

## Gene-Protective Narratives: *The Arabian Nights* Reconsidered

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### Abstract

While acknowledging the importance of Mark Turner's claim that Shahrazad, the character from *The Arabian Nights*, epitomises the "literary mind," this paper points to possible shortcomings in his argument. Through careful consideration of Shahrazad's function in the narratives within narratives that make up *The Arabian Nights*, the paper plays down the literary dimensions of her storytelling ability, drawing attention instead to the ways in which she invariably uses language as an instrument designed to achieve a specific end. By incorporating ideas from thinkers outside of the humanities -- especially Daniel C. Dennett and Richard Dawkins -- the paper offers a new reading of *The Arabian Nights*, which incorporates the contention that Shahrazad is both a user of language and is used by language -- a spinner of webs of narrative who is also caught up in these webs. Distinguishing carefully between genes and the bodies that contain them, the paper proposes that a fundamental aspect of Shahrazad's identity is that she is a vehicle for the spreading of genes. Finally, generalising from the stories contained in *The Arabian Nights*, the paper concludes that other literary narratives may also turn out to be more fundamentally gene-protective than they are "literary."

### Keywords

*The Arabian Nights*, language, mind, gene, literary, narrative

In *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (1996) Mark Turner claims that Shahrazad, the character from *The Arabian Nights*, would develop a reputation as the finest "literary mind" ever. He attributes Shahrazad's literary ability in large measure to her skill in projecting one story (a "source" story) onto another (a "target" story) to form what he calls "a conceptual blend." He also claims that this is how the human mind is structured.

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Here, leaving aside the question of how the human mind in general works, I draw attention to Turner's misappropriation of Shahrazad. His singling out of her ability for projecting one story onto another, for instance, ignores the fact that the story in which Shahrazad acts and speaks is itself projected by someone else. She is thus both "projector" and "projected." As projected she is an instrument used by another (an author) or others (authors). Although she does indeed demonstrate a flair for projecting as is evident in the clever concatenation of narratives that she produces where one narrative frequently comments on another, she has herself been embedded in a narrative by an unnamed embedder who has endowed her with this ability. Can her mind really be considered more "literary" than that of her creator(s)? Surely, to answer this question in the affirmative would be like saying that Hamlet's mind is more literary than Shakespeare's or Humbert Humbert's more literary than Nabokov's.

Another problem with the attempt to portray Shahrazad's mind as a supreme embodiment of "the literary mind" by linking it to skill in projecting one story onto another may be found in her tendency to invariably make use of language as an instrument to enable the achievement of a specific end. Turner himself implicitly points to the pervasive instrumental use of language in *The Arabian Nights* when he starts his book with the example of the vizier's using the story of the ox and the donkey as an instrument in order to change Shahrazad's mind about marrying the king. Turner then goes on to describe the instrument used by Shahrazad, quite rightly, as relying on planning and prediction (9, 20). Shahrazad will of course use the language of which her stories are composed in order to change the king's mind about summarily having each of his one-night brides executed. Here I question whether skill in projecting one story onto another can really denote a literary mind, especially when the deployment of such a mechanism invariably coincides with the use of language as an instrument geared toward clearly defined ends. I also argue that the case of Shahrazad exemplifies the idea that the persistent use of language as an instrument may be geared towards ends that do not appear to consciousness. The famous female protagonist in *The Arabian Nights* has been given a mind unconsciously motivated by the need to ensure the survival of genes.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on the work of thinkers like the philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel C. Dennett and the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, I maintain that as the balance shifts between the character's using language toward her being used by language, Shahrazad comes to stand less for the

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<sup>2</sup> Of course she will also survive as a literary character in, for instance, Ethel Johnston Phelps's short story "Sheherazade Retold," Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, Stephanie Meyer's *New Moon*, Martin Amis's *The Pregnant Widow* and Alia Unis's *The Night Counter*.

vagaries of the literary mind and more for the inexorable physicality of genes and the idea of literary narratives as gene-protective.

## I

In *Consciousness Explained* (1993), after acknowledging that the telling of stories involves not only “self-definition” but also “self-protection,” Daniel Dennett writes, “Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don’t spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness and our narrative self-hood is their product, not their source” (418). The inclusion in the first sentence of “for the most part” allows Dennett to imagine we, users of language, as “... weaving them [words] like spider webs into self-protective strings of narrative” (417). It is of course paradoxical. The storyteller tells and is told, weaves and is weaved, spins and is spun; but Dennett prefers to emphasise the passive constructions. In real life when we construct stories about ourselves, according to Dennett, “we (unlike professional human storytellers) do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them” (417). While on the one hand we do seem to have an innate and natural predisposition to choose and create stories, Dennett implies that it is too simplistic to identify ourselves as the sole origin of these stories.

