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The interliterary reception of the *Arabian Nights* in O. Henry's selected short stories

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the presence of the *Arabian Nights* in the short stories of the American writer O. Henry (1862–1910). Departing significantly from previous studies on this topic, this study challenges the traditional model of influence studies that has long dominated comparative literary scholarship. Such an approach, often restrictive, yields limited critical insight. Instead, this study adopts a reception-oriented framework to analyze the presence of the *Arabian Nights* in O. Henry's selected short stories. This theoretical perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of how the host text interacts with the source text on a textual level. The analysis is guided by Dionýz Durišin's model of interliterary reception, which provides a more effective framework for assessing O. Henry's creative engagement with the *Arabian Nights*. Additionally, the paper focuses on a specific subset of O. Henry's short stories those that explicitly reference the *Arabian Nights* in their titles and structure their narratives around its master plots. The very act of interliterary reception that underlies the construction of the five 'Arabian Nights' short stories provides invaluable insights into the ways in which America of the late nineteenth century imagines itself critically in the mirror of the *Arabian Nights*.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by re-examining O. Henry's engagement with the Arabian Nights through reception theory rather than influence studies. It is one of the few studies that have investigated O. Henry's Arabian Nights stories. The primary contribution of this paper is offering a nuanced framework for comparative literary analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of the *Arabian Nights* on world literature is so enormous and diverse that some aspects of this impact are still uncharted or under-researched. One of these aspects is the influence of the *Arabian Nights* on the short stories of the renowned American writer William Sydney Porter (1862–1910), best known by his pen name O. Henry. Although the influence of the *Arabian Nights* on his fictional art is recognized, his bibliography does not include a single systematic study of this influence. Worse still, there is a conspicuous absence of the name of O. Henry from the scholarship on the impact of the Arabian Nights on world literature. For instance, Marzolph and Richard (2004) overlooks O. Henry without providing any explicit reason.

The formative influence of the *Arabian Nights* on O. Henry's short stories was first popularized by Davis and Arthur (1931). Using the French model of influence studies, the authors did more than document the lasting influence

of the Arabian Nights on O. Henry's short stories. They, in fact, established the popular romantic image of O. Henry as the 'Caliph of Baghdad' Haroun Al Rashid. This popularized image of O. Henry does not invoke the historical figure of the Abbasid caliph as much as the fictional character in the *Arabian Nights*. Subsequent biographers, chiefly Nolan (1943), O'Connor (1970), and Stuart (1990), hammered this point of influence repeatedly. Additionally, the critical literature produced during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries on this point, which, though quite scarce, is deeply enmeshed in the classic framework of influence studies. The problem with this framework is that it is too factual and very rigid. Its sole end is to prove or disprove the act of influence. It is not concerned with what happens to this influence in the receptor's work and overlooks the creativity of the receptor by not exploring the specific ways in which the effect of influence is materialized or interpreted in the receptor's work (Domínguez, Saussy, & Villanueva, 2015).

In order to show the depth and creativity of the presence of the *Arabian Nights* in O. Henry's short stories, this study breaks free from the framework of traditional influence studies that dominate comparative literary studies. It follows the more dynamic and creative model of interliterary reception that was introduced by the Slovak theorist Dionýz Durišin (1929-1997) to explore the textual and semiotic complexities of this presence in Henry's short stories. Durišin (1984) shifted the focus of interest in comparative literary studies from international influence to interliterary reception between national literature and world literature. This paradigmatic shift provided a more creative and flexible theoretical model that can better account for the interliterary transactions (i.e., how a national literature transacts with world literature) between national literature (O. Henry's short stories) and world literature (*Arabian Nights*) (Santos & Ceyhun, 2023).

Because the *Arabian Nights* is so extensively and pervasively present in Henry (1953) fictional oeuvre, the study limits its investigation to what can be called, for convenience, 'Arabian Nights' short stories. These are a group of O. Henry's short stories whose titles refer directly to the Arabian Nights. Each one of these stories uses master narratives from the *Arabian Nights* to structure its plots.

