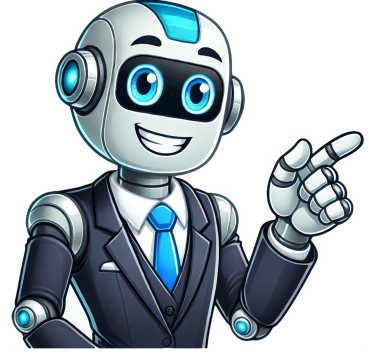


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By Dr Oliver Tearle (Loughborough University) The story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves is, after the tale of Aladdin and the Magic Lamp (which we have analysed here), the best-known of the Arabian Nights stories. The words ‘Open, Sesame!’ are famous even to people who have never read the story of the crafty thief and his adventures. But there are a number of curious details about this story which are less well-known. Before we get to those, though, and before we offer some words of analysis about this tale full of excitement and suspense, it might be worth recapping the plot. Plot Summary There were once two brothers living in Persia. Their names were Ali Baba and Kasim. When their father died, they quickly spent all of the money they inherited from him, but Kasim married a fairly wealthy woman, and was able to set himself up as a reasonably successful merchant. Ali Baba, meanwhile, married a poor woman and made a living by selling firewood, although he was much poorer than Kasim. One day, Ali Baba is in the forest gathering wood when he sees some riders coming to a cave. They pronounce the words ‘Open, Sesame!’ and a doorway opens in the side of the rock, and the men – whom Ali Baba realises are a group of forty thieves – go inside. When they have left, Ali Baba tries saying the words ‘Open, Sesame!’, and sure enough, a portal opens up in the cave, and he walks inside to find it full of carpets, silks, and coins. These men are clearly thieves who use the cave to store their treasure that they have stolen. Ali Baba takes some of the coins from the cave, remembering to utter the magic password, ‘Open, Sesame!’ so he can escape the cave, and then ‘Close, Sesame!’ so the portal seals up behind him when he’s out. He then takes his donkeys back home, laden with the coins he’s taken from the cave. Ali Baba tells his wife about what he found, and they agree to keep the coins – and the cave – a secret. But his wife wants to weigh the coins, so she goes and borrows some scales from Kasim, Ali Baba’s brother. Kasim’s wife, wondering what her sister-in-law could want with some scales, smears some tallow on the bottom in the hope that some of the items will be accidentally stuck to the scales when they’re returned. Sure enough, when the scales are returned to her, one of the coins has stuck to the scales, and Kasim’s wife tells her husband that Ali Baba clearly has lots of coins he’s acquired from somewhere. When Kasim confronts Ali Baba and threatens to tell the police about the coins if his brother doesn’t tell him everything, he tells him all about it, and Kasim rides out to the cave, remembering the magic words his brother told him about. However, so overwhelmed is Kasim by all the treasure inside the cave, that he forgets the password, ‘Open, Sesame!’, and cannot escape the cave. When the forty thieves ride to the cave to drop off their latest spoils, they discover Kasim inside, and kill him, chopping his body into four pieces. They leave these four pieces hanging inside the cave, in case anyone else has discovered the cave and thinks they can steal things from it. They clearly have no time for people stealing from them. (Oh, the irony!) When Kasim doesn’t return home, his wife gets worried, and asks Ali Baba to go looking for him. Ali Baba has a feeling his brother has gone to the cave in the forest, and sure enough, when he gets there he discovers his brother’s body in pieces. Taking it home, he gives the pieces to Kasim’s widow, who sends for a tailor, Baba Mustafa, who is adept at sewing things together. Ali Baba takes his brother’s widow in as his wife. At Ali Baba’s house, the tailor sews up Kasim’s body ready for burial. Meanwhile, the forty thieves have returned to their cave and discovered that both the body and more of their treasure have gone. They decide they must find who’s responsible and stop them. So the chief sends one of the thieves into town to track down the guilty man. The thief happens to call upon the tailor who had sewn Kasim’s body back together. When the thief pays him, the merchant takes him to the house where he sewed up the dead body. Marking the door of Ali Baba’s house with white chalk so he can find it again, the thief then returns to the forest. However, Ali Baba’s clever and sharp-witted servant, a girl named Morgiana, spots the white chalk mark and suspects something’s going on. So she goes and marks all of the neighbouring doors with similar white chalk marks. Sure enough, when the thieves turn up to sneak into Ali Baba’s house and kill