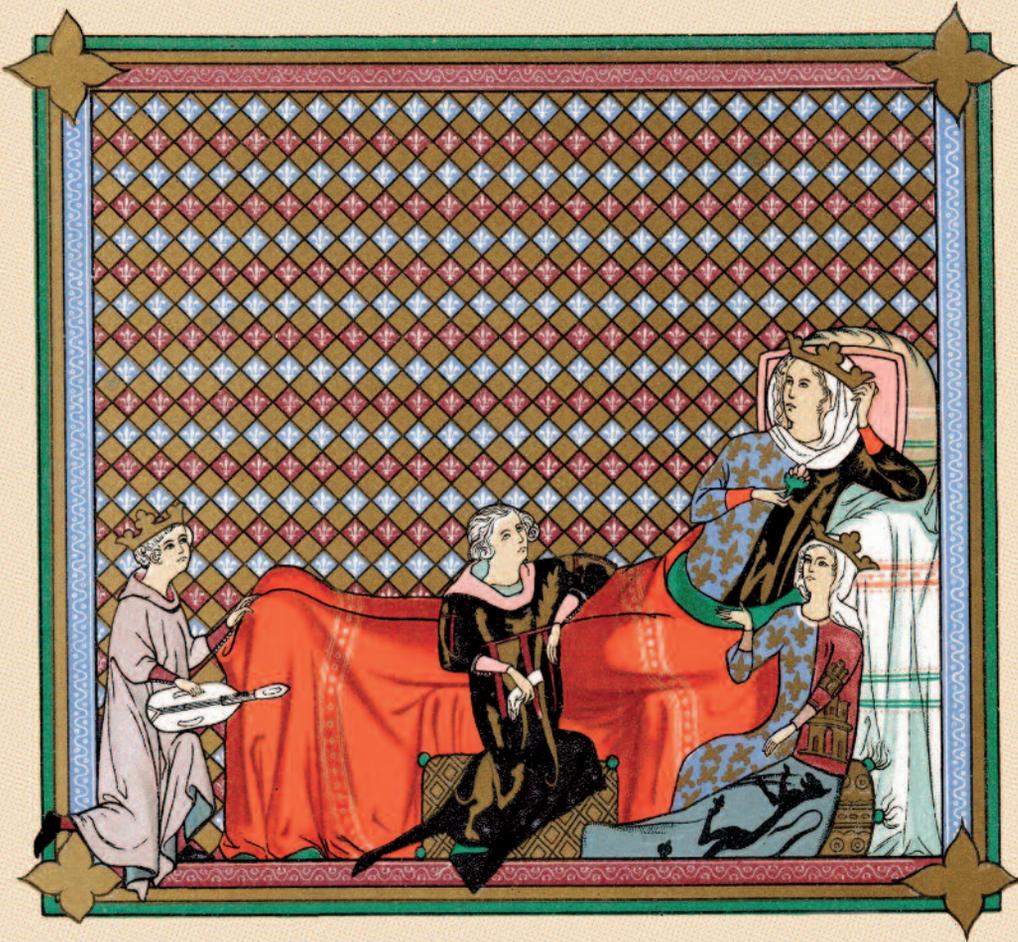


The minstrel Adenet le Roi
recites his *Roman de Cléomadès*
to Blanche of Castile, wife of
King Louis VIII of France.



The Case of the Ebony Horse

Ruth B. Bottigheimer
with Claudia Ott¹

Part 1

‘**T**he Ebony Horse’ casts a long shadow. In the Middle Ages and early modern period, it loomed large in the educated European imagination, entering Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. For humbler tastes there were Spanish and French chapbook accounts of ‘The Ebony Horse’ heroine’s misadventures at the hands of eager suitors, and of its hero’s adventures trying to regain her for himself. Central to the tale’s action is a wooden horse, whose magical flight is directed by a mundane control system of mechanical pins set into its wooden body.²

