

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: University of Essex</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 29 – English Language and Literature</p>
<p>Title of case study: <i>Stranger Magic</i></p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>For Professor Marina Warner literature acts as a cultural ambassador to open up dialogue in a globalised world riven by ideological and military conflict. She has used her research, which culminated in her multi-award-winning book <i>Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights</i>, to make a historical and cultural contribution to understanding the Middle East from the point of view of literary and artistic inter-relationships. She has used the extraordinary success of the book to raise public awareness through a series of international engagements. In the process she has addressed millions and contributed to cultural capital and debate worldwide. She has also directed the selection strategy of a major New York publisher, the Library of Arabic Literature.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Warner has been a Professor at Essex since 2004. Her work brings a renewed salience to the UoA’s long-standing commitment to the political virtue of comparative literature. She takes seriously the role that writing plays in a world of conflict, regarding it as a lens through which to examine difficult questions. In a fluid, globalised world in which people cross borders perpetually, cultural encounters are part of the fabric of everyday life, which can lead to a spectrum of interactions, either of increased antagonism or greater mutual understanding. In such a world, comparative literature matters more than ever because it can show how literature has benefitted from linguistic and cross-border contacts.</p> <p><i>Stranger Magic</i> uncovers a neglected story of reciprocity and exchange between Arabic and European literatures, and in the process tells a different story about Western and Eastern relationships than ideological and military history will admit. Begun by Warner as a response to the Islamophobia that had been building since the first Gulf War and reached fever pitch after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the book takes as its primary focus not the <i>differences</i> but the <i>similarities</i> between our respective cultures, thus giving a different angle on the supposed ‘enemy’. Warner’s argument is that the relationship with the Orient is based on a dynamic of ‘reverse colonisation’. The reasons for the Orient’s hold on the West’s imaginary and its influence on art and culture from the Enlightenment period onwards – the point at which the <i>Arabian Nights</i> were first translated – is not confined to exotic strangeness; rather, our attraction arises from encountering much that is revealing about ourselves in the ‘Other’. The picture that emerges is of cultural interconnectedness rather than rift and vengeance.</p> <p>Warner’s work on the <i>Arabian Nights</i> as a body of world myths, fables and fairy tales that have profoundly influenced Western culture and literature marks a continuation of her influential work on folklore, fantasy writing and magical thinking. It also marks a revision of her earlier work: the medieval European folk tales turn out to parallel many of the tales in the <i>Arabian Nights</i>. <i>Stranger Magic</i> gives us compelling reasons why to read these tales in relation to our own heritage. Or, as Victoria Beale of <i>The Independent</i> noted, ‘Warner’s book makes reading <i>The Arabian Nights</i> seem as essential to understanding the Western literary canon as the King James Bible’ (13 November 2011). The research that culminated in <i>Stranger Magic</i> has led to three conferences, which Warner co-organised with colleagues at Essex and at New York University, SOAS, and Oxford.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘<i>The Arabian Nights: Encounters and Translations in Literature and the Arts</i>’ (2009), New York University at Abu Dhabi

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- 'Staging the East: Oriental Masking in British Theatre, 1660–1880' (2010), Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds (funded by a British Academy Grant: £8,229)
- 'Through Dido's Eyes: The Arab Spring in Literature and the Arts' (July 2013), University of Essex; a special strand of the British Comparative Literature Association Conference on 'Migration', in collaboration with the British School in Rome and the Society for Libyan Studies, University of Essex (funded by a British Academy Grant: £12,500).

3. References to the research

Primary publication on Arab literature:

Warner, M. (2011) *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights*, London: Chatto & Windus. ISBN: 978-0701173319

- Winner – 2013 Sheikh Zayed Book Award 'For a Non-Arabic work on Arabic culture'
- Winner – 2013 Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism
- Winner – 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism
- Nominated best book of the year in *The Guardian* by Hanif Kureishi (25.11.2011)
- Nominated best book of the year in *The Times Literary Supplement* by Helen Simpson (2.12.2011)
- Nominated best book of the week in *The Independent* (11.11.2011)

Related publications on Arab literature include:

Warner, M. (2008) True stories and translated selves (The Sebald Lecture), *In Other Words. The Journal for Literary Translators*, 31, 26-41 [available from the HEI on request]

Warner, M. (2010) The vehicle of stories in the *Arabian Nights*: Riding the carpet, *Fogli di Anglistica - Rivista di studi inglesi-semesterale*, 7-8, 123-136. ISBN: 88-7804-498-2

Warner, M. (2013) Afterword, in V. Brittain, *Shadow Lives: Forgotten Women of the War on Terror*, London: Pluto Press, pp. 165-168. ISBN: 978-0745333267

Warner, M. (2013) Foreword, in A.S. Khalidi, *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist: The Life and Activism of Anbara Salam Khalidi*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. viii-xii. ISBN: 978-0745333564

4. Details of the impact

In *Stranger Magic* Warner reads the *Arabian Nights* as a case study in the contact zones of history, thus offering a path towards changing prevailing preconceptions about Arabs, Islam, and the history and civilisation of the Middle and the Near East. Warner has used her high public profile as an intellectual to challenge such preconceptions through a variety of channels, addressing non-specialist audiences in many different countries. She has also used her expertise in world literature of myth and fairy tales to act as an advisor on an innovative library project run by New York University Press. The impact has been to raise public awareness of the history of East-West cultural links and thereby influence public opinion, to contribute cultural capital in the UK and elsewhere, and to guide the selection strategy of a major publishing house.

