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How to cite

MALEH, Zina. Beyond fictionality : three uses of the frame in Tanūkhī's *al-Faraj ba*ʿd al-shidda. In: Journal of Arabic and Islamic studies, 2024, vol. 24, n° 1, p. 67–83. doi: 10.5617/jais.10122

This publication URL: https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:191126
Publication DOI: 10.5617/jais.10122

ISSN 0806-198X
DOI 10.5617/jais.10122

Beyond Fictionality: Three Uses of the Frame in Tanūkhī's *al-Faraj baʿd al-shidda**

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Abstract

According to Gérard Genette, frame narratives are one of few reliable textual markers of fictionality. While very different from the corpus studied by Genette, al-Tanūkhī's (d. 384/994) compilation *al-Faraj baʿd al-shidda* includes many anecdotes featuring at least one instance of narrative framing, as well as many more anecdotes told on a single narrative level (after the usual introductory chain of transmitters). As such, the compilation presents a good case study for the link between fictionality and narrative levels in a premodern Arabic context. On the strength of many examples drawn from the compilation, this article describes three uses of frame narratives in the *Faraj* and argues that even if some of the compiled material thematizes questions of reports' plausibility (rather than "fictionality"), narrative levels are not a reliable marker of stories considered to be more implausible. One use of the frame narrative in the *Faraj* is indeed in addressing a report's plausibility (1), but other anecdotes achieve this without any such framing. Moreover, frame narratives also take on other functions whereby they neither flag nor are reliably associated with a story's lesser plausibility. Such functions include anchoring a story's narration within a familiar situation and highlighting the message of a narrative by setting up parallels between its different levels (2). Another function is to negotiate the incorporation of less familiar voices and content, remote in social milieu or geography from al-Tanūkhī's life, into the world of the compilation (3). These different uses show that frame narratives are not reliable markers of fictionality in the *Faraj*, and that they were not artificially affixed onto the *Faraj*'s less plausible plots. Instead, they served different functions, introducing a wide variety of content and shaping the reception of stories by questioning their plausibility, yes, but also by exploiting and manipulating readers' expectations, and by pushing the limits of spaces and perspectives incorporated into the *Faraj*'s overall message of deliverance after hardship.

Key words: Frame narratives, fictionality, plausibility, foreignness, al-Tanūkhī, *al-Faraj baʿd al-shidda*, compilation, Abbasid literature.

* I am grateful to section editors Johannes Stephan and Beatrice Gruendler, as well as to Bruce Fudge, Ulrich Marzolph, and the anonymous reviewer for precious feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

Introduction

The question of fictionality has long intrigued modern readers of the judge Abū ʿAlī al-Muḥassin al-Tanūkhī's (d. 384/994) *al-Faraj baʿd al-shidda*, a compilation of material on the theme of deliverance after adversity (HAMORI 1990; BEAUMONT 1998; HAMORI 1998; MOEBIUS 2008), and scholars of mediaeval Arabic literature more broadly (e.g. LEDER, ed. 1998; KENNEDY, ed. 2005). In a modern European literary context, much of the engagement with fictionality focused on the possibility of defining what Dorrit Cohn termed the "distinction of fiction" (COHN 2000), that is, textual markers exclusive to fiction which distinguish it from factual—or referential—narratives. Among such proposed markers of fictionality, Gérard Genette thought the frame narrative to be particularly promising:

> The distinction of [narrative] level is doubtless the most relevant one here, for the concern with verisimilitude or with simplicity generally orients factual narrative away from excessive reliance on second-degree narrations. It is hard to imagine a historian or a memorialist letting one of his 'characters' take responsibility for a major part of his narrative, and we have known since Thucydides what problems the historian faces in simply transmitting a speech of any length. The presence of the metadiegetic narrative is thus a fairly plausible index of fictionality—even if its absence indicates nothing at all. (GENETTE 1993: 69)

Of course, in mediaeval *akhbār* works, be they historical chronicles or themed compilations, passing on narration to another voice is not only common but often the basis for composition in texts that do not claim to report fictive stories. On the other hand, in premodern Arabic literature more generally, the works most closely associated with a frequent and patent use of frame narratives, for instance *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, *The Arabian Nights*, or the *Book of Sindbād*, are all what we would call fictional. Some of the material that Tanūkhī's *Faraj* shares with the *Nights*, moreover, features frame narratives, which could hint at an early reception of those narratives as fictional as well.[1]

But such discussions run into the problem of the applicability of a modern dichotomy between fictional and factual narrative to such works as Tanūkhī's.[2] In proposing possible textual indicators of fictional narrative in non-fictional Arabic texts, including the frame narrative, but also the arrangement of *akhbār* in historiographical works or a plot's high degree of literary construction, Stefan Leder maintained a fundamental opposition between fiction and non-fiction (LEDER 1998: 50-51, 59-60), while Julie Meisami and Isabel Toral-Niehoff argued in response that some of these literary devices served not as indicators of fictionality but to impart additional meaning to historiographical narratives (MEISAMI 2005;

1 Most notably F197 and F478. For parallels between the patrician's story in F197 and "Sindbād's fourth voyage" in the *Nights*, see CANARD 1956: 71-72; VAN GELDER 2003: 421; HAMORI 2004: 210-15; POMERANTZ 2015: 250-69; MARZOLPH 2020: 95-105. On F478 and "the Steward's Tale," see MAHDI 1989; BRAY 2005; HAMORI 2004: 209; BIN TYEER 2016: ch. 6.

2 Different scholars use "factual," "fictional" and "fictive" to cover slightly different ideas. Factual seems to be employed for a referential story as well as the narrative reporting of it; here I understand fictive as referring to a non-referential story, and fictional as referring to a narrative whose author (and/or compiler) and reader understand it to report a fictive story.

