

# The Thousand and One Nights

*Sources and Transformations in  
Literature, Art, and Science*

*Edited by*

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## Healing by Exempla

### *Political Therapy in the Nights' Hypertext*

*Dominique Jullien*

Antoine Galland prefaced his translation of the *Nights* by spelling out three merits of the tales he was about to offer the French public: first and foremost, their entertainment value (the tales were ‘agréables et divertissants’, pleasing and entertaining); secondly, their educational value (without incurring the fatigue of a journey, readers could discover the customs of Oriental peoples), and lastly, their moral value (readers so inclined could learn from the examples of vice and virtue displayed by the characters).<sup>1</sup> My focus will be on the pedagogical and moral dimension of the tales, which in turn is closely linked to the question of the relation between the individual tales and the frame tale, where the dramatic encounter between the storyteller and the king is played out every night. Depending on the greater or lesser significance they give this relationship, readers and critics tend to heighten or underplay the political and moral efficiency of the book.

In opposition to Mia Gerhardt’s reading of the *Nights* as a collection of tales without purposeful interactions between individual stories and the frame tale, most interpretations have focused on precisely these interactions, highlighting in particular the storytelling’s effect on the king. Translators such as Burton and Mardrus dramatized Shahryar’s reactions to the stories and his slow progression toward clemency, while critics have variously emphasized the moral, political, pedagogical, and/or therapeutic dimensions of storytelling. By underlining the *Nights’* proximity to the pedagogical tradition of the mirror for princes and the genre of wisdom literature broadly defined (fables, pious tales, exempla, and so forth), such interpretations have drawn attention to the political significance of a text which attempts to transform a murderous despot into a good king, mindful of his subjects’ well-being. However, since Shahryar is not a princely child in need of early ‘edutainment’, but an adult psychopath in need of medical help, Scheherazade’s stories, in addition to their political dimension,

<sup>1</sup> Sermain and Chraïbi 2004, vol. 1, p. 21–2. Unfortunately, Robert Mack’s edition of Galland’s *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments* (Oxford World’s Classics, 1995) is shorn of any paratextual material.

aim to heal the sick king: they are both educational and therapeutic. In this chapter I propose to look at two cases where this connection between moral, political, and therapeutic stakes of the stories is especially explicit. The first is Burton's cluster of short wisdom tales (a mix of pious tales about hermits and animal fables, extending from the 146th Night to the 152nd Night), which aim to teach the king a lesson in good stewardship. Shahryar's remorseful response to these stories signals a small yet decisive step in the right direction, while the equivalence between the king's sickness and the kingdom's dysfunction is enhanced by Burton's intertextual reference to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, as we shall see.<sup>2</sup> The second is Eugène Sue's best-selling social problem serial novel, *The Mysteries of Paris* (1842–1843), which is rich in intertextual allusions to the *1001 Nights*. Toward the middle of the novel, a lengthy storytelling episode (itself a story-within-a-story) set in a Paris prison, reproduces the *Nights'* salvation story (the planned murder is delayed by the story and the curiosity it generates), its political lesson (the criminals are shown to being susceptible of reform by a moralizing tale), and its attempt at social therapy (the episode is part of the novel's campaign in favour of prison reform).

## 1 The Frame Story and the Question of Exemplarity

In her landmark study, *The Art of Story-telling*, Mia Gerhardt takes a dim view of the framing device of the *Nights*, arguing that it is merely a convenient way of gathering the heterogeneous jumble of stories into one large grab bag. There is no point in seeking a psychological progression or even a political lesson, she claims, since the book gives us little or no information about the effect of the tales on their intended listener, king Shahryar. 'As a framed collection the '1001 Nights' has no firm structure: the working-out falls short of the idea. As soon as the telling of the stories begins, the framework seems gradually to fade away. King Sheriyar rarely comments on what he has heard'.<sup>3</sup> Gerhardt dismisses earlier critical attempts at interpreting the relation of the stories to the frame as unconvincing. In particular she dismisses Marie Lahy-Hollebecque's 1927 *Le Féminisme de Schéhérazade*, which reads the *Nights* as 'l'aventure du progrès',<sup>4</sup> the adventure of progress, by pointing out that the study is based on the highly unfaithful translation of Mardrus, 'who made up little comic dialogues

2 Burton 1885, vol. 1, pp. 114–62. These tales are featured in Calcutta 11: see Marzolph/Van Leeuwen, vol. 1, p. 221.

3 Gerhardt 1963, p. 398. However, she does concede one exception to this rule: these are precisely the stories analyzed here.

