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# A Monk's Tale

## Framing the Fictional in John of Alta Silva's ‚Dolopathos‘

**Zusammenfassung:** Im späten 12. Jh. hat sich in der lateinischen Lehrtradition bereits durchgesetzt, unglaubliche, d. h. fiktionale Erzählungen (*fabulae*) zum Zwecke der moralischen und praktischen Unterweisung zu nutzen statt ihre offenkundige Fiktionalität als Lügen zu verbuchen. Der Beitrag zeigt, wie der Zisterziensermönch Johannes von Alta Silva in seinem zwischen 1184 und 1212 verfassten Werk ‚Dolopathos, sive de rege et septem sapientibus‘ (‚Dolopathos, oder der König und die Sieben Weisen‘) auf solche etablierten Legitimationsdiskurse zurückgreift, um die darin zuhauf enthaltenen phantastischen Elemente zu rechtfertigen. Dazu gehört neben der christlichen Deutung von Episoden oder der Hinzufügung eines Pro- sowie eines Epilogs vor allem die Rahmenstruktur, die das Werk als historisch ausweist bzw. auszuweisen scheint. Narratologisch gesprochen, erfindet Johannes einen Erzähler, indem er sich in den Peritexten sowie in der Rahmenerzählung als Historiograph inszeniert: Er kreiert eine *persona*, deren Fingiertheit darauf baut, vom Publikum entlarvt zu werden, und die somit die Unterscheidung zwischen Autor und Erzähler voraussetzt.

**Schlagwörter:** Binnenerzählung, Christianisierung, Erzählerfigur, Exemplum, Fabula, Fiktionalität, Historisierung, Märchen, Moralisierung, Rahmenerzählung, Wahrheit, Wunderbares, Zisterzienserliteratur

## 1 Telling Truths with Lies

In the first book of his ‚*Etymologiae*‘ (‚*Etymologies*‘, ca. 600–625), Isidore of Seville roughly distinguishes between three types of narratives based on their level of historical veracity and empirical verisimilitude, a distinction derived from classical theories of rhetoric:<sup>1</sup> *historiae sunt res verae quae factae sunt; argumenta sunt quae etsi facta non sunt, fieri tamen possunt; fabulae vero sunt quae nec factae sunt nec fieri possunt*,

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<sup>1</sup> The most elaborate study to my knowledge of this system and its impact in the Middle Ages is Päivi MEHTONEN, *Old Concepts and New Poetics: Historia, Argumentum and Fabula in Twelfth- and Early-Thirteenth Century Latin Poetics of Fiction*, Helsinki 1996. GREEN also discusses its significance in his seminal study on the rise of literary fictionality in the long twelfth century, Dennis H. GREEN, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150–1220* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 47), Cambridge 2002, pp. 1–17, 134–137.

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*quia contra naturam sunt.*<sup>2</sup> Of these three types Isidore discusses the *fabula* at greatest length, primarily with reference to animal fables and classical mythology, though not without noting that Scripture also has its share of such fictitious fabrications. As he understands it, these *fabulae* allow their audience *ut fictorum mutorum animalium inter se conloquio imago quaedam vitae hominum nosceretur*,<sup>3</sup> whether it be for the purpose of pure entertainment, (metaphoric) natural philosophy, or moral edification.

In his appreciation of the *fabula* as a potential vehicle for the sort of truth that is to be understood in the moral and/or allegorical sense rather than the historical one, Isidore concurs with his fellow Church Father Augustine, also building on the latter's argumentation.<sup>4</sup> Augustine moreover thinks it worthwhile to state the difference between, on the one hand, made-up stories that convey some 'deeper' ('higher') meaning in an appealing and therefore more convincing manner, and on the other hand, intentional lies that are meant to deceive:

Non enim omne quod fingimus mendacium est; sed quando id fingimus quod nihil significat, tunc est mendacium. Cum autem fictio nostra refertur ad aliquam significationem, non est mendacium sed aliqua figura ueritatis.<sup>5</sup>

In quo genere fingendi humana etiam facta vel dicta irrationalibus animantibus et rebus sensu carentibus homines addiderunt, ut ejusmodi fictis narrationibus, sed veracibus significationibus, quod vellent commendatus intimarent. Nec apud auctores tantum saecularium litterarum, ut apud Horatium, mus loquitur muri, et mustela vulpeculae, ut per narrationem fictam ad id quod agitur, vera significatio referatur; unde et Aesopi tales fabulas ad eum finem relatas, nullus tam ineruditus fuit, qui putaret appellanda mendacia: sed in litteris quoque sacris, sicut in libro Judicum ligna sibi regem requirunt, et loquuntur ad oleam, et ad ficum, et ad vitem, et ad rubum. Quod utique totum fingitur, ut ad rem quae intenditur, ficta quidem narratione, non mendaci tamen, sed veraci significatione veniantur.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Isidorus Hispalensis episcopus, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX* 1, ed. William M. LINDSEY, Oxford 1911, cap. 44 par. 5. '*Historiae* are true things that have taken place. *Argumenta* are things that, though they have not taken place, could take place nevertheless. Meanwhile, *fabulae* are things that have not taken place and cannot take place, because they are at odds with nature.' All translations in this essay are my own.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, cap. 40 par. 1. 'to recognise a certain image of human life in the conversation of made-up dumb beasts'

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of Augustine's understanding of and relation to fictionality, see especially Anders CULLHED, *The Shadow of Creusa: Negotiating Fictionality in Late Antique Latin Literature*, Berlin, Boston 2015, pp. 83–299.

<sup>5</sup> Sanctus Aurelius Augustinus, *Quaestiones evangeliorum cum appendice. Quaestionum XVI in Matthaeum*, ed. Almut MUTZENBECHER (Aurelii Augustini opera 13.3. Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina 44B), Turnhout 1980, p. 116. 'Not everything we make up is a lie: when we make up something that does not signify anything, t h e n it is a lie, but when that which we have made up refers to some or other meaning, it is not a lie but a figure of truth.'

<sup>6</sup> Sanctus Aurelius Augustinus, *Opera omnia* 6.1, Eds. Monachi ordinis Sancti Benedicti e congregatione S. Mauri, Paris 1837, col. 780. 'In this kind of made-up account people have attached human deeds or

It is not that strange that pre-modern pillars of the Church and unrelenting seekers of eternal Truths such as Isidore and Augustine should come to the defence of stories that lack historical veracity or empirical plausibility. After all, both men had been schooled in the Latin tradition and thus thoroughly accustomed to the art of moralising and allegorising interpretation, applied not only to Old Testament accounts or the parables of Christ, but also to the wondrous tales of classical pagan mythographers. As for animal fables, these had already been a widely implemented didactic tool for centuries, as little moral lessons, and to help develop basic Latin reading and compositional skills.<sup>7</sup> So when Augustine asserts that it would be hard to find someone who is *stupid/unschooled* (*ineruditus*) that they would conflate *fabula* with *mendacium* (‘lie’), he has good reasons to do so.

