



APPR 2005 Discussion Themes

BALANCE: The stories in *Tales from the Arabian Nights* are incredibly varied in their messages, having been passed down orally from various cultures over hundreds of years. Yet, whether the conflicts in the *Nights* come between free man and slave, mortals and genies, or men and women, it is a notion of balance within the universe that ultimately guides the tales' moral hand. The frame story of Scheherazade gives us a clue to the nature of this balance at the beginning of the book. If this is a world where kings can decide to kill their subjects on a whim, it is also a world that is ultimately shown to be just, where Scheherazade is the story-teller hero who defeats this injustice with her nightly stories. Keep this in mind when thinking about the following discussion themes.

1. CONSEQUENCES

"There are in nature neither rewards nor punishments, there are consequences

~Robert Ingersoll

- A. What happens to characters in the *Nights* who seek reward without honesty? What do the *Nights* have to say about those characters that live deceitfully? Think of stories like, "The Story of the First Old Man and of the Hind," "The Enchanted Horse," or "The Story of the Husband and the Parrot." What kinds of consequences do the deceitful characters incur?
- B. Many of the stories in the *Nights* deal with justice and forgiveness. How are these two concepts intimately related? Compare "The Story of the Merchant and the Genius" with "The Story of the Greek King and the Physician Douban." How might the tales have treated the Genius if he had not forgiven the Merchant?
- C. Hope plays an integral part in many of the tales. Explain how hope is important to the stories about Sindbad in the *Nights*. Can you think of other examples where hope is important? What does this say about our own lives?
- D. The *Nights* are filled with stories about those who have power and those who do not. Power is often abused in these stories, but very rarely do the powerful escape with their power (and lives) intact. Discuss some of these stories and how this gives an inherently moral quality to the *Nights*.
- E. Which characters in these stories come through adversity to achieve happiness? Compare "The Seven Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor" with the "Story of the Third Calendar." Compare and contrast these characters. Why is one rewarded and another punished?

2. HEROISM

"[The past] is only so heroic as we see it. It is the canvas on which our idea of heroism is painted."

~Henry David Thoreau

- A. How do the tales portray female heroism? Is this different than the portrayal of male heroes in the *Nights*? How do the societal roles defined for women in the *Nights* affect their ability to act and the resources available to them?
- B. Consider the heroic and un-heroic qualities of the following characters:
 - a. Scheherazade
 - b. Aladdin
 - c. Sinbad
 - d. Ali Baba
 - e. The Merchant

- f. Royalty
- g. Peasants
- h. Women
- i. Men

3. INGENUITY AND THE FANTASTIC

- A. The *Nights* offer a blending of the fantastic and the mundane, often pitting one against the other or combining them to create an exceptional resolution. What are some of the more fantastic ways in which problems are resolved in the *Nights*? Can these tales tell us something about the nature of problem solving, or is the “fantastic” merely a fictional device meant to add spice to the stories? How can this blending of the fantastic with the mundane be interpreted in our modern lives?
- B. How do the characters in the tales employ or advantage the fantastic elements they encounter?
- C. Why do we continue to find the fantastical and magical elements of the tales so engaging? How are they used in are modern literature and film?
- D. Metamorphosis is a powerful tool of heroes and villains alike in the tales. What meaning can we draw from its prevalence? What are some modern depictions of metamorphosis in books and film?
- E. What do the *Nights* indicate about the period’s cultural interpretation of the cleverness of women? How has that evolved in modern literature and film?
- F. Which stories contain your favorite feats of endurance? What do the tales indicate about their importance?
- G. Consider the following traits. Are they portrayed as human or supernatural in the *Nights*?
 - a. Endurance
 - b. Wisdom
 - c. Folly
 - d. Intuition

4. THE CONTRAST OF EAST AND WEST

“The very nursery tales of this generation were the nursery tales of primeval races. They migrate from east to west, and again from west to east; now expanded into the “tale divine” of bards, now shrunk into a popular rhyme.”

~Henry David Thoreau

- A. The *Nights* have been recorded in a nested or framed fashion, with one developing out of another. What is the purpose of this style and how does it affect the reader or listener? What are some modern examples of this style of storytelling?
- B. How do we translate the morals and lessons of the tales in our multicultural society? Are the lessons universal or unique to one time and place?
- C. What can be learned from the *Nights* about the civilizations that produced them? Are the morals and lessons found in the tales unique to those cultures? Can you identify a similar story in American popular culture for each of these tales:
 - a. Story of the Third Calendar
 - b. The Vizir Who was Punished
 - c. The Story of the Second Old Man, And of the Two Black Dogs
 - d. The Third Voyage of Sindbad the Sailor
- D. In general, what is the American pop culture take on *Arabian Nights*? How are the *Nights* translated into modern literature, film, and other media?
 - a. Do popular film renditions capture the flavor of the tales? What differences and similarities can be found?
- E. What do the morals and lessons of the stories tell us about the time in which *The Arabian Nights* was written? What do our stories tell us about our own time? Answer these questions through the following lenses:
 - a. Cultural
 - b. Economic
 - c. Social

d. Religious

5. HUMAN NATURE

“It is in the very nature of things human that every act that has once made its appearance and has been recorded in the history of mankind stays.”

~*Hannah Arendt*

- A. Most of the tales incorporate a human struggle or conflict between good and evil. What are the outcomes meant to portray? Do they reflect or negate your beliefs about human nature?
- B. Greed, envy, and jealousy are woven throughout many of the tales, often demonstrating a darker side to human nature. What societal factors might affect this view of human nature? Religion? Class? Race? What else?
- C. Selfishness and generosity are major players in the moral universe of the *Nights*. Would Aladdin and Sindbad still be heroes without their generosity? How does altruism relate to a more rounded understanding of human nature?
- D. How do the actions and reactions of men and women differ in the stories? How do these portrayals differ from modern depictions? Do male characters from the *Nights* behave as modern protagonists would? Do females?
- E. What are the messages related to riches and wealth that appear in the *Nights*?