4 Marie Lahy-Hollebecque 1927, p. 20.

between the king and Shehrezad.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, according to Gerhardt, the very choice of stories, especially the first ones, would seem to rule out the possibility that they have been chosen by Scheherazade for their therapeutic virtue, since they 'seem so ill-adapted to the dangerous situation' of Scheherazade. In particular, 'The Fisherman and the Demon ... seems a particularly tactless choice under the circumstances' (because of the black slave lover). Gerhardt concludes: 'All in all, in the first few stories, if we try to connect them with the frame, Shehrezad appears to be rubbing in the king's conjugal misfortune, rather than helping him to get over it'. As a consequence, Gerhardt comes down quite strongly on the side of serendipity: 'The obvious explanation is that the compilers did not ... strive to interrelate stories & frame, nor to keep alive the interest in the framing story itself'.<sup>6</sup>

In her denial of a purposeful relation between stories and frame, Mia Gerhardt is an outlier, since a majority of critics have sought rather to show just that. In contrast to Gerhardt's apolitical view, key recent scholarship has highlighted the politics of the *Nights*, such as Sandra Naddaff's essay which traces Salman Rushdie's political satire in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* back to the *Nights*,<sup>7</sup> or Wen-Chin Ouyang's analysis of the Egyptian reception of the book as a political allegory in her 2003 article 'Metamorphoses of Scheherazade in literature and film'.<sup>8</sup> In their introduction to the 2004 edition of the Galland version, Jean-Paul Sermain and Aboubakr Chraïbi trace the stories back to the tradition of the mirror for princes, whose purpose is to educate rulers while entertaining them, through the use of exemplary tales and fables.<sup>9</sup> Major critical readings have focused on the political lesson that gradually transforms a murderous despot into a good or at least an acceptable ruler. Ferial Ghazoul's book, *Nocturnal Poetics*, as well as Robert Irwin's article, 'Political Thought in the 1001 *Nights*', are good examples of this critical tradition.<sup>10</sup> Having devoted an important chapter to a comparative analysis of the *Panchatantra* fables and Scheherazade's animal tales as pedagogical stories (I will return to this later), Ghazoul concludes that the reception of the *Nights* in modern Arabic literature is primarily political:

5 Gerhardt 1963, p. 398, Note 3. Curiously, Gerhardt appeared unaware that Marie Lahy-Hollebecque was a woman.

6 Gerhardt 1963, p. 399.

7 See Naddaff 2011, p. 487–96: p. 492.

8 Ouyang 2003, pp. 402–418.

9 Sermain and Chraïbi 2004, vol. 1, pp. iii–ix.

10 Ghazoul 1996; Irwin 2004, pp. 246–57.

Modern Arab readings and adaptations of *The Arabian Nights* have generally emphasized the political component inherent in the narrative. Poets, dramatists, and novelists used it to speak allusively of ideological issues most strikingly of the abuses of absolute power. *The Arabian Nights* itself invites such an interpretation since the frame story revolves around a despotic Oriental king and the strategy to resist him and liberate the citizens. What could be more pertinent to present-day Arab regimes than such a story? Notions of philosophical mazes, castration complexes, and existential predicaments may be extracted from *The Arabian Nights* by a Borges, a Barth, or Ashbery, but Arab writers have predominantly seen the political implications in the work – that of ruler vs. citizens.<sup>11</sup>

Recalling the strong tradition that is found throughout the Islamic world of transmitting wisdom and information through teaching stories, Robert Irwin analyzes the reformist intent of the *Nights* stories in general, and in particular those stories linked to the exemplary genres – moral tales, fables, exempla – that aim to develop political virtue in their despotic listener.<sup>12</sup> By and large and with very few exceptions, the political message of the *Nights* is a conservative one, says Irwin: it preaches obedience and resignation rather than rebellion. In this, it is in keeping with the mainstream Islamic political theory which is above all realistic:

