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Between Form and Content: Narrative Typology, Metafiction and Ideology in *The Thousand and One Nights*

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Abstract: With few exceptions, narrative theory does not ordinarily consider the self-reflexive capacity of *The Thousand and One Nights* beyond its canonical instance of framing, and Arabic literary scholarship does not ordinarily engage with its narratological aspects. This article proposes a narratological approach for a systematic breakdown of story cycles through abstraction, partly by making use of computer programming language, in order to demonstrate the narrative typology in the *Nights*. It argues that repetitions, transpositions, substitutions, and reversals testify to tensions between the overt ideology of the text and the counter discourse that unsettles this logic, concealed in its poetics. The article thereby aims to bring some of the core concepts of narrative theory into dialogue with the *Nights* scholarship, and to contribute to a theoretical conversation about ideological critique in narrative analysis, particularly within the pre-modern storytelling tradition.

Zusammenfassung: Mit wenigen Ausnahmen hat sich die Theorie der Erzählforschung bisher selten mit den selbstreflektiven Inhalten aus *Tausendundeiner Nacht* auseinandergesetzt; die Analysen sind selten vom üblichen Kanon und dessen Rahmenbedingungen abgewichen. Das hängt auch damit zusammen, dass sich die arabische Literaturforschung nur selten mit narrativen Komponenten beschäftigt. Dieser Aufsatz erarbeitet einen narratologischen Ansatz, der durch Abstraktion der Erzähltypen einen systematischen Zugang ermöglicht, um die narrative Typologie in den tausend Nächten aufzuzeigen. Ich nehme an, dass Wiederholungen, Transpositionierungen, Substitutionen und Umkehrungen den Schlüssel zu den inhärenten Spannungen der Texte zwischen offensichtlicher Ideologie und Gegendiskurs darstellen; ihre Analyse zeigt Widersprüche auf, die in der Poetik der Texte verborgen sind. Das Ziel ist zum einen, einen Dialog zwischen den wichtigsten narrativen Theorien und der Forschung zum Textkorpus der Tausendundeiner Nacht zu eröffnen; zum

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anderen hoffe ich, zu einer theoretischen Diskussion zur ideologischen Kritik in der narrativen Analyse beizutragen, insbesondere innerhalb der vormodernen Erzähltradition.

1 Introduction

A devout writer of metafiction and a renowned admirer of the *Thousand and One Nights*, Jorge Luis Borges, in his essay *Partial Magic in the Quixote*, wrote:

Why does it disturb us that the map be included in the map and the thousand and one nights in the book of the *Thousand and One Nights*? Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the *Quixote* and Hamlet a spectator of *Hamlet*? I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators can be fictitious (Borges 2007, 186).

The essay is a short but insightful rumination about the nature of metafiction and Cervantes' "partial magic" in confusing the world of the reader and the world of the book, counterposing the real to the poetic. Borges, comparing *Quixote* with *The Thousand and One Nights* ("*The Nights*"), calls attention to the "curious danger" of these two texts: their protagonists are, at the same time, their readers. These works comprise many stories including, "monstrously" [*de monstruoso modo*] he adds, their own (Borges 2009, 2:47). The "danger" and "monstrosity" of this transgressive interpolation lie in its curious signifying process that generates infinite and circular self-referential meanings. In this sense, these texts produce a secondary semiotic frame, inverting the conventional relation between reality and mimesis, and unwrite their own story in a counter-story.

Why does it disturb the reader to acknowledge the fictiveness of a story, and being its reader, to imagine that she is part of that fiction? What kind of stories are more threatening than others in crossing the boundary between fact and fiction? And in conjunction with this, in a fiction that includes within itself its own reading, what is the structural function of the reader? This article considers these questions by exploring some of the vast possibilities the *Nights* offers for self-reflexive techniques that create a multi-voiced narrative. As Borges suggests, this pre-modern text is one of those books with a "monstrous" design that carries in itself its own counter-book. It shares many common interests with other works of metafiction: it takes pleasure in its storytelling and its form, creating a self-contained and self-reflexive structure. The modern reader accustomed to post-romantic and realist notions of authorship, authenticity, and originality, would be threatened by this monstrosity; but, once she moves past the fantastic that has come to define

the work today, she is left with a grotesque text that has no authority of the original text, but multiplicity of origins. This text has no individual author (or authorial function, for that matter), but several anonymous creators that span many eras and cultures. There is no singularity of the event, or of the writer's signature, but multiple events and sources. The text has a formless and limitless form, with a unique enclosing structure that allows for multiple styles, genres, and themes, all filtered through the frame's logic sequence. There is also no singularity to the text: you can add, drop, shuffle and reshuffle stories without disturbing its unity. Finally, the text is *fabulous*, in all senses of the term: wonderful, extraordinarily large and have no basis or interest in reality represented as such.¹

Then the question is, how do we respond to the narrative, structural and thematic complexities, or monstrosities, of the *Nights* without submitting it to the contemporary norms of readability? Borges' observations are helpful in relocating the *Nights* in contemporary studies of narrative art. In addition to his attention to the form and structure of the text, he considers it among essential works of metafiction, without reducing it to an oriental tale that features exotic stories. However, while postmodern fiction, including Borges' work, profusely alludes to Shahrazad and the frame-tale, the *Nights* mostly features in contemporary narrative practice and theory (in the West) either thematically or through its ingenious storyteller Shahrazad. In addition to giving short shrift to metafiction in different historical epochs and literary genres,² narrative theory's main interest in the structural study of the *Nights* is largely limited to the topic of frames and framing. Gérard Genette, for instance, mentions Shahrazad's suspension of her death with renewed narration as an example of metalepsis; Mieke Bal in her influential book on narratology uses the *Nights* as a classical example of narrative embedding; and more recently, Eric Berlatsky points attention to the number of frames available for the *Nights*, offering new avenues for a comparative reading of frames in different editions (Genette 1983; Bal 2009; Berlatsky 2009). Alongside this emphasis on the primary fabula, we find other studies that address the

1 It is important to note here that the *Nights* has its roots in a rich oral literary tradition and it seamlessly incorporates different genres. Arabic *hikâya* ("story," "narrative," "legend"), *adab* genre, sub-*hikâya* genres such as fables, *asmâr* ("evening stories") and *sîra* romances of chivalry are among different genres embodied in the text. See: "Literature, Narrative" In Marzolph/Leeuwen (2004) 622–624.

