

KAREN BLIXEN AND THE MYSTERY OF *ALBONDOCANI*  
by Susan Brantly

The significance of the word "Albondocani", the proposed title of Karen Blixen's ambitious unfinished work, has long been a mystery to critics. Robert Langbaum was hot on the trail when he suggested that it was derived from a Sultan Al-Bundukari in Burton's *The Supplemental Arabian Nights*, and subsequent critics had no better suggestion (Langbaum, 206n 1). In 1978, Frans Lasson cornered the culprit in Blixen's letters from Africa when he identified Albondocani as: "Et af kalifen Harun al Raschids navne, når han optrådte incognito" (Lasson, 265). In the proceedings for the 1985 Blixen conference held in Minneapolis, Ulla Albreck does the most thorough job of solving the mystery of Albondocani: Where does the word come from? and why has Blixen chosen it as the title for her elaborate unfinished work? Albreck succeeds in uncovering important evidence, such as discovering the existence of a story entitled "Albondukani" which has, for some reason, been excluded from many editions of *The Arabian Nights*. Although I am impressed by the information Albreck unearthed, I wish to take issue with the deductions she has made from her evidence.

Albreck's search for the source of *Albondocani* was triggered by a remark from Clara Svendsen:

How Karen Blixen happened to choose the name, "Albondocani", I have unfortunately forgotten, if I ever knew. In a spine-tingling tale by Balzac, "La grande Breteche", there is the line: "I pulled myself together by saying to myself: "Il bondo cani!"..." He is perhaps the same one (cited in Albreck, 163).

This sends Albreck into a thorough search through Balzac's works for uses of the term, all of which are equally cryptic. The trail, however, leads Albreck to Balzac's source, an opera by Boieldieu *Le Calife de Bagdad* from 1800, and to Boieldieu's source, the Caliph Haroun al Rachid in *The Arabian Nights*. By sheer determination, Albreck cleverly discovers the tale "Albondukani", omitted from many collections of *The Arabian Nights*, including the ones Blixen had in her library at Rungstedlund. Albreck considers which editions containing the story might have been

available to Blixen and posits the romantic deduction that perhaps the story was told to Blixen by Denys Finch-Hatton. Albreck concludes her endeavors with the comment: "One mystery remains: whether one ought to consider the opera "Le Calife de Bagdad" as Blixen's primary source; or whether one should consider the tale in the Burton-Smithers translation (perhaps as retold by Denys Finch-Hatton) as the real source" (170). Neither of these conclusions seems satisfying.

To begin with, I disagree with Albreck's identification of the Burton-Smithers translation as a presumed primary source for the tale "Albondukani" for two reasons. Firstly, Albreck prefers the English translation, because the publication dates of the Danish translations (Thisted 1852-1854 and Østrup 1927-28) do not mesh well with Blixen's biography and Østrup's rather late translation leaves out "Albondukani". Albreck has, however, overlooked a Danish edition in her survey of important Danish editions of *The Arabian Nights*. In 1895-96, Johannes Østrup gave out a reedited and annotated version of Valdemar Thisted's classic popular translation. The volume includes the tale "Albondukani", as well as an introduction including Østrup's commentary on his favorite figure, the Caliph Haroun al Rachid. Blixen would have been ten years old when the collection appeared, an impressionable age for the young Tanne.

Secondly, I disagree with Albreck's preference for an English primary source, because of the one reference Blixen makes to the term "Albondocani" apart from her discussions of her proposed novel. In a 1928 letter to her Aunt Bess from Africa, Blixen alludes to "Albondocanis Rigdomme" and she evidently does not feel the need to explain the reference to her Danish Aunt (Lasson, 155). This suggests to me that "Albondocani" was a figure familiar to Blixen's family back in Denmark.

Albreck's excitement over the fairly obscure references to "Il bondocani" that she has discovered in Balzac and Boieldieu's opera seems misplaced. From our perspective in the late 20th Century, we have lost sight of the immense popularity of *The Arabian Nights* in earlier ages and the great influence it has had on European letters. Muhsin Jassim Ali has written a book on the impact of *The Arabian Nights* on English literature where he states that when Hunt, Dickens or Morris peppered their works with cryptic allusions to *The Arabian Nights*, they did so with the confidence that their readers would recognize the references immediately (Ali, 3).

