A Reconciliation of Philosophy: The Frame Narrative Tradition

by

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For Lance—
although Fortuna’s fickle attention was beckoned elsewhere,
you shall always subsist in our minds and in our hearts
To Dr. Ruth Nisse,
through myrthe and through solas,
without your tireless effort and support, this ever
daunting thesis would not have been possible.

To Fortuna,
without your unearned attention, the muses
of Literature may have never persisted through
my writing
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“Reader, you have found again the book you were seeking; now you can pick up the broken thread; the smile returns to your lips. But do you imagine it can go on in this way, this story? No, not that of the novel! Yours! How long are you going to let yourself be dragged passively by the plot? You had flung yourself into the action, filled the adventurous impulses: and then? Your function was quickly reduced to that of one who records situations decided by others, who submits to whims, finds himself involved in events that elude his control”

Italo Calvino, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*
Medieval Western Europe and the Abbasid Middle East: Foundations of the Frame Narrative

Geoffrey Chaucer and Giovanni Boccaccio explore notions of fate and fortune through their conceptualization of the frame narrative; it is evident, as they are most interested in the fickleness of an impermanent *fortuna*, that at the stem of this philosophical thought lies Boethius and his *Consolation of Philosophy*. Chaucer writes in his translation of Boethius’s work, “Whil Fortune, unfeithful, favourede me with lyghte goodes, the sorrowful houre...hadde almoost dreynt myn heved. But now, Fortune cloudy hath chaunged hir deceyvable chere to meward, my unpietous lyf draweth along unagreable duellyphes in me” (Chaucer. “Boece.” 397). The *Consolation of Philosophy*, in its discussion of fate, reality, and perception becomes a structural text in understanding the motivations of philosophy and thought in many late medieval texts, in particular *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Decameron*. Although it may be prudent to say that the late Medieval frame narrative is concerned with abstract philosophical aspects of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, this would be shortsighted as it would only engage with a modern interpretation of the frame. In her exploration of the frame narrative, Karla Mallette motivates her readers to perceive these tales as such: “We think of the framed narrative as a way to call attention to the storyteller’s craft, and to the storyteller’s investment in the tale that he or she tells in particular” (Mallette, Karla. “The Hazards of Narration: Frame-Tale Technologies and the ‘Oriental Tale.’” 6). Boethius’s *Consolation* can be understood as an analysis of the writer’s relationship with their work and experience; an interpretation of the frame through Boethius would motivate one to understand the motivations and actions of the storyteller (the writer) and how this relates to the
inflections or iterations of the story. These tales were traditionally understood as embedded parables meant primarily for the function of allegorical and metaphorical interpretation; tales are told and understood for the purpose of practical instruction.

This genre specifically, within Western Medieval traditions, has been understood as using Boethius’s philosophy in contrast with entirely other modes of representing experience, life, and mortality; “Though they traced prodigiously complex paths between languages, the major framed narratives shared in common two stages in their long and eventful transmission histories: all were attested in the Abbasid East and in late medieval Europe” (Mallette, Karla. “The Hazards of Narration: Frame-Tale Technologies and the ‘Oriental Tale.’” 8). In fact, there were individuals in Medieval Europe exploring narrative traditions of the Middle East; Katharine Gittes explores this relationship and provides a lineage of this tradition through Muslim Spain,“... [the frame narrative] Kalilah and Dimnah served as a model for Petrus Alfonsi’s twelfth-century Disciplina Clericalis...the Disciplina Clericalis ranks above all other works in bridging “Eastern” and “Western” narrative traditions” (Gittes 57). Petrus Alfonsi was a 12th century convert, originally born an Aragonese Jew, who was interested in the fable and mythological traditions found in Arabic folklore; his influence was positive in his production of the Disciplina Clericalis which became a foundational text for understanding old folklore, and wholly negative in his publication of the Dialogi contra ludaeos, which became a critical basis for many anti-semitic rhetorics. The Disciplina Clericalis became a Christian meditation on Arabic culture, tradition, and ideology:

“I have given a title, Disciplina Clericalis, a name that well describes the contents, for it renders the educated man well versed in knowledge. On the
other hand, I decided that, within the capabilities of my senses, everything must be avoided in this book that might be found contrary to our belief or different from our faith” (Alfonsi 104).

Although this seems as a defensive statement by Alfonsi, one that denounces any capacity to reason religion or faith outside of one’s community, Alfonsi removes the structural and philosophical ideologies of Arabic folklore. John Tolan writes, “...drawing from non-Christian wisdom literature, he wishes to compose a manual of moral education without reference to Christian truth. The difference...from other Latin works before the Disciplina...is that Alfonsi’s sources are Oriental, and that they have a wealth of fables unmatched in the Latin tradition” (Tolan 73) Alfonsi claims in his introduction that he has chosen the name Disciplina Clericalis in order to uphold a Western interpretation of these texts. He promises not to introduce any ideas that are majorly contrary to their conventional western ideals, so as to make the philosophies more palatable to his Western audience. However, Tolan notes that Alfonsi not only attempts to align himself with the Western world but also rejects the use of Western philosophies and parables in the construction of his text. In this way, Alfonsi attempts to draw a parallel in the ideologies of the West and the East; if he can convince his Western audience that his deeply Eastern material is no different than their own beliefs, then he may persuade them of entirely new ways of thoughts through cunning and manipulation. However, what this is meant to display is that although interpretations may vary, the reasoning of social convention and the limitation of the frame transcends cultures and becomes a notion of East and West.

Although the text was originally produced in Arabic, Alfonsi later translated his work into Latin, where it would become accessible knowledge to Western authors,
“The Disciplina Clericalis strongly influenced, either directly or indirectly...Boccaccio and Chaucer, who refers to Petrus Alfonsi and his work five times in the Canterbury Tales’ ‘The Tale of Melibee’ (Gittes 58). This thesis discusses the narrative ideologies of the frame and how they progress through iterations, primarily within Chaucer and Boccaccio. Thus, the contrasting philosophical foundations of the frame narrative seems to stem from ideas presented within the frame of the Arabic traditions introduced to the West by Alfonsi. This is not to say that European narrative traditions of Medieval Europe were directly influenced by Arabic texts, however, the work presented by Alfonsi shows that Medieval European writers used the frame tradition to delve into intersecting narrative ideologies. In order to fully understand the dilemma that the frame presents, I believe that it is necessary to place the Consolation in dialogue with another text that could represent this full spectrum of thought surrounding the frame, The Arabian Nights. This text is representative of a long, and disputed, Eastern frame tradition, one that Alfonsi would have been familiar, in some form, within his study of Arabic folklore.¹ This narrative uses the frame to approach similar moral and cultural trajectories from a different perspective that acts almost in opposition to Boethius, however, attempts to reconcile similar, if not the same, limiting aspects of reality.

¹ “...the textual history of the Arabian Nights can be traced back with some certainty only to the fourteenth century A. D. Anything likely to be regarded as a Vulgate text of the Arabian Nights was not created until late in the eighteenth century, in direct response to the European demand for complete editions...” (Marzolph, Ulrich. “Re-Locating the Arabian Nights.” 156). The actual creation and publication of the Arabian Nights is disputed due to the long standing oral tradition of this narrative. In the form that the Arabian Nights is in today, would be unrecognizable to someone such as Alfonsi due to the narrative’s traversing several cultures, and perhaps, attempting to understand this text in its modern manifestation may distort a medieval reception of this narrative. However, I believe in attempting to interpret the themes of these tales, through a lens of Petrus Alfonsi and his medieval readers, one may come to conceptualize an Eastern understanding of the frame, unaltered by Western, Christian and Boethian, perspectives.
The Consolation of Philosophy is a narrative of Boethius’s meditations while imprisoned and awaiting death. Boethius finds himself disheartened by the notion of foregoing claim to his lived experiences and works through the veil of death; he is surrounded by Muses of Poetry who whisper thoughts of prior fame, to never forget the will to create, to experience, to live. In this haze, a woman appears, “Her eyes glowed like fire, penetrating far beyond the common capability of mortals; her color was intense, her strength inexhaustible...and her height was of a measure hard to fix” (Boethius 2); she is described as an indescribable thing, that which is contained within the figure of a woman, but who is beyond the scope of that human form. Her body is inconsistent, stretching and shrinking through the intensity of her demeanor; although her eyes burn with irate flames, they are not a countenance kindled by the actions of the fading Boethius, but by the company and the persuasions that Boethius has come to know. “‘Who,’ quat sche, ‘hath suffred aprochen to this sike man thise comune strompettis...The whiche nat oonly ne asswagen noght his sorwes with none remedies, but thei wolden fedyn and noryssen hym with sweete venym” (Chaucer. “Boece.” 398). This veiled woman claims that the muses that fuel Boethius’s clinging to life in fact have the very inverse effect of their appeal; instead of allowing Boethius to accept an inevitable fate of life, the muses motivate him to prolong his existence by forcing him to hinge upon his former glory. “For these are the women who choke out the rich fields of reason’s fruits; theirs are the barren brambles of the passions” (Boethius 3). The muses are not privy to logic or to reason, the goal of poetry is to engage metaphorical understanding or to allow abstract and exaggerated conceptualizations of reality; however, in doing so, the poet becomes infatuated not
with sound reason or a determinate truth, but within a superficial structure that wishes to embellish reality. It seems that by promoting life to a dying individual is only a way to cause strife and anxiety.

But who is this veiled woman and what authority/knowledge does she have in order to pass such a judgement? The veiled woman banishes the Muses of poetry and instates familiar Muses of her own control, the true Muses assisted Boethius in becoming that eminent philosophical thinker; it is Lady Philosophy herself. Boethius, a once most respected individual in the light of Lady Philosophy, has now fallen and clings to the notions of past grandeur, a time of fortuna, making it thus harder to relinquish the life that he worked so diligently to cultivate. However, Boethius’s speculations, although are philosophical contemplations, stray from a true philosophical analysis and lends themselves to the fickleness of the muses. John Marenbon writes, “The natural imagery of the verse passages, with its emphasis on natural order, reminds the reader that for Boethius the author a wise man sees the providential arrangement of all things reflected throughout the physical universe” (Marenbon 148). The imagery utilized in the *Consolation* is meant to persuade the reader into believing that impermanent fate and fortune are natural; Boethius has forgotten the natural process of the wheel, and thus he is shrouded in an alien darkness, foreign from a true ideal. Philosophy does not wish one to suffer, but to feel comfort in knowing when it is time to give up and move on to greater, permanent, existences.

In contrast to Boethius’s perception of death, *The Arabian Nights* presents a relationship with mortality and the frame that appears infinite; the narrative never
ends, and at the sight of an ending, the narrative forces yet another story. *The Arabian Nights* is a collection of narratives situated within the foundational frame of Shahrazad and her struggles. “He then swore to marry for one night only and kill the woman the next morning, in order to save himself from the wickedness and cunning of women” (Heller-Roazen 12). King Shahrayar, as an act of revenge against a particular woman for whom he held contempt, decides to marry each night, to engage in sexual relations, then murder each woman in order to alleviate any possibility of manipulation in his relationship. The daughter of the king’s vizier, Shahrazad, begs her father to allow her to be the king’s next bride, which after some time, he agrees. Daniel Beaumont notes, “A point not only of maximum suspense within the story but one also precisely analogous to that point which things have come to between Shahriyar and herself, since, according to his previous habit, Shahriyar could be expected to kill...Shahrazad now...It is rather like a game of Russian roulette; as in that pastime the game only goes on if something is missing” (Beaumont 64). The frame of this narrative is structured precariously, requiring the frame to be something of intrigue, to lure the sultan into a continuation of the story on the following night; in order for the frame to exist, for the narrative to continue, a lack of stability, suspense and chaos, must be sustained. In order to do so, on the night of their marriage, “I have a sister, and I wish to bid her good-by before day break.’ Then the king sent for the sister...Then Dinarzad [the sister] cleared her throat and said, ‘sister if you are not sleepy, tell us one of your lovely little tales…” (Heller-Roazen 18). Shahrazad does not plan to accept the king’s execution, instead, through her cunning and through the assistance of family/worldly connections, she uses this method of telling stories to
gauge the king’s curiosity and to stave off her own, and every other potential bride’s, death. One should notice that Shahrazad requires the mediation of her sister in order to carry out her plan; that a story not only requires a relationship between that of the storyteller, Shahrazad, and that of the listener, King Shahrayar, but also that of a conscious desire, someone or something to ask for the narrative to continue. Dinarzad acts as a mediating desire, the impulse that a listener may feel, but inhibits to some intrinsic limitation. The frame does not become a vehicle for a consolation of mortality, but rather motivates ideals similar to the *strompettis* of poetry in Boethius’s *Consolation*; life becomes something of deeper value, something that cannot be so easily foregone in an acceptance of divine meaning. Death is something to be warded off, and life to not be simply granted, but to be taken with passion; that life is something desire earnestly, and to accept an alternative would be contradictory to our experience as humanity.

Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are influenced by these Arabic notions of life and death as well as Boethius’s own conceptions; whether aristocrats escaping death or peasants and noblemen on a pilgrimage to escape their inevitable fate, these narratives are deeply concerned with the frame tradition and how this distorts human perceptions. The characters of these texts, like Boethius or Shahrazad, are in the midst of crisis and render their situations through story, in order to contrive a stable resolve concerning their notions of existence and the foregoing of that existence; however, by the very nature of the *Decameron*’s Florentine hills escape or the pilgrimage of *The Canterbury Tales*, the characters are on a mission to cling to life, to ward off mention of death, however, it is through these meditations
that the stories, and the frames themselves, come to resemble less of a clinging, and considerably less than a consolation, but a paradox of reconciling the two: to cling to a suffering life, or to let go of a life of possible adventure for an indeterminate afterlife.

In determining precisely where this contradiction lies, one must come to an understanding of these frame’s notions of good existence and justice, for if goodness and evil were arbitrary, then the clinging to life, and perhaps a consolation of the afterlife, would be futile; it would be meaningless to live adventurously or to die willfully, for there would be no standard for respect or social cohesion (that which is needed to produce a narrative of social communication and storytelling). Boethius believes happiness and justice to be the whim of chance, “You think that Fortune changed in her relation to you; you are wrong. These are always her habits, this is always her nature” (Boethius 23). One’s fate and accomplishments are the product of the fickle nature of fortune; one is subject to the movement of a wheel of fate: one who reaches the wheel’s peak may live in ease for the moment, and the others at the bottom experience torment and suffering. Why, if Boethius lived a good life, does he currently find himself at the bottom of the wheel? Boethius is tortured and dying, his thoughts cause suffering of a great degree, criticizing his existence and the mortality of his being; if fate is chance, then evil too may acquire fortune and good blessings. However, Fortune is not the true nature of goodness or justice, she is merely a facade to appeal to those false virtues, that true goodness and justice is not a reality, but a perception. Marenbon writes, “...Philosophy’s bold attempt to explain reward and punishment totally through final causality is suddenly abandoned for a scheme in
which God arranges everything” (Marenbon 158). Reward and punishment, physical manifestations of God’s intentions, are not the thing worthy of consideration, as those manifestations are merely schemes of a higher and unknowable position. True good fortune is not manifested in materiality but in a perception of contentedness and an understanding of that which is beyond the material; life may be suffering, but goodness is sought and realized elsewhere, separate from our present material forms.

*Arabian Nights* presents an opposition to death whereby one should cherish life, and in this way, a sense of goodness and justice lies fundamentally within our present material reality. This ideal of life seems in contrast to Boethius’s notions, it is *Arabian Nights*’ sense of justice that creates a mutual understanding among people as well as grounds itself in a much different space than in a divine realm. Ulrich Marzolph writes,

“The Medieval Arabic tales...belong to collections whose authors remain unknowns. Moreover it is quite likely that the tale included in the collections originate from a variety of sources and that more than one author contributed to their final form. This situation makes it impossible to reconstruct an authorial intention at work...in particular, the *Arabian Nights* make it difficult to extract a coherent intention, as their heterogeneous character as omnium-gatherum… over the centuries has permitted the integration of just about each and every kind of tale” (Marzolph, Ulrich. “Narrative Strategies in Popular Literature: Ideology and Ethics in Tales from the Arabian Nights and Other Collections.” 180).

Although it may be nearly impossible to extract an overarching ideology from the Arabic frame, since this narrative is a collection from various periods of drastically changing philosophies, it is because of this that *The Arabian Nights* exemplifies a deeply moral ideal, revering narrative and the tales of material existence so much so as to integrate stories as they develop over time. It is through its particular tales, and this ever adapting narrative, that seems to put forth an ‘eye-for-an-eye’ structure
that is manifested not as chance on a wheel, but a real tangible punishment inflicted within this material and perceivable reality, due to the immoral action derived by physical phenomenon. “The Fisherman and the Demon” exemplifies this notion.

While fishing, the fisherman pulls in his net and finds a sealed jar lying in this ropes; soon the jar begins to release a pillar of smoke, and in that smoke emerges a mighty djinn. This djinn was sealed countless centuries before by King Solomon himself, and although the djinn promised to reward whoever freed him from his bondage, after years of contemplation, “‘Whoever delivers me from now on, I will either put him to the worst of deaths or let him choose for himself the manner of death’” (Heller-Roazen 35). The djinn is determined to murder the fisherman for presenting the djinn with an act of kindness; however, an act like this is never tolerated in the universe of Arabian Nights, the fisherman replies, “Forgive me, and God will grant you forgiveness. Destroy me, and God will inflict on you one who will destroy you” (Heller-Roazen 35). The justice of Arabian Nights is not some change of perception or some hope of future punishment, justice is a matter of ethical behavior and immediate consequence in the material realm; it seems that a relinquishment of this materiality is a severe threat with which may be used as threat to ward of unethical behavior.

To accept an inevitable death, or to fight for life — to find virtue in the judgement of the divine, or to find goodness in the justice of the world; I believe that this is where the contest lies for an ideological foundation of the medieval Western frame narrative. The characters of the Decameron and the Canterbury Tales are motivated by their ultimate fear of death, shaped by Boethian philosophy; however,
they are restricted because they know that death is an inevitability; how is one to enjoy a life if that life is contingent upon its being illusory, impermanent, and brief? What goodness and happiness is there to be found in a series of sufferings? The seemingly fortunate knight of the *Canterbury Tales* represents this well in rejecting the Monk’s tale, “I seye for me it is a greet disese,/Whereas men han been in greet welthe and/ese,/To heren of hire sodeyn fal, allas!” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales.* 347 l. 2771-74). The Knight had just been confronted with a Boethian tale concerning the fall of great individuals, which he takes as foreshadowing of his own descent on the wheel of fortune. The frame is contrived to shed light on the possibilities of existing in this paradoxical situation, to live a life bound by the frame, yet somehow exceed the frame. The Knight rather wishes to hear a tale, “As whan a man hath been in povre estaat/And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat/And there abideth in properitee” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales.* 347 l. 2775-77). The Knight, rather than confronting the inevitable possibilities of his life, that of waning fortune and death, would rather contrive his reality as fantasy. Instead, adopting pleasurries and fortunate circumstances in this present material world is all one has to cope with their own being. However, it is not that these frame-narrative characters are swayed from notions of death, a loss of being, for they contrive many stories of death and decay; the tension arises when notions of death and justice become a familiar idea to people who believe that they have true autonomy in this world, particularly the wealthy and politically influential. In their proximity to death, they strive for not only life but a moral and a *happy* life; frustration arises in regards to the limitation to their self-control. In the presence of an ever-enigmatic yet ever-conclusive frame, it is difficult
to not fall victim to uncontrollable manifestations of anxiety. It is this anxiety that marks not the inward bounds of the frame, the narrative, nor the realm beyond, that of gods and authors, but the ever inconceivable manifestation of the frame itself.

The first section analyzes Boccaccio's *Decameron*; I am curious as to how the environment of the narrative relates to the frame and how this relationship differs from that of the later *Canterbury Tales*, of which it influences. The frame of *The Decameron* begins, and is motivated, by a scene of a ravaged Florence, decimated by the Black Death of 1348. While their home and peers are falling by the thousands, although they may be contemplative at moments about the death that surrounds them, these nobles seem to disregard the chaos and focus on the pleasures of their Italian villa; the aristocracy of the structure must be stressed, these nobles disregard life and the lack thereof in their abuse of their staff and in their subsistence of this fantasy order. This frame of chaos bound by a sense of order is concluded with a return to the chaos, merely ten days after the beginning of the retreat; it is perhaps this moment that one may see a complete disregard for the experience of the frame, that which drove them into the hills — for if they were truly concerned with the plague, why would they return when the plague has yet to cease?

The second section will analyze Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*; I think it is pertinent to understand not only how the frame is realized, but to what scenarios the frames are ascribed and how those frames are managed. Chaucer contrived an absurd situation where people of all backgrounds could come together and play a game under the same rules; where *danse* and *myrthe* becomes a situation of banter, frustration, and anger. Here, one can observe a conversation with Eastern modalities through
Petrus Alfonsi, as represented by the tales of certain pilgrims. Unlike Boccaccio, Chaucer places himself in this narrative as an unnamed intradiegetic narrator who is a participant in the pilgrimage and game, and is marked as rather odd and shy. Chaucer establishes himself as the outcast of the narrative, that the distressed and frustrated pilgrims find him elvish, both in appearance and mannerisms. This is not meant to disparage Chaucer’s persona; analyzing Chaucer’s position among the characters and how the characters perceive him (the author, and therefore that which is external to the frame) may reveal the characters’ foundations and perceptions of limitation—the frame itself. I am interested as well in discussing the abrupt ending of the *Canterbury Tales* and what this means to a frame that does not seem to want an end; the frame takes the place of the disparate goals and desires of the journey, a true and faithful understanding of the relationship of life and death, individuality and community, experience and the frame of understanding.

The third section analyzes the only tale that travels through both *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*, the story of Griselda; although this tale is not typically identified with Eastern Frame influences, due to the profound influence of Alfonsi upon the *Canterbury Tales*, the reader is forced to interpret Griselda partially through the perspective of these Eastern modalities. The historical narrative of Griselda, the tale’s repackaging of message and translation, orders the narrative in three levels of intradiegetic frames; this is to say that a complete understanding of Griselda’s narrative lineage would be to know Chaucer’s interpretation and translation of Francis Petrarch's reinvention of Boccaccio’s Griselda. The aspects of Griselda’s translation and many transformations are, in many ways, exemplary of the
notion of the frame and how perceptions of the frame may be re-rendered; it is in this story that the audience can observe direct responses between these authors and how they perceive the structuring of framing in relation to storytelling.

Finally, I will conclude this thesis with an interpretation of a modern frame narrative, Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. I will use this novel, famous for its second-person narration, to describe the process and experience of reading a frame narrative. I believe that this novel intervenes into the conversation of the frame and utilizes postmodern theories, similar to Chaucer’s reasonings, to render a conceptualization of the frame through fate and fortune, seemingly in response to the frame tradition as Boccaccio and Chaucer have explored. The frame, in its various iterations from the *Arabian Nights* to the *Disciplina Clericalis*, and then into the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales* to *If upon a winter’s night a traveler*, in its most fundamental rendering produces uncontrollable dread and anxiety.

**The Allures and Hazards of a Boethian Ideal: The Decameron**

*The Decameron* was written in fourteenth century Florence, within the institutions of Christianity, and yet marred by those very same establishments. However, the reader may also observe an integration of the Eastern frame tradition into the Western frame tradition.² As Boccaccio is attempting to contain a loss of control, of reason, and of faith in God, due to the tragedy of the Black Plague, he

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² Karla Mallette notes, “...the presence of Arab characters and settings and even the use of Arab tales as source texts is something of an inevitability given the Mediterranean milieu in which the tales of the *Decameron* are for the most part set and given the environment in which their author lived. As a young man Boccaccio apprenticed at the Naples office of the bank that employed his father, the Compagnia dei Bardi. There he moved in a Mediterranean milieu and would have had easy — indeed, inescapable — access to the popular culture...of the Arabs with whom the Italian merchants did business, who manned the ships that sailed between the Mediterranean ports” (Mallette, Karla. *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean.* 40).
seemingly looks to alien cultures that may be capable of reconciling this chaos better than the current Florentine establishment. It is within this frustration with the present order that Boccaccio contrasts the present with what lies beyond, the failure of his culture and, perhaps, the success of those cultures outside of that boundary. Underlying the philosophy of the narrative lies a distinct understanding of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, a contemplation of how life lures the ignorant and leaves them left with dissatisfaction and frustration. A material intuition vies for existence, those Muses of Poetry who beckon the soul towards Earthly places and people who exaggerate the wealth of their knowledge; Vincenzo Cioffari writes, “...Fortune does not work irrationally and indeterminately, but with a view toward the ultimate end. Far from being blind, it has a hundred eyes, for it is carrying out the Divine Will just as much as Nature, although its activity may not be apparent to Man. The instability of Fortune finds frequent expression in the *Decameron*. It is the idea which Boethius expressed in the following words: ‘si manere incipit, fors esse desistit’” (Cioffari 134). The Latin quote is translated to: ‘If it starts to stay, it ceases.’ Impermanence is the first and foremost quality of Fortune, and it is this dive into chaos, the inability to remain successful, that motivates the tales and the Brigata’s reconciliation of the Plague. The ten Florentines of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, the ‘Brigata,’ reject the corruption and decay of their society, and seek to find refuge in an ideal that is beyond the limits of human community and society.