And yet, while the Church Fathers’ musings on the nature and function of stories – their epistemological status and pragmatic potential in terms of historical/empirical and moral/spiritual truthfulness – would take deep roots in medieval Latinate culture, and though many other Latin authors both classical and medieval, pagan and Christian, had similar outlooks on the matter, *fabulae* could never fully escape the suspicions and criticisms of ‘serious readers’ who spurned them for being frivolous, irrational and mendacious. Even the medieval creators of such stories often remain entangled in the classical terminology of triviality (*nenia*, *nuga*), falsity and mendacity (*mendax*, *mendosus*, *mendacium*) when qualifying their work for their audience. Thus in the prologue to the ‘*Ecbasis cuiusdam captivi per tropologiam*’ (‘The Escape of the Captive, Told in a Figurative Manner’, 1050s?), a mock-epic take on the schoolish genre of the animal fable, the narrator remarks: *raram si pono fabellam, / Confiteor culpam: mendosam profero cartam*, adding by way of assurance, *Sunt tamen utilia quę multa notantur in illa*.<sup>8</sup> About a century and a half later, Nigel of Longchamps still feels obliged to resort to the same utilitarian rhetoric when introducing his satirical beast epic ‘*Speculum stultorum*’ (‘Mirror of Fools’, 1180s):

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words to non-rational animate and non-comprehensive inanimate things so as to intimate what they want more appealingly with made-up stories that, however, have truthful meanings. And it is not just so in ancient [pagan] authors such as Horace, where mouse speaks to mouse and weasel to fox, that a made-up story may refer to a true meaning concerning a certain matter – hence no man is *stupid/ignorant* that he would deem it fit we designate Aesop’s fables, which are [also] told to this purpose, as lies –, but it is also the case in Scripture, as when in the Book of Judges the trees are in search of a king and speak with the olive, the fig, the vine and the bramble. Of course, all of this is made up so that the thing under consideration may be approached through a made-up story with a meaning that is, however, not mendacious, but truthful.’

<sup>7</sup> For the classical-medieval Latin fable tradition, see for instance Francisco Rodríguez ADRADOS, *The Fable During the Roman Empire and in the Middle Ages* (History of the Graeco-Roman Fable 2), Leiden, Boston 2000, pp. 559–710.

<sup>8</sup> *Ecbasis cuiusdam captivi. Escape of a Certain Captive: An Eleventh-Century Beast Epic*, ed. Edwin H. ZEYDEL, Chapel Hill 1964, vss. 39–41. ‘I present you with a strange little tale. / I confess my guilt: I offer you a lying sheet of paper. / Yet there are many useful things to be gleaned from it.’

Ipsa superficies quamvis videatur inepta  
 Materiesque rudis, verba diserta minus,  
 Multa tamen poterit lector studiosus in illis  
 Sensibus et studiis carpere digna suis.  
 Non quod verba sonant, sed quae contraria verbis  
 Insita sensus habet sunt retinenda magis.  
 Quis vetet, ex nugis vario paradiagmate sumpto,  
 Seria quandoque plurima posse legi?  
 Saepius historiae brevitatis mysteria magna  
 Clauduit, et in vili res pretiosa latet.  
 Quicquid ad exemplum morum scriptura propinat  
 Doctrinae causa, debet habere locum.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, even by the end of the twelfth century, as marvellous stories were becoming more and more common in both Latin and vernacular literatures (e. g. Arthurian histories, *lais*, romances, fable- and fairy-tale-like epics, etc.),<sup>10</sup> their authors were still not wholly safe from being deemed either liars for recounting the historically or empirically untrue, or fools for believing their own nonsense. Not surprisingly, they often employ certain authorial techniques to vindicate their choice of writing, also depending on the specific contexts in which they are working. Thus, while (pseudo-)historians and romance authors of the period commonly turn to topical claims of *historical* veracity in (mock-)defence of the marvels they are recounting, invoking allegedly reliable sources (existing or made-up, written or oral, based on eyewitness-accounts or well-established hearsay), writers in a predominantly moralistic and/or religious context tend more towards stressing the *moral/spiritual* veracity of their little *fabulae*.

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**9** Nigel de Longchamps, *Speculum stultorum*, eds. John H. MOZLEY and Robert R. RAYMO, Los Angeles 1960, p. 31. 'Though this [work] may appear silly on the surface, / its matter crude and its words less than eloquent, / the studious reader will nonetheless be able, / through good sense and contemplation, to grasp its many merits. / It is not what the words sound out, but the contrary / meanings grafted onto them that are to be remembered here. / Who is to say that in the various examples of trifling tales / many serious matters cannot be read as well? / Quite often, the brevity of a story great secrets / does enfold, and hides something valuable in its lowliness. / Whatever moral example a piece of writing has to offer / in the name of education [Holy Doctrine?], it should have its place.' This 'line of defence', (rhetorically) acknowledging the humble artistic status of wondrous tales while stressing their didactic value, would be reiterated frequently in centuries to come, and it is still alive today. See for instance the many fore- and afterwords that have accompanied fairy-tale collections from the sixteenth century onward, several of which are translated and discussed in Ruth BOTTIGHEIMER (ed.), *Fairy Tales Framed: Early Forewords, Afterwords, and Critical Words*, New York 2012.

**10** See for instance, GREEN (note 1) and Jan ZIOLKOWSKI, *Fiction in the Long Twelfth Century and Beyond: Naissance, Renaissance, Both, or Neither*, in: Marianne PADE et al. (eds.), *Fiction and Figuration in High and Late Medieval Literature*, Rome 2017, pp. 11–20. I am currently preparing a monograph on medieval Latin 'fairy tales' which also pays attention to the broader literary-historical developments that proved conducive to the appearance of such texts from the twelfth century onward: Stijn PRAET, *Fairy Tales and Latin Tradition: The Case of the Donkey Prince*, Detroit (forthcoming).

In the remainder of this contribution I will be discussing a particular Latin text from the long twelfth century (ca. 1050–1230) that provides us with an interesting perspective on the various strategies through which a medieval author may attempt to tell (and ,sell') the truth by recounting that which to the less forgiving or ,simpleminded' reader (cf. Augustine's *ineruditus*) might look like nonsense or lies: a work entitled ,Dolopathos, sive de rege et septem sapientibus' (,Dolopathos, or the King and the Seven Sages').<sup>11</sup> Among other things, I will be touching on its author's purposeful use of narrative framing, which surely transcends merely stringing together random stories for the sake of collecting, as well as on his direct narratorial interventions in the form of interpretative comments and metaliterary reflections. The picture that will emerge from this, however, is not that of an all-controlling ,I' fully on top of things, but of someone who does not feel completely confident about his brand of marvellous storytelling – a true reflection of the man handling the quill, or a playful fictionalising *persona* set up for the occasion?

## 2 Once Upon a Time in Sicily

,Dolopathos' was written sometime between 1184 and 1212 at the Cistercian monastery of Alta Silva, founded not a century earlier in the woodlands of the Lorraine region.<sup>12</sup> About its author, who refers to himself only as Johannes (henceforth Anglicised as John), we know next to nothing, though the literary accomplishment of his work suggests that it may not have been his first attempt at composition.<sup>13</sup> The better part of ,Dolopathos' is made up by an encompassing frame narrative in which about ten shorter tales are embedded. It is furthermore accompanied by a pro- and epilogue, as well as a panegyric letter in which John dedicates his work to a certain Bertrand, then Bishop of Metz.<sup>14</sup> The contents of the first- and second-degree narratives in ,Dolopathos' can be summarised as follows: ever since his boyhood days, Dolopathos (> Gr. *dolos* + *pathos*, ,he who suffers deceit'), King of Sicily in the days of the Emperor Augustus, has surrounded

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<sup>11</sup> I use the Latin text edition in: Johannes de Alta Silva, *Historia septem sapientum II: Dolopathos sive de rege et septem sapientibus*, ed. Alphons HILKA, Heidelberg 1913. For modern translations, see Jean d'Haute-Seille, *Dolopathos, ou le roi et les sept sages*, ed. and trans. Yasmina FOEHR-JANSSENS and Emmanuelle MÉTRY, Turnhout 2000, and Johannes de Alta Silva, *Dolopathos: Or The King and the Seven Wise Men*, trans. Brady B. GILLELAND, Binghamton NY, 1981.