The tale is known by titles as different as ‘The Ebony Horse’, ‘The Magic Horse’, ‘The Enchanted Horse’, ‘The Flying Horse’, or ‘The Squire’s Tale’. As a lengthy romance it became Adenet le Roi’s *Cleomadés* (1283) and Girart d’Amiens’ *Meliacin* (later 1280s), both over 19,000 lines long. As a story within the *Arabian Nights* repertoire, it spread around the world, when Antoine Galland’s early 18th-century *Mille et Une Nuits: Contes Arabes* (*One Thousand and One Nights: Arab Tales*) was translated into one language after another. The presence of ‘The Ebony Horse’ in the *Arabian Nights* canon as known from Galland onward, together with the similarity of narrative detail in ‘The Ebony Horse’ to several medieval and early modern texts, meant to 19th- and 20th-century literary historians that the *Nights* were known in Western Europe – from Spain through England and France to Italy (Saly 1990, xi; Lynch 2002, 77; Keightley 1834, 40; Marzolph 2004, vol. 2, 483-4). A new perspective emerges, however, from a recently discovered and translated early 13th-century Arabic manuscript together with a long available (in the Bibliothèque Nationale, but only recently made easily accessible by publication) early modern French document, Galland’s Paris journal for the years 1708-9.

The oldest version of ‘The Ebony Horse’ – or rather the opening pages of the oldest version – lies on the final leaves of the above-mentioned early 13th-century manuscript of an Andalusian tale collection, *Mi’at Layla wa-Layla*, or *One Hundred and One Nights*. There, as Shahrazad tells the story to the Indian king in whose hands her fate lies, it bears the title ‘The Ebony Horse’:

The Andalusian ‘Ebony Horse’ (early 13th century)³

People claim, O King, she continued, that in olden times there was once a king. He led an exemplary life in his kingdom, practised justice toward his subjects, and thus the Arabs feared and revered him, and all lands were under his dominion. The King also loved learning and literature, was skilled in the art of rhetoric and was favourably inclined toward learned men. He sought the society of wise men and scholars, and his fame spread among them, so that learned men and scholars gathered around him in greater numbers than was the case for any other king.

Every year the king held two celebrations, at which he granted audience to the entire population. On these days he opened the palace gates, and the people’s concerns were brought before him. Nobles as well as simple folk had access to him then.

At one such celebration the king was just giving an audience, when three wise men stepped before him. One was a Byzantine, the second an Indian, and the third a Persian. Each of the three had brought a gift that he himself had made. Now the king had the habit, when he received a gift that he liked, to let the giver wish for something and to fulfil his wish, whatever he might choose.

And so what did the three wise men give him? The Indian presented him with a human-shaped bronze statue with a big horn in its hand into which the statue blew. He had constructed and assembled the automaton with his own hands.

When the king saw it, he found it splendid. “Honourable wise man,” he addressed the Indian, “what does this Talisman do?”

“If you place it at the city gate, O king,” he answered, “then no enemy and no spy can intrude into the city without its blowing the horn, giving a signal, and identifying him.”

When the king heard that, he rejoiced greatly. He had the talisman put into his treasure house, bestowed a cloak of honour on the wise man who had given it to him, and showed him all sorts of kindness. Then he had him enter, that is, the second wise man. It was the Byzantine. He stepped in and placed before the king a tray of reddish gold, in the centre of which was a beautifully crafted peacock with twelve chicks.

The king regarded the gift, and it pleased him. “What kind of talent does this peacock have?” he asked the wise man, and he replied, “If you set it before you, by day or by night, then you can tell the time that passes by the chicks, so that you will always know how many hours of the day have already passed. If

the day has ended and the night has come on, then the peacock cries out, but his cry sounds pleasant. The same thing happens at the end of the night.”

“If what you say is true,” responded the king, “then I will fulfil all your wishes.” And he commanded that the gift be brought into his treasure house and be well taken care of.

*At this point dawn interrupted Shahrazad,*⁴ and she fell silent. The king arose, delighted by her fascinating story, locked the door, sealed it with his seal, and betook himself to his council chamber.

