
TRANSLATION AS LITERARY RECONSTRUCTION: ANTOINE GALLAND, THE GRUB STREET ARABIAN NIGHTS, AND THE EUROPEAN MAKING OF THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS

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Abstract

This article examines how The Thousand and One Nights became a European literary institution through translation, editorial selection, and cultural reframing. It focuses on Antoine Galland's French *Mille et Une Nuits* (1704–1717) and the anonymous English version commonly associated with the Grub Street translator, which began circulating by the early eighteenth century. The study argues that the European Arabian Nights cannot be understood as a transparent transfer of a stable Arabic original. The source corpus was already historically layered, combining Indian, Persian, Baghdadi, Egyptian, oral, and manuscript traditions. Galland then reorganized this heterogeneous material for a French readership through selection, omission, stylistic domestication, and the incorporation of narratives obtained from sources beyond a single manuscript. The English translator mediated Galland's reconstruction rather than the Arabic corpus directly and established the durable title *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*. Using comparative-historical, textual, and reception-oriented analysis, the article identifies five operations that shaped the European collection: selection, omission, addition, domestication, and paratextual reframing. These operations altered not only the wording of individual tales but also the implied audience, moral register, generic identity, and cultural image of the East. The findings demonstrate that translation history should be studied as a chain of literary agency. Fidelity remains important, but it is insufficient for explaining why Galland's version became culturally more influential than many later and more philologically exact translations.

Keywords: The Thousand and One Nights; Antoine Galland; Arabian Nights' Entertainments; translation history; literary reconstruction; reception; Oriental tale; comparative literature.

Introduction

The Thousand and One Nights occupies an unusual position in world literature. It is at once a medieval Arabic story collection, a record of intercultural circulation, an archive of oral and written narrative, and a European literary myth. The work now known to international readers did not emerge in one place, at one moment, or under the authority of one author. Its history involves the movement of plots and narrative techniques through Indian, Persian, Arabic, and Mediterranean environments, followed by repeated acts of compilation, translation, editing, and republication. Consequently, the Nights should not be treated as a fixed object that simply crossed from one language into another. It is more accurately understood as a changing corpus whose boundaries and meanings were repeatedly reconstructed.

The decisive European moment in this history was Antoine Galland's *Mille et Une Nuits*, published in twelve volumes between 1704 and 1717. Galland introduced a large European readership to Shahrazad, the frame story, and a world of merchants, rulers, travelers, marvels, dangers, and transformations. His version rapidly generated reprints, translations, imitations, and literary responses. It also established an enduring image of the "Oriental tale": elegant, marvelous, morally legible, and suitable for pleasurable reading. This reception was not produced by Arabic narrative material alone. It resulted from the interaction between a layered source tradition and Galland's decisions as translator, editor, storyteller, and cultural mediator (Hazard, 1953; Borges, 1999).

The English history of the Nights intensifies this problem. The earliest widely circulated English version was not translated directly from Arabic. It was based on Galland's French text and was associated with the anonymous figure later called the Grub Street translator. The English title *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* shifted the work into a recognizable commercial and generic frame. The phrase emphasized diversion and wonder while presenting the collection as a source of knowledge about Eastern customs, manners, and religion. Translation therefore operated simultaneously at textual and paratextual levels: the stories were reworded, and the collection was renamed, advertised, categorized, and directed toward a new readership (Mack, 2009).

This article studies that sequence as literary reconstruction. The term does not imply that translation is arbitrary or that the Arabic tradition is irrelevant. It indicates that every major stage selected a version of the corpus, established boundaries, organized expectations, and authorized a particular image of the work. The central research question is therefore not only whether Galland was faithful to an Arabic original. It is how his version and its English mediation produced the European Arabian Nights as a distinct literary object. The article asks which operations enabled that production, what was changed by them, and why those changes became historically powerful.

Research Problem and Conceptual Framework

Traditional translation criticism often organizes evaluation around an opposition between fidelity and freedom. This distinction is useful when a stable source text and a clearly identifiable target text can be compared. It becomes less sufficient when the source itself is composite, when several manuscripts or oral accounts contribute to the translated corpus, and when the translator participates in deciding what the work contains. The Nights presents precisely this situation. Its Persian and Indian antecedents, Baghdadi and Egyptian layers, manuscript variability, and oral circulation complicate any assumption of a single complete original available before European translation (Ibn al-Nadim, 1971; Marzolph and van Leeuwen, 2004).