<sup>12</sup> Now Haute-Seille, part of the community of Cirey-sur-Vezouze. Only some ruins remain of the abbey's Romanesque church. For the history of the monastery, see Edmond M. DE MARTIMPREY DE ROMÉCOURT, *L'abbaye de Haute-Seill*, in: *Bulletins de la société d'archéologie Lorraine* 3.15 (1887), pp. 86-186.

<sup>13</sup> For John's style, see GILLELAND in Johannes de Alta Silva (note 11), pp. ix–xii.

<sup>14</sup> Hence the dating of ,Dolopathos': the monastery of Alta Silva was included in the diocese of Metz in 1184, while Bishop Bertrand died in 1212.

himself with intelligent advisors and has himself become a wise ruler, strict in his application of the law, but caring of his people. Through a series of events Dolopathos becomes friends with the Emperor and he decides to send his only child Lucinius (> Lat. *lux*, 'light') to Rome to be educated for seven years by none other than Vergil, legendary master in the arts of poetry, magic and divination.<sup>15</sup> Lucinius, too, displays a special talent for the latter, which on one occasion saves him from being maliciously poisoned. One night, the boy dreams that his mother has died. After pledging an unexplained vow of silence to his mentor Vergil, he hastily returns to his father's court.

Lucinius arrives at home to find the King has already remarried. Intrigued by the young man's mysterious silence, his stepmother vainly tries to seduce him. Wounded in her pride, she accuses him of attempted rape. Lucinius is unable to defend himself because of his vow to Vergil, so the King sees no choice but to condemn his son to be burned at the stake. On the allotted day, an old man steps up from the crowd, introducing himself as one of the renowned Seven Sages of Rome. The Sage tries to dissuade the King from going through with the execution by telling him an exemplary tale relevant to his own situation, thus holding up a narrative mirror of truth. Afterwards, the King decides to forestall the event and mull things over, but he is persuaded again by his wife to proceed the next day. This scenario is repeated six more times, each time with a different Sage. Their stories go as follows:

- First Sage, 'Canis' ('The Dog'):<sup>16</sup> An impoverished nobleman misinterprets the situation and in a fit of anger rashly kills his horse, his sparrow hawk, and the loyal dog that has just saved his child from a serpent.
- Second Sage, 'Gaza' ('The Treasure'): A father and son gradually rob a king's treasure from a tower. When the former finds himself glued stuck near the entrance, he convinces the latter to cut off his head and flee, so that neither of them may be identified. The King tries to tease out the remaining thief by publicly desecrating the headless corpse. The young man slices off his own thumb to explain away his uncontrollable tears at the cruel sight. Overcome by shame, he retrieves his father's body by way of a clever ruse.
- Third Sage, 'Senex' ('The Old Man'): An ill-advised young king has all the elderly in his land executed to cope with a famine and plunges the realm into chaos. One youth hides away his old father. Thanks to the latter's wise counsel he becomes a trusted advisor to the King. When the King asks each of his courtiers to show him their best friend, their most loyal servant, their favourite entertainer and their worst enemy, the old man instructs his son to take his dog, his donkey, his little boy

<sup>15</sup> For Vergil's legendary medieval reputation as master of these arts, see Domenico COMPARETTI, *Vergil in the Middle Ages*, Princeton 1997. The second part of this book is devoted particularly to the Vergil of legend, including a brief section on 'Dolopathos' (pp. 232–238), which does suffer somewhat under the author's conflation of the Latin prose text with its Old French verse adaptation by Herbert of Paris (*Li romans de Dolopathos*, ca. 1220).

<sup>16</sup> The titles of the embedded tales are a handy addition by the text editor.

and his wife. Disgruntled because of this slight, the woman betrays her husband and father-in-law at court. The King, however, pardons them, sees his own errors, reinstates the ancient laws of his kingdom and appoints the old man as high judge.

- Fourth Sage, 'Creditor' ('The Creditor'): A highly educated enchantress noblewoman becomes rich by receiving men into her bed for a fee, but cheats them out of any carnal satisfaction with the help of a magic, sleep-inducing feather. Eventually, she weds a lucky young man whose life she later saves by transforming herself into a male law specialist and cleverly entrapping his accuser at the royal court, in what is our oldest attestation of the so-called 'pound-of-flesh'-intrigue immortalised in Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice' (1605).
- Fifth Sage, 'Viduae filius' ('The Widow's Son'): The son of a Roman king has his hawk strike down a poor widow's only chicken. The woman's son in response kills the hawk, but is killed in turn by the enraged princeling. The widow demands justice from the King. Rather than having the boy executed for his crime, she accepts his son as her adoptive child.
- Sixth Sage, 'Latronis filii' ('The Robber's Sons'): A retired robber's sons get caught trying to steal a horse from a queen. She is willing to ransom them back to their father in return for some adventurous tales of his younger days. It concerns the third-degree narrations:
  - 'Polyphemus' (after the cyclops of the Odyssean episode on which this tale is modelled): The robber and his gang break into the house of a rich giant, but are apprehended and devoured by the monster one by one. The robber manages to trick the giant and blinds him horribly. After some failed attempts hiding amongst a flock of sheep, he finally escapes, but not without biting off his own finger in order to rid himself of a magic ring that forces him to reveal his whereabouts.
  - 'Striges' ('The Witches'): Following his flight from the giant, the robber winds up in a forest hut where he finds a frightened mother and her child held captive by cannibalistic witches. He poses as a hanged corpse to evade detection. The hags cut off and eat a slice of his buttocks. Eventually, they are driven out of their hut by a mysterious force, leaving their captives safe.
- Seventh Sage, 'Cygni' ('The Swans'): A nobleman stumbles across a clairvoyant woodland nymph while hunting and takes her for his wife. The nobleman's mother is envious of her daughter-in-law and schemes to have her unjustly condemned to a cruel fate. She kidnaps her sextuplets at birth, replaces them with puppies, and has the girl blamed for the allegedly monstrous, bestial births. The infants are left in the woods to die, but are found instead by a hermit-philosopher who rears them for seven years. Having learnt that the children are still alive, the wicked mother-in-law's servant sets out and steals away the boys' magical necklaces, thus forcing them to remain in what turns out to be their natural form as swans, bereft of human speech. Their still human sister takes care of them for some time, meets their unwitting father and mother, and narrowly escapes a final murder attempt at her grandmother's behest. In the end, all is revealed. The children are made

human again (but for one whose necklace has become damaged),<sup>17</sup> the family is reunited and the evildoer is submitted to the same life-sentence punishment previously undergone by the innocent nymph.