The Eighty-fourth Night

And so, my Lord, she said, the story continues:

When the wise man had ended his presentation, the king commanded that the third be admitted. It was the Persian. He was an old man and presented a repugnant appearance. The wise Persian stepped before the king, greeted him courteously and set before him a horse made of ebony with a saddle of pure gold and jewels. Everyone who was present in the throne room was enraptured.

“What marvel can this horse accomplish?” the king wanted to know.

“May God give the king a long life and enduring good fortune,” replied the old Persian. “This horse has a quite remarkable ability. It carries whoever rides it as far in a single day as a swift horse could do in an entire year.”

The king was delighted at his words. “If what you describe is really true, then I’ll give you from my kingdom whatever you wish.” And he commanded it to be brought into his treasure house.

The three wise men retired, after the king had promised them unbounded favor and benefactions.

On the day of putting the gifts to the test, the king took his place on the throne, set his crown on his head, and after the viziers and his courtiers had assembled, he had the bronze talisman with the warning horn set before him. He tested it and found that everything worked as had been promised.

“You may ask of me what you wish,” said the king.

Now the king had three daughters and one son. “Your Majesty,” said the first wise man, “I wish that you will give me your daughter to marry and that I may become your son-in-law.”

Now all three daughters were hidden behind a curtain, which hung down on one side of the chamber, so that they could look out from there unseen. The oldest princess was glad, because she saw how refined and pleasant he was and also courteous and learned.

Next thing, the king had the tray with the peacocks brought out. He tested them and found that everything worked perfectly.

“May God strengthen and increase the king’s might,” said the second wise man. “I wish that you grant me the same boon as my companion. I too would like to be your son-in-law.”

The king was satisfied and granted it to him and the middle daughter was glad, since she had noted his handsomeness and grace.

Then the king called for the horse, and it was brought to him. The wise man, to whom the horse had previously belonged, arose and kissed the ground.

“I would like to inspect this horse closely,” the king said to him. “I want to see whether it really carries its rider as swiftly as you claimed.”

“Very well,” said the wise man, ran quickly up to the horse and sprang onto its back with one leap. He stretched out his hand and turned a secret screw to make the horse fly up into the air. The horse had two such screws that he had artfully built in and had placed in secret places. One screw was for flying upward, the other for flying downward. As long as he turned the first screw, the horse flew up into the air. If he turned the second screw, then it reset itself for landing. Now the wise man did all that.

When the king saw that, he was filled with enthusiasm. “So wish for something,” he invited the wise man.

“I wish,” responded the wise man, “that you do the same for me as for my companions and that I too may become your son-in-law like them.”

At this point dawn interrupted Shahrazad, and she fell silent. The king arose, delighted by her fascinating story, locked the door, sealed it with his seal, and betook himself to his council chamber.

The Eighty-fifth Night

[...] Agreed, she said – And so, my Lord, the story continues:

The princess looked out at the Persian wise man. He was really altogether abominable to look at. In contrast, she was the most beautiful of the three sisters. She was cast down and she fretted. Then her brother, who cherished her, came in. “What has befallen you?” he inquired, when he saw her in this state.

“How should I not be wretched?” she responded. “It is because of this loathsome old graybeard.”

“No, you mustn’t be sad,” her brother consoled her and he promised her, “I will save you from him and release your hand from his right hand.”

With that he went to his father. “My dear father,” he addressed him, “Why have you promised this old graybeard that he can become your son-in-law?”

“For his wisdom and his artful skill,” answered the king.

“And what have you seen of his art?” the youth asked.

“This horse that you see here,” he replied.

The youth examined the horse. “I want to ride it,” he said, approached the horse, sprang into the saddle and wanted to urge the horse on. But it didn’t move at all.

When the king saw that, he said to the wise man, “What’s wrong with the horse? My son wants to ride it, and it’s not moving.”

The wise man stood up and turned the rise-into-the-air screw. The horse immediately began to move. As soon as the prince understood how he had to work the screw, high-spirited bravado seized him. The horse’s belly was already beginning to fill with air, and it began to fly.

The king gazed upward toward his son, until he had disappeared from sight. But when he remained out of sight all too long, he turned to the wise man. “Bring my son back to me,” he demanded.

