

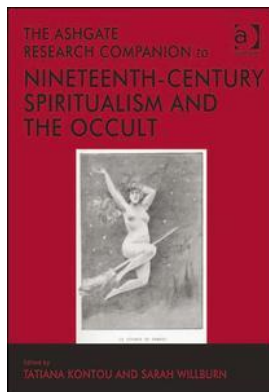
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult

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Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613352.ch10>

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Published online on: 28 Jul 2012

How to cite :- Mazen Naous. 28 Jul 2012, *The Turn of the Gyres: Alterity in ‘The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid’ and A Thousand and One Nights* from: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult* Routledge

Accessed on: 28 May 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613352.ch10>

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The Turn of the Gyres: Alterity in 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid' and *A Thousand and One Nights*

Mazen Naous

The Premise

In his 1923 poem 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid', William Butler Yeats imports formal and thematic material and imagery from *A Thousand and One Nights* (I will refer to the work as simply the *Nights* henceforth). Furthermore, Yeats uses Oriental¹ characters in this fictionalized poem to stand in for himself and his young wife George, as well as an Oriental context ostensibly inspired by her automatic writing and, later, her sleep-talking.² In the course of their traumatic honeymoon, during which an ill Yeats wondered if he had made a mistake by marrying George, she

*... tried and succeeded in producing automatic writing ... [that] lasted for several years of almost daily work, during which messages purporting to be from disembodied communicators from realms of spirit brought thousands of bits of information, information that was questioned, trusted, distrusted, and elaborated upon. Gradually, it coalesced into a philosophic and religious 'system', which WBY eventually compiled in his strangest book, A Vision.*³

Clearly, this collaborative effort produces not only a 'philosophic and religious' system, but also a literary, cultural and political one, in which information is 'questioned, trusted, distrusted, and elaborated upon'. The system, which is

¹ I use the term 'Oriental' as derived from Edward Said's 'Orientalism' to refer to the historical and ideological processes that manufacture images and myths about the East.

² See Margaret Mills Harper, *Wisdom of Two: The Spiritual and Literary Collaboration of George and W.B. Yeats* (Oxford, 2006). Harper states that, beginning 'in 1920, the various methods of reception underwent a major change, as WBY recorded in a notebook, under the heading "New Method": "George speaks while asleep [*sic.*]"' (p. 8).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

exemplified in the poem's form and content, draws on the mysticism and structure of the *Nights*, the practices of Irish Orientalism (which both participates in and challenges English Orientalism) and the agency of the female medium. I argue in this essay that Yeats's inclusion of these elements is deliberate, and that there exists a tangible link between the poem's poetics, the *Nights*-based mysticism, Irish Orientalism, and the gendered role of the medium. As Sarah Willburn puts it, the medium, in her 'mystical ontology', her possessed state, 'defines civilization in a new way'.⁴ In 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid', the poem's body, its ontology, as with the mystical ontology of the character of the young wife in the poem, communicates civilization in a new way, and provides, consequently, an alternate historicity of the occult – both linking Ireland to the Arab world and replacing in various ways a diachronic notion of history with a synchronic one. Furthermore, the poem's speaker, Kusta ben Luka, plays an important role in interpreting/translating and preserving the knowledge of the occult relayed by his jinn-possessed wife.

Kusta ben Luka, whom Yeats originally conceived as Shahrayar, Shahrazad's husband in the *Nights*,⁵ writes a letter that holds a great mystery to the Caliph's treasurer, Abd Al-Rabban. The mystery lies in ben Luka's young bride, a gift to him from the Caliph (presumably Harun Al-Rashid), who reveals to ben Luka mysteries of the occult and sensuality in her nightly jinn-possessed state. The poem draws clear parallels to the *Nights* and Yeats's 'system', which he developed collaboratively with George in the philosophical and mystical work *A Vision*. I will not engage the mysticism of 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid' on its own terms in this essay. I do think, however, that there are ways of reading the poem that draw on the socio-political practice of Irish Orientalism in its negotiation of English Orientalism at the site and complex of modernity. That is, I would like to consider Yeats's importations or conjurations as dialogic gestures in a system of exchange and value, one that alludes to Ireland's search for representational alternatives as a European nation that is also a British colony.

The Anglo-Arabic oscillation and combination in the poem put into conversation the figures of William Butler Yeats, George Yeats, Kusta ben Luka, Harun Al-Rashid, Shahrayar and Shahrazad across time and space. The consequent cross-cultural identity formations yield myriad possibilities. I will negotiate these in this chapter and argue for a *poetics of alterity* that both participates in English representations of the Orient (Yeats would have to turn to the English translation of the *Nights*) and challenges their premise by anachronistically summoning ancient, historical and mythical figures/spirits to inhabit and speak from the modern material body, the female medium's body specifically. The female medium's position, Tatiana Kontou contends, 'is one of ambiguous influence – she is influenced by the spirits, by the desires of the sitters, by the ambience, yet she also controls both the proceedings

⁴ Sarah A. Willburn, *Possessed Victorians: Extra Spheres in Nineteenth-Century Mystical Writings* (Aldershot, 2006), p. 1.

⁵ Warwick Gould quoted by Neil Mann, 'From Qusta ibn Luqa to Kusta ben Luka', at www.yeatvision.com (accessed 25 May 2010).

and those around her'.⁶ This is certainly the case with George Yeats, her fictional counterpart (ben Luka's wife in the poem) and Shahrazad of the *Nights*. Issues of mediumship and authorship, passivity and agency, and the resulting paradoxes produce fruitful possibilities for reading the medium and her message.

In the poem, the success of this endeavour in contesting modernity is problematic not only because an ancient (not modern), mythical and Orientalized East is put in dialogue with a modern European present, but also because the point of entry and discourse (in both the imagined past of the poem and the implied corresponding present in which George channels the ancient Communicators) is a seemingly subdued female body, which is possessed by a jinn and interpreted by a male listener. The possibilities of an altered modernity run into the stereotypes of the misogynistic Eastern male and passive Eastern woman. While I engage with these considerable failings, the poem's poetics, in which a modern form frames an ancient content, warrant further investigation in terms of the frame-narrative of the *Nights* and the interlocking and turning gyres in Yeats's system. What, then, are the possibilities in reading 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid'?

The Keys: Tradition, Translation and Transmission

The poem's opening line

/ ˘ ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
Kusta ben Luka is my name, I write⁷

is one of presence and alterity. The word 'Kusta', trochaic if read with an Arabic tongue, yields to an iambic flow with the stress falling on the words 'is', 'name' and 'write.' The stressing of these words highlights existence, identification and action respectively. Kusta double-writes here: as the speaker of the poem, he ostensibly writes to Abd Al-Rabban; however, it is as if Kusta's writing is to be received and retransmitted by George Yeats's automatic writing and sleep-talking. This double writing also allows Kusta to write himself as an implied Shahrayar. The very affirmation of existence, identification and action is a diffusion of multiple selves, historic and fictional, biographical and autobiographical, metonymic and metaphoric, across time and space. These changes in Communicators (spirits), Margaret Mills Harper argues in 'Nemo: George Yeats and Her Automatic Script', 'demonstrate a constant awareness that all names and personalities are provisional and that an effort dependent on partnership and subjectivity is necessarily fluid ...

