

*Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy*

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***One Thousand and One Nights Revisited: the female Aladdin in A. S. Byatt's  
“The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”***

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**Abstract** | A. S. Byatt’s story is about a female narratologist who is going through a midlife crisis sparked by the fact that her husband has left her for a much younger woman. However, from storyteller in a conference in Turkey she will become the heroine of an Arabian wonder tale of her own, complete with a djinn (genie) in a nightingale's eye (a Venetian glass bottle) that will grant her three wishes. Narratologist Gillian Perholt is thus a female Aladdin who rewrites her male predecessor’s story by asking for quite different things and partly Scheherazade as she tells and explains tales, but she is also a real woman. Both ancient and modern, spiced with references from *A Thousand and One Nights*, “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” captures the texture of the Arabian story while creating a whole new world in which a woman rewrites her own life by reinterpreting the literary models that predate her. In this paper, I argue this wonder tale explores both the limitations in women’s lives and the way to overcome them by insisting on female autonomy, on the one hand, and learning through storytelling, on the other.

**Keywords** | *The One Thousand and One Nights*; Aladdin; realism; wonder tale; Patient Griselda



**Resumo** | O conto de A. S. Byatt foca-se numa narratologista que atravessa uma crise de meia-idade despoletada pelo facto de o marido a ter trocado por uma mulher muito

mais jovem. Contudo, de contadora de histórias numa conferência na Turquia, Gillian Perholt tornar-se-á a heroína da sua própria história d'*As Mil e Uma Noites*, a que não falta um génio encarcerado numa garrafa de vidro de Murano que lhe concederá três desejos. Gillian Perholt é, deste modo, um Aladino feminino que reescreve a história do seu antecessor masculino ao pedir desejos marcadamente diferentes e, em parte, uma Scheherazade que conta e explica histórias, mas é também uma mulher real. Antigo e moderno, salpicado de referências a *As Mil e Uma Noites*, o conto de Byatt captura a textura dos contos árabes enquanto cria todo um mundo novo no qual uma mulher reescreve a sua própria vida ao reinterpretar os modelos literários que a antecedem. Neste artigo, discuto o modo como este conto explora quer as limitações na vida das mulheres quer o modo de ultrapassá-las, insistindo na autonomia feminina, por um lado, e na aprendizagem por meio do contar de histórias, por outro.

**Palavras-chave** | *As Mil e Uma Noites*; Aladino; realismo; conto maravilhoso; Griselda



A. S. Byatt has acknowledged that her impulse to write came “from years of reading myths and fairy tales under the bedclothes, from the delights and freedoms and terrors of worlds and creatures that never existed” (Byatt, “Fairy Stories” n. pag.). Unsurprisingly, Byatt’s lifelong fascination with the enchanted realm of wonder tales<sup>1</sup> is embedded in her work. To provide some examples, in her critical capacity she has devoted three out of the seven chapters, which comprise her essay collection *On Histories and Stories*, to chartering the lands of wonder from *The Thousand and One Nights* (which, incidentally, occupies a whole chapter) and Boccaccio’s *Decameron* to the Grimms and Andersen, Italo Calvino and Karen Blixen. Byatt has also authored the introduction to Maria Tatar’s *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* as well as the introduction to *The Arabian Nights*, a collection of tales taken from Richard Burton’s translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

“A thoughtful and articulate critic of her own work” (Franken xi), Byatt has written the essay “Fairy Stories: ‘The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye’” on her personal wanderings in Wonderland. While acknowledging that her wonder tales are written primarily for the pleasure of entering an imaginary world in which apples are greener and forest paths are darker than any encountered in real life, Byatt also

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term “wonder tale” to signify that the wonder element is always present in this type of tales even if the fairies are not. As Marina Warner argues, “The French *conte de fées* is usually translated as fairy tale, but the word *Wundermärchen* was adopted by the Romantics in Germany and the Russian folklorists to characterise the folk tale or fairy tale. It’s a useful term, it frees this kind of story from the miniaturised whimsy of fairyland to breathe the wilder air of the marvellous” (5).

