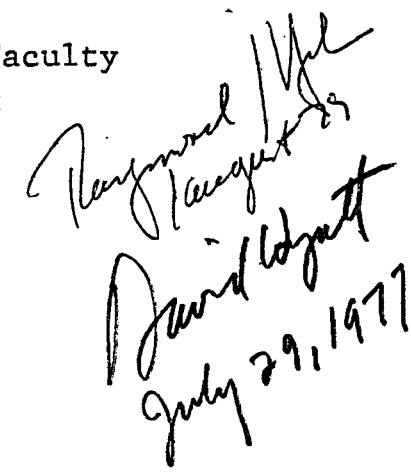
"AT THIS POINT I INTERRUPTED MY ANALYSIS TO SAY, 'YOU HAVE A WAY WITH WORDS, JOHN BARTH.'" (AN AFFECTIVE ANALYSIS OF "DUNYAZADIAD")

Richard H. Bullock
Athens, Ohio

A.B., Ohio University, 1973

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts



Department of English

University of Virginia

August, 1977

Chimera by John Barth is often seen as a comic book which plays dexterously with narrative structure and language as a sort of exercise in virtuosity. Within the story, however, Barth has his persona state that the novellas making up the book should, if successful, "'manage to be seriously, even passionately, about some things as well.'"[1] I intend to show that the first novella, "Dunyazadiad," uses its complexity and confusion to create a world which as experienced yields important insights into the human condition and proposes a passionate, positive alternative to existential despair. That's not to say, of course, that the book can't be funny--the belief that humor and seriousness are incompatible is mean-spirited and, to use Barth's term, "deathy," and I hope to maintain Barth's lighthearted (not light-headed) tone as he does. I emphasize the experience of the book since that experience appears to control much of Barth's intention as extrapolated from the form and since it's a serious and rewarding experience for the diligent reader. At this point, the only recourse is to jump in and look for a place where we can touch bottom, so let's go:

The first part of Chimera we encounter is, of course, the title, which suggests a fanciful, absurd and visionary book to come; if our knowledge of mythology is still with us, we may remember the legendary chimera, a rather flashy monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent. Since the table of contents promises three parts,

we can expect three different tales which somehow form an organic whole, as does the mythical chimera--although the entire enterprise may be exceedingly fanciful. At this point, it's hard to say.

In any case, the title of the first part, "Dunyazadiad," sets up some interesting expectations. First, the form, with the "-iad" ending, harks back to the Iliad and simultaneously to Barth's story in Lost in the Funhouse, "Menelaid." From that story's format, we can expect a story based on one or another epic hero or minor character; we may even leap to the conclusion that, like the "Menelaid," "Dunyazadiad" will do something strange structurally--but we may be jumping ahead too far here. The epic also echoes the mock-epic, and "Dunyazadiad" sounds very similar to "Dunciad," Pope's great satire on bad writers. Bad writers? We may feel glimmerings of story-tellers here, but only subconsciously; we still know too little.

When we begin reading, finally, the first sentence plunges us into a rather unfamiliar world:

> "At this point I interrupted my sister as usual to say, 'You have a way with words, Scheherazade.'" (p.3)

First, the quotation marks lead us to expect a speaker of the quote, a speaker who will sooner or later speak not to his or her fictional audience but to us, or who will be supplanted by another narrator. We assume that someone (who?) is speaking to someone else (again, who?) so at least two people and perhaps a third, the narrator of the "Dunyazadiad,"

are present. "'At this point'" specifies a moment in time or a spot in space, implying a process or a continuum: this spot, not any of the others, and at this time, right now. We are not yet suspicious; the speaker could very easily move to something like, "At this point I will build a house," setting a goal in the future that the narrative can move toward. "'I interrupted,'" though, violates that expectation; something has been in the process of being said or done before the book begins (we don't know what), and "'I,'" the speaker, whom we now know is singular, has just interrupted this unknown process. And, worse, this "'I'" is recounting a past event, grating against the immediacy of "'this.'" Furthermore, the whole thing is in quotes, implying a recounting of the entire conversation, which is also in progress when the story begins; we've been plunged into two tales at once and both have just been interrupted.

Already we do not know much and have many questions: who is speaking? to whom is the speaker speaking? what is the "'point,'" specifically? what event and what speaker have been interrupted? how has he or she been interrupted? and what has the speaker related before the initial quotation marks? This is shaping into an odd sort of narrative, but we cannot yet predict what shape or shapes it will assume.

The next words, "'my sister,'" answer the question of who was interrupted but raise another: who is this sister? Instead of meeting an answer (like "my sister, Penelope"), we find "'as usual,'" which is disturbing; the interruption

(whatever it is), being habitual or frequent, is odd--an interruption is a break, an obstruction, something unforeseen, yet this interruption happens all the time. This set of clashing meanings casts suspicion on whatever will follow: how sincere is an interruption which is habitual or even, perhaps, orchestrated? ("'At this point I interrupted my sister as usual.'") With "'to say,'" we learn that the interruption was caused by the speaker, and "'to say'" propels us forward to what "'I'" said: "'"You have a way with words, Scheherazade."'"