⁶ Tatiana Kontou, *Spiritualism and Women's Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian* (New York, 2009), p. 3.

⁷ W.B. Yeats, 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid', in *The Poems: A New Edition*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York, 1983), pp. 443–50, p. 445. Subsequent line references will be given in parentheses.

revelation [in the automatic script] is linked to mutual exploration of a multilayered reality, and that reality that is simultaneously highly sacred and grounded in joint daily life.⁸ The very ground of the poem, the traditional pentameter, enters the condition of alterity as it echoes by formal coincidence the traditional five pillars of Islam in the locus of the *Nights*, which itself alters in translation.

'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid' puts into dialogue the figures of William Butler Yeats, Kusta ben Luka and Shahrayar. This raises the question of why Yeats, in importing aspects of the *Nights*, skews the expected figure of Shahrayar and opts instead for Kusta ben Luka; according to Neil Mann, 'Warwick Gould shows that in drafts Yeats "proposed but cancelled Shahryar," the name of the Caliph who was told the stories of Harun by Sheherazade'.⁹ After all, Shahrazad means for Shahrayar to identify with and emulate Harun Al-Rashid, and thus reform the former into a just and wise ruler. One possible answer to Yeats's skewing of the fictional character of Shahrayar is his discomfort in equating himself biographically with Shahrayar, a tyrannical persona and a murderer of women. The anonymous storyteller of the *Nights*, who later yields the agency of storytelling to Shahrazad, relates the premise: acting upon his brother Shahzaman's intelligence about the Queen's infidelity, Shahrayar hides himself behind the lattice windows overlooking the pleasure grounds. The Queen appears with an entourage of ten women, concubines of Shahrayar, and ten white slaves. The ten women and men strip their clothes off, and, in pairs, engage in lovemaking. The Queen, who is left alone, cries out

*... in a loud voice, 'Here to me, O my lord Saeed!' and then sprang with a drop-leap from one of the trees a big slobbering blackamoor with rolling eyes which showed the whites, a truly hideous sight. He walked boldly up to her and threw his arms round her neck while she embraced him as warmly; then he kissed her and winding his legs round hers, as a button-loop clasps a button, he threw her and enjoyed her.*¹⁰

Shahrayar perceives a threefold insult to his honour: his wife's infidelity, her infidelity with a black slave, and the white slaves' enjoyment of his concubines. But these insults are hypocritical in nature, simply because Shahrayar possesses a harem and exchanges gifts of 'beautiful handmaids, [and] high-breasted maidens'¹¹ with his brother Shahzaman. As such, one can certainly argue that the Queen's infidelity, particularly with the 'blackamoor', is a subversive act of resistance that touches upon both gender and racial inequalities. The three insults are based on

⁸ Margaret Mills Harper, 'Nemo: George Yeats and Her Automatic Script', *New Literary History*, 33 (2002): 291–314, pp. 303–4.

⁹ Mann, 'From Qusta ibn Luqa to Kusta ben Luka'. Mann explains Gould's position and quotes Gould.

¹⁰ Richard F. Burton, *The Arabian Nights: Tales from A Thousand and One Nights* (New York, 2001), p. 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Richard F. Burton's translation of the *Nights*, which Yeats would have almost certainly consulted. There are inaccuracies in Burton's translation, however. The trope of the African 'with rolling eyes' figures not infrequently in works of English literature, as in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.¹² In his more accurate version, Husain Haddawy translates the same passage thus:

*Then they took off their women's clothes, and suddenly there were ten slaves, who mounted the ten girls and made love to them. As for the lady, she called, 'Mas'ud, Mas'ud,' and a black slave jumped from the tree to the ground, came to her, and said, 'What do you want, you slut? Here is Sa'ad al-Din Mas'ud.' She laughed and fell on her back, while the slave mounted her and like the others did his business with her.*¹³

Obviously, Haddawy's translation differs from Burton's version.¹⁴ The translational representations of this episode alter from one translation to the next, and yet both translations contribute to our understanding of the *Nights*: one translation does not occlude the other. Both translations participate in Harper's argument that 'all names and personalities are provisional and that an effort dependent on partnership and subjectivity is necessarily fluid';¹⁵ the translational revelations, then, offer a mutual exploration of a multilayered and subjective reality that both relates to and alters a distant original. In the Haddawy version there is no 'big slobbering blackamoor with rolling eyes which showed the whites, a truly hideous sight', but merely a black slave. Haddawy offers a verbal exchange between the Queen and the 'black slave' in which the slave calls the Queen a 'slut'. While the term could have a playful quality (the Queen laughs and falls on her back after the slave calls her a slut), it nonetheless points to yet another layer of subversion in which a black slave can call the Queen a slut and take possession of her body as a way of insulting the King. This action, of course, participates in a long-standing and highly problematic practice, among other hyper-masculine practices, in which the female body is reconfigured as a site of revenge and possession that generates

¹² In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow narrates: 'But suddenly as we struggled round a bend there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage' (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York, 2005), p. 35).

¹³ Husain Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights* (New York, 1992), p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* I chose Husain Haddawy's 1990 translation as a counterpoint to Burton's version, because, as Robert Irwin states, it 'is both accurate and a pleasure to read ... Haddawy's translation cannot be too highly recommended' (Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London, 2005), p. 41). While Yeats, for obvious reasons, would not have had access to the Haddawy version, he would almost certainly have heard of the many translations of the *Nights* beginning with Antoine Galland's first European translation (*ibid.*, p. 14). The point here is to emphasize the role of translation as interpretation and representation, which have important implications in 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid'.

¹⁵ Harper, 'Nemo', pp. 303–4.

masculine narratives. If the female body is the site of contestation, it follows that it may also be the site of retribution. King Shahrayar 'took brand in hand and repairing to the Seraglio slew all the concubines and the Mamelukes [white slaves]. He also swore himself by a binding oath that whatever wife he married he would abate her maidenhead at night and slay her next morning to make sure of his honour.'¹⁶ Shahrayar's indiscriminate honour killings are enough to make Yeats uncomfortable with the persona of Shahrayar. And yet, as I will demonstrate later, the metonymic¹⁷ relationship between Yeats, Shahrayar and Kusta ben Luka holds to a considerable extent.

