One way of dealing with Abbasid popular narratives is to study some of the best known collections which were translated, adapted, collected or created during the period under consideration. As my argument below plans to show, the *Thousand and One Nights*, and regardless of the specific contents of its early formation, may be the right one to focus partially on in relation to the actual demand that led to its compilation in book form. Its significance for studies of book compilation and production may be better understood when seen in relation to subsequent impetus to compilations of “nights,” the gathering of tales, and the justifications for such compilations by littérateurs. Writers on the *Thousand and One Nights* tend unfortunately to forget that the frame story which drew classical belletristic disparagement forced its structural and semantic attributes on the immediate outgrowth which was in circulation since the early ninth century.¹ Its formulaic patterns called for other clusters, but they also invited Islamic ritualistic patterns of greeting, invocation, and benediction to saturate the collection. It also lent its designs of challenge and response, rewards and punishments, and narrative or art as an improvement on life, to the collection. The tale accelerates storytelling and makes one’s life contingent on its excellence and appeal. They also tend to forget that the tale and the *khabar* (event/anecdotal report) operate in a larger social context beyond the tastes of either the court or the privileged sites of discourse.

Popularity of the tales and their like and their invasion of the caliphal palace as a private and sanctified domain should have been urgent enough to require the interference of mothers or grandmothers in the readings of the would-be caliphs, as the anecdote about Shaghab, al-Muqtadir’s mother, tells us. Writing in 320/932 Abū Bakr al-Šūlī

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reports how during the reign of the Caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–32) and while he was tutoring his son Prince Muḥammad, the servants of the Prince’s grandmother, Shaghāb, walked in and collected the Prince’s books and reading material, to come back later with the material, while the Prince, the future Caliph al-Rādī (934–40 C.E.) remarked in response: “You have seen these books and found them to be books of tradition, jurisprudence, poetry, language, history, and the works of the learned—books through the study of which God causes one to benefit and to be complete. They are not like the books which you read excessively such as The Wonders of the Sea, The Tale of Sindbad, and The Cat and the Mouse.”

The divide between two tastes and binary distinctions between the acceptable and its opposite were already so strong as to warrant this explanation. More important, however, is the fact that the prince was aware of the existence of such books which he defined as contrary to the books of jurisprudence and tradition, the cherished targets of the court.

This khabar as cited above is important for a number of reasons. It associates the courtly with the Godly, and the littérateur as instructor could not be trusted before passing through some careful screening and moral tests that covered his person, his background and texts. In terms of knowledge production, this screening covers the agent, the product or tools of production, and also the context of production and its relations. The screening was deemed necessary to protect rulers from moral damage or corruption according to the ethics of the age. The divide was already there between the insipid and the refined, the profane and the sacred. This distinction, however, cannot be fairly defined without some specifics that relate to the instructor as transmitter and also to the material used. On the other hand, this divide should not blind us to the facts that entailed its application, such as radical economic transformations and their impact on social and cultural relations. In the abovementioned quote producers of knowledge, as well as their products, cannot ensure the support of the court before an evidence of moral subordination and compliance. They are held suspect as long as there is some need for further evidence. On the other hand, the anecdote shows how the warrāqin (copyists and booksellers) market was already involved in such large production of light literature. This light

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