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Killing the Rotten Citric Lump: A Somatic Reading of the Death of Shahrazād's Hunchback¹

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Shahrazād's *Thousand and One Nights* features a strange little story about a hunchback who is assaulted and accidentally killed. Eventually he is brought back to life by a clever barber, but not before he is repeatedly "killed" over and over by various persons around town. While this medieval eastern tale was undoubtedly meant purely as entertainment, and not written for some measured didactic purpose, at its core is a complex picture of the consequences a deformed body potentially encountered: namely, somatic violence.

The hunchback's song, heard by the tailor and his wife as they first approach him, is sung in praise of excess.² What follows is a violent and exciting series of events, disastrous for the hunchback, anxiety-inducing for his many "killers." Later, when the tailor attempts to defend himself before the King of China, he says:

I invited him home with me and then went out, bought fried fish for him, and brought it back. Then we sat to eat, and I took a piece of fish and crammed it down his throat, and he choked on a bone and died instantly.³

He does not hide from the events, and in fact steps forward to confess his crimes in order to save the life of the Jewish physician.

Throughout the narrative, the hunchback is always at the center of the action, yet with the exception of the first time he is "killed," he is never written as the reader's focus, except in instances of violence performed against his body. The reader's gaze is constantly drawn to the killer, rather than the victim, and led to laugh at or empathize with the killers of the hunchbacked corpse, rather than the deformed, ever-abused body. Neither the champion nor the foil, the body of the hunchback functions merely as the catalyst, moving the story forward. Yet throughout the tale, the reader catches glimpses of him among and between the figures looming large over the scene, crouching over, abusing, and concealing the broken form of his inciting body.

As the tailor and his wife return from a day of merriment and sightseeing, they come upon a smartly-dressed, singing hunchback in the streets of their city. Quoting the poet Antarah ibn Shaddad (526-608 CE), Shahrazād describes him:

Lovely the hunchback who can hide his hump,
Like a pearl hidden in an oyster shell,
A man who looks like a castor oil branch,

¹ Many thanks to Dr. Eve Salisbury for her generous feedback and guidance with this article.

² *The Arabian Nights: Based on the Text of the Fourteenth-Century Syrian Manuscript*, translated by Hussain Haddawy, ed. Muhsin Mahdi (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1990), 249.

³ *Arabian Nights*, 256.

From which dangles a rotten citric lump.⁴ As they approach him, the hunchback sings a tune about the joys of imbibing, after which the tailor and his wife invite him, “drunk and reeking of wine,” back to their home for supper.⁵ It is here that the hunchback’s story takes the first of many fatal turns. The tailor and his wife escort the hunchback to their home, where the tailor leaves them in order to run to the market to gather up the foodstuffs they will need for their dinner party. When he returns home, the tailor and his wife agree that they will “spend the night carousing, bantering, and amusing [themselves] with this hunchback,” at which point they sit down to dine with their guest.⁶ When they have eaten to their heart’s content, the tailor

Took a piece of fish and, cramming it in the hunchback’s mouth, held it shut and said laughing, ‘By God, you must swallow the whole piece.’ The hunchback, unable to breathe, could not wait to chew, and he hastened to swallow the piece which happened to have a large bone, which stuck in his throat and choked him.⁷

The hunchback dies suddenly as a result of this sudden, violent shift in the narrative. Panicked over having the lifeless body of the hunchback in her house, the tailor’s wife insists that they get rid of the body by taking it and leaving it at the home of the local Jewish physician, allowing him to deal with the repercussions. So begins the tale of the many-times-killed hunchback.⁸

Once the tailor and his wife have disposed of the body, the body of the hunchback is taken to various locations around town and “killed” numerous times. A Jewish physician is made to think that he has killed him, before a (Muslim) steward, and a Christian broker, each believe they have caused the death of the hunchback.⁹ Each of the “killers” later tells his own story in order to, like Shahrazād, save his life.¹⁰ The first “killing” of the hunchback, though, the one at that hands of the tailor, stands out among the four not only because it is the first of all the “killings” but because it is the only “killing” to which no motive or satisfactory explanation is attributed. Unlike the physician who trips and sends the body tumbling down a flight of stairs,¹¹ or the steward who attacks what he thinks is a burglar in his kitchen,¹² or even the broker who beats the hunchback in a drunken haze, believing that the lifeless body is

⁴ *Arabian Nights*, 249.

⁵ *Arabian Nights*, 250.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Arabian Nights*, 248-251.

⁹ *Arabian Nights*, 251-253, 253-254, and 254-255.

