

# As Woman as Can Be: The Gendered Subversiveness of an Arabic Folktale Heroine<sup>1</sup>

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Recent research has contributed much to a deeper understanding of the “oral connection” of the *Arabian Nights* (Molan 1988; Coussonet 1989; El-Shamy 1990; Slymovics 1994; Hämeen-Anttila 1995) as well as of its complex textual history (Grotzfeld 1984; Pinault 1992; Irwin 1994). Though the frame story was known as early as the tenth century, complete versions of the *Nights* apparently did not exist until the nineteenth century. It was only after the introduction of printing to the Arab world that the *Nights* were submitted to a process of unifying codification (Mahdi 1994). Until then, scribes had compiled manuscripts of the collection by adding to a fairly codified nucleus of “exemplary tales” (*ibid.*: 140–63), narrative material extracted from a large number of compilations of various origins. Though a like procedure had been regarded as legitimate over the centuries, it became particularly fashionable when, in the eighteenth century, European demand for “complete” manuscripts created a corresponding market (Marzolph 1998).

Probably the most comprehensive Arabic collection of stories ever attempted was al-Jahshiyārī’s (d. 331/942) legendary compilation in the early tenth century: devised as truly monumental, it was left uncompleted, and is, alas, lost (Grotzfeld 1984: 74–76; Irwin 1994: 82). Out of the numerous anonymous compilations of tales and anecdotes of later ages, a large number contain material which also is to be found in some recensions of the *Nights*. For instance, Heinz

and Sophia Grotzfeld in their 1984 research guide have discussed a sixteenth-century manuscript now preserved in the Egyptian National Library (Taymūriyya, *qisās* 15) containing nine *Arabian Nights*-tales (Grotzfeld 1984: 83–86). More recently, David Pinault has emphasized “the ways in which the manuscript redactors were the heirs and recipients of a venerable storytelling lineage” (1992: 250). The longest manuscript taken into consideration by Pinault is a certain *Kitāb al-Ḥikāyāt al-‘ajība* (“Book of Marvelous Tales”), preserved in the Bibliothèque al-Hasania (al-Khizāna al-Ḥasaniyya) in Rabat, Morocco (*ibid.*: 252–53). Besides the occurrence of the story of the Ebony Horse (*faras al-abnūs*), this compilation shares its rather generic denomination with a fourteenth-century manuscript preserved in Istanbul (Ayasofya 3397; edited by Wehr 1956). Out of the 42 tales mentioned in the latter collection’s introduction, eighteen are contained in the first volume, the only one preserved. Out of these, four correspond directly to tales included in the *Nights* (Grotzfeld 1984: 75–82), and a fifth one, the tale of Sūl and Shumūl, is known both from a single manuscript, in which it is broken up into nights, as well as from the above-mentioned Egyptian manuscript (Seybold 1902; Schwab 1965; Grotzfeld 1984: 80–82; Chauvin 1892, 7: 107–12, no. 379<sup>bis</sup>).

The Istanbul *Kitāb al-Ḥikāyāt al-‘ajība* is an entertaining, though rather casual, compilation of tales of various genres: fairy-tales and tales about marvels, anecdotes and jocular tales, love stories and tales from Bedouin tradition. The often-quoted opinion that the collection presents a remnant of al-Jahshiyārī’s monumental compilation originates from an evaluation by the Arabic scholar Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid, and appears to be an enthusiastic overestimation rather than a balanced judgement based on sound research (al-Munajjid 1959; Wehr 1965: x–xii; Spies 1960: 157; Grotzfeld 1984: 75 sq.; Irwin 1994: 82). Robert Irwin, in his recent companion to the *Arabian Nights*, has justly stressed the importance of this compilation and its share of erotic tales (1994: 163), though the only tale he discusses in detail, the “Story of the Forty Girls”, is, in my opinion, not the collection’s most striking one, nor is its content completely extraneous to the *Nights* (*ibid.*: 83; cf. Wehr 1965: vii; Chauvin 1892, 5: 202, in no. 117). The Istanbul manuscript, though edited by Hans Wehr in 1956, has only recently been translated in full, a fact which

appears to support its prevalent evaluation as a random collection.<sup>2</sup> While German translations of various tales have been presented by Wehr (1959), Otto Spies (1961), Max Weisweiler (1965) and Sophia Schwab (1965), two tales have, notably, attracted so much attention as to be translated twice: The “Story of the Forty Girls” (Spies 1961; Weisweiler 1965: 69–89), already mentioned, and the “Story of ‘Arūs al-‘arā’is” (Wehr 1959: 5–64; Weisweiler 1965: 121–90). It is this second tale which I propose to discuss here, as an exemplary narrative of female subversiveness.

