

Hārūn al-Rashīd in Pre-Modern Arabic Literary Imaginary: Ideology of Monogamy, Harem Politics and Court Intrigues

Wen-chin Ouyang, SOAS University of London

Hārūn al-Rashīd the Icon

It is not an exaggeration to say Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170/775-193/809) is even now a global celebrity. He has made it into John Canning's (b. 1920) list of *100 Great Kings, Queens, and Rulers of the World* (1968),¹ which includes only five names from the Islamic Middle East: "Mohammed," "Abd Al-Rahman," "Harun-Al-Rashid," "Saladin," and "Mohammed II" (the Conqueror). Fame has its trappings. He is at once glamorous and dark, famous and notorious. He is the inspiration behind André Clot's history of the early Abbasid rule, *Harun al-Rashid and the World of The Thousand and One Nights* (1989?), for the complexity of his character and rule can inform historical narratives that bring out all the contradictions of an era. This is how Clot's history is advertised:

A symbol of the fabled Orient, Harun al Rashid, the caliph portrayed in *The Thousand and One Nights*, where we see him living grandly in his palace in Baghdad, surrounded by his wives, his concubines, musicians, and learned men, is not merely a figure of legend. He was the son of a Yemenite slave who cleared his path to power, very probably by poisoning the reigning caliph, her older son. Harun reigned for a quarter-century, and was the most famous caliph of the Abbasid dynasty. Through Arab chronicles, the author corrects our vision of Harun the Good, and gives a remarkable account of his development as a ruler. Though in Western countries he is remembered for the presents he sent to Charlemagne—notably the famous elephant, Abul Abbas—he was first and foremost a successful soldier who made war on the Byzantines. His empire was shaken by religious and social insurrections, and he did not shrink from annihilating the Barmecides, a powerful family whose wealth and influence he finally found unbearable. As a patron of arts and intellectuals, Harun contributed greatly to the cultural supremacy of Baghdad, whose merchants and navigators spread the name of the caliph throughout the world.²

¹ Canning, *100 Great Kings, Queens*.

² Clot, *Harun al-Rashid*. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780941533652/Harun-al-Rashid-and-the-World-of-The-Thousand-and-One-Nights>. Accessed 31 August 2021.

He is at the same time the epitome of tyranny in Milton Klonsky's *The Fabulous Ego; Absolute Power in History* (1974)³ the psychoanalysis of whom can help us to understand the human penchant for tyranny and how to temper our ego so as to transcend it.

Since his rise to iconic fame in the eighth century, Hārūn al-Rashīd and his portrayals in both Arabic and Orientalist historical and literary writings have understandably been subject to continuous scrutiny, each in turn producing a new icon based on but departs from previous ones. In recent Arabic scholarship on Hārūn al-Rashīd, there are many attempts to rehabilitate his image, and rescue his reputation from tyranny and, more importantly, from the association between the type of tyranny he exemplifies and political and moral corruption. If Aḥmad Amīn (1886-1954) presents Hārūn al-Rashīd in all his multifaceted splendor in *Hārūn al-Rashīd* (n.d.),⁴ and Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Yūnus daringly relates political tyranny to sexual debauchery in the stories structured around him in *al-Istibdād al-sulṭawī wa l-fasād al-jinsī fī alf layla wa-layla* (2007),⁵ scholars intolerant of ambiguity, against the grain of medieval Arabic-Islamic culture,⁶ feel they must rise to his defense and restore his reputation as not only a just ruler, but also a pious Muslim who observes the strict rules of Islam. Shawqī Abū Khalīl in *Hārūn al-Rashīd: amīr al-kulafāʾ wa ajall mulūk al-dunyā* (1996),⁷ Aḥmad al-Qaṭṭān and Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Zayn in *Hārūn al-Rashīd: al-khalīfa al-maẓlūm* (2001),⁸ Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Ghaffār in *Hārūn al-Rashīd: al-khalīfa al-muftarāʾ alayhi* (2009),⁹ just to name three examples, remove any mention of his abuse of power, concubines and drinking parties from his life and rule, harem and court, and offer us a biography of a devout Muslim who ruled justly, wisely and magnanimously. He loved his first wife, Zubayda, and married only three more women, all *mahāʾir*, whom he wed properly as evidenced by the dowry he paid for them. Anecdotes about his conduct as ruler at court in the pre-modern *adab* tradition and the stories about his nocturnal adventures in *The Thousand and One Nights* are expunged from these accounts.

³ Klonsky, *The Fabulous Ego*.

⁴ Aḥmad Amīn, *Hārūn al-Rashīd*. Accessed 31 August 2021 via Hindawi.org: <https://www.hindawi.org/books/51719608/>

⁵ Yūnus, *al-Istibdād al-sulṭawī*.

⁶ See Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*.

⁷ Abū Khalīl, *Hārūn al-Rashīd*.

⁸ Al-Qaṭṭān and al-Zayn, *Hārūn al-Rashīd*.

⁹ ʿAbd al-Ghaffār, *Hārūn al-Rashīd*.

