

## Reading embedded narration

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MANY TRADITIONAL oral narratives from Classical antiquity have come down to us in collections, from which we learn a great deal about the structure and content of the stories but very little about how they were actually employed in live social interaction. I have in mind such works as the compilations of myths and legends attributed to the mythographers Pherekydes, Konon, Apollodoros, and Hyginus; the anecdotes compiled by Plutarch and Aelian; the jokebook *Philogelos* that is attributed to a certain Hierokles and Philagrios; and the anonymous collections of Aesopic fables in prose as well as the fables versified by Phaedrus, Babrios, and Avianus. Whether a particular compiler presents his stories as elements of a continuous narrative (as in the mythological handbook of Apollodoros, for example) or as a series of discrete items (as in the mythological handbook of Hyginus), what these collections have in common is that the stories are imparted with minimal framing. Myths and legends are grouped together, and fables are grouped generically with other fables, of course, according to one principle or another for the ordering of the items within the collection, but this arrangement tells us little more than that they are myths or legends or fables, and as a consequence we glimpse little of their human uses. What triggers the telling of a particular tale? How is it told? What kind of person recounts it? How do the listeners respond? What does the narrative mean to the participants? After all, the primary locus for the transmission of traditional narratives is not books but human social interaction. To survive in oral tradition a story must be told, and to be told it must be useful.

Fortunately, in addition to stories in compilations many ancient narratives have come down to us in more informative contexts, since ancient authors frequently recount or allude to traditional stories in the course of speeches, essays, letters, poems, and other works, so that the narratives are framed by the narrator's comments, as when in a letter the younger Pliny digresses to relate an anecdote about an outspoken contemporary, and as when in his *Metamorphoses* Ovid represents a fictional narrator as reverently relating in a nocturnal storytelling session a miraculous tradition concerning the pious couple, Philemon and Baucis.<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, the practice of employing in written discourse stories taken from oral tradition must spring from the habit of using such stories in oral discourse. While it would be rash to treat written works or parts of such works as though they were actual transcripts of live conversations, it seems safe to assume that the secondary use of traditional stories in written works must frequently mimic and therefore approximate in many ways their primary use in human social interaction.<sup>2</sup> How should one read such texts?

Consider Plutarch's use of the Aesopic fable of the fox and the crane in his essay on table-talk in order to illustrate how conversationalists should *not* behave in a symposium. Addressing the question of whether philosophical queries are appropriate topics at drinking-parties, Plutarch argues that the questions posed by the symposiasts for conversation should be simple and uncomplicated, and the topics familiar, so as not to exclude the less intellectual guests. Like the wine the conversation should be one in which everyone shares. Persons who propose complex topics for discussion are no more fit for such social intercourse than are Aesop's fox and crane. Entertaining the crane at dinner (Plutarch continues) the fox served her a broth poured out upon a flat stone. The crane went without a dinner and looked ridiculous as she attempted to eat the broth with her bill. The crane in turn invited the fox to dinner, serving the meal in a jar having a long and narrow neck. Whereas she herself easily inserted her bill and enjoyed the food, the fox was unable to put his mouth inside and so got for himself the portion he deserved. In the same way (Plutarch concludes), whenever philosophers plunge into subtle topics at a symposium, they are irksome to most of the guests, who cannot follow, and in consequence the other diners throw themselves into singing songs, telling silly stories, and talking business, whereupon the fellowship of the party is gone and Dionysos is insulted.<sup>3</sup>

There is no obvious reason to suppose that Plutarch's use of this animal tale in his essay would not be close to the use to which he might put it in a live discussion on the same topic. He does not tell the tale for its own sake, which would be irrelevant, not to say childish, like the inappropriate behavior of old Philokleon in Aristophanes's *Wasps*, who intends to regale adult listeners with animal tales and

1 I use 'frame' to refer to narrator's contextualization of a tale, usually by means of remarks immediately before and/or after the tale itself that serve to guide the reader's or listener's interpretation of it. It is the bed of an embedded tale. This is common usage (for example, Leonardi 1989, Nagy 1992). 'Interpretive frame,' or simply 'frame,' is used more narrowly in performance studies to mean clues that guide a listener to discriminate between different orders of message, for example between a literal communication and a performance of some kind, and, among performances, between such modes as insinuation and joking (for example, Bauman 1984:7-14).

