

Article

“I Am Not Good at Any of This.” Playing with Homoeroticism in *The Arabian Nights*

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Abstract: The story collection known in the West as *The Arabian Nights* or *One Thousand and One Nights*, is famous, among other things, for its erotic playfulness. This eroticism was (and is) one of the key reasons for its continuous popularity after Antoine Galland’s French translation in 1704. *The Arabian Nights* includes, besides traditional, heterosexual acts, play, and desires, examples of homoerotic playfulness—even though we must tread lightly when using such Western concepts with an oriental text body such as this one. The homoerotic playfulness of *The Arabian Nights* is the subject of this article. By making use of a text-immanent analysis of two of the *Nights*’ stories—of Qamar and Budûr and of Alî Shâr and Zumurrud—the author of this article focuses on the reversal of common gender roles, acts of cross-dressing, and, of course, homoerotic play. He will argue that these stories provide a narrative safe environment in which the reader is encouraged to “experiment” with non-normative sexual and gender orientations, leaving the dominant status quo effectively and ultimately unchallenged, thus preventing the (self-proclaimed) defenders of that status quo from feeling threatened enough to actively counter-act the experiment.

Keywords: *Arabian Nights*; orientalism; homosexuality; homoeroticism



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One of the stories collectively known as *The Arabian Nights* relates the adventures of Princess Budûr and her lover Prince Qamar. After finally having found one another, they get separated again, as is the fate of so many lovers in so many stories. Budûr, however, takes charge of the situation, as she has done before, and by virtue of dressing up as her male lover, she becomes the son-in-law of a great sultan. When Qamar finally arrives at the sultan’s court, Budûr instantaneously recognizes her lover and decides to play a little joke on him. She invites Qamar to the bedchamber and more or less forces herself upon him, still dressed as a man. The heterosexual Qamar tries to prevent what, in his view, is nothing short of a homosexual rape attempt. He cries, “I am not good at any of this.” Only when he feels Budûr’s intimate parts does she drop the charade and both lovers are reunited.

Another story, that of Alî Shâr and Zumurrud, ends similarly. Again, the lovers are separated. Again, the woman, Zumurrud, dressed as a man, rises to the rank of sultan without being exposed. Again, Zumurrud plays with her unfortunate male lover, who is equally unwilling to engage in what he perceives as a homoerotic act. Both stories, of Qamar and Budûr (QB) and of Alî Shâr and Zumurrud (AZ), feature comparable narrative traits, most notably the reversal of common gender roles in general, and homoerotic playfulness specifically. In both cases, the homoerotic play is accompanied by appropriate, scabrous poems about men preferring anal over vaginal sex, and other men over women as sexual partners.

The erotic playfulness of *The Arabian Nights* (Marzolph and Van Leeuwen 2004, pp. 546–48) is alternated with testimonies of the zealous religious behavior of the protagonists—Qamar and Budûr especially are portrayed as frequently praying to Allah or reading the Quran—and with numerous religious supplications and invocations of God’s mercy and compassion (Al-Musawi 2009, pp. 92–100; Campo 2009, pp. 51–52). Homosexuality in *The Arabian Nights*, on the other hand, appears to be rather a mixed bag. Some scholars, like Dabid Ghanim (2018, pp. 138–66) and even the famous Victorian translator of the *Nights*

Richard Burton (1885), argue that inter-male sexual acts were more than accepted, especially in their pederastic form (that is, patriarchal and intergenerational homosexuality)—both Ghanim and Burton use QB and AZ as examples for their argumentation—whereas others, like Robert Irwin ([1994] 2008, pp. 169–70), are more skeptical of such a claim, pointing to the fact that individual stories can be identified that both approve and disapprove of homoerotic conduct.

To complicate matters even more, some scholars have argued that terms like “queer” or “homosexuality” are nothing but Western notions forcefully imprinted on (historical and contemporary) Arab cultures (Habib 2010, pp. xvii–xix; El-Rouayheb 2005, p. 1; Murray and Roscoe 1997, pp. 4–5). However, others, like Will Murray (1997, p. 41), dare to argue in favor of a “model of the trans-Islamic native domain,” in which the Western distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality is rejected for one between “taking pleasure” and “submitting to someone (being used for pleasure).”

In this article, I want to make a narrative analysis of both stories from *The Arabian Nights* containing homoerotic play, that is, the aforementioned Qamar and Budûr and Alî Shâr and Zumurrud. The reason for this choice of material is their shared narrative characteristics, and the fact that both stories are frequently discussed in reference to one another by scholars and critics (as I will demonstrate later on). In this analysis, I want to focus on the reversal of common gender roles, acts of cross-dressing, and, of course, homoerotic play. I will argue that these stories provide a narrative safe environment in which the reader is encouraged to “experiment” with non-normative sexual and gender orientations, leaving the dominant status quo effectively and ultimately unchallenged, thus preventing the (self-proclaimed) defenders of that status quo from feeling threatened enough to actively counteract the experiment. In short, it is, after all, only a story.

To do so convincingly, I will introduce, summarize, analyze, and synthesize the two said stories in detail, focusing—as indicated before—on the topics of gender roles, cross-dressing, and homoerotic play.

1. Methodology

In this article, I opt for a text-immanent perspective, ignoring almost all discussions on the dating, Arabic language, redaction, and reception history of the stories, and concentrating on the communication between the text-immanent author and the text-immanent reader (Wieringen 2020). Both discussed texts feature a (non-disclosed) text-immanent author, who tells the stories to an also immanent (also non-disclosed) reader or readers by means of the positioning of props and the interaction between characters on the décor. The real author of the texts—a physical human being having written the text we discuss in this article, and their real readers—equally physical beings, either historical or contemporary, reading the texts in a specific point of time, including the normative and/or appropriative qualifications the real reader can present towards the text-immanent or real author(s), are ignored in this analysis. From this position, I will be excluding (almost) all discussions on the dating, Arabic language, redaction, and reception history of the stories.

