

Picturing Fantasies

Illustrations of the *Arabian Nights*

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Robert Irwin's *Visions of the Jinn* looks at the illustrations of the *Arabian Nights* and provides a unique account of the history of publishing in modern Europe. By engaging this central work of orientalism, he retraces the evolution of European representations of the Arab world.

Reviewed: Robert Irwin, *Visions of the Jinn: Illustrators of the Arabian Nights*, London: The Arcadian Library in association with Oxford University Press, 2010, 240 pp., £120.

In this richly illustrated book, Robert Irwin revisits the iconography of the *Nights*, from Galland's translation to 20th century comic strips and movie adaptations. He thus provides a new insight into a fascinating editorial history and displays ample material "to analyse the evolutions of European representations of the Arab world and the fantasies projected on it".

Never before had we been given to contemplate such a wide array of illustrations that came to constitute the iconographic side of a collection of oriental tales,¹ known in French as *Les mille et une nuits* and in English as *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*, which, since their first translation in French by Antoine Galland at the very beginning of the eighteenth century, have never stopped being read in Europe by children and adults alike. Robert Irwin's large book (240 pages of 9.9 inches length and 12.8 inches width) achieves this by sampling some choice images (150 halftones in total) from the various editions of the *Nights*, thus introducing his readers to the iconographic history of this collection of tales, from the first steel and copper plates engravings to the revival of woodblock engraving in the nineteenth century and, later on, to lithography, chromolithography and photolithography.

¹ Only Jeff A. Menges published a monography on the subject but the the illustrations he was dealing with started only with Dulac (1882-1953). See Jeff A. Menges (2008), *Arabian Nights Illustrated: Art of Dulac, Folkard, Parrish and others*.

This history of illustrating the *Nights*, which will certainly appeal to a very broad reading public for the richness of its contents – although the costliness of the book somewhat qualifies this assumption – may also catch the attention of scholars working on the *Arabian Nights* or, more generally, in the field of the history of books or on the relation between texts and images. Indeed, Irwin’s text purveys information on publishers, illustrators, and engravers, but also on editorial policies or on the evolutions of the reading public and its tastes, thus providing the factual background of the history of illustrating the *Nights*.

Visions of the Jinn

Interestingly enough, it took about a century for the *Arabian Nights* to get illustrated. The first illustrated edition (and by illustrated is meant only a frontispiece) is a pirated one published in The Hague in 1729. The frontispiece is from the Dutch engraver David Coster. The first copyright editions of the *Nights* which contained any illustrations at all are the ones included in the French anthology of fairy tales entitled *Le cabinet des fées* (1785-89) and illustrated by Pierre Marrillier, and the London edition of *The Arabian Nights* published in 1785 and illustrated by Thomas Stothard.

British Copyright

In early modern England, the guild responsible for the enforcement of copyright regulations and censorship policies was the Stationers’ Company, created in 1403, and which received a Royal Charter in 1557. From then on, its members had a monopoly over book production, meaning that the ownership of a text could not be legally sold and that the text could not be published by anyone else. Thus, each book published was entered in the Company’s register with the name of the owner of the copy next to it. The Company’s Royal Charter was regularly renewed by Parliament until 1694, when Parliament did not renew it and the monopoly of the Stationers’ Company lapsed. This situation lasted until 1709 with the voting of the Copyright Act, which came into force in 1710 as the Statute of Anne. This copyright statute granted legal protection to the authors of books or to the purchasers of the copies (i.e. publishers) for a finite duration of 14 years, renewable once, and 21 years for books already in print. The availability of copyrights to everyone effectively curtailed the monopoly of the Stationers’ Company. However, this system did not encourage the production of new ideas and the publication of new books since the owners of the copies of books preferred to reprint the books for which they already possessed a copyright, rather than buying new copyrights for new publications. In fact, the battle for and against perpetual copyrights raged on until 1774 when the House of Lords officially rejected the doctrine of “common law copyright”, or perpetual copyright, supported by the London booksellers, thus affirming the existence of a public domain and securing its expansion. For further details, see John Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, London, Croom Helm, 1988.

