Undead Afterlives of *The Arabian Nights* in *What We Do in The Shadows*

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In the eighteenth-century transatlantic world, it would be difficult to find someone—whether they were speaking in English, Spanish, French, Italian, German, etc.—that was not familiar with *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*. Similar to the Bible, Milton, and Shakespeare, *The Arabian Nights* were virtually everywhere in the world of print culture. What many of those denizens of the transatlantic eighteenth century might not have known, however, was that many of their favorite stories within the collection were actually not part of the original but had been added by Antoine Galland, the early eighteenth-century French translator that introduced Europe to the collection of Eastern tales. Galland had relied on Hanna Diyab, a Syrian Maronite, for the stories of Aladdin, Ali Baba, and related tales, and scholars have begun to argue that these tales were likely composed by Diyab himself and are therefore eighteenth century in origin.

My dissertation will analyze the influence of the reception history of *The Arabian Nights* on the development of the Oriental tale, especially as found in transatlantic Romanticism, and, in turn, how that influenced literary forms ranging from epistolary fiction, gothic romances, and the intersections of literary and religious canons. In this essay, I will attend to the ways that these eighteenth-century tales in *The Arabian Nights* have continued to influence culture in the twenty-first century, specifically in the ways that the *Nights* have had what I refer to as "undead afterlives" in the gothic comedy series *What We Do in the Shadows* (FX). Though the critically acclaimed television series has just wrapped up its sixth and final season, the show continues to draw major interest with new audiences. Its producers show in detail what life might be like for four undead roommates living in twenty-first century Staten Island, filmed in mockumentary fashion as they go about their day-to-day (or, one might say, night-to-night) routines, with the help of the oldest vampire, Nandor the Relentless's human familiar, Guillermo. I argue that Nandor becomes a proxy for many of the issues facing society this last decade. Nandor becomes a kind of cipher of current social and political issues, especially surrounding gender and sexuality, and attempts to work through them with the help of Guillermo. Nandor provides a messy, funny, and approachable example of how to work through issues facing the audience but does so through leaning heavily on the tropes of Orientalist discourse. While the show, I argue, seeks to help its viewers overcome current issues in productive ways, I want to trouble its use of Orientalist tropes and discourse to probe potential outcomes of falling back on these kinds of racialized images and metaphors—which make the Easterner an "Other"—to then tacitly invite viewers to be more accepting of others.

Nandor was originally the Supreme Viceroy of Al-Qolnidar, a fictional country in southern Iran, and it becomes clear early on that he is a personification of many of the tropes of literary Orientalism that have been identified by scholars like Srinivas Aravamudan (*Enlightenment Orientalism*), James Watt (*British Orientalisms, 1759–1835*), Andrew Warren (*The Orient and the Young Romantics*), and others. Not only is Nandor representative of a medieval Middle Eastern ruler, but he also takes on all the tropes of a despot in orientalist literature. While living he had a harem of 37 wives (though several of these wives are men), in life and as a vampire he enjoys sexual excess, his ideas are almost always cast as "primitive" and out of touch, he forgets that he has a genii's lamp and Guillermo accidentally helps him to rub it the right way to get the genie to come out and grant his wishes, and he has a hidden cave full of

treasures under the house that none of the other vampires know about. Nandor is also always in search of love and acceptance, two ideas crucial to early twenty-first century identity that I contend Nandor invites the show's audience to find for themselves.