

## H.G. Wells and *The Arabian Nights*

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In 'Folktales and H.G. Wells', W.M.S. Russell discussed Wells's use of stories, types and motifs from folktales in his fiction.<sup>1</sup> For the first half of his article, he focussed on *The Sleeper Awakes*: he related its central device (to which the title refers) to "the venerable motif of Magic Sleep extending over Many Years"; he demonstrated the Sleeper's kinship with King Arthur; and he suggested, less convincingly, parallels between the Sleeper and Beowulf. Dr Russell's knowledge of English folktales has, however, blinded him to another, and more important, folktale source for Wells's work: *The Arabian Nights*.

The title, *The Sleeper Awakes*, for example, bears a close resemblance to the title of one of the tales in *The Arabian Nights*: 'The Awakened Sleeper'.<sup>2</sup> This resemblance is not merely coincidental, but, I would argue, represents Wells's acknowledgement of the source of various elements of the novel. I will begin by suggesting certain connections between *The Sleeper Awakes* and *The Arabian Nights*. I will then supply evidence, from elsewhere in Wells's works, to demonstrate Wells's familiarity with *The Arabian Nights* and his use of motifs drawn from it in his fiction from 1894 onwards.

'The Awakened Sleeper', despite its title, is not an example of the motif of 'Magic Sleep extending over Many Years'. It is, rather, an analogue of the Christopher Sly prologue to *The Taming of the Shrew*. The merchant's son, Abu al-Hasan, is the victim of a trick played by the Caliph, Harun al-Rashid. He is drugged and transported to the Caliph's palace. When he awakens, he is treated as if he were the Caliph. He is then drugged for a second time and returned to his own house. When he now awakens, his experience at the palace seems like a dream, or like enchantment practised on him by a jinn, an ifrit, or Satan. (The trick is repeated once more before it is explained to him.) In *The Sleeper Awakes*, falling asleep is used, not to facilitate a trick, but as a method of time-travelling. When the Sleeper awakens, he has been asleep for over two hundred years. (Wells has combined elements from *The Arabian Nights* with the 'Magic Sleep' motif from other sources.) Where Abu al-Hasan awoke to find himself Caliph, Graham gradually discovers that he is 'King of the Earth' — not through magic or trickery, but through capital accumulation.<sup>3</sup> At this point, the parallel with Abu-al-Hasan breaks down: Abu al-Hasan was tricked into believing he was the Caliph, Graham really is 'King of the Earth'.<sup>4</sup> Wells now uses the Caliph himself, Harun al-Rashid, as his model. Graham, like Harun al-Rashid, has his 'Grand Vizier', Ostrog. Like Harun al-Rashid, he wanders in disguise through the streets of his city by night. Thus Chapter 20 begins:

And that night, unknown and unsuspected, Graham, dressed in the costume of an inferior wind-vane official keeping holiday and accompanied by Asano in Labour Department canvas, surveyed the city....<sup>5</sup>

The trick played upon Abu al-Hasan started off from a chance meeting between Abu al-Hasan and the disguised Harun al-Rashid:

[Abu al-Hasan] fell to sitting every eventide on the bridge over Tigris

and looking at each one who passed by him; and if he saw him to be a stranger, he made friends with him and carried him to his house, where he conversed and caroused with him all night till morning.... Thus he continued to do for the space of a full year, till, one day, while he sat on the bridge, as was his wont.... behold, up came the Caliph and Masrur, the Sworder of his vengeance, disguised in merchants' dress, according to their custom.<sup>6</sup>

Graham's extended sleep is preceded by a period of insomnia. Dr Russell suggests that Wells "got the starting-point of insomnia from Bellamy".<sup>7</sup> Without minimising the importance of Bellamy's *Looking Backward* as one source for *The Sleeper Awakes*, it is worth noting that the Caliph's 'custom' referred to in this passage is often motivated, in other stories, by reference to the Caliph's insomnia. Graham thus combines the insomnia of the Caliph with the drug-induced sleep of Abu al-Hasan, just as he combines Abu al-Hasan's awakening to find himself Caliph with the Caliph's own custom of disguised nocturnal perambulation. Again we see how Wells brings together suggestions and motifs from different sources.