To highlight this chronological disjunction between text and images Robert Irwin entitled his first part “At the Beginning was the Word”. Indeed, Irwin’s book is divided into four parts following a simple chronological order which reflects changes in illustrating and/or publishing

techniques. Thus, the other three parts are successively entitled: “The Boxwood Jinn” (marking the revival to woodblock engraving in the nineteenth century), “Photographing the Jinn”, and “Colouring the Jinn”. The amount of text contained in each part is small. There is just enough to introduce the engravers and illustrators of the period, information on the techniques used, and also indications on the changing tastes and expectations of the reading public. It is then followed by long series of coloured reproductions in A4 of the various illustrations presented in the introductory text. Each picture is well referenced and some additional comments are added on the left and right margins of the pictures, enabling the reader to locate each image within the text of the *Nights* and to reconnect it with the history of the book.

As far as the first illustrations are concerned, Irwin notes some recurring features, such as the illustrators’ borrowing from pictures of classical or biblical subjects. Indeed, the Arab protagonists are often portrayed wearing the Roman toga or contemporary dress with only a turban loosely tied up around their heads to connote the Eastern provenance of these characters. The architecture of the settings is systematically classical. It is, indeed, quite striking to compare the first illustration of the *Nights*, which shows Shahrazad talking to the Sultan Shahriyar in a large canopied bed placed in the centre of a grandly classical interior design, with later illustrations of the prototypical sultana or harem girl enticingly stretched out on a sofa. The only explanation adduced by Irwin to account for this lack of verisimilitude is the scarcity of visual sources available at the time. However, other considerations, such as the marketability of such books but also the question of literary value and taste, have to be taken into account.

Irwin’s arguments are more cogent when he explains what is typical in the drawings of each illustrators and when he brings in elements of contextualisation, which give insights into the techniques available, the editorial policies that illustrators had to comply with, their status and the networks in which they moved. If Marillier’s illustrations are described as decorous and polite, Stothard is said to be good at picturing the drama of the moment, in the true manner of the English engraver William Hogarth. Similarly, Smirk’s 24 paintings, engraved by C. Armstrong on steel plates, for Forster’s new translation of Galland’s *Nights* in English have a European rather than an Islamic feel about them, the interiors being inspired by Dutch genre paintings and the exteriors looking like the English countryside. These illustrations were reused in Jonathan Scott’s new translation of the *Nights* from Arabic manuscripts in 1811.

The Impact of Mass Publication

Irwin finally argues that the discovery of Moorish Spain by French and British artists served

as a landmark in the history of the illustration of the *Nights* and that the illustrated survey of Moorish architecture by travellers such as Frederick Lewis, David Roberts, Owen Jones and Joseph Philibert Girault in the 1830s “swelled the slim repertoire of hack illustrators in Paris and London” (28).

New turns in the history of illustrating the *Nights* were also taken when the oriental tales were adapted for children and when, in the course of the nineteenth century, the rate of literacy increased and the demand for cheap publications went up accordingly. The second part of *Visions of the Jinn* tells us the story of new techniques being experimented for mass publication on cheap paper. Thomas Bewick is said to have revived the popularity of woodblock in the nineteenth century by transferring the technique of intaglio printing onto boxwood. The traveller and orientalist Edward Lane benefited from these inventions and both his survey entitled *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836) and his translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* (1838-40) were illustrated and sold at a cheap price. Not only the text but also the pictures had a didactic function, and thus needed to be accurate: “[...] as far as Lane was concerned, the chief purpose of Harvey’s illustrations was not to stimulate the imagination or supplement the storyline, but rather to introduce the British reader to the authentic look on the Arab world” (64).

After the Lane-Harvey ethnographic interpretation of the *Nights* (which, incidentally, was published by Charles Knight, the founder of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge), more fanciful representations, influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites movement in the arts, were preferred. The *Dalziel’s Illustrated Arabian Nights Entertainments*, which first appeared on poor quality paper in 104 instalments and was later bound in a quarto version in 1864, was based on Forster’s bowdlerized and moralizing translation of Galland and the text was only a pretext for the editors to get a panel of the best illustrators of the time (including John Tenniel, Millais, George Pinwell, and Arthur Boyd Houghton) to draw for them. The Morizot edition of *Les mille et une nuits* (1864) and the Jouast edition of 1881-82 were the first to have their illustrations etched. As in the case of the Dalziel firm, these editors chose illustrators with a reputation (Gavarni and Wattier for Morizot’s edition), which secured a profit.

