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# Of Shimmering Flame

## Zones of Enchantment and the *Arabian Nights*

The cosmology of the *One Thousand and One Nights / Arabian Nights* (Lane 1850; Mack 1998) teems with jinn, intermediate beings who have doctrinal status in Islam. In the Koran (see Khalidi 2009), Solomon is given mastery over them, but not all are obedient to him or to the true God. Their character is consequently ambiguous, and their actions unpredictable; literally volatile, jinn carry the plots in constantly surprising directions, and open up questions about fate and ethics. Just as the Koranic Solomon resembles the Biblical figure, but differs from him in significant ways, so jinn have affinities with Judeo-Christian demons, but the distinctions between them are of profound interest, introducing subtleties to the landscape of the supernatural and to schemes of hope in fairy tales as well as religious scripture.

In the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest, there is a fabulous collection of Judaica, created by one of those extraordinary polyglot scholars of the l9th century, David Kauffmann[1], himself so learned that he could be called a magus. One of his most intriguing treasures is a mahzor, the liturgical book used for the holiest days of the Jewish faith (the word means "cycle").

The manuscript was created in southern Germany in the first half of the 14th century, and it includes some sumptuous illuminations. One has rightly become famous and to modern eyes it is a most entertaining and thought-provoking curiosity. It appears on the opening page of the *Song of Songs*, the biblical poetry which is traditionally attributed to Solomon; it pictures the wise king on the right of a lively diptych, seated on his throne, receiving two curious women with animal faces coming in from the left – one of these might represent the Queen of Sheba. They are preceded – perhaps ushered – by a winged dragon with hu-

1 http://kaufmann.mtak.hu/index-en.html

man hands. In the upper panel, two more women – one with a duck's head that resembles the famous Wittgensteinian rabbit-duck riddle – are also being led in by a wild trio, one tumbling upside down, red legs kicking aloft. They are accompanied by a musical duo, the winged rider sounding a drum and piping, his monstrous mount spotted green, with ostrich-like legs, sucking his own crimson tail, with a bell hanging from his neck. To contemporary eyes, these beings are grotesque, absurd, comical – and the representations irreverent. To western eyes trained in Judeo-Christian iconology, the miniature's subjects also look diabolical at worst, monstrous at best: the witty deformities of their appearance, the lack of harmonious symmetry, their mottled and particoloured skins, the phallic protuberances and hint of raucous charivari mark them out as aberrant, and the beast-like aberrations carry an ethical connotation associating them with wrongdoing and evil nature.

A scholar of Jewish iconography, Ruth Mellinkoff interpreted the women's bestial features as signs of established misogyny; others attribute their appearance to the ban on graven images. There is no agreement, and the imagery is unusual. However, the artist does show signs of Muslim influence, elsewhere in the manuscript too, and the Queen of Sheba, in Islamic belief, is a jinniya, with shaggy legs or donkeys' hooves. She is never however described in a story as animal-headed or metamorphosed, so the illumination here cannot be representing such a legend.

To draw out the meaning of these creatures, it is more fruitful to look at the jinn of the Koran and Middle Eastern folklore. Mahzor's beasts and hybrids do have a great deal in common with the imagery used to represent the intermediate beings of Koranic cosmology, who are allotted by God to be ruled by Solomon, the wise son of David and master of the winds. In sura 72, the jinn are invoked as "beings of shimmering fire" who can rise to the zenith to contemplate the stars, but they appear, in Persian, Turkish and Indian art, as motley creatures. Their combinatory appearances reproduce the plural nature of their character on their bodies: in the sura dedicated to them in the Koran, the jinn tell us, "That among us there are the righteous, and there are the less so – of diverse persuasions are we ... That some of us are Muslims and some are transgressors ... the transgressors shall be firewood for hell" (72:11–15). Significantly, however, the visual imagery does not distinguish between good and bad jinn by such signs as blackness or spottedness or horns or tails: the obedient, good jinn are just as monstrously embodied, in western eyes, as their malefactor kin.

In what follows, I am going to look at the affinities between the iconography of devils and jinn, and at the differences in their meaning, function, and ethical character. Reading signs requires acquaintance with narrative in their readers' and writers' and artists' settings. I will try and communicate some of the jinn's activities from the *Arabian Nights*, and illustrate them with the changing imagery of their appearance, in order to cancel the powerful equation of monstrosity with evil.

The demonic in Europe continued to be depicted as monstrous, mixed and strange, and the irregularity of the devils' forms often produces in the beholder a response that is itself mottled: fear and horror mingling with gaiety and even hilarity. To see the tradition and its tenacity, it is worth having a look at some pages from an exuberant magical treatise in the Wellcome Library, the *Compendium rarissimum totius Artis Magicae*. The manuscript has been created in earnest to all intents and purposes, but its population of demons cannot but help make a reader laugh out loud. Did anyone ever fear such a devil as this? More startlingly still, this is one of several occult manuscripts in the Wellcome collection which was created in the late 18th century. The *Compendium* was written in German and Latin in 1766. In it, we find a grotesque, hare-like creature who is Beelzebub himself,[2] while a bespectacled, perhaps scholarly fright is called Amakbuel.[3] The names of demons often reveal links to oriental esoterica – with both Hebrew and Arabic verbal formulations. But one cannot know whether the artist's humour is inadvertent, or an intrinsic element in the nonsense – the gibberish, cacophony and disharmony – central to unleash devils, in the Pandemonium. Perhaps more genuinely alarming is The Prince of Darkness: Dagol, a fiery, cannibalistic serpentine giant, mangling victims between his jaws like Dante's Satan.[4] The lateness of the manuscript and the persistence of demonic imagery reveal that malformation and combinatory bodies marked out dangerous and powerful agents of darkness long after the Middle Ages. Just as in late antiquity, Christian artists annexed features from the gods of pagan religion – from classical Europe and India above all – to portray the devil, so during the long and complex history

2 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Compendium_rarissimum_totius_Artis_Magicae...._Wellcome_L0027758.jpg

3 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Compendium_rarissimum_totius_Artis_Magicae._Wellcome_L0027817.jpg

4 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Prince_of_Darkeness;_Dagol;_c._1775_Wellcome_L0025428.jpg

of entanglement with the Muslim world, the concept of the jinn coloured the iconology of the forbidden in Christian iconography. Jinni is Arabic for genie or demon. Jinn resemble the daimones of Greek cosmology, neither angels nor devils but intermediate spirits, closer to Paracelsian elementals than to devils.

Visually, jinn are very close to the grotesque figures of devils in medieval Christianity, and to the fantasies of the witch-hunters in early modern Europe, and there may indeed be some cross-fertilisation from India and China, whose gods and demons influenced Christian artists' ways of depicting devils. The Islamic vision of the jinn differs fundamentally, since the obedient jinn who have accepted the true faith are Solomon's servants and are absolutely not evil. They have their disobedient counterparts – the renegade jinn, who in the *Nights* appear in the form of ghouls, marids and afrits – the chief agents of the supernatural. They can cause sickness, epilepsy and madness. A particular foul species (sayatin) haunts refuse pits, lavatories, and other spots of defilement. These apostates adhere to the old religions and their gods; Zoroastrianism from Persia comes in for especially fierce condemnation in the *Arabian Nights*, far greater than Christianity and Judaism, as it constitutes a rejection of Islam by close neighbours and cultural affiliates. It is interesting that it does so, because Zoroastrian cosmology is dualist, with a powerful dark force contending perpetually with the force of good, Ahriman.

The Muslim vision rejects any such arrangements, and this is important to the stories which consequently do not condemn all jinn as diabolical; they are ambivalent, contrary, often intent on doing harm but easily fooled, cravenly servile to their master or mistress as well as entirely subject to whomsoever chance places in that role: to hear is to obey is the jinns' watchword. The Koran warns against praying to them for protection (72:22) but custom over the centuries and into the present resembles rather the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary, who must not be worshipped as such, while in practice... Solomon may be the divinely appointed master of the jinn, but his very mastery often places his famed justice and wisdom in doubt. Besides, he is not in control of all of them all of the time: he has to go to war on an epic scale to maintain his authority, and many of the jinn with whom heroes fall in love exist in zones of enchantment, sometimes under the sway of fantastic demon kings who thrive beyond Solomon's reach.

It is a mistake to think that the emphasis on symbolic patterning excluded all figurative picturing in Muslim art; the prohibition on the human face comes and goes when ordinary individuals are involved – portraiture was a strength of Moghul art, after all. In the l6th and l7th centuries, divine or holy men and

women are painted wearing little veils to cover their faces. But the jinn had their icon-makers, and they were highly inventive, possibly themselves in contact with Christian imagery, as well as subject to its influence. I am not setting out a claim for one supervening over the other, but asking for a view of the cultural mingling that takes place across borders and the moral inflections that then change their intended meaning.

However, one of the most important distinguishing qualities of Muslim belief allows a category of spirit being – the jinn – to be monstrous and yet, unlike the Christian or Judaid devil, jinn are redeemable. It is – was – heresy to believe that the devil could or would be converted –, and Origen, one of the greatest thinkers of the early church, was excluded from the pantheon of saints and the ranks of Doctors of the Church, and punished for proposing it. By contrast, jinn can be saved and the Koran relates how, when they recognize Allah and humble themselves to accept the rule of Solomon over them, they are faithful, good Muslims. And their demonic power is capable of good and ill, according to principles of intercession very close to Catholic doctrine. The jinn are ordered by the prophet to declare, "I merely convey a proclamation from God, and His messages" (72:23). They are more like daimones, the Greek spirits of energy and inspiration than Judeo-Christian devils. Jinn can be propitious, merciful in their power – and even blessed. The iconography of the jinn does not however lead to an immediate grasp of their complex nature and mysterious status in both Orthodox faith and in folklore, as conveyed by the *Arabian Nights*.

The translation 'demon' carries too strong an inference of evil in English; the alternative spellings 'daimon' or 'daemon,' which derive from Greek, capture better the character of Solomon's followers, especially since Philip Pullman in *His Dark Materials* (1995, 1997, 2000) used 'daemon' for the metamorphic animal souls of his characters. Solomon has been given control of these daemons or jinn, as is mentioned several times in the Koran: "We created man from dried clay, from fetid mud. The Jinn We created beforehand, from the fiery wind" (15:26–7). This fiery wind, close to the luminiferous ether of 17th-century New Science, becomes "shimmering flame" elsewhere (55:14–15), and the jinn appear before human beings, who are made of clay. They are consequently close to the element of air, over which Solomon is also given mastery: it is the jinn who carry the flying carpet, on which he can travel to the edge of the universe and encounter the angel who makes rain and the dragon who circles the world. One of the jinn who carry it is even sometimes named Rukha, a word close to Hebrew ruach (wind

of spirit), and to Rukh, the name of the gigantic birds of the *Nights*. Jinn are also at home in the element of water and Solomon can command them there as well: "And demons there were who dived deep at his command, and performed other, lesser tasks. Of them we took good care" (21:82).

