

Themed section

Towards New Perspectives on

Ethics in Islam

Casuistry, Contingency, and Ambiguity

Guest editor

Feriel Bouhafa



ISSN 0806-198X

Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies • 21 (2021) **IslEth**

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Can Reading Animate Justice? A Conversation from *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (*The Thousand and One Nights*)*

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Abstract

In this study, I make audible a conversation in *Alf Layla wa-Layla (The Thousand and One Nights)* on the meaning and application of justice. Without assuming that *Alf Layla* constituted an organized whole, the study identifies, in the frame narrative and the first two chains of stories—all three understood to belong to the earliest bundle—a debate on the coincidence of successful interpretation and just rulership. By the end of these tales, i.e., by the twenty-seventh night, a complete tale is told. In these stories, I propose, *Alf Layla* adopts an attitude that privileges multiplicity over singular interpretation, in a fashion that affirms the contingency of ethical questions.

The popularity of *Alf Layla* and the afterlives it enjoyed up to our present times—in the Arab world and the West—need not eclipse or substitute the Arabo-Islamic character the work came to exhibit, and the ethical questions it set out to address. In what has been read as fate, arbitrary logic, enchantment, magic, irrational thinking, and nocturnal dreamlike narratives, I suggest we can equally speak of a concern for justice. The study looks at *Alf Layla*'s affinity with advice literature, but stresses the need to read it as a work of (semi-popular) literature that pays witness to societal debates on justice.

Alf Layla, I suggest, belongs to Islamic culture in that the act of reading has been construed within hermeneutics that are largely informed by the ethical implication knowledge sharing entails. In how the stories find resolution to the crisis of the king, *Alf Layla* understands justice as an artificial and communal enterprise. The stories, more urgently, seem to suggest reading gears us towards a concern for the greater good.

Keywords: The Thousand and One Nights (Arabian Nights, 1001 Nights, *Alf Layla wa-Layla*), *Adab*, Justice, Rulership, Readership, Advice Literature, Interpretation, Multiplicity, Legitimacy

On Interpretation and Justice

In this study, I make audible a conversation in *The Thousand and One Nights (Alf Layla wa-Layla or 1001 Nights)*—*Alf Layla* from here onwards—over the meaning and application of

* I wish to thank Ferial BOUHAFI for holding the conference and raising these urgent debates; Felicitas OPWIS, for her gracious support, and Elliott COLLA who first asked me to write this study.

justice.¹ More specifically, the present study identifies a cohesive conversation, presented in the form of a debate,² in the frame-tale “The Two Kings,” and the two following sequences, “The Merchant and the Genie” and “The Fisherman and the ‘Ifrit”—all three understood to have earlier origins.³ The study suggests what connects the frame tale with the stories that follow can be understood as an interstice through which the work’s engagement with its Islamic context can be identified and examined. Without assuming that *Alf Layla* constituted an organized whole or that one story is representative of the work, I raise the urgent inquiry into why and how a work of (semi-popular) literature is paying witness to and participating in societal debates on authority and the communal good.

Speaking to a body of scholarly contribution that understands the relationship of the frame tale to the body of embedded tales through hierarchical interdependence, I propose we look at how the selected stories speak to one another. I further propose these tales are woven into a progressive trajectory, as they adapt synonymous punitive premises to changing contexts. In what has been read as fate, arbitrary logic, enchantment, magic, mystery, irrational thinking, and nocturnal dreamlike narratives,⁴ the present study suggests, we can equally speak of a concern for justice, not only as a theme, but as a heuristic designation as well.

The popularity of *Alf Layla*, and the afterlives it enjoyed up to our present times—in the Arab world (JARRAR 2008, OUYANG 2003, GHAZOU 1996) and the West (VAN LEEUWEN 2018), in cross-fertilization, cross-cultural incarnations (WARNER 2012), and translations (MARZOLPH and VAN LEEUWEN 2004, KENNEDY 2013, AKEL 2020)—need not eclipse or substitute the Arabo-Islamic character the work came to adopt, and the questions it set out to address on kingly power and the conception of justice.⁵ What follows will show that *Alf Layla* equates flawed interpretation with poor rulership, and anchors the remedy to both in a

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- 1 The primary reference for this study is Muhsin MAHDI’s edition (1984-1994); other versions (the so-called vulgate versions—the nineteenth-century editions of Būlāq, the Second Calcutta, and Breslau) will be consulted when relevant, and acknowledged in a footnote. When quotes from Mahdi are in English, the translation is mine.
 - 2 Reflection on the title, *Alf Layla* or its Persian mention in Ibn al-Nadīm’s work, in particular encouraged assumptions that the work is endless, blurring any appreciation for cohesive debates advanced within the tales. See for example Jorge Luis Borges, in “*Las Mil y Una Noches*,” or “*Alf Layla wa-Layla*” in its translation (see al-JĀRŪSH 2011).
 - 3 Aboubakr CHRAÏBI (2004) identifies the nucleus to be represented “by around thirty stories (a kind of common trunk) that are present in the majority of the manuscripts. It could be identified in a large part of the incomplete so-called Galland manuscript (BNF, Arabic, 3609-3611, ed. by Muhsin MAHDI 1984).” They are, according to him: “The Two Kings Shahriyār and Shāhzamān (the frame narrative and the inset tale); The Merchant and the Genie (plus three inset tales); The Fisherman and the ‘Ifrit (plus three inset tales); The Porter and the Three Ladies (plus six inset tales); The Three Apples (plus one inset tale); and The Hunchback (plus eleven inset tales)” (CHRAÏBI 2004: 151).
 - 4 Warner writes, *Alf Layla* is “a continuum between reality and illusion, daily consciousness and night vision, which enfolds dream, trance, hallucination, ecstasy and anguish and renders distinctions between them blurred” (WARNER 2013: 332). Kilito references *Alf Layla* as an example when showing how the night is the site of deception (KILITO 1999: 8-12). In a recent online talk, reviewed in ArabLit Quarterly’s online platform, Yasmine Seale, who is currently translating *Alf Layla* into English, echoes Kilito’s claim, in expressing an interest in creating “a night language... to reflect the fact that this is a night work...and the fact that these stories take place where dreams should be” (see *ARABLIT QUARTERLY*, July 2020).
 - 5 For an extensive survey of the textual history, translations, and reception, see MARZOLPH and VAN LEEUWEN 2004.

communal framework. The argument I am presenting here contends the following: Through setting a dynamic configuration that ties justice to interpretation, *Alf Layla* allows for designations that at once enable recognition of the contingency of ethical questions and raise a greater concern for justice. With attention to both narrative designs and normative world-views, I show, lastly, that the conception of justice emerges as collective, adaptable and, therefore, promissory. In this last feature, an alignment with *adab* can be discerned, particularly in admitting the ethical implication of knowledge sharing.

Reading the Frame Narrative

Framing is not unique to *Alf Layla*, Arabo-Islamic, or to medieval literature, and has been extensively studied. Frame stories, as Lee Haring notes, are “frequent enough for scholars to designate several as standing alone and establish a genre” and are “parasitic,” as they require other genres to live on (HARING 2004: 229-30). In “Framing Borders in Frame Stories,” Werner Wolf surveys the interpretations of frames and shows the multidisciplinary investigation of their implication (WOLF 2006: 198).⁶ Lastly, novel considerations have been proposed in examining frame tales, through attention to interdisciplinary and comparative approaches (RUSSO 2014) and to cultural and intercultural entanglements (WACKS 2007).⁷

The non-linear genetic histories of *Alf Layla*, however, pose a challenge to any discussion of threads connecting the frame tale with the body of stories that are diegetically distinct, yet entangled with one another. Scholarly attention turned to repetition (NADDAFF 1991),⁸ structure, and recurrent narrative motifs as the elements that sutured the work together. These studies added to our understanding of the complexity of *Alf Layla*, yet implicitly assumed

6 On what connects frame and en-framed tales, Wolf discusses two ways in which framings of frame stories create thematic links between framing and framed texts, *mise en abyme*, “where the embedded story (or stories) shed(s) light on the framing.” The opposite is also possible. The en-framed story is dominant, and the frame becomes subservient to it, a process Wolf calls *mise en cadre*. In this latter case, “some discrete phenomenon on the upper, framing level that illustrates—usually in an anticipatory way—some analogous lower level phenomenon of the embedded level so that a discernible relationship of similarity is established between the two levels.” Against these considerations, we can think of the frame story as a layer told by extradiegetic anonymous narrator; the frame of the chains, “The Merchant and the Genie,” and “The Fisherman and the ‘Ifrit,’” as embedded stories on the first level, while the stories enframed within each, as embedded stories on the second level. I have opted out of these distinctions in the present study, to encourage a reconsideration of what connects the frame tale with the enframed stories, which I argue, should be informed by contextual examination of *Alf Layla*’s engagement with Arabo-Islamic concerns.

