The Power of Form

The Power of Form

Recycling Myths

Edited by
Ana Raquel Fernandes,
José Pedro Serra
and Rui Carlos Fonseca

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

The Power of Form: Recycling Myths

Edited by Ana Raquel Fernandes, José Pedro Serra
and Rui Carlos Fonseca

This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-7194-X
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7194-5

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Although positivism dismissed myths as childish fancy, bound to be superseded by reason, there has been continuous reappraisal of the power of myths since the 19th century. Once viewed as primitive and unreliable accounts and an inadequate and distorted form of knowledge, myths came to be perceived as exemplary narratives, consisting of rich and complex symbolic constructs that carry meaning and a connection to reality. Myths then came to be regarded as a privileged expression of the human soul and of its possibly submerged and unconscious abysses and dramas. Rather than inherently obscure and elusive to a rational grasp, mythical narratives would therefore be driven by logical reasoning, giving shape to a particular worldview of life and humankind. The enduring power of mythical narrative is attested to by its very plasticity, subject to multiple recreations informed by changing concerns and insights. Mythical narratives have thus attracted the interest of various disciplines, from ethnology and history to philosophy, literature, sociology, politics, history of religions and art history. This interdisciplinary volume aims to study how myths are inscribed and recycled within our individual and collective heritage, and to examine the personal and political implications of our multifaceted engagement with myths as one of the forms through which we try to make sense of our perplexities.

"Voices in the Dark: Dreams, Confidences, Sisters" by Marina Warner opens the volume, taking the reader to an alluring epoch. A violent and misogynistic tale of women's treachery and lust forms the initial ground from which the labyrinthine involutions of the Arabian Nights unfurl. Shahrazad tells one story after another to her sister Dunyazad, while the Sultan listens in, till the dawn breaks. Many of her stories reprise the flourishing mythological motif that women are not to be trusted. Yet Shahrazad is speaking as a woman on behalf of the women who, like her, have been condemned to death: her tales are 'ransom tales', intended to save her life and the lives of all women. During the cycle, the stories gradually reveal a different picture, of complex interactions between men and women, of female courage and loyalty. The cycle is itself a revision: it speaks out against persistent myths about women's wiles and wickedness. The Sultan is a figure of tradition and conventional wisdom; he undergoes a metamorphosis through a brilliant recycling of myths by the voice of

critical imagination, embodied by Shahrazad: he is cured by stories told in the dark.

"Nordic Myths in William Morris' Work: Contextualization and Recontextualization" by Alessandro Zironi presents the reconstruction and use of Nordic material by Morris, whose love of Iceland and Nordic culture played a fundamental part in his poetry, ethics and political thinking from the end of the 1860s until his death in 1896. Such an extended period of time cannot be considered just an isolated part of William Morris's thought. From 1868 onwards, he translated many sagas from Old Icelandic, but also other material, namely the *Poetic Edda*. In this essay, special attention is paid to the lecture *Iceland, its Ancient Literature and Mythology*, which is strictly analyzed. This lecture can be considered a popularization of the Eddic poems and narratives for a public interested in the socialist construction of society. The mythological section of *Edda*, together with Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*, arose out of scholarly and romantic interests but became an instrument for political communication in the socialist milieu of Victorian Britain.

Carla Del Zotto's "From Asia to Scandinavia: the Myth of the Norse Gods Æsir" is a reflection on the two distinct families of gods presented in Norse mythology, the Æsir and the Vanir, who rule over different aspects of human life. Although the latter are supposedly more archaic than the former, as it may be inferred from a significant number of place names, the author shows that the Æsir appear to be the most important group, and that their name seems to include all the gods in the *Eddic* tradition. The etymon of Æsir may be linked with Old Norse *áss*, pole, Lat. *asser*, and a worship of *simulacra lignea* is widely attested to in the Viking Age, by both archaeological findings and vernacular literature. Conversely, at the beginning of the 13th century – more than two hundred years after Iceland's conversion to Christianity – the mythographer Snorri Sturluson elaborated upon the myth of the origins of the Æsir and their migration from Asia to Scandinavia. The scholarly Icelander derived the name of the wooden gods from Asia through pseudo-etymology, mistaking Æsir for a synonym of *Ásiámenn*, "men from Asia" or "Asians". Thus he was able to link the Scandinavian royal houses to the Trojan dynasties and historically support the legitimacy of the sovereignty of Nordic kingships.

Jordi Redondo and José Pedro Serra's essays revisit ancient Greek myths. The first one, entitled "Myths around the Dolphin in Greek Religion", deals with the image and function of the dolphin from two different and innovative perspectives, joining together philological analysis from a wide range of literary sources with archaeological evidence, collected all around the Mediterranean basin. This double

sample of data reveals a common pattern beginning in very ancient times, directly linked to Indo-European heritage and mixed with folktale traditions found throughout the Mediterranean area.

José Pedro Serra's essay focuses on Electra and the recreations made and inspired by Greek tragedians. Her myth has garnered special attention throughout the centuries, from the Greek tragic poets to more recent writers, playwrights, painters, musicians and sculptors, due to the endless artistic possibilities of this character. In "Electra, the Voice of Hades", the author analyses different kinds of works linked by the same mythological theme in order to show how the obsessed voice of Electra, in her desire for vengeance against her mother, has remained a disturbing form of expression, although a privileged one, in psychological dramas.

After the two essays on ancient Greek myths, Adelaide Meira Serras revisits the story of Adam and Eve in Paradise. In "A Paradise of One's Own", the author aims to highlight the many efforts of Enlightenment utopian authors to rediscover paradise, or to rebuild it. Despite their transient and imperfect nature, they tried to play the role of God, and render distinct visions of Eden, a kind of clustered myth containing the many blissful gardens they longed for.

In Maria de Jesus C. Relvas's "Myths (re)told in the iconography of Elizabeth I", the English Renaissance is at the fore. The author explains how it coincided with the reign of Elizabeth I and how the monarch soon became the iconic figure of that blooming, golden age, the inspirer of artists in general, and of writers in particular. Focusing on *The Phoenix Portrait* (*ca.* 1575) and *The Rainbow Portrait* (*ca*. 1600), this thought-provoking article aims to demonstrate how myths were told and retold in the emblematic iconography of a paradigmatic Queen.

Next comes Márcia Bessa Marques's enlightening article on William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress*. The author discusses Hogarth's work, focusing on the *Judgement of Paris* (plate 2 of the series). Indeed, the myth became a powerful tool for this artist to comment on 18th century English society.

