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Rhetoric as Black/White Magic in Classic Eastern Narratives

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This essay offers an applied reading of manipulative rhetoric in several classic Eastern narratives: the *Pañcatantra* story about the lion, the bull, and the two jackals; its Arabic recasting in *Kalīla wa-Dimna*; the tale of King Yunan and the Sage Duban from the *Arabian Nights*; the ancient Egyptian *Tale of the Two Brothers*; the biblical episode of Joseph and Potiphar's wife; the medieval *Book of Sindibād* (including the Hebrew *Mishle Sendebar* and the Arabic *Seven Viziers* versions); the frame narrative from the *Arabian Nights* featuring Shahrazād. All these stories share a recurring narrative structure: for various reasons (private gain/envy/a need to deflect guilt), someone (a courtier or a woman with royal status) falsely accuses an innocent person; a ruler is persuaded by manipulative rhetoric to inflict severe/supreme punishment; the victim of slender is effectively taken out of the way or, under more propitious circumstances, justice is restored via a successful narrative counter-speech. A rhetoric of enchantment emerges, a system in which speech operates like black or white magic, shaping reality through perception: it either conjures false worlds or restores true ones. Storytelling itself can be both weapon and cure, verbal mastery becoming a performative agency capable of reordering hierarchy and having the power to destroy or restore social order

The use of occult, supernatural, or psychological manipulation to influence minds, beliefs, convictions, or loyalties is a recurring theme in myth and literature. Various societies have envisioned wondrous mental and behavioral transformations and/or warned about mind control and ideological corruption, wrought through spell, illusion, or rhetoric. Across cultures and eras, language has always been recognized as an effective instrument of domination that plays on need, weakness, desire, or fear. Words' white magic can sway minds, faiths, or wills from despair, sin, and perdition towards good and salvation. Conversely, their black magic is conducive to doubt, emotional turmoil, loss of clarity, confidence, and even identity.

Courtly Rhetoric: A Royal Adviser Stifling (Perceived) Competition

As one of the oldest narrative treatises on statecraft, Viṣṇu Śarman's *Pañcatantra* is a textbook on persuasion, explicitly designed to teach nīti, "the science of government" in an unconventional way:

> [Viṣṇu Śarma] devised a system of education suited to the princes [who were "supreme ignoramuses," "totally averse to the very name of learning"]. He composed these five books of stories […]. With the aid of these tales, he instructed the princes. They too, learning through these stories, became in six months what Viṣṇu Śarma had promised they would. Since then, this work on practical wisdom has become celebrated as an excellent means of awakening and training young minds. (Viṣṇu Śarma, 1995: 5)

Pañcatantra instructs rulers how to manage subjects, allies, and enemies through verbal dexterity and suggestion, operating below consciousness and awakening emotion before reason. Thus, the art cultivating wisdom also opens the door to indoctrination. Speech and narrative are consistently portrayed as tools of control, deception, or survival. Manipulation of beliefs and emotions through strategic story-telling (metadiegetic tales, narrative frames) becomes a moral device. But the *Pañcatantra*'s pedagogical strategy reveals itself as an ethical paradox. It trains rulers to control others by controlling narrative itself. The tales warn against credulity while modeling manipulation, they condemn deceit while celebrating it as skill. Persuasion becomes a royal form of black magic, an approved (even recommended) art of enchantment in the service of power. The *Pañcatantra* narrative about the lion Piṅgalaka, the bull Sañjīvaka, and the two jackals, Damanaka and Karaṭaka, dramatizes the ethical ambivalence of rhetorical skills, showing how insinuation and flattery can enchant and dominate. Damanaka, the malevolent jackal, crafts his speech with rhetorical subtlety, exploiting doubt, fear, or vanity to achieve his ends. His corrupt eloquence aligns with the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s concept of *rasa*,[1] but with a dark intent, the enchantment here seeking to ensnare and subjugate (through rhetorical *vaśīkaraṇa*[2]) rather than delight and uplift. As a tool of power and manipulation, Damanaka's rhetoric relies on deliberate falsehood and half-truths used strategically, to destabilize or control his master's mind and actions. Expert insinuations and deft speech exploit Piṅgalaka's psychological vulnerabilities and catalyze his fatal misjudgment.

Damanaka's motivation is purely political. He is determined to elevate himself in the Piṅgalaka's court by adopting manipulation as career strategy. He starts by showing his eagerness to serve. When the lion is startled by the booming roar of an unknown creature, Damanaka volunteers to investigate. Upon discovering Sañjīvaka stranded on the lush banks of the Yamuna River and identifying him as the source of the frightening sounds, he immediately begins to plot: "I think I can have Tawny [Piṅgalaka] completely in my power… by practising the policies of peace and friendship, or war and enmity, using this creature [the bull]." (Viṣṇu

[1] Translated as "juice," "sap," "essence," "taste," the Sanskrit concept of *rasa* denotes the aesthetic flavor, the powerful emotional response, almost like enchantment, created in an audience through speech, gesture, and performance (see *Nāṭyaśāstra*, 2016: [VI] 53-63).