TORAL-NIEHOFF 2015). Matthew Keegan's thesis on the reception of Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* also rejects Leder's assumption that fictive stories needed to be disguised in mediaeval learned literature, arguing instead that overtly fictive content existed within that literature, along with specific theories for responding to it (KEEGAN 2017: ch. 4). Instead of fictionality, finally, Michael Cooperson suggested that degrees of plausibility—that is the probability that a report was true, rather than its categorization as either factual or fictive—informed the selection of biographical material in al-Dhahabī's (d. 748/1348) *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ,* where he identified "subtle signals" of a story's implausibility in elements of the *isnād* and departures from conventional representation (COOPERSON 2005).

Cooperson's notion of plausibility fits Dhahabī's project particularly well, since the biographer himself displays strategies that are akin to commenting on his reports' plausibility. This is less apparent in Tanūkhī's comments as a compiler, but Cooperson's observations remain especially useful in that they allow for a degree of hesitation between the truth and falsehood of a report, and for the textual expression of that uncertainty. As an *adab* compilation on a specific theme, Tanūkhī's *Faraj* embraces a broader range of content than most historical chronicles, biographical compendia and early *Maqāmāt*, as it comprises fourteen distinct chapters including Qurʾānic paraphrases, *aḥādīth*, helpful prayers, historical anecdotes, and autobiographical reports, as well as Bedouin love stories, tales of encounters with wild animals, poetry, and more. We may therefore expect that hermeneutical approaches to the book's individual pieces will differ to match the variety of the assembled content, that some narratives convey more historical information while others constitute less specifically referential parables.

Given the link noted by Genette and Leder between frame narratives and what they call fictional narratives, and the paradigmatic frames featured in the *Nights* and *Kalīla*, I will explore, then, whether frame narratives signal, or are associated with the *Faraj*'s less plausible content, and therefore call for different ways of reading the pieces in which they appear. In what follows, I will first discuss plausibility in frameless examples of *Faraj* narratives, before turning to my three uses of the frame in the compilation. While the first such use outlined bolsters a hypothetical link between frame narratives and questions around a story's plausibility, the second use goes against that hypothesis and shows that this is no automatic function of all such frames, which may instead direct the interpretation of and expectations for subsequent stories. Finally, my third usage of frame narratives as setting up less familiar situations and events complicates questions of plausibility by pushing the audience into a world where its ability to gauge what sounds true or false may be compromised.

Plausibility and the *Faraj*

Tanūkhī's compilation is characterized by a high tolerance for uncertainty—some would say ambiguity—in the relation between events and their telling, which transpires in the many *Faraj* pieces that report competing versions of the same historical episodes.[3] Such im-

3 E.g. F209 and F288, the latter of which Tanūkhī records even though he judges the former to be "more

precision, then, does not seem to lessen the narratives' value in conveying a message of relief after hardship, even if we cannot always be sure exactly how it was that a protagonist was delivered from harm. Moreover, one of the *Faraj*'s aims seems to be to bring together stories which, on the one hand, are fundamentally driven by an empirical causality that can be understood and exploited by the human mind,[4] and plots which, on the other hand, elude human comprehension and resort to divine or supernatural causation which readers must accept despite not understanding them.[5] Such an assortment, then, brings up questions as to the modes and limits of plausibility, and how each piece can be read and understood. And while Tanūkhī as compiler does not explicitly comment on the plausibility of the pieces he includes in his compilation, the narratives themselves sometimes evoke their narrators' or characters' scepticism about the events they report, which may mirror or influence the audience's attitudes to the material as well.

Some of the *Faraj*'s anecdotes themselves thus comment on whether one can believe in a given causal sequence. In fact, Tanūkhī's selection shows particular interest in whether to believe stories about the Alids,[6] which often involve supernatural elements. In F423, for example, two characters discuss whether one faced with extreme circumstances can rely on the lessons relayed by a story. The main narrative features Abū l-Qāsim b. al-Aʿlam, himself a descendant of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. During a journey from Baghdad to Kufa on the first night of the year 338 (949), Ibn al-Aʿlam, who narrates the story directly to Tanūkhī, finds himself travelling through a swamp when he encounters a lion. Terrified, Ibn al-Aʿlam, eyes closed at first, recites the Qur'ān and the *shahāda*. But then he remembers hearing that lions do not attack those who face them, so he opens his eyes and stares at the beast. When his unwitting slave stumbles onto the scene, the startled boy's scream causes the lion to pounce on him instead of his master. Ibn al-Aʿlam arrives in Kufa unharmed, where news of his adventure spreads. Another Alid comes to visit and asks:

> "You were scared of a lion? Don't you know that lions are proscribed from eating the flesh of Fāṭima's descendants?" And I replied: "Sayyid, may God give you long life, some of your peers say differently. What assurance did I have that the story wasn't false? I could have died. How could I take comfort in that story at such a time? I am human, after all." "And how could it be false," he asked, "given what we say about Zaynab the liar and ʿAlī b. Mūsā l-Riḍā?" (*Faraj* IV, 172, ll. 5-11)[7]

Ibn al-Aʿlam then tells Tanūkhī this second story, said to be well-known among Shiites, in which a woman named Zaynab pretended to be a descendant of the Prophet. To test her claim,

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correct" (أصح): TANŪKHĪ 1978 (henceforth *Faraj*): III, 130, ll. 8-10.