Thus Dennett claims that we spin our stories from a source that is actually hard to identify, and elsewhere he labels this source “a center of narrative gravity.”<sup>3</sup> According to Dennett, although it is convenient to assume that a narrative is created by an individual self, the task of identifying this self is as difficult as pinpointing an object’s centre of gravity. In both cases what you are looking for is “a purely abstract concept,” “a fiction.”

I have already suggested that the real author of the stories told by Shahrazad is not Shahrazad but the author(s) of the volume in which she appears as a character. As she is a fictional construct, it is difficult to label her what Dennett calls “a professional human story teller,” but like the professional described by Dennett she does make a conscious effort to decide which stories to tell and how to tell them. In particular, she tries to incorporate details in her recourse to the traditional elements of narrative – plot and character – that will have a desirable effect on the king; and she ensures that each narrative remains incomplete at dawn, so the king will not have her executed and will insist on hearing from her the continuation of each story the following night. At the same time, through her storytelling she wants to present a pleasing and desirable image of herself to the king. As each night her life is at stake, it seems particularly appropriate to think of Shahrazad as actively, to use Dennett’s terms, “weaving... webs into self-protective strings of narrative.”

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<sup>3</sup> See Dennett’s “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity.”

This scenario, however, relies on the tacit premise that the storyteller always remains in conscious control of her materials. At the same time as she weaves her narratives, Shahrazad – or in Dennett’s terms, Shahrazad’s “narrative self-hood” – is also woven by them and by the frame narrative in which her own story and the stories that she tells appear.

Although she may well be a magnificent example of a fictional character who spider-like endlessly spins “self-protective strings of narrative,” if we accept that a great deal of Shahrazad’s spinning has unconscious origins, evidence begins to emerge that her use of narrative fictions may be more accurately delineated as “gene-protective” rather than “self-protective.” Thus, as she invariably speaks in the interest of her genes and the DNA of which they are composed, Shahrazad does not have to be consciously aware of the impulse to spread her genes any more than she has to think of the desirability of their being spread through a liaison with someone with appropriate genes.

It would be unwise of course to suggest that Shahrazad is just a vehicle for the spread of genes, but it may be more accurate to portray her as propelled by the genes that nudge her toward reproductive achievement rather than as being driven by “literary” concerns. She invariably uses language in a manner that is more calculative than literary in the interest of educating the King so that he can become her long-term husband. She would not of course think about it in terms of genetics, but from the perspective of twentieth and twenty-first century genetics we can claim that one reason why she is driven by the desire to have King Shahriyar sire her children is because her genes are doing their utmost to ensure that she will have progeny. Her storytelling thus supports the interests of a deeply-ingrained desire to procreate.

Believing that she can break the cycle of slaughter of innocent one-night wives if she can persuade her father to propose her as a potential spouse to the King, Shahrazad describes her motives (to her father) as follows, “If I should live, I’d become the ransom for the virgin daughters of Moslems and rescue them from his hands and yours” (13). This may sound like altruism, but not when we consider that the most decisive factors motivating Shahrazad’s recourse to storytelling has less to do with altruism and more to do with genes. Of course, like any natural creature, Shahrazad is not synonymous with her genes, but the narrative in which she appears as a character may be construed to be a very early example of a narrative that raises the question of the extent to which human beings in general are inclined to act in service to others or to themselves or to the behest of their very “selfish” genes.

There are a number of reasons why Richard Dawkins has become famous but one of them of course is for coining the term “selfish gene.” In the Introduction to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his book *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins expresses some frustration with the term and the confusion that it has caused. He even claims that the book is more about altruism than it is about selfishness

(viii) although sometimes the terms overlap as when a female bird refrains from eating food in order to provide nourishment for her offsprings. Here the bird behaves “altruistically for the good of the genes” (vii). Dawkins also admits that it was unfair of him in the book to talk about certain human beings being “born selfish.” His point is precisely that the individual is not always selfish but that the genes or “replicators” that use him or her as a vehicle are always selfish. It is up to the individual. As Dawkins points out at the end of chapter 11, “We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth” (200) and “We alone on earth can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators” (201).

