

What's in a Frame? The Medieval Textualization of Traditional Storytelling

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But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence. Then Dinarzad said, "What a strange and entertaining story!" Shahrazad replied, "What is this compared with what I shall tell you tomorrow night if the king spares me and lets me live!"

The following night Shahrazad said. . . .

(Haddawy 1990:18 and *passim*)¹

Thus nature interrupts the storyteller, in this case Shahrazad, narrator of *The Thousand Nights and a Night*. Although the day breaks in at more or less regular intervals, it almost always takes us by surprise as we are engrossed in the tale that the narrator spins. As readers our experience of the tales is somewhat different from that of the listening audience portrayed in the text, yet the complexity of the narrative seduces us just as it does Shahrayar. As a master storyteller, Shahrazad compels Shahrayar to forget the real world in which he plans to execute her and instead enter the world of the narrative. Similarly, the modern reader may leave behind the twentieth-century literate world and become part of the listening audience, experiencing the oral tradition through the means of the frame tale that manages to bridge the gap between traditional and literary narrative. And what of the medieval audience whose culture and artists created the genre? How did they respond to a narrative that was written and yet evoked the oral performance context through both content and form?

¹ With the exception of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, all cited texts have been consulted in the original languages, but I have chosen to make all citations from English translations in order to provide for greater cohesion within the paper.

While previous scholarship has greatly advanced our understanding of individual frame tales, particularly *The Canterbury Tales*, the *Decameron*, and *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, little has been said in regard to the genre itself. Part of this lack is certainly due to the wide variety of works that have been included under this rubric at one time or another. The genre spans centuries and cultures; indeed, one of its most fascinating features is its inherent flexibility. Because it seemingly encompasses so many narrative forms and traditions, the frame tale has escaped precise definition and study. While this essay can by no means answer all the questions that the term “frame tale” generates, it will provide a context for further discussion, particularly in regard to the unique role of the frame tale in the orality/literacy continuum of the Middle Ages.

Definitions and Distinctions

A frame tale is not simply an anthology of stories. Rather, it is a fictional narrative (usually prose but not necessarily so) composed primarily for the purpose of presenting other narratives. A frame tale depicts a series of oral storytelling events in which one or more characters in the frame tale are also narrators of the interpolated tales. I use the word “interpolated” here to refer to any of the shorter tales that a framing story surrounds. While frame tales vary considerably in their length and complexity,² each has an impact on the stories it encompasses extending far beyond that of mere gathering and juxtaposition. The frame tale provides a context for reading, listening, and, of course, interpreting the interior tales. Despite its power over its contents, however, the frame tale alone is rather weak. It derives its meaning largely from what it contains and thus does not stand independently from the tales enclosed within it. Conversely, however, an interpolated tale can stand alone or appear in a different frame, albeit with a different connotation.

Some of the works that I would include in the definition of “frame tale” also have been called such things as “novellae,” “boxing tales,” or simply “stories within stories.” The genre appears to have been an eastern invention, most likely originating in India, where it can be traced back at

² I would not, however, consider in this definition a framing story that enclosed only one tale.

least three millennia (Blackburn 1986:527), and then moving through the Near East. In Europe, although the form appears earlier—Johannes wrote the *Dolopathos* version of *The Seven Sages of Rome* in the twelfth century, and Alfonso X commissioned the translation of *Kalila wa-Dimna* into Spanish in the thirteenth—the frame tale reached its height of popularity in the fourteenth century. And while the genre was prominent throughout European literature in the medieval period, as the Middle Ages waned so did the frame tale.

Some of the best known and most studied frame tales are the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*, the Persian *Tuti-Nameh* (*Tales of a Parrot*), the Arabic *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (*The Thousand Nights and a Night*) and *Kalila wa-Dimna* (a version of the *Panchatantra*), the many versions of *The Book of Sindibad* and *The Seven Sages of Rome*,³ Petrus Alfonsi's *Disciplina clericalis*, Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor*,⁴ Juan Manuel's *Conde Lucanor*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*, John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. While this list is by no means exhaustive, it does indicate the variety of the genre.

Just as important to the definition as what it includes is what it omits. I do not consider as frame tales collections of tales that do not have a primarily narrative frame, e.g., the *Lais* of Marie de France, the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid; nor more complex narratives that would retain much of their significance without the inclusion of their interpolated tales: e.g., Homer's *Odyssey*, Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, Cervantes' *Don Quijote*. While all these works clearly make use of framing devices, they are not frame tales under the definition I have proposed, and thus are not included in the following discussion.

The great variety encompassed by the term “frame tale” can be further subdivided. One of these categories is the student/teacher tale, such as the *Disciplina Clericalis* or *Conde Lucanor*. Primarily didactic in intent, this type has a single narrator who is a teacher or counselor telling stories to educate his student, usually a prince. These tales also fall within a larger

³ *The Book of Sindibad* and *The Seven Sages of Rome* are the titles of the eastern and western branches, respectively, of the same frame tale, which is extant in over 40 different versions.

⁴ The *Libro de buen amor* contains songs as well as stories, and its frame is more tenuous than those of the others, but it is nevertheless similar enough to be included in the genre.

genre of advice books, sometimes called “Mirrors for Princes.” The framing stories within this category usually portray an extended conversation between teacher and student where the student will ask a question that the teacher answers, using a tale to illustrate the lesson. John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* provides an allegorical example of this genre, where Genius takes on the role of teacher and storyteller.