“That is now out of the question!” responded the wise man. “You will never see him again.”

“But how is that?” said the king, losing his temper.

“Because of pure arrogance and pride, your son didn’t bother to ask me about the screw to bring the horse back to earth,” explained the wise man.

“Now he will rise ever higher until the winds blow him around.”

He speaks:⁵

When the king heard him say that, his face paled. He tore the crown ...

‘Crown’ is the last legible word on the frayed page of the ancient Andalusian manuscript. The rest, from the 85th night to the 101st night, is gone forever, although it has been reconstructed from later manuscripts. Nonetheless, the first few pages of this gripping tale communicate lively and believable dialogues. The king addresses his gift-bearing guests, and they reply. An affectionate brother responds to his sister’s grief at her sad fate. An outraged but still polite son confronts his father and then recklessly mounts the ebony horse and disappears into the ether, plunging his father into despair when he learns he’ll never see him again. The romance’s tight prose bespeaks an oral delivery to an attentive audience that hung on each word, because each word counts. In listening to and in reading this fragment we have sat among a long ago Muslim audience.

The entire tale of 'The Ebony Horse' has been known in a European language since 1283 (see below), while surviving Arabic manuscripts are less than 250 years old. Consequently, the discovery of the Andalusian telling from nearly 800 years ago is of great literary significance. On the basis of information internal to the text, such as the conspicuous absence of any reference to the Crusades, Claudia Ott concludes that the collection's origins may lie a further two to three centuries in the past (Ott 2012, 246). Of surviving manuscripts, one survives from 1776, six others from the 19th century.⁶

The ancient manuscript's discovery is dramatic. Ott, an Arabist at Germany's Göttingen University, recounts how she had been invited to perform on an Arabic flute (*nay*) at the opening night of a 2010 Berlin exhibit, 'Treasures of the Aga Khan Museum'. In an interview with Loay Mudhoon,⁷ she reports wandering among the display cases during a break, coming upon a book entitled 'kitâb fîhi hadîth mi'at layla wa-layla' in a display case of Andalusian artifacts, and 'not being able to believe her eyes'. Having previously translated the 15th-century Syrian (so-called 'Galland') manuscript of the *Arabian Nights* into German, Ott immediately recognised the significance of the book's Maghrebi script and title *One Hundred and One Nights*. Its age has for now been assigned as 1234/5 from the colophon of a second book with which it was bound.⁸

The Andalusian 'Ebony Horse' poses questions about where it is set and when it takes place. Ideally, it would have been situated at one of Andalusia's brilliant courts, Umayyad Cordoba, Almoravid Seville, or Almohad Grenada, the Western Mediterranean's equivalents of the ninth-century Baghdad of Haroun al-Rashid (766-809 C.E.). As far as the king in the opening pages is concerned, the last Andalusian ruler who had loved learning and who could indulge his passion for books had been Abû Ya'qûb Yûsuf (ruled 1163-84). '[H]e was a genuine intellectual and bibliophile and had acquired an extensive knowledge of Arabic literature and religious writing during his stay in Seville. He was to gather round him a group of scholars, including [Averroes], and collected books like the Umayyad al'Hakam II (ruled 961-978) had before,' expanding his own library by appropriating others' (Kennedy 1996, 217). In recent 12th- and early 13th-century history, however, Andalusia's courtly past and attendant luxury was sinking under the weight of military strife. Pillaging, taking booty, razing and burning strongholds, and mass executions of Muslim and Christian opposition had become recurring realities, as puritanical Almohad Berber forces invaded from Morocco (Kennedy 1996, 197-272).

In modern memory, the three generations before the 13th-century *Hundred and One Nights* was copied were years of Christian crusades against Muslim rulers. But on the ground, the reality was more complex: one Christian ruler fought another, Muslims might ally with Christian forces for temporary advantage, while on the Muslim side there was internal strife between local rulers. Even the soldiers under a single Muslim ruler's

nominal leadership fought among themselves, with Berber divisions and Arab ones, while Berbers and Arabs alike were further divided by tribal loyalties and resentments at differential rates of pay. Little wonder, then, that the king who loves learning and is beloved by all his people and respected by the Arabs, as the early 13th-century Andalusian 'Ebony Horse' shows its king to be, was a dream of long ago and far away.