Hans Wehr characterized the “Story of ‘Arūs al-‘arā’is” (henceforth: AA) as “the strangest piece in the collection” (1956: 163), while Max Weisweiler termed it an “unusual masterpiece” (1965: 327); al-Munajjid even praised it as the “most beautiful masterpiece of traditional Arabic storytelling” (1959). The story is about a woman who, as the result of a powerful planetary constellation at the time of her birth, is fated to become the quintessential incarnation of the wiles of women, eventually becoming responsible for the death of several hundred, if not several thousand, human beings. But even though, at first glance, the story offers a strong example of the dominant vein of ancient and medieval misogynous narratives, it also suggests other readings. Beyond moral evaluation, these result in interpreting the female protagonist as an exemplary expression of femininity, or—in an even wider understanding—“as woman as can be”.

In terms of structure, the story of AA is the collection’s most complex item, being composed of altogether five narrative layers with interrelated points of reference. The frame story tells of a king whose beloved daughter has died, leaving him in sorrow and distress. Eventually, a blind man suggests that he may console him by telling him a story which, as he promises, will make the king “hate perfidious, malicious, and faithless women and girls and cause him to rejoice at his daughter’s death” (148). The blind man introduces the story’s second layer by telling about his grandfather, who was once the chief of police in a certain town. The third layer is initiated by a one-eyed prisoner about to be released, who actually implores the said chief of police to keep him imprisoned so that he will be protected from the deceits of his evil wife. Embedded within this man’s narrative about his previous experience is the fourth layer, which consists of AA’s

narrative about her past; this in turn comprises several short narratives related by characters whom she met (the fabulous creature Mibqār; the shipwrecked youth who recounts his erotic adventures; al-Khulayfi‘ ibn al-Munkadir who has constructed a miraculous casket; the fabulous beings called Daran; the horse-tailed people). All of the inserted tales are subsequently closed, and the general frame is terminated by mentioning the listening king’s astonishment and wonder, which make him invite the blind storyteller’s continuous presence at court. The change of perspective caused by the various narrators, most of whom relate their experience in the first person, contributes to the story’s attractiveness. Except for the short introductory passage, in which the one-eyed prisoner recounts his being shipwrecked and first meeting AA, the narrative focuses on her as the main protagonist or initiator of action. Recounted from her perspective, the story develops as follows.

AA is the daughter of a breathtakingly beautiful slave woman and a powerful king who resides in the magnificent sea-shore town of al-Madraba. After ten months of pregnancy, AA is born as a lovely child and, because of her beauty, is named by her father ‘*Arūs al-‘arā’is*, literally “The bride of brides” (i.e. “the perfect bride”, or more generally “the quintessential woman”). But the king’s ten astrologers inform him of the evil fate attached to the girl: she has been born under the same astrological configuration which existed when Adam was expelled from Paradise, when Cain killed Abel, when Abraham was thrown into the fire (Grünbaum 1893: 90 sqq.), and when God destroyed the people of Lot, Hūd,<sup>3</sup> and Sālih (Koran 7: 65–84; cf. Stetkevych 1996). They agree that the girl is fated to be more tricky, evil, false, and adulterous than any other human being. Even though the astrologers predict that she will eventually be responsible for the destruction of the king and his city (cf. Thompson 1955: M 356.3), the king does not heed their advice, and has the astrologers decapitated and crucified. Lovingly, he educates his daughter who reads literature and poetry, studies the sciences and grammar, compiles books, and is explicitly mentioned as having come to know all kinds of stories (*ahādīth wa-akbbār*).

