Mythologist Marina Warner’s prodigious study investigates the ‘perplexing passion of the Enlightenment for a collection of medieval fairy tales from another part of the world’ (431). Despite the strict separation of magic and reason / natural and supernatural in the Age of Reason, and of warnings from dour figures like Dr Johnson to eschew the ‘whispers of fancy’, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fad for the Nights in Europe drove many authors to write their own equally fanciful versions of ‘Arabian’ tales; it enchanted artists to incorporate harems, Oriental rugs, and sultans into their artwork; and it coaxed some to don turbans and travel to Egypt to learn Arabic. ‘How do such flights of fancy speak to reason?’ Warner wonders (22), and wisely suspects that ‘escapism’ does not tell the whole story.

For Warner, Europe’s enchantment with the Nights was not solely about a need to imagine and control the Orient, as proposed by Edward Said, nor to escape Enlightenment constraints on fantasy; instead, she focuses on similarities between the medieval Middle East that produced the Nights and the European society that devoured it. Warner uses the term ‘reasoned imagination’ (which she borrows from Jorge Luis Borges) to explain this phenomenon, offering the claim that it propelled both Europe’s fascination with human flight in the mid-1600s and its enthralment with Shahrazad’s flying carpets. Similarly, Voltaire’s brand of intertwining reason and humour lines each of Shahrazad’s tales. A parallel is also drawn between medieval Baghdad as an important centre of trade and the age of travel and discovery in Europe – the former explaining the prominence of objects in the stories of the Nights as sources of enchantment (a horse made of ebony, a jewel as large as a turkey’s egg), and subsequently the rise of antiquarianism in Europe that marvelled at and gave value to objects. These are just a few of the hundreds of examples Warner provides to help us rethink our cultural picture of Europe and its relationship to the Nights not just as a curiosity for the exotic other, but as a recognition of sameness.

Warner thus hypothesises that through the Nights the West could examine itself more clearly, that ‘magical thinking ... is “stranger” not because it is unfamiliar but because it is latent and denied’ (27). Warner offers the story of the Danish-born painter Melchior Lorck (born 1526/7) as fitting proof: Lorck lived as a spy in the Ottoman Empire but during his time there created an immensely rich corpus of scenes of life. His drawings contain a ‘hallucinatory quality’ in the words of art historian Peter Ward-Jackson, who also comments on Lorck’s ‘predilection for the weird and sinister’ and ‘the morbid trend of his imagination’ (170). One of Lorck’s drawings depicts a panorama of the Venetian lagoon and includes a large, fanciful tortoise soaring atop it. Upon his return to Europe he found no one willing to publish his work, and so began to edit his prints, adding Christian elements like churches and trumpeting angels – symbols that were more acceptable to Europe because they portrayed a magic less strange.

That the Nights contained flying carpets, talismans, jinns, sorcerers, magicians, and any number of strange things did not present a problem for later Europeans, in Warner’s view, because they could safely relegate magic to the realm of the foreign. Thus the Nights became a catalyst for the imagination and in all the European forms it infiltrated (theatrical productions, gothic tales, costumes, interior décor, films) acted to legitimise fantasy and
magic under the guise of imitating a foreign other, rather than as a demonstration of one’s own predilection for foolish fancies.

While at times the sheer size and scope of Warner’s book (over five hundred pages in length and spanning a time period from the Ancient Greeks to the twenty-first century) makes it difficult to hold and recall the narrative thread, Warner wisely chose to limit her analysis of the Nights to just fifteen stories which she retells and inserts between chapters to provide a scaffolding for her research. The story of Camar al-Zaman and Princess Badoura who travel by flight, for example, creates a useful backdrop for her discussion of the dream of flying in the imagination of Europeans from a seventeenth-century memoir by Francis Godwin to the stories of Peter Pan and Harry Potter.

The book is divided into five sections, each covering a different element of enchantment. Part 1 discusses jinns and the figure of Solomon the Wise King who, in Islamic tradition, is the ruler of jinn, and compares this to the tradition of wizards like Merlin, Gandolf and Prospero in Western literature. Part 2 focuses on darkness: magicians and sorcerers, but also a shared fear of dark others (here Shahrazad’s stories of ‘The Prince of the Black Islands’ and ‘Hasan of Basra’ provide a backdrop for a discussion Othello and Titus Andronicus and a sixteenth-century painting of a dark-skinned inhabitant of Virginia as a devil). Part 3 is devoted to magical thinking and the ‘thing world’ of the Arabian Nights in which common objects are endowed with special powers of their own. Warner uses the project of Napoleonic and his team of engineers to record and publish a Description de l’Égypte, which contained detailed drawings of machinery like sugar mills, as a Western example of an obsession with things. In Parts 4 and 5, both illustrating the liberty of the imagination, Warner hits her stride and her narrative explodes with examples of how the Nights influenced the fabulist tradition of the West. She offers new views of Voltaire’s ‘Zadig’ and Beckford’s gothic Arabia tale Vathek, as well as on Goethe’s flirtation with the East in his lyric cycle The West-Eastern Divan, the frontispiece of which is written in Arabic calligraphy and embellished with arabesques.

A review of this size cannot begin to summarise all of the stories Warner tells, the multitude of examples that support her argument, and cannot do proper justice to the over twenty years of research that stand behind this immense project (the glossary, notes and biography comprise a full one hundred pages, or one fifth of the book). Adorned with over fifty illustrations and twenty-five colour plates, one of the true pleasures of reading Warner’s book is that it, too, creates wonder and marvel. One of my favourite stories is that of Bolossy Kiralfy, a Hungarian emigrant and creator of musical spectacles in Victorian London, who took over the Olympia exhibition centre in 1893 for a show he called Constantinople, or The Revels of the East. It included waxworks, a fairground ride, an aquatic pageant with a boat trip for audience members, a slave market where actresses paraded for their new masters, a harem, a mosque, perfumed fountains, camels, dancing negroes, miniatuised sights of Istanbul, ‘An Arabian Nights Museum’, and a staging of a selection of stories from The Arabian Nights. ‘Without a doubt the most marvellous spectacle ever before the public’, the advertisement reads. Like Shahrazad, Warner enchants her readers with tales of wonder, but Stranger Magic does not just entertain; it serves to underline the human need for magic, dreams and fantasy and in doing so permits us to look more closely at ourselves.

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