The coercion associated with the homoerotic play in both stories can appear as especially problematic forms of sexual violence, but only for real readers in the here and now. It is, however, not problematic for the text-immanent reader, since the violence of these scenes is not problematized by the text-immanent author. The same applies to the inferior position of the slave girl Zumurrud: From a 21st-century perspective, her position is disgraceful, but the topic of slavery is not problematized by the text-immanent author of her story, and is therefore no issue for the text-immanent reader. I will return to this topic during my analysis (see below).

For “Qamar al-Zamân and Budûr” and “Alî Shâr and Zumurrud,” I will be using the English translation by Lyons and Lyons (2010), which is based on the Calcutta II/Macnaghten edition (1839–1842). It is, remarkably, the first integral English translation after Richard Burton’s from 1885 to 1888. For the English spelling of the Arabic names, I follow those of Marzolph and Van Leeuwen.

Some authors, like [Ghanim \(2018, pp. 149–50, 156\)](#), also mention other stories supposedly thematically linked to QB and AZ, namely, “The Fifth Captain’s Tale,” “Muhammad of Damascus and Sa’d of Baghdad,” and “The Wife and Her Two Lovers.” I will exclude these, however, from my analysis for different reasons. “The Fifth Captain’s Tale” is only mentioned in Mardrus’ French edition from 1899 to 1904—an English translation by Mardrus ([Mardrus\[1937\] 2005, pp. 365–72](#)) is available—and is apparently not so much a translation from an oriental source, as a mere appropriation by Mardrus of Guillaume Spitta Bey’s *Contes arabes modernes* from 1883 ([Marzolph and Van Leeuwen 2004, pp. 137–38](#)). The stories “Muhammad of Damascus and Sa’d of Baghdad” (pp. 308–9) and “The Wife and Her Two Lovers” (pp. 446–47) are found in the manuscripts by Reinhardt (1831) and Wortley-Montague (1764), respectively, but no modern-day translations exist to my knowledge ([Moussa-Mahmoud 1976](#)).

2. The Stories

2.1. “Qamar al-Zamân and Budûr”

The tale of Qamar and Budûr is found in multiple manuscripts and editions and is considered to be one of the “great love romances” of *The Arabian Nights* ([Marzolph and Van Leeuwen 2004, p. 343](#)). According to Mia [Gerhardt \(1963, pp. 137–45, 285–95, 391–92\)](#) the story is composed from three different sources: a demon story of Persian origin, a love story of separation and reunion not unlike a Greek novel, and a third one deemed of lesser quality dealing with the adventures of Qamar’s offspring. This third part, usually handled as a separate story in itself, will be excluded from discussion in this article.

After a long wait, the King of the Khâlidân Islands, Shahriman, is given a son and heir, Qamar al-Zamân, who is “outstandingly handsome, well-formed and shapely.” The king shows “excessive love” for his son: “he could not bear to be parted from him, by night or by day.” When the king decides it is time for his son to marry, the boy refuses three times, first politely then increasingly more furiously. Embarrassed and advised by his vizier, the king locks his son up in a tower of the palace with nothing but a bed, a lantern, and a candle.

While Qamar is asleep, a female *jinniya*, called Maymûna, sees a light shining in the tower and is instantaneously dazzled by Qamar’s beauty. When Maymûna flies away to the heavens, she meets the male *ifrit* Dahnash, who tells her about the most beautiful person he had ever seen, Budûr, the daughter of al-Ghayûr, King of the Chinese Islands. Budûr, as the *ifrit* explains, refuses to marry, too. Budûr has consequently also been locked up by her father, but in a luxurious palace rather than in just a stripped-down tower.

Maymûna and Dahnash then have a rather violent discussion about which one of their “loved ones,” Qamar and Budûr, respectively, is actually the most beautiful of the two. Eventually, Dahnash flies away and brings Budûr, who is still fast asleep, to Qamar’s tower. The two appear equally beautiful and so “great [was] a resemblance between them that it looked as though they were twins or full brother and sister.” First, Qamar is awakened, and he instantaneously falls in love with the sleeping beauty next to him, although he refrains from touching her since he suspects a trick by his marriage-crazy father. When Budûr is awoken, she also falls directly in love with the man sleeping next to her. However, in search of something she could take from him as a token of remembrance, she touches his body intimately. This settles the dispute between Maymûna and Dahnash in favor of Qamar, since his beauty was apparently stronger, in that she could not resist his, whereas he could hers. The two spirits bring Budûr back to China and disappear from the story altogether.

The following morning, the two separated lovebirds are frantically looking for one another, each accusing their respective entourage of having played a foul game with them. Both react violently when no one can produce their nighttime lover, but whereas Qamar almost kills his eunuch and his father’s vizier, Budûr actually decapitates her oldest female servant. Qamar and Budûr sink away into love sickness and mental depression.

Eventually, Budûr's foster brother, named Marzawân, returns to the land and hears about his sister's great distress. At the advice of his mother, Marzawân dresses up as a woman and together they manage to sneak into the castle. When he learns about Budûr's loved one, he swears he will find him, something he eventually succeeds in when he is washed up on the shores of the Khâlidân Islands after a storm wrecks his ship. Qamar and Marzawân escape together, leaving a dead animal behind on their trail to pretend that Qamar has been killed by a lion, thus preventing his father from pursuing them. When they return to the Chinese Islands, Qamar disguises himself as a physician and astrologer to be allowed to enter Budûr's chamber to heal her of her lovesickness. From this point on, Marzawân disappears without a trace from the story, just as the two spirit creatures did before.