One of the richest compendia of portraits of jinn, a luxurious treasure called *The Book of Felicity*, in Arabic *Matali' al-saadet,* was composed by Muhammad ibn Amir Hasan al-Su'udi. (Moleiro 2007) A Turkish translation was commissioned by the Sultan Murad III in l482, and executed in his workshop at Topkapi under the direction of Ustad 'Osman, the great artist of the Ottoman court, who took imagery into new territory. The book was made for the Sultan's daughter, Fatima, to bring her good fortune[5]. It comprises many different disparate sections: an account of the Zodiac with astrological wisdom for each sign, an analysis of physical characteristics, first male, then female, enumerating such features as "having a round tip of the tongue" and "when the behind sticks up towards the back." This scientific table is followed later by another detailed scheme of bodily spasms, illustrated episodes from the *Life of Alexander* and other Muslim wonder tales (*Gog and Magog*; *Sindibad*). But one of the strangest parts offers a rare study of occult divinatory methods. These are illustrated by full-page talismanic illuminations of jinn, each of them allotted a particular sphere of action. These powerful spirit beings could control all manner of harm and danger which varies in social contexts, as conveyed by so many stories in the *Nights*: protection against ill health, danger, poverty, nightmares; success in childbearing, love, status; justice before the law and freedom from slander; luck in love, wealth and dreams. Remedies for specific purposes require specific formulae: to assure a flow of milk for a nursing mother, to withstand the onset of melancholy. Often the talismanic document is written out on paper, then rolled or folded into a wallet or a phylactery. (The exhibition of the Khalili collection at the Institut du monde arabe in 2009 included a gilded talismanic wallet, signed by its maker and created specifically for a certain individual in 1712 to protect him against accidents and illness, and to liberate him should he be captured, see Arts de l'islam 2009.) Solomon is invoked, through pentacles and other symbols; his presence guarantees the orthodoxy of the entreaties.

King Solomon makes an appearance in Sultan Murad III's *Book of Felicity* (or *Book of Happiness*) FOl 131 v. The illumination shows Solomon's throne – the

5 https://docs.moleiro.com/book_felicity_vii_11.pdf

gold hexagon with a blue seat positioned between two angels, so we are in his richly appointed house, with a peacock above and two giant jinn beside the throne, one gently embracing the other. With large rolling eyes, horns, and vampire teeth, they should perhaps be frightening, but they rather communicate cuddly monstrosity on the lines of Maurice Sendak's *Wild Things* in his famous picture book. (Sendak 1975) And their behavior, in addition to their presence in the sanctum of Solomon's palace, gives every confidence they are not out to do us harm.

All over the classical and neoclassical world, Medusa masks and sirens with split tails displayed; *sheela na gigs* are some of the female demons placed over doorways to protect the household from such overwhelming magic such as petrification; ferocious dragons and *chi'lin* guard thresholds; in ancient Egypt and later in the Hellenistic Middle East, Bes the fat gargoyle was placed in nurseries to guard against cradle-snatchers. The danger that needs to be averted gives shape to the defence against it: the virgin martyr carries the weapons of her cruel death and protects against similar afflictions. St Apollonia carries the pincers which drew her teeth and is consequently the patron saint of toothache and dentists. By analogy, the talisman aimed to protect Fatima and other children against nightmares reproduces a fearsome, blue, monstrous jinn flowing into the head of a sleeping child – the very scene which the image repels, or so it is hoped.

The *Book of Felicity* includes several talismanic pages, each filled with a vivid portrait of a jinni or afreet. Fol 90r depicts a common jinni, Huma, responsible for Fever, in a talisman designed to repel illness. Fearsome, profoundly grotesque in accordance with the principles Longinus/Horace criticized, the jinni's enchantment depends on the apotropaic manoeuvre, which all of you know and recognize: magic homeopathy or vaccine. The danger that is feared is warded off by its double, or by some greater monstrosity that therefore can contain it or quell it. The vast majority of Islamic examples in contemporary collections are pious and benign. Talismans can turn hallowed or profane according to their maker or master, the powers invoked by them and the purposes for which they are made. They are ambiguous in the same way as the pharmakon – a remedy or a poison, depending on how they are applied. The picture given in the *Nights* reveals a broader, less principled and far more capricious activity on the part of jinn through the talismans where they sometimes dwell.

Even when absent in person from the tales (he often is), Solomon provides the basic structural plot on which Shahrazad's stories depend, and his powers underlie the whole narrative foundation of the magic in the *1001 Nights*. While

the dominant frame of the *Nights* concerns Shahrazad's mission to save herself and all other women from the rage of the Sultan, that salvation story is itself contained within another larger myth about origins, analogous, but not identical, to the Judeo-Christian account of the rebel angels. This relates that some of the jinn revolted against the true God and proclaimed allegiance to Eblis, the Satan of Islamic cosmology, consequently were punished by Solomon, and became the capricious and powerful agents of caprice and wickedness who work the wonders that transfuse the world of the stories. But unlike the biblical story, the Koran – and the *Nights* – include jinn who remained true to Solomon and Allah, as well as others who repent later, in the course of the tales told by Shahrazad.

The jinns' double character in the stories opens a crucial space of possibility for them in the narrative: as the agents of fortune. As Pier Paolo Pasolini commented, "every tale in *The Thousand and One Nights* begins with an 'appearance of destiny' which manifests itself through an anomaly, and one anomaly always generates another. So, a chain of anomalies is set up... The protagonist of the stories is in fact destiny itself."[6] Destiny is the chief character of the *Nights*. But destiny in the stories is multivalent and sets off the chain of anomalies which Pasolini describes: the jinn introduce a dynamic of pure chance which runs alongside the larger designs of fate, now meeting them, now parting from them, rather as the breeze on the sea will form cross-currents in the wave pattern on the surface, which sailors watch carefully to determine the direction of the wind they can catch rather than the current or the tide in the water. (Willemen 1997, 74)

## Beings of Shimmering Fire

The jinn, good, bad and in-between, who flock in the *Nights*, add the energy of unpredictability to the plots in which they appear. They actually embody a tremendous narrative principle which gives the stories in the *Nights* their distinctive, enjoyable flavour. The jinn's role reflects how the collective poetic imagination that created the stories felt a need to identify intermediate agents, capable of both good and evil at whim; the invention constitutes an answer to the problem of evil existing in the monotheistic landscape, when a good, all-powerful deity allows terrible things to happen, including injustice.

6 https://fairytale.fandom.com/wiki/One_Thousand_and_One_Nights

## "The Fisherman and the Genie"

An old fisherman living in great poverty with a wife, his son and two daughters throws his net into the sea one moonlit night, and has no luck: his first haul is the carcass of a donkey, his second an old jar full of sand and clay, his third a heap of bits of glass and pottery, bones and débris. In between each throw of his net, he rails against fortune and passionately laments his state: "Here virtue cries for misery, and the good-for-nothing disguises himself in his kingdom. The bird that soars high exhausts itself from west to east, while the canary in its cage feasts on sweets."

He then looks up at the sky, sees dawn is beginning to break and prays that his fourth and last attempt will bring his family something to eat from the sea, in the same way as God made it obey Moses. This time, he fishes up a copper bottle, sealed with a lead stopper, and is overjoyed because the copper will fetch at least six gold dinars which he can use to buy wheat. Before setting out for the market, he decides he must open it, and as he chisels away at the lead with his knife, smoke starts rising up and up, and darkens the blue of the morning sky before it rolls down to the ground again, gathers itself together to a great rumble and takes the form of a huge afrit: "his head, as high as a dome, touched the clouds, while his feet rested on the ground. His hands resembled gigantic pitchforks, his legs the mast of a ship, his ears shields, his mouth a cavern, his teeth rocks, his nose a jar, his nostrils trumpets, his eyes torches. He had a mane of hair, all tangled and dusty. A real monster!"

The fisherman is seized by a terrible fear, as he hears the jinni – for it is a jinni, of the fearsome species of the afrits – cry out a profession of faith in the true God and in Solomon his prophet, and promise that he will never disobey him again. The fisherman reproaches him, telling him Solomon has been dead more than 1,800 years: "We are living at the end of time," he says, and demands to know his story. The jinni tells him to rejoice; but he is being cruelly ironic for with his next breath he informs the fisherman that the hour of his death is at hand, and he must choose the method and the tortures he shall suffer.

The fisherman protests: he has delivered him from the bottle, and is to be rewarded by a terrible death? "Listen to my story," orders the afrit. He then tells the fisherman: "Know that I am a heretical demon. I refused to obey Solomon, son of David. My name is Sakhr." He relates how he was brought before Solomon by his vizier and ordered to embrace the true God, but persisted in his refusal, and so was captured and sealed up inside the flask with the lead stopper, inscribed

with the name of the true God, and thrown by the faithful jinn to the bottom of the sea. There a hundred years passed, and the jinni promised to bring riches to his deliverer. No one saved him, and another hundred years passed, and he swore to make his rescuer even richer. Another four hundred years passed, and by this time the jinni had become so enraged, he swore that he would kill anyone who freed him now.

The fisherman begs for mercy, but his enemy remains obdurate. "O master of demons," cries out the fisherman. "Is this how you return evil for good?"

He recites a pious proverb which warns against such behaviour – and adds an allusion to the fate that overtakes the ungrateful hyena in a beast-fable. "Stop dreaming," says the implacable jinni. "You have to die." The fisherman reminds himself that unlike this jinni, he is a human being, endowed with reasoning powers; he can work out a stratagem. He invokes the name of God as engraved on the ring of Solomon and pledges the afrit to answer a question truthfully. His antagonist is agitated at the invocation of God and the ring, and agrees. The fisherman then asks him how he got into the bottle, since even one of his hands and feet would not fit. "I'll only believe it when I see it with my own eyes," says the fisherman.

(It is the end of the third night in the cycle, and Shahrazad breaks off: with the dawn she must stop. But the Sultan wants to hear what happens next and so she is reprieved for another day – and night. On the fourth night, she resumes her tale.)

The fisherman watches the jinni shake himself all over and turn back into smoke which rises to heaven and then gathers together and enters the flask. From inside Sakhr calls out: "You see, fisherman, I am inside the flask. Do you believe me now?"

The fisherman rushes to seize the flask and the stopper of lead imprinted with the seal of Solomon, and stuffs it back into the mouth of the bottle. Now it is his turn to give the order that the jinni must die. He is going to throw him in the sea, he says, and build himself a house on the spot so that nobody else can fish there. The jinni struggles in vain to free himself, but he finds himself once more a prisoner of the seal of Solomon.

