

Stories “lodged in goods”: Reading the thing-culture of the *Thousand and One Nights*

Sophy Kohler KHLSOP001

A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English in Literature and Modernity

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2017

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____

Date: 21-12-2017

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

Written in the persistent, loving memory of Erika Koutný, whose life cut short a project far more brilliant than any I've begun. Though unpublished, her research on the intersection of synthetic biology and consumer culture, with regards to houseplants and their potential technological realisations, deserves every mention.

Abstract

The *Thousand and One Nights* is often brushed aside as a manifestation of a long-ago past, its stories recast in orientalist tropes and scoured for clues to the secrets of foreign cultures. Yet, increasingly, scholars are engaging with the text in more complex ways, realising that to read it in this manner is to chain it to a context with which it was never entirely familiar. Born out of centuries of dissemination and cross-pollination, the *Nights* is better understood as a dynamic thing, a work produced in its movement through time and place. It therefore asks that we find a mode of reading suited to its restlessness, one that accounts for what, in *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski identifies as “the transtemporal liveliness of texts”. Such a reading draws us towards a discussion of the text not simply as something that we can hold but as a phenomenon, as more thing than object. By looking at the text-as-thing alongside the things in the text, we can see the many ways in which the *Nights* can be considered what Marina Warner describes as a world of stories “lodged in goods” that are alive and sentient. Making use of Warner’s insightful study of the text, *Stranger Magic*, together with Felski’s literary reworking of Actor–Network Theory, this thesis explores the thing-culture of the *Nights*, looking at how the saturation of the text’s historical and fictional worlds with objects, both worldly and otherworldly, reveals more than simply the artefacts of bygone eras. By recognising the agency of things, the thesis proposes, it is possible that we come closer to a method of reading that treats the text with neither reverence nor suspicion and, in doing so, reveal the ways in which the *Nights* is able to contribute to understandings of our own thing-culture and current literary praxes.

Contents

1. <i>Introduction</i>	1
1.1. Loosening the chains of context	2
1.2. The thing about history	3
1.3. Omissions and exceptions.....	6
1.4. Chapter outline.....	7
1.5. Recent developments, long genealogies	8
1.6. Choice of editions and naming conventions	13
2. <i>The travelling text</i>	15
2.1. The text without a text	17
2.2. From mouth to page and back again	19
2.3. Sites of cultural memory	26
2.4. The good in things	38
3. <i>Magical materialism</i>	49
3.1. Talking heads	50
3.2. More than things but less than life	53
3.3. Meaning made manifest: containers and carriers of ideas	58
4. <i>In search of a conclusion</i>	66
4.1. The thing about stories.....	68
4.2. Shipping the <i>Nights'</i> fantastic	71
4.3. Taking things further.....	75
5. <i>Works cited</i>	80

1. Introduction

Indeed, if the network has given rise to a certain common-sensical notion that we live in an increasingly virtual or immaterial world, it is materiality itself, advocates say, that network thinking has helped bring back to the field of literary criticism.

Nathan Hensley, "Network"

In his essay "Narrative-Men", Tzvetan Todorov identifies a peculiarity in the subjects of the stories of *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, or the *Thousand and One Nights*: one where the psychology of characters is suppressed. "Even Odysseus emerges more clearly characterized from his adventures than Sinbad," he writes. "We know that Odysseus is cunning, prudent, and so forth. Nothing of the kind can be said about Sinbad, whose narrative (though told in the first person) is impersonal" ("Narrative-Men" 444). With this observation in mind, I will propose that objects in the *Nights* – and, more specifically, their manifestation as things – often adopt this role of characterisation, in some way becoming the protagonists of many of the stories.

Looking at the frame narrative and a selection of stories within the *Nights*, I will argue that the world of objects in the stories is as alive and sentient as the world of subjects, sometimes even more so. By moving objects further into the foreground, placing them alongside subjects in "a 'horizontalizing' of the ontological plane" (Bennett, "Systems and Things" 228), I will look at objects and subjects not as singular entities operating in their own distinctive worlds but rather as co-actants in a network, following Rita Felski's suggestion, after Bruno Latour, that "[w]orks of art, by default, are linked to other texts, objects, people, and institutions in relations of dependency, involvement, and interaction. They are enlisted, entangled, engaged, embattled, embroiled, and embedded" (*Limits of Critique* 11).

Framed as networks, the nature of the relationships between objects and subjects both within and between the stories of the *Nights* speaks to a culture of trade and movement in the

early Indian Ocean world. This was a world distinguished for being both an arena of extensive trade networks and what Sa'diyya Shaikh describes as a “contact zone between literary imagination and cultural-political exchange”.¹ The link between a physical trade and an imaginative exchange not only enables the travel of subjects and objects – and their ideas – but as Jeffrey Cohen argues in his innovative article “Stories of Stone”, such a partnership “can loosen the temporal fixedness of one and the spatial immobility of the other” (61).

1.1. Loosening the chains of context

When speaking about the early Indian Ocean world, I am referring to a period roughly between the eighth and mid-thirteenth centuries, an era broadly known as the Islamic Golden Age. It is during this time that the collection we know as the *Arabian Nights* is thought to have been compiled. As Ferial Ghazoul notes, “[t]he only historically valid statement we can make about *The Arabian Nights* is that it was preserved and finished by the Arabs in the Middle Ages and was translated and highlighted by the Europeans from the eighteenth century onward” (ch.1). However, while Ghazoul is hesitant to make historical claims that go further than this, there is a reference to the collection in the Cairo Geniza, a Jewish archive of over 200 000 partial texts originating out of medieval Egypt.² The appearance of the *Nights* in this “fragmentary record of loans made by a twelfth-century Jewish bookseller and notary in Cairo”, where it is listed as one of the books lent out, gives a latest possible date for the circulation of the stories as a collection, for it is here that we first get the title in its “final form” (*Companion* 50). Yet any degree of certainty attending the *fact* of the reference to the

¹ This observation was made in her role as chair of a seminar entitled “Arabian Nights and Indian Ocean World Literatures” at the University of Cape Town, 25 March 2015.

² The Geniza is also the source for the narrative of Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave Bomma in Amitav Ghosh’s *In An Antique Land*, subtitled in some editions as *History in the Guise of a Traveller’s Tale*. Notably, we find in Ben Yiju an example of the global connections that constitute, but predate, the term “globalisation” (see Pearson, “Connecting the Littorals” 34).

Nights in the Geniza is juxtaposed with the lack of temporal specificity in the phrase “latest possible date”, an uncertainty that is generally associated with studies of the text.

The difficulty of locating the temporal and geographical origins of the stories is of course not unique to the *Nights*: it is a challenge that faces most folklorists, because of the way in which such tales travel and are transformed by the hands they pass through. Robert Irwin further suggests that part of the problem lies in the fact that folklorists are often forced to study travelling stories, those typically “carried across the world by gypsies, sailors and merchants in oral versions”, by making use of the “misleading evidence of surviving written versions” (*Companion* 77). But there are other challenges besetting studies of the *Nights*, ones that go beyond the difficulty of pinning it down historically. Because of the obstacles involved in tracing what we have come to think of as a single object, a definitive text, some of the connections I make during the course of this paper cannot be more than speculation, and yet a speculative mode is perhaps appropriate to such a fantastical work. As Irwin observes: “[t]extual criticism is, by its nature, a conjectural science” (*Companion* 54).

1.2. The thing about history

In order to compensate for the mood of uncertainty that inevitably attends the *Nights*, I will look at the way in which the text can be viewed as a “phenomenon” (Kennedy & Warner 8). In addition to this, I will tackle broader questions on reading and narrative directly in my concluding chapter, asking whether a study of the *Nights* might direct us to new ways of reading in the twenty-first century.³ Here, I will bring the *Nights* into current debates on reading and telling, particularly those worked through by Felski.

³ Ouyang poses a similar question in “Genres” (see 128).

By thinking through the stories using the foundation of Actor–Network Theory (ANT),⁴ where reading is treated as a co-event between reader and text, I will argue that we are able to lift the text out of the constraints of contextual criticism, where the text-object is approached with suspicion. The “postcritical” reading that Felski advances seems particularly useful for a study of the *Nights*, as it is better able to accommodate what she calls “the transtemporal liveliness of texts” (*Limits of Critique* 154). As Felski argues, “standard ways of thinking about historical context are unable to explain how works of art move across time. We need models of textual mobility and transhistorical attachment” (*Limits of Critique* 154). In fact, within such modes of thinking it would seem that to pin the text down in a historical moment becomes simply one way of engaging it, among others.

In addition to the work of Felski, I have set my own exploration within the domain of thing theory, a growing field of enquiry within cultural studies, which has its genealogy in ANT. Thing theory looks at the relationship between subjects and objects and posits ideas around the relationship between “thingness” and materiality. I’ve referred in particular to the work of Bill Brown and Jane Bennett, as well as Arjun Appadurai and Elaine Freedgood, who consider the relationship between subjects and objects and seek to take more seriously the things of texts, with the understanding that the relationship between human and objects occupies what Francesco Orlando sees as “a far more commanding position in what we call literature than is usually believed” (3). While each of these theorists has a different approach, they are inevitably not without overlap and are more often complementary than incompatible.

⁴ The word “network”, with its origins in the object “net” (see Hensley 366), seems in some way to fulfil the prophecy of the term Actor–Network Theory. Interestingly, Latour hyphenates Actor–Network–Theory as if viewing the theory itself as an equal player in the network.

Though they perhaps become entangled at times, their combined use allows for a multifaceted reading appropriate to this complex text.⁵

I have also relied on the studies of the movement of other texts – ones that either precede or coincide with the *Nights* – of which perhaps the most significant is the tenth-century collection *Tales of the Marvellous and News of the Strange*, recently translated into English for the first time by Malcolm C. Lyons. I have taken into account the broader patterns of circulation and movement – the “modalities of intersection and exchange” (Dobie 26) – that governed, and somewhat defined, this period. The early Indian Ocean world, connected to an extent by the monsoon, was one in which people arguably mixed more freely than they do today, circulating without the kinds of impositions now applied by border posts and passport controls.⁶

For all that such contextual knowledge can offer, however, research into the genesis and promulgation of the stories of the *Nights* leaves us with more questions than answers, and the issue of how the stories passed from one to another is still, in fact, “a great mystery” (Warner in Boehmer et al., “World Literatures”). Yet, perhaps by taking movement itself as the context for this innately mobile text, we are able to decontextualise it, in a sense, and in doing so recognise that although texts are the product of their movement through time and place they potentially dislodge themselves from both.

⁵ While Morton (*Realist Magic*) and Harman (“The Well-Wrought Hammer”) also argue for a turn to things, their object-oriented literary criticism argues against network or systems theories, claiming that this approach “is an idea once but no longer liberating” (Harman 187). In contrast to ANT, object-oriented criticism, as Bennett notes, positions “aloof objects [...] as the sole locus of all the acting” (“Systems and “Things” 228).

⁶ While this is a generally accepted “truth” – Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* being exemplary of this understanding – the traveller Ibn Battuta provides evidence to the contrary as early as the fourteenth-century in notes on his travels in Asia and Africa: “No one is allowed to pass into Syria without a passport from Egypt, nor into Egypt without a passport from Syria” (“Travels in Asia and Africa” 54).

1.3. Omissions and exceptions

While a great deal has been written on the *Nights*, remarkably little has been written directly about the text as a world of objects. Any considerations of subject–object relations seem to deal with the way in which subjects are treated as objects, most notably with regards to the treatment of women. An exception to this is the work of novelist and academic Marina Warner who has conceived of the text as a collection of “fairy tales about property” (*Stranger Magic* 28). Indeed, my consideration of the *Nights* as a world of things follows Warner’s suggestion that the stories are “lodged in goods” (*Stranger Magic* 8).⁷

In part three of *Stranger Magic*, Warner considers the way in which things in the stories “are literally alive and sentient and efficacious” (28). She looks at individual objects within, and across, a selection of the stories, providing in one instance a case history of the couch, both in and beyond the *Nights*, which takes us into the domain of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis. Yet, while Warner provides a useful overview of the way in which things and objects can be seen to work in the *Nights*, the aims and scope of her book do not allow for a more comprehensive study, where a great deal more of the stories – arguably all of them – could be couched and examined within the framework that she provides. Avoiding Warner’s longer temporal view, which reaches into the Enlightenment and through the various revisions of the text, my enquiry is historically narrower but narratively broader. In connection with my primary texts, a selection of stories drawn from across three different editions of the *Nights*, I will look closely at the ideas Warner puts forward in *Stranger Magic*, identifying both the possibilities and limitations of her study. I will ask at certain points where we might take Warner’s reasoning further or where we might depart from it.

⁷ While Warner describes the *Nights* as a “thing-world”, I make use of the term “thing-culture” used by Freedgood (see *The Ideas in Things*). I retain the hyphenation used by Warner, as it is better able to illustrate the relationship between things and the systems within which they operate: a focus of my argument.

1.4. Chapter outline

Over the following two chapters, I will account for what I see as the two main ways in which the *Nights* can be considered a world of goods. In addition to the stories being “lodged in goods”, the social world represented in the *Nights* is also lodged in goods, as is the world out of which the stories developed. To this I will add a third aspect, examining the ambiguity of the term “goods” by looking at the *Nights* as a world of goods in which goods constitute moral “goods”, often taking the form of lessons to the reader. My concluding chapter is then given over to a more general discussion of storytelling and reading practices.

The stories of the *Nights* allow for two distinct but overlapping approaches to a study of what I’ve called thing-culture, a culture born out of the preoccupation with objects, both magical and commonplace. The first, which forms the content of the next chapter, “The travelling text”, involves an exploration of the links between trade, movement and storytelling following the idea that the stories of the *Nights* would likely have travelled along trade routes, that is, with trade goods. Here I will make use of Appadurai’s suggestion that “things-in-motion [...] illuminate their human and social context” (5), acquiring their own biographies or stories through movement. Alongside this, I will look at the world in which the stories are set as a world of conspicuous consumption, taking note of the general thread of opulence, excess and the outward display of wealth that runs through the text.

Following this, in a chapter titled “Magical materialism”, I will consider the way in which the excessive plays out in the world of magical objects in the stories, particularly when looked at in combination with the saturation of major cities, like Baghdad and Cairo, with goods. Here I will make use of Brown’s idea that objects become things through the introduction of the metaphysical or the “excessive” (“Thing Theory” 5). I will look at how common objects (for example, a lamp) become magical things (a lamp containing a jinni), suggesting that one of the ways in which objects acquire this kind of agency is through the

spoken or written word. While the chapter does not come to rest on a study of the excessive, it attempts to lay the grounds for such an enquiry.

In my concluding chapter, I will consider these ideas alongside other ways in which objects acquire thingness in the stories and explore how the objects of the stories often motivate or instigate the stories themselves, becoming in many instances the real protagonists. In essence, rather than looking at objectification of subjects in the stories, I will look at what might be called the *subjectification of objects*. While a discussion of Felski's "postcritical reading" will run through the next two chapters, in my concluding chapter I will distil this into a contemplation of reading practices and theories of reading today, looking variably at the objects in stories, the objects of stories and the stories in objects.

1.5. Recent developments, long genealogies

My research follows, and responds to, a burgeoning interest in two fields: Indian Ocean Studies, an area of scholarship that is fast developing within the Humanities, and thing theory and the way in which it connects to reading practices today. While it is apparent that interest in both thing theory and the *Nights* has increased in the past decade, and intensified even more recently, the reasons for this are unclear. Certainly, interest in the stories themselves seems to predate a political interest in the areas in which they are set, an interest likely formed on the back of such events as the Gulf wars and, more recently, the reappearance of ISIS in the news following the proclamation of Caliphate in 2014.⁸ It does not appear to be in this light that the stories of the *Nights* are being revisited. Similarly, while Warner has suggested that the Internet sparked a renewed interest in fairy tales because of its being profoundly iconotextual (Personal interview, 2015)⁹ – a large part of what we remember of

⁸ However, it is perhaps interesting to note that Warner began writing *Stranger Magic* in about 1990 – that is, during the first Gulf War – and concluded it during the time of the Arab Spring (see Connor, "Nightinesses").

⁹ See also Warner, *Once Upon a Time*.

the fairy tales we read, or were read, as children is the illustrations or the pictures of them we formed in our minds – this explanation seems insufficient. Furthermore, I am reluctant to rely on an explanation that attributes the rise of the *Nights* to an “oriental fever”, as Wen-chin Ouyang, Warner and many others have done.¹⁰ Though this may have been true for an eighteenth-century European audience, seeking an escape from the philosophical confines of the Age of Enlightenment with its emphasis on rationality and empiricism, it seems less relevant to a study of the interest in the *Nights* today.

Rather, there seems to be a connection here with our changing conception of what it means to be human, one largely resulting from rapid technological developments, for example in the area of Artificial Intelligence. It seems that we are increasingly being asked to redefine the human and our (human) relationship to the world as a result of such innovations, the project of what is being called Posthumanism. As Cohen asserts: “We became posthuman (so the story goes) because of technological innovation. The internet, gene splicing, cyborgs and virtual communities have at last enabled a leap beyond the confines of flesh” (58).¹¹

But attending this is a question of the value of redirecting our attention to objects; why should we take *things* seriously as thing theory aims to do? What does it mean to begin a project that relocates agency in networks rather than individuals, as ANT does, especially when you consider the way in which the project of postcolonial literature was focused on

¹⁰ See Ouyang’s introduction to the Everyman’s Library edition of the *Nights*, particularly xi–xiii and xvi–xviii, and part four of Warner’s *Stranger Magic* as well as her introduction. Ouyang also attributes what she calls “the most significant change in the fortunes of the *Nights*” (“Introduction” xvi) to increased attention in academic circles, particularly following the publication of Irwin’s *Arabian Nights: A Companion* in 1994. Though of course this doesn’t account for Irwin’s own interest.