After Qamar and Budûr recognize each other, they marry—in spite of their previous strong reservations regarding the institution—and leave for the Khâlidân Islands again. However, when the two camp overnight, Qamar undresses the sleeping Budûr, something he refused to do during their first night together in his father's tower, and finds a mysterious jewel—whose origin and purpose are not revealed during the story—in the band of her trousers. When taken outside, a bird snatches the jewel away, leading the pursuing Qamar to an unnamed city inhabited by Zoroastrians. Working for a friendly (Muslim) gardener, Qamar has to wait a whole year before a ship will sail for the land of Islam.

In the meantime, when Budûr notices both her jewel and her husband missing, she quickly hatches a plan: "If I go out and tell the servants that my husband is lost, they will lust after me and so I must think of some scheme." She dresses up in Qamar's clothes and since they are so alike, she succeeds in pretending to be Qamar, ending up in the Ebony City. In that city, King Armânûs, deeply impressed by his/her beauty, offers him/her his daughter Hayat al-Nufus in marriage. Budûr sees no other way out than to accept and, taking Hayat into her confidence, succeeds in keeping up appearances until her lover reappears.

Qamar, in the meantime, waits a whole year for the boat. When it arrives, he loads it with treasure he found in the garden he worked in, together with Budûr's jewel. When the old gardener dies, Qamar stays to bury him, thus missing his one chance of catching the boat. When the boat arrives in the Ebony Islands, Budûr recognizes her jewel and forces the crew to sail back and fetch Qamar. After Qamar is brought into her custody, she does not reveal herself, but forces him to make love to her, thus executing the aforementioned homoerotic play. Eventually she reveals herself to him. Qamar is proclaimed King of the Ebony Islands by Armânûs, while also marrying Hayat, with the full consent of Budûr.

Several scholars have written on the exact meaning of the love story of Qamar and Budûr. Jamel Bencheikh (1984, pp. 97–135) pointed to the utter similarity of the two lovers, making them some sort of "cosmic twins," an insight that caused Daniel Beaumont (2002, pp. 67–73, 81–85) to apply Sigmund Freud's theory of narcissism to the story. According to Beaumont, both lovers did not only look alike, but were in fact one and the same person, who fell in love with their own beauty. Andras Hamori (1985) focuses on the confrontation between "patrimonial romance" and "erotic romance" in the story: The love of Qamar and Budûr's fathers competes with and eventually loses to the erotic attraction between their son and daughter. Jeries Khoury (2016, pp. 146, 190, 204) points out the lasting influence of the story on modern Arabic poets.

Joseph Campbell (1973, pp. 65–68, 74–77, 226–28, 230) mentions the story of Qamar and Budûr as an example of the total rejection of the "offered terms of life." Both son and daughter refuse to marry and thus defy the established social order that demanded such a thing of them. This challenging of the social order cannot remain for long, as Peter Heath (1987, pp. 6, 7) argues, but must collapse in order to let things proceed as fate has ordained. That is why both lovers will eventually marry and produce offspring in which they secure the continuation of the family and the bloodlines.

Richard Van Leeuwen (1999, pp. 22–232; 2007, pp. 64–69) argues along comparable lines in his discussion of the story. Budûr's and Qamar's choice against "the system"

puts them immediately in a state of social marginalization. This role-outside-the-system makes the two lovers free spirits and prisoners at the same time. Marginalization, Van Leeuwen argues, leads to the casting off of the old status and the privileges tied to that status—instead of king and queen, Qamar and Budûr become prisoners in their own family palace—but also leads to the adoption of a new role, including new and often surprising novel means of power that are associated with that new role—especially the case for Qamar in his disguise as a fortune teller and for Budûr in hers as a male ruler.

2.2. “Alî Shâr and Zumurrud”

The story “Alî Shâr and Zumurrud” is contained in Egyptian manuscripts and early printed editions (Marzolph and Van Leeuwen 2004, pp. 100–1). Mia Gerhardt (1963, pp. 141–42) classifies the story as an Egyptian love story with typical inversions of (gender) roles. The (self-identified) male hero is handsome but passive and even stupid, whereas the (self-identified) female heroine is equally beautiful, but unbelievably more clever and resourceful. Van Leeuwen (2007, pp. 100–1) draws attention to the spatial dimensions of the story, especially the palace she lives in while pretending to be a male king. Like the souks and gardens in other *Arabian Nights* stories, the palace is an “intermediate space which will guide her lover on his spermatic journey towards her.” The same applies to the palace of Budur in the first story. Unlike the story of Qamar and Budûr, this story has not been widely studied by scholars of *The Arabian Nights*, apart from Gerhardt, Marzolph, and Van Leeuwen.

In his old age, a wealthy merchant from Khorasan begets a son, just like Qamar’s father did in the first story, and names him Alî Shâr. When the father dies and the son inherits his wealth, he shamelessly wastes it on parties and faithless friends, who abandon him directly afterwards. Broken, Alî Shâr one day stumbles upon a slave market, and hears a beautiful slave girl, Zumurrud, who is mocking everyone who tries to buy her. Apparently, she can decide who gets to buy her and for what amount of money. When Zumurrud sees Alî Shâr, she instantaneously falls in love with him, even offering him the money he needs to buy her.

After they have lived some time in peace and harmony, Alî Shâr one day sells a beautiful curtain, handmade by Zumurrud, to an unknown Christian, called Barsum, even though Zumurrud explicitly forbade him to do so. Barsum manages to bluff his way into their house, drug Alî Shâr, and abduct Zumurrud, bringing her to his brother, the “unbeliever” Rashid al-Din, one of the original, unsuccessful bidders at the slave market. Zumurrud does not yield to Rashid’s advances, for which she is severely punished.

When Alî Shâr awakens and finds his lover gone, he collapses out of sadness and desperation. A friendly old woman picks him up, nurses him back to health, discovers Zumurrud’s whereabouts, and hatches a plan for Alî Shâr to rescue his loved one. Unfortunately for the two lovers, Alî Shâr falls asleep while waiting for Zumurrud, who is—quite accidentally—kidnapped by a Kurdish robber named Jawan, who happens to pass by. Jawan brings Zumurrud to his cave, leaving her in the care of his old mother. In the meantime, Alî Shâr awakens, finds his lover gone, and collapses again, only to be picked up by the old woman again.

