

# The Secularism of Fiction: A Medieval Source

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## 1. The Three Rings

A beautiful story in Boccaccio's *Decameron* tells of a wise Jew evading a trap laid for him by the famous Sultan of Egypt and conqueror of Jerusalem, Saladin.

Short of funds as a result of his own generosity, Saladin summons the money-lender Melchizedek in an attempt to outwit him of his wealth by setting him a riddle: which of the three laws, Jewish, "Saracen," or Christian, is the true one. No matter which of the three Melchizedek should choose, Saladin will be able to refute him and, as a penalty, impound his fortune. Melchizedek knows Saladin's game, however, and so, like one who answers a question with a question, he replies with a story that explains why the Sultan's riddle is unanswerable.

It seems that once there was a great man who possessed a most beautiful ring that he bequeathed to one of his sons, who in turn left it to one of his sons, and so on until it came into the possession of a man with three sons he loved equally. Unable to leave the ring to one of his heirs to the exclusion of the other two, the man commissioned a craftsman to fashion two rings identical to the original, or as nearly identical as human ingenuity permits. It was done, and upon the man's death his sons found themselves with rings so virtually indistinguishable that none of the three could claim to be the sole heir. And those three rings (says Melchizedek to Saladin) symbolize the three laws, Judaism, Islam, Christianity. "As with the rings, the question as to which of them is right remains in abeyance"<sup>1</sup>—an answer even Saladin cannot gainsay.



The author of the first medieval collection of stories—still in circulation some 250 years later when the *Decameron* was composed, and an immeasurable influence on the imagination of Europe—was himself familiar with the three laws.

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<sup>1</sup>Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (London: Penguin, 1995), 44.

Petrus Alfonsi was born Moses some time in the later eleventh century in Spain, growing up not only near but among those of the Muslim faith.<sup>2</sup> Educated in Hebrew law and Arabic letters, both physician and (perhaps) rabbi, Moses converted to Christianity in the year 1106, taking the name Petrus in homage to the apostle, and Alfonsi after his godfather, Alfonso I of Aragon. Thereafter he journeyed to England where he taught astronomy and may have served as physician to King Henry I. Later he took up residence in France. At some point Petrus Alfonsi completed his conversion, in effect, by turning his pen against his former faith, framing a polemic against the Jews that has been judged “the single most important anti-Jewish text of the Latin Middle Ages” by reason of its novel, and poisonous, allegation that the Jews killed Christ precisely because they recognized him as the Son of God and feared being overshadowed by him.<sup>3</sup> Given the fervor of Petrus Alfonsi’s indictment of his own former people, and his defense of Christianity not only against Judaism but Islam, it seems all the more remarkable that his most enduring work—the anthology of loosely framed stories entitled the *Disciplina Clericalis*—not only shows no animus against either faith but borrows deeply from both Hebrew and Arabic sources.<sup>4</sup> The *Disciplina Clericalis* was the first great conduit of oriental story-lore into Latin Europe. That no one really knows whether Petrus Alfonsi composed it before or after his conversion suggests it is written in a language categorically different from that of religious invective and doctrinal controversy. While as a polemicist Petrus Alfonsi derides the lore of the Jews, and to some degree the Muslims, as ridiculous fables, the *Disciplina Clericalis* delights readers with its own fables—some of them ridiculous.

As the very tenor of his attack on both Jews and Muslims suggests, Petrus Alfonsi lived amid fierce religious contention. His own city of Huesca, in Aragon, was retaken from the Muslims but ten years before his baptism. In his time, too, Toledo was brought under Christian rule and its mosque transformed into a cathedral. Soon thereafter the militant Almoravid Berbers established themselves on the Spanish peninsula, imposing their fundamentalism and driving many Jews to seek haven in Christian realms. Elsewhere in Europe Jews were massacred and subjected to forced conversions by the pious armies of the First Crusade that eventually captured Jerusalem—an outcome so remarkable even to victorious Christendom that it could only be attributed to the will of God. Of all this the stories of the *Disciplina Clericalis* give no sign. They are written as if the question of religion were simply “in abeyance.” Though the author does state in his Prologue that he has omitted from his collection anything “which is contrary to our belief or repugnant to

<sup>2</sup>Thus, Moses demands of Petrus in Alfonsi’s *Dialogue Against the Jews* why he “chose the faith of the Christians rather than the faith of the Saracens, with whom you were always associated and raised.” *Dialogue Against the Jews*, trans. Irven Resnick (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2006), 146.

<sup>3</sup>John Tolan, *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 11. Cf. Tolan, “Los Diálogos Contra Los Judíos” in *Estudios sobre Pedro Alfonso de Huesca*, ed. María Jesús Laearra (Huesca: Instituto de Estudios Altoaragoneses, 1996), 190: “A pesar del tono educado y sereno de los argumentos de Petrus y Moisés, los *Diálogos* ofrecen una perspectiva completamente nueva y negativa del judaísmo, much más negativa que la presentada por las obras Latinas de la tradición agustiniana.”

<sup>4</sup>Haim Schwarzbaum, “International Folklore Motifs in Petrus Alfonsi’s ‘Disciplina Clericalis,’” *Sefarad* 21 (1961): 267–99; 22 (1962): 17–59; 321–44.

our faith,”<sup>5</sup> he also acknowledges a debt to Arabic parables and proverbs as well as sundry fables and poems (with the implication that all of these materials are in some way, he does not say how, consonant with Christian teaching). While specifically Arabic sources are cited, Hebrew and Christian sources are not, to say nothing of obscure Persian and Indian originals transmitted through Arabic or perhaps Hebrew channels. Far from proclaiming a single Truth, supreme and exclusive, Petrus Alfonsi’s stories convey a narrative wealth that derives from no one culture alone.

