TRACES OF THE *THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS* IN TAWFĪQ AL-ḤAKĪM'S WORKS

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This essay explores Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's attitude to the collection of the popular stories known as the *Thousand and One Nights*, which was crucial to his further development as an author and playwright. Since these stories represent the cornerstone of many of his writings, the aim of the essay is to analyse the scope of influence of the *Thousand and One Nights* on al-Ḥakīm's work and the way this inspiration is reflected in his most significant pieces of literature, such as *Shahrazād or Solomon the Wise*, as well as in some of his short stories and less known plays, such as *Hārūn ar-Rashīd and Hārūn ar-Rashīd.* The essay also deals with al-Ḥakīm's portrayal of Shahrazād, whose character recurs in his writings the most; her character is thus the key to understanding many of his works.

Key words: Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, the *Thousand and One Nights*, Arabic literature, popular literature, Shahrazād

Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898 – 1987), a prominent Egyptian writer who can be considered a founding father of modern Egyptian drama, is one of the most influential Arab writers of the later stage of the *Nahḍa* period. It was because of his undying endeavour that drama was established in the Arab environment as a part of "real" officially acknowledged literature, and it finally became recognized by Arab intellectual elite and literary critics as well. However, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm was not only a pioneering Egyptian playwright; he was also one of the first Arab authors to be inspired by Arabic popular literature and the stories of the *Thousand and One Nights*. The special connection between al-Ḥakīm's work and Arabic popular literature was defined by several factors, including his personal experience, the environment where he grew up and his way of thinking and his personal leanings. He was born in Alexandria into a family with deeply rooted traditions and a belief in the supernatural, magic

and the jinn.[1] In his autobiography *Sijn al-ʿumr* (1964*, The Prison of Life*), al-Ḥakīm gives a detailed account of how his mother's cousin used to tell the stories from the *Thousand and One Nights* to the family. Al-Ḥakīm's mother became enchanted by the stories to such an extent that she insisted on learning the alphabet so that she could read the stories she loved by herself.[2] When al-Ḥakīm was a child, his mother came down with a prolonged illness, during which she used to read him tales from *Alf layla wa layla*, *Sīrat ʿAntar*, *Sayf ibn Ḏī Yazan* and other works. Little Tawfīq was captivated by the stories and by the time she got well again and stopped re-telling the stories, he learned to read and continued devouring the tales from the books on his own, which, in his own words, "helped him to acquire a good knowledge of written Arabic even before benefiting from regular schooling".[3] Here we can see how al-Ḥakīm's imagination, his taste for stories and, to a certain extent, even his education had been all shaped from an early childhood by Arabic popular epics and stories from the *Thousand and One Nights*. His interest in these narratives later grew into a more complex relationship with popular literature and eventually became one of the three most fundamental sources of inspiration ("the *Qur'ān*, *the Thousand and One Nights* and society")[4] for his literary works.

Popular literature – the cornerstone of al-Ḥakīm's work

When al-Ḥakīm went to Paris to study law in 1925, he came to know European literature, philosophy and particularly European drama and theatre, and he grew more and more fascinated by it. His stay in Paris not only shaped his concept of drama, and later on the form and development of Arabic drama as such, but also influenced his perception of popular literature as well. While he was reading the works of prominent Western authors, he realized that the works of the most important classical and modern European writers like Euripides, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Corneille, Molière, Voltaire, Ibsen, Shaw, Brecht, Sartre, Camus, Ionesco and many others were all inspired by popular literature, myths and legends, including the stories from the *Thousand and One Nights*.[5] Influenced by Western ideas and literary criticism after his return from Paris, he felt an urge to read the great works of Arabic literature once again, but this time he did so critically and was finally able to see their strong points as well as their

[1] The author mentions a few such examples and incidents in his autobiography *Sijn al-ʿumr* [The Prison of Life].
[2] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Sijn al-ʿumr [The Prison of Life], pp. 16 – 18.
[3] Al-HAKIM, T. The Prison of Life. Transl. by CACHIA, P., p. 58.
[4] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Zahrat al-ʿumr [The Beauty of Life], p. 121.
[5] Al-NAJJĀR, M.R. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm wa al-adab al-shaʿbī [Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and Popular Literature], p. 30.

weaknesses.[6] He came to the conclusion that *adab rasmī* ["official literature"], meaning classical literature, was too rigid and artificial. Having a polished and flowery style in the text was considered its most important quality, whereas its content was often lagging behind.[7] He believed that Arabic poetry and prose was not based on any narrative structures, epics or stories and not even on elements of dramatic art; it was just some sort of a beautiful, yet empty, decorative 'mosaic' of formulations, expressions and phrases.[8] He considered popular literature to be the true and undying source of artistic inspiration. This was a daring attitude because the classic works of refined and polished literary style and rich figurative language were valued the most, whereas popular literature was regarded as "low", "vulgar" and without any artistic, literary or cultural value. Nevertheless, al-Ḥakīm was convinced that popular literature was a genuine creation of generations of Arab people and that it reflected their ideas, needs, desires and sense of humour better than "official" literature; thus it was full of life, unlimited imagination and creative spirit.[9]

Generally, the oral character of popular literature made it difficult to survive over the centuries. However, there are a few rare exceptions, for instance the collection of the *Thousand and One Nights* (in Arabic *Alf layla wa layla*), which has been transmitted into every language of the world and which is well-known among peoples of all colours and ages, with every nation appreciating its value, except the Arabs themselves.[10] Why was this eternal literary work not recognized as a part of their own cultural heritage? This was the thing al-Ḥakīm could not understand.