[2] In verse 1.76 from *Pañcatantra*, Damanaka mentions *vaśīkaraṇa* (the power to subjugate and control) to Karaṭaka: तद्दानस्य च शंसा अमन्त्रतन्त्रं वशीकरणम् *taddānasya ca śaṃsā amantra-tantraṃ vaśīkaraṇam* (*Panchatantra 1 Mitrabheda Tantra by Vishnusharman*, n.d.), "praising it will bring [him] under control without using any magical chant." Here are two English literary translations of the passage at hand: 1) "The clever man soon penetrates/ The subject's mind, and captivates.// Cringe, and flatter him when angry;/ Love his friend and hate his foe;/ Duly advertise his presents –/ Trust no magic – win him so." (*The Panchatantra*, 1956: 34); 2) "A person's state of mind makes known/ what manner of man he is;/ entering it, one with experience/ quickly gains control over that man.// If the master gets angry, his man bends low,/ sings his praises, extols his largesse,/ hates his foes, dotes on those he favours:/ that's the sure way to win someone over/ without recourse to magical arts." (Viṣṇu Śarma, 1995: 24 [52-53])

Śarma, 1995: 33) Acting as an intermediary, he brings the lion and the bull together, but only after shaping their perceptions of one another to suit his own interests and schemes. He manipulates both powerful animals to harbor secret fear and suspicion toward each other, ensuring they both remain firmly under his direct and strict control. As the lion's friendship with the bull results in his neglecting his subjects, including the two jackals now "lean and pinched by hunger" (45), Damanaka decides it is time "to embroil" Sañjīvaka and Piṅgalaka. His first step is to approach his king and bring a troubling issue to his attention: "I have come here to acquaint His Majesty of it because it concerns his well-being. To be the bearer of bad tidings is never the wish of royal retainers; rather, it is the fear that through neglect timely action might not be undertaken to deal with the situation, that makes them speak." (91) The distressing news communicated "with alacrity" is a totally fabricated threat attributed to the bull, who supposedly plans to kill the lion and "seize his sovereignty for [himself]" (92). The jackal offers no real evidence (because none exists), but instead provides false accusations and hypothetical tales of betrayal and looming disaster.

Recognizing that fear is easier to provoke than trust, and that fear hastens decisions, Damanaka expertly crafts his rhetorical approach to instill doubt and anxiety. His rhetorical strategy is precise and calculated to put pressure on his target. He insinuates, questions, and covertly pushes the lion to draw his own (mis)conclusions by ostentatiously referencing the king's power to make his own decisions: "If His Majesty disregards our good counsel […] and if he chooses to go his own way as he pleases, then the minister can in no way bear the blame, in case His Majesty comes to grief in the future." (104) In doing so, Damanaka deftly shifts the burden of decision and consequence onto the king, all while maintaining the appearance of loyal service and prudent advice. This rhetorical maneuver allows Damanaka to slyly guide Piṅgalaka toward the conclusions he desires, while simultaneously absolving himself of direct accountability. As a result, the lion believes he is acting independently, when, in reality, his perceptions and decisions have been carefully shaped by Damanaka's manipulative speech. The lion is enchanted into acting, led by persuasive illusion rather than truth.

Learning about Damanaka's misdeed, Karaṭaka, the trustworthy jackal, berates the conniver and draws a bitter conclusion: "[I]t is our lord who is entirely to blame. For, without proper scrutiny and due deliberation, he accepted the advice of one such as you." (156) Later on, when insolent Damanaka cynically reminds a remorseful Piṅgalaka that "the morality of princes […] has nothing in common with that of ordinary men" (186), Karaṭaka does not hesitate to set things straight and serve the lion a (belated) lesson in leadership, wisdom, and diplomacy:

> [I]t is not right that the master should implicitly rely on whatever a retainer who has strayed from the course of statesmanship has to say; for the reason, that a crafty retainer keeping his own advancement in the forefront, pulls the wool over his master's eyes by presenting him with incredibly artful arguments; facts as they are not. The master should undertake an action only after deep deliberation. […] Master of his own thinking and decisions, uninfluenced by other pressures, [he] should be fully cognizant in his own mind of every single aspect of his responsibilities and functions. (189)

As the central mechanism of tragedy, indoctrination in the form of poisonous persuasion within the sphere of counsel and politics is also illustrated in *Kalila wa-Dimna*, the 8th-century

Arabic translation of *Pañcatantra* by Ibn al-Muqaffa', a book which "infuses wisdom with amusement", "the insights [being] embodied in proverbs, anecdotes, parables and analogies" (*The Fables of* Kalilah and Dimnah, 2002: 29). Before presenting its cautionary tale – the revised story of the lion, the bull, and the two jackals – about the power of persuasive rhetoric to control others, *Kalila wa-Dimna* highlights eloquence as a valuable means of moral instruction through the detailed depiction of the interaction between the philosopher Baydaba (Bidpai) and the Indian king Dabshalim, described as "a tyrant," "oppressive, arrogant, and brutal towards his subjects" (43). Witnessing "the King's behaviour and his oppression of the people," Baydaba decides that "it is intolerable to watch [him] continue in his deplorable conduct and despicable government," so he considers "how to reform the King and return him to the path of justice" (43). Having "nothing but words as weapons," he approaches the feared monarch and delivers a speech that is strikingly reminiscent in form of Damanaka's speech from the *Pañcatantra*:

> My presence here, which also carries the grave risk of addressing the King, was for the purpose of delivering my advice to him […]. Should the King scrutinize my words and comprehend them, he has the authority to react however he sees fit. Even should he reject my advice, I shall have fulfilled my obligation honestly, and can declare myself absolved from any future blame. (48)

Enraged by Baydaba's harsh criticism and accusation that he "[has] not executed [his] duties truthfully and efficiently," Dabshalim orders the philosopher's death by crucifixion, only to soon realize "he had made his decision in anger" (50). Consequently, he relents and commutes the capital punishment to imprisonment. But Baydaba's words keep haunting him, echoing relentlessly in his mind:

> [O]ne night Dabshalim could not sleep, and lay for a long time staring at the stars. He pondered their movements, their orbits, their shapes and patterns. He meditated on some of the principles of astronomy. Then, suddenly, he remembered Baydaba and his speech, and realized that he might have made a mistake in punishing this wise man. He thought: perhaps I have wronged the Philosopher, and in my anger hastily treated him unfairly. […] It was wrong of me to do so. It should have been my duty to listen to him and be guided by his counsel. (51)

The king summons the prisoner and asks him to repeat his speech "word for word, without omitting a single word or syllable" (51). After listening carefully (this time) to the philosopher's advice, Dabshalim frees him and invites him to rule his kingdom on his behalf for one year, which Baydaba does "with justice and fairness" (52). Recognizing the value of Baydaba's wisdom, the king commissions him to write "a book of great eloquence," that "should prescribe the behaviour and morality of the kings, their methods of government, and their ability to beget loyalty among their subjects" (54). Gladly accepting the task, the philosopher writes a book of fables entitled *Kalila wa-Dimna*, meant "to educate the intellectual elite." He puts "dialogue into the mouths of animals […], in order to amuse both the cultivated and the common people. But […] what they uttered was a wisdom appropriate to the highest level of the sciences, arts and letters." (55)

Within Baydaba's book however, through *The Fable of the Lion and the Bull (Jealousy turns friendship to animosity)*, speech is also recognized as potentially dangerous because it enchants, cloaking truth in the garments of fiction and turning wisdom into a form of rhetorical cunning. Again, the lion is easily influenced, much too susceptible to sycophants and fear. The Arabic adaptation retains the same plot. Born into a world of courtly competition, Dimna acts as a skillful counselor aiming at advancement. He informs his brother Khalīla that he plans to make friends with the lion, discover his vulnerabilities, and exploit them. Having managed to get close to the king of the animals, Dimna continues to earn his favor by offering to help identify the source of the booming sound that has left the lion fearful and uneasy. Much like in the *Pañcatantra*, he comes across the bull (named Shatrabah here) and serves as a go-between for him and the lion, ultimately helping the two animals form a close bond. However, this new friendship causes Dimna to lose his recently acquired status, so "[e]nvy then began to gnaw at [him]" (90). He uses his eloquence as a political weapon. By repeatedly referring to long-standing traditions and practices, he draws upon a collective heritage and legitimizes his speech. Connecting his arguments to established wisdom serves as a powerful rhetorical device. He reframes Shatrabah's loyalty as ambition and he artfully appeals to the king's fear of betrayal, appearing to question his sense of royal honor, too. His machinations result in the bull's death. When the lion admits to longing for Shatrabah's company, the jackal firmly dismisses any sentimentality: "It is just like a person who cuts off the finger that was bitten by a snake, to save himself from the deadly venom." (117) But unfortunately for him, the lion "came to know the whole story of how Dimnah had treacherously betrayed his friend Shatrabah the Bull. And when he did, the Lion punished him with a most painful and savage death." (117) Although Dimna receives the ultimate penalty, his rhetorical mastery is grudgingly admired. Even the prudent and just Khalīla, while identifying him with "immorality, deception, and treachery" (115) and scolding him vigorously for having acted "savagely", acknowledges: "You have spoken smoothly" (112). In this political mirror the manipulative act becomes a lesson in statecraft: eloquence determines access to power. The spell of speech is reclassified from moral danger to an efficient means to create and capitalize on opportunities.

The Story of King Yunan and the Sage Duban from the *Arabian Nights* echoes the structure and moral logic of the lion, bull, and jackals story from the *Pañcatantra* (via *Khalila wa-Dimna*), exploring how manipulation, especially through flattery and rhetorical cunning, can corrupt rulers and lead to injustice. Yunan is cured of leprosy by the Duban, who "is described as a *ḥakim*, a word which can be translated both as 'wise man' and 'physician'" and as "a figure with magic powers", "skilled in astrology, medicine, and plant-lore" (Pinault, 1992: 41-42). Exploiting the king's fear and paranoid suspicion, and applying classic indoctrination tactics (flattery, repetition, half-truths, emotional appeals), a jealous vizier convinces him that the sage is an evil sorcerer planning his death. His mind poisoned by his advisor's ruses, the king executes Duban based on a false, but persuasive narrative and despite the sage's pleas and parables. Thus, Yunan violates his duty of being wise and just. His moral failure is a sin for which he will soon pay with his own life, after reading the sage's poisoned parting book. A literary descendant of Damanaka/Dimna the jackal, King Yunan's vizier is a persuasive, clever, and ultimately destructive force. He is a sorcerer of language[3] who casts verbal spells overriding

[3] The metaphor of speech as sorcery finds strong resonance in Arabic and classical rhetorical thought. "The Prophet said, 'Some eloquent speech has the influence of magic (e.g., some people refuse to do something and then a good eloquent speaker addresses them and then they agree to do that very thing after his speech).'" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 5146 – Khan, 1997: 63) This hadith (interpreted as both a

reason and free will. When he convinces the king to kill Duban, a loyal subject, his weapon is not a wand or a curse, but a crafted narrative. He tells a parable, subtly equating the sage with a traitor. His black rhetorical magic revises the king's perception of a friend (as opposed to a foe), it distorts and reshapes reality, it clouds judgment and enthralls the listener, colonizing his mind.

