Richard Van Leeuwen

TRANSLATING THE *THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS*.[1]

Résumé

Les contes des 1001 nuits jouent un grand rôle dans l'histoire des relations entre l'Europe et l'Orient. Dans ce contexte plutôt vaste et nullement limité à l'exemple de la Hollande, l'auteur se pose la question de savoir quels manuscrits arabes pourraient servir de base à de nouvelles traductions. Ensuite, il présente et commente les traductions européennes les plus importantes des *1001 nuits* de ces trois derniers siècles, à commencer par celle d'Antoine Galland. En Europe, ces traductions ont largement contribué à forger une certaine image de l'Orient. La dernière partie de l'article examine ces différentes conceptions, comme par exemple celle d'un Orient sensuel et sauvage, plein de rêves et de magie à l'époque du romantisme.

Zusammenfassung

Die Erzählungen von 1001 Nacht spielen eine wichtige Rolle in der Geschichte der Beziehungen, die Europa zum Orient unterhält. Unter diesern übergreifenden, keineswegs auf Holland begrenzten Blickwinkel wird zunächst die Frage diskutiert, welche arabischen Texte einer neuen Übersetzung zugrunde gelegt werden sollten. Dann werden, beginnend mit Antoine Galland, die wichtigsten europäischen Übersetzungen von 1001 Nacht aus den letzten drei Jahrhunderten kritisch vorgestellt. Sie haben europäische Orient-Vorstellungen mitgeprägt. Von diesen Vorstellungen (etwa der romantischen, nach welcher der Orient voll von Sinnlichkeit, Wildheit, Träumen, Magie usw. sei) handelt der letzte Teil des Artikels.

---

[1] Lecture held at the Centre de Traduction Littéraire, University of Lausanne, May 16th 1994; the first translation of the *Thousand and one nights* directly from Arabic into Dutch will be published in 14 volumes by Bulaaq, Amsterdam; the last volume is scheduled in 1999; the first two volumes of *De vertellingen van duizend en een nacht* appeared in 1993.

WORKING ON A translation of the *Thousand and one nights* is not the same as translating any other literary work. A translation of the *Thousand and one nights is* part of a tradition, perhaps even several traditions, with which the translator somehow has to deal. This tradition is complex and not always clear; it is partly obscured by mystifications and by lack of historical evidence, but it has become firmly rooted in European cultural history.

In this lecture, I would like to discuss some of the problems and complications involved in translating the *Thousand and one nights*, and relate these to a broader framework in which the work has become embedded. To suggest some kind of order in this complex subject, I will treat it in three sections; first, the problems with regard to the Arabic texts, the textual history of the *Thousand and one nights* and the choice of the sources; second, the history of the European translations of the *Thousand and one nights*, the attitudes and intentions of the translators and their position within the European cultural context; thirdly, the way in which the *Thousand and one nights* was received in Europe and incorporated in European visions of the Orient. I hope to show that these issues are still relevant and not self-evident for the modern translator of the *Thousand and one nights* and that he inevitably has to come to terms with them.

Texts

It is obvious that the translator first of all has to decide which text he will use as his source. In the case of the *Thousand and one nights* this is no easy matter. The history of the text is not yet clear, the status of the available manuscripts and editions is not always defined and there exists no commonly accepted standardized version of the text. The translator has several options, depending on his intention and practical circumstances.

In the course of almost three centuries, a lot of research has been done to analyze the texts of the *Thousand and one nights*. This philological labour was mainly intended to reconstruct a history of the individual stories, the compilations and the texts that have survived. Especially in the last hundred years, researchers have focused their attention on the periodization and localization of the various stories, and the various phases of development of the collection. Their aim has usually been not only to reconstruct the history of the text and find its sources, but also to separate <authentic> stories from later additions and to define a hierarchy of stories within the text. Ultimately, this research is a quest for the mother-text, an authentic text, from which all various versions that have survived in manuscripts derive[2].