4 See BRAY 2006, and FUDGE 2018: 93.

5 Tanūkhī himself tells us in the *Faraj*'s introduction that we cannot always understand, saying that the material he collected may help reassure readers, "even if causes may be hidden and thought and reckoning may not grasp what happened" (*Faraj* I, 52, l. 5; BRAY 2019: 5).

6 Descendants of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the fourth caliph and first imam of the Shiites. Tanūkhī often uses *al-ʿalawī* to designate such characters, see e.g. *Faraj* IV, 170, l. 1 (F423) or II, 282, l. 2 (F216).

7 The text is from the edition of SHĀLJĪ, *Faraj*, whose numbering of anecdotes I also adopt. Unattributed translations are my own.

she was forced to walk towards a pride of lions and was promptly devoured, which was taken as proof of her mendacity (*Faraj* IV, 172-73, ll. 14-7).

By including different reports as evidence of lions' behavior, this story leaves multiple interpretations open as to what exactly caused Ibn al-Aʿlam to survive: his reliance on what he had heard about looking the lion in the eye; lions' universal disinterest in Alid flesh; or divine providence? According to his preface, Tanūkhī aims to provide readers with examples to reassure them in their times of distress (*Faraj* I, 52, 1. 1-2),[8] but Ibn al-Aʿlam's story is evidence that regulating one's fear with the help of stories may not be so easy, for we may find them insufficiently convincing when distressed.

In F80, an autobiographical story and one that, again, involves an Alid, Tanūkhī himself is unconvinced when his Shiite friend Abū Naṣr, whose land was stolen by the cruel vizier Ibn Fasānjas, lodges a formal complaint with the deceased imam Mūsā al-Kāẓim by placing a written deposition above his tomb in Baghdad. As a man of the law, Tanūkhī finds this strategy especially comical: "Reading the document, I was bemused and couldn't help but laugh: it was a petition to a dead man, and he'd even attached it near his head!"[9] But over the course of the narrative, Tanūkhī shows that his friend's eventual recovery of his land was not caused by a rational sequence of events initiated by the vizier who had wronged him. He strongly implies instead that it was the result of the very complaint to the Alid saint which he had earlier dismissed. The compiler ultimately contrasts this outcome with his own continued hardship: "Thanks to his petition, Abū Naṣr found success where I did not. Our misfortunes were one and the same, but he hastened his deliverance by means that I did not think convincing in seeking mine."[10] In this piece, then, Tanūkhī encourages us to believe in a causal sequence which he himself had initially thought laughable.

Both Tanūkhī's narrative (F80) and Ibn al-Aʿlam's (F423) thus make the case for a paradoxical, supernatural, causal sequence, but in so doing they also record their narrators' hesitation in endorsing such implausible explanations themselves.

Negotiating Plausibility

To return to frame narratives, they appear in many forms in the *Faraj* and are associated with a wide range of content, taking on different functions both within the logic of the story and the structure of the narrative. They are also easier to spot than to define, in great part because this is true of narratives as well (NELLES 1997: ch. 4). When it comes to mediaeval Arabic

8 In Julia Bray's translation: "To those enduring fate's injuries, nothing, I find, affords more powerful solace than reading accounts of God's graciousness, Mighty and Glorious is He, toward those who have previously suffered the same plight …" (BRAY 2019: 3-5).

9 فلمّا قرأت الورقة عجبتُ من ذلك عجباً شديداً ووقع عليّ الضحك لأنها قصّة إلى رجل ميّت وقد علّقها عند رأسه .

(*Faraj* I, 241, ll. 6-7; BRAY 2019: 172-73).

10 وصحّ لأبي نصر بقصّته ما لم يصحّ لي ، وكانت محنتي ومحنته واحدة ، ففاز هو بتعجيل الفرج بها من حيث لم يغلب على ظنّي أن أطلب الفرج منه .

(*Faraj* I, 242, ll. 14-15; BRAY 2019: 174-75).

literature, this difficulty is compounded by the fact that frame narratives are well attested but never explicitly discussed. In Tanūkhī's book, moreover, frame narratives stand in a relation of continuity with other strategies for introducing compiled material—such as the compiler's introduction, his comments, the *isnād*, or shifting narrators.[11] Frames, however, also sometimes beget frames in *Faraj* anecdotes, and multiple narrative levels imply conscious reproduction of the device as such.[12]

For the purpose of this paper, I shall restrict the discussion to *Faraj* anecdotes in which a character within a first narrative becomes the narrator of a second narrative which is in some way characterized as a story, narrative, or explanation, etc., by the text itself. These narrower criteria, the change of narrative voice and the reliance on internal concepts that may correspond to "narrative" or "story," exclude some relevant *Faraj* pieces from immediate consideration here, so that the observations below will surely fit a wider range of anecdotes than appears in the discussion.

While the two pieces discussed above ("the Alid and the Lion" (F423) and "The Petition to a Dead Man" (F80)) already referenced multiple reports, these were not organized into clearly delineated frame narratives. But elsewhere in the *Faraj*, such framing is repeatedly exploited to dramatize an internal audience's sceptical or trustful, anticipated or actual, reception of a story. In the outer narrative, or frame, of F412, for instance, a senior fiscal administrator's strange table manners and wounds elicit many questions from his dinner companions. Reluctant to tell his story, the administrator says: "It is a curious thing and I fear I may not be considered truthful." This only encourages his host to insist: "You must do us this favor" (فقال : هو أمر طريف أخاف أن لا أصدّق فيه. فقلت: لا بدّ أن تتفضّل بذلك; *Faraj* IV, 140, ll. 14-15). The man then proceeds to tell of his ill-fated journey through the desert to transport tax revenues from Baghdad to Damascus, during which he is attacked by Bedouins, rides on the back of a lion at astonishing speed, and swims to an island on the Euphrates before being rescued by passing boatmen (*Faraj* IV, 140-45). It is that story's strangeness, then, which had led the administrator to warn his audience that they may refuse to believe him.

