

# Life Itself: Storytelling as the Tradition of Openness in the *Conde Lucanor*

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The single most revealing passage of the *Conde Lucanor* is actually found slightly outside the text itself. In the *Prólogo general*, the *General prologue* to his remarkably varied and extensive corpus, Don Juan Manuel, using the same technique of framed storytelling that characterizes the *Conde Lucanor*, gives us the following little *exemplum*, worth quoting in full:<sup>2</sup>

Asi acaeçio que aquel cauallero era muy grant trobador et fazie muy buenas cantigas a marabilla, et fizo vna muy buena ademas et avia muy buen son; et atanto se pagauan las gentes de aquella cantiga que desde grant tienpo non querian cantar otra cantiga si non aquella; et el cauallero que la fiziera auia ende muy grant plazer. Et

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<sup>1</sup> I have had a number of informal occasions in the past to tell others what it was—and is—that I learned from Sam Armistead and I hope this article in some ways reflects the simple vitality of his incomparably influential teaching: that literature is an open and living thing. It is difficult to exaggerate the ways in which my work, and I imagine that of many others, was shaped by a man who would sit in graduate seminars, in all other instances the locus of formal scholarship and high culture, and unembarrassedly sing songs to us, often the songs of a Hispanic tradition that lovingly embraced, and thus kept alive, those Spaniards neglected in most other places, the banished Muslims and Jews. From Sam we learned not only the rudimentary and fundamental lessons of Américo Castro but, perhaps even more importantly, that scholarship could be, perhaps even should be, an act of engaged and loving participation, a part of a tradition of many openesses.

<sup>2</sup> All citations from the work of Don Juan Manuel are from the edition of José Manuel Blecua. Translations are my own, in consultation with the published translations of Keller (1977) (into English) and Moreno Baez (into modern Spanish).

yendo por la calle vn dia oyo que vn çapatero estaua diziendo aquella cantiga, et dezia tan mal errada mente tan bien las palabras commo el son, que todo omne que la oyesse, si ante non la oyie, ternia que era muy mala cantiga et muy mal fecha. Quando el cauallero que la fiziera oyo commo aquel çapatero confundia aquella tan buena obra commo [el fiziera], ovo ende muy grant pesar et grant enojo et descendio de la bestia et asentose cerca del. Et el çapatero, que non se guardaua de aquello, non dexo su cantar, et quanto mas dezia, mas confundia la cantiga que el cauallero fiziera. Et desde que el cauallero vio su buena obra tan mal confundida por la torpedat de aquel çapatero, tomo muy passo vnas tiseras et tajo quantos çapatos el çapatero tenia fechos; et esto fecho, caualgo et fuesse. Et el, çapatero paro mientes en sus çapatos, et desde que los vido asi tajados [et] entendio que avia perdido todo su trabajo, ovo grant pesar et fue dando voces en pos aquel cauallero que aquello le fiziera. Et el cauallero dixole:

—Amigo, el rey nuestro sennor es aqui, et uos sabedes que es muy buen rey et muy justiçiero; et uayamos antel et librelo commo fallare por derecho.

Anbos se acordaron a esto, et desde que legaron antel rey, dixo el çapatero commo le tajara todos sus çapatos et le fiziera grant danno. El rey fue desto sannudo, et pregunto al cauallero si era aquello verdat; et el cauallero dixole que si, mas que quisiesse saber por que lo fi[zi]era. Et mando el rey que [lo] dixiesse; et el cauallero dixo que bien sabia el rey que el fiziera tal cantiga que era muy buena et abia buen son, et que aquel çapatero gela avia confundida, et que gela mandasse dezir. Et el rey mandogela dezir, et vio que era asi. Estonce dixo el cauallero que pues el çapatero confundiera tan buena obra commo el fiziera, et en que avia tomado grant danpno et afan, que asi confundiera el la obra del çapatero. El rey et quantos lo oyeron tomaron desto grant plazer et rieron ende mucho; et el rey mando al çapatero que nunca

dixiesse aquella cantiga nin confundiesse la buena obra del cauallero, et pecho el rey el danno al çapatero et mando al cauallero que non fiziesse mas enojo al çapatero.

[Thus it happened that the knight was a great singer/songwriter and he wrote many wonderful songs and one in particular that had a good tune, and so taken were people with that song that for a long time it was the only one anyone would sing, and this gave the knight who had composed it great pleasure. And as he was going down the street one day he heard a shoemaker who was singing that song, both words and tune, so poorly that anyone who had not heard it before would have thought it a very bad song. When the knight, who had written the song, heard how that shoemaker so garbled that good song he had written, he was both hurt and angered and he dismounted and sat down near him. And the shoemaker, who did not notice this, did not stop his singing, and the more he sang the more he garbled the song the knight had written. And since the knight saw his good work so muddled by the ineptness of that shoemaker, he quietly took a pair of scissors and cut up all the shoes the shoemaker had made and when he finished he took off on his mount. And when the shoemaker looked at his shoes and saw that they were cut like that and realized that he had lost all his work he was very annoyed and he went yelling after the knight who had done that. And the knight said to him:

—My friend, our king is here and you know that he is a good king and very just so let's go to him and have him decide what is right.

They both agreed to this and when they came before the king the shoemaker told him how the knight had cut all his shoes and had thus done him great harm. The king was angered by this and asked the knight if it was true and the knight answered that it was but whether he didn't want to know why he had done that. And the king asked

that he tell him and the knight said to the king that he knew what a good song he had written but that the shoemaker had garbled it and that he should have the shoemaker sing it for him. And the king had him sing it and saw that it was true. Then the knight said that since the shoemaker had so garbled the good song he had written and thus damaged him he had likewise garbled the shoemaker's work. The king and all those who heard him took great pleasure from this and laughed about it a great deal—and the king told the shoemaker not to sing that song anymore and to not garble the knight's work and he paid him for his damages, and he told the knight to not bother the shoemaker any more.]

