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Shahrazad in Appalachia: Surviving Violence Through Stories and the Support of “Sisters”

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Abstract

When women are lured away from home, they become vulnerable and cannot survive the violence inflicted upon them by their 'lovers.' This thesis explores the ties between two distinct cultural regions, Arabic and Appalachian, to examine the violence against women and what allows these women to escape such situations by using Hanan al-Shaykh's *One Thousand and One Nights: A Retelling* and three traditional Appalachian murdered girl ballads.

Many of the women in these stories die at the hands of their 'lovers,' regardless of their culture of origin. Once removed from their fellow women, they lack a support system that would allow them the strength to survive. While most of the women in these tales die at the hands of their 'lovers,' Shahrazad of *One Thousand and One Nights: A Retelling* survives because she is able to take back some control of the situation by telling her own story, instead of allowing it to be told for her. She survives the bleak situation she has been put in through the support of her sister, who makes it possible for Shahrazad to continue telling her stories. The support Shahrazad receives from her sister allows her to not only save herself, but also to save the lives of other women. This thesis concludes that it is this "sister" support that enables women to survive the violence consistently thrown at them and allows them to take back control of their own narratives.

Chapter 1: Introduction

A culture of violence against women pervades the world, entrenched so deeply in human consciousness that it has become a staple of the literature and folklife of many regions. Two regions in particular that this thesis will focus on are the Middle East, specifically Arabic countries, and Southern Appalachia. These two regions are rarely considered together, even with the growing recognition of Appalachia as a part of a global community, and very little literature focuses on such a relationship. It was this gap that piqued my interest in finding the ties between these communities. My focus lies on the Arabic folktales, using Hanan al-Shaykh's 2011 novel *One Thousand and One Nights: A Retelling,* and Appalachian murdered girl ballads. I have selected three tales from the novel and three ballads that best illustrate this global culture of violence against women and how the vulnerability of these women is increased when they are pulled away from the support that fellow women provide.

One Thousand and One Nights: A Retelling is a modern retelling of the traditional *One Thousand and One Nights,* which is also known as *The Arabian Nights.* The first of the stories from *One Thousand and One Nights: A Retelling* is "Shahrayar and Shahrazad," the frame story that sets up Hanan al-Shaykh's novel. The story follows the traditional format of the *One Thousand and One Nights,* where it is Shahrazad who tells the many stories to Shahrayar in an attempt to prolong her life. Each story of *One Thousand and One Nights* takes place within the context of this frame story of Shahrazad and Shahrayar. The frame story is followed by that of "The Second Dervish" and "The Third Dervish," which is traditionally known as "The Story of the Three Apples." These stories center around men who have wronged the women in their lives, mirroring the story of Shahrazad and Shahrayar.

Appalachian murdered girl ballads tell the tale of a young woman horribly murdered by her lover, sometimes after it is discovered that she is pregnant, and dumped into a river or shallow grave. These ballads often have roots in places beyond Appalachia, such as Ireland and England, due to the migratory nature of the region and the people within it. The ballads I selected for focus in this thesis are songs that hold strong Appalachian ties, regardless of what their original roots might have been. “Down in the Willow Garden,” also known as “Rose Connolly,” is a traditional ballad that features most qualities of the murdered girl ballad, and although its roots can be traced back to Ireland, as Emily Kader’s article, “‘Rose Connolly’ Revisited: Re-Imagining the Irish in Southern Appalachia,” discusses, it is a heavily Appalachian song. Similar observations can be made for the history of “Knoxville Girl,” which, in its home country of Ireland, was known as “Wexford Girl.” However, “Naomi Wise,” or as it is more often known, “Omie Wise,” finds its roots in Appalachia, unfortunately based on a true story. Richard Polenberg’s book, *Hear My Sad Story: The True Tales That Inspired "Stagolee," "John Henry," and Other Traditional American Folk Songs*, dedicates an entire chapter to the tale of “Omie Wise” and its history, pinpointing it as one of the oldest American murder ballads. *Crimesong: Some Murder Ballads and Poems Revisited,* by Richard H. Underwood, also focuses on the story of Naomi Wise, going deeper into the history behind the ballad, as well as the tradition of the murdered girl ballad as a whole. He provides additional information on other murdered girl ballads that are based on true events, such as murders of Lula Viers, Stella Kenney, and Pearl Bryan.

One version of the Omie Wise story, written by a Braxton Carver, was published as “Life of Naomi Wise: True Story of a Beautiful Girl.” The recurring theme of the beautiful murder victim has intrigued many, including Daniel A. Cohen, who wrote the article, “The Beautiful

Female Murder Victim: Literary Genres and Courtship Practices in the Origins of a Cultural Motif, 1590-1850." His work traces the motif of the "beautiful female murder victim" as a theme throughout literature and its increasing prevalence throughout the years, from the days of court romances, where the lovers of kings would be persecuted and murdered, to modern times, where the beautiful young woman is a common victim of crime shows (279).

Both of these categories have been studied in their own right, but little scholarship has been done that connects these genres. It is here that I intend to use the scholarship conducted on these varying topics and combine them into a cohesive whole while I highlight the similarities in how violence is perpetuated against women in both cultures, as well as discuss how critical it is for women to have the support of other women in order to minimize their vulnerability to those who might otherwise wish to harm them.