Such a cleansing operation, however, tells us more about Hārūn al-Rashīd's powerful presence in the Arabic cultural and literary imaginary. The ways in which representations of his court and harem are tinkered with, edited, and transformed give us a sense of the importance of the symbolic value of Hārūn al-Rashīd, the icon, for generations of Arabs and Muslims who lay a claim to him as the symbol of their community and history. This is evident even in the more liberal representations of his character and rule. Two television adaptations suffice as examples: the prize winning 1997 Egyptian production written by 'Abd al-Salām Amīn and directed by Aḥmad Tawfiq,¹⁰ and the 2018 Syrian production funded by the Emirates written by 'Uthmān Juḥā and directed by 'Abd al-Bārī Abū al-Khayr.¹¹ These two series produced for the Ramadan season are by definition pious. However, they do not shy away from the complexity of his political career and social life but rather bring them together to make statements about the style and quality of his conduct and rule. Nūr al-Sharīf (1946-2015), who is himself an iconic Egyptian actor, portrays Hārūn al-Rasīd as a Sufi who, albeit fully cognizant of his responsibility as the leader of the Muslim community, thirsts for a peaceful life spent away from court intrigues and harem politics but in remembrance of God and the companionship of a pious and wise woman. Another iconic actor, Syrian Quṣay Khūlī's Hārūn al-Rashīd is, on the other hand, a skillful politician who manages successfully the competing claims made on him by the members of both his court and harem, and imposes a delicate balance among the various players in the games of power unfolding before him. He is able to ensure stability, peace and justice in his domain.

In the two types of the contemporary rehabilitation of Hārūn al-Rashīd, one idealizing him as a devout Muslim and another romanticizing him as a Machiavellian but just commander of the faithful, each refashioning entails selection of material from the extensive body of writing on and around this global celebrity and channeling it into a narrative discourse out of which the desired ideal character emerges. Regardless, the selection process always and inevitably involves making a decision about what to do with *The Thousand and One Nights* and, to a lesser extent, the *adab* anecdotes about his indulgence in poetry, music and, of course, sex. Even a small detail can change the intended message. The choice of Abū al-'Atāhiya (748-828) or Abū Nuwās (756 c-814) as a member of his entourage for his nocturnal tours of Baghdad is of key significance. In the 1997 Nūr Al-Sharīf version, choosing Abū al-'Atāhiya to be his mentor and companion goes with the Sufi path of the

¹⁰https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcmGKTXdbXM&list=PL9KkeccLNUBRfyIbHycHhs_YOAbhqCZz

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qI5a-4golhQ&list=PLDsEOSGNngQ0zx0mpMqN30RF0hsnJBF5E>

Egyptian TV Hārūn al-Rashīd. The choice of Abū Nuwās in Hanan al-Shaykh's 2011 "re-imagining" of *One Thousand and One Nights* signals a subversive agenda that seeks to turn the world of patriarchal authority upside down. In inserting Abū Nuwās, here as a homosexual, libertine, wine imbibing ritual clown, into the Hārūn al-Rashīd cycles in the *Nights*, al-Shaykh takes the side of "joie de vivre" in opposition to the austere religious life called for all Muslims by the fundamentalists, and at the same time creates lines of escape from the women characters from the perceived total tyranny of patriarchy. Here, she overlaps fiction with history, Shahrayār with Hārūn al-Rashīd, and fictional Hārūn al-Rashīd with his historical counterpart.

Al-Shaykh's *One Thousand and One Nights: A new re-imagining*¹² is the not first work by an Arab to interrogate patriarchal tyranny in such a way. As early as 1984, the Egyptian television series that re-writes the *Nights* for that year's Ramadan season, hailed as the most successful adaptation of the *Nights* in Arabic not just Egyptian television written by Aḥmad Bahjat, directed by 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Sukkarī and Sa'īd al-Rashīdī, and starring the two icons of Egyptian cinema, Najlā' Fatḥī and Ḥusayn Fahmī, has Shahrazād time travel from modern Cairo to Shāhrayār's kingdom in time immemorial, and treat and heal him from his narcissism and tyranny. Calling him a dictator (*diktātūr*), Shahrazād instills in Shāhrayār what we would call today gender equality as well as democracy. In the re-telling of Hārūn al-Rashīd stories, Fatḥī and Ḥusayn, who play Shahrazād and Shāhrayār, also impersonate, for example, Zubayda and Hārūn al-Rashīd, thus overlapping the patterns of Shāhrayār's power with those of Hārūn al-Rashīd. Of course they also play merchants, working class characters, and slaves—and here Najlā' Fatḥī embodies the erudite concubine figure in the *Nights* and pre-modern Arabic writings—and together, they take us on a journey of educating passion into love, tyranny into justice, and dictatorship into democracy. In this story of the education of the king and kingship power and sex are inseparable, as Yūnus reminds us in *al-Istibdād al-sulṭawī wa l-fasād al-jinsī*. Does pre-modern Arabic storytelling, in the *Nights* and *adab*, only make such a link, leaving it to us today to transform the stories of love and adventure into modern tales of subversion?

I return to the imaginings of the character, entourage and rule of Hārūn al-Rashīd in classical Arabic storytelling and *adab* works and explore the role this body of stories and anecdotes plays in interrogating tyranny and, more importantly, delineating lines of escape. I am interested in the iconic not historical Hārūn al-Rashīd, making my starting point the overlap of three patterns of political authority, here,

¹² Al-Shaykh, *One Thousand and One Nights*.

