

LIES, ILLUSIONS AND AUTHORITY

The Thousand and One Nights and Arabic Comic Theatre

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Whereas perhaps it can be doubted whether the concept of the tragic, in the Classical Greek sense of the term, has existed in the Arabic cultural and literary tradition, no one will contest the observation that the comic is an integral part of the Arabic literary heritage. From the 9th century onwards, comic genres were part of the common repertoire of both high and popular literature, in the form of jocular tales, comic anecdotes, poetry, scabrous jokes, and popular romances. In fact, the anecdote, often based on a comic plot or a pun, represents the quintessential component of the classical genre of *adab* texts, the most widespread and ambitious form of highbrow prose literature. Of course, one of the main functions of the comic element in fictional and anecdotal literature was to entertain, but it can be argued that, as a concept, it was prompted by more pretentious incentives, too, especially as a means to express social and political critique. It is this latter aspect which makes the comical such an interesting subject of narratological investigation.

In this paper I will discuss the influence of the *Thousand and one nights* - the famous cycle of tales which emerged in Arabic literature in the 9th century approximately - on the modern tradition of Arabic theatre, with special emphasis on the comic element. First, a brief outline will be given of the use of the comical as a narrative strategy in the framing story of *Thousand and one nights*; subsequently two plays will be analysed which not only are closely related to the comic genres contained in the *Thousand and one nights*, but in which the motifs of lies, illusions and authority play a decisive role. The narrative of the plays will be related to the stories from the *Thousand and one nights* which have served as their model. It will be argued that the various concepts of the comical in the *Thousand and one nights* provided an important inspiration for the uses of the comical in modern Arabic theatre, and a model for the definition of comedy and its functions. The plays that will be discussed are *Alf Janâh and his servant Quffa*, by Alfred Farag, and *The wines of Babylon*, by Fârûq Khûrshîd, both written in Egypt in the 1960s.

It is well-known that the modern tradition of Arabic theatre, which started in the second half of the 19th century, was partly based on the heritage of popular

literature, and especially of the living tradition of storytelling, romances and folklore, not only with the aim of fostering the interest of the audience, but also to strengthen the roots of the new art form in the indigenous literary tradition. However, as we will see below, particularly in the case of comedy, models from 'classical' literature were adopted, too. For both popular literature and high-brow literature the *Thousand and one nights* provided material for playwrights in modern times. Therefore, it is useful to proceed first with a brief overview of the comical element in the Arabic literary tradition.

The Arabic heritage of comic literature.

In the Arabic literary tradition comical themes and motifs can be found in both popular literature and artistic genres, in prose and poetry, in written texts and performed texts, in highly stylized anecdotes and light verse. The generic characteristics of these forms of literature are of course not irrelevant for the type and function of comical motifs. Scabrous verse, for instance, has a purpose differing from that of sophisticated poetic puns or exemplary anecdotes, although they may sometimes be written by the same author and for the same audience. On the other hand, the boundaries between the various genres were not always clearly drawn, since poetry was often integrated into prose anecdotes, and elements of popular literature infiltrated into the more stylized forms of entertainment literature. It is therefore not always easy to formulate precise definitions of concepts of the comical and to relate them to specific genres. Humor usually plays on several of its many manifestations, such as linguistic puns, the grotesque, absurdity, the inversion of roles, stereotypical figures, etcetera, without being confined to one aspect only. So as not to be drawn into a broad discussion of comic concepts, we will limit our discussion here to three genres which are relevant to our subject and which are essential for an analysis of the comical in the stories of the *Thousand and one nights*.¹

1. Anecdotes in *adab* literature; poetry and short anecdotes are an integral part of prose works of the *adab*-genre, literary handbooks of different sizes containing the standard knowledge of the cultural elite, either incorporated in general surveys, or treated in specialized works. Of course, the anecdotes, exemplary tales, traditional tales about historic figures, illustrative tales, conform to the conventions of the genre, that is, they fulfil the requirements of style, politeness, and cultural and intellectual refinement. The plots of the anecdotes are often based on linguistic puns, the inventiveness of the author or the heroes, and the extraordinary events that are narrated. Comic tales fit

into this framework, since they are intended to arouse wonder about bizarre situations and about the skill and originality of the author.

