

The Arabian Nights: a thousand and one illustrations

From the domesticated drawings of the 18th century to Disney animation, the story of illustrated versions of the Arabian Nights is one of the slow triumph of the imagination

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2011/mar/14/asha-bhosle> Image from The Arthur Rackham Fairy Book. Photograph: The Arcadian Library

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A lady on a divan telling stories to a turbaned sultan; men with scimitars running down a dark and narrow street; a jinni issuing like a vast dark cloud from a flask; a prince in a pavilion guarded by lions; a veiled lady at the entrance to a shop; a young man on a flying carpet circling over a domed palace; a man clinging to driftwood in a stormy sea . . . These days, thanks to illustrated children's books, comics, films and video games, people are much more likely to have a sense of what the world of The Arabian Nights should look like than to have actual knowledge of the stories themselves. It was not always so. The first edition of The Arabian Nights had no pictures, and even when, in the late 18th century, fully illustrated editions began to be published, their illustrations gave little sense of the exotic medieval Arab environment in which the stories were set. Only from the 19th century onwards did some illustrators try to get Arab buildings and costumes right.

In 1701 the orientalist and antiquarian Antoine Galland published a translation from Arabic into French of "The Voyages of Sindbad". The translation was well received and since Galland had been told that "The Voyages of Sindbad" were part of a much larger collection of stories known as Alf Layla wa Layla, or "The Thousand and One Nights", he located a three or four-volume manuscript of this work and set about translating it. His translation, published in 12 volumes in the years 1704-17 was a raging success. His *Les mille et une nuit* was not received as a collection of children's stories (nor should it be). On the contrary, it was read and enthused over by courtiers and intellectuals in Versailles and Paris, and Versailles and Paris set the fashions for the rest of Europe. So translations of Galland into English, Italian, Russian and other languages soon followed. Montesquieu, Voltaire, Addison, Johnson and Goethe were among the 18th-century writers whose work was heavily influenced by the Nights. The Nights had a crucial role in shaping the origins and evolution not just of fantasy literature, but also of the realistic novel.

Copyright was not policed in the 18th century and books that were successful were almost invariably reissued in pirate editions. Between 1714 and 1730 a series of pirate editions of Galland's translation were printed in the Hague. Each of the 12 volumes had a frontispiece by David Coster, a Dutch artist. Since Coster had no notion of the medieval Islamic world as something alien and strange, his engravings depicted the characters in the stories in European dress. King Shahriyar looks very comfortable in his western-style four-poster bed as he sits up listening to stories told by Sheherazade. The only concession to the exotic is that he has a loosely tied turban as an item of nightwear. The relatives of Gulnare the Mermaid are welcomed into what looks like a French palace and the genie summoned up by Aladdin is merely a very large man in a tattered robe.

Artists who came after Coster in the 18th century shared his vagueness about the exotic. The preferred strategy was to dress the men in vaguely classical togas and plonk turbans on their heads, while the women were given dresses that would not have been out of place in Versailles. In Charles-Joseph de Mayer's collection of fairy tales, the engraver Pierre-Clément Marillier portrayed King Shahriyar and his brother Shahzaman in bosky French countryside, while his version of the encounter of the third dervish with the 40 young women looks like nothing so much as a scene from Hogarth's *The Rake's Progress*. Robert Smirke's histrionic scenes from the Nights have the appearance of being based on pantomime performances.

Things changed with the publication in 1839-41 of Edward William Lane's *The Thousand and One Nights* in three volumes. Unlike earlier English translators, Lane, who had spent years in Egypt, translated not from Galland's French, but directly from the Arabic. Lane intended his translation to have an improving, didactic purpose and he seems to have thought of it as a kind of supplement to his pioneering work of ethnography, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836). He thought that the stories of the Nights could serve as an introduction to everyday life in the Middle East. (Never mind about the flying horse, the jinn, the Roc, the magic lamp and the Old Man of the Sea.) His copious endnotes furthered his didactic aim and so did the illustrations. William Harvey, a pupil of Thomas Bewick and one of Britain's leading engravers, did the boxwood engravings, but Lane stood at his shoulder, checking the look of things and providing previously published engravings of Egyptian and Moorish architecture for him to copy. In general, the purpose of the pictures was not to stimulate the imagination or supplement the storyline, but to introduce the British reader to the authentic look of the Arab world. Just occasionally Harvey was licensed to use his imagination, as with his marvellous depiction of the giant jinni in "The Story of the City of Brass", or the battle of magical transformations in "The Story of the Second Dervish".

Dalziel's *Illustrated Arabian Nights Entertainments*, published in 1865, was the most spectacular illustrated edition to be published in the Victorian age. A number of famous artists were commissioned to produce pictures for it, including John Tenniel, John Everett Millais and George Pinwell. But Arthur Boyd Houghton, a less well-known illustrator, produced the most compelling and atmospheric images – masterpieces of Victorian book illustration. Although his pictures have an authentic oriental look, the orient they conjure up owes more to India than the Arab world, for Houghton had spent his childhood in India and had relatives in the Indian army.

Though selections of the Nights whose texts were designed to be read by children had been published from the late 18th century onwards, little thought had been given to what sort of illustrations might appeal to children. Walter Crane (1845-1915) was one of the first to illustrate stories from the Nights in colour and also one of the first to consider the visual tastes of children: "Children, like ancient Egyptians, appear to see things in profile, and like definite statements in design. They prefer well-designed forms and bright frank colour. They don't want to bother with three dimensions. They can accept symbolic representations. They themselves employ drawing . . . as a kind of picture writing and eagerly follow a pictured story." Crane did not merely illustrate books; he designed them in such a way that there would be a perfect match between text and image. His *Aladdin's Picture Book* (1876) is ravishing and, since Aladdin's story is, however notionally, set in China, he drew on Chinese and Japanese imagery.