¹⁰ *Arabian Nights*, 258, 274, 287, 299, 354. The *Thousand and One Nights* is a collection of stories within stories told by a woman named Shahrazād. In the largest framing story, that which involves Shahrazād’s own narrative, a king, Shahrayar, has women brought to his bed chamber each night and, in the morning, has them executed, so as to stave off the possibility of a woman ever cheating on him as his former, late wife had. Shahrazād volunteers to be taken to the king’s bed as she has a plan for not only her own survival but the survival of all the women in the land. Because she knows that she will be a woman fated to die when the king has no more use for her, once morning comes, she tells him stories that never end. Through her skilful storytelling, she prolongs her life night after night, spinning and weaving together a thousand stories, always breaking off in the middle of a tale, leaving her audience, the king, waiting for the next installation of her tale, waiting for just one more day.

¹¹ *Arabian Nights*, 252.

¹² *Arabian Nights*, 253.

trying to steal his turban¹³ Shahrazād does not explain why the tailor would accost the hunchback as he does, accidentally killing him.

For those familiar with the many-times-killed folktale trope and its use in the medieval fabliaux tradition, there is a temptation to read Shahrazād's hunchback as being the victim of a sexually-motivated (initial) killing as, upon first glance, this story seems to mirror those. Certainly in the Middle Ages, we are often confronted with the trope of the many-times killed corpse in the context of infidelity.¹⁴ In these tales, violence as a result of an illicit affair, or suspected affair, leads to the slain body of the adulterer/tempter being repeatedly abused and "killed" by various characters around town. This, though, is only one of the major components of folktale trope AT 1537 (*The Corpse Killed Five Times*).¹⁵

Rather than read the Hunchback's Tale as conforming to this western European trope of infidelity and violence, I suggest a somatic reading of the tale is necessary. The hunchback's abused, deformed body is attacked, not because he is the lover of the tailor's wife, but precisely because of his bodily variation. That is to say, the violence enacted upon the body of the hunchback is not retaliatory in nature; rather, it is violence for sport, or entertainment. This paper will, in part, explore these two readings, retaliatory violence and violence for sport as these are both motives which a modern reader might attribute to the initial killing of the Hunchback. In the end, though, we will see that a contemporary would have understood the narrative and read the silent motive of the brutal tailor to be rooted in violence for entertainment. Analyzing the tailor's motive for abusing the hunchback before accidentally killing him is not merely a literary exercise; exploring how deformed bodies were perceived within their societies helps us to understand the ramifications and consequences of those social perceptions. I would argue that in the somatic violence we see inflicted upon Shahrazād's hunchback, we are one step closer to understanding eastern medieval body culture and ideas about what types of behaviors and practices could be seen as acceptable in terms of engaging with the deformed body.

This paper will first consider the context of the Hunchback's Tale both within the Thousand and One Nights and as a tale conforming to the AT 1537 trope. Next, I will consider the theme of drunken violence as it pertains to the concept of motive and dispense with the notion that this story mirrors the French fabliaux in terms of motive for the initial bout of violence. Lastly, I will outline the concept of somatic violence as it occurs in the Hunchback's Tale and explore this form of violence in the abuse of the adorned, deformed body.

The Thousand and One Nights in Context

Because Shahrazād's tales have been embraced by so many cultures particularly in the West in the many centuries since their inception, western readers have tended to forget that these

¹³ *Arabian Nights*, 254.

¹⁴ Examples of these include, though are not limited to, the following: "De Prestre Qu'on Porte ou de la Longue Nuit" in *Recueil Général et Complet des Fabliaux des XIII^e et XIV^e Siècles*, ed. Anatole de Montaiglon et Gaston Renaud, vol. IV, Fabliau No. 89, 1-40. "Du Segretain ou du Moine" in *Recueil Général et Complet des Fabliaux*, vol. V, Fabliau No. 123, 115-131. "Du Segretain Moine" in *Recueil Général et Complet des Fabliaux*, vol. V, Fabliau No. 136, 215-242. « Le Dit Dou Soucretain » in *Recueil Général et Complet des Fabliaux*, vol. V, Fabliau No. 150, 117-137.

¹⁵ AT 1537: *The Corpse Killed Five Times*. AnttiAarne, *The Types of the Folktale*. Translated by Stith Thompson. Second edition (Helsinki: Helsinki Commercial Printing, 1961), 442. This system of classifying folktales takes its abbreviations from its authors, thus "AT 1537" is number 1,537 of the Aarne-Thompson Tale Type Index. This is the standard system for identifying motifs by folklorists.

were stories that emerged from a particular cultural landscape in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, the stories have been read and embraced by the post-medieval West, and as a result, they have often been read in a colonial and, later, a post-colonial context. Such a reading veils and even minimizes the world that actually produced them.