2. Literature for entertainment; the domain of entertainment literature is vast and varied. It consists of works containing light verse and prose, an offshoot of *adab*, but also tales of wonder and love romances, which are often marked by influences of the colloquial language or dialects, and which served as entertainment for the elite, and popular romances and stories which were transmitted in the oral circuits of storytelling. Comic elements were of pivotal importance in all these genres, as they were meant to evoke amusement and emotions. In tales and romances, the main devices used to achieve comic effects were references to gender roles, magic, the inversion of roles, disguise, tricks, miraculous interventions, the grotesque, the cleverness or stupidity of heroes, and the subversion of the symbols of authority. Although linguistic jokes were still prominent, stylistic refinement and formal artistry were less pronounced than in the case of *adab* literature, apart from artful uses of colloquial idioms. A special sub-genre in this domain are the many rogue-stories built around the figures of well-known (historical?) folk heroes, such as Mercury Ali (Alî al-Zaybaq) and Ahmad al-Danaf.
3. Shadow theatre; popular literature originated at the interface of written and oral literature. Romances and tales were in the first instance themselves performed and were part of performances which could include impersonations, interaction with the audience, poetic digressions, music and song. As some scholars have observed, the dividing line between 'literature' and 'theatre' was not always clear. Narrative material migrated from popular literature to *adab*, and many romances and tales were originally conceived to be narrated orally, using texts only as a mnemonic support. At the theatrical end of the scale were the well-known shadowplays of Egyptian popular culture in the Mamluk period, especially those by Ibn Danyâl (d.1310). These plays contain the purest form of comic effects divested of their artistic sophistication and are notoriously obscene, invective and subversive, explicitly meant to shock and challenge bourgeois taste, public order and manifestations of authority. As a genre they come closest to the Bakhtinian concept of the grotesque, fulfilling an essential function of popular culture. The shadowplays are usually seen as a constituent element of the Arabic theatrical tradition.²

This brief inventory shows the contours of the genres in which comic narrative techniques were practiced and in which the cultural and social functions of the comic were expressed. It shows a gliding scale from artistic and sophisticated

techniques to explicitly rude and confronting forms. Within this scale, elements can be discerned which are common to most genres, in varying degrees, and which can be summarized as follows: first, humorous motifs are often used to evoke a sense of wonder and amazement, unsettling rigid visions of reality; second, a varied reservoir of narrative techniques was used, ranging from linguistic ingenuity to the use of stereotypical characters and events; third, there is often an element of subversion in the usages of the comic. In *adab* literature this may lead only to a relativizing of the personal authority of the caliph, for instance, while in rogue-stories and romances symbols of authority are challenged without being devastated, and in the shadow theatre authority is uncompromisingly satyriized and vilified. These common characteristics are too general to allow a precise typification of an Arabic concept of the comic, but they can serve as a framework for further inquiry. After all, the genres mentioned above are all included in the various versions of the *Thousand and one nights*, at least the ones which were extant in the 19th century and which could be drawn upon by modern playwrights. In the following we will concentrate on one element specifically: the relationship between the comic and forms of authority.

Authority and the comic in the 'Story of Shahriyâr and his brother'.

What we commonly call the *Thousand and one nights* is in fact a huge corpus of tales and stories of various genres and types which are directly or indirectly linked to a core of stories which bears the title *Alf layla wa-layla* and which has been expanded, revised and supplemented in many different ways, times and places. The relationship between the stories and the philological status of the various texts is often uncertain, and therefore narratological research cannot lead to any coherent and definitive conclusions regarding the work as a whole. This observation also bears upon the forms of the comic, which appears in many guises throughout the various compilations, but which cannot be reduced to a single coherent concept. As different genres alternate in the work, so does the use of comic techniques and motifs, in accordance with the genres of *adab* prose literature, farce, scabrous poetry, linguistic puns, jocular tales and satire, which were well-known in the Arabic literary tradition. We will proceed here with a brief discussion of the framestory and three stories which served as a source of inspiration for the plays that will be examined below and in which the comic element plays a prominent role.³

Although the relationship between the framestory and the chain of stories it encompasses is not always clear, apart perhaps from the most ancient core, it is

impossible not to refer to the story of 'Shahriyâr and his brother' in a narratological analysis of the *Thousand and one nights*, since it contains, so to speak, the paradigm of storytelling which pervades the collection as a whole and which recurs as a motif in many separate stories. At another occasion, I have typified the framestory as a parody, that is, as a conscious play with the conventions of a specific genre.⁴ In Arabic and Persian literature, one of the well-known genres of prose fiction fell under the category of 'instructive tales for princes', in which the initiation of a prince is described preparing him for his task as a king. The works of this type share a common form - a framestory containing a series of exemplary tales - and a common ideology, emphasizing order versus chaos, rationality versus emotions, and patriarchal authority versus the frivolity and wiles of women. The framestory of the *Thousand and one nights* comments on this genre by using its formal aspects, but inverting the main roles, since the prince, Shahriyâr, is not warned against the shrewdness of women by a bright and sensible vizier, but rather taught by an equally bright and sensible young woman to accept the feminine element in his life, restoring a distorted vision of the world. By making use of the inversion of roles, strict patriarchal authority is presented as an aberration, endangering the continuity of society.