As a mature girl, AA is engaged to her younger cousin. Agitated by the seductive accounts told her by her favorite girl servant, however, she falls in love with a young man whom she has visit her

secretly, disguised as a woman (cf. *ibid.*: K 1321.1). Shortly before the marriage to her cousin she conceives a plan to disguise the loss of her virginity. Her lover is told to organize some hundred young men-at-arms who are to abduct and rape the women-only party organized by AA in order to celebrate her wedding. Meanwhile, AA has instructed her mother to inform her father the next morning that the party has been assaulted. According to her plan, her lover and all of his friends are killed by the king's men. However, AA's vicious scheme is later revealed by her intimate servant, and the king repudiates her. Though AA still manages to marry her younger cousin, his feelings towards her soon change when he is convinced of her evil character by the arguments of a pious old woman.

In order to retaliate for her father's repudiation, as well as for her younger cousin's neglect, AA instigates her elder cousin—who had originally been the legitimate heir to the throne—to overthrow the king and kill his courtiers, who have assembled in order to celebrate her recovery from a feigned illness. When, later, her elder cousin has ascended the throne and has married her, his mother soon convinces him of her evil character, whereupon he abandons AA and has her confined in a secluded building. In order to liberate herself, AA makes love to her guardian and has her mother procure a peculiar poison, with which she kills both her lover and her husband, who hurries to the scene when informed. In the subsequent political turmoil, her husband's son is vanquished by the returned younger cousin, who claims the throne. AA finds refuge with a black slave whom, after ten days of intimacy, she strangles, since—as she states herself—she “became impatient and could not stand him any longer” (179). AA is caught, and her younger cousin, who is now the king, has her locked up in a large casket that is abandoned in the sea. Eventually she is rescued by a black demon who becomes her companion and lover, and who travels around while keeping her inside a glass casket (cf. Aarne/Thompson 1961: type 1426).

On her initiative the demon, using a certain combustible sand, destroys her father's city and burns all its inhabitants. Later, AA secretly makes love to a shipwrecked youth. When he tells her one day that he had tried to make love to a mermaid, who in retribution had him severely mutilated, AA makes her demon companion kill him. Though she tries to destroy the demon by making him fight against

another powerful demon, he crushes and kills his enemy. When one day a group of seafaring merchants stops at her island, AA asks them to take her with them and, while her demon companion is away, agrees to make love to them, one after the other. She makes love to two of them; but as she is about to meet the third one, the demon arrives and kills the whole party of some three hundred people. AA herself succeeds in convincing the demon that she has been raped. A second attempt at destroying the demon by making him confront the fabulous Daran, a rat-like demon-eating species, also fails, since the demon, remembering a casual remark made earlier by AA in connection with his narrative about the Daran, throws himself into the water and drowns the Daran. As the demon later informs her, the only threat to his life now remains any object on which the name of God is written and which, placed on his forehead, would cause his death.

This is when AA meets the teller of the story's third layer, who has been shipwrecked on her island. She makes love to him, then uses his ring on which God's name is written to paralyze the demon, and cuts the demon's throat. Even though she warns the man not to trust her, and reveals to him all her previous experience, he is so overwhelmed by her beauty that he insists on their travelling back together. From the demon, AA had learned how to reach a neighboring island, which is regularly visited by a fisherman who would come there to collect pearls and mother-of-pearl. They steal the fisherman's boat, and since it only holds two passengers, AA abandons the fisherman on the island, where he is sure to starve to death.

Once back home, although he is reunited with his first wife, on the advice of his mother the man marries AA as a second wife. When, later, he remembers her story and starts to neglect her, she develops a scheme for revenge. By using a drug acquired during the time she spent with the demon, she promises to cure the king's daughter, but instead deliberately blinds her. Although AA manages to escape, her husband is severely punished, and the king threatens to blind him; but upon hearing his story, the king concedes to extracting only one of his eyes, and bans him from living in his city. Together with his mother, his first wife, and his son, the man eventually reaches another city, where he manages to establish a modest existence. One day, his mother happens to meet AA in the bazaar

and, since AA claims that she had used the wrong drug by accident, the mother trusts her again. By means of expensive presents AA introduces the mother to the court, where she soon regularly spends her time entertaining the king's daughter. AA puts a drug into the princess's food which causes her to become pregnant without having had intercourse; as the pregnancy becomes obvious, AA tricks her husband, disguised as a woman, into escorting his mother. Her husband is discovered, held responsible for impregnating the princess, and imprisoned. The king kills his daughter in wrath, dies of grief that very night, and the man spends a whole year in prison. When he is finally set free, his mother has already met AA, who accuses him of having assaulted her, so he is jailed for another year. When he is set free again, she pretends that he is her son and accuses him of attempted incest (cf. Thompson 1995: K 2111.5). He is whipped and sentenced to a third year in jail, and when he is finally set free again, he relates his story.

