

University of Pennsylvania
NELC 1001:
1001 ARABIAN NIGHTS
Time: Tu Th, 1:45-3:14
Location: Van Pelt Library 625
DRAFT SYLLABUS: UPDATED 1/10/23

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Office Hours:

tba

Course Description:

The *Arabian Nights* (more accurately known as *The Thousand and One Nights*) is a collection of stories that circulated in the medieval Islamic world and would later become a canonical classic of world literature thanks to various stages of addition, translation, and creative retelling. It is a heady agglomeration of tales written with a distinctive frame story and form about characters and deeds that have been considered in turn memorable, hilarious, disgusting, arousing, thrilling, repugnant, and inspirational by various audiences since its beginning—and possibly even before it ever existed.

In this course, we will read almost the entirety of the 14th century collection of tales that constitute the earliest existing version of *The Thousand and One Nights* and analyze it both in relation to the medieval genres and historical contexts that shaped it and through contemporary theoretical frameworks. *The Thousand and One Nights* is a fluid and changing collection, so it is not our goal to focus on some clearly-defined “original”. We will instead discuss this collection’s origins, famous later additions such as the stories of Aladdin and Sindbad, and the role that its reception and translation in Europe played in making it a key text of world literature. We will also study some of its many later adaptations in film, poetry, and narrative. By analyzing key components of the text such as the frame story, fantasy, romance, and representations of race and gender, and by considering the aesthetics and politics of literary engagement with *The Thousand and One Nights* in modern contexts, we will come to appreciate the stories’ many travels across time and genres and develop our own ideas on what *The Thousand and One Nights* can teach us about the enduring power of storytelling. This course is taught in English, including all readings.

Course Objectives: Through close reading and critical engagement, students will obtain an in-depth knowledge of the text, context, and legacy of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Students will pursue independent research that analyzes primary sources and evaluates and critiques secondary scholarship. Students will also engage with the art of public speaking and the close analysis of visual media.

This syllabus is subject to change at any time. It is your responsibility to adapt to any such changes.

Required Readings (all available at the University Bookstore, 36th & Walnut):

Aladdin. A New Translation, trans. Yasmine Seale (New York: Liverlight, 2019). ISBN: 978-1-324-09111-0 (pb). \$14.95

The Arabian Nights, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans. Husain Haddawy. Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010). ISBN: 978-0-393-92808-2 (pb). \$25.00

Estimated Cost of required Readings: \$40.00

Reserve Readings (marked with an asterisk *), Assignments, and Exams will be posted on Canvas unless you are notified otherwise.

Schedule:

Week 1 (Thursday, January 12 only): Introduction

Week 2 (January 17 & 19): Frame & Precursors

Tuesday: *Nights*, pp. 3-18: The Story of King Shahrayar and Shahrazad, His Vizier's Daughter; The Tale of the Ox and the Donkey; The Tale of the Merchant and His Wife.

Thursday: Early Witnesses (*Nights*, pp. 353-55); **Kalilah wa-Dimnah*, pp. 256-75: The Turtle and the Monkey); *Excerpts from *101 Nights*, pp. 2-23 (Frame-story); *Excerpts from *Tales of the Marvelous*, pp. 25-40 (The Tale of Talha, Son of the Qadi of Fustat).

Week 3 (January 24 & 26): Orientalism & Translation

Tuesday: The Curious Case of Aladdin: *Aladdin: A New Translation* (trans. Yasmine Seale).

Thursday: *Excerpt from Hanna Diyab, *The Book of Travels*, II: 106-35; *Excerpt from Husain Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights II*, pp. xii-xxi.

Week 4 (January 31 & February 2): Magic & the Unseen

Tuesday: *Nights*, pp. 18-42:

The Story of the Merchant and the Demon; The First Old Man's Tale; The Second Old Man's Tale; The Story of the Fisherman and the Demon; The Tale of King Yunan and the Sage Duban; The Tale of the Husband and the Parrot.

Thursday: *Warner, "Master of Jinn"

Week 5 (February 7 & 9): Social Commentary: Gender, Class, Race

Tuesday: *Nights*, pp. 66-113:

The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies; The First Dervish's Tale; The Second Dervish's Tale; The Tale of the Envious and the Envied.

Thursday: *Nights*, pp. 113-48:

The Tale of the First Lady, Mistress of the House; The Tale of the Second Lady, the Flogged One.

Week 6 (February 14 & 16): Horror & Romance

Tuesday: *Nights*, pp. 148-203:

The Story of the Three Apples; The Story of the Two Viziers.

Thursday: *Allen, "Three Apples"

Week 7 (February 21 & 23): Humor

Tuesday: *Nights*, pp. 203-234:

The Story of the Hunchback; The Christian Broker's Tale; The Steward's Tale.