Most of us would read that quote all at once, landing with mouth open and feet flat on "'"Scheherazade."'" Now we're getting some information (maybe). We now can say that the context of the story is not the classical epic or neo-classical mock-epic, but rather is the setting of the Thousand-and-One Arabian Nights, a context filled with exotic tales, dancing girls, and quaint phraseology like, "In the holy name of Allah." So why are we hearing twentieth-century idioms from both Scheherazade and sister? The quote quoted by the speaker is interesting, too; it's a nice compliment, but the "'as usual,'" makes it somewhat ironic in tone, as if a sigh of boredom were implied: ho hum, as usual. We may infer or speculate that Scheherazade was speaking before the interruption, but we still have too little information to be even reasonably certain.

If we remember the basic outline of the Arabian Nights, we recall that Scheherazade's sister was named "Dunyazade,"

so Dunyazade is the speaker here, a deduction reinforced by the title: "Dunyazad - iad." The next sentence, which she quotes herself as saying to Scheherazade, answers some questions and provides some new information:

> "'This is the thousandth night I've sat at the foot of your bed while you and the King made love and you told him stories, and the one in progress holds me like a genie's gaze.'" (p.3)

We know what time it is, at least the time of the quoted conversation: there's only one night left of the 1001 (which doesn't look good for Scheherazade!), so much has transpired; Scheherazade has made love 1000 times and told as many stories (helping to explain the "'as usual'") with Dunyazade at the foot of the bed watching and listening. This makes her a sort of omniscient narrator, but a narrator with shortcomings; when she says, "'" you and the King made love and you told him stories,"'" storytelling and lovemaking are confused and muddled, storytelling gaining greater emphasis by its terminal position in the sentence. What's a little strange is that both these activities are here public and performed before an audience of one, just as the book is being read by one reader; we, as well as Dunyazade, act as voyeurs.

Now we're aware that the story Dunyazade is quoting is nearing its end as the one she's telling is beginning. The story Scheherazade is relating is "in progress," and the next sentence clarifies this description somewhat: "'"I wouldn't dream of breaking in like this, just before the end . . . ."'" (p.3) Scheherazade's story is also nearing its end (although Dunyazade may be frustrating more than a storyteller--they've

been making love, too!). She reiterates the interruption ("'as usual'") but falls into yet another idiom: "'"I wouldn't dream."'" This curious lapse between eras becomes wider as the sentence continues:

> "'. . . except that I hear the first rooster crowing in the east, et cetera . . .'"

The "'"et cetera"'" following the quaint way of telling time is very disturbing. Dunyazade flippantly and offhandedly tosses aside the traditional expected language she has momentarily lapsed into. The final clause,

> "'". . . and the King really ought to sleep a bit before day break"'" (p.3),

adds to our curiosity, as Dunyazade is showing a sort of compassion for the King who, after all, has raped her sister every night for almost three years with the declared intent of killing her every morning. Either Dunyazade is a very forgiving person or there's more here than meets the eye, which seems likely, given the "as usual" clue.

The final sentence in the first paragraph adds to our curiosity: "'"I wish I had your talent"'" lets us know that Scheherazade is good in bed--whatever she's doing. Whatever it is, if Dunyazade's appraisal of her own talents is correct, both the tale she relates and the tale we read must be inferior to the tale Scheherazade has been telling; our faith in her narrative ability must be shaken, and we probably should ask ourselves what we're letting ourselves get into.

The next paragraph doesn't bring any satisfaction until the final sentence. At first we read another "'as usual,'"

reinforcing the ho-hum nature of the event, followed by "'Sherry.'" This can be disconcerting--a nickname? We sigh and continue: "'Sherry replied, "You're the ideal audience, Dunyazade."'" With her being referred to by name, we may now gloat, as our assumptions before have been confirmed and we know for sure who is speaking. "'"But this is nothing"'" adds a bit more idiom to their speech, and "'"wait till you hear the ending, tomorrow night!"'" leaves us very unsatisfied; will we hear this ending if we haven't heard the beginning or middle yet? And "'"tomorrow night"'" is the thousand-and-first night, to boot; there won't be any more nights or endings after that one!

The last sentence betrays Sherry's attitude toward the King: "'"Always assuming"'" is very casual and offhand, and "'"this auspicious King"'" following it enhances its ironic tone, deflating the King's auspiciousness into irony. The kicker in the sentence is "'"doesn't kill me before breakfast,"'" an eye-opening statement; the tone doesn't prepare us for it. "'"Before breakfast"'" trivializes the entire event, leading us to suspect that perhaps Sherry is rather certain of her fate, and the final clause "'"as he's been going to do these thirty-three and a third months,"'" gives us reason to believe she may be right in being assured, even given the Arabian Nights framework. Our doubts must multiply; is this a normal reaction to a prolonged and extremely intimate, quite threatening situation?