2 Richard Martin (1989:43-145) makes the same point with regard to genres of speech in the *Iliad*.

3 Plut. *Quaest. Conv.* 1.5 (Mor. 614d-615a). Another version of the fable can be found in Phaedrus (1.26).

the like, to the exasperation of his son (1174-1187). Rather, Plutarch relates the tale in passing and with little elaboration in order to illustrate by means of a vivid and amusing analogy the central point he is making, namely, how inappropriate social behavior on the part of one participant begets inappropriate social behavior on the part of another participant, to the detriment of an entire social event. He exploits the distancing that an animal fable with its non-human characters affords, using the imaginary social life of animals as a metaphor for human social life in order to facilitate his reader's assessing undefensively the author's proposition about appropriate conversation.

### *Orders of narration*

Instead of recounting a tale straightforwardly in his or her own person, however, an author may describe the circumstances of its narration in a real or invented social situation, ascribing the telling to another person who relates it to someone else. In this case the author creates, or recreates, a narrative event, with the result that we have a text of the story as well as information about its use on a particular occasion, whether the description reproduces in some measure an historical happening or imaginatively represents the sort of event that, in the mind of the author, might plausibly call forth this particular story. The result is an embedded, or emboxed, story, a second-order narration.<sup>4</sup> Do first-order narration and second-order narration differ with regard to the richness of contextual detail?

Consider a Mesopotamian instance. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the poet tells how the protagonist Gilgamesh, driven by his desire to avoid death, makes his way to the dwelling-place of the flood-hero Utnapishtim, to whom the gods have granted eternal life. Utnapishtim gives Gilgamesh an account of the great deluge, the extraordinary event that led to his being granted immortality.<sup>5</sup> At its conclusion Utnapishtim asks: 'So now, who can gather the gods on your behalf, (Gilgamesh),—That you too may find eternal life which you seek?' Utnapishtim's point is that the factors that led to his own grant of immortality were unique and unrepeatable.

A first-order narration such as Plutarch's employment of the fable of the fox and crane features, in addition to the tale, the narrator and the immediate framing of the tale, which is likely to consist of the topic that prompts the telling of the tale and the narrator's explanation of the relevance of the tale for his or her discourse. For Plutarch the topic that prompts his narration of the fable is a point that he wishes to make about proper conversation at dinner parties, and the relevance of

4 Cf. Genette 1980:227ff.

5 For the text see Dalley 1989:109-20 (*Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet xi). The quoted verses are found in Dalley 1989:116.

the fable, as he sees it, is that it makes a similar point, namely, that misbehavior at a dinner party begets more misbehavior. A second-order narration, in which an internal character is represented as narrating to another internal character, invites more situational detail, such as where the event took place, what the occasion was, who the listeners were, how the narrator and listener behaved. The Mesopotamian epic furnishes most of this detail, even if the situation itself is fantastic.

Instances of third-order narration, in which an author presents a story embedded within a story embedded within some other discourse, are also plentiful in ancient literature. If second-order narration carries potentially more situational information than does first-order narration, does third-order narration bear even more?

In his essay *Progress in Virtue* Plutarch reports a jest about weather so cold that sounds immediately freeze as soon as they are uttered and are not actually heard until they thaw out: 'Quite relevant here is Antiphanes' story, which somebody has applied to Plato's close acquaintances. Antiphanes used to say humorously that in a certain city sounds froze because of the cold the moment they were spoken, and later, as the sounds were thawing out, people heard in the summer what they had said to one another in the winter. The same thing was true, he asserted, of what was said by Plato to men still in their youth, for not until a long time afterwards, when they had become old men, did most of them come to perceive Plato's meaning. And this is the general experience with philosophy as a whole until one's judgment acquires a healthy stability ...'<sup>6</sup>

Antiphanes recounts a humorous tale about a city so cold in the winter that words freeze as soon as they are uttered, and only later, in the summer, when the words thaw out do the citizens hear what they said back in the winter. Antiphanes' narration is cited by an unnamed person—let us call him the Philosopher—who compares the inhabitants of Antiphanes' cold city to the companions of Plato: they hear Plato's words in their youth, but until they become old men most of them do not understand their meaning. And Plutarch in his turn cites the Philosopher, his own point being that, just as the Philosopher distinguishes two life-stages in the understanding of Plato's philosophy, the youthful stage in which one hears the words of the master and the senescent stage in which one finally grasps their meaning, so also are there two stages in all philosophical learning, the immature stage in which beginners in philosophy are self-conscious and disputatious, and the mature stage in which philosophers make real progress.