“kingship” of Shāhrayār, Hārūn al-Rashīd and the King of China or Sultan of Egypt or Basra, and the intersection between court intrigues and harem politics. I am most particularly intrigued by the intervention of what I would call the “ideology of monogamy” in the ways the *Nights* stories weave together historical information and *adab* anecdotes culled from a culture of practice so alien to it into fictional tales of wonder and marvel. The *Nights*’ strategic fabrication extends our temporal and spatial purview from here and now to there and forever, and from the *Nights*’ to a multi-generic body of writing Ibn Khaldūn calls *adab*. At the same time it focuses our view on “kingship,” its style and quality, its scope and reach, and its influence and effect, and on “kinship” into which this “kingship” is integrated. Polity, society and family are collapsed into one and the same structure of power centered in gender. Similarly, the elite, merchants and laborers are brought into the very structure of power. Expressions of power, including political authority, are underpinned by gender relations, which are in turn guided by either love or lust. The *Nights*, like the contemporary re-imaginings of Hārūn al-Rashīd, playfully but judiciously selects material from *adab* and reconfigures this material for its own intents and purposes, imitating and mocking *adab* all in one breath.

The Thousand and One Nights and Adab

The *Nights*’ relation to *adab* is known. Even though it is not possible (as yet) to map in detail the influence of *adab* on the *Nights*, or vice versa, we do know that upon the translation of the Persian *Hazār afsān* into Arabic, eloquent men of letters reworked them, refining and embellishing, and produced similar types of storybooks: “*tanāwalahu l-fuṣṣahā’ wa l-bulaghā’, fa hadhdhabūhu wa-namaqqūhu wa-ṣannafū fī ma’nāh mā yushbihuhu.*”¹³ As early as the tenth century, Ibn al-Nadīm already mentioned the ways in which the author of *Kitāb al-wuzarā’*, Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdūs al-Jahshiyārī, who was a government bureaucrat educated in *adab*, compiled a collection of Arabic, Byzantine and Persian stories (*asmār al-‘arab wa l-‘ajam wa l-rūm*) from oral and written sources, from storytellers and books, and organized them into “nights” as well but kept each “night” a separate, independent, full story. Ibn al-Nadīm saw this book in, give or take, 50 folios, which contain the 480 nights or stories al-Jahshiyārī collected before his death.¹⁴

Perhaps it is beside the point to map this mutual influence by tracing the movement of stories to and from the *Nights* and *adab*, for *adab* itself defies any content-driven definition. Rather, it might be more productive to pursue a line of inquiry delineated by Ibn Khaldūn. *Adab* is one of the four sciences of the Arabic language

¹³ Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 363.

¹⁴ Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 363-364.

(*‘ulūm al-lisān al-‘arabī*), preceded in importance by grammar (*‘ilm al-naḥḥw*), lexicography (*‘ilm al-lughā*), and style (*‘ilm al-bayān*). Ibn Khaldūn defines *adab* as an area of intellectual activity, *‘ilm*, not interested in any subject (*mawḍū‘*); rather its objective is the effective use, or even aesthetic use of language in poetry or prose.¹⁵ Accordingly, *adab* means poetry and prose distinguished not just by their form, but also by their “play” with language. *Nights* does “play with language” but its play is of a different order; it transforms “word play” known of *adab*, as in the deployment of *al-badī‘* devices, such as *tibāq* and *jinās*, into “play with narration,” setting genres such as “epic” and “romance” against each other dialogically,¹⁶ for example, and following the principles of doubling (*izdiwāj*), opposition (*muqābala*), paradox (*aḍḍād*) and derivation (*ishtiqaq*) in the generation of motifs and their organization as tableaux in the arabesque tapestry of the stories.¹⁷ In its playful reconfiguration of the anecdotes (*akhbār*) about Hārūn al-Rashīd, as I will show in the following, the *Nights* tells not only a fantastic tale of his rule but also articulates a fantasy of an ideal community, here, as I will demonstrate, framed by an ideology of monogamy. I will focus on one of the many *Nights* variants so as to be able to highlight in detail how the composition of each story-text devises a subversive narrative strategy. The Hārūn al-Rashīd stories in the 15th century Galland-Mahdi text¹⁸ will serve as the locus of my inquiry, through which I will bring into focus the other relevant *Nights* tales as well *adab* material underpinning and framing these. I will then extend our vision out to the fantasy of ideal community inherent in the *Nights*’ Hārūn al-Rashīd tales. I look not at the stories of his sexual orgies with his slave girls in his harem appearing in later 19th century texts¹⁹ but at two stories that could have easily been lifted out of *Kitāb al-aghānī*, which Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (284/897-356/967) compiled around the hundred “*ṣawt*” selected the behest of and for Hārūn al-Rashīd himself.²⁰ Even though Ibn Khaldūn does not include it among his four pillars of *adab*—and these are Ibn Qutayba’s *Adab al-kātib*, al-Mubarrad’s *al-Kāmil*, al-Jāḥiẓ’s *al-Bayān wa l-tabyīn*, and Abū ‘Ali al-Qālī’s *Āmālī*—he considers it the most comprehensive and in fact the epitome of *adab* work.²¹

¹⁵ Ibn Khaldūn, *Dīwān al-mubtada’ wa l-khabar* 1 (*Muqaddima*): 753-764.

¹⁶ Ouyang, “Romancing the Epic”; and “The Epical Turn of Romance.”

¹⁷ Ouyang, “Trickster Jester.”

¹⁸ Mahdi, *Kitāb alflayla wa-layla*.

¹⁹ For a list of these stories, see “Hārūn al-Rashīd” in Marzolph and van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, 2: 585-586.

²⁰ Al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 1: 2 and 8.

²¹ Ibn Khaldūn, *Dīwān al-mubtada’ wa l-khabar*, 1: 763-764.