Zumurrud manages to escape from Jawan’s mother, dresses up in the clothes of a male soldier murdered by the robber, and eventually arrives at an unknown city at the gates of which its citizens are on the lookout for the first person to arrive. Since the old sultan has died, custom requires the first new arrival to be proclaimed his successor. Zumurrud—like Budûr in the first story—continues the masquerade, ruling the kingdom as a man.

In order to find her lost loved one, Zumurrud organizes a monthly meal for all her citizens, until eventually Barsum, Jawan, and Rashid happen to wander into the city and join the celebrations. She recognizes them immediately and has them executed in gruesome ways. Not long after her triple revenge, Alî Shâr arrives at the meal. Although she recognizes him, he does not recognize her, as was the case in the first story. Zumurrud, as did Budûr, reveals herself to Alî Shâr only after she plays the aforementioned homoerotic

game with him. The two are reunited and escape the city, loaded with precious objects, to their hometown, where they live happily ever after.

3. The Analysis

Both stories have some narrative parallels, as has been observed by a number of scholars (see above). In both cases the women are in charge, leaving the men to play the more passive parts. Both stories involve lovers getting separated, whereas the women in question manage to turn things around for the better by adopting male roles for themselves. Several narrative similarities will be discussed in more detail here, all focused on the reversal of customary gender roles: the refusal of traditional marriage, female dominance (physical, sexual, or intellectual in nature), cross-dressing, homoerotic play and “motherly fathers.” Although I use the concepts of “male” and “female” and “man” and “woman,” I am referring to text-immanent, self-identified characteristics.

3.1. Refusal of Traditional Marriage

The first break with tradition is the fierce refusal of both Qamar and Budûr to accept an arranged marriage. Marriage, as an institution, does not exclude mutual love and affection, but primarily serves the continuation of the royal lineage (Qamar’s father had great difficulties in producing an heir with his wife), the containment of accumulated wealth, possibly the confirmation of a political alliance (not the case here), and the subordination of the female partner to the authority of the male one. Even though Budûr and Qamar will fall passionately in love later on and will never express any reservations about marrying each other, at the beginning of their story, they seem to abhor marriage, although for two distinctly different reasons.

When Qamar’s father tries to convince his son for the first time, his son replies, “I have no wish to marry and no inclination towards women (. . .) to marry is something that I shall never do, even if this costs me my life.” After two years, Shahrîman tries again in vain to convince his son to marry. Qamar’s answer is even more clear than the first time, when he just quoted two poems:

I have read books written both by old writers and their successors and studied the seductions, disasters and endless wiles to which they were subjected by women, as well as the calamities with which they were afflicted.

For a third time, now a year later, the king again tries his luck and asks his son to marry in front of his entire court. Again, Qamar refuses, rebuking his ruler-father in a most unpolite way: “I shall never marry, even if I die for it. You are an old man and feeble-witted. Did you not ask me twice before to marry and I refused?” While locked up in the tower, Qamar’s anger is, however, directed to women instead of his father: “May God curse marriage and curse girls and treacherous women.”

Qamar’s objections are remarkable, not only for their fierceness, but also because of their direction. His second objection seems to consist of rather generic misogynistic tropes, apparently learned from books rather than from experience, as he quite explicitly indicates to his father. The first one is, however, much more interesting, since it seems to stem from inner conviction rather than external sources: He does not have any inclination towards women. Now this could mean two things: a convenient lie to silence his father, echoing the cliché male trope of dumping women by claiming they’re not ready to commit themselves yet, or—and this is more interesting in the light of the rest of the story—the (text-immanent) author of the story already alludes to—“plays with”—the idea of Qamar being attracted to men rather than to women. Even though in the rest of the story, Qamar proves to have a very heterosexual urge towards Budûr, his sexual orientation remains somewhat hazy throughout: He does not touch Qamar’s body on their first night, apparently because he suspects his father of setting a “marriage trap” for him, and—as others have already observed (see above)—Qamar’s love could be interpreted as a kind of self-love, since both protagonists look so incredibly alike.

Budûr also refuses marriage, but from a very different perspective. She refuses to be directed into a social model that grants her no or limited control over her life. In other words, she rebels against the social order. She says to her father, “I have no intention of marrying. As a princess, I am a mistress of power and authority, ruling over the people, and I have no wish for a man to rule over me.” When her father insists, she ramps up, just as Qamar did, only even more fiercely:

If you mention marriage to me once more, I shall go to my room, take a sword and place its hilt in the ground. Then I shall put its point into my stomach and lean against it until it comes out from my back, so killing me.

Qamar refuses marriage for psychological reasons, whereas Budûr challenges it for its social implications. He does not want any “fuss”; she wants to be free.

This motive is far less intrinsically present in the story of Alî and Zumurrud, but can nevertheless be somewhat traced. In their story, there is no mention of marriage, nor is any ceremony between the two celebrated. Alî buys her from the market and they start to live together, apparently as a wedded couple. As I will demonstrate, Zumurrud is superior to her Alî in almost every aspect of life—she is smarter, tougher, and more decisive than he is—but nevertheless she keeps referring to him as “my master” and to herself as “your slave-girl.” Even when Zumurrud has been proclaimed king over a foreign city, in her monologues interieur, she maintains the use of the language of master and slave. However, this vocal subordination of Zumurrud to Alî accentuates her dominance over him even more.

3.2. Female Dominance

Many, if not all, primary and secondary female characters in both narratives frequently show their dominance in one or more ways. To start with physical dominance, although both Qamar and Budûr react violently to the disbelief they meet after their nighttime adventure, the latter is definitely more lethal. Qamar nearly drowns his own eunuch, and when his father’s vizier comes to find out what has happened, he too receives an almost lethal beating. Budûr is also not believed by her entourage and cools her anger on her oldest handmaid by using the same sword she mentioned earlier to her father: “Budûr in a fury then drew a sword that she had by her and with this she struck the woman and killed her.”

