Clio 43:3 2014

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Scheherazade in the Western Palace: Martin Amis's *The Pregnant Widow*

> The death of the contemporary forms of social order ought to gladden rather than trouble the soul. But what is frightening is that the departing world leaves behind it not an heir, but a *pregnant widow*. Between the death of one and the birth of the other much water will flow by, a long night of chaos and desolation will pass.[1]

To portray feminism as an unfinished project in twenty-first-century England, *The Pregnant Widow* (2010) adopts a nonlinear and nonprogressive view of time, and travels back and forth between the medieval Islamic setting of *The Arabian Nights* (first English edition, 1706), the 1970s sexual revolution, and its effects in 2010. Past, present, and future merge in the novel to narrate the failure of the sexual revolution through Scheherazade, who is transformed from a coy storyteller princess to a young and sexually independent British blonde in a family-owned castle in Italy. The Russian writer Alexander Herzen, in the context of the French Revolution (1789–99), uses the term "pregnant widow" to refer to a purgatory state between two social orders, and it is through Scheherazade that the novel portrays British women's problematic position between the ideals of feminine virtue and the manifestos on female sexual desire. The sexual manifestos that preach extramarital sex inspire sexual freedom among Martin Amis's twenty-year-old British characters—Scheherazade, Lily, and Keith Nearing—students of mathematics, law, and English

1. Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Shore*, in *From the Other Shore, and the Russian People and Socialism: An Open Letter to Jules Michelet*, trans. Moura Budberg (1956; n.d.: Murray Altheim, 2011), 124, http://altheim.com/lit/herzen-ftos.html.

literature at the University of London. The characters take "the strange ride with the pregnant widow" as they hope to break from Victorian morality by having polyamorous relationships in Scheherazade's uncle's castle in Italy.[2] The devoted princess to King Shahriyar in the *Nights* emerges as a half-naked blonde, who looks for a one-night-stand; and Lily acts like a boy for an androgynous identity. The Oriental princess, who tells stories every night to save her life and to be happily married with the Sultan, insists in Amis's novel that she does not want love but sex.

The novel questions the Western concept of history as a gradual movement forward in time by suggesting that, although the 1970s was "pregnant" to changing sexual politics, many British women did not have sexual freedom. History seems not progressive but stagnant and unchanging as cultural differences between the medieval and twentieth-century Scheherazade collapse with the latter's marriage with four children. Scheherazade is in what Herzen calls a chaotic purgatory state as she claims to prefer sex to romance, but saves herself for marriage. In his review of *The Pregnant Widow*, Alex Sorondo finds it ironic that there "isn't a whole lot of actual sex going on" in a novel on sexual revolution.[3] Yet it is precisely the absence of sex in the narrative that shows how women were sexually liberated in theory, but not in practice. Scheherazade's virginity until marriage illustrates Kate Millett's argument that sexual revolution did not liberate all women from the ideals of feminine virtue.[4] The pale face of the married Scheherazade, at the end of the novel, shows that feminism is only "halfway through its second trimester,"[5] as Amis writes, and "a long night of chaos and desolation will pass"[6] before women free themselves from their domestic roles. He agrees with Herzen that revolution is "a churning process that goes on for a long time before the baby is born. It's not the instant replacement of

2. Martin Amis, *The Pregnant Widow* (London: Vintage, 2011), 393. Hereafter cited as *Pregnant Widow*.

3. Alex Sorondo, review of *The Pregnant Widow*, by Martin Amis, *Examiner.com*, July 1, 2012, http://exm.nr/1tZX5ZK (accessed May 1, 2013).

4. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, (London: Sphere Books, 1971).

5. "Martin Amis: You Ask the Questions," *The Independent*, January 15, 2007, http://ind.pn/Wn4Vhf (accessed May 5, 2013).

6. Herzen, From the Other Shore, 124.

one order by another."[7] The 1970s setting for the 2010 novel suggests that, despite the manifestos on "women's carnal appetites" (135), many twenty-first-century British women's sexual conducts are still regulated.

The failure of the sexual revolution to grant women sexual freedom, in *The Pregnant Widow*, suggests that Amis is not a misogynist, as many critics have claimed, but a writer who is engaged with sexual politics. Associating the author with his characters, Adam Mars-Jones states that Amis "defends the sexual status quo;"[8] and Laura Doan writes that Amis stays "within the patriarchal gender boundaries by upholding the pattern of dominance and submission."[9] Sara Mills concludes that Amis is "a quintessentially sexist writer" because "women are often portrayed as passive and as acted upon by a male agent"[10] in *London Fields* (1989), which was not included in the shortlist for the Booker Prize "because of its alleged sexism."[11] Even as James Diedrick defends Amis against the charges of misogyny, he cannot distinguish between "satirized sexism" and "authorial antifeminism" in his novels.[12] In response to author-centered criticism on Amis's work, Susan Brook states that Amis represents gender identity as being "fictional and unstable,"[13] and Emma Parker rightly argues that he uses sexist stereotypes "to counter the normalization of patriarchal ideology that makes sexism invisible."[14] Keith's admiration of

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7. Ed Black, "Martin Amis: How the Sexual Revolution Helped Destroy My Sister," *London Evening Standard*, November 20, 2009, http://bit.ly/1p2vuSq (accessed May 1, 2013).