The effect of parody, which has proved so hailsome for Shahriyâr, is reached by opposing the rigidity of the patriarchal attitude, upheld by a regime of violence, to the powers of the mind, in the form of storytelling, fantasy, and eroticism. Shahrazâd confronts Shahriyâr with a world of fiction, in which reality is juxtaposed to a metaphorical interpretation of life, redeeming Shahriyâr from his narrow, obsessive outlook of life by showing him the diversity of the world, the ingenuity of men and women, and the unpredictability of events. To achieve this, Shahrazâd follows three main strategies: referring to the complexities of the relations between men and women; evoking a world of strangeness, wonder and coincidences; and exploiting the imaginative force of comedy. Thus, the framestory teaches us that the comic is an integral component of a complex of narrative strategies, used to realise the essential transformative function of storytelling. This complex consists of the opposition of male and female roles, and rationality and irrationality, with the ultimate aim of unravelling the symbols of a formal, rigid and violent authority.

To achieve this aim, Shahrazâd utilizes a world of symbols and metaphors, an imaginary world which serves as an alternative to Shahriyâr's 'reality'. She creates an illusion, but it is an illusion which interferes with the course of events. Shahrazâd builds a symbolic system which seems to be detached from reality, but which in fact is an indispensable complement to reality, without which the world

would lose its meaning and society would lose its regenerative dynamic. Moreover, this system is a requirement for the exertion of royal authority: without being embedded in a fictional realm, authority will relapse into the practice of violence and death. Thus, Shahrazâd seems to argue, the comical is linked to the interplay between authority and imagination, exploring the connections between formal status and human character, between illusion and reality. It is this triangle - authority, illusion and comedy - which in the framestory completes the transformation of the seemingly fateful tragedy of the empire into a blissful future, from a situation of stagnation and doom into redemption and happiness.

Ma'rûf the cobbler and Alî Janâh al-Tabrîzî.

The powerful strategies of Shahrazâd have not only saved the empire, but also turned her world into the quintessential world of make-believe. Authors from all eras have exploited the imaginative force of the world of the *Thousand and one nights* to create their own fantasies and juxtapose reality with various fictional realms. In Arabic literature the *Thousand and one nights* remains connected with the birth of the modern tradition of Arabic theatre which occurred in the second half of the 19th century. Writers such as al-Naqqâsh (1817-1855) and al-Qabbânî (1833-1922) were among the first to use material from the *Thousand and one nights* in their plays. They were followed by a number of playwrights in the 1920s and 1930s who produced popular comedies and vaudeville entertainment. In the 1950s and 1960s, following the general trend in Arabic theatre, the narrative motifs of the *Thousand and one nights* were used for more serious projects of psychological exploration and social and political criticism. But here, too, the comical element comes to the fore, as a means to unravel the delusions of authorities and ideologies.⁵

An important play belonging to the category of social criticism wrapped in the form of comical theatre, which is illustrative of Egyptian trends in the 1960s, is *Alî Janâh al-Tabrîzî and his servant Quffa*, written by the prominent playwright Alfred Farag. To some extent this play epitomizes the function of the *Thousand and one nights* as a reservoir of 'archetypes' of Arabic comic theatre, combining the elements of farce, stereotypical characters, and a socio-political appeal.⁶ Alî Janâh al-Tabrîzî is a youth from a wealthy family who has squandered his inheritance and has now become impoverished, since his former friends refuse to help him. He meets Quffa, a poor cobbler, to whom he offers an 'invisible meal'. Alî and Quffa decide to travel together to the Qâf-mountain to try their luck. On the way, Quffa has to pay all expenses - he has saved some money in a secret

pocket - and when they arrive in a rich city, with a lot of beggars, Alî lavishly distributes alms to the poor. In a confrontation with a merchant and the chief-merchant Alî pretends to be a rich trader, and when he meets the princess of the town in the chief-merchant's shop, he tears the cloths apart to impress her. Quffa tells the beggars that they expect the arrival of an immensely rich caravan. Now the merchants rival for Alî's friendship and lend him as much money as he wants, which Alî in his turn showers upon the beggars. The merchants complain to the king that the beggars start opening shops for themselves, but the king decides to test Alî instead of punishing him. He shows him a valuable gem, but Alî smashes it and says that it is worthless. The princess falls in love with him and receives permission to marry him. Quffa says that he has more right to marry the princess, since their 'achievements' were all the result of his 'investments'. He contests the division of roles into master and servant, but Alî only replies that their hierarchical relationship is just 'the nature of things'.