*The Arabian Nights* were first translated into a European language by Antoine Galland in 1704-17 (12 Vols.), and the French version was almost immediately translated into English. Galland's French translation tended to transpose difficult Arabian names into Italian forms, more familiar to a European audience. Thus, Galland is probably the ultimate source of the Italian-sounding term "Il bondocani", and any reader of the numerous editions based upon Galland, would also be familiar with the term. This is the common source for both Balzac and Boieldieu.

The tales of *The Arabian Nights* were a titillating and sometimes disturbing counterweight to the writers of the Age of Reason. A renewed interest in the tales around 1800, coincided with the birth of Romanticism and the Gothic. The last great era of popularity for the tales was the Victorian era. In Weimar in 1804, Schiller read *The Arabian Nights* to Goethe (Köhler, 32). E.T.A. Hoffmann alludes to them in the frame of the *Serapionsbrüder* (559). Young Dickens used to act out scenes from the tales and always impersonated the character of Haroun al Rachid (Ali, 55). Strindberg was well-acquainted with the tales and alludes to the Caliph in *A Dream Play* (59). This widespread popularity of the tales makes the narrowing down of a specific primary source in world literature for "Il bondocani" seem like a search for a needle in a haystack. I think it likely that Blixen had access to both the story "Albondukani" in Danish, and a body of references to "Il bondocani" in world literature. Her own spelling of the word – "Albondocani" – is a conflation of the two spellings.

I would like to point out one sure source, although perhaps not the ultimate source, of Blixen's fascination with "Il bondocani". In *Ivanhoe*, a disguised Richard the Lionhearted has an amusing encounter with Friar Tuck in his abode as a hermit in the woods. In Walter Scott's introduction to the novel, he discusses the inspiration for this motif:

The general tone of the story belongs to all ranks and all countries, which emulate each other in describing the rambles of a disguised sovereign, who, going in search of information or amusement into the lower ranks of life, meets with adventure diverting to the reader or hearer, from the contrast betwixt the monarch's outward appearance and his real character. The Eastern tale-teller has for his theme the disguised expeditions of Haroun Alrachid with his faithful attendants, Mesrou and Giafar,

through the midnight streets of Bagdad; and Scottish tradition dwells upon the similar exploits of James V, distinguished during such excursions by the travelling name of the Goodman of Ballengeigh, as the Commander of the Faithful, when he desired to be incognito, was known by that of Il bondocani (*Ivanhoe*, 6-7).

In the same introduction, Scott makes direct reference to Galland's translation of *The Arabian Nights*. Scott wrote of James V of Scotland and his penchant for masquerade in his epic poem "The Lady of the Lake", the notes of which contain another reference to "Il bondocani" (179nQ). In that poem, James V, in disguise, becomes involved in a love rectangle, and he ultimately straightens out all the intrigue when he reveals his true identity. Blixen was a great fan of Walter Scott. Her essay, "On Mottoes of My Life", tells of how her governesses called upon her to translate "The Lady of the Lake" into Danish verse, "passages of which were frequently on the lips of my sisters and myself years later" (*Daguerreotypes*, 4). I would like to suggest that Scott is perhaps a more likely source than either Balzac or Boieldieu for the mysterious word "Albondocani", which seems to have been well understood by Blixen's family.

Now that I have proposed a solution to the mystery of "Where did 'Albondocani' come from?", I would like to address the more speculative mystery: "Why did Blixen chose the term as the title for her novel?" Albreck draws a connection between the "Albondocani" motif and the themes in Blixen's authorship of leading a double life and of "an irresistible power glimpsed in an apparently negligible presence" (169). Both of these proposals are tremendously suggestive, but Albreck's attempts to apply these two themes to the existing tales from *Albondocani* seems to stretch the point at times. I would like to elaborate upon Albreck's observations, and perhaps add a few points of my own.

