

## NOTES

- 1 Merlin Stone, *When God was a Woman*, New York, 1990, pp.22-23
- 2 Tawfik Al-Hakim, *Isis*, Al Fagalla, Maktabet Misr, 1988, p.115
- 3 M. Stone, *op. cit.*, p.89
- 4 H.W.Fairman, translated and edited, *The Triumph of Horus*, London, 1975, p.51
- 5 Lorna Oakes & Lucia Gahlin, *The Mysteries of Ancient Egypt*, London, 2003, p.462
- 6 This play is inscribed on a papyrus, referred to as the Louvre Papyrus 3129, and was deciphered by the famed Egyptologist, Etienne Drioton. Probably inspired by the Horus-Set trial of the Shabaqo Stone, it seems to have been written for public performances.
- 7 The divine personification of the earth and husband of the sky goddess Nut. The father of Isis, Osiris, Set and Nephthys, he is inclined in the favour of his grandson, Horus, during the trial but hesitates in expressing this.
- 8 Cf 7.
- 9 Etienne Drioton, *Le Théâtre dans l' Ancienne Egypte* ( Al Masrah Al Misri Al Kadeem), Cairo, 1986
- 10 Born in Alexandria (1898-1987), he grew attached to the theatre; the performances of the time were basically adaptations of Western drama. Sent by his father to Paris, to study law, Al Hakim came to the realization that the void that existed between Egyptian theatre and World theatre could only be bridged by employing the basics of Greek theatre within a Middle Eastern context. He was impressed by the French Theatre and dramatists. He was also highly interested in the plays of Shaw, Ibsen, Pirandello and Maeterlinck.
- 11 Al-Hakim uses the Greek name for Set, Typhon. He also uses much of Plutarch's version of the Isis-Osiris myth.
- 12 Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*, New York/Oxford, 1985, pp. 532-533
- 13 Mohamed Mandoor, *Masrah Tawfik al Hakim*, Cairo, 1966, pp. 44-45
- 14 Al-Hakim's concept of *Al T'adulliyah (equilibrium)* is based on a balance between all natural elements; in the sphere of intellect and literature it maintains a balance between matters of the soul and body, mind and heart, good and evil. See Ahmed Sakhsookh, *Tawfik Al Hakim*. Cairo: El Hayaa El Masriyah El Aama L'il-kitab, 2002, pp. 17-63.
- 15 A. Ismael, *Tawfiq Al Hakim: His concept of Equilibrium*, in: Noosoos Inglizia Fi Al Adeb Al Arabi Al Hadeeth, Ed. Abdl El Kader El Kot, Beirut, 1978, Dar El Nahda El Arabia, pp.105-106
- 16 Fouad Dowara, *Masrah Tawfik Al Hakim*, 2 vols, Cairo, 1986, 2, p.205
- 17 Born 1931, Dr. Nawal Al Sadawi became a successful psychiatrist and rapidly occupied a high post in the Ministry of Health, from which she was ousted for her outspokenness and boldness of expression in her *Woman and Sex*. She has written countless other books and novels, all expressing her feminist beliefs. *Isis* is the single play she has written.
- 18 Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women and God(s): Nawal El Sadaawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*, translation Summer Ibrahim, Fagalla: Dar Al Mostakbal, 2003, p.195
- 19 G. Highet, *op. cit.*, p. 540

**THE NARRATIVE SOURCES OF  
TAWFIQ AL-HAKIM'S SHAHRAZAD:  
THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS.**

**Richard VAN LEEUWEN**

The first half of the 20th century was a period of great political and intellectual ferment in the Arab world in general and in Egypt more specifically. Various political movements were resisting foreign domination and carving out the contours of national entities. In Egypt, the nationalist revolution of 1919 prepared the way for a complex power struggle between political factions and the British administration, in which rivalling ideologies, class interests and foreign economic penetration contributed to a new ideological configuration, a new social awareness, and a new sense of identity. Within this struggle, the nature of the cultural tradition, as the constituent element of an emerging national identity, became a subject of debate. The sources of cultural identity were rediscovered, re-examined, and, perhaps, re-invented to justify and determine the boundaries of a national community. The debate was partly the culmination of the process of *nahda*, or 'renaissance', which had begun in the 19th century and which involved a broad cultural self-examination in order to redefine Egypt's cultural orientation and to mobilize the assets of the cultural heritage.

Within this period of upheaval, Tawfiq Al-Hakim wrote his celebrated theatre-play *Shahrazad*, in 1934. In a way, Tawfiq Al-Hakim personifies the many contradictions of his lifetime, the political vicissitudes and, especially, the search for cultural roots and a cultural identity for the buttressing nation. This intellectual endeavour, combined with an astonishing productivity, made Tawfiq Al-Hakim into one of the doyens of Egyptian culture, together with such figures as Taha Husayn and Nadjib Mahfuz. It is these literati who not only laid the foundations of the modern tradition of Egyptian, and even Arabic, literature, but also represented the hegemonic tendencies within the broader cultural debate. In this contribution I will concentrate on Tawfiq Al-Hakim's play *Shahrazad* as an example of the author's thinking about his literary sources, focusing on the main narrative model of the play, the *1001 Nights*, and on the way in which this source is used to conform to a notion of the tragic element in drama. Parallels and differences between the play and stories of the *1001 Nights* will be related to Tawfiq Al-Hakim's quite original distinction between Greek and Egyptian forms of tragedy.