The chief of police informs the king, and the king decides to execute AA. She accuses her (last) husband of murder and delivers him up to be executed, since a dead body is found buried in his garden. As AA is about to be thrown into a pit filled with fire, she tricks her one-eyed husband into approaching her, throws him in first and only then jumps after him. The water in which she had performed her last ablution is, in compliance with her wish, poured into the fire. It happens to be contaminated with a combustible ingredient she had inserted unnoticed, and when poured into the fire produces a huge flame which kills the servant and sets the king's palace ablaze; all his courtiers are burnt to death, leaving him as sole survivor.

The dominant evaluation of AA in previous scholarship is that of a tricky and mischievous woman who not only becomes the reason for many deaths but does not hesitate to commit murder herself. Hans Wehr has pointed out that although AA consciously realizes the depravity of her actions, she is compelled to succumb to the exigencies of her preordained fate. She experiences neither doubt nor passion, and is solely a tool of destiny as decreed by God. Wehr concludes that the narrative illustrates the extreme negative consequences of the fundamental Islamic belief that human life is ruled by determinism, from which no one can escape, and feels tempted to link the narrative to a nihilistic concept (1956: 163).

Max Weisweiler, who analyzed the story in a lengthy interpretation, characterizes it as a novel about a woman who requites any man's love with death, and who, in order to kill any particular person, consciously takes into account the deaths of many other people. Weisweiler speculates that the creative descriptions of craftiness and cruelty within the story originate from the author's personal experience, and sympathizes with the author as a presumed husband who—as he expressly states—might bitterly regret having wasted many years of his life for the sake of an inferior woman (“ein Urteil des Dichters . . . der vielleicht in Reue und Verbitterung auf viele an ein minderwertiges Weib verschwendete Lebensjahre zurückschaut”; 1965: 323–27, at 323). In general, Weisweiler supplies the misogynous tale with a misogynist interpretation. He analyzes AA as a spirited and talented woman incapable of true feelings. Wily to the extreme, deceitful and hypocritical, faithless and ungrateful, cold and vindictive, she employs her intelligence and her female charm only in order to reach her goal. Even though Weisweiler concedes to AA the conscious appreciation of her own wickedness, from his point of view her first violation of the social code by consequence leads to an avalanche of ever more hideous crimes, powered by her increasing demand for protection as well as revenge.

The Arabic scholar Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid, who prefaced his popular edition of the story with a number of speculative remarks concerning its origin, has opined that AA constitutes the Arabic counterpart of the Greek Medea. He interprets AA as the model representation of a woman who “lives to do evil and who does not do anything but evil” (1980: 17). Since al-Munajjid rejects the idea that a strong belief in the inevitability of fate constitutes an indigenous Arabic phenomenon and, moreover, regards the specific female character of AA as fundamentally opposed to the Arab spirit, he favors the idea of an adapted Arabic version of the Medea-myth. This, as he enthusiastically states, would serve to confirm the long-disputed argument that Greek literature was known to and adapted by the Arabs.<sup>4</sup>

Given these strong interpretations, one wonders whether the story of AA deserves any other reading. Clearly, her behavior contradicts any universally accepted social code and is heavily objectionable from a moral point of view. Yet, as Peter Molan (in his “commentary on the ethics of violence”) has pointed out, tales like the one



analyzed here “are not the conveyance for a moral message. In that sense, they are ‘amoral” (1978: 240). Molan argues that this does not imply “the lack of an ethical framework or point of view; and, even more to the point, it in no way precludes an acute and often cynical perception of the relationship to ethical principles of such human foibles and weaknesses as self-righteousness, self-delusion, greed and hypocrisy” (*ibid.*: 240). Analyzing the tales of Sindbād the sailor, Molan repeatedly finds that the protagonist commits “gratuitous acts of violence” (*ibid.*: 244). Even though Sindbād “himself is aware of the indefensibility of the actions for which he is apologizing,” he repeatedly “justifies his unjustifiable murders” (*ibid.*: 245). However, even though Sindbād commits crimes comparable to those committed by AA, his action is judged differently by both the teller and the audience. Molan argues for an obvious “disparity between ethics and action” consisting in “the suppression of the merchant’s ethical sensibility in his pursuit of material gain” (*ibid.*: 247). Yet there is no doubt that in Sindbād’s case, the ultimate success justifies violence and even murder as legitimate means of pursuing one’s goal.