8. Adam Mars-Jones, *Venus Envy*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), qtd. in Emma Parker, "Money Makes the Man: Gender and Sexuality in Martin Amis's *Money*," in *Martin Amis: Postmodernism and Beyond*, ed. Gavin Keulks (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2006), 55–71, 56.

9. Laura L. Doan, "'Sexy Greedy *Is* the Late Eighties': Power Systems in Amis's *Money* and Churchill's *Serious Money*," *Minnesota Review* 34/35 (1990): 78.

10. Sara Mills, "Working With Sexism: What Can Feminist Text Analysis Do?," in *Twentieth-Century Fiction: From Text to Context*, ed. Peter Verdonk and Jean Jacques Weber (London: Routledge, 1995), 206–220, 207.

11. Brian Finney, *Martin Amis* (London: Routledge, 2008), 97.

12. James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 2nd ed. (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2004), 20.

13. Susan Brook, "The Female Form, Sublimation, and Nicola Six," in *Martin Amis: Postmodernism and Beyond*, ed. Gavin Keulks (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2006), 87–101, 89.

14.Parker, "Money Makes the Man," 60.

Scheherazade's large "glorious breasts," for example, does not endorse sexual stereotypes, but lays bare the bitter truth that women are still treated as sexual objects in twenty-first-century England.

Amis rejects the accusations of sexism, and even claims that *The Pregnant Widow* is "a very feminist book" (qtd. in Black). He proves his feminism by not narrating "History" with a capital H. Instead, he acknowledges the feminist critics' active part in the sexual revolution by listing their controversial books on female sexuality. The narrator comments that back to back publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Anne Koedt's "The Myth of Vaginal Orgasm" (1968), and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) inspired free love among women (*Pregnant Widow*, 59–60). *The Pregnant Widow* is a feminist book that blends history with the story of his sister to show how women suffered the most during "the sexual revolution's interregnum."[15] Among women who could not adapt to the changing sexual morality was his sister, Sally Amis, who, like Keith's sister, Violet, in the novel, died of alcoholism and depression in 2000 at the age of forty-six. When commitment-free sex was popular in the 1970s, Sally's marriage lasted only for a few months, and she gave her daughter, "conceived after a one-night stand," up for adoption (Black). Amis holds the revolution partially responsible for her tragic end: "She was pathologically promiscuous. . . . I think what she was doing was seeking protection from men, but it went the other way, she was often beaten up, abused and she simply used herself up. . . . she was one of the most spectacular victims of the revolution" (Black). While lamenting Sally's death by writing about her in his autofictional novel, Amis also shows how women paid the price of the manifestos that separated sex from emotion. His historical analysis of the changing concepts of sex and female roles since the revolution counters the claims of sexism.

Focusing on female emancipation, in *The Pregnant Widow*, Amis also responds to the accusations of being an Islamophobe by challenging cultural boundaries between Christianity and Islam by situating a female character with an Islamic origin in twentieth-century Europe. Amis identifies himself not as an Islamophobe, but "an anti-Islamist, because a phobia is an irrational fear, and it is not irrational to fear something that says

15. Brian Finney, "Life and Other Genres: Martin Amis's *The Pregnant Widow*," *personal university webpage*, n.d., http://bit.ly/Wn53NW (accessed June 30, 2013).

it wants to kill you."[16] His collection of essays on September 11, in *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom* (2008), justifies Western fear of Islam as an irrational, decadent, and destructive religion.[17] He also comments in an interview that Islam does not endorse human rights: "The temptations of modernity and equality, or near equality, equality as a goal—have not begun to surface. Islam's younger than Christianity and it's going through its inquisitorial phase."[18] The narrator of *The Pregnant Widow* shares Amis's belief that Muslim countries are backward: When Keith reads about the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the narrator notes that it is not a fight between two countries, but "between different centuries" (52). The text as a whole, however, questions "The Time War" between the two religions, and between East and West, as both the medieval Arabian princess and the twentieth-century British Scheherazade live up to the ideals of feminine virtue. An agnostic, Amis is critical of all religions that support patriarchal gender roles: *The Second Plane* calls Islamists "woman-haters,"[19] and *The Pregnant Widow* shows how Christian morality regulates women's sexual conduct. "The rise of women will take about a century, I think, to be complete,"[20] Amis states and the following three sections demonstrate how different centuries blend and clash in the novel to show how traditional female roles have not changed much since the medieval Islamic world of Scheherazade.

