

# Women and power in the thousand and one nights



**ASSIGN  
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The Thousand and One Nights is a collection of stories originally told from an oral tradition that was later written down and spread from its place of origin, the Middle East, throughout the western countries. It is told through a frame-tale format, which allows for many stories to fit within the overarching plot-line. This brings in many characters, narrators, and perspectives into the work which can make it difficult to find one, single viewpoint. Women, in particular, have conflicting descriptors which can lead to multiple interpretations of the power they have within this region of the world. Thus, it is only natural to question how some women obtain the power they exhibit within these tales while it seems as though they should have no power at all. While women in The Thousand and One Nights may have moments of power it can only be found through manipulation, and even so, this power is limited and thus unable to control their own fates.

Women, when they attempt to take control, through obvious means, are met with beatings or death. The whole tale begins when King Shahrayar walks in on his wife and a kitchen boy (1177). She had believed that her husband had already left on his visit to his brother, and leaving her alone in the palace. While this may not have been the best decision the wife could have made, she is still attempting to take control of her own fate- instead of waiting around for her husband to return to her. This situation is similar to King Shahzaman and his wife, who was found to be cheating by King Shahrayar. In both of these cases the brothers exhibited similar levels of anger, it “boiled” (1177, 1179) within them, and decided the only way to react in this horrid act of unfaithfulness was to put their wives to death. The wives both had tried to take control of their own lives by sleeping with various

servants/commoners. When their husbands found out they were all put to death. Why? They didn't manipulate the situation in any way, merely tried to sneak in moments of power over their own fates. And in the end failed. This brutality toward women can be seen in a less extreme way within the tales told, for example in "The Tale of the Merchant and His Wife." The wife gets angered at her husband for refusing to disclose information for his odd behaviors, and demands him to tell her the truth. The husband who would be put to death by God for telling of his gift of "the language of the beasts" (1183) refuses to tell her. She is persistent, not wishing to give up this power over him. When the husband cannot talk her down, he is left with no choice but to beat her into submission- "Then he began to beat her mercilessly on her chest and shoulders and kept beating her until she cried for mercy, screaming, 'No, no, I don't want to know anything. Leave me alone, leave me alone. I don't want to know anything'" (1186). His reaction lead to her needing to beg for him to stop hurting her. She gave up her power almost instantly. All because the merchant could not allow his wife to hold so much power over him, and so beat her until she had no other choice but to give in to him. He "beat her mercilessly" what other options could his wife possibly employ? It was between power and life, and women in this society are not meant to have power.

Well, women can have power, but it is only through manipulation and in other ways that the men are oblivious to the power they hold. The biggest example of this being Shahrazad. She is a woman in a higher status- the daughter of the King's vizier, and she is educated. She could have been saved from the King's cruel ways because of her bloodline, however she

decides to use her knowledge and intelligence to help the other women from certain death (1182-3). Well, this blatant power transfer could only be done through manipulation. Shahrazad plan is “ to tell a story, and it will cause the king to stop his practice, save myself, and deliver the people” (1186).

Shahrazad’s diction proves that she is fully dedicated to this plan. There are no moments of hesitation or regret within the story, and her word choices are sure an calculated. She will save herself. She will deliver the people. But despite this is an incredibly naïve plan, it somehow works in saving Shahrazad. She is manipulating the king into wishing to hear more and more of her tales by leaving the stories on a cliffhanger at the end of each night. Using her position as storyteller, Shahrazad made is so that if the King would wish to hear the end of the story he would have to spare her another night. Does she have power here? Yes. Does she have full and complete power? No. The power is still ultimately held in the king. At any point, he can decide that he has had enough of this story and put her to death like all the others. She is still enslaved to him and her own plan with no real power in choosing her fate.

In The Thousand and One Nights, women are nearly powerless, and the only power they can even grapple with is a very small amount they got through manipulation. This is enough for some of the women, such as the heroine of the tales, Shahrazad, in which she understands that for the greater good this is her life now. Men cannot become aware of the woman’s intentions, and if they do it can become fatal- like the Kings wives, or the Merchant’s wife. Power was brutally stripped away from them by the men. There are

glimmers of power within the lives of the women, however, they all remain virtually powerless in the end.