Here a brief intermezzo is inserted concerning a legal case about the contents of a bag. Act two begins in Alî's home with a row between Alî and Quffa, the latter demanding his share in their properties, the former now claiming that he in fact has a real caravan. Meanwhile the king and the vizier ask the princess to try and find out the truth about the caravan. Quffa decides to try and become king himself and betrays Alî for thirty silver dirhams. However, when Alî is on the verge of being hanged - asking permission to bequeath his 'caravan' - Quffa dresses up as the chief of a caravan and demands Alî's release. The merchants, fearing to lose their 'loans', set Alî free. Quffa, Alî and the princess leave the town to join the 'caravan'.

The material for this play is taken from several stories of the *Thousand and one nights*. The motif of the youth squandering his fortune occurs in several *Thousand and one nights* stories, for example in the story of 'Alî Shâr and Zumurrud'.⁷ Here, too, the hero is forced to go into the world and find salvation, usually in the company of a clever slave-girl. The invisible meal is copied from the 'Barber's tale of his sixth brother',⁸ in which Ja'far al-Barmakî treats a beggar on an imaginary banquet. The intermezzo about the bag is modelled after the story of 'Alî the Persian',⁹ in which two litigants struggle over the contents of a bag - allegedly full of miraculous objects - which in the end turns out to be almost empty. Finally, the motif of the imaginary caravan is taken from the story of 'Ma'rûf the cobbler',¹⁰ in which Ma'rûf is magically transported to a strange town, where he pretends to be a wealthy merchant awaiting a rich caravan. He is welcomed by the merchants and the king and is eventually married to the princess, who finds out his secret, but does not betray him. In the *Thousand and*

one nights story the ending is different: Ma'rûf finds a magic ring with which he is able to have his imagined caravan materialize. Also absent from the play is the theme of the wicked wife, which sets in motion Ma'rûf's adventurous journey.

It is clear that the story of the play is tightly interwoven with the *Thousand and one nights*, especially in its use of comic motifs. First, several stereotypes are used which have a comic connotation, such as the squanderous youth, who is an optimistic lover of life and beauty, seeking after justice, intelligent and a talented actor (according to Farag's own description in the postscript to the play); and the clever, roguish servant, simple of heart, realistic, a lover of life, and prone to satire. Both show the characteristics of the trickster, a familiar figure in this type of entertaining stories. Then there are the merchants, the king and the vizier, who are greedy, attached to status and wealth, lacking social sensitiveness and inclined to manipulation and the use of disciplinary measures. Second, among the more farcical motifs are the recurrent references to material things, such as food, drink and money. These motifs are used to stress the contrast between material life and ideals, realism and idealism, and the powerful and the powerless.

The main motif taken from the *Thousand and one nights*, however, is the motif of lies and illusions, which is nicely introduced with the episode of the invisible meal. This brief passage shows the main theme of the play, which is the way in which a lie relates to reality, or, more precisely, the way in which illusion intervenes to shape reality and influence the course of events. Alî's lie creates an illusion which is meant to produce a vision which is mistaken for reality. It is meant to shape this reality by producing what is coveted by those who are deluded, even if it does not materialize. In the episode of the invisible meal the illusion takes the place of food. The invisible meal characterizes the different functions of Alî and Quffa, the latter being connected with food and money, the former with the way the couple presents itself to the world outside. Alî is the master of the lie, responsible for turning Quffa's 'investment' into a profitable representation, which not only deludes Quffa, but also the merchants, the vizier and the king. The illusion is traded for money, which is subsequently distributed to the poor. Alî's play with representations is of course inspired by the observation that in general it is representations which determine the course of events. While the desire for material things are the basic drive of life, it is illusions which determine the structuring of this desire and the distribution of its fulfilment. Thus, the wealth of the merchants and the authority and power of the king are based on illusions, on representations of reality that are presented as the 'natural' state of affairs. It requires a counter-representation to break the 'spell' and unmask the real character of the powerful and the wealthy. This manipulation

of illusions by a deceit is subtly demonstrated by Alî's sustained lie, which not only unravels the illusionary hierarchy imposed by the king, but also proofs its power in 'producing' reality by shaping the relationship between Alî and Quffa. Even if Quffa knows that their 'representation' is a lie, in the end he cannot escape from it, since it has turned their imaginary relationship into a real relationship. Alî invested his imagination, Quffa invested his money, but in the end they are not equal partners. However, in the final scene, Quffa's 'realism' is required to save Alî from being executed. It appears that Quffa's realism needed Alî's dreaming to achieve something, but Alî's lie can prove fatal without Quffa's pragmatic ingenuity. This is only realized by perpetuating the lie, or at least leave the possibility open that the illusion might be true.