"Art-Like" Scheherazade in "Painterly Italy": Fairy-Tale Setting of the Sexual Revolution

The boundaries between the medieval Oriental past and modern Europe fall apart as Amis chooses a Western setting, a village in Campania (a region in southern Italy), that evokes the world of fairy tales. The orientalized setting of Italy itself

16. Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, "Martin Amis and the War for Cliché," in *New Atheist: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11* (London: Continuum, 2010), 36–56, 43.

17. Bradley and Tate, *"Martin Amis and the War for Cliché,"* 41.

18. Alex Bilmes, "Martin Amis Is Not a Jerk," *Gentlemen's Quarterly (UK)*, April 4, 2011, http://bit.ly/1sxWDjE (accessed May 1, 2013).

19. Martin Amis, *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom* (London: Vintage, 2009), 19.

20. "Martin Amis: The Prospect Interview," by Tom Chatfield, *Prospect*, February 1, 2010, http://bit.ly/UfMVnj (accessed April 16, 2014).

suggests that the revolution is a fairy-tale that happened "once upon a time" and has no historical reality. With its dungeon floor, battlements, towers, terraces, a pentagonal library, and "the baronial banqueting hall" (30), Scheherazade's thirty-year-old uncle, Jorquil's castle on a mountainside is a perfect fairytale-like setting for the characters to escape from their college life in London and spend a "hot, endless, and erotically decisive summer" (9). In order to show the continuity between medieval and twentieth-century Europe, the novel portrays Europe as a land of castles rather than a technologically advanced setting with modern buildings. While Keith remarks that Scheherazade is "from another world" (21), that of the *Nights* with magical lanterns, harem women, and Aladdin's lamp (21);[21] the novel's orientalized Italian setting breaks his divisions between Eastern and Western "worlds." The novel shatters the myth of the progressive West as the static, unchanging, and artificial quality of the setting undermines the power of sexual revolution to bring any social change.

Scheherazade looks "more painterly" "in painterly Italy" with a "superstitious castle, the fierce mountain, the raw blue sky" (144), Keith remarks, and his comparison of Scheherazade to art indicates how women continue to be associated with passivity and silence during the sexual revolution. When Keith looks at Scheherazade with eyes of love, the narrator remarks:

> And what do they see, those eyes? They see the equivalent of a work of art, they see wit and talent and gripping complication; for minutes on end he believed himself to be in a private screening room, bearing witness to a first performance of unforgettable spontaneity. Behind the scenes of this motion picture, the director, a troubled genius (and probably Italian), would be wisely sleeping with his great discovery. Of course he was. Look how he lit her. You could tell. (67)

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21. Here I rely on Edward Said's definition of Orientalism as the "collection of dreams, images, and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line." *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 73. He examines how the so-called savage, barbaric, and fantastic East is set as a foil to the civilized West in the texts of nineteenth-century British writers, such as William Thackeray, William Blake, and Lord Byron. Timothy Mitchell concurs with Said that Orientalism is about "a series of absolute differences according to which the Oriental could be understood as the negative of the European." *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 166. Amis's characters also use Orientalist stereotypes: Lily thinks "Arabs are lazy" (256), and Whittaker calls Arab men "butchers" (147).

Scheherazade's wit and talent, which Keith finds impressive, are never reflected in the novel. The narrator briefly mentions that she attended marches and rallies, but he never explains her political stand. Scheherazade is represented not as a complex character, but as a passive object that is given life by an Italian film director, who "lit her" by sleeping with her (67). Her rich Italian admirer, Adriano, too, falls in love with her because "Scheherazade was a work of art," which suggests that she is a work of creation and not a creator, like the director (365). In granting her the beautiful stasis of art, both the narrator and the male characters treat her as a lifeless entity. The comparison of both Italy and Scheherazade to artworks also resonates with the novel's treatment of the history of sexual politics as being stagnant and unchanging. Scheherazade's resemblance to the static world of art foreshadows the fact that the coy medieval princess of the *Nights* will not be transformed into a sexually independent woman in the twentieth century.