And yet, when everything is said and done, even after the Seventh Sage's suggestive story and explicit accusation laid against the new Queen, King Dolopathos is still none the wiser and prepares to burn his son. In the nick of time, Vergil comes flying to the rescue on the back of a giant bird and acquits Lucinius on account of a legal procedural mistake. He then tells one more anecdote, 'Puteus' (The Well): an unfaithful wife is locked out of the house by her angry philosopher husband and cleverly feigns drowning herself in a nearby well. When her sorry spouse comes running out, she slips back indoors and turns the tables on him, loudly crying for all the neighbours to hear that it was *he* who has committed adultery. She only lets him in after he has promised to forgive her. Vergil, having made his point that not even a wise philosopher is ever fully safe from the cunning of women,<sup>18</sup> now relieves Lucinius of his vow of silence. Dolopathos finally understands the truth of the matter and the Queen is condemned to die at the stake she had intended for her stepson.

Not long after, Dolopathos and Vergil pass away. Lucinius grows up to become a just king. In the meantime, Christ has walked and left the earth. One day, a Roman Jew comes to spread the gospel on Sicily. Lucinius invites him to a series of conversations, which take the shape of scholarly dialogues. They talk of many things, including man's essential dignity and fall into sin, the divine gift of free choice, the Incarnation through the Virgin, the Trinity, the subject of false idols, etc. Lucinius grows increasingly persuaded by the apostle's arguments, though not completely. Then a funeral procession passes by on its way to cremate a deceased youth. When the apostle performs the miracle of resurrection on the boy, the King and many of his subjects are amazed and convert to Christianity.<sup>19</sup> Lucinius entrusts the throne to a worthy friend and travels to Jerusalem to spend his life near the apostles and the holy places. We know he never

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<sup>17</sup> The narrator remarks in passing that it concerns that very swan who will later pull a little boat carrying one of his brothers and gain him the title of 'Swan Knight'. How the story of the swan children as we know it from 'Dolopathos' was integrated into the grander mythology encompassing not just the Swan Knight, but also the House of Bouillon and the First Crusade, is a different story altogether, one that eventually also leads to the writing desk of Hans Christian Andersen. For a literary-historical outline of that development, see Stijn PRAET, *Fairy Tales and the Latin Tradition: A Literary-Contextualising Approach*, PhD diss., Ghent 2014, pp. 339-355, and Cyrille FRANÇOIS, *C'est la plume qui fait le conte: Die Sechs Schwäne des frères Grimm et De vilde Svander de Hans Christian Andersen*, in: *Féeries* 9 (2012), pp. 55-84.

<sup>18</sup> This theme plays an important role throughout 'Dolopathos'. It is also common in the writings of many other didactically oriented (and certainly monastic) authors of the High Middle Ages, including Petrus Alfonsi's popular and influential proverb- and *exempla*-compilation 'Disciplina clericalis' ('The Cleric's Education', 1106-1110) which devotes an entire series of roguish tales to it.

<sup>19</sup> The passage is likely modelled on Luke 7:11-17.



returned from there, but are left to assume he was eventually received into the Kingdom of God.

With the wondrous storytelling in ‚Dolopathos‘, John of Alta Silva performed quite a remarkable feat, considering the environment in which he was writing. Granted, during the latter decades of the long twelfth century, marvellous stories were becoming more acceptable in both Latin and vernacular literatures than had been the case in preceding centuries, the popularity of the *matière de Bretagne* being a shining testimony to this literary evolution. That being said, are the Cistercians not known as one of the most exactly ascetic monastic orders of the High Middle Ages? Its most illustrious abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (while an imaginative literator himself) was already annoyed at the sight of the grotesque stone monsters and mythical creatures decorating many a cloister and church façade, which according to him could only lead to spiritual distraction.<sup>20</sup> For *mimi, et magi, et fabulatores scurrilesque cantilenae* he had little patience either,<sup>21</sup> much in line with ancient Christian attitudes in contempt of worldly entertainment.<sup>22</sup> Other Cistercians such as Aelred of Rievaulx and Caesarius of Heisterbach specifically warn against the *matière de Bretagne* as an enticing distraction from the true Word and instigator of vain emotions in the reader.<sup>23</sup> Of course, it is not hard to picture how stories of King Arthur and the likes would have occasionally penetrated the monastic walls and minds nonetheless – recollected by monks from the days before their admission, overheard at public performances during travels and public dealings, or even read in manuscripts that were to be copied out at the scriptorium for courtly use or indiscriminate storage.<sup>24</sup> Also, the brethren's Latinate education would have made them well acquainted with the sort of heroic and wondrous accounts found in classical poets such as Vergil and Ovid. I would note here that the Cistercians did in

<sup>20</sup> See Bernard's ‚Apologia ad Guillelmum‘ 1 (‚Defence Addressed to William [of Saint-Thierry]‘, ca. 1124).

<sup>21</sup> Sanctus Bernardus Claraevallensis, *Opera omnia* 41.2, eds. Jean LECLERQ et al., Rome 1958, p. 926.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance Augustine's ‚Confessiones‘ 1.13 (‚Confessions‘, ca. 397), in which he professes his embarrassment for having wasted so much time and idle tears on the tragic fate of Dido and Aeneas in Vergil's ‚Aeneid‘. The Vulgate itself already states: *bonus eris minister Christi Iesu, enutritus verbis fidei et bonae doctrinae quam adsecutus es. Ineptas autem et aniles fabulas devita. Exerce te ipsum ad pietatem* (I Timothy 4:6–7, quoted from the text edition in *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, ed. Robert WEBER, Stuttgart: 1969), ‚You shall be a good servant of Jesus Christ, nourished on the words of the Faith and the good doctrine which you have followed. But avoid foolish old wives' tales. Work towards being pious‘.

<sup>23</sup> See Aelred's ‚Speculum caritatis‘ 2.17 (‚Mirror of Charity‘, ca. 1142) and Caesarius's ‚Dialogus miraculorum‘ 7.36 (‚Dialogue of Miracles‘, ca. 1219–1223). The text edition that I have consulted for the latter is CAESARIUS HEISTERBACENSIS, *Dialogus miraculorum*, ed. Joseph STRANGE, Köln 1851.

<sup>24</sup> The active role of Welsh Cistercian monasteries in the preservation of broadly Arthurian narratives during the thirteenth and fourteenth century is documented in Daniel HUWS, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, Cardiff 2000.

fact develop a thriving tradition of wondrous storytelling of their own,<sup>25</sup> though this mostly involves exemplary tales detailing the miraculous interventions or deceitful illusions of God, angels, saints and demons in the world of men, usually within a tangibly religious atmosphere. In John of Alta Silva, however, we have a Cistercian who composed a fresh string of adventurous tales of courtly intrigues, preternatural beings, enchanted objects and magical metamorphoses that feel much more akin to the marvels of courtly romance and *lais* than to the miracles of the religious *exemplum*.<sup>26</sup> Yet not only did he receive formal support from his abbot, conform the Statutes of the General Chapter,<sup>27</sup> he also thought it appropriate to dedicate his work to a bishop. So how does one relate such stories to an audience of monks who are supposed to be austere and focus their lives on continuous prayer and spiritual contemplation?