emphasises the fact that, being modern literary stories, they self-consciously play with a postmodern (re)creation of old forms in what she terms “telling a story in a new-old form” (“Fairy Stories” n. pag.). In her chapter “Realism and its Discontents: *The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life*”, Alexa Alfer argues that “telling a story in a new-old form” is a curious symbiosis of tradition and change, (old) realism and (new) experiment, storytelling and critical thought, which unfold its full potential within Byatt’s fiction, since these productive relationships have accounted for the continuation as well as the challenge to the traditions Byatt’s work engages in (Alfer 48). In the wider context of the contemporary literary wonder tale, Byatt belongs in what the editor of *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* has christened as “the Angela Carter generation, in that Carter’s extensive work on the tradition of the fairy tale – as author, editor and critic – was pre-eminently influential in establishing a late-twentieth-century conception of the tales, the influence of which has continued into the new millennium” (Benson 3). Carter’s “modernized fairy tales”, which play with “the appropriation, recycling and combining of often antithetical literary forms” (Gamble 20), have paved the way for the contemporary, often feminist and/or postmodern<sup>2</sup>, revision of the genre. Its most distinctive staple has been the critique of the gendered (male) power/(female) powerlessness politics that pervade traditional wonder tales via the construction of female characters who challenge and even evade these dynamics.

Nevertheless, both Carter and Byatt refuse the simplistic formulation of feminist wonder tale as a mere reversal of roles in which the heroine changes from passive to active agent, becoming the rescuer rather than the one who is rescued. They use different narrative strategies, though: Carter’s transgressive heroines radically deconstruct politically correct visions of female propriety while they also “consistently refuse to occupy the moral high ground and behave as ‘politically correct’ feminist role models should” (Gamble 25). Therefore, Carter’s fiction is peopled by lascivious female vampires and libertines, girls who barter their bodies for money, and not-so-pure newly-weds who prefigure sexual liberty at its most (politically incorrect) excessive. By contrast, Byatt’s female characters are rather sedate: the fairies, princesses, lamias and *mélusines* who roam her fiction are less

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<sup>2</sup> In her reading of Angela Carter’s collection *The Bloody Chamber*, Sarah Gamble explains that “the rewriting of traditional tales with a feminist slant was becoming a fashionable endeavour during the 1970s and the 1980s, and, viewed in retrospect, *The Bloody Chamber* appeared to anticipate work published by writers such as Anne Sexton, Robin McKinley, Jane Yolen, and Tanith Lee” (25).

aggressively sexualised and eroticised since Byatt does not regard female sexual agency (transgressive or otherwise) as the main locus of female power. For her, true female power comes from the ability to remain a separate, autonomous being who will dedicate herself to her life's passion (which in Byatt usually entails a woman artist) even – especially – when falling in love. As Elizabeth Wanning Harries argues in “Myth, Fairy Tale, and Narrative in A.S. Byatt's Fiction”, “in Byatt's story [“The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye”] Gillian Perholt has moved beyond that [gendered] ‘imprisonment’, privileged not only because of her culture and class but also because of her prominence in her profession. Through the djinn's magical intervention she is even able to escape the confines of her aging body” (84).

In a 1990 interview with Nicholas Tredell, Byatt is quite incisive on the importance female autonomy assumes in her fiction when talking about Christabel LaMotte, *Possession's* Victorian heroine:

Christabel gives a cry which I think is my cry throughout the book: you [R. H. Ash] are taking away my autonomy, you're giving me something wonderful that I regard as secondary, my work is what matters: and nevertheless she falls heavily in love because she's a very powerful and passionate woman. (Tredell 60)

One of her most unforgettable princesses, Fiammarosa in “Cold”, echoes the same sentiment after she has made love to her desert-prince husband Sasan. After having discovered her true nature as an ice maiden and literally embracing her second skin of ice, at the height of passion she recoils from what she feels is melting, the dissolution of her identity:

Ordinary women melt, or believe themselves to be melting, to be running away like avalanches or rivers at the height of passion, and this, too, Fiammarosa experienced with a difference, as though her whole being was becoming liquid except for some central icicle, which was running with waterdrops that threatened to melt that too, to nothing. And at the height of bliss she desired to take the last step, to nothing, to nowhere, and the next moment cried out in fear of annihilation. (Byatt, “Cold” 156)

Unlike Carter, whose strongest heroines belong definitively to the realm of fantasy, Byatt's most remarkable wonder tale female characters border the crossroads of realism and fantasy and often even meet at what, in Byatt's fiction, constitute the

blurry boundaries between these narrative formats. As Byatt points out, her metafictional wonder tales do indeed “reflect on the nature of narrative, and of their own narrative in particular [because] narration is seen as the goal as well as the medium – the heroines tend to be narrators” (Byatt “Fairy Stories” n. pag.). Thus, like *Possession: A Romance*, Byatt’s “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” is set within the real(istic) realm of academia and is peopled both by literary critics who concern themselves with the analysis of traditional tales and authors whose main narrative interest is rewriting old motifs and myths. Like *Morpho Eugenia*, its narrator rewrites herself as a new fairy by using narrative as a way to avoid becoming invisible, especially to the male gaze, as she is “floating redundant” in the modern sense of being unwanted. Unlike *Possession* and *Morpho Eugenia*, “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” does not have a wonder tale narrative embedded within the wider realist frame tale that it clarifies.

In fact, this is a departure from these two modes of telling a story that I would call a hybrid – the realist wonder tale, a tale which, in Jane Campbell’s words, smoothly blends realistic and fairy-tale elements in such a way that “the lines between real and unreal simply disappear; wonder becomes naturalized, and language moves easily and often comically between the two realms” (*The Heliotropic Imagination*, 185). Both ancient and modern, spiced with references from *A Thousand and One Nights* and flavoured with Byatt’s own recurrent metafictional storytelling, “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” captures the texture of the Arabian story while creating a whole new world – since, according to Jack Zipes:

We do not simply inherit major works of art and treat them as models that we want to emulate. Rather, we periodically select works of art from the past and preserve them in new ways (sometimes critically, sometimes uncritically) because we believe that they continue to speak to our present habits, customs, needs, wishes and hopes. (*The Brothers Grimm* 51).

Part realist story, part wonder tale, this is indeed a tale that escapes categorization since Byatt rewrites an old tale in a new style by skilfully intertwining realism and fantasy. The opening line, which starts with the wonder tale formula “once upon a time”, is a perfect example of the way realism and wonder tale are blended in this story, which belongs “simultaneously to realism and fantasy by evoking the wonders of the familiar” (Campbell, “Forever Possibilities” 139):

Once upon a time, when men and women hurtled through the air on metal wings, when they wore webbed feet and walked on the bottom of the sea, learning the speech of whales and the songs of the dolphins, when pearly-fleshed and jewelled apparitions of Texan herdsmen and houris shimmered in the dusk of Nicaraguan hillsides, when folk in Norway and Tasmania in dead of winter could dream of fresh strawberries, dates, guavas and passion fruits and find them spread next morning on their tables, there was a woman who was largely irrelevant, and therefore happy. (Byatt, “Djinn” 95)

The magic carpet of the wonder tale universe blends in its realist equivalent the plane and technological advances, such as learning the language of sea mammals in their habitat or providing certain types of fruits at any given time to countries which do not grow them (by definition, relevant); these are juxtaposed to a woman who was irrelevant probably because she was not a scientist. The second paragraph introduces her in more detail: “Her business was storytelling, but she was no ingenious queen in fear of the shroud brought in with the dawn” (Byatt, “Djinn” 95). The unequivocal reference to Scheherazade<sup>3</sup>, the legendary queen of *The Thousand and One Nights* who is one of the strongest and cleverest heroines of all times in world fiction because she is able to delay her doom by putting herself between the king and his madness through storytelling, is enhanced a few lines afterwards through the allusion to gathering knowledge: “She was merely a narratologist, a being of secondary order, whose days were spent hunched in great libraries scrying, interpreting, decoding the fairy tales of childhood” (Byatt, “Djinn” 96). A true daughter of the times, Scheherazade was a remarkably learned scholar who excelled in the time-honoured pre-Islamic tradition of fighting with words rather than actions (Sallis 94), words she was quite familiar with because she had thoroughly studied them as *The Nights* detail:

[She] had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of by-gone men and things; indeed, it was said that she had collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers. She had perused the works of the poets

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<sup>3</sup> For further reading on the role of Scheherazade within *The Thousand and One Nights*, see A. S. Byatt, “The Greatest Story Ever Told” (*On Histories and Stories*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2000, 165-171); A. S. Byatt, “Introduction” (*The Thousand and One Nights*, trans. Richard Burton, New York, The Modern Library, 2004, xiii-xxii); Alexandra Cheira, “Madness and psychotherapy through the looking glass: Scheherazade’s talking cure”, *Rethinking Madness: Interdisciplinary & Multicultural Reflection*, eds. Gonzalo Araoz, Fátima Alves and Katrina Jaworski, Oxford, Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2012, 131-151); Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London, Tauris Paperbacks, 2010)

and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred. (Burton 16)

However, whereas Scheherazade is a powerful storyteller, by implication a being of primary order, the narratologist in “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” is branded a mere being of secondary order (Byatt, “Djinn” 96). The reader is not quite convinced, though, when (s)he learns this particular narratologist is called Gillian Perholt, a woman in her fifties whose family name “suggests the name of Charles Perrault, whose *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé* (...) contains some of the best-known European fairy tales” (Maack 124). How could someone who is likened to Scheherazade and named after Perrault possibly be a mere narratologist? It is because she is not:

Although she was now redundant as a woman, being neither wife [because her husband left her for a woman half her age], mother nor mistress she was by no means redundant as a narratologist but on the contrary, in demand everywhere. For this a time when women were privileged, when female narratologists had skills greatly revered, when there were pythonesses, abbesses and Sybils in the world of narratology, who revealed mysteries and kept watch at the boundaries of correctness. (Byatt, “Djinn” 103)

Power is thus restored to Gillian Perholt through her skills as a narratologist, which the allusion to a powerful female tradition of storytelling makes clear: the prophetess Sybil, for instance, is both a storyteller who derives her authority as a god’s medium, becoming a learning tool for her hearers, and the protagonist of the countless legends she has inspired. A Christian fantasy on a pagan presence of the past, the Sybil plays a decisive role in the thought over forbidden, forgotten or secret matters ever present in wonder tales. This seductive figuration stands in sharp contrast to the negative representation of women’s voice later embodied in the old wife, Charles Perrault’s Mother Goose or the wise Crone certain female narratologists in Gillian Perholt’s circle talked about with pleasurable awe (Byatt, “Djinn”104). However, the figure of the wise old woman, who authenticated folk wisdom in the stories she told while being synonymous with the unreliable crone who imparted false counsel, is adamantly rejected on the grounds of age and powerlessness by Gillian Perholt in quite unambiguous terms:

[S]he was no crone, she was an unprecedented being, a woman with porcelain-crowned teeth, laser-corrected vision, her own store of money, her own life and field of power, who flew, who slept in luxurious sheets around the world, who gazed out at the white fields under the sun by day and the brightly turning stars by night as she floated redundant. (Byatt, “Djinn” 104-105)

It is thus that this unprecedented being finds herself flying in a modern-day flying carpet – whose female flight attendant infuriatingly lets her out of with a condescending “Bye-bye, dear” after she has bowed to the businessmen aboard on their way out, signalling that her gender and age render her inferior to the younger, male businessmen – en route to a narratology conference in Ankara. The conference’s bustling proceedings are brought to life in all their academic splendour, including the paper delivered by Gillian Perholt’s Turkish friend Orhan Rifat, suggestively entitled “Powers and powerlessness: djinns and women in *The Arabian Nights*”. In that paper, Professor Rifat speaks of Scheherazade as:

a woman of infinite resource and sagacity ...who is nevertheless using cunning and manipulation from a position of total powerlessness with the sword of her fate hanging like the sword of Damocles by a metaphorical thread, the thread of her narrative, with her shroud daily prepared for her the next morning. (Byatt, “Djinn”124)