The other frame tales are primarily entertaining and can have any number of narrators, listeners, and themes, thus depicting a variety performance contexts. *The Thousand Nights and a Night* has a single narrator, Shahrazad, who tells tales to entertain her tyrannical husband, eventually softening his heart and changing his mind. The *Kalila wa-Dimna* resembles the fable tradition in that its narrators are jackals rather than human beings. Kalila, the cautious and law-abiding brother, trades stories with his devious and ambitious brother Dimna. The versions of *The Book of Sindibad* and *The Seven Sages of Rome* have from seven to nine narrators. Seven sages, a malicious queen, and a prince use their narrations to convince the king of the prince’s guilt or innocence in a trial-like setting. The *Libro de buen amor* has four narrators, one of whom is an allegorical representation of Love, and contains its tales within two extended debates over divine vs. worldly love. Both Boccaccio and Marguerite, who clearly patterns her tale after that of Boccaccio, have ten narrators. Boccaccio depicts seven women and three male companions who tell stories to pass the time while they isolate themselves from the plague. Marguerite’s ten narrators, five men and five women, are stranded together in an abbey because of a flood, and they too decide to pass the time by sharing stories. Finally, Chaucer has a total of 23 narrators, including himself, who tell each other tales on their pilgrimage to Canterbury.⁵ Often the interpolated tales in these more entertaining frames are bawdy or comic. It is important to realize, however, that such subdivisions are not mutually exclusive. The teacher/student type of tale may include bawdy tales and the ostensibly entertaining frame tale always includes serious messages for its audience, whether they be overt or veiled. An author often uses this dual nature of the entertaining frame tale to place a heavier burden of interpretation on his audience:

⁵ While there are more proposed narrators on the pilgrimage, the extant manuscripts only contain the tales of twenty-three. The issue of the supposed incompleteness of this text and the *Heptameron* is discussed below.

Again, such as they are, these stories, like everything else, can work both harm and profit, according to the disposition of the listener.

(*Decameron*; Payne 1982:796)

And so this book of mine, to every man or woman, to the prudent and the imprudent, to whomever would understand the good and elect salvation and do good works in the love of God, and also to whomever may desire foolish worldly love—whichever path he may wish to walk—this book can say truly to each one: *I will give thee understanding, et cetera.*

(*Libro de buen amor*; Daly 1977:27)

The distinction is thus one of degree. The interpolated tales do not exert total control; each type of frame can and often does contain many types of tales. Because they generally depict public storytelling events, the more entertaining frame tales will be focused upon here, but many of the same observations can be made regarding the more didactic frames.

Framing structures also oscillate between two general types: tight and loose (Jaunzems 1978:45). The tighter the frame, the more control it exerts over the content of the interpolated tales, tending to make the collection more unified. Conversely, a looser frame will contain more variety. A more didactic frame tale will tend also to be tighter: if a student asks a question concerning the loyalty of friends, the teacher is somewhat limited in his choice of tale. If, however, the intent of the tale is to entertain, as is usually the case in *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, the narrator can choose any theme so long as it holds the audience's attention.⁶ An entertaining frame does not mean that the content cannot be controlled, however. In fact, in the *Decameron* and *Heptameron* different characters take charge of different days and suggest the day's theme, and, for the most part, the narrators comply. Of course, any distinction in a genre as varied as this one can only be suggestive. Yet an author like Juan Ruiz seemingly breaks some unwritten rules by having a narrator claim to be teaching one lesson, while narrating a story that illustrates quite a different one. If one believes this variation is intentional, then the frame of the *Libro de buen amor* is actually parodic, making it quite tight. If, as some have argued, the contradiction is merely accidental, then one would conclude that the frame is loose. Those who choose the latter interpretation would argue that the

⁶ Nevertheless, the frame of the *Thousand Nights and a Night* is somewhat tightened by the prevalent theme of telling a story to save a life.

transition from oral tale to literate argument creates a haphazard fit between the interpolated tale and its context, but this type of assumption does a great disservice not only to the complexity of the oral tradition, but also to the skill of the medieval author.

The frame tale genre spans not only cultures but also the so-called “divide” between orality and literacy. Because it depicts oral storytelling events, yet clearly exists in written form in the Middle Ages, the frame tale falls into this area that we are still struggling to identify and analyze. This characteristic led Walter J. Ong to some insightful and provocative comments on the frame tale within a larger discussion of the qualities of medieval orality and literacy (1977:70):

The frame story was in fact quite common around Europe at this period [fourteenth century]. Audience readjustment was a major feature of mature medieval culture, a culture more focused on reading than any earlier culture had been. Would it not be helpful to discuss the frame device as a contrivance all but demanded by the literary economy of the time rather than to expatiate on it as a singular stroke of genius? For this it certainly was not, unless we define genius as the ability to make the most of an awkward situation. The frame is really a rather clumsy gambit, although a good narrator can bring it off pretty well when he has to. It hardly has widespread immediate appeal for ordinary readers today.

While he refers here to *The Canterbury Tales* and the *Decameron*, Ong’s comments are suggestive to our reading of any frame tale. The frame tale was certainly not a “singular stroke of genius,” at least not in the fourteenth century. Rather, it provides a means of textualizing the oral tradition. And although I would disagree with the “clumsy gambit” characterization, I believe that analysis of the role of the frame tale in an oral/literate continuum,⁷ particularly in regard to audience reception, will reveal to us important information about not only the frame tale but also the unique relationship between oral tradition and literate production in the Middle Ages.

⁷ I borrow this term from Tannen 1982.

Some Characteristics of the Frame Tale

Several characteristics of the frame tale lent themselves well to its reception by medieval audiences. First of all, the frame tale is almost infinitely flexible, enabling it to contain tales of many themes, lengths, and styles. The interpolated tales could be taken from both literate and oral traditions, thus providing authors and narrators with an almost limitless supply of material. Johannes de Alta Silva, in his *Dolopathos*,⁸ writes that he has heard rather than read his tales (Hilka 1913:95): “These tales, which I did not read but heard, were written by me to please and instruct the reader.” Other tales can be traced to literate sources, such as Juan Ruiz’s adaptation of some of Aesop’s fables in the *Libro de buen amor*. The frame tale thus draws upon not only a variety of rhetorical styles, but also a variety of sources.

