

## Tzvetan Todorov, “Les hommes-récits”

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In one of his first books, *Poétique de la prose* (1971), the Bulgarian-French author (historian, philosopher, literary critic, sociologist etc.) Tzvetan Todorov (1939–2017) published a short essay, originally written in 1967, titled “Les hommes-récits.” The essay was subsequently translated into English as “Narrative-Men,” into German as “Die Erzähl-Menschen,” and into many other languages. In this essay, Todorov discusses the status of characters and their narratives in *The Thousand and One Nights* (henceforth: the *Nights*) and, to a minor extent, in *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, written by Polish author Jan Potocki (1761–1815), a work whose structure overlaps with that of the *Nights*. Todorov suggests a critical reading of the function of tales in the *Nights* that is as simple as it is striking, since it identifies a fairly obvious characteristic whose pivotal importance for an adequate assessment of Middle Eastern storytelling can hardly be overestimated. Rather than discussing the significant impact of Todorov’s essay in the fields of comparative literature and semiotics, my interest as a folklorist specializing in Middle Eastern narrative culture relates primarily to storytelling techniques in the *Nights* and other collections of the Middle Eastern literatures compiled in Arabic and Persian. Although Todorov restricts his discussion to the *Nights*, his insights are relevant far beyond, as they open up a window to understanding basic features of the literatures concerned that are influential in numerous other literary works.

Todorov introduces his essay with a quote from Henry James’s (d. 1916) famous essay *The Art of Fiction* (1884): “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” Critiquing James’s statement as a “pure case of egocentricity presenting itself as universality” (Todorov 1977: 67),

Todorov points to literary works in which “the actions are not there to ‘illustrate’ character but in which, on the contrary, the characters are subservient to the action” (67). Of these literary works, he counts *The Arabian Nights* as “among the most famous examples.” Most of his following considerations focus on tales from the *Nights*, leading Todorov to identify fundamental characteristics of the *Nights* that he takes as representative for Middle Eastern storytelling in general. His considerations are well grounded and result in numerous densely formulated authoritative statements: “All character traits are immediately causal; as soon as they appear, they provoke an action” (68); “a character is a potential story that is the story of his life.” He culminates by asserting: “We are in the realm of narrative-men” (70).

Once Todorov has established the immediate, in fact indispensable connection between characters and their stories, he at first proceeds to illustrate the consequence of characters acting in or introduced into a narrative telling their own narratives, leading him to discuss the narrative device of embedding (70–73). This device implies the existence of both a larger embedding and one or several shorter embedded tales, both of which constitute integral parts of a larger plot whose subsequent development is influenced, if not determined by the embedded tale that is introduced at a specific moment in the embedding plot (73). Concluding that “the act of narrating” in the *Nights* “is the mainspring of the action” leads Todorov to determine the most decisive characteristic of the *Nights* in that “narrating equals living” (73) and consequently, “absence of narrative, death” (74). This fundamental insight is further detailed: characters telling an embedded tale may die as soon as the tale they had to tell is no longer necessary to teach the characters acting in the embedding tale (74); furthermore, if “loquacity saves from death, curiosity leads to it” (75). In the concluding passages of his essay, Todorov finishes by shortly discussing the connection between a maxim and the related narrative (77), by pointing to the “incessant proliferation of narratives in this marvelous story-machine” (78), and by qualifying each and every translation of the *Nights* as something special, since no translator “has been content with a simple translation merely faithful to the original; each translator has added and suppressed stories” (78).

Todorov’s essay is written in an extremely dense style, and in some way it might be easier for critics to single out his less important findings than to highlight significant statements of greater relevance. For me as a folklorist, reading Todorov’s “Narrative-men” is a revelation because he succeeds in ascertaining the unquestioned given as the overt mechanism crucial for understanding the *Nights*, and, in many ways, Middle Eastern storytelling altogether. The device of “narrating equals living” lies at the very core of the *Nights*, as the narrator Shahrazād only manages to survive by enticing the murderous ruler to listen to her tales night after night until his wrath wears away, enabling the collection to conclude in a fairy-tale “happily ever after,” notably without the narrator disclosing her stratagem. The very same device is also exemplified in what modern research, most aptly voiced by Aboubakr Chraïbi (2008), has identified as the old “core corpus” of the *Nights*, i.e. the body of

tales documented in the collection's oldest preserved manuscript dating from the fifteenth century.

This manuscript served as the basis for the first European translation of the *Nights*, Antoine Galland's *Les Mille et une nuit* (1704–17). Since the manuscript is, however, incomplete, Galland later complemented and, in fact, completed the final volumes of his *Nights* with tales collected from the oral performance of the talented young Syrian Christian storyteller Ḥannā Diyāb. Incidentally, Todorov cites the tales contributed by Diyāb with the same degree of "authenticity" as those of the old Arabic manuscript, thus unwittingly putting tales from early eighteenth-century Syrian Christian oral tradition on an equal footing with those from ancient written tradition, although the latter may or may not to some extent also have been influenced by "folklore." Todorov's application of the (unreferenced) assessment that "folklore is characterized by the repetition of the same story" (Todorov 1977: 73) to the *Nights* even appears to imply that he regarded the collection itself as "folklore." But that is a different story he does not detail.

