

READINGS AND RE-READINGS OF NIGHT 602



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One of the most disputed issues concerning Borges's readings of the *Arabian Nights*, or *The Thousand and One Nights*, to use his preferred title, evolves around his assertions about a specific and special Night. A much quoted passage from "Magias parciales del Quijote" summarises his imaginative interpretation:

Ninguna tan perturbadora como la de la noche DCII, mágica entre las noches. En esa noche, el rey oye de boca de la reina su propia historia. Oye el principio de la historia, que abarca todas las demás, y también - de monstruoso modo - a sí misma. ¿Intuye claramente el lector la vasta posibilidad de esa interpolación, el curioso peligro? Que la reina persista y el inmóvil rey oirá para siempre la trunca historia de *Las Mil y Una Noches*, ahora infinita y circular (OC 2: 46-47).

Borges emphasises here and in similar passages that the Night is central, illuminating, revelatory and vertiginous: repeating an earlier experience lived by the King in the frame story, it induces a fear of infinite repetition not only in the King, who hears his own experience echoed in someone else's, but arguably also in the reader, who shares in the uncanny effect of this dizzying *regressus*. The passage has been widely discussed by Borges scholars, Arabists and literary

theoreticians, and it continues to baffle his readers. Borges often, but not always, names this magic Night as 602. Allusions to Night 602 appear with some variations in the following essays, all of which refer to a *regressus*:

- "Los traductores de las mil y una noches", in *Historia de la eternidad* (OC 1: 413, dated Adrogué 1935)

- "Cuando la ficción vive en la ficción", in *Textos cautivos* (OC 4:433-35, first published 2 June 1939 in *El Hogar*)

- "Magias parciales del Quijote", in *Otras inquisiciones* (OC 2:46-7)

In the fiction, a very similar special Night is mentioned twice though no number is specified. This occurs in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan".

In "Tlön" the link to Night 602 is somewhat circuitous. It reads:

En una noche del Islam que se llama la Noche de las Noches se abren de par en par las secretas puertas del cielo y es más dulce el agua en los cántaros; si esas puertas se abrieran, no sentiría lo que en esa tarde sentí. El libro estaba redactado en inglés y lo integran 1001 páginas. (OC 1: 434)

The "Noche de las Noches" is a reference to the Night of Power, of Koranic origin. This is a night of magic and revelation, "We revealed the Koran on the Night of Qadr (Glory). Would that you knew what the Night of Qadr is like!" (*Koran*, XCVII-2). The association with the *Arabian Nights* is immediate in the Borges story because of the reference to 1001 pages, but there is a firmer link. It is referred to explicitly in "The Night of the Man who saw the Night of Power",¹ a tale told on night 596² at the beginning of a cluster of stories embracing Night 602.

In "El jardín" the notion of infinity, or an infinite book, is envisaged as a circular book, its last page reflecting the first. An immediate link, for me, would be the Torah, the Jewish sacred scrolls read in rotation, the last passage followed immediately by the first. But Borges moves on to a less obvious and more disturbing image of cir-

¹ Borges also refers to "The Night of Power" in "Las traductores de las mil y una noches" (OC 1: 405).

² The Koranic Night is discussed at some length by Payne and Burton in notes introducing Night 596.

cularity, when he refers to a central Night in the *1001 Nights* whose story reflects the overall narrative precisely from its central position, “con riesgo de llegar otra vez a la noche en que la refiere, y así hasta lo infinito” (OC 1: 477).³

In what follows I should like to examine Borges’s comments regarding this special Night against the evidence of the *Nights*. There are many readers who simply have looked up Night 602 and not finding anything to back up Borges’s contention, decided, perhaps understandably, that it was either a Borgesian hoax, or a cunning invention.⁴ After all, Borges confessed to not having read the entire *Nights* (OC 2: 675), so it perhaps seemed unlikely that he should stumble upon such a crucial repetition, and the idea that he might have invented it to serve his own ends was not only plausible but in keeping with accepted ideas about Borgesian practice.⁵ Yet as so often when one reads Borges’s clues carefully, evidence is found backing up his (fanciful) assertions. He says, in “Los traductores de las 1001 noches” that he has in front of him the 300 notes in Vol. 6 of Burton’s translation. However, there are many editions of Burton’s translation and not all include the same texts. Borges lists two in the bibliography to this article, one, an abridged selection in one volume, and therefore of no interest to this issue, and the other, specifying Vol. 6. of the limited edition of the Burton Club, though, most

³ The reference to centrality and infinity bears tenuous links to Zeno’s paradox, as discussed by Borges in “Avatares de la tortuga” and to its footnoted reference to *Chuang Tzu*: “El movimiento es imposible arguye Zenón pues el móvil debe atravesar el medio para llegar al fin, y antes el medio del medio, y antes el medio del medio del medio, y antes...” “Un siglo después, el sofista chino Hui Tzu razonó que un bastón, al que cercenan la mitad cada día es interminable” (255 with note 1. My emphasis) I discuss the importance of centrality in “Traces”.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of this hypothesis, see Ararou, who starts off from this premise.