The effect of Budûr’s action is also greater than Qamar’s. He scares only three people—the eunuch, the vizier, and the king—whereas she frightens not only her other slave girls but also her father’s concubines, who all witness the swift execution. Budûr’s temper and taste for blood are perhaps only equaled by Zumurrud, who executes the three men who abused her, but their motivations are different—anger versus vengeance—and Zumurrud orders the executions, whereas Budûr kills her maid with her own hands.

Budûr’s fury is also mirrored in that of the female *jinniya* Maymûna, who verbally and physically abuses her male companion Dahnash. When Dahnash is grabbed by Maymûna, he instantly recognizes and fears her:

She swooped down on him like a hawk and when he felt her grasp and recognized that she was Maimuna, daughter of the king of the jinn, he trembled with fear and appealed to her for protection, saying: “(. . .) I call on you to treat me gently and to do me no harm.”

And when Dahnash dares to insist his “lover” (Budûr) is more beautiful than Maymûna’s (Qamar), she “struck him on the head with her wing, giving him a blow so violent that it almost killed him.” Maymûna challenges him to fetch Budûr so they can compare the two humans, while threatening him: “Damned creature, (. . .) I’ll burn you with my fire, shoot you with my sparks, tear you to pieces and throw you into the desert as a lesson for all mankind.” Maymûna, like all female protagonists of the two stories, is self-evidently superior to her male peers.

A more specific form of physical dominance is found in the females' sexual prowess. To start with Budûr and Qamar again, when the two lovers are first introduced to one another, it is the woman who engages in sexual activity, while the man refrains from such. This is also the reason that Dahnash wins the bet between him and Maymûna: The fact that Qamar could restrain himself and Budûr could not, "proves" that he is the most attractive one of the two.

When Qamar awakens and finds an unknown woman next to him, so fast asleep he cannot wake her verbally or physically, he gazes upon her nearly covered body, feels his love (and probably passion) stirring within him, and decides to ask his father to marry her the next morning. He does kiss her, although the reader is kept unaware of where exactly, but when he reaches her mouth, he hesitates to proceed, contemplating the possibility that this is all nothing but an elaborate trap designed by his father to "help" him marry against his earlier expressed will. Instead, he takes a ring from her finger and puts it on his own. Then he turns his back to her, falling asleep again.

When Budûr is awoken and she finds a strange man asleep next to her, she too tries to wake him by talking to him and shaking his body. Her aroused passion, however, is described much more than that of Qamar: She sighs and trembles in love for him. When she sees her ring on his finger, she searches his also semi-naked body for another object she can take from him in return:

... she kissed him and then stretched out an exploring hand to see whether he had anything with him that she could take. When she found nothing, her hand went down to his chest and then, thanks to the smoothness of his skin, it slipped to his belly. From his navel it passed to his penis, at which her heart shook with palpitations and her lust was stirred, as lust is stronger in women than in men.

When aroused, she kisses his mouth—something Qamar refrained from doing—his hands, and every (further unspecified) part of his body, a suggestive move by the story's author to include the oral stimulation of Qamar's penis. Then, she takes him in her arms, hugs him, and embraces him while falling asleep again. Budûr is not only much more actively engaged with Qamar's body than vice versa, but also seems to have forgotten all of her earlier hesitation against marriage, something that is very much on Qamar's mind. On the other hand, Qamar at least mentions the institution of marriage explicitly, whereas Budûr seems to occupy her mind only with sex and passion.

Budûr will again take the sexual initiative and show her romantic dominance when she enters her own homoerotic play with the unsuspecting Qamar, just like Zumurrud does when she finds her Alî again. I will discuss this in more detail later on (see below). However, there is at least one other instance of (implicit) sexual dominance to be found, this time in the story of Alî and Zumurrud. When she is in the process of arranging to be bought by Alî, she wants to provide him with the necessary money.

To do so inconspicuously—probably to prevent embarrassment for Alî—she suggests, "Take my hand and pretend that you want to examine me in private." This private investigation is probably an allusion to the examination of the girl's virginity, an "asset" that would influence her price considerably. Checking it in private by an interested buyer would not raise too much suspicion. This examination is a sexual act, usually perceived as negative, but in this case obviously not, since it is at Zumurrud's—the one being examined—suggestion.

The last form of female dominance provided in the two stories is the intellectual one. Both Budûr and Zumurrud have to play a difficult social role, that of a woman being a king. This means keeping up appearances in terms of clothing, mannerism, and voice, but also maintaining a royal presence and insight in the difficult socio-political context of a royal court. What is more, both Budûr and Zumurrud are reported as being good kings, gracious and full of forgiveness, freeing prisoners, lowering or even abolishing taxes, and arranging feasts for the elite and common folk alike, to the point that all of their subjects declare they want their reigns to last forever.

Zumurrud especially appears to be an independent, smart, and self-made woman in a world dominated by men who are either dumb or evil. She is in charge of her own auction, apparently being able to decide who will buy her and for what amount, a staggering paradox of being a slave and a master at the same time. She scolds the first customers for their inferior appearance, and when she chooses Alî to be her new master, she even organizes the money he needs. When she is his, she arranges their whole life together: the house, the furnishings, the shopping, working to make a good living for them both, and so forth. Alî is bossed around by Zumurrud without any objection from his side.

When Zumurrud is king and recognizes her enemies Barsum, Jawan, and Rashid as guests at her royal table, she devises a plan to have them executed. First, she asks them their names and business, and subsequently exposes them as liars. To the astonishment of the public—common folk and nobles alike—the three confess instantaneously, turning Zumurrud into a powerful divinatix. Barsum and Jawan are flayed and their skin is stuffed with straw, to be hung up over the gate to the arena. Rashid—the one who did Zumurrud the most harm—is sentenced to be stretched out and beaten with a hundred strokes of the whip on each foot and a thousand strokes on his body, after which he too is to be flayed and his skin stuffed with oakum.