It is thus quite significant on several counts that Gillian Perholt should choose to narrate and comment on the tale of Patient Griselda, a story told by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* which is also the name of one of Charles Perrault’s wonder tales, to cover the conference’s topic “Stories of Women’s Lives”. In fact, this lengthy tale, narrated over no less than thirteen pages, embodies for Gillian Perholt the whole condition of women’s lives as depicted in fiction in stark contrast to seemingly powerless Scheherazade, “whose art is an endless beginning and delaying and ending and beginning and delaying and ending” (Byatt, “Djinn” 124) in her own terms.

According to Chaucer’s Clerk, Griselda’s tribulations are a moral lesson on bearing patiently what comes one’s way: Griselda submits to her husband’s sadistic idea of testing without a single word of reproach after she has uncomplainingly found herself torn from her children (who have furthermore, quite inexplicably, been put to death by their own father), has returned to her father with literally almost no stitch on and has been replaced by a younger woman. In fact, this single heroine could account

for the pervasive figuration of women as the angel in the house when it came to being portrayed in Victorian life and literature. However, not even the angel in the house was purposefully bereft of everything she held dear so that she could prove herself a worthy angel. Contemporary response to Griselda's tale would nevertheless certainly argue that the eponymous heroine's husband is really playing an elaborate sadomasochist game to which his wife is a willing victim, or has she not promised him that she would "obey him in everything, to do whatever he desired, without hesitating or repining, at every moment of the day or night" (Byatt, "Djinn" 110) on pain of death, in exchange for him marrying her? This promise in itself begged testing – and yet, it is a promise many women still make out of love, in their heart, every day, even in the Western world. As Gillian Perholt acknowledges,

our own response is surely outrage – at what was taken from [Griselda], the best part of her life, what could not be restored – at the energy stopped off. For the stories of women's lives in fiction are the stories of stopped energies – the stories of Fanny Price, Lucy Snowe, even Gwendolen Harleth, are the stories of Griselda. (Byatt, "Djinn" 121)

The story of Gillian Perholt has also so far been the story of Griselda to the extent she has let a man, her husband on the run, slow down her energy by behaving like a spoilt brat who wants to be caught red-handed. No more of the patient waiting game for Gillian Perholt though: when her husband finally leaves her, she unexpectedly braces herself with relief, as her own energy is now free to flow unhindered. As she puts it,

[she] imagined herself grieving over betrayal, the loss of love, the loss of companionship perhaps, of respect in the world, maybe, as an ageing woman rejected for one more youthful... She felt, she poetically put it to herself, like a prisoner bursting chains and coming blinking out of a dungeon. She felt like a bird confined in a box, like a gas confined in a bottle, that found an opening, and rushed out. She felt herself expand in the space of her own life. No more waiting for meals. No more grumbling, and jousting, no more exhausted anticipation of alien feelings, no more snoring, no more farts, no more trace of stubble in the washbasin. (Byatt, "Djinn" 103-104)

