SHAHRYAR, GIOCONDO, KOȚE’RVIKY
THREE VERSIONS OF THE MOTIF OF THE FAITHLESS WOMAN

by

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In honor of Leonardo Olschki

Gleaning in popular literature is oftentimes fraught with surprises, a sufficient reward, as it were, for the curious reader. So it was that I chanced to come across another exemplum of a successful tale’s mysterious ubiquity: the tale which is known as “Shahryar and His Brother” in the Thousand and One Nights (frame story), and the story of “Giocondo” in Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso (Canto xxviii). This time it came to me from India, where so many of them belong by birthright, as we often think.

Since no direct source-influence can be implied, as we shall see, the coincidence is of interest to us mainly if we succeed in analyzing the nature of the various versions and deriving any enlightenment from their differences. Yet, a more precise reason for this study is the opportunity to straighten out a detail of information, and to develop a point of interpretation.

The motif of the various tales consists of proving by typical examples the universal, chronic, a priori faithlessness of woman. Let us see how it develops in the three major texts, by the essential lines concerning our comparison.

“King Shahryar, lord of India and China, longs for a reunion with his brother Shahzaman, lord of Samarkand, and invites him to his court. The latter sets forth, but having to return temporarily to his home to get a jewel he had forgotten, accidentally discovers his wife’s infidelity. He does justice to the adulterers and then proceeds to his brother’s, at whose court he, accidentally again, will have a vicarious consolation in beholding, from a palace window, the Queen lying, in her turn, with another man than the King: what is more, a slobbering blackamoor. He unveils the matter to the brother only after his insistence. The outcome of these coupled misfortunes is the decision of Shahryar and Shahzaman to leave the
court and go into the world seeking adventures—and a chaste woman, if there be any. But none will they find; rather they will but realize the manifest absurdity of their search through a final revealing experience: a beauteous girl who is kept by a jealous Jinni in a crystal coffer at the bottom of the sea, being free for a moment during the Jinni’s sleep, allures the two Shahs into lying with her. Truly woman has no equal in might! So conclude the brothers, and decide to return, never again to contract nuptial alliance with womankind, but rather to give it a memorable lesson. They shall never have intercourse with a woman twice, nor shall a woman be any other man’s after having been theirs, for she shall die forthwith in the morning. From this monstrous stratagem issues the golden thread that will tie Sheherazade’s tales together.”

Now to Ariosto:

„Astolfo King of the Longobards yearns to meet the only man of his kingdom who can match his beauty (new, significant element, justifying the virile successfulness of our heroes). This is Jocondo (his name is thus spelled in the Furioso), who, owing to the accidental discovery of his wife’s adultery, reaches the court in an unflattering shape; but his morale as well as physical excellence are restored by the timely discovery that the King also is a victim of the same misfortune, even more serious because of his rank. The two, made friends by what they have in common, set out in search of consoling adventures. But at last the uselessness of their search will become manifest by an experience similar to that of the Jinni, although materially different, and quite adequate to fill any measure. To their understandable amazement the two friends find that a girl they decided to marry in common (let us keep in mind this unusual detail), obviously not content with two husbands, invites to her bed a third man, a former humble lover. Astolfo and Jocondo decide to return and wisely put up with their wives as they are, rather, as all women are.”

The Kota story that we take as our third and final exemplum is even more complex, and richer in divergencies as well as more comprehensive of the motif’s elements.

Cf. Kota Texts, ed. Murray B. Emeneau (Berkeley, 1944), Part I, Text 9, pp. 93-139. The texts edited in these four volumes in original and in English translation, are oral narrations collected from a native informant by Emeneau during field work (1936-38) on the Nilgiri Hills of South India (south of the Mysore plains). The seemingly aboriginal Kotas come third in a caste hierarchy, after the Todas (pastoralists) and the Bagadas (agriculturists): they are the artisans and musicians of the area. The isolation and inaccessibility of the plateau accounts for the limited bibliography on those communities (see the few titles on p. 36). For an analysis of Text 9 cf. Walter Ruben, Über die Literatur der vorarischen Stämme Indiens (Berlin, 1952), esp. pp. 26-31.