Submission to God, submission to Fate, and submission to the ruler dominate rather a large number of the stories. The political direction is determined at the outset, when Scheherazade, rather than thinking of how to overthrow the tyrant Shahriyar, instead proceeds to entertain him with stories ... The political theorists of the medieval Islamic world were realists. Rather than waste their time thinking of alternatives to despotism, they preferred to concentrate on how to get the best despot. In political theory and storytelling in the *Nights*, a despot could be improved by good servants who provided him not only with good advice, but also with stories that were conducive to political virtue.<sup>13</sup>

The importance of the political lesson in the *Nights* is thus clearly bound up with the genre of exemplary stories, whose pedagogical framework is replicated, to a greater or lesser degree according to translation, in the relation

<sup>11</sup> Ghazoul 1996, p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> Irwin 2004, p. 248.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

between the storyteller and the king, or between the teacher and the taught, as Sadhana Naithani puts it in her essay, 'The Teacher and the Taught: Structures and Meaning in the *Arabian Nights* and the *Panchatantra*' (published the same year as Irwin's).<sup>14</sup> However, the pedagogical framework is not the only one involved here, since Shahryar is not a young prince to educate for the throne (this is an obvious difference with the three royal dunces in the *Panchatantra*), but an adult king who has turned murderous after a traumatic experience: he therefore needs to be cured in order to be once again the just monarch that he was before the trauma.<sup>15</sup> As Irwin points out, the therapeutic and the political dimensions are vitally connected, as the health of the kingdom is linked to that of its king: 'the prosperity of the land is dependent on the moral health of the king. If the king strays, his land becomes a wasteland'.<sup>16</sup>

Readings that highlight the curative virtues of storytelling draw on this connection, from Jerome Clinton's essay on 'Madness and Cure in the *1001 Nights*'<sup>17</sup> (1985) to Daniel Beaumont's Lacanian reading in *Slave of Desire*,<sup>18</sup> to, more recently, Marina Warner's book *Stranger Magic*, which points out 'structural analogies between the narrative of the *Nights* and the experience of psychoanalysis',<sup>19</sup> and, even more concretely, weaves a web of associations between the sofa where the storytelling (and the cure) take place, and the modern-day psychoanalyst's couch:

The seating arrangement Freud devised, still practiced in analysis today, interestingly sets up a scene of eavesdropping, not conversation, which places the analyst in the position of the Sultan in the frame story of the *Nights* ... above all the very idea of the ransom tale bears on the uses of storytelling in the talking cure.<sup>20</sup>

Feminist readings of the *Nights*, beginning with Marie Lahy-Hollebecque's 1927 study *Le Féminisme de Schéhérazade*, attacked by Mia Gerhardt, rely on a meaningful connection between tales and frame tale. Lahy-Hollebecque read the book as 'le duel de l'esprit contre la force, de la science contre l'ignorance, de la lumière contre les ténèbres' [the duel of mind against might, science against

14 Naithani 2004, pp. 272–85.

15 In Galland's version, King Schahriar is said to have been 'endowed with all [his father's] virtues', before the discovery of the queen's adultery (Mack 1995, p. 1).

16 Irwin 2004, p. 248.

17 Clinton 1985, pp. 107–125.

18 Beaumont 2002.

19 Warner 2012, p. 421.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 419–420.

ignorance, light against darkness].<sup>21</sup> The purpose of the stories, she claims, is not simply entertainment, but the king's education. While Lahy-Hollebecque's analysis was somewhat naïve – she based her analysis on Mardrus's translation, without suspecting that much of what she attributed to the original was in fact due to its *fin-de-siècle* translator – her pioneering approach can nonetheless be credited with helping to establish today's thriving critical tradition of feminist readings of the tales, from – among others – Fedwa Malti-Douglas, who argued that fiction is the best strategy to redirect the king's desire toward its proper, peaceful use, to Malek Chebel, who viewed the tales as examples of a feminized world, or Susanne Enderwitz, who claimed Scheherazade as an early feminist.<sup>22</sup> Naturally, novelists also followed the same trend, reinventing Scheherazade as a modern-day feminist, from John Barth ('Dunyazadiad', *Chimera*, 1972), to Leïla Sebbar (*Shérazade*, 1982) or Assia Djebar (*Ombre sultane*, 1987 / *A Sister to Scheherazade*, 1993). In effect, feminist readings exhibit an interesting fusion of the political and the therapeutic, since they presuppose that the king's murderous misogyny is as much a psychological condition to be cured as a political injustice to be combated.