Although our terminology disposes us to think of Christian civilization and Islamic civilization as walled kingdoms, each complete unto itself and a stranger to the other, these worlds were not hermetically sealed.<sup>6</sup> Even while Latin Europe undertook the Crusades, after all, translations of scientific and philosophical works from the Arabic entered into the making and remaking of European learning, just as men of learning journeyed to Toledo, the center of translation and the site of the first school of oriental studies in medieval Europe,<sup>7</sup> where, some time later, Cervantes professed to have found the original Arabic manuscript of *Don Quixote*. (In the opinion of some, Petrus Alfonsi and Peter of Toledo, translator of the influential anti-Muslim polemic the *Risalah*, were one and the same.) The boundaries between the two civilizations may not have been as thoroughly porous as the Christian–Muslim frontier in Petrus Alfonsi’s Spain, traversed by shepherds, merchants, soldiers of fortune, and various political go-betweens and exiles, but they did allow for traffic both commercial and cultural, including the circulation of stories.<sup>8</sup> The Crusaders, many of whom learned Arabic and who cut channels to the East with their repeated ventures over three hundred years—no doubt even they served as conveyers of cultural information.

Around the same time as Christian armies seized Jerusalem, at one end of the Mediterranean, in the First Crusade, the oriental stories of the *Disciplina Clericalis* seized Europe from Spain, at the other. Through the slender dimensions of this volume a vast tradition of Indian, Persian, Arabic and other lore surged into Europe with something of the effect of water shooting through a breach in a dam. And the stories of the *Disciplina Clericalis* have no particular doctrinal content—“unreligious nuggets,” one commentator

<sup>5</sup>*The Scholar’s Guide: A Translation of the Twelfth-Century Disciplina Clericalis of Pedro Alfonso*, trans. Joseph Ramon Jones and John Esten Keller (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1969), 34.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Bakhtin’s comments on metaphors of enclosed territory: “One must not . . . imagine the realm of culture as some sort of spatial whole, having boundaries but also having internal territory. The realm of culture has no internal territory: it is entirely distributed along the boundaries, boundaries pass everywhere, through its every aspect.” Cited in Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 51.

<sup>7</sup>On Toledo see James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 51–55.

<sup>8</sup>Simon Barton, *A History of Spain* (New York Palgrave, 2004), 48. The prevailing currents seem to have run from the Islamic to the Christian worlds, but there is no reason to believe some did not run the other way. If we count Greek sources as “Western,” some of the *Thousand and One Nights* have Western affiliations to begin with. On the possibly Greek provenance of the emphasis on moderation in all things in Islamic political theory, see Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: The Rise and Fall of Islam’s Greatest Dynasty* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2004), 206; cf. C. E. Bosworth, “An Early Arabic Mirror for Princes: Tahir Dhu L-Yaminain’s Epistle To His Son Abdallah (206/821)”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 29 (1970): 28.

aply calls them.<sup>9</sup> No one, it has been said, would have anticipated the *Disciplina Clericalis* from such a fervent defender of Christianity as the convert, Petrus Alfonsi.<sup>10</sup> “Indeed, were we to expunge the brief invocations to Christ in the prologue and epilogue, the *Disciplina* could be the work of a Muslim or a Jew.”<sup>11</sup> Where victory or defeat in the Crusades was attributed to the will of God, Petrus Alfonsi tells of small contests in which the will of God plays no part and people stand or fall entirely on their own mettle and merits. Stories of a man testing his friends or a woman deceiving her husband not only belong to a more modest rhetorical register than epics of clashing civilizations but concern matters in which God takes no sides, and maybe no interest. The honor of a husband is not the fate of Jerusalem. Men, women and animals in the stories of the *Disciplina Clericalis* are placed in situations that test their wit, their honesty and their virtue. These qualities belong to no particular civilization and are not treated by Petrus Alfonsi as if they did.

Consider the first story of the *Disciplina Clericalis*, “The Half Friend.” An Arab asks his son how many friends he has; the son estimates one hundred. Skeptical because he himself has “scarcely . . . half a friend,” the father warns that no one should be accounted a friend until tested, and accordingly instructs his son to kill a calf, dismember it and stuff it in a sack, smear the sack with blood (a ruse loosely recalling the Joseph story) and then test his presumed friends one by one, saying, “My good friend, I have killed a man by accident; I beg you to bury him secretly; no one will suspect you, and thus you will be able to save me.” And so, the son visits his friends, trying them as his father instructed, and receiving from each the same refusal until finally he visits the “half friend” who is his father’s only friend. Finding the young man in need, the man secretly digs a grave for the disposal of the body, thus proving himself loyal and further demonstrating, in the words of the father, that “He who helps you when the world fails you is a true friend.” While the father is said to be an Arab, and while Petrus Alfonsi professes himself a servant of Jesus Christ, this semi-fantastic tale mentions no religion and implies no creed or doctrine, radiating if anything a certain practical skepticism (but stopping short of the black irony of the Player King: “Who in want a hollow friend doth try/Directly seasons him an enemy.”) Of a Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew, any, all or none could be imagined applauding someone who placed loyalty to a friend or in this case, a friend’s son, above loyalty to the realm.

Imported stories like this one introduced into Europe by Petrus Alfonsi often possess that element of the unusual for which we seek out stories in the first place, though the best candidates for importation are not so emphatically foreign as to offend the most deeply held beliefs of the receiving culture. Various derived, Petrus Alfonsi’s stories of ingenuity, generosity, folly and guile (all of which are written into the parable of “The Half Friend”) sidestep religious differences as deftly as Melchizedek in

<sup>9</sup>E. L. Ranelagh, *The Past We Share: The Near Eastern Ancestry of Western Folk Literature* (London: Quartet, 1979), 165. Cf. Tolán, *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers*, 235: “True, Alfonsi asserts in his prologue that [his stories] are meant to propel the reader along the path of wisdom, which leads to heaven, but the behavior to be eschewed is the unwise, the dishonest, the undignified—not the sinful.”