"Recasting Myths in Contemporary Short Fiction: British and Portuguese Women Authors", by Ana Raquel Fernandes, takes the reader to the 20th century, analyzing specific narratives by A.S. Byatt, Jeanette Winterson, Ali Smith, Teolinda Gersão, Lídia Jorge and Hélia Correia. The author discusses the position these writers and their texts adopt in relation to dominant cultural myths, turning literature into an instrument for deconstructing restrictive female images.

Nicoletta Bruno's essay focuses on the poem *Dido and Aeneas* by the Russian Nobel Laureate, Iosif Brodskij. Bruno examines how the poem,

which concerns a mythological world, may also shed light on contemporary daily events. In this essay the tragic relationship between Dido and Aeneas plays a central role.

Similarly, in Mélanie White's article one learns that in Louis MacNeice's poetry, myth functions as a fundamental matrix through which the contemporary can be envisioned. The author analyzes two long poems, which take the form of journals; *Autumn Journal* (1939) and *Autumn Sequel* (1953), in order to examine MacNeice's thoughts on the value of myth.

"James Joyce, Myth Weaver", by Philip Keel Geheber, highlights one of the conflicts inherent in the Irish Literary Revival – the incorporation of myth in modern literature. Geheber examines Joyce's work, in particular *Dubliners* and the early genesis of *Finnegans Wake*, in order to question how the Irish Revival could forge a new, modern national culture while drawing on ancient myths, sagas and the history of Ireland.

New York plays a central role in "Biblical myths of the city in Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*". Fernanda Feneja explores how John Dos Passos plays with biblical narratives in *Manhattan Transfer* in order to construct an idea of the modern city. The biblical myths effectively contribute to disclosing and reinforcing possible readings of the novel.

Angélica Varandas's contribution concerns J.R.R. Tolkien's creative work, focusing on the tree as a paradigmatic element in his poetic world. As Varandas explains, Tolkien's rewriting of tree myths acquires a more profound dimension insofar as the tree becomes the very symbol of his own *ars poetica*, condensed in the essay *On Fairy Stories* and in the tale *Leaf by Niggle*, where myth is understood as a living literary story underlying a secondary world created by the power of language.

In the penultimate essay of this collection, Rita Queiroz de Barros offers us a brilliant reflection on the myth of the superiority of English. "Myths within English linguistics: (Portuguese) loanwords in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the myth of the superiority of English", as the title suggests, discusses the identification of loanwords in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and tries to explain the problems caused by a mythical image of English as a superior language.

The volume closes with Jan Nelis' essay entitled "Catholicism and the Italian fascist re-writing of history during the 1930s". It reflects on the myth of "Romanness", which portrays contemporary Italy and Rome as being the direct and privileged heirs of Roman antiquity, conceptualising that period as an ideal of force, greatness and virility. By dealing with this full-blown "myth of origin" shaped into Italian society and religion, the last chapter of *The Power of Form: Recycling Myths* joins together ancient

and more recent forms of “Romanness”, showing the vitality, timelessness and ever-changing power of myths.

CHAPTER ONE

VOICES IN THE DARK: DREAMS, CONFIDENCES, SISTERS

MARINA WARNER

Introduction

Through allegorical or figural forms of fantastic stories and myths, narrators, both actual and imaginary, have long exchanged confidences with one another about the darker recesses of experience. Women, old and young, are often the mouthpieces for reflections on aspects of forbidden, dangerous conduct, and their reports from the dark side issue warnings, advice, and prohibitions: they help their audience and the social groups that their story-telling is reaching to reason out customs and ethics. Shahrazad, for example, and intercalated tale-tellers within the overarching structure of the Arabian Nights, report on misfortunes, crimes, and survival – sometimes others' experiences, sometimes their own. Shaharazad never tells her own story, but she encloses in her narrative cycle many first hand witness statements, as Ovid and Apuleius do before her. Her stories are addressed to a primary audience of two, her younger sister Dunyazad on the one hand, and her husband Sultan Shahriar on the other; she is forestalling his plan to murder her with her stories. Among the myriad subjects *Nights* explores, incest, with its shifting boundaries and prohibitions, features as one of the principal areas of anxiety and impurity.

The word "incest" comes from *incasta*, unchaste, and I shall look briefly at incest in general, and then focus in particular on sibling incest, or love between brother and sister. My examples will be two stories from *Nights*: first, The First Dervish's Tale from the cycle of the Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad, and second, the story of Amjad and As'ad from the romance of Camar al Zaman and Badoura. I will set the theme in perspective by bringing into the picture the confusing mythology about

such unions at the beginning of human history. Much anxious fabulation accompanies the story of the original human family, and the incest necessary at the beginning between the children of Adam and Eve. I shall close with a remarkable new novel, *Habibi* (which means my darling or my sweet in Arabic), an epic work of graphic fiction by Craig Thompson published in 2012, in which he has uncannily reincarnated in a contemporary Middle East the storytelling task of Shahrazad in a story which also tests the boundaries of love – what is the definition of family, and what is incest?

Shahrazad's Way[1]

The Arabian Nights are told in the night by a woman in bed with her husband; her inspiration must not stop flowing or she will die. She must continue summoning up stories, or she – and others – will wake up to the reality the day brings. It is as if the dreamer must continue to dream, on our behalf. Our survival depends on the continued processes of her mind. Interestingly, Shahrazad does not make up the stories, as we are told clearly from the start that she is clever and learned and has never forgotten anything she has ever read. She has applied herself happily to philosophy, medicine, history and the fine arts, and she writes better poetry than the most famous poets of her time.[2] She has a library of a thousand books, and knows all the stories she tells from having read them.

Shahrazad isn't a creator or inventor – not a writer in that sense; she is shown to us as a performer, reciting material she has already committed to memory, and which she interprets and re-interprets as she goes on. The form of narrative which she communicates has a great deal structurally in common with a piece of music, open to varying interpretation, changing with every voice or player who takes it up.

