

## ***The Nights'* Singer of Tales: Performing Tradition in the Story of the King of China's Hunchback.<sup>1</sup>**

By Zaid Mahir

No one denies the oral traditional roots of *The Arabian Nights*, but efforts to read it as a work of *verbal art* drawing for its vigor and vitality upon the oral tradition of the Arab-Muslim world are scanty. The aim of this essay is to read *The Nights* into the perspective of oral tradition theory, as an academic discipline. The theoretical approach is Richard Bauman's Oral Performance framework, one of the three major theoretical approaches to the study of oral traditions. The 'text' chosen for the application is the "Story of the King of China's Hunchback," which is recounted over sixty-nine nights and occupies 15% of the Arabic edition of *The Nights*. I am using Muhsin Mahdi's Brill edition of the earliest Arabic manuscript known which, as Mahdi informs us, is the same manuscript that was first introduced to Europe by Antoine Galland in a French translation in the early eighteenth century. Although entitled, *Alf Layla wa-Layla* [The Thousand and One Nights], this edition has thirty-five and a half stories, narrated over 282 nights, no more. Muhsin Mahdi keeps the original manuscript, which is maintained in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, intact and free of 'decorous' intervention. Apart from filling in a small number of gaps, some of which resulted from damage to or poor maintenance of the papers of the manuscript, Mahdi refrains from redaction, elaboration, interpolation, or any such intervention that traditional editors made in their endeavor to produce a 'readable text.' His act of gap-filling is therefore limited to providing missing phrases and words that already exist in other parts of the tales, or that more commonly occur in other later verifiable manuscripts than less common phrases, clauses, and words. Equally important is the fact that Mahdi's gap-filling words and phrases do not pretend, or even try, to meet conventional grammatical and linguistic standards of 'correct' phraseology, sentence-construction, or diction.

### **A Brief Reminder of Bauman's Performance Framework**

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<sup>1</sup> This research is part of an MA thesis, written under the advice of Professor John Foley at the University of Missouri-Columbia and defended and passed in 2006. I thank him for open-mindedly advising it.

Performance is culture-bound; it creates expectations among, and draws response from, members of a community engaged in watching and listening to a performance. In *Verbal Art As Performance* (1984), Richard Bauman offers us a conceptual frame of reference in performance theory. His conception is based upon understanding performance as a mode of speaking, that is, “as a species of situated human communication” where “the formal manipulation of linguistic features” no longer maintains priority as it does in text-oriented utterance (8). Deviation from normality in linguistic usage is, according to Bauman, an assertion that verbal art as performance does in fact involve “transformation of the basic referential...uses of language” to suit situated communication. Artistic performance thus carries a message to its audience, requiring them to interpret what they see/hear in a special way: “do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey” (9). The conclusion that Bauman draws here is the implication that performance develops along its lines an interpretative frame peculiar to the experience that performance engages the audience in.

Since performance is shaped by its communicative teleology, the question of interpretation comes to the fore. Bauman tackles this issue by stressing the performer’s responsibility to his audience “for a display of communicative competence... [that is] an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content,” rendering the performer subject to the audience’s evaluation and, more significantly, making his performance “available for the enhancement of experience” (11). This realization of the nature of performance and its communicative interchange necessitates on the part of the audience a “heightened awareness of the act of expression” in which the performer is directly engaged, an act that shapes their reaction, evaluation, and aesthetic participation in the experience.

Bauman adopts Gregory Bateson’s concept of metacommunication to describe the “range of explicit or implicit messages which carry instructions on how to interpret the other message(s) being communicated” (15), that is, on how to enable auditors to decode the messages that the performance carries and articulates. Bauman then offers a list of the communicative means of performance that have been generally recognized and widely documented in various cultures as keys to performance. They are: *special codes, figurative language, parallelism, special paralinguistic features, special formulae, appeal to tradition, and disclaimer of performance*. His realization of the formal and conventional nature of these devices suggests to Bauman the formal

appeal of the performance which, arousing a sense of group expectancy, “binds the audience to the performer in a relationship of dependence that keeps them caught up in his display” (16). However, these keys to performance are only examples of the communicative means that cultures utilize. There are many more possibilities, depending on the prominent features of each culture.

### **Part I.**

I will now provide a synopsis of the story under consideration, followed by a delineation of the distinct elements of popular culture that appear abundantly in the story. Then I will reveal the structural pattern that binds the tales together and informs their performance.

### **Story of the King of China’s Hunchback: A Synopsis.**

There lived in China a hunchback who was the King’s stooge and boon companion. One day he was invited to dinner by a tailor and his wife, who, loitering on the streets in the evening, came across the hunchback and were amused by his singing and drunkenness. His funny status appealed to them; they thought they could use him as their boon companion that night. At the dinner table, he choked with a fish-bone and died. Afraid of the consequences, though apparently unaware of their guest’s identity, the tailor and his wife took the corpse to a Jewish medical doctor’s house in the middle of the night. They asked to see the doctor, then secretly left the corpse on the stairs and went away. Stumbling over the body in the darkness of the staircase, the doctor believed he had caused his patient to die. Likewise afraid of the consequences, he took the corpse away and left it in a standing position against the wall of the King’s Muslim steward’s house next door. The latter, on his way back home after midnight, saw the standing figure and thought it was a thief-- the thief that he believed was stealing his meat and grease for quite a while. He struck the hunchback with a hammer and, believing that he had killed him, went out to try and get rid of the dead corpse. He took the corpse to the nearby market-place, before stores were open, and left it standing in a street corner against a store wall. It was almost dawn. Shortly afterwards, a bypassing Christian broker stopped by the store to urinate. Believing the standing figure to be a thief who wanted to steal his turban, the broker immediately struck the hunchback with his fist and called for help. The sentry assigned to protect the market-place responded to the call. However, at the sight of the dead hunchback lying on the ground and the broker beating him, he arrested the broker and took him to the Wali, that is, the man in charge of security in the town.

At the King's orders, the Christian broker was to be hanged but, thanks to a last-minute intervention by the steward who claimed that it was he who committed the crime, the broker was instantly pardoned and replaced by the Muslim steward on the gibbet. Again in a last-minute intervention, the steward was now replaced by the Jewish doctor, the latter then by the tailor, each successively stepping forward to indict himself and save his predecessor.

Informed of the death of his boon companion, the King of China had these four persons brought to court. He inquired into the nature of the murder and was made to hear the story from beginning to end. To save their life, each one of the four suspects told a tale and claimed it was more amazing than the tale of the hunchback's death-enigma. Each of the tales they told involved one type of physical deformity or another. None of the storytellers succeeded in satisfying the King's thirst for amazing details and bizarre events until it was the tailor's turn. Being the last storyteller, he had to face the greatest challenge: every one of the suspects looked up to him as their savior. He embarked on recounting a long and intricately woven tale. His skill was such that he managed to make his tale continuously unfold to beget new tales, in a non-stop sequence that ultimately drew the King's admiration. Consequently, the four persons were acquitted. Then the hunchback was miraculously brought back to life.

## **Elements of Popular Culture**

### **Urban Background**

The setting of the tales of the story is the urban sites of Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus. Each of the tales recounted in relation to these sites incorporates well-known features of urban life recognizable in big wealthy houses, palaces and courts of sultans and princes, and market-places.<sup>1</sup> And the narrative frequently stops for short periods of time to provide highly descriptive passages wherein details of architectural beauty (particularly interior design), luxurious aspects of livelihood (incense, perfumes, expensive clothes), and plenty of food (particularly expensive meals where meat, sweets, and spices are profusely offered) are repeatedly mentioned with a view to highlighting a celebratory approach to life. Wealth and prosperity in the tales allow for the presence of characters whose corporeal desires are emphasized as stimuli to their social behavior. Sexual lust is allotted a noticeable space within the dynamics of the main plot. In an article entitled "The "Mansion" and the "Rubbish Mounds:" The Thousand and One Nights in Mahir: *The Nights' Singer*...

Popular Arabic Tradition' (2004), Muhsin al-Musawi stresses the importance of the bodily discourse in *The Arabian Nights*, where description of private life becomes intrinsically woven with the narrative structure. This relationship gives vent to scenes of physical love, playful displays of sexuality, and licentiousness which themselves are central to popular culture. However, al-Musawi maintains, these "properties of popular culture...are the properties of the ephemeral and passing against the upheld stability and institutionalization of the Metropolitan center" (366).

### **Intrigue and Machinations**

Along the same line of argument and the emphasis on physical pleasure, the story abounds in examples of schemes and wicked plots devised and implemented to enable certain figures to attain personal goals at the expense of naïve lovers and reckless libertines. Due to the conservative nature of the highly aristocratic society in the Arab-Islamic world, intrigues and plotting were instrumental to achieve interclass mobility, wherein social and ethnic barriers would be dismantled in order to articulate individual freedom.<sup>2</sup> In terms of power relations, I believe such maneuvering and scheming can be seen as an attempt to create possibilities for temporary suspension of class distinction, within the hierarchical frame of thought characteristic of such societies, before reinforcing the same hierarchy through acts of coercion, brutality, and torture. Often such acts in the story are committed or caused by female characters. One distinct trait of these characters is their resourcefulness. They never lack the means to entice their male targets and render them helpless and unequipped. Taking advantage of the hierarchical social build-up of their urban milieu, they use their physical beauty to enhance their act of coercion, sometimes aided by other females, other times by male assistants.