The oldest fragment of a story-collection entitled <Thousand nights> is a piece of a title page dating from the 9th century A.D. The fragment contains no information about the contents or the identity of the compiler, but it proves that already in the 9th century a version of the *Thousand and one nights* was known. This is confirmed by several references to story collections called <Thousand nights> or <Thousand and

[2] For general introductions to the *Thousand and one nights*, see: R. Irwin, *The Arabian nights; a companion*, London 1994; M. Gerhardt, *the art of story-telling*, Leiden 1963; N. Elisséeff, *Thèmes et motifs des mille et une nuits*, Beyrouth 1949; D. Pinault, *Story-telling techniques in the Arabian nights*, Leiden 1992; J. Bencheikh, C. Bremond, A. Miquel, *Mille et un contes de la nuit*, Paris 1991; W. Walther, *Tausend und eine Nacht*, München/ Zürich 1978.

one nights> in classical Arabic works on literary history. The references to the *Thousand and one nights* are too scarce to conceive a reliable reconstruction of its history, but at least they give some indications.[3]

It seems that a kind of proto-*Thousand and one nights* first appeared in Arabic in the form of a translation of Persian stories, which was supposedly completed in Baghdad in the 9th century. This collection was probably used by storytellers to supplement their repertoire and in the course of time new stories were added which were already commonly known in Baghdad and Syria. In the 10th century, a certain Jahshiyari set about to compile a collection of stories which circulated in the Arabic regions, under the title *Thousand and one nights*. According to the Arabic source, Jahshiyari died prematurely and was unable to complete his task. His collection counted 480 nights only.

This small basis of evidence suggests that from the 9th century onwards the title *Thousand and one nights* was used for collections of stories in Arabic, which circulated partly in manuscript form and partly as oral tales transmitted by storytellers. Probably different versions existed in various parts of the Arab world, especially Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo. This view is confirmed by the existence of various manuscripts, mainly containing fragments, the oldest of which is a Syrian manuscript containing 272 nights and dating from the 15th century. According to some, this MS is a copy of the collection of Jahshiyari and should be considered as the authentic text of the *Thousand and one nights*. They argue, that Jahshiyari never intended to complete the *Thousand and one nights*, but merely wanted to compile a large collection of stories. The suggestion that he died prematurely is rejected as a mystification.[4]

Of course, it is now hard to prove whether someone died prematurely or not in Baghdad in the 10th century A.D. and what his intentions were. Whatever may have been the case, it is probable that in the 10th century a core of stories existed which was later supplemented by other stories, until the total amount of nights reached 1001. Usually a distinction is made between the originally Indian stories, the stories added in Baghdad in the 10th century, and the Egyptian stories, added between the 14th and 16th, or even 18th century. Of course, even if a classification like this can be determined with a reasonable measure of certainty, it tells nothing about the authenticity of the stories, or the value of versions of the collection from different periods.

In the 19th century the main editions of the *Thousand and one nights* appeared in print. The first was the so-called Bulaq-edition, which appeared in 1835, based on an Egyptian 18th century manuscript. Probably the same MS was used by MacNaghten for his Calcutta edition of 1839-1842. About the same time, another edition was prepared by the Austrian scholar Habicht, presented as the most complete and original version, based on a Tunisian manuscript. Later research showed, however, that Habicht unscrupulously gathered together all manuscripts of Oriental stories he could find, especially from the archive of the French National Library, and that some stories were possibly invented by his Tunisian assistant, who provided him with the material. The Habicht edition may be the largest, but it is a new creation which cannot lay claim

[3] N. Abbott, <A ninth-century fragment of the «Thousand nights»,> *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 8 (1949), no. 3.

[4] See the introduction to the translation of the Mahdi text by H. Haddawy: *The Arabian nights*, New York/London 1990, p. IX ff.

to any authenticity. At the close of the 19th century, an <expurgated and corrected> text was edited by the Jesuit missionaries in Beirut. Finally, in 1984 an edition of the oldest Syrian manuscript was published by Muhsin Mahdi, containing 272 nights, and meeting the modern requirements of scholarly text-editions. Although none of these editions acquired canonical status, the editions of Bulaq, MacNaghten and Mahdi enjoy the reputation of more or less reliable texts, which are somehow canonized by tradition.[5]

Although philological research concerning the *Thousand and one nights* is fascinating in itself, it is only partly relevant to the translator. In fact even the relevance of the main motive behind this kind of research, the quest for the authentic, or mother-text, has been contested. The well-known scholar Tzvetan Todorov, for instance, has argued that the supposition of the existence of a mother-text, in cases like the *Thousand and one nights*, should be considered as a myth. As a structuralist, he sees texts as part of a network of texts, in which no version can be designated as more authentic than others. Texts all ultimately derive from oral sources and are continually shaped by the oral tradition and by the influence of other texts. A text, even in written form, is in a state of continuous movement, it is not a standardized version, but rather a version at a certain moment in time, within a dynamic process. Texts are not shaped according to a linear, systematic development, but by external influences, internal logic, willful or coincidental additions or omissions, inventions or mistakes by copyists and transmitters, etcetera. Texts develop along various lines, none of which can be considered as more <authentic> than others.[6]

In the case of the *Thousand and one nights*, this would imply that all versions have an equal status, and that it is impossible to derive literary standards or judgements from the historical data. The Bulaq edition, for instance, is a newer version of the *Thousand and one nights* than the Mahdi-text, but it is therefore not necessarily less authentic. In fact, the textual history of the *Thousand and one nights* is perhaps a good illustration of Todorov's approach, since the form of the work suggests an eternal chain of stories, continually growing, developing and changing its appearance. The *Thousand and one nights* symbolizes the metamorphosis of stories, the dynamic which produces stories from other stories and the impossibility to stem the flow of new stories.