¹¹ Most recently, former soldier Harry Parker has written a fictional narrative that tackles the dehumanising effects of war, in part a response to the loss of his legs in a landmine explosion. *Anatomy of a Soldier* (Faber & Faber, 2016) is narrated by objects, and whether employed successfully or not, this literary device is interesting in the context of a discussion of the posthuman. While such it-narratives are not an invention of the twenty-first century (having been published at least as early as the 1700s), Parker’s objects exist in a time in which one of them is able to be a prosthetic leg, again raising the question of what constitutes human and what constitutes machine.

recentring and resituating the human.¹² Clearly, one cannot go about centring or decentring the object without thinking about the implications of this for the human subject; they may not be binary opposites, but they are certainly reliant on one another for meaning. In order to avoid assuming the categories “object” and “subject”, and risk erasing the subject, I instead place objects and subjects on the same plane, arguing that bringing the object further into the foreground can often illuminate matters of subjectivity. Indeed, it is against such things as monsters and computers – representatives of the non-human – that we define modern human identity, and as Warner observed in the last of her 1994 Reith Lectures, popular culture “teems with monsters, with robots, cyborgs and aliens” (17):

Millennial turmoil, the disintegration of so many familiar political blocs and the appearance of new national borders, ferocious civil wars, global catastrophes from famine to AIDS, threats of ecological disasters – of another Chernobyl, of larger holes in the ozone – all these dangers feed fantasies of the monstrous. At the same time, scientific achievements in genetics, reproduction, cosmetic surgery and transplants have also raised tough and unresolved ethical anxieties about the manufacture of new beings. (*Managing Monsters* 17–18)

Modern technological realisations, like the Kiva robots used in Amazon warehouses since 2014,¹³ breed the same sense of interstitiality we see in the *Nights* in stories such as “The Tale of King Yunan and the Sage Duban”, which I will discuss in detail in the chapter “Magical materialism”.

¹² It is notable that the *Nights* did not come into great prominence in the era that saw the rise of postcolonial theory with the publication of *Orientalism* in 1978; this despite the fact that the stories are part of its geographical domain.

¹³ Other recent developments in robotics include their use on SWAT teams, in operating theatres, as receptionists, and even to replace teachers in the writing of school reports. Of course, a mention of such technological developments would be incomplete without naming the unmanned aircraft systems (or “drones”) used most notably by the US military to carry out strikes in some of the areas in which the stories of the *Nights* take place.

It is also apparent from the *Nights* that what we considered to be recent developments often have long genealogies. Warner suggests that the flying carpet, in many ways emblematic of the *Nights*, is more “aerodynamically viable” than Da Vinci’s ornithopter, which suggested a form of human flight based on the flight of birds. Rather, the *Nights* proposes possibilities of a more mechanical nature. As she notes, “the Middle Eastern cultures that made the *Arabian Nights*, from North Africa to Persia, were of course sailors, and basically [the flying carpet] is a sail. So this is the idea that you’re sailing on the wind”; kite surfing is based on the same principle (“Foyles”). Unlike in other fairy tales, the flying horse in the *Nights* is not the Pegasus of Western fairy tales, but rather a machine, an automata; it is an anticipation of the flying machine: “*The Arabian Nights* thinks of vehicles by which you might be lifted [...], involving other things that can fly or move, from the mechanical end to the animal end” (Warner, “Foyles”). While Irwin, contrary to Warner, uses the rukh as an example of “fantasies about the possibility of human flight” in the *Nights*, they agree on broadly the same point: that figures like the flying carpet and the Ebony horse – and, for Irwin, the rukh – “must be conceded a role in the imaginative prehistory of aviation” (*Companion* 207). Todorov, in turn, supports the idea that we can look to fancy for ideas of invention, describing the combination of fantasy and science that occurs in the *Nights* as “instrumental”:

Here we find the gadgets, technological developments unrealized in the period described but, after all, quite possible. In the “Tale of Prince Ahmed” [...], for instance, the marvelous instruments are, at the beginning: a flying carpet, an apple that cures diseases, and a ‘pipe’ for seeing great distances; today, the helicopter, antibiotics, and binoculars, endowed with the same qualities, do not belong in any way to the marvelous. (*Fantastic* 56)

Such harbingers of invention are not the only material aspects of the *Nights* that have echoes in our modern world. We have invested objects of modernity with power in a manner comparable to the talismans of the *Nights*. Not only do brand names charge objects with value, but medals, money and credit cards all have talismanic qualities, with the belief that “the word guarantees the meaning and that it is efficacious” (Warner, “Foyles”).

But perhaps the *Nights*’ most valuable contribution is in “allow[ing] us to think beyond linguistic borders, national borders and issues of authenticity” (Ouyang in Boehmer et al., “World Literatures”), something that Ouyang argues is able to account for the text’s enduring popularity (“Genres” 128). Behind the yearning for an authentic point of origin is the wish for a better definition of home. The *Nights* complicates this understanding, much like the current day refugee crisis sheds light on the flimsy construction of a home-based identity. Warner writes in 1994 that “homelessness [...] has become the predicament of our time” (*Managing Monsters* 84) – it is even more so now.¹⁴ The *Nights* contains the history of many homes while remaining essentially ungrounded, homeless.

Through its stories and through being a kind of living, moving artefact itself, the *Nights* forces us to rethink the meaning of text. This has relevance for us in our present moment, when forms of new digital media such as the electronic book (or e-book) have us bear witness to a kind of undoing, or redoing, of the book.¹⁵ At once books are given an enormous amount of mobility, while at the same time their movement is restricted by technologies designed to control access, such as digital-rights management software. Ultimately, what all of this suggests is that the moment we find ourselves in now is different

¹⁴ A report released by the UNHCR in June 2016 revealed that the past year held the highest levels of forced human displacement on record. See Edwards, “Global forced displacement hits record high.”

¹⁵ Amazon’s Kindle makes use of a technology called electronic ink (or e-ink), which aims to mimic the look and quality of paper. This strange act of moving away from, while simultaneously returning to, the book echoes the kinds of hybrid forms we see in the *Nights*: book and not-book; human and not-human. While their Paperwhite model sees a departure from this, making use of LEDs to allow readers to read in the dark – in a somewhat magical twist on the original – the adjective “paperwhite” retains the same incongruity.

but not necessarily new.¹⁶ The *Nights* reflects so much of our own world, and because it is marvellous in nature it enables our flights of fancy out of the text or beyond it; it allows the text to travel to *our* time and still be read in the context of the medieval Islamic world. It is both our past and our contemporary.¹⁷

1.6. Choice of editions and naming conventions

The stories I have chosen for the purposes of my argument are selected from across three different editions of the *Nights*: I have relied primarily on the Norton Critical Edition, edited by Daniel Heller-Roazen and translated by Husain Haddawy,¹⁸ and secondly on the Penguin Classics Edition, edited by Irwin and translated by Ursula Lyons and Malcolm C. Lyons. However, where neither of these editions contained a particular story that I felt deserved consideration I have made use of the Everyman's Library version, the most recent of the three editions, for which editors Ouyang and Paulo Lemos Horta selected what they regard as the most readable or most successfully rendered versions of the most significant stories, as well as some of their favourites. That none of these three editions contains all of the stories speaks

¹⁶ Cohen goes so far as to argue that even the foundations of Posthumanism aren't "new": "[H]uman identity has always depended upon and been sustained by dispersive networks of actors and objects, meshworks that prevent the human from ever possessing a finite form, an unchanging ontology, a diminutive boundedness [...] Recent technologies only render more visible the ways in which human identity always exceeds the boundaries of determinate bodies, is always dispersed across a phenomenological world in which *Homo sapiens* is a small and non-sovereign member." ("Stories of Stone" 58)

¹⁷ Further evidence of this disruption to the continuity of then and now lies in the commonly held belief that it is the past that was privy to the supernatural, that today's world is a rational one without marvels and magic. Yet Irwin argues that the medieval Arab similarly believed that such things "happened in past centuries, [they] happened under the Byzantines, and under the Sasanians and other lost dynasties." (in Irwin & Warner, "Tales of the Marvellous")

¹⁸ Haddawy bases his translation on that of Muhsin Mahdi. First published in 1984, Mahdi's translation is in turn based on the fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript, used by Antoine Galland, which remains the oldest surviving version of the work (see Heller-Roazen vii).

In this edition, as with the Irwin, the stories are largely treated as part of a continuing whole, and thus where a story ends is not always clearly defined. In such instances, I have made note of the page on which, according to the contents page, a story is said to begin, but omitted the page range.

directly to the *Nights* as being a curated thing – the work of selectors, translators and scribes – as a phenomenon more than an object.

Lastly, a note on naming: not only does the name of the collection itself differ – it is variably referred to as *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, the *Arabian Nights*, the *One Thousand and One Nights*, the *Thousand and One Nights* and *1001 Nights* – but the names of the stories and the names within the stories vary depending on the translation. These variations seldom lead to confusion, and it is usually fairly easy to work out who is who and what is what across the different editions, but for consistency I have made use of the names that appear in my primary text, the Haddawy edition, with the exception of where names appear in quotations or where the stories don't appear in this edition. In the latter case, I have relied in the first instance on the Penguin edition and, thereafter, the Everyman's Library edition. Where any discrepancy in titles and naming is so marked as to be misleading, I have provided clarification. I refer to the text itself as the *Thousand and One Nights* and, more frequently, by its contraction the *Nights*. It is to this text, and its travels, that I now turn.

2. *The travelling text*

Like any traveller then, the book will return, showing the scars of its journey, the markings of travel and adventure; it should return, flaunting its history and its difference.

Zoë Wicomb, *The One That Got Away*

When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things*

In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski argues that “[t]exts are objects that do a lot of traveling; moving across time, they run into new semantic networks, new ways of imputing meaning” (160). Though Felski is considering texts in general here, the *Thousand and One Nights* is perhaps the best illustration of her argument of the text-as-traveller. Indeed, in an article in the *London Review of Books*, Warner conceives of the *Thousand and One Nights* as the “pre-eminent example of the travelling text”, borrowing on Said’s suggestion, as outlined in his influential 1983 book *The World, The Text, and The Critic*, that ideas and theories travel, “from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another” (226).¹ In a manner similar to the way in which such theories are formed and transformed by their movement, the *Nights* was born out of “cross-fertilisation, retelling, grafting and borrowing, imitation and dissemination back and forth between Persia, India, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt and Europe over several centuries” (Warner, “Travelling Text” 15).

Not only does the history of the *Nights* evoke a sense of travel by virtue of being itself

¹ Warner also makes this point in her introduction to *Stranger Magic* (see 25).

a nomadic text,² but the stories themselves are largely concerned with travel. As Elliot Colla notes in his article on figure and narrative in the *Nights*: “*The Thousand and One Nights* conjures travel [...] many of the stories of the Arabic text tell of journeys across the territories of Islamdom and beyond” (89). Colla draws a connection between the travel that occurs within the text and the travelling life of the text itself, writing that “the history of the text’s reception and circulation is also one of extraordinary voyages between continents, languages, cultures, and historical periods” (89). That the text travelled, and was formed out of an extended period of cross-cultural transactions, is evident, but what cannot be answered definitively is the question of how the stories travelled. Speculation must rely at least partly on our knowledge of the context out of which the text developed, one characterised by extensive trade networks and permeable borders. However, it is important to note that the *Nights* was not always and only textual and the kind of travelling it did was not reduced to its movement as an object.

In an interview with Claire Chambers, the Zanzibari writer Abdulrazak Gurnah describes being “surprised to read tales in a book of *The Arabian Nights*, because these stories were told by my mother and grandmother, and so on, and it felt as though they were our stories” (129). Adding more to this memory, Thomas Geider draws on a piece by Gurnah published in 2001.³ According to Geider, here Gurnah mentions that his introduction to the stories was more specifically “through the oral narration of *illiterate* women who had heard these stories from others, among them at least one *literate* woman” (Gurnah 229–30 in Geider 191; my emphasis). Here, the interweaving of illiterate and literate shows the *Nights* to be what Irwin calls “a kind of cultural amphibian” (*Companion* 113), a text that

² I am aware that nomadic is an imperfect synonym for travelling, but I use it here as it suggests a form of survival dependent on travel that speaks to the endurance or perpetuation of the stories of the *Nights*. I discuss this in greater detail in my concluding chapter.

³ See Gurnah, “Literatur”.

complicates the relationship between orality and textuality by shuttling between the two.⁴

2.1. *The text without a text*

The *Nights* is perhaps better conceived as a collection of texts than as a single, unified text: “a storybook without a definitive text, and without and identifiable author, but given shape by multiple editors” (Ouyang, “Curious Life”).⁵ This is not simply because of the overwhelming number of different editions and translations that exist today – ranging from Antoine Galland’s eighteenth-century translation through to the nineteenth-century texts of Edward Lane, John Payne, Richard Burton and J. C. Mardrus, and Muhsin Mahdi in the twentieth century.⁶ It is also due to the fact that these translations are themselves based on different editions of the *Nights*, or composites thereof, of which there are four primary, “original” manuscripts, here in chronological order: Calcutta I (1814–18), Breslau (1824–43), Bulaq (1835), and Calcutta II (1839–42).⁷

However, this diverse and greatly varied range of editions is not the only reason for a description of the text as not-text. Warner goes further, describing the *Nights* as a genre, “still changing, still growing”, observing how “[t]he tales spill out from the covers of the volumes in which they appear, in different versions and translations, and escape from the limits of time that the narrative struggles to impose” (*Stranger Magic* 7). While the *Nights* might not be considered a text for these reasons – although there is considered to be a small core group of tales, it prescribes no set selection of stories – we should also take into account the fact

⁴ Geider finds evidence for this by studying the appearance of the *Nights* in East Africa, where in a particular text the names of characters are transcribed using Swahili pronunciation (see 186–87).

⁵ I shall however refer to it as a text for reasons of simplicity.

⁶ Ouyang describes her original encounter with the *Nights*, reading it not in Arabic but in Chinese as a child growing up in Libya. When she comes to reading an Arabic version of the *Nights*, it is clear to her that it is “not at all the same story book I had read in Chinese.” (“Introduction” ix–x)

⁷ There is also much speculation on the authenticity of these so-called original manuscripts.

that a number of, largely less sophisticated, versions of the stories appeared in collections that predate the *Nights*. As Irwin reveals:

In 1949 an expert in papyrology, Nadia Abbott, published two fragmentary sheets of paper, dating from the ninth century, which carried the title *The Book of the Tale of the Thousand Nights* and then a few lines of the opening frame story of the *Nights* [...]. It seems likely that the Arabic story collection had a Persian precursor and possible that the Persian book in turn might have had a Sanskrit precursor, though neither of these has survived. As for the Arabic *Thousand and One Nights*, stories continued to be added to the original core group of stories throughout the Mamluk and Ottoman periods [...]. (*Marvellous* xv)⁸

Ultimately, there is no text that was known then and there is no essential text that can be known now; it has eluded precise definition at every point. We may go so far as to say, as Warner does, that it is “[a] phenomenon rather than a printed text” (in Boehmer et al., “World Literatures”; see also Kennedy & Warner, *Scheherazade’s Children* 8),⁹ with the awareness that a phenomenon suggests an event, something that makes itself manifest. To quote Ghazoul, then, “its specificity lies in its very emergence as a text” (ch. 1); the *Nights* is its formation.

The dynamic movement of the *Nights* between oral and textual forms, and its uncertain history, speaks to this idea of the text as phenomenon, or as both phenomenon and artefact. The text’s history, and therefore its very definition, is formed from its circulation and dynamism, the result of an extended period of movement, with author-compilers acting less as authors than as transmitters (Bray 160). Furthermore, as Heller-Roazen notes in his

⁸ See Abbott, “Ninth-Century Fragment”.

⁹ Marzolph also refers to the text as a phenomenon, as early as 2007, in his encyclopaedia to the *Arabian Nights* (see xxiv). Makdisi and Nussbaum suggest that it be thought of as a kind of palimpsest because of the way it has been “written, rewritten, and overwritten” over the centuries (see *Historical Context* 3).

introduction to the Norton edition:

The Arabian Nights lacks any stable historical and linguistic point of inception. Long before its entry into the languages of Europe, *The Thousand and One Nights*, therefore, seems to have already possessed one fundamental trait that it retains today: that of being a work in movement, caught in the passage from territory to territory, culture to language, language to language. (viii)

With this lack of specificity, stability and authority in mind, I think that an effective comparison can be made between the effacement of the individuality of characters in the *Nights*, which Todorov has observed, and the authorial anonymity of the physical text that is the *Nights*. As Warner concludes, “Now in this version, now in that, it has no known author or named authors, no settled shape or length, no fixed table of contents, no definite birthplace or linguistic origin” (*Stranger Magic* 7). The text is therefore inevitably spoken about through its translations, via a particular edition, rather than named by an author. It is impossible to speak about the *Nights* without conjuring the networks of subjects and other objects that gave rise to the phenomenon.

2.2. *From mouth to page and back again*

In their introduction to *Scheherazade's Children*, Philip F. Kennedy and Warner describe the *Nights* as “dynamic, living, and breathing” (8), echoing the active role played by the text in the absence of a clearly defined subject. Another text that we can look to for evidence of the *Nights* as dynamic, living and breathing, a text in movement, is *Tales of the Marvellous and News of the Strange*. This tenth-century collection of eighteen stories from the Arab world contains at least six forerunners of stories that appear in the *Nights*, disparities between the versions evolving between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. Irwin describes how the stories that make up *Tales of the Marvellous* were “brought back by sailors and merchants” (in Irwin

& Warner, “Tales of the Marvellous”) and constitute part of the genre *aja’ib al-bahr* or “wonders of the sea”, the broader category of which (*aja’ib*) can be applied to the *Nights*:

[A]*ja’ib*, or marvels, is the terms used to designate an important genre of medieval Arabic literature that dealt with all manner of marvels that challenged human understanding, including magic, the realms of the jinn, marvels of the sea, strange fauna and flora, great monuments of the past, automata, hidden treasures, grotesqueries and uncanny coincidences. (Irwin, *Marvellous* ix)

“Wonders of the sea” describes more than just the themes of the stories, it also alludes to stories that “come from the sea”, that is, via sailors, or those formed from the accounts of sailors: “Tall stories from the Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean, the Indian subcontinent and the Spice Islands” (Irwin, *Marvellous* ix). A well-known example of this from the *Nights* is “The Story of Sindbad the Sailor”, itself fashioned out of supposedly factual accounts. While factual accounts, such as those of merchants and sailors returning from trading journeys, would have almost certainly been transmitted orally, there is dispute regarding the transmission of fictional accounts like “Sindbad”. As Irwin argues:

Most of the tales contained in *Tales of the Marvellous* should not be classed as folklore. Moreover, they do not have the appearance of stories that first circulated orally before being written down, and neither are there indications that they were part of the professional storytellers’ repertoire and were told in the market place or on street corners. Instead the tales, which display creative ingenuity and even at times erudition, must be classed as literature. (*Marvellous* xxxviii)

Irwin argues similarly of the *Nights* that it was “designed for readers rather than listeners”; his evidence is based on the fact that some of the stories come from “pre-existing, highly literary sources” (in Irwin & Warner, “Tales of the Marvellous”) and are the “products of a highly literary culture” (*Companion* 5). Furthermore, the format of the stories themselves –

the spiralling presence of stories within stories, and the fact that many of them are “artfully constructed, highly sophisticated fictions” (*Companion* 5) – makes their telling in the marketplace difficult to imagine; their complicated, overlapping threads would presumably have been difficult for a transient audience to follow.

