

The Mediterranean Seminar
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Shahrazad's Listening Cure

Avicenna's Brain, the *Qiyān*, and the Psychological Foundations of Shahrazad's Listening Cure in the
Arabian Nights

Shahrazad, the storyteller of *The Arabian Nights*, is perhaps the most famous literary figure to engage the question of emotion in the medieval Islamic Mediterranean world, and for her this engagement is a matter of life and death. By the time she faces king Shahriyar on their wedding night, the king has already murdered hundreds of wives, and there is no end in sight. Shahrazad's plan to intervene in the king's violent emotional crisis is well-known: she is going to tell him a series of stories. However, scholars have not yet explored the contemporaneous psychological foundations of this plan. In my paper, which is the fourth chapter of my dissertation, I recast the central question of emotion in *The Arabian Nights* by asking, not how we, but how Shahrazad herself might have understand the mechanics of her celebrated "listening cure." In other words, putting to the side modern assumptions about emotions and the mind I ask a simple question about this key moment in Mediterranean literary history: Is there any reason that Shahrazad thinks her plan might actually work?

Naturally, what many people remember about *The Arabian Nights* are the stories that Shahrazad tells, but she herself also has a story, one which has its roots, not in the fantasies of Orientalism, but in a discernible historical situation, intimately bound up with the history of emotion in the 9th to 12th-century medieval Islamic Mediterranean. In the context of the 'Abbāsīd translation movement that engaged classical Greek, Latin, Persian, and Indian theories of mind, medicine, and body, culminating in the magisterial, 11th-century Arabic syntheses of Avicenna, Shahrazad herself is a representative of a particular historical figure—the *Qiyān*, a class of enslaved women distinguished by their high level of education. Indeed, the first thing we learn about Shahrazad is that she has mastered philosophy and medicine. In the medieval Islamic curriculum of knowledge, philosophy and medicine are the two cornerstones of emotional theory, the former representing the cognitive dimension of emotion, and the latter the embodied dimension. In order to get at the kind of psychological model that Shahrazad might actually have had in mind, in the course of my analysis I introduce the most important cognitive model to emerge from the medieval Islamic world—Avicenna's theory of the "inner senses" (*al-ḥawāss al-bāṭinah*, *sensus interiores*), as well as the contemporaneous medical notion of "distemperament." In my analysis I draw on Deborah Black's work on Avicenna's psychological theory, and I argue that there are plausible, contemporaneous, psychological foundations for Shahrazad's "listening cure."