One Thousand and One Nights is perhaps the most famous collection Arabic stories and poems and serves as the world’s greatest introduction to Arabic culture through literature. This collection of Arabic works can be traced to as early as the 9th century, and was known at the time as a fairytale book by the name of Hazar Afsaneh. The book contains traces of Arab, Persian, and even Indian culture and the stories were collected by several different authors and put together to establish a creative plot. One Thousand and One Nights, is not just a book of careless tales, but a piece of prized literature that is widely read and studied today in countries all over the world. In this paper I will begin with a summary of the main plot of the collection, then discuss the history of the collection placing emphasis on the Abbasid era and Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, then introduce famous translators and their contributions to the work, and finally highlight the significance of the book’s ability to introduce Arab culture to the Western world. One Thousand and One Nights has not only opened the minds of scholars and students to classic Arabic literature, but it has also placed great influence on some of today’s greatest authors and film makers, making it a truly important part of history that will be carried throughout the future.

Arabian Nights has an interesting structure; the collection of stories and poems by different authors all come together over an overarching story of a Persian King and his brutal habit. As summarized by Colin Graham in a piece for the Reference Guide to World Literature, the story begins as King Shahryār finds out that his wife has cheated on him with another man. Outraged by his wife’s betrayal, the King puts in mind that all women are the same and will
cheat, lie and embarrass him. Because he cannot live without the love of a woman and at the same time cannot trust anyone, King Shahryâr orders his vizier to bring him a different virgin each night. The vizier does as he is told, and thus begins the King’s cycle of sleeping with a virgin each night and killing her before the next morning to ensure that no one will cheat on him again. One day, however, the vizier is unable to find a virgin to bring to the King, and instead the vizier’s daughter, Scheherazade, offers herself as the King’s lover. Aware that she may very well be likely to death the next morning Scheherazade devises a plan to begin telling the King a tale. Instead of finishing the tale that night, she promises the King to complete the story the next night, forcing him to go against his will and spare her life. The next night Scheherazade finishes the tale and begins another making sure to leave the story hanging and the King waiting to hear the conclusion. Night after night, Scheherazade repeats this until she has told the collection of stories by several authors and reached her one thousand and first night with the King, in which she pleads and the King agrees to spare her life (Graham, 2003, p.1).

According to the *Columbia Encyclopedia* (2008), the tales that Scheherazade tells the king vary in themes and include a spectrum of imaginative figures and plots. These stories—the stories that classical Arabic writers have contributed to—vary, and include tales that encompass historical records, love stories, poems, tragedies, dramas, comedies, and even erotica. The stories contain fictional and imaginative figures like jinneys, magicians, and wild animals. The tales come to be known as a collection of stories from various cultures as well. Some tales are known to be contributions by Persian and Indian authors and writers in addition to those who were written by Arabs. To add to the plots interesting structure Scheherazade is portrayed often as the main character of the main story, who tells stories to the King and often the characters in her stories are telling tales of their own to other characters (p.1). This creates what we now call
a layered narrative texture, and literary scholars everywhere have found this one of the most complex yet extraordinary aspects of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Within the *Arabian Nights*' outstanding structural organization and engaging plot, lie definitive aspects of Arab culture. And more importantly, the tales unravel a description of the Abbasid era that greatly enriched Arabia. Author and professor Ira Lapidus (2002) recalls that the Abbasids, with support from the Khurasanis (a Persian ethnic group from what is now modern day northern Iran) took over the Islamic Empire in 750. They claimed to be descendants of the Prophet’s uncle Al-‘Abbās ensuring their linkage to Prophet Muhammad. The Abbasids quickly began building Madinat al-Salam (the city of peace) or Baghdad, which would serve as the administrative capital of the dynasty and include groups of people from all religions and ethnicities. It became one of the largest and most prosperous cities in the world (Lapidus, 2002, p. 56). Baghdad’s wealth and cosmopolitanism is frequently documented in many of the *Arabian Nights* tales, and the Abbasid dynasty is described placing much emphasis on the influences that the Persians had on the Abbasid Caliphs. For example, the Persian King Shahryār in the tales, and the Arabs that Scheherazade tells him stories about portray the support that Arabs and Persians had for each other during the Abbasid era.