2 *The living handbook of narratology* refers to this gap in literature: "one relatively unexplored issue concerns the development of self-reflexive narrative forms over various periods of literary history, not only in narrative fiction, but also in other genres and media. Moreover, there are hardly any studies concerning functions that may be fulfilled by certain forms of self-reflexive narration in different historical epochs and literary genres" (Neumann and Nünning n.d.).

narrative complexities of the embedded clusters of stories. Tzvetan Todorov's *Les hommes-récit* analyses the embedded narrative structure of the *Nights* as a self-reflective and self-reproducing activity, Marie-Laure Ryan in her work on typology of narrative boundaries using computer language (a seminal work that informs this study) explores embedding in the *Nights* beyond the frame story (Todorov 1978; Ryan 1990). Scholars of Arabic literature and culture, among them Mia Gerhardt, Ferial Ghazoul, Daniel E. Beaumont, Sandra Naddaff, David Pinault, Muhsin al-Musawi and Elliott Colla, have offered compelling structural studies of the *Nights*, focusing on embedded stories and/or particular cycles (Gerhardt 1963; Ghazoul 1996; Naddaff 1991; Pinault 1992; Colla 2013; Todorov 1978, 33–46; Beaumont 2002; Al-Musawi 2005; 2009).

My aim in this paper is to complement and extend these works, and to relocate the *Nights* within the study of narrative theory and metafiction today by touching on some of its inherent self-reflexive elements and bringing to attention its secondary narrative and its semiotic function. This study does not treat the *Nights* as a fixed story collection but a living process of storytelling, nor does it contribute to its metonymic reduction to the second-degree narrator Shahrazad as the ultimate symbol for the text. The monster, in its formless form, is alive; and its face is not just that of its beautiful oriental narrator, but multiple masks that, like its characters, disguise and displace the story's closure. In the *Nights*, we can find a self-reflexive awareness between form and content, corresponding to a double interest in the ethical and the literary. Using narratological analysis, which is intrinsically tied to political and ideological critique as many critics have noted,³ I explore this relation between the ethical and the aesthetic values in the primary and the embedded text in the *Nights*. I suggest that we think of the *Nights* as a metafictional narrative, a fiction about fiction that presupposes a double movement, a double reading in which the narrative text is read simultaneously for its content (the stories) and its form (the storytelling). I will look at this double movement in the narrative structure in its various aspects, including doubling and simultaneity of different reader functions; multiple temporalities; dialectical thought patterns and multi-stranded system of values. The narratological examination of character functions, actantial networks, events and actions, temporal and spatial order, and interconnections between different levels of narration will eventually help us understand the relation between poetics and politics in the *Nights*. Repetitions, transpositions, substitutions, and reversals in this

³ The narrative and ideology literature can be classified into two schools: the Marxist literary criticism and narratology. As regards to texts that inform this study, for the former see: T. W. Adorno 1984; Jameson 1981; Benjamin 1968; Eagleton 2006; and for the latter see: Bal 2009; Fludernik 1996; Lanser 2018.

narrative nexus testify to tensions between the overt ideology of the text (that of the sovereign male human) and the counter discourse that unsettles this logic, which is concealed in its aesthetic thrust. My reading of the *Nights* thus aims to bring some of the core concepts of narrative theory into dialogue with the *Nights* scholarship and to contribute to a theoretical conversation about ideological critique in narrative analysis.⁴

2 Self-reflexivity and the *Nights*

With few exceptions, narrative poetics does not ordinarily consider the metafictional capacity of the *Nights* beyond its canonical instance of embedding, and in the *Nights* scholarship in the last decade, the focus seems to have moved away from the technical aspects of narration. Metafiction, as the capacity of fiction to reflect on its own status as fiction, refers to all self-reflexive narratives that structurally and/or thematically point to its own fictionality.⁵ In the 1980s, the concept gained traction in literary studies, particularly as a hallmark of postmodern fiction and it has been regarded as a narrative technique that succeeds realist and modernist fiction. However, the relatively recent emergence of theories of metafiction should not obscure the fact that pre and early modern corpus introduces many of the characteristics associated with this technique. While there are recent studies that focus on meta-narration and metafiction in early and pre-modern literature in Europe, the *Nights* remains largely unexplored in relation to the development of self-reflexive fiction.

Linda Hutcheon in her now classic work on metafiction, for instance, demonstrates the self-love and self-obsession of the novel genre from its beginnings, asserting that “unlike its oral forbearers, it is both the storytelling and the story told” (Hutcheon 1984, 10). She then traces the origins of self-reflexive prose back to *Don Quixote*. However, being first and foremost a book about storytelling, and with roots in oral tradition, the *Nights* is a text that has nur-

⁴ An important study on ideology and the *Nights* is Wen-chin Ouyang and Geert Jan van Gelder’s research project on “Genre Ideologies and Narrative Transformation.” A part of the project is the edited volume on the *Nights*, which brings together essays on transformation of the stories when they travel from one genre, culture, period or medium to another. As the scope of this article is limited to narratological typology in a standard edition, the study of “genre ideology” in different adaptations, versions and translations remains beyond its reach. Nonetheless, a conversation between these two models may open new venues for future studies on ideology and the *Nights* (Ouyang/Gelder 2014).

⁵ See: Hutcheon 1984; Hühn 2009, 204–211; Waugh 1984.

tured the novel genre in its narcissistic structure. We only need to look at the circulation of the earlier versions westward into medieval Spain and western Europe, and to the popularity of the *Arabian Nights* during the rise of Gothic fiction in the eighteenth-century Europe, to see how deeply the *Nights* shaped the novel form.⁶ Meanwhile, the recent scholarship on the *Nights* has largely focused on the contact of the tales with other cultures or its influence on contemporary Arabic literature, thereby moving in a more transnational direction. With the recent revival of scholarly interest in the text, there is a need for academic studies that encourage a dialogue between the *Nights* scholarship and contemporary literary and narrative theory. The *Nights* is undoubtedly one of the most influential pre-modern works that contributed to the evolution of the modern novel and metafiction, by virtue of the extraordinary pleasure it takes in its own structure and design.⁷

This, of course, requires us to go beyond the *Nights*' past treatment as an exotic and oriental folk tale in Western scholarship; and adapt a novel interpretive frame that goes beyond its popular status as centuries-old collection of tales dissociated from historical or political context. This conventional reception of the text reduces its self-conscious process to a mere product, although the process of storytelling is as intriguing as the stories themselves. At the diegetic level, the stories draw our interest to the product, greatly investing in the story told; while, at the extra-diegetic level, it demands its own structural reading, drawing our attention to the way the stories are told, embedded, doubled, and negated. Hence, the most distinctive metafictional aspect of the *Nights* is its process mimesis, in which representation of the storytelling process becomes the central product itself. The structural complexity and self-reference meet an equally compelling thematic design. As many critics have observed, the *Nights* is essentially a story about telling stories, in which narrating becomes an act like any other within the tales. Naddaff, in her study of the narrative structure of the tales, beautifully illustrates this idea with the calligraphy on the cover of Richard Burton's translation, in which the word *kitab* [book] initiates the calligram and enframes it, while the center is filled with calligraphic variations on the phrase (Naddaff 1991, 14). The *Nights* is composed of books within the book, a monumental meta-story that takes itself as its subject, a self-generating and self-sustaining narrative device. It reflects upon itself as a fiction and in so doing, it considers the question of fiction, its nature, and its characteristics. As a meta-story, it contains in itself its own aesthetic theory.