Yet neither of these features excludes the possibility of their orality; indeed, the stories may have started out as simpler, more distinct forms and grown more intricate and intertwined as they were written down or passed on, and most scholars seem to argue for a fluid combination of the two forms of transmission. For clarification, Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum look back to the source texts for the *Nights*, which “circulat[ed] for centuries in both oral and printed form alongside other oral tales and other written narratives” (2). Yet, as Warner maintains, the search for “[o]ral purity is [...] a quest doomed to failure; the material of fairy tale weaves in and out of printed texts [...] language conducts from mouth to page and back again, and orature [...] has not existed in isolation since Homeric times” (*Beast to Blonde* 24).

Warner argues that there is, in fact, a record of the stories being retold in a marketplace setting, referring by way of example to the marks present in the margins of a particular manuscript of the *Nights*: “I think these marks are tallies. I think this is when the storyteller, using this book as a prompt, is counting the people in the room” (in Irwin & Warner, “Tales of the Marvellous”). The oral quality of the stories also comes through in the cadenced poetry extant in both *Tales of the Marvellous* and the *Nights* (Warner in Irwin & Warner, “Tales of the Marvellous”), which in many instances contains the kind of rhythm and rhyme scheme that would have been beneficial for recall by marketplace storytellers. Ghazoul draws a connection between the way in which the text lent itself to moving “in a

nomadic life style” and the development of specialised Arabic poetic devices:

The Bedouins in their moves from one place to another had developed art forms that suited their nomadism and migrations [...]. Even though writing was well-known in pre-Islamic Arabia, the Bedouin life style, ever on the move, imposed an economy of tools and reduced what was to be carried around to the minimum. Mnemonic aids were a necessity in this cultural ambiance, and Arabic poetry developed its own structural and rhythmic devices that would ensure the memorization of a text. (ch. 13)

The assertions of both Ghazoul and Warner are bolstered, however tenuously, by an anecdote included by David Pinault in his essay on storytelling techniques in the *Nights*. Here Pinault refers to the writings of the English scholar Richard Hole, who published a set of lectures in 1797 in which he records a series of observations by travellers:

“I have more than once seen the Arabians on the Desert sitting round a fire, listening to these stories with such attention and pleasure as totally to forget the fatigue and hardship with which an instant before they were entirely overcome.” This observation reminds us that the tales comprising *Alf laylah* were originally oral evening-entertainments and were meant to be recited and listened to. (505)

The debate regarding what Pinault calls the “oral performance” and the “literary language” of the *Nights* provides further evidence for Ghazoul’s dubbing of the text as “plural and mercurial” (ch. 1). Ghazoul argues that the debate should not fix a dividing line “between written or oral literature, for there is oral literature which has maintained the textual wording without the slightest modification”, but rather that “[t]he real dichotomy should be between the fixed and the free text,” where “[i]n the fixed text the words are part of the narrative and the oral recitation resembles the written text in its adherence to wording” (ch. 1).

Warner argues that “[t]he tales made the leap into the world by word of mouth: the book became a genre, a style, an image-language before it was grasped as a text” (“Travelling Text”), which again speaks to the way in which the text can be conceived of as a phenomenon rather than an artefact – or perhaps as both. While Warner and Irwin might disagree to an extent on the means of transmission of the *Nights*, they both agree that the stories did move. In her concluding Reith Lecture, Warner spoke about the way in which fairy tales, such as the stories that constitute the *Nights* as we know it today, were retold and passed on and mixed up, arguing against the possibility of “nativism” or tethering to a specific home:

The hearthside crone who passes on the wisdom of the tribe, who epitomises that once upon a time when all was well, has always been a polyglot cosmopolitan, in spite of her homely head shawl and those old, regional clogs she wears and her funny beaked nose and her spinning wheel. Her oral tradition, too, has been mixed and brewed and peppered and spiced with much written, literary material from all kinds of heterogeneous origins – the transmission of myths and romances, fables and proverbs took multiple pathways, as it still does today. This motley, mongrel, volatile character of folklore is of crucial importance, because even while stories are patently connected to particular places and peoples, [...] they aren’t immutable. [...] Home lies ahead, in the unfolding of the story in the future, not behind waiting to be regained. (*Managing Monsters* 87–88)

What we see as the *Nights* today is the result of the mixing, brewing, peppering and spicing that Warner describes. While we do indeed yearn for a clear and consistent narrative to tell about the formation and development of the collection, the story of the *Nights* is as complex as many of the stories it contains.

Further complexity is revealed if we look beyond the small piece of evidence found in the Geniza. Irwin, for one, extends his research on the history of the *Nights* as a collection to include the writings of fifteenth-century Egyptian historian al-Maqrizi: “[al-Maqrizi] quotes a thirteenth-century Spanish author, Ibn Said, who in turn quotes a certain al-Qurtubi (‘the Cordovan’), to the effect that tales from *The Thousand and One Nights* were circulating in Fatimid times, that is, in the late eleventh century” (*Companion* 50). Yet Irwin proceeds to find evidence of even earlier circulation of a version of the *Nights* in *Mukhayyat-i Ledun-i Illahi* (*Phantasms of the Divine Presence*), an eighteenth-century Turkish story collection, where, in the preface, the author Ali Aziz Efendi the Cretan “claims to be translating from, among other sources, *Elf Leyle* (i.e. ‘The Thousand Nights’) by al-Asma‘i”, a ninth-century philologist:

Ali’s story collection does indeed contain versions of stories that are common to the Arabic *Nights*, but he provides no supporting evidence that al-Asma‘i, the distinguished ninth-century Basran philologist and companion of the Caliph Harun al-Rashid did indeed compile such a collection; and, in general, scholars have been chary of attributing the *Nights* to a single author. (*Companion* 50–51)

Despite these uncertainties, what we can deduce from the above is that a text similar to the *Nights* was circulating at least as early as the ninth or tenth centuries, at least in Baghdad and Cairo (Van Leeuwen, *Space* 4). Yet, paradoxically, the text was both circulating and *formed out of* this circulation.

To suggest that the *Nights* is more phenomenon than text, a text that is not-text, is to then conceive of it as more thing than object. The *Nights* doesn’t operate in the way we

expect texts to, and as a result, it forces us to look twice.¹⁰ Furthermore, by making use of the work of thing theorists we can see how the *Nights* is as much a collection of stories as it is the biography of that collection. In his introduction to *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai suggests that commodities “acquire very specific biographies as they move from place to place and hand to hand” (18), that they, “like persons, have social lives” (3). It is in the movement and circulation of objects that these biographies are formed. Warner gives credence to the relevance of reading this argument alongside the *Nights*, with her description of the sense of “use of human hands” attached to one of the manuscripts of the *Nights*, the only one she has ever held:

It came out of its acid-free box, and as it came out it had a kind of sense of people having breathed and handled it for years [...]. It still carries the feeling of the use of human hands. And it's not just because it's patched and pieced and battered and torn, it's actually got a kind of saturated smell from use [...]. [Y]ou can really feel the amount of work that's gone into interpreting this book and communicating it. (“Foyles”)

What Warner's account speaks to is the effect of time on an object, and the way in which an object accumulates history. This presence of history and movement in the objects of the text is affirmed by Elizabeth Grosz, who argues that “[t]he thing has a history: it is not simply a passive inertia against which we measure our own activity. It has a ‘life’ of its own, characteristics of its own, which we must incorporate into our activities in order to be effective, rather than simply understanding, regulating, and neutralizing it from the outside” (132). By incorporating the object into our own activities, we are able to see how this single

¹⁰ Although I depart from the work of Harman in this paper, he gives the following useful, and more concrete, example of how this works: “When using a hammer, for instance, I am focused on the building project currently underway, and I am probably taking the hammer for granted. Unless the hammer is too heavy or too slippery, or unless it breaks, I tend not to notice it at all.” (“Broken Hammer” 186)

thing contains within it a network of complex social relations that tie it to subjects. To read the *Nights* with this in mind is to be forced to consider the stories separately in addition to thinking of them as part of a whole. While the frame narrative or structure of “division into nights” makes the collection cohesive, it is perhaps the only thing that makes it cohesive; as Burton is alleged to have declared: “Without the nights, no *Arabian Nights*”.¹¹

2.3. *Sites of cultural memory*

While there are many ways in which we can speculate about the movement of the *Nights*, the kind of movement I am interested in in this chapter is the movement that intersects with or involves the world of objects and, in particular, trade goods. As the purpose of trade, objects and their dissemination seem a surer or more reliable way to track the movement of such an elusive text. Historically, we can look at the interchange of goods along established trade routes, with “overlapping circuits, networks of circulation, multiple centres” (Ouyang in Boehmer et al., “World Literatures”), the two most significant of these being the Silk Road (a network of some 10 000 kilometres extending out of China towards the Mediterranean) and the equally extensive Spice Route, along which merchants, monks, pilgrims, nomads and soldiers once moved. Particularly useful to note is the appearance of objects in places they did not originate.

In order to suggest the movement of the text, Ouyang tracks the movement of commodities that appear in the stories themselves. For instance, she observes of lemon, which features in the “The Story of the Hunchback” (in Mahdi & Heller-Roazen 203), that “[it] originated in China, Asam, India and Burma, and lime from Baghdad” (“Curious Life”). By looking at “The Story of the Hunchback”, the beginning of which reads like an inventory of goods, we can further explore the world of the *Nights* as constituting a culture of moving

¹¹ See, for example, Van Leeuwen, “Art of Interruption” 183.

goods. In the story, a tailor and his wife meet an inebriated hunchback in the street and, both disturbed by his condition and delighted by his singing and beating of a tambourine, invite him home for a meal. The tailor goes to the market to buy “bread, fried fish, radishes, lemons, and a bowl of honey” (204). Halfway through the meal, the tailor crams his piece of fish into the hunchback’s mouth, and the hunchback chokes to death on a large fishbone. The fried fish, and more significantly the fishbone, set in motion a story in which a series of different characters are charged in turn with the hunchback’s death. The characters, who include a Jewish physician and a Christian trader, must tell their stories in succession in order to save their lives. The three men charged with the murder of the hunchback are eventually saved by the story of the chief of police, which amazes the king – “moves him to mirth” – to such an extent that he orders it to be written down (211).

The tale of the Hunchback is one story that complicates the pinning down of the stories of the *Nights* to particular geographical settings. While most editions name the story as taking place “in a city in China”, a footnote to Burton’s translation informs us that some editions read “at Bassorah” (the Iraqi city of Basra) and others “at Bassorah and Kájkár”.¹² Ouyang makes use of this ambiguity to construct an argument regarding what commodities can tell us about intercultural exchange. To advance this argument she speculates on the probability that Kájkár is the Chinese city of Kashgar:

Kashgar is the Western-most city in China today, located near the border with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Kashgar has a rich history of over 2 000 years and served as a trading post and strategically important city on the Silk Road between China, the Middle East and Europe. Located historically at the convergence point of widely varying cultures and empires, Kashgar has been under the rule of Chinese, Turkic, Mongol, Persian and Tibetan empires. If Kashgar, home of the

¹² See Burton, 1050 n.496.

Uyghurs, is the city of China referred to, then it may very well be one of the Asian homelands of lemon. More important, its old city – which has been called the best preserved example of a traditional Islamic city to be found anywhere in central Asia – may very well have the feel of Abbasid Baghdad. (“Curious Life”)

One of the things Ouyang points to in this passage is the fact that what seems inherent and endemic to a national culture often comes from elsewhere. In a study that links Africa to an Indian Ocean world from which it is frequently set apart, Gwyn Campbell notes how both bananas and yams, which seem so essentially African, come, in fact, from Southeast Asia: “Bantu speakers early adopted Southeast Asian plants, notably the banana for which there appears evidence in interior East Africa (Munsa in Buganda) by 3 000 BCE and in the Cameroons by 500 BCE. [...] Other adopted Southeast Asian plants included the sweet potato, cassava and the Southeast Asian yam” (177). The *Nights* reminds us of this, not least in its very history: the common title *The Arabian Nights* obscures the text’s extra-Arabic origins, omitting, for example, its Turkish and Chinese roots.

Within the *Nights*, “The Story of the Hunchback” is one story that gives authority to Ouyang’s assertion that “a material object is a site dense with cultural memory, including that of intercultural exchange” (“Curious Life”). Not only do we come across the lemon, infused with its connections to Asam, India and Burma, but other commodities throughout the story, such silk, also speak to early forms of globalisation:¹³

That silk is from China, which spread around the world along the Silk Road, is a well-known fact. Silk is not the only commodity circulating along the Silk Road.

Foods, cuisines and textile, wood, perfumes, incense, musical instruments,

¹³ Ghosh and Muecke prefer the term “transnational” or “transnational relations”, which, they argue, “designates a space of exchange, participation and transformation of people and things” without any mediation by northern/imperial centres (“Oceanic Cultural Studies” 2). For further reflection on the term “globalisation”, see Gupta, “Culinary Cultures”.

animals, plants, spices and, above all, people, travelled along the Silk Road, bringing with them their knowledge and culture. Kashgar is but one city where people's cultures and languages meet. ("Curious Life")

Ouyang goes on to consider "The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies" (in Mahdi & Heller-Roazen 66), another tale that, simply from its opening, gives us a sense of being "lodged in goods". As Irwin argues of these two stories: "For the social historian, the detailed shopping lists provided at the beginning of both 'The Porter and the Three Ladies' cycle and the Hunchback cycle are as exciting as any fantasy about jinn and flying carpets" (*Companion* 139).

In the story of the Porter and the Three Ladies, set in medieval Baghdad, a veiled woman approaches a porter in a market and asks him to follow her, carrying her basket and collecting the many purchases she makes at various stalls along the way home. She brings him back to her majestic home, where he is eventually invited to join a banquet with her and two other women of immense beauty. While lemons also make an appearance in this story, unlike their originatory presence in China, Ouyang informs us that "lemon figures little in medieval Baghdadi haute cuisine" ("Curious Life"). The following passage from the story reveals the presence of lemons (from China, Asam, India and Burma) in a market in Baghdad, as well as a variety of goods named for other places:

[T]he porter lifted the basket and followed her until she stopped at the fruit vendor's, where she bought yellow and red apples, Hebron peaches and Turkish quinces [...]. She also bought Aleppo jasmine and Damascus lilies, myrtle berries and mignonettes [...]. Then porter carried his basket and followed her until she came to the dry grocer's, where she bought all sorts of dry fruits and nuts: Aleppo raisins, Iraqi sugar canes, pressed Ba'albak figs, roasted chick-peas, as well as shelled pistachios, almonds, and hazelnuts. (Mahdi & Heller-Roazen 66–67)

While from the appearance of such artefacts in the stories of the *Nights* it is possible to build a sense – as Ouyang has done – of when and where the *Nights* moved, Irwin is more reluctant to say the same of the movement of the trade goods that appear in the story. Instead, he argues that they are out of place and are markers that the story was rewritten in places outside of where it is set (see *Companion* 125).

Perhaps what this story can really offer us, then, lies in its overt display of opulence and wealth. Although the stories of the *Nights* more often depict wealth than poverty – or at least the aspiration to wealth – and are therefore not fully representative of the world out of which they arise (one given to wealth disparity), they give us a sense of the importance and value placed on goods in the medieval Arab world; they point to a profoundly mercantilist world, to a world of conspicuous consumption, to a thing-culture, and to the dependence of the success of cities on goods.¹⁴ As Warner observes, this was a culture and belief system which “long turned on the making of things and the market in such things; Baghdad was the greatest city in the world when the stories were first being compiled, a city of manufactures and artefacts which it traded extensively by land and sea” (*Stranger Magic* 200). This cultural and historical world of trade is particularly evident in the number of merchants and traders present throughout the stories.

As Irwin notes, “commercial encounters are invariably a prelude to bizarre and wonderful adventures” (*Companion* 128); the most notorious of these merchants in the *Nights* is Sindbad the Sailor.¹⁵ “The Story of Sindbad the Sailor” (in Mahdi & Heller-Roazen 303–49), while set in Baghdad, takes us to a series of fantastical places within the stories told by the merchant. At the beginning of the story we meet a poor porter called Sindbad, whose

¹⁴ The latter is reflected in a story about the loss of two ships and their cargo told by George F. Hourani. According to Hourani, this loss “contributed to the decline of Sīrāf and Şaymūr, because of the great quantity of wealth and the number of important shipmasters and captains and merchants in them” (120).

¹⁵ Sindbad the Sailor is referred to in some versions of the story as Sindbad the Merchant.

weariness while carrying a particularly heavy load lands him at the house of a wealthy merchant, also named Sindbad. The merchant sends his page out to invite the porter in and requests that he listen to the story of how he acquired his wealth. Sindbad the Sailor then tells Sindbad the Porter the story of the first of his seven voyages, each “a wonderful tale that confounds the mind” (305), before asking that he dine with him and then sending him on his way with a hundred pieces of gold. Day after day the porter returns to the merchant’s house to hear the rest of his marvellous tales.

Remarking on the amount of space afforded to merchants in the *Nights*, Aboubakr Chraïbi argues that the text “in its present format appears to be primarily concerned with their profession” and reads almost as “a manual of basic rules in manners and customs for young merchants” (6). Warner furthers this with the observation that “[m]anaging things – trading, acquiring, giving them away – occupies the lives of many protagonists whether they have come by their goods by luck or by diligence” (*Stranger Magic* 200). Sindbad the Sailor is one character who comes by his goods initially by diligence (he buys stock to trade), and then by luck (these goods keep coming back to him despite the many disasters that befall him).

On his first voyage, Sindbad the Sailor buys goods for trade and sets sail with a group of merchants destined for the port of Basra. The crew anchors on an island, which in fact turns out to be a giant fish. When the fish begins to move below the water Sindbad sinks into the sea, but he is saved from drowning by a wooden tub bobbing on the waves, which eventually carries him to solid land. After some time on an island, Sindbad describes the approach of “a large ship [...] carrying many merchants” (309). The ship ends up being the one that Sindbad had originally set sail on. When it lands, and the captain makes an inventory of the vessel’s cargo, Sindbad asks whether there is anything left aboard the ship, to which the captain replies: “Yes sir, I have some goods in the hold of the ship, but their owner drowned at one of the islands during the voyage here [...]” (309). Sindbad then presses the

captain for the name of this merchant, and the captain replies, “His name was Sindbad the Sailor” (309).