Twice Zumurrud plans and succeeds in freeing herself from a perilous situation: first, when she escapes Jawan's mother by luring her into a state of comfortable neglect for her prisoner, and second, when she and Alî depart from the city over which Zumurrud was proclaimed king. Clearly, Zumurrud is not planning to come back, so she instructs her citizens to arrange an interim ruler until her return to the realm. Loaded with treasure, Alî and Zumurrud return to the old city where they used to live together, unbothered by the possibility that they could be disturbed by Zumurrud's old subjects. Any new ruler would gladly abstain from ever trying actively to get the old king back.

Yet another two women, even if only secondary characters in the two stories, deserve to be mentioned. When Marzawân wants to visit his foster sister Budûr to find out whether he can help her, it is his nameless mother who hatches the plan to bribe one of the palace's eunuchs, and dresses up her son as a woman to pass without suspicion. In Alî's case, there is an old woman who helps the poor man when his lover is abducted from their own house. The old woman searches for and finds Zumurrud in captivity and conceives a plan for Alî to rescue her, a plan that only fails because Alî is too weak to keep awake that night. Twice, when Alî literally collapses from heartbreak, she nurses him back to life, urging him to man up and take decisive action.

3.3. Cross-Dressing

In the two stories in question, we have a total of four cases of cross-dressing, all performed by and/or initiated by women: Budûr as Qamar becoming the son-in-law of a foreign king; Marzawân—at the instigation of his mother—as one of his sisters in order to meet the imprisoned Budûr; and Zumurrud, first as the male soldier who was killed earlier by Jawan, and later as king-elect and king of a foreign city.

Budûr's initial cross-dressing as a male, impersonating her lover Qamar, is motivated out of fear of sexual harassment by their (male) traveling companions: "If I go out and tell the servants that my husband is lost, they will lust after me and so I must think of some scheme." When Budûr arrives at the gates of the Ebony City, she pretends to be a foreign prince who has lost his way. King Armanus, impressed by Budûr's appearance as a male prince, suggests he/she marry his daughter. She plays along with the same motivation, her continuous safety as a woman alone in a male-dominated world: "How can this be done, as I am a woman? But if I don't agree and leave him, I shall not be safe, as he may send a force after me to kill me, while if I obey him, I may be disgraced."

The same applies to the case of Zumurrud's cross-dressing. When she is kidnapped by Jawan he makes perfectly clear what will happen to her if she does not escape him very soon: "Whore, (. . .) [t]here are forty of us and tonight we shall all bang away at your womb from evening till morning." After having lured her guardian into a peaceful sleep,

she dresses in the clothes of the murdered male soldier, deciding not to return to her own city for fear of revenge due to the soldier's family mistakenly thinking she was his killer. When confronted with the city wanting to proclaim "him" as their king, she does not flinch a bit, but immediately takes advantage of the situation, telling them she is of high birth and in flight from her family with whom she supposedly has had a quarrel.

The cross-dressing has several characteristics. With the exception of Marzawân's cross-dressing, it is motivated by fear of (sexual) abuse and harassment. The cross-dressing is both a result of the marginalization of those involved, and a cause for further estrangement from their original *Umwelt*. However, the marginalization is also responsible for the shedding of former identity, including the pressing social rules accompanying it, and the adoption of a new identity, giving room for new possibilities never before considered. Marzawân plays an atypical role in this regard, but the fact that he returns to the kingdom after a long absence places him in a somewhat similar social position, that of one without real power. As Budûr and Zumurrud enter a forbidden domain—the world of men—Marzawân enters the one forbidden to him—the world of women.

3.4. Homoerotic Play

In both stories we have three instances of homoerotic play: Hayat and Budûr, Budûr and Qamar, and Zumurrud and Alî. To start with the first, Budûr is more or less forced to marry the king's daughter, Hayat, in order to protect her persona as a male ruler. When the marital bed has been prepared, she kisses and caresses Hayat and recites some love poetry stirring deep emotions in herself, but then she slips out of bed, starting to pray, and continues until Hayat has fallen asleep. This happens two times in a row. On the third night, Hayat's father becomes displeased by his new son-in-law for refusing to deflower his daughter, and promises her that if "he does not go in to you and take your maidenhead, I shall have to think again and take steps, deposing him as king and banishing him from my lands."

When Budûr wants to pray again, after reciting some poetry, Hayat intervenes (in words and actions) for the first time: "Master, do you feel no shame before my father? He has treated you well and yet you have left me alone until now." Budûr contemplates the possibilities for a moment in a dialogue interieur ending in a strong self-identification as a woman: "At any rate, I am no male so as to be able to deflower this virgin." She reveals her double secret to Hayat: her love for Qamar and her identity as a woman. Hayat readily accepts the explanation and promises to keep Budûr's secret. However, that is not to say there is no love between the two women: "Then the two played with each other, exchanging embraces and kisses, after which they slept until it was nearly time for the call to morning prayer."

This scene has two distinct features. When the two protagonists perceive each other as belonging to the opposite gender, they feel uncomfortable with one another, although for different reasons. Budûr is afraid her secret will be revealed with probably dire consequences, whereas Hayat feels rejected as a marital and sexual partner. Only when Budûr is forced to reveal her true identity do the two feel safe enough not only to tolerate the situation they are both in, but also to enjoy each other's company, and physically or even sexually touch, as the story almost explicitly suggests.