If the translator adheres to this view, he has a wide choice of texts, and in the past translators have not hesitated to make use of their freedom to compile their own collections of the *Thousand and one nights*. Although they usually boasted to have uncovered <complete and original> sources, they were more interested in the quantity of stories, rather than the quality of their source-texts. For them, the *Thousand and one nights* were a rich source, since its very nature suggested the unending multiplication of stories, while the origin of the stories was, to say the least, diffuse.

In modern times, it became increasingly difficult for translators to make use of apocryphical texts. As philological research developed and the status of some texts

[5] M. Mahdi (ed.), *Kitab alf layla wa-layla*, Leiden 1984; A. al-Sharqawi, *Alf layla wa-layla*, Bulaq 1835; M. Habicht (ed.), *Tausend und eine Nacht*, Breslau 1824-43; W.H. Macnaghten (ed.), *Alf layla wa-layla*, Calcutta 1839-42; *Alf layla wa-layla*, Bayrut 1889.

[6] T. Todorov, <Le récit primitif,>in: *Poétique de la prose*, Paris 1971, p. 66-68.

was established, at least to a certain extent, the necessity to translate from original sources also increased. A remarkable example in this respect, is a new French translation which is currently being prepared by two French scholars, André Miquel and Jamal Eddine Bencheikh. The translation project has been preceded by a scrupulous study of all the available editions, manuscripts and fragments, in order to produce a standardized version of the collection. All variants can in principle be included, and in fact, the texts merge at the level of the sentence, to combine several versions. Such diligent work may in itself be laudable and result in an ambitious, important text. However, this method also has its disadvantages; after all, it implies that a new text is <constructed>, which has no equivalent in Arabic. It may become a standardized French version of the *Thousand and one nights*, but it is not in general a standardized version of the work.[7]

The opposite method can also be adopted: to choose a single text as a source and present it to the public as one of the many versions of the *Thousand and one nights*. Such a translation is the one by Haddawy, of the edition of Muhsin Mahdi, presented as the only genuine version of the *Thousand and one nights*.[8] As I have argued, this claim is rather dubious, to say the least. Apart from this, this approach is not wholly satisfactory. It may please philologists and increase the aura of authenticity of the text, but it will not please the general audience. A translation of all other versions, partly including the same stories, would be a logical, but unfeasible step.

After this survey of arguments, it will not surprise you that I have sought to find a compromise between the two extremes. In fact, neither of the two options mentioned above would be possible in the Dutch context, since on the one hand time and money for a thorough analysis of the available sources are lacking, and on the other hand only a <complete version> would interest the public and the publisher. My main argument for choosing the source-text has been that the edition should not be compiled by a European, to avoid the danger that stories or passages have been added from non-Arabic sources. This only left the Mahdi and Bulaq editions, both based on manuscript sources, the first containing the core stories, the second containing the later additions too. I decided to use both texts, arguing that no direct or indirect translation of the Mahdi text existed in Dutch and the Egyptian additions from the 14th to the 16th centuries, including some well-known stories, should not be excluded.

This meant that I used the Mahdi text for the stories which are included in both editions, and the Bulaq text for the stories which do not occur in the Mahdi edition. The order of the stories and the division of nights is maintained as it appears in the Bulaq version. I decided to take one text for each story and not to mix the two texts within the separate stories, so as to preserve their stylistic and narrative coherence. If interesting variants occur, these are sometimes added in footnotes. Of course, this compromise may be criticized on several grounds, but it has the merit that it serves practical purposes, that the method is made explicit, and that the risk of European mystification is reduced to a minimum.

[7] J. Bencheikh, A. Miquel (tr.), *Les mille et une nuits*, Paris 1991; until now two volumes have appeared.
[8] Haddawy, op. cit.

