Garcin Jean-Claude,
Pour une lecture historique des Mille et Une Nuits.

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Few scholars so far have endeavored to treat the *Thousand and One Nights* as a whole, discussing each and every story. Mia Gerhardt's seminal work *The Art of Storytelling: A Literary Study of the Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden 1963) made a promising start; most later introductions to the *Nights* either opt for a general survey highlighting some of the collection's specific aspects(1) or for a concise encyclopedic approach(2). Considering the choices of previous scholars, Garcin's "historical reading" of the complete *Nights* is not only a challenge, but rather a risk. First of all, it involves a specific choice (or specific choices), such as which edition (or editions) of the *Nights* to consider, each of which may be argued for or against; and second, any study of the complete *Nights* is (at least implicitly) based on the assumption that the *Nights* were conceived as a conscious compilation, whether in their earlier stage, such as that documented by the Galland manuscript dating from the fifteenth century, or in their later stage, such as the Būlāq edition (1835) that the present author takes as his main point of reference.

As a historian of the medieval Muslim world, particularly of Upper Egypt, Garcin appears well equipped to face the challenge, even though – or maybe just because – he admits to being just that: a historian whose expertise are historical dates and facts rather than the interpretation of literary or popular narrative texts. Unusual as it might be when studying a body of literary narratives, the present study of the *Nights* is largely unrestricted by the boundaries imposed by literary theory and/or folklorist methodology. Right from the beginning, Garcin posits his work as an extended sequel to Patrice Coussonnet's *Pensée mythique, idéologie et aspirations sociales dans un conte des Mille et une Nuits* (Cairo 1989). In his study, Coussonet had presented an ethnographic, historical and sociological analysis of the story of *ʿAlī the Cairene and the Haunted House in Baghdad* (Marzolph and Van Leeuwen, vol. 1, p. 93–94, no. 155) that – between other results – had led him to propose a member of the merchant class as the story's compiler. Garcin now promises to apply this approach to the collection as a whole, implying a similar analysis of contextual details (p. 26) for each and every tale. He does so by taking the Būlāq edition as his main reference, starting however with an analysis of the corpus of tales contained in the oldest preserved manuscript; as did Coussonet, Garcin takes additional recourse to the Habicht (Breslau) edition whose text he often regards as not only older, but also more reliable or more complete (p. 28).

Following a general introduction (p. 15-34), Garcin's study is divided into three extensive sections that are labelled "Le moraliste du XV^e^ siècle" (35-210), "Retour sur le passé" (211–331), and "Les contes modernes" (333-615). Each of the sections is subdivided into (a total of twelve) chapters that in their turn contain a varying number of focussed discussions. In these discussions, the author usually proceeds to analyse specific tales that he has grouped according to his own rationale. As a rule, each section starts with a short summary that is followed by passages discussing the respective tale's "intratextual" and "intertextual" aspects. The discussions are summed up in a conclusion (617-635), followed by notes (637–766), a bibliography (767–784) and various short appendixes, such as a list of the tales contained in the Būlāq and Breslau editions (798–796) and an index of tales and stories discussed in the book (797–804). Considering the tremendous wealth of details mentioned and discussed, it is impossible to do full justice to in Garcin's book in a short review, and so the following remarks aim to highlight some of the most important points the author raises.

The first section deals with the stories in the core corpus of the *Nights*, i.e. more or less the body of texts contained in the oldest preserved manuscript, the Galland manuscript dating from the middle of the fifteenth century. The contextual historical details mentioned in the stories lead the author to evaluate most of them as relating to the Mamluk period in Syria and Egypt, i.e. roughly the period extending from the middle of the thirteenth century to the Ottoman conquest in 1517. Coining an unusual term, Garcin labels the author of these stories a "moralist". By this he implies the fact that the author uses the tales to propagate a number of traits of human behavior, both negative and positive (p. 125–126). Translating the author's qualification to Arabic, these recurring *topoi* comprise *fuḍūl*, i.e. the transgression of the discretion that is necessary for the harmony of human relations; the practice of the virtue of resistance against temptations, in particular those of passionate love; patience and endurance (*ṣabr*); resistance (*taǧallud*); and the practice of major

(1) H. and S. Grotzfeld, *Die Erzählungen aus Tausendundeiner Nacht*, Darmstadt 1984, Baunschweig ²2012; W. Walther, *Tausend und eine Nacht*, München, Zürich 1987; R. Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*, London 1994.

(2) U. Marzolph and R. van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, vols. 1-2, Santa Barbara 2004; A. Chraïbi, *Les Mille et une nuits : histoire du texte et classification des contes*, Paris 2008.

