

“The Secret of the Secret of the Nights”

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Excerpt

To this understanding of the Nights’ definition of secrets a second tale can be finally adduced. “The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies” is the hilarious account of a night of debauchery shared by the unlikely quartet of its title. Having helped one of the “ladies” to carry her purchases from the market, the porter is invited to sojourn for the night in their home. Quickly, the group gets to drinking, and they sup “cup after cup until the porter beg[ins] to feel tipsy, los[es] his inhibitions, and [is] aroused” (72). “Toying, kissing, biting, groping, rubbing, fingering, and playing jokes on them,” he initiates the erotic situation, and they respond in kind, feeding him delectable treats. “When the wine got the better of them,” one of the ladies, the doorkeeper, strips off her clothes and leaps into the pool (72).

The sexual intensity and the perplexity of the scene increase when she emerges from the water:

She “...sat naked in the porter’s lap and, pointing to her slit, asked, ‘My lord and my love, what is this?’ ‘Your womb,’ said he, and she replied, ‘Pooh, pooh, you have no shame,’ and slapped him on the neck. ‘Your vulva,’ said he, and the other sister pinched him, shouting, ‘Bah, this is an ugly word.’ ‘Your cunt,’ said he, and the third sister boxed him on the chest and knocked him over, saying, ‘Fie, have some shame.’ ‘Your clitoris,’ said he, and again the naked girl slapped him, saying, ‘No.’...And they went on, this one boxing him, that one slapping him, another hitting him. At last, he turned to them and asked, ‘All right, what is its name?’ The naked girl replied, ‘The basil of the bridges.’ The porter cried, ‘The basil of the bridges! You should have told me this from the beginning, oh, oh!’ Then they passed the cup around and went on drinking for a while” (72-73).

In the same manner, the porter is asked to name the “slits” of the other two ladies. The second lady’s turn is nearly identical to the first’s, though the name of her “slit” is “the husked sesame.” The process by which the porter discovers the name of the third lady’s “slit” deviates more significantly. In this case, he first guesses the two already given names and only begins to offer conventional names when those fail. Yet Shahrazad strangely condenses this part of his

attempt: “To make a long story short, O King, the porter kept declaring, ‘Its name is so,’ and she kept saying ‘No, no, no, no’”(74). When he has finally “had his fill of blows,” the porter asks them to disclose the name. It is “the Inn of Abu Masrur.” The porter then reverses roles with the three ladies, and, “pointing to his penis,” asks, “Ladies, what is this?” They try a series of conventional names, each of which the porter rejects, hugging, pinching, and biting them all the while. Eventually, they request its name, and the porter replies, “Don’t you know its name? It is the smashing mule.” In response to their subsequent inquiry as to “the meaning of the name,” the porter provides this clever explanation:

It is the one who grazes in the basil of the bridges, eats the husked sesame, and gallops in the Inn of Abu Masrur. (75)

Although all four of the revelers point to a presumably familiar organ, they literally indicate a secret. Asking “what is this?” establishes the “slit” and “penis” as things perceptible yet unknown, the identity of which only the initiate knows. As Shahrazad’s nightly withholding of a remainder tantalizes the king, so here, in each case, the unknown nature of the “slit” and “penis” provokes a torrent of guesses, which are erotically accompanied by beating and biting. These anatomical secrets prove to be surprisingly similar to Shahrazad’s narrative ones. The difference between the two typical questions—the initial “what is this?” and the final “what is its name?”—is identical to the distinction, already discussed, between the secret’s outer appearance and its inner content. Subtly shifting from identification to denomination, this difference crucially relocates the knowledge being concealed, for it is no longer something held, as it were, within the organ, but something given to it externally. For this reason, the porter’s anatomically correct terms, which seek to identify what it “is,” fail. The secrets of the “slit” and “penis” are thus indeterminate: any word or phrase could possibly be their name. He will never correctly guess it. Indeed there does not seem to be any correct name, until, at his request, the girls provide it, as in *The Secret of Secrets* there are no secrets until inquiry is made to the sage’s head. The peculiar timing of this process is the twofold meaning of Shahrazad’s condensation.

Its rhythm is controlled not by knowledge but by bodily pain not unlike Shahrazad's exhaustion. Until the porter has "had his fill of blows," it will proceed indefinitely. Until the porter asks for the name, the girls need not be in possession of it, the temporal gap between the secret's appearance and its substantiation thus structuring an essential one. Even when they do reveal the name, there is no reason to consider it the correct one—only that they are sufficiently satisfied with the erotic play of inquiry and violence.

"The Story of the Porter and the Three Girls" also contains a "chief" secret, which obliquely expresses the law of all others. This is the function of the porter's humorous explanation of the "smashing mule." For precisely by presenting this term as the logical conclusion of the three ladies' names, and therefore as something not arbitrary, the porter demonstrates the entire nature of the secret, as defined by the Nights. "Smashing mule," unlike the other names, does not pretend to be the private term for "something dangling between his legs" (74): its source is blatantly external to his physiology. It is even to some degree disconnected from the secrets upon which it appears to depend, for there exist any number of beasts who could be said to act in the manner of the "smashing mule." Yet the true meaning of the porter's explanation has nothing to do with the specific metaphors being used. Referring only to other secrets, themselves recently and arbitrarily invented, the "smashing mule" "grazes" not in the in the basil of the bridges but in the "basil of the bridges," the name given to stand for the land of all names, of which the warden of any secret may elect one or more as the true name he or she has heretofore concealed.

Bibliography

Haddawy, H., Mahdi, M., & Heller-Roazen, D. (2010). *The Arabian nights*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

Fellow Commentary

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The Tortoise includes Joel Newberger’s essay as the first exemplar of analyzing evidence because it engages so thirstily with the text. Rather than simply providing self-evident commentary on the stories within *One Thousand and One Nights*, Joel gives his reader new insight into familiar texts. He does so by synthesizing an argument that engages in more close reading than summary.

“The Secret of the Secret of the Nights” interprets two stories from *One Thousand and One Nights*. We chose to excerpt the section on the story of “The Porter and the Two Ladies,” because of its exemplary use of the text to promote the author’s original argument. Through a close reading, this section focuses on the use of secrets both as a receptacle of meaning and as a device for pleasure and pain. This section in particular stands out for its engagement with the **third level of analysis** - that which goes beyond descriptive and obvious claims. Joel analyzes the text beyond what is readily apparent to bring up novel claims that are not available just from reading the evidence that is presented.

One of the ways in which this happens is through Joel’s use of an argument-determined structure. The analytical work done by this paper extends beyond descriptive commentary. It very elegantly explicates the relevant parts of the story before synthesizing an argument that extends beyond what is evident. The piece offers a brilliant example of evidence and analysis working in tandem to extend an argument in an original direction from the existing scholarship.