

CHAPTER
10

Section 3

LITERATURE SELECTION *from The Arabian Nights*

The Arabian Nights, also known as The Thousand and One Nights, is a collection of stories from Arabia, India, and Persia. Some of the stories date back to the eighth century, others to as late as the sixteenth. Believing that women cannot be trusted, King Shahrayar (Shahryar) swears to marry for one night only. Each morning, he has his new wife killed. In order to save the people from this cruelty, a clever woman named Shahrazad (Scheherezade) offers to marry the king. Each night she tells part of a story; the king is so curious to find out how each story ends that he delays having her put to death. As you read the following excerpt from "The Third Dervish's Tale," consider what it reveals about Islamic cultural values.

The Fifty-Third Night

The following night Dinarzad said, "Please, sister, if you are not sleepy, tell us a tale to while away the night." The king added, "Finish the dervishes' tale." Shahrazad replied, "Very well":

It is related, O King, that the third dervish said:

[The Third Dervish's Tale]

O great lady, the story behind the shaving off of my beard and the loss of my eye is stranger and more amazing than theirs, yet it is unlike theirs, for their misfortune took them by surprise, whereas I knowingly brought misfortune and sorrow upon myself. My father was a great and powerful king, and when he died, I inherited the kingdom. My name is 'Ajib ibn-Khasib, and my city stood on the shore of a vast sea that contained many islands. My fleet numbered fifty merchantmen, fifty small pleasure boats, and one hundred and fifty ships fitted for battle and holy war. One day I decided to go on an excursion to the islands, and I carried with me a month's supply and went there, enjoyed myself, and came back. A while later, driven by a desire to give myself to the sea, I fitted ten ships, carried two months' supply, and set out on my voyage. We sailed for forty days, but on the night of the forty-first, the wind blew from all directions, the sea raged with fury, buffeting our ships with huge waves, and a dense darkness descended upon us. We gave ourselves up for lost and said, "Even if he escapes, the foolhardy deserves no praise." We prayed to the Almighty God and implored and supplicated, but the blasts continued to blow and the sea continued to rage till dawn. Then the wind died down, the waves sub-

sided, and the sea became calm and peaceful, and when the sun shone on us, the sea lay before us like a smooth sheet.

Soon we came to an island, where we landed and cooked and ate some food. We rested for two days and we set out again and sailed for ten days, but as we sailed, the sea kept expanding before us and the land kept receding behind us. The captain was puzzled and said to the lookout man, "Climb to the masthead and look." The lookout man climbed, and after he looked for a while, came down and said, "I looked to my right and saw nothing but sky and water, and I looked to my left and saw something black looming before me. That is all I saw." When the captain heard what the lookout man said, he threw his turban to the deck, plucked out his beard, beat his face, and said, "O King, I tell you that we are all going to perish. There is no power and no strength save in God, the Almighty, the Magnificent," and he began to weep and made us weep with him. Then we said to him, "Captain, explain the matter." He replied, "My lord, we lost our course on the night of the storm, and we can no longer go back. By midday tomorrow, forced by the currents, we will reach a black mountain of a metal called the magnetic stone. As soon as we sail below the mountain, the ship's sides will come apart and every nail will fly out and stick to the mountain, for the Almighty God has endowed the magnetic stone with a mysterious virtue that makes the iron love it. For this reason and because of the many ships that have been passing by for a long time, the mountain has attracted so much iron that most of it is already covered with it. On the summit facing the sea, there is a dome of Andalusian brass, supported by ten brass pillars, and on top of the dome

there is a brass horse with a brass horseman, bearing on his breast a lead tablet inscribed with talismans. O King, it is none but this rider who destroys the people, and they will not be safe from him until he falls from his horse.” Then, O my lady, the captain wept bitterly, and certain that we would perish, we too wept for ourselves with him. We bade each other good-bye, and each of us charged his friend with his instructions, in case he was saved.

We never slept a wink that night, and in the morning we began to approach the magnetic mountain, so that by midday, forced by the currents, we stood below the mountain. As soon as we arrived there, the planks of the ship came apart, and the nails and every iron part flew out toward the mountain and stuck together there. Some of us drowned and some escaped, but those who did escape knew nothing about the fate of the others. As for me, O my lady, God spared me that I might suffer what He had willed for me of hardship and misery. I climbed on one of the planks of the ship, and it was thrown immediately by the wind at the foot of the mountain. There I found a path leading to the summit, with steps carved out of the rock.

But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence. Then Dinarzad said, “Sister, what a strange and entertaining story!” Shahrazad replied, “What is this compared with what I shall tell you tomorrow night if I stay alive!”