The study therefore distinguishes three related forms of agency. Textual agency concerns the wording, sequence, description, and narrative rhythm of translated tales. Editorial agency concerns inclusion, exclusion, arrangement, and the relationship among source materials. Reception agency concerns titles, prefaces, marketing descriptions, generic labels, and the expectations through which readers approach the translated work. Galland's historical significance lies in the combination of all three. He did not merely provide French equivalents for Arabic sentences. He helped determine which Nights Europe would read and what cultural functions that collection would perform.

This framework also separates a translator's historical effectiveness from philological exactness. Borges observes that many celebrated European and

American readers encountered the Nights through Galland even after more detailed translations became available (Borges, 1999). The persistence of Galland's imaginative world suggests that reception depends on narrative voice, readability, generic framing, and cultural timing as well as textual correspondence. A translation can be less exact in specific details yet more formative in literary history. Recognizing this fact does not remove the need for source criticism; it makes source criticism part of a broader account of mediation.

Materials and Methods

The primary object of analysis is the translation chain connecting the Arabic and Persian story tradition, Galland's *Mille et Une Nuits*, and the early English *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*. The study draws on the dissertation's historical description of the corpus, the publication sequence of Galland's translation, the English title and reception, and later critical discussions of these transformations. Special attention is given to Ibn al-Nadim's account of earlier Persian-Arabic compilation, modern encyclopedic scholarship on the Nights, Borges's interpretation of its translators, Paul Hazard's history of European intellectual reception, Macdonald's bibliographical study, and Mack's account of the English *Arabian Nights*.

The method combines comparative-historical analysis with translation and reception studies. First, it reconstructs the major stages through which the corpus entered European print culture. Second, it compares the function of five translational operations: selection, omission, addition, domestication, and retitling. Third, it examines how those operations changed four dimensions of the work: corpus boundaries, moral register, implied readership, and generic identity. The analysis avoids assuming that every difference is either an error or an improvement. Each intervention is evaluated according to its textual consequence and its historical role.

The article does not attempt a line-by-line collation of every Arabic manuscript and European edition. Such a task would require a separate textual-critical project. Its goal is analytical: to formulate a model that explains why the first European versions became acts of corpus construction. Claims of direct textual dependence are therefore limited to documented

translation relations. Broader similarities are interpreted as outcomes of reception, mediation, and the mobility of narrative traditions rather than as automatic evidence of a single source.

The Layered Corpus Before European Translation

The history of the Nights begins before the title *Alf layla wa-layla* acquired its later authority. Scholarship and the dissertation trace an early relationship to the Persian *Hazār Afsāna*, itself connected with Indian narrative traditions. Ibn al-Nadim's *al-Fihrist* records the importance of Persian story collections and describes al-Jahshiyari's attempt to compile a large Arabic collection of night tales (Ibn al-Nadim, 1971). Later materials were associated with Abbasid Baghdad and with Egyptian narrative environments. By the Mamluk period, the corpus included urban stories, merchant adventures, comic reversals, wonder tales, and accounts reflecting the social tensions of Egyptian city life.

This history has two implications for translation analysis. First, cultural mixture is not a secondary European addition to an originally homogeneous book. The corpus was intercultural before Galland. Indian, Persian, Arabic, Iraqi, Syrian, and Egyptian materials entered a frame that could absorb and reorganize heterogeneous narratives. Second, the distinction between oral and written transmission is porous. Storytellers, listeners, scribes, collectors, and editors all participated in preserving and reshaping tales. A manuscript represents a historical configuration of the tradition, not the termination of its development (Estrop, 1904; Gerhardt, 1984).

The familiar classification into Indian-Persian, Baghdadi, and Egyptian strata is therefore most useful as a model of layered formation rather than a rigid catalogue. It explains why tales differ in length, style, setting, social type, and narrative logic. It also shows why the question "Which original did Galland translate?" cannot be answered with one title or manuscript reference. Galland encountered a source network. His translation transformed one historically available configuration of that network into a new European corpus.