In this selection of stories and ballads, the women often die. They have been taken from their support systems of fellow women who give them strength and protect them from the harm that will befall them once they are lured away. Despite the geographical difference of these two cultures, women share similar experiences, such as being trapped in relationships and the violence inflicted upon them. Shahrazad is the only one of these women who survives her story, and she also is the only one who has this support, in the form of her sister. The voices of the rest of women have been taken from them as others tell their stories in their stead, forcing them into passive figures without any control over their situations. Removing women from the support that fellow women provide creates a vulnerability that men can exploit.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This thesis discusses the two culturally distinct regions of Appalachia and Arabia and how their folk stories relate to violence against women, centering on the similarities between Arabic and Appalachian folk tales and music. The primary sources for my analysis are tales from Hanan al-Shaykh's *One Thousand and One Nights: A Retelling* and three Appalachian murdered girl ballads.

The original *One Thousand and One Nights*, sometimes known better to Western cultures as the *Arabian Nights*, is a collection of Arabic folktales dating back centuries, with a history muddled by time, although the oldest surviving fragment has been dated back to the ninth century. The first translation of the *Nights* widely known by English-speaking audiences was *The Arabian Night's Entertainments: Consisting of One Thousand and One Stories*, published in 1844 by A.J. Valpy. This is the translation that I shall refer to when discussing the traditional *One Thousand and One Nights*, although I do acknowledge that they were translated in a time where collecting and disseminating folktales was primarily by educated Westerners for an educated culturally European audience, and that the translation may reflect those viewpoints at times through word choice and perhaps in other ways.

Similar structures to the tales in the *Nights* can be found in other stories from around the globe, with many scholars having examined the relationship between the *One Thousand and One Nights* with other folk and fairy tales. Two such scholars are Ulrich Marzolph and Paulo Lemos Horta. Marzolph's critical essay, "Grimm Nights: Reflections on the Connections Between the Grimms' "Household Tales" and the "1001 Nights,"" discusses the viewpoint of many other scholars and folklorists that virtually any trope found in the *Nights* could also be found in the Grimms' collection of folktales. However, researchers and folklorists at the time had neglected

to develop hypotheses on how this overlap might have come to be. The closest that many came to was saying that audiences should not think of it as a "direct transfer" of plot elements from one culture to the next, but that it would be "surprising" if there were no overlap between the two "internationally most influential collections of folktales and fairy tales" (Marzolph). One might see how such a claim that so many of the tropes in *One Thousand and One Nights* could be found in the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales after reading several tales from different European countries that closely resemble "Shahrayar and Shahrazad," the frame story for the *Nights*. Horta's article, "Beautiful Men and Deceitful Women: The One Hundred and One Nights and World Literature," takes a closer look at these similarities, examining folktales from Italian, Hungarian, and Belorussian cultures. However, a prominent difference in these tales and "Shahrayar and Shahrazad" is that, although in each a man discovers his wife's infidelity and he goes to the king, and there discovers that the king's wife is also adulterous, they do not take their revenge by murdering them, as Shahrayar does, instead casting a blanket statement around women that they are all deceitful. After reaching this point in each of the stories similar to the *Nights'* frame story, Horta attempts to find a mediating source and potential reason for these similarities, but he focuses on aspects of these European tales that are not in the Arabic tale, rather than aspects of the Arabic story that are not present in the European tale, such as the vast amounts of violence and bloodshed of women.

Al-Shaykh's retelling of the *Nights* is what the bulk of my analysis for the stories selected will be based upon. Her strong depiction of women and the violence that is perpetuated against them, as well as feminist tones throughout the novel, led to this choice over a more traditional translation of the *Nights*. Its place as a more recent translation also adds to my later argument of how women do not simply accept their fate as battered women but remain strong throughout,

even though they may still go through terrible hardships and perhaps even die at the hands of those they once trusted and loved.

Murder ballads are a prominent aspect of Appalachian culture. "'Whackety Whack, Don't Talk Back': The Glorification of Violence Against Females and the Subjugation of Women in Nineteenth-Century Southern Folk Music" by C.K. Hutson details some of the history of this music of violence in the southern region. He states that homicide was one of the region's most prevalent themes in music, and that songs that described such violence and bloodshed "outnumbered nonviolent love songs about ten to one." (114) Hutson goes on to describe how commonplace this type of violence was in both music and during the era that these ballads were most widely circulating, primarily in the 19th century, and even as recently as midway through the 20th century. The author details how some modern juries may be more inclined to acquit a man who murdered his wife and her lover, and even more so if he caught the couple in "flagrante delicto," as he was reacting on "irresistible impulse" (Hutson). Graeme Thomson's 2008 book, *I Shot a Man in Reno: A History of Death by Murder, Suicide, Fire, Flood, Drugs, Disease, and General Misadventure, as Related in Popular Song*, further emphasizes this incredible history of violence in the South as he writes of the history of many murder ballads from across the United States, with a large portion of them being particularly popular in Appalachia.

