

Invitation to World Literature: The Thousand and One Nights Video Transcript

Willingham:

The elements of the Arabian Nights tales are that it's this fantastic, and wonderful and demon haunted world. That any time you go out of your door, you're in for an adventure and you're in danger.

Zimmerman:

There are genies, rocks that grab you in their claws and transport you to different lands.

Rezaei:

Love and lust and passion and jealousy. These are all the things that existed in 1001 Nights and it really is what makes it the most universal set of stories that were ever told.

Zimmerman:

It's not all Aladdin and it's not all Sinbad.

Barry:

I encountered The Thousand and One Nights as a child, and thanks to The Thousand and One Nights, I have remained a child.

Naddaff:

We know it mostly these days as The Arabian Nights, most people don't call it The Thousand and One Nights. The original Arabic is (alf layla wa-layla), The Thousand and One Nights and A Night.

Damrosch:

Many of the stories are over 1,000 years old and we often know them without even knowing that we know them.

Jetha:

My first experience with The Thousand and One Nights was as a kid, watching movies.

Willingham:

Especially the cheesy Ray Harryhausen Sinbad movies, that were a small sliver of the original text.

Naddaff:

I think for most of us now, the best-known popular representation of the 1001 Nights is Disney's Aladdin. The 1992 film. Popeye has a number of cartoons, a whole of series of cartoons from the 1930's that use the 1001 Nights to tell Popeye stories.

Willingham:

Sinbad, Aladdin, Ali Baba, those are the three Arabian Nights characters that everybody knows. And they're wonderful adventure characters.

Rezaei:

These stories are what kept me alive and kept me excited and kept me going as a child. We left Iran in 1984. There was a war going on at the time with Iraq and we ended up leaving the country. And there are very few things that I remember taking with me. Among those were 8 volumes of 1001 Nights books that my father used to read from. They were very dear to me, quite heavy, but I made room in my suitcase for them.

Damrosch:

The Thousand and One Nights has often been read as a kind of a children's book in the West. But if you read the whole 1001 Nights we find adult issues, religion, sexual desire, things that are left out of the kid versions, but that really bring the story to life in its full dimensions.

GRAPHIC: THE FRAME TALE

Damrosch:

1001 Nights is a collection of stories set within an overall frame provided by a story that comes around it, we call it a frame tale.

Rezaei:

Which is that there's a King, King Shahrayar, and his wife cheats on him, and he decides that women can no longer be trusted.

Zimmerman:

(Reading): "Take that wife of mine and put her to death.' Then Shahrayar went to her himself, bound her and handed her over to the Vizier who took her out and put her to death. Then he swore to marry for one night only and kill the woman the next morning, in order to save himself from the wickedness and cunning of women, saying, 'There is not a single chaste woman anywhere on the entire face of the Earth.'"

Then every single night, he marries a new virgin girl from his kingdom, and in the morning kills her. And this goes on for three years, and the kingdom is being depleted of women.

Damrosch:

Finally the vizier has run out of women to give to his caliph and his own daughter says, I'll be the next one. I have to stop this.

GRAPHIC: SCHEHEREZADE

Alsop:

I love the fact that Scheherazade knew this back-story, that he would take a new wife every day and execute her the following morning. And she thought to herself, You know, I can break this pattern.

Naddaff:

And the thing that we're told is that she's stunningly intelligent and learned.

(Reading): "The older daughter Scheherazade had read the books of literature, philosophy, and medicine. She knew poetry by heart."

Jetha:

Scheherazade is a wonderful character. She actually tells certain stories to teach Shahrayar in many ways how to be a better king.

Zimmerman:

She has such great faith in the power of her own storytelling that she knows she can postpone her own death, night after night for long enough, for the king to fall for her.

(Reading): "Sister, listen well to what I am telling you. When I go to the king I will send for you, and when you come and see that the king has finished with me say, 'Sister if you are not sleepy, tell us a story'. Then I will begin to tell a story, and it will cause the king to stop his practice, save myself, and deliver the people."

Nadaff:

The idea behind Scheherazade's story-telling technique is that she will leave the king at a very important cliff-hanging moment.

Jetha:

That's our modern version of the commercial break: Stay tuned, right after this commercial the answer is going to be there.

Rezaei:

The King is like a little kid, glued to her stories and to her words. And he says, "All right, fine, I'll have to keep you alive one more night."