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virtues, ranging from courage to gratitude, for both men and women. In addition, Garcin often observes a certain satirical or ironical attitude in the "moralist's" writing (see, e.g., p. 72, 82, 116–119, 132, 136, 141, 183, etc.) that may or may not be justified. The first section culminates in chapter 4 (p. 193–210), in which Garcin argues for Ibn ʿArabšāh (died 1450), the author of a famous mirror for princes, as a possible identification for the "moralist" – even though he admits that in order to clarify this point one would have to take into account the "complete production" (p. 209) of that author, a point that is admittedly beyond his competence as a historian.

The second section treats a number of "old tales" in the Būlāq edition that the compiler has often grouped together in several shorter corpora that are interspersed with tales from the fifteenth-century manuscript. Here, Garcin also discusses four "old classics" (*Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn*, *Sindbād the "sailor"*, *The City of Brass*, *The Seven Viziers*) that originally existed as separate books. These are followed by several other tales originating in medieval Egypt and Syria.

The third section is devoted to "modern tales", some of which relate to ancient periods such as the time of Solomon, while others belong to the genres of popular romances (*sīra*) or fables. Chapter 11 (p. 539–586) discusses "new tales of the eighteenth century" and finishes in reflections about the "exhaustion of a literary genre". Accordingly, Garcin regards the last three tales he discusses (*Qamar al-zamān*, *ʿAbdallāh ibn Fāḍil*, *Maʿrūf*) as outright inventions of the compiler of the Būlāq edition.

Working one's way through Garcin's exhaustive treatment of each and every tale of the *Nights*, readers are bound to be stupefied by the numerous links ("système de rappels", p. 115, 188, etc.) he uncovers between various tales in terms of quoted poetry, repetitions, allusions, and recurrent imagery (such as the standard members of the caliph's entourage at court; see p. 197). It is fascinating and even convincing to follow him in assessing the serious attempt of the author (of the Būlāq edition) to create a more or less coherent collection. Meanwhile, the more one reads, the more one notices Garcin's highly selective use of the extensive previous scholarship on the *Nights* that sometimes becomes tantamount to outright disregard. For instance, when he discusses the *City of Brass*, he only takes into account the fairly old reflections by Gaudefroy-Demombynes and the recent, important essay by Hamori (see now also Osman Hajjar's important study on the "Messingstadt", 2012) or when he discusses parallel versions between the *Nights* and the fourteenth-century – *Ḥikāyāt – ʿağība* (p. 91–92, 148–149, 163–164) he disregards Heinz and Sophia Grotzfeld's detailed considerations (72–82). This attitude goes together with a distinct (and increasingly disconcerting) self-referentiality risking to leave the impression that Garcin aims to turn assumption or doubt into certainty, with numerous quotations of "on l'a vu", "on l'a déjà vu", "nous avons vu" and, most of all, "sans doute".

The list of neglected or disregarded opportunities to interpret specific stories not only in the light of their historical references but also taking into account their variants or their earlier versions as discussed in previous scholarship is long. For instance, Garcin interprets the lacuna in the story of the third Qalandar in the Būlāq edition as a conscious suppression, "maybe because of the latent homosexuality" (p. 69) rather than considering it as resulting from a missing sheet in the manuscript that served as the basis for the published version. In the story of Wardān (p. 318–322), he neglects to refer to the story's eldest known version in the history of Ibn al-Dawādārī (who lived at the beginning of the fourteenth century), even though this version is quoted in a contribution by Claude Brémond to the book edited by André Miquel that he references (p. 318, 708, note 19).

Moreover, being the historian he is, Garcin thoroughly disregards the mechanisms of popular literature. Popular literature goes for the message of a story, not necessarily for its historical accuracy. When Garcin thus states that an author whose data do not correspond to historical facts "is not to be trusted" (p. 320), or when he points out the obvious anachronisms (p. 86, 298) or "errors" (p. 50, 69, 87 etc.) in other stories, he misses the point. In general, he appears to distance himself from studies of a folklorist import such as when he discredits folklorist studies on the motif of the forbidden chamber (p. 66, 649, note 10) as "not being necessarily illuminating for the understanding of the *Nights*". And several, if not many of his rather sweeping statements referring to popular literature bespeak a pronounced and willful ignorance, such as when he refers to the general understanding that European demand brought the *Nights* to print and wonders why one would not make the same statement for books like the pranks of Nasreddin Hodja. What would he say if he knew that these were indeed popularized in the nineteenth century by the Jewish printer Moshe Castelli from Florence?

Notwithstanding the many points of critique a dedicated and informed reader would voice concerning Garcin's assessment and (sometimes unnecessarily judgmental; p. 323) evaluation of details concerning the *Nights*, his book is an important contribution to the ongoing research on this most influential collection of narratives, and future studies of specific stories of the *Nights* are well advised to consider what

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he has to say. Above all, Garcin sheds light on the conscious construction of a work the many intra- and intertextual references of which serve to create, if not homogeneity, then at least coherence. This aspect, if anything, is one of the main reasons why lasting success was and is not only enjoyed by single stories of the *Nights*, but moreover by the collection as a whole.

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