Secondly, F212, the story of the buried treasure, begins with a frame narrative told by a friend of Tanūkhī's father who served the judge Abū ʿUmar. He says:

> A story circulated about one of [Abū ʿUmar's] old neighbors, who had acquired great wealth after long being poor. I heard that Abū ʿUmar had shielded him from the authorities, so I asked him for his story (فسألته عن الحكاية). For a while he demurred, but then he told me:… (*Faraj* II, 268, ll. 5-7)

The inner narrative follows and begins with the man inheriting a fortune from his father. He quickly squanders it and becomes poor.

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11 Hakan Özkan identifies 83 cases of a change in narrative voice with no other intervention by the original narrator in *Faraj* narratives; see Özkan 2008: 345-46.

12 A few pieces have more than two narrative levels post-*isnād*, e.g. F197, F212, F269, F362, F368, F442, F446. The use of the device may thus show its implicit conceptualization within texts if we consider Nicolette Zeeman's objection to the "critical prioritization of the explicit" in premodern English literature (Zeeman 2007: 226).

> Then one night in my sleep I saw a human figure that said: "Your wealth is in Egypt (غناك بمصر), so go there." The next morning, I went to see the judge Abū 'Umar and gained access to him—I was his neighbor and my father had served his father—and I asked him to write a letter for me to help me find employment in Egypt. (*Faraj* II, 268, ll. 11-13)

The inner narrator then travels to Egypt, where he finds no work despite Abū 'Umar's written endorsement. Desperate, he takes up begging at night and is arrested by a patrolman, who asks what happened to him (فسألني عن خبري; *Faraj* II, 269, ll. 2-3).

> "I'm a frail man," I said, but he did not believe me, pushed me to the ground and whipped me. "I'll tell you the truth," I cried out. "Go on." So I told him the story, start to finish, including what had happened with the dream (*Faraj* II, 269, 3-6).

With the patrolman's response, another narrative voice appears, which is systematically interrupted by unique asides by the second-level narrator (the judge's neighbor, marked cursive in my translation). The two voices alternate to better contrast the two men's attitudes, one who believed an injunction conveyed to him in his sleep, and one who did not.

> "You are the stupidest man I've ever met," [the patrolman] said. "Many years back, I too saw in my sleep a human figure who said:
> 'In Baghdad, on this street and in this area'
> – *and he named my street and my area, so I kept silent, listening intently as he spoke—*
> 'there is a house called house of such and such'
> – *and he mentioned my house and my name—*
> 'with a garden, and in the garden there is a lotus bush'
> – *and my garden had a lotus bush—*
> 'and underneath it are buried 30 000 dinars. You must go and take them.'
> But I thought nothing of it, paid it no heed. And you, you fool, you left your home for Egypt because of a dream?" (*Faraj* II, 269, ll. 7-13)[13]

The second-level narrator, who had come to Egypt in search of wealth, then returns home to Baghdad, digs up his own garden, and finds the treasure in a buried urn (*Faraj* II, 269, ll. 14-18).

Here, the inner story, by contrasting the dismissive reception of a dream with a successfully uncritical one, also forces the question of its own plausibility. For we have two characters with very different reactions to similar dreams: the sceptical patrolman who dismisses his dream as meaningless, and Abū 'Umar's neighbor, who believes the injunction to go to Egypt but misinterprets what his promised *ghinā* may be.[14] His mistaken assumption is built on common sense, whereas his deliverance is due to extraordinary coincidence and supernatural causation.

The anecdote of "The Buried Treasure" (F212) thus features an inner story which deals with a truth revealed and a truth dismissed, and such narrativized judgments about what to

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13 Tanūkhī's is the first known version of this much-reprized tale. On its many incarnations, see MARZOLPH 2020: 500-06.

14 See غناك بمصر in the quote above.

believe may influence readers' responses to the inner narrative itself. In both this piece and "The Administrator's Strange Table Manners" (F412), moreover, inner stories are told by reluctant narrators who at first refuse to tell their stories, the former because it is too "curious," the latter for no given reason. In both cases, then, frame narratives featuring reluctant narrators give way to explanations deemed by their narrator or characters to stretch plausibility.

Questions of what to believe and what kind of information can be drawn from stories, and with what practical application, thus appear in anecdotes with and without narrative framing in the *Faraj*. Dream narratives, for instance, to which the compilation's sixth chapter is dedicated, systematically bring up questions about interpretation and plausibility.[15] The use of embedded narratives, however, allows for a differentiated reception of one narrative by the characters of another, and therefore offers ample opportunity to dramatize and exploit the potential ambiguity of a story's ontological and epistemological value.

Directing Meaning and Expectations

Plenty of *Faraj* pieces, however, feature frames that do not seem to flag or interrogate the plausibility of a report, and therefore negate any automatic link we may want to draw between frame narratives and less believable content. In these pieces, frame narratives take on different functions instead. One common motif is the introduction of a character in the outer narrative whose presence prompts the narration of a story in an inner narrative. In F326, for example, the frame's narrator is with Yaḥyā al-Barmakī and his son al-Faḍl when Aḥmad b. Abī Khālid enters, greets them, and leaves again:

> And Yaḥyā said to al-Faḍl: "There is a story (خبر) about that man. When we are done with our work, remind me so I tell you." And when his work had ended he reminded him. And he said… (*Faraj* III, 243, ll. 5-7)

Yaḥyā al-Barmakī then tells his son of the help extended to him by Aḥmad b. Abī Khālid's father after he had fallen on hard times.