⁵ Italo Calvino is among those who imaginatively posited that Borges may have purposefully invented the repetition. He writes: “... non sono riuscito a trovare questa 602a notte. Ma anche se Borges se la fosse inventata, avrebbe fatto bene a inventarla perché essa rappresenta il naturale coronamento dell’ *enchassement* delle storie” (394-95). I would like to thank my colleague Dr. Humberto Nuñez for his generous help with this information.

inconveniently, with a question mark regarding London as its place of publication and no date.

However, this vital if incomplete source of information leads me to believe that he is referring to the same edition as is catalogued in the British Library under the heading of Sir Richard Francis Burton, *Arabian Nights*, 16 vol. (10 vol. and 6 vol. of Supplemental nights) Printed by the Kamashastra Society for private subscribers only: London, 1885-88. The British Library holds several copies of this edition giving Benares as the place of publication, but in this one London appears as the place of publication, explaining in a note that in vol. 2-16 the place of printing is given as Benares. It is therefore highly probable that Borges "had in front of him" Vol. 6 of a similar edition, and indeed, on p.199, there is a footnote to Night 602 drawing attention to the repetition which Borges would interpret with such rich imagination.⁶ It reads as follows: "This is a mere abstract of the tale told in the Introduction, (Vol.1, 10-12). Here, however, the rings are about eighty; there the number varies from ninety to five hundred and seventy".

A similar footnote appears in Enno Littmann's translation: "*Dies ist eine selbständige Version eines Teiles der Einleitung zu dem Gesamtwerke; vgl. Bd. I, S. 19-22*" (365).⁷

The parallels discussed so far refer simply to the co-incidence between the adventure of the King and his brother experienced during their journey in the frame story and the Prince's adventure recounted in Night 602 in the tale of "The King's Son and the Afrit's Mistress". In both instances, the royal persons come across a damsel imprisoned by her Afrit who blackmails them to have intercourse with her under threat of falsely accusing them of seduction should they refuse. As a memento of the occasion, they are obliged to leave

⁶ Sir Richard Francis Burton, *Arabian Nights*, 16 vol. (10 vol. and 6 vol. of Supplemental nights) Printed by the Kamashastra society for private subscribers only: Benares, 1885-88. It is interesting to observe that Borges's resumé of the notes in this essay is a true precursor of his famous chaotic enumerations in that he includes among the Islamic practices noted "una ponderación del *asa'o* del gaucho argentino".

⁷ Borges discussed and criticized Littman's version but does not mention the note; we are indebted entirely to Daniel Balderston for this information: "This is a separate version of part of the preamble of the entire work; see volume 1, pp.19-22" (151)

their seal-rings. These parallels have been noted before, though without the precise bibliographical details given here, and presented as evidence to back up Borges's now famous assertions about the *regressus*.⁸

There is, however, a much later allusion to a *regressus* in Borges's poem "Metáforas de las mil y una noches" which differs in its scope and cannot be justified by the previous explanation.⁹ The story that is said to be repeated is not simply *su historia* meaning the King's story but in fact *their* story, specifying that it is both the King's and the Queen's story:

El libro está en el Libro. Sin saberlo
La reina cuenta al rey la ya olvidada
Historia *de los dos*. (My emphasis)

In so far as it concerns the royal couple's mutual relationship it must include the part of the frame story that tells how Scheherazade came to find herself in her present situation, which is not the case in Night 602. Internal repetition is one of the features of *The Nights*, and it became clear to me that Borges must have based his poetic lines on another text, perhaps another Night. A chance remark by an Arabist scholar pointed me in the right direction, namely, Burton's Vol. 6 but this time Vol. 6 not of the *Nights* but of the *Supplemental Nights*, and to complicate complicated matters further, not the edition in 16 volumes mentioned earlier but a rarer edition in 17 volumes!¹⁰ I shall resist extensive comparisons to labyrinths and revelations but my joy on finding on page 259 of this recondite volume the title: 'Shahrazad and Shahryar' was not much short of that described above in a passage from "Tlön".

For readers to share in this excitement, I reproduce the title page announcing the story of both the King and the Queen:

⁸ See Fishburn & Hughes (the entry on "Night of Nights") and Caracciolo, 156. This version of Night 602 occurs not only in Burton and Littman, as noted, but also in Payne, and in a note in Lane. Interestingly it is not found in Galland.

