Synchronous Fictions

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A Response by Michelle Karnes

I am grateful to Bruce Holsinger for soliciting these thoughtful and thought-provoking responses to my and Julie Orlemanski's articles. They expand the temporal and geographical parameters of our arguments in crucial ways. Together they insist on the contingent nature of fiction, not just across particular times and places but inside them. They show too how fiction resists transparency, with Sarah M. Allen and Jack W. Chen, for instance, writing that "part of the difficulty in assessing the nature of fictiveness in medieval Chinese narrative is there was no clear distinction between more and less fictional narratives."[1] In my reading of travel literature in the Latin West, that haziness is more a feature than a bug: opting not to distinguish degrees of fabularity, its authors also chose not to draw clear boundaries around truth and falsehood. I focus on marvels as puzzling phenomena whose appeal is based at least partly on their ontological indeterminacy. These marvels are more provocative as possibilities that can be neither proven nor definitively disproven than they are as pure inventions or clear facts. I suggest that this indeterminancy points to a feature that is more broadly visible (although certainly not everywhere) within the literature of the medieval Latin West: a fondness for situations where questions of truth and falsehood are bracketed or unresolved. I turn briefly to medieval theories of imagination in order to suggest that the faculty was piqued precisely by such irresolution. John Mandeville, as I read him, leans into such uncertainty. This irresolution is neither a universal feature of late medieval Western European literature, nor one confined only to it. I do think, however, that it is especially prominent in the period's literature, as suggested by its fondness for marvels. I focus on marvels in travel literature because they resist Gallagherian dismissals of premodern literature particularly well. Both Orlemanski and Katharine Eisaman Maus stress the protean nature of both fiction and fiction's conception of truth. As Maus writes, "In different genres, in other words, different kinds of events present as 'true.'"[2] The special power of marvels is that they play with that very murkiness—maybe marvels are true, maybe they are not, and it is hard to know one way or the other—and turn it to their advantage.

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Orlemanski's pathbreaking essay is dense with rich and original insights, but I will confine myself to considering two. Drawing on the work of Nicolette Zeeman, she questions a scholarly "assumption that theoretical articulations are adequate to explain the literature roughly contemporary to them."[3] Suggesting that we "be alert to the ways that imaginative writing conceives itself differently than does its contemporary meta-discourse," she concludes that "practice outstrips theory."[4] Indeed, theory should not act as a constraint: interpretation would be much the poorer if it had to be tethered to it. Her position would be valid even if the late medieval Latin West had more theory to offer—if it were, say, more like classical Arabic literature, which is more heavily theorized than any medieval literature I know. In that tradition, the defense of contemporary poetry that preferred excess and ornateness to more natural or sedate language gave rise to enthusiastic debate.[5] Focusing on deliberately provocative assertions such as "the best poetry is the most untruthful" (*khayru al-shi'ri akdhabuhu*) or "the best poetry is the most truthful" (*khayru al-shi'ri aṣdaquhu*), poets and their critics considered poetic figures, the logic of poetic meaning, and the creativity of the imagination with as much care and subtlety as one could wish.[6] It did not depend on such theorizations for its sophistication. Similarly, German fiction is not better because German scholars have devoted themselves with particular energy to the topic of fictionality, as Monika Fludernik and Sara S. Poor both show. But neither was it hampered by them.

Following Zeeman's argument that the "critical prioritization of the explicit" can impede literary criticism, I would add that critics are often suspicious of the period's theory and consider it to be flattening.[7] Theory only forecloses debate if it is made univocal, but it too submits to creative interpretation. When treated not as an end but as a provocation to further discussion, as in the case of the dictums I just quoted, it is less the supervisor of poetry than its fan. In fact, there is a rich medieval tradition of pondering the truth or falsehood of poetry and poetic figures that is rooted in the "extended Organon" of the Alexandrian philosophers, that is, the definition of Aristotle's logical works that included both his *Rhetoric* and his *Poetics*.[8] One of the three language arts that together comprised the trivium, logic was expressly tasked with distinguishing truth from falsehood. When Aristotle's logic was defined in such a way as to include poetry, philosophers gamely asked about its own brand of truth and falsehood. This was particularly true of Arabic philosophers, though it is also possible to find among Latin scholastics the conviction that "poetics belongs to the craft of logic."[9] The point was not to definitively classify poetry as either true or false but to show how it strained against those categories. Such inquiries can surely contribute to our understanding of fiction in the period.