Willingham:

What a wonderful metaphor for anyone in the storytelling business. You have to come up with the goods or, or you're dead.

Barry:

She begins weaving these stories, providing a wonderful elastic framework into which later compilers could fit as many stories as they wished.

GRAPHIC: NEVER ENDING STORIES

Zimmerman:

A lot of people think it's one story per night for a thousand nights. It's not. It's about, depending on how you count it, about 384 stories that go over the course of the nights.

Rezaei:

One story starts and within that story another story starts and within that story another story starts. So do you count that as one story or do you count that as three stories?

Naddaff:

There are a countless number of stories.

Barry:

Originally these are numbers that come from the Sanskrit to imply infinity.

Rezaei:

It's sort of like the word "gazillion" in English today.

Al-Musawi:

So when you say "One Thousand and One Nights" in Arabic—Alf Laylah wa Laylah—it means "endless".

GRAPHIC: 1001 THEMES

Zimmerman:

It's such a large and various text that contains so much that, depending on how you read it, it's a different text. So in the West I feel it's largely been dismissed in contemporary times as children's literature, whereas in parts of the Middle East, it's censored and dismissed as eroticism or pornography. And it's the same book!

Damrosch:

The fascinating aspect of The Thousand and One Nights is the mixture of moralizing and immoral behavior often in one and the same story. There are constant references to the Koran, to fate, to the will of Allah, and then people are doing things that normally you're not supposed to do in the Koran. They're getting drunk, they're making love with young boys. 1001 Nights to this day is sometimes banned in Islamic countries because it is viewed as not sufficiently orthodox

Zimmerman:

It has many voices in it. It's closest, to me, to the internet. It is filled up with that which preoccupies people, whether we like it or not, i.e., pornography, eroticism, racism, and anti-Semitism, and misogyny. Those are all in the Nights, you can't get around it. And also everything that's great about people. Examples of gracefulness and generosity, and heroism.

Naddaff:

It's about love, justice.

Zimmerman:

The stories contain very tricky women, seductive women. They contain jesters telling stories, but they also contain great epic adventures of Sinbad the Sailor or Ali Baba and The Forty Thieves. They contain a lot of buried treasure.

Jetha:

The story of the Merchant and the Demon. The story of the Fisherman and the Demon.

Zimmerman:

They contain battles and wars. Adventures where someone lives an entire second life.

Willingham:

The Fisherman and the Genie, Tale of the Ensorcelled Prince.

Zimmerman:

Someone who won't throw away his old shoes because he's so cheap, and the entire town keeps trying to get rid of (Kaseem's) shoes, 'cause they smell so bad, but they keep turning up again. Like they'll throw them in the river with rocks, and then somehow they end up back again. And they smell so bad, no one can stand it.

Jetha:

The Story of The Hunchback, the story of Nur al, of...whoa! I'm not even going to try that one (chuckles).

Zimmerman:

There's a story called The Two Hashish Eaters that my students like to do. It's just about two guys who are like really high (laughs). And they can't get anything straight and they can't find their way home. And it could have been written you know, yesterday.

Naddaff:

It's about storytelling most of all I'd say.

Willingham:

Stories are our lives. I mean we work, we do what we do through the day, so that we can have that time to tell each other the stories. We crave stories constantly and that's what The Thousand and One Nights is all about.

GRAPHIC: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Jetha:

1001 Nights originated in the 8th century AD and they were originally Persian and Indian folktales. And they then made their way to Baghdad, in the 9th century. And the first codification of 1001 Nights was not until the 14th century, Syrian editions. So if you can imagine they existed only as oral stories, being transmitted for almost 600 years. So I don't know if you've ever had that, played that game of telephone when you were a kid? But this is a game of telephone that went on for 600 years, over thousands of storytellers.

Damrosch:

Even the text translators couldn't resist adding in stories of their own.

Willingham:

For my mercenary heart The Thousand and One Nights are found treasure that can be reinterpreted and recast and retold forever. They're living tales.

Damrosch:

There are texts that come up from an Egyptian source. There are texts that come from Iraq and from all over the place.

Barry:

We are taken back to a mythified Iraq. And Baghdad was the heart of the Islamic world. Its sway extended everywhere between what is now Tunisia and what is now Pakistan, an enormous empire which was at its height under Caliph Haroun al-Rashid around whom the stories crystallize very much like so many knightly adventures came to crystallize around King Arthur.