Secondly, because of this flexibility, a frame tale, particularly one with a looser structure, could carry traditional tales over time and space. It is quite possible that a compiler or storyteller could have heard or read a frame tale containing interpolated stories that he might not have used within his version of the same frame tale, but then used them or passed them on in another context. Indeed, in a volume devoted to tracing the sources and analogues of the *Canterbury Tales* (Bryan and Dempster 1958), the authors include Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and English versions of *The Seven Sages of Rome* among Chaucer’s possible sources. There is no reason not to believe that oral versions of some frame tales could have performed the same function, although this phenomenon obviously is difficult to prove through extant texts. All enframed tales would be part of the greater available corpus of traditional narratives from which authors and storytellers drew.

Thirdly, because of this same flexibility, the frame tale could be adapted to a variety of linguistic and cultural contexts. Through various means of translation and transmission, a frame tale such as *The Book of Sindibad/Seven Sages of Rome* crossed cultural boundaries with relative ease.⁹ The fairly uncomplicated frame story could be revised into a product that was within the horizon of expectations of a local audience while still preserving elements of its sometimes exotic origin. At the same time, the

⁸ A version of *The Seven Sages of Rome*.

⁹ There are a number of different theories regarding the origin and transmission of this collection. See particularly Comparetti 1882, Perry 1959, and Epstein 1967.

composer/compiler of the new version could take stories out and replace them with others more to his audience's liking. Indeed, the *Book of Sindibad/Seven Sages of Rome* provides an excellent example of this adaptability. The collection existed in almost every European language as well as many eastern ones and in at least 40 different versions in the Middle Ages, and while there is great variation among the versions, one can see that they are all versions of a single frame tale.

The popularity and longevity of a particular frame tale would then be dependent to a large extent upon its flexibility and adaptability. As long as authors and compilers could keep the tale and its interpolated tales current with audience tastes, the tale would live on. This mutability would explain, for example, why the *Seven Sages of Rome* continued to be popular in Spain after it had disappeared from other traditions. Spanish translators imported at least four distinct versions of the collection over four hundred years, and then continued to change them, thus maintaining interest in successive generations of audiences.¹⁰ Moreover, the popularity of a single frame tale could create a market for imitations, which also served to extend the tradition of the genre. We can see this chain of events occurring in the case of the *Decameron*, which inspired numerous translations and imitations, even though most modern scholars agree that few compare to the original. Along with other factors, the lesser quality of these works may also have contributed to the decline of the genre even as they extended it. Created by imitation rather than tradition, they did not inspire the same degree of loyalty in the audience.

Elasticity in composition and reception negates any notion of completeness in the frame tale. Some nineteenth-century editors and translators attempted to determine exactly how *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, for example, can be divided into 1,001 nights. The obsession with the number 1,001 also led redactors, scribes, and translators to add other traditional tales in order to "complete" the collection.¹¹ There is now general agreement among Arabists, however, that the title is not to be taken so literally. The number 1,000 merely signifies a very large number; to add

¹⁰ The reception and development of the *Book of Sindibad/Seven Sages of Rome* in Spain is the subject of another article, currently in progress.

¹¹ In the case of the *Thousand Nights and a Night*, the other side of this notion of the whole leads scholars to label all additions to the "original" text as spurious, raising a question as to what "original" means in the context of traditional narrative.

one is to indicate a number approaching infinity. Similarly, arguments over how many stories the “complete” *Canterbury Tales* should contain or why one of the seven sages might tell more than one tale on his given day of narration are based on an entirely literate idea of completeness. Granted, the condition of the manuscripts leads to these conclusions. The fact that the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Heptameron* each survives not in one definitive manuscript but in a series of fragments makes conclusions hard to draw. The authors indicate in their prologues that there will be a set number of tales told over the course of a predetermined period of time in the case of Marguerite and a predetermined distance in Chaucer. Yet the oral tradition is unpredictable and flexible; in depicting it, the author whose text does not follow through to the exact number of tales indicated in the prologue may never have intended it to be “complete.” Boccaccio’s rigidity in this regard seems to be more the exception than the rule. Moreover, part of the fascination of both medieval and modern audiences for the frame tale is its seeming endlessness. Because these texts are in large part derived from traditional sources, the whole of the tale lies in the tradition as a whole and not in any one version of it. Indeed, the project of looking for or imagining a complete version of any one frame tale is perhaps as futile as trying to determine what constitutes the “real” *Iliad*. One may argue, and rightly so, that a frame tale is customarily much more a part of a literate tradition than the epic, but it is a literate genre that continually looks back into the oral tradition for inspiration and narrative material and so preserves many of the elements of oral narrative, even as it textualizes them.

The Rhetorical Persistence of Traditional Forms¹²

By depicting an oral composition and performance and drawing from traditional sources, the frame tale provides the medieval audience with a continuity of reception between the act of listening and that of reading. As Ong suggests, the frame tale can show a literate listening audience how it might become a reading audience. It displays in print form a situation familiar to medieval audiences—the oral composition and performance of narrative. The frame tale essentially textualizes traditional storytelling as the

¹² I borrow this term from chapter 3 of John Miles Foley’s book *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (1995).

audiences become more accustomed to texts. Therefore, it can adequately serve both the listening and reading audiences.

One must remember, however, that the frame tale is neither purely nor exclusively the product of literacy. Indeed, complex frames also live in the oral tradition, and are sometimes even dependent upon the performance context. More than fifty years ago, Linda Dégh discovered frame tales in the Hungarian oral tradition (1944), an observation that has not received the attention and further research it deserves.¹³ Far from being too complex a device for the oral composer, the frame enabled storytellers to keep the attention of their audiences, particularly when the telling would stretch over a series of days or nights. By creating a frame, a composer could maintain a contextual continuity, linking a series of stories from day to day. *The Thousand Nights and a Night* lives in versions today in much the same way (Haddawy 1990:ix). Familiar with the frame tale of Shahrazad and Shahrayar, an audience can always request “another of Shahrazad’s stories” from a storyteller. Because the frame story itself is so embedded in the minds of the audience, the composer would not even have to repeat it. Rather, he or she can begin by merely saying, “The next night Shahrazad said, ‘It is related to me, O King . . .’.” The teller can then embark on the telling of any one of a number of tales in his or her repertoire. It is also possible that a frame tale, particularly a “tight” one, could have served as a mnemonic device. If the storyteller usually told the same story in the same place, the frame tale might have helped him to remember elements of the interpolated tale. In terms of structural complexity, one might even argue that the cumulative tale, a popular folk genre, is every bit as demanding of the memory of teller and audience as is the frame tale.