This resonates with the stories of “martyrs of love” brought into one compilation, and genre, by al-Sarrāj (417 or 419/1026 or 28-500/1106) under the title, *Maṣāri‘ al-‘ushshāq*. “Anīs al-Jalīs and Nūr al-Dīn Ibn Khāqān” smacks of a tale al-Sarrāj relates about Hārūn al-Rashīd and the slave girl (unnamed) of a drummer (*zalzal*) by the name of Manṣūr who refused to be sold even to the Caliph after her master’s death. In the end, Hārūn al-Rashīd bought her, freed her and gave her an income as a reward for her devotion to her original master.²² The pairing of Anīs al-Jalīs with Nūr al-Dīn, like that of Nūr al-Dīn Ibn Bakkār with Shams al-Nahār in another Hārūn al-Rashīd tale, echoes the famous love mad couples epitomized by Majnūn Laylā. Qays and Laylā, Qays and Lubnā and Jamīl and Buthayna, to name but three, who choose to devote themselves exclusively to each other against the lifestyle led by Hārūn al-Rashīd and his slave girls: in Arabic, the phrase “*Hārūn al-Rashīd wa jawārīhi*” in today’s use conjures up the world evoked by *Kitāb al-aghānī* and at the same time pokes fun and frowns upon the excess associated with his lifestyle and of course polygamy, and more importantly, it denounces sexual excess as an expression of male power, and of tyranny.

Analyses of *Nights* subversive discourse tend to focus on the frametale, and on how Shahrazād forestalls death and heals Shahrayār and puts a stop to his killing spree. Shahrazād is often related to the figure of the “erudite concubine” in classical Arabic writings and enframed *Nights*’ tales who, benefiting from the wisdom she derives from her extensive learning, successfully restores Shāhryār back to sanity and justice from madness and despotism. The gendered discourse in the frametale is carried over into the enframed tales, and the *Nights* is often hailed as the Arabic female tradition that gives voice to women and that subverts the Arabic male tradition in which Shahrazād is versed. The *Nights*, as such is a satire of patriarchy and male authority in Arabic-Islamic culture. I need not rehearse this interpretation. I rather push this discussion further and show the ways in which *Nights* not only subverts patriarchy but also constructs an ideal community in the interstices of the dialogue between the *Nights* and *adab*, in this instance, in the “play” with the stories of “martyrs of love,” bringing their inherent “ideology of monogamy” into our reading of “harem politics,” here, overlapped with “court intrigues,” and into our reading of *adab* in general, such as *Kitāb al-aghānī* and *Maṣār‘ al-‘ushshāq*.

Hārūn al-Rashīd in the *Nights*

²² Al-Sarrāj, *Maṣāri‘ al-‘ushshāq*, 1: 34-35.

Hārūn al-Rashīd's power irradiates from the harem but reaches times immemorial and the farthest corner of the universe. "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad," "Alī Ibn Bakkār and Shams al-Nahār," and "Anīs al-Jalīs and Nūr al-Dīn" begin in the harem, respectively of the three ladies and of his own, then moves to his court towards the end of "The Three Ladies," and in "The Three Apples," which enframes "The Two Viziers." These Hārūn al-Rashīd tales are sandwiched between the preceding "The Merchant and the Genie" and "The Fisherman and the Genie," two tales inspired by the biblical Solomon legends, and the following the mythical "Jullanār" which ends the Galland-Mahdi text, with "The Hunchback," set in the reign of al-Mustansir (r. 247-8/861-2), inserted between "The Three Apples" and "Nūr al-Dīn and Shams al-Nahār." These stories cover a vast geographical area with its center in Baghdad, from Cairo to Damascus, Basra, and Kashgar in China in the Baghdad cycles, and to Persia, Iran, Samarkand, India and Indochina in the frametale.

His mobile cabinet is an entourage of three: himself, his vizier Ja'far (al-Barmakī), and his bodyguard (*al-sayyāf*) Masrūr. Together they disguise themselves as merchants and wander the streets of Baghdad at night. The purpose of their nocturnal journeys is not clear. Hārūn al-Rashīd is possibly touring his capital to make sure its inhabitants are doing well, or seeking distraction from the pressures of court. The stories of injustice that unfold before Hārūn al-Rashīd are variations on the same theme: love unrequited or betrayed leads to tragedy or crime. He then intervenes to right wrongs, punishing the wrong doers and rewarding the do-gooders, and bestow happiness on all. Justice follows a simple formula. Upon hearing the three qalandars' and ladies' love-gone-awry stories, he marries them to each other and takes as his prize the lady of the house in "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad." In "The Three Apples" he does not solve the murder. Rather, he orders Ja'far to do so and threatens to hang him within three days if the culprits are not found. The details of the murder are revealed from the perspective of hindsight. This crime-of-passion story comprises a series of coincidences. It begins with a merchant buying three apples from the orchards of Hārūn al-Rashīd in Basra for his ill wife. Seeing one of the apples in the hands of a black slave in the street and that one of the three apples is missing from the three he bought for his wife, he gets jealous, kills his wife and throws her body in the Tigris. The resolution unfolds through a similar series of coincidences. Ja'far sees a Basra apple in the hand of his young daughter, inquires and finds out that one of his black slaves snatched the apple from the young son of the murderer who in turn stole it from the three apples his father bought for his mother. In response to Hārūn al-Rashīd's amazement, Ja'far tells him the story of "The Two Viziers, Nūr al-Dīn 'Alī al-Miṣrī and Badr al-