The next paragraph, beginning with "'"Hmp," said

Shahryar,'" concentrates on the King, who has now been positively identified: "'"Hmp"'" tends to make us feel that Shahryar is taciturn and threatening, but the rest of the paragraph undercuts this despite his rather half-hearted threat: "'"I may get around to it yet."'" He continues: "'"Don't take your critics for granted."'" Critics? We expect a curt, possibly brutal monarch and we get a literary analyst. Sure enough, the next sentence comments on the story Sherry has just been telling, betraying Sherry as a capable storyteller and Shahryar as an attentive, intelligent listener:

> "'But I agree with your little sister that this is a good one you've got going, with its impostures that become authentic, its ups and downs and flights to other worlds.'"(p.4)

"'"I don't know how you dream them up"'" winds up his comments and the paragraph, displaying Shahryar's admiration for Sherry as well as his own apparent inability to tell stories. (At least <u>somebody</u> in this novella isn't telling a story!) By now we're beginning to be accustomed to the flippant tone of the speeches and their implicit sexual connotations, so Sherry's teasing remark opening paragraph four ("'"Artists have their tricks"'") is easily accepted. "'We three said goodnight then, six goodnights in all'" establishes that only the three named characters are present and the ritualistic manner of speaking adds a certain eastern "flavor" which has surfaced before only slightly.

"'Your brother'" in the next sentence is a clue, however slight, to Dunyazade's audience; "'your brother'" refers to

Shahryar, but the identity of Shahryar's brother is hardly common knowledge--we know little more than we did before. The next sentence plays with us; we see Daddy coming to court, "'expecting to be told to cut his daughter's head off'" and only after the semicolon do we learn that he is a vizier and a somewhat dotty one at that, ravaged by this three-year ordeal his daughters are going through.

The next surprise in the paragraph is Dunyazade's casual confession of Sherry's and her sexual tricks; we learn of Sherry's prowess and props and of Dunyazade's more chaste pursuits, "'a roc-down tickler from Bassorah,'" and this reminds us of the very sexually-oriented nature of the framing tale and shows us as well that the two sisters are as liberated as their speech. Sherry's "'favorite story,'" as recounted pithily by Dunyazade, emphasizes their liberality; the promiscuous woman (albeit a rape victim) wins through her promiscuity, which Dunyazade says Sherry does: "'In the same way, Sherry put a hundred horns a day on your brother's head,'" cuckolding him in his own palace.

The final sentence is ambiguous; "'every day she saved till last the Treasure Key'" would appear to refer back to one of the items in her "'Bag of Tricks,'" but the capitalization, coupled with the assertion that the key "'is what her story starts and ends with,'" propels us forward, as we seem to have reached the end of something, something "'saved till last'" and either a sexual device or a literary device--or both. And "'her story'" is odd; it could be the story just

recounted, which ends with the mention of the key; it could be the story she is telling Shahryar; or it could be the story of her adventures. For lack of evidence, we go on.

And find ourselves in the middle of another story: the King is raping and killing, the people are disgusted, and people are fleeing, leaving "'hardly a young girl fit to fuck'" (which reinforces our impression of Dunyazade as an articulate and intelligent, but somewhat--ah--funky young girl), but why all this is going on is not recounted. Instead, we come up against Sherry's academic history, which tells us once and for all that Samarkand has come a long way since the Arabian Nights and that we're reading a mishmash construct somewhere between the ancient, mythical east and twentieth century America. The phrase "'Every graduate department in the East'" reinforces this blending, as we are surprised to remember that the East spoken of here is not Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey; after that, the liberated "'our sisters'" is just one more phrase we dazedly accept on our way through the book.

The next few paragraphs provide more background information on how the country came to such a condition and display the two sisters' very up-to-date powers of analysis, as Dunyazade speaks casually of "'coup d'etat,'" "'popular base for guerilla war,'" "'poly sci,'" and "'pathology.'" We also get more details, although insufficient ones, about the King's brother, the auditor of Dunyazade's tale; Shahryar "'could count on your help from Samarkand'" implying that Brother is also a

king, and in the next paragraph we learn that he abandoned his kingdom after being cuckolded. Not much to go on.

After a paragraph establishing Sherry's need for haste (Dunyazade would have to be sacrificed soon, as the number of virgins in the kingdom was declining rapidly), a very interesting topic arises: mythology and folklore, of which the two sisters and their story are parts. As we read through this section, these words catch our attention:

> "'It's in words that the magic is--Abracadabra, Open Sesame, and the rest--but the magic words in one story aren't magical in the next. The real magic is to understand which words work, and when, and for what; the trick is to learn the trick.'" (p.7)

This talk about words alerts us to the literary nature of their (and our) enterprise, and somehow this is shocking; the characters in a story-within-a-story talking about storytelling and words. The last sentence requires some thought; like "Frame-Tale," which opens Lost in the Funhouse, this statement doubles back on itself, leaving us slightly confused as goal and process seemingly merge!

This confusion grows as we read on:

> "Sherry became . . . certain that her principle was correct, and desperate that in the whole world's stock of stories there was none that confirmed it, or showed us how to use it to solve the problem. 'I've read a thousand tales about treasures that nobody can find the key to,' she told me; 'we have the key and can't find the treasure.'" (pp.7-8)

After this remark Dunyazade admits befuddlement; like us, she is confused by this strange concept. The next paragraph, though, really throws us off:

> "'Little Doony,' she said dreamily, and kissed me: 'pretend this whole situation is the plot of a story

> we're reading, and you and I and Daddy and the King are all fictional characters.'"

(Now wait a minute! That's what we are doing! At once our "suspension of disbelief" topples as the narrative points out our actions to us and calls them into question at once: """pretend""" leaves us wondering how much truth we can put, not only into the story, but in a weird, uncomfortable way, into our own reading of it as character merges into author.)