The canonical understanding of this little tale is the one dictated by its frame, a frame in which the authorial voice of Don Juan Manuel equates himself with the knight and his writings with the song: the poet creates an original text which should be inviolate, which has a form as definitive as a given pair of shoes the shoemaker makes but which, once out in the public marketplace, is all too vulnerable to the corruptions of those who might sing the song out of tune or change a rhyme. But one might find it extraordinarily difficult to take the knight's views at face value, to hear this little story without laughing—as do the King and the rest of the audience, the explicit arbiters within the story—because that straight-faced “moral” self-destructs at every step of the way: this knight-troubadour, in some measure necessarily emblematic of the earlier medieval tradition of the sung lyric, is misrepresenting both his artistic past and his future. On the one hand, the choice of a song to represent the work of art, strongly emphasizes the highly contingent nature of the receptions and reiterations of a work of literature—even nowadays in an age of perfect electronic reproduction, the aesthetic point of a different rendition of a song (what is now referred to as a “cover”) is not exactitude vis à vis an original but rather the interpretation that is revealed in different performances, different versions. But even before we get to that future of the song, it is the vision of its own history here that is most difficult for we must know that what the knight himself has done when he “created” his song and, even more strikingly and irrefutably, what Don Juan Manuel himself was doing in the writing of the *Conde*

*Lucanor*, is scarcely different from what the *çapatero* did, largely varying from it only in that highly slippery realm of “quality.” The *Conde Lucanor* is itself but one version, one rendering, one storytelling session, within the vast framed narrative tradition of medieval Spain and Europe. A song, it has been said, is the remembrance of songs sung—and that is as true with the *trobador* as it is for the *çapatero*. And stories told, especially and explicitly within a frame, are the memories of stories heard. And as with Petrarch, roughly his contemporary and equally anxious to forget his immediate past, we are struck by the author's palpable fear of the very tradition within which he is immersed and by which he is framed—and, in both cases, with the great enthusiasm with which literary history swallows their denials and reads the texts as “original” and thus, somehow unlike their predecessors, at the beginnings of “modern” canons.<sup>3</sup> But if we are to grasp the provocation for Don Juan Manuel's anxieties and begin to

<sup>3</sup> The complaints that will be voiced by Petrarch, within several decades, about the corruptions of the *volgo* (and the *volgare*, by extension) are best and most famously elaborated in his long letter to Boccaccio explaining why he has never read Dante. The entire letter, *Familiars XXI*, 15, is worth reading (now available in the fine translation by Bernardo) for Petrarch's tone as well as many of his specific complaints remind one uncannily of Don Juan Manuel. I provide here just a few excerpts where he discusses the depredations of literature once in the popular arena—the reason, he tells us, he has given up writing in the vernacular: “. . . what can you expect to happen to our poet [Dante, never referred to by name] among the illiterates in the taverns and squares? . . . these silly admirers who never know why they praise or censure, who so mispronounce and mangle his verses that they could do no greater injury to a poet. . . . I can only express my reprehension and disgust at hearing them befouling with their stupid mouths the noble beauty of his lines. Here may be the proper place to mention that this was not the least of my reasons for abandoning his style of composition [writing in the vernacular, as opposed to Latin] to which I devoted myself as a young man, for I feared for my writings what I saw happening to the writings of others. . . . Events have proved my fears well-founded since a few pieces that slipped from my youthful pen are constantly being mangled by the multitude's recitation. . . . Each day as I stroll, reluctantly and angry at myself, through the arcades, I find scores of ignoramus everywhere and some Dametas of my own at the street corners usually ‘ruining my poor song with his screeching reed’” (Bernardo, vol III:204-205). Petrarch, of course, is at the time (as he would for the rest of his life) working arduously and lovingly on his vernacular masterpiece which will be enormously imitated and spawn innumerable versions.

sketch a literary history that does not dismiss the *çapateros* as automatically as he would want us to, it is necessary to reframe the *Conde Lucanor*, that most famous of the framed tale texts in Spanish, a work widely held up as the bedrock of the modern Castilian prose canon.

Initially, it is important to understand a bit why this prefatory tale has, indeed, been taken at face value. In fact, the knight's story, interpreted to favor the knight and his fixed song, is one that could well have been written far more recently as a parable of the branch of philology that has dominated medieval Romance studies during most of its century and a half of existence—that branch that was founded in the fervor of positivisms of all sorts and especially of the positivism that came from the discovery that one could “scientifically” study language and rationally reconstruct the “ur” languages, beginning with proto-Indo-European and all the way down the line. Romance philology and the national philologies that became its subdivisions distinguished themselves in the establishment of texts—“the” texts of the ur-nations of Romania, from “the” *Roland* to “the” *Cid*—all in the crucial and guiding belief that in the end medieval texts had ancestral definitive forms. An almost invariably garbled manuscript tradition, like the garbled rendition of the *çapatero*, presented problems to be solved by textual editing since (in a rather neat parallel with what occurred in the linguistic sphere) multiple manuscript copies of works were more or less corrupt versions of an authoritative and definitive original—the real thing—which had to be—and generally could be—reconstructed from the bad versions which, as the voice of Don Juan Manuel in the prologue would say, had distorted the author's *entención* and *sentencia*, his intention and his meaning.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, and as part

<sup>4</sup> If one looks at the stemma provided in many critical editions one may note the interesting parallelism with the sort of family trees that were being produced in the early (and heady) years of linguistic reconstruction. For an important analysis of the two philosophical and practical schools of text editing, see Hult and see also Gumbrecht for a rich and enlightening analysis of some of the earliest chapters in the development of Romance philology. It also seems crucial to note here that the most exciting and convincing historico-linguistic work done in Romance in recent years has dismantled the original notion that there was a single (let alone definitive or stable) parent language: “Latin” itself, in the end (at least the Latin from which the vernaculars descend), may be as mythical an ancestor as Dante said it was in the *De vulgari* (see Lloyd and Wright for the clearest

and parcel of this positivist textual ideology, literary texts from the pre-modern period were and often still are treated as if they were anthropological *objets*, essentially unambiguous texts from a historical moment still struggling to become modern—“modern” corresponding tellingly with the transition from manuscript transmission to print. A medieval text is thus really pre-Literary: it says what it means to say, perhaps in an allegorical encoding, perhaps via an essentially simple and child-like device such as a fable, but in the end specifiable and definitive meaning is like the ur-language or the ur-text—it is establishable.<sup>5</sup>

