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James Lion Johnson

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M.A. Essay

Sites of Interpretation in the “Gaza” of Johannes de Alta Silva

1. Introduction

Similar to other medieval texts like the *Arabian Nights*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, *The Seven Sages* is a classic frame tale in which a larger narrative framework provides the setting for a series of stories told within it. This essay will consider this frame narrative as the key element in our understanding of *The Seven Sages*. While it is common for frame tales to stage the telling of stories, *The Seven Sages* is unique in the extent to which it dramatizes the process of those stories’ interpretation. To support this assessment, I consider the sites of interpretation located at the level of the story (i.e., within the tales told by the sages), at the level of the frame narrative, and at the level of the reader. In doing so, my analysis will illuminate how the structure of *The Seven Sages* creates its elusive meaning. Further, given the place of *The Seven Sages* within the larger medieval tradition of didactic literature, I pose the questions which led me to this project: what defines the didacticism of *The Seven Sages*, and what does this say about the nature of didacticism more generally?

To focus my inquiry, I turn to a version of *The Seven Sages* that scholars have tended to treat as an outlier from the main western tradition: the *Dolopathos* of Johannes de Alta Silva, a Cistercian monk at the monastery of Haute Seille (Alta Silva). Alta Silva composed this, his only known work, between 1184 and 1212, presumably working from a collection of oral and written sources (Gilleland xvii). Transplanted from Rome to Sicily, the frame narrative of the *Dolopathos* takes place during the reign of Augustus Caesar and is named for the king in the

frame narrative: one who suffers treachery or grief (the hybrid Latin-Greek etymology of “Dolopathos”) (Gilleland v). The young prince in this version is named Lucinius, while the queen, Lucinius’s stepmother, remains unnamed. As in other versions of *The Seven Sages*, the queen attempts to seduce her stepson, Lucinius. Rebuffed, she accuses him of rape, after which Lucinius is sentenced to death by his father, Dolopathos. Each day, after the young prince has been led out for execution, with the prince sworn to silence and thus unable to defend himself, one of the seven sages tells a story to persuade Dolopathos to stay the execution of his son until the following day. This continues for seven days, until on the eighth day the prince’s tutor exonerates the prince, after which the queen is executed.

While much *Seven Sages* scholarship has been devoted to philological considerations of origins and authorship, I use a narratological approach to interrogate questions of meaning and design. I draw especially upon the work of John Jaunzems, who argued that the unity of *The Seven Sages* came not from a single guiding theme in the content of its stories but from the interrelationships between the interpolated tales (Jaunzems 47-49). Granting Jaunzems’s perception of unity, I work to deepen Jaunzems’s analysis by considering the three sites of interpretation outlined above to show how *The Seven Sages* provides a model for our own process of reading and interpretation. Additionally, I draw upon concepts from narratological and reader-response theory, particularly Gérard Genette’s presentation of “narrative levels,” Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the “dialogic,” Gerald Prince’s definition of the “narratee,” Wolfgang Iser’s phenomenological approach to reader-response, and the influence of medieval allegory.

The key to my analysis is to limit my discussion not just to the *Dolopathos*, but even further to a single story within this collection known in *Seven Sages* criticism as “Gaza.” This essay will thereby demonstrate a kind of close reading that replicates the acts of interpretation

performed within the text to theorize the relationship between text and reader. To do so, I will consider the three sites of interpretation (at the levels of story, frame narrative, and reader) as distinct spaces within which this interpretation unfolds. My analysis thus presents a shared framework to that theorized by Genette in his discussion of diegetic and metadiegetic narratives (Genette 227-37), designated throughout this essay as the level of the *frame narrative* (diegetic) and the level of the *story* (metadiegetic). Identifying himself as the historian of these events, Alta Silva's presentation of himself within the text operates at Genette's extradiegetic level. I argue that this level serves not as a major site of interpretation, but primarily as the most explicit means by which Alta Silva directs the reader how to read. Given that I am concerned predominantly with sites of interpretation and not only with the structure and function of narrative, this essay also adds a fourth category not present in Genette's narrative levels: the reader, within whose mind the various levels of narrative and interpretation converge and align.

Although this essay cannot perform an exhaustive reading of the entire Seven Sages tradition, aspects of that tradition will be referenced to bring to light features of the *Dolopathos* that support my argument. Further, since I intend for my argument here to offer clarity about that tradition, I consider the relationship between my narrower focus on a single story and the larger context of The Seven Sages as essentially hermeneutic.

2. "Gaza" and the Three Sites of Interpretation

The story known as "Gaza" (Latin for "treasure") exemplifies the three sites of interpretation I have designated as occurring at the levels of story, frame narrative, and reader. Versions of this story appeared in three of the earliest European versions of The Seven Sages, which makes it one of four stories shared between the two major western branches of the tradition. In addition to its

utility for this analysis, it therefore serves as a suitable case study for forming an understanding of the early thrust of the tradition in the West.

Level 1: Story

Described by Speer as “a ripping good yarn” along the lines of a Horatio-Alger tale of rags to riches, “Gaza” had its first known written appearance in Herodotus’s fifth century BCE account of the history of Egypt (allegedly reported to him by the priests at Memphis). Written and rewritten for two and a half millennia, folklorists believe Herodotus’s version was merely an abridgement of an already well-known tale (Speer 125-27).