Translators

When the choice of texts has been made, the translator can go to work. But here too, he has to be aware that he is part of a long tradition. This tradition started with the first European translation of the *Thousand and one nights*, the French version of Antoine Galland, which appeared in the beginning of the 18th century. The European tradition of the *Thousand and one nights* is, like the history of the Arabic texts, not without ambiguity and mystification, and the tone was set by Galland.

Galland had a text at his disposal containing 282 nights covering the stories which are also collected in the Mahdi-edition. His translation is fairly accurate, although he skipped several sections that he deemed irreconcilable with the <bienséance>, or <good taste>, of his readership. He indicated in footnotes that lie omitted obscene fragments, which were unsuitable for decent readers. Nevertheless, the first volumes of his translation were such a success, that Galland's publisher urged him to continue to produce oriental tales. Galland added all stories from manuscripts that he could find in the collection, but even this did not satisfy his publisher, who inserted some stories which were delivered to him by another orientalist. All additional stories were presented as being part of the *Thousand and one nights*.[9]

After these insertions, a diffuse phase of the history of Galland's *Thousand and one nights* ensued. In his diary, Galland mentions that he met a certain father Hanna, a Maronite from Aleppo, who told him several stories in the fashion of the *Thousand and one nights*. Galland took notes and later composed the complete stories, which he included in his *Thousand and one nights*. Among these stories were some that became the best-known *Thousand and one nights*-stories in Europe, and even came to serve as the prototype or quintessence of the *Thousand and one nights* and the Oriental tale, such as <Aladdin and the magic lamp,> and <Ali Baba and the forty thieves>. As even the existence of father Hanna cannot be established beyond doubt, the oriental origin of these stories is particularly dubious, since no authentic Arabic version of the stories has been found until now.

The history of <Aladdin and the magic lamp> is particularly complicated, as in the 19th century an Arabic text of the story turned up in Paris, which supposedly had been originally written in Baghdad in 1703, i.e. a few years before Galland's <translation>. A copy of the text was published in 1888 by the orientalist Hermann Zotenberg, who confirmed the authenticity of the manuscript. Other orientalists, however, expressed their doubts, and eventually it became commonly accepted that the manuscript was a copy of an Arabic translation of the French text of Galland, probably made in the 18th century by a Lebanese author. Stylistic and textual evidence seems to suggest that the story can not be originally Arabic and should have come from a European source.

[9] A recent edition of Galland's translation: *Les mille et une nuits; traduction Galland*, Paris 1988; see about Galland, his life and his work: G.May, *Les mille et une nuits d'Antoine Galland*, Paris 1986; R. Schwab, *L'auteur des Mille et une Nuits; vie d'Antoine Galland*, s.l. 1964; M. Abdel-Halim, *Antoine Galland. Sa vie, son œuvre*, Paris 1964.

This was also argued, notably, by the British orientalist and translator of the *Thousand and one nights*, Richard Burton, and his German colleague Enno Littmann.[10]

This reconstruction of the history of the Gallandian version of the *Thousand and one nights* is illustrative for the development of the <Nights> European tradition. This tradition was based on a combination of authenticity, intentional mystification, errors and a genuine fascination. It should be said that it was no anomaly in the 18th century that a translation was no faithful reproduction of an original text, but rather an adaptation made to please the audience. Galland himself admitted that his translation was not meant to be literal; he wanted to convey the oriental tales to a wide European audience, to make the stories accessible to the general public. In the same manner, Galland's version of the *Thousand and one nights* was followed by a wave of real and pseudo-Oriental tales, usually presented as continuations of the *Thousand and one nights*, or as translations of other, original story-collections (the best-known among these was the *Mille-et-un-jours*, by Pétis de la Croix). Most of these tales were written by European authors who were inspired by the Nights, or who hoped to share in the <Nights> commercial success. Thus, Galland's *Thousand and one nights* laid the basis for several waves of exoticism and orientalism, in the artistic sense, which emerged in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries.[11]

Galland's *Thousand and one nights* was translated into all major European languages and reprints appeared until recently. It became the standard version of the *Thousand and one nights* in Europe, to which all other translators inescapably had to refer. The translation stimulated the search for new manuscripts and the demand for Oriental tales, and it set the trail for those who together would shape the European tradition of the *Thousand and one nights*. The various translations which appeared after Galland's reflected not so much the nature of the *Thousand and one nights* itself, but rather the European vision of the tales and the various phases of European cultural history. The translations, which I will now mention briefly, at least the main ones, each reveal the cultural attitude and the mentality of the different periods.