⁶ See: Johnson, Maxwell, and Trumpener 2007; Irwin 2013.

⁷ For a general overview of self-reflexive techniques in the *Nights*, see: Rosenthal 1990.

What, then, is the treatise of the *Nights* on the nature of fiction? One could argue that it is the aesthetics of repetition, ellipses, and displacement; or the ontological assertion that art equals life, as famously observed by Todorov; or the pure pleasure in its self-referential universe of fiction. Here, I would like to offer one that explores how Shahrazad's fabricated illusions paradoxically explores realities, and the social and political implications of the narrative voice. In order to stop a despotic king from killing a virgin every day, the storyteller keeps the king in suspense, and herself, as well as other women, alive. Beyond the metaphorization of the ontological question mentioned above – that is, 'narro ergo sum,' 'I narrate, therefore, I am'⁸ – the *Nights*' thematization of storytelling is a commentary on the origins and nature of the art of fiction, where ethics and poetics, ideology and art form come together.

The narrator-writer is a compensatory witness to acts of great violence, the massacre of young women at the hands of a mad king. In her extremely precarious position as the next victim, she takes this act of brutality and turns it into art, weaving it into a complex web of stories, in which the same acts return in the form of poetry, music and tales. Having won a temporary concession, on her marriage and death bed, Shahrazad embodies the ultimate vulnerability of the female body, which she replaces with a fantasy. The brutality and injustice are turned into art of fiction, which gives the artist the capacity to express loss, tale by tale, retelling, revising, masking, and unmasking it. The source of the *Nights*' poetics is the record of the king's violence, and that of an original violence that comes before his. Its poetic treatise is not that of Orpheus' loss, which is commonly held as the metaphor for creative sublimation and artistic origins.⁹ It rather evokes the loss of Philomela and Arachne, that of abduction, rape and torture suffered at the hands of corrupt authority.¹⁰ Shahrazad composes her tales to transform violence, pain, and threats of rape and murder into an artwork that, just like Philomela's song and Arachne's tapestry, demystifies the kings as demons and beasts.¹¹

8 Ghazoul calls this 'the nocturnal incognito' as part of the tales' rhetorical code, which she understands as the text's tendency for self-reflection. Ghazoul (1996) 36.

9 For this influential interpretation of the myth, see Maurice Blanchot's *Le regard d'Orphée* (Blanchot 1988, 179–184).

10 In Greek mythology, Philomela was abducted and raped by Tereus, king of Thrace. He cut her tongue and abandoned her. She was turned into a nightingale, known for her beautiful melancholy songs. Arachne was a gifted weaving artist. She was punished and changed into a spider by goddess Minerva for transgressing her authority. One can argue that Ovid in *Metamorphoses* uses these myths as meta-commentary on his own poetics (Ovid 2004).

11 Shahrazad as a proto-feminist figure in a male oriented culture has been the subject of many remarkable studies, including but not limited to (Grossman 1980; Fedwa 1997; Enderwitz 2004).

3 The Narrative System in *The Thousand and One Nights*

In order to analyse the narrative system in the *Nights*, we need to revise our understanding of framing as a mere story-telling device. Unlike, for instance, other famous frame-tale narratives such as *Decameron* or *The Canterbury Tales*, the relation of the embedded narratives to the overall text in the *Nights* is recursive: its embedded parts require the application of the whole. It's a narrative model that allows a recursive application of its constitutive features, creating potentially infinite number of 'child frames' with a system of ever-increasing complexity. This complexity does not merely belong to the modal structure or, in Ryan's terms, "story grammar" of the *Nights*. It is also present in its discursive and semiotic systems, underlying critical threads that contradict and counteract the primary level of meaning. For instance, in the stories and narrative cycles that follow the frame story, particularly those that are temporally closer to the first night, the ordinary violence (i. e., death threat) and the ontological association between art and life (i. e., storytelling buys life) are thematically sustained. This relation between the primary narrative and the enframed stories is not merely explanatory: Shahrazad's stories do not explain why the primary disequilibrium, that is, the wife's committing adultery with a slave, has happened; nor do they demonstrate the injustice of the king's punishment. The primary and embedded relation is not that of instruction, as some critics claim; the stories do not merely reorient Shahrayar's desire, nor do they instruct him not to kill.¹² On the contrary, they further complicate these questions. The implied meta-commentary does not draw back to didactic platitudes and it resists being sewn up into a neat interpretive account.

In order to analyse this complex structure in narratological terms, I use Mieke Bal's tripartite distinction between narrative, story and fabula; and between the three agents that function in these three layers – the narrator, the focaliser and the actor.¹³ The fabula consists of a series of events that are logically and chronologically organized and of actors who experience or initiate these events. A story is a fabula that is ordered in a particular way depending on focus, interest, and ideology. A narrative text is the story that is told, that is converted into signs and conveyed to recipients in a particular medium. The narrator who 'utter' these

For a comparative reading of Ovidian stories of Philomela and Procne, and Shahrazad, see: Rowe 2014.

¹² See: Daniel Beaumont for a compelling analysis of desire in the frame story based on a psychoanalytic reading.

¹³ For similar models in classical narratology see Chatman, Herman and more recently Fludernik (Chatman 1980; Herman 2004; Fludernik 2009).

signs cannot be identified with the writer. The necessity of this distinction will become clearer, if we reconsider the frame-embedded relation just mentioned. It may seem that the embedded stories aim to seduce the king and postpone the ultimate act of killing indefinitely. After all, the narrative act of Shahrazad is the central event of the fabula in the primary text and the symbolic function of this act is enchantment. But, once we move from the fabula to the story and the narrative level, the function of this act gains new meanings. What seems to be a loose relationship between the primary and the embedded texts gradually becomes an elaborate system of narrative modelling. This three-layered distinction allows us to untangle different strands in a multi-voiced narrative and brings the reader in all three levels into its interpretive framework. The doubleness of meaning in the *Nights* depends on the reader's interpretation, whether as an agent in the fabula (e. g., King Yunnan as a bad reader in the first child-frame or Dinarzad as the reader of Shahrazad's encoded signs); an aspect of the story (e. g., reader experience and manipulation); or an element on the narrative level (e. g., the interpreter of the narrative text). Finally, the three-layer form facilitates abstraction with which fabulas can be summarized and paraphrased in such a way that reveals relations among and between these layers.