Dīn al-Baṣrī,” in which the enduring love between the daughter and son of the estranged brothers, the two viziers, guides the family reunion that takes place at the end of the story. The key ingredient in and the mover-and-shaker of the plot, just like the apple in “The Three Apples,” is a pomegranate dish. This story “is the wonder of wonders,”²³ exclaimed Hārūn al-Rashīd upon hearing it, and in a moment of ecstasy, he “freed the slave and gave the young man one of his choice concubines, settled him on a sufficient income, and made him one of his companions to the end of his days.”²⁴

The *Nights* presents a caricature of his rule. He is a benevolent tyrant. He gives orders and threatens his officers with death if they do not deliver, be it the criminal or truth. At the same time, like ‘Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, he lives amongst his people not in an ivory tower. At night, after a day at court, he often forsakes the pleasures of his harem, and goes out to the street to inspect the affairs of his dominion in person, mingles with those he rules, and listens to what they have to say before he dispenses justice. Justice is primarily righting wrongs and compensating for them. Sufficient income, his company and happily-ever-after are the added bonus. The stories told about and in the harem are brought to light and linked to other stories told at court. The three qalandars tell their stories in the harem at night in “The Porter and Three Ladies of Baghdad” but the three ladies tell theirs at court the next morning. Hārūn al-Rashīd holds court more like a patron of an *adab* séance in *Kitāb al-aghānī* than a commander of the faithful leading a prayer, going on pilgrimage, conducting a military campaign, managing the complex political and financial relations with his allies and foes, and giving audience at court. Even the texture of the story resembles *Kitāb al-aghānī*’s prose, even as it does away with the anecdotal structure of *adab* (organized around independent units of an anecdote framed by a chain of transmission) for the sake of narrative coherence. The events in the love story of a merchant’s son, ‘Alī Ibn Bakkār, and one of Hārūn’s favorite concubines, Shams al-Nahār, are structured around love poems, or songs, uttered and at times exchanged between the two lovers.

There are no two identical love stories in the *Nights*, even though they are derived from the very same paradox of love, loyalty and betrayal, from which further similar but different stories are generated and juxtaposed. These love stories are additionally structured around the concept of friendship-companionship-brotherhood (*ṣadāqa-ṣaḥāba-ukhuwwa*) central to Arabic-Islamic imaginings of political community from Ibn al-Muqaffa’ to Ibn Ḥazm and al-Tawḥīdī, to name but

²³ Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights*, 206.

²⁴ Haddawy, 206.

three who have written on the subject. Friendship, just like erotic love, is a part of love and both are at the heart of family and community,²⁵ with husband-wife and brotherhood serving as the kernel of family and the intimate connection between family and community, brotherhood encompassing both friendship and companionship, the two pillars of any harmonious community. The ideal man-woman love overlaps with the ideal man-man or woman-woman friendship, which often slips into brotherhood and sisterhood, and both serve as the exemplars of human relations at the core of an ideal community.

Adab in The Thousand and One Nights

We already catch a glimpse of how friendship works as the communal glue in the stories of the three ladies of Baghdad. Their world and life fall apart thanks to the betrayal of their flesh-and-blood sisters. The dysfunctional sisterhood is matched by the improper erotic love in the stories of the three qalandars. In these stories the key ingredients of community as prescribed by al-Tawḥīdī, “*al-ṣadāqa wa l-‘ishara wa l-mu’ākhāt wa l-ulfa*,” are missing: “*al-ri‘āya wa l-ḥifāz wa l-wafā’ wa l-musā‘ada wa l-naṣīḥa wa l-badhl wa l-mu’āsāt wa l-jūd wa l-takarrum*.”²⁶ The required exemplification of friendship (*ṣadāqa*) and brotherhood (*mu’ākhāt*) in living together (*‘ishra*) and intimacy (*ulfa*) through care (*ri‘āya*), preservation (*ḥifāz*), support (*musā‘ada*), counsel (*naṣīḥa*), spending (*badhl*), consolation (*mu’āsāt*), magnanimity (*jūd*) and generosity (*takarrum*) are disrupted. These stories present the consequences of this disruption. We see how the overlap between love and friendship plays out in “Alī Ibn Bakkār and Shams al-Nahār” and “Anīs al-Jalīs and Nūr al-Dīn” where the outside world intrudes on his private home. These two stories demonstrate how community coheres around love loyalty.

‘Alī Ibn Bakkār conducts a love affair, albeit unrequired, with one of Hārūn al-Rashīd’s favorite concubines, Shams al-Nahār, right under his nose and in the harem of his new palace. The descendant of a Persian royal family meets Shams al-Nahār in the shop of a perfumer (al-‘Aṭṭār) and they, with the help of the perfume merchant, and later a jeweler, together with his friends, her maids, even robbers, police officers and palace guards, they manage to meet in person twice, one in her private chambers in the harem, and the other in the home of the jeweler, but are interrupted on both occasions by the arrival of Hārūn al-Rashīd and the intrusion of a band of robbers respectively. Fear hovers in the air and everyone helps to keep the secrecy their love affair, here conducted through exchange of news, messages

²⁵ See al-Shaar, *Ethics in Islam*, and Ouyang, “*Ṣadāqat al-rijāl wa l-ukhuwwa*.”

²⁶ Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Ṣadaqa wa l-ṣadiq*, 1-2.

and poems delivered by their go-betweens, and escape being caught when the two meet.