*The Research Magnificent* (1915) provides an interesting comparison with *The Sleeper Awakes*. First of all, in 'The Prelude', Benham's "research", which gives the novel its title, its direction, and its central theme, is explained by means of a reference to *The Arabian Nights*:

At first it seemed to him that one had only just to hammer and will; and at the end, after a life of willing and hammering, he was still convinced there was something, something in the nature of an Open Sesame.... which would suddenly roll open for mankind the magic cave of the universe, the precious cave at the heart of all things in which one must believe.<sup>8</sup>

Benham sets out to find some meaning and purpose in life. What he finds is what Wells elsewhere terms "the open conspiracy": the idea of an intellectual elite ruling a world state. Benham dreams of the kind of power that Graham awoke to find himself possessing. In the sixth, and final, chapter, this dream culminates in the figure of Benham, wandering through the world, "kingly, unknown".<sup>9</sup> This last chapter is called "the New Haroun al-Rashid". Wells explains —

At last he was, so to speak, Haroun al-Rashid again, going unsuspected about the world, because the palace of his security would not tell him the secrets of men's disorders.<sup>10</sup>

*The Research Magnificent* shows Wells using explicitly the model that I suggested was implicit in a similar situation in *The Sleeper Awakes* when Graham wandered "unknown and unsuspected" through the city.

There are numerous other references to *The Arabian Nights* in Wells's work.<sup>11</sup> *The History of Mr Polly*, (1910) for example, contains a reference to *The Arabian Nights* as a whole, an allusion to a particular story, and a further reference to a motif from the tales. One of the books Mr Polly buys is a copy of *The Arabian Nights*. Literature, in this novel, functions as a sign of life's possibilities, as a sign of something beyond the constrictions of conventions and circumstances. It corresponds to the "Open Sesame" that Benham searched for that would "suddenly roll open for mankind the magic cave of the universe". Mr Voules, by contrast, almost embodies the constrictions and limitations of conventionality. To describe

his blossoming at Mr Polly's wedding, Wells has a recourse to the *Arabian Nights*' story 'The Tale of the Fisherman and the Jinn':

It was in the vestry that the force of Mr Voules' personality began to show at its true value. He seemed to open out, like the fisherman's Ginn from the pot, and spread over everything.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, it is also significant that one of Mr Polly's "principal and most urgent creditors" is a 'Mr Ghool'.<sup>13</sup> Thus Wells uses *The Arabian Nights* to indicate a potential for wonder and significance in life, but he also draws on motifs from the stories to embellish some of the things that prevent that potential being realised.

The most interesting allusions to *The Arabian Nights* in Wells's works are the two earliest. They occur in two stories that were included in Wells's first collection, *The Stolen Bacillus and Other Incidents* (1895). The first is found in 'The Lord of the Dynamos', and is fairly slight. Wells's account of Azuma-zi's view of the dynamo that he has come to worship contains a glancing (and punning) allusion to the jinns imprisoned in bottles by Solomon that feature in the story 'The City of Brass':

it lived all day in this big airy shed, with him and Holroyd to wait upon it; not prisoned up and slaving to drive a ship as the other engines he knew — mere captive devils of the British Solomon — had been.

The second is more significant. 'Aepyornis Island', like *The Sleeper Awakes*, takes a story from *The Arabian Nights* as its starting-point and then transforms it to produce a different kind of fiction. In 'Aepyornis Island', Wells produces a comic-scientific variant of Sindbad's second voyage. In *The Arabian Nights*, the story of the second voyage begins with Sindbad left behind on a desert island and finding a roc's egg. The narrator of Wells's story refers explicitly to the Sindbad story. He refers to a giant bird, the Aepyornis, and then tells us "Sindbad's roc was just a legend of 'em", before proceeding his own story of being shipwrecked on an island with a giant egg.<sup>15</sup> This is interesting not just because it shows Wells consciously using *The Arabian Nights* as a source at the very start of his career, but also because it allows us to tie Wells's obvious interest in *The Arabian Nights* to a specific edition: Richard Burton's translation which was re-issued in a Library Edition in 1894. The evidence for this claim is contained in one of Burton's footnotes to 'The Second Voyage of Sindbad the Seaman'. Burton's note on the 'roc' begins by noting other mythical birds and suggesting a common source for them in memories of "gigantic pterodactyls and other winged monsters".<sup>16</sup> Burton then comments —