Of course, we cannot prove with certainty that the frame tale was a popular oral traditional genre in the Middle Ages. In the form we have it in medieval manuscripts, it is obviously the product of a literate author or redactor. Nevertheless, it retains traditional forms, even as it textualizes the tradition. Moreover, as is the case with much of medieval literature, it was probably performed or recited, thus bringing it back into the oral tradition for its reception. We can see this “rhetorical persistence of traditional forms” at three levels: language, structure, and character.

In the case of *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, the traditional linguistic register is plain to see because even manuscript versions of this

¹³ My thanks to Steve Czurigia for his English translation of this article.

frame tale still demonstrate many instances of colloquial rather than classical Arabic.¹⁴ For this reason, among others, the tale was not considered “literature” until quite recently. In the Arabic literary tradition, “literature” is poetry composed in classical Arabic; thus many traditional forms were omitted from scholarly discussions for centuries. Not until after the collection received attention from literature scholars in the West did it begin to gain scholarly recognition in the East, where the rise in its acceptance and study was largely a part of a greater trend in folklore studies, inspired by Arab nationalism.

One of the unfortunate occurrences in the snarled textual history of *The Thousand Nights and a Night* is that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors tried to classicize the colloquial diction in order to create editions that were more satisfying to their literate sensibilities. David Pinault describes the vast scope of these emendations (1992:15): “They normalized the spelling of individual words, substituted elevated diction for colloquial expressions, formalized dialogue so as to remove traces of influence from the vernacular, and altered the grammatical structure of sentences to align them with the rules of *fusha* [classical literary Arabic].” Even so, traces of the colloquial language remain. Muhsin Mahdi’s recent edition of a fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript (1984) retains more of the colloquial language and gives a sense of what the medieval *Thousand Nights and a Night* looked like. Even though it is a literate production, much of its language is in the traditional colloquial register.

Even frame tales in languages that do not have the marked diglossia of Arabic, however, show the persistence of traditional linguistic forms. Carl Lindahl discusses Chaucer’s use of “folk rhetoric” in *The Canterbury Tales* (1987:96ff.). In particular, he attributes the pilgrim’s use of indirect insult to Chaucer’s attempt to duplicate the speech of commoners. Commoners would not be able to insult someone from a higher class directly for fear of reprisal, so they developed a system of indirect insults that would get their point across safely. Most of the insults in *The Canterbury Tales* take this indirect form. Lindahl further argues that Chaucer relied on these forms in order to protect himself from criticism.

¹⁴ A marked characteristic of the Arabic language is its diglossia. The colloquial, oral form of the language differs considerably from the classical, literate variety. The former lacks many of the formal declensions, and, when simulated in writing, often differs orthographically from the latter.

By displacing the unacceptable stories and common language from his voice to those of his churlish characters, Chaucer allowed himself greater freedom, thus becoming “the most brilliantly innovative and the most folkloric of poets” (167).

Boccaccio, too, borrows some of his language from the oral tradition. He is quite aware of differences between the two modes of communicating, so much so that he uses them in a disclaimer in the conclusion (Payne 1982:796):

And if perchance there be therein some tittle, some wordlet or two, freer, perhaps, than pleases your squeamish hypocritical prudes, who weigh words rather than deeds and study more to appear good than to be good, I say that it should be no more be forbidden me to write them than it is commonly forbidden to men and women to say all day long *hole* and *peg* and *mortar* and *pestle* and *sausage* and *baloney* and all manner of suchlike things.

There are those words we say and those we write. Boccaccio argues, albeit ironically here, that the distinction should not be quite so rigid. He is, after all, depicting oral storytelling; why not use the vocabulary that his narrators would use in an actual oral context? Anything less would be to sacrifice the accuracy of his presentation.

Boccaccio also recognizes the choices made in speaking and reciting orally. Not every word is always appropriate, but he argues that the context he has constructed allows him considerable freedom (*idem*):

Moreover, it is easy enough to see that these things are spoken, not in the church, of the affairs whereof it behooves to speak with a mind and in terms alike of the chastest (albeit among its histories there are tales enough to be found of quite other fashion than those written by me), nor yet in the schools of philosophy, where decency is no less required than elsewhere, nor among churchmen or philosophers anywhere, but amidst gardens, in a place of delight and diversion and among men and women, though young, yet of mature wit and not to be led astray by stories, at a time when it was not forbidden to the most virtuous to go, for their preservation, with their breeches on their heads.

While it is clear that Boccaccio does not have a primary intention here of accurately depicting a performance context, he does clearly recognize the variety of language. Just as certain words are generally present only in oral

discourse, so, too, certain words are relegated to certain contexts within the oral tradition. Aware of these differences, he chooses to use those of the oral tradition and the storytelling event rather than the more seemly ones of the literate tradition and philosophical or religious discourse. Boccaccio thus plays with his contemporary audience and defends himself against the probable condemnation of his tales, but at the same time he shows the modern reader that a medieval author can recognize the differences among different performance contexts and manipulate them according to his own purposes.