him, they cannot work out which house is his, since all houses in the area bear the same chalk mark! A second thief tries his luck, doing the same thing as the first one, but this time marking the door with red chalk. But Morgiana once again spots the mark soon afterwards, and duly marks all the other houses with red chalk. When the thieves turn up, they are thwarted again. The chief imprisons the two thieves who failed in their missions, shutting them up in the cave. (Note: this is a very stupid idea, since they are locked in there with all of the treasure, and know the password that will open the portal, so if they’d wanted to mutiny, they could have made off with all the treasure they could carry as soon as the other thieves had gone.) The chief hatches his own plan: once he has paid Baba Mustafa to lead him to the correct house, he memorises its location, rather than marking it with chalk. He then takes the 37 thieves (the other two are imprisoned in the cave) and goes to Ali Baba’s house, where, disguised in foreign clothes, the chief pretends to be a merchant from another country who is selling oil in the city. Can he spend the night in Ali Baba’s garden, and store his jars of oil in his shed? The jars are, of course, where the other thieves are lying in wait, ready to come out and join the attack on Ali Baba’s house. Ali Baba agrees, and asks Morgiana to make some food for their guest. The chief decides to have a nap in the garden. When Morgiana runs out of oil, she goes out into the shed to get some – only to discover the thieves hidden in the oil jars. They assume she is their chief, however, and ask ‘Is it time to act yet?’ The quick-thinking servant imitates the chief’s voice, telling them to wait as the time to act hasn’t arrived yet. She locates a jar that actually does contain oil, and goes back into the house. Heating it up until it’s boiling hot, she then takes the oil out to the shed – and pours it into each and every one of the jars in which the thieves are concealed. They all burn to death. She then locks the gate so the sleeping chief cannot escape. Morgiana tells Ali Baba about the thieves, and how she has saved him from them. He is grateful to her. While they are inside, the chief wakes up and discovers all of the thieves dead, so he flees over the garden fence. The chief hatches another plan which involves playing a longer game. Disguised once more, he sets up a market stall in the bazaar, using an assumed name, and trades there, opposite Kasim’s orphaned son, Ali Baba’s nephew. He befriends the young man and, over time, the nephew invites the robber captain to Ali Baba’s house for a meal, as his guest. When Morgiana recognises the robber chief, and spots the dagger he has concealed under his robes, she dresses up as an exotic dancer, complete with a dagger of her own, and asks her master if she can dance for them both. Ali Baba agrees, and while she is walking around the table to collect coins from the men, she suddenly brings out her dagger and stabs the chief, killing him. When she tells Ali Baba that this man was the same one that came to his house to kill him before, posing as an oil merchant, and she reveals the dagger the man had concealed beneath his robes, Ali Baba rewards her by giving her his nephew’s hand in marriage. Ali Baba grows very rich, thanks to all of the treasure in the cave, and – in true fairy-tale fashion – they all live happily ever after. Analysis Although it’s one of the most famous tales collected under the title Arabian Nights (or 1,001 Nights), the tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves was not originally part of the collection at all. Instead, Ali Baba, Aladdin, and Sinbad the Sailor were all ‘orphan tales’ added in the eighteenth century by a French translator, Antoine Galland. As we discuss in more detail in a separate post about Aladdin, this means that the three most famous stories from the Arabian Nights weren’t part of the original collection. Indeed, it was Galland who gave us the most famous expression associated with ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves’: ‘Open, Sesame’. Or rather, Galland’s original French was Sésame, ouvre-toi, which literally translates as ‘Sesame, open yourself’. However, ‘Open, Sesame’ (remember the comma) is how the phrase is usually rendered in English. And although ‘Sesame’ here probably refers to the plant or seed of that name – when Kasim forgets this Ur-password while he’s in the treasure cave, he tries a number of other plant names – there is a theory that it is meant to be a reduplication of the Hebrew šem (‘name’, specifically the name of God). But this