

Linked works of Indian origin such as *Kalila wa Dimna* and *The Seven Sages* [also known as the Book of Sinbad] began to appear in the thirteenth century [in Spain; in Greece in the eleventh century], and, a little later, Don Juan Manuel's *El Conde Lucanor*. European boxed stories include the *Confesio Amantis* of Gower, the *Novella* of Giovanni Sercambi [an important future name for the genre in English], Boccaccio (not only *Decameron* but *Arreto*) and, above all, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, as well as the *Tale of Bergis* associated for a time with Chaucer. All these date from the later fourteenth century and represent at least what we have called "Mediterranean culture"; in some cases there are Arabic and even ultimately Indian sources.<sup>33</sup>

What is fascinating here is the relatively late appearance of these narrative forms at roughly the same period in different parts of the globe.

A central problem about the history of the novel is precisely its late arrival on the scene, its initially uneven distribution and its great and widespread popularity since the eighteenth century. The late arrival occurs not only in Europe but in China. Andrew Plaks remarks on "the outstanding coincidence that the rise of prose fiction occurs nearly simultaneously, step by step, in both China and Europe," namely, in the sixteenth century.<sup>34</sup> He tries to explain the appearance of the Ming literati novels, "the four master-works," in terms of the transformation of the Ming economy, factional politics, and the expanding educational system.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the form is certainly not a purely Western phenomenon. While it is not found in all earlier literate societies, the limitation of the discussion of the rise of the novel to Europe, let alone to early eighteenth-century England, has no justification.

But why the uneven distribution and why the late arrival? I suggest the problem goes back to my earlier discussion of narrative, especially fictional narrative, in oral societies. Despite the development of narrative in writing, similar doubts about its fictional forms arose. Storytelling was always an ambiguous activity, implying "telling a story" in the sense of an untruth or even a lie. It failed to represent reality, was not serious.

There were two ways around this problem. As with myth, the narrative could be legitimized in the form of an account of supernatural events, which automatically got around one objection to the reality of the representation. The earlier narratives of Christian Europe were legitimized as being accounts of heavenly miracles (the New Testament) or of the lives of saints, in

the same way that painting and drawing became possible in the early Middle Ages if the subjects were drawn from religious sources. Even in the eighteenth century, it was this aspect of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* that rendered it acceptable to many Nonconformist Protestants.

The modern novel, after Daniel Defoe, was essentially a secular tale, a feature that is comprised within the meaning of "realistic." The hand of God may appear, but it does so through "natural" sequences, not through miracles or mirabilia. Earlier narrative structures often displayed such intervention, which, in a world suffused by the supernatural, was present everywhere. Indeed, one can argue that in such circumstances the actors drew little distinction between natural and supernatural; it was certainly shaded, even in personal narratives. Those times had passed with the saints' tales and with the fantasy of the romance. And even earlier in the classical world, there was a separation between the two, more distinct in some fields than others.

With the coming of the Renaissance and of printing, secular romances made a definite appearance. But they were often ridiculed, seen as fare for leisured women rather than serious men, and having potentially very negative effects on their readers. In eighteenth-century England, the romances of fantasy were supplemented by the realistic novels of Defoe and his followers, more serious and less fanciful.

The early-eighteenth-century novel adopted a different strategy of legitimation, which was its claim to be true to life, to be "a history" rather than "a story." Consider Defoe's attempts to establish the details of the time and place of the tale he is telling. And in fact the tale itself, in the case of *Robinson Crusoe* or *A Journal of the Plague Year*, did oscillate between truth and fiction, incorporating details of actual events. So too with time and place in Henry Fielding or Tobias Smollett. The epistolary mode, adopted by Aphra Benn in the late seventeenth century and later by Samuel Richardson in *Clarissa*, was perhaps another example of this claim.

I have used the words *truth*, *actual*, and *reality* in their obvious, literal, commonplace, perhaps superficial, meaning. There is an equally obvious sense in which these words could be applied to fiction that purported to say something imaginatively about the human condition. But a discrimination between literal truth and poetic truth is often recognized and refers to different modes of discourse. Fictional narrative embodying the second is certainly promoted by the use of writing, but its fictional nature is sometimes concealed either by a concern with the supernatural, the nonnatural or, in the early history of the novel, by the pretence to offer literal truth. In this way the reader's bluff is called, and his or her doubts are calmed.

