

# Réception Donnée Chez Un Riche Marchand Arabe

Peter J. Grieco

بما قالوا اليه وخلص من مائة سالناه لم فامر ولا ي معنى استرفع الجاه فقال  
ان الرجح تمام واليت مد اعوام لا يضيبي وموما مقام فقلنا وما سبب مبيدك

داني  
سبب مبيدك



داني  
سبب مبيدك

البري واليتك الجزى فقال انه كان في حمار لسانه يتقرب وقله عقر  
ولفظه شدي منفع وجهه ثم منفع فقلت الجاورته الى حماره واغمرته في كاسه

RÉCEPTION DONNÉE  
CHEZ UN RICHE  
MARCHAND ARABE

by  
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Pour Emilie  
À l'occasion de son Anniversaire  
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## 1.

When we last left you Wâsit, saffron colored  
at dawn, & you bid us remember your acclaim,  
as much for alchemist inventors as  
for goats climbing trees ripe with apricots,  
the morning was still delicate with jasmine,  
& your roosters cried coco-roco. Since then  
we have traveled far, the way weary & long.

As always, I have trusted Abu Zayd  
to follow his nose, that organ fine  
as any caliper used for measuring attar  
of roses or tracking down the pungent elixir  
of hashish wafting through narrow window slits  
of rooms that house an absent pashas harem.

What a nose! as capable in a pinch  
of locating the nearest kitchen preparing  
a feast as it is skilled at making out a trail  
of fresh camel dung, like this one, left in the wake  
of a passing caravan, which out ahead  
appears with the first stars, camped beyond the ridge.

## 2.

“Here we are,” bids my lord, as over the rim  
we see three, & soon, a fourth crimson yurt  
rise to hammer blows out of the dusty fields,  
“He is returning to Baghdad, rich & heavy laden.  
His sentries won’t be far to test who we are.”

The men ride up, cutlasses drawn. “Friends, we  
are not thieves, but go about like you, though  
unlike you it is not gold we pursue. We seek  
the unknown as pilgrims on safari do the soul.”  
“We know well who you are, Abu Zayd.  
The Maqâmât speak boldly of you & your slave.”

Slave? Mistaken for a slave! Isn’t it  
my own free will that guides me behind my  
master (whose elbow now restrains my silence)  
to capture the sweetness of his tongue in ink,  
as bees seal honey in beeswax? “No one  
would take you for a tax collector  
in that scarlet sash & alizarin hat.

### 3.

“As for your companion,” it was the Riche Marchand himself who spoke, “that’s another matter, for he wears the tattered tunic & squints through eyes of an assassin. Never mind, come dine with us, two jackals in the lion’s den, so we may will pick your fabled brains & laugh till morning comes again.”

I could see how these men were after pleasure. Abu Zayd saw it, too: “If your amusements should call for a singer, then I’m your man, for to sing about, say, a singer singing, sadly of far off wonders & strange visions, that’s my specialty, to strum upon a lyre the self-same rhythms recalled to us by our traditions.”

“But what is a lyre?” “It’s a kind of ud, or lute, & I speak good as the truth when I ask, aren’t you carrying one, Admiral? or what is just as good as one, among the goods you trade, caravan to caravan, across sand & tide from far al-Andalus?”

#### 4.

“If you mean this hollow harp, in shape an  
hourglass, inlaid with gemstones & twitching  
with melody—it is never far from me.  
Here, it arrives in the hands of my servant!  
Just as other traders from beyond Madras  
in the east have carried zeros in their pockets,  
I have pocketed this guitar, enameled in its carapace.

“So if you propose to sing for your supper,  
it is strung with silk & ready to be plucked,  
& to be heard, its notes drifting sweetly  
like motes in the fustian darkness of  
the moon. So come along. There is plenty  
for all, & Allah bids us be generous.”

Beyond tent flaps servers were already  
juggling platters of roasted hens garnished  
with saffron & lime above low tables  
of polished bronze heaped with aromatic  
stews of artichoke & aubergine. “Eat,  
as the custom is, then you’ll have your say.”

## 5.

We sat down upon cushions whose crimsons  
& blues wrought designs in wool bold as  
Achilles' shield in gold—taking places  
among silly looking men, their disheveled  
turbans loose atop sun-roughened faces,  
who watched us & pointed, much as saints once  
singled out Judas at his last ordeal.

They had heard it all before, of the garden  
& its transcendent ladder, the Prophet's  
transport to Jerusalem, the conquests  
of Iskandar, the nights Odysseus  
dreamt that back in Ithaca at last he'd learn  
that Penelope had forgotten to wait.

But after hard miles there is no soft tale  
a Bedouin refuses, the coarseness  
of the desiring world attendant on  
the splendor of the desired, as a hand  
reaching for one's mystic other makes the  
shaving glass crack & image after image shatter.