"No, no," he cries out as his jailer walks towards the sea.

"Yes, yes," replies the fisherman.

The rebel afrit tries to cajole him, sweetly and softly, and promises him wealth and blessings. But the fisherman does not believe his protestations. He knows

another story about kindness rewarded with death, and it has made him wary. And Shahrazad begins to tell the story of the fisherman telling that story...

The famous trickster tale of "The Fisherman and the Genie," at once alarming and funny, so satisfying in its (first) neat resolution when the pauper outwits the colossus, the enemy is hoist on his own petard, and the jinni inveigled back into the bottle, has rightly enjoyed a long and celebrated history (it was successfully restaged in the 2008 Disney Aladdin, with Robin Williams voicing the genie). But when Sakhr remembers the scene of his rebellion and punishment at the hands of Solomon, his story provides the fundamental background plot for the cosmology of the *Arabian Nights*, in which the wise king plays a pre-eminent role as master of the book's magic, with the jinn at his command.

The myth of Solomon's relation with this distinctive order of beings forms the deep and familiar backdrop of the *Nights*. It did not need to be spelt out by the storyteller but could be dropped into a plot where the focus lies elsewhere (on the fisherman's cunning and his ultimate salvation, for example). Shahrazad, and the real-life narrators who followed her, could assume the audience knew the backstory, just as Homer does not begin at the beginning with the story of the Trojan War, but plunges in, taking it for granted that his audience is fully aware of what took place at the Judgement of Paris.

Unexpectedly, the part of Solomon's story that concerns jinn in their bottles was known in the Middle Ages in Europe: a Middle English poem (Reames 2003) about St Margaret of Antioch includes her victory over the dragon sent by Beelzebub to destroy her. Beelzebub then appears; she binds him too. He plaintively reveals that the dragon was his brother and tells a variant of the story of their imprisonment by Solomon:

> "Salamon the wyse kynge, whyle he was on lyve,
> He closed us in a bras fat and dalfe us in a clyve.
> The men of Babylon that bras fat gunne ryve;
> And whanne that broken was, oute we gan dryve . . .
> Some swyfter then the wynde and some as swyfte as roo,
> And alle that byleve on Jhesu Cryste we werke hem mychel woo."
> ("Solomon the wise king, while he was still alive,
> Shut us up in a brass vat and buried us in the ground,
> The men of Babylon broke open that brass vat
> And when it was broken, we began to stream out.

Some swifter than the wind and some as swift as deer,
on all who believe in Jesus Christ, we work dreadful woe.")

The medieval poet may have heard the story as a pilgrim or a crusader, and it is after all from the same part of the world as Margaret of Antioch herself. Just as it is no longer true that audiences know the Greek myths, so it is with the traditions of Solomon in the *Arabian Nights*, for his Koranic persona is unfamiliar beyond the world of Islam.

The jinni Sakhr plays a dominant role in the legends about Solomon that precede the date accepted for the creation of the *Arabian Nights* in the form of the book known today. The earliest manuscript is given to the 15th century, though there are some scholars who place it earlier. Sakhr the Rebellious figures in the mythology of the days before the prophet, as one of the unenlightened, disobedient jinn. Unlike the biblical king, the Muslim Solomon understands the language of beasts and birds and commands the winds and the elements; he rules over the higher order of angels and, above all, is given mastery over the innumerable spirits, the jinn, who exist invisibly alongside angels, humans and animals and form a distinct order of beings, elemental and mortal, metamorphic physically and morally, shifting between states of visibility and invisibility, capable of redemption and goodness yet for the most part, especially in the stories of the *Nights*, capricious, arbitrary and amoral. The stories of the *Nights* take these aspects of Solomon for granted, and treat them to no exclamations of wonder, giving the impression that these qualities of his were generally known by the community of listeners as well as by the makers of the literature. There is, however, so much common ground between the Judeo-Christian tradition about the wise king and the Islamic and other Eastern material that it would be too blunt to argue simply that something intrinsically Islamic fostered the magus while Christendom preferred the wise judge.

Solomon belongs to the three monotheisms of the Middle East, appears in the Bible and the Koran, and in Judaic folklore and Kabbalistic belief. The wise king cuts a majestic yet enigmatic figure, and his deeds and characteristics, as related in the scriptures of three faiths, provide the seedstore from which the fantasies of the *Nights* have grown so richly.

The "sagest of all sages, the mage of all mages," he combines kingship and prophecy with magic, and passes from mainstream religion into mysticism and hermetic lore, with numerous wisdom books from the Bible as well as medieval and later grimoires or magic handbooks claiming his authorship (such as the

*Clavis Salomonis – The Key of Solomon* – and the *Ars notoria*); Solomonic wisdom, emerging from the Jewish-Hellenistic culture of the Middle East in antiquity, enjoyed remarkable longevity, and continued to be collected, copied, and revised in manuscripts in various languages well into the 18th and 19th centuries. His seal, his pentacle (Solomon's seal or pentacle has been a favourite cipher in 17th century Italy), and the temple he built remain salient throughout the history and practice of magic, both by marginal occult sects or by more respectable bodies, such as the Freemasons, above all.

Solomon is credited with authorship of the *Song of Songs*, *Ecclesiastes*, the *Book of Wisdom* itself, and with the *Book of Proverbs*, books which include the most intense lyric passages of the Bible as well as the Wisdom tradition of the Middle East; both these strong strands weave through the *1001 Nights*, where the stories are cadenced by bursts of ecstatic poetry on the one hand and fabulist exempla on the other. His myth meets and combines with those of others – of the hero-kings and prophets, Alexander the Great, Merlin, Hermes Trismegistus and Virgil. There are other figures of great wisdom in holy scripture – the three kings are called "the wise men from the east" in the New Testament, and there are numerous prophets, of course, but Solomon surpasses them all because, when asked in a dream what he most desires, he does not ask for money and power or long life but responds by praying to God for "an understanding heart to judge thy people and to know good and evil" (2 Chronicles 1:7–12). As a result, God answers his prayer and "Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:30). The reference to Egypt, the most fertile and ancient repository of magical wisdom, gives Solomon explicit superiority to that knowledge, as Moses (and Aaron) surpass Pharaoh's magicians in the Bible. Middle East scholar Chester Charlton McCown, commenting on Solomon's character as a magus, writes, "Few [traditions] have a richer and more varied documentation than that which glorifies the wisdom of Solomon. It may well serve as an example of the manner in which the human mind works in certain fields." (McCown 1992, 1–24)

In the Bible, Solomon's wisdom translates into practical knowledge: he is no hermit or meditative philosopher, but pursues the *via activa* as an astronomer and natural scientist, as well as a judicious ruler handing out his celebrated and cunning decisions. God has given him knowledge of the stars and their relation to time, understanding of the properties of plants and roots; he can also read thoughts (Book of Wisdom 7:17–22). The folklore that the king inspires in the

Middle East, before Islam was founded, flows into the *Arabian Nights*. For example, *The Testament of Solomon*, a splendid phantasmagoria about Solomon drilling demons to build the Temple, is a Greek compendium composed in Jewish circles before 300 AD, with some Christian additions and many affinities with later Koranic and Middle Eastern folklore. The New Testament scholar (and ghost story writer) M. R. James commented in his 1899 introduction, "No one has ever paid very much attention to this futile, but exceedingly curious, work ... related to 'Greek magical papyri and ... fairy and demon stories of East and West." (James 1899)

Since then, there has been more interest in this richly imaginative catalogue of demons, which is vividly cast in the first person of Solomon reviewing his life; it recounts a series of conversations between Solomon and the devils, whom he summons by power of his ring and the sign of the pentacle engraved on its gemstone, which has been given to him by the archangel Michael. The devils include some who have since achieved fame, like Beelzebub and Asmodeus, alongside scores of others who have not; they each have different very specific victims and ingenious – diabolical – ways of doing harm. One by one they are conscripted against their will and set to perform tasks that match their spheres of activity: the demoness Onoskelis, who strangles her victims in a noose, is ordered to spin the hemp to make ropes to haul materials. Later in the story, one of the demons whom Solomon tames links interestingly to the *Nights*: the king's help is requested in a pitiful letter by the ruler of Arabia, where the people are suffering from a demon wind ("its blast is harsh and terrible"). Solomon sets the request aside, as he is concentrating on raising the keystone of the Temple, but it is so huge and heavy that more help is needed besides Onpskelis's rope-making. But later, he dispatches a servant to Arabia with a leather flask and his seal, and tells him to hold it open facing the wind like a windsock and when it has filled out to close the neck with the seal; he is then to bring the devil wind back to Jerusalem. He does so; and the wind duly dies down, to the relief and gratitude of the Arabs. Three days later, the servant returns to Jerusalem, and the story continues:

> "And on the next day, I King Solomon, went into the Temple of God and sat in deep distress about the stone of the end of the corner. And when I entered the Temple, the flask stood up and walked around some seven steps and then fell on its mouth and did homage to me. And I marvelled that even along with the bottle the de-

> mon still had power and could walk about; and I commanded it to stand up." (*Testament of Solomon*, 43[7])

This demon tells him his name – Ephippass – and promises to do anything Solomon wishes. The king orders him to lift the keystone into place, which he does, later going on mysteriously to raise a huge column on a pillar of air. With this miracle, the intermingling of air with spirits takes the form of physical currents – wind, even tornadoes – and the demon announces the feats of sprites like Ariel and the tempest he raises by enchantment. A later work, a commentary on the Koran – Qisas al-anbiya – includes Sakhr in this crew of demons working to build the Temple. (Al-Kisai 1997) He is given the task of helping the jinn to chisel the stones without making a noise.

The *Testament of Solomon* also provides some of the material that will be worked into the background of the *Nights*; its marked love of aerodynamic wonders – the flight of the jinn, of Aladdin's palace and other prodigious displacements and overnight sensations – can be seen taking shape in this storyteller's fantasy. The *Testament of Solomon* takes the form its title suggests: at the end of his life, the wise king is giving an account of himself, so, setting aside its anecdotal supernaturalism, the work makes a real attempt to make sense of Solomon's complex character as both a godly, wise man of sacred scriptures and an apostate who worships false gods. It does so by concluding with the story from the Bible that he fell in love with the daughter of Pharaoh and "many strange women" besides:

> "And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines...
> For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods..." (I King 11:4).