> "'In this story, Scheherazade finds a way to change the King's mind about women and turn him into a gentle, loving husband.'"

(Which is what she does in the original version; it doesn't have to happen that way? The head swims.)

> "'It's not hard to imagine such a story, is it? Now, no matter what way she finds--whether it's a magic story with the answer in it or a magic anything--it comes down to particular words in the story we're reading,'"

(which comes down to particular words in the story we're reading!)

> "'right? And those words are made from the letters of our alphabet: a couple-dozen squiggles we can draw with this pen. This is the key, Doony! And the treasure, too, if we can only get our hands on it! It's as if--as if the key to the treasure is the treasure!'" (p.8)

Wow. If we thought we were confused before, we were naive; in one paragraph our illusions about the narrative have been shaken, if not shattered. We cannot immerse ourselves in the story even if we want to try by ignoring those troublesome quotation marks and the anachronisms. The story has cried out, This is a story and you are a reader! And somehow, the

very fact of this being a story, a collection of words made up of """a couple-dozen squiggles,""" is both the key to the solution of the problem of the story and that solution itself. "The key to the treasure is the treasure" demands a pause, insists on being mulled over, because not only is it odd in itself; it is part of the relationship between the book and us engaged in reading it. Suddenly we loom much more importantly in the story, and on perceiving this we may think back over the previous paragraphs and wonder how actively we were expected to read. No answers are given, though, and following a pause for fruitless reflection, we move on to even greater shock.

The author appears! At least, a character resembling John Barth who identifies himself as "a writer of tales . . . -- anyhow a former writer of tales," which again makes sense in the context of Lost in the Funhouse--a series of aborted attempts to write a story. Transported to Sherry and Doony by magic (which may be the magic of the words he writes to accomplish his magic; he isn't even certain where his facts and fictions merge: """There's a kind of snail in the Maryland marshes--perhaps I invented him.""" (p. 10)), he outlines a desire to """learn where to go by discovering where I am by reviewing where I've been--where we've all been,""" to """go back to the original springs of narrative""" (p.10)--which he is doing in this very story! Dunyazade, speaking in some present, is reviewing her past and we have arrived at some point in the middle of her recitation; all we can hope for is

that she will come back around to what happened before "'At this point'" as she tells the story.

At this point we have, whether we know it or not, the basic material from which the story is constructed. From here on, though, the narrative becomes quite complex as various patterns of time, fiction and fact play against one another to the end of part one. To do justice to these various concerns, we should try to separate them, seeing how each develops in the book and then examining their combined effect.

Time takes on an appearance analogous to a multifaceted mirror as the story develops. For the reader, time is linear; we begin on page three and read through to the end in a more or less continuous process, barring interruptions. As we discover, though, the related order of events, narrative time, works differently. As we discover in reading, the story of Scheherazade and the King begins on page five, when Doony starts relating recent history: "'Three and a third years ago, when King Shahryar was raping a virgin every night and killing her in the morning . . . .'" Notice, however, that this story does not begin with the events that set the whole story rolling; later, on page fourteen, the Genie fills in the background omitted by Dunyazade at her tale's beginning (although we must bear in mind that Doony is telling all of this, and so might be arranging the "order of revelations" to suit a literary purpose. Whew!) Also, a more vivid version is related in part two, pp. 42-52, by Shah Zaman, who (we learn indirectly,

on p. 14, and directly on p. 31) is the listener in part one and who becomes the teller in part two, filling in the history that Dunyazade omits (obviously, because only he can know certain information and because his tale and Doony's are concerned with different aspects of the larger Story.) The problem then becomes, where do pages three through five enter into Doony's narrative? She begins on page five before the 1001 nights have begun, but on page three the thousandth night has just ended. To reach this point we must read up to page 28 and "'Thus we came to the thousandth night, the thousandth morning and afternoon,'" after which the story moves chronologically in the actual order of events to its end on page 38.

At the same time, however, the situation of the telling of Doony's tale is not made explicit until the final page, when she recounts the events leading up to her tale's beginning; the end of her tale is also in a real sense the beginning, just as the beginning is the middle, so in some respects the story Dunyazade recites is like "Frame-Tale,," a Mobius strip, since our knowledge builds steadily through the story and is deflated with the twist back to the "beginning."

That isn't the only problem we have with time in the novella, though; we have the thematic problem of the mingling of twentieth century and mythical Arabian times and cultures which we noticed from the beginning. In the first place, the Genie supplies Sherry "'from the future . . . stories from the past'" (p.15). That is, the Genie, coming from the twentieth century ("'"I won't be born for a dozen centuries yet!"'")(p.13)

knows Sherry's story but helps her create it by relating the ancient stories Sherry needs to tell the King. Moreover, we readers in the present read the story, which is enclosed in quotation marks, indicating the relating of a past event; the relater of that past event also exists in the past, so we read in part one a voice relating events two or three steps removed from us: the narrator relating Doony's relation of events in her past. Part two brings us back into a standard narrator--narrative structure, and part three presents the narrator speaking directly to us. From immersion in a layered fiction, we are gradually brought to the surface of a direct address by the narrator, who puts our preceding journey of ascent into an encapsulating image to give us a more distant perspective of it: "little Dunyazade and her bridegroom, who pass a thousand nights in one dark night . . . ." (p.55)