In a more drawn-out version of such a frame, the outer narrative of F165 has ʿUbayd Allāh b. Sulaymān b. Wahb accompany his father Sulaymān b. Wahb to the Dīwān of Land Tax, over which the latter presided at the time. Enter a state scribe known to Sulaymān, who stands up to greet him and honors him. ʿUbayd Allāh is surprised: he knows that *dīwān* functionaries never stand to greet visitors at their place of work, but Sulaymān says to him: "Son, when we're alone, ask me why I did what I did with this man" (يا بنيّ إذا خلونا فسلني عن السبب فيما عملته مع هذا الرجل; *Faraj* II, 77, ll. 1-2). That same evening, ʿUbayd Allāh is too slow in requesting the story, so his father asks: "Did the food distract you from reminding me as I told you to?" (شغلك الطعام عن إذكاري بما قلت لك أن تذكّرني به ؟; *Faraj* II, 77, l. 5). He then tells him the following story: he had imprisoned the man after taking over from him as fiscal administrator in Egypt,

15 This is apparent already in the chapter's title: من فارق شدّة إلى رخاء بعد بشرى منام لم يشب صدق تأويله كذب الأحلام (literal translation: "Those who left hardship for ease after the good tidings of dreams whose interpretation is untainted by the lie of illusion," *Faraj* II, 209).

but when the roles were soon reversed, the man treated Sulaymān with reverence and generosity.[16]

Finally, a similar set-up appears in the outer narrative of F167, in which ʿUbayd Allāh b. Sulaymān, now vizier, is holding a *maẓālim* hearing when a man appears whose name he recognizes. He asks him where he is from and who his mother is, and later mentions the strange encounter to his sons and our narrator (ما أعجب ما كنت فيه اليوم ; *Faraj* II, 92, l. 13). Intimidated, his companions do not ask him to expand on his remark. The vizier nevertheless goes on unprompted and tells them this story (فلم نسأله عن ذلك إجلالاً له فقال ; *Faraj* II, 92-93. ll. 14-1): His father, Sulaymān b. Wahb, had been a prisoner of the caliph's during the vizierate of the petitioner's father, Ibn al-Zayyāt. While he was being interrogated by Ibn al-Zayyāt, the vizier's young son appeared—the frame story's petitioner—and Sulaymān was moved to tears by the sight of the vizier playing with his child. Informed that Sulaymān was crying because he, too, had a boy of the exact same age—ʿUbayd Allāh—, Ibn al-Zayyāt asked mockingly: "Do you think he foresees that son of his becoming vizier?" Irked by the vizier's question, Sulaymān prayed that his son would become vizier and receive Ibn al-Zayyāt's son as a petitioner—a wish now fulfilled in the frame narrative.[17]

Unlike the reluctant narrators of "The Buried Treasure" (F212) or "The Administrator's Strange Table Manners" (F412),[18] these narrators are all too eager to tell their stories, especially ʿUbayd Allāh and his father Sulaymān: when others fail to cue them, they simply proceed on their own.[19] Evidently, this formula constitutes a type of frame, a way of presenting a story, and one that does not imply much remove from Tanūkhī's experiences or milieu. Rather, it strengthens the coherence of the world of information sharing in which the compiler and his circle operate, by stressing the links between informers and historical characters, between stories and circumstances of narration that, if not necessarily imitative of their lives, were at least realistic.

In such pieces, frames introducing longer embedded narratives emphasize the contrast between present and past, and the reversal in power dynamics between historical characters or families across time. Such reversals are prominent in the *Faraj*, and many frameless narratives present a similar progression within a linear chronology.[20] But as well as bringing variety to the way familiar stories are told, such frames may also direct the audience towards points of correspondence or contrast between outer and inner narratives. The *Faraj*'s title and Tanūkhī's programmatic preface set up a hermeneutic frame of sorts for all compiled pieces: we know that whatever we read will ultimately correspond to the deliverance after hardship model, but at the start of every narrative, we do not yet know how. Within that larger program,

16 For the motif of rising to greet guests and its use in Tanūkhī's anecdotes, see HAMORI 2008. ʿUbayd Allāh b. Sulaymān himself rises to greet a man in his *majlis* when he is vizier, earning the caliph's rebuke in TANŪKHĪ 1971-73 (*Nishwār)* I, 78-81 (n° 32, tr. MARGOLIOUTH 1922: 48-49).

17 I am using the first version of the narrative under F167 in SHĀLJĪ's edition, *Faraj* II, 92-94. All given versions feature a frame, see e.g. *Faraj* II, 97, esp. ll. 5-10.

18 Reluctant narrators are frequent in *Faraj* frames, see also F180 below, or F197, F362 (the daughter's explanation), F478, F437, etc.

19 See F296 for a variation on this formula in which Sulaymān b. Wahb tells his secretary to ask him later why he changed the wording of a letter. This time the secretary does so and Sulaymān tells his story.

20 In fact, F326 is also given in an alternative frameless version: *Faraj* III, 246, ll. 16ff.

frame narratives can take on an analogous function: they lay out elements that the framed narrative must address, and how it does so becomes part of its interest. In F165, we come to understand that the excessive reverence shown in the frame in fact responds to the undue respect received in the framed story. And in F167, we discover in the inner story why the vizier of the frame was so keen on ascertaining his visitor's precise identity.