These 'Arabian Nights' short stories consist of "A Madison Square Arabian Night" (from *The Trimmed Lamp*), "A Bird of Baghdad" (from *Strictly Business*), "A Night in New Arabia" (from *Strictly Business*), "The Caliph and the Cad" (from *Sixes and Sevens*), and "The Caliph, Cupid, and the Clock" (from *The Four Million*).These stories show strong affinities with the *Arabian Nights* in terms of characters, atmosphere, and narrative situations. Such textual affinities qualify them for the working of the interliterary reception process since *The Arabian Nights* is part of the canon of world literature. Validating this kind of reception in O. Henry's stories would undoubtedly open up new, innovative ways of thinking about *The Arabian Nights* as a dynamically evolving part of the canon of world literature, one that transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries. Simultaneously, it would reconfigure how we read O. Henry by situating his short stories within a broader global literary heritage. The paper's innovative comparative framework, grounded in interliterary reception theory, bridges a critical gap in world literature scholarship and offers a model for future studies of transnational literary influence and reception.

2. DIONÝZ DURIŠIN'S MODEL OF INTERLITERARY RECEPTION

Durišin's interliterary theory is a systematic explanation of the inter-channels between national literature and world literature. It is based on a rejection of the concept of influence as inadequate. In his *Theory of Literary Comparatistics*, Durišin describes influence as:

> An unfortunate relic of the comparative method of 'influence-seeking' […]. The term 'influence' in its original meaning grants precedence to the giving constituent and suppresses or conceals the original creative activity of the recipient literary phenomenon. In other words, it is the result of direct application of causality, where the giving phenomenon as the cause explains the recipient phenomenon as the result" (1984, 159–60).

Durišin, therefore, proposes to discard the concept of influence in favor of that of reception, which can better account for the interliterary situation between national and world literatures.

The mechanism of interliterary reception, according to Durišin, operates on two levels; the individual and the collective. It may occur between individual works from two different literatures and/or collectively between two different literatures in terms of interliterary communities and centerisms. Since this paper explores the interliterary reception between individual works from American and Arabic literature (or alternatively from world literature since the Arabian Nights is an important part of the canon of world literature), the present section limits itself to the first level of Durišin's theory.

Durišin identifies two tracks for the interliterary relationships at the individual level: genetic contact and typological affinities. Genetic relationships occur when factual contact exists between two works from different national literatures. Such relations are either external or internal, depending on the channel of their transaction. External genetic relationships denote how a literary work in one language is received in the literature of another language. Durišin, however, emphasizes that the kind of reception in this category of interliterary relationships differs from that in comparative literary studies. It is less concerned with effect and survival than with the intercultural-interliterary dynamics of national reception. Reception, in this sense, is dynamic and creative because it changes the structure of the receptor's work (Durišin, 1984).

Internal genetic relationships, on the other hand, refer to the creative ways in which an element from a literary work is being internalized/assimilated in another work from a foreign language (Durišin, 1984). Durišin identifies two types of internal genetic relationships: direct and mediated. These two types differ in terms of the quality and scope of communication. Direct internal genetic relationships occur when a writer reads a literary work in its original language, whereas mediated internal genetic relationships occur in cases of transduction, such as translation or adaptation to other media forms.

Durišin, furthermore, identifies two types of interliterary reception in terms of functionality: integrating and differentiating. Domínguez et al. (2015) explain that interliterary reception is integrating when "identification of the target-work with the source-element prevails; or differentiating when the aim is to stress distinction between the target-work and the source-element" (27). Durišin identifies different types of reception in each of these two categories. He lists three types of differentiating reception: literary controversy, parody, and travesty. He does not provide a detailed explanation of these three types. Domínguez et al. (2015) argue that these three categories operate "as strategies of differentiation, from a lower to a higher degree, in relation to the source-work" (1984, 27).

As for integrational reception, Durišin (1984) lists six types: "Allusion" evokes the source work through quotation and paraphrase, "Borrowing" involves images, topics, or devices from the source work, "Imitation" introduces continuities with the source work that promote the evolution of literary systems, "Filiation" is borrowing or imitation that is motivated by ethnic and cultural kinship, "Plagiarism" which focalizes exclusively the received phenomenon in the act of reception, and "Adaptation," which is "a highly characteristic and significant form of interliterary reception" (1984, 178), covers translation in its two types; the interlingual and intermedial.

The second track for the interliterary process is typological affinities. This track is the logical alternative to genetic contacts when no factual evidence exists to authenticate the existence of a factual contact between two works from two different national literatures. Judging by their scope of conditionality and intensity, Durišin identifies three types of typological affinities: socio-typological affinities, literary-typological affinities, and psychological-typological affinities (1984, 199-204). In each of these three types, the concept of influence is absent. Literary-typological affinities operate on the level of genre spatial ramification. Socio-typological affinities are the result of the same social situation. Psychological-typological affinities arise from similar authorial personalities, i.e., when two authors from two different nationalities share the same psychological personality traits.