Now within this critical context it should be apparent that the various ideologies embraced by Don Juan Manuel and seemingly everywhere in his *Conde Lucanor* were ready-made to be welcomed with open arms and great affection by those constructing, a step and a text at a time, the Castilian canon—not only did he give us a text he supervised himself, with all the right philological attitudes about the corruption of texts by scribes, as the knight's story illustrates, but he gives us a text that is in other ways amenable to the epistemological principles of this literary history: it is openly and positively and unambiguously didactic. There may be, among scholars, disagreements here and there about the details of what the text or its individual stories are teaching but the universal consensus is certainly that it is a limpid guide to help meet the needs, duties and difficulties of a Castilian nobleman in the time when Castile is beginning to establish its various hegemonies in the peninsula—what more, one must ask, could one

exposition of the issue). Finally, the January 1990 issue of *Speculum*, devoted entirely to the “New Philology,” includes a number of articles that make these very points in considerable detail. See especially Nichols’ Introduction to the special issue (“If we accept the multiple forms in which our artifacts have been transmitted, we may recognize that medieval culture did not simply live with diversity, it cultivated it” (9)) and Fleischman (“The Oxford Roland, in my initial philological encounter with it, was alternately a subtext for deciphering sound laws or a node in a tree diagram mapping the scriptural genesis of a legend” (19).)

<sup>5</sup> See Patterson for a detailed analysis of the constellation of critical misprisions, of which this particular positivist naiveté is only a part, within and about medieval literary studies.

want for a canon-forming text?<sup>6</sup> Crucially, Don Juan Manuel has drawn—amply and quite citably, in fact—from the Arabic and Jewish sources he had at his disposal in the great Alfonsine libraries and everywhere in the streets of his homeland. But he has made gentlemen, *cavalleros*, of those dispersed, anonymous, and “ethnic” collections which smacked too much of the songs of the *çapatero*, with the sounds of the streets about them even when they were written in Castilian, he has wrestled those pre-literary demons to the ground, and he has tamed that untidy textual past by turning it all into mere footnotes of “sources” which give rise to his own “originality.”<sup>7</sup> But his past, his literary history, is far more than a footnote or a source or a translation.

At the beginning of this different version—or different interpretation—of the literary history that one is competing for there is the central character Don Juan Manuel himself, whose life story is itself wonderfully literary.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is a life story that seems inspired by

<sup>6</sup> The classic study of the didacticism of the text and its relationship to the prevailing historical circumstances is certainly Macpherson, but see, more recently, Burke for a suggestive study.

<sup>7</sup> The most widely quoted full-length study of the *Conde Lucanor*, Ayerbe-Chaux (1975), explicitly follows this paradigm.

<sup>8</sup> Don Juan Manuel's life is so rich and colorful, in fact, that Cantarino believes that such a character could not have written the texts Don Juan Manuel says he wrote and he attributes authorship instead to a Dominican monk who would have had both the time and the training required. He concludes that there is “. . . *en el autor castellano una clara conciencia de escritor, una notable agilidad en la aplicación de las varias formas de las estructuras más conocidas en su tiempo; un gran conocimiento de los puntos doctrinales fundamentales de la teología escolástica y una gran capacidad para una formulación estrictamente técnica y fiel de las tesis fundamentales del tomismo.* . . .” This denies, he maintains, the possibility that the author could have been who we have believed him to be, since Don Juan Manuel was a “*gran guerrero, político belicoso e intrigante, poderoso y agitado* . . .” (1984, 66). Authorship is attributable instead to a Dominican monk whose identity, apparently, will be revealed in a forthcoming publication. One is left to wonder whether such arguments would ever be made about authorship in any other period. (On the other hand, Don Juan Manuel's close ties to the Dominican order have been widely understood since Lida's classic study first explored these but, because of the highly simplified and generally simplistic notion we have of what constitutes didacticism, we have not explored the thorny—

what would become, against all logical odds, the other great foundational text of Castilian literature, the story of the Cid (the single surviving manuscript of the poem of the Cid, by the way, was probably executed in about 1301, about halfway through our hero's life.) Don Juan Manuel, as everyone knows, was the nephew of Alfonso el Sabio and the artist as a young man spent his days in those marvelous libraries his uncle had frequented, labyrinths of tomes of fabulous histories and all sorts of translations from the Arabic—an Arabic culture which at the same time was being dealt its worst and final political blows, those that would end up in the expulsions and forced conversions that would make Spain *castiza* after 1492. But those deadliest of closures are still only prefigured, although it seems increasingly clear that Alfonso understood brilliantly the appropriating powers of translation. After those earlier, bookish years Don Juan Manuel sets out to play knight: he goes off to live in Murcia, by all accounts still a wild frontier city only recently reconquered, and eventually he becomes embroiled in a series of quarrels with his king, Alfonso XI, and these were often bitter quarrels that would shape the rest of his life. Alfonso rejects Don Juan Manuel's daughter's hand in marriage, Don Juan Manuel declares war on him and, following the script, seeks an alliance with the King of Granada—Granada, of course, being the last Muslim kingdom in the peninsula by the turn of the 14th century. But the letters seeking the treacherous alliance fall into the hands of spies and are brought to Alfonso who (no doubt having heard the story of the Cid) decided it was best to patch things up with Don Juan Manuel. These adventures largely concluded, the hero turns again to the contemplative life and—with the exception of a number of renewed but less dramatic spats with his king and a second marriage which produces his heir—devotes the rest of his life to writing. He dies in 1348, the year of the Black Death and the year in which the *Decameron* is set—another framed text within which the tale of Don

but telling—fact that the Dominicans, like other preaching groups in the medieval period, used all manner of stories from the framed tale tradition that are openly antithetical to many of the teachings; we assume they were shopping around. See a further discussion of this below.) For Deyermond, on the other hand, the turbulent life and times of Don Juan Manuel are crucial to an understanding of his work, particularly as a “setting” for the *Conde Lucanor*—a view I concur with wholeheartedly and return to below. See Deyermond's introduction in Ayerbe-Chaux and Deyermond (1985).

Juan Manuel's life might well have been recounted. Indeed, the *Conde Lucanor*, the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales* constitute the trilogy of 14th century framed narratives which all explicitly reflect back on a vast tradition, their own histories, which can only be sketched out here but which must be understood as a vital part of the texts themselves.