But if frame narratives can direct the focus of an inner story's reception, they can also toy with it: they may introduce familiar motifs or narrative structures, and leave readers to discover how they will be answered or foiled. In F481, for example, the frame narrative announces ten Kufan men summoned by the Umayyad governor ʿUmar b. Hubayra to tell a story each. We therefore expect ten inner stories, as in F27, a "well-known" anecdote attributed to the Prophet Muhammad in which three Israelites must each tell the story of their good deeds to exit the cave where they are trapped: three "hommes-récits" develop into three stories (*Faraj* I, 125-28; BRAY 2019: 70-75).[21] But *Faraj* readers know that ten stories would push the piece to unusual lengths for the compilation, so we wait for the resolution of this paradox. It comes as, back in the frame narrative, the governor deems the first Kufan narrator's story so wondrous as to render any further narration unnecessary.[22]

In another example of a frame narrative setting up a motif known from other pieces in the compilation, the narrator of F180, Dallawayh, a secretary to successive caliphal chamberlains, describes his unexpected encounter with a former palace servant:

> There was in Muqtadir's palace a head valet who assisted me and Ṣāfī [the chamberlain] when we stayed at the caliphal house. When I stopped seeing him around the palace, I thought the man to be ill, but a few months later I caught sight of him in the street. He wore merchant clothes and his beard was white. I called his name and he said: "Yes, master, it is I, your servant."
>
> "What is all this white hair in a few short months?" I asked. "Why this manner of dress? Where have you been?" He demurred.
>
> I ordered my men to take him to my house and said: "Now tell me your story (حدّثني حديثك)."
>
> – Only if you grant me safety and secrecy.
>
> – I do.
>
> So he said… (*Faraj* II, 137-8, ll. 5-3)

The former valet then recounts how he came to fall asleep, inebriated, in the women's apartments of Muqtadir's palace when the caliph appeared with a group of women. Barely awake, the valet only has time to climb into a tight ventilation shaft[23] and struggles to stay hidden while, under his gaze, the caliph has sex with his concubine, until, finally, they leave. During his ordeal, the terrified valet swears to God that if he ever escapes, he will never drink alcohol or serve another person again, so that once out of the palace and fully recovered from the shock, he becomes a tradesman.

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21 For the concept of "narrative-men," see TODOROV 1971: ch. 3.

22 *Faraj* IV, 382, ll. 15-16: فقال ابن هبيرة : لا خير في سائر الحديث الليلة بعد حديثك يا أبا عمرو ، ولن يأتينا أحد بأعجب منه .

23 For the *bādhanj*, see ROSENTHAL 1977.

In this anecdote, the frame narrative sets up a question centered around one visual mystery: a man's beard turned white in a much shorter time span than seems normal. The narrator puts special focus on the white beard by making it the last element of his description when the man reappears, and the object of his first question to him. The beard thus becomes the main mystery that the valet's story must resolve.

Now before the outer narrative and before the *isnād*, Tanūkhī had introduced the piece in this way:

> The following is similar and very close to that last story, although truly it does not belong to the chapter on those who escaped imprisonment, but it is a relief-after-hardship story in general. It was told to me by the scribe Abū ʿAlī al-Anbārī…(*Faraj* II, 137, ll. 1-3)

The compiler thus pairs F180 with the preceding anecdote, F179, through explicit commentary as well as juxtaposition, telling us that it "resembles it" and "is close to it" (يشبه هذا الحديث ويقاربه), a remark that gives us precious insight into the types of connections that Tanūkhī himself drew between the items he compiled, what he saw as resemblance and repetition. In the present case, the main links between the paired stories are their context at the beginning of al-Muqtadir's reign,[24] and the motif of the fast-whitening beard. In F179, which has no frame narrative, the judge Abū ʿUmar is imprisoned for his participation in the young Muqtadir's deposition in favour of Ibn al-Muʿtazz, when, Abū ʿUmar tells us, he had "not one white strand in [his] beard" (حبست وما في لحيتي طاقة بيضاء ; *Faraj* II, 131, l. 4). After a single terrifying night in which he witnesses the executions of two fellow prisoners, he is spared by the vizier, looks at his reflection in a mirror, and finds that part of his beard is now white (*Faraj* II, 135, ll. 13-14).

Tanūkhī's comment, at the beginning of the next anecdote, that it resembles the story of the judge Abū ʿUmar (F179), therefore prepares us to spot the link between the two. The compiler warns as if in apology that F180 does not strictly fit the chapter's theme, but, crucially, he does not specify how it deviates. His preamble paves the way for the scribe Dallawayh's frame narrative, where we immediately find the connections between the two: the initial setting during Muqtadir's caliphate, and the motif of the white beard. But instead of political imprisonment, the threat of execution, and co-conspirators' painful deaths, we get the highly comical story of a drunk valet stuck in a ventilation shaft, no less terrified than Abū ʿUmar had been[25] and enduring his own form of confinement. The inner story's absurdity thus clashes with the symmetry of the narrative structure, with its question in the frame and its reply in the framed, and the answer provided is all the more comical as the outer narrative focuses our attention on a single motif whose repetition across two stories highlights the contrast in their tone, characters, and settings, even as they take place under the same regime and around the same time.

24 Shortly after Rabīʿ I 296/December 908 for F179, and sometime between 295/908 and Shaʿbān 298/April-May 911 for F180.

25 If not more; see *Faraj* II, 140, ll. 9-11: "And when I'd reached some location of the caliph's palace, I fell unconscious, feverish, my mind gone. The valets carried me to my house in my torpid state, and I stayed there a long while with an inflammation in the brain." (Here I am following SHĀLJĪ, *Faraj* II, 140, n. 8, in understanding *birsām* as an illness affecting the brain.)