3. THE INTERLITERARY RECEPTION OF THE *ARABIAN NIGHTS* IN O. HENRY'S SHORT STORIES

Because the *Arabian Nights* is part of the canon of world literature (chiefly (Al-Musawi, 2006, 2021; Horta, 2019; Ouyang, 2021)), it is possible to apply Durisin's model of interliterary reception to O. Henry's 'Arabian Nights' short stories because the act of reception is interliterary as it mediates between a national literature and world literature, as stipulated by Durišin's model. Applying this model of interliterary reception would yield significant insight into the specific ways in which a national literature transacts textually with the canon of world literature, away from the rigidity of the conventional model of influence scholarship.

Seen from the perspective of Durisin's model, O. Henry's 'Arabian Nights' short stories maintain a genetic, rather than a typological, interliterary relationship with the *Arabian Nights* because there is an actual contact between the author and the source work. O. Henry himself acknowledged reading the *Arabian Nights* and considered it one of the major influences on his art of short story. The first biographer of Henry (1953) and Smith (2004) quotes him stating that: "I did more reading," says O. Henry, "between my thirteenth and ninetieth years than I have done in all the years since, and that my taste at that time was much better than it is now, for I used to read nothing but the classics. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Lane's translation of the *Arabian Nights* were my favourites" (Smith, 2004).

Such a statement by O. Henry would further help in identifying this genetic contact as internal and mediated because elements from the *Arabian Nights* were internalized creatively in the 'Arabian Nights' short stories of O. Henry. These received elements, however, are taken from the interlingually translated version of *The Arabian Nights*. The reception, quality, and scope of *The Arabian Nights* in translation are highly thorny issues because *The Arabian Nights* is "a work undergoing permanent metamorphosis by the hand of its translators, thus in turn developing into a truly transnational repository of various literary traditions" (Marzolph & Richard, 2004). Thus, O. Henry's choice to read Edward William Lane's 1839 translation of the *Arabian Nights* would have a noticeably different effect than when reading, for instance, the more popular 1884 translation of Richard Francis Burton. Although Lane's translation is closer to the original, it is extensively bowdlerized. Lane lived in Egypt and learned Arabic there. He chose the reliable 'Bûlâq' edition of the *Arabian Nights* as the source text for his translation. This is one of the earliest Arabic editions of the *Arabian Nights* that was printed by the Bûlâq press in Cairo. Lane, however, omitted all erotic passages and some bizarre stories. He tried to nativize the *Arabian Nights* by using a pompous Biblical style with extensive scholarly notes and explanations. Unlike Burton, Lane was trying to strike a balance between oriental and European culture in his translation of the *Arabian Nights*. Marzolph and Richard (2004) report that Lane expressed an intention "to present a literary work that at the same time provided a "mirror" of the manners and customs of the culture that had produced it" (2004. 619). The result is a faithful translation minus the sensuous richness of the original text. Consequently, Lane's filtered translation mediates the act of interliterary reception, which accounts for O. Henry's exclusive intertextual use of characters (such as Haroun Al Rashid) and narrative situations (such as the Shahryar-Shahrazad master narrative, the Caliph's nocturnal excursions in disguise), and the magic realist atmosphere of the fantastic from the *Arabian Nights* in his stories. In either case, his deepest motive is to transpose the code of cultural values associated with characters and narrative situations in the Arabian Nights to the American social milieu of his stories (Mohammed, 2021). Hypothetically speaking, this wouldn't be the case if O. Henry's reception of the *Arabian Nights* was mediated by, say, Burton's translation, in which case the act of reception would be more textually immersive in the sensuous texture of language and signification of the Arabian Nights narrativity.

However, when it comes to the functionality of this interliterary reception, things become a bit ambivalent. While almost all of O. Henry's 'Arabian Nights' stories tend to integrate elements from the *Arabian Nights* into their narratives, this integration is not quite stable; it, in turn, turns at specific moments into the differentiating space of parody. Of the six integrational reception dynamics, O. Henry relies on borrowing, imitation, and adaptation. Allusion and plagiarism are not used as they occur exclusively in close re-rendering of a source work, as in the case of re-telling by paraphrase, where the source work remains intact. Filiation is also out of the question because O. Henry

and the *Arabian Nights* belong to different ethnic and cultural affiliations. There is no genealogical connection between them.