An even more complex problem confronts us when we try to decipher the boundaries between fact and fiction in Dunyazade's narrative. For one thing, the Genie or "John Barth, Author of Chimera," slides in and out of the narrative as if he were at once the author of the story and a character in it. (That's in quotes because he, as "Author," must, of course, be distinguished from the author; he's a fictional character, just as Doony is.) As he appears and disappears, moreover, he gives us conflicting evidence about his role in the story. On page ten, during our (and Doony's and Sherry's) first encounter with him, he outlines his notion of his work:

> "'My project,' he told us, 'is to learn where to be by discovering where I am by reviewing where I've been--

> where we've all been. There's a kind of snail in the Maryland marshes--perhaps I invented him--that makes his shell as he goes along out of whatever he comes across, cementing it with his own juices . . . he carries his history on his back, living in it, adding new and larger spirals to it from the present as he grows. That snail's pace has become my pace . . . (p. 10)

In other words, the Genie is involved in process, creating as he goes along and immersing himself in his creation. Yet, despite this evidence, which seems to make sense for us, as it explains his presence in the story, he continues: "'"I've quit reading and writing."'" Okay, if he can't write, how has the story come about? Apparently the answer lies in the levels of time described before: the conversation is reconstructed, an event in the past which may have been true then but which certainly isn't true now, the present of the writer at the moment of artistic creation and the reader at the moment of reading. The whole concept doesn't feel right, though; we've been through so many tangles in time and space that this one is perturbing. If it works logically, it grates emotionally.

The next major fact he states is that he appeared in the story when he wrote "The key to the treasure is the treasure" (p.11), the exact paradox Sherry discovered. The magic at this point lies in writing, in setting words down on paper. This is not only a mystical, but also a practical breakthrough, as, having had this revelation, he has begun to write after having had writer's block, and the writing has had a magical and inspirational effect: "'His adoration of Scheherazade . . . was not possessive; he desired her only as

the old Greek poets their Muse, as a source of inspiration.'" (p. 16)

Cynical readers may find the Genie's bundle of attitudes producing this statement rather saccharine and supportive of the idea that the Genie is a fictional character; he won't "'share beds'" with women unless feelings are mutual, and, due to his delight for his new mistress, he is "'"no more tempted to infidelity than to incest or pederasty."'" (p.16) After Sherry scoffs at this, though, he builds up his credibility through explaining his belief that "'his experience of love gone sour only made him treasure'" (that word again!) "'more highly the notion of a love that time would season and improve.'" (p.17)

This is very odd; the sentence forms a logical paradox participating in both fiction and reality, as the "Author" participates in his book and as the narrative plays in its genre. Despite that, however, his statement reflects a mature, healthy attitude toward life and love (and, by extension, literature) that enhances his sincerity and encourages us to continue in this funhouse or hall of mirrors, endlessly reflecting and confusing image and artifact.

As the tale continues and nights go by and the Genie appears and disappears right on time, he and Sherry (and Doony, too, since she's listener of and then teller of it all) become progressively literary in their conversations, discussing plot complexities, frame-tales and plot-functions in the context of love-making and comparing "'narrative and

sexual art'"(p.24), which they've been doing from the beginning. The Genie interprets modern psychological theory or reader-response critical technique to mean that "'writing and reading, or telling and listening, were literally ways of making love'" and he and Sherry notice

> "'the similarity between conventional dramatic structure--its exposition, rising action, climax, and denoument--and the rhythm of sexual intercourse from foreplay through coitus to orgasm and release.'"

He goes on to suggest that the teller of a tale inherits a masculine role and a listener, a feminine one, but that

> a good reader of cunning tales worked in her way as busily as their author . . . Narrative, in short . . . was a love-relation, not a rape; its success depended upon the reader's consent and cooperation, which she could withhold or at any moment withdraw; also upon her own combination of experience and talent for the enterprise, and the author's ability to arouse, sustain and satisfy her interest--an ability on which his figurative life hung as surely as Scheherazade's literal. (p.26)

In other words, he sees narrative as a process demanding an active reader as well as a competent writer, and both he and Scheherazade, as tellers and characters, need reader response and consent in order to survive. He is at once writer and thing written, creator and creation, the literary equivalent to "the key to the treasure is the treasure." The M.C. Escher etching comes to mind, of two hands in the process of drawing one another; another Mobius strip has been formed, and the main pattern of this wacky tale is beginning to fall into place. Moreover, the writer and reader, lovers, must participate in courtship games, which may be playful or serious or both at once, and upon which the partners' lives (figurative in love, usually, and literal in narrative) as

lovers, tellers and listeners depend--love demands lovers.

In the middle of this discussion an important statement appears:

> "'Whether this was in fact the case, neither he nor Sherry cared at all; yet they liked to speak as if it were (their favorite words.)'"

Due to the italics if nothing else, this phrase leaps out at us. "'As if'" helps explain much of the problem of this narrative, as (besides making fiction possible) it allows "John Barth, Author" and, by extension, John Barth, author, to write as if he could be an integral part of the narrative process as character; "'as if'" reminds us that, by gum, he's the author and he can do what he likes (including including himself as himself!)! He can have "himself" transported to the realm of his favorite book and involve himself in the compilation (through recitation from--another Mobius strip) of his favorite book. "'As if'" reminds us that an author is "free" to do as he likes with his material according to his inspiration and his skill.