The variety of the frame tale provides us then with a variety of traditional linguistic structures. In the case of *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, the traditional language seems directly the result of the oral origins of the tales and their language. Indeed, the fact that we can see editors trying to “improve” the language shows that a state of diglossia between oral and literate narrative exists, but that the frame tale includes aspects of both. In the later frame tales where we can identify a single author, the situation is not quite so clear. Certainly some traditional forms still persist due to the oral origins of the tales. At the same time, however, a Chaucer or Boccaccio may use some forms intentionally in order to make his depiction of the storytelling event appear more authentic. The extent to which traditional language exists in these works as a conscious move on the part of the author is difficult to assess.

The frame tale is not popular with modern audiences, and indeed in most cultures interest in it waned along with the Middle Ages. Part of the reason for this decline was due to the structure of the frame, which the modern literate audience sees as “repetitive.” Much like actual storytelling events, the structure of the frame tale is similar from day to day or night to night. The participants gather under comparable circumstances for each storytelling session, and the stories themselves often resemble each other so closely that the external audience finds distinguishing among them difficult.

The stories of Shahrazad are divided and often interrupted by the coming of dawn. The day arrives at more or less regular intervals, providing a formulaic cadence for the narrative. In print versions of this tale collection, one can expect a new day every few pages that provokes an identical reaction in the narrator each time: “But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence.” These formulaic divisions at once recall the oral narrative style and give the impression of a realistic storytelling event in which the skilled narrator can spin tales endlessly

through the night, interrupted only by the force of nature. Just as the audience is sure of the fact that day will come at more or less regular intervals, so too is the narrative interrupted according to the same rhythm.

These intrusions into the narrative flow often come in the middle of stories, leading many critics to believe that they are a primarily literate device put in place to create suspense, both for the internal and external audiences. Yet their very regularity belies this assumption. Moreover, many of the stories contained in *The Thousand Nights and a Night* are traditional, and we can assume that the audience would be familiar with them already, obviating the need for creating suspense in our modern sense of the word. At the same time, however, an oral storyteller also might wish to conclude the evening in the middle of a story in the hope that his or her audience would return the next evening, precisely what Shahrazad must do to preserve her life. The interruptions recall the oral tradition, where a round of storytelling might continue over a period of days (or nights), which would be interrupted at more or less regular intervals. In an Islamic society in particular, the session would have to end at dawn so that narrator and audience alike could perform the morning prayers before sunrise. The *Tuti-Nameh*, which is in more inflexible form than *The Thousand Nights and a Night* in the extant manuscripts and has a named author, also uses the device of dawn to interrupt the narrative. Here, however, all pretense of a natural division is lost because each night comprises a single story, and the nights are of varying lengths. Thus what seems natural and tradition-inspired in *The Thousand Nights and a Night* acquires an artificiality in a more literate work.

Structural repetition appears in other frame tales, albeit in other forms. In the *Book of Sindibad/Seven Sages of Rome* tradition, the repetitive structure is a necessary element of the plot. The storytelling session must fill the seven days during which the prince is forbidden from speaking. Consequently, the queen makes her accusation against the prince and calls for his execution each day, and each day one of the sages responds with a tale. From one day to the next the scenario does not change, and the stories could easily be shuffled without any impact on the story. The structuring constitutes an extended formula. Just as we expect a feasting scene in an epic to follow certain patterns, so we observe the narrative competition depicted in the frame tale to be the same from day to day. The *Libro de buen amor*, too, despite its structural irregularities, has a consistent pattern in those sections where the tales are incorporated. Each of the two

tale debates concerns the same topic as the collection as a whole—the virtues of divine versus worldly love—and each is organized in the same way as the debaters alternate arguments and illustrate these arguments with tales and fables. Both this collection and the *Seven Sages* versions seem to derive their structure as much from the rules of formal debate as from genres of oral performance.

As the frame tale becomes more literary, this structure of recurring scenes changes. Authors like Boccaccio and Chaucer try to vary events from day to day and narrative to narrative so that each performance event will be distinct. To a large extent they succeed, but not entirely. We still have similar circumstances surrounding each storytelling event, even though the author tries to incorporate variation. In the *Decameron*, for example, each character/narrator is responsible for a day, setting ground rules for the activities and choosing a theme for the day's stories. Each narrator contributes a story each day, and the majority of the tales reflect the theme of the collection as a whole, which is the relationship between men and women. Unlike the *Seven Sages*, where men and women are in conflict, here the competition is lighthearted, as are many of the tales. Even though Boccaccio provides variations, however, recurring structures and themes persist. In later imitations of the *Decameron*, the repetition becomes wooden, lacking the vibrancy of Boccaccio's text. These imitations show more signs of literate tinkering that distances them from the liveliness of oral tradition which the *Decameron* retains. These later authors also include structural repetition in their texts, but as in the case of the *Tuti-Nameh*, it has become merely a device for separating the stories rather than a look back at traditional patterns.

If we see the insertion of structural variance as a goal of a literate frame tale composer, then Chaucer is the most successful. *The Canterbury Tales* presents particular problems for any discussion of structure, of course, because of its existence in fragments. Nevertheless, we can see that Chaucer's plan for his collection was different than that of Boccaccio or any of the anonymous compilers of earlier frame tales. First of all, distance and not time is the determinant of the organization. The pilgrims are each invited to tell four tales: two on the way to Canterbury and two on the return trip. Thus the scenario does not really change from day to day, but from narrator to narrator. Chaucer introduces his narrators in the General Prologue and then again in individual prologues before the tales. Structurally, then, each tale is introduced identically with a preamble that

provides information on the narrator, his or her tale and motivation for telling it. Because these prologues are more lengthy and contain more information than the divisions that other frame tale authors use, however, they enable Chaucer to differentiate between narrators and between tales to a greater extent. Thus he balances repetition and variance. One would expect in the type of storytelling competition that is *The Canterbury Tales* that each competitor would want to introduce his or her tale in such a way as to get the most attention from the audience. Chaucer brings this quality of the oral performance into his text by means of his prologues. He also uses them, however, to make each performance unique, and although we may never know what his true intentions toward organizing *The Canterbury Tales* were, we can certainly see his designs in creating a distinct storytelling event for each narrator.