## 2 Burton's Hermits

Moving now to a specific instance where the political and the therapeutic converge, I would like to focus on a narrative cycle inserted into the third volume of the Burton version: the series of short fable-like tales involving hermits and animals beginning on the 146th night. Fables, Burton claimed in his 'Terminal Essay', and wisdom stories more generally (Burton calls 'fable' any kind of short moral tale with a lesson), are quintessential to Eastern culture where they are the most ancient literary genre, born of the need to disguise political criticism:

The Apologue or Beast-fable, which apparently antedates all other subjects in The Nights, has been called 'One of the earliest creations of the awakening consciousness of mankind.' I should regard it, despite a monumental antiquity, as the offspring of a comparatively civilised age, when a jealous despotism or a powerful oligarchy threw difficulties and dangers in the way of speaking 'plain truths'.<sup>23</sup>

21 Lahy-Hollebecque 1927, p. 20.

22 Malti-Douglas 1991; Chebel 1996; Enderwitz 2004, pp. 187–200. On Marie Lahy-Hollebecque's influence on modern feminist interpretations of the *Nights*, see Jullien 2009, p. 146 ff.

23 Burton, vol. 10, p. 115.

There are over 400 fables in the *Nights*, and Burton criticizes Lane for omitting more than half of these. By contrast, Burton's version plays up the political and pedagogical dimension of the book: in his translation the lesson is driven home both in the choice of stories and in Shahryar's reaction to them. Burton's first set of short wisdom tales (in volume 3, extending from the 146th to the 152nd Night), offers a particularly interesting case of 'fables' (in Burton's broad use of the term) being used to teach Shahryar how to become once again a good king. This is done indirectly, through a cluster of interlocking stories featuring hermits and animals. The stories are organized as follows: first interlinked animal fables, the 'The Tale of the Birds and Beasts and the Carpenter', followed by 'The Hermits', a series of three Hermit stories, followed by more animal fables.

Thus, the Burton scenario sets up a kind of central triptych featuring three successive hermit anecdotes, framed by several animal stories. In the central hermit stories, misogyny is combined with a love for animals. The first story tells of a hermit who raised pigeons. Under his good care and blessing, the pigeons multiplied and lived around him until his death, after which they dispersed. The second story tells of a virtuous shepherd who tended his sheep with such care that the wild beasts had no power over his flock. One day the shepherd fell ill and was tempted by a woman who promised to cure him in exchange for sex: when the shepherd resisted the temptation, she revealed that she was an angel sent by God and departed with a blessing. In the third panel of the triptych, another pious man is told in a dream to visit the previous hermit. On the way, he rested from the scorching heat in a meadow graced by a tree and a fountain where birds and animals came to drink. His presence frightened the creatures away, at which point he wept with regret:

I rest not here but to the hurt of these beasts and fowls ... my tarrying here this day hath wronged these animals, and what excuse have I toward my Creator and the Creator of these birds and beasts for that I was the cause of their flight from their drink and their daily food and their place of pasturage? Alas for my shame before my Lord on the day when he shall avenge the hornless sheep on the sheep with horns!<sup>24</sup>

He continued his journey and met the shepherd, who welcomed him joyfully, and the two spent the rest of their lives together as hermits, 'having clean put away from them riches and children and what not'.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Burton 1885–1888, vol. 3. p. 128.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

In contrast with the rest of the book, the hermit stories present a prelapsarian world of harmony between creatures. The animals in these stories appear to be mainly meek, domestic creatures (pigeons, sheep), which the hermits protect and care for. Generically, however, fable animals also represent the disenfranchised elements of society – slaves, servants, peasants, women and subordinates in general, as Ros Ballaster reminds us: fables give ‘voice to the powerless. Fables are a form of subaltern discourse, a means of seizing verbal authority’.<sup>26</sup> So the joint presence of animals and women in the cluster of hermit stories would appear both to convey and disguise a political message. Indeed, it seems that the lesson is being heard, since for the first time, Shahryar responds to these stories of cruelty toward animals by expressing some regret for his cruelty toward women: ‘O Shahrazad, thou wouldst cause me to renounce my kingdom and thou makest me repent of having slain so many women and maidens’.<sup>27</sup>

