

**From History to Fiction:  
The Tale Told By the King's Steward  
in the *1001 Nights***

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The tale told by the King of China's steward in the Hunchback story in the *1001 Nights* (*N* 121.22-130.11)<sup>1</sup> is adapted directly from a report about events said to have occurred early in the tenth century in Baghdad and transmitted not as fiction but as history. A comparison of the two accounts of these events—the historical and the fictional—shows the manner in which the storyteller went about transforming history into fiction.

There is, to be sure, another tale in the Hunchback story, that of the barber and the highwaymen (*N* 151.33-152.35), which can be traced to a report transmitted as history by the tenth-century historian al-Mas'ūdī about an incident that occurred at the court of the caliph al-Ma'mūn (ruled 189-218/813-33). But this report deals with a relatively short episode which could have been easily transformed from history into fiction and from one fictional form into another many times between the ninth and the fourteenth century. Furthermore, while the general theme of the historical incident is present in the *1001 Nights* version, the transformation of the characters and linguistic surface is so complete that one cannot speak of the historical account except as a distant, indirect source.

All the other sources of the *1001 Nights* identified so far are themselves fictional. Of these only the well-known *maqāmah* of the tenth-eleventh-century author Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī named after the dish *al-maḍīra* (*N* 166.14-168.24) belongs to high literature; and in this case it is certain that the storyteller adapted his version not from al-Hamadhānī's

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<sup>1</sup> *N* = Mahdi 1984. The numbers before the period refer to the Nights, those after the period to the lines within each Night

*maqāmah*, but from a thirteenth-century collection of stories known as *al-Hikāyāt al-‘Ajībah* (“Wonderful Stories”), where he found the structure, characters, and language of al-Hamadhānī’s *maqāmah* already transformed. The rest of the fictional sources, whether whole tales or individual incidents, are to be found in this thirteenth-century collection, or else in independently transmitted stories whose language and fictional form could be adopted by the storyteller with little or no modification.

In no other tale was the storyteller faced with a report that had been transmitted as history, formed part of high literature, contained accurate and detailed references to historical personages and places, and presented linguistic and dialectal peculiarities unfamiliar to him and to his audience. He was no doubt adept at adapting and transforming fictional material when composing his stories, altering, transposing, and inventing incidents to suit his purpose and design. But this historical report must have presented him with additional challenges, not all of which he was trained to meet. A comparison of the *1001 Nights* version of the tale told by the King’s steward with its immediate source is likely to provide as full an account as can be expected of the way the storyteller went about refashioning his sources, subjecting them to the rules of his art, and making them fit for incorporation into his longer and complex stories.

The historical report used by the storyteller who composed the Hunchback story was available in the fourteenth century in two main versions. The storyteller used the version reported by al-Muḥassin al-Tanūkhī<sup>2</sup> in his book *al-Faraj ba‘d al-Shiddah* (“Deliverance after Stress”). The other version is transmitted on the authority of his son ‘Alī who reported it on the authority of his father. The son’s version is sufficiently different from the one published by his father to make it easy to identify (for example, the main dish in the report is called *dīgparīga* instead of *zīrbājah*) and to ascertain that it was not the version used by the storyteller. The following outline shows how closely the storyteller follows the historical version in al-Tanūkhī’s *al-Faraj*:

1. Frame: transmission and setting in Baghdad and China  
(N 121.22-122.14 = *al-Faraj* 4:358.3-359.1).
2. Setting: family and business background in Baghdad  
(N 122.15-20 = *al-Faraj* 4:359.2-6).
3. The maiden’s first visit to the shop  
(N 122.20-124.5 = *al-Faraj* 4:359.7-360.2).
4. The maiden’s second visit  
(N 124.5-15 = *al-Faraj* 4:360.3-17).

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<sup>2</sup> (329-84/940-94), a well-known figure in the second half of the tenth century, first as a judge in various cities in Mesopotamia, and later in Baghdad as a prominent aide to the Buyid king ‘Aḍud al-Dawlah [ruled in Iraq 367-72/978-83]).

