrus, the Thousand and one nights was not a 'text', but rather represented '*matière d'Orient*', an inexhaustible source of exotic enchantment, which could be modified and adapted to conform to the tastes of the audience.

The feminist point of view with regard to the Thousand and One Nights is discussed in an elaborate analysis of the novels of the Algerian author Assia Djebar about two women enclosed in their home, seeking liberation and educating each other by telling the stories of their lives. The emancipatory element is of course obvious in the framing story of the Nights and was already noticed in the 1920s. According to Dominique Jullien this element was introduced by Mardrus in his version of the framing story. However, although it is true that Mardrus made this component of the story explicit, it can be argued that for the Arab reader it has always been evident, since the work is clearly a parody on the genre of the mirrors for princes, which were compiled to educate future kings. Shahrazād refers to this genre in an oblique way, but the educational and feminist elements cannot be overlooked.

In the final chapter the complex world of Michel Butor is explored through the prism of the Thousand and One Nights, especially the story of the 'Third qalandar', which Butor has retold in his novel *Portrait de l'artiste en jeune singe*. The novel is a kind of autobiography, showing a formative phase of the author's development as a writer, related to a mass of, mainly esoteric, texts. The analysis emphasizes Butor's narrative as a coded text, hiding information between layers of the story and references to other texts, to illuminate processes of transformation and the fluidity of meanings. The work is a portrait of the genesis of Butor's authorship, an initiation into a secret world of texts, through an introspective retelling of the story of the 'Third qalandar'. Typically, the narrative seems meant as much to hide as to disclose Butor's true self.

The essays of this book are a valuable contribution to the study of the 'afterlives' of Shahrazād in the (post-) modernist period. They are written in a precise and clear style and contain many useful ideas and starting points for future research.

University of Amsterdam,  
August 2009

Richard VAN LEEUWEN

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