### The *nahda* and the debate on cultural orientation.

In the second half of the 19th century the confrontation of the Arab world with Western political, economic and military hegemony, unleashed a debate on the condition of Arabic and Islamic culture. This debate was aimed firstly at formulating responses to Western dominance and what was seen as the failure of Arab societies to link up with the European model of modernity. To achieve this, firstly, the sources of Western power had to be examined, in the fields of science and technology, social and political organization, and philosophical and cultural concepts. Secondly, the Arabic-Islamic tradition was subjected to an intensive reinterpretation, to determine the potential of modernization, the components securing cultural continuity and the indigenous sources for a new sense of identity. In the course of time the complexity of these efforts was revealed, since the cultural tradition was found to be far from monolithic and unambiguous: it showed a rich configuration of components which were part of an inherited identity and which in many ways resisted an easy incorporation into a 'modern' vision of life.

For Egyptians the main constituents of the common identity derived from diverse historical currents: some intellectuals stressed Egypt's heritage from Pharaonic times as being typically, and exclusively, Egyptian. Others stressed the Arabic component of Egypt's tradition, which had shaped its language and literature. A third group thought the Islamic component to be most prominent and most essential for Egyptian culture, while, finally, some advocated the preservation of the link with the Ottoman-Turkish political framework. These elements were not only evoked to revitalize the indigenous culture as a response to Western hegemony, they were also reinterpreted as a possible basis for cultural renewal combining a sense of authenticity with influences from the West. There were some who were more rigorously inclined to adopt Western models of life and society as the best means to shake off European tutelage. Although the various ideological strategies crystallized into political groups which sometimes vehemently competed with each other, the question of identity remained complex and diffuse for all currents, as radical Islamist movements recognized the necessity of reform, while radically secular intellectuals would not relinquish their rich cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup>

It seems justified to say that Tawfiq Al-Hakîm to a large extent personified the debate on cultural orientation. He was well-versed in Arabic literature when he set out to study in France in the 1920s. In these formative years he absorbed an enormous corpus of Western literature and philosophy, which greatly impregnated his view on literature and life. He stressed the Islamic contribution to Western civilization, but deplored the fact that the influence of ancient Greek thought on

Islamic culture had remained limited to philosophy and science, excluding *belles-lettres* and, especially, the theatre. He also felt inspired by the ancient Egyptian world-view, which for him supplemented the geniuses of European, Greek and Arab civilizations. His vision combined a proclivity towards 'enlightenment', expressed in Greek and European notions of political freedom and human rights, and an 'Eastern' sense of religiosity which imbued Arabic-Islamic culture and which for him enriched the Western forms of humanism.<sup>2</sup>

Evidently, Tawfiq Al-Hakîm's outlook on culture was especially focused on the theatre. In his comments on his own work, Tawfiq Al-Hakîm distinguishes various approaches to the concept of the 'tragic'; first of all he mentions the Greek notion as reflected in the works of the great tragedists, which are marked by man's futile struggle against the forces of Fate. According to Al-Hakîm, this sense of Fate cannot dispense with a certain awareness of religiosity, as an acknowledgment of forces which are beyond man's power and comprehension and which steer the course of his life. It is this essential feature that is lacking in the European form of tragedy, which was shaped by the humanist vision and which became confined to the psychological and emotional struggle of man. Religiosity was replaced by a belief in the sovereignty of the will and therefore Western theatre lost the fundamental quality of the tragic. Finally, Al-Hakîm distinguishes a specifically Egyptian notion of the tragic, which is not, as in Greek theatre, focused on the struggle between man and the forces of Fate, but rather on the efforts by man to overcome the limitations of space and time.<sup>3</sup>

In accordance with these views, Tawfiq Al-Hakîm holds that only an Easterner can understand the essence of tragedy, since he has preserved the sense of religion which is an essential component. He deplores the refusal of Islamic culture to absorb the theatrical concepts of the Greeks; if the link between Islamic and Greek culture would have been achieved, not only Arabic culture, but also European culture through it would have been enriched. However, he denies that Islamic culture is unable to sustain a conception of the tragic, as is claimed by some, because it is a mistake to think that Muslims believe in forms of predestination. Thus, the cultural concepts that Al-Hakîm summarizes all have a potential susceptibility of the tragic, and, not surprisingly, Al-Hakîm is inclined to search for a synthesis. He seems to prefer the Egyptian notion, however, since he states that the ancient Egyptians would have written theatre from the same perspective as he, if they had practiced the theatrical genre. In his plays, Al-Hakîm attempts a reconciliation of these various traditions, which have shaped his world-vision and which also form an ideal balance between general concepts and specific configurations: it is only in Egypt that such an amalgam of concepts of tragedy can originate.<sup>4</sup>