5. The maiden's third visit: mutual love revealed  
(*N* 124.15-26 = *al-Faraj* 4:360.18-361.16).
6. The servant's visit to the shop: the maiden's identity and arrangements for entering the Caliph's palace revealed  
(*N* 124.26-125.12 = *al-Faraj* 4:361.17-363.1).
7. Adventures on the way to the maiden's apartment in the palace  
(*N* 125.12-127.15 = *al-Faraj* 4:363.12-365.9).
8. Meeting with Lady Zubaydah  
(*N* 127.15-22 = *al-Faraj* 4:365.10-17).
9. Stay in the palace  
(*N* 127.22-128.8 = [leaves and returns] *al-Faraj* 4:365.17-366.18).
10. Eating the *zīrbājah*  
(*N* 128.8-12 = *al-Faraj* 4:367.1-8).
11. First meeting and punishment  
(*N* 128.12-129.12 = *al-Faraj* 4:367.9-368.10).
12. Second meeting and punishment  
(*N* 129.12-23 [not in *al-Faraj*]).
13. Epilogue: marriage consummated; the happy couple leave the palace and reside in the city  
(*N* 130.1-11 = *al-Faraj* 4:368.11-369.11).

1. The framing of the historical account in *al-Tanūkhī* follows the normal pattern in historical reports. The frame consists of a chain of authorities, beginning with the last link in the chain—the person who has transmitted the report to the living narrator who is in turn transmitting it orally or writing it down in a book—and ending with the first link, the person who made the statements or experienced the events that are being narrated. A certain amount of information about each link in the chain—the occasion or the setting in which he transmitted the report, and a reference to his reliability as transmitter—can be added where available or useful in confirming the authenticity of the report. In this case, the living narrator was *al-Tanūkhī*, the author. He heard the report from the juris consult and judge Ibn al-Narsī.<sup>3</sup> Ibn al-Narsī, in turn, heard the report narrated by a certain merchant—whom he designated by name, but *al-Tanūkhī* admits to having forgotten this merchant's name—to his father.<sup>4</sup> The merchant reported that he once attended a banquet given by a colleague, a famous cloth merchant. A number of dishes were served, including the dish known as *zīrbājah*. The host did not eat of this particular dish, and his guests followed his example. He asked them to eat

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<sup>3</sup> Ibn al-Narsī's family resided in the Syrian Gate quarter of Baghdad; he succeeded another well-known judge, Ibn al-Bahlūl, as judge in the city of Hīt; *al-Tanūkhī* knew Ibn al-Narsī well and found him always to be a reliable reporter, *wa-mā 'alimtuḥu illā thiqatan*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn al-Narsī was a young man [*ḥadath*] at the time, attending his father, who was receiving a group of people in a social gathering. It is assumed that this took place in Baghdad and that the men attending the gathering were Baghdad notables listening to a report about events that took place in their city not more than a generation before.

of it and allow him to abstain, but they kept after him until he joined them. Instead of washing his hands afterwards along with everyone else, however, he withdrew to wash his hands by himself, and he continued to wash until the attendant told him he had washed his hands forty times. The guests asked him why he washed his hands so many times; he wouldn't say; they insisted; and he began to tell his story.

In the *1001 Nights* version the chain of authorities is reduced from four to two: the King's steward (who substitutes for al-Tanūkhī, Ibn al-Narsī, and the unnamed merchant who narrated the historical report) and the cloth merchant from Baghdad (who substitutes for the cloth merchant who gave the banquet in Baghdad and told his own story). This type of framing—where a character in a story tries to save his life, not by telling his own tale, but merely reporting a tale told by someone else attending a banquet where he, the narrator, happened to be present but was otherwise not involved in the tale at all—had not occurred before in the *1001 Nights*. It will occur again in the Hunchback story as the frame of the tale told by the tailor, but nowhere else in the *1001 Nights* as far as I can recall. It is not farfetched to think that it was modeled after the historical report—where the reporter hears the tale at a banquet, but is not otherwise involved in the tale substituting a chain of framing stories for the chain of transmission. (In the case of the tale told by the barber in the Hunchback story, the chain will proceed as follows: [1] the narrator tells the audience [2] Shahrazad told Shahrayar [3] the tailor told the king of China [4] the barber told the company at the banquet [5] the barber told the Caliph al-Mustansir [6] the barber's brother told x.) Thus the most complex story in the *1001 Nights* seems to be formally patterned after the chain of transmitters of historical reports in the wider sense.