The method in breaking down the *Nights* according to this narratological model includes comparing and contrasting the elements and aspects of the fabula, the story and the text through abstraction. In order to demonstrate the narrative typology in the *Nights*, I (liberally) make use of computer programming language, particularly Python, known for its easy readability. The mode of analysis here owes its premise to Ghazoul's study, in which she aims "to construct a model with which we can comprehend the complexity of the narrative" and "a model of symbolic economy" (10, 18). Here, I provide a systematic breakdown of some story cycles, an examination of metafictional elements in the relation between form and content, and finally an ideological analysis that complicates and contradicts binarisms that has come to define the narrative analysis of the *Nights*. I use the Muhsin Mahdi edition of the *Nights* based on a fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript. This collection is the oldest one and contains only 282 nights. Scholars of Arabic literature consider this manuscript the archetypal text of the *Nights* and commend Mahdi's edition for preserving its original oral character while refraining from "forcing the text to assume a 'literary' guise as every past editor has done" (Naddaff 1991, 4). Husain Haddawy's English translation is in line with Mahdi's coherent and precise work, without added layers of adornment or enhancement.¹⁴

¹⁴ See the translator's introduction. Haddawy states that "the failure of past translations lies in assuming the work to be other than what it was intended to be, a collection of tales told to produce aesthetic pleasure in the Arabic reader" (Mahdi 1995, xxv).

I have chosen the first three story cycles due to their proximity to the frame story, their similarity among different manuscripts and finally due to space restrictions of an article.

Let us now take a look at the narrative structure of the initial part in the frame story:

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1. Frame Story: ${}_1[\infty$ **External Narrator (EN)** relates
 - 1.1. ${}_2[\mathbf{Man}_1$ (*#actor, king, Shahzaman, brother of Shahrayar, object of action $A_1 =$ cheating/deception*) witnesses his **Woman** $_1$ (*#actor, wife of M_1 , subject of action*) sleeping with a **Slave** (*#actor, kitchen boy, subject of action*). **Theme** $_1 =$ jealousy/envy. Location: palace, inside.
 - 1.2. **M_2** (*#actor, king, Shahrayar, brother of M_1*) repeat **$A_1 =$ Woman** $_2$ (*#actor, wife of M_2 , subject of A_1*) commits adultery with **S_2** (*#Mas'ud, outsider*). Difference in repetition = multiplication of the act with multiple actors (10 W's and 10 S's) and cross-dressing. Location: palace, garden, inside.
 - 1.3. **M_1** and **M_2** go on a quest for finding someone with greater misfortune than theirs. **Theme** $_2 =$ quest for a story; **M_3** (*#actor, Demon, black, object of A_1*) repeat **$A_1 \rightarrow W_3$** (*#actor, captive of M_3*) commits adultery with **$M_1 + M_2$** . Difference: **W_3** is motivated by **Theme** $_3 =$ unjust punishment. Location: meadow by the sea, outside the city.
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Fig. 1: Typology of the Primary Fabula I

The story of the brothers Shahrayar and Shahzaman is fairly well-known and analysed by many critics in different forms, and therefore will not be addressed here in detail. What one immediately notices in this presentation is the actantial network, that is, classes of actors that share certain characteristic qualities. Actor is a structural position in the fabula and so far, there seems to be two actants in 1.1. and 1.2., Actants #1 is men of authority who become objects of A_1 , cheating and Actants #2 women and slaves, subjects of A_1 . These networks function within another classification: man-king, woman-wife, and slaves, hierarchically classified in this order.¹⁵ W_1 therefore not only initiates the main action that sets stories moving with her infidelity, but she also tips off the status-quo further by not observing the class hierarchy. Shahrayar's story, doubling the previous one, disturbs social principles even further by multiplying the offenders by ten and specifying the male offenders' race (black slaves). The black slave is clearly the opposite of

¹⁵ For studies on gender and the figure of slave, see: Beaumont 2002; Shamma 2017.

the king, which makes the act of infidelity even more shocking. In addition to this demonstration of social stratum, moral standards upheld by the text are also established through focalization, the vision through which elements are presented. Although the story is relayed by an external narrator, the focaliser is Shahzaman (M_1) and later Shahrayar (M_2), who doubles his brother not only as a character and actor, but also as the focaliser. The repeated scandalous acts are told through the eyes, i. e., within the interpretive framework, of the Actants #1. The act of Shahrayar's wife and Mas'ud is repeated three times, first when Shahzaman sees it, second when he relays it to his brother and third when they both witness it. While the second one is short, with the external narrator's meta-textual comment "there is no point in repeating [it]," the third repetition is somewhat different because this time we see what Shahrayar sees, and we witness a brief and erotic dialogue between the lovers (7). The text therefore orients us within the dominant social discourse and naturalizes the vision of the patriarch.

The frame of values informing the narrative at the beginning is very clear: the strict hierarchy between genders, classes and races are to be respected at all costs; women and slaves are less than human (the category defined as Arab men of power) and therefore morally inferior to (hu)men; women are to be put under lock and key in order to control their desires and so on. We, as readers, are expected to participate in this world view. In fact, focalization hardly changes throughout the *Nights*, even when the narrator is a woman (as in the *Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies*, in which gender roles are reversed) or a lower-class character (as in the *Story of the Fisherman and the Demon*). The reader therefore watches the world with the eyes of men of authority and, in principle, is inclined to accept this vision, which is only the cursory reading experience the *Nights* offers. As will be discussed in detail below, the *Nights* sustains this dominant ideology particularly through focalization, characterization, and actor functions, while simultaneously providing signs that contradict this vision. The reader is in fact invited to engage with the textual other and to a double reading of its content and its form.

Let us look at 1.3. to illustrate this point: as many critics have pointed out, the kings assume the role of the black slave in this story by committing adultery with the demon's captive. The main act of committing adultery (A_1) is once more repeated, and this time, the confinement the female body warrants is literalized: the woman is imprisoned in a glass coffin under four locks to keep her "pure and chaste" (9). The moral of the story seems to be what the focaliser-characters tell us, that is, no one can prevent "what God had ordained," that is, it is in women's nature to deceive (10). There are however considerable number of signs that runs against this wisdom. First of all, the formerly established clear-cut difference

between the actants is now disturbed. The demon reverses roles with the king, while the king assumes the role of the slave. Secondly, the kings' logic entirely ignores the past story of W_3 , who was abducted by the demon at her wedding night and whose motivation to commit A_1 is revenge for the unjust punishment she receives. Her motivation is justified, and it does not warrant the brother's verdict "great is women's cunning" (10).

Another difference in the repetition of betrayal stories is the location. The initial acts of betrayal take place inside the kings' palaces: the illicit sexual act is allegorically related to invasion of domestic space and of authority, first by an insider (a kitchen boy) then by an outsider (in 1.2. Mas'ud jumps from a tree to get inside). The palace garden as the 'locus amoenus,' where Shahzaman seeks solace from his misfortune,¹⁶ is transformed into a 'locus horridus,' becoming the very thing he tries to forget. The wild and menacing nature of female sexuality coupled with the disquieting dark intruder turns the serene meditation into a nightmare. This transition of space from one state to another is of course inverted when viewed from the perspective of the lovers (i. e., their locus amoenus is the king's locus horridus). The topos is altered in 1.3. from inside the palace in the city walls to outside of civilizational boundaries into the wilderness and the seashore. The relation between event and space takes a new form: the characters are no longer within the limits of the law of the sovereign. Shahrayar is not within the realm of his absolute power, which alters the identity and status of the character as well as his actant function. He is out of place and a stranger in rural wilderness. This atopus dimension extends the narrative to ambiguous, irrational, and unpredictable forces, further challenging the king's dominant order. Once outside of the rationally and politically organized human space, the story introduces a non-human character, a demon (Jinni),¹⁷ thereby establishing a new relationship between the text and reality (the real or the conceivably possible). We now agree on a version of reality that includes the possibility of the supernatural. This topos of wilderness as the landscape for the uncanny is repeated and extended in other story cycles hereafter.