Among Al-Hakîm's sources derived from the Arabic literary tradition is the *1001 Nights*, the famous collection of tales, whose first version was probably collected in the 9th century. The oldest, partial, text that has survived is a manuscript from the Mamluk period (15th century), which served as the basis of the first European version made by Antoine Galland in the beginning of the 18th century. In the 18th and 19th centuries various versions were compiled; some of these attempted to reconstruct the original work, others were clear mystifications. In 1832 the first Arabic edition was printed on the Bûlâq press in Egypt. Although it is not known if the *1001 Nights* as a collection had survived in the circuits of oral storytelling in the Arab world, the appearance of the printed text led to a gradual revival of the interest in the work. It was especially important for the nascent stages of Arabic theatre, which developed in the second half of the 19th century. Writers such as Mârûn al-Naqqâsh and Ahmad Abû Khalîl al-Qabbânî drew from the tales of the *1001 Nights*, both for strong plot-structures and for comic elements. Moreover, in order to gain the interest of the audience, the playwrights preferred to rework indigenous sources taken from their own cultural and literary heritage. The *1001 Nights* thus greatly contributed to the birth of modern Arabic theatre.<sup>5</sup> In the beginning of the 20th century, the *1001 Nights* remained an important source of inspiration for Egyptian playwrights and theatrical producers, mainly for comedies and vaudeville spectacles. By now the work was also intellectually recognized, however, when a dissertation on the 1001 Nights appeared under the supervision of the scholar and reformist thinker Taha Husayn in 1943.<sup>6</sup> The support of Taha Husayn raised the *1001 Nights* from a mere folkloric text to an important part of the Arabic literary heritage, which could inspire modern Arab authors. This interest in the *1001 Nights* may have partly been instigated by Tawfîq Al-Hakîm, who once wrote to a friend, complaining about the inclination of Arab authors to confine their admiration to 'high literature': 'To this day, popular literature has remained unrecognized in the history of Arabic literature. An immortal work like the *1001 Nights*, acknowledged by every nation in the world... this exalted work of art has not been openly acknowledged by a single Arab writer.'<sup>7</sup>

Throughout his life, the *1001 Nights* remained an important reference for Tawfîq Al-Hakîm. At an early stage in his career, he wrote an operetta entitled 'Ali Baba', completed in 1926, and he compiled a novel modelled after the *1001 Nights* together with Taha Husayn (*al-Qasr al-mashur*, 1936). Several of Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's plays contain references to or elements from the *1001 Nights*, such as *Solomon the Wise* (1943), *The cavemen* (1933), *Bayt al-naml* and *Harun al-Rashid and Harun al-Rashid* (1969). In *Sultan of Darkness* (*Sultan al-zalam*, 1941), a collection of essays, he uses Shahrazâd as a symbol for 'truth' as opposed to oppression and the 'darkness' of tyranny. However, his most important

work in this respect is *Shahrazâd*, which was published in 1934 and which still counts as one of Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's major works. Tawfîq Al-Hakîm himself claimed that one of the aims of the play was to break down the barriers between 'high literature' and popular literature, by using folkloric models for an intellectually appreciable work, thus making philosophical contemplations accessible to a broad audience. With this claim Al-Hakîm responded to some of his critics, who regarded his plays as mere intellectual acrobacy, which could not be satisfactorily presented on stage.<sup>8</sup> However, Al-Hakîm's claim is hardly convincing, since *Shahrazâd* marks a clear break with the previous echoes of the *1001 Nights* and is first of all an intellectual exploration and not a form of comical social criticism. In what way, then, was the *1001 Nights* reworked to become this ambitious play, how was it reinterpreted and how did it fit into Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's intellectual ambitions?

#### *Shahrazâd.*

Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's play *Shahrazâd* consists of seven scenes, staged respectively on a desolate road, in the king's palace, the palace hall, the wilderness, the king's hall, Abû Maysûr's tavern, and Shahrazâd's boudoir. Most of the scenes take place at night, at sunset or at dawn. The number of characters is limited to, beside Shahriyâr and Shahrazâd, a magician and his daughter, a serf, the king's executioner, Abû Maysûr the tavern keeper, and Qamar, the king's vizier. The narrative of the play *Shahrazâd* is presented as a sequence to the well-known frame-story of the *1001 Nights*:<sup>9</sup> Shahrazâd has finished her storytelling and has cured Shahriyâr from his obsession, which instigated him to marry a virgin every night and have her executed in the morning. However, instead of being transformed into a faithful and responsible husband and father, Shahriyâr has become 'insane'. The stories have re-created him from a 'body without a heart, matter without spirit' into a human being, but, curiously, he is no longer interested in Shahrazâd's physical beauty and is obsessed by the longing to know 'who she is'. It is as if 'another infinite horizon has been revealed to his inner eye', which prompts him to go out and roam the world in a tireless quest for knowledge. Shahriyâr compares Shahrazâd with nature, which displays its beauties, but veils its secret. It is this secret, the essence of Shahrazâd's being, which he insists on knowing, but Shahrazâd reprimands him, claiming to be completely transparent and accusing him of insanity.

During one of his journeys, Shahriyâr is accompanied by Qamar, his vizier, to whom he explains that his peregrinations are caused by his liberation from the confines of his bodily drives. He has come to loathe human bodies, and the prison of physical yearning. Qamar, who is the paragon of reason and common sense,

tries to persuade him to return to the palace and to give up his tireless quests, just as previously he tried to soothe Shahrazâd to effectuate a reconciliation between the two. In despair, Shahrazâd decides to provoke Shahriyâr and stage a kind of *déjà-vu* for the king, hoping in this way to restore him to his common sense. She invites a humble serf to come to her boudoir, where he is found by Shahriyâr upon his return. However, instead of becoming infuriated and killing the serf, Shahriyâr merely sends him away. He is no longer susceptible to the passions of love. Shahrazâd acknowledges that she has failed and Shahriyâr, as she formulates it, remains suspended between heaven and earth. Qamar, meanwhile, kills himself with the sword of Shahriyâr's former executioner.