The banquet is moved from Baghdad to a city called China, where the story of the Hunchback is in progress. It takes place at a particular time in the story, the night before the day the king's steward narrates the tale to the king of China, and concurrently with other events in the Hunchback story: the hunchback's presumed death and the transportation of his body to the house of the Jewish doctor and from there to that of the King's steward. And the setting is transformed from a pleasant occasion in which a prosperous merchant, the main character in the historical report, invites his colleagues for a meal after which they pass the time listening to his marvelous story, to a solemn occasion: Koran recitations are performed in the presence of the doctors of the religious law and of a large crowd. Then a meal is served. The King's steward happens to be there and so does the cloth merchant from Baghdad, with no explanation of how or why he got there. Then, when he refuses to eat of the *zīrbājah* and the host and guests insist that he do so, the storyteller changes the sequence of the actions in the historical report, giving rise to an inconsistency in his tale

which does not seem to have been noticed by scribes, editors, or translators.

In the historical report, the cloth merchant first eats the *zīrbājah*, then stands aside and washes his hands forty times. The guests inquire why, and he tells his story. The guests follow the story to satisfy their curiosity about this strange affair—their host’s refusal to eat of a dish he offers his guests and his having to stand aside and wash his hands forty times after eating of it. The storyteller is not inattentive to the importance of this incident, and as is his wont whenever he notices something interesting—a good meal, an attractive place, a beautiful maiden—he ornaments, elaborates, or exaggerates. In this case he multiplies the number by three: the cloth merchant is made to wash his hands forty times with potash, forty times with cyprus, and forty times with soap. But the point is that he does the washing *before* instead of after he eats the *zīrbājah*, as in the historical report and as the storyteller’s own version requires (see *N* 128.11ff, 129.20ff).

The storyteller understood the importance of the number of washings as a kind of punishment. He seized on it as an appropriate place to revise the historical report and add the mutilation theme required by the story of the Hunchback as a whole. The cloth merchant will pay more dearly for having eaten the *zīrbājah*. Not only will he have to wash his hands three-times-forty times, but he will have his thumbs and great toes cut off as well; all this will be interpolated by the storyteller at the appropriate place in the tale (*N* 129.17ff). The entire company will see the mutilation, have its curiosity aroused, center its attention on it, inquire about it, and follow the story to find out why and how it happened, before the cloth merchant tells his tale. None of this could take place until the cloth merchant begins to eat of the *zīrbājah*, a stew hard to eat with four fingers. They notice how he stretches out his hand to eat, trembling, full of fear and anger; and they notice the sinister way the food falls all over the place from between his fingers. They ask him about his maimed thumb, and he tells them about the other maimed thumb and the maimed great toes. Now they are doubly amazed. They ask him how it came about that he was so maimed and had to wash his hands one hundred twenty times. The washing incident is preserved, but pushed to the background. Attention is focused on the mutilation.

2. The storyteller shifts the historical setting backwards, from the time of the caliph al-Muqtadir (ruled 295-320/908-32) and the lifetime of the cloth merchant who narrated his own story in the historical report, to the time of Hārūn al-Rashīd (ruled 170-93/785-809), the mythical caliph of the *1001 Nights*. He replaces the two historical characters, the caliph al-Muqtadir and his mother, Lady Shaghab, with the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd and his wife, Lady Zubaydah. The storyteller will fall prey to another

inconsistency before the Hunchback story is done. The fourth narrator, the tailor, will say that he was present at a banquet earlier the same day in the same Chinese city. At that banquet a young man met an old barber. The young man and the old barber had come from Baghdad also, but after the death of the caliph al-Mustansir (ruled 623-40/1226-42) and after having first met in Baghdad in the year 653/1255. This inconsistency—that is, characters who lived four and one-half centuries apart are made contemporaries of one another—would only attract the attention of mundane historians, unlike the inconsistency mentioned earlier, which should have drawn the attention of the audience of the *1001 Nights*.

The cloth merchant's father, a modest merchant who gives his son sensible advice and leaves him a modest legacy in the historical report, is transformed by the storyteller into a great merchant who dissipates his wealth through addiction to drinking and music, leaving his son nothing. The son's character, on the other hand, is modified to emphasize his piety and devotion to the memory of his father, and his cleverness as a merchant: his success in repaying the father's debts and building his own fortune. The respective qualities and attributes of merchants and palace-dwellers is a theme that will run throughout the tale. Both in contrast to his father and in his own right, the youth is presented by the storyteller as a pillar of filial piety and mercantile virtue.