In short, there are no more impediments to her self-fulfilment as those depicted in this quite chilling portrait of marriage. The caged bird is more than ready to fly out, and fly out it will at the same time the narrative mode changes from realism

to fantasy: after she has toured Ankara, Ephesus and Istanbul in what is really her introduction to Eastern culture and prepares her for a magical encounter with a figure taken out of *The Thousand and One Nights* (Maack 127), Gillian visits the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, where she “felt well again, full of life and singing with joy (...) hidden away in an Aladdin’s cave made of magic carpets with small delightful human artefacts” (Byatt, “Djinn” 180). Afterwards, Gillian enters a little shop in the central square of the market-maze that is owned by one of Rifat’s students and finds “a very dusty bottle amongst an apparently unsorted pile of new/old things, (...) a flask with a high neck, that fitted comfortably into the palms of her hands, and had a glass stopper like a miniature dome” (Byatt, “Djinn” 182). The shop owner explains the flask might be nightingale’s eye, a famous Turkish glass with a spiral pattern of opaque blue and white stripes, and Gillian takes the flask with her to the hotel, where she washes it in the bathtub and rubs it clean. And now, lo and behold: just like it happened to Aladdin when he inadvertently rubbed his lamp, a huge djinn pops out of the bottle and gravely informs Gillian, in French, that he had been imprisoned since 1850. Given that she was the one to release him, she is entitled to three wishes.

The conversation which ensues is a delightful blend of realism and fantasy: while holding the hotel TV set in his gigantic hand, the djinn puzzles over the diminutive size of the tennis players whose match is being broadcast and decides to shrink accordingly so he is only one and a half times as large as she is. He then adds that the atmosphere is filled with presences he cannot understand, “electrical emanations of living beings” (Byatt, “Djinn” 196) only to ask as an afterthought if those men are magicians, or Gillian a witch, since they are enclosed in a box. She explains what a television is while the djinn catches an amazed Boris Becker mid-tennis match and puts him, twice the size of his television image, on the chest of drawers. The djinn puts him back on the match though when Gillian tells him she does not want the tennis player, who is moreover unaware of his surroundings as neither Gillian nor the djinn are manifest to him. Afterwards, the djinn tells Gillian she must wish for her heart’s desire, and she therefore wishes for her body to be as it was when she had last really liked it in an attempt to defeat temporal decay, although the djinn warns her that he will not be able to delay her fate: granting her immortality is not a wish he can comply with as death must also be faced in wonder tales. She may live more happily after, but she will die nonetheless as, unlike the djinn who is a being of fire and does not decay, she is made of dust and will return to it some day.

The last time she really liked her body turns out to be when she was thirty-five, so that is the body she will be presented with. Interestingly enough, before he grants her this wish, the djinn compliments Gillian on the body she has now, adding that amplitude is desirable and that he is glad she prefers ripe women to green girls although she is a little too thin for his own personal taste. I argue this passing remark has a two-fold purpose: on the one hand, it is Byatt's critique of a contemporary Western society whose ideal of female beauty is an anorexic pubescent girl (who, incidentally, quite resembles nineteenth-century female consumptives) much copied by adolescent would-be models with disastrous results both on their bodies and on their perception of beauty; on the other hand, it mediates the cultural differences between East and West in the conversation which ensues while Gillian ponders over her next wish.

Thus, in truly Arabian Night-esque fashion with regard to the description of sumptuous, sexually-charged surroundings where voluptuous women sensuously move, the djinn tells her about his three incarcerations inside the nightingale's eye, which have always implied strong, powerful women such as the Queen of Sheba, Suleiman the Magnificent's concubine Roxelana and Zefir – who have, nevertheless, lost their independence by falling in love. This marks an interesting gender inversion and a significant gendered shift of power with regard to the *Nights'* frame narrative, which details King Shahryar's betrayal by his wife, her death at his hands and his subsequent revenge on all his one-day wives finally cancelled by Scheherazade: in fact, in the djinn's story it becomes clear that it is the male element who is encapsulated in the nightingale's eye for three very large periods of time (a kind of death) at the hands of the three different women he loved before he is released by this unknown female Aladdin.

