Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas:
Prince of Abissinia and the Culture of the East

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of the means of pleasure.
Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas (65)

Whate’er thy theme, where the magic might
Of the stern Kings, that dwell mid ocean’s roar,
Or Sindbad’s perils, or the cruel wiles
Of Afric’s curs’d enchanter charm us more
Or aught more wondrous still our ear beguiles,
Well pleas’d we listen to thy fable lore,
And Truth itself with less attraction smiles.
Thomas Russell 2.

The East was la mode in the eighteenth century English literature. M. P. Conant
introduced an interesting survey and classification of the eighteenth century English
literature related to the East 3 However, I would like to divide that literature into two
main types: imitations and pseudo-translations. The imitations of the Arabic, Turkish
and Persian literatures were uninfluential and had nothing to add. They failed to rival
the originals in their structure, flavor and suspense. The pseudo-translations were
deemed unpopular except the One Thousand and One Nights or the Arabian Nights. Of
its most famous early translations were those of Antoine Galland (1704-1707), Edward
William Lane (1838-1841), John Payne (1882-1884), and Richard Burton (1885-1888) 4.

The Arabian Nights was a source book for a great number of the eighteenth century
writers. Immediately after Galland’s Arabian Nights, Turkish and Persian collections of
stories and tales were also translated by a French savant, Pétis de la Croix, and
revised by La Sage. Then, there appeared pseudo-oriental fabrications by another
Frenchman, Gueullette5. The fact that those works came to England from French,
made them welcome by the English reading public.
The influence of the Arabian Nights on the Orientalism of the time was incomparable.
Conant writes

To the magical country the Arabian Nights, ever since its first appearance in English in
the early years of the eighteenth century, has proved a favorite gateway 6.
Johnson’s fascination with the East and its culture was never fortuitous; he showed a
profound concern about the subtle and sophisticated subject of the East, and Rasselas
(1759) constituted a part of his responses to the intellectual situation of the Eastern
culture. Like many others of his time, he “borrowed extensively from the Arabian
Nights”7. The Arabian Nights was a source of inspiration for Johnson’s Rasselas. On the
It enjoys all the charms of oriental imagery, and all the forces and beauty of which the English language is capable.

It is essential to investigate the cultural assumptions and ideological framework that allowed many of the eighteenth century writers to group together both Shakespearean plots of medieval butchery and dismal ruins with fantastic tales of the exotic East. In the case of Johnson, I would argue that his interest in the culture of the East showed a great passion for all things "oriental" as a symptom of cultural malaise suffered by eighteenth century writers. Rasselas is a tableau of Johnson's admiration of the exotic East; luxuries, enchantment, escape, picturesque, Gothic, jinn, effrits [sic], sorcery; dates and coffee trade, and land of deep history and strategic geographic location that controls old great trade routes.

Rasselas, the most famous Oriental tale ever written by an Englishman, is set in the East where an Eastern prince Rasselas and his sister travel from Abyssinia to Egypt, and where Imlac sees the world of Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Persia and Arabia -- an area that constitutes a cradle of early civilizations, and bed of Islam.

Johnson found in the Arabian Nights a vast palette of effects and situations to imitate. M. J. Ali mentions that Johnson adapted the trappings and themes of the Nights and its successors for moralistic and philosophic purposes.

Thus, Rasselas enjoyed an oriental lore. In this context, I would like to trace some of the influences of the Arabian Nights on Rasselas.

**First:** Rasselas was meant to be instructive and moral with oriental background and setting. This intention was made in imitation of the Arabian Nights which is regarded by the majority of the scholars as “instructif et moral”.

**Second:** Rasselas opens with a call to the reader’s attention. Johnson writes

> Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope; who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that the deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow; attend to the history of Rasselas prince of Abissinia (39).

This opening is made in imitation of the Arabian Nights which opens with sentences that attract the readers’ attention. It opens with the following statement

> It is said, O wise and happy King, that once there was a prosperous merchant who had abundant wealth and investments and commitments in every country. He had many women and children and kept many servants and slaves (17).