Scheherazade's Alleged Sexual Transformation

The time that has passed between the Middle Ages and the 1970s is not enough for Scheherazade's rebirth as a sexually free woman. "Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? . . . If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one,"[22] Walter Benjamin writes, and the novel emphasizes the continuity in time not only with its medieval setting, but also with its allusions to literary texts from the seventeenth century to the present. References to Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and Jane Austen's novels bridge historical gaps between different literary periods and also suggest that romantic heterosexual narratives and traditional gender roles are intact. The text highlights the power of literary tradition that haunts Amis's characters, who still hold on to Victorian morality despite their enthusiasm for the sexual revolution. The narrator's comparison of Scheherazade to Austen's domestic characters and Keith to Dracula implies that nineteenth-century association of femininity with beauty and chastity, and

22. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Others (Cambridge: Belknap, 2003), 299–398, 390.

masculinity with activity and power are still prevalent. The intertextual narrative that brings together the famous virtuous female protagonists both in *The Arabian Nights* and in European texts also problematizes the enlightened image of European over Muslim women.

The world of fiction within fiction itself highlights the fictionality of Scheherazade's sexual transformation. In fact, her discovery of her animalistic instincts for sex is limited to her dream, in which she turns into to a cockroach just like Franz Kafka's character, Gregor Samsa, in *Metamorphosis*. The narrator states: "Scheherazade awoke one morning from troubled dreams to find herself changed in her bed into a . . . According to the famous story, of course, Gregor Samsa . . . transformed into *an enormous insect*, or alternatively *a giant bug*, or alternatively—and this was the best translation, Keith felt sure—*a monstrous vermin*. In Scheherazade's case, the metamorphosis was a radical ascension" (22). Scheherazade's dream of metamorphosis implies that she is at the verge of a major physical change, which according to the narrator, would be her loss of virginity: "an *animal birthday*: an animal birthday is when your body *happens* to you" (64). Her rebirth, however, is not about her first sexual intercourse, but her transformation into a roach, "a monstrous vermin," which Gregor Samsa's family wants to get rid of in Kafka's novel. Lily comments that even though Scheherazade's gradual change from a shy schoolgirl to a woman obsessed by sex is a "radical ascension," she is still sexually "unawakened" and is not even aware of her physical beauty (198). By italicizing the words, such as insect, bug, and vermin, the narrator suggests the futility of twentieth-century Scheherazade's metamorphosis that does not go beyond the change of her physical appearance, which for Amis, had never "been so important until the sexual revolution."[23]

In fact, Scheherazade's alleged sexual transformation starts with her outfit as Amis unveils the Muslim princess of the *Nights* with a headscarf or a veil, a black cotton fabric that covers the female body from head to ankle. The novel questions Western perception of Islamic headscarf as the symbol of female oppression by showing how the male gaze objectifies both the Arabian and the unveiled Scheherazade. Richard Burton, who translated the text from Arabic into English in the nineteenth

23. Bilmes, "Martin Amis is Not a Jerk."

century, "was more insistent on emphasizing the erotic and bawdy aspects of the *Nights*," and it was the text's "exotic appeal" that attracted Western readers to Scheherazade's stories that originated from Indian, Arabic, and Persian cultures.[24] As the Arabian Scheherazade is often regarded as an exotic princess, her twentieth-century counterpart becomes a sex object for Keith and his homosexual friend, Whittaker:

> "Scheherazade, in general, is absolutely glorious. But let's face it. It's her breasts."
>
> " . . . So you understand about Scheherazade's breasts."
>
> "I like to think so. I paint after all. And it's not the size, is it. It's almost despite the size. On that wandlike frame." (18)

The text evades a simple association between modernity and Westernization as Scheherazade's rebirth as a British woman with Western clothes does not free her from the masculine gaze. While questioning "the naturalness of heterosexuality,"[25] the text also shows how Whittaker and his boyfriend, Amen, too, participate in the patriarchal gaze that objectifies women. They focus on her body to discuss their sexual preferences: Amen "had a very bad reaction" to her breasts; and Whittaker compares her breasts to an arse, which can be "an inducement to having sex face to face" (18). The objectifying male gaze, in this instance, does not make Amis a misogynist, but a writer who questions the progress in gender politics in Europe.

The differences between the medieval and twentieth-century Scheherazade are further bridged as the latter is still taken in by fairy tales, which often encourage women to wait for their prince charming. At first glance, the image of the single Scheherazade with many suitors seems more liberating than her Muslim counterpart with a ruthless husband, who, after the infidelity of his queen, espouses a different maiden each day only to kill her the morning after their wedding. However, the fact that she is being chased by Keith and Adriano demonstrates how she submits to female roles of passivity and expects men to be active in romantic relationships. It is Scheherazade of the *Nights* who surpasses her subordinate role in marriage by arousing King Shahriyar's interest with her bedtime stories, which she deliberately cuts off at their most intriguing point and

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24. Jack Zipes, "The Splendor of the Arabian Nights," *When Dreams Come True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Literary Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 49–61, 53.