Detours through the Unfamiliar

The anecdotes of "The Valet in the Ventilation Shaft" (F180), "The Administrator's Strange Table Manners" (F412), or "The Buried Treasure" (F212) share a feature that is common in the *Faraj*'s embedded narratives: all three inner stories are told by anonymous narrators. For where frame narratives appear in the *Faraj*, they often—though by no means always, as we saw with F165, F167, or F326—yield narration to an anonymous or lesser-known character, especially one who is far removed in status, profession, or even geography from Tanūkhī's circle of scholars and administrators. Anecdotes with at least one framed narrative whose narrator is nameless or unknown include F16 (a seafarer), F27 (three Israelites), F110 (an Arab woman who served the Prophet's wives), F166 (spies), F180 (a valet), F212 (a neighbor of the judge Abū ʿUmar), F261 (a Sufi and a slave-woman), F269 ("an old man who worked for me"), F300 (an old man from Damascus), F362 (the wife of the *qāḍī* of Ramla and her daughter), F368 (a woman), F410 (a man), F411 (a travel companion), F412 (a tax-collector), F430 (an intendant), F441 (a Kūfan pilgrim), F442 (a notable), F446 (the leader of the town of Bisṭām; his son; a nurse), F466 (a *baysar*[26] in India; an Indian prince; a man), F468 (a slave-woman), F471 (a poor man forced to sell his slave-woman), F478 (a famous cloth-merchant).

In many stories, then, the transition from one narrative level to another corresponds to the passage from a better-known world where names are intelligible to narrator, transmitter, compiler and presumed reader, into an unfamiliar one where common knowledge loses its relevance. In F197, for example, the long story of "The Arab Prisoner and the Byzantines," enemy troops hand over an Arab, who, in an embedded narrative, then tells the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik about his decades-long captivity. Within that story is inserted the embedded tale of one of his Byzantine captors, who married a Bulgar woman and was left in a burial pit alongside her seemingly lifeless body, then survived this death sentence to rise to his status as a patrician (*Faraj* II, 191-205).[27]

Both of F197's inner narratives are extensive and have full hardship-and-deliverance plots, so that the second level does much more than set up the third, which comes instead as an unexpected narrative detour. The anecdote thus contains three narrative levels after the *isnād*, which follow a progression in geography, ethnology, and difference from the material that forms the basic stock of most *Faraj* anecdotes.

The outermost frame involves state officials taking the freed Arab prisoner to see the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik. If the circumstance is unusual, the context and caliph at least are quite common for the *Faraj*. In the second narrative layer, then, the Arab's story features Muslim prisoners amongst the Byzantines and describes a cruel and frankly impractical rotational system of captivity whereby the Muslims are shuttled between captors. Finally, the third level pushes further into the unfamiliar as the Byzantine narrator introduces the Bulgars and a new set of foreign customs, including the very physical embodiment of captivity in the form of

26 "A person born a Muslim [in India]," according to the text itself (*Faraj* IV, 300, ll. 3-4).

27 For the historical background of this story and an attempt at identifying the people and peoples involved, see CANARD 1956. The story is translated in VAN GELDER 2013: 230-44. On parallels with the *Nights*, see note 1 above.

the dead spouse's burial pit. While many of the themes running through the anecdote are common in the *Faraj*, such as the deployment of literacy and good breeding in reaching higher positions and ultimately relief, each narrative level takes the audience further from the world of Tanūkhī and his fellow Iraqi functionaries.

That movement away from the familiar can also be one towards more female spaces. In F180, the outer story had a state scribe talking to a merchant in the street, while the inner story took us inside the apartments of the caliph's concubine, into the world of valets' daily tasks and a caliph's sex life.[28] In F478, a merchant's odd behavior at a dinner-party where *zīrbāja* is served leads, by way of explanation, to an embedded story in which his lover, a *qahramāna* of the caliph's mother, smuggles him into the women's quarters of the caliphal palace so they can marry (*Faraj* IV, 358-69).[29]

Women, moreover, are frequent narrators of inner stories, even if such narration tends to be brief. In F468, another story involving the caliph Muqtadir, Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Afṭas, the secretary to Muqtadir's son al-Muttaqī, asks the caliph's female entourage for help in retrieving a beloved slave-woman who was sold to the palace. After much fruitless yearning, the woman reappears one day at his door with numerous gifts and, upon his request (وقلت لها : ما السبب في مجيئك؟ وما جرى؟; *Faraj* I, 313, l. 17), tells him how the caliph decided to send her back thanks to his mother's interference.[30] This inner story can only be told by a woman, since it occurs within the domestic sphere of the caliph's interaction with the women who entertain, and—in the queen-mother's case—manipulate him, and the presence of the female narrator only heightens the anecdote's characterization of Muqtadir as influenced by women.[31]

Finally, like "The Arab Prisoner and the Byzantines" (F197), F368 includes an inner story which appears as an unexpected detour from the initial hardship-and-relief plot. An effeminate[32] slave-soldier named ʿAbbād is challenged by his fellow soldiers to prove his courage by going unarmed to "al-Hajjāj's cisterns," a desolate place outside Baghdad, and hammering a peg into the cistern's floor. As he leaves the city, ʿAbbād takes over the narration (فأخبرني عبّاد قال : خرجت ; *Faraj* III, 406, l. 15). Once in the cistern, he completes his dare but the noise attracts an errant monkey with a chain around its neck, and as he prepares to leave with the tame animal, ʿAbbād hears a man threatening a woman outside. With the help of the panicked ape, he scares the man off and saves the woman, whom he asks for her story (ما قصّتك ؟ ; *Faraj* III, 408, l. 6). She says she is from Basra, that the violent man is a cousin who wanted to marry her but was rejected by her father. Now married to a different

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28 The piece includes rare details about interiors in the caliphal palace: as well as the ventilation shaft, there is mention of the cooling *khaysh* and of valets sprinkling water over furnishings.