## 6.

“Late in youth,” Abu Zayd began at last,  
“when I made my living more by sweat than  
by wit, I was a dealer in horses,  
& my business took me upon a time  
beyond the Aral Sea to bargain & win  
six piebald mares to vex a shah’s stallion.

“Many days ride remained between us &  
Tabriz, so I paused to let the six feed  
a while & rest the night, & then at dawn  
was ready to lead them to drink, when rose  
with the sun such a voice to make horses’ ears  
stand up & horseman tremble in his skin.

What I saw so matched the wonder of what  
I heard, that I would swear I saw an angel,  
save that only the Prophet meets Jibril  
& lives. The same revealed to other  
mortal, in all its wrath & paradisial  
splendor, would blast the eyes out of his head.

7.

“Or so attest the Sufis: that the body  
suffering such encounter would have its brains  
turned inside-out, toes twisted, fingernails  
fried, & spirit tormented with longing  
irreparable, utterly dwarfed by  
the incommensurable nature of what it lacked.

“Perhaps she hid herself in a woman’s guise,  
sleek as a gazelle, bedazzled in sequins, so  
to save me from these symptoms, full many  
of which I’ve escaped, so to become my muse,  
let us say, half angel, half bird. For still  
I hear her singing in my ear: ‘Look out there!’

“She called, as horse necks bent lips to drink.  
‘The water there is brackish, the current  
strong enough to sweep man & horses northward  
toward oblivion.’ I looked up & saw  
her bight vision across the wide river  
though her voice seemed close as a whisper.

## 8.

“ ‘This is the River Asymptote, its waters sweet that flow by me, filling its inland sea. But on your side the torrent screws against the opposite divide & sucks the body like a drain. Lovers should they attempt to cross here would be severed forever.

“ ‘One would sink fast into the whirlpool sea, the other, as I’ve said, would be carried towards the north & locked inside caves of ice, so that they would be foolish who tried, especially when there is a spot close by where jinns have built a bridge. There is my hut.

“ ‘It is time now, if ever, to sell your doubt & cleverness & buy bewilderment, to forget safety & live where you fear to most: Be notorious, since there is a candle in your heart anxious to be kindled, & a void in your soul ready to burst.’

## 9.

“Her hut was in fact a tower, spangled in turquoise, as was the bridge, crenelated at its height in the fashion of a stage from which, out over the lonely plains, kept watch the maid, built for her, too, by jinns in solace for her woe, & for woes to come.”

“But Abu Zayd, will you not tell us her name?” “It changes with the seasons, so that beautiful & as kind as summer, she called herself Adawiyah, gentle as the misty stars of August, insistent as its noonday sun, & lived alone atop those cliffs where jinns had fashioned her a bridge.

“There, where the gorge attains its narrowest width, I filed past my six, one-by-one, to where the waters flowed sweet, & first sat by my lovely muse, delighted to gaze at her & let her speak. Ever since, her words have filled my head with every kind of longing:

## 10.

“ ‘Lost & reckless, I fled Samarqand when the Mongol siege broke through, scattering those who would survive—one hundred days & each death I saw still reverberates—family, friends, parents. Here, the arrow wound that mars my thigh & marks my bitter misfortune.

“ ‘It should have struck my heart. I have shown you this pass lest you fall their way, in an instant to be bereft of your troupe & left for vultures to strip, for after gold & the thrill of sheer destruction, it is ponies they crave the best. With your help we might foil them.’ ”

Mention of Mongols sent qualms through the men. When they looked up from their huqqas we saw foreshadow of dark dread eclipsing their dull ease. For they had heard tell of Tartars, Merkits, Uighurs, barbarous bands of thieves, Mongolians all, ravishing the distant steppe.

## 11.

“Go on, Abu Zayd!” jeered the Marchand,  
“You fill your tale with any trinket you  
find like a mynah bird building its nest.  
If it shines you must have it! Everyone knows  
these Mongols. Bent on drinking mare’s milk & drunk,  
they squabble endlessly among themselves.

“It may be true, if you insist, that when  
you compare them, Franks are meek as sheep,  
yet I doubt the Asian host will ever  
range beyond the pastures of Khurasan.  
As for Samarqand, I’m sure her azure gates  
endure, osprey nesting in their parapets.

“With my two eyes I have seen her sixty  
silver domes & golden towers. Commerce  
with those parts is keen, trade beckons, & merchants  
there as in Baghdad still revel in their bartered  
riches.” Reassured, the men resumed their pipes  
sending white plumes roof ward with their sighs.