3. The four successive visits to the youth's humble shop in the marketplace are adapted by the storyteller from the historical report with only minor improvements in dramatic presentation. On her first visit, the maiden, a stunning beauty magnificently dressed and adorned, arrives early in the morning, when neighboring shops are still closed. She greets the youth and sits down at his shop. Since the youth does not carry the expensive garments she asks for, he makes her wait until he can obtain them for her from the other cloth merchants. This provides him with the occasion to converse with her and be "drowned in the sea of her love." When the neighboring shops are opened, he procures all she wants; she takes clothing worth 5000 pieces of silver and leaves without a word about where she resides or about the price. Love-stricken and bewildered, he is too distracted to demand payment. Here the two versions diverge in describing the youth's reaction. As soon as she departs in the historical report, he recovers his senses, blames himself for allowing a trickstress to dupe him and take advantage of his youth and inexperience, and begins to worry about his impending bankruptcy. In the *1001 Nights* version, the impression she makes on him does not fade as fast from his memory: he remains intoxicated with her love and asks his creditors for more time. His worry about financial troubles is postponed until after the second visit.

4. The second visit takes place a week later. She apologizes for the delay and makes the payment, and they converse until the other merchants

open their shops. She makes him purchase for her from the merchants goods worth twice as much as on the first visit and leaves, again without a word about the price. This time she is absent for more than a month; creditors begin to press him for payment; he worries about the impending bankruptcy which now seems unavoidable and offers his possessions for sale. Thus while the historical report repeats the young cloth merchant's concern with bankruptcy a second time, the *1001 Nights* version does not make him turn to his business concerns until he is forced to do so by his creditors.

5. But the trickstress, who had carefully planned the whole affair, returns in time to make payment and save him from ruin. On this third visit, she does not waste time on merchandise, but engages in such free and pleasant conversation that the youth nearly dies with joy, and then she asks him: "Are you married?"—at which point the poor virgin youth weeps. Still unaware of the trap she has been carefully laying for him, too young and inexperienced to divine her feeling in her actions, face, or speech, and being the merchant he is, he goes to offer her servant some money and ask him to act as go-between. The servant has to explain to him that she is more in love with him than he with her, that buying garments was merely an excuse on her part, and that he should go back and speak to her himself. She is of course ready to be pleased. Having accomplished her aim, she leaves the shop after telling the youth that the servant will bring him the necessary instructions.

The incident in which the cloth merchant tries to bribe the servant to act as go-between is truncated in the *1001 Nights* version in a manner that shows an effort on the part of the storyteller to modify the maiden's character in a significant way. In the historical report, the youth gets up, tells the maiden he is going to repay the other merchants what he owes them, but goes instead to offer money to the servant: "I went back [to the maiden]—I had told her 'I am going to pay [the other merchants] the gold pieces [I owe them]'—when I went back [to her] she asked, 'Have you paid them the gold pieces!?' and laughed. She had seen that I was with the servant [all the time]." The *1001 Nights* version begins with the phrase "She saw me offer the gold pieces to the servant" and omits the rest of the incident, the only one in the historical report in which the maiden expresses herself jocularly and laughs. This is in keeping with the youth's point of view with respect to the maiden in the *1001 Nights* version: he is impressed with her riches, high rank, and beauty, but he does not experience her refined, relaxed, smiling, and forgiving character as does the youth in the historical report. The *1001 Nights* version is more serious, just as it is more grim, than the historical report.

6. A few days later, the servant arrives at the shop to reveal that the maiden is sick with love of him, that she had been raised by and is the

favorite maiden of Lady Zubaydah, the queen-consort of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, and that she is the stewardess of the harem, the one who has the privilege of going in and out of the palace at pleasure to fetch things for her mistress. He reveals also that she has spoken to Lady Zubaydah about him and asked to be allowed to marry him, but that Lady Zubaydah's permission is contingent on seeing him and deciding whether he is worthy of her. Finally, the servant reveals how the maiden (who seems to have made all the necessary arrangements already) will smuggle him into the Caliph's palace so that he can meet Lady Zubaydah. Should the plan succeed, he can hope to marry the maiden; but should he be discovered, the guards will of course strike off his head. He has to decide on the spot, and he decides that he will submit to the test.