This is not to say that Shahrazād's stories are the product of a single culture. In the west, the tales are often referred to as the *Arabian Nights*, though this too creates a misconception which conceals the truth of the stories' context. Henceforth, I will use the title *Thousand and One Nights* which more accurately reflects the original text *Kitāb 'alf Layla wa-layla* (ليلة وليلة ألف ليلة) as well as avoiding attributing this collection of folk tales to one particular culture and people, i.e. Arab, when in fact the entire medieval Near and Middle Eastern worlds contributed to crafting Shahrazād's tales.

The *Thousand and One Nights* are often described as a corpus of fourteenth-century folk tales.¹⁶ It would, however, be a mistake to think that Shahrazād's tales were created in the fourteenth century. Rather, they are popular stories which had been a part of Near and Middle Eastern cultures for generations by the time they were stitched together into the particular collection of interwoven narratives that we find in the fourteenth century Syrian manuscript edited by Muhsin Mahdi. Furthermore, tales such as that of the hunchback follow pan-cultural folk narrative practices to such an extent that it makes it nearly impossible to date them with any degree of certainty. The long oral histories of these tales make it equally difficult to determine their date of origin.¹⁷ While we can be certain that the tales included in Mahdi's collection existed in the fourteenth century that is all we can be certain of. In other words, Mahdi's collection can, at best, give us a *terminus ante quem* for Shahrazād's many stories.

Knowing that these tales come to us from between the ninth and fourteenth centuries from all over the Near and Middle East allows for more complex, socially contextualized readings of the text. Because we know, very generally, the medieval people who created and listened to these tales, we can analyze something such as the abuse and violence performed against the deformed body of the hunchback in the context of Islamic society, law, custom, and culture and come away with a better understanding of medieval Islamic conceptions of the body, deformity, and somatic violence.

The Many-Times-Killed Corpse

The trope of the many-times-killed corpse (AT 1537) involves the slain body of a man or woman being shuffled among, or smuggled to, or hidden at various locations; at each of these the body is abused and "killed" again and again. This trope appears in dozens of tales from European, Russian, East Asian, Middle Eastern, Native American, North American, and South American peoples.¹⁸ The trope requires, simply, that a body be "killed" more than once; though it is often assaulted five times, the version found in the *Thousand and One Nights* contains only four "killings."

In the nineteen-thirties, Aurelio Espinosa analyzed the AT 1537 trope by breaking its recurring components down into four groups: A-F. Relevant for the medieval versions of a many-times-killed corpse are groups A and C.¹⁹ Group A considers the motive for the initial killing while group C analyzes various plot points involving how and to where the body is

¹⁶ Allen, *Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 44.

¹⁷ Allen, *Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 171.

¹⁸ Aarne, *Types of the Folktale*, 442.

¹⁹ Group B considers elements from stories in which a woman or animal is killed; group D entails the exchange of payment for burying the slain body; group E involves laying the blame on another, often involving a female corpse; and lastly, group F deals with any element in which the corpse is put on horseback. All of these elements occur in early modern and modern versions of the many-times-killed corpse.

carried around the town or village (Appendix, Table I).²⁰ While Espinosa did not include the Hunchback's Tale in his analysis, we can see that Shahrazād's story of somatic violence aligns with several of the expected elements in the trope. This variety creates a narrative unique among the tales that conform to AT 1537.

Within Espinosa's system, element C is concerned with all the "killings" which follow the initial inciting act of violence/first "death." These are all fairly straight forward in Shahrazād's tale, conforming at least in part to Espinosa's system. The Hunchback's Tale seems to pull from various elements, sometimes turning them on their heads. For example, element C1 is seen in both the physician moving the body of the hunchback,²¹ and in the broker stumbling across the hunchback in his neighborhood and, thinking he is alive, he "kills" him.²² Element C13 is seen as the body is lowered into the steward's house via his chimney; when the steward sees a body in the kitchen, he believes he has come upon a thief in the act.²³ While the hunchback winds up in the wealthy space of a noble eastern leader, as is seen in element C14, his final scene takes place in the palace of the King of China rather than the harem of a sultan. And while he is not ultimately killed as his counterparts in other traditions are, he is, instead, brought back to life by having the fishbone removed from his throat.²⁴

It is difficult to ascertain exactly to which element of group A the hunchback's death conforms. Elements A and A1 deal with a wife's lover or tempter as the victim. Element A2 holds that the murder was intentional, while A4 says that it is an accident and the cause of death is a fishbone. Certainly, at first glance, element A4 seems the most likely candidate as the fishbone is present and acts as the murder weapon. However, A4 requires that the killing be purely accidental. While it is true that the tailor did not mean to murder the hunchback, the violence he enacted on the hunchback's body was wholly intentional. None of Espinosa's elements factor in motives for violence of this sort.