Moreover, al-Ḥakīm believed in the great inspiring potential of popular literature. While he was reading the works of the European modernists, he noticed that they shared some similarities with Arabic folk tales, especially the expression of reality in an illogical, irrational and nonsensical way. Thus, he assumed that Arab authors were able to catch up with new literary trends by drawing on their popular heritage on the condition that their works pursued a different objective than the original text; the authors should give the stories a new spirit and fill them with new ideas.[11] Al-Ḥakīm himself adhered to this rule and popular literature become one of his most essential sources of inspiration. He was trying to alter the well-known stories and kept on experimenting with literary forms and genres in his works. Finally, he distinguished five basic

[6] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Zahrat al-ᶜumr, p. 109.
[7] Ibid., p. 115.
[8] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Taḥta shams al-fikr [Under the Sun of Thought], p. 49.
[9] Al-NAJJĀR, M.R. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm wa al-adab al-shaᶜbī, pp. 32 – 40.
[10] Ibid., p. 38.
[11] Ibid., pp. 45 – 63.

levels of application of popular literature and popular tradition in the contemporary arts. [12]

Al-Ḥakīm's attempts to make drama an acceptable form of Arabic literature were backed up by his theory that theatre and its forms were not new in the Arabic environment, referring to the Arabic popular genres of performance with *al-ḥakāwātī* [a storyteller], *al-muqallidātī* [a folk imitator], *al-maddāḥ* [a panegyrist] and a *rabāba* poet playing the main role. He considered these plain and improvised oral creations to be the origins of Arabic theatre.[13] He was an advocate of the simplicity of style; he regarded it as the crucial element of writing because it made the work much more accessible to the reader,[14] and the same held true for the theatrical performance and its audience.

His first work using a theme from the *Thousand and One Nights* was an operetta called *ᶜAlī Bābā*. It is perhaps al-Ḥakīm's only play where serious philosophical ideas or social issues were completely left out; its aim was to entertain the audience. The operetta is amusing and full of love, adventure, singing, dancing and fancy costumes,[15] which makes it exactly the kind of play that would attract people in Egypt at that time. However, this approach did not completely correspond with al-Ḥakīm's principles about intertextual novelty in writing, so in 1934 his most memorable play, *Shahrazād*, was published. According to many critics, *Shahrazād* represents the very peak of al-Ḥakīm's dramatic art.[16]

Shahrazād

The play draws on the famous frame story of the *Thousand and One Nights* about King Shahriyār, who lost his mind after discovering his first wife's infidelity and embarked on a mad journey of revenge on all women in his kingdom, each night marrying a new virgin only to have her slaughtered in the morning, until he met the beautiful and intelligent Shahrazād, whose storytelling cured him of this insane bloodthirsty habit.

However, al-Ḥakīm's *Shahrazād* is not a mere reworking of the original story; it can be considered a kind of intellectual sequel to the *Thousand and One Nights*. The author once said the following about the play:

[12] For more information see Ibid., pp. 69 – 80.
[13] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Qālibnā al-masraḥī [Our Dramatic Form], p. 15.
[14] Al-ĠĪṬĀNĪ, J., Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm yataḏakkar [Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm Remembers], pp. 92 – 93.
[15] Ar-RĀᶜĪ, ᶜA. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm fannān al-furja wa fannān al-fikr [Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, the Artist of Joy and the Artist of Thought], p. 22.
[16] ADHAM, I., NĀJĪ, I. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, p. 165.

> Indeed, we had taken inspiration from the stories of *Alf layla wa layla* before, like in the play *ʿAlī Bābā* and others, but what we took was a singular and entertaining side of the story, which was in accord with the theatre and the masses. But this time when I turned to the *Thousand and One Nights* again, I took, for example, the character of Shahrazād, but with regard to the ideological and literary viewpoint. She wanted to tell bloodthirsty Shahriyār things that would open his mind and it really happened, but she managed to open his mind more than necessary. He abandoned the earth and was left hanging in the air, searching for the secret of human existence, and so Shahrazād wanted him to return to the real world and to the earth again. And this is how a simple fairy-tale gets an intellectual dimension.[17]

The first act of the play begins where the original story ended; Shahrazād's storytelling strategy was successful, the king is relieved of his sanguinary whim and the whole kingdom celebrates. But very soon it became clear there was something wrong; while the town was celebrating Shahrazād's rescue of all the young women, one of them was being killed by magic. But this time it was not because of the king's revenge, it was for the purpose of knowledge. As he says to Shahrazād: "I used to kill for amusement ... today I kill in order to know ..."[18]