**Third:** Like some of the tales of the Arabian Nights, Rasselas displays remoteness _not_ the monstrous or the wild _from ordinary life. Setting the story in the East is, in part, a result of cultural uneasiness and therefore a need to go away to a remote land and a new world. One of the main ideas of Rasselas is escapism. From the early beginning of the story, we see Rasselas himself endeavoring to find a new world, away from the reality of his life. Moreover, M. J. Ali writes Although the acceptance of the Oriental tale [Arabian Nights] still falls within the neo-classical premises of the age, it, nevertheless, reveals a restless search for new visions beyond the dull and limiting conventions.

**Fourth:** the structure of Johnson’s Rasselas is an attempt to imitate that interesting
story-within-story structure of the Arabian Nights. Rasselas is composed of a series of stories told to describe the adventures of Rasselas.

**Fifth:** Johnson’s choice to write about the East, in its broader sense, locates him within a series of debates such as ancient civilizations created and flourished in the East, and that the origin of poetry being in the East. Poets enjoyed a cozy place in Rasselas. When the poet attended Rasselas in his apartment, the poet entertained him from day to day with novelty and instruction, so the prince regretted the necessity of sleep, and longed till the morning should renew his pleasure (54).

Later Rasselas expressed his fascination with the poetry of the East (60-1). In these situations we realize how Johnson follows a technique used in the Arabian Nights. Such scenes demonstrate an element of suspense, an essential characteristic of the Arabian Nights. It recalls the opening of the Arabian Nights and the beginning of each story every night afterwards. Then day time was used to make Shehrazade lapse into silence, “leaving Shahrayar burning into curiosity to hear the rest of the story”12. On another level, poetry reciting is essential in the Arabian Nights. It is a major constituent of a great number of the Nights. Husain Haddawy mentions the importance of verse to the Arabian Nights. He writes Of the distinctive features of the Nights is that the prose narrative is interspersed with verse passages, some of which were interpolated by the original editor, some by subsequent copyists 13.

In Rasselas, Imlac explains to Rasselas the business of the poet as to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest ... To be a poet, said Imlac, is indeed very difficult (61-2).

**Sixth:** like the Arabian Nights, Johnson paid much attention to talk about Rasselas’ characters throughout a variety of events and situations. In other words, like the Arabian Nights, Rasselas enjoys a feature in common with the picaresque novel: it pays more attention to action rather than character development. All characters in the Arabian Nights whether they were viziers, sultans, princes, or ordinary people remained simple or even naïve. So is the case with Rasselas, Imlac and Nekaya of Rasselas.

**Seventh:** the Arabian Nights and Rasselas enjoy some Gothic elements. Consider the Happy Valley in Rasselas and the cave in Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves in the Arabian Nights. Moreover, Ioan Williams writes In the Arabian Nights are many most striking examples of the terrible joined with the marvelous: the story of Aladdin and the travels of Sindbad are particularly interesting 14.

**Eighth:** Like the Arabian Nights, Rasselas can be read on more than one level, by the young and the grown ups; both displays simplicity, lushness and extravagance of style. They are distinguished by their interest in the lucidity and eloquence of their styles unlike those works of the eighteenth century old rhetorical decorations.

**Ninth:** Rasselas depicts images of some Eastern civilizations, and also portrays the natural beauty and luxury of the East. It opens with the description of the Royal Palace in the Happy Valley (39-41). Also mentioned is the Egyptian generosity and the luxury of the Palace where the Bassa [Pasha] of Egypt dwells (83). Such descriptions recall the luxurious scenes of the palaces of the Muslim Abbaside Caliphes including Haroun
al-Rashid in the Arabian Nights. In addition there is the reference to the various
civilizations of the East. Rasselas celebrates Pharonic Egypt in the following passage
The old Egyptians have left behind them monuments of industry and power before
which all European magnificence is confessed to fade away. The ruins of their
architecture are the schools of modern builders, and from the wonders which time has
spared we may conjecture, though uncertainly, what it has destroyed (103)
Then, Imlac expresses his fascination with the pyramids. He says
The most pompous monument of Egyptian greatness, and one of the most bulky works
of manual industry, said Imlac, are the pyramids; fabricks [sic] raised before the time
of history, and of which the earliest narratives afford us only uncertain traditions. Of
these greatest is still standing, very little injured by time (105).