### **Poetry and Song**

Poetry is one of the distinct elements of popular culture in the story. The narrator frequently incorporates verses that do not totally conform to classical Arabic poetry but are vernacular variations on poetic norms. Usually these verses express human feelings and attitudes commonly regarded as universal and exemplary, such as wisdom, grief over the mutability of the things of life, erotic love and related suffering at denial, and joy at reunion of lovers and families. Verse-song is also found in the tales, being one characteristic element of prosperous and happy life in urban sites. As such, song and poetry recited to the accompaniment of musical instruments,

generally inside palaces and great houses, tend to have a festive quality, as they contribute to the picture of wealth and abundance distinguishing urban life in the medieval Arab world. The “Story of the King of China’s Hunchback” has many such verses that the narrator uses to create emphasis, link the parts of the plot together, and sustain the power of narration. Often, these verses tend to be commentaries on life, expressed when characters are in the midst of certain difficult situations. They have therefore a particular resonance with the populace who would be able to identify themselves with the character in question.

Let us now examine the tales of the story under discussion, applying Bauman’s performance keys to the written ‘text.’ The story is structurally divided into four major tales, the last of which in turn unfolds into six tales. They are as follows:

Tale of the Christian Broker

Tale of the King’s Steward

Tale of the Jewish Doctor

Tale of the Tailor

### **Tale of the Barber and His Brothers**

First Brother: the Hunchback Tailor

Second Brother: the Paralyzed Baqbaaqa

Third Brother: the Blind Faqfaq

Fourth Brother: the One-eyed Butcher

Fifth Brother: He Whose Ears Were Cut Off

Sixth Brother: He Whose Lips Were Cut Off

A quick look at the list and succession of these tales suggests a structure of *parallelism* in which the tales seem to be following a certain pattern that binds them together in a relationship of cause and effect. This pattern is the ransom-tale.<sup>3</sup> Since the story begins with the hunchback’s apparent death and ends with his unexpected revival, all the composite tales between the beginning and end are, ontologically speaking, viable as long as they remain within the context of

the hunchback's story. This is not to say that they cannot exist by themselves. But the tales' significance is closely related to the fact that they have been told to serve one particular end--saving the life of their narrators. The urgency of the situation is such that the act of telling a tale, or even an interesting tale, is by itself not enough to obtain the King's pardon. Rather, it is telling a tale that should prove more amazing than the story of the hunchback's death, more amazing, that is, in every respect: detail, incident, character-involvement, mood, etc. Everything revolves around, and boils down to, this teleology.

At a structural level, then, the parallelism of the tales within the framework of a ransom-tale becomes so important to the narrative itself that, in terms of oral performance theory, it informs the act of telling the tales itself and dictates to the storyteller his performance. It creates a sense of regularity of situation for him and, as he moves from one event to another, from one tale to another, he becomes better able to emphasize the salient features of the tales, as they recur within the ransom-tale framework, and convey them to his audience. As a key to performance, parallelism rests on recurrence, and what counts for the storyteller here is the extent to which he can keep the idea of ransom alive in his audience's minds. He would have to create a sense of familiarity with the situation at hand and, depending on the quality of his performance, parallelism enables him to convey that sense of familiarity to the audience. As soon as his listeners are drawn into the world of the tales, they become partners in the act of performance of which they are witnesses. Their ears will be further attuned to narration, thanks to certain recurrent structures that act as prompts cuing the context within which interaction is to take place.

The discussion clearly underlines the significance of the essential ransom-tale of Shehrazad and Shahrayar, told anonymously at the outset of *The Arabian Nights*. A brief reminder, therefore, of this tale should not be considered redundant in this context.

### **Synopsis of the Ransom-Tale**

It is related that Shahrayar, a Sassanian King, provoked by his wife's unfaithfulness, decided to avenge himself upon all women. Killing his wife and her train of maids and black slaves, he made up his mind to marry every virgin girl in his kingdom and kill her on the following day, that is, after deflowering her. He carried out his plan for some time until no one in his kingdom could tolerate that practice any longer.<sup>4</sup> Shehrazad, the vizier's daughter, implored her father to marry her off to Shahrayar, in the hope that she might change his malevolent attitude

towards women and teach him a lesson. Shehrazad is described as a well-read woman, versed in the histories of nations and countries, and who has learned wisdom and poetry and acquired medicinal knowledge. Thus well-informed of human nature and the power and impact of the 'word' on the human psyche, Shehrazad embarked on her mission and, contrary to her father's wish, was married off to the despotic melancholic king. On the wedding night, she begins her narration.

This is the essential ransom-tale upon which the idea of *The Nights* is based and which informs the tales. Now an audience listening to the Nights recounted, with Shehrazad's ransom-tale in mind, would be able to follow up the progress of the numerous tales in the 'text', not only in terms of suspense created through sequential action, but also with a view to seeing the extent to which Shehrazad's skill as a narrator can encounter and subjugate that human psyche.<sup>5</sup> Of this, Muhsin al-Musawi, in his *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah fi Nadhariyet al-Adab al-Inghilizi* [The Thousand and One Nights in English Literary Theory] (1986), says: "Unlike other women, Scheherazade often depends on her wit, common sense, and wide knowledge. She is more familiar with, and aware of, his [that is, Shahrayar's] psychology; so she narrates to him a collection of stories to keep him occupied every night, thus manipulating him in the same way magic and medicine manipulate people: now comforting him, the next time treating his wound and pain. Her tales are not devoid of references to women's fickleness; yet as Scheherazade thus manages to win his confidence, she recounts stories of women's faithfulness [to their husbands] and cleverness. Moreover, she refrains from employing directly didactic preachment or blunt drollery; rather, her tales are exciting enough for Shehrazad to grow fond of this art for a thousand and one nights!" (7).

Although it does not appear again in the corpus, that is, it is never repeated, the ransom-tale's presence is domineering. This results from the recurrence of certain phrases and clauses at the beginning and end of each of the Nights. These phrases, functioning as a reminder of the essential situation (a newly married woman engaged in a cut-throat endeavor to buy time to ransom her life) maintain a sense of *parallelism* throughout the narrative. The opening phrase in each Night is:

1- زعموا ايها الملك السعيد وصاحب الرأي الرشيد ...

with variations on the first word and the adjectives used to describe the addressee, Shahrayar.

These are:

-a زعموا ايها الملك السعيد صاحب الرأي السديد...

-b بلغني أيها الملك السعيد...

-c بلغني أيها الملك العزيز...

Soon after the first few nights, a new phrase is added to this one wherein Shehrazad's sister, Dinarzad, takes the initiative and triggers a new Night:

2- فلما كانت الليلة القابلة قالت دینارزاد لاختها شهرزاد لما دخلت مع الملك شاهريار الى الفراش يا أختاه بالله عليك إن كنت غير نائمة فحدثينا بحدوتة من أحاديثك الحسان نقطع بها سهر ليلتنا هذي

With variations on some portions of the phrase:

-a فلما كانت الليلة القابلة قالت دینارزاد لاختها شهرزاد بالله عليك يا أختاه إن كنت غير نائمة فحدثينا بحدوتة من أحاديثك.

-b فلما كانت الليلة القابلة دخلت شهرزاد مع الملك شهاريار في الفراش قالت أختها دینارزاد يا أختاه إن كنت غير نائمة فحدثينا بحدوتة وتمي لنا حديثك.

The closing phrase in each Night is:

3- وإنشق الفجر وأدرك شهرزاد الصبح فسكتت وقطعت الحديث.

with variations on the position of the composite-phrases of the sentence:

-a وإنشق الفجر وأدرك شهرزاد الصبح فسكتت عن حديثها.

-b وأدرك شهرزاد الصبح فسكتت عن الحديث.

This phrase is often preceded by a request put forward by Dinarzad in which she praises her sister's storytelling and receives Shehrazad's reassurance of a more interesting narration on the following night:

ولما ان طلع الفجر قالت دینارزاد لاختها شهرزاد ما أحسن حديثك وأعجبه. قالت وأین هذا مما أحدثك به الليلة -4 القابلة إن عشت وأبقاني هذا الملك، فهو أحسن من هذا الحديث وأعجب.

with such variations as:

-a وقالت أختها دینارزاد یا أختاه ما أطيب حديثك. قالت الليلة القابلة أحدثكم بأطيب من هذا الحديث وأعجب وأغرب إن عشت وأبقاني الملك ولم یقتلني.

-b فقالت لها دینارزاد یا أختاه ما أطيب حديثك وأعجبه. قالت وأین هذا مما أحدثكم به في الليلة القابلة إن عشت إن شاء الله تعالى.