Here we have a different Shahriyār, who is no longer a bloodthirsty tyrant obsessed with his vengeance to all womankind; he is a man haunted by an unquenchable desire to discover the true essence of Shahrazād, his beloved wife. His yearning to find the answers for his questions has turned from one obsession into another. He feels an urge to leave Shahrazād and sets out on a journey because he is hoping to see all the things that Shahrazād once told him about with his very own eyes, thinking this might help him understand. Shahriyār's desire to reveal his wife's true identity is gradually turning into a quest to find the secret of human existence, and he is driven by an undying anxiety to discover this eternal truth. Suddenly he comes to the conclusion that he can never succeed unless he frees himself of the main obstacle, which is his own human body. He says: "I am free of humanity, free from the heart. I don't want to feel, I want to know."[19] But a mind cannot exist without a mortal frame and an intellect without a heart is nothing but a monster, even ready to kill for knowledge. When Shahrazād asks him: "Do you deny you were crazy about my body once and that you loved me with your heart once?" He replies: "This has all passed ... passed. I am today a miserable man."[20]

[17] Al-ĠĪṬĀNĪ, J., Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm yataḏakkar, p. 99.
[18] Al-HAKIM, T. "Shahrazad". Transl. and ed. by HUTCHINS, W. M., p. 143.
[19] Ibid., p. 145.
[20] Ibid., p. 144.

To a great extent, al-Ḥakīm was inspired by Ancient Egyptian philosophy, and this is why many of his dramas deal with the human effort to overcome the boundaries of time and space, unlike the Ancient Greek concept of tragedy, which was a result of man's inability to overcome fate and escape destiny.[21] Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the collection of *Alf layla wa-layla* fascinated him so much; it is an immortal piece of work that stands beyond languages, dialects and borders of space and time.[22] In al-Ḥakīm's play, the harmony established by Shahrazād's narrative that enabled Shahriyār to escape from time-space boundaries is disrupted, and so he tries to deal with the situation in a different way. Only when he realizes that he has tried everything from magic and travelling to the smoking of hashish in Abū Maysūr's tavern without any result, does he finally understand the truth: he cannot be freed of the boundaries that bind him because he cannot escape his own material body. He is like "water taking on the shape of its container".[23] As the literary critic Muḥammad Mandūr put it: "A human can neither live as absolute intellect nor can he depart from life without dying."[24]

Nevertheless, true mystery of the play is undoubtedly the character of Shahrazād. No one can truly know her or understand her. The slave is attracted to her physically; to him she is "nothing but a beautiful body".[25] Qamar the vizier is in love with her because of her great heart and Shahriyār is astounded by her great intellect, but she insists that they just see her in the mirror of their souls.[26] Of all the characters, Shahriyār is puzzled with her the most. However genuine his efforts to escape from the overwhelming influence of Shahrazād may be, he cannot succeed. He compares her to Mother Nature and to the flame that attracts fire worshippers and he even recognizes her in the image of the Ancient Egyptian goddess Isis. Actually, there is much resemblance between the two of them; indeed, Shahrazād, like her divine predecessor, "resurrected" her husband, even in the metaphorical sense, and she created him anew.

Al-Ḥakīm has been often criticized for exploiting the characters in his plays in order to express his particular ideas, thus making their personalities look unreal. The main heroine in particular seems to be quite far from being a woman of flesh and blood; she is mysterious and elusive, but her portrayal is vivid, and unlike some other characters, she is not flat. Though, we can see her only through the eyes of the other characters, who are unable (and perhaps even refuse) to see her and accept her as a complex human being; what they see is

[21] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Taḥta shams al-fikr, p. 81.
[22] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Fann al-adab [The Art of Literature], p. 306.
[23] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. "Shahrazad", p. 169.
[24] MANDŪR, M. Masraḥ Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, [Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's Drama] p. 67.
[25] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. "Shahrazad", p. 157.
[26] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Shahrazād, p. 34.

just an image of the ideal woman which they have created in their minds. They try to get to know Shahrazād, but their view is limited by the means they use, which, of course, says something about their personalities as well. The slave yearns to know her through his body, the vizier through his heart and the king by means of his intellect. But the truth is that she is not just a beautiful body, a great heart or even a great intellect – she is all of these things. And since their perception of her is just partial and they fail to admit that trying to look at her from different perspectives at once may help them gain a more complete understanding of her nature, none of the three men can truly understand Shahrazād or the phenomenon that her character stands for.

There have been various attempts to interpret the play and its characters, and in the preface to the third edition of the play, the author himself left the interpretation to his readers. Nevertheless, in his collection of essays published under the name *Taḥta al-miṣbāḥ al-akhḍar* [1942, *Under the Green Lamp*] he wrote that the character of Shahriyār stands for the whole of mankind, passing through different stages of human life.[27]

Shahrazād, an eternal enigma, is a human personification of Nature, and different characters in the play represent the various means of humankind to understand her; i.e. bodily sensations (the slave), the heart (Qamar), magic (the magician), narcotics (the executioner in Abū Maysūr's tavern) and intellect (Shahriyār). However, the character of Shahriyār is the only more complex one of them because, unlike the others, he has passed through the various stages of human life. It is arguable that the other characters are just reflections of Shahriyār's former selves.[28] Initially he was passionate like the slave. He even used to slay the virgins. Even though he was not doing it himself, the blame was still his, which made him live the life of the executioner for a while as well. Then he used to love with his whole heart like Qamar; he tried using magic and smoking hashish, and finally he became an anxious intellectual. Since, according to al-Ḥakīm, he could not reach the sky and he did not wish to come back to earth, there was nowhere else to go for him and he had to perish so that his cycle would be completed. The play suggests that the key instruments which bring an understanding of this world and may answer the questions burning inside us are our body, heart and intellect. However, they need to be used together in harmony, not separately; otherwise the characters are doomed to failure, often with tragic results.