With this in mind, it may cause one to question what exactly the qualities of these murder ballads are. Appalachian murdered girl ballads follow a well-established formula. Lydia Hamessley gives a brief summary of the elements in her article, "A Resisting Performance of an Appalachian Traditional Murder Ballad: Giving Voice to 'Pretty Polly,'" where she describes these songs as "murdered sweetheart" ballads. The male lover lures his sweetheart away from her home to a secluded area, presumably to get married or discuss it. After leaving, he murders

her. Typically, he has a reason; because she has become pregnant or as punishment for her "sexual excesses" are two such common reasons (Hamessley). Sometimes, such as in the cases of "Knoxville Girl" and "Omie Wise," he will tell her that he plans to kill her, at which point the audience hears her pleas for mercy, for him to spare her life. Her body is then disposed of in a body of water, often a river, or in a shallow grave (Hamessley). The murderer is usually apprehended, although whether he is punished or not, either through incarceration or execution, depends on the ballad.

Hamessley is not the only one who writes on the formula of the murder ballad. Daniel A. Cohen, in his article, "The Beautiful Female Murder Victim: Literary Genres and Courtship Practices in the Origins of a Cultural Motif, 1590-1850," talks about the aforementioned beautiful female murder victim, and its place as a "complex cultural motif" (278), and several of the genres that have informed it over the centuries. Although the article focuses primarily on British influences, and later American trial reports, with only a short section on the murder ballads, the formula he provides is nearly identical to that of Hamessley's. He asserts that the most basic aspects of the tales of a "beautiful female murder victim" is right there in the name itself: that she is female, beautiful, and has been murdered. He goes on to add more elements that are common in this cultural motif, such as that she is young and unmarried, and murdered by a man who is also young and unmarried, in the context of them having a relationship. Other elements that he includes are the "assertions of the early virtue or innocence of the victim, the strong implication that the woman's death was the direct or indirect result of a sexual "fall", and graphic (and occasionally erotic or pornographic) descriptions of the victim" (Cohen 278).

These elements are all at play in various forms in the murdered girl ballads selected for analysis in this thesis. For example, the women in the ballads "Down in the Willow Garden,"

also known as “Rose Connolly,” and “Naomi Wise” are both pregnant, as referenced by Hamessley and in Cohen’s description of their death being a result of a “sexual fall” (Cohen 278). “Naomi Wise” references the innocence of the victim that Cohen describes often, although the historical Naomi Wise may not have been as innocent as the ballad would paint her. “Knoxville Girl” and “Naomi Wise” feature the women begging for their lives as they realize they are going to be murdered. All three ballads describe the brutal and graphic ways that each woman was horrifically murdered by her lover.

The presence of these elements is most interesting in the case of “Omie Wise,” as this is the only one of the three ballads selected that is known to be based on history, with the documentation of her life and death, as well as trial proceedings, because it is a true story, and yet contains all of these elements. Of course, as ballads often do, the story has been sensationalized to some extent, assumedly. Richard Polenberg’s book, *Hear My Sad Story: The True Tales That Inspired "Stagolee," "John Henry," and Other Traditional American Folk Songs,* dedicates an entire chapter to “Omie Wise” and the historical Naomi Wise and John Lewis, as does *Crimesong: Some Murder Ballads and Poems Revisited*, a book by Richard H. Underwood. However, while both authors acknowledge that some of the facts were distorted in order to make the ballad more “moral” and to make Naomi more sympathetic, an older version of the ballad, one contemporary with the events, was found in the 1950s, adding credence to certain parts of the story, making it all the more haunting. Such events being true harkens back to Hutson’s article where the author describe how widespread the violence against women was within Appalachia, stating, “In fact, no matter how sensational these folksongs might appear to contemporary observers, the stories were not inconceivable to the listeners” (1).

Chapter 3: Analysis

One Thousand and One Nights

Most people are aware to some extent of the Arabic folktales known as the *One Thousand and One Nights,* although they may be better known to the English-speaking world as *The Arabian Nights* (Marzolph). They are a set of folktales placed within a frame story, with each story roughly equaling one of the eponymous nights. As previously mentioned, while using snippets of translations of the original tales, this thesis will focus on Hanan al-Shaykh's *One Thousand and One Nights: A Retelling* for the primary source, due to their feministic qualities and modern language. While al-Shaykh's novel includes retellings of fourteen of the original tales, three have been selected from those to highlight this culture of violence and how these stories parallel to the Appalachian murdered girl ballads.

A common thread between the three stories selected are infidelity and adultery, even if the assumption is incorrect, as well as violence against the woman involved in these scenarios, regardless of her innocence. While seen in "Shahrayar and Shahrazad," violence and disbelief in women are also primary themes in "The Second Dervish" and "The Third Dervish." Each of the main male characters in these stories could be referred to as a "weeping man:" a man rash in action and obsessed with revenge (al-Shaykh 89).