The above-mentioned phrases and clauses may be translated as follows:

1. It is purported, Oh thou happy King and possessor of wise opinion...
  - a. It is purported, Oh thou happy King, possessor of unerring opinion...
  - b. It came to my ears, Oh thou happy King...
  - c. It came to my ears, Oh thou mighty King...
2. When the following night came, Dinarzad said to her sister, Shehrazad, as she [i.e. the latter] went with King Shahrayar to bed, Oh dear sister, in the name of Allah, if you are not asleep, tell us a tale, one of your fine tales, whereby we may traverse the progress of this our night.
  - a. When the following night came, Dinarzad said to her sister, Shehrazad, in the name of Allah, Oh dear sister, if you are not asleep, tell us a tale, one of your tales.
  - b. When the following night came, Shehrazad went with King Shahrayar to bed. Her sister, Dinarzad, said, Oh dear sister, if you are not asleep, tell us a tale and finish your narration.
3. The dawn was broken, and the morning descended upon Shehrazad, so she stopped talking and suspended the narration.
  - a. The morning descended upon Shehrazad, and the dawn was broken, so she stopped her narration.
  - b. The morning descended upon Shehrazad, so she stopped narration.

4. And when it dawned, Dinarzad said to her sister, Shehrazad, what a pleasant and amusing narrative yours is! She [i.e. Shehrazad] said, and what is this in comparison with what I would tell you tomorrow night, if I lived and this king spared my life! It is more pleasant and amusing than this narrative.
  - a. And her sister, Dinarzad, said, Oh sister, what an agreeable narrative yours is! She [i.e. Shehrazad] said, tomorrow night I would tell you a more agreeable, amusing, and amazing narrative if I lived and the King spared my life and did not kill me!
  - b. So Dinarzad said, Oh sister, what an agreeable and amusing narrative yours is! She [i.e. Shehrazad] said, and what is this in comparison with what I would tell you tomorrow night, if I lived, Allah willing!

The recurrence of these phrases throughout *The Arabian Nights* is significant. It keeps the essential story of Shehrazad and Shahrayar alive in the minds of those engaged in listening to the tales as they unfold. The storyteller's awareness of this prerogative helps him cue his performance in such a way that his audience will always be alert to the significance of the upcoming Nights. He will be able to sustain anticipation among his listeners, whose admiration for the narrative and the narrator, Shehrazad, increases as the tales sequentially progress. Moreover, the parallel structuring of these phrases within the general narrative underlines for storytellers certain attributes of professional narrating. First, they emphasize the need to be able to keep listeners at bay, as Shehrazad does to Shahrayar, and gradually build toward the ultimate denouement. Second, they remind storytellers of their status in terms of historical narration.

According to Deborah Folaron, in her article "Oral Narrating and Performing Traditions in the History of Modern Middle Eastern and Maghrebian Theatre and Drama" (2002), "[t]he narration of events as they relate to each other within an ideological framework, and the contextualization necessary to re-enact those events as they presumably would have happened, are the usual tasks of the historian" (3). This is precisely what Shehrazad does. Her selection of events is varied but deliberate: she has a higher goal than merely to provide entertainment. As each Night draws to an end, the audience receives the signal, through the recurrent phrases mentioned above, that the narrator has just finished one more night successfully and would remain alive for at least one extra night. This progression adds to the listeners' hope for a better fate for Shehrazad but also, and more significantly, reinforces the power of verbal art in the face

of tyranny and injustice. G. K. Chesterton, in *The Spice of Life*, says that for all his despotism, Shahrayar has become an eyewitness to the self-independent nature of art. That dictator was compelled to listen to a tale: art alone was the alternative to life.<sup>6</sup>

It is in the light of the preceding argument, informed by the *parallelism* indicated, that our reading of the “Story of the King of China's Hunchback” (and of the parallelism distinguishing the structure of its four major and six minor tales) should proceed. The four major tales, told precisely to ransom their narrators, exemplify *parallelism* by virtue of being positioned against the background-narrative of the ransom-tale. But this is not all that there is to them. Like Shehrazad's framework, these incorporate a number of phrases and clauses carefully distributed in the tales in a structure of parallelism. They recur at certain moments in the tales, defining the stages of the narrative and creating expectations to be met throughout. One interesting aspect of the narrative to which these recurrences give rise, theme-wise, is its insistence on deformity as an outcome of the love adventures in which the main characters are unwittingly involved. This aspect pertinently recurs in each tale and appears to be possible only after other stages have been reached. Below is a synopsis of each of the four major tales, followed by a survey of the recurrences that create the *parallelism* of the tales. The synopses, however, do not quote the phrases which will be mentioned and translated afterwards.

### **Tale of the Christian Broker**

The broker relates how, long ago, he met in Egypt (his homeland) a handsome, well-dressed youth from Baghdad. The latter's liberal manners had such an appealing impact on the broker that the latter invited him to a luxurious dinner at his own house. The Baghdadi youth recounted his story- how he lost his right hand in the pursuit of physical love. He said that, while trading in Egypt long time before, he came across a beautiful woman whom he sold some cloth and instantly fell in love with. His attentions requited, the youth enjoyed the private company of the lady in her own house for quite a while. Night after night, he would fulfill his incessant pursuit of lust with her, squandering his money over food and drink and the pleasures of luxurious life, until he was broke. Unable to sustain himself anymore, he robbed a soldier in the market-place. Consequently, he received the conventional punishment inflicted upon thieves: the cutting off of the right hand with the sword. He ended up marrying the woman and inheriting her, shortly afterwards.

### **Tale of the King's Steward**

The steward recounts his tale that happened only the night before. He was dining at a friend's house with many fellow countrymen when one of the guests, to everybody's astonishment, refused to eat of a famous dish called al-Zirbaja. Faced with their persistent inquiry, he relented and started to eat, only after washing his hands 120 times with 3 kinds of soap. Thus he uncovered his thumbless hands. He then explained. He was from Baghdad, son of a well-known merchant who lived during the reign of Harun al-Rasheed. In his own store in Baghdad, the youth sold expensive cloth to a beautiful woman and instantly fell in love with her. She turned out to be the lady-in-waiting of Zubeida, Harun al-Rasheed's wife. Admitted to the palace through a secret plan, he was married off to the lady-in-waiting. However, before the consummation of marriage in sex, he incurred the bride's indignation at his unwitting behavior: he had eaten of al-Zirbaja dish offered to him at the wedding party, and neglected to wash his hands afterwards. She punished him by cutting off his thumbs, then his toes, and made him swear never to eat al-Zirbaja again without washing his hands 120 times in advance. They lived together as husband and wife until she passed away.

### **Tale of the Jewish Doctor**

The doctor relates the story of a beautiful youth whom he was commissioned to treat of some ailment a long time ago in Damascus. The marks of physical abuse on the youth's body and the sight of the right arm whose hand was amputated made the doctor suspicious. To his restless looks, the youth explained. He was a wealthy merchant's son from Mosul in Iraq. His father had sent him to trade in Damascus, where he was visited by an agreeable-looking woman. He fell for the woman and immediately enjoyed her private company in his rented residence. One day, after several amorous affairs, she brought a younger woman to his residence and let the two enjoy a private night. In the morning, he discovered that the young woman's head had been severed from her body and the first woman had disappeared. He escaped to Egypt where he lived for three years, before returning to Damascus utterly bankrupt. At the same residence he had formerly kept, he found a golden necklace that used to belong to the dead young woman. Attempting to sell the jewel at the market, he was arrested and tortured at the Wali's court. Charged with

robbery, he suffered to see his right hand cut off. Soon afterwards, he was escorted to the Governor of Damascus' office. It turned out that the two women had been the Governor's daughters. Driven by jealousy, the eldest slaughtered her sister, before committing suicide. The Governor, himself narrating this last episode to the Mosulli youth, married off his third and remaining daughter to the youth as a compensation for the latter's unjust suffering.

### **Tale of the Tailor**

The tailor recounts his meeting, at a meal in the morning of the previous day, with a lame beautiful youth who, at the sight of an old barber sitting among the invitees, refrained from joining the assembly. Prevailed upon to change his mind, he pointed to the barber and told his story. He used to live in Baghdad, he said, thriving on the fortune he had inherited from his wealthy father, when one day he fell in love with a young woman whom he briefly saw in a closed avenue. He became lovesick. However, through the agency of an old woman, he managed to obtain a date with his beloved one, the Justice of Baghdad's daughter, in her father's house. On the assigned day, recovering from his love-sickness, he sent for a barber. Instead of doing his job, the barber wasted his customer's time in the morning, prating and offering extra services, such as cupping. He insisted that he was more than a barber and that he was good at many disciplines: astrology, medicine, alchemy, Arabic grammar, linguistics, scholastic theology, arithmetic, algebra, and rhetoric. Resenting the youth's impatience, the barber insisted that he deserved attention and, further, demanded to be the youth's companion on that day. Dismissed, he was allowed to leave with a lot of food which he managed to send to his house, while hiding in the neighborhood in anticipation of the youth's departure. Then, he followed the latter to his destination.