[27] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Taḥta al-misbāh al-akhḍar [Under the Green Lamp], p. 52.
[28] ADHAM, I., NĀJĪ, I. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, pp. 90 – 91.

The play shows clear evidence of al-Ḥakīm's inspiration by symbolism[29] and especially by one of his most favourite writers, Maurice Maeterlinck, a Nobel laureate, who was known mainly for his "static dramas". These dramas were based on dialogue, but unlike usual dramas their primary function was not to comment on events or explain them; it is an obscure "inner dialogue" full of suggestions, allusions and symbols that become in themselves a kind of stage for the interior action of the play. The actual plot is not conveyed by the external action or movement of the characters but by the gradual development of ideas and issues inside of a dialogue. Al-Ḥakīm's plays, which are part of his *masraḥīyāt ḏihnīya* ["theatre of the mind"], are based on a similar concept to Maeterlinck's "static dramas". In the preface to his play *Pygmalion* (1942) he writes:

> I set up my theatre inside my mind, and I make the actors ideas that move in the sphere of unlimited thought, dressed as symbols. It is true that I preserve the spirit of *coup de théâtre*, but the dramatic surprises are not so much in the plot as in the thoughts. For that reason the gap between me and the theatre has widened, and there is no other "bridge" through which I could deliver works like these to the people than the press.[30]

Indeed, the very problem of the play when it was was first published was that it contained too little external action to be staged, but al-Ḥakīm confessed that when he was writing the play he did not really think of bringing it to the stage.[31]

The love affair with Shahrazād

It is not a secret that Shahrazād was al-Ḥakīm's most favourite heroine. She represents the image of the ideal woman he bore in his mind for all his life. For him she was a paragon of femininity as he understood it: a woman ready to sacrifice herself for a noble purpose, a devoted wife who opened her husband's mind and elevated his spirit, the one that succeeded in making him a better ruler without interfering with his policy, a well of artistic inspiration and a divine source of life. Al-Ḥakīm was to a large extent similar to the legendary King Shahriyār, for he was also known under the epithet *'Adūw al-mar'a* ["the

[29] For more information see ḤAMŪDĪ, T.Ā. *Aṯr al-ramzīya al-ġarbīya fī masraḥ Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm.* [Traces of Western Symbolism in Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's Dramatic Works] Beirut: Dār al-ḥadāṯa, 1986.
[30] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Preface to Pygmalion, p. 12.
[31] Ibid.

Enemy of Women"]. This was because he wrote several anti-female essays where he openly expressed his view on the emancipation of women and their proper place in society. His opinion of women oscillated between the idealism of his literary heroines and animosity against women in the real world.[32] This negative attitude was the result of several factors, including his personal experience[33] and family background. Indeed, he was highly influenced by his mother, who introduced him to the world of the *Thousand and One Nights*, but who he, on the other hand, blamed for his father's unfulfilled ambitions and potential. For instance, in his autobiography he wrote that his father was once "an artful poet" and a "philosopher" but that marriage changed him. Al-Ḥakīm wondered whether it was because of his mother's dominant and powerful personality, as she "directed his father's development the way she wanted it".[34] He also stated that very soon after his parents' marriage, when his mother "discovered his [father's] poverty, she was terrified by the spectre of need and she communicated her terror to his father so that he forgot all about poetry, literature and thought".[35] And this was what al-Ḥakīm believed had kept him from marriage for so long.[36] He was afraid that marriage would hinder his literary ambitions and change his artistic nature for good. He wanted his wife to be a woman who would be an inspiration for his work, someone who would take care of him and would not mind doing any sacrifice in favour of her husband: a woman, who would be most understanding and loyal to him and who "would live for the artist as he lives for the art".[37] In other words, he wanted an ideal woman; he wanted his own "Shahrazād". Her character recurs in many of his literary works, like in *Shahrazād wa Montmartre*, where he compares her to the famous quarter in Paris. He says: "Montmartre is like that coquettish woman with a deep soul; she is a beauty who sleeps during the day and who is awake at night, showing her lovers both the good qualities and the secrets of life. She is like Shahrazād, prolonging her life with stories of love and art till the morning comes."[38] In the eyes of al-Ḥakīm, every artist in Montmartre is like Shahriyār, who took pleasure in women's bodies until Shahrazād made her appearance and showed him pleasures of the spirit and mind. He became tired of bodies and the material world.

[32] LONG, R. Tawfiq al-Hakim Playwright of Egypt, p. 132.
[33] His disappointment in love can be easily figured out from his semi-autobiographical novels *ʿAwdat al-rūḥ* [Return of the Spirit], 1933 and *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* [A Bird from the East], 1938.
[34] Al-HAKIM, T. The Prison of Life, p. 27.
[35] Ibid., p. 104.
[36] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Sijn al-ʿumr, p. 33.
[37] BŪ SHUʿAYR, R. Al-Marʾa fī adab Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm [A Woman in Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's literary works], p. 77.
[38] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. "Shahrazād wa Montmartre" [Shahrazād and Montmartre], p. 46.