7 A recent workshop entitled “Framing Narratives: New Perspectives on Premodern Textual Production in Arabic” (2020), at Freie Universität revealed a persistent attention to frame narratives, as well as growing scholarly interest in reading framing through a culturally-informed interpretative lens (see <https://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/kalila-wa-dimna/events/archive_2020/Workshop_Program.pdf>, accessed on January 10, 2021).

8 Responding to the assumption that repetition might indicate lack of imagination in story-telling, Ulrich Marzolph uses repetition in a cultural framework, and focuses particularly on “the intertextual allusion to themes, motifs, and concepts familiar to the audience,” which he finds to be “a highly effective narrative technique for linking new and unknown tales to a web of tradition the audience shares” (MARZOLPH 2014: 240).

incoherence and thus contributed to inhibiting attention to how the stories in *Alf Layla* speak to one another.⁹

Scholarly discussions produced a number of theories that explored, in particular, the relationship of the frame tale to the body of tales in *Alf Layla*, through pedagogical, moral, political, psychoanalytical, feminist and cultural interpretations.¹⁰ The interaction of the oral and the written was believed to explain the persistence of frame narratives and their ability to carry traditional tales over time and space (IRWIN 1995). Of *Alf Layla*, a number of theories merit attention. Ferial Ghazoul approximates the relationship to a necklace (frame) and its beads (embedded stories). The former, she suggests, can stand alone while the latter can only exist in relation to the frame (GHAZOUL 1996: 18). Al-Musawi alleges by attending to Baghdad as a cultural metropolis, we may understand the structure and cultural outlook of *Alf Layla*. Arguing for greater attention to the cultural, and particularly the Arabo-Islamic context of the tales, al-Musawi writes, “the growing of a transplanted tale into a collection, its blooming into a panoramic scene of many sites and colors, is a metaphor for the cherished city that became its spatial frame of reference” (al-MUSAWI 2009: 4).

Attention to the Islamic currents in *Alf Layla* was first raised by Muhsin MAHDI (1984), who presented two equally transformative theses. He suggested, first, the stories were put together within a clear design (albeit not in all stories, and not in all stages of its transmission), and should not be considered an arbitrary compilation. To him, the idea that *Alf Layla* is a work with no author is a grave misreading. Second, he argued *Alf Layla* recalls the history of how the stories moved from pre/non-Islamic eastern origins, to new Islamic audiences.¹¹ This view has been brought to a new light in the works of CHRAÏBI (2004 and 2016), who examines the formation of the collection. Advancing the premises of both Chraïbi and Mahdi, I argue in the examination of the three sets of stories for a process of reshaping that brought the tales to form a debate. Unlike Mahdi and Chraïbi, however, I suggest these continuities do less to confirm an individual expert intervention. Rather, my reading suggests that there has been greater attention to readership in the process of compilation, and it makes a case for a cultural concern that finds reverberations in *Alf Layla*.¹²

9 As a result, scholars like D.B. Macdonald and Mia Gerhardt, for example, dismiss the first chain “The Merchant and the Genie,” as insignificant, and find it incompatible with the “Fisher and the ‘Ifrit” (BEAUMONT 1998: 125).

10 For a review of the theories on the frame tale, see JULLIEN 2016.

11 In his studies, Muhsin Mahdi understood *Alf Layla* as a process of bringing a king from his abstract, eastern (Sassanian and Indian) model, to an Islamic awareness of Islamic concepts, see a summary of Mahdi’s approach in ‘AWWĀD 2010. Al-Musawi revisited Mahdi’s claim, and argued for “the underlying Islamic pattern that holds the composition together” (Al-MUSAWI 2009: 8), arguing for the frame tale’s rootedness in the new Islamic milieu. Al-Musawi’s thesis comes in response to scholarly traditions that ignored continuities within the tales, and between the work and its Islamic culture, yet the sweeping claim of “underlying unity,” does not come with compelling evidence, and it can also imply ahistorical attitude vis-à-vis the genetic history, and the diverse geographic and historical map of *Alf Layla*’s afterlives. For a critique of al-Musawi’s theory, particularly in how it denies historical specificity and the complexity of the work’s many afterlives see FUDGE 2013.

12 If I use readers, audience and readership interchangeably in the present study, it is to indicate a recognition of the diverse reception modes.

The discussion of framing tends to presuppose structural hierarchy, and as such, often accepts interdependence between frame and en-framed stories in *Alf Layla*, which assumes division, even when acknowledging tension and influence between the two. In what follows, I propose a different exegesis of the frame tale in relation to the first two sequences, where I read, in the narrative layering, an epistemic continuity. This feature of cohesive continuity across layering, I further suggest, can be identified within Arabo-Islamic medieval styles of writing.

Diegetic Fluidity

Interdependence or hierarchy as lenses for reading the framing/embedding dynamic cannot account for how the three sets of stories function as (equal) parts of one debate. I propose instead, we read the relationship that governs these sets as dialogical correspondence. In other words, the narrative layering of the multiple diegetic worlds does not interrupt an epistemic continuity we may attend to in the cohesive debate in the three sequences. “The Two Kings” raises a question, “The Merchant and the Genie” and “The Fisherman and the ‘Ifrit’” respond, in two connected yet distinct threads. In doing so, I would argue, *Alf Layla*, subscribes to Arabo-Islamic medieval writing, which is marked by diegetic fluidity, or the ability (and proclivity) to move from one narrative or diegetic world to another. It has been noted by scholars of Arabic literature (KENNEDY 2005, Behzadi 2015), the styles of presentation in Arabic literature are inclusive. In debating a particular point, medieval authors cohere reports (*akhbār*), poetry lines, quotations, anecdotes, stories, and aphorisms, often from distinct genres, from Greek, Sasanian, Indian, Jāhili and Islamic cultural repertoires, a feature characterized by Lale Behzadi (2015) as a form of polyphony and understood by Julia BRAY (2005) to constitute “literary humanism.”¹³

What suggests to our contemporary eye tenuously connected fragments, incomprehensible on account of occupying incongruous narrative realms, would have been appreciated quite differently by medieval readers.¹⁴ The multiplicity of narrative forms would have presented choices for audiences with diverse moral, imaginary and intellectual makeup and proclivities. If, then, the prose availed itself to medieval readers, it is not on account of the content alone. Rather, one could imagine dynamic processes of interpretation that pull from different cultural registers accessible to both authors and readers to weave (a selection of) these pieces into new conversations. The diverse narrative pieces, in other words, come

13 Bray proposes we look at *adab* as “a web of myth,” and at *adībs* as mythographers, who give “meaning to [their] task of selection and arranging materials only if [they allow] their interpretation to overspill the rubrics [they have] allotted to them” (BRAY 2005: 2).