As the title indicates, the central figure of the play is Shahrazad, although more attention is directed to the strange mental condition of Shahriyâr. Each of the characters sees his main disposition reflected in the queen: the serf lusts after her beautiful body; the vizier, who is in love with her, praises her intellect and sensitive heart; Shahriyâr, finally, discerns a hidden truth inside her, which she is unwilling to reveal and which is the cause of his flight from his material existence. Shahrazâd states that they all see her as the 'mirror of their souls', detecting in her the essence of their own nature. She is a kind of neutral entity, in which the other protagonists project their inner urges. In spite of her extensive storytelling, Shahriyâr has not come to know her; it appears that she has only awakened the suspicion in him that there is some ulterior reality, hidden behind the seemingly neutral, uncomplicated, façade of things and persons. And it is this reality, hidden either in Shahrazâd, or somewhere else in the universe, that he indefatigably looks for.

Critics have interpreted the play on various levels. Firstly, the figure of Shahrazâd is seen as a reflection of Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's difficult relationship with women, which is attested by many statements and autobiographical comments. As becomes clear from his other works, Tawfîq Al-Hakîm was fascinated by the female mystery which for him Shahrazâd represented, as a strong and intelligent mistress, who symbolized perfection, but was still tainted by the peculiarities of her sex. As one critic remarks: 'Woman is, for him, an enigma, theoretically capable of achieving perfection, which is not given to man to do, but in practice riddled with far more faults and blemishes than her male counterpart could ever stoop in displaying.'<sup>10</sup> For some Shahrazad is the quintessential woman, the epitome of human contradictions, a combination of the elevated and the trivial. Similarly, one critic regards Shahrazâd as a symbol of the unknowable, mysterious woman, whom every man interprets according to his own disposition, but who remains an enigma.<sup>11</sup> She represents the 'unfathomable nature of reality'

which cannot be comprehended by man. According to a comment by the critic Mohammad Mandur, she proves that a human being cannot live by and for the intellect, ignoring the calls of the body and the heart.<sup>12</sup> Finally, one critic perceives a mystical element in Shahriyâr's quest: Shahrazâd represents the beloved divine entity, around which the lover hovers as a moth around a candle, fleeing his material body, and seeking some form of spiritual unification.<sup>13</sup>

These observations show the depth of Shahrazâd as a literary character and of the themes that Tawfîq al-Hakîm wove into his play. They contain plausible interpretations of the piece and explain its philosophical purport. Remarkably, however, no attention is given at all to the narrative context of the play and the possible importance of intertextual relationships for its interpretation. No reference is made to the 'master' text of the *1001 Nights* from which the themes are so explicitly derived. It seems obvious, then, to relate the play to one of its most significant sources.

#### *Shahrazad and the 1001 Nights.*

It is evident that the matrix of Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's play *Shahrazâd* is derived from the framestory of the *1001 Nights*. This story provides Tawfîq Al-Hakîm first of all with a dramatic configuration which is taken from his own 'Oriental' literary heritage, which is, admittedly, reworked according to ancient Greek and European narrative modes. Tawfîq Al-Hakîm himself, however, does not restrict the narrative roots of his play to these domains, and explicitly relates them to what he considers to be the 'Egyptian' form of tragedy. In Egyptian tragedy, he states, it is the struggle between man and the forces of time and space which is the central theme. The ancient Egyptians' ideal was to strive for a victory of the spirit over time and space, a victory which is not to be found in resurrection 'into another world where time and space are unknown, but into this same world, this same earth, with its time and space.'<sup>14</sup> According to him, whereas *The cavemen* pictures the contest between man and time, *Shahrazâd* portrays the contest between man and space. This remark is mentioned by several critics, but it is subsequently dismissed as an irrelevant remark, since the spatial aspect seems to be secondary to the main theme.<sup>15</sup> However, if the narrative of the play is related to the matrix of the *1001 Nights*, Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's statement becomes much more meaningful.

Elsewhere I have attempted to analyse the framestory of the *1001 Nights* on the basis of the hypothesis that it should be read as the linking of storytelling with the disruption of a spatiotemporal equilibrium, the destruction of a temporal and spatial structure by an event of dramatic proportions.<sup>16</sup> The basic idea is that

Shahriyâr's identity, as a man and as a ruler, is founded on a specific congruency between the king's body, his authority, and the location of his power. Shahriyâr's authority is derived from a set of boundaries which guard his integrity and the coherence of his person, and which is symbolized by the impregnability of the palace. That this congruency is based on deception is revealed when the king leaves his palace, and his body is removed from the location of his power. This event is enacted twice, in the case of Shahzamân and in the case of Shahriyâr, and in both cases the king is enabled, so to speak, to peep into his own sacred domain from the outside. They both witness a truly horrible sight: they find their spouses passionately making love to the most despicable of human creatures, a cook's mate and a black slave. This spectacle completely destroys the image that the kings have of themselves and their status, and, more importantly, it disrupts the relationship of each king with the locality of his power.

The functions of boundaries, both in the social and in the spatial sense, can be epitomized by the Heideggerian/ Derridan concept of the 'house', that is, a domestication of space based on the exclusion of a specific 'other'. Boundaries are here meant to create a domain governed by a specific idea of a homogenous self, of a hierarchy of power, of an imagined unity, which can only be achieved by banning the 'excess' of this self-image to the realm outside. However, the exclusion of the other by constructing a domestic space implies that this 'other' is always in some form present in the inside. The 'other' is the reason for constructing the spatial domain and defining its shape and boundaries, and is therefore always inherent in the construction itself, as an invisible 'intruder', a spectre that will at one point horrify the inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> We can see this mechanism quite clearly in the episode of Shahriyâr and his brother. The carefully constructed convergence of self-image, power and locality is cruelly disrupted by that which it is meant to exclude, the antithesis of the king's identity, the most despicable contamination of the image of a king. What was thought to be locked out, in fact turns out to be present in the very core of the king's domain of power.