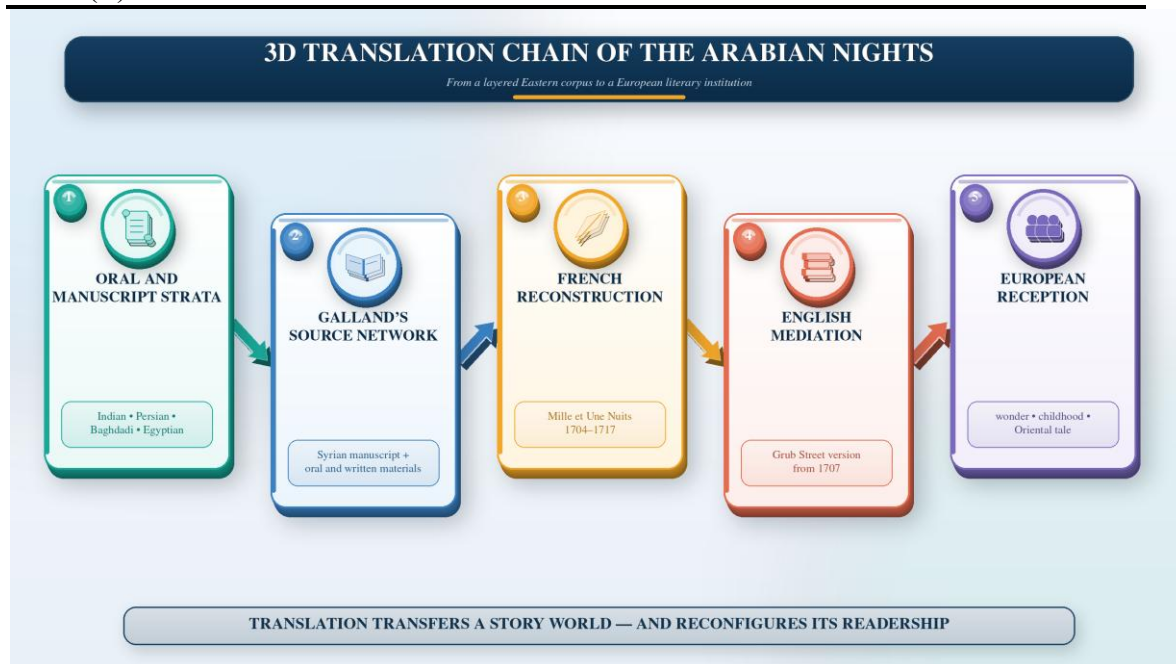


Figure 1. Translation chain through which the layered Nights corpus entered European print culture.

Galland and Translational Reconstruction

Galland's importance begins with the form of his encounter with the material. His publication of the story of Sindbad preceded the first volumes of *Mille et Une Nuits* and demonstrated the appetite of French readers for Eastern narrative. The success of the early volumes encouraged continuation, while the multivolume publication process allowed the European corpus to develop over time. Galland worked with manuscript materials, but the resulting collection was not confined to a single manuscript. The famous cases of Aladdin and Ali Baba illustrate how narratives obtained through a broader source network entered the European Nights and became central to its later identity.

Selection was the first reconstructive operation. No translator of a variable collection can include an unlimited archive. Choosing tales establishes a canon and assigns representative status to particular plots, settings, and characters. Galland's choices helped associate the Nights with enchanted objects, sudden reversals of fortune, travel, concealed identity, and the movement between poverty and wealth. These motifs existed within the wider tradition, but selection intensified their visibility and made them central to European expectation.

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Omission was the second operation. Galland reduced or reformulated material that conflicted with the decorum of his intended readership. Explicit sexual detail, coarse expression, and some forms of violence were moderated. Such intervention can be criticized as cultural sanitization because it narrows the tonal range of the Arabic corpus. At the same time, it shaped the work's European portability. The collection could circulate within polite reading culture and eventually within family and childhood reading. Omission thus changed more than isolated passages; it altered the perceived genre and moral address of the collection.

Addition was the third operation. When narratives beyond the principal manuscript entered Galland's sequence, translation became inseparable from collection building. The European canon of the Nights includes tales that acquired their authority through Galland's edition and its descendants. Their popularity demonstrates that canonization can proceed through translation even when manuscript history is complex. The translated collection did not merely represent a pre-existing totality; it created a new totality that readers then treated as the work itself.