The central triptych of hermit stories is framed by animal stories that focus on violence, particularly human violence toward animals. In response to Shahryar’s request for a bird story, Scheherazade tells two nested stories, in which the Duck tells the Peacock and his wife the story of ‘Lion and the Carpenter’, on the 146th and the 147th nights respectively. The second one, about the lion and the carpenter, is a condensed and simplified version of the fable of the animals collected in the eleventh-century Encyclopaedia of the Brethren of Purity. This story, itself an adaptation of a fable of Buddhist origin, is analyzed by Robert Irwin as an ‘ecological fable’.<sup>28</sup> While the story has particular appeal for a contemporary reader (animals complain about Man’s greed, cruelty to other living creatures, and reckless destruction of the environment), it is also a thinly veiled criticism of Shahryar’s despotic destruction of his kingdom. In the *Nights* version of the story, the animals, led by the lion, attempt to form an alliance against Man who mistreats them cruelly, but the rebellion fails through Man’s treachery, as the carpenter tricks the lion into entering a cage then sets it on fire. A typical fable moral (trickery wins over strength) here serves to illustrate a lesson about man’s tyranny over animals. It is also a bitter lesson

26 Ballaster 2005, p. 4.

27 Burton 1885–1888, vol. 3, p. 129.

28 Irwin 2004, p. 252. Irwin notes that the story denounces not just cruelty to animals but cruelty to humans as well (p. 253). In the *Epistle*, the animals bring a lawsuit to the court of the Jinn against men, accused of enslaving them and wrecking the environment; arguments go back and forth for some hundred pages. See Goodman and McGregor 2009. Another essay by Robert Irwin discusses the insertion of this animal fable into later editions of the *Nights* (Calcutta 2, the basis for Burton’s translation): see Irwin 1992, pp. 36–50, especially pp. 49–50.

about political failure. The same is true of the framing story in which it is embedded, the story of the duck and the peacocks: attempting to escape from this traumatic experience the duck seeks refuge on an island with the peacocks and the deer, far from Man; but their utopian community is short-lived as sailors eventually arrive at the island and kill the duck.<sup>29</sup>

Then following 'The Hermits' (which takes up night 148), Burton's Scheherazade tells more animal fables that also deal with violence, in particular the 'Story of the Waterfowl and the Tortoise' and 'The Fox and the Wolf'. In the first of these the waterfowl, disgusted at the violence in the world and the mediocrity of his own kind, takes up life with a tortoise. In the second fable, the fox is the victim of the wolf's brutality, but then he is able to revenge himself by leading the wolf into a pit.

Salient themes throughout these fables are the violence of the powerful over the powerless, and the recurring utopian desire to retreat from it onto a sheltered island. In different ways these animals are hermits too – they exhibit the same desire to sever their ties to a tainted world. Capital lessons are being taught to the king in these pivotal nights. First, the suffering of the animals at the hands of Man evokes the suffering endured by the king's subjects. The stories serve to chastise Shahryar for his bad stewardship: he has lain waste his own kingdom, wantonly killing women of childbearing age. By contrast, the hermit characters carefully tending their animals offer an example of good stewardship that the king should follow.

Along with repentance, the king expresses a desire to leave his palace for a hermit's life: 'O Shahrazad, thou wouldst cause me to renounce my kingdom...' However, the goal is not for Shahryar to resign his throne and become a hermit (although he does just that in Naguib Mahfouz's rewriting of the *Nights*),<sup>30</sup> but to become a reformed monarch. Therefore, the hermits' rejection of women also offers the king an example that he should not follow, for fear of destroying the kingdom in another way. Hermit stories, stories about seclusion, about the utopian separation from society, here paradoxically serve to transition

29 A secondary theme in these stories is the importance of prayer: Scheherazade reveals that both the duck killed by sailors and the waterfowl killed by a falcon had neglected to say their prayers. Shahryar, who sometimes forgets to say his prayers before falling asleep, takes notice, and thanks Scheherazade for her lesson: 'O Shahrazad, verily thou overwhelmed me with admonitions and salutary instances' vol. 3, pp. 125–32. Thus, the fables teach the king a double lesson: a political lesson (his duty toward his subjects) and a religious lesson (his duty toward God).