<sup>10</sup>Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, *Orígenes de la novela* (Madrid: CSIC, 1962), 64; cited in Tolán, *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers*, 234.

<sup>11</sup>Tolán, *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers*, 91.

the *Decameron*, and like that wise man they amuse and amaze rather than dogmatize. Even if Boccaccio had not borrowed from the *Disciplina Clericalis*, we might well place his own stories of ingenuity, generosity, folly and guile (all of which figure in the story of Melchizedek and Saladin) in the same tradition, avoiding as they do everything sectarian and one-sided. If, as many would say, Boccaccio stands as the inventor of modern prose fiction, then Petrus Alfonsi is one of its pre-inventors. As an index to the “influence on the fiction of the world” wielded by the fables of the *Disciplina Clericalis*, E. L. Ranelagh once cited, in addition to the number of surviving manuscripts and the long list of borrowers over the centuries, the use of stories for illustrative purposes in “*novelle* in Italy, *fabliaux* in France, and English Literature in England.”<sup>12</sup>

In a letter written by Oliver the Scholastic to the King of Babylon in 1221, mention is made of a supposed debate between a Christian, a Jew, and a Muslim

in which the Christian placed the Mosaic above the Muslim law, the Jew preferred the Christian doctrines to the Muslim, and the Muslim placed the Christian faith above the Jewish. [Oliver] argues from this circumstance the superiority of the Christian religion, since the two non-Christians praised it.<sup>13</sup>

But another account, put into writing a century before, tells of the chief of the Khazar tribes in Central Asia, in the year 740, contemplating conversion to one of the three monotheistic faiths, listening to sales presentations from a Christian and a Muslim, and then, noting that “the Christian preferred Judaism to Islam, and the Moslem preferred Judaism to Christianity,” turning to the Jew and accepting the Jewish faith.<sup>14</sup> All such stories seem to be rigged. The *Decameron* story of three rings symbolizing the three faiths, now envisioned as equally true, is all the lovelier by comparison. The story also beautifully symbolizes the fictions that passed between the Christian and non-Christian worlds in the later Middle Ages, penetrating ideological defenses, disarming animosities and enjoying considerable independence of religion because they never claimed the majesty of Truth in the first place: fictions like the Arabic stories translated into Latin by Petrus Alfonsi, the Jewish convert to Christianity, and conveying a sort of practical wisdom that belongs to no single faith.

## 2. Holy War and Cultural Traffic

Idealized as a defender of the faith and said to have taken part in the sack of Alexandria (the most successful crusading venture of the fourteenth century),<sup>15</sup> the “verray, parfit gentil” Knight of the *Canterbury Tales* has a son, the Squire, whose portrait evokes the oriental and whose tale is an overflowing horn of oriental motifs. Thus does Chaucer touch on the ironies of his civilization’s double vision of the oriental, going back to the First Crusade on the one hand and the entry of the *Disciplina Clericalis* into the language and imagination of Christian Europe on the other, at almost the same time. While Islam, which included Christendom in the House of War, was accounted “the greatest enemy

<sup>12</sup>Ranelagh, *The Past We Share*, 165.

<sup>13</sup>Dana Carleton Munro, “The Western Attitude toward Islam during the Period of the Crusades,” *Speculum* 6 (1931): 340.

<sup>14</sup>James Kritzeck, *Jews, Christians and Moslems* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965), 13.

<sup>15</sup>Aziz S. Atiya, *Crusade, Commerce and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 104.

of the Christian Church” in the age of Chaucer, its persecution of Christianity “the longest, the most continuous, the most widely extended, the most thorough-going, the most obstinate, the most pernicious, the one with the most agents,”<sup>16</sup> nevertheless Christian Europe accepted from the hands of this hated foe some of the sources of its own literature.

It is one of the ironies of cultural history that stories from the Islamic world should have flowed into Latin Europe and gone into the making of its fiction even as the image of Islam itself as a religion of license, violence and fraud was established in Europe. In the very shadow of the Crusades and in the face of the Church’s desire “to reduce communication with Muslims to a minimum,”<sup>17</sup> even then Arabic stories entered the lore of Christian Europe, in the first instance through the channel opened by Petrus Alfonsi. In the Middle Ages, the machinery of censorship that is an adjunct of the printing press did not exist, and resort to “Aesopian” methods took a correspondingly different form, with fables actually akin to the Aesop tradition, like the animal stories of the *Disciplina Clericalis*, passing untraceably between civilizations officially at war. The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky divided Aesopian compositions into two categories, one trite, didactic, “prosaic,” the other exalted, inspired, witty, “poetic.”<sup>18</sup> The fictions of the *Disciplina Clericalis* are all of these things. Under the appearance of the commonplace they glimmer with brilliance, and under the semblance of ordinary didacticism they offer perfect camouflage to fantastic invention, an arrangement that must have contributed to their vast popularity and their success in crossing borders even in a time of the most bitter contention.

Anti-Islamic propaganda got going after the First Crusade—not coincidentally, the birthing hour of a new literature as well.

The romances of Charlemagne and soon those of Arthur; the Miracles of the Virgin; the wonders of Rome and the legends of Virgil; the legendary history of Britain—they are all products of approximately the same period and of precisely the same point of view as that which produced the legends of Mahomet [as a drunkard or a confidence artist, for example] and the fantastic descriptions of Moslem practices. There can be little doubt that at the moment of their formation these legends and fantasies were taken to represent a more or less truthful account of what they purported to describe.<sup>19</sup>

At the other end of the literary scale were tales not of heroes on the order of Charlemagne but nameless folk like those of the *Disciplina Clericalis*, itself composed in the wake of the First Crusade—tales, too, that are not meant to be taken as historical or true, whose pleasure resides, in part, in a dram of the fantastic mixed in with their naturalism. The *Disciplina Clericalis* was a harbinger of a flood of written stories that extended from

<sup>16</sup>Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000; orig. pub. 1960), 211.