In the case of Hayat and Budûr, the homoerotic "play" is unintended—a strange convergence of circumstances—and (unconsciously) initiated by the "cisgender" character (for lack of a better word), whereas the cross-dresser is very much in the position of the situation's victim. In the other two cases of homoerotic play in the two stories, these characteristics are exactly the opposite. Cross-dressers Budûr and Zumurrud intentionally plan and execute the play, whereas their "cisgender" partners are clearly at the wrong end of the stick, at least in their perception. In addition, where Qamar and Alî are very concerned about what they think is a quickly approaching homosexual rape, Hayat is as much concerned about not being taken seriously as a sexual partner by Budûr.

In the case of Budûr and Qamar, the first—again, acting like a male ruler—ostensibly expresses “his” love for the newly arrived: “I love you because of your surpassing beauty and your unique loveliness.” There are no lies here, as the reader of the story will know. Qamar blushes “for shame” and expresses concerns about his manliness:

I have no need of this honour, which would lead me to commit a sin. Rather, I shall live poor as far as money goes but rich in perfect manliness (. . .) O king, I am not accustomed to this.

Budûr replies with a string of increasingly more cheeky lines of nearly concealed homoerotic poetry. Some examples:

My tool is large, but the young boy says:
 “Strike like a hero to the inmost parts.” (. . .)
 (. . .) Because of you I have abandoned women,
 So that people think today I am a monk.
 Do not compare a woman to a beardless boy,
 And do not listen to a censorer who says this is a sin.
 There is a difference between a woman whose foot the face kisses,
 And a gazelle who turns to kiss the earth.
 May I be your ransom; I have picked you out
 Because you neither menstruate nor ovulate.
 Were I inclined to lie with pretty girls,
 The wide land would be too narrow for my children.
 (. . .) If you don’t lie with me as man with wife,
 Do not blame me when you are cuckolded.
 Your tool is soft as wax,
 And every time I rub it, it gets flabbier
 (. . .) If you won’t take my vulva as a place of prayer,
 Here is another that you may prefer.
 She offered a smooth vulva, but I said: “I don’t do that.”
 She gave up, saying, “Whoever is turned away from it
 Is turned away: no one these days uses the front.” (. . .)

Eventually, Qamar succumbs to the king’s pressure: Full of shame and in tears he unties his trousers. “Stretch out your hand between my thighs to the usual place, and maybe it will stand up,” Budûr commands him. “I am not good at any of this,” he replies. When he starts to explore Budûr’s body, he reaches “a dome full of blessings and of movement.” Qamar is surprised not to find “an instrument like those of men,” and wonders if the king is perhaps a hermaphrodite, “neither male nor female.” It is at this point that Budûr breaks the illusion and reveals herself to her lover. “He embraced her and she embraced him; they exchanged kisses and then lay with one another on the bed.” When, afterwards, Qamar asks her why she played such a trick, she replies, “I only did it as a joke, for amusement and pleasure.” The amusement is understandable, although somewhat one-sided in nature. The pleasure, however, is indicative that the whole role-playing game was also sexually arousing, at least for her, but perhaps even for both.

In the case of Zumurrud and Alî, the joke is readily on the table, that is, for the reader of the story. She says to herself, “I must play a joke on him for a while and not tell him who I am.” After dinner, Zumurrud demands a massage for her feet and legs by Alî, who reluctantly proceeds. When ordered to go higher, Alî refuses initially to go above “his” knee. Zumurrud, in her role of male monarch, rebukes him: “You must do what I tell you and I shall then make you my beloved and appoint you as one of my emirs.” Zumurrud demands he undo his trousers and lie on his face, apparently “ready” for anal penetration. Alî pleads, “This is something that I have never done in my life, and if you force me to it, I shall take my case against you to God on the Day of Resurrection.” However, Zumurrud stays in character: “Undo your trousers and lie on your face or else I shall cut off your head.”

Very reluctantly, Alî obeys her, after which Zumurrud positions herself on his back, supposedly ready for penetration. He quickly observes, however, that the king seems to miss the necessary erection to perform such a thing: “He felt something smoother than silk and softer than butter, so that he said to himself: ‘This king is better than any woman. (. . .) Praise God, it seems as though he has not got an erection.’” Then, Zumurrud changes positions, taking the missionary position and guiding Alî’s hand to her vulva. She says, “[I]t is a habit of mine that I cannot get an erection until my penis is stroked by hand. Come and do this until it rises, or else I’ll kill you.” When Alî discovers the king has no penis, he feels his own organ “stretching to its fullest.”

“The king has a vagina,” he concludes, at which point Zumurrud makes herself known to him, leading to some very colorfully described heterosexual sex between the two lovers:

[H]e pounced on her, like a lion on a sheep, and plunged his rod into her scabbard. He kept on playing the roles of gatekeeper at her door and imam at her prayer niche, while she joined him in bendings and prostrations, rising and falling, following her hymns of praise with lascivious wriggling and movements, so much so that the eunuchs heard her.

They eunuchs witness the two having sex, Alî Shâr on top of her, the other snorting and writhing, and conclude—quite correctly—“That is not how a man moves. (. . .) It may be that this king is a woman.” However, they keep their mouths shut for a reason not given by the story. Perhaps they did not understand the situation and were just too confused to report anything against their king.

The two scenes between Budûr and Qamar, on the one hand, and between Zumurrud and Alî, on the other, have some interesting differences. Qamar asks Budûr, after their love-tumbling, why she pulled off this trick, whereas Alî does not seem interested in the reason at all. He does not ask for it, and only the readers of the story know the comic situation that is to come. Zumurrud’s play is also rougher than that of Budûr, both in tone of voice and in actions.

Budûr teases Qamar with the help of more of less seedy poetry, whereas Zumurrud just plainly commands Alî what he has to do. In addition, Budûr keeps the play to manual sexual actions—kissing, stroking, touching—whereas Zumurrud simulates riding and grinding on Alî’s back and bottom while he is faced downwards. Zumurrud stimulates Alî to touch her private parts, elevating the playing field somewhat like Budûr did, but not before a total reversal of sexual custom: She rides him, she is dominant, he is taken, he plays the passive part.