Mechanisms of power

Every serious Egyptian play of the 1960s, the heyday of Nasserism, contains an element of social critique, and in this *Alî Janâh* is no exception. It is quite obvious that the play with illusions is meant to make visible the mechanisms of power and the delusory basis on which power hierarchies and the distribution of wealth are built. The merchants and the king are represented as mere avaricious egoistic and manipulative crooks, exploiting the people for their own benefit. But the play also shows the function of what may be called 'ideology', that is, the effect of presenting utopian visions, based on the promise of wealth, disturbing the natural order of society. The hope for the promised bliss unsettles the regular mechanisms of power, albeit only because of greed, and can immediately influence the distribution of material wealth, since this distribution had been determined by an illusionary representation all along. Ideologies can change the state of things just by representing reality in a different way, by giving hope and by speculating on the nature of human beings. Whether the actual promise is fulfilled is not disclosed by the author, who also refuses to judge whether the manipulation of reality by using lies should be condemned or praised. Of course, Farag's treatment of these issues can be related to the revolutionary message of Gamâl Abd al-Nâsir, who injected a new dynamism into Egyptian society by presenting a new vision of the future.

Before we proceed to discuss the more general aspects of the relationship between *Alî Janâh* and the *Thousand and one nights*, we will first turn our attention to another Egyptian play from the 1960s which shows a similar concern for the manipulation of illusions.

The wines of Babylon.

Fârûq Khûrshîd's play *The wines of Babylon* was first published in the journal *al-Masrah* in 1967.¹¹ It relates the ascendancy of the good-for-nothing Habazlambazaza, who is the 'hero' of the play but hardly acts himself. He appears in intermittent monologues explaining events and revealing their inner logic. His ascendancy to the position of 'amîr' at the court of Caliph Hârûn al-Rashîd is mainly realized by the women around him, his mother, the crafty Dalîla, and the slave-girl Yasmîn. He had bought Yasmîn on the slave-market and describes her as: 'Yasmin, the belle of Baghdad and its future princess... Yasmin, enchanting dream of the orient: the magic ring which controls the hidden genie who appears before you whenever you rub the ring and - Hey presto, to hear is to obey, and the whole world is yours to command; ask and it shall be granted, for nothing is beyond his power, and in his language the word *Impossible* does not exist. The eternal Yasmin who lives in every age and in every place. The wondrous Yasmin who hides in every woman, but only reveals herself in a rare few... a remarkable few.' [p. 466] She is clad in a belly-dancer's costume and enchants the men with her charms. However, she is not averse of using fraudulent means to achieve her aims: the ascendancy of Habazlambazaza in the palace hierarchy.

Habazlambazaza's adversaries are Alâ al-Dîn Abû al-Shâmât, the adjutant of Hârûn al-Rashîd, and the famous rogues and chieftains Hasan Shûmân, Ahmad al-Danaf and Alî al-Zaybaq. These knights are the faithful servants of the caliph, but through the machinations of Yasmîn, Dalîla and Habazlambazaza's mother they fall into disfavour with the caliph and are removed from their positions. Habazlambazaza is aware of the emptiness of his achievement, but he is convinced that in the end he will become the idol of the people.

The second part of the play consists of a dialogue between a modern Dalîla, presumably the chief editor of a newspaper, and Alâ al-Dîn Abû al-Shâmât. Alâ al-Dîn reproaches her for her press campaign against his person and asks for the reason why she initiated it, now that he has already lost all his functions and power. Dalîla answers him that what she needs from him is his support for the new 'regime', since 'we' have the power and the glory, but 'you' have the people's heart. The new regime needs Alâ al-Dîn's reputation and respect to prevent the populace from undermining order and standing in the way of progress. If he would lend his reputation to Habazlambazaza, the people will refrain from mutiny against their leaders and the principles. If Alâ al-Dîn is willing to join them, he will have to do nothing and will live a rich and happy life. If he refuses, he will suffer a fate similar to that of Ahmad al-Danaf (concentration

camp), Hasan Shûmân (false rumors), and Alî al-Zaybaq (starvation). Alâ al-Dîn says that their lives may have been destroyed, but that their reputations are still unbroken and their adventures are still recited by the people.