14 Narrative forms vary; we see monologue-like reflections, poetry lines, conversations, excerpts of epistles, and aphorisms. Our attention should be directed to the scales of readership projected and expected in the canvass of tones: from generic sources (it was said/believed), to specific authorities (the prophets, saints, Companions, and esteemed scholars); from quick (one sentence) to elaborate (two-page) accounts; from aphorisms to elaborate discussion of legitimacy; from accepted norms to contested histories; and lastly, from pleasantly accessible rhetoric to laborious diction.

together to form thoughts and arguments, not only through the text but through readership, i.e., what and how the readers may select and reproduce.¹⁵

In this vein, one may understand how these different stories in *Alf Layla* assume a conversation that flexibly and organically moves from one (narrative/diegetic) world, to the other. Epistemic continuity across narrative layering is the most unique feature of Arabic writing that we see in *Alf Layla*, and a feature through which the stories, with diverse responses to transgression, build progressive argumentation. What follows studies the frame tale with one inset story, and the following two enframed narratives of “The Merchant and the Genie,” with three inset stories; and “The Fisherman and the ‘Ifrīt,” with seven inset stories. I will read these stories as different stages of a debate over the purview of kingly power. The first story opens with a crisis (in the failure of the vizier and the king), which stems from an act of grave misinterpretation, and throws the kingdom into chaos. The (ethical) disorientation we find in the opening story will be shown to be consonant with the overall inquiry of the first two sequences that assume the task of debating, explaining and re-situating the missteps of the king and the vizier. A shared concern glints into sharp focus through these particular stories that seem to have been rewoven, across narrative layers, into one extended debate over the meaning and application of justice.

When the King Errs

“There Is No Sin Greater Than a King’s Sin”
(NIZĀM AL-MULK, trans. DARKE 2002: 43)

Alf Layla opens with the story of “The Two Kings,” Shahriyār and Shāhzamān, referred to as the frame narrative. We encounter king Shahriyār ten years into his reign as a successful ruler. “His power reached the remotest corners of the land and its people... the country was loyal to him, and his subjects obeyed him,” as the story goes (HADDAWY 1990: 59).¹⁶ Quickly, an interruption takes place when an affair involving the queen and the maids of the palace is discovered and witnessed. In response, the two kings embark on a journey intended to disavow kingly power. Their quest, replete with moments of mis-reading, fails. King Shahriyār returns to address the initial challenge by reasserting his authority through marrying a woman every night and ordering them killed by dawn, the execution being carried out by the vizier himself (MAHDI 1984: 66). A crisis ensues. From the palatine site of the king’s cuckolding and first murder, chaos spreads kingdom-wide. The first three executed brides—the daughters of a vizier, an army general and a merchant—are followed by daughters of “the mercantile circle and the commoners” (MAHDI 1984: 66).

¹⁵ For an analysis of the readership of medieval *adab*, see MONTGOMERY 2013, especially chapter, “The Articulation of The Book of Living.”

¹⁶ It is important to note here that by introducing the two kings as brothers (MAHDI 1984: 57 et passim) *Alf Layla* presupposes a stable succession to power—were they perhaps the two sons of a former king? Relevant to note here that Galland’s translation begins the story of the Two Kings by reference to their fathers (IRWIN 1994: 48, 111). The longevity of the reign, ten years, as we are told, and the hunting scenes further attest to a state of prosperity and stability. For the significance of royal hunting, see PARIKH 2020.

Dissatisfaction plagues the kingdom as a whole, gesturing to the interdependence of sound kingly administration and the stability of the state, and priming the reader/listener, from the onset, to expect the solution to be sought within a communal framework that speaks to both. The king's practice brings about the interference of the vizier's daughter, Shahrazād, who marries the king and delays her own execution (and saves the king and the kingdom) by narrating stories,¹⁷ until an heir is produced, marking a resolution to the crisis and a conclusion to the work.¹⁸ I will show in what follows that Shahrazād could have concluded her narration with the two chains of stories alone—by the twenty-seventh night—since a complete argument presents itself.

The frame tale has been the topic of extensive scholarly consideration, often identifying the theme of women's deceit as the primary site of the crisis.¹⁹ While cuckolding the king and the question of women's deceit weave into the chain of events that lead to the king's decision, and reappear consistently in later tales, prioritizing it as the main line of inquiry disembeds the story from what can be deemed an organically developed concern pertaining to good rulership and the question of justice. King Shahriyār's decision constitutes a form of injustice that glaringly announces itself, and the sex scene itself should be apprehended as a breach of royal authority. Sex does not maintain a stable reference in the tales, and in this particular context it gestures to the frailty of legitimacy—or rather, its constructedness. The opening story, as such, presents a crisis of authority, and the injustice the opening tale presents pertains to the abuse of kingly power, which I argue, *Alf Layla* openly equates with a failure of interpretation.

In witnessing seemingly synonymous instances of women's deceit,²⁰ the character of king Shahriyār mistakes repetition for evidence, and the conclusion that women cannot be faithful or trusted is, thus, erroneously reached, independent of advisers, precedent or context. Following this act of flawed reasoning, the king collapses three positions by simultaneously

17 The repetitive return (to the frame-tale), at the end of each narrative stretch, which is marked in the diegetic world by sunrise, brings the readers back to the palace. Can we perhaps see in the repeated return of the narrative in new stories every night, political implications, particularly in that it retires the king to a recognizable orbit, retrieving kingly authority back into the realm of the palace, and symbolically to a limited scope? The repetitive movement from frame to enframed stories achieves this separation narratively: what governs the rest of the kingdom—and the tales—extends beyond what the king can know or control.

18 Appreciating Shahrazād can be furthered by locating her character in medieval historiographical and popular views in which women close to power were often portrayed as the catalyst of destruction of kingdoms. By enabling and successfully activating cultural transformations, as well as masterfully orchestrating the complex narrative structure of *Alf Layla*, the character of Shahrazād turns these assumptions on their heads, and would have been, in doing so, hermeneutically appealing to medieval readers.

19 On this point, for instance, al-Musawi suggests that *Alf Layla* is “bent on dissipating absolutism” (al-MUSAWI 2009: 3), he however, assumes that the problematic proposed in the frame tale is about sexuality and faithfulness, and that Shahrazād is disproving it through tales of sincere love and sacrifice.

20 The frame story presents three instances that suggest to the character of the king that women cannot be faithful: Shāhzamān's and his own cuckolding, and a third case is the kidnapped bride locked in a cage, whose captivity does not stop her from collecting ninety-eight rings of her sexual encounters (men she lured for intercourse), rounded up to one hundred by taking the two rings of Shahriyār and Shahzamān, who both participate in her adultery (MAHDI 1984: 64).

occupying the role of a witness, a victim, and a judge. Not being a party in a dispute while adjudicating is an intuitive principle (known in today's terms as the bias rule). A cultural cue from two lines of poetry testifies to how the collapse of the two positions into one, i.e., being a party and a judge in the same dispute, has been identified as a marker of injustice, and that kings' exemption of this violation was widely recognized and generally accepted. In attempting to remedy an impossible political situation, the famed Arab poet al-Mutanabbī (d. 345/965) laments the disruption of his friendship with his patron, the Ḥamdānī *amīr* Sayf al-Dawla, who later expels him from his *majlis* (council). To highlight the injustice of the fallout, al-Mutanabbī writes, "Oh you, most just of all people, except in how you treat me / The dispute is with you, and you are both the opponent and the judge."²¹ The line echoes an expression to the same effect from a poem by an Abbasid poet, Muḥammad b. 'Alī Khuzā'ī, also known as Di'bil (d. 246/860), in which he writes, "And I do not expect justice on your hands as long as / My eye sheds tears, and as long as you are both the opponent and the judge."²²

As for being a witness while adjudicating, classical Islamic sources equally reject this type of conflation. This has been established in the story of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13/634 – 23/644), the second caliph, who was approached by two people to rule on a dispute and was asked to perform the role of a witness in the case. 'Umar refuses to be simultaneously the witness and the judge and says: "I either give testimony and do not arbitrate, or I arbitrate but do not give my testimony" (*in shi'tumā shahidtu wa-lam aḥkum aw aḥkum wa-lā ashhad*).²³ In both legal and popular understanding, the conflation of positions—a witness, a victim/a party, and a judge—marks an interruption of justice; and this would have been instantly communicated to the medieval audience of *Alf Layla*.²⁴ Shahriyār's decision, it must be noted, presupposes the principle of separation that he openly violates.²⁵ His exemption is not simply

21 "yā a'dala l-nāsi illā fī mu'āmalatī / fīka l-khiṣāmu wa-anta l-khaṣmu wa-l-ḥakamu" (al-MUTANABBĪ 1978: 366).