Thus, time and time again, moral narratives feature an envious and deceitful courtier proving to be less a servant of truth than a technician of belief. Words, stories, and proverbs operate as calibrated interventions on another's mind. The speaker's verbal domination alters a sovereign's perception through speech alone. The art of verbal manipulation is not just natural cleverness. It is deliberate, often trained in the art of (courtly) discourse, and deeply attuned to human vulnerabilities. A charmer reads the mind of his victim, he perceives underlying desires, fears, and insecurities. He shifts moral frameworks without confrontation: he offers plausible, seemingly logical arguments and parables; he stirs powerful motivators that hijack reason, such as fear, jealousy, anger; he performs deceptive trustworthiness and loyalty, dismantling suspicion and inviting trust. The manipulator emerges as a rhetorician, skilled in the arts of flattery, storytelling, and insinuation. His speech is not mere ornament, but a deliberate technology of control, that weaponizes cultural and moral literacy to dominate. Much like a magician conjures illusions, the charmer reshapes perception through narrative. His power lies not in force, but in verbal enchantment, a soft tyranny of the soul.

Rhetoric and Gender Precarity: A Woman Fighting for Her Life

In the ancient Egyptian *Tale of the Two Brothers*, Anubis/Anpu's wife tries to seduce Bata, his brother, "an excellent[4] man. There was none like him in the whole land for a god's strength was in him." (Lichtheim, 2006: 204) Her initial rhetoric is enticing rather than coercive: "She got up, took hold of him, and said to him: 'Come, let us speed an hour lying together. It will be good for you. And I will make fine clothes for you.'" (204-205) When he refuses, she is suddenly placed in a potential mortal danger. As an unfaithful wife, she can only expect the worst. Trying to protect and save herself, she changes her speech from seductive to aggressive, and her rhetoric becomes a mirror-image inversion of the truth. She accuses Bata of the very act she proposed, reassigning guilt to the object of her forbidden desire and reasserting power over the narrative by controlling the first public version of events (which, more often than not, becomes the authoritative one). Understanding that her speech has already preceded him and poisoned his reputation, Bata flees the household, without disputing the allegations. It is only when a murderous Anubis pursues the "defiler" and gets close to him, a divine rhetoric of mythical vindication (brought about by the sun-god Pre-Harakhti[5]) responds to the rhetoric of manipulation. Bata's body becomes a form of counter-speech. His miraculous transformations and metamorphoses, as well as the preservation and recovery of his heart function as white-rhetorical proofs that physically manifest (and thus restore) truth, effectively dismantling the false reality created by the wife's black rhetoric.

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warning and an appreciation of the power of language) acknowledges that persuasive or eloquent speech can have a psychologically overpowering effect on its audience, an effect likened to sorcery. In Islamic rhetorical theory, persuasive speech is praised when it upholds truth, but when deployed in service of falsehood, it becomes spiritually dangerous.

[4] Another English translation (Hollis, 1990) credits him with being "a beautiful young man" (5), his physical attractiveness seemingly getting him into trouble.

[5] The sun-god Re (or Pre) "appeared in three major forms: as Harakhti in the morning, as Khepri in midday, and as Atum in the evening" (Lichtheim, 2006: 89).

Joseph's story from Bereshit/Genesis 39 reiterates the theme of a failed seduction[6] that develops into serious claims of wrongdoing. Humiliated by Joseph's rejection and fearful of the possible consequences of her acts, Potiphar's wife employs rhetorical devices. She gives not one, but two vivid, very dramatic tales of attempted rape. To the household servants, she expresses outrage and fear, using the language of violated social norms. To Potiphar, she shifts emphasis, appealing to his masculine honor and framing Joseph's alleged act as an assault not only on her, but on him, too. Perceiving what each specific audience needs to hear to act as desired, she tailors her speeches accordingly. She inserts ethnic and class prejudice into her accusation, referring to Joseph as "a Hebrew" "brought […] unto us to mock us" (Genesis 39:14). She bitterly (and vengefully) reproaches to Potiphar: "The Hebrew servant, whom thou hast brought unto us, came in unto me to mock me." (39:17). This deliberate rhetorical strategy of hers is meant to mobilize xenophobia among her servants and husband, making the story more believable because Joseph is the Other, the outsider.[7] The woman also makes use of a physical prop, i.e. Joseph's garment, which she displays like courtroom evidence. Potiphar's reaction is not investigative, it is judicial in effect, but not in form. His judgment is driven by social expectation and personal embarrassment.[8] Yet the biblical narrative denies Potiphar's wife the final word. Unlike Bata, Joseph does not receive immediate vindication through visible divine intervention. Instead, he proves his character and restores his reputation through subsequent dream interpretations[9], administrative capability, and moral consistency. The reader is permitted to see his life unfold as a refutation of the false accusation. This form of white rhetoric emphasizes patience, trustworthiness, endurance, being rather slow than spectacular.

A similar pattern of rhetoric and reasoning, demonstrating both the mechanics of deception and the endurance of truth, appears in *The Seven Sages*, a medieval compilation of stories within a framework-narrative, probably originating in Indian traditions (the lost Sanskrit text being presumably dated around 500 B.C.[10]), with two main branches, the Eastern one, known as *Kitāb al-Sindibād* (*The Book of Sindibād*), and, respectively, the Western one, generally

[6] Again, the target is a good-looking youth: "Joseph was of beautiful form, and fair to look upon." (Genesis 39:6) "Beauty in the Bible is sometimes a vulnerability for powerful people go after beautiful objects." (Frymer-Kensky, 2002: 74)

[7] She "subliminally builds on the common fear that foreign men prey on a nation's women." (Frymer-Kensky, 2002: 76)

[8] It seems though that a close contextual reading of the Hebrew text allows an alternative interpretation of this episode: when she speaks to Potiphar, while apparently rephrasing the rape account already publicly presented to their servants, his wife might use *double entendres* and allude to facts only known to the two of them, the most important of them being Joseph's obligation to procreate *in* Potiphar's *stead*. In this case, her discontent and Potiphar's anger might not be caused by Joseph's ethnicity or (false) audacity. Instead, both are bothered by *the servant* who refuses to serve, "to do the thing he was intended to do, despite the excellent conditions that Potiphar created for him. […] Therefore Joseph is not stoned to death because of attempted rape, but ends up doing a new job in jail because of his refusal to do that particular thing he was commanded to do, or even bought for to do." (Pirson, 2004: 259) Thus, the scorned woman vents her frustration with the attractive young man who rebelled against authority and declined to obey his master's orders.