In the *Dolopathos*, “Gaza” is told by a sage who wishes to persuade Dolopathos to delay the execution of his son, Lucinius. Alta Silva’s version features a knight who retires from service as guardian of the king’s treasury. The knight lavishes his wealth on his son, who spends it all on an extravagant lifestyle. Fallen into indigence, knight and son rob the treasury. The king plans to trap the thieves upon their return by placing a vat of pitch beneath their entrance to the tower. When father and son return, the knight enters unawares and falls into the trap laid for him by the king. The knight commands his son to cut off his head, lest his body be identified, and his family be disgraced. After the son avoids a series of the king’s attempts to discover him, the king abandons his search.

It is first important to notice the role that thievery plays in the story, which provides the setting for its broader philosophical meditations. Not only about theft, “Gaza” also becomes a story about detection, which is always about uncovering some kind of truth. Alta Silva’s selection of a story that incorporates the necessity of interpretation within the plot therefore provides the material from which all other interpretive acts develop. Critically, this theme also

highlights the centrality of deception to the story as first father and then son avoid detection and evade interpretation at the level of the story. We see this especially in the story's central event, the son's murder of his father. While this murder could be viewed as predominantly oedipal, the decapitation in "Gaza" is basically a semiotic act that obscures deciphering the headless form. Thus, the body itself becomes a crucial site to decode reality. There is no surface in "Gaza" that is free from such content that demands to be interpreted and understood.

After the father's decapitation, the king in the story must resort to a series of elaborate ploys to identify his accomplice. With this, the son's deception of the king assumes increasing prominence. When only the headless corpse of the knight is discovered, the king orders the father's decapitated body to be dragged through the streets so that the king's knights can observe which household grieves for the dead man. In effect, the king stages an experiment to probe reality. The first time, the son cuts off his finger to excuse his weeping. The second, he drowns his own son in a well. Each time, the thief is brought before the king but manages to excuse his grief. Attempting one last stratagem, the king hangs the mutilated corpse upside down from a tree and guards it with forty knights. Through an ingenious device, however, the son rescues his father's body. The tale thus foregrounds the son's trickster ability to avoid detection and foil the king's attempts to decode reality.

A peculiar thing happens, though: not only is the king deceived, but the son is himself deceived by the illusion that he has created. After the second dragging and the drowning of his own son in the well, the thief again deceives the king – this time to the point where the son's pretense itself begins to fold back into reality:

Tunc etiam lacrimis falsis, immo uerissimis perfusus: Magnum, ait, o rex, beneficium solatiumque prestiteris misero, si me ab hac uita que omni tormento, omni morte michi grauior uidetur, subtraxeris. (54-55)

Then bathed with false tears, or rather with the very realest ones: You would offer me – a wretch – a great kindness and solace, O king, he said, if you subtracted me from this life which seems to me more painful than any torment, any death.¹

The thief has established such an elaborate pretense that reality has become indistinguishable from the fiction he has created – his tears both false and real. He has deceived not only the king, but, in a manner, himself. What began as mere profligacy has led to tragedy, with every added deception only compounding his suffering. This episode hints at the precariousness of the distinction between reality and fiction, including the reciprocal power of one to determine the other.

Even so, the king is again deceived (“Sic iterum rex deceptus,” 55), as are the forty knights who are commanded to guard the corpse – confused (“confusi,” *ibid.*) by the thief’s cunning. The language of this final episode reinforces this sense of constant trickery, in which by a subtle device the son forges a divided [white and black] set of armor (“[s]ubtili ergo ingenio arma partita fabricat”) to delude (“deluderet”) and deceive (“deciperet”) the knights stationed on either side (*ibid.*). With the knights and the thief’s armor, the story presents a reality that is literally divided. The story thus ends as it began: with deception. The king remains misled. The tale provides no solution to its epistemic instability, as the thief manages to evade detection.

“Gaza” thus raises the question of how to resolve this confusion. Here enters an important figure who is not present in other versions of the story: the king’s counselor, who plays the role of a kind of medieval detective figure. When the king has discovered his initial loss, he turns to an old man for assistance in catching the remaining thief. This figure provides key clues for the process of interpretation that the story demands:

¹ For the purposes of close reading in this essay, I have chosen to offer my own translations of the text. A published translation by Gilleland also exists and can be found in the bibliography.

Fuerat hic senex aliquando famosissimus latro quem comprehensum ex oculis priuauerat eique de mensa sua cotidianos constituerat cibos. Hic regi consilium sepe bonum et utile prebebat, utpote qui multa uiderat et audierat suoque experimento didicerat multa. (51)

This old man was once a very famous thief that [the king] had caught and deprived of his eyes, whom the king had given a seat at his table for his daily meals. This man often gave good and useful advice, in as much as he was one who had seen and heard many things and had learned many things by his own experience.

The old man (*senex*) is a sage in his own right who embodies the virtues of wisdom, experience, and expert counsel. Intrinsic to his story is a redemption in which his sins become the source of his insight. For this reason, he is described by the sage throughout not as “latro” (thief), but as “senex” (old man). A kind of Tiresias, he has lost his outward vision but gained an inward sight. Significantly, it is the knight’s son who is instead described throughout as “latro” in place of the old man. This is typical of frame tales more generally, where a resemblance to traditional tales leaves most characters unnamed and instead identifies them by a characteristic or profession (Irwin 42-43). This aspect of “Gaza” foregrounds the role of action in determining one’s character while alluding to the transformative power of wisdom to change it.