The play ends with a monologue by Habazlambazaza in which he explains that he is the one 'who taught [mankind] how to be Adam, and Eve, and Cain and the serpent and Christ, all in one. I am the core of man and his reality.'¹² He had to exist, so that the people should know the glaring truth that 'all things belong to the will, and it lies within our power to remove the obstacles in our way, through the ideals and principles which every man must embrace - if not by conviction then by every other means. Yes, the means... our prime weapon. And when the means are everything, man will disappear and they will remain,' at the expense of 'good people'.¹³

The story of this play refers to the *Thousand and one nights* and more specifically to a cluster of stories from Egyptian folklore about four famous rogues, Alâ al-Dîn Abû al-Shâmât, Ahmad al-Danaf, Hasan Shûmân and Alî al-Zaybaq, and the similarly roguish Crafty Dalîla. These stories are included in some versions of the *Nights* and contain various adventures of the popular heroes, who try to outsmart others and each other, hoping to win the favour of the caliph. By using all kinds of tricks they succeed in acquiring a function as officer of the guard, challenging the existing power structure to attract the caliph's attention. The story of Alâ al-Dîn is the story of the rise and fall of a hero, combined with a romantic love story, evoking the vicissitudes of fate, the wiles of women, the evil intentions of rivals, and the courage and inventiveness of the rogue figure. The characters and events are quite stereotypical and their adventures are generally entertaining and as a rule comprise various comic elements, such as the satyrizing of authorities, ingenuous tricks, disguises, inverted roles, practical jokes and farcical plots. Through these humorous episodes, they reflect the attitude of the population towards the powers-that-be and the role of popular culture in expressing the people's feelings. They do not really represent the Bakhtinian grotesque, as an expression of the people's contempt for the symbols of power, but they do unravel the false pretensions of the powerful and the mechanisms they use to buttress their position.

It is this complex of generic and thematic characteristics that shapes the paradigmatic framework of Fârûq Khûrshîd's play. It aspires to analyse the mechanisms of power from the perspective of the population, unmasking corruption and nepotism among the elite, which consists of notables and a caliph who are only interested in the pleasures of life and the preservation of their privileged position. It denounces the manipulative practices of those who exploit

corruption to advance their interests, including the press, which can break political careers. The stereotypes of power are transplanted from the folkloric past to the present, thus conveying popular critique of power abuse to the current situation in Egypt, and evoking the traditional distrust of the powerful among the populace.

Within the process of Habazlambazaza's ascendancy to prominence, the motif of lies and illusion plays a crucial role. As in *Alî Janâh*, power and authority are not based on solid ideological foundations or institutional formalities, but rather on arbitrariness and manipulation. Power is based on betraying others and of constructing reputations and images. The role of Dalîla as the great manipulator of representations is crucial: she shapes events by the way she represents them in her media, knowing full well that the reality that is produced is nothing but an empty image. In her bitter cynicism, she holds that 'ideals' are not an end, but rather a means to acquire power. They are the illusions that should be manipulated to construct and preserve positions of authority, protecting them against the possible 'disobedience' of the people. In her dialogue with Alâ al-Dîn, Dalîla says: 'Like you, I believe in ideals, I believe in slogans and shining phrases, but unlike you I know they are only a means, not an end.'¹⁴ And: 'Principles and ideals are the means of the daytime hours, out in society, and before the public, and in speeches and newspaper articles.'¹⁵

As in *Alî Janâh*, in *The wines of Babylon*, too, power is depicted as a form of deceit and the manipulation of ideas. These can be deconstructed by counter-deceit and counter-manipulation, by deconstructing them in the theatre, making use of the vast reservoir of comic techniques, motifs and stereotypes, which contrasts the perspective of the powerless and the powerful. Although *The wines of Babylon* comprises the components of traditional comic tales and refers to a comic subtext, it can be questioned if the play should be categorized as a comedy, because the bitterness of the political critique diminishes the comical tone. But it is perhaps in this generic hybridity that the power of the message lies. The comical metatext of the *Thousand and one nights* is contrasted to the bitter reality of the present, in which even comedy has lost its frivolity.

Conclusions

The discussion above shows how material from the *Thousand and one nights* was reworked to shape the narrative framework and provide various motifs of two modern Egyptian plays. It allows us to draw some general conclusions about the influence of the *Thousand and one nights* on modern Arabic theatre as a metatext

defining not only the texts of the plays themselves, but also their reception. As we have seen, within this process of intertextuality, the comic component plays a predominant role.