If the motives were following the French tradition, we could be looking at a blending of elements A4 and either A or A1. This, though, is problematic. First, Shahrazād never shies away from shinning the light on infidelity, and second, as discussed below, the aftermath of the first "killing" does not fit the cultural norms for a suspected cheating wife. Below, this question of the motive for violence will be considered by addressing why the Hunchback's Tale cannot conform to element A1, and how instead, it conforms only to A4. In order to understand these motives it would first be helpful to discuss the context Shahrazād has created within her narrative.

Drunken Violence and the Urban Space

To my knowledge, no study has yet been conducted on the urban element of trope AT 1537, though such an element does seem to exist. Drunkenness and the urban environment have, however, been thoroughly explored in Mushin al-Musawi's *Islamic Context of the Thousand and One Nights*.²⁵ In the case of the Hunchback's Tale, as it is throughout Shahrazād's stories, urban life functions as the context in which excess, drunkenness, and corruption takes place.

²⁰ Aurelio M. Espinosa, "Hispanic Versions of the Tale of the Corpse Many Times "Killed," in *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 49, no. 193 (Jul. – Sept., 1936), 181-193.

²¹ *Arabian Nights*, 252-3.

²² *Arabian Nights*, 254.

²³ *Arabian Nights*, 253.

²⁴ *Arabian Nights*, 355.

²⁵ Mushin J. al-Musawi, *The Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

For the tailor and his wife, this influence of urbanity takes the form of drunken amusement and drunken violence.²⁶

Drunkenness and urban corruption explain the temptation to engage in illicit activities, but they also provide the platform for violence to occur.²⁷ The urban environment enables the whole series of events in the Hunchback's Tale to transpire: from the presence and consumption of alcohol,²⁸ to the multicultural milieu of the hunchback's attackers. Considering the presence of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in this single unnamed, vague space within the realm of the King of China, we can extrapolate that they must be in an urban environment. The professions of the characters, tailor, physician, steward, broker, king, street-performer, are also helpful in understanding their space as urban rather than rural. Finally, the fact that the characters can easily and quickly get from one house to the next in passing off the body onto one another, all within a single evening suggests that they are all fairly close together, as one would expect to find in an urban environment.²⁹

For the story to function as it does, it must take place within the urban space. Al-Musawi notes that in the stories of the *Thousand and One Nights*, it is always the urban environment "where temptation occurs and ... misfortune come[s] in consequence to one's deeds."³⁰ It is only within an urban space that the tailor can come across the intoxicated hunchback, take him home, and "kill" him, before dumping him at the house of a local Jewish physician who will accidentally "kill" him before lowering him into the kitchen of a neighboring steward who will beat the hunchback to "death," and who will, in his own right, set the drunk Christian broker up to come across and "kill" the hunchback. Al-Musawi writes that in Shahrazād's tales, "wine becomes the trope for absolute abundance, carelessness, and frivolity. It is associated with darkness, [the time when] restraint is put aside."³¹ The urban space allows for this varied cultural landscape of "killers," for these drunken assaults on the deformed body.

This association of darkness with drunkenness with danger is exemplified in the Hunchback's Tale. Indeed, it is the dark, drunken, urban environment that sets the stage for the violence perpetrated against the body of the hunchback. Of our hunchback's story, al-Musawi notes that it is the fog of alcohol which "deludes" the attackers into believing they have each, in their turn, murdered the hunchback.³² In addition to muddling the minds of the "killers," this darkness also prevents the reader from fully seeing the hunchback in each scene. Shahrazād's audience is so focused on the tailor going to the store that they nearly miss that fact that he is leaving his wife with a drunk stranger, alone in their home.

²⁶ Arabian Nights, 249 and 250.

²⁷ The prolific amount of alcohol found in a story populated largely by Muslims may surprise some audiences. In addition to creating the framework within which violence can occur, use of alcohol in a narrative such as the *Thousand and One Nights* functions too as metaphor. According to al-Musawi, instances of intoxication and the defense of intoxication in the *Thousand and One Nights*, despite cultural/ religious prohibitions, can often be read as a social commentary on secular-minded leaders (*Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights*, 170). He describes the use of wine in the *Thousand and One Nights* as "carnavalesque," in the sense that it satirizes traditional authorities (*Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights*, 171).

²⁸ Alcohol is consumed by the Hunchback, the tailor and his wife, as well as by the broker.

²⁹ There is even enough time for broker, the last to assault the hunchback, to "[pass] the night" in the chief's house.

³⁰ al-Musawi, *Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights*, 156.

³¹ al-Musawi, *Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights*, 188.

³² al-Musawi, *Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights*, 187.