In the Justice's house the enamored youth hid himself in the girl's chamber, at her father's sudden return. The Justice beat one of his slaves. The slave cried out loudly and his laments were immediately echoed by the barber who, stationed outside the Justice's house, believed the cries to be the youth's. The barber's laments, in turn, drew a lot of people to the house, forcing the Justice to open the door in astonishment. Awkwardly facing the multitude, the latter let the barber enter the house in search of his master, whom he accused the Justice of beating in retaliation. Upstairs, the youth had just hidden himself in a big box. Spotting the box, the barber realized who the

occupant was. He lifted the box over his head and went away with it. Frightened and hopeless, the youth jumped out of his shelter and fell at the doorstep of the house, breaking his leg and developing a permanent limp. He ran away and, eventually, left Baghdad and wandered from one country to another, before he ended up in China.

To this, the tailor continues, the barber retorted in an attempt to defend himself against the youth's allegations. He did what he did in order to save the youth from death. I was neither curious nor talkative, he confirmed. Of all my father's sons, I am the least talkative, least curious, and most reasonable. To prove his claim, he begged to be listened to, as he told his tale.

### Elements of *Parallelism*

A number of clauses, similar to those of Shehrazad and Dinarzad mentioned earlier, recur at the beginning and end of each tale, underlying the challenge the narrators face as they attempt to ransom their life. To the King's wondering statement,

1. a - هل سمعتم بأعجب من هذه القضية وما جرا لهذه الأحذب.

the Christian broker approaches, kisses the floor before the King, and says:

b - يا ملك الزمان ان اذنت لي حدثتك بشئ جرا لي يبكي الحجارة اعجب من قصة هذه الأحذب.

When he finishes his tale, the broker says:

c - وهذه ما جرى لي وغريب ما اتفق لي. فهذا أيها الملك ما هو أعجب من حديث الأحذب.

But the King retorts:

d - ليس هذا أعجب من حديث الأحذب ولا بد لي من شنقكم انتم الأربعة على أجل الأحذب.

Next, the Steward approaches and, addressing the King, requests in a tone of bargain, saying:

2. a - ان احكيت لك حديثا اتفق لي ليلة البارحة قبل أن التقي هذه الأحذب عندي، فإن كان اعجب من حديث الأحذب تهب لنا أرواحنا وتعتقنا.

The King's reply is:

-b نعم، إن وجدتها اعجب من حديث الأحدث وهبتكم أرواحكم الأربعة.

Finishing his tale, the Steward says:

-c وبعد هذا جرائي مع الأحدث ما جرا. وهذا حديثي وما رأيت البارحة.

Dissatisfied, the King firmly turns down the storyteller, saying:

-d ما هذا والله بأغرب من قصة الأحدث الأكذب.

Third, the Jewish doctor proceeds, kisses the floor before the King, and says:

3. -a يا سيدي عندي حديث أقوله أعجب من هذا الحديث.

And the King briefly replies:

-b هات.

When the Jewish doctor's tale is over, he says:

-c فهذه ما هو بأعجب من حديث الأحدث.

Further dissatisfied, the King replies at length:

-d نعم والله ما هو أعجب ولا أغرب من قصة الأحدث الأكذب ولا بد ما اقتلكم انتم الأربعة، فإنكم انتم الأربعة اتفقتم على قتل الأحدث الأكذب وقتلتم حكايات ما هي بأعجب من قصته، وما بقي غير انت يا خياط وانت راس البليه، فهات حدثني بحديث غريب عجيب يكون أعجب وأغرب وألد وأطرب، وإلا قتلتكم الجميع.

The tailor takes the challenge and briefly says:

4. -a نعم.

Then he embarks on narrating his very long tale that brings about the King's pardon but only after the six minor tales (which will be briefly related in Section Two) are recounted. To the tailor's

-b فما هي أعجب وأغرب من قصة الأحدث الأكذب.

the King's final response is:

-c هذه القصة التي جرت بين هذه الشاب والمزين الفضولي انها لأطرب وأحسن من قصة الأحدب.

These phrases and clauses may be translated as follows:

- 1-a. Have you heard of a more amusing issue and what's happened to this hunchback?
- b. Oh thou King of all time, if you give me the permission, I will tell you something that happened to me, which makes stones cry, more amusing than the story of this hunchback.
- c. And this is what happened and chanced to me; so this is, Oh thou King, what is more amusing than the tale of the hunchback.
- d. This is not more amusing than the tale of the hunchback, and I must have you all four hanged, for the sake of the hunchback.
- 2-a. If I tell you a tale that chanced to me last night, before meeting this hunchback at my place, and it turns out to be more amusing than the tale of the hunchback, will you grant us our life and set us free?
- b. Yes. If I find it more amusing than the tale of the hunchback, I will grant you all four your life.
- c. Hitherto, this is what happened to me indeed with the hunchback, and this is my tale and what I saw last night.
- d. By God, this is not more amazing than the story of the hunchback-liar!
- 3-a. Sir, I have a tale to tell, which is more amusing than this tale.
- b. Go ahead.
- c. So this is what is more amusing than the tale of the hunchback.
- d. Verily, by God, it is neither more amusing, nor more amazing, than the story of the hunchback-liar; I must kill you all four. It is because the four of you agreed on killing the hunchback-liar, and told tales that were not more amusing than his story. No one remains except you, tailor, and you are the cause of this trouble. So come and tell me an amazing, amusing tale, more amusing, amazing, savory, and gleeful. Otherwise, I will kill you all.

4-a. I will.

b. But it is not more amusing and amazing than the story of the hunchback-liar.

c. This story that took place between this youth and the curious barber is, verily, more gleeful and pleasant than the story of the hunchback.

Now, within the framework of Richard Bauman's oral performance approach to oral tradition, *parallelism* “involves the repetition, with systematic variation, of phonic, grammatical, semantic, or prosodic structures, the combination of invariant and variant elements in the construction of an utterance.” The above-mentioned recurrences in the four major tales do, in fact, suggest a pattern that fits into Bauman’s definition of parallelism. In their insistence on maintaining basic structural principles but to a degree of flexibility defined by the context within which they fall, these recurrences enable the performance of the Arabic ‘text’ to meet the requirements of the situation. Such persistence, in Bauman’s perspective, “may serve as mnemonic aids to the performer of a *fixed traditional text*, or enhance the fluency of the improvisational or spontaneous performance.”<sup>7</sup>

With this understanding in mind, I now move to Section Two, where the survey of *parallel* structures continues, now in the six minor tales, with a view to underlining the general pattern of narration in the Story, before singling out (briefly) other keys to performance.

## Part Two

The structure of *parallelism* continues to inform the rest of the “Story”, that is, the six minor tales attributed to the barber and narrated by the tailor, dictating to the narrator his instrumental use of the ransom-tale framework and maintaining a sense of urgency throughout. To meet the expectations of his listeners-- both the King of China in the “Story” and listeners in the general sense of the word-- the tailor takes advantage of the deformity theme utilized thus far.<sup>8</sup> Building towards the salvation of the whole group of suspects, he includes details of *unnatural cruelty* inflicted upon each one of the barber's six brothers.<sup>9</sup> These details may seem gruesome and repugnant enough to draw listeners away from the act of narrating. Conversely, though, they keep the hunchback story alive in the listeners' minds; the King's dissatisfaction with the first three narrators testifies to the influence the hunchback's strange death had on the king's

decree. In other words, the story of the hunchback's death begins to assume here a kind of significance that goes beyond serving as the *raison d'être* of the tales. It becomes intrinsic to the strategy that the four narrators, but particularly the tailor, will have to use to obtain ransom. In a sense, therefore, the hunchback story becomes *the* narratological background against which all the tales are to be judged. Indeed, the King's patient listening to the tales (and his final judgment of the narrative quality) suggests the amount of challenge that storytellers face as they attempt to win their listeners' approval and appreciation of narration.

The fact that, for all their ingenuity, the three preceding narrators fail to generate admiration gradually augments expectations and makes the sense of urgency all too real. During the progress of the tales, and through the agency of the Arabic storyteller who embarks on the mission of narrating these tales to an Arabic audience, the reality of the situation can be conveyed to the audience only via performance. We can see a kind of analogy between the role that the tailor plays within the text of the "Story" and the role the Arabic storyteller plays outside of the text. Just as the former's narrating is the decisive factor in the whole process of ransom-acquisition, the latter's performance of the tales, but particularly of the tailor's tale, is the decisive factor in the process of acquisition of audience' applause, to which the Arabic storyteller aspires. His success, within the general framework of Performance theory, rests precisely on the extent to which he can utilize the recurrences, structurally paralleled, to cue his performance in such a way that his auditors will be drawn to engage in interactive listening. He will, therefore, allot the barber's account prime attention, emphasizing especially the latter's reiterations, as they occur in parallels.

The following is a synopsis of the barber's tale, which includes the tales of his six brothers.