The breaking-up of the spatial integrity of the palace leads to the breaking-up of the integrity of the king's identity, which now appears to have been built on a delusion, an artificial construct created only to hide what it cannot destroy. It can be argued, moreover, that what the king sees is not so much an intruder from outside, but rather a part of himself, a kind of *alter ego*, that he has always tried to ban from his identity. He now realizes that what he has always seen as a unified personality, the basis of his self-image as a man and a king, in fact consists of at least two versions of his self, the mighty king and the low, lustful serf. The spatial domain protecting the congruence of his locality, his body and his power, turns out

to contain his body-double, a copy of himself as his antithesis, a component of himself which he cannot control without the structure supporting his authority.

The dislocation of Shahriyâr's self-image is caused by an act of mobility, that is, by Shahriyâr's crossing the boundary between the inner and outer domains, creating a distance between himself and his constructed 'interior' space. The theme of mobility is of course tightly linked to the theme of dislocation, as is shown by the reaction of the two kings to the fatal blow to their person's integrity: now that the system of boundaries protecting their status has been demolished, they start roaming the world disguised as beggars. Since they have lost their identity, their space is no longer marked with the indications of their status. The world has become a boundless desert. Only when they imagine to comprehend that it is in fact woman who is the cause of their downfall, they return to the palace and start the fateful cycle of sex and death, with the intention of restoring the integrity of their identity. The domain of women is eliminated from their lives and a new unification of body, power and location is realized.

The cost of this restoration is immense, however, since it not only depletes the reservoir of marriagable virgins, it also blocks any possibility of reproduction, since no heir to the throne can be conceived. Shahriyâr is caught in a circular motion of time, preventing progress and condemning the empire to stagnation and fossilization. Shahrazâd has 'reconquered' his domestic space, but only by excluding the forces of time. At this point Shahrazâd enters the stage. By her storytelling she not only succeeds in redeeming Shahriyâr from his ritual cycle and restoring the regular sequence of time; she also teaches Shahriyâr that the world is essentially multifarious and that no unified, monolythic identities exist. She fills Shahriyâr's space with marvels and characters, dilemmas and devices, persuading the king that he has to accept the temporal aspect of change in his domain and the diversity in the world and in himself. He accepts this multiple identity, linked to the forces of time and transformation, and therefore reintegrates the female domain into his spatial structure. This happy ending is symbolized by Shahriyâr's promise not to have her executed, and by the three children that Shahrazâd has borne during the period of storytelling.

This analysis of the story of Shahriyâr and Shahrazâd inspired by spatial concepts helps us to better understand Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's remarks about the spatial dimension of *Shahrazâd*. In the play, too, Shahriyâr has been transformed by Shahrazâd's storytelling, but here the 'happy ending' is lacking and although Shahriyâr is cured from his obsession, he seems to be afflicted with another disease. Shahrazâd's stories have failed to reconcile Shahriyâr with his 'body-dou-

ble', his lower self and the physical part of his personality, which in the *1001 Nights* allow him to accept her in his domain, but have now rather separated him from it and destroyed it. When Shahrazâd attempts to re-enact the scene of adultery by hiding a serf in her boudoir, it appears that Shahriyâr is unaffected by her ruse and fails to respond in the 'normal' way: he has detached himself from physical desires and from the jealousy associated with love. But this also means that no reconciliation has occurred between Shahriyâr and Shahrazâd, between the female and the male domains. Shahrazâd now appears as an all-encompassing entity, inaccessible to Shahriyâr, who, now, has no means of amalgamating her world with his world.

This lack of reconciliation is expressed in terms of space. In the *1001 Nights* the disrupted spatiotemporal equilibrium is restored after Shahriyâr has accepted Shahrazâd's admonitions and acknowledged the duality of himself and the space which contains his identity. A new congruency is created allowing him to accept his multiple personality which enables him to accept Shahrazâd, as a female component, in his domain. In the play it seems that, after Shahriyâr's effort to appropriate his royal space and keep it to himself, by excluding women and constructing a monolithic vision of himself, it is now Shahrazâd who, by her storytelling, has appropriated the space of authority, monopolizing it with her closed, female, domain. After Shahriyâr has shed his libidinal self, the space of his former self has no longer any markers for defining his identity, as a man or as a king. When Qamar summons him to return from his peregrinations, Shahriyâr responds with the question: 'Where to?'<sup>18</sup> The place of his royal authority is no longer linked to his self-awareness and this is why he is condemned to eternal travelling, exactly as previously, when he had just discovered the queen's betrayal. If the spatial construction of his royalty is broken, only roaming through the world remains, without the paraphernalia of kingship.

