

by FRED INGLIS

Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights

by Marina Warner

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Marina Warner is surely the most complete and celebrated internationalist in the humanities departments of British universities. Brought up in Cairo, polyglot of five languages, grandchild of Plum Warner, the Ur-ancestor of English cricket, occasional novelist and author of nearly thirty books, she is almost as rare a bird as is to be found in the thousands of pages of her studies in myth, faery, folktales, as well as the complex dynasties of paintings, prints, cartoons and movies which have been born of them.

Her classic histories of Mariolatry and St Joan, oblique products of her devoutly catholic childhood, brought her swift and justified fame. Her study of the interminable lineage of male monsters and their revolting *resumés*, *No Go the Bogeyman*, bore compelling witness not only to the toughness of her sensibility (some of the horror stories she retells with due objectivity and a touch of relish are horrible, all right) but also to her omnivorous imagination, let alone her grasp of giant topics.

This new book, *Stranger Magic*, is much more, of course, than a gift to the dismaying crowds of New Age rejectionists of canonical science and their superstitious return to the purported wisdom of the folk. For it has been the great achievement of a century's work in anthropology to learn the truth of R G Collingwood's remark that "to the educated man as such there is no pleasanter kind of self-flattery than the doctrine that folklore, the one cultural possession of the illiterate, is merely their perversion of what his own class has bestowed on them".

Marina Warner is a stout defender of just that cultural possession. It is then a paradox, though one she carries off with perfect poise, that this is a book about books, hundreds of them, and all of them books collecting, reporting, retelling, revising, parodying, celebrating, wallowing in the uses of literacy on the part of the illiterate.

Not surprisingly, such a history commits her to a repetitiousness which sometimes threatens to swamp the book. For her subject is vast enough even to match her ambition. It is to pursue into their great tradition the tales of the thousand and one Arabian nights as told by

Shahrazad (Warner's orthography) during the three-year sentence of death pronounced by her husband, and nightly postponed by a new bedtime story (in the end she narrates her way out of ritual decapitation).

There is by definition no original text for *The Arabian Nights*, but we may be sure that Warner has her hands on all the earliest versions in print with their copious illustrations, as well as spotting with her keen, infallible eye echoes of the original fables in the Koran and the Old Testament, in the rich mythography around King Solomon, in Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Voltaire, Mozart, Goethe ... the list of the mighty writers whose imaginations were lit by Shahrazad's many inventions fills any Pantheon and comes bang up to the cinema screen with Robbie Williams's movie of Aladdin and the great Michael Powell's 1940 version of *The Thief of Baghdad*.

The mere business of assembling her enormous multitude commits Warner to her repetitions, and one cannot fairly expostulate at this. Nonetheless, at the umpteenth appearance of the bottle, the djinn, the beautiful damsel, the sumptuous carpet, the desert sands, the conversational pots and pans, the cruel tyrant, the voice from the sky, anyone raised on the normal English-speaking literary diet of a realist aesthetic and a dependable connection between cause and effect has to discover the same reserves of patience as the amazing Professor Warner.

At the same time however, our Anglophone realist cannot surely so have lost touch with a romantic childhood that the mere reiteration of magic symbolism does not once more run thrillingly off the tongue. The very piles of jewellery and precious stones – amethyst, emerald, porphyry, silver, crystal, carnelian, let alone the white silk pantaloons, the jewelled slippers, the cataracts of long black hair – are set deep in the collective imagination and throb in Warner's pages with all their old power.

It was Theodor Adorno who, in a marvellous note in *Minima Moralia*, recalled that gold and precious stones were once revered because their radiance was thought to be inherent not reflective; whatever was touched by their light came under their influence. "As radiant things gave up their magic claims," Adorno added, "they become promises of a happiness cured of domination over nature. This is the primeval history of luxury, that has migrated into the meaning of all art."

This is the light the book needs to shine over the great piles of its stories. Behind Warner of course stands the massive rectitude of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. But she is at pains to

qualify and disperse Said's stern polemic and recover the delightfulness of the storyteller's art. She hasn't, however, found the key which, like Adorno's insight, would unlock the innumerable puzzles of her so very repetitious and dark materials.

Baffled as to interpretation and properly averse to theoretic moralising, Warner is left with a very long chronology. In her very interesting chapter 'Money Talks', for instance, she decodes the long history carried by the design of the dollar bill and its Solomonic hieroglyphs, but the key she never picks up is Keynes's, when he writes in the *General Theory* that "the importance of money essentially flows from its being a link between the present and the future". This is the source of its undoubtedly magical powers, and explains in Keynes's offhand dictum the reason why all those chests and coffers spill their great cascades of coins over the caves and carpets of the 1001 nights.

Without a key one is just left, in both senses, wondering, and Warner is excellent on wonder. She resists, naturally, any easy Enlightenment distinction between science and magic. Epistemology is shaped out of the methods and ideas which preceded it. Scientific concepts are necessarily formed by slow heat in a crucible baked by ancient, even dead principles of inquiry. But at the present moment of universal genealogising, we could have done with a lot more genealogy – not of sources, she is utterly complete on sources, but of that imaginative alchemy which turns old tales to new, imaginative purpose.

She tells us exactly how, for instance, William Beckford, Horace Walpole and 'Monk' Lewis so shared out their Gothic recipes and Islamic parodies to make an Orientalist trilogy. Her chronicle is attractively sociable in its storymaking, and her eye for vivid detail mesmerising. The trouble is that she leaves her readers crying out for the meaning she finds in it all; then she vanishes through the shimmering curtains of *heteroglossia*. All she leaves behind is the enigmatic image of a doe she once encountered at Fonthill, near Bath, Beckford's Gothic resting-place.

In her closing pages the grave and bearded visage of Freud appears, and the reader is braced for theoretic explanation at last. But, characteristically, Warner tells us in intimate detail the tale of a beautiful rug on the analyst's couch, a prize item in Freud's rug collection. She is permitted to touch it by the curator. "It is unexpectedly soft and silky". Warner turns away from the rug to Henry James's teasing about "the figure in the carpet", then to Wittgenstein, of all people. The End.