Sexual politics regarding infidelity were much the same at the time the *Nights* – a collection of Middle Eastern and South Asian stories and folk tales which were assembled over many centuries by various authors, translators and scholars across the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa – were translated into Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age (which comprised the eighth to the thirteenth century) and Chaucer's Griselda made her appearance in *The Canterbury Tales* (written at the end of the fourteenth century). The Middle Ages were indeed a dark period for women as they were totally dominated by the male members of their family and were expected to unquestioningly obey their father, their brothers or, for that matter, any other male

members of the family. Moreover, there was severe punishment for rebellious girls, who were beaten into submission since disobedience was seen as a crime against religion. During the same period of time, Eastern men – but not women – could be polygamous, so a polygamous wife was branded as an adulteress and punished accordingly. Quoting Sallis, “conceivably, in the world of the Nights, death is the worst thing a man can inflict upon a woman, while sexual betrayal is the worst thing a woman can inflict upon a man” (92-93).

In *Harun al-Rashid and the World of the Thousand and One Nights*, André Clot comments on the Islamic sexual politics that allows for male polygamy:

Islam is a polygamous society that encourages lovemaking: ‘O ye who believe! Interdict not the healthful viands which God hath allowed you’ (Koran, Sura V). ‘When you perform the act of love, you are giving alms’ (Hadith). ‘Sensual pleasure and desire are as beautiful as the mountains’ (Hadith, according to Zaid ibn Ali). There is considered nothing wrong, therefore, in a wife’s sending a beautiful woman to her husband’s bed. (45)

However, this double standard did not extend to civil rights such as education, employment or inheritance. According to Valentine Moghadam, the position of women depended much more on socio-political and living conditions such as urbanization, industrialization and political machinations of the state managers than it did on the culture or intrinsic properties of Islam. For him, Islam is neither more nor less patriarchal than other world religions such as Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism (Moghadam 5).

The fact is that, quite unlike their Western female counterparts at that time, Scheherazade’s female contemporaries lived in a society that did not curtail their rights with regard to education, employment and owning property on account of their gender. To illustrate how different Islamic society was with regard to their treatment of women at that time, I will provide a few examples. With regard to education, between the ninth and the twelfth century women were foremost in founding many Islamic educational institutions, such as the University of Al Karaouine, founded by Fatima al-Fihri in 859 CE (Lindsay 197). Thus, women could study, earn academic degrees and qualify as scholars or teachers, especially if they belonged to learned and scholarly families, who sought to provide the highest possible education for both their sons and daughters (Lindsay 196-198). As far as employment was concerned, women could be employed in such diverse occupations as farmers, spinners, doctors,

presidents of guilds, investors or scholars (Shatzmiller 350-401). As for money of their own, they were entitled to the right of inheritance as stated in the Quran, Sura 4 (Badawi n. pag.). Moreover, under Islamic law, the woman's consent was an unequivocal requisite before marriage could take place (Esposito & Yazbeck 79) and her dowry, previously regarded as a bride-price paid to the father, became a nuptial gift retained by the wife as part of her personal property (Esposito & Yazbeck 339). With regard to their domestic role, women reigned supreme at home, of which they held the same economic rights as their husbands, with regard to housewifely affairs, slaves and children, who were educated and guided in their religious faith, marriage and profession by their mothers (Zipes, "Splendor of Arabian Nights" 54-55). Finally, as far as women's skills and abilities were concerned, the famous Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd, born in Muslim Spain in the twelfth century and known to the West as Averroes, asserted that women possessed equal capacities to men which could make them stand out both at war and in peace, like the women warriors he presented as examples did among the Greeks, Arabs and Africans. He held such strong belief in this point that he claimed women were the equal of men (Ahmad) – an idea that, incidentally, is supported by the Quran, which in Sura 30 ascertains that men and women are equal but not identical in creation and in the afterlife, that one person is not superior to the other, and that a woman is not created for the purpose of a man, but that women and men are both created for the mutual benefit of each other.

Eastern women rights during the Middle Ages were thus quite unlike Patient Griselda's and her contemporaries'. The fact that these powerful Eastern women's stories are juxtaposed to meek Griselda is but another indication of the wrong assumptions that, in view of the more patriarchal contemporary Arab society, can be made about the powerlessness of Scheherazade's female contemporaries: in the figure of its famous storyteller, the *Nights* indeed depict a significant gendered shift of power to which, at the time of its writing, the Eastern construction of women as equal to men with regard to both mental capacities and their full use in private and public life is decisive.