In the *1001 Nights* version, the servant then instructs him to "walk to the mosque built by Lady Zubaydah on the bank of the Tigris." He arrives there in the evening, performs his prayers, and passes the night in the mosque. In this episode the storyteller systematically removes from the historical report all the details about the historical topography of Baghdad.

In the historical report, the youth (who presumably lived somewhere in the Karkh area on the west side of the Tigris where the cloth market was located) is instructed to "cross [the Tigris] to al-Mukharrim [a well-known quarter in tenth-century Baghdad situated slightly to the north of the area where the caliphs' Residence, Dār al-Khulafā', was located] and enter the mosque built by the Lady [the mother of the caliph al-Muqtadir] on the bank of the Tigris, on the outer wall of which facing the Tigris the Lady's name is incised in cut brick, and wait there. Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Narsī [al-Tanūkhī adds at this point] said: This was the mosque whose gate has now [that is, at the time Ibn al-Narsī narrated the report] been blocked up by Subuktakīn, the Chief Chamberlain, freedman of [the Buyid king] Mu'izz al-Dawlah [ruled in Baghdad 334-56/945-67], known as Jāshangīr, who connected the mosque to the [walled!] space [or courtyard] of his house, making it the place of prayer for his soldier-slaves." The addition of the information to the historical report was necessary. Ibn al-Narsī's learned audience in Baghdad knew that the mosque he named was not open to the public. He had to explain that, while this was true at the time he was narrating the report, it was not the case during the lifetime of the Lady who built the mosque as a pious foundation; it was then open to the public and could have easily remained open all night. Neither the storyteller nor his audience, on the other hand, knew anything or cared about the historical layout of Baghdad; and none of this information made sense to them. "Walk to the mosque built by Lady Zubaydah on the bank of the Tigris" was good enough for an audience who knew nothing of the topography of a city long in ruins.

7. The youth spends the night in the mosque, waiting for the

adventures that will terminate in the satisfaction of his desires or his death. He is to cross over from the familiar everyday world of the marketplace to the unfamiliar closed world of the Caliph's palace and harem, isolated from the outside world and protected by doorkeepers and guards. When at the break of dawn the maiden's servants arrive with empty boxes followed by the maiden herself, they converse and she weeps as she places him inside the box in which he is to be transported to the palace along with the other boxes in which she pretends to be bringing clothes and other effects for Lady Zubaydah. As the boat floats downstream on its way to the palace, the youth regrets his decision after it is too late, wonders whether he will achieve his desire, weeps, prays to God to save him. Yet he does not abjure his desire or calculate whether its fulfillment would have been worth losing his life, as he does in the historical report: "I said to myself, 'I let myself run the danger of being killed for the sake of a desire that may not be fulfilled after all, and were it to be fulfilled, it would not have been worth dying for'." When the boxes arrive at the door guarded by the chief servant, he insists on inspecting their contents and begins with the box in which the youth is hidden. The youth is so frightened he cannot control himself. His water runs out of the box. The maiden, whose presence of mind and wits never leave her, accuses the chief servant of having been responsible for spilling the flask of holy water from the well of Zamzam in Mecca and spoiling the colors of her Lady's garments. Then the Caliph himself arrives and wants to inspect the contents of the boxes; the youth nearly dies of fear many times over. After the Caliph has inspected all the other boxes, the maiden again saves the situation by insisting that this particular box contains her Lady's special secret effects, which he will soon see when she opens it for him. The box is carried in. The youth is taken out of the box and placed in a secluded room, and the box is filled with other goods for the Caliph to see when opened.

Throughout these breathtaking adventures, and in part because they involve a number of characters in the palace and numerous bits of dialogue, the historical report is full of dialectal expressions. These are removed by the storyteller or else replaced by dialectal expressions current in Mamluk times in Syria and Egypt. The same is true of names of material objects and of the names of the ranks of the palace guards. In trying to embellish the scene in which the box is carried through the palace corridors, the storyteller presents the chief servant as having "started up from his slumber" when it was broad daylight and even the Caliph was up and about. The scene with the Caliph, which in the historical report is short and the dialogue crisp and rapid, is elaborated far beyond what the audience of the historical report would have found believable, making the Caliph open the boxes one after another and look at everything in them. Finally, the storyteller deprives the youth of the food, drink, and other

amenities with which the maiden provides him in his secluded room. This sign of the maiden's kindness did not conform to the severe aspect of her character that was soon to be exhibited in the *1001 Nights* version.