<sup>17</sup>Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 146.

<sup>18</sup>Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, *The Psychology of Art*, trans. Scripta Technica, Inc. (Cambridge, MA.: M. I. T. Press, 1971).

<sup>19</sup>R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 29.



India to Iceland, an inundation that represents “one of the great literary processes in the formation of European civilisation.”<sup>20</sup> It cannot be coincidental that this surge in narrative, so massive that “no single reader now in his lifetime could possibly get through all the books of medieval stories that still survive,”<sup>21</sup> took place while Christendom engaged in commerce on the one hand and war on the other with the world of Islam, a great storehouse of narrative.

If tales were to be admitted into the Latin West from the realm of Islam, ways had to be found to sever them from their origins and get around the ideological defenses of the West itself. Ways were found. Oriental tales including Petrus Alfonsi’s story of a woman allegedly transformed into a weeping puppy were gathered into the *Gesta Romanorum*, a collection “no more ‘Roman’ than the Holy Roman Empire.”<sup>22</sup> Preachers, even preachers of the Crusades, might interpret oriental stories as conventional moral lessons, at once appropriating their attractions and removing their strangeness. They might use stories as sweeteners. From the pulpits of the later Middle Ages, one could hear stories derived not only from Aesop’s fables but the *Panchatantra* (via Arabic redactions), even from a branch of the tradition of the *Thousand and One Nights*, such was the plenty of narrative sources at hand. Less earnest and doctrinal sorts might understand such stories as dwelling outside the official dichotomy of truth and falsehood altogether—as fiction. Inasmuch as Arabic stories would never have been assimilable into foreign cultures unless they had been more or less independent of Islam to begin with, we can say that the very flow of oriental tales into the lore of the West supported the category of fiction as a thing with a life and language of its own, independent of official dictates. The category of fiction facilitated literary traffic with the enemy in the midst of a clash of civilizations extending over centuries and accompanied by a violent war of words.

“The Christians took [the Arabs’] stories while often removing from them all their specifically Islamic features.”<sup>23</sup> But more fundamental than the details of this or that story is the understanding of “story” itself as fiction, something not to be vouched for but nevertheless with a claim on our interest; a narrative instructive perhaps, but recounted principally for amusement; not exactly a lie but not the truth either; independent of the teachings of religion but not directly opposed to them, like the fables of the *Disciplina Clericalis*. Assuming they were composed in that order, how pleasant it must have been for Petrus Alfonsi to turn from his *Dialogue Against the Jews*, with its fiery polemics against his former faith and former self, to the stories of the *Disciplina Clericalis*, where religion is simply not at issue. In a world bitterly divided over points of belief, fictions allowed the audience to believe or not believe, as it wished. If testimony by a Muslim was viewed with suspicion in Christian courts, and testimony by Christians in Muslim courts, nevertheless fictions whose authors were understood not to be under oath could pass from one world to the other. Fictions therefore distinguish themselves from propaganda that demands to be taken as true despite its own fantastic nature, propaganda

<sup>20</sup>G. T. Shepherd, “The Emancipation of Story in the Twelfth Century” in *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1979), 46.

<sup>21</sup>Shepherd, “The Emancipation of Story in the Twelfth Century,” 46.

<sup>22</sup>Alice E. Lasater, *Spain to England: A Comparative Study of Arabic, European, and English Literature of the Middle Ages* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1974), 105.

<sup>23</sup>Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: Tauris Parke, 2004), 77.

such as the story in the *Canterbury Tales* of the martyrdom of a Christian boy at the hands of Jews, likened by the Prioress to the “notable” murder of Hugh of Lincoln. If a *Decameron* story of Saladin gathering intelligence in Italy (10.9) does not solicit the same sort of belief as medieval propaganda stories of his network of spies, still less does the fable of an intelligent crow, set in the days when crows were white—the Manciple’s Tale, with analogues in the *Thousand and One Nights*—demand to be credited as solemnly as the Prioress’s Tale. Nor, for that matter, does Boccaccio’s story of three rings, symbolizing three faiths, bequeathed to each of three sons, compare in weight with the medieval legend of Noah’s three sons receiving their portions, Shem becoming the progenitor of the Saracens, Ham of the Africans and Japheth the Europeans.<sup>24</sup>

The Prioress’s Tale is certified, in effect, by its very genre as a miracle of the Virgin, as well as by the analogy between the martyrdom of its hero and the murder of Hugh of Lincoln. The story of Griselda verges on the incredible, but at least the Clerk can authenticate his tale by referring it to “Fraunceys Petrak,” who himself took it from the *Decameron*. A story that derives via obscure pathways from oriental sources, a story like those of the *Disciplina Clericalis*, cannot be authenticated and therefore belongs to a different category, which I call fiction. Concerned as they are with ordinary folk who lack the public, chronicled existence of a historical figure, such stories are devoid of historical authority and can only be deemed apocryphal. And the understanding of such tales as inventions independent of truth, which we enjoy and retell as we please—this understanding allowed them to flourish in the face of the disapproval that compositions not Christian in origin, and not necessarily illustrating a moral or philosophical principle, might have been expected to excite. According to Thomas Aquinas, Muhammad adulterated whatever truths he taught “with many fables and most false doctrines.”<sup>25</sup> The category of fiction accords a place to “fables” outside the scheme of truth and falsehood and outside the cognizance of doctrine, and any number of brilliant fables came to Christendom from the Islamic world itself. Taking the *Disciplina Clericalis* as a starting point, we can say that the category of fiction now familiar to us began as a sort of safe-conduct pass across enemy lines in an age of religious warfare.