In the short story called *Amāma ḥawḍ al-marmar* [Before the Marble Basin] from the collection *ᶜAhd al-Shayṭān* [1938, The Age of Satan], al-Ḥakīm describes his meeting with Shahrazād in her castle. One lonely night he longs for company, so he decides to pay her a visit. He introduces himself as her "creator", after which she makes it clear that he was not the creator of her character but that actually she had created him as an author. When al-Ḥakīm asks for permission to stay with her in her palace, she replies that it is not possible because he is a living man, while she is a character in his stories. However, his wish may come true the day he becomes a part of the literary world, like his stories, so that they can live together in this fantastic realm forever.[39] In the short story, al-Ḥakīm expressed clearly what an important role Shahrazād played in both his literary and personal life. Not only did the play which bears her name make him famous, but it seems she also played the role of his muse and he longed for her presence in his real life as well.

In 1941 Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm wrote a collection of short stories and essays called *Sulṭān az-ẓalām* [The Sultan of Darkness] where we can find another short story with Shahrazād playing the main role, called *Shahrazād maᶜa Shahriyār al-ᶜAṣr* [Shahrazād with the Contemporary Shahriyār]. The story is set in the time of the Second World War, when Shahrazād cannot bear watching the misery of the people anymore, so she decides to visit "Contemporary Shahriyār" in his castle in Berchtesgaden. She wishes she could open his eyes and change his worldview as she did to the "Former Shahriyār". However, this time she does not have a thousand and one nights to do so because Contemporary Shahriyār is busy waging war and does not have time for stories, yet he is tempted by the idea of winning such a beautiful, intelligent and powerful woman for his propaganda. They start a discussion during which Shahrazād tries to show him that "if he loved the whole of humankind and not just the Aryan race, he could be far more powerful than he is now."[40] She explains to him that fame from warfare is an ephemeral thing, saying:

> In history, there were many of those who led armies and conquered lands, relying on military power. They savoured the crowns of the war victories that adorned their heads, but they did not realize that they were made of flowers that fade in the course of time. And so it happened and the wind scattered the flowers and blew them away.[41]

[39] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. "Amāma ḥawḍ al-marmar" [Before the Marble Basin], pp. 85 – 101.
[40] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. "Shahrazād maᶜa Shahriyār al-ᶜAṣr" [Shahrazād with the Contemporary Shahriyār], p. 105.
[41] Ibid., p. 106.

Her speech is reminiscent of the scene from a famous story from the *Thousand and One Nights* called *Ḥikāyat Madīnat al-nuḥās* [The City of Brass], where the hero, Amīr Mūsā, walks through a magnificent empty city where he reads the inscriptions about powerful kings who conquered the world with their armies, but that after they died they became completely forgotten.

> Where are the Kings earth-peopling, where are they? The built and Peopled left they e'er and aye!
> They're tombed yet pledged to actions past away and after death upon them came decay.
> Where are their troops? They failed to ward and guard! Where are the wealth and hoards in treasuries lay?
> Th' Empyrean's Lord surprised them with one word, nor wealth nor refuge could their doom delay.[42]

Instead, she advises him to follow the example of prophets, artists and scientists, whose power enriched the world and brought them eternal glory. After Shahrazād made her speech, the morning overtook her and she lapsed into silence. As far as Contemporary Shahriyār is concerned, he fell silent too, but "nobody knew whether it was because Shahrazād's words persuaded him or because he was pondering how to get rid of this dangerous woman".[43] The story is, together with the other ones from the collection, a harsh criticism of Hitler and his policies during the Second World War, as can be clearly seen from its title and allusions to Berchtesgaden, the Aryan race, fascism and war. Al-Ḥakīm speculates here over the idea that had there been a Shahrazād for this Contemporary Shahriyār, history could have been different. However, the strong menacing undertone in the final lines of the story reveals that the author was not quite convinced of this, perhaps because the slaughter caused by Contemporary Shahriyār was even more dreadful and more horrifying than ever before.[44]

Solomon the Wise: love versus power and intellect

Al-Ḥakīm's inspiration from the stories of the *Thousand and One Nights* was not limited to the frame story about King Shahriyār and his lovely and eloquent Queen Shahrazād. In 1943 he wrote a play called *Sulaymān al-Ḥakīm* [Solomon the Wise], which draws on the *Qur'ān*, *Torah* and the *Thousand and One*

[42] "The City of Brass", transl. by BURTON, R.F., p. 107.
[43] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. "Shahrazād maᶜa Shahriyār al-ᶜAṣr", p. 108.
[44] Ibid., p. 93.

