THE TALE

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Part 1 – Antoine Galland's *One Thousand and One Nights*

CD: In 1704, Antoine Galland published *One Thousand and One Nights* with such success that it led to many imitations and sequels, but also to the birth of a whole literary genre, the oriental tale "à la française". Good morning Carole Boidin. You teach comparative literature and you conduct for Paris-Nanterre University's Master of Literature a seminar precisely devoted to this East and West cross-fertilisation. What exactly did Antoine Galland do?

CB: Good morning Colas. You must know that Antoine Galland was first a specialist of antiquity. At the time, an entire international network of ancient things scholars used the commercial and political emulation of great European powers around the Middle East to search this region's antiquity again. It is in this context that France has already seen born, especially since the end of the 1660s, a turkeries' trend and an interest in the religion and customs of Middle Eastern nations, as indicated by the broad success of Thévenot, Bernier and Chardin's travel narratives.

Galland brought back manuscripts, including a travel story that was in fact *Sinbad the Sailor*, which he translated. Then he published more widely *One Thousand and One Nights* at Barbin, a bookseller specialised in fairy tales, which is significant, but also in the travel stories I just mentioned. It is such a success that he soon published a pirate edition. Seven volumes had already been published, and the eighth wasn't from him. It was actually from Pétis de la Croix, a colleague of the College de France who translated stories from a Turkish manuscript for another project, which Barbin then interpolated as an eighth volume. So, it shows a well-rooted trend, soon to become European.

Galland, once this indelicacy fixed, published another four volumes of *One Thousand and One Nights*, sometimes based on handwritten sources, sometimes on stories told by Orientals in Paris at the time or on his own knowledge or readings. Pétis de la Croix published five volumes of his own project that he still entitled *One Thousand and One Days*. So, we can see that what Galland did, and what Pétis de la Croix did too, is that he seriously translated Arab stories which he then acclimated a bit because they were sometimes a little too light or too tedious for the supposed sensitivity of the public of his time.

But on the other hand, what is very interesting is that he turned Scheherazade into a real heroine, saving her kingdom from the cruelty of her husband with the charms of her stories, which constituted a sort of double discourse, a priori moral but also entertaining. Galland insisted a lot on this double aspect by making characters draw lessons from their experiences, which is something he specifically added to the stories.

Scheherazade spoke directly to the French public, explaining Oriental customs and beliefs necessary to the understanding of her stories, which allowed to scatter here and there allusions to current events. It was still very limited in *One Thousand and One Nights,* but it has been very much exploited in later versions of oriental tales.

Part 2 – The trend of orientalised tales

CD: These oriental tales that have real Persian or Arabic sources, even if they were well dressed in the language of the classics, inspired a posterity of French parodies using the exoticism of the decor and ornamented Oriental styles. What characterises this trend of oriental tales “à la française”?

CB: Galland and Pétis de la Croix actually translated true Arab, Turkish and Persian tales, as continued to do several real translators but nevertheless, you are right, this success manifested itself especially in imitations which were not necessarily but often parodies. Besides a series of *One Thousand and One Nights* sequels like Jacques Cazotte’s, many books were entitled: *The Thousand and One Hours*, *The Thousand and One Quarter-hour*; there even was a rewrite of *The Héptameron* that was entitled *The Thousand and One Favours*. We can clearly see the rise of the oriental or “oriental-ish” tale, which sometimes drew only on the authors’ imagination but sometimes on oriental or Asian resources, mainly translated by students called "language youth".

This ancestral resource, real, so-called or fake, expanded. Thus, an author named Gueullette gathered, among others, Chinese or Mongolian collections but also *Soirées bretonnes* in 1712, which were supposed to be translated from 8th-century Breton texts. Mademoiselle de Lussan published *Veillées de Thessalie* in 1731, some of the texts going back to Antiquity. So we see that in these supposedly translated resources, we find common features: the entrenchment technique gave these collections a potentially infinite length; another very salient feature was the profusion of fantasy, which reigned already in *One Thousand and One Nights* and in fairy tales before it but which will now be multiplied thanks to all the new deities met in all regions of the world, summoned in a serious or parodic way.

It created a multiplication effect, not only of deities, of forms of fantasy, but also of types of characters. There were picturesque descriptions of various settings, whimsical characters, every component that allowed oriental fairy tales, more than other fairy tales, to be free from the constraints of likelihood or even good taste. As far as good taste is concerned, these tales, as you mentioned, used typically oriental stylistic forms that were sometimes caricatured, especially exclamations or slightly sententious formulas. But it is especially characters’ wit and a certain narrative irony that gave the genre its success.

Moreover, the narrators were endowed with a prodigious memory and a clearly displayed moral purpose, which authorised numerous arrangements, just about infinite. And especially since the technique of entrenchment emphasised the effects of stories on the recipient mind. Sometimes it's going to be in a funny way, as was the case in *A Thousand and One Follies* in 1742, by the same Cazotte I mentioned earlier, which insisted on the soporific power of tales.

Part 3 – Philosophy and libertinism

CD: These imitations, these sequels were characterised by an exoticism that is the hallmark of the genre. But there also is an erotic dimension, for example with Crebillon.

CB: Yes, in the context of this orientalist trend in France, the very free structure of the potentially infinite tale, as I said, was exploited by authors who were sometimes more subversive than the simple

translators of whom I spoke. These authors insisted on the exoticism and luxury of the Orient, using those to compose tales that could be openly erotic but also satirical.

So, allusions to current events developed and the oriental location served as a kind of veil to avoid censorship but also to push boundaries. We can mention here Crebillon with *Tanzaï and Néadarné*, in 1734, which earned him a few months in prison, and then the same author's *The Sopha*, in which a character relates in a fun way his transformation into a sofa and then tells us, quite precisely, all the intimate embraces he bore in the course of his travels.

In the 1740s and 1750s, La Morlière's *Angola*, Voisenon's *Sultan Misapouf* or Diderot, quite well-known now, with *The Indiscreet Jewels*, continued in this vein. But what you need to know is that it is paradoxically contemporaneous with a massive return to moralising tales.

Finally, the oriental tale "à la française" may take the form of a philosophical tale, and there I am obviously thinking of Voltaire.

Of course, in *Zadig*'s fictional dedication the Wise Persian who supposedly wrote the dedication warns his recipient against the wantonness of *One Thousand and One Nights* and what he calls tales without reason. *Zadig* stands out while still being an oriental tale. Voltaire has learned much about the Orient, like Montesquieu did, and exploited this "orientalist vein" probably to avoid censorship, but also to rely on knowledge, on Eastern beliefs and to develop utterly original reflections.

He kept from the Orientals, not just a kind of naivety but a certain irony. He used ingenuous characters as critical tools. He also relied on oriental apologues, well-known at the times, including Pilpay's *Fables*, that partly inspired La Fontaine's *Fables*, or another tradition called *The Three Princes of Serendip*, which he used very exactly for one of *Zadig*'s episodes. All these stories, these seemingly simplistic oriental narratives became for him a kind of matrix in which he instilled philosophical content several times, especially in other tales like *The History of a Good Brahmin* or *The White Bull*.

CD: Carole Boidin, thank you very much.