¹⁶ "Shahzaman stayed in the palace and, from the window overlooking the garden, watched the birds and trees as he thought of his wife and what she had done to him" (5).

¹⁷ There are several kinds of demons in Arabic folklore and they are regarded as partly natural creatures inhabiting our world and partly fictional. Their ontological status, therefore, is ambiguous. They can be good or evil, with supernatural powers. See: "Demons" in Marzolph/Leeuwen (above, note 1) 534–537.

This shift introduces the central tension between, what we might call, a philosophy of identity and non-identity sustained through the narrative.¹⁸ The stable and totalizing form of identity embodied in the figure of absolute authority (which extends to his political domain) is countered by the logic of non-identity, illustrated here as the capacity to shift form. We can observe the latter in the unstable imagery that populates the stories: uncontrollable female desire, multifarious demon figures, metamorphoses, deformities, scattered bodies, hybrid creatures, and duplicated selves. The monstrosity Borges finds in the *Nights'* ontological conundrums thereby takes on a thematic function.

The first two story cycles Shahrazad narrates, *The Story of the Merchant and the Demon* (2) and *The Story of the Fisherman and the Demon* (3) introduce and extensively use the theme of metamorphosis, which includes human to animal and to inanimate objects (and back). The theme entirely takes over the story of *The Porter and the Three Ladies* cycle (4), mirroring earlier mutations (as per the form's demands) as well as duplicating the "sorcerer young woman" character-type in the *Story of the Merchant and the Demon* (2.1). The end of the *Second Dervish's Tale* (4.2.) includes a long section where the demon and the king's daughter wage a bitter combat, transforming themselves into a series of animate and inanimate beings. Curiously, the theme of metamorphosis is crossed with that of physical deformity from *The Porter and the Three Ladies* through the extended "Hunchback" cycle. The imagery of the disfigured body includes amputation, mutilation, dismemberment, and physical impairments. These monstrosities harbour a resistance to the identifying thought that upholds stable and secure forms, embodied by the patriarchal order.

The tension between identity and non-identity, epitomized in the king/reader and woman/storyteller pair is also part of the narrative's poetics. It is a declaration of an aesthetic and literary principle embodied in the events in this text. It points to the fundamental dialectic of narrative art – the dual mechanism of unity of form and formlessness, perfection and monstrosity. It is in fact change itself that is the subject matter and the true interest of the *Nights*. Before reaching any form, it points to the absence of form. This circle of storytelling is always on the move. What you are can always change, be displaced, or misplaced, for better or for worse. Everything is mutable, everything is a contingent aspect of storytelling. The infinite mutability of forms (and functions) as a threatening, inconstant and unpredictable impetus becomes the driving force of the perpetual storytelling device of the *Nights*.

¹⁸ I borrow this term from Hegelian critical theory. The tension in the *Nights* is dialectical, in the sense that these opposing strains epitomized in the king/reader and woman/storyteller achieve unity (Hegel 2010).

In order to further examine the relation between the ideological and aesthetic thrust of the narrative, let us look at the rest of the frame story:

Frame Story: $_1$ [∞ **External Narrator (EN)** relates $_2$ [

- 1.1. M_2 kills (A_2) W_2 (by proxy) and decides to have sex and kill all women (W_{∞}). Shahrazad ($\#actor$, W_n , potential object of A_2); **Vizier** $_1$ ($\#actor$, father of W_n) to prevent W_n from marrying M_2 tells a story (**Character Narrator, CN**)
 - 1.1.1. $_3$ [M_4 ($\#actor$, Merchant) speaks animal language: **Ox** ($\#actor$) & **Donkey** ($\#actor$, object) have work imbalance, **Donkey** tells **Ox** to deceive (A_1) owner, owner deceives **Donkey**, back to initial balance;
 - 1.1.2. W_4 ($\#actor$, wife of M_4) curious about his secret, although revealing it would kill him. M_4 overhears his Rooster talk about him, W_4 consequently gets **punished**. **Theme** $_4$ = curiosity is dangerous (binary opposite to T_2).] $_3$
 - 1.2. W_n in order to delay A_2 by M_2 tells stories (A_3): $W_n = CN_2$, $M_2 = \text{Interlocutor}$, **Dinarzad** = I_2 ($\#actor$, object of the act of storytelling, subject function = ensure the continuation of A_3). **Theme** $_5$ = narration gives life.
-

Fig. 2: Typology of the Primary Fabula II

The actant functions are now clearer with the completion of the frame. Shahrazad (W_n) just like (W_3) is an object of unjust punishment, coupled with the trope of wedding night as death (literally and/or metaphorically). The act of deceiving (A_1) which creates the initial equilibrium and sets storytelling in motion is not remedied at the end of the frame.¹⁹ Instead, the imbalance is further compounded by Shahrayar's decision to rape and then murder all women in his city. The main mirror action (action that gets repeated in other stories) has now changed from deception (A_1) to violence of killing (A_2). This shift is part of the mad king trope, since stubborn, self-righteous, and selfish kings abound in folk tales and other early modern narratives. Shahrayar holds the absolute power of the sovereign to exile and execute, that is, to be above the law that affects all the people in his city. What guides the action from now on is Shahrayar's motivation, that is, his madness in the form of incoherent and unpredictable power. Shahrayar's act of violence is the origin of storytelling in the *Nights*: the educated and wise storyteller decides to transform not only the past brutality, but also any future pain and threat into an artwork. The poetics of the *Nights* lies in this record of violence and it is

¹⁹ The analysis here owes much of its terminology to Todorov's model of narrative in his *Poetics of Prose*.

intricately related to the question of justice in a fundamentally unjust and unequal society. The embedded texts told by Shahrazad mirror and multiply this trope in elaborate ways.