A second basis, wanting only a superstructure of exaggeration.... would be the huge birds but lately killed out. Sindbad may allude to the Aepyornis of Madagascar, a gigantic ostrich whose egg contains 2.35 gallons. The late Herr Hildebrand discovered on the African coast, facing Madagascar, traces of another huge bird.<sup>17</sup>

Was this passage the 'germ' for 'Aepyornis Island'?

Dr Russell ended his account of *The Sleeper Awakes* by noting that "much remains to be done in the identification of tales, types and motifs" in Wells's fiction.<sup>18</sup> I hope that by drawing attention to Wells's use of *The Arabian Nights*, and how *The Arabian Nights* remains a point of reference for much of Wells's writing career, I have not only supplied a few more identifications but also pointed to a significant area for further research.

## Notes

1. W.M.S. Russell, 'Folktales and H.G. Wells', *The Wellsian*, No. 5, (Summer, 1982), pp.2-18.
2. This appears in Burton's edition under the title 'The Sleeper and the Waker' (Volume 9, pp.1-28). Burton adds, in a footnote, that the familiar title for the story is 'Abou-Hassan or the Sleeper Awakened'. (All references to *The Arabian Nights* in this article will be to the 1894 Library Edition of Burton's translation: *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, reprinted and edited by Leonard C. Smithers, 12 Volumes, H.S. Nichols & Co., London.)
3. *The Sleeper Awakes, The Works of H.G. Wells* (Atlantic Edition), Vol. II, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1924, p.313.
4. Graham's first reaction to the news that he has slept for over two hundred years is, however, worth noting in this context: "But it can't be....I am dreaming. Trances — trances don't last....this is a joke you have played upon me!" (p.207). Furthermore, as Dr Russell has reminded me, Graham is subsequently **duped** (just as Abu-al-Hasan was) first of all by the Oligarchs, then by Ostrog. Where Abu-al-Hasan was tricked into believing he was the Caliph. Graham, despite being nominally 'King of the Earth', is effectively powerless and, for most of the novel, is the pawn of political forces he does not fully understand.
5. *The Sleeper Awakes*, p.400.
6. 'The Sleeper and the Waker', *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, Volume 9, p.2.
7. "He thought of Bellamy, the hero of whose Socialistic Utopia had so oddly anticipated this actual experience." (*The Sleeper Awakes*, pp.242-3.)
8. *The Research Magnificent, The Works of H.G. Wells* (Atlantic Edition), Vol. XIX, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1926, p.7.
9. *Ibid.*, p.370.
10. *Ibid.*, p.370.
11. What follows is not intended to be a comprehensive list. We could add, for example, the title *New Worlds for Old* (1908) with its allusion to Ala-ed-Din, or the heading for Chapter 3 of *The Invisible Man* (1897) — "The thousand and one bottles".
12. *The History of Mr Polly, The Works of H.G. Wells* (Atlantic Edition), Vol. XVII, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1926, p.137. I am indebted to my colleague, Peter Caracciolo, for this example and for initiating the research this article draws on.
13. *Ibid.*, p.186.
14. *The Short Stories of H.G. Wells*, (Ernest Benn, London, 1948), p.287.
15. *ibid.*, p.261.
16. Volume 4, p.357.

17. Volume 4, p.358.
18. W.M.S. Russell, *op.cit.*, p.7.

### **Residential Conference 1983**

The topic of this year's weekend conference is to be "H.G. Wells and George Orwell". It will once again be held at P.N.L.'s Tufnell Park Hall of Residence, on 17th and 18th September. The cost of the whole weekend, including full board, will be £15.

As usual, there will be three speakers, audio/visual material, books, good food and a convivial atmosphere. This will obviously be a popular occasion. Members wishing to attend should make sure of a place by sending a £3 deposit per person to the Hon. General Secretary.

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