Throughout the tale, the old man acts as a foil for his knightly counterpart’s failure of experience to offer wisdom and thus prevent his catastrophic downfall. In this way, not only does the old man serve as a foil for the knight’s well-meaning foolishness, but also stresses the necessity for Dolopathos (another *senex*) to listen to his counselors (i.e., the sages) in the frame narrative. It is therefore the old man who instructs the king how to determine where the thieves entered the tower (51), dissemble his grief at the loss of his wealth (51), lay the trap (51), drag the knight’s body through the streets once (53) and then twice (54), and arrange the final stratagem with the knights (55). In fact, the king does not take a single action in the tale that does not arise from the old man’s counsel. The fact that these devices fail does not diminish from their

significance to the telling, which does not amount to a single prescription but to a broader pattern of connections: experience over innocence, wisdom over folly, and deliberate counsel over precipitous action. In a word, the old man becomes the key interpreter within the tale, mirroring both the sage-as-narrator at the level of the frame as well as the external reader.

One episode in particular elucidates this point. After the old man instructs the king to seal the tower and light a bundle of grass within, then to walk around the outside of the tower until he discovers the hole where the smoke escapes, the old man observes:

Scias... o rex, fures tibi tuos per locum ubi fumus egreditur abstulisse thesauros; quos nisi aliqua arte capias, quod superest asportabunt. Non enim cessabunt, quippe quibus adhuc prospere cessit res, donec totum thesaurum exhauriant. (51)

You may know, O king, that the thieves have carried off your treasure from you through the place where the smoke goes out; whom unless you capture by some device, they will carry off whatever remains. As long as they prosper in this, they will surely not stop until they have exhausted all the treasure.

Here again is an instance of both pragmatic and philosophical significance. While the old man correctly interprets the tower as a practical object, the story also presents it as a broader symbol of vision and power. The tower symbolizes fears common to both story and frame narrative: the king in the story, who has lost a great portion of his wealth; the retired knight, who fears for his son's reputation without an inheritance; and Dolopathos in the frame narrative, who believes he has been betrayed by his only son and must execute his heir. The tower thus serves as a nexus in a network of associations that establishes specular (i.e., mirror-like) reflections between story and frame. Further, it is the old man (the interpreter at the level of the story) that facilitates this process of decoding, who does so not with his senses but through reason.

“Gaza” also highlights the consequences of errors in interpretation, which primarily take the form of the knight's senescence and his failure to manage his son's inheritance. The narration

begins to emphasize the pitiable quality of the knight as father and son fall into the trap laid for them by the king, which infuses the remainder of the story with pathos. Consistent with the sage's manner of narration, there is a proverbial quality to the telling of this key moment: "Ecce autem fatalis illa dies, que neminem bonum malumue preterit" (But behold that fated/fatal day, which passes by no one good or ill, 52). Here the description of this day as "fatalis" (meaning both "deadly" as well as "destined" as decreed by the fates) underscores that no other end can come of such a course of action. Described as unfortunate and unsuspecting ("incautus miser," a striking asyndeton), wearing his clothes and shoes, the father is submerged in the vat up to his chin. Only able to move his tongue, groaning ("[i]ngemiscens") and wretched ("infelix"), he begs his son to decapitate him, lest he be identified by his head ("per caput cognitus") and it bring eternal dishonor and loss to his lineage ("eternam suo generi maculam inferat et iacturam," 52). It is as disgraceful an end to a once honorable man as could be conceived, presaging Dante's torments of the damned in the depths of hell.

The sage's description of the son's decision here represents the key dichotomy in the *Dolopathos* and *The Seven Sages* – what Jaunzems has aptly described as "the difference between acts based upon knowledge and acts based upon ignorance, fear, and anger" (58). While the father's actions thus far have been based upon love, they have been gravely misguided insofar as they have also stemmed from ignorance and fear. The sage outlines this distinction in his narration as the son hesitates to execute his father's command to behead him, with "timor et necessitas" (fear and necessity) demanding what "amor" (love) forbids (52). The narrator describes the son's dilemma as that of "not knowing what he should do more suited to the moment" (nesciens quid utilius ad tempus ageret, 52), which highlights above all the significance of interpretation in determining action, as well as the gravity of its results.

This pathos surrounding the knight continues in the narrator's description of the treatment of the knight's corpse. "Quia enim nobilis erat" (Because he was noble, 52), the old counselor observes when he hears of the knight's decapitation. The past tense refers not only to the knight's death, but to the consequences of errors of interpretation insofar as they determine moral choices – here, the loss of nobility. The knight's son must then see his father dragged miserably ("Qui cum uideret patrem sic miserabiliter trahi," 53) through the city at the old man's advising. He must deny to the king that "hic miser truncus" ("this miserable trunk," *ibid.*) has anything to do with him as he excuses his grief. Dragged twice through the surrounding cities, the father's remains are thus described as a "corpse with its bones and muscles barely clinging together" ("cadaver... uix ossibus et neruis coherens," 54). The father's corpse has become barely recognizable as a body. The original act of decapitation, predominantly a semiotic act, has continued to the point where it has become indecipherable. That the reader is here reminded of Hector only foregrounds the significance of that original folly.