Thursday: **Visit to Kislak**

Week 8 (February 28 & March 2): Again with the Humor

Tuesday: **Midterm**

Thursday: *Nights*, pp. 234-60:

The Tailor's Tale; The Tale of the Second Brother; The Tale of the Fifth Brother.

Week 9: Spring Break

Week 10 (March 14 & 16): Metamorphoses

Tuesday: *Nights*, pp. 260-302:

The Story of Jullanar of the Sea.

Thursday: *Ballaster, "The Sea-Born Tale"

Week 11 (March 21 & 23): Later Tales

Tuesday: *Nights*, pp. 303-323:

The Story of Sindbad the Sailor (to end of Third Voyage).

Thursday: *Nights*, pp. 323-49:

The Story of Sindbad the Sailor (continued).

Week 12 (Thursday, March 30 only): Film

Tuesday: An Overview

*Watch: The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad (dir. N. Juran, 1958). You can find it online here:
<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x86fqn8>

*Read: Bullock and Zhou, “Entertainment or Blackface?”

Week 13 (Tuesday, April 4 only): Modern Echoes (to be assigned)

Thursday: Edgar Allan Poe, “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade” (*Nights*, pp. 356-72); Taha Husayn, Excerpt from *The Dreams of Scheherazade* (*Nights*, pp. 375-77); *Robert E. Howard, “The Tower of the Elephant”; *Tanith Lee, “A Hero at the Gates”; *James Joyce, “Araby,” from *Dubliners*; *A.S. Byatt, “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”; **one more**

Week 14 (April 11 & 13): Contemporary Concerns (to be assigned)

Tuesday: *Assia Djebar, “The Woman in Pieces”; *Naguib Mahfouz, *Arabian Nights and Days*; *Fatema Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West*; *Hassan Blasim, “The Hole”. **one more**

Thursday: *Ted Chiang, “The Merchants and the Alchemist’s Gate”; *Githa Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel*; *Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*; *G Willow Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*. **one more**

Week 15 (April 18 & 20): Projects

Week 16 (Tuesday, April 25 only): Projects

Assignments:

20% Participation
20% Final research paper
15% Midterm Exam
15% Film analysis
10% Translation analysis
10% Project Presentation
10% Story Map
Map Quiz (ungraded)

1. Participation consists of two components:

a) Attendance. This is a seminar centered around a very tricky text. Regular, engaged attendance to every class session is crucial to your success. **Chronic (more than two) unexcused absences will be penalized.**

b) Discussion. Our sessions will be devoted almost entirely to student-led discussion of our readings, with occasional context and moderating provided by your professor. That means you must have completed the reading assigned for every session and are prepared to discuss it in an intelligent way with me and with your peers. **For pointers on what makes a good discussion, see my handout on Canvas.**

2. Final research paper: A ca. 15-page paper involving original research using primary sources and engaging relevant secondary literature. Topics will be decided in close consultation with the professor, but can include any question relating to the stories themselves and their contexts, but also the collection's history, translations, influences, and adaptations in film, theatre, and other literatures and media. To assist in this, early in the semester, our class will attend one session on research methods and resources with VPL's Middle East Studies Bibliographer. **Due as an upload to Canvas by the last class session. In 2023, this is Tuesday, April 25, by 5pm.**

3. Midterm Exam: The format will resemble a quiz, not a detail-oriented inquisition. I see it as an opportunity to check in with you to see how firm a grip you have on our main concepts so that we all might adjust our focus and methods as needed. **In 2023, this will take place in class on Tuesday, February 28.**

4. Translation analysis: A 3-4 page analysis in essay form that compares two or three different translations of the same story from the *Nights* and attends to the potential merits to each of them. The translations in question need not be ones we use in class. **For a list of translations and details, see the handout on Canvas. In 2023, this is due as an upload to Canvas by Tuesday, February 7, 5pm.**

5. Film analysis: A 3-4 page analysis in essay form of one aspect of one of the film adaptations chosen from the list provided. It need not be one of the films we discuss in class. For the list and details, see the handout with sample prompts on Canvas and refer to Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film* (in suggested reading). In 2023, this is due as an upload to Canvas by Tuesday, April 4, 5pm.
6. Story Map: One of the distinctive features of the Nights is its “story-within-a-story” format, which was designed to be deliberately bewildering. To help you keep track of who is telling what story, and how one story is nested within another, like Russian dolls, please use some kind of diagramming to keep track in graphic form of your progress over the course of the semester. This might be done in any medium (analog or digital), format (such as a family tree), format (such as an animation) or size (a poster above your desk). Be creative, but be accurate! In 2023, this will be due by Thursday, March 16, 5pm.
7. Map Quiz. Take-home, open book. Blank map to be provided. In 2023, this is due as an upload to Canvas by Tuesday, January 24, 5pm. No point value, but must be passed by all students.