Similar situations to this are repeated on Sindbad’s other voyages. For example, on his third voyage, after being separated from his crew and presumed drowned, he sees a ship on the waves in the distance. When the ship eventually anchors, the ship’s clerk responds sympathetically to Sindbad’s story, saying: “There was a passenger with us whom we lost, and we don’t know whether he is alive or dead, for he has left no trace. I would like to give you his goods, and you will take charge of them and sell them to this island” (321). The captain of the ship asks that the goods be registered in the name of Sindbad the Sailor, “who was with us on that island and who drowned, without leaving any trace” (321).

Etsuko Aoyagi attributes Sindbad the Sailor’s principality as a character to this luck and his own incompetence, contrasting him to typical protagonists who would be notable for their “internal merits”, and arguing that he “escapes from danger, not with his own ability, but thanks to a succession of accidental situations” (76). The accidental situations that Aoyagi describes see Sindbad regularly disappearing without a trace and then popping back up in the form of his merchandise; his trade goods might be thought of as having assumed his place during his disappearance. As a merchant, Sindbad is represented by his goods; furthermore, what subjectivity he has he seems to gain through the goods he acquires, through the acquisition and possession of things. Trade and the objects of this trade are what allow him – and his stories – to keep moving; it is not so much the content of the goods that matters, but rather the fact of their movement. Without the possibility of trade, Sindbad could be seen not to exist. Similarly, it is the porter’s movement of goods that lands him at the house of storytelling.

The dominance of merchants in the stories – of which one can get a sense simply by scanning the index of stories – manages to reduce these individual characters to a category.

“Sinbad the Sailor” is at once his name and his occupation: his occupation is his identity. This is similarly true of Sinbad the Porter (see Colla 96). More importantly, both Porter and Sailor are defined by their relationship to goods, and the way in which they move goods. The example of Sinbad and Sinbad follows Todorov’s claim regarding the effacement of character interiority in the stories. Not only are individuals given stock descriptions and reduced to categories, but these categories are based on the activities they perform, activities formed out of their relationship with objects. Indeed, characters in the *Nights* are presented as forming part of a network with things, in this case sailor-and-ship, porter-and-parcel; they are inseparable from the network that connects them to objects.

From this we can deduce that there is value in placing the objects of the *Nights* alongside the subjects of the *Nights*, viewing the two as co-actants in an elaborate and extensive series of networks, neither one “detachable as a lonely actor” (Cohen 60).¹⁶ As Cohen argues of things that they are “embedded within networks of agency in which what they can and cannot do – where they may and may not move, what they desire and what they can achieve – is simultaneously constrained and enabled by other actors within that reticulation” (60), so the same can be said about subjects. Warner gives the following example of the way in which subjects can be enabled by objects, where objects become a way of conveying thoughts and ideas: “When the Arabic of travellers concerned was non-existent [...] things were the chief media through which information and sympathy travelled between strangers who could hardly talk to one another” (*Stranger Magic*, 165).

¹⁶ This is not to deny the individuality of objects, however. As Muecke illustrates, it is often in connection that individuality is formed: “This particular carpet, one might say, is better than all those other carpets which you know and remember through those percussive effects you sense a million times before in similar transactions with things, in the resonance of the marketplace, a story about Sinbad, a multitude of shock waves through crowded time” (68). Bennett similarly argues that we can “do justice both to systems and things, [...] acknowledge the stubborn reality of individuation and the essentially distributive quality of their affectivity or capacity to produce effects” (“Systems and Things” 228).

The sense in which objects can become a medium through which to speak is well illustrated in *By the Sea*, Gurnah's fictional representation of the twilight of the Indian Ocean world. In the novel, Hussein covets a beautiful table that stands in Saleh Omar's shop. While the two negotiate over a price for the table, they chat daily, eventually becoming friends in a "casual exchange of opinion over that beautiful table" (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 22) Hussein intends the table as gift for the young Hassan Mahmud, whom he is wooing (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 30), and when he "spirits" Hassan away, the table becomes what Freedgood calls a "metonym of loss" (*Ideas in Things* 155). Years later, Hassan's brother, Latif, recalls sitting across the same table from Saleh Omar and reveals how when his mother "started to talk about the table, the misery and recriminations of [Hassan's] departure all came back" (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 104). What this narrative thread also speaks to is the bonds that develop between people and things, as well as the bonds that develop between people, and break, over or via things.

The ebony table is one of the objects in *By the Sea* whose trajectory or biography helps tell the story. This approach of looking at objects in terms of their histories, which Gurnah achieves so effectively in his fiction, is advanced by Igor Kopytoff in his contribution to *The Social Life of Things* and by Marcel Mauss in *The Gift*. Both look at the circulation and exchange of objects with the movement of people and, therefore, the centrality of exchange to human life (see especially Mauss 45). Kopytoff's claim that "[i]n no system is everything so singular as to preclude even the hint of exchange" (70) bolsters the sense in which people and goods become actors in a network, rather than simply being acted upon by external forces.

In his research for *The Gift*, Mauss looked at the indigenous peoples of Melanesia, Polynesia and the Pacific Northwest, concerning himself not with individuals, but with the society as a whole (77–78), and echoing Kopytoff's avoidance of singularity. Mauss noted

the bonds that formed between people over the transfer of a possession in each society, concluding that “this bond created by things is in fact a bond between persons, since the thing itself is a person or pertains to a person. Hence it follows that to give something is to give a part of oneself” (10). We have seen the way in which the thing may pertain to a person in the story of the ebony table in *By the Sea*, but this is something that is also present in many of the stories of the *Nights*, not least in the story of King Shariman and Qamar al-Zaman, where the rings exchanged are all that remain of the meeting of the two lovers.

In “The story of King Shariman and his son, Qamar al-Zaman” (Irwin, Vol. 1),¹⁷ Shariman, king of the Khalidan islands, despairs when his son, Qamar al-Zaman, a boy of “surpassing beauty” refuses to marry after having heard much said about the “guile and treachery” of women. When, at the advice of his vizier, Shariman puts the matter of marriage to Qamar in front of an assembly of court and state officials and he once again refuses to marry, the king has him imprisoned in an abandoned tower for causing him humiliation. One night, the jinniya Maimuna sees a light on in tower and goes to investigate. There she discovers a sleeping Qamar and is amazed by his beauty. After gazing upon him for a while, Maimuna leaves him and soars up to the lowest level of heaven, where she comes across the ‘ifrit Dahnash.¹⁸ Dahnash tells her that he has just come back from the Chinese islands where he caught sight of Princess Budur, the daughter of King al-Ghayur, whom he describes as “more beautiful than any other creature created by God”. The beautiful Budur is similarly determined never to marry, as she has no desire for a man to rule over her. Thus she – like Qamar – has been imprisoned by her father in the hope that she might come to her senses.

¹⁷ The story is known by various other names; for example, as “The Tale of Kamar al-Zamān and The Princess Budūr, Moon of Moons” in Mathers’ translation into English of the Mardrus French translation; as “The Story of Qamar al-Zaman and His Two Sons, Amjad and A’sad” in Haddawy’s expanded version; as “The Story of the Amours of Camaralzaman, Prince of the Isles of the Children of Khaledan, and of Badoura, Princess of China”; and often simply as “Camar al-Zaman and Princess Badoura”, as in the English translation of Galland.

¹⁸ An ‘ifrit (often spelled afrit or efreet) is one of a class of jinn. Although the apostrophe is usually omitted, I have retained it here as it appears in the Irwin edition, and used it throughout for consistency.

Maimuna and Dahnash begin to argue over which of their finds is the more beautiful, but unable to reach an agreement, they decide to settle the matter by summoning the 'ifrit Qashqash to judge independently. Qashqash concludes that the two look like twins, matched in "beauty, grace and perfection", and suggests that the dispute be resolved by placing Qamar alongside Budur and then waking each in turn. "Whichever then burns with love for the other must be the less beautiful," says Qashqash. Dahnash and Maimuna take turns to change into fleas and wake Qamar and Budur by biting them. When Qamar wakes to discover the princess sleeping alongside him, he falls in love with her instantly; he concludes that she must be the woman his father wants him to marry and he commits to doing so the very next day. Before going back to sleep, however, he takes the ring off her finger as a keepsake and puts it on his own. When Budur is awoken, she too is seized by passion. She notices that Qamar wears her ring, but she leaves it and takes his ring to wear as a replacement. The matter still unresolved, Qashqash helps Dahnash to carry Budur back home to China.

When Qamar wakes in the morning to find Budur gone, he is confused and concludes: "Had it not been for the ring, I would have thought it a dream". After questioning the eunuch who stands guard at his door, as well as the vizier and the king, and receiving no clue as to the princess's identity or whereabouts, Qamar believes he has been deceived. The king, however, thinks his son has "lost his wits". Back in China, Budur experiences a similar fate; she too is believed mad and locked up by her father, this time with an iron chain around her neck. However, Budur has a foster brother, Marzuwan, who, recognising the signs of love, believes Budur's story and resolves to help her find her mysterious lover.

After months of travel, Marzuwan enters a city where he hears of the story of Qamar al-Zaman and concludes that he must be the one Budur pines for. He goes in search of Qamar and, after finding him, persuades him to accompany him back to China. In China, Qamar pretends to be able to cure Budur of her madness in order to get close to her. He does so by

writing a letter, filled with longing that “complains to the paper through [his] pen”, which he puts into an envelope together with the ring he took off her finger on that fateful night. In the letter he makes it known that the ring is a symbol of his passion for her: with the giving of the ring, he gives also of his heart. Recognising the ring and, by extension, her lost lover, Budur’s spirits are lifted. The two are at last reunited and summarily married.

But a short while after, Qamar, fearing that King Shariman must think him dead, asks Budur’s father for permission to return home with her to the Khalidan islands. Stopping along the way to rest, Qamar watches over the sleeping Budur, and given over to desire, he undresses her. Fastened to her waistband, hidden “in her most precious place”, he discovers a blood-red jewel: a talisman made out of carnelian and engraved with an indecipherable script. When he takes it out into the light to get a better look, a bird swoops down, snatches it out of his hands and carries it away in its beak. Qamar follows the bird from valley to valley trying, in vain, to get the talisman back, until he ends up lost in a strange city of magians. Later on, Qamar witnesses a fight between two birds which reveals in its carnage Budur’s jewel, and he concludes that “it means he will soon find her again”. And this is indeed the case, but only after an extended series of adventures and misadventures, culminating in a bed-trick in which Budur, dressed as Qamar, coerces him into her bedchamber before revealing her true identity.

While the talisman acts, in the first instance, to separate the two lovers, it later reunites them when Budur discovers the jar in which Qamar has hidden it, cunningly disguised as part of a shipment of olives. Thus, as Wendy Doniger remarks, the story picks up on a fairly common fairy tale theme “in which a bird mistakes a ruby for flesh and carries it off, causing the separation of lovers who are reunited when the ruby is found in the craw of the bird” (123). With its likeness to flesh, the blood-red jewel, taken first by Qamar and then

by the bird, constitutes the removal of a part of Budur.¹⁹ Furthermore, through the placement of the talisman “in her most precious place” the red carnelian acts presumably to safeguard her virginity, and therefore as a metonym for Budur’s genitals, her “jewels”.²⁰ The carnelian and the ring, representing both pieces of their owners and the social transactions of love and sex, illustrate how the exchange of goods in the *Nights* frequently underlies, or even upholds, social contracts.²¹

2.4. *The good in things*

The way in which the exchange of goods is intertwined with social exchanges is particularly evident in the giving of alms, which according to Mauss “are the result on the one hand of a moral idea about gifts and wealth and on the other of an idea about sacrifice” (15). In the *Nights*, alms are given with the underlying intention of sacrifice and with greed considered a sin; the idea is that in pleasing God you help stave off disaster (see Mauss 15). The giving of alms appears throughout the *Nights* – most overtly in the story “The woman who gave alms to a poor man” (Irwin, Vol. 2) – and it points to a different sense in which the stories, and the culture out of which the stories are born, are “lodged in goods”; that is, they are steeped in messages of moral good or justice. Indeed, as Mauss informs us, the Arabic word for alms, *sadaka*, originally meant justice (15).

In “The woman who gave alms to a poor man”, a king has told his subjects that he will cut off the hands of anyone who gives alms to the poor. One day a starving beggar approaches a woman and asks her for alms, and although at first she refuses out of fear that her hands will be cut off, eventually “her heart [softens] and she [gives] him two loaves”

¹⁹ In fact, one of the origins of the name carnelian is believed to lie in the Latin *caro*, *carnis*, meaning flesh or body (see Warner, *Stranger Magic* 223).

²⁰ For an extended reading of this see Hamori, “The Magian and the Whore”.

²¹ See also Warner, *Stranger Magic* 244.

when he invokes the Name of God. When the king finds out, the woman's hands are cut off. Despite being a woman of incomparable beauty, she is refused marriage because of this "serious defect". She is abandoned in the desert by the king's mother and the baby she is carrying falls into a pool of water. The baby is rescued by two men who, it turns out, are manifestations of the two loaves that the woman gave to the beggar – "the gift that caused [her] to lose [her] hands". They restore her hands to her, making them "better than before", and she gives thanks to the Almighty God.

Although it is one of the shortest tales in the *Nights*, "The woman who gave alms to the poor man" is valuable for pointing directly to the way in which the value of goods is tied to cultural or spiritual value in the stories. Engaging with more than one meaning of the word "good" allows a way of thinking of stories as having morals or carrying "things" of value to a society and of the book as a cultural object. To speak of goods in the stories of the *Nights* is therefore to speak not only of the goods of trade, but also of a sense of moral or social good (which is, in turn, frequently attached to material goods). One of the ways in which this plays out is in the etiquette attached to gift exchange and trade.

According to Mauss, "[d]iverse economic activities—for example, the market—are impregnated with ritual and myth; they retain a ceremonial character, obligatory and efficacious; they have their own ritual and etiquette" (70). While gift giving and exchange are reliant on "unwritten rules of behaviour" in order to run smoothly (Muecke 65), they are also rituals in and of themselves. The stories of the *Nights* are saturated with what Stephen Muecke describes as kind of "cultural economy" (65), which we see attached to economic activity. Many of the stories demonstrate, for example, how it is customary to give something to a king or sultan through whose land you travel, and how it is also customary to receive something in return. This cultural economy is, in turn, connected to the economy of travel,

where the giving of gifts acts as a kind of two-way customs duty. In short, travel in the *Nights* is often dependent on transactions involving objects.

In the *Nights*, goods are often exchanged alongside stories, which echoes the world of early Indian Ocean trade in which “traders working the monsoon routes learnt each other’s languages and customs, and exchanged stories as well as goods” (Muecke 65). Here, traders acted almost as cultural brokers, and as Kopytoff suggests, “constituting a distinct *quasi*-cultural group, [they] provided the channels for the movement of goods between disparate societies” (89), “mediating between the different exchange systems” (89). While certain cultural codes belying economic exchange exist, there are also those cultural statements made by commodities themselves; as Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood observe, “[g]oods assembled together in ownership make physical, visible statements about the hierarchy of values to which their chooser subscribes” (ix). Stories such as “Abu Muhammad the sluggard” (in Irwin, Vol. 2) speak directly to the world of value placed on commodities, one in which wealth is made to talk, yet simultaneously contain a moral story, a story of “value” that posits a correlation between money-grubbing or materialism and punishment by Almighty God.

In response to a question from the caliph of Baghdad, Abu Muhammad the Sluggard, who in his youth was “the idlest person on the face of the earth”, tells the story of how he acquired his great wealth. When his father died, leaving no money, his mother came to him with five silver dirhams, saying that the Shaikh Abu’l-Muzaffar was about to set off for China, and that he should ask the Shaikh to use the money to bring him back something with which he could make a profit. Abu’l-Muzaffar brings back a valuable monkey; the monkey had saved the crew from several perils along the way (a feat for which he had been handsomely rewarded), and he had brought up jewels from the sea when the ship anchored at

one of the islands along the way. Thus, by the time Abu Muhammad receives the monkey, he has already earned profit on his initial investment.

As God had provided for him, Abu Muhammad the Sluggard ceases his lazy ways and opens up a shop. Here, every afternoon, the monkey brings him a thousand dinars and Abu Muhammad is soon able to buy “property and estates, [plant] orchards and [acquire] mamluks, black slaves and servant girls” with the accumulated wealth. However, one day the monkey speaks and reveals itself to be a marid.²² The marid then tricks Abu Muhammad into helping him kidnap the daughter of a prominent merchant, by marrying her and then destroying the talismans designed to keep the very same jinni at bay.

While the merchant had at first refused to give his daughter to Abu Muhammad, Abu Muhammad’s wealth speaks, as it had to the king at the start of the story, allowing the story to move forward:

If a rich man says something wrong, the people say:

“You may be right, and what you say is not impossible,”

But if a poor man speaks the truth, they say:

“You are a liar; what you say is wrong.”

Money invests a man with dignity and beauty in all the lands.

Money is the tongue of those who seek eloquence,

And the weapon of whoever wants to fight.

Not only is the story activated by wealth, but Abu Muhammad is literally animated by wealth; he is “revived” by money (Warner, *Stranger Magic* 212). It is money that makes him give up his idle ways. As Ulrich Marzolph argues, Abu Muhammad puts his riches on display, and “[t]he one and only occasion on which he ever gets up is in order to ask a merchant about to depart for a journey to buy some goods for him” (“Narrative Strategies”

²² A type of jinn, one particularly powerful and feared.

173). The story constructs its moral message by producing a contrast between Abu Muhammad and the merchant Abu'l-Muzaffar. As Warner argues, Abu'l-Muzaffar is the “ethical hero” of the story; “[he] has no thought for his own gain” (*Stranger Magic* 215). This is not limited to the story of Abu Muhammad, however. In the *Nights*, such visible or conspicuous consumption *vis-à-vis* trade goods or the wealth accumulated through trade is frequently pitted against moral good.