Does third-order narration, such as that of Plutarch's use of the Philosopher's use of Antiphanes, carry richer information than second-order narration? Not necessarily. Plutarch provides little information about the two embedded

6 Plut. *Mor.* 79a.

narrations, mentioning the point that the second-level narrator makes with the tale, but otherwise saying nothing of him or his audience nor under what circumstances he employs the tale, and with regard to the deepest level, that of Antiphanes, Plutarch does little more than identify the narrator by name. Probably no rule can be formed, because the primary narrator can handle the presentation in any number of ways. For example, Plato's *Symposium* shows at least four levels of narration.<sup>7</sup> The whole piece is narrated by a certain Apollodoros (N1), who quotes his informant Aristodemos (N2), who recounts the conversation of different men at a dinner-party, among them Socrates (N3), who recalls what Diotima (N4) once told him. So at one point in the narrative Apollodoros quotes Aristodemos, who quotes Socrates, who quotes Diotima—four narrators, one inside the other, not counting the author of the piece, Plato. The author provides situational information about all four levels, most richly about level three, the symposium itself.

Logically, it is possible to imagine an infinite number of frames, one inside the other, like the reflections of a mirror in a mirror, but in practice frames beyond third-order narration are probably not very common in either oral or written discourse. The greater the number of levels there are, the less likely they are to be relevant to the aims of the primary narrator, and deep embedding is difficult for a narrator to handle clearly and for an audience to follow comfortably.<sup>8</sup> So there is an informational advantage in embedded narration if we are given details about narrator and listener and occasion, but deeper embedding does not guarantee the reader greater profit, since the primary narrator may be either generous or stingy in the amount of information provided at the different levels.

### *Resonance*

I turn to three factors that may need to be taken into account in reading framed narration. Consider the tale of Cupid and Psyche embedded in the novel by Apuleius.<sup>9</sup> On the level of second-order narration, the tale is related by an old woman to a frightened girl in her charge, a kidnapped bride, with the kindly aim of heartening and consoling her, since the old woman's tale recounts the tribulations of another bride, Psyche, and of her eventual reunion with her husband, Cupid. But the story reaches beyond the immediate situation to resonate in many ways with the principal plot as well, both with the protagonist's own protracted trials and eventual liberation and also with other important themes of Apuleius'

7 Sandy 1970:463 note 1.

8 Part of the reason is the limited capacity of human short-term memory. The number of items of the same sort that one can store without error is around seven (Miller 1956).

9 Apul. *Met.* 4.28-6.24.

novel, such as undue curiosity. So the old woman's tale has points of contact with the immediate storytelling situation as well as with the distant situation of the novel's protagonist, Lucius. Narrative-level two alludes to narrative-level one. Accordingly, an embedded tale may owe multiple allegiances, reflecting not only the immediate narrative strategy of the embedded narrator but also the larger narrative interests of the primary narrator.

In practice, however, it is difficult to evaluate whether the author's wish for resonance distorts in any way the embedded storytelling situation. Let us imagine that, in planning his novel, Apuleius began with the story of Lucius and his transformation into an ass, which we know he borrowed from a Greek antecedent. He decided to embed in his narrative another narration, the tale of Cupid and Psyche, partly because of the themes of curiosity and suffering that it shared with his principal story. So the novelist created an internal narrator, an internal audience, and a setting for the telling of the embedded tale. Although the tale of Cupid and Psyche owes allegiance both to its immediate situation and to the larger tale of Lucius, the immediate storytelling situation is credible enough. Since we know from other evidence that consolation is one of the uses to which oral tales are often put, it is hard to evaluate to extent to which the internal narration may have been distorted for the sake of the larger text.

### *Emergence*

Each time an oral story is told, its shape and content reflect a particular narrator's response to the particular occasion that has called forth the tale, since an oral story itself possesses no fixed or proper or necessary form. When for example Homeric characters employ a story, they generally relate it in an elliptical form, slanting their narration toward the point they wish to make. Accordingly, after the disguised Odysseus asks to be allowed to compete in the bow contest, the suitor Antinoos rebukes him for his presumption, suggesting that the wine has gone to the beggar's head. So too (Antinoos continues) did wine infatuate the head of the centaur Eurytion in the house of Peirithoos, when the centaur came to visit the Lapiths. Since Eurytion did criminal deeds, the heroes dragged him outside and cut off his ears and nostrils, so that Eurytion paid the penalty for his drunkenness (*Od.* 21.287-304). Antinoos views the beggar's request to compete in the bow contest as prompted by his having drunk too much wine. So he cites as a precedent the legend of the centaur Eurytion who similarly drank too much wine, misbehaved, and was punished. In the same way the beggar will be punished if he tries to string the bow. Antinoos recounts the legend elliptically, not even mentioning precisely what Eurytion's misbehavior was.<sup>10</sup>