The first character narrator,²⁰ Shahrazad's father, also Shahrayar's vizier, tells two embedded stories. His motivation in this act is to deter his daughter from marrying the mad king. His first story is didactic, a lesson on miscalculation and dangers of curiosity (in 1.4.1), while the second story serves as a threat (1.4.2). The first embedded stories in the *Nights* are therefore intended to have an effect on the primary story. However, if we compare this character motivation with the function of the embedded stories, there seems to be a discrepancy between the intended lesson by the storyteller and the content of the stories. Neither story gives a clear moral lesson that can translate into Shahrazad's present situation. On the contrary, they leave the reader (Shahrazad being the character-reader) puzzling over the presumed correlation between the primary and the embedded texts. In the first story, the interpretation offered by the storyteller establishes the following equivalence: Donkey = Shahrazad and Ox = Shahrayar, so if the former tries to deceive the latter, it/she will get punished due to miscalculation, that is, misinterpretation of the situation. This equivalency fails to function on many levels. Neither the power relation between the two characters, nor the nature of deception, nor the resulting punishment, none of it neatly translates into Shahrazad's plans about Shahrayar. If anything, it is the Merchant – who “was taught the language of the beasts,” that is, who acquired a wisdom, a knowledge others lack, and who uses it to correct a wrong – who actually mirrors Shahrazad (12). Similarly, the second story fails in its faulty identification between the wife and Shahrazad; and the Merchant and the Vizier. It is not the vizier himself but his daughter Shahrazad whose life is under threat, just like the Merchant, if she reveals her secret plan to deceive the king with her knowledge. The vizier, the second figure of authority, is therefore a bad storyteller and the narrative refuses to resolve its embedded texts into neat didactic allegories. Shahrazad, on the other hand, is a good interpreter of signs, an ideal reader unlike her father, who is able to comprehend the situation and act on it.

The narrative function of Shahrazad's act of storytelling has been the center of most narrative studies on the *Nights*. The function is clearly two-fold: it creates suspense and delay, keeping the mad king in perpetual temptation to hear more. As such, it also becomes a life-giving and life-saving act to avoid unjust punishment, which is then repeated in the embedded tales, particularly in the first three cycles: Demons, Metamorphoses and Hunchback. In the first, the two old men

²⁰ We can also consider Shahzaman or the kidnapped woman as the first character narrators, who relate their own stories.

buy the Merchant's life from the Demon with stories; in the second, three Derivishes save their lives by telling stories, and in the third, the Barber avoids the Caliph's punishment by relating his brothers' stories. This central idea of trading life with art is repeated throughout the rest of the book in different forms, as many studies amply demonstrate.

What I would like to call attention to in Shahrazad's narrative function is the role of desire and curiosity. These narrative stimuli are part of the duality of the *Nights'* aesthetic principle, that is, the dialectic between form and formlessness. Desire, as Brook's seminal "Freud's Masterplot" tells us, is narrative's dynamic principle: "[it] is the wish for the end, for fulfillment, but fulfillment delayed so that we can understand it in relation to origin, and to desire itself. The story of Shahrazad is doubtless the story of stories" (Brooks 1977, 299). In this sense, the role of desire and curiosity in the economy of narrative is very clear: they keep the primary interlocutor, Shahrayar, in suspense, making him want to hear more each night. Structurally, this suspension keeps the storytelling device flexible and potentially infinite. The never-ending deferral of death through narrative seduction prevents any closure of the narrative space. This desire of narrative not only gives the work an allegorical signification at the symbolic level (i. e., the *Nights* as the allegory of the struggle between power and knowledge; between time and life; between death and art, but it also becomes the allegory of itself as a work of art), an active production and performance of a writer-storyteller. Desire and curiosity of and for narrative are also non-identitarian drives and they escape any identifying thought and absolute identification that the king represents. For the interlocutor, who listens to Shahrazad's stories, the sense of stable self and identity falls apart, the king-reader loses himself in the story, in which everything is free, mutable, and contingent. This aesthetic principle informs the ideology of the text, which views art as an opportunity to explore different ways of viewing the world. It invites us to trace the textual other, offering its own counter-reading.

In order to explore the character-reader function and the discursive plurality in the *Nights*, we need to look at the dramatization of readership established in Shahrazad's first night as the narrator. Without the narratee Shahrayar and his demands for seduction, the story would not be told, the 'book' would not even be possible. The presence of the narratee draws the attention to the storytelling process and enobles him to participate in the artistic process, not only by bearing witness to it but also by being an essential part of it. Although Shahrayar seems to be the passive party, his presence and response are vital for the process, literally and figuratively. The text offers only seduction, absolute seduction for the king/narratee, who is the 'Reader' of the 'Book' of *Thousand and One Nights*. He is the consumer of the product. And yet, there is the trace of excess in this narrative and erotic unity between Shahrayar and Shahrazad, a third party, sitting beside the

bed, and with Shahrayar, listening to her sister's stories: Dinarzad. Bal describes the relationship between Shahrazad and Dinarzad as a semiotic exchange in which the latter interprets the former's encoded instructions (65). In addition to this function in the fabula, Dinarzad is also the semiotic key to the pursuit of the textual other—which brings us back to the idea of the counter-book. The counter-reader is not the one who is held in suspense and locked in the progress, but the one who observes the process mimesis.

Dinarzad is the antithesis of her sister: she is silent and passive all through the narration, and therefore is not in a fully functional category for the fabula, except for her initiation of the act of storytelling (uttering “sister, if you are not sleepy, tell us one of your lovely little tales to while away the night”) and ensuring its continuation at the end (uttering “what a strange and wonderful story”) every night as per Shahrazad's instructions. Yet, the actor's inconspicuousness in the fabula does not mean that this actor is without significance at other levels. Dinarzad doubles Shahrayar in his function as narratee/reader.

The stories are addressed first and foremost to the male reader, who is the figure of limitless power and authority. The storyteller is bound by the demands of her primary interlocutor, sustaining the seductive relationship between the story and the reader, and between herself and her husband/potential killer. In the king's bedroom, beside the bed, Dinarzad is the feminine reader who has no interest in this seduction process. She is the reader of the counter story. While Shahrayar represents the demands of the storytelling conventions, Dinarzad has a meta-fictional function. She is aware of Shahrazad's plan, hence the entire seductive structure of the narration that remains obscure to Shahrayar – precisely because he is constantly held in seduction – is wide open and clear to Dinarzad. Her pleasure as the counter-reader does not depend on an ideally built story with a beginning, a middle and an end, but on the very act of storytelling, on the process itself rather than the product.

The *Nights* reproduces the dialectic between male and female pleasure in the text as readers, in this case. While Shahrayar enjoys the conventional story for its climax and satisfaction with the ending, in parallel not only to male sexual act but also what Brooks calls “binding of textual energies,” Dinarzad is invested in the process of storytelling, extending her pleasure from one night to the other.²¹

²¹ Brooks argues that the desire of reading is desire for the end: “desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative [...] Hence one can consider ‘binding’ to be a preliminary function that prepares the excitation for its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge” (Brooks 1992, 104–105). Also see Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts* for an analysis of feminine and masculine desire in the *Nights* as regards to narrative time (Khanna 2007).