3.5. *Motherly Fathers*

One last example of gender role reversals can be found in the description of Budûr’s and especially Qamar’s father. Both of them, one could argue, behave rather stereotypically “motherly” in their love and care for their respective daughter and son. Budûr’s father is, according to the story, “exceedingly fond of his daughter” and when his daughter threatens to kill herself if forced into marriage, “the light became darkness in his eyes and he was consumed with anxiety for her.” Although this unrest and care is certainly not unusual for a loving father, the affection of Qamar’s father is, again, according to the text of the story, “excessive.”

Qamar’s father cannot suffer to be parted from his son, either by day or night. When refused by his son the first two times, he is unwilling to press further “because of the strength of his affection.” When Qamar, pressed the third time, reacts fiercely in public, embarrassing his father before his whole court and thrown into the tower, the king “spent the night in a state of concern for his only son, whom he loved dearly.” The text continues to explain that Qamar’s father never fell asleep “without putting his arm under his son’s neck.” Thinking about the—quite understandable—punishment for his son, Shahrîman cannot fall asleep: He twists from side to side “as though he were lying on burning branches,” and his eyes fill with tears.

4. The Synthesis

What does it all mean? What does the reversal of gender roles in both stories signify? I see three, mutually non-exclusive options. The first focuses on tension and restauration, the second on the comical, and the third on the stories as being some sort of safe space. To start with the first, as [Campbell \(1973\)](#) and [Heath \(1987, pp. 1–21; 1988, pp. 3–26\)](#) have already pointed out for the story of Qamar and Budûr, both stories have a happy ending in which the social order is re-established.

Qamar and Budûr defy the social order by their refusal of the embodiment of that order, marriage. From this refusal, all the gender reversals—possibly excluding those of their fathers—originate: the magical meeting in the tower, Budûr's violent outburst, Marzawân's cross-dressing, Budûr's rise to power, and their homoerotic play. At the end of the story, however, the old situation seems to have been re-established: Qamar takes the lead in their sexual union after Budûr reveals herself to him, and marries both his old love and Princess Hayat, to which neither woman seems to object. Both women grant him a son, thus resolving the tension of the two monarchies in need of a (male) heir.

Although in the story of Alî and Zumurrud marriage is not an issue, this one also ends with the re-establishment of the dominant social order. Alî is a kind but foolish sod who loses his father's fortune, only to find a slave girl—a doubly submissive state—who saves him time and time again. In the end, Zumurrud flees her given kingdom with Alî and some serious treasure in order to live together in Alî's old hometown. She bears him children and they live happily ever after. Again, the disruption of the social order—Zumurrud saves Alî—is pacified at the end by the return to the social status quo.

This context of a return to “normality,” both in the descriptive and normative sense of the word, is a kind of possibility condition for the rest of the story to work its “magic,” so to say. This magic works two ways: towards the comedy of absurdity and towards the freedom of experimentation. The text-immanent author of the two stories is clearly conveying a message of sociological, psychological, and emotional absurdities, to which the text-immanent reader can only respond with laughter and enjoyment. The tone of the storytelling is lighthearted, and the prose is interspersed with poetry clearly designed to ridicule the whole situation. The description of the two (or three!) homoerotic scenes is elaborated using all kinds of highly sexual metaphors urging the cross-dressed women to start laughing at the whole situation, a condition readily copied by their male partners when the situation becomes clear.

Of course, contemporary readers of the 21st century could have a very different understanding of the whole situation than the text-immanent reader has. “We” as postmodern readers could very possibly raise questions regarding the lighthearted relating of what is nothing more, at least in our eyes, than an (attempted) homosexual rape, or at least the threat of such, in a situation of a clearly unequal power relationship. The reaction to this (attempted) rape—laughter by both woman and man, by both the aggressor and the victim—produces a dissonance for a society that is very engaged in a civil discussion on sex, power, and aggression. When “we” read both stories, we will probably feel more than just comical relief: embarrassment, anger, or disbelief.

The text-immanent reader, however, understands the comical element in the two stories, also because the situation is eventually returned to normal. Because of the combination of restoration and absurdity, the text-immanent reader is challenged to “go” one more step: to experience the text as a free space. Because the situation returns to its normative standpoint and because of the absurdity of the incidents in the story, this reader is encouraged to find a narrative universe in which they (the text-immanent reader is not gendered) finds room to contemplate on their own position regarding the challenged gender, sexual roles, and positions.

Playing or identifying oneself as a member of the opposite gender, being attracted to or repulsed by the idea of engaging in homoerotic actions, experiencing or exerting (sexual) dominance, being in a social position one would never have expected to find oneself in, freeing oneself from the mores et leges of civil society, choosing to (be) marginalize(d),

experiencing the outsider's perspective—these are all examples of reflections the story is challenging the reader to view. It makes the stories a kind of safe space in which the text-immanent reader can reflect and experiment without danger of being marginalized or ridiculed.

This poses questions regarding the theme of restoration, the *conditio sine qua non* of the absurdity and the free space. Is there a real restoration of the status quo? On the level of the characters, there is: Qamar, Budûr, and Hayat are together as two heterosocial couples, aimed at producing royal offspring, including a male dominance in both relationships, just as Zumurrud lives in obedience to her master-lover Alî at the end of their story.

For the characters, nothing seems to have changed in the end and all endeavors seem to be without any lasting effect, but the same does not apply to the text-immanent reader, who has witnessed the reversal of the gender roles, the cross-dressing, and the homoerotic play. For them, the world has definitely changed: New possibilities have been opened, shown to them in the safe confinement of absurdity and the apparent restoration of the social order.

The stories of Qamar and Budûr and Alî and Zumurrud are about romance, love lost and found again, revenge and wrath, and being clever so as to save yourself and your loved one. But above all, both stories are about the joy and excitement of being in a safe environment to experiment with power, sex, gender, and self-identification. And what a joy it is.

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