The narrative begins with a grim scene divulging the horrors wrought by the fatal Black Plague,

“Sometimes the swellings were large, sometimes not so large, and they were referred to by the populace as *gavócciolo*. From the two areas already
mentioned, this deadly *gavócciolo* would begin to spread, and within a short time it would appear at random all over the body. Later on, the symptoms of the disease changed, and many people began to find dark blotches and bruises on their arms, thighs, and other parts of the body, sometimes large and few in number, at other times tiny and closely spaced. These, to anyone unfortunate enough to contract them, were just as infallible a sign that he would die…” (Boccaccio 5).

Boccaccio explores a world that has no true hope for a future and no memory of the past; the denizens of Florence are inflicted with an ever evolving sickness, a mysterious malady that not only flays the flesh of its host but has raddled the mind and soul of this Florentine community, for they know of impending death but know not its origin nor why nature has decided to inflict such an atrocity amongst them,

“Against these maladies, it seemed that all the advice of physicians and all the power of medicine were profitless and unavailing. Perhaps the nature of the illness was such that it allowed no remedy…At all events, few of those who caught it ever recovered, and in most cases death occurred within three days from the appearance of the symptoms...” (Boccaccio 6).

The community felt helpless beneath the weight of this chaos; no doctor of worldly medicine could ascribe meaning: medieval science could not inhibit the disease, however the moral foundation of the Plague was observed in its tendency to spread,

“But what made this pestilence even more severe was that whenever those suffering from it mixed with people who were still unaffected, it would rush upon these with the speed of a fire racing through dry or oily substances that happened to come within its reach. Nor was this the full extent of its evil, for not only did it infect healthy persons who conversed or had dealing with the sick...but it also seemed to transfer the sickness to anyone touching the clothes or other objects which had been handled or used by its victims” (Boccaccio 6).

The Plague would infect anyone, benevolent or morally depraved, and would do so based only on a basis of the Plague’s proclivity to not only infect those in proximity to the sick but contaminating the materials and worldly environments in which the sickness has merely passed through. The world and its Church establishment, the
moral foundation of this medieval society, may include righteous people, but the corrupt are too many and too prosperous that even a mere proximity to this evil will cause death. The plague becomes a phenomenon that has almost divine qualities through its deeply irreconcilable and seemingly unnatural occurrence, while acting as a morally equalizing judge who seems to condemn for living amongst the impure material.

This moral foundation of the Plague led to two contrasting conclusions in regards to ‘warding-off’ its evils: “Some people were of the opinion that a sober and abstemious mode of living considerably reduced the risk of infection...Others took the opposite view, and maintained that an infallible way of warding off this appalling evil was to drink heavily, enjoy life to the full, go round singing and merrymaking…” (Boccaccio 7). Many were led to believe that the Plague was a mark of corruption, a consequence for the actions of sinful man, however others were driven by this near apocalypse scenario in which the only, and final, way to live the best life is to reject the divine and celebrate through the hell-fire. The appearance of the Plague within this society has left the community grieving the mark that, they seem to believe, God has placed upon them for their acts of sin.

Amid this chaos, the audience is introduced to a group of aristocrats seeking shelter from this impending death; although it is not their deaths that seem to be impending, for they desire merely a respite from the notion of death. “‘I would think it an excellent idea...for us all to get away from this city, just as many others have done before us, and as indeed they are doing still. We could go and stay together on one of our various country estates, shunning at all costs the lewd practices of our
fellow citizens and feasting and merrymaking as best we may without in any way overstepping the bounds of what is reasonable’’ (Boccaccio 16). Boccaccio’s “Brigata,” by leaving the city, rejects this presence of material fallibility, acknowledging a true seeded corruption that is growing within Florence; their reason for leaving would very well seem to be the Plague, however, as I will discuss further in this thesis, there must have been other motivations since they return only ten days later to a still Plague-ridden Florence. The Brigata escapes to their countryside estate, and they appear to establish an order that resembles a cross of philosophies between their fellow Florentines and their preventive measures, “‘A merry life should be our aim...However, nothing will last for very long unless it possesses a definite form” (Boccaccio 20). To ensure a productive, healthy, and bearable experience, the Brigata is to establish an order, a hierarchy, to enforce tradition and markers of society that support a flourishing community; however, that established order is constructed for the purpose of amusement. The game of the Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* is established with this instruction of order and amusement: that each day a king/queen shall be chosen and the theme of that days tales shall be decided by the elected monarchy.

The Brigata attempts to reconstitute social order, relying upon their own intentions and that of the traditions that have framed their perceptions. Joy Hambuechen Potter notes, “...it is in a sense the personification of the self-evident authority of tradition. The authority of the elders is thus absolute because it represents the absolute, the axiomatic values of society in which are expressed the ‘common good’ and the common interest” (Potter 25). The Brigata attempts to establish a
structure which they themselves believe to be the axis of a benevolent social order — it is one that is understood through a system of elders who are chosen or provided a position of authority that is within the best interest of the common good. “The lack of ‘elders’ or any authority except their own may thus also connote denial of any axiomatic values or truths in the universe” (Potter 25). The Brigata must accept an internal order to their experience in order to relay some intrinsic moral value to their inherent situation; that to accept an authority that exceeds the present company would be to undermine that present authority and would dishevel current and seemingly lasting forms of moral value. This may be understood through a framing of Boethian philosophy in judging the value of tradition and relinquishing judgement to higher powers; however, through the behavior of these aristocratic heirs, it is evident that their clinging to authority is less a desire for tradition and more as a frenzied attempt to deny the change around them.

The theme chosen for each day acts as a frame which directs the understanding and telling of each character’s individual stories. These themes are constituted through notions of love and loss, contemplating fate and that which settles amongst the chaos. Teolinda Barolini writes, “Generosity is generated by compassion; this *compassione*, which motivates the author in his Proem at one end of the book and the characters of Day X at the other, is not only the social glue which holds together the fabric of human society, which literally humanizes the society, but is also the textual glue linking the several levels of the *Decameron*” (Barolini 521-522). Boethianism is founded in a notion of compassion for one’s self and for the other in their constant oppression on the Wheel of Fortune — it is seemingly this
compassion to rectify the chaos that structures the development of the frame and the Brigata’s perception of this situation. “...there is no reason why you should be amazed if, on the high seas of this life, storm winds from all direction buffet us about, for this in particular has been our guiding principle, that we be displeasing to those who are most despicable” (Boethius 7). The Brigata is estranged from their community, and through this chaos, their thoughts and stories are directed by the disorder that they seemingly attempt to avoid. Like the imprisoned Boethius who is led astray by the Muses of Poetry, the Brigata seeks to discredit notions of the corruptible Florentine society, and attempt to listen only to their philosophical endeavor of storytelling and the construction of their new-order. By doing so, they are left believing that the frame is useful as the foundation for a reimagining of society.

Fate and fortune shape the Brigata’s interlude and the framing of their narratives; as the Florentines reconstitute the social order, they do so believing that their actions and ideas are contrary to a corruptible hierarchy. They seem to believe, like Boethius, that their actions and efforts towards adjusting their fate, and the fate of a dying Florence, are useless. Goodness may come to those who simply travel the wheel, but to know true fortune is to relinquish one’s self to the machination of order and to remain unwavering in that position of morality. On the Fifth day, with a theme of love and fate designated by Fiammetta, the Fourth story introduces the wealthy Ricciardo Manardi and his affair with Catarina, the daughter of the reputable Messer Lizio de Valbona. This action perpetrated by Ricciardo is one that may be considered immoral and corruptible, for their relations were conducted outside the confines of matrimony. Ricciardo is initially marked as just another corrupted aristocrat who
relies upon the seeming kindness of Fortuna, as he finds a consolation in his standing in the hierarchy. However, the story concludes with a perturbing, yet alleviating, scene between Ricciardo and Messer Lizio, Ricciardo claims, “‘Alas, my treasure, the day has come and caught me unawares! What is to happen to us?’ At these words, Messer Lizio stepped forward, raised the curtain, and replied: ‘What you deserve’” (Boccaccio 397). To this comment, Ricciardo becomes deeply concerned, for he believes that, in the eyes of the community, he deserves death for the actions of premarital sex.

Ricciardo believes that fortune is an actor who responds to the critical actions of individuals and provides an equal consequence, however, the actions of true fortune are not merely instances of ‘karma,’ a response to a material action, but are interested in the quality of one’s soul and where that standard may lead one’s social integration, “‘Ricciardo,’ said Messer Lizio, ‘this deed was quite unworthy of the love I bore you and the firm trust I placed in you. But what is done cannot be undone, and since it was your youth that carried you into so grievous an error, in order that you may preserve not only your life but also my honour, you must...take Caterina as your lawful wedded wife’” (Boccaccio 398). Instead of enacting his right to submit Ricciardo to the authorities, it is decided that Ricciardo and Caterina’s honor can be maintained if they are to be wedded; and this is not a forced action, for the marriage is amiable and filled to ‘their heart’s content.’ An immoral act is not punished without first considering the true morality of its perpetrator; although fickle fortuna only cares for impermanent pride, true fortune considers the heart and soul of the individual who has seemingly fallen to the guise of the Muses, for even Boethius is given a time to
repent and return to true fortune’s light. In this case, even though Ricciardo’s initial adulterous actions are destructive, he is provided a moment of repentance and clarity to which he understands that his fortune is not his own promiscuousness, but is the empathy and dedication that is corrupted to become promiscuity. Ricciardo realizes that true fortune is the accepting and authentic Lady Caterina who would have him, and through this a true reverence is created. True Boethian Fate and fortune seems to become a fixture to which the Brigata comes to understand their own situation and believe that there is still a possibility to return to the top of the wheel.

Although the Brigata appears to be contextualized with benevolent intentions, it seems as though their social order is structured more deeply by amusement than they originally may have intended; or perhaps simply never thought otherwise, for although each individual present will eventually be elected to this monarchic position, this discounts the working members of their party, the maids who are seldom mentioned. Even though the breakdown of common society, through the Black Death, inspired the Brigata to seek greater ideals where everyone’s amusement and welfare is supported, the Brigata falls short of their inspiration and fails to recognize how truly ingrained they are within Florentine culture; perhaps their goal of creating a new order is futile because they refuse to relinquish their traditional notions of hierarchy and social class. Through their interaction with the wait-staff, it is clear that the ‘common good’ is not within the interest of the aristocrats, instead they care only for the common good of the aristocrats. On the Sixth Day, an argument begins between two maids, Licisca and Tindaro, concerning petty gossip which does not involve the young aristocrats, until the aristocrats involve themselves. Being the keepers of the
common good, it is permissible that the Brigata attempts to assist in this quarrel, however, “While Licisca was talking, the ladies were laughing so heartily that you could have pulled all their teeth out” (Boccaccio 445). Although the maids appear to be in a real dispute amongst themselves, the supposed ‘guardians of good’ laugh in the faces of individuals like them, seeking shelter from demise. Instead of being empathetic, the aristocrats are brash and impatient, seemingly only finding the benefit in authority in the amusement that pain and struggle seem to bring to them, “But for the fact that the queen sternly commanded her to be silent, told her not to shout or argue anymore unless she wanted to be whipped…” (Boccaccio 446). Instead of dispute resolution, as the Brigata seems to promote this through their semblances of order, a harsh oligarchy emerges that is not interested in traditional systems working towards a common interest. The order that is created is one that promotes the wellbeing and amusement of its recognized elite while approaching everyone else as though they are utilities for that amusement. It is as though the Brigata does not associate human life with anything differently than the stories that they tell; the maids, like the short narratives, are meant to be contained by the frame and recognized only within the context and the bounds of that frame. The Brigata tells tales for amusement and to delve deeper into their conceptualization of society and its falling; they use these tales as a tool to reconstitute their methods of living and to reaffirm the foundations of their intentions. Through this egocentric lens, the Brigata structures an order that condemns tradition yet reaffirms that tradition, finding themselves trapped within a Boethian torment that seeks to grasp experience but must learn to relinquish that worldly interest.
The Brigata, through their display of dispute resolution, show the caution of requiring amusement regardless of circumstance; that their behavior may be considered repugnant and inexcusable whilst they maintain their own status as this ‘new society’s’ elders. It seems that instead of representing a moral rectitude, the Brigata is meant to display a propensity for Boethian Philosophy to delve into negligence. However, perhaps, given the seemingly apocalyptic predicament in which the Brigata finds themselves, this oligarchical order is a mildly respectable attempt at creating joy and stability amidst the shambling chaos; by finding amusement or irony in struggle, one is capable of persisting through the encroaching darkness. This theme of preservation, rather than corrupt leadership, remains a salient theme throughout *The Decameron*; this is eloquently metaphorized within the First Day by Neifile, praised for her manners, concerning Abraham the Jew.