The connection between the mercantilist world and the moral world of the *Nights* comes together neatly in the historical figure of the *muhtasib* in Medieval Egypt and brings us back to alms, where the relationship between justice and commodity reveals itself in the Arabic word *sadaka*. According to Irwin:

The *muhtasib*, or market inspector, supervised weights and measures as well as the quality of goods in the market, and he chased up debt defaulters. But he also had policing duties and he was responsible for public morality. He tried to ensure that all Muslim men attended the noon Friday prayer at the main mosque and that the month-long Ramadan fast was observed. He also had to patrol secluded spots, lest they be used for adulterous assignations or frequented by drunks, beggars or prostitutes. (*Companion* 157)

Andras Hamori provides an effective example of the ambiguity attached to the word “goods” in the *Nights* by looking at “The City of Brass” (Irwin, Vol. 2). The story of the City of Brass begins in Damascus, when the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik hears tell of how Solomon would imprison jinn in brass bottles, which he would close up with molten lead marked with his seal and toss into the sea. The journey to find one of the bottles that have so piqued his curiosity sees an expedition, led by the knowledgeable Shaikh ‘Abd al-Samad, set off to the City of Brass. The party is joined by Emir Musa ibn Nusair, whose lands in the Maghreb border the region where the bottles can be found.

Along the way, the group come across the ruins of once-great civilisations, beginning with the palace of Kush ibn Shadad. Warnings written on the surviving columns act as moral lessons, and as harbingers of what the party will find when they eventually reach the City of Brass. Through these inscriptions, Ibn Shadad speaks from the grave, telling the travellers how his greed (“I would not give away a single mustard seed”) and materialism (“To satisfy desire with transient things”) eventually led to his downfall, how the riches he had saved up “[a]s ransom for my life and to postpone my death” were unable to “ward off the fate sent us by the Omnipotent King”.

Moving on from the ruined palace of Ibn Shadad, the party comes across an automaton – a horseman made of brass – followed by an ‘ifrit imprisoned in a column of black stone, both of which help direct them to the City of Brass. Yet, when the party finally reaches the city they cannot find a way to penetrate its walls. Twelve of the emir’s men attempt to scale the walls, but one by one they fall to their deaths after succumbing to the call of the phantom sirens below. Al-Samad is finally given safe passage after reciting verses from the Quran and calling on the Name of Almighty God to protect himself from their feminine wiles. He opens up the gate for the others with a key he takes from the corpse of one of the city’s dead guards. Walking through the city, Musa and his men discover a society in which everyone lies dead surrounded by evidence of their former glory, as if suspended in time.

In the centre of the city, they come across a young woman laid naked on a slab of marble and covered, out of modesty, with a highly valuable material, the likes of which has never before existed and does not exist elsewhere. A nearby plaque, flanked by two dead guards, tells of the demise of the city through famine; in the woman’s voice it speaks: “For seven consecutive years, no drop of rain fell and no grass grew on the surface of the land. We ate the provisions that we had, and then we turned to our beasts and ate them until there was

nothing left.” Yet the famine hinted at in the inscriptions is both a physical hunger and a spiritual starvation, as the men are asked to contemplate: “Did they make provision for the Day of Resurrection and prepare to answer to the Lord of mankind?”

Hamori meditates on the ambiguity of the word “provisions” with regards to “The City of Brass”, by looking at the Arabic word *zād*, and its Quranic source where it is used in the phrase “the best of provisions is piety”:

Our reading of the story must determine whether we take the *zād* mentioned in the City of Brass in an ethical sense, or as food for thought, provisions for the mystic, or gnostic traveller. At any rate, the journey becomes a spiritual one, for the phenomena described in it ripen into metaphor, and the tableaux into allegory. It is, so to speak, a *qūtu 'l-qulūb* “food for the heart” that is meant in *min 'adami 'l-qūti mātū* “they died for lack of food”. In the City of Brass, life is reduced to a kind of taxidermy because it is a place of spiritual starvation. (14)

While “The City of Brass” warns against “vanity, arrogance and hubris” (Warner, *Stranger Magic* 180), key characters in the *Nights* who come to embody this moral message through the sum of their actions are Sindbad the Sailor and Kasim Baba (in “The story of Ali Baba and the forty thieves killed by a slave girl”). Like “The City of Brass”, the stories in which these characters appear are fictions about “wealth, luxury and their penalties” (Warner, *Stranger Magic* 180); the implication in the stories is that Sinbad the Sailor and Kasim Baba are both punished for the value they place on goods of the physical world over those of the spiritual.

In “The story of Ali Baba and the forty thieves killed by a slave girl” (in Irwin, Vol. 1), two Persian brothers, Kasim and Ali Baba, receive an equal share of their father’s meagre inheritance. Kasim marries a rich woman and becomes a wealthy merchant; Ali Baba marries poor and lives as a woodcutter. One day, while cutting wood in the forest, Ali Baba sees a

group of forty men approaching on horseback. Thinking they must be robbers, he climbs a tree to hide and watch. He sees the leader of the men approach a rock face at which he utters the words “Open Sesame”, and a door to a cave opens. The men disappear into the cave for a while, then exit, mount their horses again and leave the forest. Intrigued, Ali Baba approaches the rock and pronounces the same words that he heard the leader utter. Inside, he finds the cave to be full of gold coins, and he fills his saddle bags with as much as his mules can carry.

While Ali Baba’s wife is ecstatic at their good fortune, Ali Baba warns that the gold should be kept a secret, and he resolves to bury it. But Kasim’s wife discovers their secret and, overtaken with envy, tells Kasim to set out for the forest the next morning; he does so, taking with him ten mules each of which carries a huge chest. Kasim utters the magic words and enters the cave where he collects as much gold as he can carry. But when he attempts to exit the cave, he cannot remember the words, and he tries a series of humorous variations on the phrase in vain. When the robbers arrive back at the cave, they find Kasim and kill him. When Kasim doesn’t return, his wife gets worried and tells Ali Baba of his trip to the forest. Ali Baba returns to the cave, wherein he finds the dismembered body of his brother, which he bears back to his house. When the robbers return to the cave to find the body gone, they realise that Kasim must have had an accomplice, and they resolve to find and kill Ali Baba. But their plans to do so are repeatedly foiled by his slave girl, Marjaneh, who eventually kills them all. For her bravery, Ali Baba offers Marjaneh his son’s hand in marriage. They are equally matched by their good qualities: her bravery and his generosity. The story ends with Ali Baba visiting the cave again and filling his bags with gold – but using his fortune “with moderation” and so living the rest of his life in “great honour and splendour”.

The message encapsulated in the tale of Ali Baba is, in its simplest form: trouble comes to those who are greedy. Ali Baba learns this through the trouble that comes to Kasim, and uses his fortune in moderation. Realising this same message, Sindbad repents in his final

voyage: “God has shown him what calamities greed brings” (Ouyang, “Whose Story” 145).²³

The idea of stories bringing value, or things of value, to a society is taken further in the story of Sindbad through the involvement of the reader. The society is not simply the society of the stories, but it is also the society *outside of* the stories; it is both the reader then and the reader now:

[T]he “journey in search of knowledge” is undertaken not only by the prophets (Joseph or Muḥammad) and Sindbad the Sailor, [...] but also by those who listen to the story; the “you” in the *Sūra*.²⁴ Sindbad the Porter in the *Nights*’ story embodies the “you” of *Sūrat Yūsuf*. He is given the task of listening to Sindbad the Sailor’s stories. Sindbad the Sailor’s narration is the knowledge Sindbad the Porter ought to learn and his reward. The Porter is poor at the beginning of the cycle but becomes rich by the end of the story. The only thing he does is to listen to the Sailor’s stories. (Ouyang, “Whose Story” 145)

Not only is there the suggestion in the *Nights* that we become rich through stories (Sindbad the Porter is literally being paid to listen to stories), but there is also the way in which the stories told about a thing are able to increase (or indeed diminish) its value, much like the yarns spun by estate agents, through which a derelict property becomes “a renovator’s dream”. As Muecke writes: “You have to tell a good story to make a good sale: a carpet is not just a carpet, you have to make it fly” (65).

Yet these “good stories” attached to the sale of goods are often born out of particular ideas around moral good. Simply put, this connection reveals itself in the link between this

²³ The story of Sindbad is more complex, however, as he seems to travel as much in search of adventure as wealth.

²⁴ A *sūra* is a chapter of the Quran. *Sūrat Yūsuf* is the twelfth chapter, and tells the story of the biblical Joseph (Yusuf).

monetary value and values, as in moral principles or cultural affinity (see Muecke 66).²⁵ Devleena Ghosh and Muecke use the example of the trade in ivory to illustrate this point, contrasting “an appreciation of the beauty of a carved ivory artefact” with “the compassion for elephants criminally slaughtered” (“Natural Logics” 160).²⁶ Here, two different stories arising from two different perspectives – the one aesthetic, the other ethical – variably diminish or increase the value of ivory. While the value of an object thus increases (or decreases) with the circulation of stories around that object, the circulation of goods is itself able to transform ordinary commodities into luxuries, as with the example of ivory:

Ivory was in abundance in Africa to the extent that it was used for palisades in villages in the pre-colonial period. This non-luxury use meant that traders from India could do good business, distributing it around the then-global economy centred in the Indian Ocean, where it would be transformed into a luxury commodity at many times its original value. So here a natural material, abundant in certain areas, is converted through the manifold addition of cultural value into a rare material. (Ghosh & Muecke, “Natural Logics” 159)

While Muecke argues that it is stories told about goods, with their connected cultural value, that add “magic to the aura of the commodity” (72), this is not the only way in which magic operates in the *Nights*. A more literal magic frequently accompanies trade goods, a magic by which seemingly ordinary, inert objects are shown to have an active power: an ordinary lamp conceals a jinni and a gem has the ability to summon a flying couch. Thus, the stories are as much lodged in the kinds of goods that pervade the stories’ marketplaces – expensive cloth,

²⁵ Yet it is important to note that the treatment of values in the text is itself ambiguous; the stories are at once pious and provocative: “Religious dogma, political authority, social etiquette, ethical codes and sexual mores are often turned upside down, inside out, while in the same breath divine omniscience is asserted and beneficent kingship, social structure, law and chastity are upheld as the means of maintaining and managing God’s world on earth.” (Ouyang, “Introduction” viii)

²⁶ See also Muecke 70.

spices and foreign foodstuffs – as they are in flying carpets and talismans. Here, both the spoken word and the written word, already so intertwined, lend magic to things – albeit in different ways. In the next chapter, I will look at some of the ways in which the magical and the mercantile operate, and intersect, in the *Nights*.

3. *Magical materialism*¹

The supernatural begins the moment we shift from words to the things these words are supposed to designate.

Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*

I would say that the moment an object appears in a narrative, it is charged with a special force and becomes like the pole of a magnetic field, a knot in the network of invisible relationships. The symbolism of an object may be more or less explicit, but it is always there. We might even say that in a narrative any object is always magical.

Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*

From the preceding chapter it is apparent that the suggestion that there is value in looking at the object world of the *Nights* does not come *ex nihilo*, or purely from a place of theory. The historical world of the *Nights* is one that, as Warner writes, “turned on the making of things and the market in such things” (*Stranger Magic* 200). Conceiving of the fictional world of the *Nights* as similarly “lodged in goods” – with all its attendant ambiguity – allows us to talk about objects in a way that goes beyond their role in historical trade networks, a way that takes into account what Bennett calls the “vitality” of things (*Vibrant Matter* 12).

While Muecke argues that “the market works on fictions” (72) – that the spoken word adds value to trade goods through the stories told about them and over them – in the stories of the *Nights* the written word enacts its own kind of magic, what Warner calls “word magic”. Here, the marking of ordinary objects with words transforms them into symbolic things, imbuing them with magic of a different kind to that described by Muecke – and in a different

¹ This phrase is borrowed from Connor, who writes in the *London Review of Books* 34.6 (2012): “*Stranger Magic* carries forward the highly distinctive magical materialism that impelled Warner’s *Phantasmagoria* (2006). Where that book explored the many different material forms that have been used to body forth the soul, *Stranger Magic* finds in the many enchanted and enchanting objects of *The Arabian Nights* a repeated self-figuring of the operations of fantasy. Can there, after all, be a more literal embodiment of the animism that we see ourselves as having abandoned than the strangely eloquent object that we take a book to be?” (14–16)

See also Harry Garuba’s “Explorations in Animist Materialism”, which similarly unsettles object/subject binaries, but using the framework of “animist materialism” as an alternative to “magical realism”.

way. Perhaps the best example of word magic in the *Nights* is the inscriptions that charge talismans, converting them from ordinary objects into things of power. The story of “Ala’ al-Din Abu’l-Shamat” (“Aladdin of the Beautiful Moles”), for example, concludes with the Princess Maryam producing a jewel of five facets “inscribed with writing like ant’s trails” (Irwin Vol. 1), one side of which is engraved with the image of a couch. When Maryam rubs the jewel, a couch appears, which she is then able to command through the power of the writing inscribed on the talisman.

In “The City of Brass”, the written word itself is enough to prevent one action, or encourage another. When Emir Musa ibn Nusair climbs a nearby mountain to get a better sense of how the party might scale the walls of the city, he comes across seven tablets of white marble, on which are inscribed “admonitions, warnings and exhortations” (Irwin, Vol. 2). After reading the inscriptions, the emir comes down the mountain “with a clear picture of the vanity of this world”, and concluding that “ascetism in this world is the best way to ensure a happy outcome”, he resolves to find favour with the Commander of the Faithful. Here, the inscriptions themselves act out their message by encouraging, or indeed precipitating, piety or “good” behaviour.

3.1. Talking heads

The extent of the power of the written word in the stories reveals itself in “The Tale of King Yunan and the Sage Duban” (in Mahdi & Heller-Roazen 36–). Housed within the cycle of “The Story of the Fisherman and the Demon”, it recounts the story of the Byzantium king Yunan, who becomes ill with a disease that his physicians are unable to cure.² A travelling sage called Duban – who is well versed in all the sciences, “from philosophy to the lore of plants and herbs, the harmful as well as the beneficial” (37) – offers to heal the king and

² Haddawy names this as leprosy.

succeeds, an act for which he is generously compensated. However, Yunan's jealous and conniving vizier resents that which the king bestows on Duban as a reward, fearing that he will appoint Duban in his place. He therefore plants a seed of doubt in the king's mind, convincing him that the sage is "a foreign agent who has come to destroy [him]" (44) and that he should be executed. However, the sage is able to avenge his death posthumously by animating his severed head with the help of a book containing "countless secrets" (46), the pages of which are poisoned. When the poison has spread through Yunan's body, the sage's disembodied head recites an incantation, and the king falls dead.

While the book in the tale of Yunan and Duban is able to kill through the involvement of its connected subject, sometimes objects in the *Nights* operate – or move – only because of the literal invisibility or absence of their interrelated subjects. An example of this is the prevalence of jinn in the *Nights*, who are often invisible. Notably, the flying carpet, which has become so deeply associated with the stories, has its origins in the movement of jinn under the command of Solomon, who, in the Quran, is said to have been given control both over the jinn and over the air and the wind. As Warner notes:

The way the jinn behave, as if they are spirits, elemental spirits of fire and air [...] they are like solid energy. I thought of them a little bit as particle physics; they're sort of in the air, and you can't see them, and they keep moving and changing things and transforming everything. And that is the origin of the flying carpet. Because Solomon is carried around on his carpeted throne by the flying jinn. And the flying carpet [...] originates interestingly enough in the idea that Solomon, omniscient, wise Solomon, can go anywhere he likes, see whatever he wants in the world, because he's carried on the spirits air and fire, who he has mastery over. ("Foyles")

According to the word of the Quran, those jinn who found “the true god” and pledged loyalty to Solomon were made to attend to him, bearing him “in state, through the air, on his carpet-covered throne” (Warner, “Tales Things Tell”).³ These jinn make their grand appearance in the story of the City of Brass, when the jinni Dahish relates how he came to be imprisoned in stone. Here, Dahish describes how Solomon had flown into battle mounted on a carpet alongside his army of men, wild beasts, birds and reptiles, and 600 million jinn (see Ouyang & Lemos Horta 425). Yet these jinn, who move the carpet under the guise of the carpet acting of its own accord, are themselves powered by the use of magical or charmed objects (Warner, “Foyles”). The best-known example of this is Aladdin’s lamp in “The Story of Aladdin, or the Magic Lamp” (in Ouyang & Lemos Horta 669–774), made famous chiefly through cinematic renditions of the story. As Todorov observes, “Aladdin manages to realize his desires with the help of magical instruments” (*Fantastic* 138): in this case, a lamp and a ring.

While Warner argues that the efficacy of talismans “derives from their autonomy” (*Stranger Magic* 217), that is, from their ability to act independently of subjects, I proffer that it is rather in their partnership with other actors that they come alive, that they work only through their connection to subjects. This is bolstered somewhat by Irwin’s observation that the sorcerer of medieval Islamic history was one who “worked through books, swords, talismans and lamps to force the unseen legions to his will” (*Companion* 202). While talismans help our characters out, they do not seem to act of their own volition, but rather through their interaction with the subjects they are linked to in the kinds of relationships Felski describes as “networks of cooperation, conflict, control, and cocreation” (*Limits of Critique* 24). The same can be said of other objects in the *Nights*, whether magical or mundane, sacred or profane. While Yunan and Duban may indeed be a fable that “dramatises

³ The jinn who disobeyed were punished by Solomon, imprisoned in the brass bottles whose discovery initiates the story of the City of Brass.

books-as-agents” (*Stranger Magic* 198), the book is an agent only because of its relationship to its subject; the book is enabled by, and enables, the subject Duban. These interactions work in relationships of seemingly infinite reciprocity, sometimes so fluid as to be virtually inseparable. As Warner notes of the jinn who animate such objects as lamps and rings, they “have transmuted into charmed things, activated by texts, which in turn become talismanic” (*Stranger Magic* 219). In the *Nights*, then, magic often comes in the form of objects, or via objects, “enchanted things” that have “develop[ed] attachments to their owners” (*Stranger Magic* 199).

Such charmed objects, a key characteristic of the *Nights*, speak to Bennett’s idea of the vitality of objects. In a manner similar to Grosz, Bennett conceives of things as having their own “force” or “vitality”, intrinsic to the object rather than the product of movement through human history as is the theory of Appadurai. This force is distinct from what Appadurai calls a biography; it is a kind of sentience. It is this awareness of the potential “vitality of (non-human) bodies”, which Bennett writes about in *Vibrant Matter* (12), that allows Warner to frame the *Nights* as “fairy tales about property, in which things are literally alive and sentient and efficacious” (*Stranger Magic* 28). However, while Warner takes up some of the ideas of Bennett and Grosz in order to bring thingness to the surface, she stops short of the decentring of the human and the redistribution of agency that they advance. It is here that, picking up the insight provided by Warner, and making use of the work of Felski, for one, I attempt to push beyond her and take her discussion in a different direction.