As different translations make for divergent yet interdependent interpretations, so do the different transliterations of Kusta ben Luka (the poetic persona) and Qusta ibn Luqa (the historical person). Qusta ibn Luqa al-Ba'labakki, the Arabicized version for the Greek name "'Costas/Constantine, son of Luke" who came from Baalbek',¹⁸ is a historical Arab Melkite-Christian figure of Byzantine ancestry who,

*... working in Islamic lands in the 9th century, did work in astronomy that included translations of Greek astronomical works and original compositions. In addition, he composed and translated mathematical, medical, and philosophical works ... He reportedly collected Greek scientific manuscripts from Byzantine lands; his translations and revisions of these formed an important part of his scholarly activities. Qusta was fluent in Greek (as well as Syriac), as demanded by his scientific translations, and he also mastered Arabic, a language in which he produced many original scientific compositions. Qusta's scholarly career, which was centered in Baghdad, is notable for his association with numerous patrons, who are particularly important for establishing his biography as well as the chronology of his work. These include various members of the 'Abbasid caliph family, government officials, and a Christian patriarch.'*¹⁹

The choice to replace Shahrayar with Kusta ben Luka points to Yeats's preoccupation with cultural transmission and translation. Like Kusta, Yeats is both outside the dominant culture and at the centre of it, the main difference being that Kusta ben Luka is a Christian in a Muslim world and Yeats an Irish Protestant in England.

Furthermore, Yeats seems to be tapping into an Irish origin-myth in superimposing Kusta ben Luka on the figure of Shahrayar:

¹⁶ Burton, *The Arabian Nights*, pp. 13–14.

¹⁷ See Stephen Clingman, *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary* (Oxford, 2009), esp. pp. 11–16. Clingman's important work on the concepts of metaphor and metonymy throughout his book informs my engagement with these concepts.

¹⁸ Mann, 'From Qusta ibn Luqa to Kusta ben Luka'.

¹⁹ Elaheh Kheirandish, 'Qusta ibn Luqa al-Ba'labakki', in Thomas Hockey et al. (eds), *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers*, Springer Reference (New York, 2007), pp. 948–9.

For several centuries, Irish thinkers had claimed a special cultural relationship to the ancient East, believing that the Irish language derived not from Celtic or other European tongues but directly from Phoenician or Hebrew and that, therefore, the Irish people were also of ancient Middle Eastern descent.²⁰

The fact that Qusta ibn-Luqa hails from Baalbek (a region in contemporary Lebanon, which comprises the land of ancient Phoenicia) does not appear accidental within the configuration of Irish Orientalism. What is at stake here is the resurrection of an ancient Irish language and culture independent from Anglo-Saxon cultural markers and impositions. In his translations, the historical Qusta ibn-Luqa preserved important Greek works that would have been lost to Europe otherwise. The poem's Kusta ben Luka plays a crucial part in interpreting and preserving the knowledge of the occult relayed by his jinn-possessed wife for future (and especially modern) times. This is far from coincidental, since W.B. and George Yeats 'reworked memories and knowledge into newly understood conceptions ... [including] ways of understanding the conflicted larger worlds of Ireland and Europe in the war-torn early decades of the twentieth century'.²¹

Yeats's deliberate mythologizing of Kusta ben Luka in 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid' draws attention to the instability of cultural transmission. To begin, Yeats's re-transliteration of the name Qusta ibn Luqa to Kusta ben Luka unfixes the Arabicized transliteration of the Greek name and creates both a historical Qusta of ninth-century Baghdad and a Kusta inserted into the *Nights* of the Anglo-Irish literary imagination. Furthermore, Yeats creates an anachronism by placing a middle-aged Kusta alongside an old Harun. Yeats's biographer R.F. Foster states that *A Vision*, including the poem, is 'a fictionalized framework inspired by *The Arabian Nights* ... When "The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid" had appeared earlier that year, tainted by an inescapable air of stately hokum, [Frank Pearce] Sturm had sent a sharp letter pointing out the incompatible age-spans of the protagonists: a flaw left uncorrected by [Yeats].'²² While I agree with Foster's pointed critique of the poem's 'stately hokum', the possibility exists that the 'incompatible age-spans' of Kusta and Harun do not constitute a 'flaw'. Sturm alerts Yeats to the fact and Yeats chooses to keep the anachronism. It is possible to argue that this is a case of artistic licence, but I would like to posit a theory that Yeats aims to challenge the very notions of time and space and point to their collapse within modern discourse, one that is perpetually in the making. In so doing, Yeats seems to prompt the poem's readers to think magically about the time-space synchronic collapse as signs of both modernity and occultation. I will return to this point when I discuss George Yeats's agency in automatically writing herself as a Shahrazad in the lines of the poem.

²⁰ Heyward Ehrlich, "'Araby" in Context: The "Splendid Bazaar," Irish Orientalism, and James Clarence Mangan', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 35 (1998): 309–31, p. 320.

²¹ Harper, *Wisdom of Two*, p. 16.

²² R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1997), pp. 274–5.

Another aspect of Yeats's choice of Kusta ben Luka is that it places Yeats-as-ben Luka both inside and outside the poem. Kusta is the main speaker in the poem, but he is also responsible for preserving the secrets of the occult to which the poem points. In the multiframe narrative of the *Nights*, Shahrazad resides in one of the outer frames. While Shahrayar exists on that plane with her (Shahrazad tells her stories for Shahrayar's benefit), he is there to listen and learn. Kusta ben Luka learns a great deal from his wife, but he speaks for and represents her nightly revelations. As such, the poem's Kusta both retains Shahrayar's position as instructee and transcends it by relating the story of his instruction.

Kusta, anachronistic mediator and translator of cultures, as both Shahrayar and Yeats himself, reorients the discourse of the *Nights*. He does so, however, by occulting this reorientation within layers of alterity. After Kusta ben Luka names himself, he declares that he writes

*To Abd Al-Rabban; fellow-roysterer once,
Now the good Caliph's learned Treasurer,
And for no ear but his.*

*Carry this letter
Through the great gallery of the Treasure House (lines 2–5)*

Kusta ben Luka's address is not to the reader, but to the Caliph's treasurer: Abd Al-Rabban. As in his altered name, Kusta turns away from the poem's reader to his friend, reorienting the reader's perception to one of voyeurism, at least for the moment. This alteration seems analogous to séances in which a medium would relay a personal message to an attendant in the presence of other séance sitters, who are in turn positioned as eavesdroppers or voyeurs. The intended audience, Al-Rabban, is not ostensibly an historical figure. What information or treasure can his name yield? As Kusta ben Luka's name gestures to a character of historical significance, we might expect some corresponding signification in Al-Rabban's name. Abd Al-Rabban's significance remains largely hidden unless ben Luka's vocation of translation and transmission comes to bear upon it. Translated from the Arabic, Abd means 'servant (of God), man, human being', and Al-Rabban 'the rabbi'.²³ Abd, short for Abdallah or Abdullah, reveals another layer of occultation for it hides God. But God is all the more present, because He is hidden in the curtailed name; that is, 'servant' cannot stand by itself, but in relation to God (occulted and all the more present as a consequence). Furthermore, Al-Rabban (or the rabbi), like ben Luka, is located both outside and inside a Muslim world. From Harun Al-Rashid, named exclusively in the title of the poem, to Kusta ben Luka and Abd Al-Rabban a triumvirate dialogue of three religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) takes place as represented by the three figures. Certainly, the three monotheistic religions constitute a facet of the *Nights*.