8. The storyteller had yet another reason for depriving the youth of food and drink. In the historical report, the meeting with the queen mother takes place the day following his arrival. The storyteller, however, decided to move rapidly and have him meet Lady Zubaydah, the queen consort, soon after his arrival at the harem.

The meeting in the historical report is a private affair; the queen mother dismisses all but one of her handmaidens. In a brief scene, he kisses the ground before her and invokes God's blessings on her. Without speaking to him, she turns to the maiden her stewardess, praises her for the choice she had made, and gets up from the weight of her raiments and ornaments, receives him surrounded by thirty handmaidens, converses with him, questions him about his condition, is pleased with his answers, praises him, and commits her stewardess, the maiden she esteems as though she were her own child, to his care. None of this would have been believable to knowledgeable men or the audience of the historical report in Baghdad. But it is not nearly as unbelievable as what follows next.

9. As an additional favor, the storyteller's Lady Zubaydah orders that the youth spend ten days "with them," that is, in the harem apartments in the palace, and he has the youth repeat that he remained there ten days and nights, without catching sight of the maiden, however. Lady Zubaydah then asks for and receives the Caliph's permission to marry her stewardess, and she apparently arranges for the marriage ceremony to be performed in the harem, again without the Caliph being in any way involved in the affair. Another ten days and nights elapse while the handmaidens prepare the necessary sweets and foods and equip the maiden for the wedding night. For twenty days the youth, an unmarried commoner, a total stranger to the Caliph's household, smuggled into the palace without the Caliph's knowledge, is made to hide in the harem. The Caliph gives permission that a stewardess be married without being told to whom, a marriage ceremony is arranged in the palace, men are brought in to write and witness the marriage contract, and for ten days the whole palace is in an uproar preparing for the wedding night. The Caliph must have been blind indeed. If the storyteller meant to accentuate the youth's impatience after spending ten days hidden in a room and another ten days smelling the sweets and exquisite dishes being prepared for the wedding night, and make believable his forgetting to wash his hands after eating the *zīrbājah*, he could not have invented a less likely story to achieve his purpose. No tenth-century resident of Baghdad with the most rudimentary knowledge of the customs of the palace would have believed such a story.

The historical report contained information about the topography of the palace and about court ceremonies that was no longer comprehensible to the storyteller and his audience. The day after meeting the queen mother, the youth had to be smuggled out of the palace, hidden in the same box. The exit was somewhat easier than the entrance, the inspection requirements being more perfunctory. He is taken back to the mosque and left there to regain his house on his own. A few days later, one of the maiden's servants arrives with a letter from her and 3000 dinars, a gift from the queen mother who had ordered that he buy appropriate clothes, a she-mule to ride, and a slave to march before him, and in general required that he dress up and equip himself as befits someone who is to be presented before the Caliph. He is to proceed to the Commoners' Gate of the Caliph's Residence on the day of the Mawkib when the Caliph receives the officials of high rank and the public's business is conducted in his presence, and wait there until he is summoned to be presented before the Caliph and married before him (the Caliph having already consented that the ceremony be performed in his presence). He follows these instructions and rides his she-mule to the Commoner's Gate on the assigned day; an attendant calls his name, takes him in, and presents him to the caliph al-Muqtadir, who is sitting on his throne surrounded by courtiers, judges, and military chiefs. Hardly is the awe-stricken youth inside the audience hall when a judge pronounces the marriage formula and he is conducted out. Upon leaving the audience hall, he is taken to a sumptuous and richly furnished apartment, made to sit down, and left there by himself.

10. This is the apartment in which the maiden was to be conducted to him that night. All day long no one pays any attention to him and he does not notice anyone he knows, only servants moving about and exquisite food being carried in and out. Toward nightfall the doors of the apartment are closed, there is no sign of his bride, and he feels very hungry. He wanders about the empty apartment and hits on the kitchen; the cooks do not recognize him and think he is an insignificant agent. He asks for food and is given a bowl of *zīrbājah*. In his embarrassment, and afraid they may recognize him, he eats, washes his hands in a hurry with some potash he finds in the kitchen (thinking that was enough to remove the *zīrbājah*'s odor), and returns to the spot where he was made to wait.