New Techniques, New Representations

In “Photographing the Jinn”, Irwin explains the establishment of the technique of photolithography in the 1880s and argues that it allowed more curves into the images and freed the illustrators from the interpretation of the engraver. Eventually, in the turn of the century, it was replaced by half-tone printing which brought all shades of grey into the illustrations. Along these

technological innovations, Irwin discusses the stylistic influence of Japanese art, and its use of vibrant colours, on illustrators of books, such as Walter Crane's *Aladdin's Picture Book* (1874). Richard Burton's translation of the *Nights* in ten volumes in 1885, and supplemented with six other volumes in 1886-88, is considered by literary critics as a landmark in the history of the book. Indeed, Burton's translation is based on a fuller version than the Bulaq text used by Lane and was unbowdlerized. The exotic features and what would have looked like obscene scenes to a Victorian readership were emphasised by Letchford's fanciful and erotic illustrations.

Albert Letchford was one of the few illustrators of the *Nights* who was also qualified as an Orientalist painter. Frank Brangwyn was another painter belonging to this genre and, in the latter's case, the artistic affiliation is perceptible in his tendency to avoid dramatic, supernatural or erotic scenes and his preference for realistic street scenes. However, as Irwin notes, the profession of book illustrator, and especially in the popular literature book market, was not attractive enough, even financially speaking, for artists accustomed to grand style painting.

Irwin concludes this third part with Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations of *Ali Baba* (1897) and the influence of the Art Nouveau movement, with its stylisation and its delight in curves and volumes, on Beardsley.

The last part, "Colouring the Jinn", is about the introduction and evolution of colouring techniques in the early twentieth century and, as the reader gathers from the different lives of illustrators he/she is presented with, about the evolutions of the status of the illustrator, who would stand by then on an equal footing with renowned painters. Interestingly enough, the new half-tone process allowed illustrators to keep possession of their original paintings, which they subsequently sold, in the case of British illustrators, in The Leicester Square Galleries, which became a "leading spot" for such sales (132). Thus, Georges Newnes, who published in 1899 a new version of the *Arabian Nights* for children, hired painters with a reputation, such as William Heath Robinson, who had trained at the Royal Academy Schools of Painting, for the 250 drawings to be inserted in his edition. Robinson did the "Aladdin" stories, while Helen Stratton worked on "Sinbad". These illustrators let their own styles and interpretations show through. For instance, Stratton's figures are characteristically elongated while Robinson's tend towards the grotesque.

These illustrators appear to have benefited, as Irwin puts it, from publishing "during the golden age of children literature" (136), and the introduction of expensively illustrated gift books opened a new market for them. Thus, Arthur Rackham, who is still considered today as a pioneer of

the genre, included seven Arabian Nights illustrations into his *The Arthur Rackham Fairy Book* (1933).

The first illustrations of the *Nights* to be reproduced in colour were Edmund Dulac's fifty watercolours for the *Stories from the Arabian Nights* (1907), as retold by Laurence Houseman. They enhanced the volume so beautifully that Dulac's contribution was again solicited for Houseman's *Ali Baba* (1911), *The Princess Badoura* (1913), and *Sindbad the Sailor* (1914).

Diverse Influences Leading to Hybrid Illustrations

The influence of Persian and Arabic miniature paintings is also perceptible in Dulac's illustrations, with, for instance, his use of tilted floor, multiple viewpoints, and his reduction of the depth of the picture, his decorative use of colours and his lack of shadows. According to Irwin, this influence was something new and to be accounted for by the circulation of such artifacts in Europe and their careful study, as carried out by F.R. Martin in *The Miniature Painting and Painters of Persia, India and Turkey* (1912) and by Percy Brown in *Indian Painting under the Mughals* (1924). Robert Irwin then contemplates the influence of Art Deco in Kay Rasmus Nielsen's and in Virginia Frances Sterett's illustrations and pays attention to the original style of the German illustrator Max Slevogt (1868-1932), of Marc Chagall, Pauline Baynes, Eric Fraser and Errol Le Cain.

Bringing his study to a close, Robert Irwin outlines the consecutive paradigms which constitute the history of illustrating the *Nights*: "This study has traced a progression from the courtly pastoral to ethnographic realism and from there to stylized fantasy. There is also a progression from attempts to represent the Orient to attempts to assimilate its style. As the decades progressed, the world of the Arabian Nights came to look more and more strange, for there is little sense of the Otherness of the Orient in the art of Coster, Smirke or Stothard" (239).

