FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR—THE ARABIAN NIGHTS: COUNTER-CULTURE OR PORNOGRAPHY?

Day/Time: MW 3:30-4:50
Office Address: Harris Hall Room 329
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Maximum Enrollment: 15

COURSE DESCRIPTION: The Arabian Nights are the most popular example of Arabic literature in the western world. They inspired playwrights during the heyday of print culture, and filmmakers as recently as Walt Disney’s Aladdin. From the historian’s perspective, they are a collection of stories compiled during the Middle Ages in such cities as Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus. They reflect traditions that are much older, and draw upon legends widely repeated in such diverse regions as China, India, Iran and Turkey. Analysts of pre-modern societies in the Islamic world now recognize The Arabian Nights as a major literary source that sheds light on many types of colorful people whose antics enlivened the scene in great Islamic cities of pre-modern times, but who remain largely invisible in more formal sources. The Nights also raise issues of cultural practice that contrast with formal strictures imposed by such sacred texts as the Koran itself. The fact that the stories were allegedly told by a woman conniving to stave off vengeance killings by a ruler raises intriguing questions about male-female relations. We will consider these issues in the context of various translations that themselves reveal biases of modern-day writers, who may have reveled in the worlds of counter-culture or pornography.

AREA OF CONCENTRATION: Asia/Middle East

TEACHING METHOD: Discussion of issues and themes indicated in the syllabus question sets. All participants will be asked to lead a discussion on a particular story or version in translation.

EVALUATION METHOD: Performance graded 50% on active participation in discussion, 50% on quality of written assignments. No examinations.

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS: These will be spaced throughout the course, beginning with brief exercises (3-5 pages) on specific topics all participants will consider, longer analyses of issues chosen individually toward the end. Students can count on a total of 20+ pages. All essays will be based on in-class readings.

GRADING BASIS: ANC (no P/N option)

TENTATIVE READING LIST:
N. J. Dawood: Tales from the Arabian Nights, 9780140442892
Robert Irwin: The Arabian Nights, A Companion, 9781860649837
Mary Zimmerman: The Arabian Nights, A Play, 9780810120945
Online in Canvas (no purchase): several translations, including: Richard Burton: The Arabian Nights, A Plain and Literal Translation

NOTES: Attendance at first class mandatory.

INSTRUCTOR PROFILE: I am a historian of the central Muslim world with a special focus on the history of Islamic Egypt. Although I teach courses dealing with the background of contemporary politics, my research has dealt with the pre-modern civilization of the region. I have recently published a history of crime and prosecution in Cairo during the later Middle Ages, in which characters similar to those we will discuss in the Nights show up repeatedly.