This episode conforms to the young merchant's character in the historical report and is quite adequate as preparation for what was to follow there. But it is too plain and "realistic" to conform to his character in the *1001 Nights* version. His filial piety, his success as merchant, his trials in entering the palace—all these prepare him for greater reward and greater punishment. Since entering the palace twenty days earlier, he has been resting in his apartment in the harem, where he has been well fed and cared for all along as befits the future bridegroom of Lady Zubaydah's

stewardess. In preparation for being introduced to him as wife, the maiden is conducted to the bath. That night he is offered an elaborate meal, including a bowl of *zīrbājah* so sumptuously prepared and highly sweetened that he neglects all the other dishes and immediately attacks the *zīrbājah* and eats his fill of it, wipes his hands, forgets to wash them (or, as he likes to explain his lack of refinement, “God the Most High made me forget to wash them”), and sits and waits.

11. The next episode is again more elaborate in the *1001 Nights* version, which emphasizes the maiden’s high position in the Caliph’s palace: the music, the singing, the display of the bride as she moves about the entire palace, where she is given presents of gold and silk garments—all meant to prepare for the major episode that follows and explain the maiden’s reaction. After all, she was brought up by Lady Zubaydah herself and had been her chief confidante, accustomed to the most refined company and way of life imaginable. This is the high point of her life, a time in which she is reminded of her worth and position in the palace. She is proud and full of herself, and looking forward to the greatest moment a maiden in her position is said to look forward to: the moment of embracing her beloved—a youth she had gone through so much trouble to seduce and had run great dangers to smuggle into the palace. She is disrobed and left alone with him in bed. Impatient, scarcely believing that the union is taking place, he throws his arms around her neck. She smells the strong odor of the *zīrbājah* on the hands embracing her!

What happened next in the historical report was too mild to fit the storyteller’s plans. For there she merely repulses him, accuses him of being unable to rise above his station as a lowly commoner, and gets up to leave the bridal room. He begs her to inform him of his sin, and is told that he had eaten the *zīrbājah* but had not properly washed his hands; how then does he expect to embrace a maiden of her station in life! He begs her to listen to his story, she allows him to tell it, and he swears that henceforth he will never eat *zīrbājah* without washing his hands forty times afterwards. Once she has reminded him that from now on he must conform to the social proprieties of his new station in life, she is neither resentful nor cruel, but smiles, forgives him, orders a sumptuous meal “fit for the caliphs’ tables,” and they eat, drink, and move to the bed where the marriage is consummated.

In the *1001 Nights* version, on the other hand, the storyteller has now arrived at the episode where the youth had to be maimed for eating the *zīrbājah*. He has prepared for the maiming by having the youth forget to wash his hands, not merely in a hurry and therefore inadequately, as he did in the historical report. He moves now in measured steps to elaborate the episode as fully as he can. The maiden is beside herself. She lets out a

loud cry, her handmaidens come running in, and the youth is left utterly frightened and bewildered about her strange behavior. At first she orders the handmaidens to throw “this madman” out. Upon inquiring what evidence of his madness she has, he finds out that he is a madman because he ate the *zīrbājah* and did not wash his hands, knowing full well that he was about to be in bed with someone of her august rank. Then she orders her handmaidens to hold him down, whips him on the back and buttocks, and asks her handmaidens to send him off to the magistrate of the city police to cut off the hand with which he ate the *zīrbājah* and which he forgot to wash. The youth, who still does not appreciate the enormity of his deed, his sin against the aristocratic social conventions of palace-dwellers, can only curse the *zīrbājah*. The handmaidens entreat their mistress to spare the ignorant youth, but she insists on teaching him a lesson by maiming something of his extremities so that he will never again eat the *zīrbājah* and not wash his hands. She turns to rebuke and curse him, and then leaves the room. For ten days a slave-girl brings him something to eat and drink and tells him the maiden is sick because he ate the *zīrbājah* and did not wash his hands. Still unable to comprehend his fault, he is angry and keeps wondering “what kind of damned manners are these?”