My sense, then, is that fiction took shape as a literary category during the era of the Crusades when stories flowed into Latin Europe, many from the stores of its own adversary, anonymous and untraceable, concerned not with personages of note but with persons anonymous themselves—persons who could be anyone. In every respect, the new fiction contradicted the clash of civilizations as portrayed by the propaganda of the time. In the *Disciplina Clericalis*, there is no sign of clashing civilizations. Its stories tell of Greeks and Arabs, and mention Mecca and Rome, indifferently. Where propaganda painted Islam as a religion of lies and its founder as a confidence-artist, ruses are often celebrated in the *Disciplina Clericalis* as well as the tales it fed into (like those of the *Decameron*), as they had long been in folk tales. And just because these stories concern

<sup>24</sup>Cf. *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. C. W. R. D. Moseley (London: Penguin, 1983), 145. On the story of Ham and its uses, see David Brion Davis, “Blacks: Damned by the Bible,” *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 16 (2006): 37–40.

<sup>25</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. the English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1924), Book 1, Ch. 6; 13. According to Peter the Venerable, the doctrine of Islam was filled with “many ridiculous things and the maddest absurdities” intended to seduce the imagination from God (Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 148).



mainly persons unknown (unlike the heroic poetry inspired by the Crusades), the stories themselves lack the authority of a more historical narrative. Not only did fiction take in stories from outside the Christian world, it held forth a vision of life at ground level at variance with the high abstractions of propaganda.

### 3. Fiction and Enmity

It is a striking fact that the *Thousand and One Nights*, synonymous in the West with fantastic literary invention, emerged from a civilization whose literary theory devalued invention and scarcely recognized fiction itself.<sup>26</sup> The official contempt in which fictions were held in Islamic culture may have had something to do with their imported or composite nature. In a counterpart of the irony of Christian civilization importing fictions from the Islamic world in the age of the Crusades, the Arab conquerors of the Near East eagerly assimilated the cultural riches of subject peoples even while proclaiming the unique truth of Islam, and it is in such cultural commerce that many of the tales of the *Nights* presumably have their roots. But a culture that took great pride in being distinct on earth, the sole possessor of divine truth, could hardly rejoice officially in stories that came from outside its purview, even if the more obvious traces of foreign origin were erased. Nothing could be farther from the Qur'an, which issues from a single source—God Himself—than a miscellany like the *Nights*, uneven in tone, not to be taken quite seriously, and deriving, like the *Disciplina Clericalis*, from Persian, Indian, Jewish and other sources. Technically, the entire collection is set somewhere in the vagueness of the Far East, “in the peninsulas of India and Indochina” where King Shahrayar and his brother reside, as the opening of the Prologue informs us. In the bold fantasies of the *Nights*, medieval Muslims may have sensed the world beyond the borders of Islam—the world of the unbeliever. But regardless of notions of unclean lands outside the confines of Islam, Muslims must have encountered Unbelievers aplenty in daily life—non-Muslims constituting perhaps a majority of the population in the very Golden Age of the caliphate.<sup>27</sup> The rhetoric of intolerance did not bar the practical toleration of other “Peoples of the Book,” and neither did pride in Muslim uniqueness bar the import of stories from, and their export to, the world beyond the community of Islam.

Like the zero in mathematics, an Indian invention that migrated to the Arabic world; like the Phoenician alphabet adapted by the Greeks, stories are inventions too powerful to be confined to a single culture. Not only did they cross from one to another, borne by the currents of the “ocean of stories,” but on both sides of the Christian/Islamic divide they were gathered into collections—anthologized—and thereby elevated into a category of their own, more or less independent of sacred doctrine. Much as Aesopian fables, once collected,

tend strongly to be told for their own interest as narratives, whether witty, clever, amusing, dramatic, satirical, sensational, sentimental, or wise. The story itself becomes the main thing, instead of the idea that it is supposed to convey implicitly,<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 287, 295.

<sup>27</sup>Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, 206, 230.

<sup>28</sup>Ben Edwin Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), xxv.

so, in motley collections such as the *Nights* on the one hand and the *Disciplina Clericalis* on the other (where the preceding list of adjectives applies very well, as they also do to the *Decameron* for that matter), we witness the formation of fiction itself as a literary category. This is not to say that fiction excited no disapproval. Certainly it called forth apologies and defenses, as when Petrus Alfonsi hedged his story-collection with the confession that “in human writings, nothing is perfect,” a precursor of Chaucer’s disclaimers as well as Boccaccio’s equivocating defense of the *Decameron* on the ground that “there is no craftsman other than God whose work is whole and faultless in every respect.”<sup>29</sup> But if fictions had to be justified, nevertheless they *could* be justified, if only as a lesser good or as something not to be taken absolutely seriously.<sup>30</sup> In refusing to have anything to do with storytelling, Chaucer’s Parson takes a minority position. (If Chaucer himself had held such a view, he might not have “retracted” the *Canterbury Tales* but burned them.) Is it significant that the tale immediately preceding the Parson’s harsh attack on “fables” has cousins in the *Thousand and One Nights*?

The ease with which stories crossed civilizations, stands in direct contrast to the intractability of doctrinal differences. Stories entered the *Thousand and One Nights* from Indian, Greek, Jewish, Persian sources as if the theoretically absolute barrier between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds amounted to very little in the eyes of fiction. Civilizations that officially regarded one another as infidels shared stories of the infidelities of women, as in the *Disciplina Clericalis*. Narrative goes where doctrine cannot. On the other hand, that story-lore passed between Islamic and Christian civilization doesn’t mean these civilizations warmed to one another in consequence.