theory seems less persuasive than the idea that the magic words refer to the idea of opening up a sesame seed pod that releases the ‘treasure’ within the pod. What’s more, although the tale is traditionally known by the title of ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves’, the character who demonstrates the real cunning and cleverness is not Ali Baba but his servant girl, Morgiana, whose quick thinking and wise actions save her master not once but twice. Of course, as in many European fairy tales, Morgiana is rewarded with her freedom and a socially advantageous marriage to Ali Baba’s own nephew: she is free from a life of servitude and goes on to prosper as the wife of a rich man. In this way, Morgiana’s sly cunning mirror Scheherazade’s: she, too, wins her freedom through telling this tale to her master, among many other tales. It’s as if Scheherazade is subtly hinting that good masters reward their female servants by granting them freedom and prosperity – as her own master should do when she has finished entertaining him with her stories. But Morgiana isn’t the only quick-thinking female character; Kasim’s wife, too, hatches the plan with the tallow on the scales which leads to her discovering Ali Baba’s bags of coins. Ali Baba does steal from other thieves, but that nevertheless renders him a thief himself, rather than an honest man. Morgiana, however, despite committing murder, does so out of loyalty to her master, and she is rewarded with a husband and her freedom. Subscribe to get the latest posts sent to your email. Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. 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(The actual phrase differs depending on translation.) They entered, and the portal closes behind them. Ali Baba assumes they are hiding their goods in the cavern. After they leave the cavern, no longer saddled with their loot, the Captain uses the same words to close the portal before the band departs. Once they disappear, Ali Baba raids the cave himself, and discovers it packed wall to wall with valuables. He collects as much gold as his mules can carry, and brings it back home to his wife. It is enough wealth to last a lifetime.Ali Baba's wife borrows a scale from Cassim's wife to measure the gold before Ali Baba hides it, and the latter woman uses a trick (she puts wax on the scale to capture the gold) to determine what they are measuring. Cassim and his wife insist Ali Baba tell them of his secret, and he complies. Cassim sets out for the cavern himself, and is equally amazed. Unfortunately, he forgets the magic words, so is stuck inside the cavern. When the 40 thieves arrive again, they kill him, cut his body into quarters, and hang him up in the cave to scare anyone else who may trespass.Concerned when Cassim does not return, Ali Baba investigates to discover the corpse, which he takes home. He works with Cassim's wife - promising to marry her himself after a period of mourning - and Cassim's maid, Morgiana, to bury Cassim without drawing any attention to the situation. To this end, Morgiana blindfolds a cobbler named Baba Mustapha, and brings him to a non-descript room so he can sew Cassim's body back together without recognizing the house or family.Meanwhile, the thieves find the body missing, and realize someone else knows about the cave. The Captain dispatches one of them to infiltrate the town and listen for news of some strange deaths. That thief eventually meets Baba Mustapha, and learns that he had recently stitched up a body. The thief blindfolds the cobbler, who is able to reproduce his path to the house, which the thief then marks with white chalk so he can find it again with the rest of the band. Morgiana, however, spots the mark and senses that something is wrong. To foil the plan, she marks a handful of neighboring houses with chalk as well. When the thieves return to find they have been duped, the Captain kills the man who had found the house, and sends another thief to find it. A blind-folded Baba Mustapha again leads to Ali Baba's house, and the thief marks it this time with red chalk. However, Morgiana catches on and does the same thing to other houses. The robbers are confused again that night, and the Captain murders the second man before deciding to handle the task himself. He repeats the same process with Baba Mustapha, but this time memorizes the location himself rather than using chalk.Then he returns to the house disguised as an oil merchant in need of lodging for the night. The other thieves are hidden in oil jars carried by mules; only one jar actually has oil in it. They plan to sneak out once Ali Baba is