Lane's translation of the Nights, while certainly scholarly, had been excessively prudish, as Lane excised stories and incidents with erotic content. When Richard Burton produced his translation from the Arabic in 10 volumes with six supplementary volumes (1885-8), he went to the opposite extreme and not only kept the sex scenes in but exaggerated them, and he produced extensive notes on such matters as homosexuality, bestiality and castration. The first edition of Burton's translation, which was published for subscribers only so as to lessen the danger of being prosecuted for obscenity, had no pictures, but soon after his death in 1890, a young friend and devoted admirer of Burton, Albert Letchford, produced 70 paintings which served as the basis for the illustrations in a new edition of Burton's translation that was published in 1897. Letchford had trained in Paris as an orientalist painter and he had spent time in Egypt. While hardly a great artist, he did share Burton's taste for the erotic and so nudes feature frequently in the illustrations. Moreover, he had a taste for the fantastic and some of his demons and temples are very weird indeed. He was shy and no businessman and consequently he was usually poorly paid. While still a young man, he contracted a disease in Egypt from which he later died in England.

These days adult fiction is rarely illustrated, but in the 18th and 19th centuries it was normal, and

novels by Trollope, Surtees, Dickens and other much less well-known writers carried pictures. But towards the end of the 19th century, for reasons which are not clear, adult novels were no longer illustrated as a matter of course and illustrators found themselves restricted to working mostly on children's books. In the opening decade of the 20th century, gift books aimed at children became fashionable. They were expensively illustrated (and referred to by the historian of children's literature, Brian Alderson, as "cocoa-table books"). The colour plates on shiny paper were usually covered by protective sheets of tissue paper.

Though Arthur Rackham (1867-1939) was the acknowledged master of the illustrated gift book, he specialised in English and Nordic themes and the opulence and gaudy colours of the orient did not suit his muted and gnarled style. Consequently, when the publishers Hodder and Stoughton were looking for someone to illustrate *Stories from the Arabian Nights* as retold by Laurence Housman, Rackham recommended a Frenchman, Edmund Dulac. Dulac, a passionate Anglophile and admirer of the British tradition of book illustration, was multi-talented and among other things had turned himself into an expert on the techniques and motifs of Persian and Mughal miniature illustration. *Stories from the Arabian Nights* (1907) was a great success and was succeeded by *Princess Badoura* (1913) and *Sindbad the Sailor & Other Tales from the Arabian Nights* (1914). Though Dulac imitated the jewel-bright colours of Persian miniatures, his *Nights* illustrations also featured techniques and motifs drawn from Japanese prints and Chinese paintings. Dulac's women are very beautiful and his monsters very ugly.

The demise of the luxury gift book was one of the minor casualties of the first world war and many illustrators fell on hard times. Dulac had to diversify and took to designing stage sets, postage stamps, playing cards, book plates and commercial packaging. In 1953 he died while demonstrating the flamenco. (I hope that I have such a good end.)

Although Dulac's illustrations to the *Nights* are probably the most famous, there are other 20th-century artists whose renderings of fantastic scenes from the *Nights* deserve to be far better known than they are, among them Kay Nielsen, Julius Detmold, Eric Fraser and Errol le Cain. No longer were the jinn depicted as just big men with scowls and swords. Instead fabulous monsters flew through weirdly exotic landscapes. Nor did the illustrators feel that they had a duty to get the medieval Arab world ethnographically and historically right. Instead artists such as Nielsen and Le Cain drew on the demonology and, more generally, the iconography of all Asia – Chinese cloud bands, Buddhist haloes, stylised flames, blue jinn, palaces with their façades cut away, phosphorescent colours and broken frames. For the first time, visual fantasy fully matched and even exceeded the verbal fantasy of the stories of the *Nights*. In his autobiography, *Miracles of Life*, JG Ballard suggested that illustrated versions of *The Arabian Nights* helped prepare him for surrealism.

Most of the illustrators exploited the improved technology of colour printing. But Eric Fraser (1902-83) was exceptional. Otherwise best known for the illustrations he did for the *Radio Times* from the 1930s until the 60s, he invariably drew in black and white. He worked with a strong line, sharp edges and ruthless stylisation. In 1958 he was commissioned by the Folio Society to illustrate two volumes of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, for which the text was an English translation of Joseph Charles Mardrus's flamboyant but essentially fraudulent translation of the *Nights* into French. Though the value of the text is questionable, the Folio edition is valuable for Fraser's illustrations, which conjured up a strange fantasy world, redolent both of Elizabethan woodcuts and science fiction. He was of approximately the same generation as Michael Ayrton, John Craxton and John Minton, and his work is a superb example of British neo-romantic art.

For the enduring legacy of the *Nights* one has to go to the cinema. Nielsen ended up in Hollywood, where he worked on Disney's *Fantasia*. Dulac's illustrations strongly influenced the look of the silent Fairbanks *Thief of Baghdad*, as well as the more recent Disney *Aladdin*. The history of *Nights*

illustration has come a long way from the pedestrian efforts of Coster. Essentially its history is one of the slow triumph of the imagination. Fantasy illustration developed in parallel to fantasy literature in the 19th and 20th centuries. Illustration of the Nights followed an evolution from the courtly pastoral to ethnographic realism and from there to stylised fantasy. There was also a progression from attempts to represent the orient to attempts to assimilate its style. Furthermore, there was an advance from just dumping pictures in books to actually designing pictures to work as illustrations in books, and Crane was a pioneer in this. Over the course of three centuries a new iconography of wonder had been created.

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