The storytelling, then, has failed to restore Shahriyâr's sense of spatial harmony, and has only succeeded in postponing the sense of its loss. After Shahrazâd has finished her stories, this sense of loss is reinforced and, it seems, perpetuated, as Shahriyâr has freed his 'body from the hobbles of a place' and feels in his soul a 'dissolution of the spatial attribute'.<sup>19</sup> One of the functions of the storytelling has been to uphold an illusionary spatial harmony, which created a distinction in Shahriyâr's awareness of an 'inside' dominated by imagination and thought, and a 'reality' outside. Now that Shahrazâd has stopped telling stories, the temporary harmony is broken and Shahriyâr is forced to go out and search for the 'Real'. Here we can again observe a confrontation between constructions of reality - spatial constructions, storytelling - and the Lacanian Real, that which cannot be

structured by narratives and symbolic systems. As a spatial structure, reality is a constructed system, meant to hide or exclude the unnamable, the Real, the Thing that cannot be comprehended. After the discovery of the queen's unfaithfulness, the 'return' of the Real is warded off by the structuring function of Shahrazâd's tales, but once the storytelling has ended, the Real looms up again as an object of irresistible desire. Without the structuring encapsulation achieved by narratives, the Real destroys boundaries and differentiations, and turns the world into a limitless, unordered space, without markers and hierarchies. The only spatial entity which Shahriyâr cannot cast off is his body. Although he has pledged to forsake his physical/spatial identity, he remains locked in the space of his body, which 'space has formed the way a container gives form to the water'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Shahriyâr's life is reduced to an isolated existence within the confines of his body, seemingly without links to the space and bodies that surround him: 'My life took on the shape of the space and time containing my body'.<sup>21</sup> His fundamental question is: 'Do I have any true existence outside of the time and space which encompass my body...?'<sup>22</sup>

#### *Shahrazâd and the story of the 'Queen of the serpents'.*

An analysis of the spatial dimensions of the framestory of the *1001 Nights* and Tawfiq Al-Hakîm's play *Shahrazâd* shows the way in which the alternation of spatial equilibrium and rupture provides the dynamism of the narrative and the explanation of Shahriyâr's state of mind. It explains, in my view, why the play can indeed be seen as a narrative about 'space', as Tawfiq Al-Hakîm has claimed. However, there is more. There is another story of the *1001 Nights* which seems to have influenced *Shahrazâd* and which has a clear intertextual relationship to it: the story of 'the Queen of the serpents'. It is certain that Tawfiq Al-Hakîm knew this tale, since it seems to have inspired his play *The cavemen*, which was published in 1933, one year before *Shahrazâd*. In the 'Queen of the serpents', the main setting is a cave, as in the play, and the queen herself is named Yamlikha, as is the shepherd guarding the cave in Tawfiq Al-Hakîm's play. The interwovenness of the tale with *Shahrazâd* adds another dimension to the play, which is directly related to its dramatic purport. It accentuates the vanity of Shahriyâr's efforts as an inherent part of the human condition and the inescapability of Fate.

In the story of the *Queen of the serpents*<sup>23</sup>, Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn, the son of a Greek philosopher, but now a humble lumberman, is accidentally imprisoned in a cave filled with honey. After some time he finds a hidden exit out of the cave, enters a mysterious landscape, falls asleep, and is woken by the arrival of the serpent queen with her retinue. The serpent queen, named Yamlikha, tells him the story of Bulûqiyâ, an Israelite king, who finds a text in the treasury of his father

in which the future arrival of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned. Bulûqiyâ dons his royal robe and sets out on a journey to meet Muhammad. To achieve this, he has to go to the grave of Solomon, steal his ring, and find the Fountain of Life, in order to live until Muhammad's time. After he fails to obtain the ring, Bulûqiyâ is taken on a journey by the angel Gabriel, who shows him the secrets of the cosmos and the mechanisms governing the natural world. To his great disappointment, however, he is not allowed to meet Muhammad and he returns to his palace to resume his kingship. After he has listened to the stories of the serpent queen, Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn is allowed to go back to the human world, where destiny overtakes him: it turns out that he is destined to cure the sick king, but only by sacrificing the serpent queen, whose body he has to boil. After he has drunk the broth of the boiled serpent, he gains insight in all the sciences of the cosmos and the divine secrets, and suddenly enters into a state of utter bliss.

The parallels between the story of the *Queen of the serpents* and the play *Shahrazâd* are evident. As Bulûqiyâ, Shahrazâd finds a trace of 'truth' intruding into his life. He is subsequently taken on a 'narrative' journey by Shahrazâd, who shows him the marvels of the world and the secrets of human nature. However, these stories do not quench Shahriyâr's thirst, since they fail to reveal to him the ultimate truth which he knows to lie hidden behind the outer appearance of nature. In the story of the serpent queen, Bulûqiyâ is contrasted with Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn, who is of a humble position and is imprisoned in a cave, but is nevertheless afforded a glance into the true nature of things and the hidden forces of spirit and matter. The contrast between the two reveal the ironies of Fate: Bulûqiyâ gives up his kingship and sets out on an arduous journey to learn about the Divine Truth, but fails, whereas Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn, who has refused even to learn a trade, is chosen by destiny to become one of the chosen few to gain esoteric knowledge and power. It is the tragedy of Shahriyâr that, like Bulûqiyâ, it is not his destiny to know the 'truth' that he desperately longs to know, which is, in fact, his only reason to exist. He is obliged to roam forever, bounded by the laws of space and time, without being allowed to overcome these laws and obtain inner enlightenment.

Within this narrative complex, Shahrazâd fulfils the roles of both the angel Gabriel and Yamlikha, who explain the nature of the world to the heroes, by a journey and by storytelling, withholding the ultimate truth. For Shahriyâr, Shahrazâd is his antithesis, his Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn, who has obtained knowledge of everything although she has always been confined to her rooms. She represents a kind of Borgesian 'aleph', a microcosm in which the nature of all things can be seen. She acts with the precise calculation of the celestial bodies and is fin-

ally regarded as a 'great intellect'. Although she denies to hide some secret, she reinforces this image, when she says that if the veil between them were to be removed, he would not be able to bear living with her.<sup>24</sup> Shahrazâd, therefore, is the symbol of Divine Truth, of Yamlikha, and of Muhammad. Her truth is unattainable for some, while others are predestined to obtain it. But it can only be obtained within the cycle of decay and rebirth: the serpent queen has to be sacrificed in order for the secret knowledge to be transferred upon others. Ironically, perhaps, Shahrazâd will have to be killed before the knowledge she represents can be reborn in Shahriyâr.