One Caliph in particular, Hārūn al-Rashīd, greatly allowed Persians to become involved with the Abbasid rule. Hārūn al-Rashīd allowed for the Persian Barmakid family to play a great role in the Abbasid dynasty, and Lapidus (2002) writes, “they were made generals and provincial governors, and served as the tutors of young princes” (p. 60). He even appointed Ja’far bin Yaḥyā, of the Barmakid family as his wazir who was to supervise all aspects of the bureaucracy (Lapidus, 2002 p. 60). Al-Rashīd also took great interest in education and literature thus making him a greatly important character in *One Thousand and One Nights*. 
Perhaps his interest in literature and adventure allowed for writers during the time to make him the hero figure of many stories. Several tales which in *Arabian Nights* also include Ja’far bin Yahyā as a character that the Caliph trusts and befriends (Kennedy, 2004, p. 1). Kennedy (2004) writes that in *Arabian Nights*, the he “is the caliph who explores the streets of his capital by night in disguise and joins in the lives and adventures of his subjects. He is accompanied by a small group of companions, notably his closest friend Ja'far the Barmakid, his chief factotum the eunuch Masrur, and the poet and court jester Abu Nuwas. All these are historical figures.” (p. 1). The tales told about the Caliph reflect upon his adventurous nights, his strict rule, and his distribution of wealth. These characteristics can be seen in one story in particular, which is about a poet who has been summoned to quickly tend to the Caliph because he is very ill. On his way to see the Caliph, he is lured into entering a women’s harem as the women in a specific household allow him to. Instead of rushing to the Caliph who was ill, the poet stays with the women instead and indeed the Caliph is frustrated with this later. Once the Caliph knows the truth about where the poet really was, he decides to disguise himself and secretly go to the women’s harem at night with the poet. Knowing somehow that the Caliph was on his way the women hid and did not offer for the men to come up. The Caliph tells the poet the women have done well for not allowing them to enter the harem, and that if they had, the Caliph would have killed them. Instead, the Caliph distributes rewards to all (Kennedy, 2004, p. 2). This tale shows the Caliph’s hobby of exploring the Baghdad streets at night as well as showing his generosity towards his people—something that is a vital part of Arab culture.

This emphasizes that the tales within *Arabian Nights* are not just fairytales without any significant value. Instead, the tales serve as an account of historical information and description of the time of the Abbasid Caliph and are important to the preservation of Arab culture at the
time. They also demonstrate to readers that Persians and Arabs were reliant on each other at the
time—as can be assumed from the Caliph’s Barmakid wazir, and that much of Al-Rashīd’s
responsibilities were carried out by the wazir. Therefore, the tales imply that Hārūn al-Rashīd is
not prominently known for his powerful political rule of his caliphate, but rather more famous
and most remembered for his appearance in several of Scheherazade’s stories in the book One
Thousand and One Nights.

Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd’s emphasis as the true Caliph of the Arabian Nights, was not
simply a part of Scheherazade’s imagination. As mentioned by Hugh Kennedy (2004) in his
historical article, the role of the Caliph in the tales was documented in the stories in Al-
Isfahani’s Book of Songs that was an early book the tales were taken from. Abu al-Faraj al-
Isfahani, was a famous historian and scholar in Baghdad who lived during the time of the
Abbasid dynasty and in particular during the rule of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. He wrote the
poetic and harmonic collection, which was at the time entitled Al-Aghani (Book of Songs), and
many of the songs were dedicated to the nightly adventures of the famous Abbasid Caliph
(Abu, 2007, p.1). Therefore, it can be very well assumed that the tales included in One
Thousand and One Nights are various works by different authors that have been collected and
included in the volumes of this famous piece of literature. Kennedy (2004) mentions that, “The
earliest known version of the Nights dates from the fourteenth century and many of the stories
that we think of as typical of them, such as Ali Baba and Aladdin, date from well after that.
However, cycles of stories about Harun and his court were already in circulation within a
generation of his death and soon acquired a fantastical aspect. The eventual stories of the
Arabian Nights were the reworking of an old tradition.” (p. 2). The old traditions of Al-
Isfahani’s Book of Songs, and probably many other authors and scholars of the time all come
together in the *Arabian Nights* tales to recount the historical and cultural traditions and events of the Abbasid era. The reflection of Arab culture and history that the collection brings to readers is truly remarkable and would not have been possible without the works of the scholars and literary works of the famous “Golden Age of Learning” that took over Baghdad during Abbasid rule.

*One Thousand and One Nights*’ structure, historical and cultural value, and overall significance were all leading factors that lead to the translation of the work into several different languages. The first man to translate the tales was Antoine Galland, and the collections and works were first translated as *Les Mille et Une Nuits* making the famous Arabic book available for the first time in the French language. It was perhaps the Western world’s first introduction to the remarkable literary work. Antoine Galland was a French scholar who lived, traveled and worked in the 1600s. Galland was one of seven children and was born into a poor family, in France. Despite this, however, Galland still managed to receive an education and learned in languages such as French, Hebrew, Latin, and even Greek. He continued his studies to the university level attending well-known colleges in Paris. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2012), “He accompanied the French ambassador to Constantinople during 1670–75, learned Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, and wrote a journal of his travels.” (p. 1). He eventually served as a collector of antiques, ancient coins, and manuscripts who would study and explain them to the royal court of King Louis XIV of France. The scholar was also known for his literary writings and academic input in dictionaries of the time. Antoine Galland seemed to be a polymath of his day demonstrating his knowledge in several different subject areas. As noted in *Britannica* (2012), “he translated the Qur’ān and in 1694 wrote *Les Paroles remarquables, les bons mots et les maximes des Orientaux* (The Remarkable Sayings,
Apothegms, and Maxims of the Eastern Nations), a compendium of Eastern wisdom, and Les Contes et fables indiennes de Bidpai et de Lokmam (1724; “Indian Fables and Tales of Bidpai and Lokmam”)” (p.1).

Although the French scholar was known for several famous works, he is most remembered for his translation of One Thousand and One Nights into the first western language. It is has been said that Galland translated the major Arabic work from the Syrian language. Pamela Toler (2008), a professor of history and graduate from the University of Chicago, writes that Antoine Galland’s translations of the Arabian Nights seemed more like a hobby of his. After a long day of work within the King’s court, he would retrieve to translating the Arabic tales at night as a way to relax. Galland would also tell his colleagues that the translation of the tales brings him more pleasure than any of his other studies of coins and artifacts (p. 1). Before the translator could write down all the stories, he first had to collect the different manuscripts that they had been written on by different storytellers. The storytellers of the tales would each write down the way that they had told the ancient story and the tales were often times edited and told according to who the story teller was. Taking all these things into consideration, the difficulty of translating the manuscripts was not intimidating for Galland, who was determined to make a true book of the tales.