asleep, and kill him.Once again, Morgiana is not fooled; when she goes out to borrow some oil, she discovers the men in the jars, and boils oil from the final jar, killing them with it. The Captain investigates later that night, and escapes before he can be killed.Morgiana tells Ali Baba what happened, and they bury the corpses. In gratitude, Ali Baba grants Morgiana her freedom. (In some versions, this does not happen until later.)The danger is not over yet, though; the captain wants revenge. He disguises himself as a merchant and befriends Ali Baba's son so that he is invited for dinner. Morgiana senses something fishy, and hatches a plan. She and another servant perform for the men; during her dance, she stabs him.When Ali Baba learns the truth, he is so grateful that he gives Morgiana his son's hand in marriage. Ali Baba is now the only living soul who knows the cave's secret words, so he passes it along only to his sons and they live happily in prosperity.AnalysisThis story was also added to the collection by Antoine Galland in the 18th century, and remains one of the most popular of the tales. It is widely retold, and frequently performed for children (with the more violent parts amended, of course). Many people do not realize the popular, lighthearted phrase "Open Sesame" comes from this story, and that it connects to a tale a lot more grave and violent than we may have expected. Regardless, though, "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" is undoubtedly a classic tale.Morgiana's role is the most interesting one to examine in this story. Socially, Morgiana is effectively invisible - she is not only a slave but also a woman. Women in these stories often cause messes through their foolishness; Morgiana, however, is the stark opposite. In fact, she is story's true hero, not only because of her cleverness but also because of her loyalty. She is strong, resourceful, and calm in the face of danger, performing all the clever feats we would expect a male hero to. Analyzed in the context of the frame story, the characterization provides an interesting comment on Scheherazade's mission. The narrative involves a woman earning respect through her natural abilities, in the same way Scheherazade wants to do for herself and her peers through her storytelling. Even more intriguing is the performative aspect of the story, almost cinematic in the way Morgiana integrates a sensual dance into the scheme that finally solves the story's central conflict. Scheherazade, too, is attempting to bring stasis to a troubling situation through art.On the other hand from Morgiana: Ali Baba, the namesake of this story, is an utter fool. His first minor slip comes in inadvertently allowing his brother and his wife to discover his possession of gold, which leads to the whole issue in the first place. (Of course, the story presents his flaw as trusting his wife, an interesting contradiction.) Worse, he is fooled twice by the robber captain, in two different disguises. Both times, Ali Baba ignorantly invites the impostor into his house, taking no precautions and completely missing the warning signs that Morgiana catches. She is left to clean up the messes he makes, and does so masterfully. Though we would expect Ali Baba to be our hero, he does not act in such a way, but is instead reliant on his slave's vigilance.This story, just like "Aladdin", offers a great example of the common Arabian Nights motif, whereby a poor man rises to riches by means of a lucky break. Ali Baba is simply in the right place at the right time to learn the thieves' secret; he discovers the riches because of fate, not because of anyone else's actions. This supports the idea that even the poorest of men can come across good fortune. Of course, the story then suggests that one must capitalize on that good fortune through vigilance and cleverness.Once again, we finish with a happy ending. It is interesting to note that Ali Baba is rewarded with prosperity and happiness for doing exactly what made the captain and the forty thieves reprehensible in the first place: stealing. Ali Baba consistently steals from the cave, and allows the greed of others to threaten his safety. At first, the story suggests he will suffer because of greed - but then cleverness saves the day.An interesting parallel can be drawn between Ali Baba and the robber captain: are they really that different? In this story, the line between hero and villain can become blurred if you look closely enough, or unless you realize you ought to be looking not at the male namesake but at the slave girl in the background.

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