Not much is known about the sources of the story of the *Queen of the serpents*. It seems likely that it has never been part of an original version of the *1001 Nights*, but has been adapted from earlier texts to fit into the collection. The story of Bulûqiyâ can be found in the ancient collections of stories of the prophets, where it is not embedded in the story of Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn. The latter story shows clear traces of alchemist and neo-platonist influences, with its references to Greek philosophy, various kinds of metals, the cycle of knowledge, the sacrificing of the serpent, the Fountain of Life, the name Yamlikha [Jamblichus'], and the state of blissful insight. These influences are confirmed by a remarkable parallel between the cave of Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn and the cave of the nymphs as described and analyzed in a famous essay by the neo-platonist philosopher Porphyry. The cave of the nymphs - based on an episode of Homer's *Odyssey* - is filled with honey, too, and has two entrances/ exits, one of which may only be used by the chosen few who have gained divine knowledge.<sup>25</sup> At least some works of Porphyry were known in Abbasid times and it is not impossible that the *Cave of the nymphs* was also known in a certain period, although no Arabic translation has survived. More generally, neo-platonist theories have had a profound impact on Islamic philosophy and mysticism,<sup>26</sup> and it seems justified to compare Shahriyâr's tireless quests with the esoteric strands within the Islamic tradition, partly through the story of the *Queen of the serpents*. What Shahriyâr strives for is a unification with the Intellect, which is represented, but perhaps also shielded off, by Shahrazâd.

### Conclusions.

Tawfiq Al-Hakîm mentioned among the influences shaping his play *Shahrazâd* the examples of several European authors and the great Greek playwrights. These influences are, thematically, superseded by the clear reworking of an indigenous, Arabic source, the *1001 Nights*. And ultimately, the play is based on Tawfiq Al-Hakîm's concept of the 'Egyptian tragedy', that is, of man's vain struggle against the confines of space and time that shape his destiny and impose their laws on

him. The complex nature of these narrative sources reflects the intellectual debate in Egypt in the beginning of the 20th century, when a modern literature was moulded on a variety of indigenous, foreign, modern and traditional models. Typically, Tawfiq Al-Hakim sought to reconcile these various cultural resources which were available to him, as a result of his unique position as an Egyptian intellectual, on the point where Eastern and Western, modern and traditional, spiritual and materialistic tendencies converged. Tawfiq Al-Hakim's oeuvre is an attempt to weave these strands into a new, original, texture, a landmark in the evolution of a new Egyptian tradition in which universal and local components complement each other.

As far as *Shahrazad's* theme is concerned, the synthesis between the various influences is found firstly in the conceptualization of space as a constructed reality, which can be fractured, disrupted, or, so to speak, put out of order, subjecting man to the relentless unordered confrontation between his body and the Real. It seems that this is the essence of the tragic component of what Tawfiq Al-Hakim calls Egyptian tragedy: the way in which space imposes itself upon the human body and the human mind, forcing his psyche to accept a constructed reality or else deliver him to a state of non-identity, undifferentiatedness, amorphousness, without a will to oppose the force of spatiotemporal laws. In the *1001 Nights* Shahriyâr at first refuses to accept a spatial duality which reflects a duality in himself, and instead attempts to enforce a unified space/self upon reality, thus creating a reality in which the harmonious interaction of time and space is disrupted. Shahrazâd tries to make him realize that the co-existence of various components is the essence of human life and a precondition for a coherent vision of the world and of the self, creating a new spatiotemporal balance. In the play *Shahrazâd* this balance is not achieved, since Shahriyâr fails to recognize space as conceptualized in relational terms; he only sees the absolute space dominated by Shahrazâd, without differentiations which would enable him to shape his identity, throwing him into an abyss of Real time and space. His tragedy is that he is forced to move into a world without boundaries, without an aim, but also without a starting-point, a point to return to.

The essence of tragedy, according to Tawfiq Al-Hakim, is the human struggle against the forces of the Divine, as expressed in the Greek theatrical tradition. In *Shahrazâd*, the essence of the tragical concept must be sought in the relationship between the human soul and its spatial environment, the impossibility of reconciling inner experiences of space with Real space, the inability of humans to accept the artificial constructions of space which mediate between their vision of the world and the incomprehensible Real, which encapsulate the Real and situate

it in a livable reality. For Shahriyâr this mediation has been revealed as false and illusionary, but his intuition of the proximity of the Real gives him the illusion that the Real can be 'known' and 'discovered', instead of only sensed and conjectured. He yearns for a mystical unification which has wiped out his links to reality. Here, the divine forces are not represented by Fate, but by the limits of human knowledge and the discrepancy between knowledge and experience. There is no question of predestination, but of the ultimate boundedness of the human condition. It is man's tragedy that he is essentially unable to combine his experience and his rationalization of the space in which he lives and from which he cannot escape from.