O. Henry borrows and imitates, in Durisin's sense, many aspects from the *Arabian Nights*. Each one of the five stories borrows the temporal framework of the night, i.e., nocturnal storytelling, from the *Arabian Nights*. Each story opens in the evening and proceeds to execute its narrative with the unfolding night. "A Madison Square Arabian Night" opens with "Carson Chalmers, in his apartment near the square, Phillips brought the evening mail" (335). The action of the story unfolds within this single night. The same temporal signaling of the night framework span happens in the other stories. In "A Bird of Baghdad," the narrator ushers the reader into the atmosphere of the story with the synoptic sentence "Let us say it is night" (1356). "A Night in New Arabia" has a larger temporal span, but the nocturnal atmosphere of its narrative is prioritized at the very opening sentence of the story with its invocation of the caliph Haroun Al Raschid's nightly tours in disguise in Baghdad in search of entertainment. This invocation initiates the thematic and structural pattern of the subsequent narrative of old Jacob Spraggins. "The Caliph and the Cad" unfolds over the span of a single night. Corny Brannigan, its central character, acts the role of the caliph in the night: "Every evening after Corny had put up his team and dined at a lunch-counter that made immediateness a specialty, he would clothe himself in evening raiment as correct as any you will see in the palm rooms. Then he would betake himself to that ravishing, radiant roadway devoted to Thespis, Thais, and Bacchus" (1823). Similarly, "The Caliph, Cupid, and the Cad" is a one-night story that opens with its central character Dopy Mike sitting "on his favourite bench in the park. The coolness of the September night quickened the life in him like a rare, tonic wine" (278). The subsequent narrative covers the span of the unfolding night. "A Bird of Baghdad" follows one of Quigg's nocturnal adventures: "One night at 9, at which hour the restaurant closed, Quigg set forth upon his quest" (1357).

However, the borrowing does not end here as these five stories develop further affinities with the *Arabian Nights* in terms of characters and narrative situations. The Caliph venturing incognito in Baghdad is a major narrative trope in the *Arabian Nights*. It features prominently in “Harun al-Rashid and Abu’l-Hasan of Oman” (Nights 946-952), “Ibrahim and Jamila” (Nights 952-959), and “Abu’l-Hasan al-Khurasani” (Nights 959-963). Thus, as soon as each one of O. Henry's five stories signals its nocturnal setting, a Haroun Al Rashid-like figure appears on the narrative scene. In "A Bird of Baghdad," Quigg is a present-day Haroun Al Rashid: "Without a doubt much of the spirit and genius of the Caliph Harun Al Rashid descended to the Margrave August Michael von Paulsen Quigg" (1357). In "The Caliph, Cupid, and the Cad," Dopy Mike (Prince Michael) is the caliph of the title, although he is not directly identified with the name Haroun Al Rashid in the narrative of the story. However, the narrative only indirectly identifies him with the caliph as he emulates the latter's nocturnal adventures in disguise on the streets of Baghdad: "I appear incognito, of course, as you may gather from my appearance. It is a fancy of mine to render aid to others whom I think worthy of it. Perhaps the matter that seems to distress you is one that would more readily yield to our mutual efforts" (279). Corny Brannigan in "The Caliph and the Cad" is effectively invoked as a Haroun Al Rashid-like figure: "There was one who saw the possibilities of thus turning the tables on Haroun al-Rashid. His name was Corny Brannigan... And if you read further, you will learn how he turned upper Broadway into Baghdad and learned something about himself that he did not know before" (1823). "A Night in New Arabia" differs slightly from other stories in fashioning its central character, Jacob Spraggins. The story starts with an extended elegiac reflection on the magical times of Haroun Al Rashid of the *Arabian Nights* and contrasts these times with the dystopian present-day New York. The narrator then proposes to call the unfolding story "THE STORY OF THE CALIPH WHO ALLEVIATED HIS CONSCIENCE" (capitalization in original) (1373). Evidently, Spraggins is the caliph of the title. "A Madison Square Arabian Night" opens by invoking its central character, Carson Chalmers, as a Shahryar-like figure. It soon switches him into the caliph figure when he hosts the vagrant artist Plumer, who keeps addressing his host as the caliph: "All right, my jovial ruler of Bagdad. I’m your Scheherezade all the way to the toothpicks. You’re the first Caliph with a genuine Oriental flavor I’ve struck since frost. What luck!" (337).