Why then is AA’s behavior judged differently? Does her gender predispose this different evaluation? An analysis such as Weisweiler’s, with its obvious misogynist tendency, appears to give an easy answer to these questions. Yet much of Weisweiler’s commentary bespeaks his own bias and is easily unmasked. For instance, he analyzes the story as containing a frame constituted by AA causing crimes just after her birth (i.e., when the astrologers are executed because of her, even before she has reached a state of personal responsibility) and after her death (when the combustible liquid causes great damage). Moreover, he sees AA’s character having been predisposed by her mother, who, he argues, is by the later course of action proven to be no less vicious than AA herself (this refers to her mother’s having procured the poison she uses to kill her guardian and her elder cousin). What then, one wonders, of her father’s predisposition, not alluded to by Weisweiler? After all, the story leaves no doubt that her father acquired the throne illegitimately, having seized power by pushing aside AA’s elder cousin after his own brother’s death.

Weisweiler’s interpretation is further to be linked to the misogynist thread dominant not only in European narrative literature since

antiquity (cf. Moser-Rath 1987: 121–28) but also present in medieval Arabic literature. The lesson the blind narrator of the story promises to teach to the king who mourns for his beloved daughter is an old one. A number of medieval Arabic anecdotes underline the popular opinion that girls should not be educated (Marzolph 1992: t. 2, no. 529), and numerous tales, such as those of the popular *Sindbādnāma* (Perry 1960; Belcher 1987), testify to the wiliness of women, allegedly nurtured by a never-ending stream of invention firmly rooted in female character (cf. Malti-Douglas 1991: 49–66; Merguerian and Najmabadi 1997). Weisweiler knows that the depiction of a woman as a morally decrepit character is by no means an exception in medieval Arabic literature; he also refers to a story in al-Nuwayrī's *Nihāyat al-arab* in which a sexually obsessed woman knowingly makes love to her own son, and later marries him to the daughter resulting from their incestuous union (1954: 295–301, no. 117).

And yet, when linked to social conditions, a detailed analysis of the reasons for any of AA's crimes reveals a different picture. AA's crime record is considerable, and she herself makes us understand that what we hear is by no means complete (Wehr 1956: 198). Not taking into consideration the significant material and physical damage caused at various points, the following is a condensed survey of her capital crimes, mentioning the amount of victims and the underlying motivation (numbers refer to pages in the Arabic text).

- (1) 163: roughly one hundred young men are killed through AA's strategem to disguise the loss of her virginity.
- (2) 166: many courtiers are killed in strife in retaliation for her father's repudiating her.
- (3) 169: a guardian is killed by AA who has been instrumental in killing her husband.
- (4) 169: her husband is killed by AA in retaliation for neglect.
- (5) 170: many people are killed because of the struggle over succession.
- (6) 170: a black slave is killed by AA out of boredom.
- (7) 172: all the people of her city are killed by the demon on AA's behalf, in retaliation, because they are "evil".
- (8) 176: a shipwrecked lover is killed by the demon on AA's instigation, out of jealousy and hurt pride.

- (9) 178: a rival demon is killed by AA's demon companion, as she had wished that he be destroyed.
- (10) 181: roughly three hundred merchants are killed by the demon because some of them made love to her (to which she had consciously acceded in order to be taken along with them).
- (11) 185: the demon is killed by AA because he had held her captive.
- (12) 187: a fisherman is delivered up to starvation by AA and her new companion because they needed his boat in order to escape.
- (13) 195: a princess is killed by her father because AA had made her pregnant in order to have the king punish her husband.
- (14) 199: a merchant (AA's last husband) is killed by the king because AA accused him of murder.
- (15) 199: a person buried in her husband's garden has been allegedly killed by AA's last husband (no reason specified).
- (16) 200: AA's former husband is killed by AA, in retaliation.
- (17) 201: a servant and courtiers are killed posthumously, through AA's ruse, in retaliation.