In virtually all of the tales of the old "core corpus," the characters, when threatened with death, save their lives (or that of another character) by telling their (or a) story. This feature not only documents the supreme reign of the mentioned narrative device but also proves the *Nights* to be not just a haphazard compilation of tales arbitrarily chosen for superficial entertainment. Rather, the repeated feature betrays the careful and conscious hand of an author (or several authors) who chose the initial tales of the "core corpus" to link with Shahrazād's own situation of saving her life through storytelling. The fact that the device is lost after the "core corpus" rather results from the vicissitudes of history, as incomplete manuscripts of the *Nights* were completed with stories of the most diverse genres to fulfill the collection's promise of a thousand and one nights of storytelling. In addition to linking the embedded tales told by Shahrazād to her own embedding tale, i.e. the frame story of the *Nights*, the device "narrating equals living" also establishes a link between the *Nights* and the ancient and influential Arabic narrative of Khurāfa, a pseudo-historical character who is said to have lived during the time of the Prophet Muḥammad and whose name over time came to acquire the generic meaning of "tale of the marvelous and strange" (Marzolph and Van Leeuwen 2004: vol. 2, pp. 616–617). Khurāfa, not mentioned by Todorov, is thus the quintessential "narrative-man," the terminological personification of narrative in unity with its narrator. The narrative Khurāfa tells is his own, as he recalls how one night he was taken prisoner by three demons. As the demons discussed what to do with him, he was subsequently ransomed by three men who told the demons a "tale of the marvelous and strange" each in return for the prisoner's life. Incidentally, a close adaptation of Khurāfa's tale is the first story Shahrazād tells in the *Nights*, the tale of "The Merchant and the *Jinni*." Here, the traveling merchant unintentionally slays a demon's son and when about to be killed in retaliation is ransomed by three old men telling a marvelous story each in return for a third of his life. Dutch historian

of literature Mia Gerhardt used the term “ransom tale” to account for the working of the crucial device Todorov later identified.

Furthermore, the embedded tales told by the additionally introduced characters are not just random tales of previous events. Without any exception, the embedded tales treat “marvelous and strange” events whose further course usually leads to the narrating character’s meeting with that of the embedding tale. “Tales of the marvelous and the strange” are thus the fundamental genre. Their introduction not only serves to propel the action but also reminds the audience of belief in the omnipotent capacities of God as well as the inevitable working of fate. Interestingly, fate, although predestined, is never mandatory in the tales, as in the “folkloric” dimension there appear to be multiple versions of predestined events whose exact course can be influenced by active intervention on the part of the concerned characters. Even a character’s minimal individual engagement may decide which one of the predestined courses his or her career will take.

Todorov’s essay is also groundbreaking in discussing the generic feature of the frame story. This feature is, in fact, essential for numerous Middle Eastern collections of stories, some of which made a decisive contribution to world literature. The Arabic *Kalila wa-Dimna*, essentially the adapted translation of a Persian adaptation of the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* (Five [Books of] Wisdom), is a collection of animal tales and fables narrated by the animal characters of its frame story to illustrate their differing arguments. Prior to modernity, the collection was translated into about 40 different languages and had a lasting impact on the European literatures of the Middle Ages and early modernity. The Persian *Sendbād-nāme* (Book of Sendbād), whose European versions are known under the label “The Seven Sages,” is constituted by a frame tale in which a young man slandered by a malevolent woman is about to be executed for his alleged misdemeanor, and the embedding tales are told either by the king’s viziers in defense of his son, or by the slandering female character. Both of the aforementioned collections belong to a genre commonly named “mirror for princes,” implying a pedagogical intention of the embedded tales to instruct and distinguish right from wrong. Similarly, the *Nights* has been termed a “mirror for merchants,” as many of the characters in the tales are merchants, and their adventures serve to illustrate the ethics of merchants that presumably constituted the main audience for the tales in their original context. The “Book of the Parrot,” best known through the Persian adaptation of the Indian *Shukasaptati* (70 [Tales of a] Parrot), the *Tuṭi-nāme*, again introduces another specific frame story that once more exemplifies the main device “narrating equals living” identified by Todorov. While her husband is away on business, a young woman asks her two parrots for advice whether she should give in to temptation and visit a prospective lover. The male parrot scolds her for her immoral intentions and is killed, both because of its straightforward admonishment and because it does not clothe them in illustrative narratives. The female parrot, instead, offers to let the woman decide, warning her not to fall into the trap of doing something she might later regret, such as it happened to the characters of the tales he knows, since “regret

of things past is of no use." Once the woman's curiosity is aroused, she requests the parrot to tell the tale alluded to, and when the tale finishes the night is over so that the woman is kept from giving in to temptation. In this manner, numerous Middle Eastern collections of tales are constituted by a specific embedding frame story that is, as a rule, filled with embedded tales whose content supports the narrator's and the frame story's argument. The frame stories of the Middle Eastern collections are thus not just mere frames to be filled with entertaining stories to pass the time, such as those of Boccaccio's *Decamerone* or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (on a superficial level, although they are more meaningful when carefully read).

Instead, they serve as a narrative device to unite a universe of tales under a common umbrella, as both the embedding and the embedded tales share a common and clearly defined goal. Whereas the previously discussed device of "narrating equals living" is mainly germane to the *Nights* and similar collections in which a character's life is threatened, such as the *Sendbād-nāme* and its various versions, Todorov's discussion of the frame story is rudimentary and could have been much more elaborate, particularly in view of the fact that the latter device was tremendously influential in numerous national literatures. Read as a stimulating initiative, however, his discussion proves to be as insightful as inspiring for an adequate assessment of one of the impactful mechanisms at work in the Middle Eastern literatures.

## Works Cited

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