This story reads like a modern thriller written in high classical Arabic literary style. The two protagonists, with the aid of their sidekicks, hide in chests, concealed alcoves, balconies, and invisible street corners, run away along darkened garden paths and alleyways, escape on boats, and meet in strange places, all the while looking out for palace guards and eunuchs, malicious spies and whistleblowers. Such suspenseful escapades are punctuated by lush descriptions of the beauty of the protagonists, the rooms in which they do meet, the curtains, the rugs, the seats and cushions, of the feasts and what and how food and wine are served, of the people in waiting, their appearance, dress and posture, and of the song and dance performed, and by the poems that mark the highs and lows of the story. The protagonists die, and on the same day too, as one would find in the stories of *Maṣāri‘ al-‘ushshāq*, martyrs of their unrequited love. Their friends even manage to bury them next to each other.

Hārūn al-Rashīd does hear murmurs of the affair from a maid angry because of a beating she receives by the orders of Shams al-Nahār, but chooses not to investigate. He takes an active role in “The Story of Anīs al-Jalīs and Nūr al-Dīn Ibn Khaqān” when the two lovers squat in his palace when they flee from their hometown, Basra, to Baghdad. They even make themselves at home and stage song and dance parties. When Hārūn al-Rashīd hears noise from afar and goes to investigate, disguised as a fisherman, he finds out about the injustice behind the lovers’ exile. Nūr al-Dīn is the son of the good vizier, Fadl al-Dīn Ibn Khāqān, who at the request of his good king, Muḥammad Ibn Sulaymān al-Zaynabī, purchases a slave girl, Anīs al-Jalīs. Despite his warnings, Anīs al-Jalīs meets Nūr al-Dīn, Fadl al-Dīn’s philandering son, and they fall in love. In order to keep himself and his family from the evil vizier, al-Mu‘īn Ibn Sāwī, Fadl al-Dīn orders Nūr al-Dīn to marry Anīs al-Jalīs and more importantly never to take another wife or concubine or resell Anīs al-Jalīs. He soon dies. Nūr al-Dīn squanders all his inheritance. His friends turn away from him, even those who received gifts and help from him. He contemplates selling Anīs al-Jalīs at the slave market, and has an altercation with al-Mu‘īn Ibn Sāwī, whereby the latter figures out the secret of Anīs al-Jalīs. As al-Mu‘īn Ibn Sāwī comes after him, Nūr al-Dīn runs away, taking with him Anīs al-Jalīs, with whom he cannot be parted. Hearing this, Hārūn al-Rashīd sends Nūr al-Dīn home with a letter to the king of Basra for him to remove al-Mu‘īn Ibn Sāwī as vizier and appoint Nūr al-Dīn in his instead. He even sends Ja‘far to make sure all is in order. Indeed, al-Mu‘īn Ibn Sāwī plots to have Nūr al-Dīn killed but Ja‘far arrives in time to save the

day. He takes Nūr al-Dīn back to Baghdad. Hārūn al-Rashīd frees Anīs al-Jalīs and gifts her to him, appointing them both his boon companions.

Hārūn al-Rashīd is a benevolent tyrant at his best, who brings to life the *Nights'* description of the king of Basra: "bountiful as the sea, so that even the proud were glad to be his servants and even the days and nights awaited his command, for he was a man who rejoiced in sharing his wealth with those who served;"²⁷ and of Shāhrayār, "a towering knight and a daring champion, invincible, energetic, and implacable. His power reached the remotest corners of the land and its people, so that the country was loyal to him, and his subjects obeyed him."²⁸ Unlike Shāhrayār, however, Hārūn al-Rashīd and the king of Basra overlook or forgive certain trespasses. We have already witnessed the magnanimity of the former. Al-Zaynabī too overlooks the Khāqān family's violation of his trust: they absconded with the thousand gold dinars set aside as the price for Anīs al-Jalīs together with the slave girl herself. However, their power and grace are not unconditional. Their effect and reach are premised on fulfilling the conditions set up in the "ideology of monogamy" expressed through the juxtaposition between two types of love: exclusive devotion of the lovers to each other or vice versa. Nūr al-Dīn Ibn Khāqān's only virtue is his devotion to Anīs al-Jalīs. Here, "monogamy" is an episteme, and is coeval with loyalty and solidarity associated with brotherhood and friendship in the *Nights* and *adab*, and its opposite, the unrestrained pursuit of sex, with the total disregard for the code of conduct inherent in the ideology of monogamy that must underpin the imagined ideal community.

The code of conduct matters more than the king, for in the *Nights*, the king loses his kingdom when he or his queen violates this code. In the frametale, Shāhrayār's queen breaks the code and puts the kingdom at risk. In "The Fisherman and the Genie" the frametale, of a Hārūn-al-Rashīd-like king who goes out to inspect an out of ordinary occurrence in his kingdom, then rights the wrong, rewarding the good and punishing the evil, and the enframed tale, of a king whose queen behaves like Shāhrayār's queen and loses his kingdom, offer us the consequences of following or violating this code of conduct. Similarly, "Jullānār," the last story in the Galland-Mahdi text, is the story of educating desire into love. The Childless king Shahrīman gives up all his concubines and marry Jullānār. A beautiful son is soon born. Their son, Badr Jāsīm, however, must go through a similar experience of learning how to love from lessons on, let us say, lust, or pursuit of desire for its own sake. He has to

²⁷ Haddawy, 344.

²⁸ Haddawy, 3.

get lost, wander around the world, experience desire and learn to love properly before he can be king.