[9] Joseph's God-given ability to interpret dreams (for Pharaoh's officers and for Pharaoh himself) leads to his exaltation as second-in-command in Egypt. The slanderous words bring him down temporarily, but his later prophecies save Egypt from famine and ultimately bring about the salvation of his own family.

[10] Morris Epstein (1958: 5) has suggested a correlated chronology for all Eastern versions (both lost and surviving), presented as a "Tentative Chart of Affiliated Manuscripts".

designed as *The Seven Sages of Rome* (which keeps the seven sages mentioned in the title, but not the philosopher named Sindibād, or Sendebar, or Syntipas). While the Western versions of this collection are numerous (at least forty), there are only eight extant Eastern versions, among which: 1) the (now lost) 8th-century Arabic *Al-Wuzarāʾ al-sabʿa* (*The Seven Viziers*), variations of which can also be found in *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (*The One Thousand and One Nights*) and *Miʾa Layla wa-Layla* (*One Hundred and One Nights*); 2) the pivotal *Mishle Sendebar* (*Tales from Sendebar*), "probably the bridge linking Eastern and Western forms" in Morris Epstein's opinion (*Tales of Sendebar*, 1967: 3), which is thought by many to have begun to appear in Hebrew in the 12th or 13th century, but which, based on circumstantial evidence, may have circulated at "a considerably earlier date" and "may very well represent the oldest known Eastern text"[11] (18).

The central plot in *The Seven Sages*, common to all versions, highlights the destructive power of a single false accusation and the salvific power of multiple, sustained, wise counter-narratives. The anthology features a king, his son, a royal consort scheming the prince's destruction because he rejected her advances, and seven viziers who share cautionary tales to protect the prince until he can speak in his own defense. In Eastern versions, a prince is educated by the wise sage Sindibād/ Sendebar, who foresees a deadly danger in his horoscope and instructs him to keep absolute silence for seven days to avert the catastrophe. During this period of mandatory silence, the king's consort attempts to seduce the prince. When he rejects her, she retaliates by claiming that he tried to assault her and also disclosed plans to overthrow and even murder his father. Believing the woman's powerful lie[12], the king sentences the prince to death. His execution is halted by a group of seven sages, who, over the next seven days, tell the king one or two instructive tales each day to illustrate the cunning, wiles, and untrustworthiness of women. The woman fights tooth and nail to save herself. To each vizier's tale, she immediately responds with a story of her own, aiming to demonstrate the malice or foolishness of men and reinforce her original accusation:

> Next morning, the Damsel, hearing of the impression which had been made upon his Majesty by the eloquence of one of his vazīrs, and how her plans were thus overthrown, again presented herself, and, complaining loudly of her wrongs, implored justice. She reminded his Majesty of a day of retribution; accused him of protecting one who had looked on his harem with an eye of sin; denounced the vazīr as corrupt and a receiver of bribes; and as bent upon bestowing the sovereignty on the prince by the death of his master. (*The Book of Sindibād*, 1884: 37)

On the eighth day, the period of imposed silence is over. The prince speaks, reveals the truth which convinces the king, and thus clears his name. The lying woman is typically punished:

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[11] "I submit then, that the *Book of Sindibad* may be – in the form in which we have it – Hebraic in origin. Absorbed into the Persian stream of literature, it appeared in the Pahlavi translation of the sixth or seventh century of our era. It had, however, already passed into the Oriental Jewish tradition, where knowledge of the Talmud was limited and often nil. […] In the Oriental Jewish world the work was translated into Arabic and was embraced by the Arab world, as indeed the Torah was by the Koran. Cloaked in Arab garb, it made its way from one spellbound audience to another, until it reached the West." (*Tales of Sendebar*, 1967: 35-36).

[12] The Book of Proverbs (5:3-4) warns about seductive, smooth speech. The king's consort resembles the "strange [forbidden] woman" whose lips "drop honey," "[b]ut her end is bitter as wormwood, / Sharp as a two-edged sword."

> Then the sultan commanded a ponderous stone to be tied to the feet of the artful and wicked concubine, and she was cast into the sea. The tutor was rewarded, and invested with an embroidered robe of great value. The sultan delighted in his son, and abdicating his throne, gave it up to the prince, who made all happy by his justice and clemency" (*The Book of Sindibād*, 1884: 214)

But the Hebrew version of the story provides a very different outcome. After the wrongly accused young man reveals the truth, the king and his courtiers intend to put the woman to death[13]. But their decision is drastically changed by the input of the (now) two wise people in the room: Sendebar and his worthy pupil, the prince, who apply principles embedded in the Torah and in Jewish wisdom literature:

> [T]he Prince replied: "Let her not be condemned to die, for every man fights for his life. And now I will ask of the King and his counselors to pardon her sin, and not to execute her." And the King and the officers that were with him, and the whole nation, were happy to forgive her sin. (295)
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> And Sendebar [said]: "[M]y petition and my request is that what is hateful unto you do not do to your neighbor, and love your neighbor as yourself."[14] And the King did as Sendebar counseled him. (297)

Bata's sister-in-law, Potiphar's wife, the damsel[15] in *The Book of Sindibād*, the favorite maiden[16] of the king of Sendebar speak and act in similar fashion. Each of them is a woman forced to fight for her life because of her own recklessness. They share the same motivation and commit the same transgression: driven by intense desire for an off-limits young man, they give into temptation, disregarding the consequences of taking such liberties in a men's world. At first, the woman tries to manipulate the young man she illicitly desires through:

1) blunt proposition or overt seduction, both verbal (direct invitation, promises) and actual (proximity, attitude, touch): before enticing him to cozy up with her, the wife of his brother allows Bata to see her while she braids her hair and when he urges her with the task assigned by Anubis, she pointedly replies: "Don't make me leave my hairdo unfinished."[17] (Lichtheim,

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[13] Seemingly, a just punishment, since "false charges in public, trial before all the people, and lying testimony are each harder to bear than death" (The Wisdom of Ben Sira 26:5).