Since the publication of *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins has been at pains to emphasise that while characterising genes as selfish he had not intended to imply that we, human beings, can never be “cooperative” or “altruistic.” “I did not mean to suggest that the selfish gene approach precludes cooperation,” he explains in a BBC Horizon Documentary entitled “Nice Guys Finish First.” “It is the individual that counts and the reproductivity of its genes,” he continues, “which can only be carried to the next generation thanks to an individual’s reproductive success.” Dawkins backs up this thesis with several examples from the animal kingdom including bees who, he maintains, readily sacrifice themselves for the sake of future generations. According to Dawkins, just like bees, people will often (without usually knowing that they are doing it) place the interest of their genes which, metaphorically, only care about their own survival and replication, above the interests of their own particular physical well-being.

Later editions of *The Selfish Gene* contain a chapter that borrows from the title of Dawkins’s Horizon Documentary: “Nice Guys Finish First.” Of course Dawkins needs to define what he means by “nice guy,” and when he does so in the book he casts his definition in neo-Darwinian terms: “A nice guy is an individual that assists other members of its species, at its own expense, to pass their genes on to the next generation” (202).

In *The Arabian Nights*, by entering an extremely hazardous arena (marrying the king) Shahrazad risks her own death in order to potentially save other women’s lives, which of course also means by extension facilitating the survival of their genes. Thus, if successful, she will have the chance to make a substantial contribution to the dissemination of the DNA of others because she may save countless women from being deflowered and killed by the King. Instead of becoming one-night wives, these women will retain their potential to be able to mate and spread their own and their future mates’ DNA.

If we think of Shahrazad as thus willing to place herself in a life-threatening position to help ensure the safety and survival of the offsprings and DNA of others, we may be tempted to think of her as altruistic; but this can hardly be the case because the safety and survival of her own DNA and her offsprings’ is so paramount. Others can only spread their DNA if she survives the nightly storytelling sessions and is in a position to spread her DNA.

Defining altruism most social theorists insist that it involves “action which *does not* benefit the actor, but only some other creature” (Moore qtd. in Hurford 254). In light of this definition, Shahrazad’s actions should not be considered altruistic because the plan on which they are based offers up the possibility of not only her own survival and that of her own DNA but also that of her own (potential) offsprings and their DNA.

Shahrazad has been heralded by some critics as a prototypical feminist. Her feminist instincts may indeed be thought of as influential right from the beginning when she successfully usurps her father’s authority. They are also implied as one prominent feminist critic, Fedwa Malti-Douglas, points out, because “when she consciously takes on her shoulders the burden of saving womankind from the royal serial murderer, she had taken on a much more arduous task: educating this ruler in the ways of the non-problematic heterosexual relationship” (359). Surely, however, Shahrazad cannot be as strong a feminist figure as Malti-Douglas and others have alleged because once she marries the king she adopts the position of wife and child-bearer. One crucial point in the concluding pages of *The Arabian Nights* is that Shahrazad’s triumph in persuading the king to marry her and to drop his “slay the wife after the first night rule” has been matched by her success in providing him with male heirs, thus satisfying the stereotypical Middle Eastern culture’s preference for males. She has produced three sons who together function as part of her plea when she argues that if she is executed, these kids, “one walking, one crawling, one sucking” will be rendered “motherless” (577).<sup>4</sup>

The gratitude that the king feels toward Shahrazad as expressed in the last pages of *The Arabian Nights* may be thought of as reflecting indebtedness toward her not for amusing him nightly with “good” stories or spectacular sex, but for being so fertile and adept at spreading his DNA. Although at the beginning of the frame narrative both Shahriyar and his brother Shah Zaman are depicted as extremely prosperous and successful kings, there is no mention of their having had any children from their respective wives. Thus, it not at all clear that their DNA had been given any chance to spread. Indeed, rather than being portrayed as obliging conduits for their husbands’ DNA, the brothers’ wives were shown to be congenitally unfaithful, graphically caught *in flagrante delicto* with their black paramours (4, 5). As cuckolds, the two brothers are lamentably distant from the possibility of successful distribution of their DNA.

The emotions triggered by the affront to male honour in this ancient Middle Eastern, decidedly patriarchal, milieu are predictable. Less obvious is the idea that King Shahriyar and King Shah Zaman’s DNA is being assaulted, and the shafting of their DNA subconsciously contributes to the brothers’

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the “Conclusion: The Marriage of King Shahriyar and Scheherazade” section may not have appeared in the original Persian versions of *The Arabian Nights*.

desires for bloodcurdling acts of revenge. Shah Zaman will use his preternaturally sharp scimitar to “cut the two [wife and paramour] in four pieces with a single blow” (AN 4), and after the interlude with the woman with the sleeping jinee, which further convinces him that the insatiable force of women’s desire is matched by the seemingly endless extent of their “malice” and “cunning” (10-11), Shahriyar returns to his palace and orders his chief minister to have his wife executed, before he himself rushes over to the seraglio and strikes down with his sword all the concubines and their mamelukes [including we assume his wife’s blackamoor, Saeed]” (12).