Adenet le Roi's Romance about Cleomadés and Claramondine (c.1283)⁹ and Girart d'Amiens' *Meliacin* (mid- to late 1280s)

In 1283 a second, and profoundly differing, version of 'The Ebony Horse' flowed from the pen of one of France's most accomplished minstrels, Adenet le Roi. Instead of tight dialog, there are 19,000 rhyming verses. In the part that corresponds to the surviving Andalusian manuscript of 'The Ebony Horse', Adenet shifts attention from the horse to the adventures of its rider, beginning with a prequel that effectively identifies Cleomadés as a flower of Spanish chivalry before proceeding to the arrival of three kings from Africa: Melocandis from Barbarie, Baldigans from Morocco, and Cromptars from Bougie (ll. 1474-1506). Each brings an astonishing gift, in return for whose acceptance by the king, Marcadigas, each wishes to marry one of his three beautiful daughters. Melocandis has brought a hen of pure gold with three chicks that sing out the hours, Baldigans a mechanical trumpeter that sounds his horn should a treasonous intruder enter the city, and Cromptars a wooden horse¹⁰ that carries its rider wherever he wishes to go (ll. 1587-1618). Adenet inserts a long passage about the marvels of which Virgil had been capable (in the Middle Ages Virgil was accounted a great magician), before continuing the story. Two of the kings are handsome enough to aspire to the hand of a beautiful Seville princess,¹¹ but the suit of the hideous Cromptars plunges his intended bride Marine, the youngest and most beautiful princess, into despair. Cleomadés comforts her in vain, since his father will not go back on his word to Cromptars, to which his mother assents (ll. 2355-64). As a last resort, Cleomadés – impatient and impetuous – sets out to test the horse. Dissembling friendship but intending vengeance, Cromptars prepares to send him aloft, while in the background the mechanical trumpeter, ignored, sounds his horn in warning (ll. 2415-20). Cromptars turns *une cheville* (little pin, l. 2451), the horse rises until it is out of sight, and when Marcadigas asks him to bring his son back, Cromptars pleads impossibility on the grounds that he forgot to tell Cleomadés the method of return (ll. 2463-70). Marcadigas then throws Cromptars into prison.

Adenet's romance about Cleomadés and Claramondine has been studied philologically (Bormans 1867), syntactically (Wolff 1884), comparatively with Girart d'Amiens' *Meliacin* (Römermann 1903), stylistically (Davidson 1905), in terms of architectonic patterns (Boland 1974), and in the historical position of its prose (de Eguia Corral and Mussons Freixas 1998). Its form in early popular Spanish print has been

compared and analysed (Pastrana-Pérez 2001, and Rouday 1977). Medieval manuscripts have been published (Henry 1951-71) and Adenet le Roi's biography has been parsed (Henry 1951, reprinted 1996; Adnès 1971), as have its heraldry (Brault 2008) and educational functions (Kouamé et al. 2009).

A third telling of 'The Ebony Horse' came from the pen of Girart d'Amiens in the mid- to late 1280s. Entitled *Meliacin*, its plot follows the same trajectory, but the names of people and places differ, as do some motivations. The same individual, Blanche of France (1253-1323), is credited as key to the romance's chain of transmission: by Adenet in an acrostic at its end (ll. 18529-686) and by Girart's illustrator in a miniature at the beginning (Saly 1990, viii, x). This is not surprising. Blanche of France, a daughter of Louis IX of France, married Fernando de la Cerda (1255-75), the son of Alfonso X of Castile. As Infante of Castile, Fernando was involved in his father's massive project of translating Arabic documents into Castilian, the first of which, in his case, was *Sendebār* (Lat. *Syntipas*). Since the *Sendebār* stories comprise an integral part of *One Hundred and One Nights*, it is reasonable to suspect that Castile's translators turned to a copy of it, perhaps even the very copy newly discovered in Berlin, for the *Sendebār* stories. Similarities and deviations in Adenet le Roi's and Girart's versions of 'The Ebony Horse' form patterns that suggest both were working not from a literal translation of the *Hundred and One Nights*, but from an intermediate translation-adaptation.¹² Adenet le Roi's romance has received notably more scholarly attention than *Meliacin*, probably because its greater literary merit engendered a larger number of literary descendants.