The frame story of *One Thousand and One Nights*, "Shahrayar and Shahrazad," sets the tone to the stories that will follow, one of darkness, violence, and bloodshed, indicating to the reader immediately that these tales are not the same watered-down fairy and folk tales used by Disney for family entertainment. Instead of a heartwarming tale of orphans overcoming adversity, it begins with infidelity and violence. Described as a "strong and powerful" king who

remained “fair, caring, and kind to his people” (al-Shaykh 1), King Shahrayar at first appears to perhaps be the protagonist of the tale. However, as the story continues to progress, the reader quickly learns this is not the case, as he falls into an insurmountable rage after discovering the infidelity of his wife with a black slave, told of his cuckoldry by his brother, who witnessed Shahrayar’s wife and her slaves making love and merry with these black slaves in the garden with no shame (al-Shaykh 3-7). After his slaughter of the women and their lovers, he decrees that he shall marry a new virgin every day, deflower her at night, and execute her the next morning, to “protect [himself] from the cunning and deceit of women,” citing that there is not a “single chaste woman” on earth (al-Shaykh 8). As this bloodbath continues, causing unrest among the citizens who had previously adored Shahrayar, the daughter of the Vizier, named Shahrazad, approaches her father and tells him of her desire to marry King Shahrayar, in hopes that she might be able to save other women from the fate that had befallen all those before her (al-Shaykh 8-10). Her father finally relents, after having argued with his daughter in attempt to save her life. She then goes to the king’s chambers, taking her sister with her. Before they leave for the king’s chambers, Shahrazad instructs her sister to ask her to tell a story as she’s “not sleepy,” in an attempt to “engage the King fully” and manage her time carefully enough during the telling that it is not finished by first light, when she is to be executed, and he allows her to live another day to finish the story, after which she begins another one (al-Shaykh 8-11, 17, 24). Her plan succeeds, and Shahrazad’s sister continues to ask for more stories at night, continuing to prolong Shahrazad’s life. Each morning the two sisters cling to each other, amazed that Shahrazad was able to survive another night (al-Shaykh 17). The story traditionally ends with Shahrayar realizing he has fallen in love with Shahrazad, making her his queen (“Arabian Night’s Entertainment” 383-384).

Al-Shaykh's retelling does not put as much focus on the relationship between Shahrazad and Shahrayar. Instead, her focus lies upon that of Shahrazad and her little sister, Dunyazad.

"The Second Dervish" begins with a prince who is telling the story of how at some point he lost his right eye. After traveling to show off his skills, a series of misfortunes tear away his might and wealth, leaving him alone in the world, when he at last finds a city, where he is taken in by a tailor. When his intellectual skills are deemed unnecessary, the man becomes a woodcutter, and this work leads him to an underground palace where he finds a beautiful young woman (al-Shaykh 70-72). The woman reveals that she had been kidnapped by a demon, "the grandson of Satan himself," on her wedding night and imprisoned underground for twenty-five years. She also mentions that the demon is married with children, and visits her secretly every ten days, because he does not want his wife to discover his indiscretions (al-Shaykh 73). The woman invites him to stay until the demon returns, an invitation which the prince eagerly accepts. The two are happy together over the course of these days and fall in love. But he wishes to free her from her prison and the demon, which she declines. He then asks how she tolerates being with the demon, and she responds that habit and loneliness allowed her to resign herself to her fate, a thought familiar to those who experience abuse (Halket 36). The woman had told the prince of an orb that would summon the demon immediately, and he runs to it, even as she protests and begs for him to not, and he ignores her wishes.

The young woman sends the prince away just before the demon appears, where he berates her, calling her a slut and believing that she was unfaithful to him, even though she is his prisoner, revealing just how hypocritical his own nature is (al-Shaykh 76-77). He finds a rope and axe that belongs to the prince, and beats the woman, before going to find the man who left his items behind. The demon at last finds the prince, and takes him back to the underground

palace, where he pits the prince and the woman against each other, attempting to get a confession of their guilt or get one to kill the other. They both lie to the demon, insisting they have never met each other. While the demon is unsure that the prince is who the woman slept with, the demon remains firmly rooted in his belief in her infidelity. Because of this, the demon severs her arms and then cuts off her head, but allows the prince to live, taking only one of his eyes.

Al-Shaykh highlights the abuse that the woman has undergone while living as the demon's captive, taking care to engage the reader's sympathies for her. Al-Shaykh creates a terrifyingly vivid image of what many abuse victims do when describing how the young woman insists on staying with her captor: they create excuses for their partners and staying in the safety of certainty, even when that causes further hurt (al-Shaykh 76, Halket 36). She echoes this sentiment in an exchange between the Prince and the woman, where the Prince says, "I understand that fear makes you tolerate all the injustices bestowed upon you (…), but I cannot comprehend how you tolerate being with him," to which the woman responds, "habit and loneliness have reconciled me to his appearance and company" (al-Shaykh 76), reasons that women often use for why they continue to tolerate abuse against them. After the demon interrogates her about the axe and rope, he strips, binds, and flogs her, torturing her in an attempt to extract a confession, demanding to know who she had been with, even though he himself was unfaithful. The demon discovers the identity of the man, taking him to the woman with the intention of killing them both, testing their lies to protect each other. Ultimately, the demon slaughters the woman with an excess of force, hacking off her arms and beheading her, a far harsher punishment than that which he inflicts on the other man, only taking one of his eyes (al-Shaykh 80, 82). Once again, the theme of murdering the beautiful young woman returns, a multicultural motif that continues to reappear throughout literature across the world, from the

distant past of Arabic countries, to 18 and 19th century Appalachia, even to today in modern times.