[14] "[T]hou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." (Leviticus 19:18) This is the Golden Rule of Judaism (what to do), considered "the central tenet of the Torah" by Rabbi Akiva (Bereshit Rabbah 24:7). Rabbi Hillel the Elder gave a variation, known as the Negative Golden Rule (what not to do): "What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it." (Shabbat 31a:6)

[15] "[A] peri-faced moon (one of the wives of his Majesty), fair as a hūri of Paradise, was secretly enamoured of the prince, but had hitherto found no opportunity of meeting him alone, or of telling him her love." (*The Book of Sindibād*, 1884: 25)

[16] "Whom the King had raised and he loved her above all his women." (*Tales of Sendebar*, 1967: 81)

[17] Later on, reverting the narrative, she will mention her hair once again: "He said to me: 'Come, let us spend an hour lying together; loosen your braids.'" (Lichtheim, 2006: 205) One might very well surmise that she was too confident in her charm(s) and did not truly expect her words to be taken literally when she appeared to chastise Bata for rushing her. The damsel in *The Book of Sindibād* makes a similar reference to her own hair, that she obviously considers a beauty asset: "No sooner had I conducted the prince into the harem than he began to say: 'The reason of my silence is, that my heart is ensnared in your tresses, and my soul slain by the curve of your eyebrows.'" (1884: 26)

2006: 204); "his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said: 'Lie with me.'[18]" (Genesis 39:7); "she declares her passion for him, and offers to put him in possession of the kingdom in return for his confidence" (*The Book of Sindibād*, 1884: 25)[19]; "she bared her flesh before him, saying: 'Have you seen any woman as beautiful as I? Speak to me and lie with me and we will slay your father for he is an old man, a hundred years old, and you will reign, and I will be your maidservant!" (*Tales of Sendebar*, 1967: 83);

2) insistence: "she spoke to Joseph day by day" (Genesis 39:10); "she continued to talk to him and then she embraced him and kissed him" (*Tales of Sendebar*, 1967: 83);

3) privacy in a space which is mostly/exclusively hers: "Joseph went into the house to do his business; and there was none of the men of the house there within. And she caught him by his garment, saying, Lie with me" (Genesis 39:11-12); she "asked [the king's] permission to take the prince to the harem, under pretense of endeavoring to extort from him the secret of his silence" (*The Book of Sindibād*, 1884: 25); "she brought him into her chamber" (*Tales of Sendebar*, 1967: 83).

When rejected (thus risking exposure and a death sentence), the intrepid woman recalibrates her discourse in order to extricate herself from the perilous predicament she has carelessly created. She begins by exerting first-mover narrative dominance.[20] Her words enter silence and fill it completely, becoming the default reality. Like sorcery, her rhetoric functions by seizing temporal control (she demands immediate action), turning story into pseudo-fact, manipulating social pressure (she invokes honor, shame, fear), and conjuring false futures. Each component aligns with the logic of spellcraft: a precise utterance spoken at the right moment to the right listener can change destiny. The manipulative woman exploits the symbolic weight of sexual accusation in a patriarchal honor culture and she splits audiences, telling one story to domestic attendants, another to the principal male authority. The absence of the accused, and the accuser's deliberate collapse of deliberative time, ensure that no counter-speech is initially possible. Rhetorically speaking, the silence of the accused is converted into a presumption of guilt. It functions not only as a legal disadvantage, but as a dramatic device illustrating the fragility of truth in the face of persuasive falsehood.

But if black rhetoric overwhelms by speed and emotional force, white rhetoric counters through patience, analogy, and incremental persuasion. The viziers do not argue directly, they do not contradict the king's consort. Instead, they tell stories[21], they create competing interpretive worlds that loosen the grip of the initial enchantment. Each parable is a rhetorical counter-spell, it reframes the king's interpretive lens and offers analogous scenarios with different moral outcomes. It buys more time for reflection and teaches the king to recognize

[18] "Her approach is direct. She does not try to seduce him, simply issues words of command. He is, after all, her husband's slave, and she expects to be obeyed. […] Potiphar's wife may not have the right to demand sex with Joseph. She certainly does not have the authority to penalize him, and cannot sell him out of her husband's hand. Her commands are empty for she cannot punish him for refusing." (Frymer-Kensky, 2002: 75)

[19] In Redwan, 2023: 61, see English translations of more detailed (and explicit) versions of his passage, excerpted from three Arabic manuscripts dating from the 17th and 18th centuries.

[20] But the Book of Proverbs (18:17) cautions that this dominance might not be definitive: "He that pleadeth his cause first seemeth just; / But his neighbour cometh and searcheth him out."