The Fifty-Fourth Night

The following night Dinarzad said to her sister Shahrazad, “Please, sister, if you are not sleepy, tell us the rest of the story of the third dervish.” Shahrazad replied, “Very well”:

O my lord, I heard that the third dervish said to the girl:

When I saw the path on the side of the mountain, I invoked the name of the Almighty God, hung against the rock, and began to climb little by little. And the Almighty God bade the wind be still and helped me with the ascent, so that I reached the summit safely and went directly to the dome. Glad at my safe escape, I entered the dome, performed my ablutions, and prayed, kneeling down several times in thanks-

giving to the Almighty God for my safety. Then I fell asleep under the dome overlooking the sea and heard in a dream a voice saying, “O ’Ajib, when you wake from your sleep, dig under your feet, and you will find a brass bow and three lead arrows inscribed with talismans. Take the bow and arrows and shoot at the horseman to throw him off the horse and rid mankind of this great calamity. When you shoot at him, he will fall into the sea, and the horse will drop at your feet. Take the horse and bury it in the place of the bow. When you do this, the sea will swell and rise until it reaches the level of the dome, and there will come to you a skiff carrying a man of brass (a man other than the man you will have thrown), holding in his hands a pair of paddles. Ride with him, but do not invoke the name of God. He will row you for ten days until he brings you to the Sea of Safety. Once there, you will find those who will convey you to your native land. All this will be fulfilled, providing that you do not invoke the name of God.”

Then I awoke and eagerly sprang up to do the voice’s bidding. I shot at the horseman, and he fell from the horse into the sea, while the horse dropped at my feet, and when I buried the horse in the place of the bow, the sea swelled and rose until it came up to me. Soon I saw a skiff in the offing, coming toward me, and I praised and thanked the Almighty God. When the skiff came up to me, I saw there a man of brass, bearing on his breast a lead tablet inscribed with names and talismans. I climbed into the skiff without uttering a word, and the boatman rowed with me through the first day and the second and on to the ninth, when I happily caught sight of islands, hills, and other signs of safety. But in my excess of joy, I praised and glorified the Almighty God, crying, “There is no god but God.” No sooner had I done that than the skiff turned upside down and sank, throwing me into the sea. I swam all day until my shoulders were numb with fatigue and my arms began to fail me, and when night fell and I was in the middle of nowhere, I became resigned to drown. Suddenly there was a violent gust of wind, which made the sea surge, and a great wave as tall as a mountain swept me and with one surge cast me on dry land; for God had willed to preserve my life. I walked ashore, wrung out my clothes, and spread them to dry.

Then I slept the whole night.

In the morning I put on my clothes and went to scout and see where I was. I came to a cluster of trees, circled around them, and as I walked further, I found out that I was on a small island in the middle of the sea. I said, “There is no power and no strength save in God, the Almighty, the Magnificent,” and while I was thinking about my situation, wishing that I was dead, I suddenly saw in the distance a ship with human beings on board, making for the island. I climbed a tree and hid among the branches. Soon the ship touched land, and there came ashore ten black men, carrying shovels and baskets. They walked on until they reached the middle of the island. Then they began to dig into the ground and to shovel the earth away until they uncovered a slab. Then they returned to the ship and began to haul out sacks of bread and flour, vessels of cooking butter and honey, preserved meat, utensils, carpets, straw mats, couches, and other pieces of furniture—in short, all one needs for setting up house. The black men kept going back and forth and descending through the trapdoor with the articles until they had transported everything that was in the ship. When they came out of the ship again, there was a very old man in their middle. Of this man nothing much was left, for time had ravaged him, reducing him to a bone wrapped in a blue rag through which the winds whistled east and west. He was like one of whom the poet said:

Time made me tremble; ah! how sore that was
For with his might does time all mortals stalk.
I used to walk without becoming tired;
Today I tire although I never walk.

The old man held by the hand a young man who was so splendidly handsome that he seemed to be cast in beauty’s mold. He was like the green bough or the tender young of the roe, ravishing every heart with his loveliness and captivating every mind with his perfection. Faultless in body and face, he surpassed everyone in looks and inner grace, as if it was of him that the poet said:

With him to make compare Beauty they
brought,
But Beauty hung his head in abject shame.
They said, “O Beauty, have you seen his like?”
Beauty replied, “I have ne’er seen the same.”

My lady, they walked until they reached the trapdoor, went down, and were gone for a long time. Then the old man and the black men came out without the young man and shoveled the earth back as it was before. Then they boarded the ship, set sail, and disappeared.

I came down from the tree and, going to the spot they had covered, began to dig and shovel away. Having patiently cleared the earth away, I uncovered a single millstone, and when I lifted it up, I was surprised to find a winding stone staircase. I descended the steps, and when I came to the end, I found myself in a clean, whitewashed hall, spread with various kinds of carpets, beddings, and silk stuffs. There I saw the young man sitting on a high couch, leaning back on a round cushion, with a fan in his hand. A banquet was set before him, with fruits, flowers, and scented herbs, as he sat there all alone. When he saw me, he started and turned pale, but I greeted him and said, “My lord, set your mind at ease, for there is nothing to fear. I am a human being like you, my dear friend, and like you, the son of a king. God has brought me to you to keep you company in your loneliness. But tell me, what is your story, and what causes you to dwell under the ground?”

But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence. Then Dinarzad said, “Sister, what a strange and entertaining story!” Shahrazad replied, “What is this compared with what I shall tell you tomorrow night if I stay alive!”

Activity Options

1. **Using Aural Stimuli** With a small group of classmates, take turns reading this excerpt from *The Arabian Nights* aloud. Then discuss why you think this collection of stories has enchanted audiences for centuries.
2. **Using Visual Stimuli** Visualize a scene from this tale. Then draw a sketch for an illustrated version of the story. Display your sketch in the classroom.