²³ See Rohi Baalbaki (ed.), *Al-Mawrid: A Modern Arabic-English Dictionary* (Beirut, 1997).

For example, 'The Story of the Hunchback'²⁴ in the *Nights* begins with Shahrazad relating the tale, which takes place in China. In the story, a hunchback chokes on a fish-bone and dies while having dinner at the house of a tailor and his wife. Afraid of being sentenced to the gallows, the couple drop the hunchback's body at the house of a Jewish physician and run away. Then, the Jewish physician drops the body at the house of a steward, who, in turn, disposes of the body at the corner of the market's entrance, where a Christian tradesman finds it. The market's watchman accuses the Christian tradesman of murdering a Muslim, a grave crime. The tradesman is consequently sentenced to death, only to be saved, none too soon, by the steward, who takes responsibility for the hunchback's body. The steward is sentenced to death instead, only to be saved by the Jewish physician, who in turn is saved by the tailor. Hearing of the story, the King of China summons all to him. In the King's court, each of the characters tells a story, and some offer stories within stories. Finally, a barber informs the King of China that there is still life in the hunchback; the barber removes the fish-bone with a pair of tweezers from the hunchback's mouth, and the hunchback sneezes and stands up. The story ends with the King of China bestowing 'robes of honor on the steward, the tailor, the Christian, and the Jew'.²⁵

The moral of the story points to a realization of critical interdependency between the Muslim, Jewish and Christian characters as a mode of survival. Rather than continuing to shirk responsibility for a shared problem (symbolized by the hunchback), the characters stand up for each other and tackle the problem collectively. This confluence places the characters metonymically (side-by-side) and layers them metaphorically (one above the other in frame-narrative); the story gains horizontal and vertical complexity informed by multidimensional (characteristic and formal) interdependency.²⁶ It is interesting that, in *A Vision*, Yeats describes 'Will' in phase 26 of The Twenty-Eight Embodiments as 'The Multiple Man, also called "The Hunchback"'.²⁷ In this phase, 'there is an attempt to substitute a new abstraction [for all the old abstractions as in morality or belief], a simulacrum of self-expression'.²⁸ In terms of the *Nights*, the stories and the representations of the stories produce thickness and fruitful dimensionalities. As a result, Shahrazad rewards each character by allowing him to assume the narration, tell and represent his story, and receive a full pardon from the king. By narrating a pardon scene reliant on storytelling, Shahrazad, in effect, sows in Shahrayar the seeds of rehabilitation and her own pardon. This trope finds resonance in ben Luka's wife's nightly jinn-possessed revelations, as I will discuss later in the chapter. To return to lines 2–5 in the poem, a break takes place in line 4 in which Kusta ben Luka moves from a

²⁴ See Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights*, pp. 206–95. For 'The Story of the Hunchback' and all its sub-stories within the frame-narrative, I rely on Haddawy's translation.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²⁶ See Clingman, *The Grammar of Identity*, pp. 11–16.

²⁷ W.B. Yeats, *A Vision: An Explanation of Life Founded Upon the Writings of Geraldus and Upon Certain Doctrines Attributed to Kusta Ben Luka* (London, 1925), p. 110.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

first-person to an imperative second-person address. This turn reorients the reader's focus from the persona of Kusta ben Luka to his letter's journey through 'the great gallery of the [Caliph's] Treasure House' (line 5). The turn bifurcates ben Luka and his letter (the writer of the letter and the letter itself are both interdependent and of equal importance), and the reader accompanies the letter on its way to Abd Al-Rabban in the hopes of learning its secret. The secret, as ben Luka later reveals, concerns a dialogue between ben Luka and the Caliph Harun Al-Rashid, after which the latter gifts the former a wife. The point-of-view turn, then, emulates the formal and characteristic interdependencies in the *Nights* in a poetics of alterity, in which the poem turns/rotates point of view, character and content in a gyre-like motion. The gyre is a symbol and concept in Yeats's later works and figures considerably in *A Vision*.²⁹ It is a circling movement beginning at the tip of a cone and expanding to the broad end; it then reverses and contracts back, changing the direction of spin, or pern, as it does so. Yeats thought of reality as two such cones interpenetrating one another.³⁰ I engage with the philosophical and poetic implications of the gyre in relation to 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid' later in the chapter.

Let us return to the moment in the poem when Ben Luka asks Al-Rabban (and, in effect, the reader who accompanies the letter) to stop

*And pause at last, I was about to say,
At the great book of Sappho's song; but no
...
Pause at the Treatise of Parmenides
And hide it there, for Caliphs to world's end
Must keep that perfect, as they keep her song,
So great its fame. (lines 11–19)*

The fact that ben Luka would like his letter placed between 'Sappho's song' and the 'Treatise of Parmenides' is significant. Of Sappho's poems only 'one complete poem and some substantial fragments survive, culled from quotations in other writers or from papyrus finds'.³¹ Parmenides's philosophical poem also

... [s]urvives [only] in large fragments. It opens with the narration of a journey taken by the initiate poet-speaker, apparently from the world of daily life and light to a mysterious place where night and day cross paths and

²⁹ For a more comprehensive explication of the figure and concept, see *ibid.*, pp. 128–39.

³⁰ Robert Welch (ed.), 'Gyre', in *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford Reference Online, Oxford University Press, 2000), at www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t55.e990 (accessed 25 May 2010).

³¹ Margaret Williamson, 'Sappho', in Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization* (Oxford Reference Online, Oxford University Press, 1998), at: www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t133.e564 (accessed 17 May 2010).

*opposites are undivided. Here he is greeted by a goddess whose instruction forms the remainder of the work.*³²

Sappho's and Parmenides's poems become frames for ben Luka's letter. These frames survive in fragments, however, and act as reminders of ancient traditions, their transmission and translation, loss of knowledge, and its rediscovery and reconstruction, issues of considerable concern for both the historical and imagined Kusta ben Luka. Furthermore, the themes of love and the occult in Sappho's song and the treatise of Parmenides respectively inspire the thematic progress of the 'Gift of Harun Al-Rashid'.

Chiastic and Dialogic Gyrals Turns

Aware of the failures of transmission, Kusta/Shahrayar/Yeats (side-by-side and in a frame-combination) predicts in lines 29–30 of the poem that 'In after time they will speak much of me /And speak but fantasy'. Ben Luka acknowledges that his history and knowledge will be subject to imagination and 'fantasy' in their transmission across time and space, and that is why he commits his story to paper. Of course, an accurate account of ben Luka's history is premised on the survival of his letter, which is placed between the ill-fated poems of Sappho and Parmenides.