In addition to borrowing characters and narrative situations, these stories develop further intertextual connections with the *Arabian Nights*. Such connections most often materialize on the figurative level of language as rhetorical figures of speech. "A Madison Square Arabian Night" is full of such instances. Philips, the butler, is always associated with the genie of the magic lantern: "Philips appeared. He never entered; he invariably appeared, like a well-oiled genie" (335). Such similes are meant to emulate the butler's briskness and swift physical movements. The expensive rug in Chalmers' apartment is metamorphosed into the magic carpet of Aladdin: "The rug was not an enchanted one. For sixteen feet he could travel along it; three thousand miles was beyond its power to aid" (335). This example is a metaphor which plays on desire and confinement. Chalmers is consumed by suspicion of the fidelity of his wife, who was then touring Europe alone. The mail that Philips brought frames him in a Shahryar-like situation. The metaphorical association with the magic carpet occurs on the narrational level as a clue for the reader to perceive the intensity of Chalmers' physical and psychological agitation. Such associations, however, are parodic in nature because O. Henry's borrowings from the *Arabian Nights* occur in the part of the story where Chalmers is poised as a Shahryar figure. Like Shahryar, he is led to suspect the fidelity of his wife, and he is now consumed by suspicion and anger. The explicit reference to the *Arabian Nights* in Chalmers' narrative is meant to re-orient the act of reading towards the parodic into which Chalmers' narrative occupies the forefront, and the frame narrative of the *Arabian Nights* is posited in the background. This kind of parody is postmodernist in appeal as it lacks the ironic stance and plays on critical difference. In Linda Hutcheon's terms, this parody is a "de-doxification" of the very act of textual representation. Hutcheon (1989) argues that "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (1989, 93). This process operates in the association of Philips and Chalmers' rug to the genie of the magic lantern and the magic carpet of Aladdin, respectively. Although O. Henry's textuality is firmly grounded in that of the *Arabian Nights*, it works to subvert this textual filiation through de-doxification, which is similar to the Derridean aporia and trace (Jadwe & Faisal, 2024). In these two instances, the association is installed but quickly subverted, whereby a critical distance ensues to remind the reader that this is just another representation (O. Henry's story) of a past representation (the *Arabian Nights*).

"A Night in New Arabia" is rich with multifaceted references to the *Arabian Nights* but lacks the parodic stance of "A Madison Square Arabian Night." The opening paragraphs of the story are densely stacked with allusions to different aspects and stories from the Arabian Nights. There is a reference to Haroun Al Rashid's nightly disguise, "seeking diversion and victims for their unbridled generosity" (1372). There is also an allusion to the narrative cluster of Ja'far and the Barmakids (notably "Ja'far the Barmakid and the Bean-seller"; and "Ja'far the Barmakid and the Old Badawî"). The web of intertextuality becomes denser when O. Henry makes allusions to different stories from the Arabian Nights: "So then, fearfully through the Harun-haunted streets creep the One-Eyed Calenders, the Little Hunchback and the Barber's Sixth Brother, hoping to escape the ministrations of the roving horde of caliphoid sultans" (1375). O. Henry refers here to the Qalandar cluster of stories (Nights 15, 16, 18, & 433), "The Hunchback's Tale" (Night 23), and "The Barber's Tale of his Sixth Brother" (Night 34). O. Henry selected these three stories carefully to act as a threshold for the narrative of Jacob Spraggins. "The Hunchback's Tale" is a story about telling stories framed by the Hunchback's death and return to life. Telling stories is the ultimate arbiter of Eros and Thanatos, where narrativity becomes the very texture of life itself. No wonder that "The Tale of the Barber's Sixth Brother" is itself inserted in "The Tale of the Tailor" in "The Hunchback's Tale." Like The Qalandar's Tales, "The Hunchback's Tale" is about transformation since it tells of a man who was transformed into a monkey and then transformed back into a man. Such a magical realist transformation reminds of Spraggins' transformation from a greedy animal into a real human but then transformed back to his original state. These three tales from the *Arabian Nights* act as a narrative threshold for the process of reading Spraggins' narrative. They act as a phenomenological 'horizon of expectations' for the reader who comes afresh to Spraggins' tale of self-made fortune and that of his daughter's romance.