22 "wa-lastu arjū ntiṣāfan minka mā dharafat / 'aynī dumū'an wa-anta l-khaṣmu wa-l-ḥakamu" (NAJM 1962: 140). We see a reference to such conflation in Ibn Ḥazm's (d. 456/1064) *Tawq al-ḥamāma*, in a line of poetry about the injustice of a person who acts both as an opponent (*khaṣm*) and a judge (*ḥakam*) (see IBN ḤAZM 1987: 135).

23 It has been used as a precedent for preventing the judge from being a witness in a case they are adjudicating (see MAS'ADĀNĪ 2014: 99).

24 One of the basic rubrics of justice implies that blame and punishment cannot be shifted to innocent people, and in a way this attitude, which came in clear response to tribal practices revenge, was captured in two Qur'anic verses: (Q. 35: 18) "and no soul burdened with sin will bear the burden of another," and (Q. 99: 7-8) "So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it / And whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it." (For the translations see <quran.com>.)

25 I want to briefly note here that the conflation intimates the conception of the wise prophet-king, which *Alf Layla* brings as a distant occurrence—in the temporal narrative space, and in popular cultural expectation as well—in the second sequence, with the story of the 'Ifrit who rebelled against king Solomon, the prototype of the sage or the wise king within whom claims of complete legal and political authorities harmoniously coincided. Once conflated in the person of the (wise) prophet-king, legal/religious and political authority started to be claimed separately and in relation to one another in Arabo-Islamic societies. The present study sheds light on how literature contributed to these questions, particularly through suggesting that authority may not go unchallenged or unregulated. See the related discussion of the construed ethical character of Alexander the Great, "Philosophy in the Narrative Mode:

claimed but violently activated, and (the references to) the king's executions are meant to be a physical confirmation of this violation. The problematic *Alf Layla* is provoking in the frame tale, I contend here, produces an opportunity to revisit kingly authority. Put differently, *Alf Layla* is questioning whether the ruler can be above the law, and if the king alone, without any advice or consultation, can be a just ruler.²⁶ And it is this thesis that the following two sequences of stories address by debating the conception of retribution in ways that reconstitute the purview of kingly power. I find it urgent to study the first two sequences together with the frame tale, as they seem to be closely knit—independent of subsequent occurrences of similar concerns over justice and/or kingly authority—as a complete debate.²⁷

The specific provenance of *Alf Layla*'s many manuscripts, and the historical moments of their rebirth, do not monopolize how readers may appreciate the conversations the work raises. Yet, and without attempting to pin a particular historical juncture, it can be argued that the stories selected in the present study, in the form that came down to us, lend themselves to questions the Islamic political landscape raised during and after the fourth/tenth century.²⁸ By showing that rulership is not absolute, and that the king is not immune from error, the three stories help alienate the concept of divine favor or manifest destiny that rulers claimed over different periods of Islamic and pre-Islamic histories.²⁹ In the absence of claiming rulership through divine favor—or being the deputy of God or the Prophet—legitimacy locates itself largely within the performance of the king. An imagined world in which a king errs so gravely presupposes an artificial view of justice and suggests that rulers do not possess but need to seek the knowledge to administer it. In misinterpreting the crisis, the king threatens the whole kingdom, which again stresses that justice cannot be realized within the person of the king alone, strongly calling for an external management or co-management of rulership. The way in which the following sequence of stories responds to the frame tale further suggests that legitimacy is inseparable from justice and that the latter is a dialogical enterprise that comes to life in its dynamic engagement with precedent, consultation, and context. The frame tale facilitates a case in which the king is a party in a crisis and manipulates this configuration to reject placing rulership and judgeship (and by extension religion/law) under the same body, as it shows that the conflation (of positions) spells disaster.

Alexander the Great as an ethical character from Roman to medieval Islamic literature,” by Anna Ayse AKASOY in this special issue.

- 26 In a nudge to the frame tale, “King Yūnān and Sage Dūbān,” an inset story in “The Fisherman and the ‘Ifrit,” brings this question into a playful enactment: a king misreads the kindness of the sage, decides to kill him, ignoring the advice of his viziers. As the king flips through the blank poisonous pages of a book gifted to him by the sage, entitled, “*khaṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*” or (*For*) *The Most Elite*, we are to see *Alf Layla*'s humorous commentary on the fatal interdependence of mis-reading and injustice.
- 27 Here it is relevant to note that David Pinault, in his book *Story-Telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights* proposes a particular selection. He finds that, “The Fisherman and the Genie/Enchanted Prince Cycle,” several of the tales of the ‘Abbāsid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd and his famed vizier Ja‘far al-Barmakī, together with “The City of Brass” form a sense of thematic and aesthetic conversation (PINAULT 1992).
- 28 Here I find Deborah Tor’s exploration of how advice literature islamicized Iranian kingly ideals particularly informative to the changes of the political notions of rulership. For more see TOR 2011.
- 29 On the concept of divine favor see STETKEYVICH 2002 for the Arabo-Islamic context, and SOUDAVAR 2003 for the Persian context.

Failed Viziership, Successful Reading

Eclipsed by the story of the two kings, the appearance of the vizier in the frame tale receives very little attention, and is even considered dispensable.³⁰ As mentioned earlier, the vizier first appears, quite unflatteringly, when executing the king's verdict, failing to perform the role of an advisor to the king and a guarantor of the kingdom's stability.³¹ The character appears again in the frame tale when Shahrazād, the daughter, requests to be married to the king: "I may either succeed in saving the people," she tells her father, "or perish and die like the rest" (HADDAWY 1990: 76). Baffled by her fortitude, the vizier asks: "What is it that is pressing you in this matter so as you would risk your own self?" (MAHDI 1984: 66). She insists: "It has to be done" (MAHDI 1984: 69). The vizier attempts to dissuade her from the decision by sharing three aphorisms, on caution, avoiding risks, and curiosity, then by narrating a story in two segments, "The Merchant and His Wife," and "The Tale of the Ox and the Donkey" (MAHDI 1984: 67-71).³² The vizier fails, twice. And the attempt to coerce a particular (didactic) message onto the story he narrates proves humourously futile, as his stories blatantly mock didactic expectations.³³

The significance of the vizier's segment has been ignored, although it is the earliest instance of an inset story in *Alf Layla*. The story, more significantly, is followed by an act of interpretation (as the vizier attempts to explain the meaning of his stories to his daughter). I would propose that this can be seen as *Alf Layla*'s manual on how (not) to read. The vizier's advice, in the form of a story about the futility of advice-giving, instantly mocks itself, and through its failure directs us to consider the significance of this moment vis-à-vis the work as a whole. On the narrative level, the vizier's stories entail contradictory elements that confuse the intended purpose and fail to form a cohesive message. On the hermeneutical level, the humor is produced from the incongruity of the attitudes of the vizier and Shahrazād, and more acutely from the vizier's inability to sense this disparity. The two attitudes speak to different strategies of reading. The first is diegetically insular, the second extra-diegetically fluent, and attuned to broader communal obligations. By prefacing the success of Shahrazād's

30 In his article "Exemplary Tales", Mahdi notes that copyists of two manuscripts that survived (held in Oxford and Paris) felt the story of the vizier did not affect or add to the frame tale and decided to delete it. (See MAHDI 1984).

31 In certain historical moments, viziers were believed to be the link between the ruler and the people (see VAN BERKEL 2013), if not scholars, and major actors in statecraft.

32 In his study of *Alf Layla*'s osmosis of its knowledge milieu, Chraïbi examines how the stories have been reworked into the Islamic context. Chraïbi examines, the ways in which "The Ass, the Ox, the Farmer and His Wife," which is part of the vizier's advice to Shahrazād, and which is of Indian origin; and "The Merchant and the Genie" (Trader and the Jinnī), which is of Near Eastern origin, "are imitated, reworked and recast in the Nights within the ideological context and literary tradition of medieval Islamo-Judaeo-Christian culture" (CHRAÏBI 2004: 149-157).