I

Through all the twists and turns the Arabian Nights has undergone, the central theme remains and remains known to every hearer and every reader: Shahrazad has been sentenced to die in the morning by her husband Shahriar, the Sultan of the Indies, who, in revenge for the infidelity of his Sultana (he found her and all her handmaidens cavorting with slaves), has decided to marry a virgin every night and cut off her head

[1] All translations by Marina Warner unless specified otherwise.
[2] Galland, *Les Mille et une Nuit: contes arabes*, vol. I, 35.

in the morning. The Vizier is ordered to find the bride and then, in the morning, to take her away to die; candidates are running out, but his eldest daughter, Shahrazad, volunteers. He tries to dissuade her, telling her a threatening animal fable to point out her folly.[3] But she still insists. She asks if she may bring her younger sister Dunyazad with her to the palace, for she has a plan: on the fated first night, after she and the Sultan have made love, Dunyazad is to ask her sister for a story – a bedtime story – and Shahrazad will begin to tell her one, and will continue until dawn breaks, when 'speaking was no longer permitted', as the enigmatic refrain puts it. The Sultan, who has been listening in, will want to know how that story ends, will want to hear more stories like it, and will give Shahrazad more time, sending away the Vizier who arrives in the morning to take away the bride (his daughter) to the scaffold. In this way, she will be able to put off the day of her execution until the Sultan relents. Shahrazad plays the part of an Arabic Penelope, delaying her fate by weaving an endless tapestry of stories. She does not unpick her work, however, but lets it grow. From the vast store in her memory, she holds his curiosity, wins her reprieve and, through her heroic practice, vindicates her sex.[4]

"The night is for ourselves, but the day is for God," the Tunisian writer and film maker Nacer Khemir says, offering one way of explaining these mysterious arrangements.[5] Profane stories can only continue in the privacy and darkness of night, the time and place of dreams. There, Shahrazad can wind the vengeful ruler into an exchange of confidences between one young woman and another; he is placed in the position of the male eavesdropper on their women's knowledge, tantalized into discovering more about the greater complexities and subtleties of human psychology – male as well as female – in response to the vicissitudes of fate.

Yet, in the Arabian Nights, many of the stories Shahrazad tells reiterate the frame story's message that women are not to be trusted. Women's wiles (Arabic has a word for this danger – *makr*) know no end – or do they? So there is a paradox here, with the voice of Shahrazad apparently

[3] "The Story of the Donkey, the Ox, and the Labourer." *Les Mille et une Nuits*, vol. I, 12-13.
[4] Ghazoul 18.
[5] Private communication with Nacer Khemir (Abu Dhabi, December 2009). In 1982 and 1985, Khemir performed *Les Mille et une Nuits* at the Théâtre National de Chaillot, Paris, directed by Antoine Vitez; he has since written and directed a trilogy of films inspired by Arabic legends and mysticism: *Les Baliseurs du Desert* (1984); *Le Collier de la colombe* (1991), and *Bab'Aziz: Le Prince qui Contemplait son Ame* (2005).

collusive with the dark thoughts of the Sultan and many others in the stories – at first.

For the Sultan is not alone in his plight: his brother Shahzenan, the Sultan of Great Tartary, has also found his wife in flagrante with a black slave from the kitchens. The insult to his honour struck a deeper wound than a blow to his heart. Instantly, with one stroke of his scimitar, he cut off both the lovers' heads and threw their bodies out of the window. He then quit his country and his throne in his misery and set out on his travels. Visiting his brother, Shahriar, the Sultan of the Indies, he comes across by chance even more riotous disorder in his harem; this accidental discovery has wonderfully rallied Shahzenan's spirits.

The two brother-widowers commiserate and complain together and set out to roam the world, abandoning fame and fortune, to live quiet lives of sorrow in obscurity. However, settling down in a meadow by the shore, they see a huge jinn materialise out of the sea like a waterspout. He is carrying a glass box on his head, locked with four padlocks, and when he puts it down and opens it, a beautiful young woman is revealed inside. The two kings hide in terror, climbing up a tree; they overhear him saying that he stole her on her wedding day and made her his wife. She settles his massive head in her lap, and as soon as he falls asleep, extricates herself and solicits the two kings, whom she has spied in their hiding place. She demands they make love to her, or she will wake her master. When they give in, she takes a ring from them each in trophy and adds them to the string of 98 she has already won. Her lust and treachery reinforce the brothers' opinion of the wicked *makr* of the female sex, and Shahriar's vengeance – his serial marriages and murders – merely mirrors what women do if given the chance (*Cosi fan tutte*).

Although the narrator of this frame story allows no chink of doubt as to the truth of the brothers' experiences, it is possible that the Sultan and his brother have gone down into that dark rage that Shakespeare later dramatized in *Othello* and in *The Winter's Tale* when Leontes also becomes possessed by demons of jealousy. It is Shahrazad's role in Nights to clear this anger and remove the rationale for the men's hatred. Her stories gradually introduce maltreated wives, subjugated daughters, faithful female lovers, clever and courageous slave girls, courageous loving mothers, intelligent teachers and loyal sisters in an increasingly shining procession of women. They eclipse the witches, adulteresses and evil sisters with whom they often have to contend, and they also reflect, with cunning and high spirits, the virtues of the storyteller herself and her audience – but not so undilutedly or obviously that her purpose shows too much.

Throughout, I hope to draw he reader's attention to the idea of literature as recitation, performance, and ritual: stories can be read silently on the page, but they record a scene in which words, spoken aloud, or sometimes chanted or sung, are warding off danger, a scene which returns, night after night, a repeated spell of propitiation. Like David soothing the maddened and furious Saul by playing on the harp, the verbal patterns of Shahrazad's stories calm the fury of the Sultan by calling his mind to the future, to a new day.

By the end, the reader, like the Sultan, can agree that she, and by implication all humans, deserve to live, be treated with mercy and justice, and that her stories should be inscribed in a book in letters of gold – the book we readers are holding in our hands, even if the letters are not always written in gold.

Within the stories-inside-stories, several tales dramatise other protagonists saved by storytelling. These "ransom tales", include the tales told within the two opening cycles, "The Merchant and the Genie" and "The Fisherman and the Genie", and many others in which the narrators subdue their enemies by fascination, like legendary snake charmers. Characters thrive on stories, and their accounts of their woes (for woes they most often are) nourish us, the listeners and readers who, like Shahriar, will be lifted from our misogynistic, sometimes misanthropic depression. Negativity will be overcome and unexpected possibilities will open up before us. For in the event none of the woes matter – in the classic happy ending, Shahrazad's sister Dunyazad marries Shahzenan, and Shahrazad herself presents Shahriar with the three children to whom she has given birth, unnoticed by her groom, during her three or so years under sentence of death. Of course this conclusion, in all its preposterous, cruel unlikelihood, accords with the fairytale conventions of the kind of stories Shahrazad herself knows and has been so busy spellbinding him with, and it still has the power to work its spell of release and contentment on the reader.