Level 2: The Frame Narrative

Alta Silva provides the reader with a representative at this level in the same way that the sage offers Dolopathos representatives in the knight, king, and counselor within the story. This representative is Dolopathos himself, the king who listens to the sage's story at the level of the frame narrative and thus fills the role designated by Gerald Prince as the "narratee." Fulfilling all of Prince's functions for the narratee, Dolopathos serves above all as a relay between diegetic narrator and external reader and thus plays a crucial part in determining what Prince might identify as the "narrative's fundamental thrust" (Prince 20-23). Dolopathos's role as the narratee determines the stakes of the narration: through his eventual decision, the sage's story here and

those that follow will determine the life of Lucinius. Given that Prince's narratee can be either a reader or a listener, the narratee in a frame narrative also acts as a mediator between Donald R. Howard's conception of the "bookness" and the "voiceness" of a framed collection (applied to *The Canterbury Tales* in Howard's analysis), the combination of which creates a new kind of work generative of untold meanings where the "commonplace... that you can read the world, nature, memory, or experience like a book" becomes "the notion... that you can read a book as you experience the world" (Howard 63-67). Dolopathos as narratee bridges these two aspects in the *Dolopathos* and contributes to the reader's capacity to experience the text both aurally (in the manner of an oral tradition) and visually (as reader), playing a fundamental role in the text's generation of "untold meanings."

The first thing to notice about the metadiegetic staging of "Gaza" within the frame narrative is that it arrives without any ado. As is consistent with the rest of the collection, the sage does not preface his story: "tributum quod ceteris regibus soluere teneor tibi solvam: narrabo quod quondam accidit, si iubeas me audiri" ("I shall pay you the tribute that I have paid to other kings: I will tell you what happened once, if you command that I be heard," 49). This approach typifies the sage's storytelling technique at the level of the frame narrative, where the point is not to make exact identifications between the characters in the stories and those in the frame, but instead to make larger allegorical points that leave room for interpretation on behalf of the narratee. The sage does not imply that he intends his story to achieve a particular aim, but merely proclaims he will tell the story of "what happened once" and leaves any further conclusions to his hearer. This approach conflicts with other early versions of *The Seven Sages*, in which narrators offer lengthier prefaces that dictate static correspondences between characters in the tale and characters in the frame narrative, with neat conclusions appended to the end of

each story based upon these exact identifications. In contrast, the allegorical mode of telling used by the narrators within the frame narrative of “Gaza” and other stories in the *Dolopathos* allows for broader conclusions that honor the multifarious nature of the stories themselves, from which no single conclusion can be drawn.

While the *Dolopathos* is not an allegorical work in terms of genre, Alta Silva draws upon allegorical techniques in a way that other contemporaneous versions of *The Seven Sages* do not. More common in religious and philosophical writings, medieval allegory offered access to a “non-sensible reality” and served as a “heuristic device that makes the difficult and abstract message easier to understand” – in essence, providing access to lessons beyond the capacity of “the literal language of logic and argument” to comprehend (Sweeney). Along with the flexibility in association between objects and ideas provided by allegory, this attempt to discern a reality that lies beyond the senses defines the process of interpretation in “Gaza.” (It is with this in mind that the old counselor’s blindness in “Gaza” assumes its full significance, as he possesses direct access to this non-sensible reality.) With its varying levels of interpretation, allegory serves as a parallel structure for the three sites of interpretation within “Gaza.” The sage’s allegorical mode thus provides a more flexible kind of storytelling that makes connections between the story and the frame narrative that would not otherwise be apparent. It also contributes to the creation of a type of narrative that possesses many of the characteristics of Bakhtin’s notion of the “dialogic” in a polyphonic text where there exists no master narrative under which all events can be interpreted or subsumed, and where narrative processes of coexistence, interaction, juxtaposition, and counterpoint simultaneously create layers of meaning based not upon their relative supremacy but upon the interrelationships that exist between them as perceived at a single point in time (Bakhtin 23). There further remains the possibility that

these tensions cannot be resolved (71), with the text's most unifying quality being the "unmergedness" of the "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses and the genuine polyphony of full-valued voices" that it contains (4). So too in Alta Silva's art, "it is futile to seek in it a *systematic monological philosophical* finalizedness, even of a dialectical nature, not because the author failed to achieve it, but because it was not a part of his intention" (26). This method of narration engages readers of "Gaza" by summoning them to an active role in the interpretation of this complexity.

This is the extension of Jaunzems' comment about *The Seven Sages* more generally that "the author's interest lay in the *parabolic* possibilities of narrative rather than in the *exemplary*," citing the difference that "both offer ethical advice but a parable demands an emotional commitment whereas an exemplum requires an intellectual assent" (55). Surpassing the merely moralizing quality of an exemplum, this emotional commitment seems to relate to the circumstances of the narration itself, one that is common to frame tales – what Irwin calls the "competition against a nearly impossible standard of excellence" (in this case, the standard is Dolopathos's decree upon the life of Lucinius). Through this method of "empathetic narration," the narrator (here, the sage) seeks to inspire a sense of empathy in his audience, Dolopathos (47). Interestingly, this appeal to empathy contrasts with the perspective on the emotions seen at the level of the story, where it is emotion (the father's love, the son's fear) that leads to tragedy in contrast to the more reasoned behavior of the old man. Emotion thus possesses different valences at different narrative levels. At the level of the external reader, this emotional commitment encourages the reader's own empathetic response and invites a dynamic mode of engagement with the text.

It is also in this light that we understand the importance of the education of Lucinius at the start of the frame narrative and the prominence given to his learning to read, whereby the “concrete fact of knowing how to read carries with it the more symbolic aspect of knowing how to ‘read’ correctly the truth of the world around and the truth of the words of others,” which Simons (rightly) identifies as “the whole thrust of the Seven Sages tradition” (45-47). This theme corroborates the specularity of the frame narrative with its stories and fulfills a vital narrative function by providing the reader with the context to understand the interpolated stories. In this way, the reader observes that the work of the *Dolopathos* will revolve around how characters interpret stories in their role as exempla of reality versus fiction, with the fact of reading becoming an illustration of the possibility for the interpretation of signs and symbols.

