

Public Abstract

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Since its introduction, in a French version, into eighteenth century Western Europe, The Arabian Nights has drawn a lot of attention, both from critics and ordinary readers. The picture of life depicted in the European texts of The Nights catered to the interest the colonial Europeans had in the bizarre and exotic, allegedly characteristic attributes of the East. The influence of the texts on the Western mind was such that they shaped certain notions and misconceptions about the Arab-Muslim world that had begotten the tales. Many of these misconceptions were a result of the fact that The Nights was introduced in a printed form, thus concretizing ideas and beliefs about authorship and narrative endorsed by our modern print-culture. The aim of this thesis is to argue for The Arabian Nights as a work of verbal art whose roots are in the oral tradition of the Arab world. The text of the Nights draws upon a rich reservoir of folk tales, which had enjoyed enormous popularity among Muslims and Arabs, circulating for about a thousand years. My thesis is divided into three chapters. The first is devoted to laying out a theoretical background for the application of an oral tradition approach. Chapters Two and Three are given to the application of this approach: Richard Bauman's Oral Performance framework. The text chosen for this application is the "Story of the King of China's Hunchback." The ultimate conclusions emphasize, among other things, the role of Middle Arabic in enabling the text to be performative enough to be appreciated in its own terms.