First, I would like to examine the narrative structure of *The Arabian Nights'* tale "Albondukani". The story consists of three interlocking tales, a narrative structure not uncommon in *The Arabian Nights*. Whenever Blixen spoke of her ambitions for her novel, *Albondocani*, she described it as one hundred, two hundred or as many as 1001 separate, but connected tales (see Glienke, 250; Langbaum, 44; and Thurman, 363). The story of how the Caliph in disguise discovers and marries a beggar who proves to be an impoverished princess, flows into a tale of how this

princess comes under the threat of death because the Caliph believes she has allowed one of the Caliph's chamberlains to see her face, which in turn leads to the comic heart of "Albondukani". In disguise, the Caliph proposes to marry a young girl in straightend circumstances, and her mother is convinced that the Caliph must be a great bandit, because every time his name, Albondukani, is mentioned, sheiks and chiefs of police shake with fear and rush to do his bidding. The series of tales is resolved when we learn that the Caliph's suspicious mother-in-law is also the mother of the doomed chamberlain who is suspected or having viewed the Caliph's other wife. This twist of fate inspires the Caliph to pardon both his wife and the chamberlain.

Such surprises of rate are not foreign to Blixen. The series of revelations at the end of "The Roads Round Pisa" come readily to mind, for example. In both "Roads Round Pisa" and "Albondukani", God or Fate proves to have a greater imagination than the characters who believe they are manipulating the divine story. The notion of the divine story is described by Cardinal Salviatari in "The Cardinal's First Tale" of the *Albondocani* group: "The divine art is the story. In the beginning was the story. At the end, we will be privileged to view, and review, it – and that is what is named the day of judgement" (*Last Tales* 24). Life is an infinitely complicated network of interlocking stories. Thus, it is possible that the term "Albondocani" points to a narrative structure that reflects Blixen's aesthetic cosmos.

The tale "Albondukani" is specially characterized by the theme of confused identity, a theme familiar to readers of Blixen's tales. The Caliph recognizes quality in the beggar he takes as his wife. In hilarious fashion, the future mother-in-law mistakes the Caliph for a thief. The Caliph, however, has not recognized the old woman as the mother of a man he has condemned to death. When he does recognize her, he takes steps to bring about the happy ending of the tale. The theme of mistaken identity is closely tied to the motif that Albreck identifies as being central to *The Arabian Nights'* "Albondukani": "secret power hiding beneath an unremarkable outer form" (168). The name "Albondukani" works like a magic invocation upon the servants of the Caliph, because it reveals the presence of the hidden power. This motif of concealed power also seems related in my mind to the idea of the "Divine Child" as applied to Blixen's authorship by Aage Henriksen: the apparently weak child possesses

divine powers; the humble merchant is actually Haroun al Rashid, Prince of the Faithful.

For Walter Scott, the name "Il bondocani" was a code name for nobility masquerading as one of the common people. Although mistaken identities and masquerades are common fodder for Blixen, the specific motif of nobility moving about with commoners is present in both "A Consolatory Tale" and "Converse at Night in Copenhagen". According to Judith Thurman, a Prince Albondocani was to wander through the tales of *Albondocani* (363). Although such a figure does not survive in any of the extant tales from *Albondocani*, perhaps the original thought was that this Prince Albondocani would act as a *deus ex machina*, in the way that the Caliph does in *The Arabian Nights*. Albreck has noted that the puppet-master Pipistrello functions providentially in the trilogy of tales commencing with the "The Cloak" and, later, in the tale "Second Meeting" and that perhaps this is a vestige of the original notion of Prince Albondocani.

"Albondocani" is specifically the alias of the Caliph Haroun al Rashid. Something that Albreck does not do in her essay is examine the references to the Caliph in Blixen's works. Doing so enables us to glimpse what this figure meant to Blixen. When Blixen refers to "the riches of Albondocani" in her letter to Aunt Bess, it is in contradistinction to the efforts of Robinson Crusoe. Crusoe must achieve the simplest accomplishments of culture, such as a loaf of bread, through great effort. Albondocani's riches can erect palatial suites in a day, as is done in the tale "Albondokani". The achievements of Robinson Crusoe are limited by his wit and the strength of his hands. Because of the riches of Albondocani, the scope of the Caliph's deeds are limited only by his imagination. If Robinson Crusoe represents the power of man, Albondocani possesses omnipotence second only to Allah.