⁹ "Metáforas de las mil y una noches", *Historia de la noche* (OC 3: 169-170, first published in *La Nación* 27 February 1977, p. 1.

¹⁰ Robert Irwin, to whom I remain eternally grateful for his generous help with this point. See Burton.

SHAHRAZAD AND SHAHRYAR. King Shahryar marvelled at this history and said, "By allah, verily, injustice slayeth its folk! And he was edified by that wherewith Shahrazad besoke him and sought help of Allah the Most High. Then said he to her, "Tell me another of thy tales, O Shahrazad; supply me with a pleasant story and this shall be the completion of the story-telling," Shahrazad replied, With love and gladness! It hath reached me, O auspicious King, that a man once declared to his mates, I will set forth to you a means of security against annoy. A friend of mine once related to me and said: - We attained to security against annoy, and the origin of it was other than this; that is, it was the following: (The Tale of the Two Kings and the Wazir's Daughters).¹¹

Burton draws attention to the parallels between this tale and the frame story in an important footnote (f4) which announces the final outcome:

The connection between this pompous introduction and the story which follows is not apparent. The "Tale of the Two Kings and the Wasir's Daughters" is that of Shahrazad told in the third person, in fact a rechauffé of the Introduction. But as some three years have passed since the marriage, and the dénouement of the plot is at hand, the Princess is made, with some art I think, to lay the whole affair before her husband in her own words, the better to bring him to a "sense of his duty".

The "Tale of the Two Kings and the Wazir's Daughters" repeats the whole of the Introduction, not just the incident with the Afrit's Damsel as summarised earlier, but starts as does the frame story with the visit of the King's brother, the discovery of both their spouses' treachery and their decision to absent themselves from the Court on a journey, their discovery of "the malice of women" through the incident with the Afrit's Damsel, their return, full of feelings of revenge, which leads to the King's decision to kill the Queen and take a fresh virgin every night and have her beheaded in the morning. This, until he weds the spellbinding storyteller. At one

¹¹ Burton (ca. 1919). See the Introduction in Vol.1:10-12 of the *Nights*, and its repetition in Vol. 6: 257-272 of the *Supplemental Nights*.

point during the telling of this tale, the King, Shahryar has that moment of revelation referred to by Borges, and exclaims:

By Allah, this story is my story and this case is my case, for that indeed I was in reprobation and danger of judgement till thou turnedst me back from this into the right way, extolled by the Causer of causes and the Liberator of necks! (269)

This recognition leads the King to follow the example of mercy given in the story with the happy outcome known by all.¹²

The Nights in the *Supplemental Volumes* are not numbered, but another small footnote to this Night indicates that it corresponds to the last Night (1001) in the Breslau Edition, (vol. xii, p. 383), and thus obviously not to Night 602.

The Habicht version of the Breslau text is the only one which includes this story in the main body of the text, on the last night. It gives a very condensed version of the Supplemental Night discussed above but it also contains the King's words of recognition, "*Bei Gott, diese Geschichte ist meine Geschichte*" (15: 179).¹³

It is important to note that the epiphanic tale in these two instances is not experienced at the quasi-numerical centre of this vast, expansive text but at the end, terminating the story of the *Nights* as it began. This *regressus*, which also opens up the text to the endless repetitions mentioned in Borges's reading, is suggested and reinforced by its position in the palindromic number of the title, 1001.

To summarise: the special night that Borges identifies as Night 602 can be traced to certain editions of the *Nights* discussed by him (Burton, Payne, Lane, Littman), though not to all, but the night alluded to in the poem 'Metáforas de las mil y una noches', equally special, can not be so identified, and appears to correspond to Night

¹² In the cluster of stories including 602 there are also examples of a king being persuaded to delay the execution of his son, and then being grateful for this advice, but nothing as immediately analogous as this.

¹³ Habicht's is the only edition which includes the story of the King and the Queen in the main body of the text. Borges does not discuss this edition in his famous essay, but mentions Habicht in "El Zahir". It is possible that Borges had not come across this version of the last Night when he wrote about Night 602 in the essay and in "Tlön" and in "Jardín" but may have done so later.

1001. This exists only in Habicht, and as a supplemental night in one edition by Burton.

I am aware of the possibility that tracing Borges's magic night to its various origins might in the end destroy its enchantment, yet this need not be so. For the purpose of this examination of Borges's imaginative readings of a magical Night in the *Nights* against the backdrop of some of the "originals" is not to bring this controversial issue in any way to a close, but to enable further speculation. For instance, the *mise en abyme* effect ascribed to the one Night clearly applies to the other, and though Borges has not dealt with the ramifications of one *regressus* nested in another, readers of this article may wish to muse on possible borgesian readings of these embedded mirror-images and their effect upon the King, the *Nights*, and themselves.

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