Animals, Sex and the Orient: a feminist retelling of the Arabian Nights

Helen Francesca Hopcroft BFA (University of Tasmania), MA (Royal College of Art)

Thesis submitted for the award of a Doctorate of Philosophy (English), August 2016.
The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository, unless an Embargo has been approved for a determined period, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.
Acknowledgements

Various humans and non-human animals assisted during the writing of this thesis. I would specifically like to thank Dr. Caroline Webb for her wise supervision; Pamela Poulson for her careful reading; Bev Seiver, Gretchen and Jules Darras, Wendy and Brian Chantler for babysitting; Rosemary Field for inspiration and entertainment; my colleague Dr. Lil Hayes for her encouragement and my boss, Keith Foggett, for his forbearance; Nicola Hodder for permission to use her haiku; finally, Leroy, Jasper, Ash, Raspberry, Weedy and Greedy also played their part.
To Sophie
Contents

Part I: Exegesis

Introduction: Stories about Stories pp. 7-22

Chapter one: The Power of the Imagination pp. 23-47

Chapter two: Truth and Lies pp. 48-71

Chapter three: Beautiful Beasts pp. 72-103

Conclusion: Lessons Wrapped in Fur pp. 104-112

Works Cited pp. 115-123

Part II: Artefact

Novella pp. 123-198
Animals, Sex and the Orient: a feminist retelling of the Arabian Nights

This exegesis explores contemporary retellings of the Arabian Nights (the Nights). This collection was first translated for European audiences in 1704, and subsequently became something of a ubiquitous cultural icon in the West, particularly in nineteenth-century England. On the basis of texts influenced by the Nights, such as Vathek (1786) by William Beckford, Arabian Nights and Days (1979) by Naguib Mahfouz, Nights at the Circus (1984) by Angela Carter and When Dreams Travel (2003) by Githa Hariharan, this exegesis argues that there is a literary tradition of using the collection, and the frame story in particular, as a platform from which to critique power. The nature and scope of this critique has changed over time: texts from the nineteenth century have tended to consider the moral consequences of colonialism, while those in the twentieth and current century are generally using the Nights as a vehicle to explore feminist, ecological and postcolonial issues.

In addition to the exegesis, this thesis includes a novella length piece of creative writing that speaks to this tradition, specifically by using the Nights to critique male power over women, and female complicity in this process; references to human power over animals are also frequently embedded in the text. The novella, an eroticised reimagining of the Nights, is narrated in the first person by Scheherazade and includes a number of individual stories that reference the tropes of fairy tale and traditional British children’s literature. Thematically, the novella challenges what Val Plumwood has called the “the lower value accorded the underside, the body, the senses, emotion, the imagination, the animal, the feminine and nature” (Feminism 123). By conflating Scheherazade’s storytelling with her embodiment, it introduces the concept of ‘skin narratives’ – or sexual performances - and suggests that these play an important role in her perception of empowerment. This focus on the body is meaningful primarily because it accepts embodiment as the ultimate source of all culture and cognition, thus reversing a fundamental Western binary. The novella suggests that if stories emerge from bodies, and both are conceived as having liberatory potential, then storytelling is a type of imaginative becoming that invites agency into our material lives.