Perhaps one might argue that the woman did in fact deserve her fate, given that she was unfaithful, although her "lover" had kidnapped and abused her for twenty-five years. This is not the case of the poor wife in "The Third Dervish," whose husband subjects her to death even though she is truly innocent.

The third dervish, the son of a sailor, weds the daughter of a merchant, falling deeply in love with her upon laying eyes on her and even deeper after hearing her speak. The wife soon falls pregnant and has two sons. Misfortune strikes them when the wife falls ill, and nothing could improve her health. She wakes her husband late one night, citing a deep craving for an apple, of which she had heard but never seen. He searches for it, but they are not in any local market, and after the wife's declaration of wishing she could "crunch one bite from an apple or even just smell it," he was determined to go "even to Paradise itself" to find it for her (al-Shaykh 85). After being told that he would have to journey far to reach his prize, he sets off to find the apples and pays a high price for three of them, quickly hurrying home with the image of his wife in his mind. However, instead of the joy he had imagined, when he returns, she only looks at them before falling asleep once again, and his anxiety for her health increases, worrying that perhaps he had been too late. Leaving for work the next day, he sees a black slave holding an apple, and asks how the slave acquired it. The slave responds with a wink, saying it was from his sick mistress and that her husband "whom she detests" traveled for weeks to get the apples for her, citing her giving of the apple to the slave as a sign of her love (al-Shaykh 86). His words send the husband into a fit of rage and he goes home, having already decided that if he didn't see three apples there, he would "slice his wife open from jugular to jugular" (al-Shaykh 87). When

he returns to his incredibly sick wife's bedside, he discovers there are only two apples, and dissatisfied with her answers, believing them to be admissions of guilt, he slaughters her, hacking her body into pieces and sinking the remains in the river (al-Shaykh 87). He is at ease, even pleased with his actions, until he later discovers that his oldest son had stolen one of the apples, which in turn had been stolen from him by a slave (al-Shaykh 88). In that moment, he realizes he murdered his wife, an innocent and faithful woman, in error.

While he, his father, and sons mourn the loss of the wife, the narrator's father cries out, "thanking God that [his wife] was already dead," for this act would have caused her to commit suicide for the love of her daughter-in-law (al-Shaykh 89), illustrating how strong the love can be between two women. Even though this mother was not the woman's own, she adored her. Like the young woman in "The Second Dervish," this woman is alone. It may not be the physical type of loneliness, but she is separate from other women and the support that they provide. No mention is made of her own mother, or if she had any sisters, or friends before her life with her new husband. She has only sons, and no daughters. She is the only woman in a family of men, separated from the support that a woman needs.

These stories follow a similar model to that of the Appalachian murdered girl ballads, the structure of which will be further analyzed in a later chapter of this thesis. However, a similar structure can also be found in stories and traditions across the globe. Many scholars, such as Ulrich Marzolph and Paulo Lemos Horta, have examined the link between *One Thousand and One Nights* and other literature, particularly that of fairytales and folklore. Marzolph's critical essay, "Grimm Nights: Reflections on the Connections Between the Grimms' "Household Tales" and the "1001 Nights,"" discusses the viewpoint of many that virtually any trope found in the *Nights* could also be found in the Grimms' collection of folktales. However, he also mentions

how past folklore collectors and researchers neglected to even develop a hypothesis regarding the overlap of the *One Thousand and One Nights* and the Grimms' tales, although they did note that audiences should not think of it as a "direct transfer," yet stating that it would be "surprising" if there were no overlap between the two "internationally most influential collections of folktales and fairy tales" (Marzolph). Such a claim could be seen within the article of Horta, "Beautiful Men and Deceitful Women: The One Hundred and One Nights and World Literature." He examines Italian, Hungarian, and Belorussian folk and fairytales, all of which closely follow the frame story of "Shahrayar and Shahrazad." However, while each tale has a man discovering his wife's infidelity, goes to the king, and discovers that the king's own wife commits adulterous acts against him, typically with those deemed as lesser in some way, they do not take their revenge against them by way of murder, instead deeming all women as deceitful and adulterous (Horta).

Appalachian Murder Ballads

The murder ballad is not a solely Appalachian phenomenon, but the ballads were far more prevalent there than in many other locales (Hutson 4). In ““Whackety Whack, Don't Talk Back”: The Glorification of Violence Against Females and the Subjugation of Women in Nineteenth-Century Southern Folk Music,” the author, C.K. Hutson gives the statistic that songs that described such violence and bloodshed “outnumbered nonviolent love songs about ten to one,” particularly in the southern Appalachians (Hutson 1). The Appalachian murdered girl ballads, the focus of this section of the thesis, make up a large portion of these violent and bloody love songs.

Appalachian murdered girl ballads follow a well-established formula as shown in the literature review: a young woman goes with her lover, presumably to discuss marriage, and she then is murdered by her lover in some horrific manner. The murderer then disposes of her body, often in a shallow grave or by dumping it in a body of water, oftentimes a river. An additional element to many of these ballads is the pregnancy of the woman (Hamessley). This is typically a precursor and perhaps cause of her murder, such as in the case of “Omie Wise.” The murdered girl ballads often have roots in places beyond Appalachia, such as Ireland or England, due to the migratory patterns of the region, although many times they are adopted into Appalachian culture or modified to better fit the region. The ballads examined in this section are “Knoxville Girl,” “Down in the Willow Garden,” and “Omie Wise.”