30 'He abandoned throne and glory, woman and child. He deposed himself, defeated before his heart's revolt at a time when his people had forgotten his past misdeeds. His education had required a considerable time.... He left his palace at night, wearing a cloak and carrying a stick and giving himself over to fate' (Mahfouz 1995, p. 222).

back to it, since the king will learn from them not how to be a hermit, but how to be a good or at least an acceptable king, committed to his duty toward his subjects and the preservation of royal lineage and social integrity.<sup>31</sup>

This is also, of course, what the ten-day separation from the city of Florence accomplishes for Boccaccio's secular-minded hermits, who then find themselves better prepared to return to the fullness of social life. As Thomas Greene pointed out in his seminal essay on 'Forms of Accommodation in the *Decameron*', there is no Romantic estrangement from society in Boccaccio, but on the contrary, a horror at the communal dissolution brought on by the plague, and an exemplary return to a regenerated social order by way of the eremitic experiment.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps this is why Burton chose as his epigraph for his version of the *1001 Nights* a quote from the *Decameron* ('Niuna corrotta mente intese mai sanamente parole'), which features on the first page of his translation along with the picture of the labyrinth, and which he translated by the equivalent proverb 'To the Pure All Things Are Pure'.<sup>33</sup> In *The Decameron*, the plague is both cause and metaphor of the societal breakdown, while the retreat of the youthful characters away from the diseased city-state allows them playfully to transition back to its reformed version.<sup>34</sup> Just as Boccaccio's spirited *brigata* fled the plague-ridden city of Florence for the beautiful country retreats of Tuscany, circling back to it in space and in story-time, so the secluded space-time of the *Nights* (the night, the harem, the talking cure of tales – all this 'nocturnal poetics', to quote Ghazoul's memorable title) will bring about the return of the enlightened king to what, from his kingdom, has survived and is poised to begin anew.

### 3 Sue's Reformed Monkey

What the garden does for the *Decameron*, what the bedchamber does for the *1001 Nights*, the prison does for Eugène Sue in the eighth section of the *Mysteries of Paris*, which appeared in 1842–1843 with a success that was comparable only to that of Galland's *Arabian Nights* in the previous century.<sup>35</sup> The way that

31 The fable of the animals is of Buddhist origin, as Robert Irwin reminds us: a faint trace of the conflict at the heart of Buddhism – the choice between a king's life and a hermit's life – still remains in its Arabic rewriting. See Ásvaghoṣa 2008, especially pp. xxxiii–xlii.

32 Greene 1976, pp. 114–28.

33 Burton 1885–1888, vol. 3, p. 6.

34 Boccaccio 1985. On this strategy of temporary separation, see Mazzotta 1976, in particular pp. 129–30.

35 Sue 1989; 2015.

this serial novel and early bestseller engages with the *1001 Nights* is essentially twofold. First, Sue appropriates the motif of the Prince in Disguise: the hero, Prince Rudolph von Gerolstein, is the ruler of a fictional German principedom who delights in dressing up as a working class man and descending into the slums of Paris to solve crimes, right wrongs, and save young girls from destitution and prostitution (including, as is well known, his own long-lost daughter, charmingly misnamed Flower-of-Mary). Karl Marx, in his early pamphlet *The Holy Family*, cruelly mocks the character he calls 'The German Harun el Rashid' for his philanthropic slumming, as well as the ludicrous pretensions of his author to reform society through storytelling.<sup>36</sup> I have analyzed elsewhere<sup>37</sup> the political dimension of the prince-in-disguise motif in Sue's *Mysteries*: in this chapter, I wish rather to focus on a different aspect of the *Nights*' intertext, the embedded story told in the prison by the petty thief and master storyteller Pique-Vinaigre (Bitters). The inmates, led by the sinister assassin Skeleton, are plotting to murder young Germain, who landed in prison following a false accusation, and who is suspected of being an informer. The attack is to take place during the storytelling episode, when inmates are busy listening to the story and the guard leaves for lunch. But the plan backfires: the inmates, including some of the assassins, become so engrossed and captivated by the 'fictional' adventures of the boy The Runt [Gringalet], his evil master Chops-Him-in-Two [Coupe-en-Deux], and the dangerous monkey Gunpowder [Gargousse], that they forget about the murder, while the prison guard also wants to hear the story so badly that he forgoes his lunch break. Germain's execution has been delayed by curiosity: the first level of analogy with the *1001 Nights* – storytelling as a life-saving device – is thus achieved. A second level of analogy concerns the political lesson that the author seeks to teach through his tale. Commenting on the paradoxical literary tastes of the hardened criminals who make up Bitters's audience, Eugène Sue notes that they tend to like naïve, moralistic tales:

Most prisoners, in spite of their cynical perversity, almost universally favor naïve, not to say puerile, stories in which an inexorable fate, after trials and travails without number, avenges the oppressed on those who tyrannize against them.... [W]e all know with what deafening applause

36 Marx and Engels 1956, p. 239. Later in the same book, the comparison returns once again: 'Herr Rudolph indulges in charity and dissipation like those of the Caliph of Bagdad in the Arabian Nights' (p. 268).

37 See Jullien 2009, first chapter: 'Le prince déguisé, symbole politique et motif poétique' (pp. 24–70); on Marx's comparison between prince Rudolph of Gerolstein and the caliph Harun al-Raschid, see p. 32 and following.

the common audiences in the theaters of the boulevard greet the victim's deliverance and the hissing and booing they rain down on the villain or the traitor.<sup>38</sup>

Bitters's sentimental tale about a poor little boy who is terrorized, beaten, and starved by an evil master – a kind of poor man's *Oliver Twist* – is in fact the storyteller's version of the melodrama, the great popular genre of the nineteenth century, in which working-class masses, honest and criminal alike, delighted at the theatre.<sup>39</sup> What is at stake here, for the socialist writer Sue, preoccupied with reforming society, is the education of these proletarian masses: simple Manichean tales where innocents are saved and villains are punished are appropriate teaching tools, commensurate with their audience's literary and moral sophistication. The arch-villain Skeleton's concern is not simply that the guard refuses to leave the room, but also that his accomplices may be disinclined to let the murder take place, 'a murder in which their impassive behavior was to make them complicit', after hearing a story that appeals to their sense of compassion.<sup>40</sup>

That the melodramatic tale functions as a kind of pedagogical fable is underscored by another character, the honest Slasher [Chourineur], who is in the employ of Prince Rudolph and got himself sent to prison in order to protect Germain: like an oversize and burly Dinarzade, Slasher stresses key climactic moments of the tale with his comments, pointing out the moral relevance of the story, and encouraging the inmates to side with the victim rather than the perpetrator. When the attack on Germain finally happens, Slasher defends him and enlists some of the inmates to help him, again by calling attention to analogies with the tale: Skeleton, like the evil Chops-Him-in-Two, picks on the weak, while he, Slasher, identifies with the monkey Gunpowder, who kills the villain at the end of the tale, thereby saving the child: 'Be careful, Skeleton! If you want to play Chops-Him-in-Two anymore, I'll play Gunpowder, and I'll slit your throat'.<sup>41</sup>

While Bitters's fable (in Burton's broad sense of the word) teaches inmates proper social ethics, the melodramatic prison episode aims to teach the novel's readers a third lesson that Sue spells out in his explicitly pedagogical conclusion to chapter 12: it is meant to dramatize and stigmatize the failures of the

38 Sue 2015, p. 1072.

39 Peter Brooks notes in passing the kinship between the melodrama and *The Mysteries of Paris*, which was at the time the novel most often adapted to the stage, as well as a direct novelistic counterpart to the genre of melodrama. See Brooks 1985, p. 88.