### **Tale of the Barber and His Brothers**

The barber used to live in Baghdad, during the reign of the Caliph al-Mustansir billah [who ruled from 1226 to 1242 A.D.]. At the Muslims' 'Eid, or religious festive celebration of fast-break, the Caliph ordered that ten highwaymen be brought to his court to be executed. Believing that the ten men, escorted by the Wali and his guards, were on their way to a feast, the barber slipped into the boat that would carry them to the Caliph. At the Caliph's court, after the ten men were beheaded, and to the Caliph's indignant inquiry, the barber explained that his silent

acquiescence was due to his wisdom and farsightedness. The amount of science, philosophy, and rhetoric that I have acquired, he said, was incomparable. I have always been ill-requited, in spite of my disinterested endeavor to offer succor to the right people. He then told the following stories.

### **First Brother: The Hunchback Tailor**

He was a tailor who lived in Baghdad off a modest income. One day a married woman appeared to him through the scuttle of her house. She seduced him with her inviting smile; he fell in love with her instantly. Aided by her husband, she managed to entice the tailor into sewing a lot of clothes for herself, then for her husband, in return for nothing. To further humiliate him, she and her husband had him consent to marry their maid. On the eve of his wedding, they made him sleep in their mill and, with the assistance of the miller, the tailor replaced the mule in grinding the wheat. His consequent refusal to go on with the marriage plan drew one last act of humiliation. Made to believe that he was irrevocably desired by the wealthy man's wife, and that she had no hand in his latest misery, he accepted an invitation to enjoy the private company of the wife during an alleged absence of the husband. Discovered by the latter and put to shame in public, he suffered the Wali's physical punishment and was soon banished from Baghdad.

### **Second Brother: the Paralyzed Baqbaaqa**

Baqbaaqa was wandering in town when an old woman approached him and asked if he was interested in being admitted to a large house with an orchard, where he would enjoy the private company of a beautiful lady. He immediately responded to the invitation and ended up sitting in a luxurious pavilion, eating and drinking with a good-looking maid, to the accompaniment of other maids playing on the lute. Slapped on the neck repeatedly by the host-maid, he suffered to let his eyebrows be painted red, armpit hair plucked out, and facial hair utterly shaved. The maid got drunk and, in her excitement, had Baqbaaqa dance and her fellow-maids hit him with the furniture of the house. Recovering consciousness, he was made to strip and chase the drunken maid in the nude around the house until, in the frenzy of erotic pursuit, he fell from a dark room through a hole in the floor, down to the market. It was the skimmers' section. He was humiliated and made a laughing-stock, beaten on the mountback of a mule, and banished by the Wali from Baghdad.

### **Third Brother: the Blind Faqfaq**

Faqfaq was a blind man who lived off beggary and shared a small residence with fellow beggars, where they kept the money they earned. One day he knocked the door of a big house seeking charity. Turned down, he fell over the stairs into the street where he was helped by an inmate. They went back to their residence, not knowing that they had been followed by the big house's owner, who had just denied Faqfaq help. Swiftly and skillfully, the pursuer managed to enter the house and hide, with the help of a rope dangling from the ceiling. Faqfaq received his share of the earned money and sat to eat with his inmates. Secretly sharing the meal, the stranger was soon discovered and beaten. The beggars cried for help and the police arrived. These three and the stranger, who now pretended to be blind, were taken to the Wali's office. At the phony beggar's request, he received 400 blows with a stick until he opened his eyes. He then claimed to be a member of that group of four beggars and that they pretended to be blind in order to have access to the private life of others. He requested that his fellow beggars be punished, as they tried to rob him of his due share, and that Faqfaq be the first on the list. Their pleas of innocence were in vain. Further, at the phony beggar's suggestion, the Wali sent for the earned money, gave a quarter of it to this informant, confiscated the rest for his own use, and banished the three blind men from Baghdad.

### **Fourth Brother: the One-eyed Butcher**

He had been a wealthy butcher, in possession of houses and landed properties. His customers had been high-class people and distinguished figures in Baghdad, before he was reduced to poverty in the wake of the following event. A simple-looking old man frequently bought meat at his shop for five months. The coins he paid were so bright and shiny that the butcher kept them in a separate drawer, for the good fortune they might bring. One day he opened the box with a view to using the coins to purchase new lambs. To his astonishment, he found small, circular pieces of paper instead! His anger and disappointment gave way to what he thought was an ingenious plan. He slaughtered a big ram and had parts of it hung on the hooks outside. Enticed, the old man stopped at the shop and did what he used to do before. The butcher got hold of his customer and quarreled with him, thus drawing people's attention. In refutation of the butcher's charges of fraud, the old man replied by claiming that the former sold human meat for lamb meat. Inside the shop, where the ram's flesh had been hung, the crowd were startled to see a human body, slaughtered and hung! The butcher immediately became the target of the

furious crowd; he received a blow by the old man on his right eye. At the police-station, he denied the charges in vain. Beaten with a stick 500 times and scandalized in public for three days, the butcher was eventually banished from Baghdad forever.

In another city, now working as a cobbler, the butcher got one day very close to the King's convoy. As soon as the King saw the cobbler's right eye, he refrained from going out on the hunting trip he had planned to take that day. In retaliation, the King's guards beat the man hard. The incident drove the cobbler to the other part of the city, where he recovered health and lived well. A few months had passed before one day he heard the noisy sounds of horse-hooves nearby. Frightened, he took to the nearest house and opened its main door. Inside a dark corridor, he was held by two men who took him for a criminal terrorizing and intimidating the owner of the house. At the Wali's court, the knife he held and his excruciated body testified against him. Whipped 100 times and scandalized in front of everybody, the cobbler was kicked out of the city forever.

### **Fifth Brother: He Whose Ears Were Cut off**

He was a poor man who lived off beggary in the night time. Inheriting the trivial sum of 100 dirhams from his father, he bought glassware with the money and sat in the market to sell, dreaming of a better life. Soon, however, he lost himself in a daydream in which he envisioned himself making huge profits and accumulating a great fortune. His anticipated success continued until he became a powerful man to whom the minister would marry off his only daughter. Proud and arrogant, he would humiliate his bride and deny her consummation of the marriage in sex. Reaching an extreme level of misconduct, this daydreamer would kick a glass of beverage off his wife's hand, only to find out that he had just kicked off his glassware-basket and reduced all the contents to small pieces.

He spent his day wailing his misfortune and tearing his clothes in public. A distinguished lady passed by and, inquiring, she helped him with the huge sum of 500 dinars. Happy with the gift at home, he was visited by an old woman who lured him into following her towards a big house, where he would enjoy the private company of a beautiful woman. He did. The beautiful woman playfully seduced the guest, before handing him over to a well-built black slave who, with a sharp sword, repeatedly hit him until he fainted. Believed to be dead, he was thrown into a cellar, from which he escaped. A month later, uncovering his identity to the same old woman, he

made her repeat the experience. This time he managed to avenge himself and kill the black slave, a maid, and the old woman, but, as he attempted to strike at the good-looking seducer, she lured him into believing that she would recompense his misery with money and precious things. However, she ran away with everything, leaving very little for the man to go back home with. Next day he was arrested and, at the Wali's office, he bought his life with the stolen merchandise and was banished from the country.

### **Sixth Brother: He Whose Lips Were Cut off**

This was a man who became a pauper after a life of richness. So he went out seeking help. At a big house owned by a wealthy Barmak, he asked and was admitted into a spacious property that ended in a great orchard. An important-looking man listened to his story and, pretending to be overwhelmingly touched, promised food and money. He asked his guest to eat of a series of dishes that actually were not brought in. Time and again, the host would order a certain dish and assume the attitude of a man engaged in eating and enjoying the luxury of expensive food. Baffled and amused at this humiliating mimicry, the guest joined the host in the act of make-believe until he decided to retaliate. Pretending to be drunk with the wine thus allegedly served, he slapped his mimic-host on the neck and said that, as he had been made drunk by the generosity of the landlord, he deserved to be pardoned. Applauded for this clever defense, the guest was not only pardoned but also raised to the status of a life-long boon companion of the Barmak, then his treasurer.

In the latter's mansion the barber's sixth brother lived long and thrived until his landlord died. The Sultan confiscated everything that had been in the possession of the deceased and of his treasurer, rendering the latter a pauper again, subject to a life of aimless wandering in the country. One day he was attacked by a group of bandits who took him to be a rich man. Unable to ransom himself, he suffered to have his lips cut off. His captor's wife then seduced him; his reluctant response was ill-timed. Discovered by the husband, the man was further brutally mutilated: his penis was severed and he was cast away on the highway until he was rescued by caravan travelers.

### **Tale of the Barber Continued**

The barber's tales thus completed, he begged to be duly judged as an uncurious, untalkative man. Although the Caliph's reply was sarcastic, he commended the barber as such.

However, the latter was dismissed from the Caliph's court and banished from Baghdad. Upon the Caliph's death, the barber returned to his hometown, to find all his brothers dead. The barber then turned to the young man, he said, and helped him escape a miserable end. Yet, he was ill-treated and accused of curiosity and misconduct.