First, the stories of the *Thousand and one nights* lend themselves quite well for theatrical adaptations because they are imbued with a notion of performativity. In the cycle itself the stories are transmitted orally, by a narrator who is not the author, but only a conveyor of the tales. This contributes to the generic instability of the text, resulting in a wide variety of different versions, extensions, reworkings, and imitations. Some of the stories were known from the oral circuits, with their interactive reception and reshaping of the narratives, and thus were already part of a proto-theatrical tradition. The stories were conceived and presented as performances, provoking an immediate response from the listeners/readers. This was achieved by using various techniques, of which comic effects were among the most important. It is these performative narrative techniques which make the material so suitable for theatrical adaptation.

Second, the world of the *Thousand and one nights* is intimately associated with forms of exoticism, evoking a glorious past which is part of the collective memory. The appeal of this exoticism cannot only be found in its aesthetic aspects, such as extravagant settings, colorful, luxurious clothing, hints at eroticism, or precious objects, but also in its familiarity as a shared history. The *Thousand and one nights* provides an image of a past and an atmosphere which are familiar to the audience, enabling the author to project a literary form and literary themes into a well-known historical setting. In this way links and contrasts between the present and the past can be suggested from which the main narrative suspense is derived: the past as a mirror of the present. It is in this mirroring effect that the comic element can play its role.

Third, the *Thousand and one nights* provides the playwright with a rich stock of stereotypical settings and characters. The court of Hârûn al-Rashîd, the rich elite, the poor scoundrel, the rogue, the gorgeous slave-girl, the adventurous scion of the wealthy class, merchants and viziers, they can all be taken from the *Thousand and one nights* with their respective peculiarities and functions, appealing to images that are familiar to the public. They convey a sense of social differentiation, arbitrary power, heroism, good and evil, and gender roles which immediately evoke specific connotations, which in turn can be linked to stereotypical figures and images of the present. Of course, such a vast reservoir of stereotypes is a *Fundgrube* for comic literature, since the play with prejudices and fixed visions of 'others' is one of the main techniques of comedy.

Fourth, the *Thousand and one nights* provides author and audience with a general discourse of the challenging of the symbols of authority. The *Thousand and one nights* presents authority in its most pure, unadulterated, arbitrary and violent form, contrasting it to vulnerability, inventiveness and beauty. It thus enables the playwright to convey a message of social justice, not only by juxtaposing images of power and powerlessness, but also by referring to Shahrazâd's courage and insight, and to the subversive components of popular culture. Projecting this critical message into the past can provide protection against censorship and persecution, but it can also enhance the feeling among the audience that social justice is part of their political and cultural heritage, and not something created *ex nihilo* or imported from foreign civilizations. The struggle for justice for the people is as old as history itself, and Shahrazâd and her many heroes are its symbol. As has been noted above, within this struggle, comedy has always had a crucial role to play, for the deconstruction of the mechanisms of power.

Finally, all these aspects converge in the mighty figure of Shahrazâd, who is an exotic stereotype and a cultural icon representing the discourse of liberation. This discourse is of course of primary importance, since it conveys a concept of literature, of narrative and of symbolic structures. It shows a world which interacts with a world of fantasy and which is at least partly governed by the power of the imagination. Shahrazâd confronts Shahriyâr with an imaginary world which shows him how his life is founded on the obsessive belief that the imagination is no more than illusions and disillusion, a belief that has disrupted the balance between reality and imagination in his personality. By re-integrating the two components of Shahriyâr's personality and vision of life into a coherent symbolic system, represented by the chain of stories, a new regenerative dynamism is installed. As we can see, in the *Thousand and one nights* and in the two plays discussed above, this play with the relationship between reality and imagination - in the form of lies, illusions or stories - is a very powerful narrative device, revealing the inherent function of storytelling as a means to manipulate reality. It is here, perhaps, that the most essential influence of Shahrazâd must be sought, as a model of the power of the imagination and narrating against forms of repression and deceit. After all, this is what playwrights such as Alfred Farag and Fârûq Khûrshîd seemingly hope to achieve. And for them, as for Shahrazâd, the comic is one of the most effective weapons.

The question that remains to be asked is if the two plays under study should be considered as real 'comedies', instead of plays merely making use of comic elements. In both cases, the happy ending is quite doubtful and the message that

the play wants to transmit is bitter rather than comforting or optimistic. Still, it is the reference to the *Thousand and one nights* and its narrative world, its sense of irony, parody and subversiveness which in these two cases save the comic purport of the plays. The narrative context secures the comic nature of the unravelling of the intertwinement of illusions and power.