Right after this statement ben Luka continues in the imperative mode:

*... Recall the year
When our beloved Caliph put to death
His Vizir Jaffer for an unknown reason:
'If but the shirt upon my body knew it
I'd tear it off and throw it in the fire.'* (lines 30–34)

Recalling the Caliph's killing of his 'Vizir' is simple enough, but recalling what is occulted, the cause behind the Caliph's action, is nearly impossible. Ben Luka quotes the Caliph's words on the subject, and this premises the dialogue that is about to take place between ben Luka and the Caliph. The Caliph, however, reveals only that he would tear the very shirt upon his body and throw it in the fire if it knew his secret (the one that Jaffer presumably pays for with his life). What then is this grave secret?

Ben Luka continues:

³² John Roberts (ed.), 'Parmenides', in *Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World* (Oxford Reference Online, Oxford University Press, 2007), at: www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t180.e160 (accessed 21 May 2010).

... *Enough for me*
That in the early summer of the year
The mightiest of the princes of the world
Came to the least considered of his courtiers;
 ...
And thereupon a colloquy took place
That I commend to all the chroniclers
To show how violent great hearts can lose
Their bitterness and find the honeycomb. (lines 39–48)

Here, Kusta ben Luka enacts another turn by moving into the relaying or storytelling mode. He begins with the phrase ‘Enough for me’, effectively re-placing himself, metaphorically, as a witness. Ben Luka goes on to describe how the prince (presumably Harun Al-Rashid) came ‘to the least considered of his courtiers’. Who can this courtier be, except for ben Luka? Moreover, why is he the least considered of courtiers? Two possible answers come to mind with respect to the latter question: as a courtier versed in the arts of flattery, ben Luka may be performing humility rhetorically to emphasize his message and gain the reader’s trust; and, as a Christian serving the Caliph, undoubtedly alongside many courtiers of the Muslim faith, ben Luka finds himself the least considered of courtiers. In referring to himself in the third person, Kusta ben Luka bifurcates himself into storyteller and character; this allows him both to transmit his story and act as a character in it, much like the role of a medium in a séance. As I argued earlier, this rhetorical move echoes Yeats’s choice of ben Luka at the expense of the figure of Shahrayar as a way of existing outside and inside the story. If ben Luka is recounting or reading the contents of his letter, which I believe he must, he provides a singular hint that manifests in this turn of point of view. Otherwise, the poem proceeds opaquely and seamlessly from one episode to the next. This opacity blurs the borders between the self and the perception of the self, creating multiple selves in the process, which exist side-by-side and in combination. One self does not occlude the other even when one self possesses another.

From there, Kusta ben Luka commends the colloquy to ‘all the chroniclers’ in a clear effort to control the mode of transmission. The maxim, which ben Luka offers to the chroniclers, affords the Caliph a great heart, but it is a ‘violent’ one that needs guidance to ‘find the honeycomb’. The choice of ‘honeycomb’ rather than its product, honey, draws the Caliph’s attention to a structure of hexagonal wax cells and the collective process that leads to the strength of the honeycomb. The hexagonal wax cells seem to resonate with Parmenides’s poem ‘in hexameters’³³ in which Parmenides receives instruction from a goddess, and with the *Nights* in which Shahrayar receives instruction from Shahrazad’s stories. Interestingly, Shahrayar is rehabilitated by learning to emulate the Harun Al-Rashid of Shahrazad’s imagination, and Yeats’s Harun Al-Rashid from his dialogue with Kusta ben Luka. Thus, the personas of Shahrayar and Harun Al-Rashid enter the condition

³³ Ibid.

of partnership and interdependency in the poem and the *Nights*, like the bees that collectively build the honeycomb. Furthermore, this partnership occurs across time and space: Shahrayar learns from a historical (no longer living) and imagined Harun Al-Rashid, and Harun Al-Rashid (ruled 786–809) learns from a future Kusta ben Luka (c. 820–912).³⁴ As I argued earlier, the collapse of time and space points to Yeats's challenge to these very notions within modern discourse, and it also alludes to a mystical gesture of 'Man and *Daimon*'³⁵ in which man learns from his demon. Implicit in the image of the honeycomb, then, are the technological achievements and organizational skills (based on interdependency and partnership) that lead to the sustaining structure of love. The process is ever-renewing, but the product ends with consummation. Yet what convincing advice can Kusta ben Luka bestow on Caliph Harun Al-Rashid, whose name translates ironically as 'Aaron the Wise' in the Christian tradition?

Kusta ben Luka expounds in lines 74–80 of the poem:

*'Great prince, forgive the freedom of my speech:
You think that love has seasons, and you think
That if the spring bear off what the spring gave
The heart need suffer no defeat; but I
Who have accepted the Byzantine faith,
That seems unnatural to Arabian minds,
Think when I choose a bride I choose forever;'*

The courtier, about to take licence with the Caliph, asks the same to forgive the freedom of his speech. Kusta ben Luka rehashes the Caliph's view of love as a seasonal and physical love only to counter this view: being of the Byzantine faith that 'seems unnatural to Arabian minds', ben Luka chooses a spiritual and everlasting love, except that in so doing he instates a Christian–Muslim binary. The binary is all the more problematic, because ben Luka premises it on appearance (not fact) in the word 'seems'. Ben Luka's turn in the words 'but I' takes place in the latter part of line 77, effectively interlocking ben Luka's 'Christian' view with Harun Al-Rashid's 'Muslim' view. Figure 10.1 shows the two interlocking gyres with a swirl demonstrating the turn. A mystic concerned with geometric configurations and their spiritual significance (Yeats gives an added possibility to the title of the poem in *A Vision*; the title on page 121 reads: 'Desert Geometry or The Gift of Harun Al-Raschid'), Yeats, I would argue, sought to emulate the figure of the interlocking gyres, which he develops in *A Vision*, in the stanzas of the poem. In the excerpt above, lines 74–77 constitute one gyre, and lines 77–80 make up another; the turn in 'but I' interlocks the two. Moreover, 'Byzantine faith' in line 78 is placed directly above 'Arabian minds' in line 79, pitting 'Byzantine' against 'Arabian', and 'faith' against 'minds.'

³⁴ The dates I supply for Harun Al-Rashid's rule and Qusta ibn Luqa's life come from the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* and *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers* respectively.

³⁵ Yeats, *A Vision*, p. 131.

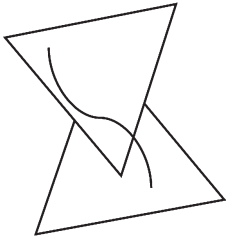


Figure 10.1 The interlocking gyres, created by the author.