## 12.

“I am no hero,” admitted Abu Zayd.  
“I know not whether this muse was Sybil,  
too, or liar. How will we get on as  
our numbers diminish? Who will remember us?  
What is love but the compounding of death?  
Our task is not to seek one or the other,  
but to keep watch atop the barricades.

“But hear me now, as I heard her, that even  
the libraries of Baghdad & its House  
of Wisdom will not be spared attack.  
The Ilkhanates, whom we will court as friends,  
will set in winter siege, & a thousand  
engineers from China will come to serve.

“Their catapults arrive to cast our walls  
in flames, & forces banded from among  
all our adversaries—the Greek, the Frank,  
Armenians, & more—make coalition  
with the Horde, to pillage completely, down  
to the books they trample to cross the Tigris.

### 13.

“ ‘We will hold them back by ambush at the  
River Asymptote & trap them below  
its swirling currents!’ So went the plan devised  
by Adawiyah as we lounged beside  
each other in the cool of evening. ‘But how?’  
‘Saw the boards so they snap below their hooves!’

“ ‘Impossible. Even were we able  
to tamper with the work of jinns, after  
the second horseman, the ruse would be met,  
the cavalcade halt its narrow advance,  
& turn vengeance upon us.’ To which came  
wise retort: ‘Will not the Khan ride in front?’

“She was right. The pride of the Horde must ride  
out first, or another take his place to  
usurp his power, but level him & the others  
disperse—We spent three days inventing a hinge  
to lower a door in the floor of the bridge  
& drop fast at our Ali Baba command!



## 14.

“Oh, how fine it was to work this plan!—  
to figure so precisely the means, just  
as seven grains of barley must each be  
the length of seven mustard seeds, & they  
each the length of seven poppy seeds, & they  
the length of seven particles of dust  
stirred up by a cow—we knew our task that well.

“So the ambush was hatched. We waited atop  
the lonely tower for mad hooves’ advance.  
‘What do you see Adawiyah?’ ‘I see  
all those grains & seeds & dust!’ ” The singing  
continued through the night, the tobacco,  
& the wine, & a cheer rose up when came  
the shout for well laid trap to “Open!”—wide.

So that any passer-by might wonder  
to see gesticulating forms thrown up  
against the high tent wall, as though against  
the canvas screen of a shadow play, &  
hearing passionate voices ringing out in  
melody, yearn for a peek at the show.

## **Notes and Annotations**

## Title & Image

This image is taken from the collection of paintings by Yahya ibn Mahmûd al-Wâsitî based on the *Maqâmât* (Séances or Sessions), a collection of poetic vignettes written in Arabic by Muhammad al-Qâsim al-Harîrî (1054-1122). The manuscript of 99 miniatures, whose completion is dated to 1237, is held by the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Very little is known about the painter, except that his native city is thought to have been Wâsit on the Tigris, which is within the precincts of modern Baghdad and that he was born circa 1200. The al-Wâsitî paintings are unparalleled in Arab art and are celebrated for their depictions of everyday life in the Arab world of the early 13th century (see Oleg Grabar's *Masterpieces of Islamic Art*, 2009). "Réception donnée" is number (47v) in the BNF manuscript.

## Séance 1

When we last left you Wâsit: The fictional narrator of my poem is Al-Hârith, who Muhammad al-Qâsim al-Harîrî made his narrator. Al-Hârith's role is as Abu Zayd's sidekick & chronicler in the original poems sequence.

The description of the village called Wâsit comes from motifs depicted in Séance 43v, "Al-Hârith et Abû Zayd conversent avec un homme à l'entrée d'un village."

Many words peppered throughout the poem—such as saffron, alchemist, apricot, jasmine, caliper, attar, elixir, hashish, etc.—are from a list of words, found online, that are said to be of Arabic derivation.

Abu Zayd: trickster-hero of al-Harîrî's poem, *al-Maqâmât*.

## Séance 2

Here we are, bids my lord: Abu Zayd speaks.

We know well who you are, Abu Zayd. . .": The Riche Marchand speaks.

The narrator mistaken for a slave: Folio 105v of the *Maqâmât* manuscript depicts "Al-Harith at the slave market" (Grabar, 172).

"No one / would take you for a tax collector." The Riche Marchand speaks.

### Séance 3

Jackals in the lion's den: a motif in miniature painting, deriving from the fables of Bidat, a legendary Indian poet, first translated into Arabic in the 8th Century (see Grabar, 47).

I could see how these men were after pleasure: our narrator, Al-Hârith, speaks.

“If your amusements. . .”: Abu Zayd speaks.

The idea of nested singers—of a singer that appears in a song sung by a singer who appears in another song—is a figure common, I believe, to oral traditions generally. I was reminded of it by Zachary Mason's *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* (2010).