Clamades from 1480 to the Early 17th Century

Two hundred years after Adenet le Roi produced his romance, the printing press was in use in western European cities, and a shorter prose retelling of Adenet's lengthy romance could be bought throughout France from 1480 onward and in Spain after 1521 (Pastrana-Pérez 2001). A hundred or so years later, Nicolas Oudot (1565-1636) published *Histoire Plaisante ... du ... Clamades & de ... Clermonde...* (*Pleasant ... History of ... Clamades & of ... Clermonde ...*) in northern France.¹³ By then the unnamed Andalusian king had passed through Adenet le Roi's 'Marcadigas' on the way to becoming a Sardinian prince named Marchaditas, who had become King of Spain by marrying the Spanish infanta Doctive. They had three beautiful daughters – Heliador, Soliadisce, and Maxime (a misreading of Adenet's 'Marine?') – as well as a cosmopolitan son Clamades, whom they had sent to Greece to learn Greek and to Germany and France to learn German and French. Also a valiant knight, he fought beside his father to vanquish foreign attackers and to restore peace to Spain.

Only after this prologue, which abbreviates Adenet le Roi's prequel to the Andalusian tale, does 'The Ebony Horse' as told in *One Hundred and One Nights* begin to unfold. Its three kings are still African, but are now skilled in astronomy and

necromancy and are said to come from 'Barbarie', 'Amoras', and 'Hongrie' (sic!). They are allied with one another so that each can secure one of the Spanish king's beautiful daughters in marriage. Each has prepared an astonishing gift: a hen and three chicks made of pure gold that walk one after the other and sing sweetly; a figure of a man worked in pure gold that sounds a horn the moment anyone thinks a treasonous thought against the ruler; and a wooden horse with steel pegs that guide it wherever its rider wishes to go. The horse's creator, King Croppart of Hungary, is an ugly hunchback, to whom the king regrets giving his daughter. He wants the gifts, however, and summons his son to inspect them. The youngest daughter tells her brother she'd rather die than marry the hunchback.

Clamades tells his father in Croppart's presence that he mustn't turn Maxime over to such a repellant man, and that he doubts whether the horse will work. Seizing an opportunity, the perfidious Croppart invites Clamades to try the horse himself. Although the golden sentry sounds the warning horn, everyone's attention is fixed on the drama before them. Clamades mounts the horse, and Croppart turns the peg that sends him aloft, until he is lost to view. The king asks that his son now return, but Croppart replies that he forgot to tell Clamades about the return peg. King Marchidas, incensed, throws Croppart into prison.

The story so far has taken only about six pages, or a tenth of Nicolas Oudot's sixty-or-so-page chapbook, a smaller proportion of text than it occupies in *One Hundred and One Nights*. This leaves more space for the hero's adventures, a staple of early modern chapbook content. Oudot's chapbook also incorporates an accumulation of shifts in perspective. The unarticulated Andalusian 'here' of 'The Ebony Horse' has become a Mediterranean 'there' (Spain as well as Sardinia). The eastern 'other' of the Andalusian story (Byzantium, Persia, and India) has become the southern lands of Africa, which from a north European perspective correctly envisages the Maghreb as a distant extension of southern Spain. One cannot help noting the geographical error of including Hungary among North Africa's kingdoms, a mistake that Oudot presumably expected his readers to overlook.

In *One Hundred and One Nights*, the repugnance evoked by the third king's appearance arose from his age, a familiar medieval trope for marital mismatches, whereas Adenet's text and its literary descendants repeatedly describe Croppart as misshapen (*bossu*) and ugly (*laid*), which had become an early modern trope for wickedness, leaving his elderliness a narrative irrelevance. The shift from accidental ugliness to intentional sinfulness emerges from Croppart's acts themselves: he committed a sin of omission in the Andalusian tale by not informing the prince about a second peg to bring his horse back home again, an omission whose potentially wicked intent the text credibly diminishes by showing the prince's rash haste to try out the horse. In strong contrast, the Oudot chapbook vilifies Croppart by making his omission clearly intentional.