25. Parker, "Money Makes the Man," 63.

saves the rest for the following night. With her cunning plan to tell endless stories, she tames her murderer husband's rage against women, wins his love and trust, and saves herself from being executed. The princess is a storyteller, planner, and doer, while her twentieth-century version, just like many traditional fairy-tale characters, passively waits for men to win her heart.

Ironically, the Oriental Scheherazade, who educates her husband, seems more of a feminist than her British counterpart, who tells "a bedtime story" to condemn her uncle's girlfriend, Gloria, for not being virtuous. She takes pleasure in shattering Gloria's Catholic and ladylike image by revealing her secret night of sex and drugs at the party of a sex tycoon (61): "'Sexual disgrace,' said Scheherazade with a greedy look as her teeth caught the light. 'And I was *there*'" (57). Scheherazade was at the party only as a passive observer, and her "greedy look" suggests that she is jealous of Gloria's liberty to dance and flirt with men. Gloria was drunk enough to swim bottomless and to almost drown in a Jacuzzi and was later found locked in a bathroom with cocaine, making out with a stranger. According to Alex Bilmes, Gloria "represents the future of sex, the violence of porn," and it is through Gloria that Amis criticizes sexual revolution that "separate[s] sex and emotion."[26] Instead of being concerned for Gloria's drug use and health, her friends simply find her morally corrupt and agree that her wild night does not suit a woman who is "practically engaged" to Scheherazade's uncle, Jorquil. Excited with Gloria's "day of shame," Keith says to Scheherazade: "I hope you'll tell me many more stories like that" (62). Scheherazade's eagerness in sharing Gloria's fall from virtue shows how twentieth-century British women become agents of patriarchy by condemning those who fail to live up to the ideals of feminine conduct.

As the British Scheherazade endorses Victorian ideals of feminine virtue in her stories, Keith cannot practice the sexual manifestos he preaches and open his heart to Scheherazade. The sexual revolution does not even liberate men, like Keith, who is caricaturized as Don Quixote, a knight who is lost in his illusions: "Don Quixote, talking of his imaginary girlfriend, Dulcinea del Toboso, told Sancho Panza, *I paint her in my fancy, according to my wish*. Keith had done too much of this with Scheherazade, and made her into someone above his reach to

26. Bilmes, "Martin Amis Is Not a Jerk."

know. She would have to come down, to condescend, in his imagination" (148). As Don Quixote makes up a girlfriend, Keith imagines that Scheherazade secretly flirts with him. The shared bathroom between their bedrooms in the castle is a major source of fantasy for Keith, who likes to hear Scheherazade shower and thinks of her lips. He becomes hopeful when she forgets to lock the bathroom door and appears in her underwear, and when she puts her head on his shoulder while sleeping in the car. While comparing Keith to the fantasist Don Quixote, the narrator also supports Keith's reading of Scheherazade's actions as signs of flirting by commenting that, when she woke up in the car, she "glanced up at him through her lashes with her unreadably generous smile . . . And it all began again, her arm against his arm, her thigh against his thigh" (42). Ironically, their physical contact is limited to Scheherazade's sleep time, and just like many Victorian novels that Keith reads, the text does not fulfill the readers' anticipation for a sex scene between the two protagonists.

The power of Victorian literature in the construction of gender roles is evident as Keith, despite the sexual manifestos on gender equality, pretends to be Dracula and gives Scheherazade the role of his praying victim. He plays the role of a vampire who is about to suck her blood: "he was moving in on her, and she was backing off and even half sat herself on the curved lid of a wooden trunk, and their faces were level, eye to eye and breadth to breath. And now they were given a ticket of entry to another genre" (164). Scheherazade also pretends to be a coy Victorian woman and playfully retreats to avoid the vampire's bite. Although Keith succeeds in being violent and powerful with hands "vampirically raised and tensed" (164) in their role-play, he remains passive in his relationship with Scheherazade. According to the narrator, Keith could have taken her to the bedroom if he could say: "*Count Dracula would want your throat, your neck. But I—I want your mouth, your lips*" (165). Caught up in the role play, Scheherazade too wanted to kiss Dracula:

> "The other night—why didn't the count kiss me the other night?"
> "The count?"
> "Count Dracula."
> No, don't die—please don't die. He waited. "The count wanted to kiss you, . . . He very much wanted to." (203)

Keith's desire to be as powerful, rich, aristocratic, and dominant as Dracula shows how Victorian ideals of masculinity haunt twentieth-century British men. Ironically, it is not Keith, a college student with a working class background, but Dracula who Scheherazade wants to kiss. Her fantasy of being bitten by a vampire also shows how she is attracted to masculine traits of strength and omnipotence, and wants to play the subordinate role in a relationship.