At the end of the Arabian Nights, according to some versions, Shahrazad's library is brought from the Vizier's house to the palace. So the stories have already been collected – the Arabian Nights we have been hearing are already in existence. Indeed now and then in the course of the book, we are shown the circumstances in which they are recorded, for example when Haroun el-Rashid, after hearing the tales in the house of Zobeide, orders them to be written in letters of gold and placed in the palace library. Haroun's orders are echoed by Sultan Shahriar, when he joyfully reprieves Shahrazad and tells the scribes to write down all her stories. However, as Abdelfattah Kilito points out, this command adds to

the dizzy circularity of the Nights: this copy will be a copy of something which already exists in the library that Shahrazad collected as a young, unmarried woman. Except for the story of Shahriar himself – that is the only one she has not told.[6]

But, as Levi Strauss said about myths, every time the myth is told, it is different, and Shahrazad performs the stories rather than reads them from an existing text. Even if she keeps to the letter of the story as already determined, her role resembles that of a singer, who makes every song different at every rendering, or a pianist, who does the same – the same musicians make different recordings of the same piece of music over and over again.

The prior existence of this vast body of stories adds to the oneiric quality of the whole: not exactly a collective unconscious, her library seems to stretch into infinity, an archive of all the stories. The 1001 in the book's title hints at infinity, and indeed the stories keep multiplying, planting the seeds of new, different stories, as well as multiple versions and translations. The utopian fantasy of the book includes the possibility that someone could act as the keeper of memories on this vast and labyrinthine scale, that someone like Shahrazad could fulfil the role described by the poet Derek Walcott: "Every collection of human beings gathered for a long time in one place codifies itself, arranges rules of conduct, and makes a calendar for its celebrations of harvest, of the shapes of the moon, with tribal melodies, and preserves its fables and its history in the archives of the shaman and the griot and the bard's memory."[7]

This is a hope of survival, too. A wager against history, a stand against entropy and a sighting of a small light in the general darkness. Ferial Ghazoul has remarked how the darkness of the Nights' original setting extends narrative circumstances into metaphor, from the time of their telling to the dark skin of the slave with whom his wife betrays him to the black rage that overcomes the Sultan – the background keeps flipping to the fore and back again.[8] In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, in which he revises many themes of the Nights, Marco Polo says to the Great Khan, "This is also the aim of my explorations: examining the traces of happiness still to be glimpsed, I gauge its short supply. If you want to know how much darkness there is around you, you must sharpen your eyes, peering at the faint lights in the distance."[9] His Marco Polo is an alter ego, a male writer and teller of tales standing in for Shahrazad, who also

[6] Kilito, *Dites-moi le songe* 67-70.
[7] Walcott 57-61.
[8] Ghazoul 26.
[9] Calvino 51.

tells her stories to the Sultan to pick out faint lights and dispel the thickest part of the darkness around him.

The immediate locale seems, however, to have proved a little too nocturnal for the first translators. Antoine Galland demonstrates 17th century decorum when he clarifies the arrangements: "The Sultan went to bed with Shahrazad upon an alcove raised very high, according to the custom of the monarchs of the east; and Dunyazad lay in a bed that was prepared for her near the foot of the alcove."[10] It is fanciful to imagine such high beds in the Middle East in any period, and the illustrations accompanying the Nights reveal the reasoning: embarrassment at the presence of the younger sister in the marriage chamber. In many of the illustrations of the Nights, Dunyazad is concealed behind the bed-curtains, and all three are fully dressed besides. Galland also introduces a small change, which to my knowledge has not previously been remarked upon, but which reveals how disturbing the setting was to European readers; he specifies that Dunyazad, as requested by her sister, wakes up Shahrazad before dawn so that she can continue her story and then stop when dawn breaks, not because they needed to get some sleep, like party-goers, but because the Sultan has to go to work. Again, Kilito has noticed a puzzling crux here: clearly Shahriar never sleeps.[11]

The Nights are not much concerned with being realistic, it is true, but the scene of Shahrazad's storytelling could not possibly involve an early morning call such as might take place in a boarding school or a monastery. The Arabic editions describe the three of them together all night long talking and listening till dawn – a much more recognisable situation (the two sisters are young women, after all) and a far more psychologically convincing way for the pair of them to beguile the Sultan than a wake-up call an hour or so before dawn, which would most assuredly strengthen his resolve to have this wife beheaded. The night-time scene, as originally set, fulfils a crucial atmospheric purpose: it blurs the boundary between waking and dreaming, and plunges the frame story into that intense, in-between state known as hypnagogic, where images appear in the mind's eye with hallucinatory vividness.

It is this state to which Caliban refers, yearningly, as he tells the shipwrecked crew in his famous lines about preternatural, poetic knowledge:

---

[10] *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* 17; *Les Mille et une Nuit: contes arabes*, vol. I, 44.

[11] Kilito, *Dites-moi le songe* 20.

> Be not afeared. The isle is full of noises
> Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
> Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
> Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
> That, if I then had waked after long sleep
> Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming
> The clouds methought would open and show riches
> Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
> I cried to dream again. (*The Tempest, Act III*)

Readers of Galland's first two volumes objected to the interruptions between Shahrazad and her sister that ritually open and close each night's episode, and he decided to suppress them in the subsequent instalments and allow each story to run freely to its end. Again, this editorialising threw more light onto the book, and with this, the dreamlike feeling of the bedroom faded.

The first French illustrators at least show the couple in bed together, although wide awake, bolt upright and far apart, as well as fully dressed; scores of later illustrators indulge the lascivious possibilities, but very rarely, as far as I can see, show the trio in the post-coital intimacy described in the book. In an illustration such as Kai Nielsen created for his l917 edition, Shahrazad kneels, a stark naked, diminutive and pearl-white suppliant nymph, at a distance on the floor below the dais on which the Sultan is enthroned; this stress on threat and hierarchy draws justified attention to Shahriar's disproportionate power, but loses the sense of the night voyage – the midsummer night's dream – that the two sisters embark on together with their adversary. Other artists follow suit, showing Shahrazad at the Sultan's feet in his throne room, on his balcony, on a sofa, etc. In the 19th century, harem conventions prevail and Shahrazad is a siren, coiled around him, the mood is teasing (foreplay rather than the aftermath, 'the lover's ordinary swoon') and this also lacks the feeling of conspiracy and initiation which the sisters' exchanges create. In such illustrated editions, Dunyazad is sidelined, often absent altogether.