Out of these victims, at least five (nos. 3, 4, 6, 11, 16) are killed by AA's direct initiative, either by poison (3, 4), through strangling (6), by having their throat cut (11), or by being thrown into a blazing fire (16). Leaving aside, for a moment, destiny as the ultimate reason for AA's actions, it appears promising to take a closer look at the underlying motivations. In the reading proposed here, AA is a strong and ambitious, though vulnerable, heroine, who aims at nothing more objectionable than being the woman she is: beautiful, passionate, and longing for her share in sexuality, tenderness and protection. Her first criminal action, notably, does not originate from her own initiative but is induced by her favorite servant's telling her stories about love and tender relationships at a time when her father has already arranged for her marriage. Since AA is a strong character, she does not surrender easily to social requirements, and instead schemes to find ways to have her will. Up to this point, even Weisweiler is ready to excuse her, since she has succumbed to a persistently seductive pressure and has, unwillingly, fallen deeply in love (1965: 324).

Excluding the few exceptions in the above list in which murder is either instrumental or appears gratuitous, most of the ensuing

crimes result from a development forced upon AA in consequence of her initially innocent love-affair: social conventions force her to disguise the loss of her virginity, and being a princess, she is moreover forced to rely on an exceptional plot involving a large number of members of her own social class. Besides, the story does not make the slightest mention of the female participants in her bachelor-girl's party objecting to making love to her lover's friends. While this again can be read as expressing female immorality, it may also be understood as underlining AA's premarital sexual relationship as perfectly normal within her own social peer-group. However violent, AA's first criminal action might have been her last one, had her father understood and accepted it as an inevitable and justified form of protest against the social conventions framing AA's sexuality, and as constituting the ultimate expression of her femininity. Yet her father, as well as most human men she is subsequently married to, repudiates her, thus hurting her pride, and in her own perception from then on he constitutes a constant threat to her safety and well-being. Only occasionally does AA succumb to self-righteousness, such as when she kills the black slave who had protected her or when she delivers her last husband to be executed with no apparent reason except his inability to protect her from punishment.

But who is to blame AA for succumbing to her own weakness? Does AA have to be strong and morally unflinching while most other, notably male, characters in the story are allowed to indulge in their "human foibles"? Most of the men she is surrounded with are at least as weak as she is: her father does not have the courage to accept fate's decree and prefers to execute ten innocent astrologers and to rebel against the inevitability of facing destiny, instead of following the advice he had received—a fatal disregard for which, in an act of (divine) justice, he is later annihilated. And the man who rescues AA from the island after she has killed the demon does so against her own explicit advice, and succumbs to his own desire after a long process of ambiguous consideration. The only two persons who do not reproach AA for her behavior are her mother and the demon; the former constitutes the reason for her existence, and the latter is non-human and thus beyond human considerations. The men in the story are, on the other hand, not only weak in character and obsessed with their apprehension of AA as an attractive sexual object, but also

retain access to means of exerting power: her father has acquired the throne by force, and throughout the story armed clashes and the brutal exertion of superiority appear to be perfectly normal expressions of the male attitude towards solving conflicts. In a world thus constructed, a woman aiming to be "as woman as can be" would need to have to take recourse to subversive action, not necessarily in order to overthrow the existing order but only in order to undermine, evade or outwit the moral and ethical principles of a male-dominated society so as to be herself.

On the other hand, even though in a first reading of the story AA appears to be not only the dominant but also the most active character, a closer analysis shows that most of her actions result from a reaction to circumstances. Her schemes to destroy and kill do not emerge from personal viciousness. On the contrary: she offers her counterparts a fair chance to listen to her and to understand her character. After she kills the demon and before she escapes, with the story's main male character, to the human world, she relates her story. In so doing, AA is not merely a "femme-récit" (cf. Todorov 1971) whose identity is conveyed by narrating her story; by showing her true self, she strips herself of all previous conjectures and assumptions, thus enabling the man to form his own opinion, and offering him a unique opportunity to accept her as the sensitive, vulnerable, and contradictory human being she is.

