LS 395.02: Canterbury Tales and Arabian Nights

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The philosopher Simone Weil once expressed her amazement that “certain periods almost without material means of communication surpassed ours in the wealth, variety, fertility and vitality of their exchanges of thought over the very widest expanses.” In the case of exchanges between the Islamic and Christian worlds in the later Middle Ages, one has the sense that stories were the more prized, and their circulation the more robust, because of the limited means of passing them. Of the Sultan of Syria we are told in the Man of Law’s Tale that he eagerly sought “Tidynges of sondry regnes, [reigns, realms] for to leere [learn]”; and such a thirst for reports and stories must have been shared by many. For the purposes of this course the manifold resemblances between two of the best-loved works of world literature, the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Arabian Nights*, will serve as the principal index of the exchange of story-lore between the Islamic and Christian cultures in medieval times. At least four of the *Canterbury Tales*—the Squire’s, the Merchant’s, the Pardoner’s, the Manciple’s—have some identifiable oriental source or parallel. In addition, the impressive series of generous deeds at the conclusion of the Franklin’s Tale is reminiscent of similar sequences in the *Nights*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, and the *Disciplina Clericalis* (the first collection of stories to appear in Latin Europe, composed in the twelfth century by a Spanish Jew who converted to Christianity and knew Arabic). Both the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Arabian Nights* include diverse tales from hither and yon, from the folk tradition, from sources unfathomable, and both are “framed” yet inconclusive and open. Many tales in each collection resonate with tales from the other. The beasts in the *Nights* tale of “The Wolf and the Fox” cite Allah and those in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale the Christian God, but otherwise the two stories of trickery and reverse trickery have much in common, both larded with proverbial wisdom, both enlivened with dialogue, both containing further stories.

It is one of the ironies of literary history that stories from the Islamic world should have flowed into Latin Europe, and entered into the making of its fiction, at the same time that the image of Islam itself as a religion of license, violence, and fraud was established in Europe. In the very shadow of the Crusades, and in the face of the Church’s desire “to reduce communication with Muslims to a minimum” (Norman Daniel), even then Arabic stories entered the very lore of Christian Europe; and even as Middle English romances celebrated the victory of Christians over Muslims, propagandistically portrayed as heathens or pagans, the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Arabian Nights* spoke a sort of common language. With their animal fables and romances, their bawdy jokes and stories of miracles—all of them set within unforgettable frames—these two great works leave the reader with the impression that the civilizations from which they sprang were not as alien to one another as often portrayed. Similar ancient stories, from Aesopian fables to licentious jests, may have fed both traditions. Especially during the Soviet era, literary people spoke of “Aesopian” compositions, cunningly disguised to slip by the political police. In the Middle Ages fables actually derived from Aesop, or resembling such, passed untraceably between civilizations officially at war.

**Texts**

Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* (in the original Middle English)
Anon., *Arabian Nights*, Haddawy translation
Readings


Arabian Nights: Prologue (pp. 3-16); "Story of the Merchant and the Demon" (pp. 17-29); "Story of the Fisherman and the Demon" (pp. 30-66); "The Porter and the Three Ladies" (in part; pp. 66-86); "The Envious and the Envied" (pp. 101-1043); "The Three Apples" (pp. 150-206); "The Hunchback" (in part; pp. 206-214; 249-266; 268-272; 272-275; 282-289; 289-295); "Nur al-Din Ali ibn-Bakkar and the Slave-Girl Shams al-Nahar" (pp. 295-344); "Story of the Slave-Girl Anis al-Jalis and Nur al-Din Ali ibn Khaqan" (pp. 344-383); "Jullanar of the Sea" (pp. 383-428).

Submitted Questions

Each week you are to submit three typed questions regarding the reading on the due date, according to the following schedule: A-H: Monday; I-P: Wednesday; Q-Z: Friday. I will teach to these to some extent.

Papers

First paper, concerning any part of the Chaucer reading to that point, due October 11. Second paper, concerning any part of the Nights reading, due December 6. Papers are to be no less than 1500 words. Students aspiring to an A should submit papers of no less than 2000 words. Topics are open. In all cases be sure to know the text and cite it accurately, have a thesis, defend it well, and show mastery of the elements of composition. Late work subject penalty.

NB: Titles of works are underlined or italicized; titles of stories go in quotation marks. Title of your own essay is neither underlined nor italicized nor placed in quotation marks. Prose is quoted like prose (from margin to margin), verse like verse (as it appears in the text). Not “Everyone took their car” but “Everyone took his or her car” or “All took their car” or “Everyone took cars.” LS Writing Standards to be distributed.

Students are to edit their own work.

Plagiarism is strictly forbidden, as the UM catalog states.

Final Exam

Essays.

Attendance

Three absences are permitted, after which a grade will be deducted from a paper for each absence. Use your three absences wisely.

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