Toler (2008) writes that, between the years 1701-1704, Galland simply just collected different manuscripts which were mostly written in the Syrian language and dated back to the 14th and 15th centuries. Toler also writes that Galland’s journal claims that, “he used another source: Hanna, a Christian Arab from Aleppo who had traveled to Paris in 1709. Hanna told Galland 14 ‘very beautiful Arabic stories,’ including “Aladdin,” “Ali Baba” and “Prince Ahmed and the Peri Banou.” (p. 2). Antoine Galland wrote summaries of the stories that Hanna
told him and included them in what later became some of the most popular volumes of his translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*. If Galland’s claim is indeed true, then the French scholar can be accredited for being the first to add the most popular of the Arabic tales like “Aladdin” and “Ali Baba” to the book *Arabian Nights*. Galland also made great changes in the *Arabian Nights*—changes that are said to have been better for the European translation of the tales. According to Toler (2008), the French translator would pick and choose the tales (from the manuscripts) that he deemed most useful and meaningful to the European people. His translations were often times inaccurate because of the way he translated some Arabic meanings and versions of words into the French language. He also omitted parts of stories that he thought were too promiscuous or inappropriate for the European people and the time they were in. The volumes of the tales were slowly published in Europe between the years of 1704 to 1717. And, once finished, the European readers of the tales were left wanting more (Toler, 2008, p.3). Many followed in translating the tales, but all versions seemed to imitate Galland’s. The translation of *Arabian Nights* by the French Galland, introduced for the first time Arabic stories and tales to the European people. Above all, it served as a welcome for Arabic tradition and culture to the western world.

Another popular translation of the *Arabian Nights* was Sir Richard Francis Burton’s publication of *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, which consisted of about 16 volumes of tales in the English language and was released between the years of 1885 to 1888. Burton was an English traveler and linguist and learned over thirty world languages. He was especially skilled and had great interest for the Arabic dialects, which may have been the main reason for his undertaking the translations of the Arabic tales. Burton’s translation of the tales although more literal, was somewhat frowned upon by the European population. His translations included
excessive references to sexual details and were inappropriate for all readers. Even Burton’s wife was known to have hated his literary translations of the sexual content of the tales, and is said to have burned copies of his papers and works after his death (In Continuum Encyclopedia, 2006, p.1). Many other English men attempted to translate the Arabic tales, creating several different versions of the stories. Looking past the validity of the translations, people everywhere took joy in reading the tales and historians and writers began to study and teach the structure and content of the classic Arabic tales.

If we take a look at modern day, we can see the influences that One Thousand and One Nights has had on the world. The book is used in many genres of everyday life ranging from education, to entertainment, and from classrooms and movie screens to theater stages. European scholars began to study the stories’ structures and used the tales as examples for their own. The Arabic work was noted as the most famous form of Arabic literature introduced to the western world, and authors were inspired to write books of adventures and fairytales of their own. Even here at the American University of Sharjah, there is an Arabic course dedicated just to the study of the Arabian Nights tales. Disney movies such as Aladdin and the King of Thieves (1995) and the Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996) have been created based on the Arabian Nights tales in order to entertain young children and include stories of Arab royalty and gypsies. In 2011, the tales took to the stage at the Edinburgh International Festival and actors portrayed the tales literally and acted them out as daring adventures, and brutal tragedies. The theater production was aimed at describing the real Arab tales placing emphasis on the decisiveness and cunning characters and the descriptions of fate and destiny that Scheherazade had once described in her tales (Brockelhurst, 2011, p.1).
To conclude, *One Thousand and One Nights* has played a prominent role in several aspects of world history, literature, and drama. It’s combination of the Arab and Persian cultures have introduced the western world to the Islamic era of Arabia. Tales of the Abbasid Caliph and descriptions of a prosperous and wealthy Baghdad allow readers to learn about the historical events that were documented in the tales. The tales combine the culture and religion of classical Arabia and demonstrate the Golden Age of Learning that took place during the Islamic period. Stories of philosophy, comedy and tragedy can be witnessed throughout the collection. Authors and translators have long been amazed by the collection’s structure and have used the work as an example for their own texts. Traces of ancient manuscripts of the texts make it credible as a source for documenting certain events that had taken place in Islamic Arabia, and the *Nights* have been the influences of modern movies, theater productions and writings. No other work of classic Arabic literature has established the same international effects on education and entertainment. It is with pride that I can say One Thousand and One Nights is an extraordinary part of classic Arabic history and will continue to define Arabic culture throughout the years to come.
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