At this point it is revealing to have another look at AA's name. "Bride of brides" may not only be understood as "the perfect woman"; it also contains a strong signal which indicates AA's expected social role: the denomination "bride" defines her role in some future marriage, becoming a man's sexual mate, wife, and mother of children. At the same time, the denomination disregards her identity as an individual woman, and by voicing social expectations denies the potential possibility that an attractive woman might choose other ways to live than being a man's perfect bride, the ultimate satisfaction of male projections. AA does not reject sexuality, nor does she avoid men. Yet she never acts in fulfillment of anybody's individual or social expectations, but only out of her own choice. Even so, in multiple ways she remains a product of male fantasy since, after all, her sexual activity does not result in the obvious biological consequence of her producing offspring, as she never becomes pregnant. While in

a misogynist interpretation this might be understood as yet another expression of AA's narcissistic character, it may also be read as an invitation to men to confine sex to the actual act, to indulge in sexual activity without having to be responsible, or, in even more straightforward terms, to practise sex without guilt.

The above reading of the story of AA is not only provocative but strains the compatibility of the protagonists's action with any universally accepted moral code, however understandable or justifiable her actions might be. Moreover, to take up Molan's argument mentioned earlier, AA's action is not justified by ultimate success. Even though at times she appears to reach states of comparative peace and happiness, AA is always forced into reacting when being disregarded, treated in violation of her own free will, or challenged. In other words, it is not her shrewd character that causes her criminal action. Her rationale for action is her demand for social security and personal happiness, whose degree and ways to be attained she experiences as legitimate. Incidentally, the *Arabian Nights* contains a vaguely similar story about a cunning woman called "crafty Dalila" (Chauvin 1892, 5: 245–48, no. 147; Gerhardt 1963: 184–90). Without going into details of that story, for the present purpose it may suffice to summarize that Dalila, originally the daughter of a respectable member of society, also turns to criminal action when disregarded, albeit with a varying degree of violence. Contrary to AA, Dalila's legitimate request is eventually fulfilled, and thus her previous action becomes justified by her ultimate success. Out of the numerous negative female characters mentioned in mediaeval Arabic narrative literature, another particularly interesting, albeit minor one is Fāṭima "the turd" (Barth 1984: 14), Ma'rūf the cobbler's wicked wife in the final tale of the *Arabian Nights* (Walther 1987: 124–33; Sabbis 1999: 136–42).

A further dilemma in analyzing the various levels of understanding the story of AA is constituted by the narrator's perspective. In content, the story of AA is linked to other tales about wily and adulterous women, expressing a world view frequently regarded as originating from India. Though Otto Spies in his review of Wehr's translation is right in mentioning that many traits and motifs point in the direction of India, his opinion of a "doubtless Indian origin" appears unfounded (1960: 158). The inevitability of acting within

the frame determined by fate is a significant characteristic of the Islamic world view, and Weisweiler has demonstrated that similar tales of morally reprehensible women existed in medieval Arabic literature. The one motif in the story that is doubtless of Indian origin is that of the woman being kept in a box, which is also contained in the frame of the *Arabian Nights* (Chauvin 1892, 5: 190 sq., 8: 59, no. 24). Its essential idea is already known from an ancient Chinese translation of an originally Buddhist source (Wesselski 1925: 3–8, 185–87, no. 1; Horálek 1987). Other motifs, such as the final scene of burning, are also reminiscent of Indian sources. However, the spurious occurrence of Indian motifs does not constitute a decisive attestation of the story's origin, much less of the narrator's world view. But who is the narrator of the story of AA?

Again referring to Molan, we find the ethics prevalent in the Sindbād-stories linked to the outer frame story of the *Arabian Nights*: “As Sinbad justifies his unjustifiable murders, so does the king justify the unjustifiable murder of his wives by their potential infidelity” (1987: 245). In the same vein, were the story of AA part of the *Nights*, one might argue that it presents a mirror of that of king Shahriyār, picturing a woman who is so obsessed with her own self-perception that she regards murder as a legitimate means of action. The eventual “cost” of this action is obvious, and the narrator makes the audience aware by the course of events that AA will have to pay for it: any woman challenging the moral rules of society to a similar degree is doomed to perish. In this way, having linked the story of AA to the outer frame story of the *Arabian Nights*, it is useful to remember, albeit sketchily, some of the implications of the various levels of storytelling connected with the female narrator Shahrazād (Attar/Fischer 1991; Malti-Douglas 1991: 11–28; Sallis 1999: 85–107).