### 3 Framing the Fictional: Christianisation, Moralisation, Dramatisation, Historicisation

Firstly, John does what we would expect from a writer in his position, namely mould his narrative materials to illustrate and confirm certain moral and spiritual truths and wisdoms. This is most evident in the frame tale, which starts off as something reminiscent of a romance adventure, but over time develops into a religious conversion story, and one that would have been of particular interest to John's intended audience: a young boy from a noble family who proves himself exceptionally chaste, obedient and silent (cf. the vows to become a Cistercian monk) receives an education in the ancient Latin authorities (also prerequisite to enter the Cistercian brotherhood), but eventually takes the next step and transcends their profane wisdom by retreating from the courtly world to spend his life in a spiritual place devoted to God (the monk's solution for the problem of the cunning woman posed in 'Puteus')... It reads like a celebration and even heroisation of the choice for a monastic life. Meanwhile, the embedded *exempla* of 'Dolopathos', while somewhat daring at times, generally remain in line with a medieval Christian ethos, validating virtues such as self-constraint, humility

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<sup>25</sup> See Brian P. MCGUIRE, *Friends and Tales in the Cloister: Oral Sources in Caesarius of Heisterbach's 'Dialogus Miraculorum'*, in: *Analecta Cisterciensia* 36 (1980), pp. 167–247, complemented by Brian P. MCGUIRE, *Written Sources and Cistercian Inspiration in Caesarius of Heisterbach*, in: *Analecta Cisterciensia* 35 (1979), pp. 227–282.

<sup>26</sup> Looking at story collections from the later thirteenth and fourteenth century, we notice an increased openness to such materials within religious contexts, Jacobus de Voragine's hagiographic 'Legenda aurea' ('The Golden Legend') and the 'Gesta Romanorum' ('Deeds of the Romans') being excellent cases in point. John's 'Dolopathos' comes quite early in that respect.

<sup>27</sup> For the relevant paragraph in the Statutes concerning the writing of new books, see *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux*, ed. and trans. Chrysogonus WADELL, Cîteaux 1999, p. 481.

and charity while punishing vices like wrath, pride and deceitfulness, from time to time also acknowledging the just hand of God in the matter.

Secondly, in case his reader should miss the point, John attaches moralising interpretations to his stories, as I acknowledged *supra* a common approach in Latin education and writing since Antiquity. With each new *exemplum*, its second-degree narrator offers some comments to the King regarding the lessons he should ideally draw from it. In a neat parallel to these little *ad hoc* exegeses addressed to the King, the first-degree narrator similarly addresses his reader right after Lucinius had been vindicated and set free (a climactic moment that comes with the sense of an ending, except that John then takes the anagogical logic of his account further). He praises Dolopathos's sense of duty and sacrifice, as well as Lucinius's *obedienciam custodiamque precepti [...et] constantiam, patientiam ac pudicitiam*, and then exhortitatively remarks: *Quis hodie regum uel principum aut saltem abbatum patris imitetur iusticiam? Quis pauperum monachorum dumtaxat, ne dicam secularium, filii obedienciam et patientiam exequatur?*<sup>28</sup>

Thirdly, the very manner in which the frame story of 'Dolopathos' plays out constitutes a dramatisation of the salutary, edificatory potential of storytelling itself. From the First Sage's *exemplum* to ward off Lucinius's death to the Roman apostle's discussions of the Faith that steer the young King towards spiritual life everlasting,<sup>29</sup> all of the embedded narratives in 'Dolopathos' are offered up by their second-degree narrators as *de te fabulae* ('stories about you') to their textual addressees, the successive kings of Sicily.<sup>30</sup> The connections between the embedded tales of Vergil and the Sages and their encompassing frame, but also among the tales themselves, are manifold, each new story picking up elements from previous ones, repeating, mirroring or contrasting them. The result is an intricate and coherent narrative texture in which a number of thematic threads can be traced that bear direct relevance to the hidden truth underlying the events in the textual reality of the Sicilian court,<sup>31</sup> including: murder resulting from

<sup>28</sup> Johannes de Alta Silva, p. 91: 'obedience and faithfulness to the precept that had been placed upon him, [and his] constancy, meekness and chastity? [...] Who today among kings, princes or even abbots would strive to surpass the father's sense of justice? Who amongst monks really, who have taken the vow of poverty (and I am not even speaking of laymen), would rival the son's obedience and meekness?'

<sup>29</sup> This attempt to escape death through storytelling reminds one of course of those other, more famous medieval framed tale compilations 'Alf laila wa laila' ('The Thousand and One Nights', frame story first attested in the ninth century) and Giovanni Boccaccio's 'Decameron' (1351).

<sup>30</sup> Tale compilations in which the transfer of wisdom is thematised by means of a proper frame tale (rather than a less narratively complicated dialogue) become more common in Europe during the High Middle Ages, probably also under the influence of Oriental models. See for instance Pascale BOURGAIN, *Latin Culture and Oriental Wisdom*, in: Wim VERBAAL et al. (eds.), *Appropriation and Latin Literature (Latinitas Perennis 2)*, Boston, Leiden 2009, pp. 163–178.

<sup>31</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the many connections between these *exempla* amongst themselves and their frame tale, see Yasmina FOEHR-JANSSENS, *Le temps des fables: Le Roman des Sept Sages, ou l'autre voie du roman* (Nouvelle Bibliothèque du Moyen Âge 27), Paris 1994, pp. 195–296.

rash and foolish decisions, the unnaturalness of infanticide, the life-saving bonds between parents and (their) children, the overly strict application of human laws, the cunning of women, etc.

Saliently enough, the truthful suggestiveness of the *exempla* in ‚Dolopathos‘, the *mise en abyme*, reaches its climax with the Seventh Sage’s tale about the enchanted swan children, exactly the sort of story John’s earliest audience would have associated with the mendacious marvels of the *matière de Bretagne*. Nevertheless, it is here where the trials and tribulations of the Sicilian kings are mirrored most clearly and systematically, even as regards several minor details.<sup>32</sup> Apparently, not only can incredible *fabulae* be employed to illustrate eternal moral/spiritual Truths, they may also shed light on more specific situational, temporal truths, helping their audience to discern the everyday workings of the world more sharply and make wise decisions accordingly.

John also adds an important nuance to his dramatisation of edificatory storytelling: having heard all of the tales of the Seven Sages, Dolopathos still does not grasp the truth. In the end, Lucinius is acquitted not by his father’s perspicacity, nor by Vergil’s final anecdote about the wiliness of women, but by the latter basically pleading mistrial and then allowing his pupil to disclose what has happened.<sup>33</sup> Lucinius, too, spends many hours listening to a wise man, the Roman apostle, but without ever fully embracing what he has to offer. It takes the sight of an actual miracle to convert him to the ultimate Truths of Christianity. Thus we are reminded that the practical potential of stories, truthful as they may be, is not always realised; it takes the right kind of diligent and open-hearted reader/listener to recognise, understand and benefit from their examples. If they do not, at least part of the fault is theirs, not the storyteller’s.

These first three writerly strategies through which John of Alta Silva tries to highlight the ‚deeper‘ truth value of his narrative materials, are not that much out of the ordinary, akin as they are to the moralising and allegorising interpretational methods that had been applied to fables and classical mythology for many centuries. However, John also adopts a fourth strategy, one that may have seemed more problematic to some of his contemporaries (not to mention those of us trying to make sense of it eight hundred years later). We now turn to the peritextual pieces of ‚Dolopathos‘, its pro- and epilogue, in which the narrator reflects on some of the literary trends of his day and how his own account fits into that.<sup>34</sup> Their paragraphs read like a catalogue of literary

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32 I hone in on this topic in Stijn PRAET, Een onwaarschijnlijk verhaal: de Latijnse ‚sprookjes‘ van een middeleeuwse Cisterciënzer, in: *Volkskunde* (2018, forthcoming).