Nights.[45] The play begins with a part taken from the story of *Alf layla wa layla* called *al-Ṣayyād wa al-ʿifrīt* [The Fisherman and the Jinni], in which the fisherman opens a brass pot which he found in the sea and involuntarily releases a jinni from it. The jinni had once served in Prophet Solomon's service, but he rebelled against him and was imprisoned in the pot and thrown into the sea. Upon being released, he intended to kill the fisherman, but then he agreed to be taken to Solomon instead. The rest of the story is based on the Quranic tradition and the *Torah*, and it even contains some parts from *The Song of Songs*. Solomon learns from the hoopoe about the faraway land of Sheba ruled by the beautiful Queen Bilqīs. He invites her for a visit and since she is afraid that he might invade her land, she sets out for a journey to Ūrshalīm (Jerusalem). With the help of the rebellious jinni, whom he has now pardoned, Solomon tries to dazzle Bilqīs's eyes with many wonders, but he is unable to win her heart as she is secretly in love with her captive, Prince Munḏir. The king is irritated because despite having a thousand wives, she is the first woman to refuse him. The wily jinni tries to persuade Solomon that "a heart's door is like any other. When it doesn't open with a key, it can be opened without one. [...] You break it".[46] After that he turns Prince Munḏir into stone and Bilqīs has to cry a full basin of tears to break the curse. However, with the basin nearly full, a trick is played on her, and it is finally her maid Shahbā' who saves the prince and wins his heart, leaving Bilqīs devastated. As soon as Solomon realizes what a terrible thing he has done, he deeply repents and Bilqīs forgives him, since his repentance "flows from a truthful heart".[47] After her departure, the broken king dies quietly in his chair after a long period of sleep, his death being discovered only after his stick was eaten by the termites and his body collapsed. The fisherman finally learns to resist the tempting words of the jinni because "the seed of wisdom in Solomon did not die".[48]

The play revolves around the idea that love can be neither bought with gold nor forced by power or magic. We are all equal in matters of love; being a prophet, king, a queen, or even the wisest man, will not help to win another's heart. While in *Shahrazād* al-Ḥakīm pondered over the mysteries of human existence, in *Sulaymān al-Ḥakīm* he indicated that the human heart is the greatest enigma, even greater than intellect or wisdom. At the end of the play Queen Bilqīs says: "Truly, Solomon, the human heart is the greatest miracle. A miracle which resists power." And Solomon adds, "And wisdom."[49] The plays have something in common though, for both Shahriyār and Solomon are

[45] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. Preface to Sulaymān al-Ḥakīm [Solomon the Wise], p. 5.
[46] Al-HAKIM, T. "The Wisdom of Solomon". Trans. and ed. by HUTCHINS, W.M., p. 57.
[47] Ibid., p. 70.
[48] Ibid., p. 78.
[49] Ibid., p. 71.

doomed because of love; the first of them is not capable of love anymore, while the second one tries to enforce it. Moreover, they both suffer and die due to a woman: Shahriyār tries to unveil her essence and Solomon tries to unlock her heart. Unfortunately, they both try the wrong means to do it, forgetting that one can neither know nor touch a woman's heart with power, magic, intellect or tricks; it has to be done with nothing else but one's own heart.

Another issue discussed in the play is how treacherous power may be, even if it is connected with reason. Although Solomon possesses almost unlimited secular and religious power over the people and the jinn, it is not enough for him as there is still one woman out of a one thousand who does not succumb to his charms. This phenomenon is in fact very common among the kings and viziers, and even among the ordinary men in the *Thousand and One Nights*; it does not matter how many wives and concubines or slave girls a hero has, he often becomes obsessed with one girl and he does everything to win her over.

Gradually, Solomon becomes more and more convinced of his absolute authority and impeccability; he abuses the power that was given to him by God and resorts to ignoble machinations with the lives of other people, trying to demonstrate that nothing is impossible for the great Solomon the Wise. His childish and conceited behaviour is quite far from how one would imagine a bearer of the epithet "the Wise" to act. Ironically, a prophet is no longer able to distinguish between the good and the bad and so he becomes easy prey for the cunning insinuator, the jinni. Only when Solomon has finally come to his senses does he realize what suffering he has brought to his beloved Bilqīs and this breaks him. Suddenly he understands that with great power comes great responsibility and even one mistake may ruin people's lives. There are several similar stories in the *Thousand and One Nights* about mighty kings who shared their lot with Solomon; one says they became proud and vain about their power and wealth, so one day God sent the Angel of Death to take their lives and it was too late for them to repent.[50] There are many others where it is clearly stated that a ruler will be held responsible for the suffering of his subjects on Judgement Day.[51] Al-Ḥakīm articulated one of the crucial ideas of the play through the character of the fisherman who says towards the end of the play:

> Whenever we go too far in deceiving ourselves about our capacities, Heaven makes us an object of ridicule and mockery. [...] The day a

[50] See "Jumlat ḥikāyāt tataḍamman ᶜadam al-iġtirār bi-l-dunyā wa wuṯūq bihā" [Collection of the stories implying that we should not let ourselves be fooled by this world and put our trust in it]. In *Alf layla wa layla*, vol. III, pp. 8 – 18.

[51] See for example "al-Malik ᶜUmar al-Nuᶜmān wa-waladayhi Šarr Kān wa-Ḍawᶜ al-Makān" [The King ᶜUmar al-Nuᶜmān and his Two Sons Šarr Kān and Ḍawᶜ al-Makān] and many others.