The very connections among the three monotheistic religions constituted so much contested territory. While “Christian and Muslim ideas about judgment, retribution, and reward in an afterlife were basically similar”<sup>31</sup>—making it impossible to say whether the wise hermit of the *Disciplina Clericalis*, who knows that his good and bad deeds will be weighed before God, is Christian or Muslim or indeed Jew—and while both civilizations laid claim to the heritage of the Greeks and the Jews, such common ground by no means made for tolerance and mutual good will. Crusade and jihad are themselves basically similar: holy wars both. That Islam recognizes Jesus as a prophet has never endeared that religion to Christianity. That both religions hold Jerusalem sacred only made Jerusalem a bone of contention and a prize of war. That Harun, the most famous of the caliphs, shared the name of Aaron, and his brother Musa that of Moses, did not persuade Muslims that the Jews were their kinsmen. And if in the Middle Ages “every Christian child was taught to revere Moses,”<sup>32</sup> this did not uproot the hatred of Jews from

<sup>29</sup>*Disciplina Clericalis*, 34; *Decameron*, 800.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Karen Sullivan’s idea of fiction as an activity in which the author engenders the sort of confusions that define heresy, but is not prosecuted for doing so “because he is composing fictions, which are . . . not to be taken seriously”: *Truth and the Heretic: Crises of Knowledge in Medieval French Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>31</sup>Bernard Lewis, *Cultures in Conflict: Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the Age of Discovery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>32</sup>Ruth Ames, “The Source and Significance of ‘The Jew and The Pagan,’” *Mediaeval Studies* 19 (1957): 37. On Jews as both the forerunners of Christianity and the objects of Christian hatred, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004), 261.

Christian hearts, as it did not prevent Petrus Alfonsi from repudiating his former name of Moses for the sake of Christ. Chaucer's Pardoner pretends to have in his possession the shoulder-bone of "an hooly Jewes sheep," but begins his tale by remarking that the tavern-goers of Flanders thought the Jews didn't tear Christ's body enough, so they swore on His body parts. Civil wars, wars against brethren, are notoriously venomous and bloody. Perhaps Petrus Alfonsi's attack on Judaism is as venomous as it is because it belongs to his own autobiographical civil war. The identification of Muslims with pagans, as in romances celebrating their defeat;<sup>33</sup> circulating stories of Muhammad as a trickster, lecher, drunkard; Dante's obscene depiction of Muhammad and portrayal of lower Hell as a city of mosques ("meschite");<sup>34</sup>—such things suggest how deep the poisoned well of hatred was, and how potent the propaganda concocted of those waters could be. But fiction thrived even so.

According to Marco Polo's report on the sect known as Assassins, with the aid of a certain unspecified sleeping-draught a Sheikh (or Old Man of the Mountain) removes youths under his control to a garden of delights, giving them a foretaste of the paradise that awaits them when they meet their death. Boccaccio knew something of the Assassins, and if he wanted to inflame or simply play on anti-Muslim sentiment he had a royal opportunity in this story of a master of mind-control who transforms young men into killers ardent for their own death. Instead, Boccaccio uses the story of the Sheikh and his potion for purely comical purposes. In *Decameron* 3.8, the Sheikh becomes a lusty abbot, and the sleeping-drug, rather than transporting a youth to a simulated paradise, transports the hapless Ferondo to a sham Purgatory where he is lashed every day while the abbot enjoys his wife. We are told that the sleeping drug came into the possession of the abbot "in the East," his source being "a mighty prince, who maintained that it was the one used by the Old Man of the Mountain whenever he wanted to send people to his paradise in their sleep and bring them back again"—an unmistakable reference to the story of the Assassins, here cited in jest, and placed at several removes from Boccaccio himself. It is as if Boccaccio mined the narrative potential of Petrus Alfonsi's tales of sexual trickery even as he radicalized the freedom from religious animosities of the *Disciplina Clericalis* as a whole. If Boccaccio had intended to use the tales of the *Decameron* for anti-Muslim propaganda, he might not have adapted some from Arabic sources at all, as could also be said of Petrus Alfonsi.

#### 4. Fables: Simplicity, Subtlety, Power

In view of the hate-propaganda then in circulation, it seems remarkable that Christian Europe proved so receptive to stories from the Islamic world, though by the same token those best suited for the European market were not fixed in foreign settings and did not convey specifically religious doctrine. In the story of "The Sword" in the *Disciplina Clericalis*, a deceived husband praises his wife in the very presence of her lover. In the corresponding story in the section of the *Thousand and One Nights* devoted to "The Craft and Malice of Women," the husband, in praising his wife, invokes Allah. In the *Decameron* version (7.6), the woman's lover gives thanks to God, that is, the Christian

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Diane Speed, "The Saracens of *King Horn*," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 564–95; also C. Meredith Jones, "The Conventional Saracen of the Songs of Geste," *Speculum* 17 (1942): 201–25.

<sup>34</sup>*Inferno* 8.70.

God, for his deliverance. Clearly, these religious touches are superficial embellishments of a story belonging to no religion in particular.

