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Shades of Misogyny

Medieval Versions of the Seven Sages Tradition from a Gender Perspective

The narrative tradition of the Seven Sages, to which this special issue of *Narrative Culture* is devoted, originated in the East and spread all over Europe during the Middle Ages. The many versions of the tale bear witness to its enormous and long-lasting success. The story pops up in a wide variety of languages, historical periods, and social and cultural settings. The narrative exists in many forms but essentially is a frame story in which a woman falsely accuses a young prince of having tried to rape her. While the prince has vowed to remain silent for seven days, his father has to decide on his son's (and the woman's) fate. As part of the legal process, a number of embedded tales are told to influence the father in some way. The woman defends her own case, and seven wise men take up the young prince's defence. This implies that the embedded stories have an outspoken persuasive function.

The oriental versions of the narrative—handed down in different languages and sources from the tenth century onward—are generally known as *The Book of Sindibad*. Toward the twelfth century, the tradition made its way to Western Europe. The oldest European version is the French *Roman des sept sages de Rome*, which was first written in verse (before the mid-twelfth century), but became more popular

and influential in a prose version from around 1200 (known as version A). A number of translations and adaptations derive from this prose version, including the Latin *Historia septem sapientum* (version H, ca. 1330). The Latin version was extremely important for the lasting success of the narrative tradition because it gave rise to even more translations and adaptations in almost any European language.

The narrative tradition of the Seven Sages is not well known in academic circles, let alone by the larger public. Pan-European and even global and transcultural as this narrative material is, it did not fit well in national perspectives on literary history. Of course, the wealth of versions and languages involved may have discouraged scholars from diving into this international tradition. A great help is the groundbreaking work of Canadian scholar Hans R. Runte, who founded The Seven Sages Society in 1976, and published an annotated international bibliography on all aspects of the narrative tradition in 1984. Runte has updated this bibliography ever since in an free online edition.

All but one article in this special issue are based on papers that were presented in two sessions at the International Medieval Congress of Leeds in July 2018. Initially, our call for papers focused on translations and adaptations deriving from the French *Roman des sept sages de Rome*, but, in their presentations contributors opened the discussion to other versions of the tradition, such as the *Book of Sindibad* and the Latin *Dolopathos* by Cistercian monk Johannes de Alta Silva (ca. 1190). Their comparative analyses between sometimes remote versions often proved to be enriching.

Because the Seven Sages tradition is generally associated with misogyny, we asked contributors to give special attention to aspects of gender. Indeed, all articles address the power relations between the male and female characters in the frame story and the embedded tales. However, the relations between men and women showed much more variance and nuances than was expected. The articles herein demonstrate the considerable differences between the underlying gender ideologies, which are often explained as the result of adapting to a different cultural, intellectual, or social context.

Bea Lundt dismisses the positivistic, structuralist and modernist approaches to this cycle of narratives and shows the opportunities that this wealth of texts, with all its versions and variants, creates for analyses from a transcultural and postcolonial perspective. More particularly, she distances herself from studies that were intent on determining and studying vulgate or common versions and pleads for analyses that consider the particularities of *all* textual witnesses. In her contribution, she compares Latin and German versions from different centuries

with the Eastern tradition. In addition to the Eastern tradition, Lundt's corpus includes three Latin versions: the twelfth-century *Dolopathos* by Johannes de Alta Silva, a fourteenth-century parable in Johannes Gobi's *Scala Coeli*, and the widespread *Historia septem sapientum*. The German versions she discusses are *Diocletianus' Leben* by Hans von Büchel and the *Sieben weise Meister*, both from the fifteenth century. Most fundamentally, Lundt questions the usefulness of modern binary gender constructions for analyzing premodern texts. She argues that the construction of the female and male characters in her corpus is less stereotyped and more diverse than is often assumed.

Alexandra Hoffmann focuses on one of the versions of the Eastern tradition, the Persian *Sindbād-nāmeḥ*, written in the second half of the twelfth century by Ẓahīrī Samarqandī. Because this text of high literary quality was dedicated to a local ruler, Hoffmann places this mirror for princes in a didactic tradition that encompasses philosophers' ethical treatises. In a didactic context, the many embedded tales—no fewer than thirty-four in this version—offer possibilities for a more subtle form of instruction, which leads to further reflections on the effects certain emotions, such as anger, can have on men and their governance. According to Hoffmann, the many stories about women's wiles were indirectly meant to address male anxieties, such as fear of sexual inadequacy.

Yasmina Foehr-Janssens discusses the misogyny of the French *Roman des sept sages de Rome* in prose (ca. 1200), which she compares to the older French versions in verse (V, represented by K and fragment C) and to the Eastern tradition of the *Book of Sindibad*. She argues that the selection and order of the embedded tales in the *Roman des sept sages* strengthened the misogyny. Two of the newly embedded tales, Senescalcus and Tentamina, receive a more profound analysis. Foehr-Janssens demonstrates that the harsh misogyny of these tales is double-faced: although the young female characters' voices of protest are brutally silenced, the rebellion against their unhappy situation comes clearly to the fore.

Nico Kunkel compares some of the oldest French versions in verse and prose (A, K, and D), the Latin versions *Historia septem sapientum* and *Allegatio septem sapientum*, and the German versions *Historie von den sieben weisen Meistern* (printed by Johann Bämle in Augsburg in 1473) and *Historij von Diocleciano* (fifteenth century). Kunkel argues that we should not only look at the variance in basic plot and structure (i.e., the selection and order of the embedded tales) but also examine the impact of minor differences that can have significant impact. His analysis along these lines allows him to demonstrate that small adaptations in the frame story

can lead to fundamentally different representations of motherhood, education, and jurisdiction.

Carys Gadsden focuses on the *Chwedlau Saith Doethion Rhufain*, the Welsh prose reworking of the French *Roman des sept sages de Rome* (prose version A). She describes the Welsh author's adaptation technique and compares it with how the English versions relate to the French source. What at first glance might be regarded as a short, defective rendering of the *Roman des sept sages* may be the result of a considered program on the part of an author-redactor who softened the misogynist tone of the French source and positioned the new text in the Welsh literary context, notably with a clear reference to the traditional Welsh tale of *Culhwch and Olwen*.

The last contribution is by Anne Reynders. She concentrates on the oldest of the three Dutch versions, *Van den VII Vroeden van binnen Rome*. This verse version is found in a single fourteenth-century manuscript and is also based on the French *Roman des sept sages de Rome* (prose version A). Compared to its French source, the Dutch version has an additional episode at the end in which the empress justifies her actions by referring to her social isolation. This attenuates the text's misogyny considerably: the female protagonist is no longer depicted as a diabolical figure but as a human being who makes a mistake guided by wrong but understandable motives.

The contributions in this volume show that the narrative cycle of the Seven Sages engages in gender constructions in many different ways. Even very small changes in the frame story or the order or contents of the embedded tales can have considerable effects on the narrative's overall message. All contributors have taken a comparative approach; they compare different versions of the narrative tradition and juxtapose how the embedded stories relate to the frame and vice versa. By definition, the dialectics between the frame narrative and the embedded stories elicit multiple interpretations. As a result, this special issue shows that although the misogyny in the different versions of the Seven Sages tradition is undeniable, it is much more diverse and fluid than has generally been assumed in secondary literature.

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