This specularity between story and frame begins immediately with the narrator’s description of the knight at the beginning of “Gaza:”

... cum iam multis annis euolutis labore et senio fractus esset nec posset iam tumultum curamque curie sustinere, regem obnixè rogabat quatenus sue deinceps debilitati senectutique parcens claves sui thesauri reciperet eumque sineret ad propriam redire domum liceretque ei inter filios reliquum uite sue tempus quietum ducere et iocundum.
(32)

... since now, with many years having passed, he was broken by toil and old age, nor was he now able to bear the tumult and the cares of the court, he was determinedly asking the king to spare his weakness and senescence and take back the keys to the treasury, and to allow him to return to his own home and permit him to spend his remaining years among his children in peace and pleasure.

This initial situation in the story mirrors exactly the circumstances in the frame, with the knight’s senescence mirroring that of Dolopathos who has reigned for many years and now wishes his son to assume the throne. The language the sage uses to describe the knight’s decrepitude echoes how Dolopathos described his own condition to Lucinius at the moment when he reveals his intention to entrust his kingdom to his son:

Et ecce iam labore et senio fractus sum, spiritus meus attenuatus est, defecit virtus mea, fortitudo recessit, subintravit corpus debilitas, tremor membra occupavit nichilque michi aliud superesse video quam sepulchrum. (49)

And behold I am now broken by toil and old age, my spirit is weak, my strength has failed, my fortitude has receded, weakness has penetrated my body, trembling has occupied my limbs and I see that nothing else now remains for me except the tomb.

Nevertheless, whereas contemporaneous versions of *The Seven Sages* would preserve such an identification throughout the entirety of the story and its interpretation, the specularity here will not preclude further correspondences.

That the dissipated son in “Gaza” is the knight’s first-born son and heir (“primogenitus,” 49) establishes a further symmetry between knight-son in the story and Dolopathos-Lucinius in the frame narrative. Significantly, this parable of the prodigal son contrasts with almost all other versions of *The Seven Sages*, where the guardian of the treasury is not a loyal knight as here but is instead a debauched sage whose own profligacy compels his thievery and the coercion of his son as an accomplice. (Told instead by the stepmother-empress, the lesson is that neither sages nor sons can be trusted.) Given the context in the frame narrative where Lucinius awaits execution for his own alleged intemperance, it seems strange for the author to devise another version where the sage instead tells the story and puts the son at fault for the vices that occasion his father’s death. Beyond this, the story could be understood to imply that Dolopathos ought to complete his son’s decreed execution rather than let his son squander his inheritance.

Nevertheless, a rare line of interpretation interspersed by the sage within the story at this point (a sudden intrusion from another narrative level that Genette calls “metalepsis” (234)) explains the meaning of this change: “Hic non, o rex, a uirtute sperabat gloriam, qui eam pecuniis vel furtis putauerat obtinere” (“He [the son] was not hoping for glory from virtue, O king, who thought to get it by money or tricks,” 50). The sage’s intention is not to wag his finger at one specific

action, but to offer a subtler portrayal of the process of moral decision-making. The knight's decisions in the story are clearly lacking, yet we have sympathy for him as a father who has failed. His actions are not condemned but held out to Dolopathos as a symbol of flawed humanity – albeit one neither the reader nor Dolopathos should wish to emulate.

A key instance of deeper philosophical implications in “Gaza” comes with the sage's interpretation of the thief's deception of the king in the story. As with his resolution to decapitate his father in the tower, it is “ex metu et necessitate audaciam sumens” (“[by] taking up audacity from fear and necessity,” 53) that the son first escapes detection by telling the king he lost his thumb. Deceived, the king consoles him and bids him go in peace:

Sic ergo ille astucia sua se suosque liberans ad propria remeavit, et rex similitudine delusus veritatis redit ad senem consilium accepturus. (54)

Thus, freeing himself and his family by his cunning, he returned home. The king was deluded by the likeness of truth and returned to the old man to obtain counsel.

The sage enjoins Dolopathos not to be deceived by the veil of ignorance that hangs between humanity and the reality of things, of which humanity sees only a semblance. These words apply directly to the frame narrative, where the queen has concocted an elaborate display to accuse Lucinius of a crime he has not committed. The judge of whether this is likeness or truth is Dolopathos, who must choose whom to condemn. To accomplish this, he must look beyond likeness, not allowing himself to be deceived by trickery as was the king in the tale.

Despite the work that has been done so far, however, we are left with the question of how to conceptualize the reader's place in this method of narration. Uncharacteristically, especially for a parable intended to inspire a particular conclusion, there is no protagonist or hero in the tale with whom the reader can fully identify. While impressive for the sheer ruthlessness of their cunning, the son's actions are monstrous. The knight, first described as honorable and loyal, is

misled by a father's love and succumbs to a grotesque death. The old counselor, while a complex and intriguing presence in the story, is ultimately outwitted by the young thief. The king too is deceived and despairs of finding redress. None of these characters provides a sure point of identification either for the external reader or for Dolopathos as proxy within the frame.