3.2. *More than things but less than life*

By looking at a selection of stories within the *Nights* – some of them used by Warner in her own analysis – it is possible to see how the world of objects in the stories is as alive as the world of subjects, sometimes even more so, and that therefore more can be gained from

looking at the latter alongside the former. This brings us back to Grosz, who makes the important point that the object should not be conceived of as the other, or the binary double, of the subject (131), particularly as what we find in the *Nights* is both objects and subjects that occupy a liminal space, somewhere between person and thing, “a person who is not a person, a thing that is not quite a thing” (*Stranger Magic* 197).⁴ This is a problem that in her analysis Warner seems either to deliberately sidestep, or perhaps not to manage to overcome. Rather, her language of the thingness of persons and the sentience of things still assumes these categories. Her insistence that “things acquire a life of their own” (*Stranger Magic* 199), regardless of their “attachments to their owners”, and her focus on their ability to act independently of their users, merely reiterates a divide.

This shortcoming is marked, as the fact that these are not necessarily two disparate worlds but rather worlds that overlap and intermesh is particularly evident in “The Tale of King Yunan and the Sage Duban”. Here, the severed head of Duban, animated after his death, is evidence of the interstitiality of objects and subjects in the *Nights* – their existence, through their vibrancy and liveliness, as a kind of cross-breed of object and subject. The book as an instrument of revenge – the killing book – occupies this same liminal space. As Warner herself notes:

Oscillating between a person and a thing, Douban’s head can stand for the ambiguous condition of phenomena in the *Arabian Nights*: the stories continually test the border between persons and things. [...] [F]or their very undecidability as objects, the head of the physician Douban and his murder weapon of choice illuminate the animist character of objects. Both of them belong in a debatable land: a person who is not a person, a thing that is not quite a thing. Or perhaps a

⁴ The entanglement of subjects and objects is also linguistically present in the process of translation from Arabic, where, as Irwin notes, “the absence of capital letters can lead to proper names being mistranslated as things” (*Companion* 9).

very special kind of thing: a severed head that speaks, a book that kills. (*Stranger Magic* 197)

Yet for Warner to begin here with the phrase “oscillating between person and thing” points to a reliance on the categories of “person” and “thing”. Rather, Duban’s head is never an independent subject; it does not move *between* person and thing so much as it *is* person-and-thing. This semblance of life in death appears elsewhere in the *Nights*, notably in a particularly eerie scene in “The City of Brass” (Irwin, Vol. 2), where the travellers come across a woman about whom we are told “those who looked at her thought that she could not be a corpse but must be alive”. The woman, the story goes, “seemed to be watching the newcomers, and looking from right to left”, and her eyes, the emir tells Talib, “were removed after death and given a backing of quicksilver before being put back in place. As they gleam, it seems as though the eyelashes are moving them and so they appear to be twinkling to those who look at her, while, in fact, she is dead”. In becoming a corpse, the woman with the mercury eyes is, to appropriate the words of Simone Weil for my own context, “turn[ed] [...] into a thing in the most literal sense” (quoted in *Stranger Magic* 205). Yet she is both corpse and more than corpse, both thing and more than thing, and while she is “more than thing”, she remains what Warner describes as “less than life” (*Stranger Magic* 205).

The strange and involuted relationship between subject and object in the *Nights*, which here creates the illusion of life, is present also in the automata that populate several of the stories: objects that deliver the impression that they are operating independently of subjects. An example of this is the ebony horse, in the story of that same name (Irwin, Vol. 2), which, though initiated by human hands, appears to fly of its own accord. In the story, a king is approached by three wise men, one of whom brings a horse made of ebony and ivory. Of the horse, the king is told that, “when a man mounts it, it will take him to whatever land he wants”. The wise man, who is also magician, shows the king’s son, the prince, a screw that

must be turned in order to animate the horse, and two knobs on the horse's shoulders that will make the horse either ascend or descend when rubbed. The prince takes off with the horse, flies over cities he doesn't recognise, and eventually lands on top of a king's palace when it gets late. He leaves the horse there and enters the palace in search of provisions. Here he encounters the princess and, shortly afterwards, the king. The prince challenges the king's entire army to a battle in order to win his daughter's hand in marriage, but insists that he "shall mount only the horse on which I rode here". Facing the king's men, the prince turns the screw on the horse; "[i]ts interior fill[s] with air", and it takes off. When the prince returns to his father's kingdom, the king advises him to never mount the horse again, saying, "You don't know all its qualities and you have been tricked by it." But the prince ignores his father's advice and, filled with desire for the princess, takes to the sky the following morning with the intention of bringing the princess back with him. As the prince has pined for the princess, so the magician has pined for the horse he created, and so he kidnaps the princess and the horse from the king's orchards and whisks them off to the city of Rum, with the aim of "burn[ing] [the prince's] heart as he burned mine". After a complicated series of events, during which the magician is in turn kidnapped, the tale ends with the prince and princess safely back in his father's kingdom and the king smashing the ebony horse, "destroying its workings".

Several key moments in the story attest to the conflation of the mechanical and the living: for one, the horse filling with air creates a sense of a breathing, living thing, and for another, the suggestion that it may have the kind of consciousness that would make it capable of trickery. In fact, this trickery is the work of the magician who made the horse and, although seeming to act independently, the horse works in collaboration with the magician. Both the ebony horse and the girl with the mercury eyes attest to the kind of sentience afforded to inanimate objects and posthumous subjects in the *Nights*. Yet they also speak to

the presence in the stories of what Irwin calls automatonophobia, or a fear of statues. Irwin elaborates on this phenomenon, as an attitude present in *Tales of the Marvellous*, by speaking about the historical writings of Muslim travellers.

[I]t's very noticeable even as late as Evliya Çelebi, the Turkish traveller writing in the seventeenth century, it does seem as though Muslims, when they're writing, have great difficulty coming to grips with the idea of statues as works of art. As far as Evliya Çelebi is concerned, if you see a man of stone, it's either a wonder-working talisman [...] or it's someone who's been petrified and turned into stone. (in Irwin & Warner, "Tales of the Marvellous")⁵

This outlook is also present in the *Nights*: if you see a human form in stone, it is almost always somebody who has been petrified or imprisoned – it is never a work of art. Notably, in "The City of Brass", the statue that the travellers come across turns out to be an imprisoned 'ifrit and not mere stone. Moreover, the 'ifrit is not only both human and beast, with its "two huge wings and four hands, [...] [and] two eyes like burning coals" (Irwin, Vol. 2); it is a half-beast, half-human thing, a spectacle that causes us to reconsider the essential characteristics of its component parts, both organic and inorganic. In this way the *Nights* causes us to rethink how we define human and thing, complicating the divide between what is living and what is inert. The 'ifrit is very much alive, but he does not have the liveliness of the travellers, who are by definition mobile. This being "made thing", which occurs throughout the *Nights*, in this case as a form of punishment, is one way in which an atmosphere of automatonophobia penetrates the stories.

⁵ See also *Marvellous* xxviii–xxix.

3.3. *Meaning made manifest: containers and carriers of ideas*

While Warner may fall short of escaping a reliance on the categories of subject and object, her initial framing provides a useful way for us to look at how so many of the stories of the *Nights* are lodged in goods that “move” – both literally and figuratively – and the way in which objects become things as per the idea advanced by Brown. As Brown suggests:

You could imagine things [...] as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. (“Thing Theory” 5)

Thus, in Brown’s view, objects become things when they stop working for us in the way they are supposed to, or when they cease to perform their intended function. He gives the following examples by way of clarification:

[W]hen the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (“Thing Theory” 4)

Warner uses Brown’s hypothesis to launch her discussion of the thing-world of the *Nights*. One of the points she makes here is that talismans and other magical devices in the *Nights* slip “between object and metaphor”, where “the literal materiality of [the] thing dissolves into the virtual reality of its powers” (*Stranger Magic* 433). It is in this “slippage between object and metaphor”, Warner seems to suggest, that the thingness of the objects of the *Nights* reveals itself.

It is at this point that I would like to make use of Warner's argument, but take it further. Warner's suggestion that objects transition to metaphor seems to provide a translation of objects into dematerialised ideas. Certainly, Brown's idea that a thing names "a particular subject-object relation" suggests the need to make use of a linguistic device of a different kind. Indeed, to make use of metaphor would seem to take us away from the realm of ANT, and away from Felski, too, who argues that these somewhat ubiquitous literary devices "yoke *abstract ideas* to more tangible or graspable phenomena" (*Limits of Critique* 52; my emphasis). Furthermore, it would take us back from thing to object, as it is things, argues Freedgood, that "are not always semiotically severed from their materiality or their relations to subjects and objects beyond the narrative frame" (158). Rather, as Freedgood claims, "the object as metaphor loses some of its qualities in its symbolic servitude" (*Ideas in Things* 11); in addition to the bondage to abstract ideas, the servitude that Freedgood mentions here is also the subjection to subjects. It is with this awareness that she asks that we read metonymically rather than metaphorically,⁶ as it is the "metonymic thing", "even if it is, at the level of content, a commodity—[that] has a chance to remain a thing—a sensuous object with connections to people and places beyond the novel that have meaning in the novel" (154). Perhaps then it is metonymy rather than metaphor that brings out the thingness of things.⁷ Indeed, in her casting of the metonym as a traveller, "a figure that tends to wander out into the world" (162 n.27), Freedgood allows us renewed access to this illusive device; it becomes better able to speak to the elements of a text characterised by a lack of fixedness.

⁶ While the extent of this project doesn't allow for a thorough consideration of metaphor and metonymy, for further argument on the move away from metaphor see Brenda Cooper's *Magical Realism in West African Fiction* and *The Grammar of Identity* by Stephen Clingman, which both elaborate on this turn.

⁷ I am including synecdoche under the category of metonymy.

In the *Nights*, objects are often frequently the vehicles for ideas; they embody William Carlos Williams's well-known aphorism, "No ideas but in things."⁸ Where Sherry Turkle observes of this that "the thing carries the idea" (308), so in the stories of the *Nights*, objects are both the meaning and the carrier of that meaning. The many rings of the *Nights* are a good example of this, whether they represent the marriage of two lovers or, as in the case of signet rings, the securing of ownership or establishment of authenticity. These rings contain, and are activated by, the networks of symbolism within them, but in addition the symbolism is born out of the cultural and historical networks in which they operate.

To elucidate this point, it is worth looking briefly at money, or currency, and its talismanic behaviour. Warner argues of cheques, IOUs and paper money, for example, that their "worth [...] does not inhere in the materials in which they appear [...]. Value is inscribed into them, as it is with talismans: intricate graphic ornament, multiple lattices and complex sprinkling of letters, emblems, mottoes, names, symbols and distinctive numbers woven together, and embedded watermarks give the note such specificity that it cannot be forged." (*Stranger Magic* 255). She looks at the etymology of the word "talisman" in order to draw a conclusion that echoes that of Turkle:

The shadow of *telos*, Greek for goal, lingers in its meanings in these contexts: in ancient Greek, *telesma* surprisingly means simply "money paid or to be paid"; other uses include "tax", "outlay" and, most significantly with regard to the development of "talisman", "a certified copy or certificate", often stamped with the symbolic power of a seal to give it specific value, significance and authority. A promissory note, an iou, a wager, would fall under this first meaning. However, the stem *teles-* in Greek produced several related words applying in a religious

⁸ See "A Sort of a Song" and, later, the much longer "Paterson", in which this becomes something of a mantra. In "Paterson", Williams writes: "a man is indeed a city, and for the poet there are no ideas but in things."

context, as in *telesmos*, a consecration ceremony, for example [...]. Talisman consequently entails something having been brought to fruition, completed, often a transaction or pact made for some sacred or religious purpose, with autonomous and often mysterious significance. (*Stranger Magic* 217)

Yet while money has significant metonymic currency in the *Nights*, a focus on what, after Warner, I've called "the slippage between object and metonymy" seems best initiated with a look at the bed-object. The bed is an object that cannot seem to avoid this slippage, largely because of the fact that the *Nights* is "a book of stories told in bed" (*Stranger Magic* 408). Looking at the refrain with which each of nights ends and begins allows a unique way of speaking about the Sultan Shahriyar and his relationship to this particular signifier.

In his essay "Repetitiveness in the *Arabian Nights*" Aoyagi takes up the theme of stock descriptions initiated by Todorov in "Narrative-Men", looking additionally at the relationships between the characters both within and across stories. He argues that the repetition of names in the text "demonstrates that persons cannot be unique in the strict sense of this word and that, sharing the name with others, a character in the *Nights* rids itself of absolute uniqueness, or isolated individuality" (74).⁹ Names sometimes also echo one another in what Ghazoul calls "phonetic duplication" (ch. 2); such is the case with the sisters Shahrazad and Dinarzad whose voices form the refrain with which each of the nights begins and ends:

But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence. Then Dinarzad said, "What a strange and entertaining story!" Shahrazad replied, "What is this

⁹ Examples of this phenomenon across stories include the characters Aladdin (in "Aladdin of the Beautiful Moles" and in "The Story of Aladdin, or The Magic Lamp", for instance) and Qamar al-Zaman (in "Qamar al-Zaman" and "The story of King Shahrیمان and his son, Qamar al-Zaman").

However, to rely too heavily on this observation would be to ignore the text's diverse origins.

compared with what I shall tell you tomorrow night if the king spares me and lets me live!”

The following night Dinarzad said, “Sister, if you are not sleepy, tell us one of your lovely little tales to while away the night.” Shahrazad replied, “Very well”.¹⁰

This phonetic duplication, as well as the repetition of these lines throughout the text, results in a kind of erasure or diminishing of character, and with it, the effacement of subjectivity. Furthermore, these moments seem to overlook the presence of the sultan. Shahrazad speaks of him in the third person, with only the suggestion that he is there. He comes to be symbolised by the bed on and across which Shahrazad tells her stories.

However, the bed-object is what frames the *Nights* not because it is literally the site of Shahrazad’s storytelling, but also because of the way in which, as metonym, it comes to stand for the impetus of the frame narrative. The bed – as the marriage bed, with its representations of pleasure and intimacy but also of the possibility of betrayal – represents, more specifically, the infidelity of the Sultan Shahriyar’s wife. It therefore comes to stand for the very actions that propel the text, as represented by the frame narrative. In this narrative, Shahriyar discovers that both he and his brother have been betrayed by their wives. After having his wife killed, and concluding that all women are equally untrustworthy, Shahriyar resolves to marry a different woman each night, beheading each the very next morning in order to prevent any chance of betrayal. The vizier’s daughter, Shahrazad, devises a plan to end this senseless killing, beginning by marrying the sultan. On the night of their marriage, Shahrazad starts to tell the first of the tales that will keep Shahriyar enthralled for a thousand and one

¹⁰ This phrasing varies across the different versions of the text – some even omit these “interruptions” altogether – but this particular version is drawn from Haddawy’s translation (Ed. Mahdi & Heller-Roazen).

nights. Here, Shahriyar's own transformation (his figurative "movement") from tyrant to a more benevolent despot, across the course of the frame tale, takes place via the bed.

Thus, it is this act of infidelity, metonymised by the bed-object, that launches the narrative(s) – both the frame story and, subsequently, the stories embedded therein. Yet through the stories the bed transitions from a site of violence back to a site of intimacy, a transformation made possible by Shahrazad's storytelling. Storytelling, it should be noted, is an intimate act, and this sense of intimacy is enhanced in the frame story by Shahrazad's telling of stories by night. As Warner furthers:

Those tales [told by Shahrazad] are unfolding in the night-time, whereas the flying sofas in a tale like "Aladdin of the Beautiful Moles" are strictly daybeds and as furnishings suggest a specific form of consciousness, the state of reverie that arises when someone is still awake or rather semi-awake, a receptive state of consciousness – reverie and daydream, rather than dream, subconsciousness rather than unconsciousness [...]. (*Stranger Magic* 410)

The bed, then, is a symbol that frames the stories of the *Nights*; it is the ultimate object, and through the meaning it accumulates it becomes a fungible thing in a complex network of object and subject. More significantly, though, the symbol of the bed in the *Nights* is both one of symbolic and literal movement, carrying characters to other cities and other states of consciousness.¹¹

In the story of Ala' al-Din Abu'l-Shamat (in Irwin, Vol. 1), the daybed transitions into a magical thing that literally transports the story's characters, while at the same time standing in for the relationships we come across in the story. In the tale we meet a wealthy Cairene

¹¹ The bed also recurs within several of the enframed stories, whether manifesting via the plot device of a Shakespearean-style bed-trick, the stuff of wedding nights, the consummation of marriage, or its presence as an object of enchantment (there are many flying beds in the *Nights*).

merchant¹² who is in a state of despair, as his wife of forty years has not provided him with a child. When he tells his story to Muhammad Simsin, a magician posing as a poor hashish addict, Simsin gives him a mixture that he says will thicken his sperm. Shortly afterwards, the merchant's wife gives birth to a baby boy of "surpassing beauty", whom they call 'Ala' al-Din Abu'l-Shamat, Aladdin of the Beautiful Moles, after the moles on his cheeks. Fearing that harm will come to him, his parents confine him to a cellar beneath the house where he is to stay until he reaches puberty. But 'Ala' al-Din manages to escape one day and convinces his parents to let him set off with a trading party heading for Baghdad. After being attacked by a group of Bedouin highwaymen and left for dead, 'Ala' al-Din is rescued by the sinister merchant Mahmud al-Balkhi, who is secretly a magician and harbours a "passionate desire" for the young merchant. After refusing the advances of al-Balkhi, 'Ala' al-Din takes shelter in a mosque in Baghdad, where he is discovered by two merchants. Here he enters a contract that will see him briefly married to the daughter of one of the merchants, the beautiful Zubaida. Everything seems to be going well, but then Zubaida dies and 'Ala' al-Din is hanged – though really they are both still alive. After several more twists and turns, we find 'Ala' al-Din in Alexandria, where he has discovered "a jewel big enough to fill the palm of the hand", which "had five facets and was inscribed with writing like ant's trails with names and talismans." After rubbing the facets and getting no response, 'Ala' al-Din concludes that it is probably a useless piece of onyx, and he sells it to a passing sea captain who then kidnaps him and takes him to Genoa. Here he meets the king's daughter, Husn Maryam, who walks in accompanied by Zubaida. 'Ala' al-Din falls in love with Maryam, who, it turns out, had choreographed many of 'Ala' al-Din's catastrophes as she is in love with him. But she has also helped him, saving him from hanging and sending him the jewel which would, by a very knotted path, led to his reunion with Zubaida. 'Ala' al-Din's love for Maryam triumphs

¹² In other versions of the story, the merchant is from Baghdad.

and he resolves to take her as a second wife. Maryam brings out the jewel, and conjures a couch by rubbing the image engraved on one of the facets. Seated on the couch alongside ‘Ala’ al-Din and Zubaida, Maryam implores it to carry them all to Alexandria, “by the names, the talismans and the hieroglyphs inscribed on this jewel”. After Alexandria, the couch takes them to Cairo, where ‘Ala’ al-Din marries Maryam.