“But what is a lyre?” The Riche Marchand speaks.

“It's a kind of ud. . .” Abu Zayd resumes.

### Séance 4

“If you mean this hollow harp. . .” The Riche Marchand speaks.

The image, “a mote in the darkness,” appears in Mason.

“Beyond tent flaps. . .” This is our narrator Al-Hârith.

“Eat, / as is the custom. . .” the Riche Marchand resumes.

### Séance 5

“We sat down. . .” Al-Hârith resumes.

“Judas at his last ordeal” recalls Da Vinci's famous fresco.

Iskandar is the Persian name given to Alexander the Great.

“Penelope had forgotten to wait,” is the theme of Mason's first “Lost Book.”

My phrase, “the coarseness / of the desiring world attendant on / the splendor of the desired,” adapts Grabar's commentary: “emphasis is placed on the contrast between the visual richness of the world desired and the simplicity or even poverty of the desiring world” (94).

“(I)mage after image shatter(s)” recalls a friend's insights into a Magritte painting.

## Séance 6

Tabriz is a city in Iranian Azerbaijan which, early in the 16th century, became a celebrated center of miniature painting.

Jibril: The Archangel Gabriel in Arabic.

## Séance 7

“Or so attest the Sufis:” I heard this story from a friend who took me to a Sufi meeting in Ankara.

‘Look out there!... The water there is brackish...’ Adawiyah is warning Abu Zayd.

“(H)alf angel, half bird”: Browning’s evocation of Elizabeth Barrett in *The Ring and the Book*.

## Séance 8

‘This is the River Asymptote...’ Adawiyah resumes. With the River Asymptote, I’m thinking of a vertical asymptote such as  $y = \frac{1}{x}$  whose values approach positive & negative infinity as  $x$  approaches zero from opposite directions.

Jinns: supernatural beings of Moslem legend.

‘It is time now... to sell your doubt’: Adawiyah’s prodding riffs on aphorisms ascribed to Rumi, the 11th century Seljuk poet & mystic.

## Séance 9

“Her hut was in fact a tower...” Abu Zayd resumes.

“(I)n the fashion of a stage”: In her study, “Oral Narrating Traditions of the Arab World: A Source of Inspiration for the Miniature Paintings of Hariri’s *Maqâmât*” (2008), Filiz Toprak remarks on the “compositional settings and figure placements” of the *Maqâmât* scenes, as well as on their stage-like iconography & the performative gestures of their figures, & connects them to the medieval tradition of shadow puppetry as practiced in the Arab world.

“But Abu Zayd, will you not tell us / her name?” asks one of the Abu Zayd’s auditors.

“(B)eautiful & as kind as summer”: Browning’s description of his tragic heroine in *The Ring and the Book*.

Adawiyah: Arabic girl’s name meaning “summer flower.”

### Séance 10

“ ‘Lost & reckless, I fled Samarqand. . . ’ ” Abu Zayd is reporting the direct speech of Adawiyah.

Mention of Mongols. . . : This is Al-Hârith’s interjection.

### Séance 11

“Go on, Abu Zayd!” The Riche Marchand doesn’t believe Abu Zayd’s apparently anachronistic tale. Are his reports reliable? Have those things really happened?

“(S)ixty / silver domes & golden towers”: Image derived from Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*.

Reassured, the men resumed their pipes: Al-Hârith’s interjection.

### Séance 12

“ ‘I am no hero,’ ” admitted Abu Zayd”: The very opposite of a man of action, Zayd is said to have been a popular figure because of his punning & playful skill in Arabic.

“What is love but the compounding of death?” This phrase is adapted from something I read in Mason.

The Mongol siege of Baghdad: the city fell in February, 1258, ending its Golden Age only 20 years after the completion of al-Wâsitî paintings, which fortunately for us must have been housed elsewhere than in one of Baghdad’s great libraries. With the help of Adawiyah, Abu Zayd has seen grimly into the future.

### Séance 13

“ ‘We will hold them back by ambush...’ ” Abu Zayd resumes his tale with the reported speech of Adawiyah, and continues with a report of their dialogue.

The “Ali Baba command”: Open Sesame.

### Séance 14

Seven grains of barely, etc.: Abu Zayd’s report alludes to a system of counting atoms attributed the Buddha in the *Lalitavistara Sutra*, as cited by Alex Bellos in *Here’s Looking at Euclid* (2010).

‘I see / all those grains & seeds & dust!’: Al-Hârith’s report of Abu Zayd’s account ends here, ambiguously, with the words of Adawiyah.

The singing /continued through the night: Al-Hârith returns us to the scene of the Réception.

Final note: It should go without saying that this list does not exhaust all borrowings, influences, & inspirations that have gone into the composition of this poem.

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