40 Sue 2015, p. 1080.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 1095.

justice system – which is merciless toward the poor yet lenient toward white-collar criminals, prices poor defendants out of the legal system, and locks petty delinquents in dangerous jails where they turn into hardened criminals:

To summarize briefly the theoretical and practical ideas we have tried to make clear in this episode of prison life: we will consider ourselves fortunate if we have demonstrated the insufficiency, sterility, and danger of group confinement; the disproportion that exists between our understanding of and punishment of certain crimes (domestic theft or burglary) and certain misdemeanors (embezzlement); and, finally, the material impossibility for the poorer classes to reap the benefit of laws and civil suits.<sup>42</sup>

Eugène Sue's reformist goals, his social and political agenda, became more and more explicit as the *Mysteries of Paris* grew from being an entertaining slum thriller<sup>43</sup> into a passionately earnest utopian socialist manifesto, with similar 'conclusions' at the end of each major episode – even frequent authorial interruptions in the middle of the most dramatic episodes – which served to make the novel itself work like an exemplary tale. The book campaigned for prison reform, free lawyers, interest-free banks for the poor, communitarian farms, workers' compensation plans, and many other measures that were in fact implemented – some of them lastingly – after the 1848 revolution.<sup>44</sup>

The tale told by Bitters has an appropriately theatrical ending: after the monkey Gunpowder, whom his master has taught to kill The Runt with a razor, turns on him and cuts his throat instead of the child's, all the slum's inhabitants parade to accordion music, carrying The Runt and Gunpowder in triumph.<sup>45</sup> No longer hated and feared, the monkey has been successfully reinserted into society, just like Slasher, the former criminal, has been reformed and is now working for the good Prince Rudolph. It is therefore possible to see in the monkey a fable animal of sorts, who facilitates a pedagogical reading of the story as a redemptive transformation of the dangerous classes into the laborious classes, to paraphrase historian Louis Chevalier's famous title about nineteenth century Paris.<sup>46</sup> In her essay, 'The Teacher and the Taught', Sadhana

42 Ibid. p. 1108.

43 Critic Sainte-Beuve slyly called it 'un roman bien épicé, bien salé, à l'usage du beau monde' (quoted in Bory 1962, p. 246).

44 On the role played by *The Mysteries of Paris* in the 1848 revolution, see historian Pierre Chaunu's classic study *Eugène Sue et la Seconde République* (Paris: PUF, 1948).

45 Sue 2015, p. 1092.

46 Chevalier 1958.

Naithani points out key similarities between the *Panchatantra* fables and the *Nights*: 'Both stories are built on the education of rulers', 'Both teach through the narration of stories',<sup>47</sup> and 'both are stories about storytelling'.<sup>48</sup> The same can be said of *The Mysteries of Paris*, which also aims towards the healing of societal ills and education of the despot: not the tyrannical monarch of old, of course, but the People, the new despot of the modern democratic age.<sup>49</sup>

The storytelling episode set in a Paris prison in Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* offers some insight into the passionate quarrel of the serial novel (*la querelle du roman-feuilleton*) that raged throughout the nineteenth century, with people taking sides about the value of these entertaining, indeed, these addictive tales, as pedagogical tools for teaching the masses and healing society's ills. Analogous to Burton's hermit fables, Sue's modern *Arabian Nights* claimed a role in awakening minds and consciences, and both texts offered highly self-conscious narratives that purported to picture and also bring about acts of healing and teaching. Looking at what Benjamin called the 'afterlife' of the 1001 *Nights*<sup>50</sup> – both in Burton's highly idiosyncratic translation and in Eugène Sue's tale of modern Parisian slumdogs – we can observe a continuous preoccupation running through these widely different types of texts: the enduring dream of healing the polis through storytelling. Ros Ballaster captures the ambiguous status of the fable when she defines it as 'a story which delays or defers tyrannous action':<sup>51</sup> whether the stories lulled the tyrant into a passive, non-harmful state of repose – the serial novel, people said, was a new kind of drug<sup>52</sup> – or whether they prompted the tyrant to reformed action, whether the stories entertained and distracted, or reformed and taught, they were a way of acting out the intellectual's perennial fantasy of doing things with words.

47 Naithani 2004, p. 273.

48 Ibid., p. 284.

49 With the advent of universal (male) suffrage in 1848, the question of the education of the people became a politically burning issue.

50 Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *Illuminations* 1969, p. 71.

51 R. Ballaster, *Fables of the East*, p. 5.

52 On the debate of the serial novel, see Lise Dumasy (ed.), *La Querelle du roman-feuilleton: littérature, presse et politique, un débat précurseur (1836–1848)*, Grenoble: ELLUG, 1999. On the analogy between serial novels, oriental tales, and drugs, see D. Jullien, *Les Amoureux de Schéhérazade*, pp. 33–41.

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