The Problematic Motive of the Jealous Husband

The tailor and his wife had already been out enjoying diversions all day when, on their way home, they run into the hunchback.³³ Drunk, he performs music on his “tambourine, singing, and improvising all kinds of funny gestures.”³⁴ This song is the only time the audience actually hears the hunchback, yet even at this moment the darkness seems to be creeping up around him, muffling his voice. The audience hears Shahrazād rather than the hunchback:

Go early to the darling in yon jug;
 Bring her to me,
 And fete her as you fete a pretty girl,
 With joy and glee,
 And make her as pure as a virgin bride,
 Unveiled to please,
 That I may honor my friend with a cup
 Of wine from Greece.
 If you, my friend, care for the best in life,
 Life can repay,
 Then at this moment fill my empty cup,
 Without delay.
 Don't you, my tantalizer, on the plain
 The gardens see?³⁵

It is tempting to read this with an eye straying toward the tailor's wife. Certainly, the hunchback references pretty girls and virginal brides, but he sings here not of women but of wine. “Don't you, my tantalizer, on the plain / the gardens see?” he asks.³⁶ Cups of wine are, for the hunchback, the rose colored glasses through which he can see a more beautiful, if artificial, world. His song celebrates the view that alcohol allows life to repay one with all the best things in life. Yet, paradoxically, or ironically, this is contradicted by the events that unfold throughout the rest of the story.

Shahrazād says that the tailor and his wife realize that the hunchback is drunk as they approach him; they invite him home for supper and drinks.³⁷ After they have already walked home, the tailor then goes to the market, presumably leaving the hunchback alone with his “pretty, compatible, and loyal wife.”³⁸ This could certainly be read as either terribly naughty or at the very least highly inappropriate. This is supposed to be a culture in which women were not to be left alone with strange men.³⁹ Nevertheless, the tailor leaves his wife alone with a complete stranger, and strangely, the wife agrees to be left alone with him, in their home. When the tailor recounts these events for the King, he says nothing about his wife being a part of the crime, but mentions her only as being frightened as well. He does reiterate that he brought him home before going out for the food, again, implying that he left his wife alone with the hunchback.

³³ *Arabian Nights*, 248-9.

³⁴ *Arabian Nights*, 249.

³⁵ *Arabian Nights*, 249.

³⁶ *Arabian Nights*, 249.

³⁷ *Arabian Nights*, 249-250.

³⁸ *Arabian Nights*, 248.

³⁹ In *Sahih Bukarli* 4:52:250 ibn Abbas narrates that “It is not permissible for a man to be left alone with a woman.” This is aside from her husband and a mahram (a blood relative). Further, in *al-Tirmidhi* 3:118, Umar ibn al-Khattab narrates, “Whenever a man is alone with a woman, the Devil makes a third.”

Reading the first killing as retaliatory violence for some unseen adulterous action leaves more questions than it answers. If the wife and the Hunchback are lovers, why does Shahrazād not come out and say so? Despite the fact that King Shahrayar might be sensitive to the topic, she uses the theme of infidelity throughout many of her stories.⁴⁰ When extramarital affairs are mentioned, Shahrazād always explores the consequences of these actions. One could argue that the Hunchback's first killing functions as such evidence. But why, then, is the wife never punished? Why, when the tailor is being questioned by the King of China, does he not excuse his actions by sharing his suspicions of his wife's indiscretions?⁴¹ If there had been a suspicion of infidelity, the tailor's wife would have been punished and killed, as custom dictated. Yet not only is the tailor's wife never punished in the text, even for the crimes we know that she does commit,⁴² she is hardly the enclosed, meek woman lacking agency. The tailor's wife is seen out cavorting in the city after having spent the day wandering around seeking diversions and amusements alongside her husband. After the death of the hunchback, she is wholly her husband's accomplice and, indeed, it is she who has the idea to get rid of the body lest they fall into trouble.⁴³

When the tailor's wife is left alone with their guest while her husband goes to the market, we must understand that is not because the tailor is playing the part of the cuckold but because the hunchback is not viewed as a threat to the tailor's virility. Finely adorned though he may be with Egyptian robes and scarf and hat, he is still

A man who looks like a castor oil branch
From which dangles a rotten citric lump.⁴⁴

Quoting the poet 'Antar, Shahrazād compares him not to any other man nor to some beast, but to a plant which is in decay. He is an asexual being adorned, dressed up as a man of the world.⁴⁵ This perception of the hunchback as a non-sexual entity is clarified further when Shahrazād allows us to hear the hunchback's song. He sings not of craving women, but only of the bottle. He has no desire for any woman; he hasn't the time to

...Fete a pretty girl,
With joy and glee,
And make her as pure as a virgin bride,
Unveiled to please.⁴⁶

The tailor is able to leave the hunchback alone with his wife because the hunchback does not provoke a masculine marking of territory. The hunchback's bodily deformity removes the potentiality of being a sexual threat to the tailor.