33 In rejecting the generally assumed separation between the fictive and fantastic, on the one hand, and erudition on the other, a number of scholars reacted by imposing unto *adab* and semi-popular *adab*, didacticism. The process encouraged questions and conclusions derived from theoretical debates external to the projects of medieval works, reinforcing the initial division between literature and erudition (fictiveness and didacticism), they initially set out to critique.

storytelling with the vizier's failure, *Alf Layla* puts forward a certain stance on hermeneutics that openly rejects singular reading.³⁴

If the ultimate aim of a hermeneutically successful reading is to do away with reading altogether, and to produce a result (by controlling and eclipsing the discursive semantic realm), in mocking stories that bring the narrative into a didactic conclusion, and by exaggerating their failure, *Alf Layla* shows the impossibility of reducing a story to a message. Through the vizier's failure, *Alf Layla* advocates for didactically bad reading, and in doing so, defends reading as a process.³⁵ As part of the frame narrative, the vizier's performance carries overarching implication for the work as a whole, since the frame tale, as neatly articulated by Philip Kennedy, "casts an interpretive shadow upon the nested tales told by Scheherazade" (KENNEDY 2016: 169).³⁶ Through this meta-moment, *Alf Layla*, in the character of Shahrazād, defends reading and privileges the act of interpretation as a process embedded within communal concerns, and infused with ethical implications, as she weds her own life to the fate of the community as a whole.

Khurāfa and "The Merchant and the Genie"

The first story in the embedded tales, "The Merchant and the Genie," has a frame tale and three inset stories. Chraïbi shows how the frame tale in this sequence harkens back to the tale of Khurāfa, a Bedouin who is taken by genies in the desert (CHRAÏBI 2004: 153).³⁷ While the captors are uncertain on whether to kill, enslave or free their hostage, three people appear, and tell an extraordinary story, each, in exchange for Khurāfa's release.³⁸ Chraïbi interprets the positioning of the story at the beginning of the tales as a scholarly commentary on the work and its compilation. He writes,

[G]iving unity to a newly compiled book and beginning it with an explanation of its subject matter are scholarly techniques, the work of an expert in Arabic philology (what is khurāfa?). Their presence shows that the *Arabian Nights* have been carefully reworked and rewritten after they made their entry into the medieval Arabic-Islamic world. (CHRAÏBI 2004: 154)

34 Does the appeal of *Alf Layla*, perhaps, lie in its distinction from, and resistance to, the exhortatory mode that characterizes scholarly practices one can find in *hadīth* criticism, where the multiplicity of contexts in which a particular *hadīth* is cited and transmitted, is eclipsed into a list of authorities (*isnād*) and thus denied narrative visibility, as to concede to a seemingly stable didactic message? Inquiring into the validity of this thesis falls outside the purview of the present study, yet seems pertinent in pointing to conversations that can be reconstructed through attention to the Islamic framework of *Alf Layla*.

35 See the illuminating analyses of bad reading in RUSSO 2014.

36 The approach, here, agrees with Professor Karla Malette, who suggests that "the frame serves a primarily hermeneutic function" (MALETTE 2020: 190).

37 Structurally and thematically, Chraïbi places this group under the "excessive, unjust and absolutely unexpected" (CHRAÏBI 2004: 154). For more on the story of Khurāfa, see DRORY 1984.

38 The story was believed to echo the biblical tale of Abraham, see BEAUMONT 1998.

In comparing the two, the shared plot should not distract from a significant difference. *Alf Layla* reworks the story in a distinct way that transforms the main question from a display of fate to an inquiry into justice.

The story of Khurāfa structures its appeal through projecting uncertainty, as the fate of the main character oscillates against three options: death, enslavement, release.³⁹ “The Merchant and the Genie,” instead, opens with a scene in which an involuntary crime takes place, when the Merchant unknowingly kills the son of the Genie by throwing the pit of a date in the forest, and is now threatened to be punished by the Genie. In the (added) scene, the Merchant asks the Genie, “For what sin you intend to kill me?” (*bi-ayy dhanb taqtulunī?*) (MAHDI 1984: 72). The Genie explains what transpires, i.e., the Merchant is being advised of the allegations against him (analogous to the hearing rule)—and here we already see a process, antithetical to the crisis of Shahriyār who never speaks to his victims, prior to meeting Shahrazād. The Merchant protests: “If I killed him, then I only did that by mistake, I therefore wish that you would pardon me.” The Genie avers: “I must kill you for killing my son!” (MAHDI 1984: 72). The Merchant requests, and is granted, a grace period to settle his accounts and inform his family of his situation. In Khurāfa the kidnapping has no reason or justification. The moment preceding it is silent. This added exchange diverges significantly from the story of Khurāfa, and recasts the story into the realm of justice, as it introduces, in lieu of fate and mystery, transgression and accountability. The story as it appears in *Alf Layla*, additionally, ties the sequence, inversely, to the frame tale, through the conspicuous absence of witnessing (of the transgression or the involuntary genie-slaughter) around which the crisis of king Shahriyār emerges.⁴⁰

The Merchant shows up at the rendezvous point and waits. A Shaykh passes by, accompanied by a gazelle in chains, then another Shaykh, accompanied by two black dogs, and a third, with a she-mule. All three Shaykhs decide to wait for the Genie, with whom they strike a deal: they volunteer to redeem, each, one third of the Merchant’s life, by telling wondrous (*‘ajība*) stories, on the condition that they please the Genie (MAHDI 1984: 75-77).

39 Here, CHRAÏBI is referencing the version of the story as it appears in *al-Fākhir* of al-Mufaḍḍal b. Salama, which shares several elements with The Merchant and the Genie in *Alf Layla*, as a “story-for-a-life” bargain format. The three genies, while debating the fate of Khurāfa whom they kidnapped, encounter, separately, three persons, each offers a fantastic tale in exchange of the life of Khurāfa. In her piece on the story, DRORY (1984: 142-44) suggests that the story of *Khurāfa* is an attempt to legitimize the *khurāfa* genre.

40 It is pertinent to mention here Fedwa Malti-Douglas who suggests that the frame tale anchors the narrative against the Arabo-Islamic predilection to the aural over the seen (or listening over witnessing)—a cultural para-text that further teases out *Alf Layla*’s embeddedness in its context. In her article, “Homosexuality, Heterosexuality and Shahrazād,” Malti-Douglas points to the visual versus oral in the experiences of Shahriyār, pointing to the broader cultural host of this dynamic. She writes: “Sight versus hearing are cast as alternate ways of acquiring knowledge,” and continues, “[w]e are firmly on the ground of a debate well entrenched in medieval Islamic mentalities, that of the superiority of the senses, specifically the aural over the visual. Shahriyār’s continued attempts to find the truth through his faculty of vision have only led him astray. It is through his faculty of hearing, through listening to Shahrazād’s narratives, that all will be set aright” (MALTI-DOUGLAS 2004: 40). The present study does not abide by the binary analysis of aural-visual, or hearing-seeing, as suggested by Malti-Douglas, for two reasons. First, storytelling is approached as a form of knowledge sharing that invites and demands an act of interpretation—not only as an instance of telling/hearing. I hope to have shown, second, that the crisis of Shahriyār is not about witnessing per se but about interpretation.

Their endeavor succeeds. The Merchant is pardoned and is reunited with his family (MAHDI 1984: 81-85).