As religion leaves no trace in Petrus Alfonsi's fable of "The Sword," so in other ways, too, the stories of the *Disciplina Clericalis* seem intentionally devoid of detail and specification. "Going through the forest a man found a snake which some shepherds had stretched and tied to some trees." When we learn of the broad diffusion and reproductive success of stories like the one that begins thus in the *Disciplina Clericalis*, we can only wonder how narratives so bare and featureless could exert such influence. "A man." What man? "The forest." What forest? But if brevity really is the soul of wit, then in one sense at least these stories gain rather than lose by their narrative simplicity and concentration. To this day, good jokes are swift and spare, not weighed down with details. Perhaps, too, bare-bones stories like those of the *Disciplina Clericalis* circulated all the more readily because they left the freedom to thicken the plot and specify persons in the hands of the teller. In scanning the contours of narrative from the *Disciplina Clericalis* to the *Decameron*, from French fabliaux to the *Canterbury Tales*, from the *Canterbury Tales* to the modern novel, we are struck at each stage with a gain of particularity.<sup>35</sup>

As fictions passed from culture to culture, from language to language, "translators" and tellers could point them as they wished. Both in the *Disciplina Clericalis* and the *Decameron* (7.4), we find the tale of a woman who, found out by her husband in the middle of the night, makes him believe she has thrown herself in a well in despair. When he races to the well she races inside the house, locks him out, and proclaims his nocturnal escapades to the world. In the *Disciplina Clericalis*, the tale is told as an example of female guile, while the dressier *Decameron* version is told at the expense of a husband so jealous that his wife finally gives him something to be jealous of, such a drunkard that she plays on "the fellow's talent for drinking himself unconscious," such a fool that he brings on himself the ridicule and humiliation he dreads. At the end, in token of his defeat, "not only did he promise [his wife] that he would never be jealous again, but he gave her permission to amuse herself to her heart's content, provided she was sensible enough not to let him catch her out." Of the same radical, Boccaccio and Petrus Alfonsi make virtually contrary tales.<sup>36</sup> Each is free to inflect his version as he likes and to make it bear out the commonplace he chooses—the dishonest wife or the foolish husband. Each could perhaps have fashioned a tale to support the other's choice.

If the apparent simplicity and narrative modesty of Petrus Alfonsi's stories contributed to their diffusion, so too did fictions cross more readily into another cultural world if, like his own, they were little encumbered with doctrine, allusion or eloquence—in effect, were too insignificant to fight over, unlike hotly contested points of dogma. In a sense, fictions confessed their own weightlessness by telling so often of people duped into believing some impossible fiction, like the reluctant adulteress in one of the best-known stories of the *Disciplina Clericalis*, persuaded by an old bawd "wearing the habit of a nun"

<sup>35</sup>On average, the tales of the *Decameron* are something like ten times longer than those of the anonymous thirteenth-century *Cento novelle antiche*, and the *Canterbury Tales* some three times longer than Boccaccio's in turn. Robert J. Clements and Joseph Gibaldi, *Anatomy of the Novella: The European Tale Collection from Boccaccio and Chaucer to Cervantes* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), 216–17.

<sup>36</sup>Cervantes too told the tale of the well, though not in *Don Quixote*.

that a weeping puppy now harbors the soul of a woman lamenting her chastity. Such fables seem to exist in a world apart from the fury of religious invective. In Petrus Alfonsi's diatribe against the Jews, rabbinical teachings are likened to "old wives' tales."<sup>37</sup> In the story of the weeping puppy, we rejoice in a tale told by an old procuress (ancestor of the most famous of old wives, Chaucer's Wife of Bath). The Arabic stories most compatible with the soil of Latin Europe told not of a clash of civilizations or faiths, or the fall of enemies, but for the most part of subjects of this order, well beneath the level of the heroic. A bird that informs on the infidelities of his master's wife; a blind man who recovers his sight just as his wife closes with her lover overhead in a tree; thieves who turn against one another—humble matter like this flowed from the East into the *Canterbury Tales*. Those who imported stories and elements or kernels of stories did not import the noblest works of the other world, and those who used them in new ways did so without acknowledging their sources—as, indeed, the *Nights* stories efface signs of their origins—or perhaps even knowing them. In Chaucer, the naming of Arabic authorities, among them "Averrois" and "Avycen," stands in sharp relief against the anonymity of Arabic narrative sources. The Pardoner cites Avicenna on the effects of poison but does not mention, if in fact he knows, that his very tale is of eastern provenance. Petrus Alfonsi is named in the Tale of Melibee as a source of moral maxims, not of stories.

The audiences and redactors of oriental tales may not have been aware of their origin, but from the *Disciplina Clericalis* to Boccaccio and Chaucer and beyond, good stories showed the impossibility of reducing others to fixed types, in the way that propaganda reduces the Muslim to a worshipper of Muhammad, or the Jew to an enemy of Christ. Among the most evocative and entrenched of all types is the dishonest wife, and while it is true that the *Disciplina Clericalis* contains a cluster of unforgettable stories of female infidelity and guile, it is also true that the "pupil" to whom they are told is warned point-blank, "You should not believe that all women are like that; great chastity and goodness are found in many women." Significantly, the unfaithful wife in the most renowned story of this lot—the wildly popular oriental tale of "The Weeping Bitch," a tale so good that some place it in the *Decameron* even though it is not to be found in those pages<sup>38</sup>—has no desire to betray her husband but is simply hoodwinked into doing so, contrary to the conventional image of woman as a creature of illicit desire. She is even called "very chaste." In a sense, the co-presence of feminist and antifeminist notes in the *Decameron* is in the tradition of Petrus Alfonsi. Boccaccio could have written a good story about a chaste adulteress.

The *Decameron* story we began with, that of the three rings, also disrupts the identity of its focal character with his conventional definition. Saladin, short of funds both because of his military adventures and his "extraordinary acts of munificence," has nowhere to turn except the wealthy Jew Melchizedek; but because "this Melchizedek was such a miserly fellow that he would never hand over [the necessary sum] of his own free will," Saladin decides to lay a trap for him. Ordinarily, a character identified as a miser *has* been reduced to his definition: he is possessed with greed, the fool of his own ruling passion. The image of Jews as covetous materialists is of course a strong and persistent one. In the later Middle Ages, there were those who thought of the three religions as

<sup>37</sup>*Dialogue Against the Jews*, 46.