When we reach the middle of the story and the thousandth night, the identity between Barth the creator and "Barth," the creation, grows stronger; he relates how, having broken through his writer's block, he

> "'had gone forward by going back, to the very roots and springs of story. Using, like Scheherazade herself, for entirely present ends materials received from narrative antiquity and methods older than the alphabet,'"

(like, say, the Thousand-Nights-and-a-Night?)

> "'in the time since Sherry's defloration he had set down two-thirds of a projected series of three novellas, longish tales which would take their sense from one another . . .'"

(which, if we're paying attention, is intriguing; has he been writing Chimera for three years (the time elapsed between Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera), and if so, is he telling the truth about the order of the writing?)

. . . "'The two I've finished'"

(hmm; see previous comment.)

"'have to do with mythic heroes, true and false.'"

(and again, truth and falsehood, especially on a mythological level, intimately concern fictions and their validity; both a true mythic hero and a false one are fictitious, but one partakes of a cultural and psychological reality while the other does not.)

"'. . . The third I'm just in the middle of.'" (p.28)

(How true! He is at the midpoint, page 28, of a novella 56 pages long.) The implication is that "John Barth" does not know how John Barth will end the tale, and, having incorporated the initial part of the story just one paragraph before, this is slightly plausible. However, the dazzling skill Barth has already demonstrated leaves us suspicious (having forgotten, for the moment, the authorial time-lag noticed earlier) that he could do so much without having the ending completely planned.

From this revelation, that author and story are hopelessly confused, we stumble dizzily into his further reminder

> "'that from my point of view--a tiresome technical one, I'll admit--it is a story that we're coming to the end of.'" (p.30)

Once again we're reminded that we can't believe what he's

saying because he isn't real, while at the same time we must believe him because he's telling the story: he's the only authority we have. But this fictional truth or true fiction or whatever it is apparently isn't even binding on the other characters: Scheherazade says, """I haven't decided yet whether or not I care to end the story that way,""" and in answer to Doony's terrified question (which makes us uneasy, too--is anyone in control here? Is the love-relation leading to unbridled passions? Tune in.), """Doesn't she have to, if it's in the book?""" the Genie is troubled. Facts in the Thousand-and-One Nights haven't corresponded exactly with the events he has perceived (or written; or both) and he admits that "'he himself was altogether absent from the plot'" and prays to Sherry that she end "'as it ended in his version.'" Whose version? The one he's writing? The one we're reading? The original? He apparently intends the original, but the vague referent is disconcerting. And sure enough, Sherry asks him just that question, realizing that she constitutes part of his "'materials from narrative antiquity'" (p.28).

His reply reinforces both his feigned or real ignorance of the future (a necessary--oh dear--fiction to preserve even the slimmest thread of credibility) and his role as "Author" of the story in process:

> "The Genie . . . repeated that he was still in the middle of that third novella in the series, and so far from drafting the climax and denoument, had yet even to plot them in outline . . . he announced that the title of the story was Dunyazadiad." (p.32)

And then he continues, explaining Doony's role as recipient

of the """whole literary tradition""" and the """whole erotic tradition, too""" while remaining """a virgin in both respects."""" (p.32) Near the end of the story she is telling, the Genie says, """now it's <u>your</u> turn,"""" and follows it with a description of her plight (of following a rough act, 2002 now-decapitated ex-virgins and Shahryar's recounting of Sherry's tales, leaving her few, if any, options) climaxed by the cry, """Dunyazade! Dunyazade! Who can tell your story?"""" The answer being, obviously, Dunyazade and the Genie/John Barth, who informs us almost immediately that his effort (and by definiton--we must hope--Dunyazade's) is "'a pure fiction--to which . . . he would endeavor with all his heart to find some conclusion in keeping his affection for (Doony)'" (p.33).

Finally, he disappears for the last time, and as he goes he says, """Dunyazade, I'm your brother! Good night, sisters!"""" (p.33) He is their brother-storyteller, brother-character, and brother-inventor all at once, and his last words acknowledge that complicated (and, given his concept of narrative-as-love, slightly incestuous) relationship, leaving Doony and Sherry to complete the first section, in which they perfunctorily act out the <u>Nights</u> as originally written and outline Sherry's plot, the details of which not even Doony is privy to (as we aren't) until the second-to-last paragraph. In the excitement of the anticipated double gelding and suicide making up Sherry's plot, we probably miss the full significance of Sherry's last statement; it betrays

either a disbelief in the Genie's theory or a renunciation (though they saved her neck for her to slice) of stories, of narrative: "'"May we wake together in a world that knows nothing of he and she!"'" (p.38)

In the final paragraph we learn the exact circumstances of Doony's story; with Shah Zaman spreadeagled on the bed and her holding a razor to his penis, she has told him "'the story of (his) present bondage'" and now brings her tale to a close. She says "'you,'" referring to Zaman, much more frequently in the last paragraph, making the story-telling-listening relationship crystallize in our minds as well as in the prose. And with her terse final statement, "'Your brother's docked; my sister's dead; it's time we joined them,'" her story and Sherry's and Shahryar's are, at least seemingly, closed down as well.