Notes

- ¹ For a general outline of the various genres of the Arabic literary tradition, see: R. Allen, *The Arabic literary heritage; the development of its genres and criticism*, Cambridge, 1998.
- ² See: S. Moreh, *Live theatre and dramatic literature in the medieval Arab world*, New York, 1992.
- ³ For a discussion of the textual history of the *Thousand and one nights*, see: U. Marzolph/ R. van Leeuwen, *The Arabian nights encyclopedia*, 2 vols, Santa Barbara, 2004; for a summary of the story of 'Shahriyâr and his brother' and references concerning the story, see: id., vol. 2, pp. 370 ff., and the index.
- ⁴ R. van Leeuwen, 'The art of interruption: The *Thousand and one nights* and Jan Potócki,' *Middle Eastern Literatures*, vol. 7 (2004), no. 2, pp. 183-198.
- ⁵ For the connections between the *Thousand and one nights* and the emergence of modern Arabic theatre, see: Marzolph/ Van Leeuwen (2004), vol. 2, article 'Theater', with references; M.M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic drama in Egypt*, Cambridge 1987; id., *Early Arabic Drama*, Cambridge 1988; R. Bencheneb, 'Les dramaturges arabes et le récit-cadre des Mille et une nuits,' *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée*, vol. 18, (1974), pp.7-18; id., 'Les Mille et une nuits et les origines du théâtre arabe,' *Studia Islamica*, vol. 40 (1974), pp.133-160; id., 'Les Mille et une nuits et le théâtre arabe au Xxsiècle', *Studia Islamica*, Vol. 45 (1977), pp.101-137
- ⁶ For this essay I have used the English translation by Roger Allen, since the Arabic text was not available to me at the time of writing: S. Kh. Jayyusi/ R. Allen (eds), *Modern Arabic Drama; an Anthology*, Bloomington/ Indianapolis 1995, pp. 305-351; A. Farag, 'Ali Janah al-Tabrizi and his servant Quffa.'
- ⁷ See Marzolph/ Van Leeuwen, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 100-101 (in the Bûlâq edition, nights 308-327).
- ⁸ Id., op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 120-1 (night 32).
- ⁹ Id., op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 99-100 (nights 294-296).
- ¹⁰ Id., op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 291-293 (nights 989-1000).
- ¹¹ An English translation of the play can be found in M. Manzalaoui, *Arabic Writing Today*, vol. 3, *Drama*, Cairo 1977; references are to this translation.
- ¹² Manzalaoui, op. cit., p. 507.
- ¹³ Id., op. cit., p. 507.
- ¹⁴ Id., op. cit., p. 496.
- ¹⁵ Id., op. cit., p. 497.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF YUSUF IDRIS' *AL-FARAFIR* TO EGYPTIAN AND WORLD COMEDY

Marvin CARLSON

Although Yusuf Idris is one of the most widely read short-story writers of the Arab world, he also produced a significant body of drama, among which his 1964 work *al-Farafir (The Flipflaps)* holds the pre-eminent position, both for the richness and originality of its dramatic themes and construction but also because it is one of the first major attempts to explore the potential of a specifically Egyptian dramatic expression. Idris' first three plays, written in the mid 1950s, were dramas of social realism, clearly reflecting the interests of the new era and in form and concerns very similar to the work of other contemporary Egyptian dramatists. The first two, both short, dealt with the sufferings of the poor and exploited while the third, Idris' first full-length play *Al-Lahza al-Harija (The Critical Moment, 1957)* deals with the effects of the Suez war on a middle-class Egyptian family and a British soldier. During the seven years following this play, Idris wrote nothing more for the theatre, devoting himself instead to short stories and journalism. During this time, however, he later reported that he devoted much thought to the problem creation of a new kind of Egyptian drama, one that would be truly Egyptian both in subject matter and technique instead of the work based on Western models, which up until then had dominated both modern Egyptian drama and indeed modern Arabic drama in general. To this end he developed an approach, which he outlined and defended in an influential series of articles entitled *Our Egyptian Theatre*, published in 1965 in the leading literary periodical, *al-Kitab*.¹

Actually the program Idris proposed in these articles, both in its motivation and its strategies, was not radically different from that suggested by al-Hakim in a preface to his drama *Ya Tali al-Shajara/ The treeclimbers* three years before, but the far great visibility of the journal *al-Kitab* brought these arguments to the forefront of Egyptian literary discussion and encouraged the idea, still widely held among writers on the modern Egyptian theatre, that al-Hakim's drama remained essentially in the tradition of the European avant-garde (and in particular of its most recent manifestation, the Theatre of the Absurd), while Idris opened the way to a distinctly different, Egyptian-based mode of experimental drama.²