### Elements of *Parallelism*

The following phrases and clauses have been used to create structural *parallelism* throughout the tales. Whenever the barber finished a tale, the Caliph joyfully replied with the statement

1- فضحك الخليفة من كلامي وقال يا صامط، يا قليل الكلام، احسنت ما قصرت. وامر لي بجائزة وانصرافي.

The statement has the following variations:

- a فضحك الخليفة من حكاياتي وقال صلوه بجائزیه ودعوه ينصرف.
- b فضحك الخليفة الى حين استلقى على قفاه وامر لي بجائزه.
- c فلما سمع الخليفة قصتي جميعها وما أخبرته عن اخوتي ضحك ضحكا شديدا وقال صدقت يا صامت، انت قليل الكلام وما عندك فضول، ولكن اخرج الان من هذه البلد واسكن غيرها.

To this the barber would reply

2- فقلت لا والله يا امير المومنين ما اقبل شىء دون ان احكي لك ما جرى لبقية اخوتي.

With the following variations:

- a فقلت له والله يا امير المومنين اني قليل الكلام وكثير المروة ولا بد ما احكي بين يديك بقية حكايات اخوتي حتى تعلم اني قليل الكلام.
- b فقلت والله يا مخدومي انا ما انا كثير الكلام ولكن حتى احدثك كماله حكايات اخوتي حتى يتحقق مولانا الخليفة حكاياتهم جميعها ويصير على خاطره ويورخهم في خزانته ويعلم اني ما انا كثير الحديث يا مولانا الخليفة.

These phrases can be translated as follows:

1. The Caliph laughed at my speech and said, well done silent man, you haven't fallen short [of

my expectations] untalkative man, and he ordered that I be given a prize and that I be dismissed.

- a. The Caliph laughed at my tales and said, give him a prize and let him be dismissed.
- b. The Caliph so laughed until he lay on his back, and ordered that I be given a prize.
- c. When the Caliph heard all of my story, and what I told him about my brothers, he heartily laughed and said, in truth, silent man, you are untalkative and uncurious; but now, you are to leave this country and to reside in another.

2. So I said, Oh Prince of the Faithful, Allah forbid I accept anything until I relate to you what befell the rest of my brothers.

- a. So I said unto him, Oh Prince of the Faithful, by Allah I am untalkative, though quick to offer succor, and I ought to relate unto your hands the rest of the tales of my brothers, so that you know I am untalkative.
- b. So I said, Oh my master, by Allah I am reticent, I, but let me relate to you the remainder of the tales of my brothers, so that our lord, the Caliph, verily learns all their tales and perhaps, as the tales appeal to his heart, he has them transcribed and kept in his own bookcase, and verifies that I am reticent, Oh our lord, the Caliph.

In his account of his brothers' tales, the barber reiterated a certain sentence immediately after the banishment-stage in each tale. He would utter the following sentence by way of proving how helpful, chivalrous, and quick to provide succor he was. And he meant it to be a reminder set against the young man's accusations, namely, that the barber's curiosity and incessant chattering were behind the young man's ultimate misfortune.

#### First Brother's Tale

1- ونفي من المدينة فخرج وهو لا يدري اين يقصد، فخرجت وراه وزودته.

#### Second Brother's Tale

2- فصنع اخي مائة دره ثم نفاه من بغداد، فخرجت انا يا امير المومنين خلفه وادخلته المدينة سراً ورتبت له مونتته، فلولا مروتي فعلت ذلك.

### Third Brother's Tale

3- ونفا الوالي التلاته، فخرجت انا يا امير المومنين ولحقت اخي وسالته عن حالته فاخبرني بهذه الذي دكرت فرددته وادخلته سراً ورتبت له ما ياكل وما يشرب في الخفيه.

### Fourth Brother's Tale

4- فهج اخي على وجهه وسمعت انا به فخرجت اليه واستخبرته فاخبرني بحديثه وما جرا له فاخذته واقبلت به المدينه سراً ورتبت له ما يقوم باوده.

### Fifth Brother's Tale

5- وخرج هاجا الى بعض البلاد فلقيوه اللصوص فعروه فسمعت انا به فخرجت له تيابا لبسها وادخلته المدينه سراً واضفته الى اخوته.

### Sixth Brother's Tale

6- فخرجت اليه وحملته ودخلت به المدينه ورتبت له ما يقوم باوده.

The sentence is translated as follows:

1. And he was banished from town, so he left not knowing where to go; I went after him and supplied him with provisions.
2. So he slapped my brother a hundred times, and then banished him from Baghdad; so I went out, Oh Prince of the Faithful, after him, brought him back to the town secretly, and set his provisions; I did that out of my feeling of chivalry.
3. And the Wali banished the three [men], so I went out, Oh Prince of the Faithful, and caught up with my brother; I asked him how he was doing, and he told me what I have just related to you; I brought him back [to the town] secretly, and arranged for his food and drink in private.
4. So my brother wandered aimlessly about; I heard of him [i.e. his predicament], so I went out after him; I inquired and he told me what had befallen him; I took him back with me and entered the town secretly; then I supplied him with sustenance.
5. And he went out rambling in some country; he came across highwaymen who stripped him; I heard of him [i.e. his predicament], so I went out with clothes that he put on; I brought him

back to the town secretly and had him join his brothers.

6. So I went out after him and carried him; then I entered the town and supplied him with sustenance.

In the light of Richard Bauman's performance approach, these reiterations gain momentum from the event that makes them possible and within which they are articulated. The event is the story of the hunchback's death and its consequences. Yet even this event cannot be fully appreciated as a work of verbal art (which is what the tales are, in the sense of form) without setting the "Story" against its narrative background-- Shehrazad's ransom-tale. In other words, the tales of the "Story" are situated in two events simultaneously: that of the "Story" and that of *The Nights* as a whole. Further, the artistic vigor of these reiterations, as constituent parts of the narrative structure of the "Story," draws upon the social context of the event of the hunchback's death. He was the King's stooge and boon companion, in an age when to acquire such a position entailed high competition and drew intense rivalry. Therefore, the significance of these *parallel* reiterations, as situated utterances, becomes anything but merely textual. Awareness of this fact does inform the storyteller's approach to the 'text' and dictates to him his would-be performance. His narrating of the tales of the "Story" will be keyed to two things: the ransom-tale-guided "Story of the Hunchback," and the socially guided (and situated) act of narrating the Story.

Bauman's recognition of the nature of narrative as one rooted in human events, in the first place, underlines for him the two-fold ontological aspect of narration. Referring to Roman Jakobson, he observes: "narratives are keyed both to the events in which they are told and to the events that they recount, toward narrative events and narrated events."<sup>10</sup> This observation is important to our understanding of the "Story of the Hunchback" as a narrative event in the first place. It directs attention to several forces working "collaboratively", while the narrative text is being narrated. In *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (1982), Gerald Prince sets the narrative event under two distinct but complementary categories, *Narrating* and *Narrated*, and argues for an important position for the *Narratee* in the general presentation of the *Narrated* (16-26). Of special interest here is the position of the *narratee* in the general process of narration. It may be directly and explicitly articulated, through the preposition, you. In the "Story," as in the *Nights* in general, this preposition is used very often both at the beginning and end of each tale, distinctly reminding us of who happens to be the audience at that moment of

narration. On the other hand, the preposition may not be articulated, and so we may not know of the listener's reaction or attitude during the narration. However, the oral performance approach to the text brings listeners onto a common plane of understanding, facilitating interaction between the *narrator* and *narratee*.

This plane exists as a result of the assumption that the audience is aware of their significance as receivers of the narration, that is, as decoders of all signs that are utilized in the act of *narrating* and which make up the narrative. Signs must be familiar to the audience; familiarity is the result of a common cultural background between the narrator and his audience. So when the latter receive the signs and decode them, they do so under the influence of a context - their cultural context. Otherwise, they end up roaming in the abstract: oral *narrating* (of a story) to an audience can never be an exercise in abstraction, since its vehicle of expression is the spoken word. Context draws attention to what happens in the narrative and is informed socially, politically, and historically by the milieu within which the narrative is possible. Therefore, the more able to decode the signs the audience are, the easier it is for them to (artistically) appreciate the act of storytelling and to interact with the storyteller. Performance, therefore, becomes the *sole* means for enabling the audience to decode, appreciate, and then interact.