Among these gods, the Bible mentions Ashtoreth, and Milcom "the abomination of the Ammonites," and how Solomon sacrificed to them. For this reason, the God of the Bible eventually prevents Solomon's son from inheriting his kingdom. In relation to the *Arabian Nights*, this fall from grace gives Solomon an equivocal, even lesser status in the eyes of Western audiences. In the Muslim sacred book, by contrast, the wise ruler is tested by God and tempted in different, often highly

7 https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Testament_of_Solomon.djvu/43

ambiguous ways. But his character is steadier – there are no temptress women to lead him away from the true God. In one passage, his virtue falters:

> "Remember when, on an evening, were displayed before him horses
> frisky and fleet.
> He said: 'I have a love of horses that makes me forget my Lord till
> the sun hides behind its veil. Bring them back to me.'
> And he proceeded to stroke their Shanks and necks."
> (Koran 38:31–33)

More crucially, he successfully withstands the lure of "disbelieving devils ... who taught mankind sorcery..."

> "They know full well that he who deals in sorcery has no share in
> the afterlife.
> Wretched is the price they pay for their souls, if only they knew!"
> (Koran 2:101–2)

So, his magical powers are clearly distinguished from the practice of sinners and apostates: theus is goety, his theurgy.

Both holy books reflect legends and folklore circulating in the region before the stories about Solomon were written down, but with these careful discriminations, the Koran establishes that some forms of magic can be divinely approved and benign. It presents Solomon as a man with a deep understanding of the heavens and the properties of things; it also describes the command God has given him over natural forces, embodied by jinn who inhabit distant kingdoms, worlds beyond this world often evoked as paradisal wildernesses filled with all kinds of rare and marvelous stones, animals and birds. These sides of Solomon's character subsequently give rise to yet more imaginative fantasies, ranging from the mystical to the scabrous. Solomon's mythopoeic fertility has not come to an end. Hans Werner Henze recently composed an opera called *L'Upupa* (*The Hoopoe*) for which he wrote the libretto, where he improvises with evident delight on motifs from the *Nights* about Solomon and his messenger bird (Henze 2003), while at the more popular end of culture, the World Wide Web today is packed, as one might expect, with Solomonic lore: the wise king is now identified as a shaman, and promises access to healing of mind and body.

The literature which gathers around his legend in Europe ranges through love magic, pharmacology, scatology, homespun lore, and rude common sense (when he finds himself in comic material, he plays the ultimate wise guy). But even in the most esoteric or coarsest passages, Solomon's supreme knowledge and insight remain his defining characteristics. Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy* around the same time as the Mahzor manuscript was produced, in which Solomon appears – an indication of the wise king's prominence. The Italian poet, who gives diviners and conjurors very short shrift in the *Inferno*, ignores any taint of necromancy or womanizing in Solomon's legend, and places him unequivocally in Paradise in the sphere of the sun where his starry soul shines gloriously as the fifth light. Thomas Aquinas indicates his starry soul:

> "La quinta luce, ch'è tra noi più bella,
> spira di tale amor, che tutto 'l mondo
> là giù ne gola di saper novella:
> entro v'è l'alata mente u' si profondo
> saver fu messo, che se 'l vero è vero
> a veder tanto non surse il secondo."
> (*Par*. X, ll. 109–15)
>
> ("The fifth light, which is the most beautiful among us, breathes from such a love that all the world below hungers for news of it; within it is the lofty mind to which was given wisdom so deep that, if the truth be true, there never arose a second of such vision." See Dante 1971)

Three cantos later, before another reverent evocation of King Solomon, Dante gives an elaborate account of the sphere of the sun, with the singing stars and their double dance (*Par*. XIII, ll. 1–27). The complex astronomical scheme which his dense verses evoke shows the poet's deep reading in hermetic and astrological texts, from later versions of Greek Neoplatonists which were transmitted – and preserved – through Arabic translations. But the harmony of the wheeling stars depends on Dante's identification of his own metaphysical strivings with the goals of geometry: in the closing lines of the *Divine Comedy*, he compares his awe at his vision of paradise to

> Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affl ige
> per misurar lo cherchio, e non ritrova
> pensando, quel principio ond'elli indige
> tal ero io a quella vista nova.
> (*Par.* XXXIII, 133–6)
>
> ("Like the geometer who sets all his mind to the squaring of the circle and for all his thinking does not discover the principle he needs, such was I at that strange sight.")

The biblical Solomon, who combines kingship with unsurpassed wisdom, synthesises for Dante the ideal fusion of worldly justice, science and metaphysics. But the topological structure of the universe in *Paradiso* XIII, in which the shining soul of Solomon lives forever, displays the working of a particular practical mnemonic system credited to Solomon the magus and to sages after him. Dante invites his readers directly to picture in their mind's eye two turning gyres involving twenty-four stars; in this way, he invites us to use fantasia to understand the heavens. Such a practice of active imagination is central to magical thinking, invoked, for example, in the life of the magus Apollonius of Tyana by Apollodorus in the late second century AD, and adopted by such practitioners of natural magic as Pietro Pomponazzi and Giordano Bruno, for whom visualisation was an active force which can tune in to the forces of the cosmos and penetrate the secrets of phenomena.

Dante always shows great sensitivity to the dangers of magic, and is consistent in his repudiation: Virgil may be his guide to the underworld because his poem proves his special access to such secrets, but the Roman poet in Dante's poem bears no other trace of the many marvelous feats of magic attributed to him by medieval tradition. In the same way, Dante allows the associations of Solomon's occult wisdom to infuse the scenes in which he appears in *Paradiso*, while he himself enacts mentalist methods for committing knowledge to memory using geometrical forms, as advocated in the tradition of natural magic, and then enjoins his readers to follow the same process.

The glorious and blameless figure of Solomon in Dante's *Paradise* may seem remote from the colourful folklore that fills the *Arabian Nights*, but his Dantean character epitomises how acutely the poet needed to distance his work. The strong contrast between this Solomon and the Solomon who commands the jinn is crucial, I believe, to the eventual huge success of the Eastern stories in Europe.

While Christian orthodoxy, as defined by Thomas Aquinas's thought, must reject magic, the cosmology of the *Nights* gives magic space; it becomes a vision of natural order, and the magus, symbolised pre-eminently by Solomon, takes up a role within this territory of enchantment, which can be either beneficent or malignant depending on which story is being told. To contemporary readers, however, and to Jews and Christians whose angelology is more uncompromisingly dualist, Solomon's magical powers cast him in a very ambiguous light – in the realm of fantasy fit for (children's) literature rather than metaphysics. This alternative theology, however, does allow the concept of the good demon to flourish – and a demon who can be either good or bad, quite apart from the profound effects this possibility has on an ethics of redemption, is a catalyst of narrative surprise.

The moral potential for righteousness, as attributed to the jinn, leads to another development in the stories of the Middle East and the *Arabian Nights*. The worlds of humans and jinn can intermingle, and even marry – without necessarily leading to catastrophe. A human being can fall in love with a jinniya and marry her – in some cases, happily. Numerous fairy tales in the *Nights* tell of such unions – and of their fairy children, who can take up residence in Cairo or Baghdad without mishap. In "The Tale of the Second Old Man", for example, in the cycle of "The Merchant and the Genie" towards the beginning of the *Nights*, the protagonist relates how when he was young he met a slave in rags on a quayside who asked him to marry her, which he did, and how, later, his brothers plotted against him, robbed him, and threw him and his young bride into the sea. Whereupon, revealing herself to be a fairy, she plucked him out to safety:

> She took me upon her shoulders and, carrying me to an island, left me and disappeared for the whole night. In the morning she returned and said: 'Do you not know me? I am your wife. Know now that I am a jinniyah and that when I first saw you, my heart loved you, for Allah willed it so . . .'

She is in a rage against his brothers, she continues, and is flying off that very night to sink their boat and kill them. The old man pleads her to show mercy towards them, and she agrees; she carries him up into the air and deposits him back on the roof of his home. There he finds his brothers leashed and weeping. They have been changed into bitches by his wife's fairy sister when she heard of their wickedness; the spell cannot be lifted before ten years are up. The old man is now

wandering with his transformed brothers in search of his lost fairy wife. Women – human women – can also become the spouses, reluctant or otherwise, of demon lovers. In the frame story, the Sultan Shahriyar and his brother Shahzenan come across the colossal jinni's beautiful prisoner, a human woman who has been stolen by this disobedient and wicked jinni on her wedding day from her husband. They show no surprise that such a relationship should exist, but are only horrified at her ferocious desire to avenge herself through sex. The indeterminacy of the outcome of such jinn-human marriages lifts the stories into the realm of surprise. The stories give warnings about the complexity of these unions, however. The tales of Hasan of Basra and of Jullanar of the Sea, like legends about selkies in Scotland, or the fairy tale of Undine or Rusalka in Europe, unfold marriages to a fairy wife that are fraught with danger and heartbreak. But on the whole, it seems that men can love and marry jinn or perish, but relations between women and jinn are often violent and unhappy; tales of abduction, and captivity dominate – transparent allegories about abusive marriages.

Several magical unions do, however, take place between human grooms and fairy brides, and these marriages can prosper and do not need to end with the separation of worlds again. Janshah, Hasan of Basra and Prince Ahmed are some of the heroes who, spellbound by the beauty of a fairy they have once glimpsed, pursue her through thick and thin, and eventually succeed in winning her and returning home to the world with her as their wife. Similarly, the otherworldly romance of Sayf al-Muluk and Badiat al-Jamal dramatises Sayf's undying passion for the jinniya Badiat, daughter of the king of the true-believing jinn. Her portrait has been magically woven in gold into a jewel-studded robe, and given by Solomon himself as a reward for his conversion to Islam to Sayf's father, the King of Egypt. Sayf unfolds the robe and sees Badiat's beauty and is lost – his life becomes an epic quest to find her. Through a tangle of bizarre and wonderful adventures (monstrous races, fabulous islands, many near-death experiences) he does so. En route he rescues a maiden – Dawlat Kathun; she is captive to a rebel jinni, son of the Blue King of the jinn, who has stolen her away to his castle, 120 years' journey from her home in Serendip. This demon prince has been warned at birth by his horoscope that he will meet his death at the hand of a son of a human king, so he has hidden his soul in the stomach of a sparrow, which he has shut up in a box, then put the box in a chest, inside another chest, repeating the manoeuvre seven times seven, until the last coffer, which is made of marble; this he has sunk by the shore of the ocean stream that encircles the world.

But Dawlat Khatun has learned the secret of her captor's vulnerability, and she confides it to Sayf, who, when he hears it, cries out,

> I am that son of a king! And here on my finger is the ring of Solomon, son of David – blessed be their names! Come now with me down to the shore and we shall see if what is said is true!

With the magic of the ring, he raises the marble chest from the ocean depths, breaks through all the boxes within boxes and extracts the sparrow. The demon jinni in the form of a huge cloud of dust pursues them, wheedling piteously for his life. But Sayf strangles the sparrow, and the jinni collapses in a heap of black ashes. Dawlat Khatun is free: she turns out to be his beloved Badiat's milk-sister and she helps Sayf al-Muluk to find her. The romance ends in a double wedding which braids and knots together most satisfyingly the long tangle of the plotlines (I have hardly begun to comb them out here).