When I was young I found the scene in the cruel Sultan's bedroom a picture of the world, and the two sisters' conspiracy, with Dunyazad urging her elder sister Shahrazad to tell her a story, seemed to me the clearest metaphor of love against death, expressed through the alliance of girls against men in power over them, and ultimately for imagination over experience.[12] That "dot dot dot" which intervenes between one break of

[12] The scene caused some prudish objections in its early renderings. In *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, the first English translation, Dunyazad wakes up Scheherazade before dawn to prompt the story: this timing avoids the embarrassing

day and the next night, that ellipsis which the French rightly call "points de suspension", contains all the excitement of an unknowable future that is nevertheless thrillingly and inevitably round the corner.

The power of stories to forge destinies has never been as memorably and sharply portrayed as it is in this cycle, in which the blade of the executioner's sword lies on the storyteller's neck: the Arabian Nights present a supreme case for storytelling, because Shahrazad wins her very life through her art. "Her stories are white magic", writes the novelist Naguib Mahfouz, speaking through the character of Shahriar, "They open up worlds that invite reflection."[13]

The opening story of the Nights, when the two brothers come upon the captive bride of the jinn and she seduces them both, inverts the ensuing storytelling scene in the Sultan's bedroom. Here, one woman who has sex with two men, brothers, one after the other, is depicted as an insatiable example of women's wickedness.

The ancient genre of exemplary literature, The Mirror for Princes, underlies the structure of the Nights with its long sequence of stories; like Kalila wa Dimna, the Arabic Aesop, the tales are full of fun, invention, worldly wisdom, knowing titivation, and they flourish on a vigorous spate of sheer entertaining inventiveness. But the idea that literature can teach a prince how to rule, or teach the listener how to behave, or enlighten the audience about the ways of the world and how to cope with them, remains at the heart of Shahrazad's enterprise. The preceptors lurking beneath the emblematic figures of Bidpai or Aesop are traditionally represented by trickster characters in their material, not by their princely or powerful partners such as the lion or the bear. These animal protagonists in fables reflect the ruler back to his face: he receives warnings thereby, and is

---

fact, evident in the sisters' original plan, that Dunyazad is waiting for her cue in the bedroom while the Sultan takes his pleasure with Shahrazad. Ros Ballaster focuses on women writers' uses of Oriental plots and characters to draw attention to their concerns, and argues strongly that the Oriental tale, as practiced by women writers such as Clara Reeve and Frances Sheridan, was used to convey an ideal of nation and forge a new community, open to female independence, and opposed to domestic and political tyranny. In the fiction of the 18th century, ranging from the work of the radicals Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft to the novels of the conservative Jane Austen, Ballaster identifies many pairs of sisters who, by colluding like Dunyazad and Shahrazad, manage to impress their alternative view of a new dispensation on to their fellow characters - and on their readers. See Ballaster, Ros. "Playing the Second String: The Role of Dunyazad in Eighteenth-century English Fiction." *Arabian Nights in Historical Perspective*. Eds. Saree Makdisi, and Felicity Nussbaum. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 83-102.

[13] Mahfouz 2.

shown his future. The wily creatures stand for his advisors, counterparts of the storyteller but often represented as unprincipled and devious. So the ethical process moves between characters and the moral emerges from their interactions. Likewise, in the Arabian Nights, when stories are told, the actors in the plots are often counterparts of the audience: Sultan Shahriar meets a multitude of other tyrants in the mirror of Shahrazad's stories. But with even sharper piquancy, the storytellers nested inside the stories-within-stories of the cycle are recounting experiences they have themselves suffered in the company of others who have committed similar follies or crimes; they also find themselves reflected, so that, as the saying goes, their astonishing tale, "if it could be written with a fine nib in the corner of the eye, would become a lesson for all who can hear it."[14]

Shahrazad echoes the actions of Esther in the Bible, in her role as advocate for her fellows; Esther speaks to another tyrant, Ahasurerus, to save her people, while Shahrazad acts on behalf of women. But does a threat lurk behind the ostensibly salvific purpose? Is there an implication, when Shahrazad pleads with her father to let her marry the Sultan, that if she fails, she will avenge her predecessors? Is she a Judith, too, who seduced Holofernes in order to assassinate him, the enemy of her people, the Jews?

A related tale, found in some recensions of the Nights, dramatizes a variant on the story: a king called Saba takes a virgin bride every week and kills her. No motive is given – he is a prototype serial killer, an ogre, a Bluebeard. He then marries Bilqis, daughter of his Vizier and a jinn, and does not realize that she is a jinniya; she turns the tables on the bloodthirsty king, and does away with him.[15] Solomon's messenger bird, the hoopoe, brings back news of this exploit when he reports that a great queen rules in the south; Bilqis is her name, and in these Middle Eastern legends, Jewish as well as Arab and Persian, she is the Queen of Sheba, her kingdom is Saba, and she has the suspect nether parts (ass's hooves, shaggy legs) of a non-human creature.[16] Mahfouz picks up on the ambiguity of a wife's relation with such a husband in his stories, *Arabian Nights & Days:* his heroine, Shahrazad, is unhappy. "Whenever he

[14] Kilito, *L'Oeil et l'aiguille* 105-107; Colla, "The Ladies and the Eye: Figure and Narrative in the Porter's Tale." Colla translates the sentence: "Mine is a tale that, if it were written in lessons at the corner of the eye, would be a needle for those who would consider – or, for those who would be pricked."
[15] "The Story of King Saba." *An Encyclopaedia of the Arabian Nights,* vol. I, 354.
[16] Warner 112.

(Shahriar) approaches me," she tells her father in despair, "I breathe the smell of blood."[17]

In the literature of the Middle East, "aja'ib" – meaning marvels, wonders, astonishment – describes a genre that ranges from fantastic travel yarns to metaphysical myths.[18] Alf Layla Wa Layla contains wonders of all kinds on this narrative spectrum, and aims to produce precisely that condition of "aja'ib" – astonishment – in the reader and listener. Dunyazad gives us our cue when she exclaims each dawn at the splendour of her sister's tale, and Shahrazad then counters that she knows another, even more astonishing. These exchanges between them, with the Sultan concurring with Dunyazad's desire to hear more, provide a musical refrain that cadences the flow. (Some of the early readers found it repetitious, and early translators dropped the interruption).