Domestication was the fourth operation. Galland's prose adapted narrative rhythm, description, and social interaction to French literary expectations. His success depended on preserving enough cultural difference to sustain wonder while creating enough stylistic familiarity to sustain reading. This balance transformed foreignness into legible enchantment. Borges's comparison of translators is valuable here because it shows that the identity of the Nights changes with each translator's linguistic and cultural project (Borges, 1999). Galland's Nights is recognizable not only by what it contains but by how it sounds.

Retitling and paratextual framing formed the fifth operation. A title, subtitle, preface, or advertisement tells readers what kind of book they are opening. Galland's French title gave European coherence to the collection, while later English packaging emphasized entertainment and knowledge of Eastern life. Paratext reduced the uncertainty of a heterogeneous corpus by placing it within a stable commercial and generic category. The Nights became both a treasury of stories and a symbolic guide to an imagined East.

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Figure 2. Five reconstructive operations that shaped the European Arabian Nights.

Table 1. Major transformations in the French-English mediation of the Nights

Stage	Principal operation	Immediate textual effect	Reception consequence
Arabic–Persian corpus	Compilation and historical stratification	Variable tale inventory; interaction of oral and written transmission	No single closed ‘original’ governs every later version
Galland, 1704–1717	Selection, omission, addition, and domestication	A French-readable corpus with modified tonal and moral range	A canon of marvel, decorum, and polite entertainment
Grub Street, from 1707	Indirect translation, retitling, and commercial framing	Galland’s reconstruction transferred into English print culture	Arabian Nights’ Entertainments becomes a durable genre label
Later European reception	Retranslation, adaptation, illustration, and imitation	European versions acquire authority beyond their immediate sources	Childhood reading, Romantic Orientalism, and a world-literary afterlife

The Grub Street Translator and English Mediation

The early English Arabian Nights was a translation of a translation. This fact is methodologically decisive. The anonymous translator did not

independently reconstruct the Arabic corpus; he mediated Galland's French reconstruction. The relation may be represented as Arabic and Persian narrative traditions → Galland's French collection → English commercial edition. Each arrow indicates a new set of linguistic and editorial decisions. The English text inherited Galland's selections and omissions while adding its own title, prose habits, publication context, and implied reader.

The long descriptive title of the early English edition framed the book as both entertainment and ethnographic information. It presented Shahrazad's storytelling as the means by which a ruler's bloody vow was interrupted, then advertised the stories as an account of Eastern customs, manners, and religion. This paratext converted narrative plurality into a coherent promise: readers would be diverted and instructed at the same time. The title *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* proved particularly durable because it compressed an unfamiliar Arabic collection into a memorable English genre.

The label "Grub Street translator" also directs attention to the commercial conditions of translation. Anonymous literary labor, rapid publication, reprinting, and competition were central to the work's circulation. By 1713 the English version had already reached several editions, indicating that its cultural force did not depend on scholarly prestige. Repetition stabilized wording and expectation. Readers encountered the *Nights* as a familiar English book even though its relation to Arabic passed through French mediation.

The 1799 review cited in the dissertation is revealing because it describes the tales as pleasurable stories associated with childhood while criticizing the quality of the old translation. By the end of the eighteenth century, the collection was already embedded in readerly memory. A new translation was justified not because the stories had failed, but because they remained valuable enough to deserve linguistic reform. Reception had therefore separated the narrative institution from any single wording. The *Arabian Nights* could be retransmitted because readers already recognized its imaginative identity.

Translation, Reception, and the "Literary Orient"

The success of Galland and the Grub Street version participated in the construction of what European criticism called the "literary Orient." This

category was not a precise geography. It joined places, customs, religions, marvels, costumes, and narrative conventions into an imaginative region. Martino's account of the Orient in French literature shows that this region functioned as a literary system rather than as a reliable map (Martino, 1906). The Nights became one of its most powerful organizing texts.

This process involved both knowledge and distortion. European readers learned names, urban settings, objects, rituals, professions, and social relations that differed from their own experience. Yet those details were selected and arranged within a framework of wonder. The Orient became readable because it was made simultaneously unfamiliar and coherent. Translation offered cultural contact, but the contact was mediated by expectations of exoticism, enchantment, sensuality, danger, and moral surprise.

The influence on writers such as William Beckford demonstrates the creative productivity of this mediated image. Beckford's engagement with Oriental narratives did not reproduce the Arabic Nights as a philological object. It converted the translated atmosphere of the Nights into a new European work. Similar processes affected childhood reading, Gothic fiction, Romantic Orientalism, and the European tale of wonder. Reception therefore moved from translation to imitation and from imitation to genre formation.