Justice is Artificial

The most striking feature of the stories in the sequence of “The Merchant and the Genie” lies in how they share an inquiry into retribution in a progressive trajectory. The main tale proposes retributory measures—retaliation, or in the words of the Genie, “an eye for an eye, is it not!” (*a-laysa l-qatl bi-l-qatl*) (MAHDI 1984: 73). The first inset story narrated by the Shaykh with the Gazelle suggests a reduced punishment, where the culprit experiences a lighter version of the committed crime, or as the story puts it, “a taste of the harm inflicted on others” (*udawwīqūhā mā dawwāqat al-ghayr*) (MAHDI 1984: 81).⁴¹ The story of “The Shaykh and the Two Black Dogs” moves farther along the spectrum and suggests conditioned pardon.⁴² The third and last story in this sequence,⁴³ the Shaykh with the she-mule, parodies King Shahriyār’s story more directly, in having a cuckolded husband, and proposes, in response to adultery—and two murders—forgiveness. The Genie settles the case in concert with the three shaykhs; and sets the merchant free. In none, it must be noted, punishment results in death.

In the stories I analyze here, and elsewhere in *Alf Layla*, we quickly realize that the world of the tales does not discriminate between *jinn* and human, a point argued by EL-ZEIN (2009). Drawing on the two realms, as is the case in this sequence, nonetheless allows for complex narrative possibilities. The characters of the human realm exchange stories with the king of *jinn* to establish a shared worldview, and also to agree on interpretative strategies. These exchanges pull the characters from their distinct worlds—*jinn* and human—into harmonized expectations. The stories narrated by the shaykhs are not merely wonderful “*ajība*,” they are autobiographical, and they share a search for responses to forms of transgression. They do not simply please the Genie, we would assume, they set up a collage of experiments; in each, an individual interpretation produces new iteration that is both specific to each Shaykh, yet communicative of broader shared norms. They form a narrative host for the Genie to

41 The transliteration kept the “d” instead of “dh,” in *udawwīqūhā* and *dawwāqat*, to reflect how it appears in *Alf Layla*.

42 In the second story, kindness and generosity are met with jealousy and a murder attempt to which the narrator, the second shaykh, responds by forgiving the intentions. But the wife, who is a believing genie, well-versed in the art of magic, transforms the two culprits into dogs, a state they would remain in for ten years as retribution for their crimes. A time frame constrains the punitive measure, after which the two are allowed to restore their human form.

43 The third shaykh’s story [in AL Reference: 378] parodies king Shahriyār’s situation more openly. One day, he finds his wife in bed with a black slave. She casts a spell on him and transforms him into a dog (Mot. D 141; Mot. K 1535). In the shape of the dog he had become friends with a butcher whose daughter noticed that he was a transformed human. She released him and instructed him on how to turn his wife into a she-mule by means of a magic spell. While the story in the Mahdi edition is not incorporated in the same place, differing versions are given in the *Būlāq* (Bulaq vol. 1 A H 1251, pp. 9-10) and *Calcutta II* editions. Whether the story has a later date, since it has not been included in the Syrian manuscript, per Mahdi’s work, or whether it may suggest a reliance on an even earlier source than the Syrian manuscript, as has been also suggested (see IRWIN 1994: 137), remains to be tested.

make his decision. As instances of knowledge sharing that set up a progressive trajectory, the stories of the three Shaykhs create an obligation for the Genie to choose clemency.

Against the story of Shahriyār, this sequence is introduced as an elaborate process with stages that loosely echo formal legal administration⁴⁴—the hearing, trial, recognizance, a stay of execution, and expert witnesses.⁴⁵ The stories of this sequence tie in an inverse correlation, the finality of punishment to the act of reading/listening. Knowledge primes the character of the Genie, to find confirmation of justice in the process rather than in the punitive outcomes. In doing so, the sequence locates fairness in a court-cum-*majlis* of dialogical collectiveness. By narrating their own tales, and by sharing with the Genie different interpretations of punitive premises, the characters show that narration is yoked to the realization of justice. In other words, *Alf Layla* shows us that interpretation is not only a contribution to the ongoing aspiration for justice, but as a collective process, in itself, becomes a site of justice.

A second sequence of stories, introduced on the eighth night, “The Story of the Fisherman and the ‘Ifrit’” (MAHDI 1984: 86-126),⁴⁶ projects the debate into a new area. Engaging with forms of punishment, the new sequence curates exchanges in which not transgression but beneficence (*ihsān*) is punitively repaid. It thus shifts the focus from transgression, as was the case in the first sequence, into questioning retribution itself. In the frame story, the Fisherman, after freeing the ‘Ifrit from millennial captivity,⁴⁷ finds himself facing death. “How can you repay kindness with punishment?” (*hādhā jazāy minnak w-jazā mā-khallaṣtak*), he laments (MAHDI 1984: 90). Retribution is poised to be examined as betrayal and injustice, or the behavior of the wicked (*al-fawājir*), as the Fisherman puts it (MAHDI 1984: 90). Tricked by the Fisherman into getting back in the bottle, the ‘Ifrit pleads to be pardoned, and *Alf Layla* revisits the notion of *ihsān*. The ‘Ifrit evokes popular wisdom: “Hail those who show beneficence (*ihsān*) in the face of transgression,” and adds: “if I were a transgressor (*fa-idhā kuntu anā musīr*), you can choose to be benevolent (*muḥsin*)” (MAHDI 1984: 106). The implication here, that transgression does not necessarily call for punishment, designates the punitive as a realm for debate and interpretation.⁴⁸ A number of inset tales are

44 In her article “*Idra’ū al-ḥudūd bi-l-shubuhāt: When Lawful Violence Meets Doubt*,” Maribel Fierro looks at a story in *Alf Layla* that builds its narrative plot within the interpretive realm of the legal saying “*idra’ū l-ḥudūd bi-l-shubuhāt*,” which entails that God’s sanctions are not to be applied in cases that entertain doubt (see FIERRO 2007: 208-10).

45 First, we see the Genie presenting an initial verdict to which the Merchant is given a chance to respond. The Merchant is granted the option to leave for a year and return for the execution of the Genie’s verdict (stay of execution, i.e., delay in enacting the judgement), his vow to return functions as a recognizance, i.e., a release of the defendant with the obligation to reappear in court. The three shaykhs tell their own experiences on punishment and in doing so their stories are akin to expert witnesses. In sharing their cases, they also introduce multiple precedents. The Genie’s initial judgement, more urgently, is put to a form of trial, then appealed by the Merchant and the three Shaykhs, and later reconsidered and overturned.

46 In the frame story, the ‘Ifrit identified himself as one of the rebels who, in concert with Ṣakhr, revolted against king Solomon and ended up in a brass bottle—a later story in *Alf Layla* invokes the Solomon lore and engages many refractory Genies who are said to have had similar fate. For the Solomonic allusions in *Alf Layla*, and in particular The City of Brass sequence, see HAMORI 1971 (repr. 1974).

47 The Fisherman “finds a bottle of yellow brass in his net, with a leaden cap stamped with the seal of Solomon. He opens the bottle, and an enormous, frightening Jinnī emerges” (MARZOLPH 2004: 183).

48 For the Arabic roots of *ihsān*, see IZUTSU 2007.

told before the frame story concludes with an act of pardon, which in turn is reciprocated by reward.

The stories of this sequence address more openly the themes of accountability and risk entailed in acts of punishment. In the first inset story, “King (al-)Yūnān and Sage Dūbān” (MAHDI 1984: 93-104),⁴⁹ unjust retribution does not pass without consequences. Following flawed advice from a vizier, King Yūnān orders the killing of Sage Dūbān, who came “from a foreign kingdom” and cured the king when no other physician could. Sage Dūbān exclaims: “How could they repay my good with evil?” (*anā ‘amilt khayr jāzūnī bi-l-qabīh*) (MAHDI 1984: 102). The punitive decision of the king, however, leads to his own death. The story explains: “had they been just, they would’ve been judged fairly” (*law anṣafū unṣifū*). By misusing his powers, the king transgressed to a fatal point. To the same end, the following stories show examples of poor decision making and unexpected reverse retribution.⁵⁰ This sequence bleeds into a separate narrative, in “The Ensorcelled Prince,” still within the diegetic world of the same story.⁵¹

Retribution or Reward? A Hypothetical Exercise

During his captivity, the rebel ‘Ifrit in the frame story of “The Fisherman and the ‘Ifrit,” experiments with scenarios in which he makes pledges to whomever may free him. During the first two hundred years, the ‘Ifrit pledges to make the person who sets him free rich until the end of time (*ughnīhi li-‘āqibatīhi*). In the following two hundred years, he promises to reward them with the riches of the world (*fatahtu lahu kunūza al-ardī jamī‘ahā*). The following four hundred (and another one hundred) years, the ‘Ifrit pledges to make whoever frees him a *ṣultān* (ruler), and to be their servant, making three of their wishes come true daily. After all these centuries, when no one came to the rescue, the ‘Ifrit pledges to kill whoever frees him, savagely (*asharra qatla*), or alternatively, to let them choose how to die (*umannīhi bi-ayy mawta yamūt*).