Solomon plays a distant role but his magic suffuses this epic romance, which stages a teeming population of jinn, both good and evil, inhabiting regions all around the world and far beyond its known borders. Dramatically capable of changing size, jinn have the edgeless forms of their elements, air and fire; whether rebels or not, they are intrinsically metamorphic beings and can take an infinite number of human, animal and monstrous shapes. Multiple, versatile, fluid and elusive, they incarnate energy in the stories. But they also feel things keenly, and they die: these mortal sympathies add depths and even pathos to their role.

The poet and scholar Amira El-Zein has commented in a recent book, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*: "[...]it is captivating that beings from the two realms of the visible and invisible worlds travel freely from one realm to the other... The movement from one dimension to another is constantly open both ways. From the perspective of these folktales, it is quite natural for humans and jinn to constantly circulate between the two realms as the scriptures and the tradition certify, while many folktales and fairytales in the West display rather preserved domains for each species." (El-Zein 2009, 117) She goes on to compare this Eastern folk theme with the Mélusine legend, a tale which belongs in the family that inspired the "The Little Mermaid" by Andersen and Dvořák's opera "Rusalka", where the prohibition on mingling between the sea creature and a human prince demands that the heroine denature her fairy form: in Andersen's cruel imagination her tail is split to make legs. From Scotland to southern Eu-

rope, it is fatal to fall in love with a being of another world: the forlorn Merman in Arnold's poem ("The Forsaken Merman") pines for ever for his lost bride; the fisherman yearns for the selkie who vanished when he broke the prohibition and either looked at her on a forbidden day, or found her sealskin and tried to keep her from putting it on again.

Similarly, when the jinniya take the form of aerial beings and can also live in the depths of the sea, they resemble the swan maidens and sirens of European lore. But, again, they are not necessarily doomed to separation or death. The daimonic, spiritual and enchanted interpenetrate the earthly like the twisting threads of a tapestry.

A remarkable legal document was drawn up in Syria in the 14th century to determine the status of such unions in accordance with the faith, with the Koran and the Hadith as well as the biographies of the Prophet. Though the theological evidence comes down on the side of disapproval of such marriages, they are not deemed inconceivable: indeed, the very disapproval expressed by these highest authorities admits their possibility. Children can be born of these matches and the tales sometimes give warnings about their future; but the offspring of humans and jinn do not only occur in the fantasies of romances or the *Nights*: in Luxor in the 1970s, the Arabist Fred Leemhuis was told about a local man who had two wives, one a jinniya whom he saw every Thursday in the upstairs room of his house. They had five invisible children, while with his human wife, who lived on the ground floor, he had nine visible offspring. His transport business flourished as his jinn children lent a helping hand. Some of the learned opinion opposes this view, arguing that, quite apart from the unlawfulness of such procreation, jinn cannot take the fully human form necessary to conceive a human baby – the existence of the jinn is not in doubt, but suitability of their form.

In a plot, the supreme being can act as a narrative force embodied in providence, but there are limits to the spectrum of his behaviour. Even the furious God of the Old Testament does not possess the degree of idiosyncrasy and vitality that less strictly perfect beings, intrinsically various and unruly, can add to a story. It is not simply a question of the devil having the best tunes, but a reflection of the inherent demand that this kind of fairytale storytelling makes: for surprise, for wonder, for astonishment.

The Greek myths could imagine gods and goddesses behaving badly and they correspondingly fizz with inventive plots: with the fairytale and the tales from

the *Nights* this variety and spice, so necessary to a good story, move out of the ranks of the divine into the intermediate world of spirits.

The Koran does not describe the jinn in zoomorphic terms, but their traditional animal hybridity reciprocates Solomon's god-given mastery over the animal world, his understanding the language of the birds, and his attendant train of creatures, real and mythical, including his messenger the hoopoe. Several scenes of the Koran dramatise enigmatic relations between the wise king and the natural world, including that strange love of horses quoted earlier. Some of the jinns' activities on Solomon's behalf – their diving into the sea and raising a wind – associate them with the elements, and in many ways they are closer to nature spirits, to the elves and fairies and sprites of English and Celtic folklore than to the demons of the religious tradition. The jinn became portrayed with animal features in the context of the heavenly court, the artists reaching for a language that mediates between the visible natural world and the supernatural. In the visual tradition of Persia and India, where the ban on graven images was less strictly observed than elsewhere in the Islamic world, the Solomon of the Koran presides over a scene of paradisical enchantment, characterised by talking beasts and birds – including his messenger the hoopoe.

For example, in a wonderfully opulent and richly detailed miniature from the Deccan in Mughal India, painted c. 1610–30 AD, the hoopoe is perched on Solomon's shoulder; Solomon is seated on his throne with its seven steps and lions couchant; his deputy – the general in charge of the troops of the jinn, al-Damiryat – stands on his right, next to his vizier, al-Bahrakya. These are two of Solomon's four princes, with the lion as the prince of beasts and the eagle the prince of birds.

This Solomon of Islamic culture presides over animated phenomena, all obedient to his command, like the jinn. Many rich manuscript illuminations, painted in Persia or, again, in Moghul India illustrate these passages of the Koran, and show Solomon presiding in his court, usually in a garden paradise, surrounded by angels and jinn, birds and animals – the harmonious and varied Edenic world at his disposal. Yet the jinn in attendance are monstrous, with hooves and tusks and tails and hairy bodies, often luridly coloured, spotted and ill-assorted with exaggerated, often comical faces, rolling eyes, drooling mouths.

In a more extended passage, from Sura 27 "The Ants," the Koran gives more detail about Solomon's God-given gifts. It opens with apocalyptic passages about the plagues of Egypt obtained by Moses from God to punish Pharaoh and his people and then passes rapidly on to Moses's notable successors. Solomon makes

a mysterious appearance in a sequence of compressed yet vividly coloured scenes which draw on popular legends about the wisest of wise men. The sura tells us that Solomon said:

> O people, we have been taught the language of Birds, and granted of all gifts. This is truly a favour most conspicuous. [...] Solomon's host of jinn, men, and birds were marshalled in ordered ranks before him, and when they came to the Valley of the Ants, one ant said, 'O ants, enter your dwellings lest Solomon and his troops should crush you unawares.'
>
> (Koran 27:15–18)

Solomon, understanding the warning, "smiled in amusement at its words," and gives thanks for the gift, asking God to admit him to the company of his servants. In a highly elliptical manner, the Koran does not expand on the episode, but implies that Solomon, as he has been given power to understand the speech of all creatures, was able to take care not to harm the ants who, as puny, anonymous and labouring creatures, serve to remind us of the importance of humility.

Another insect, sometimes an ant, sometimes a termite, makes a further, highly symbolic appearance in Solomon's legend: the king has captured the most powerful of the jinn, including Beelzebub, and ordered them to build the Temple. But he realises that he will die before the work is finished, and that the jinn will down tools as soon as they see that he is near his end. So, he sets himself up to lean on his staff and remain there, standing, until an insect gnaws through the stick and Solomon's corpse falls to the ground. The Koran refers simply to "a crawling creature of the earth" (34:14) and this is variously translated, but in all cases the point is the paltriness of the agent in this episode when the great wise king's mortality is revealed.

Sometimes the ants are replaced by locusts, which are even lesser in status. But Solomon's wisdom consists in his appreciation of all human contingency, and his acknowledgement of his own littleness. Sura 27 then passes swiftly on to the scene in which Solomon calls for his messenger, the hoopoe, and when he does not come to his call, threatens to kill him for this lapse (27:21). But the bird soon returns and brings news of a queen living in the south – this is the Koran's account of the Queen of Sheba's encounter with Solomon, given rather differently in the Bible (1 Kings 10:1–13). Solomon forgets about punishing the bird and

becomes curious; through a series of magical prestiges, he summons the queen to come and meet him. The Koran then moves into phase briefly with the Bible; but the two accounts of the meeting soon part again as the Koran includes cryptic moments of mysterious magic, as when Solomon conjures a floor of glass which the queen mistakes for a deep pool of water... 'and exposed her legs.' Solomon then reveals to her that "This is a terrace burnished with glass." She instantly converts to his God.

The chapter then closes with stirring accounts detailing the doom that will fall upon unbelievers at the Day of Judgment – in terms recognisably echoing both the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation. As in the encounter with the ants, Solomon's reactions to the Queen of Sheba reveal above all his defining persona as magus, a man endowed with preternatural powers over living things and the elements, who can interrupt time and vault through space at will. Yet he is also mortal, fallible and flawed while the Queen of Sheba's mysterious nether limbs identify her as a jinniya in some versions of her encounter with Solomon.

An unusual moral twist on a ransom tale, told by the Persian romancer Nizami in *The Mirror of the Invisible World* (Chelkowski 1975), has a compelling emotive charge: Nizami relates how the child Solomon and the queen have together is born deformed, but they learn that they can heal him if they confess to each other the truth about themselves. The queen admits she lusts after young men, while Solomon, in this story, does not suffer from similar libidinousness but confesses he covets lavish gifts in return for dispensing his famous wisdom. As the two bare their weaknesses to each other, their child grows whole again.

[This child, known by several different names, will himself enjoy a great destiny, as the founder of the Ethiopian royal house, rulers of a most ancient Christian nation, and the spiritual ancestor of Rastafarianism, which traces itself in this way directly back to Solomon: Haile Selassie, the last emperor being the last earthly representative of the wise king.]

The legends of Solomon form the warp on which the *Nights* are woven in another respect. He commands the beasts and the airs, and the jinn are his agents, but none of his enchantments would be powerful without his seal, and the inscriptions stamped out by its means: the stoppers in the bottles which hold captive the renegade jinn are sealed with his pentacle and his motto. The talismans that control the jinni of the nightmare and of fever are written, material objects. In the concluding part of this lecture, I now turn to the spirit powers infused into the talisman by means of inscription; this ancient amuletic religious prac-

tice, widespread throughout the world of antiquity, was given an intensely scribal, rather than purely emblematic or rebus-like character in Muslim devotions. Talismans are still widespread in the Middle East, and they hold intrinsic interest, I believe, in relation to the phantasmic powers of encipherment in the modern era.

The connection with writing as an act introducing meaning and value proves crucial to defining the talisman as distinct from the amulet; although talismans are seen as a subset of amulets by the leading scholars in the field, they are distinctively characterised by inscription. Sometimes enigmatic, sometimes expository, the texts written on them pack them with power; they also sometimes define their function. The imagined outside forces, divine and usually benevolent, are activated chiefly by these words, and sometimes – but much less often – by depiction: word magic or image magic transforms raw matter into a symbolic object possessing power. These powers can be embodied in many different kinds of artefact, as long as the object is marked: words infuse the enchantment. And once done it can only be undone by applying immense knowledge of yet more powerful magic; the talismans' relationship to time appears to be central to their nature and they endure for aeons (Princess Tadmoura and Solomon have been lying there protected for hundreds of years). The jinn who animate things have transmuted into charmed things, activated by texts, which in turn become talismanic. The words of the story are transmuted into magic, into blessings.