The Horse of the *Hikayat* (late medieval or early modern, unknown date)

Sometime in the late medieval or early modern period, a scribe prepared a collection of tales entitled *Hikayat* (*Tales*). Translated by Malcolm Lyons, who previously translated the monumental Calcutta II edition of the *Arabian Nights* (earlier available only in Richard Burton's florid prose), it is scheduled to appear in 2014 as *Tales of the Marvellous and News of the Strange*. Tantalisingly, the stories comprise only the first volume, the second volume having been lost. But the table of contents for the entire collection survives, and lists in the lost second volume a tale called '*fars al-abnus*' (horse of ebony).¹⁴ Without the text, however, it is impossible to know the contents of the *Hikayat* 'Ebony Horse'.

What remains astonishing is that as late as the sustained production was of the Oudot chapbooks in France and their Spanish chapbook cousins *Historia del cavallero Clamades*, 'The Ebony Horse' still hadn't appeared in *The Thousand and One Nights*. It was, as Mia Gerhardt called it and several other tales, 'an orphan tale'.¹⁵ That fact alone throws the ubiquity of 'The Ebony Horse' and its European cognate tales into high relief and leaves us wanting to know how and by what route 'The Ebony Horse' entered *The Thousand and One Nights* in the 18th and 19th centuries. The resolution of that puzzle, which will appear in a sequel to this article in the next issue of *Gramarye*, begins with a young Syrian visitor to Paris named Hannâ Diyâb.

Ruth B. Bottigheimer

References

1. Claudia Ott has been of great help in verifying my English translation from her Arabic-to-German translation by comparing and correlating my rendering with the original Arabic.
2. Note that the flying horse in 'The Ebony Horse' is distinct from ancient Assyrian or Greek winged horses. The latter fly under their own control, whereas the former are automata that, furthermore, typically carry the hero to a virginal princess (Asper 10: col 689).
3. The following translation is from *101 Nacht* (197-201), Claudia Ott's translation into German from the Arabic of the early 13th-century *Mi'at Layla wa-Layla* manuscript, and appears with permission from the Manesse publisher.
4. Italics indicate words that the scribe rubricated in the medieval manuscript.
5. 'He speaks' is an insertion typical for the fictitious narrator or virtual storyteller, who in the world of Arabic narratives installs himself as an ultimate authority for the entire text, thus creating the atmosphere of an oral performance. See Ott 2003 and Ott 2012 247-9. The collection as a whole has been (fictively) attributed to Sheik Fahdâs (or Fahrâs) the Philosopher (Ott 2012 245, 248-9).
6. *Ibid.*
7. <http://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-claudia-ott-a-new-chapter-in-the-history-of-arab-literature>

8. Ongoing paper and ink analysis from the body of the manuscript itself will eventually establish its real rather than inferential date.
9. The manuscript bears no title. Cleomadés is named for the first time on line 214 (Adenet 1971, 204), Claramondine not until much later.
10. [U]n cheval de fust (l. 1611), later called *le chevalet de benus* (l. 2123), that is, 'the ebony horse'.
11. Only about 1,800 lines into the romance does Adenet identify the royal court's location as *Sebile la Grant* (l. 1886). The Arabic name for Seville is *İs bilya*.
12. This simple statement grows from a consideration of masses of data that I propose to incorporate into a detailed study.
13. This story closely follows the c.1285 French romance *Cleomades* as summarised in English in Keightley's *Tales and Popular Fictions* (1834), chapter 3, pp. 42-91, and which – along with a shorter 1480 print version – is reproduced in Adenet le Roi, *Le Cheval volant en bois* (2010).
14. My thanks to Robert Irwin and Ulrich Marzolph for the Arabic book and tale titles.
15. Gerhardt (1963), 12-14.

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