The Caliph, Cupid, and the Cad might lack such intertextual references, but its narrative is reminiscent of the familiar narrative trope of the lover waiting impatiently under the window of his beloved house, as in "Alî Shâr and Zumurrud" (Night 82) and "Anklet" (Night 461). Similarly, "A Bird of Baghdad" employs the riddle trope from the *Arabian Nights* as the center of Qugg's narrative, which looks backward to tales such as "The King Who Kenned the Quintessence of Things" (Night 289), "Linguist-Dame," "The Duenna and the King's Son" (Night 411), "Ma'dîkarib" (Night 278), and "Merchant, the Crone, and the King" (Night 294). The narrator attempts to emulate the riddle atmosphere of the *Arabian Nights* when he suggests naming this "gleaned tale" as "THE STORY OF THE YOUNG MAN AND THE HARNESS MAKER'S RIDDLE" (capitalized in original) (1359). The phrasing of the suggested title is reminiscent of the titles of the *Arabian Nights*. To further emphasize the intertextuality with the *Arabian Nights*, the young lover, Simmons, who is tasked with solving the riddle, announces that "I read *the Arabian Nights* when I was a kid… But, say, you might wave enchanted dishrags and make copper bottles smoke up coon giants all night without ever touching me. My case won't yield to that kind of treatment" (1358). Although parodic in effect, this statement is one of orientation or grounding, as it contextualizes the young man's riddle narrative within the framework of the riddle trope in the *Arabian Nights*. "The Caliph and the Cad" is no exception. Its narrative seems to find its impetus in "Mock Caliph" (Night 73), with its central character, the son of a wealthy jeweler, playing the mock caliph every night. This is part of the disguise trope in the *Arabian Nights*. Cory Brannigan plays the mock caliph every night in New York as part of his nocturnal self-reinvention, transforming from an ordinary person during the day into a Haroun Al Rashid night.

Furthermore, this multifaceted borrowing from the *Arabian Nights* is supplemented by a revisionary process of imitation that works on a deeper textual level. In these five stories, O. Henry reproduces the phenomena of the fantastic, the carnivalesque, and magic realism, which are quite common in the tales of the *Arabian Nights*.

Using Todorov (1973) theoretical insights on the fantastic, Khrais (2014) found that the fantastic is richly used in most of the tales of the *Arabian Nights* and that it equally opts into the marvelous and the uncanny. Todorov sees the fantastic as that moment of uncertainty that the reader experiences when faced with a supernatural situation, but the reader soon opts from this uncertainty into either the marvelous or the uncanny (1973, 25). O. Henry uses the fantastic in a similar way in two of his 'Arabian Night' stories. "A Madison Square Arabian Night" and "The Caliph, Cupid, and the Clock" reframe their plots' narrative closure in the textual space of the fantastic. Plumer's supernatural gift in "A Madison Square Arabian Night" and Prince Michael's oracular powers in "The Caliph, Cupid, and the Clock" are prime instances of the fantastic. The two stories are realistic and present a rational world of cause and effect. They create a momentary space of uncertainty for the reader. Like the *Arabian Nights*, O. Henry heightens this uncertainty by prolonging the duration of the fantastic. Plumer tells Chalmers that he has a supernatural gift of drawing the truth of people instead of their appearances. This gift caused his tragic fall. Plumer asks him to draw a picture of his wife from a photo and calls an expert artist to verify the picture. Prince Michael holds the young lover for most of the story even when the park clock is past the time of the rendezvous. Like in the *Arabian Nights*, the narrative opts this space of uncertainty of the fantastic one time into the marvelous and the other time into the uncanny. In "A Madison Square Arabian Night," Plumer's supernatural gift turns out to be real at the end of the story when the professional artist Reineman, whom Chalmers asks to check Plumer's pastel painting of his wife, announces that "The face," said Reineman, "is the face of one of God's own angels. May I ask who?" (340). "The Caliph, Cupid, and the Clock" takes the opposite direction in the resolution of the 'fantastic' as the interpretational uncertainty opts into the uncanny. As an explanation, the park clock is not set and is delayed: "By George! that clock's half an hour fast! First time in ten years I've known it to be off. This watch of mine never varies a—"(283).