⁴⁹ This story is contained in the oldest preserved manuscript (MAHDI 1984) and belongs to the core corpus of *Alf Layla*. It reiterates the ransom motif of “The Two Kings,” albeit in an inverted way, as the sage is not allowed to tell a parable and is killed, in consequence the king also dies a violent death (MARZOLPH 2004: 459).

⁵⁰ In the first inset tale, “King Yūnān and the Sage Dūbān,” unjustified retribution proves fatal to the king; the second story, “The Vizier of King Sinbād,” functions as a transitional link (MAHDI 1984: 97-99); the third is “The Prince and the Ogress” in which an act of plotting an unjustifiable retribution is thwarted; in the fourth, “The Husband and the Parrot” (MAHDI 1984: 98-99), an act of advice (exposing a wife’s adultery) is met by unwarranted punishment; the fifth is “The Story of the Crocodile,” referenced by Sage Dūbān to delay his demise (yet not narrated in the Madhī edition, for the precariousness of the position of the Sage: “I cannot narrate it in this condition that I find myself in”; MAHDI 1984: 103); the fifth is “The Story of Umāma and ‘Ātiqa,” mentioned but not told (“now is not the time for telling this story while I am trapped in this small space,” MAHDI 1984: 106); and the seventh is “The Story of the Ensorcelled Prince” (MARZOLPH 2004: 176).

⁵¹ The Merchant is rewarded by the Genie and is shown the secret pond with magic fish. The Merchant offers the magic fish to the king of the city and, diegetically, forges the shift into a new story of the king and the half-human/half-ossified prince. The Fisherman is brought back to conclude the story and gives his daughters in marriage to the king and the prince of the kingdom.

Armed with boundless might, the ‘Ifrīt, now restrained by captivity, embarks on a hypothetical exercise of power, within which, through fickle and temporally conditioned pledges, fatal retribution is placed within the epistemic ambit of ultimate reward. The stories within the sequence of “The Fisherman and the ‘Ifrīt,” realize this span: retribution and reward are entangled, interchanged and reversed resulting in the collapse of the semantic (binary) distinction of the two only to be reconstructed into a spectrum of possibilities. Power is restrained then challenged, in this tale. Yet, and against the established interchangeability of retribution and reward, power is reconstituted wherein choosing pardon in lieu of retribution becomes possible—presenting a miniature of the overall plot of *Alf Layla*, and informing the king’s transformation. The threat of retribution that opens the tale is balanced by a threat of reverse punishment, and is resolved through pardon, beneficence and reward.

From Revenge to Pardon: A Progressive Trajectory

In questioning punitive decisions, the two sequences directly respond to the initial collapse of positions that king Shahriyār exemplified in a display of absolute and unrestrained power. The first sequence enacts a series of short trials that transform Shahriyār’s collective punishment into a spectrum of options, ranging from retaliation—already a conservative replacement for the king’s act—reduced retribution over a specified period of time; to pardon. The second sequence resumes where the first sequence ends, with a frame story that takes the debate further and investigates the conception of retribution, before concluding with beneficence and reward.

The two combined present a progressive trajectory. While the first sequence accepts retribution as a response to transgression, yet favors pardon, the second sequence shows that, without attention to context and proper process, retribution itself can become a form of transgression that incurs fatal consequences. In adopting multiple scenarios for synonymous premises, the two sequences combined, like the rebel ‘Ifrīt, expand the interpretive potentials of retribution. The punitive decision reached by king Shahriyār re-emerges in scenes the stories curate to parody the king’s dilemma; the decision perpetrated by the king alone extends, in the two chains, into a sequence of sessions involving several characters whose configuration to one another produces multiple iterations of justice. Most significantly, in these sequences storytelling is geared toward seeking clemency and benevolence.

The *majlis* of Shahrazād

In reading “The Two Kings,” we are struck by the conspicuous absence of any sign of courtly culture at the palace of Shahriyār. That the vizier is solitary, and never speaks to the king, alerts us further to this lack. Without advisors and courtiers, Shahriyār remains deaf to the kingdom’s turmoil. Shahrazād, who knows popular, scholarly, and courtly norms,⁵² succeeds in curating a solution to the crisis through exposing the king, in the first two sequences, to

52 She was well-versed in “*aqwāl al-nās wa-kalām al-ḥukamā wa-l-mulūk*” (MAHDI 1984: 66).

his own crisis. In this sense, the debate advanced in the first two sequences steers the frame tale: an act of reading (or listening/knowing) enables clemency and reform. The explicit concern with kingly affairs and the central role of Shahrazād, suggested to a number of scholars an affinity between *Alf Layla* and advice literature (Mirrors for Princes, or Fürstenspiegel or *adab al-naṣīḥa*), a body of works intended to offer counsel for the rulers and viziers, on proper conduct and maintaining good government (GRUENDLER [et al.] 2004, MARLOW 2009, LEDER 2015). This has been noted by Jean-Paul SERMAIN and Aboubakr CHRAÏBI (2004), Yuriko YAMANAKA who uncovers instances of direct borrowing (2006),⁵³ and somewhat loosely, by IRWIN (2004).

Researchers have identified a host of investigations into the models of rulership in medieval literatures, a concern that cannot be overemphasized: it is believed to be the thread that ties all things, the axis around which the affairs of the world orbit, as the 4th/10th century Córdoba courtier Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih put it (IBN ‘ABD RABBIH 2012: I, 5). Rulership looms large in *Alf Layla*, especially in the tripartite debate examined in the present study. We, however, encounter a particular attitude in these tales. In reaching solutions that favor clemency, *Alf Layla* transforms the king by embedding his authority within a communal scope. It does so in the spirit of subjugating kingship to an authority external to its own (Shahrazād in this case), that can better realize justice, recognize societal consensus and protect the community. In its broader implication, questioning the performance of the king is not unique to *Alf Layla* or Islamic medieval literature as it speaks to the societal aspiration to manage and moderate authority. The approach we can reconstruct from the tales of *Alf Layla*, however, conforms to a specific understanding of how this management can be affected.

Shahrazād, an Orator and a Judge

If *Alf Layla* activates this transformation through Shahrazād, I will proceed to mention two comparable examples, from the *Book of Government* (*Siyar al-Mulūk* or *Siyāsa-Nāma*) and from the *maqāmas* of al-Ḥarīrī (the *maqāma* of Rayy in particular), that articulate this aspiration through a judge (*mubād*) and an orator (*khaṭīb*), respectively. In *Siyar al-Mulūk*, a story speaks of a custom practiced in Persia in which the king accepts petitions from the people in the presence of a judge.⁵⁴ If a petition is filed against the king himself he steps down

53 In her examination of the tale of “Alexander the Two-Horned and Certain Tribe of Poor Folk” told on the 464th night in *Alf Layla*’s Calcutta II edition, Yuriko Yamanaka uncovers a connection between *Alf Layla* and advice literature (2006). More specifically, Yamanaka finds correspondence between the tales in *Alf Layla* and the *Book of Counsel for Kings* (*al-Tibr al-masbūk fī naṣīḥat al-mulūk*). Building on the observation of Victor CHAUVIN who noted an overlap between the two, Yamanaka identifies ten stories that are shared between *Alf Layla* and *al-Tibr*. These, she argues, are more likely to have been borrowed from *al-Tibr* to *Alf Layla*, by a compiler or compilers wishing to heighten the moralistic tone of *Alf Layla* (YAMANAKA 2006: 111). This overlap, Yamanaka notes, should tell us that advice literature and *Alf Layla*, which are categorized into ‘elite’ and ‘popular,’ are in fact “closely intertwined” (YAMANAKA 2006: 112).