The activity of jinn and their masters in myths and stories has explanatory force for the marvels that occur in them, but it also sets up troubling moral dilemmas for audiences in a monotheistic culture. Muslim theologians tackled the question of magic, jinn and Solomon's connection with them, and in general, orthodox thinking remained uneasy and cautious, while popular belief and custom, as reflected in the *Arabian Nights* and other stories, as well as in hundreds of amulets and charms of other kinds, stood firmly with the jinn and their powers.

In some of the stories of the *Nights*, a magic talisman takes the form of such a jewel. In the "Tale of Camar al-Zamas and Princess Badoura", for example, Camar becomes curious and takes Badoura's gem from inside her clothes while she is sleeping; he discovers it is "a carnelian engraven with unknown figures and characters." The early English version of this much-loved story goes on. This carnelian, says the prince to himself, must have something extraordinary in it, or my princess would not be at the trouble to carry it with her. And indeed, it was Badoura's talisman, or a scheme of her nativity, drawn from the constellations of

heaven, which the queen of China had given her daughter, as a charm that would keep her from any harm as long as she had it about her.

So here the storyteller associates the Princess of China with astrological magic, inscribed on to her special protective charm. Camar's act of curiosity is punished, an unusual occurrence with respect to a male protagonist, when a bird plucks the gem from his hands, and he finds himself wandering far from Badoura in pursuit of the bird. The talisman is evoked in other versions as "blood-red jewels;" its privy place on to Badoura's person, its hitherto unknown presence concealed in her clothes, ties it unmistakably to her most intimate and erotic persona, to her "jewels" which have been stolen earlier in the story while she slept. (In European languages the stone's name actually points to its associations with flesh: it comes from Latin *caro*, *carnis*; however, the root of the Arabic word, 'aqiq' comes from the verb 'to cut' – perhaps on account of its aptness for carving?)

The stolen talisman keeps drawing a scarlet thread between Camar and Badoura, from one improbable episode to another, as it makes its way back to her and acts as the token which sparks the recognition when Badoura, in disguise as a male prince, rediscovers her jewel in the jars of olives in which Camar has shipped his treasure. She waits to produce it during a remarkable bed-trick seduction scene. Badoura's charm is made of carnelian, as are many other talismans in the *Nights*, for example Maryam's in "Aladdin of the Beautiful Moles," which summons the magic flying bed for the newly wed lovers towards the end of the tale. Carnelian is the favourite material of such magic amulets, as can be seen from the collection in the British Museum, since the Prophet liked the stone best of all, it was said (though Muhammad himself recommended lack of ostentation).

Venetia Porter's superb British Museum catalogue (Porter 2011) includes numerous talismans and amulets in carnelian in different strengths of glowing reds to browns, ranging from pine resin to cranberry relish to caramelised demerara sugar; such amulets can be very small, and exquisite in translucency and workmanship – the engraving into the gemstone performed with fine pointed string-driven drills. The properties of stones were expounded in every aspect by the Arabic scholar al-Tifaschi in his book, *Best Thoughts on the Best of Stones*, written in the 13th century (Abul Huda 1997), but even without knowledge of this kind, the minerals in themselves offer richly satisfying surfaces and temperatures, for touching even more than contemplating: cool, dry, austere, almost lunar, pale or yellow-grey chalcedony, varied highly polished slippery streaked agates, sardonyx, jasper, obsidian, sard, jade. Rock crystal, perceived to be like

frozen water, was especially suited to spells for finding wells and against dying of thirst or drowning. Amuletic stones, for putting in your pocket or wearing on your finger or dangling from your belt, could be made of all these varieties of rock, but also of silver, brass and gold. The list sounds the kind of litany that evokes earthly splendour in the *Nights*, and punctuates the wondrous fortunes that fall into the hands of lucky protagonists. In spite of the Prophet's warning against display, one group of amulets are medallions struck in gold, closely resembling Byzantine coins and pierced for wearing.

## "Abu Mohammed the Lazy"

Zubayda, the wife whom Caliph Haroun al-Rashid loves most of all, is making a head-dress of splendid jewels, but the central gem is missing and she wants a jewel bigger and brighter than any other. She sends a eunuch to the caliph and he immediately gives the order that the jewel she wants must be found; when he hears there are problems, he cries out in a rage, and is then told that the merchants have revealed that a certain merchant in Basra, nicknamed Abu Mohammed 'the Lazy,' the son of a mere barber at the public baths, has a marvellous jewel of the size and purity that Zubayda covets. Haroun instantly appoints the executioner Mesrour to act as his ambassador and summon Abu Mohammed to the caliph's presence. While he waits in Basra, Mesrour tastes the unimaginable luxury and grace of Abu Mohammed's palace: his bathing pools of marble and gold filled with rosewater, his guest robes of brocade and precious stones, the feasts of delicacies he spreads at his table. The magnificence rivals the caliph's, Mesrour thinks darkly to himself that all this princeliness will have to be explained.

Saddling a mule with silver and jewels, Abu Mohammed sets out for Baghdad. In audience with Haroun al-Rashid, Abu Mohammed lavishes gifts on the caliph: quantities of pearls and precious stones. Then, from another chest, he produces a brocade tent studded with jewels, its columns made of soft Indian aloe wood, the panels set off with green emeralds, with designs representing every kind of animal, bird, wild beast, all encrusted with more precious stones, jacinths, emeralds, topazes, rubies and others. Abu Mohammed then offers to show some of the tricks he can perform: at a nod of his head, the crenellations of the palace bow to him; at a roll of his eyes, closed tents appear before the company; at a word, a concert of songbirds starts up.

Haroun marvels that a son of a mere barber at the public baths could enjoy such powers and such fabulous wealth, and asks to know their source. Abu Mohammed shows no reluctance in telling him. He says: "It is an altogether strange tale, extraordinary, and if one wrote it, with a fine nib, in the corner of an eye, the whole world would learn from it." He launches into it: he was such a lazy boy, he says, that during the hot season if the sun reached him where he was dozing, he was too indolent to move into the shade. His father died when he was fifteen, but his mother, who worked as a servant, provided him with what he needed, and he just idled and dozed, until one day she gave him a small sum and told him to give it to Abu al-Muzaffar, a travelling merchant and a man known for his generosity to the poor, who was leaving for China on a trading mission. Abu Mohammed was to ask him to buy him something with it which he might be able to use. In those days, he was so lazy that he needed his mother's help to set himself upright, dress himself, and then had to lean on her for support as he stumbled on the hem of his clothes on their way to the quayside. Al-Muzaffar forgets all about the commission until the very last minute. But he's a man of his word and he orders the ship to turn back so he can use the small sum to buy something for Abu Mohammed, as he had promised. His fellow merchants refuse; he insists, but they still refuse, until he offers to reimburse them for the delay. This he does, handsomely. They set sail again and reach a populous island of pearl traders and jewel dealers, where al-Muzaffar finds a man sitting on the ground surrounded by monkeys; he keeps them chained and beats them as they fight among themselves. One monkey is mangy and miserable and the others turn on it with particular vengeance, which fills Abu al-Muzaffar with compassion. He buys the creature with the pittance Abu Mohammed's mother gave her son to help set him on his feet.

As they are leaving, pearl fishers approach the boat to sell more of their finds, and the monkey breaks free and dives with them, fetching up quantities of precious stones which it tosses into its benefactor's lap. At their next landfall they are unlucky and find themselves among cannibals. Some of the company are eaten; the monkey once again demonstrates its prodigious nature and, when night falls, undoes the bonds on its new owner. Al-Muzaffar pays tribute to their saviour, endows the animal with a reward of a thousand dinars, and asks each of his fellow merchants to match his munificence. The monkey sets each one of them free, too, for an equal reward in every case. Because he is an honest and generous man, Al-Muzaffar does not forget his original pledge to Abu Mohammed, and he does not plan to keep the prodigious animal. On his return to Basra from

his voyages, now infinitely richer than he could ever have dreamed, al-Muzaffar seeks out Abu Mohammed, and finds him asleep. The young man bestirs himself reluctantly at his mother's pleas, and, still stumbling on the hem of his clothes, takes receipt of the monkey from al-Muzaffar's servants – cursing his mother for getting him out of bed just for this. But then al-Muzaffar arrives, and hands over the already vast treasure accumulated through the creature's cleverness. And so begins the story of Abu Mohammed's powers and riches.

Abu Mohammed is revived by the money; he gives up his idle ways and sets up a shop in the bazaar; helped by the monkey who brings him a thousand dinars every day at lunchtime, he begins to prosper. They become close, they live as one, eating and drinking together. Then one day the monkey opens its mouth and begins to speak, like a human being. He tells Abu Mohammed that he is "a marid of the genii," and that his next boon will be to marry him to a beautiful girl, beautiful as the full moon, the daughter of a trader in provender. And so, clothed in gorgeous robes, riding on his mule with the silver jewel-studded saddle, and with ten slaves in attendance, Abu Mohammed sets out to ask for the hand of the merchant's beautiful daughter.

A poem interrupts the unfolding of the tale, a neat, icy piece of proverbial wisdom, commenting on the way riches give a different perspective to events:

> If a rich man talks all at sixes and sevens, people say, 'What a true opinion, quite beyond refutation!' But if a poor man speaks according to the truth, he's taken for a liar, his sayings are set at naught.

The merchant at first rejects Abu Mohammed, as he has no family and no social standing. But his money speaks, as the poem has noted. The ape has given the bridegroom very exact instructions. When he collects his bride in ten days' time, he will find in her house a cupboard with a brass ring in the door. Under the ring he will find keys, which he must use to open the door; inside he will find "a chest of iron, at the corners of which are four talismanic flags; in the midst is a basin filled with money ... eleven serpents ... a white cock with a lacy coxcomb tied up in string ... and a knife ..." He must take the knife and use it to sacrifice the cockerel; he must then tear up the flags, and kick over the iron chest. Then and only then will he be able to lay a finger on his virgin bride.