10 Edmunds 1997:418-20.

An anecdote recounted by the younger Pliny in one of the letters (4.22) furnishes a subtler instance. Citing a public statement made by a certain Junius Mauricus that required courage to utter, Pliny declares that such behavior was nothing new to Mauricus, who gave strong proof of his courage before the Emperor Nerva himself. The emperor (Pliny recounts) was entertaining a few select friends for dinner, Mauricus among them. The topic of conversation turned to the notorious informer Catullus Messalinus, whom Pliny characterizes as a man who lacked humanity, fear, shame, or compassion, a man whom the emperor Domitian had employed like a weapon against his enemies. As the diners traded stories about the horrible man, the emperor asked: 'And what would have been his fate had he lived till now?' Mauricus answered: 'He would be dining with us.'

Pliny's narration of Nerva's dinner party ends with the courageous quip of Mauricus. He does not describe the emperor's response to it, or anyone else's response, because responses to Mauricus's comment would be irrelevant to Pliny's point in the present context, which is to illustrate Mauricus's bravery, not to develop the interaction of the participants at the dinner party as a drama for its own interest. Pliny's anecdote omits the climactic element that we might have expected, the emperor's response to the brave comment of his guest. Like Antinoos, Pliny tells his story elliptically, dwelling only upon that which is necessary to make his point.

At the other end of the continuum, Hesiod's two tellings of the myth of the first woman illustrate how freely a story can be adapted to different purposes. The versions differ considerably in content and emphasis, reflecting the nature of the context in which each is employed. In the *Theogony* (570-616) the first woman is unnamed; she is made and dressed by Hephaistos and Athena; and she herself, as the prototype of all women, is Zeus' gift of evil to mankind. In the *Works and Days* (47-105) she is called Pandora, and the name is explained; she is made and attired by Hephaistos, Athena, the Horai, the Charites, Aphrodite, and Hermes; she has a husband, Epimetheus; and her jar is the source of all evils. In one poem Hesiod is interested primarily in the natural and supernatural beings that populate the world, so that his emphasis is on Pandora as the prototype of all women; in the other poem the poet is interested more in the quality and conditions of human life, so that in this instance he emphasizes the irreversible entry into human life of evils such as hard work. The teller slants each narration to its situational context. There is no neutral, or default, form, since every oral narration is motivated.

Hesiod's selectivity and emphases on these occasions are features of what performance-oriented scholars of oral narration call the emergent structure of the text, that is, the interplay among all the factors that contribute to the narrative event as it affects the text of the narration—the performer, the performer's competence, the genre, the situation, the audience, the goals of the participants,

and so on.<sup>11</sup> Hesiod emphasizes those features associated with the first woman that are relevant to each narrative occasion, and downplays or omits others. It is inappropriate, therefore, to treat his two texts as complementary and interlocking, as though each were somehow a defective version of the myth. Minna Skafte Jensen aptly compares such a view to that of the early folklorists who combined different texts of a ballad in order to create a single, 'proper' text.<sup>12</sup> A myth or ballad text synthesized by a scholar does not result in a form that is truer to tradition, but in a new creation.

### *Tension*

A third complication is tension, by which I mean that a story may have a different meaning when it is viewed by itself and when it is viewed in a particular context, resulting in a tension between the story considered ideally and the story considered situationally.

Take two tellings of essentially the same story by different narrators on different occasions. One is a fable that Phaedrus (3.3) tells about Aesop. There was (Phaedrus says) a certain man whose flocks of sheep were giving birth to lambs with human heads. Alarmed at the prodigy he consulted various soothsayers. One soothsayer explained the omen as referring to the man himself, who needed to perform a sacrifice in order to avert the danger. Another soothsayer interpreted it as a reference to the man's wife, and likewise recommended that the man perform a sacrifice. But Aesop, who happened to be standing nearby, remarked to the farmer: 'If you want to remedy this portent, give wives to your shepherds.' In his promythium Phaedrus explains the fable as illustrating the common saying that a man with experience in the world has more truth in him than a soothsayer does.