> wise man is filled with a sense of his own wisdom is the day closest to the time the cloak is stripped off his ludicrous stupidity.[52]

On the other hand, Bilqīs seems to be far more intelligent, reasonable, brave, good-natured and loving than her male counterpart. Although she knows that Munḏir does not feel the same way she does, she struggles with the unrequited love as bravely as she can. She does not even hesitate to shed as many tears as is necessary in order to bring him back to life. Again, she is just another Shahrazād or Isis, a flawless woman who is ready to sacrifice herself for the ones she loves. She is even grateful to Solomon for all the distress he caused her because now she can be at least friends with her beloved, and this is more than she had ever hoped for. In his book on al-Ḥakīm Richard Long expressed the assumption that the character of Bilqīs possibly reflected the kind of partner al-Ḥakīm himself was looking for.[53]

Images of Shahrazād in his other works

As mentioned before, this perfect woman, often called Shahrazād, occurs in many of al-Ḥakīm's works. But sometimes, as we can see, she is called a different name, like in *Sulaymān al-Ḥakīm* or in *as-Sulṭān al-ḥā'ir* [1960, The Perplexed Sultan], another play penned by al-Ḥakīm. She can be recognized in the character of the beautiful lady that bought the Mamlūk Sultan who was not manumitted before the old king died and therefore he has been still a slave. The people consider her to be a local prostitute, but she is actually a virtuous widow who enjoys nocturnal discussions about literature and arts in the company of men. She even says herself that she is like Shahrazād, sitting at the sultan's feet every night and bringing joy and delight to his heart.[54] She is definitely a woman to remember, even for the sultan, who is not sure whether or not this is the last night they will spend together, which indicates that in the future their relationship might develop into a more intimate one.

Denis Hoppe believes that al-Ḥakīm's inspiration by the *Thousand and One Nights* is partially reflected in his novel *Yawmīyāt nā'ib fī al-aryāf* [Diary of a Country Prosecutor, 1937] as well because the main story does not unfold directly, as it is in Western fiction, but in a vague circular manner with an interruption of side episodes, thus reminding one of a frame story with embedded narratives in *Alf layla wa layla*. What is more, the presence of a mysterious beautiful woman, Rīm, functions as a loose connection between the

[52] Al-HAKIM, T. "The Wisdom of Solomon", p. 77.
[53] LONG, R. Tawfiq al-Hakim the Playwright of Egypt, p. 55.
[54] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. As-Sulṭān al-ḥā'ir [The Perplexed Sultan], p. 105.

episodes, even though she appears only at the beginning and at the end of the novel, very much like Shahrazād in the *Thousand and One Nights*.[55]

Hārūn ar-Rashīd and the improvised theatre

For all his life, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm was searching for new forms of dramatic expression as it is clearly visible, for example, in his famous plays *Yā ṭāliᶜ al-shajara* [1962, The Tree Climber][56] and *Maṣīr ṣirṣār* [1966, The Fate of a Cockroach], which are based on the concept of "the illogical" or "irrational" [*al-lāmanṭiqī, al-lāmaᶜqūl*].

However, it is obvious that al-Ḥakīm never really ceased to explore alternative theatrical approaches, so after a discussion on the improvised theatre with a famous Egyptian literary critic, ᶜAlī ar-Rāᶜī, he wrote a short improvised play called *Hārūn ar-Rashīd wa Hārūn ar-Rashīd* [1969, *Hārūn ar-Rashīd* and *Hārūn ar-Rashīd*]. Afterwards, he gifted the play to ar-Rā'ī and told him to handle it according to his wishes, and so ar-Rā'ī published the play in his book *Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm fannān al-furja wa fannān al-fikr* [1969, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, the Artist of Joy and the Artist of Thought] together with a commentary on its creation.

By means of this piece of improvised theatre, al-Ḥakīm aimed to break down the barrier between the actors and the audience. However, such performance would have been demanding for the actors, since it required a lot of experience and skills, and staging the play would have been difficult because of theatre censorship as well because there was no fixed text to be approved or refused by the committee. However, ar-Rāᶜī found a solution to the problem, proposing that the play be practised until its text became settled. Then it could be written down and handed in for approval, with any further possible changes supposed to be discussed with the committee as well.[57]

The play begins with the director of the troupe explaining to the audience the principles of the improvised play, after which he chooses the subject of the play. He suggests the story of Caliph Hārūn ar-Rashīd from the *Thousand and One Nights* because it is well-known to the actors as well as the audience, and its roles could be rendered both seriously and satirically, according to the preference of the actors.[58]

[55] HOPPE, D. The Novels of Tawfiq Al-Hakim, pp. 15 – 24.
[56] For more information on the topic see GELLA, J. "Marginal Comment on Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's symbolic intellectual drama *Yā ṭāliᶜ al-shajara.*" In *Graecolatina et Orientalia,* 1978, Vols. VII – VIII, pp. 251 – 252.
[57] Al-RĀ ᶜĪ, ᶜA. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm fannān al-furja wa fannān al-fikr, pp. 148 – 149.
[58] Al-ḤAKĪM, T. "Hārūn ar-Rashīd wa Hārūn ar-Rashīd" [Hārūn ar-Rashīd and Hārūn ar-Rashīd], p. 209.