Thus, *Visions of the Jinn* takes us through the fascinating history of illustrating a book, namely *The Arabian Nights*, which has, for centuries, allured and inspired generations of readers, adults and children alike. It displays an incredible array of illustrations and provides insight into the lives and influences of illustrators, engravers and publishers. It also purveys indications about the different engraving processes, printing techniques, and about the quality of the books. Finally, it indicates the different ways in which Europe assimilated a foreign text and, by unearthing classical, biblical or other iconographic hypertexts, Irwin highlights the essentially hybrid nature of these illustrations. Even when they depict, as in the case of Orientalist illustrators, street scenes which look realistic, the very affiliation of the illustrator to this school of painting acts as a filter between

the image and the text and the image and reality.

However, the survey produced in *Visions of the Jinn* is not a comprehensive one and the selection of images remains problematically framed. Indeed, it is based on personal tastes rather than on a scientific overview. As Irwin argues in his preface: “I have concentrated on illustrated editions of artistic merit or of significance for other reasons”; but he never goes on to define what “artistic merit” consists in or what those “other reasons” might be (6).

One point related to Irwin’s insufficiently problematised selection of material is his reliance on the collections of the Arcadian Library, which, though impressive, restricted the scope of his enquiry, for instance by focusing mostly, if not entirely, on French and English versions of the *Nights*. Considering the very transnational nature of the text, this is perhaps to be regretted. The book equally lacks a clear presentation of the holdings of the Arcadian Library. Indeed, this would have helped the reader put Irwin’s selection process and the end result in perspective and would have made Irwin’s choices seem less arbitrary.

Furthermore, *Visions of the Jinn* does not provide a thorough study of the evolving nature of the interactions between the different versions of the text and their illustrations. Irwin’s purpose is more to give an outline of the history of illustrating the *Nights* and of the lives of its illustrators to his readers than to address this issue of interactions. He does mention it once in his introduction but never tackles the issue again.² Nor does he ponder on the preference of editors and/or illustrators for certain scenes, deemed fit to be illustrated. Equally, the question of the constitution of an iconographic corpus and of its subsequent subversions is not addressed. It is also to be regretted that Robert Irwin never develops on the political context in which these images circulated. Nor does he address the question of their ideological underpinnings in colonial, imperial or postcolonial times. Such an omission, especially when dealing with a text which has long been viewed in Europe as a source of information on Arab culture and as the epitome of Arab literature, is puzzling, if not disturbing.

Further Readings

This publication *Visions of the Jinn* feeds into a long and rich tradition of literary studies on the *Nights*. Indeed, monographs dealing with different aspects of the text are published every year.

² « [w]hat is the use of a picture in a book? It is there to instruct or inspire? Is the picture chiefly a prop for the imagination, or does it provide visual annotation to the text? Does it offer rest for the eyes after so many words, or are illustrations primarily advertisements or lures set out by publishers in order to attract potential purchasers in bookshops? Should the picture merely duplicate the prose? Are the pictures mostly for children in order to help through so much prose that is difficult? » (7).

Critics have looked and are still looking into the history of the many versions of the text and their dissemination in medieval and modern Europe (Sermain, Chraïbi, Yamanaka and Nishio, Irwin, Scholz, Lyons, Makdisi and Nussbaum, Rastegar), or analysed the history of its translations and the influence of its percolation on the constitution of European canons (Hodaie, Marzolph, Irwin, Larzul, Lyons, Saleh, Makdisi and Nussbaum), or again offered narratological (Leeuwen, Sallis, Pinault, Naddaff, Ballaster, Mack, Makdisi and Nussbaum), social (al-Musawi, Makdisi and Nussbaum) and even psychological (Chebel) readings on the text.

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More on Robert Irwin

Robert Irwin, the author of this book, and formerly Lecturer in the Medieval History Department of the University of St Andrews (Scotland), has travelled extensively in the Arab world and is Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society. Before *Visions of the Jinn*, he published *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* in 1994 (2nd ed. 2004), an anthology of classical Arabic texts in 1999, and he wrote the introduction to Malcolm and Ursula Lyons's collection of favourite tales from the *1001 Nights* in 2010.

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