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Shahrazad and Li Ch'ing Chao:

The Ideal Woman In a Patriarchal Society

Ancient Eastern Literature, much like the Ancient Eastern World, was dominated by men and in many ways seemed to be governed by patriarchal ideals. Although there are depictions of strong female characters and descriptions of the tenacious nature of actual women in Ancient Eastern Literature, it is easy to see that the overall function of a woman was to assist and support a man. Perhaps there are no better examples of the portrayal of women's positions in ancient eastern patriarchal societies than Shahrazad, the story telling protagonist from *The Thousand and One Nights*, and Li Ch'ing Chao, an ancient Chinese writer and poet. In both *The Thousand and One Nights* in which Shahrazad is created and in the afterward for *Records on Metal and Stone* in which Li Ch'ing Chao outlines the unfortunate direction of her life, the reader is able to see the quintessential function of women in societies driven by patriarchal ideals. Though these two women exemplify both intelligence and reason (greater than many male characters and male writers involved with Ancient Eastern Literature) they still remain in the service of men, Shahrazad to King Shahrayar and Li Ch'ing Chao to her dead husband. Through the depiction of Shahrazad and the life of Li Ch'ing Chao, a reader can easily see the woman's place within an ancient patriarchal society was to comfort and to serve a man.

In *The Thousand and One Nights* Shahrazad's intelligence and reason is undeniable. Shahrazad is married to King Shahrayar who has been marrying a young woman each night and having her executed the following morning, in order to gain some sort of vengeance on his cheating wife and protect himself from the calamitous nature of women. Through her

brilliant storytelling Shahrazad is able to keep herself alive as well as mend the King's damaged heart. Before her first night with King Shahrayar, Shahrazad goes to her sister and says, "when you come and see that the king has finished with me, say, 'Sister, if you are not sleepy, tell us a story.' Then I will begin to tell a story, and it will cause the king to stop his practice, save myself, and deliver the people" ("Thousand and One" 1579). Through this passage the reader can see Shahrazad's brilliance, as well as her desire to restore the King Shahrayar's faith in women. She has devised a plan and, in the end, that plan is successful. Though Shahrazad is able to show her high level of intelligence and reason through her own story, telling her greater purpose still remains to serve and to fix a damaged man.

Similarly to Shahrazad's story in *The Thousand and One Nights*, Li Ch'ing Chao shows her high level of intelligence and reason in her autobiographical work in her afterward for *Records on Metal and Stone*. In her story she tells of the immense amount of books her husband and herself have painstakingly collected and the learned life that they have chosen to lead. Li Ch'ing Chao goes into detail describing the way she could guess in which book, in which chapter, on which page, and even on which line a certain passage could be found. In addition to the intelligence portrayed in her afterward for *Records on Metal and Stone* Li Ch'ing Chao was (at least somewhat) a well-received and well-established poet. In her afterward for *Records on Metal and Stone* Li Ch'ing Chao spends time describing her husband's instructions on what to do if the city is in danger, she writes, "He answered from afar, his hands on his hips: 'Follow the crowd. If you can't do otherwise, abandon the household goods first, then the clothes, then the books and the scrolls, then the old bronzes—but carry the sacrificial vessels for the ancestral temple yourself; live or die with them; don't give them up'" (Chao 1412). Through the connotation of this passage, as well as

Li Ch'ing Chao herself, we see the ideal purpose of a woman in an ancient patriarchal society; that is, to serve a man. Though she is intelligent she spends no time creating a plan herself, but instead is instructed by her husband and follows his instructions.

Through her brilliant story telling Shahrazad is able to mend King Shahrayar's damaged heart and save her own life, as well as the lives of others. Though she saves the lives of many young women (herself included) and rescues the people of her city through her storytelling, Shahrazad's greater accomplishment (as shown in *The Thousand and One Nights*) is her loyalty and service to a "great" man. The reader is able to see the ideas of loyalty and service through the stories she tells; the similarities between her own situation and the characters she depicts are frequent and prevailing. While telling the story of a dying man and the woman who stayed loyal to him through his demise, she writes "When I see your distress,/ It pains me, as you see./ And when I see you not,/ It pains me, as you see./ O speak to me, my life,/ My master, talk to me./ ... The day I have you is the day I crave;/ The day you leave me is the day I die./ Were I to live in fear of promised death,/ I'd rather be with you than my life save" ("Thousand and One" 1613). Through this passage it is easy for the reader to see that Shahrazad is alluding to her own situation, giving King Shahrayar comfort and showing him how much she cares for him. Shahrazad is showing King Shahrayar a circumstance in which a man means more to a woman than her own life, softening his heart, and telling of her own loyalty through this character. She is also showing the reader the duty of an ideal woman in a patriarchal society such as this.

In her afterward for *Records on Metal and Stone* Li Ch'ing Chao tells the reader of a courageous life that she has led, and depicts harrowing scenes of war that she had survived. Throughout her life she had tried to protect the collection of books and artifacts that she

and her husband had collected, but in the end the collection dwindled down to only twenty or thirty percent of what it had originally been. Li Ch'ing Chao discusses the incompleteness and the ordinary nature of what is left but states that she still values them as if she was caring for her own life. Though the collection had diminished Li Ch'ing Chao followed her husband's instruction on what to protect, putting her own life in danger and losing almost all of her wealth. At one point when describing her own decaying health, she wrote "I also grew very sick, to the point that my only vital sign was a rasping breath. The situation was getting more serious every day" (Chao 1413). Although her well-being was diminishing she kept trying to preserve the collection, as instructed by her husband. Much like Shahrazad, Li Ch'ing Chao is showing her reader (whether she means to or not) the duties of an ideal woman in an ancient patriarchal society.

Although there are portrayals of strong female characters as well accounts of the strong-willed nature of actual women in Ancient Eastern Literature, the purpose of these women seems to always lead back to serving a man. The character of an ideal woman, in the literature from these societies, is repeatedly connected to their loyalty to a man. Both Shahrazad in *The Thousand and One Nights* and Li Ch'ing Chao in her own life recounted in her afterward for *Records on Metal and Stone* show this ideal by caring for a man or for his actions. Through the depictions of these women it is effortless for the reader to understand that a woman's place, in an ancient patriarchal society, is to comfort and to serve a man.

Works Cited

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