The djinn then asks Gillian to tell him her story, and this female Aladdin – who will rewrite her male predecessor's story by asking for quite different things – turns into Scheherazade-mode as she tells the djinn contemporary tales of her world, which strike him as bizarre while they also help her sense of her world. That is how she comes to understand at last that she became "so enmeshed in what was realism

and what was reality and what was true [that her] imagination failed” (Byatt, “Djinn” 233). It is thus that the tale that posits Gillian as powerless Griselda is subtly changed into a tale about a powerful female narratologist, whose gifted storytelling is a primary source of strength, which also empowers her as a woman with the agency to change both her story and her own perceptions of the story that have been stopping her energies.

Maybe it is because her imagination has been vividly stirred by the djinn’s conjuration of a world of fiery passions that Gillian makes her second wish, that the djinn would love her. He obliges by making love to her in a scene rendered in the sensuous language of *The Thousand and One Nights*, but not before he tells her that maybe she has wasted her wish, “for it may well be that love would have happened anyway, since [they] are together, and sharing [their] life stories, as lovers do” (Byatt, “Djinn” 250). It really does seem so since the djinn is willing to accompany Gillian back to England so he better understands her world, although this is not her final wish: after a conference in Toronto, where she presented a paper subtitled “Wish-fulfilment and Narrative Fate: some aspects of wish-fulfilment as a narrative device”, she realises as she speaks that:

In fairy tales...those wishes that are granted and are not malign, or twisted towards destruction, tend to lead to a condition of beautiful stasis, more like a work of art than the drama of Fate. It is as though the fortunate had stepped off the hard road into an unchanging landscape where it is always spring and no winds blow. (Byatt, “Djinn” 266)

Falling in love with the djinn was not one of her wishes, but it has happened nonetheless, along with the realisation that it is precisely because she loves him that she has to let him go: unlike Griselda’s husband, who kept her in bondage because of the promise he forced her to make, Gillian refuses to become the master of the djinn’s fate, although he is similarly enslaved by the laws governing the wonder tale with regard to the granting of three wishes to his liberator. Thus, her final wish, despite her knowledge that the thing the djinn most desires is his freedom from servitude to the owner of the nightingale’s eye, is: “I wish... I wish you could have whatever you wish for – that this last wish may be your wish” (Byatt, “Djinn” 270). She knows he will go, although he reminds her that she also wished he would love her and he does, assuring her that he will return to her from time to time. The granting of this final

wish, as she discovers, will paradoxically lead her to that condition of beautiful stasis she has explained in her paper, which is quite the opposite of the stopped energies that result from love traps. In fact, she has vindicated Griselda when she changes her story by choosing a life of “forever possibilities and impossibilities” (Byatt, “Djinn” 272) rather than submitting to another’s choice. Her happy-ever-after is loving her body again, freeing her imagination from the strictures of realism, reality and truth and meeting the djinn some times upon a time.

Many feminist authors have used the wonder tale to explore feminine desires and dreams by rewriting several narratives pertaining to the literary tradition of the wonder tale so as to enable women to gain the power patriarchal society denied them by means of the creation of strong heroines. In some more extreme cases, Byatt argues, this particular mode of rewriting was carried out because it was believed all female protagonists in old tales were fragile victims and passive objects commanded by men; as she points out, this is nevertheless an inaccurate reading of the old narratives as the literary tradition of the wonder tale is also full of powerful princesses and resourceful peasants she will emulate in her own fiction. Byatt thus capitalises on several teachings in her writing, namely the unveiled criticism evinced in women’s tales ever since the seventeenth century as well as the utopian tradition of the English wonder tale in the nineteenth century, which questioned the Victorian *status quo*. In Byatt’s tales, things are not what they seem though: if it can be said that her female Aladdin’s transformation depends mainly on the realization that loving someone does not mean not loving yourself, it is also true that this is a political act which subverts gender in order to subject the genre to feminist revision.



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