12. Then the maiden returns, furious as ever, and insists on having her revenge. The handmaidens tie him up, and she takes a sharp razor and cuts off his thumbs and great toes. When he is able to open his eyes and speak again, he declares that he will never again eat the *zīrbājah* without washing his hands one hundred twenty times afterwards. She approves and makes him promise and swear to fulfill his pledge.

13. After the first blissful night, the youth in the historical report is able to enjoy the company of the maiden day and night for a whole week without interruption. Then the festivities celebrating the end of the first week of marriage take place. The next day she explains to him that they cannot go on living in the Caliph’s palace; it was only because of the queen mother’s interest in her that it was possible for him to consummate the marriage in the palace, something that had not happened to anyone else before. She gives him 10,000 dinars (the queen mother had just given her 50,000 on the occasion of her marriage, and the maiden’s own wealth in the city is many times that sum, a matter that the merchant remembers with professional interest) and asks him to buy a spacious house with many rooms and a large garden, and not to be tight-fisted as merchants are apt to be. She is used to living in palaces and will not agree to live in a small house. He buys the house that fits her needs; she moves into it with her possessions and handmaidens, and bears him many sons. He continues to trade with success (“for I just could not abandon the business and stop gaining a living”). After many happy years in which he continues to

prosper, she dies. But the obligation to wash his hands forty times every time he eats the *zīrbājah* remains. His sons, to whom he points, are sitting around him; they are the evidence and proof of his story. The audience—all fellow merchants—knew about his wealth and probably were listening to his story in the spacious house he bought for his departed wife. The only doubt they could have entertained would have been the following: how could all this happen to a fellow cloth merchant without his friends and associates learning about it earlier? His absence from his shop, his newly gained wealth, his buying a spacious house, his having a wife and handmaidens who had been accustomed to the life of palace-dwellers—could all this have remained a secret until the day he decided to tell his story? Perhaps they did know the outward features of his new life. They could not of course have known about his adventures in the palace, which had to be kept a secret, at least until after 320/932, the year of the caliph al-Muqtadir’s and his mother’s death.

In the *1001 Nights* version the merchant concludes his story once he has satisfied the audience’s curiosity about how he came to have his thumbs and great toes cut off and why he had to wash his hands one hundred twenty times. The audience is now curious about what happened next, and he continues his story. First he had to wait for his wounds to heal. Once they were healed, the maiden came to him and, finally, the marriage was consummated. He stayed with her “the rest of the month” and it was he who was impatient to leave the palace. The storyteller then follows the historical report until they settle in their new home, but omits the fact that he went back to trading and making his own living and the fact that she gave him many sons. Finally, there is no explanation of how or why he left Baghdad, or why he happens to be in China.

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Ever since Aristotle spoke of the respective merits of history and poetry, history as something that actually took place has been distinguished from fiction as something that could possibly take place but may not in fact have happened. It was always known that certain kinds of poetry or fiction dealt with strange and impossible things, strange and impossible at least to an audience not credulous enough to believe everything it hears. The *1001 Nights* is of course full of strange and impossible stories. But the tale told by the King’s steward (and the Hunchback story as a whole) is not such a story. It claims to be an account of historical events involving historical persons in a well-known time and place, and it does not even hint at anything that is impossible in itself.

Nevertheless, we have seen in how many places the audience of the

historical report would have found that report credible but would have laughed the fictional version out of court. For them, the fictional version was impossible. Although derived from historical reality, it was an outrageous distortion and corruption of history. Nor would they have it particularly interesting or amusing. On the contrary, they would have found it silly and cold, not because they lacked imagination or were ignorant, but because they knew too much. It was a tale about their city and history and institutions and customs, and it was ridiculously inaccurate. Had it been a tale told about China or some inaccessible region at some remote time, they might have been amused by it, for it told of nothing that was inherently impossible. However, possible and impossible do not have to do only with things or events, but with the audience as well. What would have seemed impossible to the audience of the historical report in tenth-century Baghdad could very well seem possible to the audience of *1001 Nights* version in fourteenth-century Damascus or Cairo, which consisted of semi-literate men and women who remembered nothing to gainsay what they had heard about what might have happened in eighth- or ninth-century Baghdad: for all they knew, this was history, or else they were only too willing to transform the fictional version back into history. The same would prove to be true of audiences in later times and other countries or cultures. But it seems to have been especially true of learned Orientalists who have used the *1001 Nights* as a source for the study of the manners and customs of Oriental societies.

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