<sup>33</sup> Daniel 1975: 310.

<sup>34</sup> Plaks 1977: 321.

a societal or on a personal level, but organized, narrative history is rare, and without documents, fragmentary. So in terms of cultural history, what is surprising about the novel, as distinct from narrative more generally, is not simply its absence from oral cultures, but its late and sporadic appearance long after writing was introduced, followed by its great popularity despite the continuing hostility it attracted up to the nineteenth century in Europe, later elsewhere. Today we live in a culture dominated by fiction, as none other has been.

The word *novel* appears to come into English from the Romance languages in the late fifteenth century with the meaning of "news." Within ten years of the advent of the printing press to Europe, around 1486, Henry VII started to publish partisan diplomatic accounts as well as news or announcements in occasional printed broadsheets. By Elizabeth's time, various groups beside the government made use of this media, often for domestic affairs in the form of ballads. The term used for these news-ballads was *novels*, like the French *nouvelle* or the Spanish *novela*. "It only suggested something new, and did not press the issue of facts versus fiction."<sup>27</sup> In the sixteenth century the word is used, after the Italian, to refer to a tale or short story of the kind in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In the seventeenth century, it comes to be employed as in contemporary English to refer to a long fictional prose narrative in contrast to the romances (the French and Italian *roman* and *romanzo* cover both), because of the close relation to real life. Nevertheless, the problem of acceptability remained. There was still a doubt, expressed by Richard Steele in the *Spectator*, no. 254 (1711) when he wrote, "I'm afraid thy Brains are a little disordered with Romances and Novels." The great difficulty of both was related to the mechanization of writing in the form of printing, reducing the need to read aloud, as many could acquire, even if temporarily from a friend or a library, their own copy for silent perusal.

It was this possibility of a disordered mind that encouraged the notion of people being led astray by fiction, to the symptom of Bovarism named after Flaubert's nineteenth-century novel, but which had arisen much earlier with regard to the romances as we see in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* of 1604, in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* of 1751, in the many objections to the novel that were expressed in the eighteenth century, and in the preference of most male readers for nonfiction and the development of a dominantly female reading public.

The novel is clearly a product of literate cultures as well as of leisured

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ones, yet it flourished relatively late in cultural history and certainly did not follow closely from the invention of writing itself. Early narratives appear in Greece and Rome, few in the earlier period in the Near East. But stories like Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* or Longus's *Daphne and Chloe* and the erotic romances of the Greeks were at best forerunners of the novel as we know it today.<sup>28</sup> Early examples of narrative fiction, often referred to as romances or novels, that were found in ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian literature were relatively short, very different in scope from later novels either in Europe or China. Although these works were thought to have been directed at a popular audience, the reading public was much smaller and more elitist, though it comprised women as well as men.<sup>29</sup> In Egypt, fictional narratives were written in Demotic (from say, the seventh century B.C.E.), but they were apparently all "of fairly modest length." Modest could mean less than six thousand words. Some were longer. "The chief structural means by which stories were made more extensive than a simple anecdote is the device of a story-within-a-story."<sup>30</sup> What kind of status did such fiction have? There is no evidence that narrative texts were used in education. Closer prototypes than these "novels before the novel" appeared in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, most notably in Rabelais and *Don Quixote*, but also in the mass of French romances of the seventeenth century.

After the classical period and the long hiatus that followed in Europe, fiction seems to have revived only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The historian Norman Daniel sees this revival as representing a bond with oral culture: "The sudden appearance of a fictional literature is evidence of Europe's natural links with the other cultures that derive from the ancient sources of the Near East"—in other words, the Bronze Age cultures with their invention of writing.<sup>31</sup> For example, the earliest example of the "boxed" story (the story-within-a-story as in the *Arabian Nights*, the frame story for which is probably Indian and the first reference from the ninth century) he sees as being Pedro de Alfonso's *Discipline Clericalis*. The author was a converted Jew who translated the tale from the Arabic and "was the first to introduce the genre of fable, a kind of subdivision of Wisdom literature."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> On the novel in classical societies, see Perry 1967; Heiserman 1977; Hägg 1983; Tatum 1994; Morgan and Stoneman 1994; Holzberg 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Egger, "Looking at Chariton's Callirhoe," in Morgan and Stoneman 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Tatum 1994: 206.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel 1975: 310.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel 1975: 108.