“Knoxville Girl” was popularized during the folk revival by the Louvin Brothers but had long before been a popular Appalachian ballad. However, before even this, “Knoxville Girl” had been brought presumably by Irish immigrants through their version, “Wexford Girl,” which

potentially had roots stretching back even further (Thomson 60). But some other ballads have murkier origins, making it more difficult to discern exactly where the song originated.

The roots of "Rose Connolly" were contested for several years. Otherwise known as "Down in the Willow Garden," this song was attributed for many years to being an Appalachian song that had made its way to Ireland, but scholarship by D.K. Wilgus and others sought out to prove its Irish origins (Kader). Wilgus posits that murdered sweetheart ballads are closely related, with the ballads exerting influence on one another to the extent that makes it difficult to discuss a "single example of the pattern" of murdered girl ballads, which he mentions is found throughout England, Ireland, and North America, particularly in Appalachia (Wilgus 172). Its widespread use further illustrates the worldwide culture of violence against women.

"Omie Wise" is perhaps the most purely American-Appalachian of these ballads, the most studied (Underwood 12), and one of oldest American murder ballads (Polenberg 51). Unfortunately, it is based on the true story of Naomi Wise. Richard H. Underwood in his book, *Crimesong: Some Murder Ballads and Poems Revisited*, dedicates a chapter to the story of Naomi Wise. Likewise, Richard Polenberg does the same in *Hear My Sad Story: The True Tales That Inspired "Stagolee," "John Henry," and Other Traditional American Folk Songs*. Both books focus heavily on the facts behind the case, of which there are few that are truly known for certain, due to colorful tellings of the tale to make the historical figure Naomi Wise more sympathetic (Polenberg 53-54, Underwood 13).

However, while the history of each of these ballads are fascinating, and provide an illuminating background and context, it is the songs themselves and their lyrics that I am most concerned with, and what they say about the region they were commonly found in, as well as how they relate back to al-Shaykh's *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Given the traditional nature of these songs, and their oral passing through history, it is rare to find two recordings that cite the lyrics exactly the same way, due to the oral tradition of ballads. For this reason, I will occasionally use multiple versions of the ballad to illustrate the variety in lyrics.

As stated previously, there is a formula to the murdered girl ballads. There is typically a reason to the lover's actions, even if it is selfish or horrific, such as having grown tired of her, not wanting to marry the woman, or, most commonly, her becoming pregnant. However, "Knoxville Girl" does not possess any of these reasonings, perhaps making it one of the coldest and most disturbing of these songs. The narrator of this ballad is called "Willie" by the Knoxville Girl, while the victim herself remains nameless, illustrating how often the victims of abuse are nameless and forgotten, while the perpetrator is remembered for years to come.

The version of "Knoxville Girl" used throughout this thesis is the version released by the Louvin Brothers in 1959. Within the lyrics, they sing as if they are the narrator, a young man named Willie from Knoxville, Tennessee. Willie has met a young girl, who remains nameless throughout the ballad, and he would visit her every Sunday. One Sunday, when they were a mile away from her home, with him having successfully separated her from those who served as a protection, he takes a stick and begins beating her with it. Although she begs for mercy, he continues to brutally beat her to death, only stopping when the ground was soaked with her blood. He then takes her by her "golden curls" and throws her body into the river. Willie returns home late that night; his mother asks him concernedly why he was covered in blood, to which he replies that he had a bloody nose. He is later taken to jail, and his friends attempt to bail him out, but they lack the monetary means. The song ends with Willie musing on how he will waste the

rest of his life away in that cell, all because he murdered that “Knoxville girl,” whom he claims to have loved, even if his actions say otherwise.

The second verse of “Knoxville Girl” recalls the tale of “The Second Dervish,” as the demon beats the young woman senseless as she begs for mercy. A similar theme is seen in “Knoxville Girl:”

> She fell down on her bended knees for mercy she did cry
> Oh Willie dear, don't kill me here, I'm unprepared to die
> She never spoke another word, I only beat her more
> Until the ground around me within her blood did flow (Louvin Brothers 5-11).

Earlier in the song, the young woman does not know what would happen, as he would visit her “every Sunday evening” (Louvin Brothers 2). Such routine creates a false sense of security, as one would assume that the evening walks were also a part of the routine, even though he is luring her away from her home. Due to his insistence of her never becoming his bride, one may easily infer that a topic of their walks was marriage, as is often the case in murdered girl ballads (Hastie 113). Willie’s murder of the Knoxville Girl is also more brutal than many of the other murders in the murdered girl ballad tradition, as he “picked a stick up off the ground and knocked [her] down” (Louvin Brothers 4), before killing her by brutally beating her, so heavily that her blood soaked the ground around him. The closest to a motive is given at the end of the third verse, that states, “you can never be my bride” (Louvin Brothers 12), implying that he is killing her in order to avoid marrying her, but that still does not explicitly state why he murdered her.