Hence the significance of the *narratee* in the general framework of performance approach. This understanding designates Shehrazad's ransom-tale technique, as one rooted in an attempt to draw her audience-- Shahrayar-- to a common plane, where negotiation of power becomes possible only when she provides this audience with clues to her performance. Her structural parallels serve the purpose. And this is precisely what the "Story of the Hunchback" does. The text is informed and guided by *parallelism*, Bauman's key to performance. And it is within this frame of reference that any other key to performance should be underlined in the text.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

The preceding reading of the 'text' of the "Story of the King of China's Hunchback," in terms of the Oral Performance approach to oral tradition, suggests to me the following:

1. Being rooted in the popular culture of Arabic-speaking countries, such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, the tales utilize certain features of urban life that are common in the Arab world and, therefore, accessible to the public. Not only do the tales reflect popular taste and give vent to

popular needs-- psychological, social, political, etc (as popular literature often does)-- but they are also pregnant with signs of, and references to, daily habits, social manners, and class-informed practices that constitute popular culture in urban centers. Their accessibility is further facilitated by the expressive language of the text. It is a combination of standard Arabic, Arabic vernaculars (particularly Egyptian and Syrian), and local dialects influenced by non-Arab neighboring countries. I call it Middle Arabic.<sup>12</sup> The Middle Arabic of the text is, by definition, understood by the populace, middle, and upper classes. It can be therefore designated as a *special register*, an in-between possibility of communicating what, otherwise, might be restricted to the language of this class or that.

2. The significance of this compromise is two-fold. On the one hand, it enables the tales to be 'read' and appreciated in their own terms, without subjecting them to rigorous critical standards, such as those customarily applied by orthodox critics.<sup>13</sup> On the other, it enables their narrators to take the narration to horizons of performance that are unlimited in their impact on the audience.
3. The idea of compromise is interesting in its indication of how flexible and, therefore, open to interaction a popular culture text can be, once approached properly-- that is, once cued via the right means of reading. This means or method, as my reading has shown, is the Oral Performance approach instrumentalized, both aesthetically and socially, by Richard Bauman. The tales can be approximated through Bauman's keys to performance, which will help their text open up venues for interpretation, in addition to the initial act of artistic appreciation. *Parallelism* is the most conspicuous structural quality of the tales that serves as a key to performance. It is the one clue needed to argue for the oral traditional roots of the text of the "Story of the King of China's Hunchback." Moreover, I find myself inclined to emphasize the plausibility of the Oral Performance approach for an extensive study of *The Arabian Nights*, as a work of verbal art rooted in the oral tradition of the Arab world.
4. Application of this approach may also enable us to suggest a pattern of narration that is carefully and skillfully upheld by the writer(s) of *The Nights*. For example, and with respect to the question of deformity underlined earlier, the structural *parallelism* in the Hunchback story has suggested to me a mode of narration that is basically (though not strictly) founded on the following pattern:

1. *A man in the market-place incidentally meets with a woman who stirs his amorous affections or erotic desire.*
  2. *The enticement generates a secret rendezvous to take place shortly afterwards, often at the woman's abode.*
  3. *The enamored lover's arrival at the designated place is often accompanied by generous supplies of food and drink.*
  4. *The rendezvous includes a celebratory consumption of food and drink and/or physical pleasure accomplishment.*
  5. *The rendezvous soon starts a series of adventures that end with the lover being cruelly deformed.*
  6. *The lover either changes course of life or place of residence, with signs of utter resignation to the rule of fate.*
5. In the light of Foucault's theoretical position, the success of the "Tale of the Tailor" can be attributed to the discursive power of the narrative, which is rooted in oral tradition. The text has the ability to continue to unfold, almost endlessly, and generate tales of increasingly "amusing" and "amazing" details to satisfy a well-informed and, accordingly, hard-to-win audience. It is discursive enough to defy narrative closure and, rather than being content with cold repetition of patterns, the "Tale of the Tailor" even suggests the possibility of generating more sub-tales ascribed to the barber. Indeed, the tale invites maneuvering and re-positioning of all the composite units of narration, such as character-involvement, scene-description, plot-execution, and the surprise element, which might help beget more sub-tales. The idea of deformity is itself an aspect of transformation, made possible by virtue of the discursive power of the tradition that informed these tales over time.<sup>14</sup>
6. I am therefore inclined to say that, contrary to Muhsin Mahdi's renunciation of later Arabic originals (printed in the nineteenth century) as an outcome of additions untrue to the original manuscript, *The Arabian Nights* is a work of verbal art that invites additions and transformations *precisely* because of its discursivity. This quality is a direct result of oral tradition. The "Tale of the Tailor" is a case in point. It serves to suggest the difficult task of a storyteller, as he strives to meet the expectations of a hard-to-please audience. The Tale

highlights the significance of the ransom-tale frame and its narrator, Shehrazad. With this in mind, even the number 1001 may, to a flexible frame of thought, sound rigorous and boundary-bound in an Arab world rich with oral tradition.

## Appendix

The following is a list of phrases and utterances, occurring in the “Story of the King of China's Hunchback,” which may be considered as potential keys to performance. Their regularity in the tales enables the storyteller, as performer, to cue his performance towards involving his audience in the act of narration as recipients of an encoded text with which they are already familiar. However, to determine exactly whether these phrases and descriptions fall under this category or that requires research to be informed by fieldwork, the kind that, for instance, Parry and Lord did in former Yugoslavia. For the purposes of this research (which is limited in scope), I include some, not all, of those utterances and suggest their eligibility as keys to performance, insofar as they fit into the definition that Richard Bauman provides for each key in *Verbal Art as Performance*. They are, therefore, liable to acquire different signification or added significance as this key or that, depending on how far we can prove, via extensive fieldwork in the Arab world, their conformity to Bauman's definitions.

### *Special Codes*

- 1 فدارت وجهها وشالت النقاب فنظرت نظره اعقبنتي حسره فما تماكنت عقلي.
- 2 وكشفت وجهها فنظرتها نظره اعقبنتي النظره حصره.
- 3 ان لهده سبب عجيب يجب ان يورخ في الكتب ولو من ماء الذهب.
- 4 ولما سمعنا الحكاية تعجبنا غاية العجب وهزنا الطرب.

These may be translated as follows:

1. She turned her face [back to me] and raised the veil; I looked [at her] once and an *Alas* succeeded: I lost composure.
2. And she uncovered her face; I looked at her once and an *Alas* succeeded.
3. There must be such an amazing reason for this [story] that it should be documented in books

with gold water.

4. And when we heard the tale, we got extremely amused and were shaken with ecstasy.

There is a sense of archaism in these phrases, which is, as Bauman realizes, an attribute of the special language of verbal art. But they are old-fashioned utterances "readily understood by all, even children" (17). Also, there is a conventional use of rhyme, both internal and end-rhyme (which my translation does not show). A well-informed and fully equipped oral storyteller, versed in the oral traditional forms of his own speech community, may choose to stress or accentuate the above-mentioned utterances. He may reiterate them within their own structural space to gain effect. Or he may read them *melodiously* to make their particular context emotionally charged.

### *Figurative Language*

This is a characteristic quality of the text. Figures of speech are often used to emphasize the impact of meeting a beautiful woman in the market-place, sudden exposure to luxurious lifestyle (and the concomitant pleasures of watching and listening to pretty slave girls singing and playing on musical instruments), and the description of attractive urban sites and views. Moreover, the text abounds in verses and songs whose occurrence creates a particular resonance in the listener's mind. Figurative language may strike the audience as exemplary of similar situations with which they are familiar and to which they can cue their reception. Examples include similes, metaphors, and personifications. One distinct quality in this respect is the use of hyperbolic language, creating emphasis and raising expectations.

- 1- فلما جلست وكشفت نقابها وقلعت ايزارها فوجدتها شكل عظيم وكانها البدر المصور وتمكن حبها مني.
- 2- فلم اجلس غير ساعة حتى فتحت طاقه وطلت منها صبيه كانها الشمس المضيئه، لم ترا عيني احسن منها، فتبسمت لما نظرتني، فانطلق في قلبي النار ونقلب بغض النساء بالمحبه، وتميت جالس الى قرب المغرب وانا غايب الصواب.
- 3- فنزلت وجلست في القاعة الصغيرة وادا بعشر جوار كانهم الاقمار قد اقبلت واصطفت وعشرين جاريه اخرى قد اقبلت وهم نهدي اباكار وبينهم الست زبيدة وهي ما تقدر تمشي من الحلبي والحلل.
- 4- فدخلت الى الدهليز فاجد قاعه معلقه عن الارض سبع ابحر ودابيرها شبابيك مطلقه على بستان فيه من جميع

الفواكه وسائر الاطيار والانهار دافقه نزهة الناظرين وفي وسطها فسقيه في اركانها الاربعه اربع حيات مسبوكة بالذهب الاحمر تلقي الماء من افواهاها كانها الدر والجوهر.

- 5- وان درتم البصر في بركة الحبش ارجعت ابصاركم كليله من الدهش، الم تزوا لذلك المنظر الجميل وقد احدقت بخضرتها مقطعات النيل، كانه زبرجد رصع بسبايك فضه.
- 6- وان كنت بساحل مصر وقد حلت الشمس طلوعا ولبس البحر من اتوابه زردا ودروعا احياك نسيمه القليل وظله الوافر الطليل.