33 Similarly, in the twelfth-century ‚*Historia septem sapientum*‘, which shares its basic intrigue with ‚Dolopathos‘ (see *infra*), storytelling itself leads to nothing but a postponement of the Prince’s execution. In the end, the boy only clears his name by resorting to trial by combat, rightly trusting that his innocence will ensure God’s protection.

34 For the importance of prologues as a place of literary-theoretical reflection and interpretational guidance in high medieval literatures, see Pascale BOURGAIN, *Les prologues des textes narratifs*, in: Jacqueline HAMESSE (ed.), *Les prologues médiévaux*, Turnhout 2000, pp. 245–273.

tropes pertaining to historical truthfulness, literary originality and dependence on oral sources – commonplaces of the sort we also find littered across contemporaneous (pseudo-)historiography and chivalric romance, where they are often to be taken with more than a grain of salt.

The prologue opens with a critical comparison between two (but actually three) groups of writers, namely *ueteres* (‘Ancients’) and *moderni* (‘Moderns’), then a rather ‘fashionable’ theme at the schools.<sup>35</sup> *Veterum philosophorum*, so the narrator explains, *studium hoc totum fuit rerum ueritatem proprietatemque multiplici uarioque sermone disquirere, regum bella et illustrium gesta uirosum, prout temporum decursus declarabant, proprie et nude describere, rerum gestarum fidem et temporum noticiam in exemplum et in admirationem posteris reliquentes*.<sup>36</sup> The Ancients here are specified as those *philosophi* who have striven towards historical veracity and whose accounts are still valuable to the medieval reader. In terms of Isidore of Seville’s traditional tripartite division of narrative genres, this would classify their writings as *historiae*, based on true events – the Latin term *res gesta* commonly being reserved for narratives with historiographic pretensions (cf. the Old French *chanson de geste*) – and written down in a straightforward, truthful manner to serve as an example for posterity. Next, the narrator complains about certain writers among the contemporary Moderns (*modernorum quidam*) who are not interested in truth, but send lies into the world in the shape of exaggerated flattery and invectives. In their perverseness, they attempt to *meram ac simplicem ipsam corrumpere ueritatem et ueritatis pallio mendacium obumbrare*.<sup>37</sup> This, we could obliquely relate to Isidore’s category of the *argumentum*, not strictly speaking historically true, but at least empirically possible (though in fairness, what John describes here leans closer to *mendacium*, lie).

Then, the narrator launches an attack against the kind of Moderns who, like madmen, *nec uerum nec uerisimile quid dicentes ad tantam eciam stulticiam deuenerunt ut quibusdam monstruosarum fabularum laruis repertis diuersas partes sibi que repugnantes coniungere niterentur monstisque libros suos replentes monstruosam laruaemque*

<sup>35</sup> We also see this, for instance, in the newly created *artes poeticae* of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, of which Matthew of Vendôme’s ‘Ars versificatoria’ (‘The Art of Versification’, before 1175) is an early example. The tension between, on the one hand, classical authors and those adhering to their exemplary value, and on the other, contemporary authors who prefer novel experimentation to classicism, is a recurring phenomenon throughout Western literary history. For the situation in the long twelfth century, see for instance Alessandro GHISALBERTI, *I moderni*, in: Guglielmo CAVALLO et al., *Lo spazio letterario del Medioevo* 1.1, Rome 1992, pp. 605–631; Brian STOCK, *Antiqui or Moderni?*, in: *Medieval Litature and Contemporary Theory* (1979), pp. 391–400.

<sup>36</sup> Johannes de Alta Silva, p. 2: ‘The efforts of the ancient philosophers were wholly dedicated to the search for the truth and the nature of things through manifold and various inquiries. They described the wars of kings and deeds of illustrious men throughout the course of time in apt and naked terms, and left behind a faithful record of historical events [*res gestae*] to serve as an example and source of admiration for posterity.’

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*: ‘corrupt the unadulterated and simple truth and cover up lies with a cloak of truth.’

*paginam hominibus traderent*.<sup>38</sup> To those who already know about the marvellous contents of ‚Dolopathos‘, this spiteful condemnation of Isidore’s third category of the incredible *fabula* may appear rather puzzling. Granted, the narrator does go on to make a concession regarding such stories, namely that *dum regionum civitatumque leges et iura commemorant, dum prauorum bonorumque mores et actus describunt hominum, dum his ridiculosis fabulis detinentur, et uice ioculatorum humane miserie solatium prae-buerunt et, quid eligendum quidue respuendum foret, posterorum iudicio reliquerunt*.<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding this afterthought about the exemplary or at least soothing potential of certain incredible *fabulae*, it does feel as if the narrator is shooting himself in the foot here.

The ambiguity continues as he positions ‚Dolopathos‘ within the literary landscape he has just sketched:

Ego autem dum ueterum recolo studium, dum eorum ammiror ingenia, cuiusdam regis gesta, sub quo et cui mira contigerunt, subito in memoriam deuenerunt. Qui quia adhuc scriptoribus intacta uel forsitan incognita permanebant, timens ne tanta tanti regis opera paulatim successu temporis a memoria hominum omni cum tempore laberentur, presumpsit ea quamquam elinguis et ydiota, quamquam nullius discipline scientiam assecutus, saltem qualicumque stillo describere, non tam materiam phaleratis pompis cupiens colorare uel ut uerius decolorare dicam, quam materie ueritatem, prout res geste sunt, simplici pedestricque calamo satagens declarare.<sup>40</sup>

The narrator is ostentatiously professing his adherence here to the aforementioned *ueteri philosophi* and their truthful, unadorned descriptions (*materie ueritatem, prout res geste sunt*) of true events (*cuiusdam regis gesta*) for the edification of future generations. ‚Dolopathos‘, he suggests, will be a proper *historia* that can function as an *exemplum*.

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**38** Johannes de Alta Silva, p. 3: ‚without ever saying anything true or verisimilar arrive at such stupidities that they try to conjoin various contrary bits and pieces from monstrous confabulations with phantoms of their own invention. Filling their books with monsters, they offer mankind a monstrous and haunted page.‘

**39** Ibid.: ‚when they commemorate the laws and jurisdiction of regions and cities, when they describe the depraved and goodly customs and deeds of men, attached as they are to these ridiculous confabulations, they do offer a juggler’s solace to human misery and leave behind examples for posterity to judge over what is to be desired and what is to be despised.‘

**40** Ibid.: ‚As for me, as I was contemplating the studiousness of the ancients, whose ingenuity I admire, the deeds of a certain King, under whose reign and to whom some marvellous things had happened, suddenly descended into my memory. Because until then the materials had never been touched on by any writer and may have even remained unknown, I feared that the great undertakings of this great King would, little by little and with the passing of time, slip from mankind’s memory. Thus I took it upon myself – even though I lack the eloquence and training and have never acquired an understanding of any discipline – to write them down in a style that I can manage. In doing so, I do not wish to colour (or should I say discolour) my materials with ornamental pomp, but to lay bare the truth of the matter as it happened, labouring on with a simple and prosaic pen.‘