Similarly, to pick up on Orlemanski's example, it is constructive to study medieval conceptions of race in tandem with modern ones. However, it is noteworthy that the dominant medieval classification—the division of the world among Noah's sons, such that Ham's descendants live in Asia, Shem's in Africa, and Japheth's in Europe—features little in recent discussions of race in the Middle Ages. Such a classification should not circumscribe our discussion of the topic, but it should contribute to it. As Carol Symes suggests, we might also better understand how medieval conceptions of race influence modern ones. I agree with Orlemanski and Zeeman that medieval literature from the Latin West is no less sophisticated for its disinclination to theorize itself in a formal way within the period proper. But the theoretical paradigms that do exist might offer useful insights without acting as limitations.

I would also extend Orlemanski's final argument about comparitivism as a method. She writes that the "comparative poetics of fiction . . . aims to make the dissonance of the concept, its explanatory friction, a part of the knowledge it generates."[10] Instead of rejecting fiction as a concept anachronistic to the Middle Ages, then, she finds value in a method that places "nonmodern archives and arguably modern notions" in a mutually enlightening conversation with one another.[11] I would suggest that comparative literature within a historical period can function similarly. For instance, in the book from which my article is partly drawn, I compare the treatment of marvels in the literature and philosophy of the medieval *dār al-Islām* and of the Latin West. Sometimes the influence of the former on the latter is clear; sometimes there is no evidence of influence. Such comparison helps to alienate the familiar, to create dissonance in a way that revises our conceptions. It also runs similar risks, such as the imposition of a hierarchy that prioritizes the literature of Western Europe or the understanding of other traditions through its terms. It risks homogenization and the erasure of real differences. As Edward Said has most famously shown, those are not just potential risks but committed errors, and they have had grave consequences. There is a key difference between synchronic comparison and the transtemporal brand discussed by Orlemanski in that conceptual terminology is usually imported from later periods. But our understanding of medieval concepts can benefit as much, I think, from cross-cultural comparisons as from cross-temporal ones.

NOTES

1 Sarah M. Allen and Jack W. Chen, "Fictionality in Early and Medieval China," *New Literary History* 51, no. 1 (2020): 233.

2 Katharine Eisaman Maus, "Fake News," *New Literary History* 51, no. 1 (2020): 250.

3 Julie Orlemanski, "Who Has Fiction? Modernity, Fictionality, and the Middle Ages," *New Literary History* 50, no. 2 (2019): 157.

4 Orlemanski, "Who Has Fiction?" 158, 161.

5 For an introduction to this criticism, see Alexander Key, *Language Between God and the Poets: Ma'nā in the Eleventh Century* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2018), 196–240; and Lara Harb, *Poetic Marvels: Wonder and Aesthetic Experience in Medieval Arabic Literary Theory* (dissertation, Department of Middle Eastern Studies and Islamic Studies, New York University, 2013). For an anthology translating some of the primary texts, see Mansour Ajami, *The Alchemy of Glory: The Dialectic of Truthfulness and Untruthfulness in Medieval Arabic Literary Criticism* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1988).

6 See, for instance, Mansour Ajami, *The Neckveins of Winter: The Controversy over Natural and Artificial Poetry in Medieval Arabic Literary Criticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1984); and Christoph J. Bürgel, "Die Beste Dichtung ist Die Lüegenreichste: Wesen und Bedeutung eines Literarischen Streites des Arabischen Mittelalters im Lichte Komparatistischer Betrachtung," *Oriens* 23–24 (1974): 7–102.

7 Nicolette Zeeman, "Imaginative Theory," in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 226, cited in Orlemanksi, "Who Has Fiction?" 158.

8 See, especially, Deborah Black, *Logic and Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1990).

9 Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014), 102. See also Black, "Aristotle's *Peri hermeneias* in Medieval Latin and Arabic Philosophy: Logic and the Linguistic Arts," in *Aristotle and his Medieval Interpreters*, ed. Richard Bosley and Martin Tweedale (Calgary: Univ. of Calgary Press, 1992), 25–83.

10 Orlemanski, "Who Has Fiction?" 164.

11 Orlemanski, "Who Has Fiction?" 164.