O. Henry's imitation also manifests itself in the textual reproduction of the carnivalesque phenomenon quite common in the *Arabian Nights*. Agzenay (1989) argues persuasively that "the *One Thousand and One Nights* was the privileged space of carnivalesque and anti-authoritarian discourses" (1989, 227). O. Henry imitates this comedic festive worldview in which "the awareness of the people's immortality is combined with the realization that

established authority and truth are relative" (Bakhtin, 1984). "The Caliph and the Cad," "A Bird of Baghdad," and "The Caliph, Cupid, and the Clock" embody this carnivalesque worldview. Each night, the central character in each of these three stories takes the liberty to act as the caliph in a possibly alternative reality. Brannigan, Quigg, and Dopy Mike are from socially inferior positions but become immensely prominent at night as they disguise themselves as caliphs or princes. Mortality here turns into immortality in the schizoid discourse of identity in space and temporality. Each night, they perform a kind of ritual spectacle, which textually figures as "a world of topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled" (Stallybrass & Allon, 1986). The rationale of this carnivalesque space is clearly stated at the beginning of "The Caliph and the Cad".

> There was a certain Caliph of Baghdad who was accustomed to go down among the poor and lowly for the solace obtained from the relation of their tales and histories. Is it not strange that the humble and poverty-stricken have not availed themselves of the pleasure they might glean by donning diamonds and silks and playing Caliph among the haunts of the upper world? (1823).

Corny, the truck driver, plays the Haroun Al Rashid during the night as part of his desire to subvert established authoritarian hierarchies. He becomes the "queer feller" for the established social hierarchies. He is fashioned as the grotesque both in terms of his subversive personality and in terms of ludicrous behaviors. Corny, at the end of the story, provides valuable insight into his carnivalesque personality and its socially subversive ends: "I been playin' gent a long time, thinkin' it was just the glad rags I had and nothin' else. Say you're a swell, ain't you? Well, you trot in that class, I guess. I don't, but I found out one thing, I'm a gentleman, by and I know it now. What'll you have to drink?" (1832).

No such confession is present in the other two stories where the atmosphere of the carnivalesque is less grotesque than comedic. Quigg and Mike live two lives, one during the day and another at night. They act in a reversed Haroun Al Rashid classic narrative situation in terms of hierarchy and ends. Here, the movement is structurally carnivalesque, and the disguise is not, as in the Arabian Nights, set to seek entertainment. Quigg and Dopy embark on these night adventures solely to help those in distress. Quigg offers free meal cards, and Dopy offers his quasi-mystical expertise to assist people. Quigg is a humble restaurant proprietor, and Mike is a tramp during the day. But when night falls, they go into the city as caliphs incognito, for no obvious reason but pleasure and amusement. "A Bird of Baghdad" explicitly states this reversal: "By day he was Quigg, the restaurateur. By night he was the Margrave the Caliph the Prince of Bohemia going about the city in search of the odd, the mysterious, the inexplicable, the recondite" (1357). Similarly, Prince Michael/Dopy Mike, the narrator reports, used to be "clad as the poorest of mendicants in the parks; he loved to study humanity. He found in altruism more pleasure than his riches, his station, and all the grosser sweets of life had given him" (283). Thus, both of them embark each night on a quest into a world of magic realism, where fantasy combines with realism to create a fairy world of social fluidity. Each sets up his mock royal court, which figures in the narrative as a spectacle in which communication is ritualized. Quigg and Dopy are humorously addressed with dignifying epithets befitting a caliph. Such a nocturnal world as that of Quigg and Dopy disrupts the power structure of society by negating all hierarchies. It is a festive world far beyond even the magic and wild imagination of the *Arabian Nights*, as the lover tells Quigg. In this festive world, comedy reigns supreme, and the fairy atmosphere of the surreal night can make anything, even miracles, happen. Like the *Arabian Nights*, the festive space of the night is where tales unfold. The carnivalesque ceases by day, and the human world returns to reality. The riddle is answered, and the prince transforms back into a frog: "But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence" (*Arabian Nights* 1990, 75).

Given these extensive borrowings and imitations, was O. Henry trying to intermedially adapt the *Arabian Nights* to the short story form? The viable answer would be yes since what O. Henry was trying to do is "a kind of transmediation that is characterized by a transfer of compound media characteristics among dissimilar media, and in the end media transformation is governed by fundamental pre-semiotic and semiotic media similarities and

differences" (Elleström, 2017). This is not intertextuality because the Arabian Nights as a hypertext foreground the very textuality of O. Henry's narratives. While this kind of hypertextuality complies with Dolezel (1998) typology of transfictional operations, extension, modification, and transposition (1998), it exhibits strong aspects of intermedial adaptation and its related textual phenomena of transculturation, hybridization, indigenization, and syncretism. This aspect of transfictionality operates on the principle of 'shared fictional world', similar to what Jadwe (2025) identified in the novels of Pym (2025). Based on this principle, O. Henry was building his fictional worlds on the same textual exegeses of the world of the *Arabian Nights* to the extent that if a character from O. Henry's *Arabian Nights* short stories may cross textual boundaries into the world of *Arabian Nights*, that character would not be odd or out of place.