Jehannot de Chevigny would converse with Abraham concerning faith often, and as Jehannot’s Christian religion would damn those who do not follow its teaching, Jehannot was concerned about Abraham. Abraham eventually indulged Jehannot’s plees, and agreed to, in the very least, travel to Rome and decide whether the establishment, the Roman Catholic Church, is truly a champion of righteousness. Upon his return from his voyage, Jehannot questioned Abraham’s opinion of what he experienced, and Abraham replied, “... unless I formed the wrong impression, nobody there who was connected with the Church seemed to me to display the slightest sign of holiness, piety, charity, moral rectitude or any other virtue” (Boccaccio 40). Although the Earthly Church appears deeply immoral, Abraham is wiser than the average worshipper; he distinguishes the difference between those who
control an idea and the true intentions of that idea, “‘But since it is evident to me that their attempts are unavailing, and that your religion continues to grow in popularity, and become more splendid and illustrious, I can only conclude that, being a more holy and genuine religion than any of the others, it deservedly has the Holy Ghost as its foundation and its support’” (Boccaccio 41). Despite the known recklessness and immorality of the church, the faith of Christianity prevails within the thoughts and hearts of its faithful. A corruption rampant amongst those who are meant to champion the faith would presumably lead that cult to ruin; however, despite that corruption, countless people continue to find a genuine experience amongst that rabble.

Throughout his narrative, Boccaccio shows a rebelliousness, yet certain reverence within the minds of his Brigata — that tradition may not be at the stem of their order, for they find fault and chaos within those traditions. Potter recognizes, “The reason for such bitterness in an otherwise good-humored book has a profoundly social basis. It lies in the failure of the contemporary organized religion to preserve the sacred, and its consequent inability to perform its social function, as demonstrated by the role assigned to it in the description of the plague (one of impotence and absence)” (Potter 48). As Abraham found, the Brigata, by the nature of them running from established modes of salvation and assistance, seem to show a certain distrust within those societal structures. It should be noted that this Brigata had originally formed in the church of Santa Maria Novella, however, it was decided that remaining in this sanctuary would be less beneficial to their salvation than would be leaving society altogether. Boccaccio provides a narrative metaphor for the failure of the established Church to be a true moral pillar in the community; that the wealthy and
influential aristocrats would choose not to seek comfort in the arms of religion in the midst of crisis, is the mark of a system failing to provide for the wellbeing of its constituents.

However, by their experimentation of *restructuring* the social order and hierarchy, rather than creating a new society founded by unfamiliar ideologies, the Brigata displays a certain deference to the current social order that exists. Although they do seem to contrive a contrasting order which attempts to limit the presence of immorality and promotes the prolonging of amusement, the aristocrats still yet cling to traditional notions of class hierarchy as they disregard the amusement of their servants. In this way, the Brigata has not disregarded the previous social order but has only refashioned it in order to better represent their individual goals and desires. Thus, if they are already content with the current order, or at least the benefits of a class hierarchy, why attempt to create a new order emphasized on wellbeing and amusement? The Plague becomes a living metaphor for the Florentines’ social reality, and comes to be viewed as the symptom of a profound corruption in humanity; it would be understandable to consider the Brigata as disillusioned by those structures and traditions that were meant to reaffirm their standing in society. Instead of relying upon the pre-existing order, the Brigata finds a more Boethian resolve within this matter, that faith does not require a determination within the material establishment or leadership; true fate and destiny is determined by God regardless of the examples that the supposedly faithful clergy provide. The establishments of the Church and of the aristocratic order are merely Poetic Muses that manipulate the downtrodden into believing self-contradictory ideals.
The Brigata wants to disregard the Chaos in the midst of a falling order, so as to contrive a new frame, one that is motivated by true divinity rather than materiality; it is the crumbling social hierarchy, established and motivated by the questionable Catholic Church, that dissuades these Florentines from considering the structured traditions, leaving them to discount those aspects of society that stem from this corruptible base. It seems as though, as this Brigata attempts to live contrary to a life amongst the Plague and an unfaithful devotion, to look solely for the amusement and the virtue outside of the present is to take little note of the present chaos; the Florentines become so focused on contriving this new order and satisfying the sensibilities of the Aristocrats’ humor, that they seem to forget why they had escaped to their countryside estate in the first place. By focusing on a Boethian ideal, an impermanent life wherein one must come to relinquish that life by placing hope in the divine and a permanent afterlife, one loses sight of the dirt and grime that those Muses of Poetry appear to sing and listen only to the restricted voice of Philosophy. For if one is always looking towards the divine, and acknowledge this material world as corrupt and illusive, then one begins to disengage from that present world, finding themselves in further denial of the world around them.

*The Decameron* is concluded only ten short days subsequent to their arrival to the countryside estate, “Next morning they arose at the crack of dawn...and with their wise king leading the way they returned to Florence...the three young men went off in search of other diversions; and in due course the ladies returned to their homes” (Boccaccio 797). The men of the Brigata return only to seek further escape from their chaotic lives, and the women return to their barren Florentine estates filled with a
dwindling number of residents — if this is the case, what has the Brigata learned from their interlude, wherein their perspectives were formally framed by the chaos and ruin that encapsulated and wholly influenced their experience. They reformed society, understood the faults of tradition, and noticed where structural order must conform to support the health and amusement of its constituents. However, from their experience, the Brigata seems to have learned nothing — the Black Death did not conclude in under a fortnight, nor did the Brigata mention any news of the Plague ceasing in Florence. If they returned to Florence on such a whim, were they truly escaping due to the Plague or due to some other reason? If they returned so shortly, while the Plague was still in full effect, then their concern must not have been detrimental health effects of the Plague, rather, they left Florence due to an innate boredom, a need for amusement, that is left limited due to the restrictive social order and motivated exponentially by the biblical proportions of this Plague. Rather than the seemingly appropriate theme of distinguishing God and Church, this does not seem to be at the very core of the Brigata’s concerns.

Although the frame is that of a dying metropolis, this frame, rather, is motivated by a more primal urge within that of the Brigata — in the face of death, one reminisces and holds to the experiences and joys of life, only to ultimately be left in denial, leading one to seek out that which they had lost, that which can never be retrieved. Joel C. Relihan writes,

“It is of crucial importance to our understanding of Consolation that the prisoner refuses to forget his earthly life, to let go of that kind of memory, even though, alone and within his cell, he has no real scope for ethical action either...the conclusion, that individuals must of necessity behave well before the eyes of an all-seeing judge, is far from the transcendent view of the world that Philosophy had hoped for. The prisoner, offered the path of
transcendence, takes instead the path of humble access to God through prayer...the ultimate ethical choice made by the prisoner in *Consolation* is to stay alive (Boethius xvii).

Boethius decides to ‘return’ to life in hope of rebuilding a forgotten perspective, however, if the individuals placed in those Boethian shoes are not of the same moral rectitude as Boethius himself, the ideology becomes perverted and reductive, sending the Brigata back to chaos rather than enlightening them concerning the chaos. “Every pleasure knows this one thing:/Goading on those who enjoy it./Like those honeybees that hover./Once it pours its pleasing nectar,/It is gone, and pangs the bruised heart/With a sting that can’t be drawn out” (Boethius 64 l. 1-6). The material wealth, extravagant possessions, and the excessive lifestyles, in which the Aristocrats of the Brigata presumably indulged, are noted as extremely fleeting objects worthy of little to no attention; once the pleasure of a material thing or experience has been transferred to the indulging actor, that pleasure has occurred and will never occur again, in the same manner or at all. That which is accomplished, owned, experienced within the physical realm must be understood as the fickle and transient thing that it is. The Brigata returns to Florence either in a denial in which they have talked themselves into, believing the reality of their new order and forgetting the tragedies of Florence, or they return in hope of a familiar materiality that will motivate the next stage of their lives. However, in either circumstance, the Brigata will return to be left deeply disenfranchised by their philosophical journey, for they will still find death and destruction with little to no semblance of their high-society Florentine lives. By the very nature of the limitation of the Boethian frame, to understand the bounds of fate and true fortune, the transient materiality of their lavish lifestyles were meant to
fade sooner or later. They return to a plague-ridden Florence, presumably to care for their ailing relatives, or to die themselves.

**Middle Eastern Narrative and a Reconciliation to the Boethian Ideal: The Canterbury Tales**

It would seem pertinent to recognize the Boethian influence upon the frame and the progression of the pilgrims’ tales within *The Canterbury Tales*. At the conclusion of the tales in most early manuscripts, Chaucer claims, “Wherfore I biseke yow mekely for the mercy of God that ye preye for me, that Crist/have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes, and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. 461). Chaucer renounces most of his writings, claiming that they are sinful and merely stories of vanity; however, he refuses to retract his translation of Boethius and his stories of saints, for they are worthy tales of a high style that support those favored philosophical beliefs. Rosemarie McGerr writes, “The translation effected is one of new dimension rather than rejection. Throughout the poem, Chaucer reorients the reader among several levels of perception by means of a narrator who fights with the inevitable ending of his tale and vacillates between objective and subjective views of his material” (McGerr 109). However, the retraction is not a genuine article of remorse, rather, it should be understood through the perspective of Chaucer’s typical satire and humor; for how could this be a genuine retraction if it is merely a single page note placed seemingly as an afterthought as it appears in elegant manuscripts of what he claims as a deeply sinful tome? Chaucer is not authentic in his retraction, rather, he is observing the hyperbolic reactions of a Boethian community in response
to a contrasting text; this is to say that Chaucer seems to acknowledge that, although Boethian philosophy may be a foundation for this text, the manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* is one of deeply integrated and opposing ideologies stemming from not only Western philosophies, but also evidently from the Arabic traditions.

In addition to the traditional Boethian values that are present within Chaucer’s text, it appears that he is utilizing a rather specific and seemingly contrasting philosophy that is acknowledged periodically throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. In one such case, as the Wife of Bath introduces her tale, she claims, “Of alle men yblessed moot he be,/The wise astrologien, Daun Ptholome,/That seith this proverbe in his Almageste:/ ‘Of alle men his wysdom is the hyeste/That rekketh nevere who hath the world in honde” (Metlitzki 111). As discussed previously in the introduction, Chaucer utilizes the texts of Petrus Alfonsi in considering this contrasting philosophy, however, it is mostly unknown as to the extent of Arabic influence within the writings of Chaucer. The quote stated above is unusual. Dame Alys, the Wife of Bath, mentions the *Almagest* by Ptolemy, a supposedly Western text written by Ptolemy himself; however, Dorothee Metlitzki observes that “The source ‘at the beginning of the Almagest,’...is of particular importance as it confirms Chaucer’s use of Ptolemy’s *Syntaxis* in the translation of Gerard de Cremona from the Arabic...It contained thirty-three sayings attributed to Ptolemy and was taken from an Arabic work…” (Metlitzki 112). Chaucer’s quotation becomes a direct allusion not to Western philosophical ideals, rather, he seems to nod to the Arabic sources he utilizes in translation. It is through this exploration and integration of Arabic philosophy with Western European thought that one can observe the evolution of the frame within Geoffrey Chaucer’s
construction of the frame narrative; Chaucer seemingly distorts the traditional frame, marked by a Boethian determinism through the limitations of the frame, through the presentation of contrasting philosophies that create a paradox of agency and a persistence for control.

The frame in which Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is situated is a seemingly benign ritual undertaken by devout Christians, a pilgrimage, “The tendre croppes and the yonge sonne/Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne/And smale foweles maken melodye/That slepen al nyght with open eye./So priketh hem nature in hir corages,/Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. 47 l. 7-12). Chaucer begins his poem with a sense of longing and anticipation; it is a suspense derived from a wholly natural space, that, just like within the crops is the propensity to grow and within each bird is the instinct to sing, so to does human inclination lead on to seek community, freedom and justice through the parameter of faith and devotion.

The pilgrimage of this narrative is destined for the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket, “Of Engelond to Canterbury they wende/The hooly blisful martir for to seke/That hem hath holpen what that they were seke” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. 47 l. 16-19). What is important to note at first is that the characters, despite the notion of pilgrimage that Chaucer introduces in the previous lines, do not seem to be seeking pilgrimage out of this primordial instinct. Instead, the pilgrimage to Canterbury, contrary to the Brigata and their interlude for entertainment, is marked by a lack or an ailment; the characters of this manuscript do not seek vacation or reprieve, they travel to be healed. This scenario is critical to the frame and the
perception of narrative within *The Canterbury Tales* as it is within this situation that one can observe the brink of human emotion and distress; these characters are concerned with an impending limitation to their lives (death, sickness, or otherwise), while attempting to negotiate their existence and individuality through presenting their own personal narratives. What is also important to consider, in relation to the Boethian ideal, is to whom or what the characters are devoting their faith; David Wallace notes, “...pilgrims seek out Becket, the martyr, because he helped them recover from illness. This sense of obligation, which amounts to the honoring of a contract, is foreign to the animal and vegetable worlds...The emphasis upon natural amiability is maintained as the poem turns from divine to man-made governance” (Wallace 67). This act of Pilgrimage is one that seems to deeply contrast the unsullied natural scene described by Chaucer; a sense of obligation or devotion is not a natural phenomenon, but a human desire that humanity has grown to adopt and reason. Faith, contrived by seeking out miracles from a human source, leaves the scene to be produced and reasoned through entirely human methods. Rather than finding solace in God’s divine trajectory, as Boethius might promote, the characters of *The Canterbury Tales* find solace in human intervention and material society.