⁴⁰ Many of the tales included in the canon of the Thousand and One Nights consider the subject of infidelity on the part of the wife: The Lady and her Five Suitors; Lady and her Two Lovers; Vizier's Son and the Hammam-keeper's Wife; The Craft and Malice of Women. These are just a few examples on top of the ultimate frame story, that which contains the affairs of the wives of Shāh-zāman and Shahrayar.

⁴¹ *Arabian Nights*, 256.

⁴² i.e. attempting to dispose of the hunchback's body and pawn the murder off on the Jewish physician.

⁴³ *Arabian Nights*, 251.

⁴⁴ *Arabian Nights*, 249.

⁴⁵ This notion of the adorned, deformed body will be explored further, below.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

A Somatic Reading of the Killing

While out, the tailor gathers the ingredients and soon returns home, where the three will feast. The tailor gives the hunchback fish and bread. Al-Musawi has written that in Arabic literature, the sudden presence of food in a narrative should be considered “the most dramatized sign of socialization that will lead to further complications and to further conflict.”⁴⁷ He argues that the within food and drink lies the implicit “implication of immanent menace.”⁴⁸ Nowhere is this more apparent and pivotal than when, as the tailor departs in search of an evening repast, we follow him to the market and the hunchback disappears from our sight. When the tailor returns home, the hunchback comes sharply back into focus, just in time for a festive bout of somatic violence and abuse.⁴⁹

Shahrazād notes that the tailor and his wife are delighted to have the hunchback in their home, if only for the sake of their own pleasure.⁵⁰ He is both the source of their merriment and the object of their entertainment. The tailor and his wife are “pleased to have the hunchback with them, saying to each other ‘we will spend the night carousing, bantering, amusing ourselves with this hunchback.’”⁵¹ The tailor and his wife are complicit in the violence. This is not a death-seeking violence; rather, it is violence for sport. While much of the violence seen in the subsequent “killings” comes from a place of fear or defense, that which the tailor pursues is violence for the sake of his own amusement.

The dinner scene shifts quickly from a seemingly pleasant evening to one of extreme violence when the tailor forces a piece of fish down the hunchback’s throat and holds his mouth closed until he expires.⁵² When the tailor’s jocular abuse turns fatal and the hunchback suffocates, the tailor freezes, “stunned, and trembling.”⁵³ His wife quickly comes to the rescue with a plan to unburden themselves of the deceased body.

When it is revealed to the King of China that the hunchback has only been repeatedly assaulted and abused but not actually (permanently) killed, the King “bestow[s] robes of honor on... the tailor” along with all the others who have attacked the hunchback.⁵⁴ While murdering the hunchback would have punishable by death,⁵⁵ violent acts against the deformed body are rewarded with laughter and gifts from the king.⁵⁶ These include forcing food down his throat causing him to suffocate;⁵⁷ causing him to tumble head over heels down a flight of stairs;⁵⁸ beating him with a club on the ribs and the back;⁵⁹ raining blows down upon his neck and body;⁶⁰ and choking him.⁶¹ At the center of this tale is one instance after another of consequence-less somatic violence against the hunchback.

It is in these moments the Hunchback’s Tale diverges from the expected narrative plot found in AT 1537 tales; instead of being attacked and killed because of illicit sexual activity or for some wholly unknowable cause, the hunchback is attacked and killed as a consequence

⁴⁷ al-Musawi, *Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights*, 273.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Arabian Nights*, 250.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Arabian Nights*, 250.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ *Arabian Nights*, 356.

⁵⁵ *Arabian Nights*, 252, 254.

⁵⁶ *Arabian Nights* 356.

⁵⁷ *Arabian Nights* 250.

⁵⁸ *Arabian Nights* 252.

⁵⁹ *Arabian Nights* 253.

⁶⁰ *Arabian Nights* 254.

⁶¹ Ibid.

of his very body. We ought to understand the concept of somatic violence like sexual violence: the means by which violence is enacted and the apparent cause or flashpoint for that violence. In other words, somatic violence is physical violence enacted against the body due to the attacker's perception of that body. Bodily violence perpetrated against a deformed body because it is deformed is a particular form of punishing the other which prevails throughout the Hunchback's Tale and his many "deaths."

Shahrazād pays careful attention to the full physical nature of the hunchback, even if she often hides his form between and behind the violent bodies of his attackers. She considers his physicality in two forms: that with which the Hunchback adorns himself and the very body which he adorns. She does not include details about either of these without reason. When we consider the medieval context of the Islamic world with respect to clothing, appearance, and the body, and how these help to construct one's identity, Shahrazād's intent with the hunchback's "death" at the hands of the tailor, of all people, becomes clearer.