When someone in the Nights wants to convey how astonishing his – or her – story has been, they reach for an extreme image: "If you inscribed [this tale] with a needle in the corner of the eye, it would give matter for reflection to those who can understand its lesson."[19] The extended metaphor raises shivers as it searches out an area of ultimate sensitivity, but it also works with the symbolism of the eye as the organ of discernment, and a vehicle of power. The story earns its place among sacred, apotropaic texts and the ranks of amulets and talismans: like an Egyptian wadjet eye or the eye of Fatima inscribed with sacred formulae, it can protect against the evil eye.

Optics recur to form metaphors with different angles throughout the Nights; for example, Shahrazad's stories feature one-eyed men like the dervishes (whom we shall soon be hearing from) with a frequency that is certainly unlikely, sometimes even tending to the absurd. However, though the protagonists do not regain their full sight, the circumstances in which they became blind present a gamut of moral choices, from pure bad luck to conscious moral fault, on which the light of the stories plays to further the shahradean task of revealing human beings' multiple destinies.

The light of the stories gleams in the darkness of the bedchamber: metaphor dramatised and enacted in deeds; blindness leads to the

[17] Mahfouz 4.
[18] Mottahadeh 29-39.
[19] From the preamble to the "Tale of the Young Man" (the Prince of the Black Islands), *Les Mille et une Nuits*, vol. I, 54; also in preamble to "The First Calender's Tale" in "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Bagdad," *Les Mille et une Nuits*, vol. I, 82. Sometimes translated as "fine pen" not "needle." Miquel, "Préface" in Kilito, *L'Oeil et l'aiguille* 104-111.

catastrophes the stories capture; semi-blindness the state in which fate often leaves us – if we are lucky.

II. The Primal Elder's Curse

Prohibitions are the catalyst of myths and fairy tales: when Bluebeard singles out one key to a door, the only door in his many-chambered castle which must on no account be opened, his command points the drama in one direction only. Prohibitions are structural, too, and need not take verbal form, openly uttered. One of the deepest structural taboos in myths is founded in kinship regulation and definitions of incest proximity: Phaedra is not Hippolytus's mother, but the wife of his father, and the nurse helps persuade Phaedra that this relation allows her passion for her stepson, there being no bond of consanguinity between them. Incest regulations are drawn up differently in every society, on the bases of social and contractual affinity as well as blood relationships, and the interpretation of these varies from culture to culture, creating wide terrains for trespass and tension, and opening manifold possibilities of forbidden love, one of the inexhaustible topics of romance – and of stories everywhere. As the psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell explores in her book *Siblings* (2003), relationships between brothers and sisters are as intensely and passionately complicated as relationships between the generations, yet on the whole, the Oedipus complex has eclipsed inquiry into the forms of love and violence that possess siblings.[20]

This vagueness gives rise to a need for definition, and myths are there to help. Mythic stories explore the limits of the law, and they need to keep beating the bounds of the permitted and its correlative, the forbidden. An intrinsic part of their ethical function consists of the testing of rules, and bad behaviour, whether by gods or humans, helps define them.

The myth of creation posed a problem, as after the Fall, the children of Adam and Eve were still the only people on Earth so far, so brothers and sisters had to marry one another. Early Christian commentaries on Genesis finessed the tricky necessity of incest by suggesting that the firstborn, Cain, had a twin sister called Calmana, and the second son, Abel, his own twin called Delbora; Adam gives each brother the other's twin sister for a wife, thus cleverly uniting a twin (a clone) to a sibling (not a clone) and distributing as widely as possible the different genetic material available. Islamic theologians were less happy with this solution, and they excluded the progeny of Cain altogether, while Abel is thought to have been

[20] Mitchell, 47-58.

murdered before becoming a husband or a father; they then proposed that Seth, Adam and Eve's third son, and Japeth, their grandson, were given in marriage to houris from paradise, called Nazlah and Manzilah (foreshadowings of this myth can be detected in the cryptic allusion to the Nephilim, the sons of god who married the daughters of men, in Genesis 6:4).

Recycling myths is often spurred on by the need to solve a puzzle in a different way from our predecessors: if the early church fathers and Islamic scholars strike us now as naïve or absurdly literal-minded, the cause of their worries still give us pause. Child abuse, one of the widest and most acute anxieties of our time, a crime that is vigilantly policed and extremely prevalent nevertheless, frequently takes place between members of the same family, and much of that which takes the form of pornography and paedophilia is based on a displaced incestuous desire.

The tale of the First Dervish or Calender[21]

The first of my exemplary stories, The Tale of the First Dervish or Calender, recounts the misadventures of one of three mendicants; these three begging monks, or calenders, turn up at the sybaritic house of the Ladies of Bagdad, and are given hospitality by the mistress of the house (sometimes known as Zobeide), on condition they accept without protest or comment everything that takes places in front of them.

All three monks are blind in their right eye, and when they break the command of silence, as inevitably they do, they are each ordered to tell their story; each of these stories then describes how they became such strange cyclopes. Sandra Naddaf, the Arabist author of a brilliant critical study, *Arabesque*, explores in particular the cycle of the Porter; she draws attention to the tales' preoccupation with carnal knowledge, and with women's playful, improvisatory and poetic mastery of this field of inquiry.[22] She lingers on the unforgettable bathing scene, when the Porter and his three hostesses name their private parts, exhibiting the joyous exuberance of Arabic in this respect. The women proceed in a spirit of infinite jest that has an earnest significance at its heart: the freedom of women's language.

---

[21] "The History of the First Calender, a King's Son," *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* 80-86; "Histoire du premier Calender, fils de roi," Galland, *Les Mille et une Nuit*, vol. I, 136-144; "Histoire du premier calender," *Les Mille et une Nuits*, vol. I, 83-89.

[22] Naddaff, *Arabesque: narrative structure and the aesthetics of repetition in the 1001 nights*.

The house of the Ladies of Bagdad is a house where women are in command, and after their party – the splendid feasting and the delightful erotic bath – the calenders arrive, followed by the Caliph Harun al-Rashid, his Vizier Jafar, and his executioner, Masrur, all in disguise. A series of weird, bloody tableaux ensues, sadistic and ritualistic. The men think they can compel the women to explain the mysterious scenes which take place in the house – they are seven men against three women, after all – but their hostesses, finding the rules of hospitality flouted, demand instead that they explain themselves, and summon seven black slaves with sabres unsheathed. The erotic overtones deepen, and prepare the ground for the confessions that the dervishes are made to make.