Among the successors of Galland was Edward Lane, an orientalist and anthropologist, who lived in Egypt for many years, disguised as an Egyptian, in order to gather information for his now classic study, *Manners and customs of the modern Egyptians*.[12] Apart from this, he prepared an English translation of the *Thousand and one nights*, based on the Calcutta and Bulaq editions. His translation is accurate and faithful, although he, like Galland, yielded to the moral standards of his age, which were marked by an extreme prudishness and emphasis on propriety. Lane omitted several passages and stories, which he deemed improper: <I here pass over an extremely objectionable scene, which, it is to be hoped, would convey a very erroneous idea of the manners of Arab *ladies*[13]>, and: <The story here alluded to is inserted in the original; but, being extremely objectionable, and too short and simple

[10] H. Zotenberg, *Histoire d'Alâ al-Dîn, ou la lampe merveilleuse*, Paris 1888; E. Littmann, *Tausendundeine Nacht in der Arabischen Literatur*, Tübingen 1923, p. 8; R. Burton, *Supplemental nights to the book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, [1906?], p. VII ff.

[11] M. Pétis de la Croix, *Mille et une jours*, Paris 1710-12; see for oriental tales in France: M.-L. Dufrenoy, *L'Orient romanesque en France, 1704-1789*, 3 vols., Montreal 1946-7/ Amsterdam 1975.

[12] A recent edition of this work: The Hague, etc. 1989.

[13] E.W. Lane, *The Thousand and one nights*, London 1979, vol. 1, p. 193.

to be abridged, I have been compelled to omit it altogether[14]>. Moreover, Lane supplemented his translation with a mass of footnotes, containing information on all aspects of life and manners of the Arabs and Muslims. These footnotes were so substantial, that they were later edited separately under the title *Arabian society in the Middle Ages.*[15]

Lane's translation partly derived from a renewed general interest in Oriental tales and folktales, but it also marks the ascendancy of the anthropological view of the Orient. Its emphasis on <manners and customs> was exemplary for the tendency to systematically analyze other cultures and peoples as objects for study, to be investigated, measured and classified. Of course, this attitude is closely connected with the spread of the British Empire and the contacts with exotic native peoples in Africa and Asia.

In 1885-1888 Lane's translation was followed by the famous version of the British polyglot, explorer, anthropologist, orientalist and eccentric Richard Burton, whose life has already become the subject of several extensive biographies. Burton became famous after his travels in India, Africa, Egypt and Arabia, especially his journey to the Islamic Holy Places, Mecca and Medina, disguised as an Afghan Muslim, and his search for the sources of the Nile in Central Africa. In his anthropological fieldwork, he showed a special interest in the sexual habits of the Oriental and African peoples. In the course of his lifetime, this interest became rather an obsession. He showed a strong inclination to criticize Victorian morality by describing the erotic liberties enjoyed by exotic peoples.[16]

Burton discarded the translations of Galland and Lane as <prudish> and <bloodless> and contrary to the <temperament of the Arabs>. By this he meant, of course, the sexual temperament of the Arabs. He subsequently embarked upon a new translation of the Nights, <in the style of an Arab, if English would have been his mother-tongue>. He included all the scandalous passages which had been omitted by his predecessors and even added some details here and there to enhance the erotic purport of several scenes. He clearly wanted to portray the Arab as being casually sensual, uninhibitedly enjoying the pleasures of life and adhering to a primitive, but straightforward moral code. Finally, he added footnotes to show his encyclopedic knowledge of all aspects of Arab, Islamic and African culture, but also to elaborate on erotic details.

It is remarkable, that in his <Terminal essay> he explains the social and religious background of the Nights in 17 pages, then explaining the condition of women and the pornographic nature of the Nights, finally spending more than fifty pages on the subject of pederasty. Typically, in the same essay, Burton states: <Syphilis also, which at the end of the XVth century began to infect Europe, is ignored by the Nights>. He subsequently begins an elaborate discourse on syphilis, exhibiting his knowledge of the disease as it occurs in different climatic zones, various treatments in different cultures

[14]Lane, *id.* vol. 1, p. 463.

[15] E.W. Lane, *Arabian society in the Middle Ages; studies from the Thousand and one nights*, ed. S. Lane-Poole, London 1883/1987.