Death of the Adorned, Deformed Body

In the final section of this paper, I will explore how the concepts of adornment and body identity come together in this attacking of the adorned, deformed body. The role of appearance in the medieval Islamic world plays a significant role in the subtext of the Hunchback's Tale. Aesthetic identity and the perception of such are rooted in both the physical body and that with which the individual clothes and adorns the body. Bodily deformity complicates perceived identity already; in the case of the finely adorned, deformed body, the perception of aesthetic identity is a paradox.

Shahrazād's hunchback is described as being expertly dressed in a mixed Arabian and Egyptian style.⁶² According to Hadas Hirsch, medieval Muslim men "defined the body's aesthetic perception based on physical attributes together with additions of clothing and adornment."⁶³ This combination of the natural body and artificial ornamentation functioning together to convey identity and aesthetic presence is used by Shahrazād and is explicit throughout the Hunchback's Tale. Hirsch explains that "outward appearance is the practice of body construction marking the boundary between the self and the other."⁶⁴ In the case of the hunchback, we see the natural, deformed body clothed in exquisite ornamentation; Shahrazād has adorned the other in the finest of things. This misshapen body is ornamented in the best of the tailor's world, Egyptian robes, a fine scarf and hat, "with knots of yellow silk stuffed with ambergris."⁶⁵ The other is clothed in the finest things which he, as a tailor, might create. He punishes the finely adorned deformed body because it is both finely adorned and deformed. The presence of his splendid clothing places the tailor is beneath the hunchback, the latter being the purchaser of the former's goods. The markings of the other are draped with the trappings of wealth, inclusion, and normativity. From the tailor's perspective, the other is clothed as the self, or the imagined self, the highest achieving self. The hunchback's perceived identity is tied to both his natural deformity and his added refined artifice. Shahrazād pays close attention to the aspects of the hunchback's appearance over which he can exercise control; this makes for a complex body dichotomy. He is, at once, both deformed and adorned. From the outside, he is both malformed and exquisitely ornamented.

This hybrid natural/constructed identity of the hunchback must be considered within a medieval Islamic context. When constructing one's appearance and identity, one was guided

⁶² *Arabian Nights*, 249.

⁶³ Hadas Hirsch, "Personal Grooming and Outward Appearance in Early Muslim Societies" in *Al-Masāq*, 23:2 (Aug 2011), 100.

⁶⁴ Hirsch, "Personal Grooming and Outward Appearance in Early Muslim Societies," 99.

⁶⁵ *Arabian Nights*, 249.

by legal authorities, i.e. both the Qur'an and the Hadith.⁶⁶ This is due to the fact that appearance and identity were tied together and conveyed something about one's inner being. Hirsch notes that the internal and external are connected in that they mirror one another, even though "good looks are earthly and transitory, as opposed to appropriate behavior which rewards one with eternal life in paradise."⁶⁷ The notion that the external is a reflection of the internal has far reaching consequences for the body which defies or transcends normativity. If the internal condition shines through and impacts the external being, the hunchback's deformity can be seen as evidence for his malformed soul.

This logic could speak to how and why the hunchback is treated as he is, not simply with respect to the violence constantly enacted against his body, but also the way in which several characters speak about him. The tailor, the King of China, and Shahrazād, each in their turn, describe him as "roguish."⁶⁸ His killer, his patron, and his creator all refer to the abused, deformed being as "this roguish hunchback."⁶⁹ There is no explicit reasoning for why the hunchback would be described as dishonest or immoral. Nothing of his character is ever detailed in the text, except for perhaps his love of the drink, though this is hardly confined to his person; more than half the characters in the Hunchback's Tale consume alcohol and no similar judgment is passed on their characters. Should we perhaps take this "roguish" descriptor as connected to his physical body, i.e. the only aspect of his being which has been described in any full and careful way?

We must see these descriptors, roguish and hunchback, the former dealing with his character, the latter with his physical body, as linked. Concerning this connection between the blighted body and the corrupted character, the second-century Islamic jurist, al-Shāfi'ī, taught: "beware the one-eyed, the cross-eyed, the lame, the hunchback... and anyone with a blight (*'āha*) on his body... Truly he is a friend of deception."⁷⁰ Kristina Richardson notes that "identifying an entire group of people as deceptive, controversial and distressing marks their characters as fundamentally counter to *shari'a* ideals."⁷¹ In this way, the hunchback's physical deformity is a manifestation of his tainted inner being. Richardson goes on to write that "unlike people with moral failings who can change their attitudes and actions to accord with Islamic ideals, blighted people are condemned by their own bodies and have no hope for moral redemption."⁷² While the tailor and his wife, the physician, steward, and broker are all redeemed and pardoned through their telling of new stories for the king, the many-times-killed hunchback remains roguish to the end. This connection between the blighted body of the hunchback and the corrupted soul within can only aid us in understanding why somatic violence is enacted upon the body of the hunchback consequence-free.