Even as he returns home to Knoxville, where he is discovered by his mother, and goes to bed, little remorse is seen in his actions, although it is mentioned that he "rolled and tumbled the whole night through," he also describes "troubles … like flames of hell around [his] bed," perhaps alluding more to his fear of being discovered than guilt for his actions, much as how he lied to his mother, saying the blood that covered his clothes was due to a bloody nose. It is worth noting that there is a possibility that the case of a bloody nose is true, to some extent, as he "called for … a handkerchief to bind [his] aching head," perhaps due to the Knoxville Girl having fought back against her imminent murder. The song then leaps to Willie's imprisonment, following the murdered girl ballad formula to its conclusion. However, the final line adds to the random violence throughout the ballad, as it states, he murdered her, "the girl [he] loved so well." It causes one to once again question his motive. If he loved her "so well," why did he murder her, let alone in such a brutal fashion?

There is a recurring theme throughout many, if not all, of the murdered girl ballads, where the girl's beauty is described. Daniel A. Cohen writes about this in his article, "The Beautiful Female Murder Victim: Literary Genres and Courtship Practices in the Origins of a Cultural Motif, 1590-1850." In 1836, a New York reporter wrote a vivid description of a "beautiful female corpse," detailing her figure, arms, face, and bust, comparing her to the Venus de Medicis, mentioning that he was "lost in admiration at this extraordinary sight" (Cohen 277). There is a grotesque fascination with the body of a deceased woman, one that continues even today, with incredibly violent films depicting the deaths of the women in them, films often referred to as "torture porn," because there is no sense to or reason for the violence except that it happens and it titillates the viewer. Cohen provides the basic components of this murder of the beautiful woman, stating that these components are "explicitly laid out in that phrase" (278) of

the “beautiful female murder victim.” He includes several more components that are depicted in popular literature, such as that the woman is young and unmarried, and she is most often murdered by a man who is young and unmarried, while the two have some sort of relationship, whether that be romantic or sexual. Further common elements are the “assertions of the early virtue or innocence of the victim, the strong implication that the woman's death was the direct or indirect result of a sexual "fall", and graphic (and occasionally erotic or pornographic) descriptions of the victim” (Cohen 278). This formula he provides of the beautiful female murder victim closely follows that of the murdered girl ballads.

“Down in the Willow Garden,” also known as “Rose Connolly,” is also sung in the first-person point of view of the murderer. He and his “lover” go to the willow garden, and while they sit and talk, courting each other, Rose falls asleep. It is then revealed that the lover had poisoned the wine that she was drinking. After poisoning her, he then stabs her, ensuring her death, and throws her body into the river. He mentions how his father had told him that “money would set him free,” if he would just murder Rose Connolly, implying a transfer of money and the son would be relieved of any obligations (“Down in the Willow Garden” 7-8). Given the formula of the murdered girl ballad and the subtext of obligations, it is easy to infer that Rose was pregnant, and older versions of the ballad confirm this. However, the story does not end well for the murderer. His father sits by his cabin, mourning his son who was hung for his crimes.

This ballad once again follows the formula of the murdered girl ballads, the lover subdues her with poisoned wine. He ensures her death by stabbing her, and then throwing her into the river. The sequence of events feels reminiscent of “The Third Dervish” in *One Thousand and One Nights*, where, after the man murders his wife, he chops her up, and throws her into the river (al-Shaykh 87). While, like many of the ballads, the man is eventually captured and brought

to justice, either by being incarcerated or executed, the second verse brings up an interesting point that is prevalent throughout these ballads: “My father often told me that money would set me free / If I would murder that dear little girl whose name was Rose Connelly” (“Down in the Willow Garden” 7-8). Often, the perpetrator believes that he will not and should not be punished for his crimes. Within this song, it is the murderer’s father who led him to believe that nothing would happen if he were to murder Rose Connolly (Hutson). An older Irish version of the ballad makes it clearer that Connolly was pregnant, and that is what led to her demise (Wilgus). Often these pregnant lovers are murdered because of societal standards. For example, it might be because the two are not married, he is engaged to someone else and his extramarital actions might cost him, having to pay for the child, or he believes that it might cost him social standing, as well as religious reasons, for some.

While the lyrics to “Omie Wise” vary, the story ultimately remains the same, due to its roots being based in history. Naomi Wise is to meet her lover, John Lewis, who had gotten her pregnant. He lures her away from her home under the pretense of giving her money. This is not what happens, as when they arrive at Adam’s Spring, he takes her further away from her home, talking of how they would be married, until they reach deep water. Naomi asks him throughout their journey if he plans to marry her or leave her behind, to which he finally replies that he intends to drown her. She begs for her life, and for the life of her unborn child, claiming that she would leave “as a beggar” and not be his wife if he would just allow them to live. He instead pushes her deeper into the water where she drowns, and he rides away, even as she screams for help. Some versions of the song describe how two boys find her body while fishing, and later send for John. John is sent jail, where neither his friends nor family will bail him out. Other

versions of the song say that John escapes jail and goes to join the army after six months of imprisonment ("Omie Wise" [*Bluegrass Lyrics*]).