[16] Biographies of Burton: F. McLynn, *Burton; snow upon the desert*, London 1990; E. Rice, *Captain SirRichard Francis Burton*, New York 1990; B. Farwell, *Burton*, London 1964.

and the effects of the disease on horses.[17] It is no coincidence, that Burton also treated his audience on translations of the *Kamasutra* and the well-known Arabic treatise on sexuality and eroticism *The perfumed garden*, of Sheikh Nafzawi.[18]

Burton's translation is a rather weird book, reflecting on the one hand the aberrations of his unusual character, and on the other hand the complex spirit of his age. He was a typical protagonist of the British Imperial mentality, and the perverse side of Victorian morality. Burton abhorred the double standards and hypocrisy of his time, and he utilized his representation of the Orient as a kind of antithesis to European narrow-mindedness, indulging in sensuality and adhering to primitive, but honest moral standards. The translation is also a curious mixture of philological accuracy and mystification. He discusses the complications connected with the <Gallandian stories>, and he adds a translation of <Aladdin and the magic lamp> from the French. However, he also adds a translation from a Hindu version of the story, allegedly from a MS called *Totaram Shayan (no. III)*, to eliminate the <inordinate Gallicism> of Galland and to retain the original Oriental flavour. This manuscript is probably a text written by Burton himself.[19]

Like the work of his predecessors, Burton's translation is highly characteristic, for the translator as well as his age. This is much less conspicuous in the case of the German translation of Enno Littmann, which appeared in the 1920s. Littmann's version, a combination of the Bulaq and Calcutta texts, is the first translation with a modern scholarly approach. It is primarily a literal translation of the Arabic text, not an attempt to convey to the general public the curious world of the Orient, or the life and customs of the Orientals. Littmann indicates which text He uses and when he departs from the main text. His *Die Erzählungen aus den tausendundein Nächten* is still considered to be the most reliable European translation, although he, too, skips some lines, at one occasion renders a paragraph in Latin in a footnote, and includes the apocryphal Gallandian stories. It should be said that Littmann's translation is in general admirably accurate, but also rather dull, lacking the liveliness and eccentricity of Galland's, Lane's and Burton's exoticism.[20]

I have mentioned the four most typical translations of the *Thousand and one nights* which have been published in the course of two centuries. Of course, there are other translations and pseudo-translations which could be discussed in this context– John Payne, Gustav Weil and Joseph Mardrus, to name a few–, but I think these examples suffice to show first, the diversity of approaches and, second, the way in which the spirit of the age affected the attitude of the translator and purport of the final text. One can also perceive a certain continuity, however, or at least a chain connecting the various translations. This obviously leads to the next question: How is a translator of the *Thousand and one nights* influenced by this long tradition of translations and how can he determine and justify a new approach?

---

[17] Burton, *The thousand nights and a night*, [s.l.; 1906?] vol. 10, p. 88-90.
[18] Recent editions: *The Kamasutra of Vatsyana*, tr. R. Burton, F.F. Arbuthnot, New York 1963, Sir R. Burton, *The perfumed garden of the Shaykh Nefzawi*, London 1963.
[19] *Supplemental nights*, vol. 3, p. VII, 51 ff., 195 ff.
[20] A recent edition: *Die Erzählungen aus tausendundein Nächten*, 6 vols., Frankfurt am Main 1976.

I think the translator of the *Thousand and one nights* has to be aware that he is as much as the others a child of his time, and that his choices and decisions are partly determined by forces beyond his control. There is perhaps an unconscious attitude or outlook which will later be considered as typical for the 1990s. A translator cannot transcend his time, he cannot detach himself from the tradition, nor create something that is contrary to the spirit of his age. Thus, even if he decides to deliver a linguistically accurate translation, he still faces the problems connected with conveying a text which is more than five centuries old, which originated in another culture, and which is most probably a rather austere rendition of an oral text. Even if he wants to avoid unnecessary exoticisms, the strangeness, irrationality and curiosity of the stories, from a European perspective, greatly contribute to their liveliness and spirituality. An important consideration is, that the translation is not made for scientific purposes, but to serve an audience which is interested in literature and story-telling. A translator has unavoidably to exchange scholarly accuracy for literary devices and freedom; he has to use the margins allowed to him to make a text from another culture and another age accessible, understandable and enjoyable to the public. Thus, he inevitably enters the domain of interpretation, concessions to facilitate the reading of the text and the use of images which perhaps confirm stereotypical representations of the Orient.

In this respect, the tradition built by other translators of the *Thousand and one nights* remains an important factor. After all, these translations have shaped the expectations of the audience, but also, to a great extent, the translator's perception of the work. Since his translation will anyhow be placed in the tradition which has emerged before him, the translator can never shake off this heritage.