Part Two establishes certain facts at once: in the first three sentences we learn that Dunyazade was telling the story, that it's now over, and that Shah Zaman was its listener; but we already knew all that. What has changed is the narrator: Doony no longer is telling the tale in quotes, but instead the omniscient narrator (John Barth? the Genie?) is. At first we were thrown off guard and then puzzled by the quotation marks, wondering when we would "meet" the speaker through a narrator, as quotation marks imply we will. At the end of part one the quote is finally closed off, implying that something to the effect of, "She said" will follow. Not so,

though--we're met in part two with more quotes: "That's the end of your story?'" We have to wait until the third line to infer that Zaman said that, and we can only infer it because the narrator does not explicitly say so until his third speech on the next page. During all this Doony speaks only in indirect discourse and Zaman in direct, making his delivery much more immediate than hers; something has changed. For awhile, as they assess each other's position and strength, they speak equally, the narrator describing the actions accompanying their words. Once the Shah's superior power over and voluntary surrender to Dunyazade is established, however, his speeches become longer as hers become shorter and end finally in mute gestures: "Dunyazade wept"; "shut her eyes and whipped her head from side to side"; "moved her head indifferently." (pp.41-42). Her last speech displays her waning (and his waxing) powers as her former, formidable storytelling abilities disappear: "'Can't you make it (his penis) go down?' the girl asked thickly." (p.42) Her power gone, she can only weakly implore, while Zaman's state of arousal bespeaks his storytelling readiness.

Zaman's story does not puzzle us the way Doony's did; for one thing, its context is familiar to us, enframed as it is by a conventional narrative. Also, it's not a surprise: on p. 40 he asks permission to tell a story "in exchange for the one you've told me," and repeats his request on p. 42. He asks again a paragraph later and only then, finding no resistance, begins. (How different are these circumstances from

Doony's! In hers the telling was confused, the listener a captive audience, the reader confused and disoriented; Zaman's is refreshing after such a long, hard journey through puzzling prose.)

His story is not a retelling of Sherry's and Doony's from the first sentence; his begins six years ago, not three-and-a-half, and it begins. At a beginning. What a relief to have the promise of a chronological telling! Immediately he establishes an important difference between himself and his brother, professing love for and fidelity to his wife, to the extent of dismissing his concubines "'in mid-clip'" (p.43) and finishing with his wife. After he confuses fiction and reality (within the context of the story which is . . . oh, never mind) by recounting his meeting with "'that famous ifrit of your sister's story'" (p.43), he betrays his and his brother's plan to "'rape and kill a virgin a night, so as never again to be deceived.'" But he, apparently unlike his brother, is reflective and wonders "'how a private apocalypse'" (his) "'can infect the state and bring about one more general,'" namely, the ruin of his kingdom or a revolution against his cruelty.

Shah Zaman, though, gets his Scheherazade, his vizier's daughter, the very first night, and she loves him. After she outlines at length the "'Tragic View of Sex and Temperament'" (p.45) and then denies it in her own experience (lovers should strive for equality, she says, but she could only be happy in a role subordinate to that of a man she admired), Zaman

confesses his plan and brings down her wrath for resolving to keep his oath "'lest I seem chicken-hearted and a fool.'"

"'"Lest you seem!" the girl cried out. "Harems, homicides--everything for the sake of seeming!"'" We see at this point the dark side of "as if": he can neither invent nor erect ("'I could neither function nor dissemble'") and the story he recounts to her, the sorrow and remorse it engenders in him, unmans him. We see then (if we're watchful) that love and narrative work in two ways and can lead to potency or impotence, depending on circumstances and the attitudes of the participants. When Zaman abandons his vow, his "'heart and tool . . . (rise) as one'" (p.47) and he is freed to consider a better course, which again brings in "as if" as a positive force. Unsure of how to satisfy both himself and Shahryar, he grows depressed; his girl offers a solution, paradoxical as always:

> "'You can neither keep your vow nor break it . . . Perhaps you'd better do both for awhile, till you find your way.' I asked her how such a contradiction was possible. 'By the magic words as if . . . which, to a person satisfied with seeming . . . '" (p.48)

Aha! "Satisfied with seeming" is the key here; Zaman was unsatisfied with his need to seem honorable to his brother, while the Genie and Sherry were quite satisfied with their "as if." Seeming turns ugly when its motive is insincere and goes against the seemer's ethical code, just as storytelling turns sour when the storyteller no longer speaks sincerely.

This remarkable girl loved him, but he admits that "'I

couldn't treasure her as she treasured me.'" (p.48). (We've read this word before, when the Genie spoke of treasuring love. Now one person either does or does not treasure another, the term changing from a noun as in "The key to the treasure is the treasure," to a verb with an abstract object, to a verb with a very concrete object--and the implication is of a reciprocal "treasuring." Our sense of something crystallizing here grows stronger, and we move on alertly.) She then outlines a plan to save her sisters' necks and Zaman's face. This plan forms the origin of the Amazons, as becomes clear (p.50) when she declares her intention to amputate her left breast, and it relieves him of the necessity of killing virgins while allowing him to appear as if he were doing so. He still offers each relief from virginity, an offer two-thirds take him up on, but his despair and desire for a special relationship continues:

> All I craved was someone with whom to get on with the story of my life, which was to say, of our life together." (p.52)

(Now the story encompasses not just what he tells, but what he is and does; a story does not depend on a teller but can be acted out by or embodied by its human source. In this case, though, we must not forget the narrator/author, who renders Zaman's independence and, by extension, ours, problematic.)