Dinarzad is outside of the economy of seduction: she is the other-reader that is pushed outside the narrative dialectic, and yet she is still there, beside the bed, pointing to the excess, the non-identity, the lack of form, the counter-book, the one night next to the thousand as it moves towards infinity.²²

Let us now turn to the embedded text in order to explore the symbolic function of the act of narration and the metafictional elements in form, starting with the first cycle of the embedded text recounted by Shahrazad, “The Story of the Merchant and the Demon”:

I. Frame Story: $_1[\infty$ **External Narrator (EN₁)** relates $_2[W_n$ in order to delay A_2 by M_2 tells that

1. $_3$ [**External Narrator (EN₂ = W_n)**] tells that **Merchant₂** throws date pit, allegedly kills **Demon₂**’s son. In order to delay A_2 by **Demon₂**, three men tell stories. **Theme_{2&5}** Location: open country, outside

1.1. $_4$ [**First Old Man₃** (#CN and actor) with a **deer** (#ex-wife and cousin of CN) tells his past story: Woman₃’s jealousy leads to metamorphoses: son to bull, mother (#mistress) to cow, who then gets slaughtered; son spared. Shepherd’s daughter (#magician/sage) reverses the metamorphoses and transforms ex-wife to a deer. **Theme₁**] $_4$

1.2. $_4$ [**Second Old Man₄** (#CN and actor) with two dogs (#brothers of CN): brothers’ jealousy leads to violence; a good **Demon₃** (#sage) turns them into dogs. **Theme₁**] $_4$

Third man tells a more amazing story (remains untold in the Syrian manuscript). The **Demon₂** forgives the **Merchant₂**] $_3$

Fig. 3: Typology of the Embedded Fabula I

The first story the king hears repeats two previous themes, unjust punishment and the idea that narration equals life, and fabula elements of 1.3 (kings sleeping with the demon’s wife). As we have already seen, the location of open country invites ambiguous, irrational, and unpredictable forces. The **Demon₂**’s arbitrary use of his power by demanding the **Merchant₂**’s life for throwing a date pit and accidentally killing his son clearly reproduces Shahrayar’s demand to kill all unmarried women in the city. Moreover, the embedded stories within the story introduce the trope of metamorphosis, not only for its fantastic qualities to sustain narrative seduction in the fabula, but also to further complicate the question of the relation between appearance and reality in the story (i. e., nothing is what it seems), and so to allude to the nature of storytelling in the narrative level. In both stories, a character sets things right and remedy the initial injustice: the shepherd’s daugh-

²² As many readers of the *Nights* point out, the title *Alf Layla wa Layla* in Arabic, which is literally “a thousand night and a night” suggests mathematical infinity. For a remarkable analysis of the numerical code, particularly of thousand and one in the *Nights*, see Ghazoul (above, note 8) 38–39.

ter in 2.1. is an actant, together with Shahrazad and Merchant₁, who all have a previously acquired wisdom (i. e., semiotic interpreters) and use it for justice. The previously established theme of jealousy is repeated here: the jealous characters are eventually punished and transformed into an animal, reconciling essence with appearance, transgressive desire with inhumanity. It thereby becomes harder to establish a clear correspondence between the primary and the embedded stories, which further complicates the symbolic function of embedding.

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1. ₃[External Narrator (EN)₂ W_n tells that Fisherman repeated action of casting net, finds a dead donkey the first time, a large jar full of mud the second, broken stuff the third, a sealed jar the fourth. Fisherman frees Demon₃, who threatens to kill him (A₂). Theme₃.
 - 1.1. Demon₃ narrates his own story, refuse to submit to the prophet Solomon, imprisoned in a jar.
Fisherman tricks him back into the jar.
 - 1.2. ₄[Fisherman (EN) narrates King₁ (#actant, man of authority) is sick, Sage Duban (#actant, wise) cures him with an object through touch. King intends to correct Vizier₂'s jealousy of Sage with a story, Theme₁:
 - 1.2.1. ₅[King Yunan (EN) narrates Man₅ jealous of Woman₅ (#Wife) parrot spies on wife, M₅ learns W₅ commits adultery (A₁), W₆ deceives parrot and M₅, parrot killed. M₅ later regrets having killed his guide.]₅
 - 1.2.2. ₅[Vizier₂ (EN) narrates Vizier₃ tells King's Son (#actant) told by Vizier₃ to chase after a Girl (#a she-ghoul), who deceives him, a demon in the form of human. He is saved by saying that he has been unfairly treated. King₃ kills Vizier₃.]₅
 - ₄[Fisherman (EN) narrates that the Vizier₂ warns King of Sage for being too crafty. King decides to A₂ Sage. (#Sage promises a story, then decides not to tell.) Sage gives King a book "The Secret of Secrets," which kills King. Theme₃. Difference: the King dies.]₄
 - ₃[Fisherman releases Demon₃, who promises wealth. Wealth = 4 fishes, Fisherman takes to the King₂.
King₂ curious about their magic (#from wall emerges a maiden, a black slave), leaves to see the lake, Theme₂. In a palace, sees a Young Man
 - 1.2.3. ₄[The Young Man (CN) narrates that he was a king (#actant), Woman₆ (#wife of the Young Man) commits adultery (A₁), deception is drugs, W₇ opens gate with unintelligible words, W₆ A₁ with Slave₃, king injures S₃. W₇ turns Young Man into half man half stone, turns inhabitants into fish in 4 different colours based on their religions, beats Young Man up every day (#disturbed equilibrium)]₄
- King₂ A₂ (#kills) S₃, disguises as slave, reverses metamorphoses, A₂ W₇. Young Man joins King₂ in his palace. They marry Fisherman's two daughters and take Fisherman's son to his service. King₂, Young Man and Fisherman live peacefully thereafter.]₃
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Fig. 4: Typology of the Embedded Fabula II

When we look at *The Story of the Fisherman and the Demon*, symmetries between this second cycle and what comes before is quite clear: deception, quest for a new story, unjust punishment, curiosity and its dangers, and finally, the idea that nar-

ration equals life. The powerful actants in the embedded fabula are now tripled: King Yunan, with poor judgement and bad council, King₂, potent and just, and the Young Man, a dethroned and humiliated king. Interestingly enough, the stories of these three kings are framed within the story of the Fisherman, a “commoner” character whose story is marked by his poverty and labour.²³ This contrast in characterization is part of the larger ‘doubling’ structure prevalent in the *Nights*, in form and in content. Here, doubling serves for inversion, that is, creating an inverted world, counterposing royalty and commoners, wisdom and madness, and the weak and the powerful. Actors, in different classifications, deal with ideological oppositions in their social world, which translates into oppositions and doublings between characters and between representatives of power. The Fisherman’s poverty and predicament are foregrounded with long non-narrative interruptions in the form of poetry each time he casts his net. His recitations of poetry also indicate that he is a good candidate for storytelling. At the end of the frame, the Fisherman’s world is inverted by the fair King₂ and he becomes prosperous as the king’s father-in-law. This inversion is a sign of collective wish-fulfillment for the oppressed lower orders. It is a dream-come-true story that secures justice in an unjust and unequal society, in which a Fisherman, thanks to his work, his cunning and his luck, becomes royalty.