Fascinatingly, the sage has employed a tale that evokes the oedipal fears of Dolopathos to make the exact opposite point from what could be inferred: let your son live. That this oedipal undercurrent echoes the frame drama need hardly be noted. But it is far from the only thing the reader is meant to notice. In fact, the meaning of the tale only begins to take form when we consider it in relation to our own act of reading. The mutability of correspondences, the sage's refusal to draw exact conclusions from the events of his tale or establish fixed points of identification, his insistence on more subterranean meanings, and his demand for intervention on the part of the narratee in the frame and thus by necessity of the reader in the narratee's place: this is itself the substance of his story.

Text to Reader: The Extradiegetic

Although I have chosen to exclude the extradiegetic as a site of interpretation in its own right within this essay, Alta Silva's preface to the *Dolopathos* (located at Genette's extradiegetic level) provides readers with indispensable information for understanding the intention of the work and their own process of interpretation. In this way, the extradiegetic serves as a transition from the sites of interpretation located within the text to the extratextual site of interpretation at the level of the reader.

In his preface, Alta Silva describes the efforts of the ancient philosophers as engaged in "describing the truth and quality of things" ("rerum veritatem proprietatemque... disquierere,"

2), whence they left a “faithful record of history for the instruction and delight of posterity” (“rerum gestarum fidem et temporum noticiam in exemplum et in admiracionem posteris relinquentes,” *ibid.*). Excoriating contemporary authors for corrupting this “pure and simple truth with the ferment of lies” (*fermento mendatii meram ac simplicem ipsam corrumpere ueritatem*) and “concealing lies with the cloak of truth” (“*ueritatis pallio mendatium obumbrare*”), Alta Silva describes them as offering praise and blame without either rhyme or reason, while forgetting Horace’s “*medium tenere*” (i.e., the “golden mean”) (*ibid.*). The only good thing about these pseudo-philosophers who rant and join together opposites in tales filled with monsters and ghouls, Alta Silva argues, is that their presentation of the laws and justice (“*leges et iura*”) and the “customs and deeds of corrupt and good men” (“*prauorum bonorumque mores et actus*”) “has left to the judgement of posterity what ought to be upheld and what should be rejected” (3).

It is at this point that Alta Silva begins to introduce the frame narrative, leaving no further indication for how to interpret the collection. Nor does the author reenter until the final pages of the collection, after all the stories have been told. Having positioned himself against other authors of the day and offered preliminary guidance for how his own collection is to be understood, he surrenders the task of interpretation to the reader. It is therefore left to the reader to discern the “pure and simple truth” (“*veritas*”) from the lie (“*mendatium*”) that has been covered over by the “cloak of truth,” as the sage’s narration also describes in “Gaza.” It is the task of the reader to choose the good from the bad (“*quid eligendum quidue respuendum foret*,” 3). Notably, Alta Silva softens the didactic aspect of the work by stating that it is intended both for instruction and for delight (“*in exemplum et in admiracionem*”). This implies that together with the pleasure of the stories themselves, the delight of the *Dolopathos* lies in one’s engagement with the model (“*exemplum*”) it provides, through which readers may learn

something about the nature of things through a positive mode of engagement with the text that arises from the pleasure of discovery and careful inquiry.

Level 3: The Reader

Along with these considerations from Alta Silva's preface, it is the persistent uncertainty "Gaza" presents at the sites of interpretation within both the story and the frame narrative that determines the importance of the reader's role. In a word, the sites of interpretation at the levels of story and frame invite the reader's involvement in their own act of interpretation. This process is homologous to Iser's conception of the "implied reader," a construct inherent to any literary work whereby the text "designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text" and thus define the reader's role (*The Act of Reading* 34). Iser's implied reader further depends on two interrelated aspects, which Iser calls "the reader's role as a textual structure" and "the reader's role as a structured act." The reader's role as "textual structure" designates the process by which the reader comes "to occupy shifting vantage points [narrator, characters, plot, and fictitious reader] ... and to fit the diverse perspectives into a gradually evolving pattern." As the reader's role is defined not just by the different perspectives within the text but also by "the vantage point from which he joins them together" and "the meeting place where they converge" (both of which only emerge through the reading process and therefore do not exist on the page), this process "allows [the reader] to grasp both the different starting points of the textual perspectives and their ultimate coalescence, which is guided by the interplay between the changing perspectives and the gradually unfolding coalescence itself" (35-36). Through this process, the author manipulates these perspectives to modify the reader's relationship to the text (36). Although Iser worked with the novel, it is clear that the multilayered

structure inherent to a frame tale only amplifies the dynamic process through which a reader engages with the text.

Thus far in this essay we have considered the reader's role as a textual structure, which is defined in "Gaza" through the shifting perspectives at the level of the story and its relationship to other perspectives at the level of the frame narrative. We have also observed Alta Silva's direct address to the reader at the extradiegetic level, by which the author has further specified the reader's role. This textual structure facilitates the second aspect of Iser's conception of reading, which he calls the "structured act" (*The Act of Reading* 36). By means of this latter process, the reader causes the various perspectives engendered by the text to converge within their imagination, with the two aspects of the implied reader thereby related as intention to fulfillment. Critically, "[t]he fact that the reader's role can be fulfilled in different ways, according to historical or individual circumstances, is an indication that the structure of the text *allows* for different ways of fulfillment" (36-37). This explains why any given reader can actualize only a selective portion of the text's possibilities.