Although *the Arabian Nights* and O. Henry's short stories are both fictional prose narratives, the nature and requirements of each are different. This is a qualitative difference of mediums; one of orality versus writing. The *Arabian Nights* is an oral folk narrative, whereas the short story is a formal literary subgenre of narrative fiction. O. Henry translated, in Durisin's sense of the term, the *Arabian Nights* into his five short stories intermedially by adapting orality into textuality.

But this brand of orality, in Ong (1982), is 'secondary orality'. It may resemble primary orality in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas. However, it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well. (1982, 133).

To this effect, almost all the five 'Arabian Nights' short stories present themselves as narratives of oral storytelling. The narrator in each story functions as a Scheherazadean storyteller addressing the reader directly. In this context, the reader is less a narratee and more a physical presence within the address. Probably, "A Madison Square Arabian Night" is an exception to this pattern, as it leans more towards drama than narrative. Nevertheless, it still emulates orality through its staging of a Scheherazadean storytelling scene, which forms the core of its narrativity. The other four stories are oral narratives delivered as direct addresses to the reader, who remains focalized throughout each story. Sometimes, the limited scope of the short story struggles to accommodate the expansive nature of orality, as seen in "A Night in New Arabia," where oral storytelling transitions into metafictionality. Indeed, the storyteller's ongoing dialogue with the reader (as a Shahryar interlocutor) evolves into a self-reflexive narrative on storytelling: "Thus, by the commonest artifice of the trade, having gained your interest, the action of the story will now be suspended, leaving you grumpily to consider a sort of dull biography beginning fifteen years before" (1373). This is not only an oral storyteller manipulating his audience but also a metafictional gesture, as it occurs within the space of a well-crafted short story, owing to the compressed form and its narrative revelation logic. This makes the new *Arabian Night* narratives more climactic than accumulative in effect.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, O. Henry's 'Arabian Nights' short stories maintain an internal and mediated genetic interliterary relationship with the globally translated *Arabian Nights*. Although this relationship is integrating, it tends to be differentiating. O. Henry relies heavily on the integrating elements of borrowing, adaptation, and imitation, but they are de-stabilized by the working of parody, the carnivalesque, and the fantastic. O. Henry was not mechanically imitating the *Arabian Nights*. He was writing American *Arabian Nights* by reproducing creatively the narrative signature of the *Arabian Nights* in his short stories.

This textual reproduction is culturally self-fashioned since O. Henry's reception of the *Arabian Nights* is intimately related to the specific ways in which the author imagines his America at a specific historical moment. The world of the *Arabian Nights* serves as the Lacanian imaginary for this immensely rich and frightfully unequal America. The very act of interliterary reception that underlies the construction of the five 'Arabian Nights' short stories operates as a Freudian identification process where the cultural psyche of the nation is being mirrored. Thus, this interliterary reception becomes what Lacan (1977) calls a 'mirror stage' in which the subject assumes an image of

oneself, recognizes oneself in it, and ultimately appropriates this image as oneself (1977). This imaginary identification is the stage at which the ego is created by identifying with something outside the subject (presumably, the Arabian Nights). It is logical, then, to conclude that this process of interliterary reception provides invaluable insight into the ways in which America of the late nineteenth century imagines itself critically in the mirror of the *Arabian Nights*.

This correlation of the cultural and textual dynamics in the act of interliterary reception is possibly a promising field of investigation for comparative literary studies, notably those related to the global appropriation of the *Arabian Nights* in various national literatures. Such a correlation can also be useful in extending the parameters of Durisin's theory of interliterary reception by espousing its rigid interliterary classifications with a fertile para-literary dimension. The act of interliterary reception, in this way, can be meaningfully read as an act of cultural self-fashioning through psychic mirroring and identification.

As such, this study demonstrates that interliterary reception is not just about textual borrowing, but also about cultural and psychological self-reflection. By reinterpreting the *Arabian Nights*, O. Henry's stories offer a unique lens through which late 19th-century America critically imagines itself. This approach paves the way for new research into how literary texts function as mirrors of national and cultural identity across different historical and geographical contexts.

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