> "a loving friend; a loving wife; a treasurable wife, a wife." (p.52, emphasis mine)

If we remember all the talk about love-relations, tellers and listeners, and writers and readers, this desire for a

wife, for marriage, gains new depth. Just as most people want a love relation which will endure, of which marriage is the most culturally sanctioned and psychologically tenable (through commitment, social custom, et cetera), the story-teller or -liver needs a counterpart with whom "to get on with the story of (his) life."

On receiving Shahryar's message, Zaman reflects on Sherry and wonders if she has a younger sister.

> "if she does, I'll make no inquiries, demand no stories, set no conditions, but humbly put my life in her hands, tell her the whole tale of the two thousand and two nights that led me to her,"

(again, a doubling, as in the number of tales and tellers)

> "and bid her end that story as she will--whether with the 1st goodnight of all or (what I can just dimly envision, like dawn in another world) some clear and fine and fresh good morning." (p.52)

In other words, Zaman planned the same situation that Sherry did, adding his story but allowing Doony to end it, taking over the narrative from him.

Doony, though, has doubts, which dampen the ringing effect of Zaman's last sentence with its "'clear and fine and fresh good morning'"; she counters, """I can't imagine what you're talking about""" and doubts the veracity of Zaman's story, to which he replies:

> "They're too important to be lies. Fictions, maybe--but truer than fact." (p.53)

This sentence asserts what the Genie only suggested: that fictions and facts are irrelevant in themselves and that their use gives them their value. Zaman's whole story may indeed be false, but who cares? It's valuable to him and by

extension to us, so its truth-value as a literal fact isn't important; it's what it does for the human condition. He continues:

> "Let's take the truly tragic view of love! Maybe it is a fiction, but it's the profoundest and best of all! Treasure me, Dunyazade, as I'll treasure you!"
> ("'It won't work,'" Doony says.)
> "Nothing works! But the enterprise is noble; its full of joy and life, and the other ways are deathy. Let's make love like passionate equals!"
> "You mean as if we were equals," Dunyazade said. "You know we're not. What you want is impossible."
> "Despite your heart's feelings?" pressed the King. "Let it be as if! Let's make a philosophy of that as if!" (p.53)

This exchange forms the narrative and philosophical climax of the novella; we can't really know the truth of anything, not even love, let alone the facts of a mere story. All we can do, all we need to do, is to act as if, to love and treasure one another as if it were a possibility, and then fiction and reality merge into a liveable alternative to despair.

Shah Zaman goes on to affirm Shahryar's alternative to pain, "equal promiscuity"; "'he believes that all people are unfaithful, and that the way to spare oneself the pain of infidelity is to love and not care.'" (p.54) Shahryar accepts a truth, real or not, with which he can live, while Zaman accepts a fiction, unreal or not, with which he can love. He admits its absurdity while affirming it to the end:

> "Treasure me, Dunyazade!"
> "We've talked all night; I hear the cocks; it's getting light."
> "Good morning, then! Good morning!" (p.54)

Again, Doony brings the story to a halt with a series of brief statements, but she no longer has the final word. The Shah both winds the tale up and sends it spinning off into the absurd, optimistic morning of a new day, a "clear and fine and fresh morning."

After the crescendo of part two, the quiet exposition that greets us in part three is surprising yet welcome, like the first few steps on the platform after a ride on a roller coaster. Very deliberately, the narrator, who has taken the narrative completely over, explains in the first paragraph the historical context of the "Dunyazadiad" in its relation to The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night. The second paragraph is confusing, yet strangely appealing in its oddness and beauty:

> If I could invent a story as beautiful, it should be about little Dunyazade and her bridegroom, who pass a thousand nights in one dark night

(an interesting image of what has passed before, both literally and figuratively)

> and in the morning embrace each other; they make love side by side, their faces close, and go out to greet sister and brother in the forenoon of a new life.

This image goes beyond our knowledge, but it fulfills the hope and expectation instilled in us by the climactic last part of part two. This is, we think, as it should be. The narrator doesn't let us bask long in its warmth, however:

> Dunyazade's story begins in the middle; in the middle of my own

(which can refer to the preceding story, to the Genie's story,

which embraces all stories, including the human story, begins and ends at night; moreover, we have seen it to be a sort of Mobius strip, veering from one place to another and losing sight of itself in some of its vertiginous bends but always returning to a beginning. It can never end, as long as humans live and love and require the truth of fiction and the fiction of love to keep them alive. For although each man's story has a beginning and an end, that frame and the millions of other stories co-existing alongside it, framed within it, and enframing it form a timelessly returning Story which each person must recreate for himself, discovering his own "as if" to cope with his temporal blindness and simultaneous knowledge of "the Destroyer of Delights and Desolater of Dwelling-places" (p.56):

> To be joyous in the full acceptance of this denoument is surely to possess a treasure, the key to which is the understanding that Key and Treasure are the same. There (with a kiss, little sister) is the sense of our story, Dunyazade: The key to the treasure is the treasure.

NOTE

[1] John Barth. Chimera. (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 3. All subsequent references to this text will be noted in the body of this paper.