A partial recounting of this highly complex ancestry might begin, for the sake of efficacy, with the *Disciplina clericalis* of Petrus Alfonsi, that most quintessential of medieval "Spanish" texts: written in Latin for an "international" public (in London, where he was a resident doctor and wise man) by a converted Jew, purportedly to provide teachings for other Christian disciples and unabashedly dripping with the wisdom and the short stories of the Muslims.<sup>9</sup> The *Disciplina*, which survives in more than sixty widely dispersed manuscript versions, in every vernacular and corner of Europe, is itself an *exemplum* of the tradition. To begin with, the text itself claims, in its frame, to be a translation from an unspecified language and it is clear that this is something of a topos within this tradition which allows the network of texts to openly share, *a priori*, in the textual profusion both reflected and created. Furthermore, from the very beginning our notion of didacticism is tested and, in the end, debunked: the authorial voice, the wise man giving instruction to the novice, hints broadly at trouble ahead, excusing himself for stories whose "moral" may be mistaken. And the frame itself starts to grow, to multiply and complicate as stories become new frames. Interpolation, it will turn out, is a key feature of the tradition and while the so-called "Chinese box" phenomenon might look like a tightly structured and thus closed system from the outside, once inside it we realize that from a functional narrative point of view the effect is one of infinite and unavoidable openness and variability since, once the pattern has been established, a new story can be added at will, virtually anywhere, inside any box. Any character, at any point, can break out into yet another story. At the same time interpolation makes excruciatingly explicit the highly contingent nature of both the storytelling itself and, crucially, its reception. For although it is widely recognized that the

<sup>9</sup> The *Disciplina* is woefully understudied, especially given its vast popularity, which is attested to by the manuscript tradition; see the quirky introduction but latest and best translation by Hermes.

telling of a story is thematized in a frame—and it is—it is far less commonly observed that the listening to a story, its interpretation, and thus the potential variability in meaning, is just as strongly brought to the fore: when we can see and hear the listeners of stories and their interpretations, we are pushed to meditate directly on the many contingencies of meaning—and the implied infinity of frames implicated by interpolation makes ever more obvious and radical such orality and its necessary relativism.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in the *Disciplina*, the trouble hinted at in the beginning is, indeed, everywhere: from stories from which no clear, let alone "clearly Christian" meaning can be extracted to stories whose logical "morals" would seem to go directly against the conventional pieties.

Take, for example, the central story in a major interpolated cycle within the *Disciplina*, (a story that will be heard again by the group of Florentines taking refuge from the Black Death). The disciple hears the story of the woman who, locked out of the house by her husband, who has caught her *in flagrante*, tricks him by dropping a stone into the well outside the house, making him think she has thrown herself into the well. He runs out, thinking she has drowned, and she then locks him out, loudly accusing him of being the miscreant, of spending all night running around. The story itself hardly lends itself to any easy moralization, since, at a minimum, the husband is good but the wife is cleverer, and gets away with it. But the problematization of meaning is further driven home in the relationship of story to frame: as soon as the story is told the pupil, who has been listening avidly, virtually leeringly, says "There is no one who can protect himself against the

<sup>10</sup> Brooks has noted that the framed narratives provide the most acute version of the contingency of meaning: "Framed narratives and those, such as *La Chute*, that incorporate the listener in the discourse of the speaker illustrate most explicitly a condition of all narrative: shape and meaning are the product of the listening as of the storytelling . . . these appear always to contain a moment of 'evaluation,' a moment where the speaker calls attention to and reflects on the 'point' of his story, and explicitly or implicitly calls the listener to attention, asking him to judge the story as important" (236). See also Fajardo, who not only notes that the point of the frames in these texts is "to guide the reader toward reflection on their art" (18), but also suggests some of the harmonic reading of this tradition that Cervantes had, one which emphasizes that deliberate insufficiencies—i.e., openness—is a vital part of the scheme of things.

trickery of women unless he be protected by God. This story which I have just heard is a warning to me not to marry." It would seem that men have always had a hard time when it comes to interpreting unfaithful women, and that this problem, in fact, also lies at the heart of the second and by far most important framed tradition that echoed in the Alfonsine libraries and spilled into the streets of Don Juan Manuel's Murcia, and that anyone can immediately bring it to mind by just evoking the image of a woman narrating a story. It too grapples with that morally and narratively difficult problem of the unfaithful woman and the boorish or unfair judgment that follows.

Before turning to that problem, however, it is important to signal, however cursorily, two of the other major framed tale collections that are so vitally a part of Don Juan Manuel's universe. Both of these have their "origins" in the Buddhist literature of India, but their tales, as well as the habits of framing and interpolation, become essential features of the narrative traditions of the whole of Europe. The first of these is the text known in Spain as the *Calila e Digna*: the principal extant Castilian version is probably from the middle of the thirteenth century, but the vast network of other earlier and contemporary versions, again, in virtually every language of the Mediterranean basin and the rest of Europe, indicates clearly that it was a productive collection. Like all the others, it is also a textual tradition that is still alive and vital: many of the animal fables of this collection are deeply embedded in the very vital Hispanic folk storytelling tradition and in English, where there were twenty different versions produced during the 18th and 19th centuries (a new one has come out more recently, with an introduction by Doris Lessing).<sup>11</sup> The other tradition is no less alive and well than it was in a medieval Europe where its versions proliferated: those who came of age intellectually in the sixties probably first knew Herman Hesse's version, *Siddhartha*, of what in medieval Spanish was *Barlaam e Josafat*. And somewhere in between the two, Lope used some of the material for his own theatrical version, "Barlaam y Josafá" while, coming back full circle, Don Juan

<sup>11</sup> The medieval Castilian *Calila* is now readily available in the edition (with comprehensive introduction) of Cacho Blecua and Lacarra (1984), and see also Lacarra's (1979) study of most these texts. The most recent English version is charmingly (and perceptively) "retold" by Ramsey Wood.

Manuel himself used the basic story, a rendition of the life of the Buddha Gautama, as the frame for another major work of his, the *Libro de los estados*.