Abu Mohammed forgets the order of the monkey's commands, and after the raptures of his wedding night, he gets up to fulfill them. As he comes to the end

of his grisly business, his young bride leaps up and cries out, "The jinn has taken possession of me!" For Abu Mohammed 'the Lazy' has undone the talismans her father has carefully contrived to protect her, and the ape appears and carries her off: he has been plotting for six years to abduct her "to the City of Brass where the sun never rises." The story, as related by Abu Mohammed to the caliph, turns into a passionate quest to regain his lost love and opens on to a series of picaresque adventures, which move it from the realm of romance into the genre of the epic voyage, as in the "Sinbad" cycle. At first, Abu Mohammed abandons himself to despair, and wanders in the desert, bewailing his fate. There he comes across two snakes – one white, one black – attacking each other; he picks up a stone to break up the fight and kills the black one, and soon discovers that the survivor is a jinni as well but one of the good jinn who have repented, believe in Allah and have sworn eternal enmity on the unregenerate rebel jinn, to whose number the wicked ape belongs. The good jinni's brother then appears, and in gratitude for the white snake's deliverance, offers to help Abu Mohammed in his quest for his lost love; he assures him they will overcome the evil ape in the end. More of his fellow jinn join forces, and they order one of their slaves to whisk Abu Mohammed into the air on his back – but he must remember not to call on the name of God while flying through the air. Up they soar, "so high that the world below disappeared to reveal to my eyes stars like mountains on their moorings, and in my ears angels singing the glory of God." But he forgets the jinni's warning and when a divine apparition orders him to sing the praises of God, he does so; the jinni who is carrying him crumbles into ashes under his legs, and Abu Mohammed plunges headfirst into the sea.

More wanderings follow – through a country that's a dependency of China where the inhabitants speak Arabic, and farther, with Abu Mohammed still helped by the brother jinn of the snake he rescued. They show him the way at last to the City of Brass. There, a jinni equips him with a magic sabre to keep him invisible in the huge crowds of monstrous inhabitants with their eyes placed in the middle of their chests. He reaches his bride, who tells him that the ape, in his mad passion for her, has revealed to her the secret talisman which gives power over all the jinns in the city. It takes the form of an eagle standing on a pillar with an inscription that she does not know. If Abu Mohammed fumigates it with musk, she tells him, the rebel jinn will muster and he will be able to command them to do whatever he wants. Abu Mohammed instantly orders them to seize and bind the ape, courteously asks his wife if she will consent to come back with

him to Basra and, on her agreement, transfers his wife, himself and all the riches of the City of Brass to his house there. With the eagle talisman's power at his command, he then summons the monkey and shuts him up in a copper bottle sealed with a stopper of lead to keep him out of mischief for ever – or until another hero lets him out in the interests of another romance, another story.

The caliph is astonished by the adventures of Abu Mohammed, and makes him as many magnificent gifts in return as Abu Mohammed lavishes on him. The crown Zubayda was making is not mentioned again, and the story has been so stuffed with riches of every kind that the stone she coveted as the centrepiece has become a trifle.

## The Word of The Talisman

Tis true: there's magic in the web of it...
(William Shakespeare, *Othello* III. iv. 68)

"The Tale of Abu Mohammed the Lazy" combines two traditions: an Egyptian strand of eerie phenomena and powerful instrumental magic, and a story of trade and adventure in the East and the Far East which originates in Iraq. The monkey jinni begins as a poor maltreated creature, but changes into a malignant schemer; the effect is gripping, especially as his plans have been laid with such long-term foresight and have such a specific erotic purpose. By contrast with this willfulness, our wastrel hero lacks all definition and volition; he is the plaything of chance, with no hint from the storyteller that he has been chosen for some reason of merit. Rather the opposite: there is comedy in the telling, with the scruffiness, the dopiness, the sheer hopelessness of the fifteen-year-old recognisable to most parents in any era. André Miquel points out that while Abu Mohammed's adventures coincide with Sinbad's in some respects, he is Sinbad's opposite in character: he drifts into things whereas Sinbad sets out with a goal. (Bencheikh–Miquel 2005) Abu Mohammed the lazy, the lackadaisical, the good-for-nothing who makes good, is one of the models that shapes Galland's Aladdin and all the comic disasters of pantomime Aladdins since.

But he is also a living lesson in the ways of providence: what Allah gives, he gives according to his will, which is unfathomable. As Miquel wryly remarks, who is the caliph to deplore unmerited, unearned fortune beyond the wildest imagining? The riches Abu Mohammed acquires are the true subject of the story,

and al-Muzaffar is the ethical hero, the exemplary benefactor (a fairy godfather) who has no thought for his own gain. Throughout, the jinn occupy the ranks of the animals, in accordance with their heterogeneity in myth (monkey; cockerel; snakes; eagle). Through their agency, they bring the hero fabulous, manufactured treasures (money, jewelled mule saddles, brocade tents with jewel-encrusted skirts). Their connection to natural energies underlies the wealth they produce: the tale unfolds a story of international trade and literally animates the goods that form part of that trade. Jinn bring their owners measureless luxuries, as well as love and delight, a superfluity of pleasures and status made manifest in gold, jewels, fine cloths, perfumes and tableware. Yet the lists of riches punctuate the story so often that eyeskip sets in; listeners too would let their ears idle to the repetitions of jewels and the lovely words that name them. The flow is disrupted by the operation of talismans; these secure the natural forces which bring the riches, and they act as the instruments of reversal and counter-reversal in the narrative itself. The jinn and the talismans act in harness as the agents of the plot; they also embody happenstance itself, the workings of destiny.

By contrast with ensouled things like relics or fetishes, talismans form another class of charmed things, bringing luck or protection: things affected not by personal memories and feelings but by a kind of magnetic bond with an independent force – supernatural, divine or diabolical. The word 'talisman' enters colloquial English principally by means of the translations of such stories of spell-binding, and their active, sometimes baneful, sometimes benevolent force irradiates the atmosphere of the most outlandish and impressive of the plots. In the same way as the fetish was imported from the imperial encounter in order to grasp attachments to inanimate things and shifting ideas of exchanges, financial and erotic, the term 'talisman,' after it entered Western languages from the Middle East, also opens meanings accruing to things as they have circulated and exercised influence since the 18th century and into this new one.

The OED defines 'talisman' as "an object imbued with magical power to offer protection or to inflict harm". This limited definition could also apply to amulet, charm or periapt, but nuances in usage can be adduced to distinguish these magic objects and instruments. So how does a talisman differ, if at all? The derivation of the closely related term 'amulet' is not certain, but the a-here may be privative, from a-moliri meaning 'to avert' or 'remove' (soften?). Almost all dictionaries also characterise amulets as things worn on the person: the coral necklaces which baby Jesus wears in dozens of medieval and Renaissance paintings of the Ma-

donna and Child, for example, linger from Egyptian and eastern Mediterranean magic practices. The rarer word 'periapt' also evokes something kept closely in contact with the body, from the Greek 'peri-', 'about' and possibly 'apt' in fitting, or 'haptein', 'to touch'. In both cases, the charms remain small and intimate and are not necessarily inscribed with verbal formulae.

By contrast, talismans come in all shapes and sizes, and are imbued with their special properties and sphere of influence by the words written into them. Although they can be worn like lockets, they do not need to be kept about a person to work – indeed their efficacy even derives from their autonomy: their indwelling force can radiate regardless. The use of protective and divinatory charms was widespread in antiquity before the establishment of Christianity and Islam, in the whole of the Hellenic and Judaic Middle East, though it is the Arabic word that has taken root since the Enlightenment. 'Talisman' was introduced into English in 1638 from French, where it was taken from Arabic: 'tilsam' (also 'tilsim', 'tilism', 'tilasm'). These words were themselves adapted from Greek: 'telesma'. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* defines tilsamas "an inscription with astrological and other magic signs or an object covered with such inscriptions, especially also with figures from the zodiacal circle ..." (Bianquis et al. 1999, 500–502)

The words on traditional talismans take many forms: the Ninety-Nine names of God appear engraved on swords and scabbards; magic brass bowls are incised with prayers for the sick so that when filled with water, that water acquires healing powers by contact; sometimes such holy water was created by washing the hand-held blackboards on which children learned to read and write the Koran. Solomon is frequently invoked, his wisdom summoned by the pentacle or his seal or ring; sometimes all three combined. Storks and snakes and scorpions, powerful apotropaic symbols, are represented to secure the balance of the temperaments. The writings on the talismans need not be legible; indeed, they gain in efficacy through their enigma and resistance to decipherment. The arabesque knots and imbrications are labyrinths to confuse enemies (non-sense is crucial to magic).

The word spread in English gradually in 18th-century Oriental tales, and became properly naturalised in the 19th; a similar pattern occurred in French. It appears, for example, in the title of a lurid pamphlet of around 1770 about a magic gem belonging to Queen Catherine de' Médici, who was widely suspected of necromancy. (Fauvel 1770) The term also took hold in other languages in the same period. The shadow of 'telos' (Greek for 'goal') lingers in its meanings in these contexts: in ancient Greek, 'telesma' surprisingly means simply "money

paid or to be paid;" other uses include "tax," "outlay," and, most significantly with regard to the development of 'talisman,' "a certified copy or certificate," often stamped with the symbolic power of a seal to give it specific value, significance and authority. A promissory note, an IOU, a wager, would fall under this first meaning. However, the stem 'teles-' produces several related words applying in a religious context, as in 'telesmos', a consecration ceremony, for example, and 'teles-ter', a priest, or initiate, used by Plato in conjunction with 'mantikos', a seer. 'Telesphorion', still with the same root, describes a sorceress or ritual prostitute in the Greek translation of the Bible (Deut. 23:17-18). And that first attested use of 1638 simply adopts into English the word 'telesmata', used for consecrated statues set up in Egypt and Greece to protect city and community. 'Talisman' consequently entails something having been brought to fruition, completed, often a transaction or pact made for some sacred or religious purpose, with autonomous and often mysterious significance.

Unlike the fetish, it is not ascribed individual character or saturated with someone's presence. Instead, it significantly settles into a European term for a charmed object in its own right, an amulet. It is not difficult to see how the word eventually passed from practical acts of exchange towards a specified end, into the realm of the sacred where imagination is efficacious and changes reality. The connection remains especially strong in the case of seals: the power does not inhere in the object itself, but is released when it is used to stamp some other thing. This necessary act of transmission presupposes an inherent dynamic virtuality to the force inside the seal, easy to personify as a mobile energy force – a daimon, a jinni.

This origin of 'talisman' in forms of certification has rich implications. For looked at one way, money used to complete a payment possesses efficient power. The object's meaning radiates through the inscriptions it bears, often secret symbols authenticated by different, complex measures, like the emblems on banknotes and credit cards. But its function shifts according to its referents. Consider the difference between a will and an indulgence – a will disposes of things in the world, while an indulgence guarantees the remission of punishment in the hereafter. Catholic indulgences, often profusely elaborated with many layers of official authentication and sanction, are indeed a form of talismanic certificate, and it is suggestive that the practice, enthusiastically promoted by cardinals and bishops in the 15$^{th}$ century, grew in the climate of crusading propaganda: is this an effect of contact? The new printing presses were not kept busy with learned works, but were pouring out hundreds of broadsides assuring the faithful

that their sins could be ransomed by acquiring the document. The copy was as efficacious as the original: indeed, the original did not matter.