The Mirrors for Princes and wisdom books also contain structural repetition, but here it is usually quite strict and rigid. Each section begins in a similar fashion with the student asking a question of the teacher who then responds with a story. Here the divisions and repetition seem not to have much at all to do with the portrayal of oral performance but rather provide a means of indexing the tales in encyclopedic form. In addition, many of the sections or chapters not only are numbered but have headings as well. One can quickly skim through, for example, and find the tale that has to do with the loyalty of friends or that concerning greed. Because these collections serve as guides for behavior, they are constructed so that the reader can turn to any section as needed. This type of ordering would position the Mirror for Princes in the realm of literacy as defined by Jack Goody (1977), who sees lists and indices as products of the literate mind.

All frame tales by their very nature contain structural repetitions or reiterations. While some of these are clearly the products of literacy, as is the case with the wisdom books, many are persistent reminders of the oral ancestors of these tales. Because recurring structural elements appear in the frame tale for a variety of reasons, however, we cannot use this evidence alone to prove any relationship between the genre and the oral tradition. Taken with other indicators, however, especially those of traditional linguistic registers and traditional characterization, the structural reiterations show that even the most literate of frame tale authors continue to look to the oral tradition for their material.

In terms of characterization, frame tales clearly recall traditional tales. Shahrazad notwithstanding, the majority of characters and narrators

in these tales have no names. Instead, they are identified by some characteristic, often a profession. Even Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, clearly the work of a literate hand, retains this traditional quality. One need only think of the narrators: the miller, the knight, the prioress, and so on. These generic titles give the author flexibility while at the same time providing the audience with something familiar. How many traditional tales begin with the words, "Once upon a time there was a king . . ." ? This device adds to the adaptability of the frame tale because each audience can identify the character or narrator with one with which it is familiar.

Nevertheless, the narrators sometimes do have names in the frame tale, although the characters in their stories usually do not. In some cases the naming of the narrators has a specific purpose. For example, in the wisdom book, the patron for whom the book is intended may be named as the student. Thus the author clearly incorporates his role as teacher into the text itself. Yet the tales themselves often give no indication of their audience, and the narrator and prince, although named, are not distinctive. Any prince could look into the "mirror" of any other and perhaps see himself.

In other frame tales, naming plays a different role. For example, in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*, the narrators apparently represent historical figures. Oisille is recognized by most as an anagram for "Loise" and hence "Louise." She may be intended as Marguerite's mother, Louise de Savoie, or Brantôme's grandmother, Louise de Daillon. The name Oisille also suggests *oiselle*, or female bird, opening up numerous possibilities for interpretation. Marguerite appears in the text as Parlamente, apparently a play on two words meaning "pearl," another term loaded with symbolism (Chilton 1984:12). The *Heptameron* is clearly a literate text which draws heavily on Boccaccio, however, making this naming a conscious effort on the part of a literate author to distinguish one character from another.

Distinguishing the characters is accomplished not only through naming, however, and naming is indeed only a minor element of characterization. In the more literary frame tales—*The Canterbury Tales*, *Decameron*, *Heptameron*—the authors take great pains to create actual characters whose personalities differentiate them from one another. Chaucer, Boccaccio, and Marguerite also try to give their narrators distinct identities as narrators so that we cannot, for example, imagine the Wife of Bath telling the Pardoner's Tale. Here again, Chaucer incorporates the

most diversity into his cast of characters. Indeed, much of the uniqueness of each storytelling event in *The Canterbury Tales* is due to the characterization of the narrators, but although the characters are distinct from each other they are frequently typecast by their professions and social status. Perhaps because of the looser structure and seemingly unfinished nature of *The Canterbury Tales*, it is easier for the modern reader to perceive distinct personalities among these narrators. In Boccaccio's and Marguerite's frame tales, the structural repetition and the sheer quantity of stories rob each tale and narrator of some individuality.

In those frame tales more tightly bound to tradition, *The Seven Sages of Rome* or *The Book of Sindibad*, for instance, the characters are much less distinct. Naming does not distinguish one sage from the other; they can be freely interchanged without disturbing the flow of the narrative. If the seventh sage told the tale of the fifth, a reader would not notice any difference in his or her experience of the text. In this particular set of tales, some of the connections between character and narrator are so loose that in certain versions a sage tells a tale that in another version may be included in the stepmother's narration. There is also little sense of different purposes among the narrators. Because the *Seven Sages* tradition is so broad, however, there are exceptions to this uniformity of character. For example, Johannes' *Dolopathos*, the most literary of the western versions, includes Virgil as one of the narrators. He is clearly distinguished from the sages, and it appears that Johannes expects us to associate all of the Roman poet's characteristics with his narration in the *Dolopathos*. He is also the prince's teacher in this version, so his role is yet again distinguished. This version is additionally remarkable in that the king and the prince are also named: Dolopathos and Lucinius, respectively. As Marguerite constructed significant names in the *Heptameron*, here too the names are loaded. Dolopathos has experience of much pain in his life, and having to condemn his only son just adds to the despair; hence his name is constructed from the Latin and Greek words for pain. Lucinius, alone among the prince characters in his conversion to Christianity, has a "light-bearing" name. Johannes' naming of the primary characters in the frame is in keeping with the more literary quality of his version. He repeatedly alludes to the Bible and classical literature, and although he claims his sources are oral (Hilka 1913:107), he clearly wishes to produce a text. Other versions of *The Book of Sindibad* or *The Seven Sages of Rome* for the most part do not name the

king or the prince. They more closely resemble the folktale tradition in their portrayal of characters.

Regardless of how the narrators are distinguished, however, the characters in the tales they tell are even more the product of traditional narrative. Here even fewer names are used and, because many of the stories are similar to one another, the characters often run together. One can readily identify types—the deceitful wife, the gullible husband, the evil counselor, the greedy merchant—but distinct personalities are quite rare. Thus it is not surprising that we can find analogues to many of the interpolated tales in the oral tradition.