Warner's research on relations between Western and Arab cultures has been extensively disseminated through her media appearances. She has been interviewed on a variety of national and international TV and Radio programmes, including BBC radio, US, Irish, and Australian radio stations. She has also been interviewed for magazines with a predominantly Middle Eastern readership. These include a magazine in the United Arab Emirates [corroborating source 1] and a

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New York based Middle East arts and culture magazine [corroborating source 2]. Across these platforms Warner has reached over **3.8 million people**. Examples of Warner's TV and radio research dissemination include:

- BBC Four TV documentary (27/4/11): Warner appeared as an expert 'talking-head' on 'Secrets of the *Arabian Nights*', presented by Richard E. Grant, which reached an audience of approximately **650,000** and was described by its producer as 'a ratings success' [corroborating source 3]
- BBC Radio 4 (3/11/11): Warner was interviewed for 'Woman's Hour' about *Stranger Magic* and the importance of the *Arabian Nights* for the West, reaching an audience of approximately **3 million** [based on average figures made public in 2009 – source 4].
- BBC Radio 3 (23/7/12): Warner was interviewed for Episode 2/2 of 'Goethe and the West-Eastern Divan' about Goethe's fascination with the medieval Persian poet Hafiz. The programme reached an audience over **150,000** [source 5].
- ABC National Radio Australia (4/7/12): 'How the magic of the *Arabian Nights* changed the west'.
- WBUR Boston NPR Radio (30/3/12): 'The Arabian Nights - A new twist on the old magic in the tales of the *Arabian Nights*'.
- RTE Ireland (3/1/12): Warner was interviewed on 'Arts Tonight' about the *Arabian Nights* stories. Audience over **50,000** and **1200 podcast downloads** [source 6].

Warner has also made great efforts to engage general audiences through personal appearances at prominent events. She has spoken at many literary festivals, book fairs, and bookshops to discuss *Stranger Magic*, and has given over 20 public lectures about themes relating to it. Between 2011 and 2013 she addressed a total live audience of **over 700** at public events such as:

- Whitechapel Gallery, London (June 2013): 'First Thursdays', discussion on folklore and modernity, **audience of 113** [source 7].
- BOCAS literary festival, Trinidad (April 2013): one-on-one discussion with novelist Lawrence Scott about *Stranger Magic*.
- Maison française d'Oxford (February 2013): 'The Arabian Nights. A Roundtable with Readings and Lectures'.
- Royal College of Art, London (November 2012): Keynote at *The Shadow of Language* conference, **audience of 200 including 100 delegates from outside academe** [source 8].
- Cabinet Magazine Event, Brooklyn Brewery, New York (October 2012): Public Discussion between Warner and George Prochnik about *Stranger Magic*. Audio recording available at: http://cabinetmagazine.org/events/warner_prochnik_stranger_magic.php
- Wigtown Book Festival (September 2012): in conversation with Tahir Shah.
- Edinburgh International Book Festival (August 2012): public lecture in Scottish Power Studio Theatre on 'How Magic Helped Create The Modern World' (Tickets £10, £8).
- The University of Warwick Distinguished Lecture (March 2012): public lecture on 'The Tale Things Tell: Charmed Goods in the World of the *Arabian Nights*', available on YouTube since April 2012, **1,137 views**.
- The Swedenborg Society, London (November 2011): public talk about *Stranger Magic* to an **audience of 85** taking a total of **£425 in tickets** [source 9].
- GV Art, Art and Science Gallery, London (November 2011): closed-door symposium attended by Lisa Appignanesi, Ruth Padel, performance artist Stelarc, and others.
- Cheltenham Literature Festival (October 2011): The Cheltenham Lecture, to **an audience of 118** [source 10].
- University of Cambridge Festival of Ideas (October 2011): public lecture on 'Enchantments in the *Arabian Nights*, or, the life of the jinn'.
- Poetry Next to the Sea Festival, Fakenham, Norfolk (May 2011): public talk on 'Word

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Magic: Scheherazade's Way'.

- Università Degli Studi di Enna 'Kore', Italy (March 2011): public lecture on 'Scheherazade's Voice: Migrations and Meaning in Oriental Tales'.
- Bath Literature Festival (February 2011): opening lecture 'The Flying Carpet' to an **audience of 177** [source 11].

Warner has collaborated with a major publishing house to create the first comprehensive library of classic Arabic texts in modern, lucid translations, with the goal of introducing Arabic literature to a general audience of readers. In October 2010 she was appointed to the International Advisory Board of the newly founded Library of Arabic Literature (LAL) to advise on the LAL's selection for translation, leading to a major new project to translate *The Hundred and One Nights*. Warner also advises the LAL by editing its English translations. Her contributions to LAL have been corroborated by its General Editor [source 12], who adds:

Marina has made a valuable contribution to the work of the LAL and the success of the Library is undoubtedly due in part to her advice. For its part the LAL executive board is delighted and puts great stock in the nature of the endorsement that Marina Warner's membership of the Advisory Board lends the whole project.

General Editor, Library of Arabic Literature

5. Sources to corroborate the impact [All sources saved on file with HEI, available on request]

1. Marina Warner interview in Bint Al Khaleej, July 2013
2. Marina Warner interview in Bidoun, Spring 2013
3. Figures from executive producer, 'Secrets of the *Arabian Nights*', BBC Four
4. 'Radio 4 big winners in listener figures', *The Independent*, 29 Oct 2009
5. Figures from 'Twenty Minutes' producer, Radio 3
6. Figures from Arts Tonight, Ireland
7. Figures from Whitechapel Gallery, Visitor Services Supervisor
8. Figures from Head of Photography, Royal College of Art
9. Figures from Publicist, Swedenborg Society
10. Figures from the Cheltenham Literature Festival
11. Figures from Festivals Officer, Bath Festivals
12. General Editor of the Library of Arabic Literature