But certainly none of the framed tale collections from which the *Conde Lucanor* is vitally inseparable is more widespread and influential than the one swiftly summoned by the image of a woman narrating a story: *The Thousand and One Nights*, and the versions of it all of us have gotten from childhood on is still very much alive and well, from cartoon versions of it with Olive Oyl as the frame's female narrator and Popeye playing Aladdin in the inner tale to Borges' loving embrace of the text and its infinite openness. In thirteenth-century Spain, we can be sure that the young Don Juan Manuel knew, at a minimum, the version most conveniently called the *Sendebär*. Also known as *El libro de los engannos de las mujeres*, *The Book of the Wiles of Women*, or some version or another of the *Seven Sages* or *Seven Vizirs*, the *Sendebär* is one of the dozens of large interpolated story cycles within the vast frame of the *Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>12</sup> Its many versions covered medieval Europe, and any chart of its dozens of translations and versions will reveal clearly the vitality of the tradition: the mid-thirteenth century Castilian appears to derive directly from an Arabic version; that same Arabic text also gives us a Hebrew version from which, in turn, derive others in Latin, Catalán, Italian, and so on.

The Castilian *Sendebär*, like virtually all of these texts, begins with an evocation of the textual tradition of which it is a part—like the *Disciplina*, it tells us it is a translation of stories that have a certain wisdom to impart, a translation commissioned by Prince Fadrique, brother of Alfonso el Sabio. And the frame itself evokes the open ur-frame in a tantalizing fashion: A King finally has a son, his heir, with a favorite wife; because of certain astrological predictions the child is sent off to be educated by a wise hermit and when he returns to his father's court he is under injunction—for complicated reasons—to not speak for seven days. But the young prince is no sooner back than one

<sup>12</sup> A reasonably clear exposition of the complicated textual history of the *Sendebär* (or *Book of the Wiles of Women*) is available in the Introduction of the Keller translation of the Spanish version, which he edited in 1953. Keller's translation also provides a considerable bibliography. See also Lacarra (1979).

of his stepmothers, a young, beautiful and wicked one, attempts to seduce him and tells him that together they will murder his father and rule the kingdom. The good son, breaking the prohibition, refuses her and in her rage she accuses him of the treacheries. But he, now doubly warned of the deathly danger of speaking compounded by the first slip, cannot defend himself—which, of course, will enrage the King and make him believe the beautiful wife. There ensues a marvelous battle of stories, wonderfully emblematic of this tradition, between the bad wife and stepmother, the wily woman, on the one side, and the seven wise men, the *consejeros* (as Patronio will become) who defend the Prince. We see clearly here two features of this tradition that will unavoidably shape Patronio's discourse in the *Conde Lucanor* (features shared by the other traditions as well). First, there is the open celebration of pluralism: a story that is palpably Greek or traditionally Middle Eastern is told after one that might remind us of something in the Old Testament, which is in turn followed by another clearly drawn from contemporary Castilian or Florentine or London society. Secondly, the tales are sometimes quite clear in their meaning—given the context—but just as often they are not what we might think “appropriate”: the woman tells a number of stories that could well be interpreted to mean that women really are wicked; the wise men tell some stories that are difficult or impossible to construe allegorically or otherwise as having anything to do with the situation at hand, and so forth. In the end, the only consistent “moral” or “lesson” to be drawn from the stories on both sides is one that Patronio will tell the Count over and over again, both directly and in his stories, but which the Count, and the literary historians he has made in his image, will seem not to hear or believe: that truth is highly contingent and relative, that absolutes are dangerous or evil, and that interpretation and judgment should avoid the temptations of closures and certainties.

The textual tradition of these framed tales bears a poetic relationship with this story line: there are no real, certainly no identifiable, originals, and all versions are self-conscious of their existence as one of many. In the frames we find a recounting of the textual tradition's vitality, for in the telling of stories and in their various interpretations we see reflections of history: stories told before and meant to be recounted again, in the future. It is impossible to escape the association this bears with the version of medieval history we have, by and large, not heard: a medieval Europe startlingly and

vitaly multilingual and polymorphic. With these texts we are offered a different version of that world, a heretical textual ideology: all versions are different, all are authentic, all are derivative, all are original. It is thus hardly surprising that these texts have resisted and thwarted medievalist readings and enclosure, the readings of a discipline grounded, in significant measure, in the possibility and need to establish definitive editions of original texts and convinced, furthermore, that medieval texts (unlike shifty modern ones, produced in our grossly self-conscious era) are usually univocal.<sup>13</sup> There is great irony here, for it is increasingly evident that most if not all of these general and guiding notions about medieval texts are directly produced in and by the closures of the modern period: it is only in the wake of

<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that the best recent literary study of the *Thousand and One Nights*, or of any version of it, one should say, is the work of a scholar who is neither an Arabist nor a medievalist: George May's recent work on the Galland version is a superb reading of a text relatively little dealt with. As the subtitle, *le chef d'oeuvre inconnu*, indicates, May is concerned with the ways in which Galland's version is ignored, in part because it is perceived, incorrectly May argues, as a “translation” in the modern sense. Thus, while by and large others have been either obsessed with or paralyzed by the elusive issue of “originals” and the primacy of this edition versus this other version—May says simply, and refreshingly accurately, that Galland's “translation” is, for many different reasons, a legitimate text in its own right, a specific version of a far-flung tradition, which then engenders and continues its own tradition, both in French and in other European languages. (In fact, Muhsin Mahdi's recent new edition and study of a 14th-century version indicates that Galland's version served as one of the variants for the 19th-century printings of Arabic versions, such as the famous Bulaq.) What is crucial is that this is true not only because of the great individual success of Galland's brilliant rendition but because the version, the different story told time and time again, is what the entire tradition is all about. May's other principal observations about the text's features, those that have made it disappear out of literary histories of the eighteenth century, are equally applicable to the medieval tradition: it is a text that lacks any coherent philosophical or ideological message and it is assimilated to the non-canonical (i.e., un-fixed) genres. Ironically, it seems that the review of Professor May's book that will appear in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* will lament that Professor May does not know Arabic and is not working with the “authentic” text. Finally, perhaps ironically, it is crucial to note that it is only when one recognizes the authenticity of each of these variant texts that one can go on to read them as literary, rather than archaeological, objects.



printing, and reasonably fixed texts, and authors with detailed biographies, and, later on, the overweening positivisms of the new faiths, that one can understand some of these beliefs of our literary histories.<sup>14</sup> The framed tale tradition, on the other hand, bears an almost sweetly nostalgic and productive relationship with the oral narrative tradition from which it springs and which, crucially, it will in some measure perpetuate since, although the form is in part written and therefore closed, it continues to openly invite addition and retelling.