Though the religious authorities of Islam did not use print to disseminate their reserves of grace, the talisman was essentially reproducible, and repetition did nothing to diminish its effects. Scribes made copies, and calligraphic expertise enhanced the value – and the power – of the document. In Mecca, certificates, some of them gorgeously illuminated, were sold to pilgrims to take home with an assurance of the grace they had received by doing the Hajj; some of them are substitutes for the pilgrimage itself. In cases when it could not be performed, their purchase could bring equal blessings.

Metals are matter, and their value derives from certain material qualities (the untarnished glister of gold!) and the symbolic dimensions attributed to those qualities. By contrast, paper money acquires value only through the authority backing the value it has been ascribed and the trust placed in that authority by the users, collectively. The first paper money, stamped "Great Ming Circulating Treasure Certificate," was printed in China under the Ming dynasty in 1375. It carried a picture of heaps of coins to the amount it was worth and many inscriptions validating it from the emperor. The Chinese called it "flying cash" and it proved to be so – in a process that has become familiar, more and more notes were issued to keep up with their spiralling loss of value until, in 1425, printing was suspended. As Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum, puts it, "The fairies had fled – or, to put it in grander language, the faith structure needed for paper money to work had collapsed." (MacGregor 2010) The first paper money in the West also depends on faith. The worth of certificates issued by John Law in his pioneering schemes to finance the Mississippi Company in 1716–20, of "continental dollars" circulated by the United States during the War of Independence, and of *assignats* issued by the Revolutionary government in France to cover the spiralling debt, of share certificates, bills of exchange, cheques, IOUs, and all other forms of paper money, does not inhere in the materials in which they appear (even less so in the case of the phantasmic character of twenty-first century finance). Value is inscribed into them, as it is with talismans: intricate graphic ornament, multiple lattices and complex sprinkling of letters, emblems, mottos, names, symbols and distinctive numbers woven together, and embedded watermarks give the note such specificity that it cannot be forged.[8] (Cribb 1986, 116–19, 135, 151,

8 Balzac recognises the relation between inscription and value in *La Maison Nucingen* (1837), in

158–59, 163, 168–69, 170–89) The symbols which still transform worthless paper into effective currency sometimes exactly repeat those on talismans, especially those associated with Solomon and the building of the Temple. The five-pointed star of the Seal of Solomon is emblazoned on the US $50 banknote, for example, while the $1 note, itself a powerful emblem of the Union's self-image, carries the Great Seal of the United States, made up of hermetic emblems from the history of magic as well as scripture: the haloed eye of God at the summit of a pyramid with thirteen brick courses. Their presence reflects the success of Freemasonry since the 17th century, as a space where a secular form of ritual and esoteric wisdom was pursued and a secular priesthood established within a rational state.

The processes involved in the object's certification resemble the repetitive inscription of talismans, while the transformation achieved likewise produces an enchanted and special object, with active and powerful 'autonomous glamour,' independent of who is handling it. For financial dealings online today, encrypting the information is crucial: a plethora of codes – numbers, symbols, letters in jumbled series – is needed to protect the correct transfer of the monies. Nothing is ever quite enough to withstand the metamorphic antinomianism of lucre: "Money is chameleon-like, ever-moving, ever-changing, impervious to moral law." (Cribb, 1986, 121) Further invisible inscriptions, embedded in magnetic strips, also authenticate the card. In the United Arab Emirates, HSBC has issued a credit card, inscribed with symbols to comply with the Koranic ban on usury. Is this a development of a talisman which protects against evil?

The British Museum general catalogue applies 'talisman' to a varied set of items ranging in time and in geography from North Africa to Asia: an astrological spell inscribed on a mid-tenth-century Daoist Chinese apron or girdle; a child's scarlet talismanic jacket from Ottoman Turkey embroidered all over with protective inscriptions; plaques from medieval Egypt with directions for finding treasure; and a painted flag by a contemporary Algerian-French artist, Rachid Koraïchi. All these different kinds of things – clothes, flags, school and household implements, medallions and stones – involve inscription; it is writing above all that defines the talisman and can consequently deepen our understanding of word magic in its currency today.

which Rastignac's sudden wealth has been achieved through the new medium of the lithographic press, on which his collaborator, the financier Baron de Nucingen prints shares to issue to investors. I am very grateful to Stephen Bann for this reference.

But it is not any text that achieves the transformation of the thing in question from an ordinary object to a thing with talismanic power. The writings which charm it are magical, holy, and often hermetic. They are sometimes intelligible but not necessarily so, as they frequently depend on underlying enigmatic systems, such as casting horoscopes and geomancy.

In Christian and Islamic cultures, the use of talismans was fraught, because magical devices were suspect, and black magic was strongly disapproved in the commentaries on the Koran as it was in Christian doctrine. With regard to Islamic amulets, Venetia Porter writes that Black magic as practised by "illicit magicians" is condemned most strongly in the Hadith (Porter, 2011, 131–2), while later Muslim lawyers attempted to clarify the separation between licit and illicit magic and what was tolerated. Although in general terms that which did no harm to others was accepted, the situation is highly complex, with Ibn Khaldun, for example, regarding all magic as illicit but distinguishing between charms and talismans in discussing magic, licit and illicit talismans. But it is still writing that provides the particular and crucial characteristics, and writing figures in the *Arabian Nights* far more prominently than it does in the fairy tales of Perrault or the Grimm brothers. The picaresque events in the life of a hero like Hasan of Basra move from document to document – this is an early epistolary romance, with the difference that fairies and sorcerers are letter-writers too. The *Arabian Nights* often mentions without any particular astonishment that a heroine can read and write – even when she is apparently a slave, like Zumurrud in the tale of her love of Ali Shar. In "Hasan of Basra," we are told that Hasan is a good scholar, encouraged by his mother who cannot herself read and write, though she recites many poems by heart.

The Topkapi Museum in Istanbul holds the largest collection in the world of talismans in the form of clothes; nearly a hundred articles of dress, the earliest dating from the 15th century, such as the chemise made for Prince Djem (1425–95), and the most recent from the 19th century when the practice ended – officially – with the modernising of the Ottoman court. Shirts, skullcaps, tunics and other articles were worn for protection against every kind of harm – under armour in battle, for example – as well as for success in love and fertility. A child's talismanic shirt from the 15th or 16th century Mogul India, on exhibition in Paris, still shows dark stains of the child's sweat down the middle of the back, on the chest, and under the arms; stains also saturated with human hope, with parental wishing.

These talismanic clothes are astonishing artefacts: the robe of Sultan Selim II (1566–74), for example, is richly gilded, patterned with circles and densely

written all over in different coloured inks, with much gleaming decoration. Other Turkish noblemen's clothes from the same era have their entire surface damascened in exquisite geometric compositions, with diapers, medallions, and panels appliquéd on to the cloth, until the fabric becomes a different form of sacred illuminated manuscript or pilgrimage certificate.

The cotton from which the shirts are made has been treated with starch, so that they can be written on, indeed literally 'in-scribed,' written into, and the serried, calligraphic ornament mingles different scripts – one so feathery it is called 'ghubar î', meaning 'dust.' These inscriptions include the Beautiful Names of God, with certain ones emerging as the favourites; others reprise Sura twelve, 'Joseph,' from the Koran, which describes how Jacob, who had gone blind from crying over Joseph's disappearance, recovered his sight when he passed over his eyes a tunic which Joseph had sent from Egypt with his brothers. This passage gave clear approval to miracle-working garments, and was invoked especially for protection against such misfortunes as falling into wells and being held captive in dungeons.

These scriptural quotations and prayers are mixed with sacred emblems, such as Solomon's seal, and 'magic squares' in which numbers are substituted for letters to make arcane rebuses. The footprint of the Prophet, his sandals, his bow, arrows and sabre, the double-bladed sword of Ali (for putting out both eyes of his enemy), and, sometimes, protector animals such as serpents and scorpions, are included to support the prophylactic value of wearing the chemise or other dress.

Talismanic garments form a group of magical instruments, but they are clearly – each of them – unique, carefully customised for their intended wearer. Court astrologers were instructed by the chief physician at the court when such a garment was needed in the palace, and they cast the wearer's horoscope in order to determine the exact hour propitious for the specialist scribes to begin the work of inscription; several years sometimes passed before it was completed, and again the time was carefully divined and met, the hour recorded on the fabric. The enchantment, like an individual jinn at their command, has been infused into them in every possible pertinent and particular detail.

The custom had travelled to Turkey from the East with astrology and, like the ornamentation of Ottoman damasks, bears the imprint of Chinese aesthetics and manufactures; the process of their making echoes the elaborate horoscopes and geomantic procedures of imperial Chinese traditions. The Turkish talismans, taking the form of articles of dress, are not trifles, but precious and sophisticated artefacts, élite articles produced by learning and skill, and credited with powers

to hold sickness, death, disappointment and sterility at bay for the highest members of an intensely hierarchical society. They are above all produced as entirely characteristic artefacts by a literate culture which attaches very high value to the written word. Like other imported terms – totem and taboo, fetish and shaman –, the concept of the talisman, when it reaches Europe and takes root there, comes couched in a borrowed vocabulary in order to designate a form of other knowledge, developed in a non-Western culture.

How the imported word 'talisman' filled a semantic gap can be seen when reading Arrigo Boito's libretto for Verdi's *Otello* (1887). The mischief-maker itself – the handkerchief Othello gives Desdemona – has become a talisman. In 1604, as we heard, Shakespeare's Othello had limned the love charm's potency, magnifying its dark provenance by stressing its origins in the far distant magic of sibyls, and the ancient Egyptian art of mummification. But Shakespeare did not yet have to hand the word that came effortlessly to Boito in the late 1880s:

> Desdemona, woe if you lose it, woe!
> A powerful witch designed the secret thread
> In which is placed a talisman's deep bane.
> (Act III)

By the end of the 19th century the word 'talismano' had arrived in Italian to give, as words do, a habitation and a name to something long intimated but not clearly designated. Throughout the opera, the talismanic qualities of the handkerchief give it a quasi-autonomous power, greater than it possesses in the play. It becomes not only Iago's tool but in some way his emanation, his daimonic alter ego. Cassio and Iago sing a marvelous lilting duet to the transparent web, which takes on a spirit flimsiness:

> White and lighter than a snowflake,
> than a cloud woven from the air of heaven.
> (Act III)

The thing itself dissolves: as with a talisman, the agent of its magical power lies beyond sensory perception, instilled into the material handkerchief by invisible arts that have transmuted its nature, just as a banknote or an IOU ceases to be a mere piece of paper.

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