Despite being caught up in the role-play, Scheherazade does not long for the spiritual and passionate bonding between Dracula and Mina in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, but for sex. While Keith imagines Scheherazade as the mother of his children, she asks Keith to suppress his feelings for her and have a one-night-stand in the maid's room, which is beyond his girlfriend Lily's reach: "I don't want love. I just want a fuck," Scheherazade says, and the narrator comments, "Keith thought he might have to be sick" (204). The text subverts the ideals of feminine virtue by placing the word "fuck" into the mouth of a character who shares her name with the Muslim Arabian princess. Ironically, while making fun of the virgin Victorian female characters, Keith is disgusted with Scheherazade's idea of having sex without any commitment. "But it was love that was the trouble. Because that was what he [Keith] had, and that was what she didn't want," the narrator comments (110). The text reverses gender roles as the emotional and fragile male characters fall in love with a heroine who does not want romance: "Adriano's always on about love. And I don't want all that. He'd've been much better off just making a tactful little pass" (105). She is sexually frustrated because they only kiss. Scheherazade hopes to give up her role as the coy princess of the *Nights* by asking for casual sex and by not treating Keith or Adriano as her prince charming.

The novel portrays the strong presence of Victorian morality in the 1970s as Scheherazade appears to be sexually independent, but does not have sex before marriage. The narrator compares Scheherazade to virtuous Victorian heroines by juxtaposing Lily and Keith's gossip on her sex life with the fact that Keith is reading Charlotte Bronte's novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847):

> "And now she's saving herself up. No more handjobs. Conserving herself for Timmy."
>
> "That's wise."

. . . . . .

> The next day he kept to his room, and forced himself to finish *Jane Eyre*. (199)

Keith's references to virgin Victorian characters show how British fiction has supported female roles of virtue and chastity. While discussing Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), Lily asks: "Who fucks Fanny?," and Keith answers, "What? No one fucks Fanny. . . . She's a heroine, Lily, and heroines aren't allowed to do that" (125). If the heroine falls from virtue, the nation will fall apart because woman is the ground upon which the nation is constructed as the motherland. Anne McClintock argues that a nation's construction as a "familial and domestic space" depends "on the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women and children within the domestic sphere."[27] Naturalization of gender roles was possible with Victorian heroines, who embraced their domestic roles, restrained their passion, and proved to their readers that only virgin women are eligible for marriage. Scheherazade's satisfaction with the wedding themed Victorian novels shows that, wittingly or not, many twentieth-century female readers associate marriage with happiness, and care more for lifetime commitment than sex. The sexual revolution of the 1970s becomes problematic as the heroine of *The Pregnant Widow* does not fall from virtue and refrains from premarital sex just like her Oriental counterpart.

The text emphasizes the continuity of patriarchal family structure from the medieval era to the present as Scheherazade marries her rich boyfriend, Timmy, and has four children. The narrator's representation of Scheherazade's post-marriage life without love shows that her virginity was not rewarded with a prince charming: "They were all there, pretty much. Timmy and Scheherazade with their four grown-up children, in perfect-family formation—girl, boy, girl, boy. Born-again Scheherazade looked unglamorous" (354). Ironically, marriage is not a happy ending but a rebirth that takes away Scheherazade's glamour and makes her as pale as "Casper the Ghost," as Gloria comments (227). Gloria pities her life with a missionary husband, who lived in Jerusalem to convert Jews to Christianity (227). Here it is

27. Anne McClintock, "'No Longer in a Future Heaven': Gender, Race, and Nationalism," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 89–111, 90–91.

evident that Amis does not favor fanatic Christians over Islamists: *The Second Plane* depicts Islamists as "haters of reason,"[28] and according to Gloria, Scheherazade's Christian husband is "a practicing maniac" (227). In response to Gloria's concerns about Scheherazade's life with a missionary, Keith simply jokes that her "tits don't look religious" (227). Diedrick argues that Amis's "comic voice" is "a method of confronting often-oppressed truths,"[29] and Keith's joke caricaturizes both the objectifying male gaze and religion. Ironically, the sexist language, which many critics blame Amis for, works to show how men, like Keith, gloss over the ways in which patriarchal and religious ideologies oppress women.

Fairy Tale Interrupted: The Myth of Modernity and Westernization

The rebirth of the Arabian princess as a twentieth-century British woman with a religious fanatic husband defies Western definition of modernity as being symmetrical, progressive, and "singular, moving from one stage of development to another."[30] Scheherazade's virginity until marriage speaks to the sexual repression of many European women in the 1970s and in the twenty-first century. The art-like image of Italy, where no winds blow, for example, is interrupted as Whittaker, a thirty-one-year-old British man fluent in Italian, talks about how the Italian government prohibits contraception and abortion to discourage nonproductive sex. When Scheherazade asks how Italians avoid pregnancy, Lily says, "Easy. Hypocrisy . . . Backstreet abortions," and highlights how sexually liberated girls perform virtue to preserve their social respectability (17). While discussing the risks Italian women take to prevent motherhood, however, the British characters gloss over the fact that abortion in England was legalized in 1967,[31] only three years before their

28. Amis, *The Second Plane*, 19.

29. Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 14.