Images

The tradition of translating the *Thousand and one nights* suggests that there is an audience, consisting of readers and critics, who are interested in the work, who give their comment and who keep the tradition alive. If one studies the reception of the *Thousand and one nights* in Europe from the 18th century onwards, it is again remarkable that attitudes towards the *Thousand and one nights* are not essentially different from one time to another. They show some diversity, stressing various aspects of the work and reflecting cultural changes and cultural currents, but on the whole a certain consistency can be perceived. It is obvious that these attitudes are not solely shaped by the work itself and the response of the public, but rather by a much broader framework of attitudes towards the Orient. These were shaped by economic and cultural exchange, but also by military confrontations and theological disputes. The relations between Europe and the Islamic world date back to the Middle Ages, the times of the Crusades and Arab Andalusia.

Also in the literary field the contacts between the two cultures are reflected, first by the translation of Arabic fables, stories and their influence on European narrative prose and poetry, and second by representations of the Arabs and Muslims in European literature.[21] This means that the first translation of the *Thousand and one nights* did not appear in a vacuum, but within a set of long-prepared ideas and views of the

[21] See, for instance: D. Metlitzki, *The matter of Araby in medieval England*, London etc. 1977.

Orient. This structural set of attitudes, which paved the way for the reception of the *Thousand and one nights*, is well-documented and is recently discussed by scholars such as Edward Said, Rana Kabbani and others.[22] Some elements of this age-old <orientalism> are still relevant today.

It should be noted, that the reception of the *Thousand and one nights* in Europe, although part of a larger framework, was never rigid or monolithic. Contemporary observers expressed very different and sometimes contradictory opinions of the work. For instance, in the 18th century, the tales were praised by some because of the moral lessons they contained; at the same time, they were appreciated by others because of their purely fictitious character and lack of moralism. The tales were simultaneously discarded as perverse and libertine, and recommended as instructive pedagogic material for children. Such opposite statements show the complexity of the reception of any major literary work, but it also illustrates the variegated and complex nature of the *Thousand and one nights*, which inspired many different interpretations and judgments.[23]

It is not surprising, then, that various cultural and artistic currents in Europe could draw upon the *Thousand and one nights* to build their own form of orientalism, and to incorporate exotic elements into their system of metaphors. Thus, in the 18th century, the apogee of the Enlightenment, the tales often served as models for moral parables, in which ethical dilemmas or educational examples were presented and discussed. These dilemmas were situated in an Oriental setting, probably to suggest some kind of moral autonomy, dissociated from Christian morality, and dominated by primitive, clearly defined norms. In the era of Romanticism, the *Thousand and one nights* provided material for an Orient which was saturated with sensuality, savagery, eroticism, wealth, dreams, drugs and magic, and an all-embracing, irrational fate. These elements were used to create a form of exoticism which served as the antithesis of the urban, civilized, rational, well-organized and humanist world, from which the romantics sought to escape. These two visions, the moral and the romantic one, have never lost their attractiveness and can be discerned in attitudes towards the Middle East until this day.[24]

Another persistent view of the *Thousand and one nights is* that the tales somehow give a faithful image of the real Eastern world. This idea has been preserved especially by the various translators. Galland recommended the Nights in his foreword explicitly because, according to him, they faithfully portrayed the dally life of the Orientals, and, what is more, in an entertaining form. Anyone interested in the manners and customs of the Arabs could henceforth refrain from undertaking the tiresome journey and learn everything he wanted to know by reading the *Thousand and one nights* in his arm-chair. This idea was strengthened by Edward Lane, who, with his wealth of information in his footnotes, suggested that the tales were a mirror of life and culture in the Orient, that they reflected the mentality of the Oriental and were in fact an ency-

[22] E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978; R. Kabbani, *Europe's myths of Orient*, London 1986.

[23] About the reception of the *Thousand and one nights*, see, for instance: P. Caracciolo (ed.), *The Arabian Nights in English literature*, London 1988; M.J. Ali, *Scheherezade in England*, Washington 1981; and Irwin, op. cit.

[24] See Caracciolo, op. cit., and Ali, op. cit.; about Oriental tales, see: M. Pike Conant, *The Oriental tale in England in the eighteenth century*, New York 1966; and Dufrenoy, op. cit.

clopedia of knowledge on his manners and outlook. Burton, in his turn, rejected Lane's representation and presented his own vision as the only true and faithful one. Allegedly, he derived most of his intimate knowledge of the Arab world from his personal experience.