As previously mentioned, "Naomi Wise," or, more commonly, "Omie Wise," was based on the real life murder of a young woman named Naomi Wise, largely assumed to be murdered at the hands of her lover Jonathan "John" Lewis, although, historically, the evidence they possessed was largely circumstantial (Polenberg 55) and little is known for certain other than that she was murdered in 1808 (Underwood 13), including if John Lewis was the actual murderer, although he was convicted (Underwood 17). However, the historicity of the tale is not the focus of this argument. Of the ballads selected for this thesis, "Omie Wise" has the most variation between them. Some tell only the tale ["Omie Wise" [*Bluegrass Lyrics*]), while others have a dialogue between Omie and John (Watson), although they still share the same story.

Omie Wise was pregnant, and John Lewis planned to kill her because of that. He asks her to meet him at Adam's Spring, while claiming that he would bring her "money and other fine things" (Doc Watson 4, "Omie Wise" 4). Upon her arrival at the spring, John claims he is going to marry her, however, he is taking her to her doom. Although she begs for her life, and the life of her unborn child, saying she will go and "never be [his] wife" ("Omie Wise" 12, Doc Watson 16), he still murders her. Again, violence lies at the center of the song, as he murders her in horrific detail. In one version, it is said that "he kicked her and choked her and turned her around" to throw her into deep water where she would drown ("Omie Wise" 13). In the version that Doc Watson recorded, it is more romanticized, with it perhaps looking like he might be going to spare her life, as "he kissed her and hugged her" before throwing her into the deep waters to drown (17-18).

It is perhaps the version that Doc Watson recorded that is more unsettling. The details included in Watson's recording are far more disturbing, as in that version, he rides away, even as Omie screams (21). This version details the recovery of Omie's body, by two boys fishing, who then sent for Lewis, who was imprisoned but never made a confession (Watson 24-30).

Throwing the woman into the river happens in each of the ballads, perhaps alluding to another theme. In Christian beliefs, baptism washes away the sins of the baptized, perhaps leading to the conclusion that the murderers thought if they hid their sin in the river, washing it away, they would never be caught and they would not be seen as sinners, and indeed their reactions after the murders, where they never showed any guilt or remorse for their actions, would imply that they believed themselves to be cleansed and free of blame.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

"Sister" Support

Of the six stories examined here, in only one of them does the woman survive. Not only does Shahrazad survive, but she also saves other women from King Shahrayar's bloodlust, including her little sister, Dunyazad. The question arises of why she is the only one to survive.

I conclude that Shahrazad's power is in her storytelling abilities. It is this power that allows her to survive. Her demand to have power over her own story enables her to survive the violence that killed so many before her. The other women in these stories do not tell their stories; in all cases but one, it is the surviving man that tells the story and renders the women passive throughout. The women are not allowed to speak for themselves and shape their own narratives.

Shahrazad clings to her sister, her support, and refuses to let her go. She demands that control over the situation, refuses to relinquish it. Unfortunately, the same is not true for the other women in these tales. Each of the murder ballads here mentions how the murderer took the victim away from her home and from the presence of others, isolating her, especially from other women. The women in "The Second Dervish" and "The Third Dervish" are isolated and removed from the company of other supportive women. Lured away from the support of their "sisters," these women become vulnerable and easier to exploit and destroy.

It is not simply the presence of another woman within the story that saves the victim, however. In both "Knoxville Girl" and "The Second Dervish," other female characters are mentioned, but within either of them, none of these women interact with the victim. In "Knoxville Girl," the murderer, Willie, is given support while his victim is not. His mother supports him, while he removed his victim from her support system, from the women that might

have protected her. Willie does not tell his mother what he has done to the young girl, instead lying about the blood on his clothes. Perhaps, had she known what her son was planning, she might have been able to save the girl from her son.

Hastie mentions that in these ballads, the families of the victim are often non-existent (113). Throughout the ballads, the victim's families are not mentioned in any of them. While it is mentioned that the women are lured away from their homes, no family members, let alone women, or women who would give her the "sister support" that could save her, are present.

This is also seen in *One Thousand and One Nights* in the Second and Third Dervishes. In "The Second Dervish," the wife of the demon is mentioned, but she never appears. Even when the woman is hijacked by the demon on her wedding day, no females are mentioned. Her captor keeps her separate from all, but especially from women, as he refuses to let his wife know about the woman he has taken. When the woman finally does get a person around, someone for support, it is a man, a "weeping man" whose rash actions ultimately end in her death. I posit that it would have been different if the person who had found her had been a supportive sister and that the two would have likely found a way to escape. While in "The Third Dervish," the woman may be happily married, she lacks sister support. She has been removed from her mother, has no daughter, and no other female support is mentioned. The only other support she would have had was her mother in law, who is now dead. The husband talks of how devastated the mother-in-law would have been to discover what her son had done to his wife. Her presence, had she not already passed away, could have very well saved her beloved daughter-in-law. It is another "weeping man" whose obsession with revenge and rash actions that causes the death of an innocent woman.

Shahrazad's insistence on keeping her sister near, keeping her support near, is a large part of what enables her to survive. Her support goes along hand in hand with Shahrazad's control over the narrative, as her sister supports her through it and encourages her to continue, even when it might feel easier to give up. The support that women provide to other women is a vital aspect of life, which also saves lives. "Sister" support enables women to survive the violence that the world consistently throws at them and allows them to take back control of the narrative so they may tell their own story.

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