This code of conduct is applicable to the officers of the court, especially the viziers, and the members of the community, merchants and laborers alike.²⁹ The viziers, from Shahrazād's father in the *frametales*, to "The Fisherman and the Genie" and Ja'far in Hārūn al-Rashīd stories are mirrors of their kings. The character and conduct of good viziers are accentuated in their juxtaposition with the evil viziers in "King Yūnān and the Sage Dūbān" told within "The Fisherman and the Genie," "The Two Viziers," and "Anīs al-Jalīs." The fictional viziers overlap with fictionalized historical figures, Ja'far Ibn Yaḥya al-Barmakī (d. c. 190/803), and the two Khāqāns: al-Faṭḥ Ibn Khāqān (d. 247/861), who served as the governor of Egypt and Syrian provinces; and Abū al-Ḥasan 'Ubayd Allāh ibn Yaḥyā ibn Khāqān (d. 263/877), who served as the head of the *Dīwān al-Kharāj* and director of the tribunal of *mazālim* (grievances). These good viziers, characterized, to use al-Tawḥīdī's criteria, by the care (*ri'āya*), preservation (*ḥifāz*), support (*musā'ada*), counsel (*naṣīḥa*), spending (*badhl*), consolation (*mu'āsāt*), magnanimity (*jūd*) and generosity (*takarrum*) they show their king, family and community, are juxtaposed to evil viziers, exemplified by al-Mu'īn Ibn Sāwī in "Anīs al-Jalīs," who initiate and carry out conspiracies to remove their kings or co-viziers and rob their subjects of their women and worldly possessions. Total tyranny is their objective.

The juxtaposition of "Nūr al-Dīn and Shams al-Nahār" and "Anīs al-Jalīs and Nūr al-Dīn", in such a close sequence, plays out the doubling (*izdiwāj*) and opposition (*muqābala*) structured around two concepts, each containing two contradictory meanings (*addad*): love in its platonic and lustful forms; and friendship in its good and evil manifestations. Nūr al-Dīn and Shams al-Nahār, despite their infringement on Hārūn al-Rashīd's rights—but Hārūn al-Rashīd is the icon of the magnanimous king—they evade detection and capture thanks to their friends and allies. Dūr al-Dīn's friends, the perfumer and jeweler, and Shams al-Nahār's maid and housekeeper, serve as their go-between messengers, organize their meetings, hide them and aid their escape, and help them cover their tracks. Anīs al-Jalīs and Nūr al-Dīn ibn Khāqān are not as fortunate. The former has only Nūr al-Dīn as her friend and ally, and the latter loses all his friends as soon as he goes bankrupt. His generosity towards his friends is not returned. Friends turn into debtors and come after him. A friend even advises him to sell Anīs al-Jalīs, to break the promise he made to his father. Luckily his temper gets the better of him and at the very last

²⁹ See Ouyang, "Utopian Fantasy or Dystopian Nightmare."

minute in the middle of the slave market, he decides against handing Anīs al-Jalīs over to al-Mu‘īn Ibn Sāwī and they run off to Baghdad. They are saved by their love and, of course, the good caliph.

“Ideology of Monogamy” and Tyranny

The good caliph, interestingly, does not have to abide by the love paradigm, not even in the *Nights*, but he must embody friendship. This separation between love and friendship in the conduct of the good king opens up lines of escapes from any type of total control. I now come to the paradoxical relationship between tyranny and the ideology of monogamy. If “ideology of monogamy” breaks down tyranny’s lines of defense, tyranny also renders “ideology of monogamy” vulnerable to its excess. Neither is total. This is because tyranny is conceptualized in the *Nights* and *adab* as the manifestation of unruly desire, and monogamous love as its foil. In the grey area between, let us say, love and sex, or the interstices between love and friendship, there is space for *fitna*. *Fitna*, which means distraction or diversion in both erotic and political senses, brings together “harem politics” and “court intrigues” and at the same time separates them. In “The Three Apples” the death resulting from the missing apple in one household causes conundrum at his court, from suspicion of infidelity, to murder and robbery, or *fitna* as Hārūn al-Rashīd calls the series of events in the story and in its enframed story, “The Two Viziers,” and in “Anīs al-Jalīs.” This *fitna* also diverts his attention from court, as we see in “Anīs al-Jalīs,” or harem in “Nūr al-Dīn and Shams al-Nahār.” The slippages between “court intrigues” and “harem politics,” public and private, community and individual, and power and love, open up lines of escape from tyranny in both ideologies and practices of power. Even Hārūn al-Rashīd cannot exercise total tyranny.

In “Mock Caliph,” one of the most popular Hārūn al-Rashīd stories in the *Nights* not included in the Galland-Mahdi text, tells the story of a wealthy jeweler who gets entangled in the caliph’s harem intrigues. He falls in love with Ja‘far’s sister, Dunyā, but Zubayda causes a rift when she calls him away from their rendez-vous, and as a result Dunyā has him beaten up and banishes him from her affections. He sells all his possessions, hires a boat, and plays the caliph presiding over a feast and a party of song and dance every night until the caliph chances upon the party. Hārūn al-Rashīd comes to his rescue again, of course, and reunites the couple. The point of the story is less the caliph’s power but more the cracks in the structure of his power.