Plutarch tells a different version of the tale in his *Dinner of the Seven Sages*. Here the perceptive protagonist is not Aesop but another sage, Thales.<sup>13</sup> In this case the prodigy was a new-born creature that is part human and part horse. The tale ends with Thales telling Periander either not to employ young men to tend his horses or to provide the young men with wives. When Periander heard Thales' recommendation with its implied diagnosis, he burst out laughing.

Periander's laughter in Plutarch's narrative is the equivalent of the promythium in Phaedrus's poem. It comments on the tale, guiding our understanding of it, for the tale does not have a fixed meaning that inheres in its text, but rather its meaning is dependent upon narrator and occasion. For Phaedrus the tale is primarily a didactic narrative that illustrates how practical experience of the world

11 Bauman 1984:37-45.

12 Jensen 2000:314 and note.

13 Plut. *Mor.* 149c-e.



is superior to the pure intellectualism of soothsayers, whereas for Plutarch it is essentially a humorous tale about the covert bestiality of young, unwed men. One narrator emphasizes the triumph of worldly wisdom; the other, the sexual humor of the tale. Neither narrator wishes or tries to convey all the possible meanings that the tale might be made to bear; instead, each frames the tale in such a way as to call attention to certain meanings, and these constitute its meanings on the particular occasion.

A passage in the twenty-fourth book of Homer's *Iliad* illustrates how a particular situation may call forth a truly surprising application of a story. When Priam, the aged king of Troy, came in fear and mourning to the Achaian camp to ransom the body of his son Hektor, his host Achilles wished to induce his grieving guest to take food with him. Achilles referred as a precedent to the case of Niobe, whose loss was similar in kind to Priam's but greater in its extent. 'Even Niobe (Achilleus said) remembered to eat after she had lost her twelve children. In anger Leto's children had destroyed Niobe's children, Apollo slaying her six sons, Artemis her six daughters, because Niobe had compared herself favorably with Leto, saying that the goddess had borne only two children whereas she herself had borne many. When Niobe wearied of weeping, she remembered to eat. So also they (Priam and Achilleus) should pause to take food, and later Priam might resume his mourning of his son.'<sup>14</sup>

It strikes a modern observer as obvious enough that the Niobe legend, considered apart from any particular context, is essentially a cautionary story illustrating how a kind of hybriatic behavior—in this case boastfulness springing from excessive pride—can have disastrous consequences for the character who exhibits it. One can easily imagine a Greek narrator citing the story to exemplify the proposition that boastfulness or insolence or impiety may entail reprisal, especially when the offended party is more powerful than the offender. Therefore it is unexpected when Achilles gives it here not a cautionary but a prandial application. What modern scholar, considering the bare text of the story, would ever have predicted that the blasphemous Niobe would be cited as a positive precedent, as a model of behavior?

In Achilles' use of the legend on the occasion of Priam's visit there is a considerable gap between the apparent, or structural, meaning of the story and its situational, or applied, meaning. Taken by itself and with no particular context, the Niobe legend is a story of misbehavior followed by punishment; it is a cautionary story. But for Achilles on one evening at Troy its meaning is that it is permissible for a grieving person to take food. Understood ideally, it is apotretic, but

14 Hom. *Il.* 24.601-20. On Achilles as narrator in the present passage see Hansen 1982; for the way in which he unfolds the details of his story, see Slater 1983.

understood situationally, on the occasion of its employment by Achilles, it is protreptic.

### *Conclusion*

The secondary use of traditional stories in written works doubtless mimics in many respects their primary use in live discourse, so that we can examine framed stories in the expectation of gaining insight into the ancient use of oral stories. But multiple embeddings do not guarantee a greater richness of situational detail, since the primary narrator is free to economize at any level.

A complication in reading represented storytelling as reflective of human social interaction is the author's possibly distorting the embedded material in order that there be points of contact between the secondary text and the primary text, that is, resonance, a common feature in the literary manipulation of embedded narration. It is often difficult to evaluate the effect of this factor on emboxed texts.

Two normal features of oral narration are found also in literary representations of narration: emergence and tension. Because traditional texts are emergent, their form and content are conditioned by their particular narrator, audience, and occasion of transmission. It is a mistake to regard such texts merely as incomplete parts of a whole that should be combined with other incomplete wholes in order to make a proper text, for to remove a text from its context is to deny the factors that determined it.

Meaning too is emergent, since it depends on the same factors of narrator, audience, and situation. When a tension exists between the ideal meaning of a story and its situational meaning, it cannot be resolved because the ideal mode is the imagining of a story as having no situational context, as existing conceptually, whereas the situational mode is a realization of a story in particular situations.

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