After that the actors choose their roles freely and the play begins in a similar way as in the original story about Caliph Hārūn ar-Rashīd and Muḥammad ibn ᶜAlī the Jeweller.[59] The caliph learns about a group of people who imitate his court, so he decides to see them with his own eyes, taking Vizier Jaᶜfar al-Barmakī with him, both of them disguised as merchants. What they see is a false caliph and his vizier, who are talking to a crowd of people about the corruption of the real Hārūn ar-Rashīd's court. They say the caliph is interested only in distractions with his slave-girls and leaves the political and social issues of the kingdom to the ambitious vizier and criminal executioner Masrūr. The real caliph and vizier are roused to anger, speaking about a revolution and conspiracy. Soon, their identity is revealed, as someone from the crowd overhears them speaking and so the false caliph and his company change their speech dramatically, pretending they were only repeating the words of the caliph's enemies. The real Hārūn ar-Rashīd and Jaᶜfar slip away, while the other caliph tries to explain to the crowd that they had to put on an act because they were afraid they would be executed. Afterwards, the director comes to the stage and poses a question whether the audience would prefer courage with death or hypocrisy with deliverance, by which means he initiates a free debate between the actors and the audience. The play is not only a perfect combination of both sides of al-Ḥakīm – his sense of humour and love for philosophical thinking,[60] but it contains an idea of political protest as well, which make it a very interesting theatrical performance indeed.

Al-Ḥakīm's approach to intertextuality might have been sometimes rather stereotypical; the female protagonists mostly reflect the images of an ideal woman, while the male protagonists often resemble the author himself. In the short story *Amāma ḥawḍ al-marmar* [*Before the Marble Basin*], Shahrazād was startled by al-Ḥakīm's speech because she recognized Shahriyār's spirit in him, and Solomon's epithet is "the Wise" (in Arabic "al-Ḥakīm"), which reminds us of the name of the author himself. A coincidence it may be, but the similarity between the character of the wise king and Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm is evident – however intelligent they might have been, they fail to understand the secrets of a woman's heart.

As mentioned above, al-Ḥakīm's heroines from the plays discussed in the study are basically the same; they are beautiful, alluring, kind-hearted, intelligent, and self-sacrificing, and they can be identified with the character of the famous Shahrazād from the *Thousand and One Nights*. However, some

[59] See "Ḥikāyat Hārūn ar-Rashīd maᶜa Muḥammad ibn ᶜAlī al-Jawharī" [The story of Hārūn ar-Rashīd and Muḥammad ibn ᶜAlī the Jeweller]. In *Alf layla wa-layla*, Vol. II, pp. 191 – 200.

[60] Ar-RĀᶜĪ, ᶜA. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm fannān al-furja wa fannān al-fikr [Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, the Artist of Joy and the Artist of Thought], pp. 154 – 155.

literary critics have come to the conclusion that al-Ḥakīm's Shahrazād was actually not inspired by the Eastern Shahrazād but by her European counterpart. It is not a secret that her character migrated from the Arab world to the Western one, where her nature was changed, so when she finally returned to her homeland, she was not the same woman anymore. The Eastern Shahrazād was by no means the mysterious and sensual temptress we see in al-Ḥakīm's work. In fact, she is more of a symbolic figure, an ancient goddess in whom all the feminine aspects of a woman's nature are united.

Al-Ḥakīm's plays full of magic, supernatural forces and fantastic settings recall the atmosphere of the original stories of *Alf layla wa layla*. Occasionally, he used an Arabic form of rhymed prose [*saj ᶜ*] (e.g. in the play *Shahrazād*), which appears in the *Thousand and One Nights* as well, and in some plays (*Sulaymān al-Ḥakīm*) he even inserted parts of poetry (Solomon's *The Song of Songs*) into the text. According to Paul Starkey, this approach of incorporating large parts of poetry into his plays contributes to the disjointedness of the whole text.[61] However, when we look at the original stories from the collection of the *Thousand and One Nights*, we will find countless pieces of poetry that decelerate the narrative as well, so we could say that al-Ḥakīm was not only inspired by the content of *Alf layla wa layla* but also by some of its formal features. Sometimes he used an intertextual approach to take advantage of the audience's or actors' familiarity with the subject and because he managed to recognize the dramatic potential of a particular story, as was the case of the play *Hārūn ar-Rashīd wa Hārūn ar-Rashīd*.

The influence of the *Thousand and One Nights* on al-Ḥakīm's literary *oeuvre* is undeniable; the collection of stories had been a part of his life since his early childhood and he never ceased to find inspiration in those simple creations of folk spirit. Perhaps we can go as far as to say that were it not for those stories, none of the author's works would be created now, for it was *Alf layla wa layla* that stimulated his imagination, his love for fancy stories and even his fondness for theatre, taking into account the performances of folk storytellers and poets in which he saw the true origins of Arabic drama. Al-Ḥakīm's whole life was intertwined with popular literature and drama and he was striving to put the two of them together and defend their proper place in Arabic literature. His endeavour to incorporate popular literature into modern dramatic art sprang from his yearning to bring something original to modern Egyptian theatre (and literature, too), whose major part was based on imitations and adaptations of European plays. It is true that in some of his aims he might have been less successful and some were left unfulfilled, yet his devotion to literary art made

[61] STARKEY, P. From the Ivory Tower: A Critical Study of Tawfīq al-□akīm, pp. 210 – 211.

him one of the most influential personalities of Egypt's cultural scene of that time.

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