This penultimate scene, the three lovers carried off by the couch, makes literal a metaphor of rapture, where “the idea of being carried off, especially by love or by happiness, turns into an actual flight” (Warner, “Foyles”). However, this “carrying off” is associated not only with love or happiness, but also with the pleasures attached to storytelling; it points to storytelling as a means of travel or transcendence. Our imagination takes off with the flight of ‘Ala’ al-Din, Maryam and Zubaida on the magic carpet, much as it does with the prince on the ebony horse, turning these objects of flight into symbols of the movement of stories themselves – and our movement through stories.

The bed – and its related forms, carpet and couch – is not only a primary symbol for the nights (indeed, *the* primary symbol), but also represents the collection’s overarching message: the freedom brought by stories. The freedom storytelling affords to many of the characters in the *Nights*, and the attendant association of beds in the stories with flying, adds another whole set of considerations, its own stream of metaphors, albeit ones in which the object is not simply a vehicle for meaning but the meaning made manifest, the thing itself. Thus, as material goods become magical things in the *Nights*, so stories become active through the system in which they operate and the power afforded to them in this system. It is Felski’s recognition of this – that stories are things – that motivates her turn to ANT as a mode of literary criticism.

4. *In search of a conclusion*

The frame tale of the *Nights* is notably characterised by the power it affords to storytelling. While Ghazoul reminds us that “*The Arabian Nights* is clearly a narrative about the act of narration” (ch. 3), it is more specifically about the active or transformative power of narration. This trope is synthesised in the character of Shahriyar, whose personal transformation from a gynocidal tyrant to one who willingly spares the life of women occurs over a thousand and one nights, through the stories Shahrazad tells him. Yet it extends to many of the stories embedded within this narrative: the stories Shahrazad tells to postpone her death frequently feature characters who must tell stories to stave off their own deaths or the deaths of others.¹ The way in which stories are used to postpone or “ward off” death in the *Nights* has led Warner to conclude that they behave in a similar way to talismans (“Tales Things Tell”). Warner’s observation, in turn, lends itself here to a consideration of stories as both things of value and active participants in the world of subjects.

In the *Nights*, if stories have proven their worth, or are deemed to be of value, it is said that they should be written down in letters of gold or engraved in the corner of the eye with a needle.² In “The Story of the Merchant and the Demon”,³ for example, an old man comes across a despairing merchant and responds to his story by saying, “you are a very pious man and your story is so wonderful that were it written with needles on the corners of men’s eyes, it would be a lesson for those who take heed” (Irwin, Vol. 1), while in “The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies” we are told that, if written down, the story would serve as “a warning to those who wish to consider” (Mahdi & Heller-Roazen 84–85) or as

¹ Here, as Todorov notes, “storytelling equals living” (“Narrative-Men” 448).

² Chraïbi argues that this makes a product out of the stories; it constitutes a kind of “cashing in” in a moral sense: “reward if it is good, punishment if it is bad” (155).

³ In this case “demon” is being used as substitute for “jinni”, which is used in other versions of the story (though often anglicised as “genie”).

“counsel to those who profit from counsel” (Irwin, Vol. 1). Moreover, as “The story of the eunuch Kafur” (Irwin, Vol. 1) illustrates, the lessons hoped to be reaped by making permanent the word are often those related to piety. Here, the caliph orders that the story “be written down and given a permanent place in his treasury, so that future generations might read it, wonder at the turns of fortune and entrust their affairs to God”. Etching these tales in the corner of the eye, coherent as they often are with Islamic cosmology, means living with, and through, these messages; they invariably distort, affect or transform sight.

Yet this movement from oral to written acts both as a way of reaffirming the power of the story and as a way of consolidating it, giving it agency or the potential to affect change in the world. Furthermore, the idea that transcription makes the stories durable, or designates them as valuable, or indeed “good”, speaks to the idea of the *Nights* as not only a thing-culture but also a word-culture, and the product of culture that is lodged in both goods and words. As Warner tells us, this “was the realm of the peoples of the book and in their stories people write to one another” (“Tales Things Tell”). She further notes that “writing figures in the *Arabian Nights* far more prominently than it does in fairy tales. [...] The *Arabian Nights* often mentions, without particular astonishment, that a heroine can read and write, even when she is apparently a slave” (“Tales Things Tell”). If, as Warner posits, the stories are “lodged in goods” (*Stranger Magic* 8), then they are lodged in both goods and words.

What I have referred to as the thing-culture of the *Nights* is inextricably linked to this word-culture, where words – and their material manifestations – often appear to have a vibrancy or agency similar to that of the magical goods in the stories. This becomes clear when we look again at the story of Yunan and Duban, where the book Duban uses to avenge his death quite literally acts out Felski’s assertion that “[l]iterary texts can be usefully thought of as nonhuman actors” (*Limits of Critique* 154). In this story, words – signified by the object book – become active things, infused with what Warner describes as a “causal energy”

("Foyles"); they are capable of affecting change, of acting on the world. Yet the *Nights*, as a whole, has a similar active energy; the text exemplifies Felski's idea of a text as a nonhuman actor. This is connected to its being a work caught up in movement, its definition born out of centuries of dissemination and cross-pollination. By thinking about *Nights* as a dynamic thing alongside the things in the text, we are able to come closer to a sense of what the *Nights* offers us in this teleo-historical moment.

4.1. *The thing about stories*

If "good" stories end their lives as objects in the *Nights*, gaining materiality through transcription, then it is objects that frequently propel or instigate stories and, in doing so, gain a measure of subjectivity. Take, for example, the fishbone in "The Story of the Hunchback", which sets in motion a tale in which a series of different characters are charged at turns with the death of a hunchback, or the date pip in "The Story of the Merchant and the Demon", which, when discarded in a nearby field, leads to a string of characters having to tell stories to win over the jinni whose son the date pip killed. As stories provide a means of transcendence, moving readers and carrying ideas, so objects in the stories of the *Nights* are able to provide a means of propulsion, often helping characters out of tricky situations while at other times getting them into trouble.

"The Story of the Fisherman and the Demon" (in Mahdi & Heller-Roazen, 30–) is one tale that provides evidence for the idea of objects as motivators of plot. Here, a poor old fisherman catches in his net a heavy brass bottle, secured with a lead stopper imprinted with the seal of Solomon. Curious as to what might be inside the bottle, the fisherman opens it up, and out comes a plume of smoke, which coalesces into an 'ifrit. The 'ifrit tells the fisherman that he has been imprisoned in the brass bottle for rebelling against Solomon and refusing to accept the true faith. While in the jar, the 'ifrit tells the fisherman, he grew increasingly

furious, to the point where he vowed to kill whoever freed him. However, aware that he can outsmart the 'ifrit's "demonic wiles" (35) with his God-given reason, the fisherman devises a plan and asks the 'ifrit to let him ask him one final question before being killed. When the 'ifrit consents, the fisherman asks him how he managed to fit inside such a small bottle, saying that he will only believe it if he sees it with his own eyes. The 'ifrit agrees to prove it and, turning back into a cloud of smoke, slips inside the bottle. Acting quickly, the fisherman seals the bottle with the lead stopper, once again imprisoning the 'ifrit – and saving himself. Thus, the fisherman defeats the 'ifrit with the help of the very same bottle that initiated the story; the bottle allows for both the story's beginning and its resolution.

As precipitators of plot, objects – in collaboration with subjects – often behave as the protagonists of stories in the *Nights*. In this sense, objects are not unlike like the props of theatre, which Shoshana Avigal and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan note, "can characterize a *dramatis persona*, indicate place, or advance the plot at one level, but simultaneously, at another level, [...] act as support for the actor, provide him with a place to sit when he is tired, or provoke him into action" (17). While this is more clearly the case in "The Story of the Fisherman and Demon", where the brass bottle is a transparent metonym for the jinni within, it often occurs more subtly. It is these same bottles, coveted by the caliph 'Abd al-Malik, that initiate the journey to the City of Brass, where men are killed and lessons learned.

It is also significant that this story tells us less about the fisherman (only that he is old and poor, that he has a family) than it does about the brass bottle, with its links to the story of the City of Brass, its rich backstory in the history of Solomon. This speaks to how the effacement of character in the *Nights*, noted by Todorov and Aoyagi, forces objects to take up roles traditionally reserved for subjects. While this is one of the ways in which plot is advanced, it often works in conjunction with descriptions attached to objects, where images

of beauty are metonymised by objects.⁴ In the story of King Shariman and Qamar al-Zaman, for example, protagonists Qamar and Budur are both given names associated with the moon; according to Doniger, “*Qamar* means ‘moon,’ and *Budur* means ‘full moon’ or ‘circle of the moon’” (115). The bed-trick in the concluding scenes of the story is only made possible by their equalled beauty: it is because both are as beautiful as the moon, because their beauty *is* the moon’s beauty, that this plot device is able to succeed. Here, the identities of Qamar and Budur – formed through a description of things – are subsumed by the narrative in which they appear; they seem to figure only for the purposes of story.⁵

The objects in the stories of the *Nights* are not only tied up with the stories told about them, and the life stories of characters, they are also attached to the object – that is, the aim or purpose – of stories. Studying the intricate relationships between stories and objects is one way of illuminating the benefits of Felski’s approach. Much like the “text’s status as coactor: as something that makes a difference, that helps make things happen” (Felski, *Limits of Critique* 12), objects in the *Nights* are what propel the narratives or “keep the stories on the move” (*Stranger Magic* 200). In many instances, they provide the real impetus for the initiation of a narrative or the continuation of plot. If we are to look at the subject world of the *Nights*, then, it seems necessary to look at it alongside the object world or thing-culture of the stories, as in many instances it is things that motivate or enable narratives.

⁴ For example, in “The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies”, the porter describes a woman he comes across in the market as having, “a forehead like the new moon, [...] eyebrows like the crescent in the month of Sha’ban, cheeks like red anemones, mouth like the seal of Solomon, lips like red carnelian, teeth like a row of pearls set in coral, neck like a cake for a king, bosom like a fountain, breasts like a pair of big pomegranates resembling a rabbit with uplifted ears, and a belly with a navel like a cup that holds a pound of benzoin ointment.” (in Mahdi & Heller-Roazen 68)

⁵ Rimmon-Kenan illuminates this deep connection between narrative and identity by employing the useful term “narrative identity” as an alternative to “identity” (“Illness” 11), and thus adding value to Todorov’s claim that, in the *Nights*, “a character is a potential story that is the story of his life” (“Narrative-Men” 446).

4.2. *Shipping the Nights' fantastic*

The theme of storytelling and its ability to enact change also attaches itself to objects in the *Nights* independently of the written word, a key example being the association of flying carpets with the flight of the imagination. Yet there is more to be said about carpets and their connection to the text than the metaphors of travel and transportation associated with other flying things in the stories (such as automata, rukh and jinn). This comes partly out of what Warner terms the “cultural coincidence of carpet-making and storytelling among nomadic peoples” (*Stranger Magic* 80). Warner makes use of this historical detail to suggest that the weaving of oriental carpets, and their motifs, can be read as a model for the patterns of storytelling in the *Nights*. Making use of the work of Italian writer Cristina Campo, she argues:

The flatness of a carpet contains and orders all constituent elements at an indeterminate scale – large or small – in the same way as a story compresses and organises swathes of raw material. [Campo] evokes how an oriental rug unfolds a surface on which ornaments play in infinite recession, or mise-en-abyme. [...] This structure rhymes with the storyteller’s methods in the *Nights*: stories within stories that give the *Nights* its involuted structure, just as oriental carpets are often banded one frame set inside another. (*Stranger Magic* 81–82)

Thus, the structure of an oriental carpet, with its decorative elements playing in infinite recession, “mirror[s] the narrative architecture of the *Nights*” (Warner, *Stranger Magic* 411) with its infinite recession of storytelling. Yet, recession works here on another level: the text compared above to a carpet is one featuring carpets whose own symbolic value elicits comparisons with texts. As the oriental carpet mirrors the narrative architecture of the *Nights*, so the flying carpet of the stories reflects the way in which texts move readers and carry ideas.

Somewhat ironically, this seemingly ordered framing is partly what affords the text its inability to be defined and contained, what gives it its characteristic flightiness or fluidity. As Ghazoul remarks: “The flexibility of the narrative is guaranteed by an enclosing structure which can contain a multiplicity of genres, conflicting styles, and divergent themes, without destroying in the least the coherence of the text” (ch. 1). Perhaps then it is this very structure – the lodging of story segments within frames – that makes the stories more amenable to travel. By packaging themselves neatly within the narrative boxes, the stories ensure that, as Irwin’s claim, “if the frame story survives, [they] are likely to survive too” (*Companion* 235).

However, while Warner and others speak of stories *within* stories, there seems to exist another possibility, one inherent in Warner’s use of the word arabesque, not only for connoting that which is arab-*esque* but also for denoting a form of surface decoration. The interlacing, the arabesque, that Warner describes takes place on the surface of the carpet, and the word “surface”, with its suggestion of superficiality and shallowness, hints at something elided. Perhaps what we need to be aware of then is that in “translating” the *Nights* into a category (or into terms) with which we are more culturally familiar, we lose something that we might grasp if we stay within the world of its composition a bit longer, before moving out. Yet, this is a loss that seems partly inevitable, as travel, notes Colla, “suggests forms of movement that entail loss as much as gain” (91). One of these forms of movement is translation, the movement from one language to another, and as a synonym of words such as change, convert and interpret, “translate” definitively suggests loss.

As Said asks “whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation,” (226), so the same might be asked of fantastical texts like the *Nights*. There are likely to be aspects of

the *Nights* that have not travelled well, or have simply not travelled at all – an example of this being the loss, with translation, of instances of wordplay. It is possible, of course, that in translation we miss out on something that could add to an argument about the connection between words and things. For example, in Arabic, the pun between *needles* (*'ibar*) and *lessons* (*ibar*) (see Colla 102),⁶ which cannot be rendered in English, could add value to an argument about the connection between physical goods and moral good, for one.

However, translation into different languages and different forms is part and parcel of the survival of the text in general and the *Nights* in particular. For the *Nights* travel meant survival, and within the *Nights* stories survive by being written down. The movement from oral to written within the stories, and presumably back again, echoes the movement of the collection itself and points to a potential method of survival and perpetuation. It is possible that it is as a result of their ability to overlook and transcend borders that stories survive, a feat made easier, in the case of the *Nights*, by the connectivity of the early Indian Ocean world.

Yet this is as much a literal transcendence of borders as it is one that occurs within the realm of the imagination.⁷ Warner argues that, of all the classes of literature, it is fairy tales that “offer the strongest evidence of bonds in common across borders of nations, race and language” (*Managing Monsters* 87). Ouyang argues, more broadly, that “[t]he fantastic always travels” (in Boehmer et al., “World Literatures”),⁸ suggesting that it is the magical character of the stories of the *Nights* that made them amenable to movement. However, what

⁶ This relationship of course plays out in the frequent instruction that tales should be engraved in the corner of the eye with a needle as lessons or warnings.

⁷ As Gurnah notably observes of the stories of the *Nights*, which drifted through his childhood in Zanzibar: “It [...] never occurred to me to ask why we told each other stories about China, Persia, and Syria, but these places existed in our imaginary world, because the sea routes made us part of the wider world” (in Chambers 129).

⁸ Conversely, though not incompatibly, Van Leeuwen argues that it is in the very crossing of boundaries that “travel, magical, fiction” are produced (*Space* 26).

is still unclear is why the fantastic travels so easily and, more significantly, how the *Nights* – as an example of the fantastic – travelled. While this could possibly be explained by the reliance of fairy tales on recognisable archetypes or “stock characters”, such an explanation seems both insufficient and limiting.

Instead, making use of Irwin’s claim that “[s]tories must offer something to their human hosts in order to make the crucial leap from memory to memory or page to page” (*Companion* 235), I suggest that one of the ways in which the stories of the *Nights* ensured their survival was by offering the transcendent power of the magical, the ability to induce so-called flights of fancy. In the *Nights*, the more literal trade in, or exchange of, stories sees them behave as modes of imaginative transport, where the imagination becomes its own form of transport alongside forms of land, sea and air travel.⁹ While we find rapture as a form of transport within the fictional world of the *Nights*, made material in objects like the flying carpet, the emotive power of stories, their ability to move readers or listeners, also characterises the behaviour of the text in society.

As a nomadic text, the survival of the stories of the *Nights* was (and is) partly dependent on movement. One of the ways in which stories move (and survive) is through what Ashraf Jamal describes as the “integrality of stories and trade” (405). Active participants in the world of trade, stories are attached to things in a way that ensures the circulation and survival of both. Not only do stories provide a way for weary travellers to forget their fatigue and hardship, but they provide a means of travel to those who are otherwise stuck in one place. We see this in the character of Yusuf in Gurnah’s *Paradise*, who expresses his disappointment at being left behind in the care of Hamid and Maimuna, as “a journey to the lakes in the deep interior [...] had begun to excite him” (63). As he has

⁹ Gurnah sets this up in *By the Sea*, where Saleh Omar describes arriving at Gatwick airport as an asylum seeker: “For some, as for me, it was the first journey by air, and the first arrival in a place so monumental as an airport, though I have travelled by sea and by land, and in my imagination” (5).

never been there before, it is the *idea* of the interior that excites him, most likely as a result of the “[m]any traders [that] passed through the town [...] [bringing] news with them and incredible stories of daring and fortitude on the journeys” (Gurnah, *Paradise* 71). For Yusuf, stories are, as Jamal describes, “a way through the world; a way of travelling without physically having to thumb a ride, grab a cheap flight, or get on a boat” (406).