[21] "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." (Proverbs 18:21) "A word is the source of every deed;/ a thought, of every act./ The root of all conduct is the mind;/ four branches it shoots forth:/ Good and evil, death and life,/ with the tongue as their absolute mistress." (The Wisdom of Ben Sira 37:16-18)

patterns of manipulation. Embodying Deuteronomic principles (judgment must not be hasty; multiple voices must be heard[22]), delay counteracts the woman's urgency. Where black rhetoric overwhelms, white rhetoric reorients. Where black rhetoric compresses time, white rhetoric creates time. Where black rhetoric narrows perspective, white rhetoric expands it. The viziers' strategy is not merely clever; it dramatizes an entire pedagogy: discernment requires diligence and the ability to interpret analogy. By the final day, the king's interpretive world has shifted. His beloved's accusations have been efficiently dismantled by the cumulative indirect persuasion of the viziers' stories. White rhetoric wins through accretion, not confrontation. Crucially, the king's change occurs as a form of self-authored recognition, preserving royal dignity and making reversal possible.

But a woman's rhetoric is also depicted in *The Arabian Nights* as possessing positive, beneficial capabilities, when it seeks restoration and/or salvation. Triggered by (again) a self-defense instinct, it responds to existential threat by employing parabolic instruction and temporal resistance. Such approach makes use of analogical reframing, accumulates multiple counter-stories, and practices hermeneutic virtue by exercising interpretive patience. Shahrazād's rhetoric, while meant to be redemptive, operates through the same mechanisms of suspense and seduction that define black magic. The famous (and cherished) spinner of spell-binding stories tries to reform the "mad tyrant" because she knows that she is more than prepared to rise to the challenge. In spite of being "just" a young *woman*, she is already an accomplished self-instructed scholar, having had read "the books of literature, philosophy, and medicine. She knew poetry by heart, had studied historical reports, and was acquainted with the sayings of men and the maxims of sages and kings. She was intelligent, knowledgeable, wise, and refined. She had read and *learned* [emphasis added]." (*The Arabian Nights*, 1995: 11) Among other valuable things, she has learned – or understood – how to draw on her intellectual brightness and erudition in order to successfully face adversity. She knows that speech mastery – if skillfully summoned up – can get her far, as established by classical rhetorical treatises[23]. Speech can bind, delight, or coerce the soul (*nafs*) through beauty, rhythm, and metaphor, which is explicitly equated to magic (*siḥr*), an ambivalent force, with intention and truth-value as the moral discriminants between white and black kinds. The same verbal operations that classical poetics celebrates as aesthetic enchantment[24] can function as techniques of

[22] "At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is to die be put to death; at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death." (Deuteronomy 17:6; see also 19:15) False accusation is to be severely punished: "And the judges shall inquire diligently; and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother;/ then shall ye do unto him, as he had purposed to do unto his brother; so shalt thou put away the evil from the midst of thee./ And those that remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil in the midst of thee." (Deuteronomy 19: 18-20)

[23] Such as al-Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn/ The Book of Eloquence and Exposition*; Ibn Wahb al-Kātib's *Kitāb al-Burhān fī wujūh al-bayān*, also known as *Naqd al-nathr/ Book on Prose Criticism*; ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's *Asrār al-Balāgha/ Secrets of Eloquence*; *Dalā'il al-I'jāz fī al-Qur'ān/ The Proofs of Inimitability in the Qur'ān*.

[24] The concept of *balāgha* (more on this concept in Bohas *et al.*, 1990: 113-117; Smyth, 1992; Halldén, 2005), the classical Arabic notion of eloquence, aims not simply to persuade, but to reach the listener in spirit and imagination. Enchantment, in this sense, is not a distortion of truth, but rather its way of coming forth. See "[The discourse] has to be exhibited in the most brilliant and decorated, most splendid and wonderful form that is most fit to win the heart's favor and the largest share of its affections, and is most capable of setting the praiser's tongue going and prolonging the displeasure of the envier." (Al-Jurjàni, 1982: 78)

domination in narrative practice. One's mastery of *siḥr al-bayān* ("the magic of eloquence") can decide between life and death.

Shahrazād proves to be a smooth operator. She seemingly chooses to give eloquence an interpretation and a purpose which are quite unusual in the Islamic context, where rhetoric is focused on "analysis rather than composition"[25] (Smyth, 1992: 248), while in the Western Tradition it is an art of making one's own speeches with the specific goal of speaking persuasively[26]. As if following Aristotle's teachings[27], Shahrazād carefully prepares her endeavor by neatly conjuring the circumstances favorable to what she has in mind. She devises a clever stratagem involving the presence of a third person beside her and the king – her younger sister, Dinarzad/Dunyāzād, or an unnamed *qahramānah* (see Grotzfeld, 1985: 75) – designed to prompt the storytelling by saying: "if you are not sleepy, tell us a story." But, lo and behold, none of Shahrazād's tales concludes before dawn, the hour of her scheduled execution.

> But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence, leaving King Shahrayar burning with curiosity to hear the rest of the story. Then Dinarzad said to her sister Shahrazad, "What a strange and lovely story!" Shahrazad replied, "What is this compared with what I shall tell you tomorrow night if the king spares me and lets me live? It will be even better and more entertaining." (*The Arabian Nights*, 1995: 18)

