Iconography in the 19th century Persian Book Illustration and Painting: the case of Thousand and One Nights

Questions:
- What features characterize the available historical knowledge about art in Iran? What are the benefits/shortcomings of this approach?
- It is claimed that the Persian art of painting declined after the European influence; what is wrong with the reception of a “foreign” influence? To what extent was it mere “imitation”? Where does the agency of Persian tradition of painting stand in this narrative?

Sani ol-Molk (1814-1866)
- (one of) the first Iranian painters who studied in Europe
- productive before and after his European “contact”
  - his works are a valuable platform that shifts the center of focus from mere historical collecting of data to the painting itself
  - his works’ development provides the means to test the historical assertion about the demise of Persian paintings after the European influence

1. Thousand and One Nights
The illustrated book of Thousand and One Nights is the last sample of the Royal tradition of book making in Iran, produced under the supervision of Sani ol-Molk between 1852-1859.
- this book alone will not suffice partly because the scope of possibility was ultimately defined by the verbal narrative

2. Single Paintings
- single paintings were produced before and after his European experiences
- a comparative perspective for testing the European impact

Elham Etemadi
University of Leuven

an illustration of Shahrzad from the book:
Shahrzad va Donyazad Hekayat
Mikounad [Shahrzad and Donyazad are Narrating], (vol. 1, p. 56)

1847-50(?)

1. Thousand and One Nights
- a flower and two buds on her chest foreshadow her upcoming three sons: the vest’s golden stripe encompass the flower and buds, on the one end, and points to her womb in the form of an arrow, on the other

- the illustrations associate the presence of a black person to the concept of death in the narrative
- in this illustration the black lady is separated from Shahrzad with a wall in between. The distinction points out the fact that she is protected from death

- why is Shahrzad portrayed in a combination of Iranian and European clothes (i.e. a long bell-shaped skirt with a decollete shirt)?

“Shahrzad had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and had accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred” (Thousand and One Nights, p. 41)

- Shahrzad is to represent an educated and knowledgeable woman who is different from other women

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