And that open storytelling tradition thus inscribed and framed is one that also confounds the inordinately simple notion of didacticism so often applied to these texts in particular—there seems to be a deeply felt need to clearly shelve them as either “entertaining” or “didactic.”<sup>15</sup> We are plagued, as a result, by the pseudo-question of how scurrilous or obscene or hermetic stories can have been used to teach truths, a problem that exists in great measure because of this ontological precision we feel is applicable to medieval texts and, no less, because of the notions we bring to bear of what constitutes both teaching and a plausible truth value that one might want to teach. But one could argue that the most substantial teaching that takes place here—in all the texts from the *Disciplina* to the *Decameron*—is more simply, more “modernly,” to value listening and the cumulative wisdom of many stories, many of which, like life itself, are stories of unfairness and unintelligibility. At the same time, and consequently, the listener learns that interpretation is highly contingent and once again we face the historical ironies this reading reveals since we are largely conditioned to believe relativism inimical to the Age of Faith, or faiths, and its texts. Reflected in this, once again, is that anthropological or developmental model we apply to history and especially literary history: the medievals were an earlier, more primitive version of ourselves, still in the process of evolving. In fact, these texts

<sup>14</sup> “The illusion that logic is a closed system has been encouraged by writing and even more by print. Oral cultures hardly had this kind of illusion, though they had others. . . .” Ong 169.

<sup>15</sup> For what one might fairly call canonical discussions of this issue, see Keller’s prefaces to his translations of both the *Conde Lucanor* (1977) and the *Sendebär* (1956), both of which are fair and even-handed composites of the views of major critics.

demonstrate that a substantial part of the medieval corpus of texts (and these were by all accounts and all evidence the most widely read, used, and told texts) did not in practice make that ontological distinction between recreation and learning that we rather condescendingly attribute to that primitive, pre-literary stage, a view we often justify by appealing to the handful of essentially idiosyncratic truth-texts, such as the *Commedia*.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, to read the explicitly didactic prefatory remarks of any of these works—including and “beginning” with the *Thousand and One Nights*<sup>17</sup>—and to then encounter complex, “moral”-resistant, perhaps even pornographic stories—does not mean we must assume the authors were joking or being ironic or (best of all, à la Juan Manuel) that sloppy or inept scribes threw the wrong category of stories in. We should see in this instead the “modern” view of literature it reflects: aesthetics and morality are not clearly distinguishable and any reading we take away from it is highly and multiply contingent, a view perhaps best expressed by Boccaccio himself in the preface to the fourth day.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Dante’s railing against the practice of telling stories in *Paradiso XXXIX* is commonly cited: “Christ did not say to his first company, ‘Go and preach idle stories to the world,’ but he gave to them the true foundation . . . . Now men go forth to preach with jests and with buffooneries, and so there be only a good laugh, the cowl puffs up and nothing more is asked . . . .” (XXIX, 109-117, Singleton translation). But Dante’s own stern judgment, and the widespread practice revealed here (as well as in the extensive manuscript traditions of the framed tales) is proof precisely that the more rigid ontological distinction between “didactic” and other kinds of literature is being imposed from without.

<sup>17</sup> “The lives of former generations are a lesson to posterity. A man may review the remarkable events that have befallen others, and so be admonished. He may consider the history of preceding ages, and be so restrained. Praised be He who has ordained that the history of former generations be a lesson to those which follow. Thus are the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*.” Translation cited from Clinton (107), his translation of the Bulaq edition.

<sup>18</sup> I note that, although there is a considerable literature on the frame of the *Decameron*, and there is some mechanical recognition of the identifiable “origins” of many of the individual tales, there is no study of which I am aware that deals with Boccaccio’s text as I am suggesting we should read Don Juan Manuel’s, as framed by the larger framed-tale tradition. (The larger study in progress of which this article will eventually

The frame, or frames that are distinctive features of all these texts both provide and recall the difficulties of interpretation and the unavoidable contingencies of meaning for these and, arguably, all stories. Thus, in the interpretation of the particular stories in the *Sendebär*, to return to the text that most closely frames the *Conde Lucanor*, we always have in the back of our minds that it is Sheharazade telling the frame story of the unfaithful wife telling stories to save her life (although she is executed at the end of all the versions except the Hebrew one.) And Sheharazade, of course, is in the same predicament because the Sultan's wife had been lavishly and indulgently unfaithful to him and, in his moment of passionate grief and outrage, he judges all women unworthy of life. It is only Sheharazade's stories that restore life, that bring him back from the madness of nightly murders, and we thus overhear her telling of the *Sendebär* with some anxiety. And there is yet another frame that might be explicitly evoked when we are reading the Castilian version of the *Sendebär* since in its outermost textual frame the narrator tells us that this text, this translation, as he calls it, was commissioned by Prince Fadrique, another uncle of Don Juan Manuel's. The hapless Prince Fadrique was put to death by his brother, Alfonso el Sabio, because Fadrique had sided with a wife of Alfonso's who had to flee the court in squabbles now shrouded in mystery but which appear to have involved all the elements in the framing tale: astrological predictions, the rightful heir and his loyalty to the king, and even the wife's suspected unfaithfulness. History tells us Alfonso loathed the Queen Violante (even her name was fitting) and he executed his own brother

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be a small part, includes a far more extensive consideration of the *Decameron* in this light.) I also note, in passing, that the *fortuna* of a story like X, 10, the story of Griselda, is telling; arguably the most difficult to interpret in the text, especially given its relationship to the frame, it is retold and rewritten (and thus reframed) more than any other in the text. Even Petrarch, clearly uncomfortable with the ideologies of the open and relativist traditions of retelling and resinging, gives us his own version, although he attempts to impose closure both by casting it in Latin and by dictating an explicit and clear-cut moral. (Of course, even with such tight reins, the story remains almost wildly difficult.) And, with some further thanks to Chaucer, who both vernacularizes it and explicitly brings to the fore the variety and difficulty of its interpretation, that attempted closure is a failure as well.

for a political liaison with her which may well, of course, have been much more.