While narratologically speaking this historicising truth claim need only pertain to the first diegetic level of the text, the embedded tales are likewise framed in an atmosphere of historical veracity by their second-degree narrators Vergil and the Seven Sages – the acumen of the *ueteri philosophi*. The Sages mostly introduce themselves as scholars who roam the lands to learn about the fortunes (*fortuna*e) and fateful events (*casus*) that have befallen mankind and who recount them to others by way of *exemplum*, the generic term that is also used with reference to ‚Canis‘, ‚Senex‘, ‚Creditor‘ and ‚Latronis filii‘. ‚Viduae filius‘ is moreover designated as *res gesta*, while ‚Gaza‘ and the fairy-tale-like ‚Creditor‘ and ‚Cygni‘ are respectively said to relate *quod quondam accedit* and *fortunam que quondam accedit*.<sup>41</sup> As for ‚Puteus‘, Vergil goes as far as asserting that he had been an eyewitness to the events himself: *subito in mentem redit quod ipse uidi*.<sup>42</sup> Based on the rhetorics and terminology used by the first- and second-degree narrators of ‚Dolopathos‘, it is safe to conclude that its contents are presented to the reader as an exemplary *historia* encapsulating other exemplary *historiae*.<sup>43</sup> Not once are these stories associated with *fabulae* – not until the epilogue, that is. I quote it here in full:

Hic ergo narrationi mee finem imponens lectorem rogo ne incredibilia uel impossibilia me scripsisse contendat nec me iudicet reprehensibilem, quasi eos imitatus sim quorum uitia in libri prefatiuncula carpserim, quia non ut uisa sed ut audita ad delectationem et utilitatem legentium, si qua forte ibi sint, a me scripta sunt; quamquam etiam etsi facta non sint, fieri tamen potuisse credendum. Ceterum autem cogetur nemo munus habere meum, neminem hec legere compello. Verum si quis malicia aut inuidia magis quam iusto zelo succensus nostra dampnat nec nostram recipit satisfactionem, dicat et ipse michi quomodo magi Pharaonis virgas suas in colubris mutauerint, quomodo produxerint ranas de paludibus, quomodo aquas Nili verterint in sanguinem; dicat et ipse michi quomodo Phytonissa prophetam suscitauerit Samuelem, quomodo etiam Circe, Solis filia, Vlixis socios in diuersa transformauerit animalia, quod uere factum beatus Augustinus Ysodorusque Hyspalensis testantur. Et cum hec negare omnia non possit, nostra quoque ut recipiat necesse est.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 49, 62, 80: ‚that which took place once‘; ‚an adventure which took place once.‘

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 88: ‚Something suddenly comes to mind that I have seen myself.‘

<sup>43</sup> By way of contrast: in the prologue to the aforementioned beast epic ‚Ecbasis cuiusdam captivi‘ (vss. 34–39), its narrator amusingly takes pains to note that his story is just a little *fabula* (*fabella*) that is certainly not to be mistaken for some ancient *res gesta* based on an eyewitness-account.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 107 f.: ‚As I am bringing my story to a close here, I ask the reader not to protest that the things I have written are incredible or impossible, as if I had imitated those [Moderns] whose vices I have tackled in the little preface to this book. For they were written down by me not as I have seen, but as I have heard them, and this for the pleasure and benefit of my readers (should there be any). And even if they did not happen, it is nonetheless credible that they could. In any case, I am not forcing anyone to accept my gift; I am not compelling anyone to read them. However, should anyone, inflamed by spite or envy rather than righteous zeal, condemn my work and reject my justification of it, let him tell me himself how Pharaoh's magicians changed their staffs into snakes, how they brought forth frogs from the marshes, how they turned the waters of the Nile into blood. Let him tell me himself how the Pythic soothsayer [i. e. the Witch of Endor] brought back Samuel from the dead, and even how Circe,

In this final paragraph, the narrator at the same time reinforces and nuances the historicising truth claim of his prologue. Now that the reader has been submitted to the marvellous tales of ‚Dolopathos‘, he anticipates the understandable criticism that at least part of his work positively reeks of monstrous *fabulae* instead of *historiae*. His threefold topical defence has a certain nervousness to it: 1) If my stories are not historically true, than at least they are empirically plausible (if not *historiae*, then *argumenta*), also given that the Vulgate, the classical poets and the Church Fathers all confirm that magical metamorphoses (cf. ‚Creditor‘ and ‚Cygni‘) and resurrections (cf. frame tale) belong to the realm of historical fact. 2) If my stories are not historically true, I cannot be held accountable for that, because I based them on hearsay rather than on an eyewitness account.<sup>45</sup> 3) If my stories are not historically true and that bothers you, no-one is forcing you to read them.

Now, the peritextual assertions that ‚Dolopathos‘ is a historical account based on an oral source (*non ut uisa, sed ut audita*) that has never been put into writing before (*scriptoribus intacta*) would have likely raised some eyebrows amongst John’s earliest readers, and not just because of the work’s incredible preternatural elements, but also because for almost all of its narrative materials there existed well-known antecedents in Latin and/or vernacular literatures, where they did not necessarily come with historiographic pretensions.<sup>46</sup> The frame tale of ‚Dolopathos‘ is unmistakably an elaborate adaptation of a pre-existing family of Latin and vernacular texts generically referred to as ‚The Seven Sages of Rome‘, based in turn on the Oriental ‚Book of Sindibad‘

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daughter of the Sun, transformed Ulysses’ men into various animals, which both Augustine and Isidore of Seville confirm to be true. And seeing as they cannot deny these things, they must also accept mine.’ The textual references are respectively to Exodus 7:9–26; Samuel 28; possibly Ovid, ‚Metamorphoses‘ 14.242–307; Augustine, ‚De civitate Dei‘ 18.17–18; Isidore, ‚Etymologiae‘ 8.9.

<sup>45</sup> The importance of eyewitness-accounts and reliable written documents for constructing a proper *historia* is already discussed in Isidore’s ‚Etymologiae‘ 1.41. John’s contemporary Gerald of Wales introduces the wonders of the second part of his ‚Topographia Hibernica‘ (‚Topography of Ireland‘, 1188) as follows: *Scio tamen et certus sum, me nonnulla scripturum quae lectori vel impossibilia prorsus, vel etiam in ridiculosa videbuntur. Sed ita me Dii amabilem praestent, ut nihil in libello apposuerim, cujus veritatem vel oculata fide, vel probatissimorum et authenticorum comprovincialium virorum testimonio, cum summa diligentia non elicuerim* (Geraldus Cambrensis, Opera, ed. John Sherren BREWER and James F. DIMOCK, Doetinchem 1861, pp. 74 f.), ‚I know and I am certain that I will be writing several things that to the reader will seem truly impossible or utterly ridiculous. But so help me God, I will include nothing in this little book that I have not carefully distilled either through relying on my own eyes or from the first-hand accounts of most trustworthy men living in the region‘. For the assertion in ‚Dolopathos‘, also see FOEHR-JANSSENS (note 31), p. 98n13.

