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[Illustration by Pauline Baynes for The Arabian... in The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English](#)

Summary Article: **Thousand and One Nights**

From *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*

The *Thousand and One Nights*, also known as the *Arabian Nights*, is a story collection, containing Indian, Persian, Greek, Arabic, and other elements and popularized in Europe through 18th- and 19th-century English and French translations. It is a perennial source of musical, dramatic, and cinematic adaptations. The earliest known Arabic manuscript of *Nights* dates to the ninth century, although Arabic authors identify the tales as Persian. The Persian tales, in turn, are evidently based on Sanskrit originals. Like other Arabic works in the Indo-Iranian tradition, notably the animal fables *Kalila and Dimna*, attributed to the sage Baydaba or Bidpai, *Nights* presents itself as a work of advice to kings. Its stories unfold in a world ruled by despots. The most important of these is King Shahriyar, who, betrayed by his wife, marries and executes one virgin after another. His murderous compulsion provides the pretext for the tales told by Shahrzad, the learned daughter of the king's vizier. After volunteering to marry the king, she saves her own life by telling stories and leaving them incomplete, thereby forcing him to spare her for another day. Her stories—or at least those that form the core of the collection—provide the king with object lessons in the use and abuse of power. Many stories in *Nights* feature brutal despots, among them the imaginary king Yunan, who wrongly executes the sage Duban and—in a denouement of great symbolic importance—is himself killed by the poison-soaked pages of a volume bequeathed to him by the sage. Kings are thus advised to heed their advisors and to submit to the lessons found in books. Not all the exemplary stories are negative: some feature (relatively) benevolent despots who—perhaps significantly—tend to be historical figures rather than mythical kings from far-off lands. The best known of these historical figures is the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809), who in the stories takes to the streets of Baghdad in disguise in order to examine the condition of his subjects. Typically, he is rescued from the ensuing predicaments by his resourceful vizier Ja'far al-Barmaki (also a historical figure, d. 803). After revealing himself as caliph, Rashid rewards the just and punishes the wicked. The motif of caliph as folk hero is present in tenth-century historical sources but in *Nights* apparently represents a later idealization of the early Abbasid period. This idealization was embraced by European readers, who pronounced themselves enamored of what the English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson (d. 1892) called the “golden prime / of good Haroun Alraschid.” To the extent that it tells tales of bad kings and offers good kings advice on how to do their job, *Nights*—or at least the core stories around which the collection grew—may be read as a criticism of the institution of monarchy. Yet the collection, which brings together stories from many times and places, should not be understood as providing an accurate account of political and social life in any particular premodern society. In modern times, the characters and situations of *Nights* have served the purpose of political allegory in several works of Arabic literature (e.g., Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days*).

See also Abbasids (720–1258)

Further Reading

- Haddawy, Husain, *The Arabian Nights*, 1992; Irwin, Robert, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*, 2004;

Mahdi, Muhsin, *The Thousand and One Nights (Alf layla wa-layla) from the Earliest Known Sources*, vol.1-3, 1984-95; Mahfouz, Naguib, *Arabian Nights and Days*, translated by Johnson-Davies, Denys, 1995; Tennyson, Alfred, "Recollections of the Arabian Nights," in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, 1830.

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