Fadrique, it would turn out, kabbalistically commissioned a text that described his own eventual demise so well. Don Juan Manuel learned from both uncles the correlations between closure and death—a correlation that is at the heart of those open framed narratives he wants to both enter and then close, thus setting a crown and seal on a tradition of both textual and interpretative indeterminacy. The *Conde Lucanor* is an explicit effort to close that fluid and open tradition it mimics, to appropriate and tame and file away the past by giving it a fixed form; the other allegory in the knight's story is that of the fixed text swallowing whole and thus fixing the oral tradition. Once again, our text and history dance ineluctably about each other: like his Uncle Alfonso, Don Juan Manuel has glimpsed how, through translation into Castilian, he may effect linguistic hegemony, how this can eliminate a pluralist past and establish a national language. And, once again, as one might well expect given the necessary ideologies of the national philologies in the making, literary history and historians have rewarded him beyond all expectations: the *Conde Lucanor* sits comfortably as the fixed cornerstone of Castilian prose, the tidy closure of that untidy and cacophonous past, a past now tamed and enumerable, a footnote stating the "origins" of each of the fifty stories of the text.

But like the story of the knight and the shoemaker and like Petrarch's various efforts to tame the past and limit the future, this story of the *Conde Lucanor* and, by extension, of the earliest history of the Spanish canon, unravels readily. In the end, although death and closure do threaten everywhere, the *Conde Lucanor* itself proves, despite its author's intentions, that as long as stories are told life survives. In fact, once we reframe the *Conde Lucanor*, bringing back to life the whole gaggle of storytellers and *çapateros* who give the text both past and future lives, that text, thus interpolated, is anything but closed and definitive. On the contrary, as part of this tradition, the many marvelous difficulties of the *Conde Lucanor* emerge and cry out: the far from simple or static frame with its many voices; the many stories which make no clear or cleanly identifiable sense; and the various incongruities of the little *refranes* that the voice identified as Don Juan Manuel offers after each story has been told (they are always grossly reductive and often have little to do with the story that has been told, and why, moreover, does the voice of the *çapatero*—for that

is certainly what a *refran* is—get to close each tale?).<sup>19</sup> It even turns out that a fifty-first story has crept into some manuscripts of Don Juan Manuel's apparently definitive and neat edition of fifty stories, and scholars, with little sense of irony, quarrel over whether it is "authentic" or not "authentic."<sup>20</sup>

Patronio, the storyteller, the *sabio*, the *vizir*—a woman and a Jew—always hesitates to judge, and he speaks, perforce, in the voices of all his storytelling ancestors and compatriots. His first story, which we can now see as an enlargement and a complication of the frame itself, is about how a king tests an advisor he has assumed to be loyal but who is now accused by others of disloyalty (and in the end it is impossible to know whether the advisor was loyal or merely alert to the fact he was being tested). And the final story (or at least the fiftieth one) which is told only after Patronio has pronounced a long and remarkable speech on how his master the Count must never too closely believe his stories and never take his advice, these stories, at face value, inscribes itself into a superb complex of medieval stories all about the great and wise Saladin.<sup>21</sup> Of the dozens of stories invoked by Patronio's choice here, the most charming and telling is one of those

<sup>19</sup> The one reader who has grappled sensitively and suggestively with the interrelated problems of internal inconsistencies within the text and the fact that many stories are far from easily interpreted was, perhaps unsurprisingly, Lida, in an article published almost a half century ago. In the first of the three "*Notas*," Lida explores Don Juan Manuel's attachments to the Dominicans, preaching order par excellence, and encourages the reader to note the "popular" nature of that didacticism, one strongly akin to that of rabbinical and buddhist teaching. In the latter two cases, of course, although Lida stops just short of saying it, what is being taught is not some specific truth but the difficulty of interpreting and finding Truth.

<sup>20</sup> There is poetic justice (or irony, depending on one's perspective) in the fact that, despite all his precautions, Don Juan Manuel lost even this most minimal skirmish: the very number of *exempla* is not only in doubt, but the very fact that a probably spurious one could creep in so convincingly is testimony precisely to the fluidity and explicit openness of a genre Don Juan Manuel thought he could close (the kind of openness inscribed in the suggestion of infinity of the "thousand and one" nights.) See England for a discussion of the fifty-first tale.

<sup>21</sup> The different Romance manifestations of the Saladin stories were the subject of the suggestive essay by Castro.

Boccaccio will retell, in which Saladin asks a Jew to tell him which of the three religions is the true one. The Jew then tells him a story (of course, it is an interpolated tale) about a man who had a precious and beautiful ring he left to his heirs as the mark of authenticity. But, after many generations, there was a man who had three sons he loved equally and he did not want to have to choose among them, so he had a craftsman make two other rings, each so like the first no one was afterwards able to tell which was the original nor which son the "true" heir. Here, to "close" the *Conde Lucanor*, Patronio tells a story with a comparable texture. The wise and just Saladin, in this tale, turns out to be, after all, only a man and one day he makes a judgment in error: he tries to seduce a happily married woman. In order to implement that bad judgment, to have sex with her, he sets out to find an absolute answer for a difficult question, for she has told him she will sleep with him if he can answer the question of what is the single finest virtue a man can have. Saladin sets out on a long voyage, seeks the answer everywhere, but it is a long and, for a long while, a seemingly fruitless search: no one wants to give a single true answer to that question. But he persists and finally it seems he has succeeded: in a far-away land, someone tells him the single best virtue is shame. Of course, when he returns to the woman, this one both clever and honest, she points out that this is the right answer—and that shame will keep him from dishonoring her. A sheepish Saladin has learned the lesson about absolute and clear answers that his narrator Patronio has tried so very hard to teach—although the simple Don Juan Manuel of the inevitable *refran* insists the story means: "*La verguença todos los males parte; por verguença faze omne bien sin arte.*" And literary historians, in so many things mimicking Don Juan Manuel's postures, read this as the couplet says, a story about how shame is the best virtue a man can have. But Patronio's point is clearly a quite different one, and the *Conde Lucanor* is a text, finally, unable to escape the openness and the relativistic lessons of its kin and in the end it too is about the potentially mortal pitfalls of that complex relationship between the teller of stories and the listener, counselor and king, Sheharazade and Shahriyar, author and critic. Moreover, Patronio tells the Count these stories, stories about the pitfalls of advising and believing, telling and interpreting, not in some quiet and peaceful vacuum but in a room that resounds with the echoes of many voices: Sheharazade who may die in the morning, the wicked stepmother who does die, at least sometimes,

Don Juan Manuel's uncle Fadrique who is put to death because stories were told, perhaps false but believed.