As Boccaccio’s Brigata comes to establish a near-democratic association, within the high-born world, in which amusement and wellbeing are the primary goals, Chaucer’s “Compagnye,” although ultimately competing to entertain, devolves more readily into strife and class dispute. The members of the Compagnye are introduced to each other and to the audience in the Tabard, a pub in Southwark, that is owned by the host and coordinator of this pilgrimage, Harry Bailey; it is in this pub that
Chaucer provides an account of all the pilgrims and his expectations for the ensuing religious expedition. However, it would seem peculiar that an event such as this, a journey of pious intentions, would commence in an atmosphere for drunkards; by doing so, it would seem that an equal playing field is established, where social influence will not overcome the zeal of drunken mirth. The pub is perhaps the only environment in which members of conflicting class statuses may inhabit a similar space and yet still have an amusing time, albeit, even in this environment, a reputable knight still may not interact informally with the local miller. Although the Host appears to be a rather merry individual, promoting that environment of unburdened amusement, he is described, “A semely man oure Hoost was withalle/For to been a marchal in an halle” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. 60 l. 751-52). Although the General Prologue appears to be one engaging with the notions of equality, as the narrator provides nearly the same consideration concerning the details of all the pilgrims, the Host is likened to a professional who negotiates social boundaries and facilitates appropriate hierarchical etiquette, Wallace suggests, “A marshal...needed to be an expert in reading the fine discriminations of social degree…” (Wallace 68). By comparing the Host to such a profession, the narrative sets forth a foreboding of social conflict in which the social structure will be seemingly biased towards the more reputable class.

The pilgrimage is thus provided parameters through the emergence of a game, as motivated by the host, Harry Bailey; each pilgrim is to tell two tales, one on the way to the shrine and, although it is not included within the text of *The Canterbury Tales*, one upon their return to the tavern. The pilgrim with the best story, as judged
by their host, will be provided a free meal at the inn. Although this appears to be a congenial action on behalf of the Host, as it seems that he is suggesting a way of connecting with one another while making their journey more entertaining, by contriving this situation as a game, the host does not create an amiable environment, rather, he creates a landscape for competition and hierarchy; the goal is not simply to listen to and to enjoy the tales, but is to establish a ranking of narrative. Harry Bailey, like Dioneo in the *Decameron*, furthers this reaffirmation of traditional hierarchy in attempting to repress certain tales, presented through explicitly *boring* themes. Gabriel Josipovici considers “It is partly this reason too that the Host warns pilgrim after pilgrim not to preach. A sermon, for the Host, represents the height of boredom...What the host really objects to is that the preacher has designs on his listeners” (Josipovici 537). This may appear ironic, as the Host rejects to listen to religious sermons while leading, what is supposed to be, a profoundly religious journey; however, although hypocritical, rejecting the notion of preaching and sermons rather seems to be a strategic maneuver in order to suppress all competing ideological foundations for understanding the social order. Preaching is ousted, because a true preacher is too focused on the narratives of their listeners, their struggles and their joys, and what they believe to be the present, unsullied *truth*; they believe in a single, higher truth, and refuse, or simply cannot, conform to ways of being that are outside of their own narrative. The *Decameron* seems to hinge upon moralistic tales, although requiring amusement, so that they may be able to create something ideologically new — the Host requires no morals and attempts to dissuade from stories of such leaning, for he wants an *amusing* story without foundational
ideologies that would keep those stories from delving into hearsay and insult towards the corrupted ruling class. Not only is the Host a facilitator of social order, but he is also a censor of social or political ideas that hold no value to him nor to the bourgeois class that he represents. The Host not only facilitates hierarchical oppression, but is emblematic of a hierarchical structure that acts in contrast to Boethian moralistic and religious zeal.

The Host, in his position as the marshal of the group, attempts to uphold a traditional notion of hierarchy through supporting the voices and interests of those pilgrims from a higher social status; namely the Knight. In a process of manipulating common ideals in order to support the interest of the ruling class, the host upholds the beliefs of the elite; in turn, by supporting ideologies that exploit the rural and pauper classes, Chaucer exposes a possibility for corruption within Boethian philosophy. I will analyze certain pilgrims in their relationship to wealth and the aristocracy, as well as their convictions toward certain Boethian ideals, particularly: the Knight, the Monk, Chaucer the Pilgrim, and the Parson.

It is within the Knight’s Tale that the audience is introduced to Chaucer’s interpretation of Boethian philosophy and the strange ramifications that coincide with its practice. The Knight presents the tale of Arcite and Palamon, Theban cousins from the clan of Oedipus, imprisoned by Theseus following his invasion of Thebes. While in prison, the cousins gaze upon the royal garden from their cell, observing Theseus’s daughter, Emelye, with wonder and grace; while Arcite is now freed and covertly seeking the attention of Emelye, Palamon learns of this indiscretion, escapes prison, and attacks Arcite in public, making Theseus aware of this imprudence. Theseus
forces an arena battle between the cousins in which Arcite is accidently injured, resulting in his death. Palamon, although in grief, accepts Emelye as his wife. This story is meant to mark the fates of two nobles, a propensity for all humans to experience rises and falls of fortune. Theseus pronounces to Palamon after Arcite’s death, “Ther helpeth noght. Al goth that ilke weye./Thanne may I seyn al this thyng moot deye” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales.* 94 l. 3033-34). The Knight presents, and seems to agree with, a deeply Boethian notion considering the process of life and death, that regardless of the bounties of life, all are subject to the same fall from grace, death. Although this may arouse anxiety, Theseus continues, “Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me/To maken vertu of necessitee/And take it wel that we may nat eschue./And namely that to us alle is due./And who so gruccheth ought, he dooth folye” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales.* 95 l. 3041-45). Theseus, and in this way the Knight, appears to acknowledge death and an acceptance of that impending fate. It seems that the Knight accepts that Wheel of Fortune, who acts in fickleness, knowing that all humanity is subject to the same fate. However, the ending of this tale serves to disregard the previous recognition: that one should not avoid the notion of this fate, to acknowledge, accept and proceed with life, “For now Palamon in alle wele./Lyvynge in blisse, in richesse, and in heele./And Emelye hym lovet tendrely./And he hire serveth so gentilly./That nevere was ther o word hem bitwene/Of jalousie or any oother teene./Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales.* 95 l. 3101-07). Despite his profound recognition of impermanent satisfaction and happiness, the Knight drifts off in thought hoping for a happily-ever-after, which he had just professed does not exist. Palamon cannot live
from then on in happiness with his wife, for they will die and shall be subject to
God’s true Wheel of fate that shall certainly judge Palamon critically. It is this
resistance, that the Host attempts to rectify, that presents a corruptible Boethianism.

Although the Knight, representative of elite social thought, displays an
acceptance of Boethian philosophy in his tale, it does not seem as though he is
confident of or committed to its teachings. As the Knight is systemically supported by
the Host, the marshal who is meant to reinforce hierarchical etiquettes, the notions of
Boethius’s philosophy become distorted, reinterpreting a certain determinism latent
within Boethianism, in order to benefit their own personal interests. This concern
becomes particularly apparent in the presentation of the Monk’s tale, as the Knight
attempts to reconcile a truer and systematic Boethian ideal that imposes the idea of
threat upon his social standing. The frame, at this point, becomes engrossed within a
feud of a corrupting Boethianism that continues to influence the interpretation of the
tales.

The Monk’s tale is a tome considering the rise and fall of great individuals,
expressing the fickleness and complexity of Boethius’s Wheel of Fortune. “At
Lucifer, though he an angel were/And nat a man, hym wol I begynne./For though
Fortune may noon angel dere,/From heigh degree, yt f el for his synne” (Chaucer. *The
Canterbury Tales*. 331 l. 1999-2002). The tale, beginning with ancient mythological
accounts and proceeding with more contemporary medieval portrayals, traces the
history of descents from fortune, happiness, power, and wealth. The Monk’s rhetoric
is meant to display the heights of a Boethian ideal: exploring the bounds of fickle
Fortuna and noticing the persistence in her impermanence. The material gain of
fortune’s grace is nothing in comparison to the stability and eternality of nature, that of the divine. However, this tale is cut short when the Knight intervenes, “Hoo...good sire, namoore/of this!/That ye han seyd is right ynough, ywis/And muchel moore, for litel hevynesse/Is right ynough to muche folk, I gesse./I seye for me it is a greet disese./Whereas men han been in greet welthe and/ese,/To heeren of hire sodeyn fal, allas!” (Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales. 347 l. 2766-73). Although the Knight agrees that the Monk’s theories may be true and commonly believed, as the Boethian ideal of a receding fortune was conventional, the story still yet frightens the powerful Knight, as the tale forewarns him of an impending fate, for his fortune to have reached its limits. Even if the story upsets the Knight, if he truly believed in the philosophy of the tale, he would not interrupt so abruptly in the middle; by interrupting, the Knight attempts to affirm a certain lasting hierarchy that he would like to observe within his “Boethian” society.

As the Knight is allowed to finish his tale without interruption, those beneath him in the social hierarchy are not allowed the same comfort; the marshal of the group, the Host, reaffirms the Knight’s griefs and suspicions in his response to the Knight’s interruption, “Ye...by Seint Poules belle,/Ye seye right sooth. This Monk, he clappeth lowde./He spak how Fortune covered with a clowde/I noot nevere what...Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse!/Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye’ (Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales. 347 l. 2780-83, 2788-89). Although the Knight was the only one to respond negatively to the tale, the Host generalizes the group’s disagreement with the Monk’s tale; even more so, he claims that the Monk’s notion of Fortune is blurry and incoherent, denouncing the knowledge of a
conventional “tragic” philosophy only to see the elite relieved of anxiety. This only supports the notion that the Host is merely attempting to uphold the traditional hierarchy; the process of interpretation becomes soiled in the reconciliation of ideologies and beliefs solely of the wealthy, those who are ascribed greater social responsibility. Boethian philosophy becomes something of deep tragedy to those who have everything to lose, and because the elite believe this rhetoric to be true, it must become a manipulated philosophy of which only retain elements which support the standing of the structurally dominant.

This strange interpretation of Boethian philosophy is solidified and perhaps reconciled, not by reasoning the Knight’s response to this tale, rather, it is by conceptualizing the frame: by whom the tale is being told and how he relates to that message. The Monk is described as a masculine and frivolous man, “A Monk ther was, a fair for the maistrie./An outridere that lovede venerie,/A manly man, to been an abbot able” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. 49 l. 165-67). He is a talented man who enjoys hunting and indulging upon desires, he is an affluent monk who has no qualms in discussing his corruption or hypocrisy. Seemingly, the Monk, although of a different social class, is in no worse of a financial position than the Knight, however, the Monk is capable of remaining calm in light of a belief that is wholly Boethian; presumably the Monk is at the top of the Wheel, as he indulges and is indulged on whim, with only a tragic descent to follow. Eleanor Johnson notes, “Refocusing attention now on content, the Monk says a tragedy can do nothing but lament how Fortune strikes down the proud, when least expected...The Monk...shifts from talking about tragedy as lamentation to lamenting the limitations of tragedy itself” (Johnson
In a way, the Monk is capable of conceptualizing tragedy as something entirely different than the Knight; tragedy is a systematic and natural process that is not the fuel of one’s anxiety, but is the bounds of that tragedy, a conclusion to the suffering of the material. Fortune’s Wheel is not to be lamented, while that outer-bound to the wheel is completely unknowable, but is the cause of worry; lamentation becomes a futile activity that is not worth the effort. Through this juxtaposition of the Monk’s personality and the tale that he tells, Chaucer attempts to pressure Boethian philosophy into exposing a contrasted observation of the deterministic meaninglessness promoted by the distorted version of the host; although the Host, and the elite, wish for the pilgrims to understand fortune as fatalistic, emblematic of one’s social position and trajectory, through the Monk, Chaucer attempts to display a true philosophical enlightenment that corresponds with the unsullied presentation of Lady Philosophy. The Monk is capable of acting contrary to true fortune, good morals, while not becoming irked knowing that the future is merely a plummet into oblivion; in some way, the Monk has accepted the illusory nature of reality and has found the beauty in its fickleness. He lives a deeply immoral and material life, but is content in knowing that that material is impermanent and brief. It is here that one can begin to observe Chaucer’s integration of a spiritual motivation of Boethian philosophy by framing it through a lens of the present materiality, as influenced by Petrus Alfonsi and the Arabic frame narrative tradition; instead of focusing on that which transcends the frame, the intention and process of the divine, it is more prudent to consider a moralistic observance of reality that is rooted within that reality to which humans have access.
Beauty through impermanence can be observed in Petrus Alfonsi’s *Disciplina Clericalis*, within the tale of “The Half Friend and the Perfect Friend.” A father is discussing with his son how to know a good friend; in his explanation, the father tells his son to test his friends — the son should murder a calf, place it in a sack, and approach each friend claiming that you have killed a man a need assistance to escape a painful fate at the hands of the law. However, “Many are a man’s friends, when he counts them, but few when he has need of them” (Alfonsi 106). A true friend is not meant to hold another to a moral standard, to pray for their soul or only to encourage morally decent behavior, instead, the perfect friend is the one who not only does not provide judgement, but assists materially and ensures that murderer’s/friend’s financial and emotional stability. Chaucer notices this understanding of humans’ relationships to one another and the material that encompasses their lives; it is within this acceptance of the material that one may come to understand the necessity, and profound importance, of the material regardless of its impermanence. As Chaucer continues his tales, the ideals of the Host and the Knight slowly become refuted and resolved through the pragmatic solution presented by Chaucer the Pilgrim and his like-minded peers. The lofty ideals of the elite become understood through a context of impermanent beauty wherein morality is thus no longer limited by faith and the divine; rather, ethical interaction is marked by worldly and physical support/entertainment, for the physical reality is one in which humanity lives and thrives.