In *A Vision*, Yeats explains:

*... when, however, a narrowing and a widening gyre reach their limit, the one the utmost contraction the other the utmost expansion, they change places, point to circle, circle to point, for this system conceives the world as catastrophic, and continue as before, one always narrowing, one always expanding, and yet bound forever to one another.*³⁶

Oppositions are integral to Yeats's system; even when 'they change places', they seem to do so absolutely without a hybrid possibility. And yet, the oppositions as represented by the interlocking gyres are 'bound forever to one another'. The result, of course, is 'catastrophic' simply because the metaphoric change of places is merely that – a change of places, a chiasmus of sorts, without resolution; however, there is possibility alongside impossibility in the word 'seems'. Appearance is not absolute. It deals with form, not content, and therein lies dialogic possibility. The turning thus continues with the word 'seems' in line 79 and signals a possibility of compromise or a dialectic culmination, one that is also sexual.

In making his case for one bride, ben Luka continues:

*'And if her eye should not grow bright for mine
Or brighten only for some younger eye,
My heart could never turn from daily ruin,
Nor find a remedy.'* (lines 81–84)

The form of lines 81 and 82 produces a chiasmus-like structure, an antimetabole, 'by which the order of the terms in the first of two parallel clauses is reversed in the second'.³⁷

Figure 10.2 shows how the change of places of the words 'eye' and 'bright' constructs two gyres meeting at their narrow ends. Here, the gyres are in position to interlock, but they wait for the fulfilment of the conjunction 'if'. The conjunction

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 131–2.

³⁷ Chris Baldick, 'Chiasmus', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

creates scenarios of both possibility and impossibility. If the beloved's eye brightens 'only for some younger eye', the change of places completes; the gyres interlock into a catastrophic dance of binaries. In such a scenario, ben Luka's heart would 'never turn from daily ruin'. The word 'turn' is one of possibility, but being beset with 'never,' travels to the place of impossibility. Conversely, ben Luka's figuration of absolute Byzantine (Christian) love, if required, secures the heart's 'turn' in the place of possibility. The binary holds to a large extent.

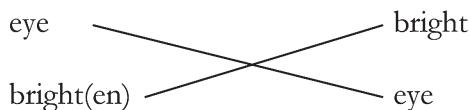


Figure 10.2 The antimetabole, created by the author.

Harun Al-Rashid holds love to be seasonal, and this changeability is also absolute. Seasons will always change, and so will love with them. In response to ben Luka's longing for everlasting love, the Caliph asks:

*... 'But what if I
Have lit upon a woman who so shares
Your thirst for those old crabbed mysteries,
So strains to look beyond our life, an eye
That never knew that strain would scarce seem bright,
And yet herself can seem youth's very fountain,
Being all brimmed with life?'* (lines 84–90)

The Caliph's question interlocks with ben Luka's assertion in line 84, and produces another set of interlocking gyres in the phrase 'But what if I' (see Figure 10.1). Notice that Harun Al-Rashid uses two conjunctions, 'but' and 'if,' in line 84, and repeats the words of ben Luka's antimetabole, 'eye' and 'bright', in lines 87 and 88 respectively. That the Caliph emulates ben Luka's style and repeats his words in his offer of a woman who shares ben Luka's thirst for 'old crabbed mysteries' is significant. It seems that an exchange has taken place, not merely a change of places, in which Harun Al-Rashid accepts ben Luka's premise on love, and the Christian notion of love specifically. Moreover, this woman shares ben Luka's thirst for the occult, and 'yet herself can seem youth's very fountain'. The woman's straining 'to look beyond our life' does not seem to alter her youth. The Caliph, however, moves away from ben Luka's formulation based on form; the woman's straining should alter her youth, but it does not. Thus, her seeming (form) does not coincide with her taxing endeavours.

In a clear acceptance of Christian love, the Caliph continues:

... *'That love*
Must needs be in this life and in what follows
Unchanging and at peace, and it is right
Every philosopher should praise that love.
But I being none can praise its opposite.' (lines 94–98)

The Caliph begins with 'That love', which alludes to ben Luka's Christian formulation of the concept, and ends the sentence on line 97 with the assertion that every 'philosopher should praise that love'. The phrase 'that love' is used twice for emphasis in the Caliph's sentence. Harun Al-Rashid's acceptance and praise of that love is not an act of conversion, however. Not being a philosopher like ben Luka, the Caliph 'can praise its opposite'. That is, the Caliph both learns from ben Luka and retains his oppositional position. The paradox produces chiasmic and dialogic interlocking gyres of change and exchange, acceptance and opposition.

It is worth noting that an emergence of an Arabic Christian literature took place between the eighth and tenth centuries. The literature is theological and apologetic in nature. From the second half of the eighth century, an Islamo-Christian controversy arose 'with the development of Muslim theology and the criticism of Christianity by Mu'tazilite theologians'.³⁸ The controversy gave rise to a number of literary debates between Christian and Muslim interlocutors. Two 'philosopher-doctors, the Melkite Qusta ibn Luqa and the East Syrian Hunayn ibn Ishaq replied to the letter of a Muslim sage'.³⁹ Ben Luka's assertion in the poem points to a certain refutation of Islam through the concept of love. The Caliph's acceptance of ben Luka's position, even if it does not lead to his conversion, and his aid in finding ben Luka a like-minded woman, is dangerous. Here lies, I believe, the secret of Harun Al-Rashid's killing of his Vizir Jaffer, who probably found out about the exchange and the Caliph's gift of a young woman who shares ben Luka's philosophical perspective; hence the title of the poem 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid'.

Shahrazad and Nemo's Agency

In reflecting upon his gift of a wife, Kusta ben Luka also emulates some elements of the Caliph's position:

And thereupon his bounty gave what now
Can shake more blossom from autumnal chill
Than all my bursting springtime knew. (lines 103–105)

³⁸ René-Georges Coquin, 'Arabic Christian Literature', in André Vauchez (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* (e-reference edition), at: www.oxfordreference.com/views/Entry.html?subview=Main&entry=t179.e215-s1 (accessed 2 May 2010).

³⁹ Ibid.

Ben Luka uses 'springtime', the season in which the Caliph takes a new wife, as premise, but he moves it to reflect his interior 'bursting springtime'. Versed in flattery, the courtier claims that the Caliph's bounty can 'shake more blossom from autumnal chill'. This, of course, is one way of undermining the Caliph's philosophy of seasonal love without causing offence, but it can also refer to ben Luka (like Yeats) being older and the 'gift' of a wife (like George Yeats) being a young woman. Here, ben Luka seems to give the Caliph power over the seasons as some bounteous deity.

The gift causes ben Luka anxiety, however, because marriage does not guarantee love:

*Yet was it love of me, or was it love
Of the stark mystery that has dazed my sight,
Perplexed her fantasy and planned her care? (lines 112–114)*

Ben Luka's concept of love bifurcates as evidenced in the repetition of the word 'love' in line 112. Who does ben Luka's new wife love? Does she love him, or does she love the mystery of the occult that dazes his sight? Certainly, the Caliph's matchmaking effort is based on a perceived compatibility between ben Luka and the woman in that they both have a keen interest in the occult. In accepting the Caliph's gift, however, ben Luka finds that he has to revise his idealized and absolute concept of love.