Of course, this reinscription or reframing of the *Conde Lucanor* not only destabilizes this once sure text but, necessarily, reframes the terms of how we may narrate the history of the Hispanic canon in its first centuries. As with the text of the *Conde Lucanor* itself, it is now apparent that the non-Castilian past, and future, of this literary history cannot be contained and neatly defined, reduced to an inventory of "sources" that have been translated into Castilian or to a series of summarizing couplets. Cervantes, predictably, read all of this superbly: in the Arab translator, in the impossibly interpolated stories, in his open-ended text and in his dialogue with the rogue Avellaneda, in all of this we see the essential medieval universe, narrative and historical, that Quixote is engaged with. In a sense it is logically he who is capable of providing a kind of loving farewell, with sadness and regret, for this open narrative world where stories and the telling of them and the attempts to make sense of them all show us how foolish, and perhaps deadly, is the belief in absolutes of all sorts. And perhaps Cervantes was amused and heartened by the case of the *Conde Lucanor*, whose will to closure and a kind of murder for his literary ancestors turned out to be far less strong than the great vitality and life-giving powers of a narrative tradition presided over, after all, by that greatest defier of certain death, Sheharazade. More recently, one might think Octavio Paz was speaking about the *Conde Lucanor* when he noted: "If a writer kills the other writers that live within him and who contradict him, he is guilty of something worse than murder. When we repress plurality and contradiction within ourselves, we also repress it outside: we suppress others, we commit violence against reality. If literature is expression, then it is condemned to ambiguity. In literature there are no simple truths and each work contains its own contradiction, its own critique."<sup>22</sup> But Paz is not speaking about the medieval framed tale tradition—in fact, all too predictably, he goes on to say in this same passage that these are the characteristics of "modern" literature, thus denying, curiously, his own medieval ancestry.

<sup>22</sup> Cited and translated in González Echevarría (1990).

But that ancestry too cannot be denied. For if there is, eventually, a kind of closure to this chapter in Spain itself, it is perhaps the case that the medieval Spanish tradition survived elsewhere and that literary history, here as elsewhere, should not be bound by the unreasonable strictures of linearities and "source studies" but reflect more frequently both the proleptic and the synchronistic—those features writers themselves so treasure. A number of years ago I was thunderstruck to hear the story (or one version of it) of Columbus' landing in the New World. The tale I heard was that the first man to get off the ship and try and speak to the natives was a court translator on loan from Isabela, a Jew, of course, who was sent assuming (quite logically) that Arabic would be the official language of the Indies, the *lingua franca* that would allow communication with the natives. So he got off the ship first and Arabic was, at least for a handful of sentences, the first Old World language spoken in the New World. Ten years ago this story seemed to me primarily emblematic of the now largely unrecognized prestige and centrality of Arabic in medieval Europe. But that is an interpretation of that story that alters considerably once one frames it with any sort of knowledge of the literature of Latin America, the literature of a different diaspora. Once one has heard even a few little bits and pieces of the voices that speak in what Castilian became in the Indies, that little tale opens up to a far richer interpretation: in what must have been a crazy conversation in Classical Arabic and Taino, one hears, I think, the rich cacophony of voices, that multiplicity of others that are the roots and the frames and the lifeblood of medieval Spain and, no less, of the new Spain *ultramar*. It is the many voices of medieval Spain that come across the sea in 1492, in the person of that Jew who undoubtedly spoke all the languages of all of the stories of the *Conde Lucanor* (the version that does not succeed in neutralizing the others and making them but one)—and although the languages themselves will of course be different on this side of the world, the delight in many voices and, as a result, in many truths, finds a new home and new narrators and singers. It is even true that, in another kabbalistic touch, the voices silenced in Spain after 1492 only begin to come alive again after Américo Castro, obviously fated by his name to cross the sea one day, comes to the New World fleeing the closures of 1939.

The echoes are everywhere: we hear them in Paz' concerns, concerns that reflect on his own heterogeneous heritage as a Mexican,

in Borges' incessant and infinitely loving play with Sheharazade and all her progeny, in Nicolás Guillén's bilingual poems that are so uncannily reminiscent of the Hispano-Arabic *muwashshahat* (with little "*kharjas*" in Yoruba, instead of in Mozarabic) and in the figure of Columbus himself, a Columbus who managed to tuck away the medieval world on his ships, along with the other essential provisions for the founding of the New World and its literature, a Columbus, as Carpentier will tell us, who both celebrates and perpetuates plurality and multiplicity and relativism.<sup>23</sup> If he is the ancestral narrator of the New World it is because he is the very alternative to the closure that threatened everywhere in 1492. But once again, the storyteller vanquishes sure death: Columbus, with his translator at his side, is the perfect narrator of the medieval tradition that is most charmingly and vitally Spanish, one in which Castilian is not the one true original but only one version, in which the vessels of the Kabbala are everywhere shattered, and in which—despite what the knight tried so hard to make us believe, and has succeeded for so long—the authentic and the true and the original are many, not one.

<sup>23</sup> See the inspiring work of González Echevarría for these readings and for an overarching view of Latin American literature that allows one to glimpse the significant and enriching ties that link the literature from *ultramar* to the medieval canon. See especially 1985 for multiple relevant discussions: the problem of the specificity of Spanish literature, closure as an instrument of power and suppression of other voices, and especially chapter 4, "Terra Nostra, Theory and Practice" for some consideration of how some modern and contemporary Latin American texts dwell directly on the medieval intertext; and 1990 for an inspiring and key reading of *El Arpa y la Sombra* and Carpentier's enriching and open view (explicitly non-linear) of the literary history of which he is a part, a history like Columbus' bones, everywhere scattered in the New World, the "original" and "authentic" now hopelessly confused with the "fakes." "Columbus appears in *El arpa y la sombra* as a figure of plurality and multiplicity not only through the image of his bodily and textual dispersal, but also because he is the agent for the concepts of enmity and relativism. . . . Columbus appears then, as the prophet of a relativism that makes the modern novel possible, Cervantes' above all."

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