Contemporary interrogations of power, especially within the Arabic-Islamic context, have placed the burden of tyranny on patriarchy and its symbol, Shāhryār and Hārūn al-Rashīd. In Hanan al-Shaykh’s “re-imagining,” for example, subversion

of patriarchy is addressed to Hārūn al-Rashīd, who is now the flesh and blood incarnation of Shārayār, and the defiance is expressed through the three ladies of Baghdad's refusal of the caliph's match-making and marriage proposal. Such subversion engages keenly with the relationship between politics and erotics in the *Nights*, but misses the ways in which the *Nights* interrogates power and its structures and shows us glimpses of lines of escape. One exception is Saʿdallāh Wannūs's (1941-1997) 1977 play, *al-Malik huwa al-malik* (The King is the King). Inspired by "The Mock Caliph," this play shows that power resides more in how we perceive it than its actual pervasiveness. In a plot that resembles that of Alexandre Dumas' *Man in the Iron Mask* (1840s) and Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), Wannūs replaces the king and his entourage, the Hārūn al-Rashīd threesome, with a different cast, a merchant and his sidekicks, and shows us that power resides in symbols, here the crown, robe and staff, and it is through these symbols that power is exercised. The *Nights* does something similar and more through its iconization and interrogation of the iconizations of Hārūn al-Rashīd. It tells us repeatedly but variously that no tyranny is total.

Bio:

Wen-chin Ouyang is Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature at SOAS, University of London. She has published extensively on classical and modern Arabic literature and critical theory, including *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Mahdi, Muhsin *Kitāb al-f layla wa layla min uṣūlihi al-‘arabiyya l-ūlā*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984. Tr. Husain Haddawy. *The Arabian Nights* based on the text by Muhsin Mahdi. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990.

Hārūn al-Rashīd (1997)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcmGKTXdbXM&list=PL9KkeccclNUBRfyIfbHycHhs_YOAbhqCZz

Hārūn al-Rashīd (2018)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qI5a-4gohlQ&list=PLDsEOSGNngQ0zx0mpMqN30RF0hsnJBF5E>

Ibn Khaldūn, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. *Dīwān al-mubtada’ wa l-khabar fī tārikh al-‘arab wa l-barbar*. Ed. Khalīl Shihāda. Beirut: Dār al-Fkir, 2001.

Ibn al-Nadīm, Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq. *Al-fihrist*, ed. Riḍā al-Mazandarānī. Dār al-Masīra, 1988).

al-Iṣfahānī, Abū al-Faraj. *Kitāb al-aghānī*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1992.

al-Sarrāj, Abū Muḥammad Ja‘far Ibn Aḥmad Ibn al-Ḥasan. *Maṣāri‘ al-‘ushshāq*. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.

al-Shaykh, Hanan. *One Thousand and One Nights: A new re-imagining*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011.

al-Tawḥīdī, Abū Ḥayyān. *al-Ṣadaqa wa l-ṣadiq*, ed. ‘Alī Mutawallī. Cairo?: Maktabat al-Ādāb, 1972).

Secondary Sources

‘Abd al-Ghaffār, Ḥasan. *Hārūn al-Rashīd: al-khalīfa al-muftarā ‘alayhi*. Giza: al-Dār al-‘Ālamiyya li l-Kutub wa l-Nashr, 2009.

Abū Khalīl, Shawqī. *Hārūn al-Rashīd: amīr al-kulafā’ wa ajall mulūk al-dunyā*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1996.

Amīn, Aḥmad. *Hārūn al-Rashīd*. n.d. Accessed 31 August 2021 via Hindawi.org: <https://www.hindawi.org/books/51719608/>

Bauer, Thomas. *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, tr. Heinrich Bietersfeldt and Tricia Tunstall, New York: Columbia University Press, 2021.

Canning, John. *100 Great Kings, Queens, and Rulers of the World*. New York: Taplinger Pub. Co., 1968.

Clot, André. *Harun al-Rashid and the World of The Thousand and One Nights*. Tr. John Howe. 1986. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780941533652/Harun-al-Rashid-and-the-World-of-The-Thousand-and-One-Nights>. Accessed 31 August 2021.

Klonsky, Milton. *The Fabulous Ego; Absolute Power in History*. New York: Quadrangle, 1974.

Marzolph, Ulrich and Richard van Leeuwen, eds. *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2004.

al-Qaṭṭān, Aḥmad and Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Zayn, *Hārūn al-Rashīd: al-khalīfa al-maẓlūm*. Alexandria: Dār al-Īmān, 2001.

Yūnus, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. *al-Istibdād al-sulṭawī wa l-fasād al-jinsī fī alf layla wa layla*. Beirut: al-Dār al-‘Arabiyya li-‘Ulūm, 2007.

Ouyang, Wen-chin. “Romancing the Epic: ‘Umar al-Nu‘mān as Narrative of Empowerment,” 5-18. In *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* 3:1 (January 2000).

_____. “The Epical Turn of Romance: Love in the Narrative of ‘Umar al-Nu‘mān,” 485-504. *Oriente Moderno* 19:1 (2002).

_____. “Utopian Fantasy or Dystopian Nightmare: Trajectories of Desire in Classical Arabic and Chinese Fiction,” 323-351. In *Le repertoire narrative arabe medieval: transmission et ouverture*, ed. Aboubakr Chraïbi, Frederic Bauden and Antonella Ghersetti. Geneve: Droz, 2008.

_____. “Ṣadāqat al-rijāl wa l-ukhuwwa fī l-thaqātayn al-ṣīniyya wa l-‘arabiyya,” 145-172. In *Alif: A Journal of Comparative Poetics* 36 (2015),

_____. "Trickster Jester: on humour, word play and laughter in the *Arabian Nights*," 1: 32-58. In Bendix, Regina and Dorothy Noyes (eds.), *Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Ulrich Marzolph*. Dortmund: Verlag für Orientkunde, 2018.

al-Shaar, Nuha. *Ethics in Islam: Friendship in the Political Thought of al-Tawhidi and His Contemporaries*. New York: Routledge, 2014.