Seemingly, in order to purvey this contrast of philosophical ideals, Chaucer places himself inside the frame so as to establish a vocal and dynamic foil to the Host.
By establishing the author of the story as an intradiegetic narrator, a narrator who is a character within the story that they tell, Chaucer creates a tension unlike that of the *Decameron*. Not only do the characters vie for dominance over the frame, but now there is inserted an objective manifestation of the frame: the author external to the narrative is capable of recognizing his meta-position to the narrative in order to manipulate the frame while he is also actively influencing the perspectives of those characters in a way that allows them to reason the limitation of the frame on their own terms. Like the game in which the pilgrims are contending, Chaucer creates a competition between himself and the Host of the pilgrimage. Both characters desire to be in control of the frame, that which directs and limits the interpretation of narrative. However, the Host fails to recognize even his untenable position within the narrative, for the only individual responsible for relaying the narrative could hold agency over the frame of that tale; it is the work of authors, who design the landscape, to control and manipulate the bounds of reality.

Regardless of the Host’s true position in juxtaposition to Chaucer the Pilgrim, and Chaucer the author, this does not halt the Host’s attempts to demean the pilgrim and discredit his respectability; the Host comes to represent the vulnerability of class hierarchy, those who rule through manipulation and repression, a satirization of the grief that manifests at the loss of agency. Through his refusal to relinquish any agency, the Host accepts an inevitable death to this own control and sanity, for those who have convinced themselves of their own ultimate-control of the frame are to find a more painful death once that agency has been challenged. Although the Host’s notions should be considered outside the margin, exterior to the bounds of truth, the
Host uses Chaucer the Pilgrim as a scapegoat, projecting his own true position on those who threaten his current state. Preceding the telling of Chaucer the Pilgrim’s tale, the Host attempts to ridicule Chaucer, “This were a popet in an arm t’enbrace/For any womman smal and fair of face./He semeth elvysh by contenaunce,/For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales.* 292 l. 701-04). Harry Bailey constantly points out Chaucer’s aloofness, his small stature, and, within this passage, what the Host calls an *elvish* appearance. It would seem as though Chaucer the Pilgrim is quite a foil for the Host, a forthright and overbearing individual, that the Host marginalizes Chaucer as distinctly different and untrustworthy. This mention of the elf points toward this fact: Medieval European folkloric traditions surrounding the elves have marked this mythological race as tricksters, selfish creatures who prey on humans for their own mysterious benefits.\(^3\) The Host is not only claiming Chaucer to be, in a way, secretive, but also to have malicious intent in his secrecy. However, this observation by the Host is misguided, for the Host claims that Chaucer’s patient pilgrim is any less patient and destructive than himself. The Host wants to demonize a critical way of thought for merely being marginally different: to recognize the principles of Boethianism and Christianity, but to disregard the motivations of a deterministic class hierarchy. In this way, Chaucer the Pilgrim becomes a misconstrued symbol for the irony and satire that one may

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\(^3\) “...the faithful are left in no doubt not only that fairies exist, but also that they are quite simply devils” (Green 15). Fairies/elves were often associated with illness and deception; often, these creatures were believed to abduct and impersonate humans of their choice in order to further their mysterious agenda.
observe in those manipulated Boethian ideals. E. Talbot Donaldson in his classic 

_Chaucer the Pilgrim_ wrote:

“Now a Chaucer with tongue-in-cheek is a vast improvement over a simple-minded Chaucer when one is trying to define the whole man, but it must lead to a loss of critical perception, and in particular to a confused notion of Chaucerian irony, to see in the Prologue a reporter who is acutely aware of the significance of what he sees but who sometimes, for ironic emphasis, interprets the evidence presented by his observation in a fashion directly contrary to what we expect” (Donaldson 485).

The frustration that the Host presents stems from an intrinsic disillusionment that arises in attempting to discern Chaucer the Pilgrim’s character and purpose within the frame. The Host attacks Chaucer, accusing him of treachery, prior to Chaucer representing himself to the group — that is to say Chaucer has seemingly yet to speak to anyone of the group prior to the Host’s attacks, and yet the Host attempts to frame Chaucer’s narrative with his own perspective. However, with the _Tale of Sir Thopas_, the audience, and the Host, is capable of realizing that prejudice, as a rejection of the satirical frame that encompasses the Host and the totality of the _Canterbury Tales_, is futile. By marking the Host’s narrative, the pilgrimage to Thomas Becket’s shrine, by irony and childlike repetition, as is the rhyme scheme of Sir Thopas, is to consider the humorous and fallacious ramifications of living under certain ideologies. As the Tale of Sir Thopas comes to represent the true silliness of the _Canterbury Tales_ itself, the Host’s philosophy becomes reinterpreted as toxic and illogical as his position in the tale serves to hyperbolize the satirical actions of the elite.

Chaucer’s first attempt to tell a story, _Sir Thopas_, is a rather short story concerning Thopas’s lust for the fairy queen, but the tale is interrupted by the Host, “‘for pleynly at a word,/Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!’” (Chaucer. _The
Canterbury Tales. 296 l. 929-30). The Host ridicules Chaucer’s simple rhyme scheme, claiming it is improper and of no quality to the audience; he demeans Chaucer and he puts pressure on his skills as a literary figure, as the Host believes that this is the best of which Chaucer the Pilgrim is capable. This appears ironic, as the individual who wishes to have autonomy over the frame, the Host, attempts to persuade the audience of the author’s ineptitude to convince the audience of certain literary nuances and themes. Although this may persuade the other pilgrims of Chaucer’s incapacity, to the reader the Host’s own credibility is tainted once the reputation of the true coordinator of the frame, Chaucer the author, is harmed. The host finds himself in a battle for control, incapable of removing those representations that Chaucer uses in contrast; for this reason, the Host does not simply disregard Chaucer’s Tale and skip his tale altogether, rather, “‘Lat se wher thou kanst tellen aught in geeste/Or telle in prose somwhat at the leeste/In which ther be som murthe or som doctrine’” (Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales. 296 l. 933-35). Harry Bailey provides Chaucer another chance to tell a tale that is worthy of their listening, something that is heroic yet joyful. However, what follows, the Tale of Melibee, has been seen by critics of Chaucer as a passive-aggressive response by Chaucer to provide the exact opposite of what was asked.

The Tale of Melibee follows the story of Melibee and his wife, Prudence, following a home invasion that leads to the death of their daughter. They discuss the philosophy and strategy of handling those who have wronged them. It is a narrative written in long prose with high-style jargon, which has led critics to believe that this story was merely told to punish the pilgrims with boredom for their insolence. It
would be expected that Melibee’s meditations would draw from only European ethical and epistemological traditions, however, contrary to popular Medieval philosophy, Melibee and Prudence’s thoughts are framed through a type of Arabic philosophy, primarily Petrus Alfonsi and his *Disciplina Clericalis*. As the Host concedes, at least for the moment, the frame to Chaucer, Chaucer begins to implant additional philosophies in order to satirize, and in this way, critically analyze the ramifications of a corrupt Boethianism, as presented by the Host, and how they may be reconciled. Perhaps the social hierarchy is not divinely ordained and perhaps spirituality should be no basis for a physical existence, for reality is tied to the land, the material, and the human heart, Chaucer directly quotes Alfonsi, “The book seith, ‘Whil that thou keepest thy conseil in thyn herte, thou kepest it in thy persoun./And whan thou biwreyest thy conseil to any wight, he holdeth thee in his snare.’ ‘And therfore yow is bettre to hyde youre conseil in youre herte than praye hem to whom ye han biwreyed youre conseil that he wole kepen it cloos an stille’” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. 304 l.1144-45). Amidst the corrupt, as this world is contrived seemingly of sinners, the only process to ensure one’s welfare is to believe in one’s own foresight, for praying, placing hope within the spiritual, is only a way to make one susceptible to manipulation. By exposing themselves through tales and relinquishing themselves to the notion of a spiritual pilgrimage and an intrinsic hierarchy, the pilgrims open themselves up to being swept up by the ideals of institutional religion and hierarchy; the Host is capable of taking advantage of the pilgrim’s personalities and their, now exposed, beliefs, motivating strife and condemning a lack of this persistent exposure, this *myrthe and solas*. 
In fact, the Host responds to this tale in a rather unexpected manner that would seem to expose a social incapability to accept the pragmatic while needlessly praying for an unsullied perfection, that social convention may ever be under one individual’s control. The Host is not offended nor does he reproach the *Tale of Melibee*, instead, he agrees with its themes, however opposes the stories concepts on the basis of his wife’s complete disregard of practical behavior and sympathetic thought. Harry Bailey’s wife cannot hear this tale, for her lack patience and her sense of a dying agency leads her into such situations as, “And if that any neighebore of myne/Wol nat in chirche to my wyf enclyne/Or be so hardy to hire trespace/Whan she comth, she rampeth in my face/And crieth, ‘False coward, wrek thy wyf! By corpus bones, I wol have thy knyf’” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. 329 l. 1901-06). The Host’s wife becomes irritated at the slightest reflection of her ‘non-status,’ that someone may not bow to her as if she were a high-born noble deserving of the same respect; at this instance of social rejection, the Host’s wife does not attempt to reconcile the small control she does have as a mortal and a physical person, but rather turns to blasphemy, ‘by Christ’s bones.’ When the disillusionment settles, the wife fails to admit that she is not in a position worthy of social control and collapses into a furious state of anxiety where it is not her ideals that have failed her, but society that has failed to meet the expectations of the ‘true’ ideals of her beliefs. Although the Host is reproachful of his wife’s behavior, it is an unmistakable hypocrisy that follows his words, for this moment is quite contrary to the Host’s actions, as he consistently requires the tales of the pilgrimage to meet his social expectations and to satisfy the elite’s control in regards to the perception of the tales.
In the *Disciplina Clericalis*, there is a parable entitled ‘The Mule and the Fox,’ one those which Chaucer directly quotes in his *Tale of Melibee*. A Fox asks a Mule about his lineage, and instead of presenting his own, albeit meager, ancestry, the Mule answers that he has a relative who achieved a noble stock. Using this scenario, the father attempts to explain to his son, amidst a culture of nobility that stems from military prowess or familial connection, as to what qualities mark the existence of a true noble. Through Alfonsi, Chaucer attempts to reroute the process of determinism away from a spiritual foundation and towards a morality fueled by the material world. “Choose a man who is instructed in the seven liberal arts, and well versed in the seven rules for good conduct, and well versed in the seven knightly rules; such a man I would consider to be representative of true nobility” (Alfonsi 114). A true noble is not one with military prowess or divine designation, it is generated by the actions of humans: a person who has invested time and energy into self-enrichment, they are a pupil of the world, interested in subjects that attempt to discern the material plane and attempt to maneuver it through empathy and consideration of others. Chaucer’s tale of Melibee provokes a contrary philosophy in regards to the ideals of the Host and the ruling class, proposing the true corruption to that hierarchical way of life.