The reader embarks upon the formal process of interpretation alongside the sage himself, who concludes his telling with a brief exegesis intended to persuade Dolopathos to delay the execution of his son:

Vides, o rex, quotiens et qualiter rex iste deceptus sit. Tantis enim ignorantie tenebris mundus iste obuoluitur, ut sepe que iniquissima et falsissima sunt, iustissima et uerissima ab hominibus iudicentur. Tu ergo noli nimis properare perdere filium, quia forte latet quedam veritas que te ab obprobrio et filium tuum a morte ualeat liberare. Ego etiam rogo te quatinus pro exemplo quod tibi protuli vitam filio hodiernam concedas, crastina die, nisi melior superuenerit fortuna, facturus quod hodie omisisti. At rex: Certe, ait, o uenerande sapiens, magnis si hoc petisses honoribus a me ditandus fueras sed quoniam uitam tantum hodiernam filio postulasti, nephas duco tibi hoc denegare. (56)

You see, O king, how often and in what way that king was deceived. By so great a darkness of ignorance is the world covered over, that often those things that are most

unjust and false are judged by men to be most just and true. You, then, do not so hurry to kill your son, because by chance some truth lies hidden that could free you from shame and your son from death. I likewise ask that you spare your son's life for today in exchange for the story (*exemplum*) that I have offered you. Tomorrow, unless a better fortune has supervened, you may do what you omitted to do today. To which the king replied: Certainly, O venerable sage, you would have received great honors, had you asked for that. But since you have only asked one day of life for my son, I consider it impiety to deny this to you.

While the sage's skilled interpretation deserves an analysis unto itself, there are a few key points to note. First, the sage foregrounds the deception practiced against the king in the story, drawing further attention both to its magnitude and quality through the alliteration of "quotiens et qualiter" (how often and in what way). Importantly, he also uses the rhetorical "you see" ("*[v]ides*") to coopt Dolopathos into the work of interpretation and thereby request the reader's participation via Dolopathos's role as narratee.

Echoing Alta Silva's preface at the extradiegetic level, the sage next states that the king's confusion in the story merely reflects a universal problem of interpretation, where the conspicuous superlatives that follow emphasize the degree of humanity's inability to discern true from false. The sage's words here echo what Naithani has inferred as the moral of the closely related *Arabian Nights*: amidst the contradictions of human nature (itself a mirror of the larger nature that surrounds and creates it), "[t]he subject of these contradictions can neither judge nor be judged on any absolute scale." We observe this critical element in the silence of Lucinius and his reliance on the sages to provide his defense. According to Naithani, knowledge thus means "the realization of mystery, deeds never have only a singular effect, beliefs stand to be corrected, and emotions need to be accompanied by compassion for the mystery" (279). This recognition of insufficiency in the face of epistemic and even ontological uncertainty is the lesson of "Gaza" and indeed of the entire *Dolopathos*.

Moving from the general to the specific, the sage uses “*liberare*” (to save, free) to act upon both the king and his son to raise the possibility that there is something that could save both the king from shame (“*obprobio*”) and his son (“*filium tuum*”) from death. Making the death of Lucinius equivalent to the disgrace of Dolopathos and father and son equivalent to one another, the sage places them on the same side of a rhetorical argument. All of this meanwhile proceeds against the concept that the sage has just introduced, “*veritas*” (truth), which is set against the world’s ignorance that the story exemplifies. At every level of “Gaza,” it is this possibility that there exists “some truth” (“*quedam veritas*”), itself as indistinct as the darkness of ignorance to which it is opposed (another recognition of the “mystery” described by Naithani), that is held out as the reward of careful inquiry.

“*Pro exemplo quod tibi protuli*” (“in exchange for the story I have offered you”) further creates an equivalence between the story and the life of Lucinius. It is a straightforward equation: a story for a life. This calculation emphasizes the importance of the sage’s story at the same time that it gestures to the preciousness and fragility of a human life. The word he chooses to designate his story (“*exemplum*”) is likewise significant. Literally meaning “example,” it would have been familiar to medieval readers, who would have associated it with sermons and compendia of moral tales intended to instill virtue. With this, the sage stresses that there is a moral lesson embedded within his tale that has the force of religious instruction behind it. The sage further emphasizes that he requests only “*vitam... hodiernam*” (“today’s life,” or “the life of today”) for Lucinius. This is what Tarek El-Ariss has described as “holding time” in his work on the “aesthetics of survival,” in which the storyteller repeatedly defers a seemingly “inalterable retribution” and thereby creates a “terrifying space of vulnerability” akin to Bergson’s reading of “*la durée*” and Deleuze’s model of “the virtual” – spaces of becoming and suspension that exist

outside of time. The sage in this conception would be related to the archetypal trickster who manages to avoid reckoning – only up to a point, as Oedipus; or indefinitely, as Scheherazade and the sages on behalf of Lucinius here (El-Ariss 2-4). This proposed exchange thus demonstrates the provisional nature of truth as well as life – a conception of reality that is always relative, evolving, and contingent. This fact makes it possible for the reader to intervene, as any fixed arrival would abolish the reader’s role as an interlocutor.

Thus, even with Dolopathos having accepted this exchange in his response, at this point the threat of death still looms over Lucinius. The epistemic uncertainty at the heart of the frame narrative generated by the stepmother’s false accusation of rape against Lucinius remains unresolved. Set within the frame narrative, this incident has provided occasion for a story (“Gaza”) that revolves around the search for truth and the ability of the characters to interpret their surroundings and navigate uncertainties in a way that foregrounds their ability to make moral choices. At the level of the frame narrative, the sage’s story has offered Dolopathos this same opportunity for careful interpretation and moral decision-making. While the drama of the frame narrative will eventually be neatly resolved with the exoneration of Lucinius and the execution of the queen, it is at this point of suspension that the reader’s intervention occurs. In this way, Dolopathos’s admission that it would be “nephas” (meaning not simply “wrong,” but an “impiety” or violation of divine law) not to grant the sage’s request to defer his son’s death serves as a direct injunction from the text to the reader, part of Iser’s “textual structure” by which Alta Silva reminds readers that they have as much at stake in the act of interpretation as do the characters on the page.