The First Dervish's story is the shortest of the three, and it describes how he was the son of a king, but fell into utter wretchedness through a combination of folly, bad luck, and inadvertency. He has made mistakes, again and again, and each of them has proved irreparable. The most grave was his collusion with his first cousin, the son of his uncle; this young man and he were born on the same day, and so in some sense he felt him to be his twin, his double. One day, this cousin came to him with a mysterious, veiled woman, and plied him, the dervish relates, with much drink and food until he became putty in his hands and did not take stock of what he was doing. His cousin then led him to the cemetery, found a tomb, opened it, and once inside the chamber, lifted a stone slab which gave on to a flight of steps, descending into another chamber. His cousin gave him plaster and water, and told him to seal up the entrance after he and his mysterious female companion had gone down into the depths.

The first dervish complied. It was only on the following morning, when he woke up after his night of revels, that he realised what he had done. He rushed to the cemetery, but found that, among all the tombs, he could no longer identify the one in which he had immured his cousin and his paramour.

His horror at what he has done is interrupted by a coup d'etat: his father the king is deposed and murdered by his Vizier. The Vizier, the dervish tells the ladies, harboured an implacable grudge against the prince, for the grim reason that in his youth, during a hunting expedition, the young prince had shot wide and hit the Vizier in the left eye, In his triumphant new state as the usurping ruler, the Vizier confronts the young prince who mistakenly blinded him, and viciously takes revenge, gouging out the prince's eye. He then lets him go, as long as he never shows his face again in his forfeited kingdom.

The prince flees to his uncle, who he finds in despair at the unexplained disappearance of his son; the nephew reveals what has

happened, and in spite of the danger of re-entering the usurper's realm, he offers to take him to the cemetery to look for his son.

The one-eyed prince and his weeping uncle steal back together to the cemetery and this time, he is able to identify the tomb and they demolish it, break it open and find smoke curling out from the depths and an evil stench enveloping them. In ever mounting anxiety, they make their way down fifty steps, past huge supplies of delicacies and wine, until they reach the underground chamber where they find a bed, draped and curtained, and the lovers lying together intertwined, blackened and burned, fused into a single block of cinders.

At this, the prince's uncle bursts into wild lamentation, spits on the burned face of his son, slaps him with his slipper to dishonour him, and curses him to all damnation. For the mysterious veiled woman is none other than his daughter, his son's sister, whom his son has loved, he cries, with a criminal passion since they were children. He had reprimanded him, separated them, and done all he could to repress this forbidden passion, but the wicked girl loved her brother back with all her heart. The devil held sway over them both, inspiring him to create their secret hideaway, where they would live together forever. But the justice of high heaven fell upon them and visited on them in this existence the fire that would be theirs in an eternity of pain.

The prince finishes his sad story: after discovering the terrible fate of his cousins he decided, he says, to strip himself of all his worldly wealth and status and start a life of wandering as a dervish. In this guise he came upon his companions, the other two dervishes, and they proceeded to roam together.

It is their turn to tell their stories to the mistress of the house in Baghdad and her several sisters. Each of their tales opens a new and different territory of prohibited and fatal love: the Second Dervish brought about the murder of his lover, whom her lord and master, a terrifying jinn, tortured for her adultery before his eyes, while she steadfastly refused to betray him.

All three Dervishes relate their misfortunes, all cautionary romances, at the orders of the mistress of the house, to a mixed audience consisting of men who are guests of the women. The story sequence is placed inside the overarching cycle of Shahrazad's 1001 nights of storytelling, in which she is the narrator to an audience composed of her sister and the Sultan who has threatened to execute her. So the stories within stories are mise-en-abyme both architecturally – placed one inside the other – but also functionally; they mirror one another in their setting and purpose. They are

all of them ransom tales, told to figures who hold power of life and death over the teller, in order to change their mind and soften their hard hearts.

Many fairy tales and myths revolve around these tragic questions of incestuous unions, the most familiar of these being that of Phaedra. Phaedra has her counterparts, her sisters in love, in the Arabian Nights story of Amjad and Assad. Amjad and Assad are the children of the co-wives Badoura and Hayat al-Nufus respectively, in the long, famous romance of Camar al-Zaman and Princess Badoura.[23] One of the most remarkable and hilarious recognition scenes in the corpus of fairy tales leads to the final triumphant resolution: Camar is forced into bed by Badoura, who is in disguise as a man; he weeps and rails that he is not that way inclined, but is forced by her to continue. When he finally, reluctantly touches her sexually, he realises at last who she is.

However, before this Badoura, in disguise as the king, has married another Princess, Hayut al Nufus, who has agreed to keep her secret. When Badoura and Camar are reunited, Hayat is not put out at all, but expresses joy at the thought of becoming a co-wife to Camar.

After this happy ending, the polygamous romance takes a strange turn and darkens into a stern fable about criminal desire, heresy and treachery. The two princess-conspirators each have a son – Amjad and Assad – and when these boys grow up, each of Camar's two wives, while remaining the best of friends, fall in love with the other woman's son, Phaedra-style.

I shall not elaborate further; the twists in the plotting are too knotty to untangle here. But I will pause to say that the Nights contains many more stories which permute possible erotic conjunctions within the family every which way: in Nur-al-Din and Anis al-Jalis the hero seduces his father's beautiful new slave girl to the despair of his father. (This is a plot which I myself have used in my second novel, *The Skating Party*, though my direct inspiration was the story of Phoenix, Achilles' tutor in the *Iliad*.)

The beautiful and justly famous romance of Camar and Badoura performs a series of variations on doubling and twinning, one of the dominant motifs in cases of sibling incest, where the transgression involves mistaking something that is alike for something different, and consequently seeking to unite with someone too close to be permitted. The story keeps setting up different pairs of likenesses and then revealing the genealogical and moral subtleties that distinguish them; in this way the narratives are again elucidating the boundaries of lawful behaviour. At the beginning, Badoura and Camar are one of a kind, each of them so

[23] "The Story of the Two Princes Amgrad and Assad," *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* 410-440; *Les Mille et une Nuits*, vol. I, 889-962.

beautiful they cannot be told apart; later, Amjad and Assad are so close and resemble each other so much that, at the age of seventeen, they seduce men and women alike by their charms; they too are joined at the hip, as it were, and "so attached were they to each other, they never left the other nor for an hour, not for a second, eating, drinking, and sleeping together..." Their mothers were crazy about them, covering them in embraces and kisses, which neither boy saw as anything dangerous, let alone criminal. (vol I, 890, *Pleaide*).