Chaucer concludes his *Canterbury Tales* in an abrupt manner; it concludes with the tale of the Parson with no further explanation of the rest of the pilgrimage, even though the audience was promised a full journey to the shrine and a return to the tavern, with a decision as to the winner of the game. What is presented in the Parson’s tale is a rather conventional Christian text, “Strictly speaking, the Parson’s tale is
neither a tale nor a sermon but a penitential manual” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales.* 400n1). The Parson presents an ordinary conviction towards religious beliefs and Christianity, particularly the foundations of sin and penance; however, although this structure of beliefs may be conventional in context of the Medieval European tradition, the presentation of a manual to contrast sin seems unconventional and unexpected in the frame of the *Canterbury Tales.* Chaucer displays a lineage of the frame stemming from the Arabic and has amplified this influence through his use of Petrus Alfonsi. In this way, Chaucer promotes philosophies of the Arabic frame, however chooses to conclude on this deeply Christian note, seemingly alien from the materialist philosophy of *The Arabian Nights.* It would appear that Chaucer wants to reignite an understanding of the frame through a more approachable source than distant Arabic philosophies: the divine and its necessity for material repentance, as well as attempting to remove the corruption within a distorted contemporary Christian/Boethian way of thought. In this satirical position, the Parson’s tale comes to represent the ending that the audience was promised, an epiphany resulting in personal growth and wellbeing, the Shrine of Becket, as well as the recognition of the truest storyteller, as chosen by the Host or in spite of the Host.

The Parson’s tale becomes the object of spiritual desire, and at the same time, emerges as a reconciliation of the material in light of the spiritual, a contrary Christian/Boethian ideal that is created by the class hierarchy. The Knight and the Monk may find themselves within two veins of thought, contrary to each other, and by their coexistence, manifest a Boethianism that debases true spirituality. A pure Boethianism is easily misconstrued and can lead society to ruin, perhaps as inferred at
the conclusion of the *Decameron*. However, to reconcile this toxicity, The Parson describes the process of penitence as a tree, at its roots is contrition — the process of human sin and forgiveness is an endeavor that is deeply bound to the material Earth, for it is only within this material human that imperfection is possible. “Of the roote of contricious spryngeth a stalke that bereth braunches and leves of confessioun and fruyth of satisfaccioun” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. 403 l. 115). Although from the Earthly dirt springs a deficient creature, something that, at some point, will require forgiveness and will transcend those bounds of knowledge through remorse. David Raybin writes, “It is thus more accurate to Chaucer’s portrayal to see in the extended metaphor of pilgrimage not a transcendent circle of godly/angelic/saintly perfection existing outside of earthly time and space, but something of a fan leading into a more linear...human movement toward such perfection” (Raybin 15). Although the ideal of a Boethian philosophy is to work towards a permanent and spiritual existence, it is only through a deeply material process by which one chooses to repent, motivated by remorse, within this Earthly plane that one will gain access to these transcendent planes.

The Parson, through his explication of sin, reveals that the Host, and the Knight, will perhaps never be content because they fear a loss of agency; that they dare to reinterpret Christian and Boethian ideals to manipulate the determinism of everything, meaning that they have no control and never had control but seem to fear the loss of something that they never possessed. However, by accepting the importance of the bond of the material and the spiritual through Chaucer and the Parson, the bound of the frame, the encroaching anxiety of fate and human mortality,
stands as an imposing force that must not be misunderstood as the seemingly threatening monstrosity that it is, but to regard the frame for its awe-inspiring power to encompass and motivate the trajectory of human history. To relinquish one’s fears of this staggering knowledge, that agency means nothing light of the bounds of an impermanent existence, is to become content in that material existence, understanding that it is a place of beauty that activates one’s transcendence into the divine.

Meaning through Recontextualization: The Tale of Griselda

In the elements of the frame narrative, as presented by Boccaccio and Chaucer, the literary device of the frame is a metaphysical representation of the limitations of humanity; however, as societal expectations of mortality and divinity became more understood, more conceptualized, the frame required the adoption of additional philosophies in order to reconcile the propensity for corruption in Boethianism. Therefore, in order to properly illustrate this transition of philosophical foundations within the frame narrative, I will focus on one particular tale, ‘The Tale of Griselda.’ This is the only tale, within this frame tradition, that has been consistently translated and rewritten, diversifying the frame. The story of Griselda is originally written in the vernacular of the Florentine language by Boccaccio, then reinterpreted and provided with a new ‘frame,’ encompassed by epistles, by Petrarch, until Chaucer satirizes Petrarch’s beliefs, seemingly in an attempt to return Griselda to her proper Boccaccian frame. It is through this process of creation and innovation, of which Griselda is the subject, that one may come to an understanding of the shifting of the frame’s concerns.
The significance of the Griselda tale and its lineage as presented in all its “retranslated” versions, the nuances that allow this tale to transcend languages and to become a paradigm for reinterpretation, lies within the symbolic position of Griselda and how she becomes an object of interpretation rather than an individual who has her own whims and desires. Carolyn Dinshaw writes, “Walter ‘translates’ Griselda: he sees her and recognizes her natural beauty and virtue even in her impoverished condition, under her ragged clothes; he chooses her for his bride, takes her from her father, orders her to be stripped and reclothed in finery, and makes her wife and mistress of his household” (Dinshaw 133). Gualtieri, or Walter, is pestered to take a wife by the inhabitants of his kingdom, contrary to his own whims, and he agrees to do so only if he is allowed to choose the wife without the argument of his vassals. Eventually, he chances upon Griselda, the daughter of an impoverished farmer, and although her appearance is meager and deprived, Walter’s instincts notice a more profound rendering of this peasant girl, that there is a true naturalness to her state, a beauty that transcends the paltry conditions of her present situation. However, despite simply noticing the beauty that lies beneath, Walter must advance this natural state of Griselda into a retranslation of her body, to redress the signified in order to produce the effects of a more esteemed signifier; Walter forces Griselda to be stripped of her clothing, to be naked in public, only to be reclothed in the finery of his estate.

This moment of the ‘Tale of Griselda’ marks the transition of Griselda’s body, from the extension of an individual to an object of which can be known and trusted, Dinshaw notes, “Translatio...has the potential for revealing the truth and wholeness, the plentitude of the female body, obliterating, that body; for disassembling and
substituting; for estranging the truth and fragmenting wholeness (Dinshaw 134).” In the midst of that translation, the moment when the tale has been shaved of its signifying details that produce the context of themes, there can be a moment where the truth of the signified is displayed, that the object of knowing is revealed in its isolation to the frame; Griselda’s naked body, removed from the ragged clothes of the poor, and prior to being redressed with rich finery, becomes an object of knowing without the reference of an established frame. Within her nakedness, she becomes truth, a thing which is manipulated to support individuals’ contrary lives, but whose underlying beauty will never be realized because such a variable thing has no underlying consistency that can be known, which leaves Walter to constantly question the loyalty and persistence of Griselda. By redressing Griselda, translating her into a higher caste, Walter, in actuality, rejects the truth and places importance and faith within that frame of nobility, for he cannot accept Griselda as the daughter of a poor farmer, and she must be reinterpreted.

Within this translatio, Walter holds some degree of expectation in his desire for knowing, to understand the woman he has chosen to marry and to be able to be confident in her loyalty. Throughout their marriage, Walter provides Griselda with several tests, truthfully acts of abuse, to observe whether Griselda would retaliate or respond negatively; Walter convinces Griselda that he has killed their children and even throws her back into the peasantry, only to play the hero when he returns all that he had taken away. Walter believes that he knows Griselda, for he is the one who places upon her the context of a frame by retranslating her into his own class and community, and in this way, Griselda's intentions would be entirely knowable.
Although Griselda consistently responds to Walter’s abuse with expected passivity, Walter refuses to find satisfaction within this presentation of her qualities. It would seem that the mark of loyalty and faith is not one that is expressed through action, but is indicated through an inaction, a lack of treacherous measures. It appears that Walter may only be satisfied with an explicit representation of loyalty, of which does not exist in a relationship of faith; Walter should understand Griselda's persistent passivity as her unbreaking loyalty, however, Walter can never be satisfied for he expects the world to be knowable through the existence of the signified rather than to judge individuals through the physical and direct representation of the signifier.

This anxious frustration presented by Walter, and the desire for agency among the unknowable, is exposed through the manifestation of the frame’s historical lineage, as the tale is retranslated through Petrarch and Chaucer. The frame is expanded as Griselda is reinterpreted and provided new meaning. Dinshaw observes, "The tale’s clear, almost schematic outline of the relationship between husband and wife rendered it useful as an exemplum...its potential for pathos suggested both dramatic treatment...and an upward shift in level of style, rendering it an occasion for affective response; and the moral issue of the truth-value of fictional discourse itself could be thrown into relief by the tale’s inclusion in collections of narratives...where the meaning or value of the tale could be debated" (Dinshaw 132)

It is particularly important to notice where meaning is created within the frame narrative; this position becomes exposed in a tale such as Griselda’s as one can observe the transition of debate and response to the tale through several frames, as surmised through characters of the narrative. The thematic response of this exemplum is rendered through a framing of the tale through which context and a certain perspective is provided, Robin Kirkpatrick writes, “...we cannot forget that the tale is
told within the framework of the Canterbury game. Of course, Boccaccio’s story too
is set within the ‘cornice’ of the hundred tales; and...we cannot ignore the epistles that
accompany Petrarch’s version” (Kirkpatrick 245). Although the details of the tale
remain relatively consistent in each interpretation, the theme is manipulated through
the juxtaposition of the greater frame that surrounds the tale. The translation of
Griselda provides no new insight, the authors simply want to conceptualize the deeds
of Walter through the understanding of religious connotation or of sin. However,
these themes are not provided within the bounds of the ‘Tale of Griselda,’ they are
inferred from the position within the narrative which the tale occupies, the character
who has decided to tell this tale, as well as the subject of the greater frame that
encompasses the tale. The frame narrative becomes marked not by the inclusion of
certain minor tales, but of the undulation of crisis and revelation of storytellers that
motivates the understanding of those particular tales.

Dioneo’s Tale

Griselda’s Tale is originally written by Boccaccio within the tenth day of his
*Decameron*; it is the last story presented before the Brigata returns home to a plague-
ridden Florence. Is this moment meant as an impasse, to symbolize the enigma that is
disease and God’s wrath, or perhaps the suffering that is destined for all mortals? It
seems evident that the perspective of the narrative is meant to be influenced by the
position of the Griselda tale as the final interpretation and the last thoughts left to the
readers and to the Brigata. The tale is told by Dioneo, the contrived leader of the
Brigata through control and manipulation; in this way, Griselda’s tale is not
emblematic of the beliefs of the majority, but are a distorted philosophy meant to
suppress and demean female independence. The *Decameron* begins by introducing a group of young women who feel vulnerable amidst the chaos of the plague; they discuss in what ways they may overcome their insecurity and decide that it is a lack of men amongst their group that produces this anxiety, “You must remember that we are all women, when left to themselves, are not the most rational of creatures, and that without the supervision of some man or other their capacity for getting things done is somewhat restricted” (Boccaccio 17). Their supposed unsteadiness is soon cut short as the women of this Brigata chance upon three young aristocratic men, and thus feel sufficiently secure to leave the city; however, this line of thinking is absurd, and it is Dioneo who is the first to point this out, “It is not our foresight, ladies, but rather your own good sense, that has led us to this spot” (Boccaccio 20). Dioneo recognizes that the men who chanced upon these women, not vice-versa, are the fortunate ones for it is the ingenuity and tenacity of the women of this Brigata that enacted their plan to escape the plague; Dioneo initially presents himself as a marginalized character, an individual with seemingly foreign social beliefs whose primary interest is the relinquishment of oppression and subjugation. From this initial presentation of Dioneo, it would seem as though the Tale of Griselda, as told by Dioneo, would be a proto-feminist narrative that is profoundly critical of Gualtieri; however, through Dioneo, a propensity for corruption within the Boethian ideal manifests and exposes his ideals as selfish and manipulative.

In the same breath as his supportive proclamation, as well, it is Dioneo who motivates a sole ideal of amusement, “I know not what you intend to do with your troubles, my own I left inside the city gates where I departed thence a short while ago
in your company. Hence you may either prepare to join with me in as much laughter, song and merriment as your sense of decorum will allow, or else you may give me leave to go back for my troubles and live in the afflicted city” (Boccaccio 20).