<sup>46</sup> Many earlier commentators of ‚Dolopathos‘, beginning with its earliest modern editor Hermann OESTERLEY, have accepted these phrases in the pro- and epilogue at face value, readily interpreting them as an indication that John took his materials directly from popular oral folklore. I am not inclined to take that hypothesis for granted, given both the highly topical nature of the peritexts and the existence of textual evidence that points in a different direction (see *infra*).



which survives in Arabic, Syriac, Persian, Greek and Hebrew redactions.<sup>47</sup> As for the embedded *exempla*, the only ones for which we cannot pinpoint any unmistakable textual models are ,Creditor‘ and perhaps ,Cygni‘, which may have either been derived from or served as model to an Old French *chanson de geste* (or they may share an unknown common ancestor).<sup>48</sup> Though in principle John might have heard some of these stories being (re)told or recited at one point in his life, before his time in the monastery or during a stolen moment outside its walls, it does seem unlikely that a well-read author like himself would have been completely ignorant of their written traditions.

## 4 The ,I‘ in the Lie

Recapitulating: we have seen how with ,Dolopathos‘, John of Alta Silva is expanding on a long tradition of Latin authors, both pagan and Christian, who believed that even a humble, child-like genre like the *fabula* can be used to convey moral/spiritual Truths and elucidate concrete real-life situations. What complicates the matter is that its first-degree narrator moreover claims, along the topical lines of contemporaneous historiography, that his previously undocumented materials are also historically true or at least plausible, a claim that would have been suspicious to medieval readers both on account of their incredible contents and their well-documented prior existence in popular Latin and vernacular texts.

How then should we qualify this Cistercian author from the Lorraine: fool, liar of fictionist? Let us briefly consider these three possibilities: perhaps John did indeed base (part of) his work on what would have been a rather lengthy oral account by a public performer (who in turn may have taken his cue from one of the existing ,Seven Sages‘- or ,Book of Sindibad‘-texts). And perhaps he did believe all of it to be true or at least likely, strengthened in this opinion by the ancient Latin *auctoritates*. This would have probably made him a fool in the eyes of some of his more critical contemporaries. Alternatively, John is intentionally lying about the historical veracity and provenance of his materials so as to enhance the dignity and novelty of his already morally truthful stories, which, however, would be risky, superfluous and also not very pious. That

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<sup>47</sup> For an introduction to these Western and Eastern branches, see for instance Lodewijk Jozef ENGELS, *Seven Sages of Rome*, in: Willem P. GERRITSEN and Anthony G. VAN MELLE (eds.), *A Dictionary of Medieval Heroes. Characters in Medieval Narrative Traditions and Their Afterlife in Literature, Theatre and the Visual Arts*, Woodbridge 2000, pp. 244–248, and GILLELAND in *Johannes de Alta Silva* (note 11), pp. xiii–xix. The nested tales in the Western versions are mostly of a European descent.

<sup>48</sup> For medieval parallels to the *exempla* and frame tale in ,Dolopathos‘, see FOEHR-JANSSENS (note 31), pp. 449–473. For the connections between ,Cygni‘ and its Old French counterpart ,Élioxe‘, see *La Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne. Elioxe. Beatrix* (The Old French Crusade Cycle 1), eds. Emanuel J. MICKEL et al., Tuscaloosa 1977, pp. lxxxxi–lxxxix.

leaves us with a third option, which is also the most interesting, certainly more so than a gullible or a fibbing monk, namely that John of Alta Silva is disassociating himself from the first-degree narratorial ,I' of ,Dolopathos', constructing and donning instead the fictionalising *persona* (literally: ,mask') of a pseudo-historiographer, also echoing the latter's hollowed-out trademark claims of historical veracity.

Elsewhere in this volume, Eva VON CONTZEN rightly observes that the author/narrator-duality, taken for granted in modern narratological theory, does not always add something significant to our reading experience of medieval narrative texts. Meanwhile, there are many cases in which medieval authors actively make use of that very duality to introduce an element of *playfulness* to their narrations. The so-called ,Loire school' provides us with an early example of this. As Wim VERBAAL discusses in several of his articles,<sup>49</sup> when it comes to medieval Latin literature before 1100, overt disjunctions between the voice of the narrator and that of the author seem fairly absent. Then around the turn of the century, a group of scholars from the Loire valley including Marbod of Rennes and Baudri of Bourgueil – all men of the cloth, abbots and bishops even – collectively turned to writing Ovidian-styled Latin poetry in which experimenting with fictive narratorial *personae* lay at the very heart of the game. A number of these poems are deliberately crafted, also intertextually, so as to invite in some confusion regarding whether or not the narrator is to be (fully) identified with the author, potentially leading some of their less witting readers to scandalous conclusions, for instance if the *persona* in question is that of an ardent nun's lover or a hypocrite pederast with a taste for pretty novices who apparently ,betrays' himself in his verses.

Narratorial games like these presuppose an implied reader who is able to acknowledge that there is no a priori need for the reality conjured up within the text to neatly correspond to the historical-empirical reality outside of it; that the ,I' of the text is not misrepresenting the world, but authoring another one. They ask for a reader willing to participate in what in modern terminology we could call the ,fictional contract'.<sup>50</sup> If I

<sup>49</sup> See Wim VERBAAL, *Getting Lost in Worlds: The Fiction of Literature (Eleventh and Twelfth Century)*, in: Marianne PADE et al. (eds.), *Fiction and Figuration in High and Late Medieval Literature*, Rome 2017, pp. 56–58, and Wim VERBAAL, *How the West was Won by Fiction: The Appearance of Fictional Narrative and Leisurely Reading in Western Literature (11th and 12th century)*, in: Anders CULLHED and Lena RYDHOLM (eds.), *True Lies Worldwide: Fictionality in Global Contexts*, Berlin 2014, pp. 194–198.

<sup>50</sup> Questions regarding the conceptualisation and nature of fictionality currently occupy a prominent position in the study of medieval literatures across the world. Recent publications that attempt to provide a critical survey of some of the main currents in the field include Sonja GLAUCH, *Fiktionalität im Mittelalter; revisited*, in: *Poetica* 46 (2014), pp. 85–139, Timo REUVEKAMP-FELBER, *Diskussion. Zur gegenwärtigen Situation mediävistischer Fiktionalitätsforschung. Eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme*, in: *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 132.3 (2013), pp. 417–444, and Monika FLUDERNIK, *The Fiction of the Rise of Fictionality* (forthcoming). I am sympathetic to the latter's inclusive definition of ,fictionality as the invention [I would add: ,and experience'] of fictive worlds which are presented in textual, dramatic (i. e. performative) or visual (and audiovisual) form for the entertainment, diversion, intellectual stimulation and (moral) instruction of recipients who, in their turn, recognise that the truth claims

am right, a similar case can be made for the peritextual pieces of ‚Dolopathos‘. This would mean that, on top of morally edifying his monastic audience and confirming their choice for the coenobitic life, our white monk of Alta Silva is also inviting them to a little readerly game of fictionality, hinging on their ability to recognise the difference not just between *historia* and *fabula*, but also between author and narrator. Cistercians at play!

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profered by these texts or artefacts are predominantly universal, moral and philosophical rather than historical or factual“, not eliminating „from view the technique of the pseudofactual, i. e. of a strategy of deceptive (or ironic) authentication through factual pretense“. Despite the fact that this conceptualisation indeed fits a work like ‚Dolopathos‘ rather well, looking at it from a more generalising angle, I would nonetheless de-emphasise her insistence on universal, moral and philosophical truth claims; after all, not all fictional worlds are consciously created to offer much more than their own diverting existence, nor are they always interpreted as such.