Jetha:

Haroun al-Rashid is a very interesting character because he actually exists. He was the 5th abasid caliph in Baghdad around the 8th century. It was the golden age of Islam.

Zimmerman:

One of the things that Scheherazade does is focus on stories of Harun al-Rashid, who is a sort of wonderful, beautiful model of a king. As opposed to the king that she's telling the stories to, who's out of his mind. And Harun says to his lieutenant,

(Reading): "I've taken up in my fingers and let fall all the jewels of my treasury, the rubies, the emeralds, and the sapphires, but not one of them lifted my soul to pleasure. I've been to my harem and passed in review the white and the brown, the coppered colored and the dark, but none of them lifted my soul to gladness. And the veil of the world has not lifted."

His lieutenant recommends to Harun al-Rashid as antidote to his depression that he hear stories of other people and that this will take him away from this endless internal fixation. And that's exactly what King Shahrayar needs. And it's exactly what Scheherazade is doing for him.

GRAPHIC: THE PORTER AND THE THREE LADIES OF BAGDAD

Barry:

If I were to choose one complex of stories to represent the entire storybook I would choose "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad". Here you have the very model of the book itself, stories within stories within stories.

Zimmerman:

The porter who is just someone who carries things for people is sitting in the marketplace and is hired by a very beautiful woman.

(Reading): "With a soft voice and a sweet tone, she said to him, 'Porter, take your basket, and follow me.' Hardly believing his ears, the porter took his basket and hurried behind her saying, 'Oh lucky day, oh happy day.'"

And they buy a great abundance of things, go to her house and there's three lovely girls there. And he sort of invites himself to stay, and one thing leads to another. Things get a little sexy.

Damrosch:

The Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, really explores the sort of sexuality and mystery of this strange universe.

Naddaff:

After the three ladies have had this encounter with the porter they said, "Thou must not remain with us this night, save on condition that thou submit to our commands. Go read the writing over the door. Who so speaketh of what concerneth him not, shall hear what pleaseth him not." But of course if nobody ever asked questions, about what they saw, there would be no stories to tell.

Damrosch:

He can't resist asking what's happening here and suddenly he's about to be killed. Now he has to tell stories to save his own life.

Zimmerman:

And then there's this refrain which comes in over and over and over, in *The Thousand and One Nights*, "But morning overtook Scheherazade, and she lapsed into silence, and then Dinazade said to her sister, 'What an amazing and entertaining story.' Scheherazade replied, 'What is this compared with what I shall tell you tomorrow night, if I stay alive?'"

GRAPHIC: 1001 ADAPTATIONS

Barry:

A sign of a great work of art is that it can be adapted and reinterpreted by creative artists. New renditions that are just as powerful as the original.

Alsop:

"Scheherazade" is a piece of music that was composed by Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov. I've had the great privilege of conducting "Scheherazade", I guess a half a dozen, maybe ten times, in my career so far. This opening theme, represents Shahrayar, who's someone who's really immovable. He's been doing things his way, and you're not gonna change it at all. And then this is Scheherazade, with the harp accompaniment. He didn't want people to listen to this piece as though it were a literal translation of the stories, but more as almost a fantasy and a rhapsody about Scheherazade and how she managed

It was as if he were bursting open a straightjacket.

Al Masawi:

People will stand just below his window at night, shouting, Can you tell us what is the next tale? and so on. That is imitating the same frame in the Arabian Nights. Scheherazade and Duniyazade, her sister. So later on his manuscript was not enough. This is why he brought somebody from Aleppo around that time from Syria in order to dictate to him the rest. So the dictation began and more volumes began to appear.

Damrosch:

It's a striking fact about The Thousand and One Nights that some of the most famous stories today were never there originally. The story of Aladdin, the story of Ali Baba, the story of Sinbad, first appeared in the French translation by Galland. Now they appear in Arabic texts translated back from French.

Naddaff:

It had an extraordinary translation history. In England, it was known as the Arabian Nights Entertainment.

Damrosch:

Each verse of The Thousand and One Nights is written by someone for some particular kind of audience. With Sir Richard Burton he's using The Thousand and One Nights partly to explode the sort of repressive sexual morays of Victorian Britain.

Naddaff:

Richard Burton was an extraordinary linguist. He was a great explorer. He spoke probably over 25 languages. He was really quite a brilliant man in many ways.

