

Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor, and the authors of the articles discussed will be invited to reply.

The Arabic Frame Tradition

To the Editor:

I would like to offer some corrections to Katharine Slater Gittes' article "The *Canterbury Tales* and the Arabic Frame Tradition" (*PMLA* 98 [1983]: 237–51). Gittes betrays her unfamiliarity with basic scholarship on the history of the *Panchatantra*. Her first error is the belief that "a subsequent translation from the Arabic back into Sanskrit forms the basis of all the existing Sanskrit texts," and a second is her claim that "the Arabs, not the Indians, first enclosed this collection within a frame" (237). The former statement would have shocked even such early students of the *Panchatantra* as Johannes Hertel or Franklin Edgerton and others before them, who knew as early as the beginning of the century of several Sanskrit recensions of the Bidpai collection, none of which is a reverse translation from the Arabic.

Unfortunately, Gittes bases a large part of her argument on the latter statement, attempting to prove that the open-ended framing device that Chaucer borrowed from oriental sources is a reflection of Arab mentality. Her belief that the Arabs first enclosed the *Panchatantra* in a frame rests on a surmise made by B. E. Perry in *The Origin of the Book of Sindbad* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1960), where he refers to a similarity between the introduction to the *Book of Sindbad* and that of the *Panchatantra*. Perry offers, without any tangible support, the opinion that the introduction to the *Panchatantra* originated in the *Book of Sindbad* (54). The latter work, as Perry himself concludes, is Pahlavi in origin, and even if it did provide a model for the introduction to the *Panchatantra*, it does not follow that the Arabs were the first to enclose the *Panchatantra* in a frame. It is well known that the Arabs learned the framing device from the Indians through the intermediary of Persians and transmitted it to the West through a flux of important oriental narratives, among which is the *Book of Kalilah wa Dimnah*. That the framing device originated in India was recognized by scholars writing as early as the nineteenth century, such as the Indologist A. Loiseleur-Deslongchamps in his *Essai sur les fables indiennes et sur leur introduction en Europe* (Paris: Techener, 1838), 6–7. And the fact that the *Panchatantra* was framed in its Sanskrit sources from the

earliest stages has been supported by modern scholars such as S. K. De ("From *Aśvaghosa* to *Kālidāsa*," in *A History of Sanskrit Literature: Classical Period*, ed. S. N. Dasgupta, 2nd ed. [Calcutta: Univ. of Calcutta, 1962], 86–87). Finally, it should be noted that the Arabs added an introduction or a frame to *Kalilah wa Dimnah* two centuries after it was translated into Arabic. This introduction, entitled "The Preface of Ali the Son of ash-Shah Farisi," is found only in some later editions of the book; it is found in neither the oldest versions nor the older translations. It differs from the Sanskrit introduction to the *Panchatantra* in both content and length.

Contrary to the thrust of Gittes' argument, the Arabic frame of *Kalilah wa Dimnah* is not open-ended. In this respect it differs from the introduction to the *Panchatantra*, which contains nothing to indicate that Vishunsharman's instruction to the princes has been completed at the close of the work. In all relevant Arabic editions of *Kalilah wa Dimnah* the narrator closes the frame after the last tale with an expression of good wishes addressed to King Dabshalim. It seems that Gittes is unaware of the existence of this Arabic frame. Ironically, she derives her information about the Arabic version of *Kalilah wa Dimnah* only from Arthur Ryder's translation of the well-known Sanskrit Pūrṇabhadra recension of the *Panchatantra* (A.D. 1199) edited in the original by Johannes Hertel and published at Harvard University in 1908. Gittes would have done better simply to stress the positive role of the Arabs in transmitting the framing device to the West without claiming for them a priority that runs counter to the accepted scholarship in the field.

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To the Editor:

Katharine Slater Gittes' essay perpetuates the more common myths about the "Arab mind" and Arabic literary aesthetics. While Chaucerians may debate the extent to which Eastern framing techniques influenced Chaucer (Gittes' discussion does little more than recapitulate material presented in Dorothee Metlitzki's