Shahrazād's silence suddenly pausing (often on a cliffhanger or even mid-sentence) the exhilarating account effectively buys her time – until evening, when she is prettily asked by Dinarzad to resume the narration. A story finishes, another one begins (to while away the rest of the night), but, to be sure, it is thoroughly timed not to be completed until morning, when a pattern emerges, a scenario repeated again and again, with only slight variations, almost always mentioning the necessity of Shahrazād's survival ("if the king spares me and lets me live!"; "if I stay alive!"), so that the storytelling continues. By the seventh night, the king is hooked. He clearly indicates he has become interested: "Dinarzad said to her sister Shahrazad, 'For God's sake, sister, if you are not sleepy, tell us a little tale.' The king added, 'Let it be the completion of the story of the merchant and the demon.' Shahrazad replied, 'With the greatest pleasure.'" (27) From now on, Shahrayar will quite frequently ask to hear "the rest of the story"[28] (47), but sternly reminding himself that *afterwards* he will proceed with his initial sanguinary plans: "Then I shall do to her what I did to the others." (75) Several dozen nights later, the recurring pattern pertaining to the storytelling convention is reduced to a pair of brief utterances: "But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence." – "The following night Shahrazad said: […]." (153)

[25] "In the Islamic context […] one studied language in order to understand the basic proofs of Islamic Law," "in order to extract a meaning from an established text and not to compose a new one." (Smyth, 1992: 248)

[26] "Speech making was prominent already in Homer, and the Greeks soon realized that a moving expression might achieve a desired effect – i.e. it might move the army or city to action. Recognizing the utility of language encouraged the Greeks to study eloquence so that they might produce it at will." (Smyth, 1992: 243)

[27] "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion." (Aristotle, 1954: 24)

[28] His desire has begun transitioning "from sex to text" (see Malti-Douglas, 1992: 23).

The versions of *The Arabian Nights* that are the best-known and the most celebrated – and also the most problematic from the perspective of authenticity[29] – offer very polished and well-rounded renditions of the legendary "one thousand and one nights," which are scrupulously exact regarding the number of the nights. They confer Shahrazād a mythical aura, projecting her as a gentle magician with transformative powers, who captivates Shahrayar by carefully pacing the narrative, by holding his attention night after night and, in so doing, gradually dissolving his murderous determination, reshaping his very being, and patiently inverting the pattern of domination. The true enchantment lies in her command over time, orchestrated through speech that embraces the logic of the storytelling instead of the logic of proof. "The Merchant and the Demon," Shahrazād's opening tale, mirrors her own predicament: a merchant tells his story to a demon intent on killing him. The demon's wrath is repeatedly deferred by other characters who intercede with their stories, each re-enacting the rhetorical act of deferral through wonder. Stories within stories proliferate. The tale becomes an allegory for rhetoric itself: speech as a substitute for punishment, narration as the transformation of judgment into attentive listening. Through Shahrazād's cumulative narratives, Shahrayar is drawn into empathy, compelled to experience the lives and sufferings of others. The ethical effect of this enchantment is conversion: by the thousandth night, the king has become a keen listener (plus an attentive husband and father of three) rather than a tyrant.

But, in fact, "[w]e do not know what the conclusion was in the Indian archetype nor in *Hāẓar Afsānah*, the Persian recension." (Grotzfeld, 1985: 75) In many old (especially Syrian) manuscripts "there is no trace of a 'conversion' or 'listening to reason'" (86). Since "the stories are gathered from very shifting traditions" (87), many major disparities can be identified between the numerous versions of the famous collection. Willing to provide some kind of much sought-after closure, Haddawy kindly adds a postscript to his translation of *The Arabian Nights* based on the text of the fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript[30] edited by Muhsin Mahdi: "*Tradition has it* [emphasis added] that in the course of time Shahrazad bore Shahrayar three children and that, having learned to trust and love her, he spared her life and kept her as his queen." (1995: 428) Nevertheless, nothing – not even a sad ending of her adventure – can overshadow Shahrazād's momentous triumph through eloquence. On reflection, the incompleteness of *her* story is in perfect accord with her trademark rhetoric of the suspense and it might suit her magic better than any mention of domestic bliss and of a successful moral conversion of the king.

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The cross-cultural narratives examined in this study reveal a stable moral grammar of speech. Although drawn from different linguistic, religious, and cultural environments, they suggest a universal recognition of the same psychological truth: people do not see reality as it is, they see reality as it is presented/narrated to them (and whoever controls the narrative controls the situation). They share an almost formulaic concern with the potency of language,

[29] See Husain Haddawy's introductions to *The Arabian Nights*, 1995: ix-xxix and, respectively, *The Arabian Nights II*, 1995: ix-xvii.

[30] This manuscript contains two hundred and seventy-one nights only, hence the generic title given by Haddawy to his published translation, *The Arabian Nights*, instead of *One Thousand and One Nights – Alf layla(h) wa-layla(h)*, a title attested in the Islamic world as early as the 10th century. "The first element in the title of that popular book: 'One Thousand Nights' is very old, as it is an adaptation of the Persian *hezar efsane*, which means 'A Thousand Stories,' according to various Muslim writers the name of a pre-Islamic collection of tales and fables." (Goitein, 1950: 301)

with its ability to conjure worlds, distort perception, and reallocate social power. This is the sense in which ancient authors treat speech as a form of magic, as a performative force capable of altering reality. In these tales, two competing modes of speech (implicitly, two competing word-worlds) confront one another: black rhetoric (manipulative, urgent, deceptive, totalizing, and performatively violent) and white rhetoric (patient, indirect, interpretive, cumulative, and reality-restoring). Black rhetoric enchants the judge with a false world, while white rhetoric patiently builds an alternative that is morally and narratively stronger. The ultimate triumph of wisdom is not the defeat of the manipulator, but the restoration of right perception[31], the unbinding of the judge from a dangerous enchantment. Such victory is not just psychological or political, but almost metaphysical since language becomes the medium through which good and evil contend for the soul.

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[31] "For through speech becomes known wisdom [*ḥokmâ*], and understanding [*tĕbûnâ*] through the answer of the tongue." (The Wisdom of Ben Sira 4:24)

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