Willingham:

He did more than, well, than any dozen other people I can imagine. I mean discovering the source of the Nile. All these wonderful things. A bit of a rogue, a bit of a rake. Never married to Liz Taylor though so, he didn't have that going for him.

Damrosch:

Later translators always liked to make fun of Richard Burton's translation, which they view as excessive. But Burton actually was very serious about trying to convey the popular quality of the tales, how it might be recited in a marketplace in Cairo as he'd heard them recited for popular entertainment.

Willingham:

It's almost as if the, the lyricism of the language is more important than the accuracy.

Damrosch:

Here's an example from the story of Aladdin when Aladdin is supposed to give over his magic lamp to an enchanter. And the enchanter isn't getting it and is very upset.

(Reading): "And when the moor man saw he would not hand it over he waxed wroth with wrath exceeding and cut off all his hopes of winning it. So he conjured an adjured and cast incense in middle most the fire."

Willingham:

And his wrath was very wrothful. It was, it was, undiluted, it was the quality of wrath. Wrothful wrath. I suspect, I don't know....

Damrosch:

(Reading): "When forthright the slab made a cover of itself and by the might of magic pitted the entrance. And Aladdin, unable to issue forth, remained underground." ...I love Burton.

Willingham:

Nowadays if we were to do this entire scene it would be boiled down to two lines. One line. Throw me the rope, I'll throw you the idol.

Damrosch:

When we look at different adaptations it's important to think critically about what they're doing with the text. Sometimes the Europeans shade over in a kind of patronizing Orientalism, even tend to a certain racism, as in the Burton account where the slave becomes this hideous blackamoor with rolling eyes. And we see some of this going on up even today into the Disney Aladdin in which Aladdin, himself, our hero has quite light skin whereas the villain Jafar has dark skin and a hooked nose, old anti-Semitic stereotypes now being read back into the story.

GRAPHIC: 1001 FILMS

Naddaff:

The Thousand and One Nights was used a lot by early filmmakers. So actually Thomas Edison did a short film in 1902 that used The Thousand and One Nights. George Melies' famous Palace of The Thousand and One Nights in 1905. 1924, Douglas Fairbanks with The Thief of Baghdad, the great silent movie. The Thousand and One Nights lets them engage in certain kinds of special effects to create certain kinds of fantasy worlds.

Jetha:

There are many different adaptations that many people don't realize that actually come from The Thousand and One Nights. One story in The Thousand and One Nights called "The Sleeper Awakened". It's very much Trading Places. It's about Harun al Rashid and he goes down into the town and he sees a very poor man. And in the middle of the night he has his guards go and take this man, bring him up and the fellow wakes up, and he is suddenly, he wakes up as the king. And, and it's very much that line of Trading Places.

Naddaff:

Even in music videos something like Michael's Jackson's "Do You Remember the Time?" One can see traces of a story from The Thousand and One Nights. It's a story of betrayal, it's a story of a slave, who performs, who dances.

Rezaei:

Of course there are hundreds of other stories that have never been animated, never been shown on the big screen. So that's one of the things we're hoping to do with what we're doing.

Jetha:

There's this world of possibilities. A world of different existences.

GRAPHIC: 1001 NIGHTS LATER

Barry:

The Thousand and One Nights is about a wise woman who becomes the wife of an evil and mentally sick king. Through the stories which she tells this king, the king reintegrates the scattered aspects of his personality, ceases to be a murderous despot, acquires wisdom through these stories and becomes a great king.

Zimmerman:

These stories safely introduce him back into the world, the real world which he found so traumatic. You know? Fiction does that. Trivial storytelling does that, fart jokes do that.

Rezaei:

One thousand and one nights later they have now formed a relationship, they've had three children, and so in the end he decides to pardon his wife.

Damrosch:

Probably no one ever reads the whole thing from beginning to end. You find your way in it. You find the places that you like. You're finding pathways and find what speaks to you at this moment.

Alsop:

We all know these stories. We're all familiar with these, even if you're not literally familiar with every single story. This idea of a shared narrative that's passed from generation to generation. I mean this is part of our DNA, as human beings.

Willingham:

Every single one of us has the urge to, to hear and tell good stories. If you haven't read The Arabian Nights yet, how lucky are you? You get to explore it for the very first time.

THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS

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