Although the nature of the representations differed, the assumption that the *Thousand and one nights* reflected real life in the Orient remained uncontested throughout the centuries. In a recent interview on Dutch television, the interviewer said he was struck by the similarity between the tales and modern Cairo, which he had just visited. I think it is much more striking that someone should uncritically seek resemblances between fictitious medieval tales and the reality of a modern city, except when for him the Orient is still a fictitious world, the representation or construction of which has to some extent been shaped in his mind by fantasies as the *Thousand and one nights*. Whatever may be the case, this example shows that the idea of the *Thousand and one nights* as a reproduction of a certain reality is still alive.

Another image of the *Thousand and one nights* is that of an erotic masterpiece of world literature. This image can hardly be justified by the translations of the work itself, since most editions in Europe were expurgated and edited for the convenience of decent readers and nurseries. However, the explicit censoring of <obscene> passages, may have contributed to the Nights' erotic reputation. After all, Richard Burton, for instance, but also others, speculated on the curiosity aroused by the prudishness of his predecessors, to publish a <complete, unexpurgated, unabridged> version, containing all the controversial passages and <obscenities> left out by others, and more. Other translators and pseudo-translators have also exploited this reputation to seduce the public to buy <the real thing>. Editions <for adults> were published, sometimes with appropriate illustrations, and from the beginning Oriental pornographic stories were among the main genres inspired by the *Thousand and one nights*, especially in France in the 18th century.[25]

The Nights' pornographic reputation is hardly supported by textual evidence. Erotic passages occur, but they are certainly not abundant, and they are usually inserted in a more or less casual way, without any emphasis on scabrous details. They are rather humorous and matter-of-fact, and certainly not meant to arouse or to shock. It is true, however, that the fact that the tales are told by Shahrazad to cure the Sultan from his sexual aberration, and that the stories are told at night in the marital couch, suggest that the whole collection should be read from an erotic perspective and that story-telling as such should be seen as a substitution for or equivalent of eroticism. Whether this was intended or not, it clearly stimulated the fantasy of the European readers and it fitted into their perception of the Orient.

The discussion of the connection between the *Thousand and one nights* and the representation of the Orient, is not without relevance to the modern translator. Even now, traditional attitudes towards the *Thousand and one nights* and the Orient survive and they are sometimes astonishingly similar to 18th and 19th century perceptions. In the course of time, the issue has become highly sensitive and politicized; it has become common practice to criticize stereotypical representations of the Orient, and a translator is obliged to answer questions as to why he chooses this particular work for

[25] See, for instance: C. von Karwath, a.o. (eds.), *Das Buch der Tausend und der einen Nacht*, Wien 1906-14.

a translation, knowing that it has contributed so much to the distorted image of the Arab world in Europe. He is asked how he thinks to avoid the sins of his predecessors in this respect and correct the misconceptions, so as not to contribute to the continuation of the European tradition of misrepresentation and falsification.

In the case of the Dutch translation, the first question is not difficult to answer. Since there exists no Dutch translation directly from the Arabic, one should be made. After all, the distortions will only multiply when only texts are available based on European versions, which are sometimes of dubious origin and purport. A fairly authentic translation can only clarify misunderstandings and provide new evidence for the debate. As to the second question, I think that no translator should have the pretention that he can transcend all the prejudices or preconceived images of his time, which sometimes are deeply rooted in his tradition. He should be critical, he should inform himself to broaden his view on the work and its cultural context, he should avoid sensationalism and the straining after effect, but he can never presume to stand above the influences of his tradition and age. He is not free of stereotypical images, even if unconsciously, and he cannot pretend that cultural barriers do not exist.

Conclusion

It has been my intention to summarize some of the problems involved in preparing a modern translation of the *Thousand and one nights*. I have dealt with general issues especially, and not with specific linguistic or technical difficulties, which would probably only interest a small audience of specialists. I hope to have made clear that translating the *Thousand and one nights* is a very complex undertaking, which touches on several fields of research, literature and ideology. Of course, this complexity makes the work all the more fascinating. Translating the *Thousand and one nights* is like entering a vast area of cultural history, in which two cultures meet, merge and collide, a history which goes on until today. It shows the richness and the dynamic character of the *Thousand and one nights* as a literary work and as a cultural phenomenon, which, as is suggested by the fate of Shahrazad, will forever survive.

Reference: Richard Van Leeuwen, “Translating the Thousand and One Nights”, dans W. Lenschen (ed.) (1995), *Différée, ignorée, altérée. Les mécomptes de la traduction par quatre traducteurs* (E. Barilier, M. Hediger, Ch. Langemann, R. Van Leeuwen), Lausanne, Travaux du Centre de traduction littéraire, n° 2, p. 65-93.