While the inverted world is rewarding for the powerless, it is terrifying and potentially corrective for the powerful. King Yunan and the dethroned Young Man fail in their roles as patriarchal monarchs, the former due to his vizier and the latter to his wife. Vizier characters, starting with Shahrazad’s father – who murders Shahrayar’s wives per his order – and reproduced in many other tales, represent tensions in power circles, and in bonds of loyalty and rank.²⁴ King Yunan has to choose between the loyalty of the Sage, a man of wisdom and knowledge, and the loyalty of his chief counselor. Initially, he correctly interprets the situation by telling *The Tale of the Husband and the Parrot*, where the analogy between the primary and the embedded stories is accurate (Parrot = Sage; Wife = Vizier; Man = King Yunan). His vizier, in contrast, misinterprets the situation and narrates an untenable story in which the analogy entirely fails (King = King; Sage = Vizier; Vizier = Son). The story’s logical sequence, as well as its line of reasoning are flawed, particularly when considered within the fictional world of

²³ Class hierarchies in the *Nights* are highly pronounced. It seems that the cycles in the Mahdi edition follow a class scale, from Merchant to Fisherman, then to Porter and Barber. When Shahrayar decides to marry and kill women every night, it is noted that “It became King Shahrayar’s custom to take every night the daughter of a merchant or a commoner” (11).

²⁴ For a study on the relation of the *Nights*, and the political thinking and institutions of the time, see: Irwin 2004.

the *Nights* (e. g., the demon pardons the son's life with a simple plea). Although the vizier ironically tells a story about a treacherous vizier, King Yunan is unable to keep up his semiotic skills and gives in to his vizier's advice. The Sage's empty book kills the king, literalizing the metaphor *par excellence* for the *Nights* by inversion: narration equals life and its absence death. In this story, the one who is threatened by the absence of narration is the powerful actant – the Reader with the capital R. The second inversion of the fate of a king in *The Young Man's Tale* repeats Shahrayar and Shahzaman's stories in the primary fabula: the authority of the patriarchal monarch is threatened by its lowest subjects, re-enacting the worst nightmare of the reader-king. It mirrors Demon₃'s own story at the frame level of the cycle as a rebellion tale against authority but this time told by the injured party. The initial balance is eventually re-established by the potent King₂, who kills the slave and the wife.

The persistence of violence, on which royal authority is based in the embedded stories, testifies to a double meaning and to two competing interpretations. The first one is the endorsement of the dominant and established order that overrides the voice of its others, such as commoners, women, and less-than-humans. This literal reading is based on what the story says. The counter-meaning lies in what the story stands for, in its narrative form, as showcased in this article, creating new meanings that disrupt the dominant frame of values informing the narrative. This disruption is accomplished through the text's interaction with its reader. The embedded text in the *Nights* functions as a sign to the reader with regard to how the text should or could be read. The centrality of character-readers Shahrayar and Dinarzad, whose interpretive preferences lie with different politics and poetics, substantiates this discursive plurality. This duality is also showcased in the logical and conventional restrictions of the fictional world. Contrary to the text's repeatedly professed logic of predestination, particularly in characters' evocations to God and their preordained fate, links between actions are based on cause and effect rather than a fatalistic logic. For instance, the abducted woman's (W₃) motivation for her infidelity in 1.3.; Sage Duban's call for justice;²⁵ and the Fisherman's eventual agreement with the Demon₃, all depend

25 Sage Duban, when he realizes that King Yunnan intends to kill him, recites the following verse:

“For long they ruled us arbitrarily,
But suddenly vanished their powerful rule.
Had they been just, they would have happily
Lived, but they oppressed, and punishing fate
Afflicted them with ruin deservedly,
And on the morrow the world taunted them,
“Tis tit for tat; blame not just destiny” (47).

on a rational cause and effect sequence. Although divine will is a conventional constant in the characters' views, events are entirely caused by the characters' actions. The text thereby problematizes the fact that some actions do not have consequences, when they should. The repeated plea in the Fisherman cycle, "spare me and god will spare you. Destroy me and God will destroy you"; or the trope of the wronged victim throughout the text all point to this logic of cause and effect and the injustice in its repudiation. Kings, Caliphs, and other men of authority do not pay the consequences of their actions. Instead of a recourse to a straightforward corrective storytelling, however, the *Nights* further complicates this victimhood structure, sustaining the simultaneity of the primary and secondary semiotic frames.

This double movement in meaning making is also present in narrative time. On the one hand, the linear movement pushes the narrative forward temporally night after night, while moving deeper ontologically in narrative levels, which points to the embedding system as suspense and seduction. Its temporality is linear in the primary fabula and circular in the embedded fabulas. On the other hand, there is a less salient temporal impulse that is regressive. It returns the reader to the primary story through repetitions of its aspects and elements, reminding her of Shahrazad's act of storytelling. This temporal dynamic of remembering and forgetting is a symptom of the ideology at work. The reader is left to create and mediate the simultaneity of these two temporalities. If one fails, one reads the story like Shahrayar the king, locked in its suspense and in the dominant ideology. Dinarzad, meanwhile, keeps account of both times and their semiotic strands.

4 Conclusion

The embedding and the structure of its levels are therefore more than story-telling tools; they are part of the aesthetic and ideological framework of the *Nights*. Almost every tale in the *Nights* relates directly or indirectly to the frame story. Shahrazad maintains the continuity and unity of her stories by putting them into a structural, as well as a thematic mise-en-abyme to produce the effect of endlessness. Thematic patterning distributes recurrent concepts and motifs among different incidents and frames of story. It emphasizes the unifying argument or the main idea, which different frames and stories have in common, although they are never direct repetitions. As we have seen above, one story evokes another through recurring themes and motifs, creating a self-referential chain. The mirroring relation between the primary and the embedded narratives has a double

focus. On the one hand, it calls our attention to the significance of the primary text, insisting that the ostensible autonomy of the embedded tale is misleading and that these tales have the meaning they do only because the primary tale has been told. On the other hand, the meaning of this relation that we are invited to distill leads us to consider the primary text as contribution to a storytelling code, an open one that invites more stories and multiple voices.

The *Nights* as a text that speaks only of itself – a story that tells its own story – is itself non-identarian, and its ideological and social others are a symptom of this self-reflexive form. My aim in this essay has been to demonstrate more completely this self-referentiality and discursive plurality in the *Nights* through a systematic study of its narrative elements. With the abstractive approach and the recursive narrative typology proposed here, I also hope to have opened up some structural, aesthetic, and political interpretive frames for future narrative studies, and to have brought the *Nights* scholarship in conversation with narrative theory. As Borges suggests, a book which does not contain its counter-book is considered incomplete (13). The study of the counter-book in the *Nights* is yet to be completed and it has the potential to extend our understanding of fiction and its relation to ideology.

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