Ben Luka relays that, on first coming to his home to live with him:

*... She had not paced
The garden paths, nor counted up the rooms,
Before she had spread a book upon her knees
And asked about the pictures or the text. (lines 118–121)*

It is here that the young woman, who remains nameless throughout the poem, begins to resemble the character of Shahrazad. The *Nights* describes Shahrazad as one who 'had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of by-gone men and things ... [and had] perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments'.⁴⁰ At stake here are the issues concerning knowledge and transmission, even when they seem to become occulted if they are mediated by women. The poem's allusion to Shahrazad's studying of 'philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments' serves as a reminder, I would argue, that Arabs and Muslims once possessed knowledge of considerable importance, much of which, states Jonathan Lyons, informs the West's 'modern technical lexicon: from azimuth to zenith, from algebra to zero'.⁴¹ The anachronistic presence

⁴⁰ Burton, *The Arabian Nights*, p. 14.

⁴¹ Jonathan Lyons, 'The Crusades are Over; The West Needs to Engage with the Muslims', at: www.juancole.com/2009/01/lyons-crusades-are-over-west-needs-to.html

of Kusta ben Luka, as both the implied Shahrazad's husband and translator of esoteric knowledge, and the presence of a learned wife, seem to contest the idea that Islam and modernity are antithetical. Certainly, Shahrazad/George Yeats side-by-side and in combination demonstrates how a modern female form can channel the knowledge of an ancient tradition.

Paradoxically, however, the poem also reinstates the stereotypical role reserved for Arab women. While both women exhibit a deep intellectual curiosity and commitment to book-learning, only one chooses her mate voluntarily. Shahrazad petitions her father to marry Shahrayar, despite his many protestations, and wilfully overrides his objections.⁴² Shahrazad's courage, defiance and agency are causes for celebration in the *Nights*. Inversely, ben Luka's young wife does not or is unable to protest her status as the Caliph's 'gift' to Kusta ben Luka. Instead, and after her initial interest in books, she exhibits traits of exoticism that one would expect in an Oriental context. While ben Luka writes by candle-light near his sleeping wife, he sees her form move:

... Upon a moonless night
I sat where I could watch her sleeping form,
And wrote by candle-light; but her form moved,
And fearing that my light disturbed her sleep
I rose that I might screen it with a cloth. (lines 127–131)

Unwilling to engage his wife's interiority, ben Luka returns his attention to matters of form and the geometry of interlocking gyres. Notice that lines 127–129 interlock with lines 129–131, a semicolon and the conjunctive 'but' constituting the overlap (see Figure 10.1). The word 'form' repeats twice, in the body of first gyre and then in the body of the second. Ben Luka watches his wife's sleeping form and thinks it stable; however, the form moves or turns and alters, which disturbs him. Resisting instability, ben Luka thinks that 'light' had disturbed his sleeping wife. The word 'light' is used twice as well, once in the body of the first gyre and then in the body of the second. 'Candle-light' turns into 'my light' from one gyre to the next, and betrays a self-centred ben Luka who has to shield his wife from his light. But the turn in the wife's form is more profound.

In her discussion of Yeats's philosophical system and specifically his use of funnels, Brenda Maddox states that this 'metaphysical [and I would argue poetic] appliance ... had a wide end and a narrow end and the function of transferring large to small, general to particular, or spiritual to natural. Yeats came to envisage the funnels as working in pairs, interpenetrated and turning.'⁴³ As in the previous gyral formation, a serious turn or transfer occurs. Ben Luka relates:

(accessed 25 May 2010).

⁴² See Burton, *The Arabian Nights*, pp. 15–22.

⁴³ Brenda Maddox, *Yeats's Ghosts: The Secret Life of W.B. Yeats* (New York, 1999), p. 84.

*I heard her voice, 'Turn that I may expound
 What's bowed your shoulder and made pale your cheek';
 And saw her sitting upright on the bed;
 Or was it she that spoke or some great Djinn?
 I say that a Djinn spoke. A live-long hour
 She seemed the learned man and I the child. (lines 132–137)*

If the wife's form turns, it makes sense that she would order a counterturn (a change of perception) in ben Luka. Her first word, unsurprisingly, is 'Turn'. The young wife, possessed by what ben Luka chooses to interpret as a jinn, becomes, at least ostensibly, a medium for ancient wisdom as transmitted by the jinn; but she is by no means passive, since ben Luka places her metonymically in relation to the jinn. The very fact that ben Luka questions the source of the voice ('Or was it she that spoke or some great Djinn?') places the wife alongside the 'great Djinn'; ben Luka decides wilfully to attribute the words solely to a jinn ('I say that a Djinn spoke'), but that does not occlude the participation of his wife. As such, the young wife – as does George Yeats in her automatic writing and sleep-talking – aligns herself 'with the dominant masculinized position and the subordinate feminized one ... [resulting in] this spiritual hermaphroditism', Margaret Mills Harper explains.⁴⁴ The temporal reversal in which ben Luka becomes the child and the young wife the learned man attests to this spiritual hermaphroditism and the allusion to Shahrazad as both subject and author of the *Nights*. As Shahrayar learns from Shahrazad, ben Luka learns from his wife, even if indirectly; and Yeats learns from George. This places all personas, jinn and demons included, side-by-side and in combination as multiple selves across time and space. Furthermore, if ben Luka places himself first outside the action of the poem as its speaker, translator and transmitter, and, second, as a character within the poem, his wife does the opposite by placing herself as a character first and turning to 'a learned man' who influences ben Luka's representations second. That is, and as Maddox argues in terms of Yeats's funnels, a cross-function of transfer from general to particular and its reverse, and inside to outside and its reverse, takes place. As Harper explains, when George Yeats (née Hyde-Lees) 'was initiated into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1914, ... [she] took as her motto and magic name the Latin word *Nemo*: no one or, suggestively, no man'.⁴⁵ Of course, *Nemo* corresponds to the famous answer given by Odysseus, which helps him escape the Cyclops Polyphemus. Survival through anonymity is central to the name's meaning; however, as Harper suggests, in 'no man', survival is also gendered. Like Shahrazad, who is no one (and no man, which inverts to all men as Shahrazad imagines her male characters) in the tales she tells, *Nemo*/ben Luka's wife nonetheless controls the narrative/poem by influencing Yeats/ben Luka.

This dynamic calls into question the authorship within and without the poem. Brenda Maddox states that 'Yeats later acknowledged the parallel with

⁴⁴ Harper, 'Nemo', p. 297.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

The Thousand and One Nights in the poem that most clearly refers to his wife, "The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid".⁴⁶ The poem renders malleable the idea of biography and autobiography, and their relation to authorship. Fredric Jameson proposes in his reading of *A Vision*, within which the poem is later situated, 'that we rediscover in this situation a whole new conceptuality of the collective, and of collaborative work: one which does not depend on some private property of the individual imagination'.⁴⁷ Certainly, this is the case with the *Nights*, a work of multiple storytellers that grows over centuries and extends its influence on later writers, such as Diana Abu-Jaber, Jorge Luis Borges, Naguib Mahfouz and Salman Rushdie, across time and space, and also the case with George Yeats, whose no-name is a refusal of single identification.