Time Frames

The flow of time in the frame tale also indicates the interactions between oral and literary traditions. There are several different time frames at play in any frame tale; the more layers of framing, the more complex the relations become. Thus in *The Thousand Nights and a Night* when the barber tells the story of his fourth brother in “The Hunchback Tale,” the audience simultaneously experiences the narration within five contexts. First, we consider the action as the brother allegedly experienced it; second, we listen to the barber tell the tale to the caliph and third, to the king in the tailor’s rendition of the barber’s performance for the caliph; fourth, Shahrazad is reiterating the same story to Shahrayar in *The Thousand Nights and a Night* through the double filter of the barber; and lastly, the audience listens or reads the tale through the last filter of the current reader or performer. In each of these contexts, time moves at a different pace, and functions in a different way.

Perhaps even more importantly, however, is the paradox inherent in any frame tale regarding its relationship to time. Each time one of the characters rises to tell a story, the action of the frame effectively halts, even though the very telling of each interpolated tale brings the frame closer to its conclusion. As each narrator tells a tale, he or she reminds the audience of the previous and subsequent narrations. Time within the frame thus becomes cyclical, as the action of each narrator reiterates that of the one before. Even if the tale itself is quite different, the circumstances of narration repeat themselves. Like traditional narrative patterns, the time frame upon which this phenomenon relies is cyclic. There is always,

however, another time system operating at the level of the outer framing tale. Here the action is linear. We are approaching a conclusion, destination, or resolution of some kind, and in order to get there, the narration must pass through the repetitive time represented by the interpolated tales. This linear patterning of time is more the norm of literate narrative. Thus we have the two competing notions of time present in one genre. The linear narrative of the frame tale must pause to accommodate the repetition of the interpolated tales, which reiterate similar arguments with similar results. Inversely, the interpolated tales are pulled along by the force of the linear time of the frame. This phenomenon may be one reason for the popularity of the frame tale in the medieval period. As notions of time and narrative changed, the frame tale displayed the very ideas that its audience was dealing with in the real world outside of the frame. For a society becoming increasingly more literate and with an increasingly stronger concept of linear time, the frame tale at once affirmed these new ideas while opening a window back onto the familiar world of traditional narrative.

Narrator/Audience Dynamics and the Portrayal of Performance

While no one would argue that the frame tale presents an accurate depiction of the performance event such as we would expect from the folklorist's field notes, it does make some interesting comments on the dynamics between narrator or composer and audience. It perhaps does not record performance, but it certainly portrays it. Even if we cannot determine the accuracy of the portrayal, perhaps we can look for hints as to how medieval authors saw the performance event. In addition, by studying the depiction of narrator/audience dynamics in the frame tale, we may better understand the close relationship between the frame tale and the oral tradition.

For example, many scholars have commented on the agonistic nature of oral traditional performance.¹⁵ The frame tale confirms this dynamic: narrators are always either competing against each other or against the standards of a very demanding audience that holds the life of the narrator in its hands. Two examples can serve to illustrate this element of the frame

¹⁵ See espec. Ong 1982:43-45.

tale. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Host has offered a prize for the best story, thus setting the stage for competition. Each narrator tries to top the previous one. In *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, Shahrazad has no competition from other narrators, unless one considers the narrators whom she herself creates and ostensibly controls. Instead, her competition lies in her audience. Shahrayar holds her life in his hands. If a story is not adequately diverting, he may at any time return to his old uxoricidal ways.

Similarly, many of the tales Shahrazad tells are also what Gerhardt terms “ransom tales,” where the narrators tell a tale to save his or her life (1963:ch. 5). The “Hunchback Tale” demonstrates the inherent danger of this situation as the tailor, broker, steward, and doctor do not tell adequately wondrous tales and thus are nearly put to death before the barber saves them all with his narration. All of the tales told in this series also have protagonists who have suffered some type of physical mutilation. Most are victims of misunderstandings or unfortunate circumstances, but despite their relative innocence, they are taken for criminals and punished as such. Thus the telling of the stories mirrors the struggle portrayed in the content, and the narrators seem to relish telling the graphic details even as they fear for their own lives and compete against each other and the ruthless standards of the king.

This competition against a nearly impossible standard of excellence in entertainment also often makes the narration empathetic. Empathetic narration has been identified by Havelock (1963:145-46) and Ong (1982:45-46) as another element typical of oral tradition. Because so many of these narrators are telling tales for their own lives or that of another, they have a vested interest in their contents. If the tale depicts a situation similar to the one in which the narrator finds him or herself, this quality of empathy increases. If the audience sympathizes with a character within the tale, perhaps it will also have mercy on the narrator.

The empathy engendered by the frame tale may also shed light on the concentric yet often conflicting time frames discussed above. One may well wonder to which temporal frame the audience pays most attention when there can be as many as five operating simultaneously in a layered frame tale such as *The Thousand Nights and a Night*. The empathy of the listeners for any given narrator would lead them to identify more with the particular performance of that narrator. For example, in *The Book of Sindibad* and *The Seven Sages of Rome*, we anxiously anticipate the resolution of the framing story, even though we can assume that truth and the prince will

prevail. If one has an emotional investment in the plot of the frame tale itself, the sages' stories are more a nuisance than anything else, merely filling space while not having any obvious effect on the outcome of the story. The logic of the plot demands the tales, however, and implies that if the sages did not narrate, the prince would certainly lose his life. From the point of view of the external audience, which fully expects the prince to survive, the stories themselves become somewhat irrelevant. Further, if the entire collection is embedded in a larger frame tale, as is the case of *The Book of Sindibad* appearing in the *Tuti-Nameh* or *The Thousand Nights and a Night*, the audience may well have developed greater empathy for Tuti or Shahrazad, respectively, and thus pay more attention to whether or not the narrator of the larger frame is fulfilling the task of stretching the narration over the course of an entire evening. On the other hand, in those collections where the frame tale is rather spare in comparison with the interpolated tales (and these comprise the majority), one may welcome the latter in their role as entertainment. Thus while the objective effect of the interpolated tales is always to impede the temporal progress of the frame tale, our subjective reaction to this tension varies depending on our sympathies.