30. Timothy Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000), 1–29, 8.

31. In *The Long Sexual Revolution*, Hera Cook comments that British women had abortion even before the Abortion Act of 1967. She foregrounds the role of contraception in the sexual revolution by writing that "the first birth control clinic in Britain openly and publicly set up for unmarried women was started in London in 1964," and birth control pills were "not widely available until the end of the 1960s." See Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800–1975* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 288, 319. Kate Millett also writes that "any increase in

visit to Italy. By foregrounding the state control over women's bodies, the text shows how the enlightenment ideals of individual freedom do not necessarily apply to women. Although British women had more economic power due to increasing job opportunities and the Equal Pay Act of 1963, they were still judged by the codes of honor associated with sexual purity. As Scheherazade, who asks for a "fuck" yet saves herself for marriage, the text suggests that the sexual revolution of the 1970s did not totally grant women sexual freedom and free them from domestic ideology.[32]

Dark ages seem not so dark as the novel portrays violence against women in twentieth-century Europe. Scheherazade assumes a modern progressive identity when Whittaker informs her of *matrimonio riparatore* (forced wedding), which asks raped Italian girls to marry the rapist to cleanse the family honor: "'I don't understand,' said Scheherazade. 'Why in the world would you marry the rapist? It's prehistoric'" (16). The novel questions Scheherazade's belief in linear progressive history by showing how the so-called "prehistoric" tradition is celebrated as a happy-ever-after ending that enables parents to walk proudly with their heads held high. Whittaker further comments that the alternative to marriage is honor killing, a patriarchal tradition "commonly defined as the murder of a woman by members of her family who do not approve of her sexual behavior."[33] He remarks that, just like in Afghanistan, Sicilians advise raped girls: "Marry the rapist or your menfolk'll kill you" (16). The islanders' practice of the brutal tradition without the fear of being imprisoned suggests that the police force does not even investigate the death of girls whose relatives are complicit in the

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sexual freedom for women in the period 1930–60 . . . is probably due less to social change than to better technology in the manufacture of contraceptive devices and their proliferation." See Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 63.

32. In *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), Angus McLaren also points out that sexual revolution was a cultural myth that could not overcome the social prejudice against women's sexual desires, abortion, and homosexuality. Callum G. Brown, on the other hand, argues that "by the early 1970s pre-marital sex was not only the norm but was also becoming widely accepted amongst young people as devoid of moral guilt." See Brown, "Sex, Religion, and the Single Woman c. 1950–75: The Importance of a 'Short' Sexual Revolution to the English Religious Crisis of the Sixties," *Twentieth-Century British History* 22.2 (2011): 189–215, 212.

33. Dicle Koğacıoğlu, "The Tradition Effect: Framing Honor Crimes in Turkey," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15.2 (2004): 118–51, 118.

honor killing. The murder of sexually assaulted women in twentieth-century Italy questions the use of the so-called "backward," "chaotic," and "violent" past as a foil to the modern civilized present.

Scheherazade's representation of forced weddings as "prehistoric" customs of Italy favors England's "Enlightenment concern about good and enlightened government, rule of law, freedom, and liberty of the individual."[34] According to Diedrick, Amis endorses Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's belief that "Enlightenment is totalitarian;"[35] and the novel exposes the nationalist and patriarchal undertones of enlightenment by showing how women become the ground upon which England becomes the epitome of progress and equality. Whittaker, for example, elevates the cultural superiority of England by commenting that patriarchal traditions exist only in the remote island of Italy, where men seem to be from the Middle Ages. While Whittaker represents honor killing as an Italian tradition, Keith thinks of how his family could have killed his promiscuous sixteen-year-old sister, Violet, "in any kind of shame-and-honor arrangement" (16). Keith and his stepbrother, Nicholas, would "get very emotional" about Violet's sex life and even say they would "kill anyone who laid a finger on her" (237). The two British men's potential for violence to restore family honor problematizes Whittaker's assumption that southern Italy is left behind enlightened Europe with gender equality. In fact, Gill Hague and Ellen Malos write that British women's honor is associated with sexual propriety and that men are often excused for murder if they are 'provoked' by their unfaithful wives.[36] Keith's desire to regulate Violet's sexual behavior implies that little has changed since the Middle Ages and that British men, too, can resort to violence to protect feminine virtue.