29 See also note 1 above.

30 I read this story as a triumph of the queen-mother's skilled manipulation of her son. See also Ashtiany Bray 1998: 93 n50. Cf. Osti 2013: 59 for a different take on the same text.

31 See van Berkel (et al., eds.) 2013, and Ashtiany Bray 1998: 93.

32 The word is مؤنّثا in Shāljī's edition (*Faraj* III, 406, l. 4) and MS arabe 3483 in the BnF in Paris, f. 171b, l. 14, but MS Or. 61 in Leiden (p. 390, l. 14) has مخنثا. The implication seems to be that the slave's effeminacy casts doubt on his courage.

man, she had been on a desert[33] stroll with her female neighbors, when the spurned cousin followed them with armed men, each of whom abducted one of the women. The cousin then carried her off to the cisterns, where he forced himself on her and was about to kill her when ʿAbbād intervened (*Faraj* III, 406-08).

In this anecdote, a second narrative voice is introduced as we leave the city of Baghdad with the slave-soldier for a desolate place in the wild, and a third as we hear of the woman's abduction and rape, so that each narrative takes us further from familiar city life but also further from male perspectives and, via the story of an "effeminate" slave, into a woman's tale of her misfortune. In the end, the slave-soldier does prove his courage, but, two embedded stories later, he does so through actions quite different from what the terms of the frame had led us to expect.

Conclusion

I started by asking whether frame narratives in Tanūkhī's *Faraj* signaled or were associated with implausible stories. But the *Faraj*'s frame narratives show a wide variety of structure, function and content, so much so that it is often difficult to delineate what may count as a frame, and little can be concluded about anecdotes with frames that cannot also be said of some frameless pieces as well. I am therefore tempted to conclude that frame narratives are not an especially apt concept for analyzing works like Tanūkhī's *Faraj*. Examples like the *Arabian Nights*, the *Book of Sindbād* or the *Decameron* lead us to expect frame tales to be a cardinal feature of the works in which they appear,[34] and we may foist onto them a *mise-en-abyme* function whereby they reveal the text's awareness of its own artificiality, of its own fiction, in an easy slip from metadiegetic as "second-level" to metadiegetic as "self-referential" narrative.

But even in the many pieces where they figure clearly in the *Faraj*, frame narratives are rarely the predominant feature of the text, and any mirroring is as likely to reveal coherence with a world of ubiquitous story-telling as it is artificiality. Moreover, frame narratives echo other framing devices in the compilation, such as its title and chapter headings, the compiler's introduction, chains of transmitters (*asānīd*), and extradiegetic comments by the transmitters or compiler, and they cannot always be distinguished in impact or function from other types of transitions in voice and focalization within a text.

Regardless of their emic pertinence, however, frame narratives undoubtedly provide a productive perspective on the *Faraj*, helping us identify specific subtypes of frames, draw novel parallels between pieces and seek a better understanding of the dynamics of individual anecdotes. In so doing, I found that some frame narratives enabled the dramatization of characters' reception of events as more or less plausible, encouraging readers to make such judgements as well and to reconsider the link between intelligible causality and plausibility (F212, F412). In other examples, we also saw that frame narratives could strengthen a story's

33 صحراء, *Faraj* III, 408, ll. 10 and 12. On the use of this word here, see ASHTIANY BRAY 1998: 89-90.

34 See FOEHR-JANSSENS 2015: 13: "Le récit dans le récit constitue toujours un ornement cardinal de l'œuvre dans laquelle il prend place."

point, directing the meaning of embedded content by pushing details and themes to the foreground (F326, F165, F167), but could also highlight the diversity of content and tone by encouraging connections and belying expectations (F481, F180). As such, these frames may reinforce a story's plausibility, or pretend to do so, since a neat structure can also better contrast with absurd events (F180). Lastly, and especially in anecdotes with longer frames and unexpected inner narratives, diegetic levels highlight a story's journey into less familiar territory, both in geographical and social terms, by flagging each new perspective with a change of narrator and yielding speech to men of different milieus—soldiers, Byzantine leaders—as well as women (F197, F368, F468). With such movement away from urban and male spaces, common references are also left behind, complicating judgements of what sounds believable or not.

Most importantly, then, frame narratives were not automatically and artificially affixed onto the *Faraj*'s stranger, more implausible plots. They emerged as diverse strategies to tell a story, introducing a wide variety of content and shaping the reception of stories by questioning their plausibility, exploiting and manipulating expectations and, marking each step in a narrative's progression, by pushing the limits of perspectives incorporated into the *Faraj*. They are not reliable indicators of fictionality, nor are they consistent markers of more remote, stranger, or necessarily less plausible content. Instead, their use highlights specific features of the narratives they generate as well as fundamental aspects which also exist elsewhere in the collection, whether in narratives with frames or without.

One of these aspects is a duality between the decidedly rational driver behind many *Faraj* plots and the collection's encouragement to take comfort even in what the mind cannot grasp. Another is the compilation's constant play with repetition—of formulas, themes, motifs, of known characters and settings—and change—of topics, places, narrative structures and unknown narrators. By pulling circumstances of narration from the *isnād* into the story, frame narratives help pose the question of the relationship between a tale and its telling, and by extension, between an individual "deliverance" piece and the compilation in which it appears. Instead of flagging implausibility and telling readers how one particular piece should be read within the collection's stated goals, frame narratives help narrativize the question of how each story relates to the audience's world, how it can be told and heard for comfort, information, or entertainment, and a little of all three. "All this is deliverance after hardship," Tanūkhī seems to tell us. "Believe it as you will."

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