<sup>38</sup>See Irwin, *Arabian Nights: A Companion*, 64.

worshippers respectively of Fortune, Nature and Grace: the Jews (as seekers of worldly prosperity) of Fortune; the Muslims (as devotees of indulgence) of Nature; the Christians of Grace.<sup>39</sup> Just as the parable of the three rings disputes this simplicity, so does Melchizedek himself defy the type of the miser befooled by his own love of wealth. So far from being a fool that he defeats the Sultan's plot, Melchizedek is also, as it turns out, so little of a compulsive hoarder that he "gladly" provides Saladin with the necessary funds as soon as honestly asked.

The *Disciplina Clericalis* tells of friends who prove not to be friends, of Alexander not in his greatness but in his grave. (Hence Hamlet: "Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole?") Alexander does not equal greatness, women do not equal lechery, as Melchizedek does not equal a miser. But if people don't boil down to some single quality or category presumed to sum up their entire being, neither can we say of the Latin audiences of such stories that they were "Christian" as if this single fact ruled them from the top down. Surely, the audiences of the *Decameron* or the *Canterbury Tales* were not so entirely Christian that they couldn't enjoy tales that originated beyond the borders of Christendom, just as audiences of the *Thousand and One Nights* were not so altogether Islamic that they couldn't enjoy stories that antedated Islam and entered its lore from Persia or India.

Human differences can be exaggerated. Christians fought in Muslim armies. It is possible that Christian artists worked on the frescoes of the Alhambra, as Muslim builders contributed to Christian architecture in Spain. Harun al-Rashid and Charlemagne, later to become legendary in their respective civilizations, exchanged ambassadors and gifts. The Qur'anic story of a messenger of God who after committing three bewildering deeds reveals the evils averted by each (so that by slaying an apparently innocent youth, for example, he prevented the boy from bringing iniquity to his parents)—this story not only has many Christian analogues but may have sprung from similar rabbinical tales justifying the ways of God.<sup>40</sup> The various Jewish, Christian, and Muslim versions of this theodicy legend are like three interlocking rings. In evading Saladin's trap by delivering the parable of the three rings only to provide the money gladly when the Sultan honestly applies for it, Melchizedek seems to say that the children of all three religions—Jews, Christians, Muslims—know the difference between liberty and duress, candor and entrapment, honor and deceit.

Like Shahrazad wisely not telling the king of her intention to cause him to stop killing, Melchizedek does not inform Saladin in so many words that he perceives the trap that has been set for him and has no intention of walking into it. Fables have often been used to say something to "persons whom one must be careful not to offend by direct address."<sup>41</sup> There is something of this in Chaucer's indirect manner, as well as his pose in the *Canterbury Tales* of a man of small ability not even worth describing—a man too whose very worries about offending his audience somehow license his freedom of speech. One school of thought has it that fables are originally or essentially a means of circumventing superior power, a weapon of the weak. Aesop the slave gets the better of

<sup>39</sup>Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 215.

<sup>40</sup>See Haim Schwarzbbaum, "The Jewish and Moslem Versions of Some Theodicy Legends," *Fabula* 3 (1959): 119–69.

<sup>41</sup>B. E. Perry, "Fable," *Studium Generale* 12 (1959): 24.



his master, as does Melchizedek the mighty Saladin and Shahrazad the king. Whether or not late-medieval storytellers entertained such crafty intentions as these great fablers, the fiction bequeathed them by Petrus Alfonsi gave them the means to get around official disapproval of cultural traffic with the Islamic world.

If fables empower the lowly, prose fiction was itself the lowliest and least regarded of literary forms. Petrarch seems to have thought even so remarkable a work as the *Decameron* beneath his notice. “If I were to say I have read [the *Decameron*],” he wrote, “I would be lying, since it is very big, having been written for the common herd and in prose, and I was too busy and time was short.”<sup>42</sup> (Petrarch also said, “I shall scarcely be persuaded that anything good can come from Arabia”—so great was his contempt of Arabic importations and influences.)<sup>43</sup> The doctrine of poetry’s superiority lived on into the twentieth century, reasserting itself in the belief that prose speaks the vulgar language of statements, while poetry is somehow autotelic and independent of reference. In a discussion of the profound and long-lasting prejudice against storytelling in particular, Northrop Frye delineates four levels of verbal constructions in Christian tradition, from “high myth” or supreme truth at the top, “which is not only not literary but cannot really be understood except by those who have passed beyond the need for literature” (as the Parson seeks to wean the Canterbury pilgrims from fables and fiction) to the lowest rung of all, “the literature designed only to entertain or amuse, which is out of sight of truth, and should be avoided altogether by serious people.”<sup>44</sup> Somehow, though, such literature managed to survive and flourish despite being blacklisted. In some respects, indeed, being out of sight of truth, that is, sacred truth, worked to its benefit. If prose compositions are unworthy of critical notice (as Petrarch left even the *Decameron* unread), by the same token they may be left to themselves. Moreover, lying outside of doctrinal systems, stories could be imported from, say, the world of Islam without those concerned feeling that they had imported Islam itself. The slight cultural weight of fictions and fables made their transport easier. Ironically, it was in part because of the very lowliness of tales like those of the *Disciplina Clericalis* that these compositions, originating in foreign traditions, were able to enter the literature of Latin Europe, laying the basis for the modern novel with its many sources and voices.

<sup>42</sup>Francesco Petrarch, *Letters of Old Age*, Vol. 2, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, Saul Levin and Reta A. Bernardo (New York: Italica Press, 2005), 655.

<sup>43</sup>Petrarch, *Letters of Old Age*, Vol. 2, 472.

<sup>44</sup>Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 21.