The novel's disbelief in the revolution is also evident as Joan of Arc (1412–31), the French Catholic saint who lifted the siege at Orleans and was burned in Rouen for "dressing as a boy" (117), seems more liberal than her twentieth-century

34. Aslı Çırakman, *From the "Terror of the World" to the "Sick Man of Europe": European Images of Ottoman Empire and Society from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 108.

35. Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 11.

36. Gill Hague and Ellen Malos, *Domestic Violence: Action for Change* (Cheltenham, UK: New Clarion P, 1993), 53.

counterpart, Lily, who wears her own androgynous outfit: combination of culottes, knee-breeches worn by upper-class Renaissance men, and halter tops. Lily's desire to be simultaneously male and female resonates with Hélène Cixous's "Newly Born Woman,"[37] a bisexual woman who combines feminine qualities with masculine codes of independence and wisdom. Lily, however, fails to be the newly born woman as she submits to the ideals of feminine beauty in her impersonation of masculinity. Her decision to dress like a boy becomes problematic as her new outfit with miniskirts and see-through blouses foregrounds her femininity and fulfills her desire to be as beautiful as Scheherazade. Lily's cross-dressing lacks any revolutionary value as the text evokes Joan of Arc, who disobeyed the biblical rule against cross-dressing and wore tight pants to avoid being raped by her fellow soldiers. While protecting her virginity, her suit of armor, as early as the fifteenth century, challenged the classification of sexes into social and domestic spheres. Her active participation in politics illustrates Cixous's argument that "accepting the other sex as a component makes them [women] much richer, more various, stronger."[38] The strong woman warrior was a threat to the socially constructed female roles of maternity and passivity, and therefore, her violation of gender roles was punished with death. The narrator once again undermines the role of the 1970s generation in changing sexual politics by bringing together Joan of Arc's national achievements with Lily's cross-dressing that seems no more than a fun and experimental shopping spree.

Acting like a boy, however, does initiate Lily to speak up for women's sexual freedom. The narrator quotes Lily's feminist speech that asks Keith for "a trial separation": "'*Why should boys have all the fun?'* said Lily, and blew her nose into the paper napkin. '*We're anachronisms, you and me. We're like childhood sweethearts. We should've met ten years from now. We're too young for monogamy. Or even for love*'" (23). Her preference for having multiple partners over a lifetime commitment challenges the commonly held belief that love is a prerequisite for women to have sex. The narrator, however, mocks Lily's feminist revolt by interrupting her speech on free love with the information that

37. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986).

38. Cixous, "Sorties," in *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986). 63-132, 84.

she blows her nose into a napkin. Lily fails to be the revolutionary new woman of the 1970s as she preaches sexual freedom but only dates Keith. In fact, soon after leaving Keith to act like a boy, Lily asks him to spend the summer with her in Italy. Her confession to Keith that she is "no good at being a boy" suggests that she is not ready to play the masculine role of independence and have a vacation without a man to accompany her (24). It is Keith who profits from the break up by dating an ex-girlfriend to overcome his loneliness. The narrator's comment, "the free-love business certainly worked best with girls who were acting like boys" (24), serves as a critique of women who have internalized the equation of masculinity with sexual freedom and, therefore, cannot have affairs without pretending to be men.

Overall, in relation to the term "pregnant widow," the narrator remarks that "the old order gives way to the new, not immediately, though, not yet," and the children of the purgatory state—Scheherazade and Lily—are in between their desire for sexual independence and their duty as bearers of tradition (167). The marriage institution preserves its pivotal role as the protector of the patriarchal family structure as Scheherazade marries Timmy, and Keith marries first Gloria, then Lily, and then has four children with his third wife. Keith's stepdaughter, Silvia, argues that the sexual revolution failed because it did not abolish the domestic ideology that imprisons women at home: "In her view, the first and possibly the only clause in the manifesto should have read as follows . . . : *Fifty-fifty in the home*," the narrator remarks (185). She believes that women cannot have sexual freedom as long as they are burdened with housework and childcare. The 1970s generation went through a sexual trauma as they were tempted to choose free love over marriage, the narrator suggests, and the ending of the novel represents fear of Islam as the new trauma of the 2000s. Pointing out the growing number of Europe's Muslim population, Silvia says to Keith that, by about 2110, "the end result of your sexual revolution might be sharia and the veil. . . . Of course it won't work out like that. That's a whole century away" (357). Her emphasis on the veil and the title of the book, "the pregnant widow," suggest that women become the ground upon which a nation's degree of modernity and potential for social change are measured. The blonde, Christian, and British Scheherazade's entrapment in marriage, however, challenges Silvia's hierarchical binary between the progressive West and the

backward Islam with gender inequality. The narrative's movement forward in time from Scheherazade's marriage in the 1970s to Silvia's critique of domestic ideology in the 2000s problematizes the Western idea of modernity as a progressive development by suggesting that traditional gender roles are still intact.

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