In the *Nights*, Shahriyār appears as the supreme ruler, commanding life and death, who readily falls victim to a (daring, yet stunningly simple) female ruse. By stimulating the ruler's curiosity, Shahrazād educates him without his noticing. From the perspective of a male narrator or audience, Shahrazād is the perfect threefold woman: she educates the king, she participates in his sexuality, and she shares his company; thus she is mother, whore, and friend (cf. Marzolph 1994: 95). The male she confronts is brutal and insensitive, and has

not only to be civilized and domesticated, but also to be distracted, so as to allow his own positive qualities to unfold. In the *Nights*, authors (who were certainly male) have a female narrator educate a male wrongdoer. Probably the best that one could extract from this tricky relationship for the rendering of gender roles in the frame story is a male longing for women to be like Shahrazād and a male inability to cope with the true multitude of female patterns of behavior. Shahrazād, like AA, acts subversively, since her ruse would not work if it were uncovered. Yet Shahrazād does not act for her own profit. Her goal is not to gain personal happiness, but to reform the king and save the country. For this social goal, she sacrifices her time, her talent, and her body.

AA, on the other hand, works solely for her own gain. Though she is certainly able to make a man as happy as can be, hers is not a social goal. And while sexuality in a man is justified as a call of nature, her own deliberate decisions to make love often taste of adultery and betrayal. In the story's moral, a woman living her female sexuality constitutes an imminent danger and threatens men's lives as well as (male defined) social order in general (Schulze 1988: 344). Remke Kruk has argued, in the context of the strong heroines of Arabic romances, that men are expected to indulge their sexual appetites, even though in so doing they might at times behave utterly ridiculously; on the other hand, women who unleash male sexual desire risk causing social disruption and provoke chaos, so that "woman's sexuality as a source of *fitna* has to be brought under control at whatever cost" (Kruk 1998: 114). Most of all, AA is depicted as a woman with a truly insatiable sexual appetite—a stereotype that on a psychological level might be understood as arising from the ambivalent attitude of men towards female sexuality, as well as an underlying male dread of inferiority, as expressed by such cases as the (unsolved) ancient question as to whether men or women experience greater pleasure in sex (Thompson 1995: J 99.1, T 2). Men like Sindbād are expected by society to accomplish the utmost in personal gain, and eventually have to pay, even if only by repressing their feelings of guilt—for which Sindbād compensates by giving alms and clothing widows and orphans (Molan 1987: 245). AA, on the contrary, is expected to surrender herself within the given rules of the male dominated society and, since she does not surrender, has



to bear the consequences of being judged as a negative character. The narrator, as well as the audience, of her story are certainly male, and besides the—albeit perverted—depiction of her independence, the story does not offer much in terms of identification to a female audience. Had a woman told the tale, it would certainly have developed differently. The way it is, AA's ultimate deliverance lies in death, since the gendered subversiveness forced upon her by societal codes fundamentally contradicts the ethics of her self-realization.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented in January 1999 at the workshop "Challenging the Established Order" organized in Leiden as part of the European Science Foundation program "Individual and Society in the Muslim World", atelier VI: "Images and Representations". I would like to thank the organizers and participants of the workshop for their numerous suggestions, some of which have been considered in the revised version.
2. A complete translation of the Istanbul manuscript, including the published translations (Wehr 1959; Spies 1961; Weisweiler 1965) as well as revised and new translations by S. Grotzfeld (formerly Schwab) and containing full comparative annotation by the present author has recently been published (Marzolph 1999).
3. Instead of *Thamūd* (as in Wehr 1956: 159; Wehr 1959: 18; Weisweiler 1965: 136), I propose to read *Hūd*, with the following arguments: The graphic shape of both words is similar; it is not necessary to quote the *Thamūd* separately, since they are already implicitly included in the mention of *Šāliḥ*; and, most important, *Hūd*, *Šāliḥ* and *Lot* are treated one after the other in the quoted Koranic passage.
4. A possible relationship between AA and Medea is outside of the present focus. Interested readers might consult recent studies such as McDermott (1989), Morse (1996), Kepetzi (1997), and Corti (1998).

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