At the same time, the direction of circulation was not simply East to West. Galland-derived versions were retranslated, adapted, and in some cases returned to Eastern languages and print contexts. The dissertation notes that even the English title influenced later publication history. Such movement complicates models in which an original culture produces and a receiving culture only consumes. Once translated, the Nights entered a transnational system in which versions could acquire authority independently of their first linguistic direction.

Results and Discussion

The analysis yields five principal findings. First, the European Nights was constructed from a corpus that was already composite. This finding changes the meaning of fidelity. A translator could be faithful to a manuscript while still representing only one historical configuration of the tradition. Conversely, a version based on several materials could depart from one

manuscript yet preserve the corpus's long-standing capacity to absorb narratives. Textual criticism must therefore identify the level at which fidelity is being evaluated: wording, manuscript, tale, frame, or evolving collection.

Second, Galland's translation combined textual, editorial, and reception agency. Selection established a European canon; omission adjusted moral register; addition expanded corpus boundaries; domestication created stylistic accessibility; and paratextual framing established genre. These operations were mutually reinforcing. Polite prose alone would not have created the same work without a selective corpus, and added tales would not have achieved the same authority without the stable title and publication sequence that presented them as parts of one collection.

Third, the Grub Street translation demonstrates the importance of indirect mediation. English readers received not an unmediated Arabic Nights but an English interpretation of a French reconstruction of a multilingual narrative tradition. This does not make the English text culturally insignificant or simply defective. It makes its mediation visible. The English version created vocabulary, titles, reading habits, and associations that shaped subsequent literature. Indirect translation can therefore possess strong literary agency even when it increases distance from a source language.

Fourth, reception converted editorial choices into cultural memory. The later association of the Nights with childhood, innocent pleasure, fairy-tale wonder, and Oriental enchantment was not an automatic property of every Arabic version. It emerged from the interaction of selected tales, moderated content, visual and verbal paratext, repeated editions, and adaptation. By the time reviewers demanded better English, the European imaginative institution was already secure. Linguistic revision could occur inside an established horizon of expectation.

Fifth, the category of the "literary Orient" must be treated critically but not reductively. It undoubtedly simplified diverse cultures and often transformed historical societies into an exotic aesthetic field. However, it also provided a medium through which European readers and writers encountered non-European narrative forms, frame structures, social types, and ethical problems. The task of comparative literature is not to choose between celebration and accusation. It is to identify the mechanisms through

which difference was selected, translated, made pleasurable, and assigned cultural meaning.

These findings support a broader model of translation history. A translated classic should be studied through at least four linked questions: What textual materials were available? Who decided the boundaries of the translated work? Which audience and literary norms shaped the target text? How did paratext and republication stabilize the new version? In the case of the Nights, these questions reveal why Galland's translation remained influential despite later versions that were closer to Arabic wording or more complete in scholarly terms.

The study also clarifies the limits of its argument. Literary reconstruction should not become a justification for ignoring omissions, colonial assumptions, or inaccurate cultural representation. Nor should the popularity of a translation be treated as proof of its adequacy. Historical influence and ethical evaluation are distinct questions. Galland can be recognized as a powerful literary mediator while his transformations are examined critically. The model proposed here makes both judgments possible because it describes what each intervention did before deciding how it should be valued.

Conclusion

The European Arabian Nights emerged through a chain of transformations rather than a single act of linguistic transfer. A historically layered Eastern corpus was selected and reorganized by Galland, mediated again in English, stabilized through titles and editions, and expanded through reception and imitation. The result was not identical with any one Arabic manuscript, yet it became one of the most consequential forms of the Nights in world literary history.

Five operations explain this transformation: selection, omission, addition, domestication, and retitling. Together they altered the corpus, moral register, implied readership, generic identity, and cultural image of the collection. The Grub Street translator then demonstrated how an indirect translation could create a durable national reception by giving the work a memorable English name and a commercial frame.

The main conclusion is that translation must be analyzed as literary agency. Fidelity remains essential for evaluating textual relationships, but it cannot alone explain canon formation or reception. Galland's achievement and controversy arise from the same fact: he did not merely transport the Nights into Europe; he helped construct the form in which Europe imagined, read, and rewrote it.

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