In "The Deluge at Norderney", a story about an elaborate masquerade, Malin Nat-og-Dag states: "Of all monarchs of whom I have ever heard, the one who came, to my mind, nearest to the true spirit of God was the Caliph Haroun of Bagdad, who, as you know, had a taste for disguise" (*Seven Gothic Tales* 25). In a similar vein, Blixen writes in *Out of Africa*: "Amongst the qualities that he [the native] will be looking for in a master or a doctor or in God, imagination, I believe, comes high up in the list. It may be on the strength of such taste, that the Caliph Haroun al Raschid

[sic] maintains, to the hearts of Africa and Arabia, his position as an ideal ruler; with him nobody knew what to expect next, and you did not know where you had him" (23). The notion of the Caliph's penchant for disguise as Albondocani and of his considerable imagination strikes once again at the heart of Blixen's cosmology. The Caliph is an imaginative artist of existence, and as such, Godlike.

Like Blixen's idea of God, the Caliph of *The Arabian Nights* loves a good joke. In "The story of Abu-L-Hasan the Wag, or the Sleeper Awakened", Haroun al Rachid, in the style of Holberg's Jeppe paa Bjerget, (1722), drugs Abu-L-Hasan and places him on his throne and commands his court to treat him as the Prince of the Faithful. Abu-L-Hasan behaves much like Jeppe, both as ruler and when he is returned to his former state. In a similar fashion, another artist of existence, Pellegrina of "The Dreamers", plays a well-intentioned joke on Pilot by making him believe he is the gallant rebel who has murdered the Curate of the Bishop of St. Gallen. There is no evidence that Pilot has actually committed the crime. He does not remember having done it, but is willing to believe it anyway.

The Caliph can get bored or depressed and when this happens he experiences "a contraction of the bosom" and the only cure is to "come forth to amuse himself among the people" (Lane 2:353). While in disguise, the Caliph corrects injustices, fools the foolish, and punishes the evil. In the inset story of "A Consolatory Tale", we meet Prince Nasrud-Din who "fancied for himself the role of the Caliph Haroun of Bagdad" (*Winter's Tales* 295). The Prince's attempts to emulate the Caliph by moving among the commoners are not terribly successful. Nasrud-Din is not the true Caliph and does not possess quite the same imagination and insight. He is deceived by his courtiers who manipulate his experiences among the commoners, like Potemkin erected his villages for Catherine the Great. Fath the beggar, a man of greater imagination and an artist at misdirection, finally reveals to Nasrud-Din the state of things.

A final reference to Haroun Rashid is made in *Shadows on the Grass*, when Blixen describes how Farah dressed magnificently as her escort after the bankruptcy: "and in these things he looked like the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid's own bodyguard. He followed me, very erect, at a distance of five feet, where I walked, in my old slacks and patched shoes,

up and down Nairobi streets" (*Shadows on the Grass* 46-47). In this passage, Blixen herself becomes the Caliph. Immense power strolling in shabby clothing, an image that could console her in the aftermath of her greatest loss. Blixen identified with the Caliph as an artist of existence. Her fictional alter-ego, Pellegrina, lives the life of a masquerading Haroun al Rashid with the help of the infinite riches of Marcus Coccoza, rather than the riches of Albondocani. Blixen herself drew on the riches of her own imagination.

How to solve the second part of our mystery: Why has Blixen chosen *Albondocani* as the title of her novel? I propose it is because "Albondocani" is a magic word that conjures forth the imagination of *The Arabian Nights* and strikes at the heart of Blixen's artistic cosmos: The world is an infinitely complex network of stories generated by an Artist/God. The artist of existence (the Caliph, Pellegrina, Blixen herself) may enhance the divine artwork with flare and imagination. But, as is demonstrated by the twist of fate in the tale "Albondukani", God, Fate, or Allah's imagination exceeds that of the mortal artist, who may pray along with Charlie Des-pard: "Almighty God, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are thy short stories higher than our short stories" (*Winters Tales* 25). *Albondocani* remained as the title of Blixen's work even after the thought of including a Prince Albondocani had faded away. It remains as an invocation of the power of imagination.

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