For Shahriyâr, the interlude of storytelling by Shahrazâd has been a kind of *katharsis*, which has radically changed his vision of life. But it is a *katharsis* in the mystical sense, a sudden awareness of a hidden truth which enables him to throw off the chains of material life, of the passions of the body, and the trivialities of social conventions. This sense pushes him into a permanent state of liminality, which prevents him from returning to his former life, but also from being incorporated into some new reality in a new configuration. His metamorphosis is incomplete, his initiation has only detached him from his past, without providing the possibility of a reincorporation. The *katharsis* has effaced the boundaries which are necessary to complete a process of transformation and link it to a structurally coherent reality. Shahriyâr has found some form of insight, but it is the insight that some deeper knowledge exists, not the knowledge itself or the insight that reaching this knowledge is essentially impossible. In this, he resembles Bulûqiyâ, who is aware of a form of truth but is unable to attain it. Tawfiq Al-Hakim has once remarked that he intended to write another play as a sequence to *Shahrazâd*, entitled the 'Return of Shahriyâr', but that he was unable to conceive the narrative embedding of such a return. In fact, it is Shahriyâr's tragedy that such a return is inconceivable.

## NOTES

- 1 For an introduction to intellectual currents in the nahda period, see A.L. Hourani, *Arabic thought in the liberal age 1798-1939*, London, 1970.
- 2 R. Long, *Tawfiq Al-Hakim. Playwright of Egypt*, London 1979, p. 13; Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Sultân al-zalâm*, al-Qâhira, s.d., p. 23.
- 3 W.M. Hutchins, *Plays, prefaces and postscripts of Tawfiq Al-Hakim*, Washington 1981, vol. 1, 'Introduction', p. 6; 'Introduction to King Oedipus', pp. 281-283, 287.



- 4 Long, p. 194; Hutchins, 'Introduction to King Oedipus', pp. 273-5, 277, 280, 283.
- 5 About the textual history and reception of the *1001 Nights*, see: U. Marzolph/ R. Van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights. An Encyclopedia* (forthcoming), which also contains references to the influence of the work on Egyptian theatre.
- 6 S. al-Qalamâwî, *Alf layla wa-layla*, reprint: al-Qâhira 1976.
- 7 Cited in: P. Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower. A Critical Study Tawfiq Al-Hakim*, London 1987, pp. 184-5.
- 8 Long, pp. 8, 86; Starkey, p. 38.
- 9 There are several Arabic editions of the play; references here are to the English translation by W. Hutchins, in: id. (1981).
- 10 Long, p. 132.
- 11 Starkey, p. 41.
- 12 Long, p. 32.
- 13 Hutchins, 'Introduction,' p. 3.
- 14 Starkey, p. 38.
- 15 Id., pp. 43, 127.
- 16 R. Van Leeuwen, *The Poetics of the Journey in the Thousand and One Nights*, in preparation.
- 17 See about these approaches to spatial constructions: M. Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction; Derrida's Haunt*, Cambridge/ London 1997.
- 18 Scene four, Shahrazad, p. 155.
- 19 Scene three; Shahrazad, pp. 152-153.
- 20 Scene seven; id., p. 171.
- 21 Scene seven; id., p. 169.
- 22 Id., p. 169.
- 23 The story of the 'Serpent queen' can be found in the Bûlâq edition, Nights 482-537; see also: Marzolph/ Van Leeuwen.
- 24 Scene two; Shahrazad, p. 146.
- 25 English translation: *Porphyry, The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey* (A rev. text with translation), Buffalo 1969.
- 26 See: M. Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, New York 1983.

## FACES IN THE MIRROR. IMAGES OF SHEHERAZADE ON THE EGYPTIAN STAGE

Nehad SELAIHA

It never ceases to amaze me how the popular mind in the Arab world can condone the most atrocious crimes committed by males against females and how lying and wiliness are extolled as feminine virtues and classed under the rubric of wisdom. In a seminar at the AUC last winter, after a lecture by Iraqi scholar Feryal Ghazouli about Sheherezade, Mona Ibrahim, a young assistant professor at Cairo university, wondered aloud about the validity of the image of Sheherezade propagated by *The Nights*. The reforming of the rake theme, familiar in European fiction and drama in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, was here stretched beyond the bounds of credibility. Far from an ordinary rake, Shahrayar was a downright brutal murderer. 'How could a woman tolerate being nightly raped by such a man and then treat him like a baby, sending him to sleep with bedtime stories?' Ibrahim validly asked. The answer was 'fear' and the survival instinct. Sheherazade had to spin out the web of her days with yarns, Ghazouli said.

Though the stories of *The Arabian Nights* have inspired many writers and provided material for scores of films and plays, their narrator took some time to arrive on the scene. The first person to air Sheherezade on the Egyptian stage, as far as I can discover, was Sayed Darwish in a four-act comic operetta that carried her name and for which the pioneering colloquial verse writer, Biram El-Tonsi, wrote the lyrics. It was performed by Darwish's own company in 1919 and was later revived, according to an extant theatre bill, in 1926, under the direction of the first acknowledged Egyptian theatre director, Aziz Eid, with comedian Bishara Wakim (whose lively comic performances are preserved in old movies) and Alia Fawzi in the leading parts. Long before the theme of the good ruler being corrupted by his evil entourage became rampant in the drama of the 1960s, after Nasser's accession to power, El-Tonsi and Darwish presented us with a startling image of Sheherazade as a dissolute queen, spoilt by her vicious, power-grabbing court, and turned into a ruthless autocrat. Rather than spend her nights taming Shahrayar (here conspicuous by his absence) and ridding him of his ferocious blood lust, she amuses herself with chasing after prospective handsome lovers, even as the country faces the threat of foreign invasion. Fortunately, however, Za'bulla, a valiant, virile officer, comes to the rescue, arriving timely on the scene to subject her to a long and tempestuous process of edification which steers the play to a happy end.