⁶⁶ Hirsch, "Personal Grooming and Outward Appearance in Early Muslim Societies," 116.

⁶⁷ Hirsch, "Personal Grooming and Outward Appearance in Early Muslim Societies," 106

⁶⁸ *Arabian Nights*, 300, 287, 354, and 356.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820) was the eponymous founder of one of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence. His ideas and teachings remained relevant throughout the Middle Ages as they were referenced and cited by scholars for centuries afterwards. According to Kristina Richardson, this particular idea is echoed in no less than five separate major texts from between the 10th and 13th centuries. She writes that "more than thirty authors... penned works in the manāqib al-Shāfi'ī tradition." Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī, *Manāqib al-Shāfi'ī*, ed. Al-Sayyid Ahmad Saqr. vol. II (Cairo: Dār al-turāth, 1971) 132, in Kristina L. Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U P, 2012), 27, 34 n 18.

⁷¹ *Shari'a* ideals refer to those derived from the religious laws based upon the Qur'an. Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World*, 27.

⁷² Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World*, 27.

Conclusion

When the hunchback is found in the steward's kitchen, he exclaims, "Wasn't it enough for you to be a hunchback, but you had to turn thief too?"⁷³ The Muslim steward expresses his frustration, surprise, and a reluctant incredulity that this creature in his kitchen, burdened already with the fate of the hunchback, deformed of body and character, would stoop to become a criminal as well. He sees the deformed body already as evidence of a corrupt character, now here, in his thieving, he is truly becomes some of the legal dregs of society.

The first "killing" at the hands of the tailor, this violence enacted against the deformed being, is retribution not for some unseen crime but as a consequence of his very existence. This particular deformed body and the violence enacted against it are not unrelated. Somatic violence as a means of punishing the body and the being's existence is the dominant theme of *Shahrazād's* tale of the hunchback. The body, externally deformed, is destroyed as a way of punishing the internal deformed soul.

The paradoxically adorned, deformed body was eligible for consequence-less violence. The hunchback's attackers and "killers" are all rewarded when the king discovers that they have only suffocated him, sent him tumbling down a flight of stairs, beaten him with a club, choked him, and assaulted his body and neck with furious fists. In this context, we see that there are no consequences for abusing a body which deviates from the norm.

⁷³ *Arabian Nights*, 254.

Appendix I: Medieval Elements in the AT 1537 Trope

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| A | “A man kills his wife’s lover.” ⁷⁴ |
| A1 | “A man kills his wife’s tempter. The wife is his accomplice.” ⁷⁵ |
| A2 | “One man kills another. The motive is not recorded.” ⁷⁶ |
| A3 | “A man dies accidentally when a fish bone sticks in his throat.” ⁷⁷ |
| C1 | “When the neighbor finds the corpse, he ‘kills’ it, believing it to be alive and a robber, or he merely carries it to the gate of a monastery, or even to the abbot’s room.” ⁷⁸ |
| C13 | “The corpse is put in a private house through a chimney and is left standing, leaning against a wall. The owner of the house arrives, believes that it is a robber and ‘kills’ it.” ⁷⁹ |
| C14 | “The ‘death’ of the dead man in the sultan’s harem.” ⁸⁰ |

Table 1. Each of the elements from groups A and C come from various fabliaux analyzed by Aurelio Espinosa in his 1936 study of the trope. In the western European versions of the trope, a single element from group A, attributing motive to the first killer, appears in a story, while multiple elements from group C can appear in the same story. In the Hunchback’s Tale, we see a variety of elements from group A working together to hint toward a motive rather than state so explicitly. I have included both A and A1 on the chart here not to suggest that they are at play in the Hunchback’s Tale, but to illustrate where the confusion could lie in falsely attributing the motive of the jealous husband to the tailor. While it was a popular motive in many western fabliaux (see note 5), it is not at work in the Thousand and One Nights. All three elements from group C shown above occur in some altered form in the Hunchback’s Tale. It is this combination of elements that allow me to argue that Shahrazād’s Hunchback’s Tale fits the AT 1537 trope, though in a manner which deviates from the western European model.

⁷⁴ Espinosa, “Tale of the Corpse Many Times ‘Killed,’” 183.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Espinosa, “Tale of the Corpse Many Times ‘Killed,’” 184.

⁷⁹ Espinosa, “Tale of the Corpse Many Times ‘Killed,’” 185.

⁸⁰ Espinosa, “Tale of the Corpse Many Times ‘Killed,’” 187.

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