Tenth: Rasselas contains references to the rich econo-my and profitable trade of the
East. Rasselas enters Cairo and realizes that
Commerce is here [in Cairo] honorable: I will act as a merchant ... you will see all the
conditions of humanity, and enable yourself at leisure to make your choice of life (75).
This comes in imitation of the trade scenes and situations of the various tales of the
Arabian Nights. For example, the first night is The Story of the Merchant and the
Demon 15.

Eleventh: Rasselas is replete with fables and proverbial wisdom. I would argue that
some of their geneses were developed from tales of the Arabian Nights. For example,
consider The Tale of the Envious and the Envied from the forty-sixth night 16.

Finally, it is needless to say that it is hard to ignore Johnson’s borrowings from the
Arabian Nights. The influence of the Eastern cultures on the eighteenth century
literature is worthy of more elaborate studies.

Notes
6. Ibid. 1.
7. For information and a list of the eighteenth century writers who were influenced by the Arabian Nights see appendices A and B in Conant’s The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century.
10. Mohamed Abdel-Halim. Antoine Galland: sa vie et son oeuvre (Paris: n. p., 1964), 263. However, Jorge Luis Borges mentions that the Arabian Nights is a type of fiction
meant to entertain and move the reader without conveying a certain message. See The New York Review of Books (21 October 1971), 49.

13. Ibid. xxvii.
16. Ibid. 101-2.

References


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Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas (65)
Written in the evenings of a single week to pay for his mother's funeral, Samuel Johnson's only novel offers a compelling glimpse of the distinguished English writer's moral views. Its rapid execution, it.

PAUL GORING lectures on eighteenth-century literature and culture at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim. He has previously edited Laurence Sterne's A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy for Penguin Classics, and his other publications include The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture (2005). SAMUEL JOHNSON. The History of Rasselas. Prince of Abissinia. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by. Paul goring. Penguin books. Penguin classics. Published by the Penguin Group. Rasselas, philosophical romance by Samuel Johnson published in 1759 as The Prince of Abissinia. Supposedly written in the space of a week, with the impending expenses of Johnsonâ€™s motherâ€™s funeral in mind, Rasselas explores and exposes the vanity of the human search for happiness. The work is.Â Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what you've submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! External Websites. Britannica Websites. Articles from Britannica Encyclopedias for elementary and high school students. Rasselas - Student Encyclopedia (Ages 11 and up). WRITTEN BY. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. However, Samuel Johnson wrote this story more than two centuries ago, and the writing style and vocabulary used are likely to be challenging for many. Balancing the difficulty in reading the story is that the story is not long. Considered by many to be a classic, here is a book that anyone who has styled himself a philosopher or just a seeker after truth should read.Â "Rasselas" of the title is a prince who has led a sheltered life in the Happy Valley. Over time he becomes discontented with always being contented, and decides to escape his boredom by leaving. He is led by his guide Imlac, a court counselor and poet; accompanying them is Rasselas's sister and her maid. Samuel Johnson The History of. Rasselas. Prince of Abissinia. In parentheses Publications Orientalism Series. Cambridge, Ontario 1999. 1. Description of a palace in a valley.Â Rasselas was the fourth son of the mighty emperor, in whose dominions the Father of waters begins his course; whose bounty pours down the streams of plenty, and scatters over half the world the harvests of Egypt. According to the custom which has descended from age to age among the monarchs of the torrid zone, Rasselas was confined in a private palace, with the other sons and daughters of Abissinian royalty, till the order of succession should call him to the throne.