In the corpus of Western fairy tales, the story of Apollonius of Tyre relates how a king wants to marry his daughter, and she consents. Their crime is revisited by Shakespeare in *Pericles*, and returns, transmuted into romance, in the figure of Peau d'Ane or Donkeyskin in one of Perrault's first stories, which relates that in this case, the princess successfully flees her father's criminal offer of love, and in the happy ending, converts him into repenting of his ways. Alongside deliberate incest, stories of inadvertent incest also flourish in innumerable tales about foundlings who inspire unexplained stirrings of love in their lost parents or siblings and are usually recognised at the very last moment, before the love takes a wrong turn. This is the plot that Pirandello draws on with such a devastating sense of horror in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

In the Arabian Nights, stories about siblings in the tale of the First Dervish and the account of the mad love of Badoura and Hayat al Nufus and their children reflect the furiously detailed arguments of Islamic jurists about prohibited degrees of affinity, which create highly propitious conditions for terrible tales of doomed passion. Polygamous unions had to be regulated, along with the complex webs of family – the inter-related offspring that resulted from them led to a need for ever closer restrictions of who could marry whom. Fairy tales reflect the commitment of social rules to exogamy from the natal bloodline – not only through marriage, but also through foster kinship and elected affinities. Heroes and heroines form loving, all-or-nothing attachments in the Nights with adoptive siblings who then devote themselves to their wellbeing: Hasan of Basra, after he is rescued from drowning by the seven daughters of the King of the Blue Jinn, is befriended by the youngest jinniya; she sticks to him loyally through thick and thin, helping him win his beloved fairy wife. He reciprocates her love, but it remains brotherly. The story opens a space for male-female relations that are not based on blood ties or erotic desire. This kind of friendship presents a mirror for correct conduct as opposed to the wrongful, incestuous union.

Another set of entanglements in Islamic society developed from milk-relationships: children who shared a wet-nurse were also forbidden to fall

in love. This widening of the family to include foster-siblings of this kind corresponds to the earlier, extremely extensive and strict Catholic degrees of affinity, which forbade, for example, god-children marrying each other. The milk relationship depends on the vision of bodily mingling at a very intimate depth; one's flesh nourished by another's so the two parties become as close as relatives linked by blood, while the female milk is combined by analogy with male milk – semen.

The ties of god-siblings – the origin of the word gossip – depend on a less incarnational concept of affinity, one instituted by the waters of baptism poured in the presence of the same sponsor, or godparent. And it is the case that Christian canon law forbade all unions to the seventh degree, which takes the prohibition so far that it is astonishing anyone was allowed to marry at all.

Early Muslim authorities drew a clear line between Islamic customs and pre-Islamic in the matter of permitted marriages; one that had been allowed but became condemned was marriage to one's father's wife after his death – that is, to one's step-mother. Anthropologists see in the earlier form a trace of matriarchy, whereby status is held by the female and conferred on her spouse, so that a young man would come into his father's inheritance by stepping into his shoes – or rather, his bed.

From the point of view of the Arabian Nights, another pre-Islamic custom which was forbidden under Islamic law was marriage to two sisters. The commandments are presented, as usual in the *Qur'an*, from the male perspective: Sura 4 lists the prohibitions: "forbidden to you are your mothers and daughters, your sisters, your aunts… etc." and it ends, with absolute finality, "and that you should take to you two sisters together, unless it be a thing in the past."

Because of this deep malaise about siblings having sex with one another or one person having sex with a pair, or more, of siblings, the implications of the frame story of the Nights are already suspect, even tainted, and may account for the dubious light in which the book was seen, and remains seen in some orthodox, pious quarters of the Islamic world. Marriage to sisters was considered disgraceful, barbarous misconduct, in spite of avoiding the biological conditions of incest "in the strict sense of consanguineous union."[24] As Geert Jan Van Gelder continues to explain, "The main objection to such unions is social rather than biological: the former (marrying one's stepmother) could easily be seen as disrespectful towards the father, the second is supposed to lead to rivalry between

[24] Gelder 80-81.

siblings, and both forms, if productive, will result in odd degrees of kinship, but not necessarily in inbreeding and its concomitant dangers."[25]

Marriages between step-parents and children, between aunt and nephew, uncle and niece, or a father with a foster-child or illegitimate offspring, as well as all cross-generational unions with grand-children, were imagined and analysed with the tools of jurisprudence and divinely inspired wisdom by generations of theologians, sometimes deploying depths of sophistry.

One of the rare institutions that have approved such unions is the American religion of Mormonism. The practice still generally provokes a strong sense of unease and even horror. It was condemned in the United States, although it persists; there have been notorious cases in which the polygamous patriarch, living as husband to several sisters, has been arrested and jailed. However, while polygamy and related practices have been banned, several other restrictions on unions have been lifted, it seems, by common consent, without much discussion or legal manoeuvres; for example, Woody Allen raised eyebrows when he married one of his foster-daughters, adopted by his former wife Mia Farrow, but the union was approved in law.

Juliet Mitchell comments on the weakening of taboos in the West, where tangles of siblings at different degrees of closeness result from divorce and remarriages: step-brothers and sisters are not related by blood, for example, though they can be raised intimately together.

The potentially scandalous aspect of the night-time scene that encloses and structures the whole of the Arabian Nights arises from the sisters apparently sharing the Sultan's bedroom. The coy evasions of European translators and illustrators have been countered by rather less circumspect fantasies: in a recent novel, called *Whatever Gets You Through the Night*, the poet Andrei Codrescu re-imagines the scene in a highly charged erotic light, with Dunyazad the little sister as the Sultan's bedfellow, pleasuring his jaded appetites with her kittenish ways, while Shahrazad, the learned older sister, works hard at her clerical task.[26] Codrescu has annotated his recycling of the Nights with plentiful marginalia, clasping the body of his ironic text in a dense midrash of further tongue-in-cheek sallies against his predecessors in the business of retelling the Nights. In a vast note, which curls over two double-page spreads, Codescru lambasts the editor and translator Husain Haddawy for entirely missing the point – the scabrous, salacious, mischievous and deep point of it all:

[25] Gelder 80-81; see also Héritier, *Two Sisters and Their Mother*.
[26] Codrescu 80-81.