Yet the relationship between travelling and storytelling also takes the form of a trade in stories, one that sees stories behaving like what Muecke calls “story commodities” (68).¹⁰ Significantly, in “The Tale of King Muhammad Bin Sabaik and the Merchant” storyteller and merchant meet when the king sends Hasam the Merchant to discover the “most marvellous story ever”. The idea of a merchant tasked with bringing back a story speaks to this idea of story commodities, where words are here turned into active things that can be “found” and “brought back”. Indeed, Shahrazad herself engages in a kind of trade in stories; she “bargains with them for her survival” (Connor, “Nightinesses”). In relating or “passing on” stories that are already in circulation, rather than telling tales of her own invention, she is, in some way, a peddler of stories or a vehicle for the tales and the ideas they convey.¹¹

4.4. *Taking things further*

By drawing our attention to the story itself, in these myriad ways, the *Nights* manages to overcome the curse among modern critics, where, according to Felski, literature is “separat[ed] from everything around it” and the way in which it penetrates and gives meaning to our lives is ignored (*Uses of Literature* 5). Scholarly reading today is widely governed by what Paul Ricoeur called “a hermeneutics of suspicion”: the idea that a text is masking or

¹⁰ Muecke gives the example of Bollywood here, “the stories India is trading around the region and the world” (68): “This flow of story commodities has been circulating ever since Sindbad, but is now going beyond the Indian Ocean region” (68–69).

¹¹ Irwin also tells us that “[i]n medieval Arab society, one did not boast of inventing stories: one claimed only to be transmitting them” (*Companion* 87).

concealing something and that it should therefore be approached with cautious distrust. In *Freud and Philosophy*, he pits this against another prevalent method of reading, “a hermeneutics of trust”, which seeks instead “revelation” (in Felski “Suspicious Minds” 216). Felski challenges the metaphors that attend these methods, metaphors of depth and surface – digging down and standing back – arguing that both “treat a text as an inert object to be scrutinized rather than a phenomenon to be engaged” (*Limits of Critique* 84).¹²

As a result of these modern methods of reading – one “driven by reverence” and the other by distrust – literary studies seems to have reached a kind of stalemate, which has produced a hunger for stories that demand us to read differently. To read one thing as masking another in the *Nights* – for example, the magical as masking the mercantile – does not seem to exhaust the text, nor is it what we look to literature for. Rather, at least one of the things we look to literature for is transcendence; we ask to be moved beyond our circumstances or to be moved to feeling. The *Nights* provides this, making a case for literature as a form of interference, for literature as acting on the world rather than imitating it. As Warner observes of the *Nights*:

[It] inspires a way of thinking about writing and the making of literature as forms of exchange across time – dream journeys in which the maker fuses with what is being made, until the artefact exercises in return its own fashioning force. [This] draw[s] away from the prevalent idea of art as mimesis, representing the world in a persuasive, true-to-life way, and emphasise[s] instead the agency of literature. Stories need not report on real life, but clear the way to changing the experience of it. (*Stranger Magic* 27)

Shifting the hermeneutics of suspicion “from a mode of analysis to an object of analysis”, as

¹² For more on the exclusive methods of analysis, “deep structure” and “surface structure”, see Rimmon-Kenan, “How the Model Neglects the Medium” 159.

Felski suggests we do (see “Suspicious Minds” 218), allows us to recognise, and then overcome, at least some of the limitations of an otherwise restrictive mode of reading, one particularly stifling for our understanding of such a complex and self-reflective text. Instead, Felski’s suggested postcritical mode, with its foundations in Actor–Network Theory, seems better able to accommodate a view of the *Nights* as an agent.

Bemoaning the inadequacy of traditional methods of analysis to account for this dynamism, what she calls “the transtemporal movement and affective resonance of particular texts” (“Context Stinks!” 574), Felski argues that in thinking of texts as “nonhuman actors” we are able to do justice to them. While she suggests that we thus give more thought to the way in which “[w]e are intertwined and entangled with texts” (*Limits of Critique* 84), we are similarly intertwined and entangled with other objects in ways that require further consideration – but consideration of a different kind.

Felski’s call to challenge established attitudes to “texts and time, things and persons, action and interaction” (“Context Stinks!” 575) is answered by Warner in *Stranger Magic*. Yet, while Warner makes a definite attempt at such a provocation, seeking another – an other – mode of reading, the story she tells is incomplete, and even she “confesses her reluctance to declare her case closed” (Connor, “Nightinesses”), accepting, in metaphor, that “coming to the end [of this book] does not close the windows or draw the curtains against daybreak” (*Stranger Magic* 431). While my aim has been to extend Warner’s argument further, I too fall short of a resolution.

Although I have suggested at various points that it is the fantastical nature of the *Nights* that allows for no more than a speculative mode of study, this inability to bring into port a conclusion is strangely comparable with the text itself, where one thousand and one

suggests an infinite number. As Jorge Luis Borges reflects on the title:

I think its beauty lies in the fact that for us the word *thousand* is almost synonymous with *infinite*. To say *a thousand nights* is to say infinite nights, countless nights, endless nights. To say *a thousand and one nights* is to add one to infinity. [...] A day has been added to forever. (566–67; emphasis in original)

While the “us” of Borges is likely to be an extra-Arabic “us”, the association of one thousand and one with infinity is not unique to Western consciousness; as Ouyang notes, it also means infinity in the Middle East, and “suggests that the collection may encompass an infinite number of stories” (“Introduction” viii–ix).¹³ This absence of finality associated with the collection only adds to the text’s inability to be defined and contained in other ways, not least in its readings. As Connor asserts:

There can be no new reader, and therefore perhaps no wholly new reading of the collection of stories known as *The Arabian Nights*. Not because they have been exhausted by retelling and explication, but because we always seem to have encountered them, or some of them, already, somewhere else, at some other time in our lives we are not able quite to pin down. They are [...] a past that has never been fully present – translations without originals. And yet, just as there can be no authentic first time for the reading of *The Arabian Nights*, there can be no once and for all signings off either. (“Nightinesses”)

¹³ In his keynote address at the Weekly Mail Book Week in 1987, J.M. Coetzee produced a comparison between stories and cockroaches, which drew, for one, on the way in which stories beget more stories – they “breed” – and, in this way, open themselves up to a life of infinity. He further noted of stories and cockroaches that, “[o]ne of the things you can’t – apparently – do is eradicate them. [...] It is said that they will still be around when we and all our artefacts have disappeared.” (“The Novel Today”)

While an analysis of the *Nights* may equally see “no once and for all signing off”,¹⁴ it is possible that by lingering in the world of the *Nights* a bit longer, observing the behaviour of things, we are able to get at what others may miss.

As part of her defence of things and their significance in “contemporary consciousness”, Warner notes how “in a super crystallised cultural solution [things] can crystallise ways of thinking, feeling and acting. These thickenings of significance are one way that things can be made to talk” (“Tales Things Tell”). Studying the thing-culture of the *Nights*, and things within the “cultural solution” of the *Nights*, may open up a space for other, intertwined branches of analysis and the entanglement of thought they leave in their wake. While Felski laments that in modern criticism “a text is being diagnosed rather than heard” (*Uses of Literature* 6), a reading of the *Thousand and One Nights* that pays attention to the complexity of the relationships between subjects and objects, and their overlapping and interconnected roles, goes some way towards ensuring that the text is heard. Such a reading relies on recognising the vibrancy and multiplicity of the text’s thing-culture.

¹⁴ Interestingly, Freedgood theorises that metonyms exhibit this same instability: “the infinite metonymic threads [...] can never be drawn tight enough to enclose (or close off) a world between the covers of a book.” (105)

5. Works cited

5.1. Primary sources

Irwin, Robert. Ed. *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights: Volumes 1, 2 & 3*. Trans.

Malcolm C. Lyons and Ursula Lyons. London: Penguin Classics, 2010.

Mahdi, Muhsin and Daniel Heller-Roazen. Eds. *The Arabian Nights: A Norton Critical*

Edition. Trans. Husain Haddawy. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

Ouyang, Wen-chin and Paulo Lemos Horta. Eds. *The Arabian Nights*. London: Everyman's

Library, 2014.

5.2. Secondary sources

Abbott, Nadia. "A Ninth-Century Fragment of the 'Thousand Nights' New Light on the Early

History of the Arabian Nights." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 8.3 (1949): 129–164.

Aoyagi, Etsuko. "Repetitiveness in the *Arabian Nights*: Openness as Self-foundation." In *The*

Arabian Nights and Orientalism: Perspectives from East and West (pp. 68–90). Ed.

Yamanaka, Yuriko and Tetsuo Nishio. London: I.B. Taurus, 2006.

Appadurai, Arjun. Ed. *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University

Press, 1986.

Avigal, Shoshana and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. "What Do Brook's Bricks Mean?: Toward a

Theory of the 'Mobility' of Objects in Theatrical Discourse." *Poetics Today* 2.3

(1981): 11–34.

Battuta, Ibn. *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325–1354*. Great Britain: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Bennett, Jane. “Systems and Things: A response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton.” *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 225–33.

Boehmer, Elleke, Marina Warner, Wen-chin Ouyang, and Sa’ddiya Shaikh. “*The Arabian Nights* and Indian Ocean World Literatures.” Department of English, University of Cape Town. 25 March 2015.

Borges, Jorge Luis. “The Thousand and One Nights.” Trans. Eliot Weinberger. *The Georgia Review* 38. 3 (1984): 564–74.

Bray, Julia. “A Caliph and his Public Relations.” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 7.2 (2004): 159–70.

Brown, Bill. “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 1–22.

Brown, Bill. “Objects, Others, and Us (The Refabrication of Things).” *Critical Inquiry* 36.2 (2001): 183–217.

Burton, Richard F. *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night, Volume 1*. Project Gutenberg, 2010.

Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Campbell, Gwyn. "The Role of Africa in the Emergence of the Indian Ocean World Global Economy." Gupta et al., pp. 170–96.

Chambers, Claire. *British Muslim Fictions*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Chraïbi, Aboubakr. "Texts of the Arabian Nights and Ideological Variations." *Middle Eastern Literatures* 7.2 (2004): 149–57.

Clingman, Stephen. *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Coetzee, J.M. "The Novel Today." Keynote address delivered at the Weekly Mail Book Week. Cape Town: Baxter Theatre, 9 November 1987.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Stories of Stone." *Postmedieval: A journal of medieval cultural studies* 1 (2010): 56–63.

Colla, Elliot. "The Porter and Portability: Figure and Narrative in the Nights." Kennedy and Warner, pp. 89–107.

Connor, Steven. "One's Thousand One Nightinesses." *London Review of Books* 34.6 (2012): 14–16.

Cooper, Brenda. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a third eye*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Dobie, Madeleine. "Translation in the Contact Zone: Antoine Galland's *Mille et une nuits: contes arabes*." Makdisi and Nussbaum, pp. 25–50.

Doniger, Wendy. "The Rings of Budur and Qamar al-Zaman." Kennedy and Warner, pp. 108–26.

Douglas, Mary and Baron Isherwood. *The World of Goods: Towards an anthropology of consumption*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.

Edwards, Adrian. "Global forced displacement hits record high." *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, 20 June 2016, www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html

Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

Felski, Rita. "Context Stinks!" *New Literary History* 42.4 (2011): 573–91.

Felski, Rita. "Suspicious Minds." *Poetics Today* 32.2 (2011): 215–34.

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago, IL.: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Freedgood, Elaine. *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Garuba, Harry. "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society." *Public Culture* 15.2 (2003): 261–85.

Geider, Thomas. "Alfu Lela Ulela: The *Thousand and One Nights* in Swahili-Speaking East Africa." In *The Arabian Nights in Transnational Perspective* (pp. 183–200). Ed. Ulrich Marzolph. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2007.

Ghazoul, Ferial J. *Nocturnal Poetics: The Arabian Nights in Comparative Context*. Cairo: AUC Press, 1996.

Ghosh, Amitav. *In an Antique Land*. London: Granta, 2011.

Ghosh, Devleena and Stephen Muecke. Ed. *Cultures of Trade: Indian Ocean Exchanges*. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.

Ghosh, Devleena and Stephen Muecke. "Oceanic Cultural Studies." Ghosh and Muecke, pp.1–8.

Ghosh, Devleena and Stephen Muecke. "Natural Logics of the Indian Ocean." Ghosh and Muecke, pp. 150–63.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*. Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2005.

Gupta, Akhil. "Global Movements of Crops Since the 'Age of Discovery' and Changing Culinary Cultures." Ghosh and Muecke, pp. 164–78.

Gupta, Pamila, et al. Ed. *Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean*. Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010.

Gurnah, Abdulrazak. "Literatur: Eine durchwachsene Geschichte." In *Früchte der Zeit: Afrika, Diaspora, Literatur und Migration* (pp. 227–38). Ed. Helmuth A. Niederle, Ulrike Davis-Sulikowski, and Thomas Fillitz. Vienna: WUV-Universitäts-Verlag, 2001.

Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *By the Sea*. London: Bloomsbury, 2002.

Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *Paradise*. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.

Hamori, Andras. "An Allegory from the Arabian Nights: The City of Brass." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 34.1 (1971): 9–19.

Hamori, Andras. "The Magian and the Whore: Readings of Qamar al-Zaman." In *The 1001 Nights: Critical Essays and Annotated Bibliography* (pp. 25–40). Ed. Kay Hardy Campbell et al. Cambridge, MA: Dar Mahjar, 1985.

Harman, Graham. "The Well-Wrought Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism." *New Literary History* 43.2 (2012): 182–203.

Heller-Roazen, Daniel. "Preface." Mahdi and Heller-Roazen, pp. vii–xiv.

Hensely, Nathan K. "Network: Andrew Lang and the Distributed Agencies of Literary Production." *Victorian Periodicals Review* 48.3 (2015): 359–82.

Hourani, George F. *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Irwin, Robert. *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*. London: Allen Lane, 1994.

Irwin, Robert. Introduction to *Tales of the Marvellous and News of the Strange*. Trans. Malcolm C. Lyons. London: Penguin Classics, 2014.

Irwin, Robert and Marina Warner. "Tales of the Marvellous and News of the Strange: Robert Irwin in conversation with Marina Warner." London: London Review Bookshop, 21 January 2015. www.londonreviewbookshop.co.uk/events/past/2015/1/tales-of-the-marvellous-and-news-of-the-strange-robert-irwin-in-conversation-with-marina-warner

Jamal, Ashraf. "Telling and Selling on the Indian Ocean Rim." Moorthy and Jamal, pp. 403–17.

Kennedy, Philip F. and Marina Warner. Eds. *Scheherazade's Children: Global encounters with the Arabian Nights*. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2013.

Kopytoff, Igor. "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process." Appadurai, pp. 64–94.

Makdisi, Saree and Felicity Nussbaum. Eds. *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.

Marzolph, Ulrich. "Narrative Strategies in Popular Literature: ideology and ethics in tales from the *Arabian Nights* and other collections." *Middle Eastern Literatures* 7.2 (2004): 171–82. Electronic.

Marzolph, Ulrich. *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia: Volume One*. Santa Barbara, CA.: ABC-CLIO, 2007. Print.

Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. W. D. Halls. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000. Print.

Moorthy, Shanti and Ashraf Jamal. Ed. *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social and Political Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2010.

Morton, Timothy. *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2013.

Muecke, Stephen. "What Makes a Carpet Fly? Cultural Studies in the Indian Ocean." Gupta, Hofmeyr et al., pp. 65–74.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Transparent Things*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973.

Orlando, Francesco. *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination: Ruins, Relics, Rarities, Rubbish, Uninhabited Places, and Hidden Treasures*. Trans. Gabriel Pihás and Daniel Seidel. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006.

Ouyang, Wen-chin. Introduction to *The Arabian Nights* (pp. vii–xxi). Ed. Wen-chin Ouyang and Paulo Lemos Horta. London: Everyman’s Library, 2014.

Ouyang, Wen-chin. “Genres, Ideologies, Genres Ideologies and Narrative Transformation.” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 7.2 (2004): 125–31.

Ouyang, Wen-chin. “Whose Story Is It? Sindbad the Sailor in literature and film.” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 7.2 (2004): 133–47.

Ouyang, Wen-chin. “The Curious Life of Objects in the Arabian Nights: What can food, gems and clothes tell us about cultural encounters?” SOAS, University of London. London. 3 December 2014. Inaugural Lecture.

Parker, Harry. *Anatomy of a Soldier*. London: Faber & Faber, 2016.

Pearson, Michael. “Connecting the Littorals: Cultural Brokers in the Early Modern Indian Ocean.” Gupta et al., pp. 32–47.

Pinault, David. "Story-Telling Techniques in The Arabian Nights." Mahdi and Heller-Roazen, pp. 504–19.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. "How the Model Neglects the Medium: Linguistics, Language, and the Crisis of Narratology." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 19.1 (1989): 157–66.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. "The Story of 'I': Illness and Narrative Identity." *Narrative* 10.1 (2012): 9–27.

Said, Edward. "Traveling Theory." In *The World, The Text and the Critic* (pp. 226–47). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A structural approach to a literary genre*. Trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975.

Todorov, Tzvetan. "Narrative-Men." Mahdi and Heller-Roazen, pp. 443–53.

Turkle, Sherry. "What Makes an Object Evocative." In *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (pp. 307–27). Ed. Sherry Turkle. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007.

Van Leeuwen, Richard. "The Art of Interruption: The *Thousand and One Nights* and Jan Potócki." *Middle Eastern Literatures* 7.2 (2004): 183–98.

Van Leeuwen, Richard. *The Thousand and One Nights: Space, travel and transformation*.

London: Routledge, 2007.

Warner, Marina. *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time: The 1994 Reith Lectures*.

London: Vintage, 1994.

Warner, Marina. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On fairy tales and their tellers*. London:

Vintage, 1995.

Warner, Marina. "Travelling Text." *London Review of Books* 30.24 (2008): 15–16.

Warner, Marina. *Stranger Magic: Charmed States & the Arabian Nights*. London: Chatto &

Windus, 2011.

Warner, Marina. "The Tales Things Tell: Charmed Goods in the World of the Arabian Nights." The University of Warwick Distinguished Lecture Series. University of Warwick, April 2012.

www2.warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/events/distinguishedlecture/marina-warner/

Warner, Marina. "Authors at Foyles: Marina Warner." London: Foyles Bookshop, 29

November 2012. www.foyles.co.uk/podcasts

Warner, Marina. *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2014.

Warner, Marina. Personal Interview. March 2015.

Warner, Marina, Elleke Boehmer and Wen-Chin Ouyang. "Arabian Nights and Indian Ocean World Literatures." University of Cape Town. Cape Town. 25 March 2015. Seminar.

Wicomb, Zoë. *The One That Got Away*. Cape Town: Random House Struik, 2000.