Of course, the extent to which the kings have been copulating with concubines and using them as conduits to further facilitate chances of their (the kings’) DNA distribution is unknown; but King Shahriyar’s “binding oath that whenever he married he would take his new wife’s maidenhead at night and slay her the next morning to make sure of his honor” (12) may be regarded as a supreme method of contraception. Short of abstaining from heterosexual sex, death, or some form of self-mutilation, at that time a more precise and definitive way of countering any chance for dissemination of a man’s DNA can scarcely be imagined.<sup>5</sup> Obviously as long as King Shahriyar’s proclamation was enforced, his DNA would never have been able to perpetuate itself as a result of copulation with any of his moribund spouses.

A thousand and one nights. Three children. An amazing success rate. In keeping with the thread that I am attempting to unravel, it is very appropriate that as part of his pardoning of Shahrazad, the king conjures up her lineage: “May Allah bless you and your father and mother and their root and branch” (577). In twenty-first century parlance we may take this to be an acknowledgment of the importance for him and his progeny of her genealogy and her genes. Passed down from generation to generation, Shahrazad’s genes (and the DNA molecules of which they are composed) may benefit from a blessing aimed at further enhancing their quality and by extension the quality of the king’s descendants. Shahrazad’s DNA had better be of the highest possible caliber because it has already been passed to three of his offsprings and more children may follow.

By invoking her lineage and failing to mention his own, King Shahriyar may be subconsciously taking for granted the excellence of his own genes, obviously a dangerous assumption given that he is a mass-murderer – although prior to the killing spree, he was described as “a brave cavalier,” “an especially superb horseman” and as “beloved by all the people of his realm” (2), implying perhaps healthy and desirable DNA.

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<sup>5</sup> We could also employ a term used by Stephen Pinker in *How the Mind Works*: “Darwinian suicide.” Shahriyar’s decree that his brides be murdered after the first night of marriage might imply that any woman who agrees to the marriage commits Darwinian suicide in that she invites a death that is a sure fire way of curtailing the propagation of her genes.

## II

Although in the early pages of *The Literary Mind* Turner is quick to portray Shahrazad as epitomising such a mind, it is not until chapter seven, when he discusses the tale of the barber's fifth brother Al-Nashsharand, that specific examples of her storytelling are highlighted. This is the tale of a man whose dalliance with another man's wife leads to his having his penis and lips cut off. It is one of the tales told by the barber who was erroneously arrested (along with ten highwaymen who had already been executed) and who employs his tales as a means of pleading for his life before Caliph Al-Mustansirbi'llah (382-419). This tale along with other tales told by the barber, in turn, appears within "The Hunchback's Tale" where the barber's predicament aptly parallels that of the tailor, whose life is in jeopardy following the supposed murder of the hunchback, and who uses his own story to plea for his life before the sultan of China (367-82).

After listening to "The Hunchback's Tale, the sultan establishes a touchstone by exclaiming, "Have you ever heard of a more wondrous tale than that of my hunchback?" (334). The Christian broker then claims, "I'll tell you about something that happened to me, for it is much more wonderful and delightful than that of the hunchback" (334). Following the Christian broker, first the steward, then the Jewish doctor attempt to tell a tale more "wondrous" than that of the hunchback; but in the sultan's eyes they fail to do so, leaving only the tailor to outshine his peers. If the tailor succeeds the sultan of China will pardon them all (367). Fortunately, the sultan admires the tailor's story and declares, "The adventure of the young man and that busybody of a barber is indeed more delightful and wondrous than the story of my lying knave of a hunchback" (420).

The barber, the hunchback, the Christian broker and a plethora of other storytellers and above all Shahrazad herself may all be thought of as driven by a pragmatic imperative in response to the injunction: "Your story or your life!"<sup>6</sup> In the inner narratives (for example, the barber's tales attributed to his brothers), the slightly less inner narratives (for example, "The Tailor's Tale" in which the first barber appears as a character), and the outer narrative (where Shahrazad, for instance, tells "The Hunchback's Tale" inside which "The Tailor's Tale" is embedded) tales are employed by an author (the barber, the tailor, Shahrazad) as a means to the specific end of remaining alive. Shahrazad's stories are indeed her life, and many of the storytellers within those stories may be thought of as holding not only their own but her life in their hands. What

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<sup>6</sup> The formula "Narrative equals life; absence of narrative, death" is perhaps best exemplified in the first tale in "The Fisherman and the Jinee" sequence in which a king is killed as a result of licking his finger and then turning the pages of a poisoned book. As every page is blank, the book cannot contain narrative. It is the absence of narrative that proves fatal. See Todorov 233, 235.

makes Shahrazad's act of storytelling markedly different to later masters of the short story is that she always uses stories in the interest of survival.