Despite any empathy inspired by the tales, audience interruptions are characteristic of most traditional performances, and in the frame tale, too, interruptions sometimes play a role. Interestingly enough, Chaucer and Boccaccio make greater use of interruptions than the authors and anonymous compilers of other frame tales. It appears that as a frame tale becomes more literate, and *The Canterbury Tales* and *Decameron* are more clearly the products of the literary tradition than earlier tales, it becomes necessary to insert the oral performance keys into the text itself. In the other frame tales, interruptions would be taken for granted, but in the work of Chaucer and Boccaccio, there is a greater self-consciousness at work. The authors are not merely presenting traditional tales but also including their observations of the tradition.

As is the case with other self-conscious or literary characteristics, interruptions of the narration are most marked in *The Canterbury Tales*. And the narrator who is interrupted most rudely and abruptly is the persona of Chaucer himself. As he tells the story of Sir Thopas, Chaucer the pilgrim is interrupted by the Host himself, who cannot tolerate what he deems gross poetic incompetence (Robinson 1957:B² 2109-15):

“Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee,”
 Quod oure Hooste, “for thou makest me
 So wery of thy verray lewednesse
 That, also wisly God my soule blesse,
 Myne eres aken of thy drasy speche.
 Now swich a rym the devel I biteche!
 This may wel be rym dogerel,” quod he.

The interruption in this case serves to construct irony in the text by portraying the persona of the author as a poor poet, particularly in comparison to the other narrators. By reserving the harshest criticism for his own persona, Chaucer heightens the humor of the narration while allowing that tale-telling is an art as well as a valuable skill.

Perhaps the most fascinating portrayal of narrator/audience dynamics in the frame tale is that of the power of the tale. As Robert Georges has shown, the storytelling event influences the social positions of both narrator and audience for the duration of the performance (1969:318): “as the storytelling event is generated, the social identities of storyteller and story listener become increasingly prominent while the other social identities coincident with these during the storytelling event decrease in relative prominence.” While holding the floor, the narrator is the most powerful figure in the performance context. Thus a lowly miller, providing he is a skilled storyteller, can exert the same power over Chaucer’s pilgrims as does the noble knight. Whoever is narrating dominates the social hierarchy of the performance event, regardless of his or her station in any other context. A good tale well told is shown to be quite powerful in the frame tale’s portrayal of oral performance: it can help to pass the time, help one forget plagues and floods, and even reverse death sentences. A tale can save or end a life depending on how entertaining or convincing it is in the opinion of the audience, and the teller who controls it thus controls the fate of the listeners.

The mindful audience can appropriate this power, however. In several of the frame tales, the person responsible for communicating the tales to the reader is not a storyteller himself, but merely a reporter of action. Chaucer deftly takes on this role, as he ridicules the composing abilities of his persona within the text but at the same time makes it clear to the external audience of *The Canterbury Tales* that as author he is quite skilled. The incompetent storyteller bears the ultimate responsibility for the broad dissemination of the tales, thus taking the power from the more

skilled oral composers and making it his own through writing.

Boccaccio does much the same thing in the *Decameron*. When he interrupts the narrative at the beginning of the fourth day, he too begins to tell a story, but he does not allow himself to finish it, claiming that he is not in the same league as those whose tales he passes on to the reader. This posturing serves two purposes. First, as author he distances himself from his own text by insisting that he merely presents the tales of others. This ironic distancing allows him to fend off criticism from those who believe his tales to be too risqué. Second, even if he interrupts his own tale primarily to cast off responsibility for the other tales, he still shows himself to be an incompetent storyteller in comparison to the ten narrators he portrays. After all, they each tell ten complete stories while he cannot finish even the one he starts. Of course, despite any refusing of responsibility or demonstration of incompetence as a storyteller, Boccaccio himself brings us the tales and thus wields the ultimate power over the reading or listening audience.

Perhaps the best example of the usurpation of the tale's power, however, comes from *The Thousand Nights and a Night*. When the king of China has heard the wondrous story of the barber and all the related narratives in "The Hunchback's Tale," he orders that they be recorded. The Caliph Haroun ar-Rashid does the same in the story of "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad," also contained within *The Thousand Nights and a Night*. Finally, when Shahrazad has finished her narration and Shahrayar has forgiven her, he orders that her wondrous stories be recorded in gold (although one wonders how after three years' worth of nights, Shahrazad will remember all the stories, let alone find the time to reiterate each one). The king in each of three instances has told not a single tale; his role is limited to that of audience. While the stories are being told, the king is under the power of the storyteller, whether that person be a barber, a young lady of Baghdad, or a queen. Thus the traditional hierarchy is turned on its head during the performance event. When the narration has ended, the king resumes his all-powerful role, but perhaps recognizing that he has recently been deposed, albeit temporarily, by the storyteller, he appropriates the stories, has them written down under his own aegis, and therefore once more becomes the master of his kingdom.

This ending to a frame tale, while certainly formulaic, demonstrates the textualization of traditional storytelling that constitutes the genre itself. The medieval recorders and compilers take the vibrance and vitality of the

oral tradition, the very elements that give it power over audiences, and attempt, through the frame tale, to transfer this force to the literary text. Through the process of placing a collection of tales in a portrayal of the oral performance that originally engendered them, the author or compiler retains many of the traditional forms as well. Thus the frame tale, as much if not more than any other medieval genre, depicts through its very existence the constantly fluctuating relationship between traditional and literary narrative in the Middle Ages.

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