It thus falls to the reader to respond to this uncertainty through their own act of reading. As such, it is significant that the reader is present for the sage’s interpretation, as the sage models

the reader's own process through the importance he gives to deliberate analysis, the ability to read and speak critically, and the recognition of the contradictions inherent to experience and the mystery of reality. Yet there always exists a space between the stories as they are told and interpreted at the level of the frame and the external reader. Readers witness not just a useful, moral story with a vague or general application to their own lives: it is something they are involved in, because they have been asked to participate. This relates closely to Jaunzems's observation that "the didactic force" of *The Seven Sages* lies not in the content of the stories *per se*, but in the internal drama of the fact that "the reader's superior knowledge forces him to meet in advance the ethical issues raised by the tales and then invites him to reflect upon the difference between acts based upon knowledge and acts based upon ignorance, fear, and anger" (58) – a distinction that "Gaza" has foregrounded at every narrative level.

Further, these sites of interpretation at the levels of story, frame narrative, and reader are not just parallel, but superimposed. Viewed diachronically, events of successful or failed interpretation at the level of the story provide the material for later interpretation that will occur at higher levels of analysis. When viewed synchronically, however, there is no such separation. The reader simultaneously occupies all levels through their place in Iser's "textual structure" and is intended to participate in every act of interpretation that occurs at each site within the story and the frame narrative in their role as "structured act." The place of reading becomes the place of interpretation. Here again we see the text's dialogic ability to overlay narrative levels and create meaning not through sequence but through interaction (Bakhtin 25-26). As in Iser's transcendental vision of the literary work in which the twin poles of text and reader converge at a midpoint that cannot be identified "either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader" but which nevertheless sets the text in motion and creates its existence

(“The Reading Process” 50), Alta Silva requires that the reader reach an independent conclusion that may conflict with that of the text itself and with those of other readers. This in turn relates to Iser’s conception of the text as the fixed stars among which different readers will find different constellations, no matter the influence that the author exerts on the processes of their connection (“The Reading Process” 57) – a result of the tension that exists between the real reader and their generic place as the “implied reader” generated by the text (*The Act of Reading* 36). Crucially, one reader’s interpretation will be not only different from another’s and from the text’s, but *more*. That is to say, the morals appended to the stories within the frame, as here, are only distillations or fragments of the text’s potentialities. Furthermore, the insufficiency of the text’s interpretation is itself deliberate: in the recognition of its inadequacy, the reader is tasked with its completion. This is the nature of the “unwritten” part of the text that Iser identifies as stimulating the reader’s engagement through an attempt to supply the missing links (“The Reading Process” 51). This process by which the reader is drawn into both the tale and its telling – both the story and its interpretation – is the key element in the reader’s experience of “Gaza.”

While I have chosen to designate the level of reader as a site of interpretation and not a fourth narrative level superimposed upon Genette’s previous three, the narrative structure of “Gaza” also generates the peculiar sense that the reader occupies a space where the boundaries of the text become coterminous with those of the external world. The reader thus seems to act as a character in the “real” world whose own success is no less dependent upon processes of interpretation than were those of the characters on the page. Genette identifies the genesis of this bizarre sensation in the effects of “metalepsis” through which one level of narrative intrudes upon another, the breaking of the “shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells” (236) – a dynamic inherent to the frame tale. “Such

inversions,” Genette cites from Borges, “suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious” (ibid.). This is the “unacceptable and insistent hypothesis” about metalepsis, Genette argues, which troubles the reader with the uncanny sense “that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees – you and I – perhaps belong to some narrative” (ibid.). In this light, we might equally designate the external reader not simply as another site of interpretation, but another, supra-diegetic narrative level unto itself. This is perhaps the most profound and unsettling conclusion that “Gaza” and the frame tale more generally suggests to its readers.

3. Conclusion

Focusing on a single story in the *Dolopathos*, I have argued that The Seven Sages uniquely dramatizes the process of interpretation. “Gaza” shows the many implications of this narrative approach, and herein lies the nature of its didacticism. Whatever explicit moral one can draw from “Gaza” is only “*pars pro toto*,” wherein the richness of the text’s “semantic possibilities” will always lie beyond the capacity of the reader to integrate into a single consistent pattern (Iser, “The Reading Process” 60). The value of the *Dolopathos* lies in such a recognition. It accepts as axiomatic that true didacticism does not insist upon a single moral, but instead makes readers aware of how they read and interpret situations of epistemic and moral complexity. Real didacticism is therefore not any stated moral one could apply, Alta Silva argues, but an attitude that foregrounds interpretation in the storytelling process.

While Alta Silva’s “Gaza” in the *Dolopathos* typifies the layeredness inherent to the interpretation of a dialogic narrative that operates at several levels simultaneously, the process it exemplifies is also an essential element shared throughout the corpus of The Seven Sages. The

Seven Sages presents a world in which storytelling becomes a condition of survival and thus assumes the quality of an existential necessity. In doing so, it places the burden of interpretation on readers, who must develop their own understanding and carry that understanding across the shifting boundaries of the text into the world beyond. That the Seven Sages refuses to provide final answers to the world's mystery is ultimately its greatest lesson and the true nature of its didacticism.

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