As a storyteller, Shahrazad endeavours to use stories to manipulate King Shahriyar so that he, as audience for each and every tale, will come to share what Turner calls the storyteller's "mental viewpoint," a large part of which consists of Shahriyar's view of how people should and should not behave. If through her storytelling she can get King Shahriyar to share, even to a minimal extent, her way of looking at the world, Shahrazad may indeed be able to rehabilitate him so that he will cease being a serial murderer of innocent virgin brides and begin to see women and heterosexual unions in a more positive light. In order for this to happen, the King has to be able to recognise connections between his own situation and the situations in which the characters find themselves in her tales. Turner implies that Shahrazad's stories are at their most poignant when they work through "elaborate indirection" (129). Whether Shahrazad is herself aware of every single parallel between inner and outer narrative that might have a beneficial effect on the king is another matter.

Although the details within each narrative are of course crucial, it may be the case that as Shahrazad becomes more and more experienced and proficient in her storytelling, she becomes less and less consciously aware of the details which are most likely to be effective in manipulating the king. She becomes like the driver of a car for whom the necessary foot, hand and eye movements required for efficient driving have become automatic. Just as the experienced driver does not have to consciously think about how much pressure to apply on the accelerator or which way to turn the steering wheel, Shahrazad does not have to think about which of the devices used in a given tale are most likely to have the desired overall effect on her prime audience.

As we begin to see Shahrazad losing control of the language she uses, it becomes more feasible for us to think of her in the light of Martin Heidegger's suggestion that it is language that speaks, not mankind.<sup>7</sup> The question of the extent to which Shahrazad is using language as opposed to being used by language resembles the question of the extent to which she produces narratives as opposed to being produced by them. Indeed, the narratives themselves may be thought of as producing "Shahrazad." Here, in a kind of supplement to Heidegger's "language speaks" and Dennett's "narrative speaks," the formula "genes speak" emerges.

If we can sidestep for a moment the question of the authorship of the various narratives that make up *The Arabian Nights* we can be cognisant of the power of the narratives themselves and of the language of which they are composed. Shahrazad does not have to be consciously aware of this power any

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<sup>7</sup> In his essay "Language" Heidegger writes: "Language speaks. Man speaks in that he responds to language.... Man speaks only in that he responds to language" (210).

more than she need be aware that her behaviour tends to serve the needs of her genes. If King Shahriyar as the main surrogate reader can acquire and put into practice the necessary insight, Shahrazad and her DNA may survive and prosper along with many other potential virgin victims and their possible progeny and their DNA and so on. The character Shahrazad acts in accordance with an unconscious urge to put the biological before the cultural.

Although the plan that Shahrazad conceives and puts into practice may reflect humanity's subliminal need to serve the interests of genes and DNA, this need is of course not uniquely human. Dawkins has admirably demonstrated that human genes like those of other species are only interested in their own survival and replication, and he has insisted that we should never confuse genes with the body or the self that houses them. There is constant tension between the two. While bodies, as Dawkins points out, are "integrated, immensely complicated machines," restricted in terms of time and place, genes are like time travellers headed toward the future, "skipping free and untrammelled down the generations" (234). We are indebted to Dawkins for drawing attention to the gene's perspective. "Without the gene's eye view of life," claims Dawkins, "there is no particular reason why an organism should 'care' about its reproductive success and that of its relatives rather than, for instance, its own longevity" (234).

Mark Turner was too quick to give Shahrazad the laurels for having the ultimate "literary mind." Not only is she a fictional character rather than a flesh and blood human being but also her deployment of language is far too dominated by the instrumental, the use of story as means to an end, the hope that a favourable reaction to the story will translate into a favourable reaction to the teller. Turner himself implies this when he says, "Shahrazad's 'mental position' includes the goal of leading Shahriyar to think of ending the story of Shahriyar and Shahrazad in the way she has in mind" (129). Turner's interpretation also excludes unconscious motivations. Shahrazad's storytelling is both self-serving and gene-serving. Her genes are the unconscious initiators of the storytelling for which she, rightly or wrongly, would become legendary. In fact, she exemplifies the idea that sometimes storytelling may be more fundamentally gene-protective than it is literary.

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