54 *The Book of the Government or Rules for Kings* (also known as *Siyar al-Mulūk* and *Siyāsa-Nāma*). It should be noted that two studies suggest that the work has been written in two instalments, at two different points in the vizier’s life (SIMIDCHIEVA 2004: 99), and by more than one author (KHISMATULIN 2008: 30-66). It speaks of a custom of the Persian kings in which they give special audiences for their people

from the throne and kneels before the judge, asking humbly to be judged impartially. Through this performance, the story enacts before the public a model of justice in the form of rulers that submit themselves wilfully to the authority of the law.

In the *maqāma* of Rayy by al-Ḥarīrī, the protagonist Abū Zayd assumes the role of a preacher at an assembly and gives eloquent sermons (COOPERSON 2020: 99-103). During the sermon, Abū Zayd adopts the cause of a person who comes forward accusing the prince—who is present at the gathering—of neglecting a petition he submitted against one of the officials. Failing to get justice, the petitioner appeals to the preacher to offer the prince advice (*li-nuṣḥihi*). The protagonist seizes the opportunity, publicly shames the prince and succeeds in persuading him to redress the wrong inflicted on the petitioner. In the manuscript that was copied and illustrated by Yaḥyā b. Maḥmūd al-Wāsiṭī (dated 7 Ramaḍān 634/May 4, 1237), currently in the possession of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, there is an illustration of this anecdote. Al-Wāsiṭī interprets the story in a double-page painting, on facing pages of the manuscript, that represent “a single moment divided between two images, which are meant to be read as a continuous temporality” (ROXBURGH 2013: 186). In his interpretation, al-Wāsiṭī places the king on the throne, in the upper section of one painting—flanked by his guards—and the preacher, Abū Zayd, alone, on a raised *minbar*, in the middle of the second painting. While the prince retains a higher position, everyone in the scene, in both paintings, including the prince, faces the preacher. Empowered by the collective gaze, Abū Zayd looks at the prince, and extends his hand and finger, in a gesture of reprimand and advice. It is quite notable that al-Wāsiṭī’s interpretation, in empowering the orator, intimates the story’s conclusion within the moment of encounter between orator and prince. The absence of the petitioner in the visual interpretation, additionally, suggests that al-Wāsiṭī understood that authority to be the central question in the story. In these two examples, the ruler listens to and is under the authority of a judge (*mubād*) and an orator (*khaṭīb*). And in both, as is the case in *Alf Layla*, the authority of the ruler is curtailed, artificially, to serve the communal good.

To claim a congruity between *Alf Layla* and advice literature is a valid inquiry as we detect features distinctly shared by the two. We should, nonetheless, carefully consider the unique treatment of rulership in *Alf Layla*, which claims registers that do not necessarily avail themselves to advice literature. It is also more urgent to investigate how and why a work of (semi-popular) literature pays witness to societal debates on good rulership and the communal good. In particular, it behooves readers of *Alf Layla* to recognize a distinction between advice, advisers and the attendant advice literature, on the one hand, and on courtly culture that keeps rulers knowledgeable, on the other. While advice could be detected in the

at the festivals of Mihrjan and Nauruz. The king “received the people’s petitions and laid them all before him; one by one he looked at them, and if amongst them there was one complaining against himself he rose and came down from the throne and knelt before the mubad-mubadan (this meant chief justice in their language, and he sat on the king’s right hand) saying, ‘Before all other cases judge between me and this man, impartially and regardlessly’” (NIZĀM AL-MULK, transl. DARKE 2002: 43). Then it was announced that all whose suit was against the king should stand on one side as their cases would be dealt with first. Then the king would say to the mubad, “In the eyes of God (be He exalted) there is no sin greater than a king’s sin... O God-fearing mubad, take care that you do not favour me against your conscience, because everything which God in future will demand of me, I ask of you; so I hereby make you responsible” (*ibid.*).

tales, the debate raised in the first three sequences seems to suggest that a greater role should be given to courtly culture. I would suggest that it is a mistake to assume that Shahrazād performs the role of an advisor only. The sequences I examine here search for solutions to the crisis, less by advice—that is, by drawing on a critique to counter the behavior of the king, or to dispute the injustice of the decision—than by reimagining the configuration of transgression (and authority) from different perspectives. The expertise of Shahrazād, instead, who is knowledgeable and aware of the cultural context, attitudes and tendencies of her community (*qariyat wa-dariyat*) (MAHDI 1984: 66) belongs to the realm of a *majlis*. The knowledge Shahrazād shares in the tales infuses the worldview of the king with cultural norms and with an obligation to communal expectations.

The Ethical Implication of Sharing Knowledge

A striking feature the study of *Alf Layla* should recognize lies in how its Western inception—both as a text and as an intrigue—curtailed the attention to the Arabo-Islamic character, encouraging layers of narrative, in different contexts, that made strange, and in need of proving, any reverberations of (medieval) Arabo-Islamic questions, values and attitudes. The present study starts from a different place, by making audible the conversations the stories advance, without assuming a coherence or suggesting one fixed reading. The stories addressed here, in speaking of pardon as a response to transgression, engage with a vast body of interpretations, in formal and popular culture, that *Alf Layla*'s medieval/pre-modern readers expected and perhaps even demanded. That the selected stories loosely echo elements of the formal administration of justice and of advice literature, suggests that the linkage depends upon significant homologies between these realms, over the interdependence of justice, rulership and the communal good. In its parody of, and then departure from, approaches advanced in both, however, *Alf Layla* as a work of (semi-) popular literature, attests to the diversity through which medieval Islamic societies debated those concepts. The affinity, it must be added, does not suggest that *Alf Layla* should be treated as a work of advice literature, or as a legal inquiry. Rather these affinities poise the work to contribute to questions over rulership, justice and the communal good. It invites new approaches to unveil the conversations between the different realms of knowledge production, and stresses the urgency of incorporating the debates *adab* enables, in the examination and reconstruction of medieval thought.

Alf Layla puts forth a particular understanding of the conception and application of justice. The crisis of authority in the frame story presents singular interpretation as an act of coercion. The following sequences of stories make a case for interpretation as a communal and dialogical enterprise and suggest that justice is artificial—profoundly contingent on acts of interpretation. As just solutions to the crises unfold in dialogical storytelling, *Alf Layla* alerts us to the phenomenology of justice. The king's attempt to bring meaning to a closure, to a finality that is sealed and confirmed by blood, dismantles itself against multiplicity. Just as the Genie in the first sequence chooses pardon after hearing the stories shared by the three shaykhs, and as the rebel 'Ifrit chooses benevolence in lieu of random punishment, king Shahriyār is reformed through the knowledge Shahrazād shares with him. In these, *Alf Layla* belongs to Islamic culture, particularly in that the act of reading has been construed within

hermeneutics that are largely informed by the ethical implication sharing knowledge entails, as most medieval *adab* works assert. The stories suggest that interpretation, in its communal, dialogical forms, gears us towards a concern for the greater good.

Through attention to both narrative styles and the normative worldview of the Islamic context, the present study hopes to have shown a novel reading of *Alf Layla*'s contribution to justice. I argue that the stories examined here have been recast into an extended—cohesive—debate, informed by Arabo-Islamic questions in content. They, more urgently, reverberate, in both form and style, a primary feature of Arabo-Islamic knowledge production, which I call diegetic fluidity. In presenting the failure of kingship as a crisis of interpretation, and then emphatically advocating diverse interpretations, *Alf Layla*, the present study hopes to have shown, adopts a hermeneutical attitude that privileges multiplicity and resists unitary interpretation in a fashion that affirms the contingency of ethical desiderata. And perhaps, by locating the ethical obligation in the act of interpretation, I conclude, *Alf Layla* holds a powerful suggestion on the relevance of (medieval) literature to the advancement of justice in our societies, a link that is very much at issue today.

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