They may be translated as follows:

1. Sitting down, she uncovered her veil and took off her robe. I saw that she had a great face, like a full moon: her love conquered me.
2. I had not sat for more than an hour when a scuttle was opened and a young woman appeared. She was like the bright sun; I had not seen such beauty before. She smiled to me... and fire erupted in my heart: my hatred for women turned to love. I spent the rest of the day sitting, having lost my head.
3. I stepped down and sat in the small hall. All of a sudden, ten slave girls, like moons, appeared and lined up. Then twenty slave girls-- bosomy virgins-- appeared with Lady Zubeida between them: she could hardly walk, with the weighty jewels she had worn.
4. I entered the corridor from which I saw a hall that was suspended from the ground seven seas [that is, layers]. The hall had many windows commanding an orchard that had all kinds of fruits, birds, and rivers flowing to the satisfaction of picnicking onlookers. In the center of the hall, there was a fountain with a snake in each one of its four corners. The snakes were red-gilded, wherein water came out of their mouths like pearls and gems.
5. And if you look at al-Habash pond carefully and prolong the look, it would render your vision weary and dim. Have you not seen that beautiful view, where the Nile patches stare at the verdure of the pond, and the Nile itself looking like aquamarine studded with silver-casts?
6. And if you happen to be on the shore of Egypt, and the sun arrived to rise and the sea assumed an apparel of its own clothes-- an apparel of armors and coats of mail, it [i.e. the shore] would revive you with its little breeze and abundant shade.

*Food Lists: Descriptive Codes?*

A common feature of the “Story” is the frequent listing of food items and dishes, generally within passages involving social interaction. Certain designated dishes, mentioned with an emphasis on meat and quality ghee (or cooking fat), draw attention to wealth and plenty characteristic of higher classes. Detailed listing of spices, grains, nuts, honey, and sweets, for example, indicates luxuriousness and lavishness to be found, not only in rich people's households but also in houses that are particularly concerned with maintaining a refined taste for food as an expression of a refined taste for life. Being of different origins, these and other food items color the tales with a unique tinge of historical implications: it is a tinge resulting from an assemblage of cultures made possible in urban sites, only after the establishment of Arab-Islamic empires in Damascus, Baghdad, and Andalus respectively. The well-known medieval Muslim scholar, Ibn Khaldoun (d. 1406), in his *Kitab al-'Ibar wa-Diwan al-Mubtada' wal-Khabar*, commonly known as *al-Muqaddimah* [the Introduction], speaks of the transition of the State from nomadism to urbanization (190-92). He cites examples of unprecedented excessive luxury, particularly from the Abbasid era. They show the extent to which exposure to other far more civilized cultures can have an impact on the newly urbanized state. I am, therefore, inclined to consider food lists (of items, dishes, etc) as keys to performance, although they do not literally conform to Bauman's definitions. They do, however, combine attributes of special codes (in their restricted use in daily speaking) and parallelism (in their frequent mention throughout the “Story,” though not necessarily in their structural positioning). For lack of a better designation, I call them *descriptive codes*. The following are but a few of them from the text:

- 1 فما لبثت ساعه حتى قدمت لي خونجه من افخر الالوان من سكباج وطباهجه وقرموش مقلي منزل في عسل نحل ودجاج محشي سكر وفسنق، فاكلنا حتى اكتفينا. تم رفعت المايده. تم غسلنا ايدينا ورشوا علينا الماورد الممسك.
- 2 تلك اليه قدموا لي خونجه طعام، من جملة الطعام خافقيه فيها زيرباجه مختره بقلب الفسنق المقشر مجلبه بالجلاب والسكر المكرر.

They may be translated as follows:

1. It did not take long before she provided me with a khunja of excellent colors: skbaaj, tabahga, fried qarmoosh [i.e. catfish] dipped in bee-honey, chicken stuffed with sugar and pistachio. We ate until we had enough. Then the dining table was removed; we washed our hands and

musked rose-water was sprayed on us.

2. That night they provided me with a food khunja. Among the food was a khafqiyya in which there was zirbaja, covered with peeled pistachio kernel and treated with julep and refined sugar.

An Arabic storyteller, well-informed of the connotative levels of food and feast descriptions in his own or in a related society, can cue his own performance of these passages in such a way that he manages to create a common plane on which his listeners can interact. Many of the food and feast descriptions in the "Story" are closely associated with amorous adventures and the pursuit of sexual lust. This is one more reason why such passages can be used to cue performance: their availability both to the upper classes and the populace. A storyteller, ignorant of the utilitarian aspect of these descriptions, may well miss a handy instrument to raise expectations and enhance interpretations. Further, and within the narratological significance of the ransom-tale framework, such passages prolong narration and prevent narrative closure, which is what the *Nights*, in a very restricted sense, are about.

## Notes

1. The significance of such features for the study of popular culture has been adequately underlined in many recent publications in the Arab world. See, for example, Farouq Khawrshid, *Qadhaya Sha'biya* [Popular Issues] (Port Sa'id: Mektabet al-Thaqafa al-Diniya, 2003); Ibrahim Abdul-Hafidh, *Malamih al-Taghyeer fi al-Qassass al-Sha'bi al-Ghina'i* [Features of Change in Lyrical Popular Fiction] (Cairo: Mektabet Zahra' al-Sharq, 2001); and Mursi al-Sabbagh, *Dirasat fi al-Thaqafa al-Sha'biya* [Studies in Popular Culture] (Alexandria: Dar al-Wafa' li-'Aalam al-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, 2000). On *The Arabian Nights*, see particularly Muhsin Jasim al-Musawi, *Mujtama' alf laylah wa-laylah* [The Society of the *Thousand and One Nights*] (Tunis: Markaz Manshuraat al-Jami'a, 2000).
2. I make this assumption in the light of Muhsin Mahdi's article, "From History to Fiction: The Tale Told by the King's Steward in the 1001 Nights". In this article, Mahdi makes the argument that the "tale...is adapted directly from a report about events said to have occurred early in the tenth century in Baghdad and transmitted not as fiction but as history" (65). The tale reveals, as the synopsis will soon show, the extent to which interclass mobility is

possible in an age where class distinction is intensively endorsed by the ruling regime, itself an example of conventional power.

3. For a well-informed reading of the ransom-tale from a literary perspective, see Mia Gerhardt, *The Art of Storytelling*. In a section entitled, “Ransom Frame” (401-16), itself part of a discussion of the structure of *The Nights*, she describes the complex emplotment of a certain number of tales (four) and explains it in terms of the ransom-frame. She cites the “Story of the Hunchback” as one such example.
4. According to other editions of *The Nights*, Shahrayar carried out his plan for a very long time (3 years in Boulaq's edition), until there was no girl left in his kingdom!
5. In my opinion, it is this performative quality of Shehrazad's narrative that suggests the discursive nature of *The Arabian Nights*, from a Foucauldian perspective. This is largely due to the power of tradition that informs the corpus and persists in various forms throughout the tales.
6. In Muhsin al-Musawi, *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah fi Nadhariyet al-Adab al-Inghilizi*, 8.
7. In Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, 18-19. Emphasis is mine.
8. In *The Art of Storytelling*, Mia Gerhardt speaks of mutilation as a prominent motif in the “Story of the Hunchback.” She says: “Each of the four men reports, not a personal experience, but an extraordinary adventure told by someone else...; and every time the account of this adventure serves to explain a bodily defect.... [T]he mutilation is attributed to a third person, which puts the man who reports about it in the same position as the reader: intrigued at first, and subsequently pleased when his curiosity is satisfied by the mutilated man's account” (413). Within the narrative context of the “Story,” deformity or mutilation becomes important enough to the act of narration itself that it should be emphasized during the *performance* of the text.
9. I am employing the term *unnatural cruelty* as it is used by Jane Garry and Hasan el-Shamy, in their edition of *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature*. The two editors use the term to designate one of the prominent motifs in folklore and popular literature. Among the four types of unnatural cruelty they underline, there is one entitled Cruel Spouses (398-403). However, it is always the man who plays the cruel part. The editors do cite an early story in

*The Nights*, one that is told by the vizier to his daughter, Shehrazad, by way of warning her of the consequences of marrying the King. The story is about a husband's cruelty to his wife. There is no mention of women being the cruel party, as is the case in the tales in the "Story of the Hunchback," which raises questions about the teleology of such practices in *The Nights*.

10. In *Story, Performance, and Event*, 2.

11. At the end of the thesis, I provide an Appendix of some utterances, descriptions, and motifs that serve as keys to performance. However, my point is to emphasize the overwhelming significance of *parallelism* in the text of the "Story," as one that informs the narration, rather than being one key among several. According to Richard Bauman, it is enough for an oral traditional text to have one of these six keys to enable its performance.

12. By this I do not indicate any historical era in the same sense that, say, the designation Middle English does.

13. Ibn al-Nadim (d. 998), the first Arabic scholar to mention the 1001 Nights in his book, *al-Fihrist*, denounces the work and its likes as insipid and loathsome. He thus reveals the rigorous standards of literary appreciation dominating his age-- the second Abbasid era.

14. Needless to say, the word transformation should not be understood in a Kafkaesque sense of the word, a confusion which might issue as a result of the word deformity.

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