The invocation of the jinni (the singular in Arabic for the plural jinn) and its Arabian locus allows the *Nights* to participate both actively and passively in the poem's content. In the Qur'an, Allah states, 'We created man of clay that gives forth sound, of black mud fashioned in shape. And the jinn / We created before, of intensely hot fire.'⁴⁸ In creation, the jinn precede, and consequently have a hierarchical power over, mankind, hence the power of possession. In the *Nights*, the jinni figure becomes representative of the Arabs' cultural fears and gains a semi-secular dimension. In its debut in the *Nights*, the jinni is described as 'a black pillar, which grew and grew till it rose skywards and began making for the meadow'.⁴⁹ The Arab fear of a growing black phallus is quite clear, especially in relation to the Arabian girl whom the jinni had abducted on her wedding night. One can argue a similar case for George Yeats, who is possessed by a spirit on her wedding night and continues to channel a 'large number of Communicators of male gender [that] may imply the importance of her position as subject as well as the necessary deflection from her daily self'.⁵⁰

Later in the *Nights*, another jinni dons the Christian name of 'Jirjis',⁵¹ which translates as George, and takes the shape of a 'Persian' man.⁵² In 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid,' however, Kusta ben Luka calls the jinni 'the Arabian host' (line 145) as if he were aware that both jinni and Arab (outsider and insider) would combine into an essentialized Arab figure in their transmission to a future modern European setting. But this outsider is actively mediated to England by W.B. Yeats, an Irish poet at the centre of Empire. As such, Yeats seems to be participating in the long tradition of Irish Orientalism that Joseph Lennon describes as 'anticolonial Orientalism ... In the Irish case, one marker of anticolonial Orientalist narratives is the projection

⁴⁶ Maddox, *Yeats's Ghosts*, p. 75.

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (London, 2007), p. 270.

⁴⁸ *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. M.H. Shakir (Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library), 15.26–27, at: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/k/koran/> (accessed 17 May 2010).

⁴⁹ Burton, *The Arabian Nights*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Harper, 'Nemo', p. 303.

⁵¹ Burton, *The Arabian Nights*, p. 73.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

of “sameness” – rather than “otherness” – onto the “blank screen” of the Orient.⁵³ In effect, Irish Orientalism includes sameness alongside and in combination with otherness. The past combines with the present and the Arab outsider enters one of the centres of Europe, through George Yeats’s European female body, thus provoking a state of alterity, a modern crisis of the self both individual and collective. But the mode of entry is highly sexual if rendered through the lens of the *Nights*. As with the Queen’s (Shahrayar’s first wife) infidelity with a black slave, a cultural outsider, George channels a large number of male communicators, some of whom are cultural outsiders. The jinni who possesses the young wife in the poem certainly emulates George’s possession on her wedding night. If George/Nemo/ben Luka’s wife side-by-side and in combination channel outsiders, then the outsiders, like the black slave in the *Nights*, seek revenge in their entering and possessing a female body. The conquest for and governance of the female body remains, unfortunately, at the centre of cultural and political discourse, Oriental and Occidental.

Kusta ben Luka, Yeats and/or Shahrayar states towards the end of the poem:

*All, all those gyres and cubes and midnight things
Are but a new expression of her body
Drunk with the bitter sweetness of her youth. (lines 184–186)*

The ‘gyres and cubes’ become an expression of the young wife’s ‘body’. That is, ben Luka is ultimately unable to move beyond form (that of the female body specifically) as the site of negotiation, possession and revenge. In the final lines of the poem, ben Luka states:

*A woman’s beauty is a storm-tossed banner;
Under it wisdom stands, and I alone –
Of all Arabia’s lovers I alone –
Nor dazzled by the embroidery, nor lost
In the confusion of its night-dark folds,
Can hear the armed man speak. (lines 188–193)*

⁵³ Joseph Lennon, *Irish Orientalism: A Literary and Intellectual History* (Syracuse, 2004), p. 264. For more on the connection between Orientalism and *fin-de-siècle* culture, see, for example, essays by Terry Eagleton (‘The Flight to the Real’) and Regenia Gagnier (‘Is Market Society the *Fin* of History?’) in Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (eds), *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 11–21 and 190–311 respectively; and chapter 11 of Robert Aldrich’s *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London, 2003), titled ‘The French in North Africa’. Works that demonstrate the continuity of these fascinations into the early twentieth century include Urmila Sheshagari, *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (Ithaca, 2010) and Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (eds), *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899–1939* (Durham, NC, 2007).

Exhibiting jealousy worthy of Shahrayar, ben Luka likens a woman's beauty to a banner of war. The imagery is reminiscent of the poem's beginning, in which ben Luka asks Al-Rabban to carry the letter through the Treasure House, 'Where banners of the Caliphs hang, night-coloured / But brilliant as the night's embroidery, / And wait war's music' (lines 6–8). In relating a 'woman's beauty' to a 'storm-tossed banner', ben Luka seems implicitly to prescribe the locking-up of women in the Treasure House to protect their beauty. His letter, which encapsulates that beauty, is also placed in the Treasure House. In the confusion, only ben Luka, in repeating the phrase 'I alone', can 'hear the armed man speak'. The repeated phrase places ben Luka as an outside-insider in relation to Islamic culture, and allows him, as a result, a heightened sense of perception. What he hears, however, are the words of an armed man standing under the banner of woman's beauty. Ben Luka's relationship to the armed man (presumably the jinni) is adversarial. The jinni standing below the banner of beauty is a jinni in possession of the woman's body. Furthermore, the fact that he is armed suggests his using the woman's body as a weapon. In these final lines we find an almost inevitable failure, but one that remains, for all its shortcomings, in dialogue with a series of possibilities for making cross-cultural connections.

Conclusion and/as Premise

'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid' returns at its end to the imagery of the Treasure House of its beginning. In this final synchronic act, the poem's ending becomes a portal for its beginning; and yet both beginning and ending retain their temporal positions. The synchronic does not occlude the diachronic. The resulting paradox is not exclusively of the occult, however. In this chapter, I argue for tangible connections, interdependencies, between seemingly incommensurable parts: the poem's poetics, the mysticism and structure of the *Nights*, Ireland and the Arab world, Irish Orientalism and the Shahrazadian role of the medium. These parts exist side-by-side and in combination, isolated and interdependent. In conclusion, I gesture to the premise in which I make these claims, and reclaim the same in the conclusion, the differential lying in the body of the chapter. 'The literary text', Kontou explains, 'can therefore be understood as a materialized spirit – an embodied entity summoned from the netherworld, living and dead at the same time.'⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Kontou, *Spiritualism and Women's Writing*, pp. 1–2.