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PREFACE TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON
“THE ARABIAN NIGHTS: PAST AND PRESENT”

As of 2004, three hundred years have passed since the introduction of the most influential work of Oriental fiction to a Western audience. Published in 1704 for the first time in a European language, Antoine Galland's *Les Mille et une Nuits* presented the adapted French translation of a work that through the centuries of its previous and posterior existence can best be characterized as humanity's most ingenious device to integrate diversified narrative material into a cohesive whole, as a collection possessing the potential to combine tales and stories from the most diverse origins, sources, and genres, as an *omnium gatherum* and a true shape-shifter in terms of narrative content. While arching back to ancient Indian tradition, the collection probably originated at some unknown period in Sassanian Iran under the title of *Hezâr afsân* (*A Thousand Stories*); it was translated into Arabic as *Alf laylah wa-laylah* (*A Thousand and One Nights*) and in English tradition gained popular renown as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* or simply the *Arabian Nights*. In presenting his translation in 1704, Galland achieved more, in fact much more, than to make a work of literature known to an audience different from the one for which that work had originally been created and by which it had been read. His translation initiated a wave of translations and adaptations into all major European (and, subsequently, many other) languages that itself resulted in a vogue of fiction in the “Oriental style” and inspired an endless number of imitations and re-creations of the most diverse kind not only in literature, but also in the arts, music, dance, and even architecture. Even a simple collection of short autobiographical statements about the influence of the *Nights* on their work by writers and creative artists from the past three hundred years would fill several volumes. At the same time, scholarly knowledge about the origin and development of the *Nights* is still far from being exhaustive, as important contributions—such as Muhsin Mahdi's (1984–94)

edition of the Arabic manuscript that served as the basis of Galland's translation—have only been presented in recent decades, and numerous questions concerning the collection's history and character remain to be studied in detail.

In view of the tremendous impact the *Arabian Nights* have exercised on Western creative imagination and following a joint proposal by the French and German national commissions, the general assembly of UNESCO has voted to include the *Arabian Nights* in its list of commemorative events for the period 2004–2005. Besides the preparation of an *Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (Marzolph and van Leeuwen), various international meetings have been and will be convened in order to celebrate the occasion and to document the state of scholarship on the *Arabian Nights*. It is in this framework that, following an invitation by the Baroque library at Wolfenbüttel, Germany, the symposium “The *Arabian Nights*: Past and Present” will take place in September 2004. This meeting will present the findings of twenty international scholars on points ranging from the history of manuscripts of the *Arabian Nights* through positioning the *Nights* in modern and postmodern discourse to various aspects of the international reception of its tales. The present volume of *Marvels & Tales* contains one half of the meeting's proceedings, while another ten essays are being published simultaneously in the journal *Fabula*.

It is with great pleasure and sincere gratitude that Don Haase's kind invitation to publish the essays in this special volume is acknowledged. My special thanks also go to all of the contributors for their patience and endurance during the editorial period. While at the time of publication the actual symposium at which the essays will be discussed is still ahead of us, all of the authors have striven to present concise studies originating from their fields of expertise. Because the work is a shape-shifter, it is virtually impossible to grasp the phenomenon of the *Arabian Nights* in simple and unambiguous statements, much less in one clear thesis. Diverse as the subject of research is, so are the topics of research, offering new approaches as well as more detailed insights into previously explored arenas. This multitude of approaches is probably the most vigorous aspect of the fascination that the *Arabian Nights* continue to exert until the present day. Even though each of the studies presented here might appear to be no more than a drop when viewed against the “ocean of stories” of the *Nights*, it is hoped that they will contribute to a deeper and more adequate international appreciation of the collection, the many facets of whose composite character, despite its long history in the West, in many respects still remain unknown.

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Guest Editor

Works Cited

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