Although Dioneo just professed the women’s courage and intellect, he utilizes their own insecurities to support his own personal interest; by threatening to leave the Brigata if his demands are not met, in a way, he holds the women hostage, as they are still not satisfied with the notion that they can manage without a man. By posing this desire as a threat, Dioneo exposes his antagonism and hypocrisy regarding his beliefs of autonomy and social structure; he exploits supportive beliefs in order to manipulate those of a contrary mindset into believing that his perspectives are the only noteworthy considerations. It is this necessity for amusement that motivates the decay of the aristocratic order that is enforced upon this journey. Upon this demand for amusement, the escape from Florence becomes less of an act of survival, and more of an elective vacation; this can be ultimately observed following Griselda’s Tale, as Dioneo motivates an amnesia towards the chaos and recognizes purely the joy, and the Brigata returns to the place that they were supposed to be escaping. Dioneo’s framing of Griselda’s Tale encourages a notion of the overbearing and unpragmatic man.

Dioneo explicitly frames Griselda’s Tale with a reproach towards Gualtieri and a seemingly sympathetic observation of Griselda’s precarious position, “I want to tell you of a marquis, whose actions, even though things turned out well for him in the end, were remarkable not so much for their munificence as for their senseless brutality. Nor do I advise anyone to follow his example, for it was a great pity that the
fellow should have drawn any profit from his conduct” (Boccaccio 784). Gualtieri’s behavior is repugnant, his abuse of his wife is not the mark of a saintly or of a concerned individual, rather they are the actions of a tyrant. It is only the actions of a criminal, of a demon wringing out the humanity within an individual, that would contrive such a situation, to limit, out of selfishness, the actions and perspectives of others in fear of reprisal. However, although the frame of the tale professes the heinousness of Gualtieri’s actions, does this tale, as original to Boccaccio, profess a positive feminine message and the absurdity of hierarchy, in this case patriarchal? Although Dioneo presents himself as a potentially progressive character who attempts to support some notions of women’s independence, it is only while he is in positions of dominance that he makes such claims. Marilyn Migiel explains, “When it comes to the subject of gender and sexual relations, Dioneo’s views get reinforced because he gets the first and last word. When he introduces the first woman character of the Decameron and the first representation of heterosexuality, he initiates the debate on gender even if he does not take account of gendered views” (Migiel 60). Not only does Dioneo dictate the terms by which the Brigata is to structure their journey, but he also happens to provide the final tale of each day, summarizing his perceptions of the group’s philosophy concerning that day’s theme. Although he appears to disregard the patriarchal influence of their previous society, through his tales and conjecture, the manner through which he conducts his presentation provides a rather contrary perception of Dioneo that is controlling and, by consistently providing the final words, like the Host of The Canterbury Tales, refuses to relinquish control of the frame.
Regarding Dioneo in this way, the abuse in his final tale should be considered through the notion of a corrupted Boethianism, Migiel describes:

“...Gualtieri has to resort to extreme measures, since there is almost no humanly conceivable way for Griselda to prove her absolute submission to him. It seems hardly coincidental that violence against women emerges when the very possibility of women’s empowerment does. The stories of the *Decameron* imply that if women gain power, their power must remain limited, by violent means if need be” (Migiel 149)

Even though his comment was in support of women’s independence, his constant framing of the days’ tales and themes show Dioneo’s distrust in the philosophical fortitude of his female companions, that they are incapable of providing that most salient message to the audience. Dioneo only wants the women of the Brigata to believe him to be benevolent of his actions so as to win their trust, gain control, and exert dominance over yet another conquest. Boccaccio’s Griselda becomes a criticism of unchecked hierarchical systems, however, falls into paradox when realizing that those professing ideals are the very same people who enforce those hierarchical orders. A Boethian fatalism is distorted into rendering determinism and social position into a sign of divinity rather than the fickle Wheel that it is. The promise of progress becomes a tool of oppression to force the oppressed to willingly submit to a rule that is contrary to their own personal interest and wellbeing.

*Petrarch’s Tale*

Subsequent to Boccaccio’s telling of the Griselda tale, Francis Petrarch became privy to the story and found within it a profoundly religious theme that explores the depths of a divine epistemology and intention, “...the story has a strong romance aspect, in that it represents the victory of the individual will...Petrarch turns this motif to a religious account, emphasizing the unpredictability of divine intention,
which can send its grace ‘even into the hovels of the poor’” (Kirkpatrick 232).

Griselda is a tale concerning agency and reconciling the limits of knowledge — however, Petrarch attempts to reconstruct a notion of epistemology regarding the unknowability of the divine and humanity’s blind acceptance of that fate as fickle Fortuna. Petrarch manipulates the Boccaccian frame, distorting the position of Griselda, and Walter, into an object of respectability rather than a sociopathic display of Walter’s own narcissism; quite literally, Petrarch Latin title for this tale translates to, “A Fable of Wifely Obedience and Devotion.” Petrarch reframes Walter’s symbolic actions, his abuse, in order to affirm the good, yet harsh, intentions of the divine.

Although Petrarch seemingly and genuinely believes in this representation of Griselda, it would appear questionable as to whether Petrarch truly wished to invoke the frame narrative tradition and to respond to the philosophical foundations of that lore. It is within a letter written by Petrarch, sent to Boccaccio concerning his Decameron, that Petrarch exposes his contradictory response to Griselda and, seemingly, fails to observe the true immediacy and enigmatic anxiety as presented within the Boccaccio’s ‘framed’ Griselda:

“I too...would have wept, for the subject certainly excites pity, and the style is well adapted to call forth tears, and I am not hard-hearted; but I believed, and still believe, that this is all an invention. If it were true, what woman, whether of Rome or any other nation, could be compared with this Griselda? Where do we find the equal of this conjugal devotion, where such faith, such extraordinary patience and constancy” (Petrarch 391).

If this is what Petrarch understood from the tale of Griselda, that she should be admired for her patience and not pitied for her need to be patient, then how much of Boccaccio’s Decameron had Petrarch truly read? Although it has been noted that
Dioneo represents corruption and manipulation of Boethian themes, however, his immediate response to this tale is reproachful and attempts to persuade the readers of Griselda’s misfortune. Diverging from this line of thought, Petrarch considers Griselda as a parable of devotion where faith no longer considers the limitation of the frame and simply finds contentedness in non-contentedness; devotion is a vague understanding of the divine in which the divine requires unwavering and unquestioning loyalty regardless of the circumstances. To succumb patiently to abuse, to disregard the suffering of the frame, is to display one’s faith and loyalty. However, to observe Griselda as Petrarch has, to disregard her thoughts and actions through Walter’s intention, is to consider the framed tale without the frame that directs one’s perception of that tale.

Petrarch’s version of Griselda appears in his Seniles, a tome of epistles regarding Petrarch’s convictions of literature and narrative’s position amongst religious ideals. These letters encompass the devotional tale of Griselda; however, by placing this tale among short religious letters, Petrarch removes Griselda from the frame tradition where the tale is no longer surrounded by narrative. This is to say that the tale no longer appears with the contemplation of character introduction and/or persuasion; Griselda’s tale is left to be contemplated amongst devout themes and rendered, more or less, through the audience’s perspective alone. Without the considerations as presented by Boccaccio and later Chaucer, the tale of Griselda becomes a tale devised entirely through the perspective of Gualtieri, without taking into account the true immorality of Griselda’s treatment. This removal from the
frame, and quite literally extracted from its native tongue, is claimed to be motivated by a desire for a more divine theme, Petrarch writes:

“This story it has seemed good to me to weave anew, in another tongue, not so much that it might stir the matrons of our times to imitate the patience of this wife — who seems to me scarcely imitable — as that it might stir all those who read it to imitate the woman’s steadfastness, at least; so that they may have the resolution to perform for God what this woman performed for her husband” (Petrarch 388).

Petrarch seems to agree with Boccaccio in the absurdity of the situation, that an abuse and a victimization has taken place. However, Petrarch places the burden of proof upon Griselda, in that her behavior, not Walter’s, is to be avoided within social encounters. To behave so patiently is to behave passively, allowing one to succumb to the abuse that Walter inflicted; Petrarch blames Griselda for the abuse that is inflicted upon her, as any woman who may imitate her behavior would find themselves far less successful. However, Petrarch recognizes that this behavior should be distinguished when approaching concepts of the divine, that Griselda’s behavior is meant to be understood as a parable in humanity’s relationship with God — but how could such a parallel be drawn when the metaphorical God, Walter, is an abusive and vindictive despot who cares only about loyalty and not about the welfare of his faithful?

Griselda’s tale in its reframing is provided a burden of universality and a transfer of knowability; that Griselda no longer represents God’s unknowable intention, but Walter symbolizes God’s ever wrathful purpose that must not be questioned, that one must relinquish their acceptance of the limitation of the frame and to devote themselves to the boundless expanse of the divine.

Although the frame appears to be a device which limits the extent to which the characters may live and breathe on the page, it is through the frame that the story may
become self-aware and provide context or critical analysis to the presented stories. However, through Petrarch, Griselda is surrounded not by a critical frame, but by epistles; this would mark the falling of the establishment and a rise to an unchecked authority of the author. The reader must no longer consider the perspectives of several characters and of the story itself, but is now subject to only the whim of the author, of a God. David Wallace notes, “Petrarch’s epistles, though full of historical detail, tend to escape or erase the specific moment of their historical origin...The formation of the Petrarchan academy, then, represents an attempt at self-classicizing, of exempting text from the erosions of time” (Wallace 266). The frame, as displayed by Boccaccio, is devised to limit social influences, motivated by the ideals of the establishment that may skew thematic occurrences through vague metaphors and allusions. Through the use of the frame, the tales become solidified and tangible within a believable world. However, Petrarch’s use of the epistles are meant to mark a time out of time, to remove the tale of Griselda from that corporeal world — creating a frame that is bound to no context. This shows the level of control, and a refusal to relinquish any modicum of agency, that a thinker like Petrarch requires of the frame. Like the Host or Dioneo, Petrarch wishes to remove himself from aspects of space and time so as to consider his tales as timeless and autonomous; however, unlike these other characters, Petrarch wishes to represent Griselda’s tale as universal, not to establish his own agency, but to regard reality as minimally influenced by the frame; for the frame is the limitations of mortality and human control whereas the frame’s exterior is a place of Boethian and Christian heights. Petrarch attempts to manipulate the frame tradition
into recognizing not the limitation of the frame, but the boundless extent and relationship between the interior of the frame and its divine and ageless exterior.

The Clerk’s Tale

The Tale of Griselda, now charged by a frame that exposes, yet reinforces, corruption, as well as manipulates thought in order to fortify a lofty Christian theme, yet is contrived in order to sustain an ignorant perception of corruption, arrives to Chaucer as an abused and bastardized, misunderstood and mistranslated distortion of the true reality of the frame. Chaucer is made aware of Griselda’s tale through Petrarch’s rendition, and in a way, directly responds to the text as presented by Petrarch; Chaucer, once more, translates Griselda, however this time, she is not removed from the frame of context so as to be interpreted through the perspective of her abuser, rather, Chaucer, although now writing in English, returns Griselda to the narrative frame as originated by Boccaccio. In this way, Chaucer wants to restore that method by which Griselda may be understood; she is not the product of her tale, but is the representation of social anxiety and cannot be conceptualized without the response of that society. By removing Griselda from the narrative frame, Petrarch relinquishes Griselda’s signifiers, the perspectives and motivations of the characters to tell and respond to this tale; in restructuring the narrative frame, Chaucer returns the frame to a necessary contextual position whereby the meaning of Griselda can be debated. Peggy Knapp notes, “Interpreting Griselda’s actions and words (few as they are) is not the problem — they are quite clear; the problem lies in discerning the Clerk’s tone toward them, and the whole text’s tone toward the Clerk. For Griselda does not speak for herself; her story is told by a man, and a clerk at that” (Knapp
Chaucer returns Griselda to the traditional frame where the tales must be interpreted through the philosophies and motivations of the storyteller; as Boccaccio’s Griselda must be understood as a product of Dioneo’s behavior, Chaucer’s Griselda, too, must be conceptualized through the Clerk and his juxtaposition to the other characters and the pilgrimage.

Like the Decameron and its framing by Dioneo’s perspective, it seems as though Chaucer’s retelling of Griselda holds the same concerns; the Clerk, a man of heightened intellect, is in control of Griselda’s tale, and although the Clerk is ultimately critical of Walter, like Dioneo, his viewpoint leaves no room for women’s perspectives and seems to reinforce those patriarchal stereotypes of male intellectual dominance. However, in discerning more clearly the Clerk’s inclinations as well as the Host’s, and the Pilgrims’, reaction to the Clerk’s telling of Griselda, one may observe a more radical notion of the Clerk from his alienated position in the pilgrimage and his cynical convictions toward elitist institutions.

Like Chaucer the Pilgrim, the Clerk remains quiet during the journey, and when he finally speaks in order to respond to the Host and to tell his tale, it is in a satirical response meant to, perhaps, frustrate the elites of the journey and to demean the unnecessary hierarchy of their group. The Host asks the Clerk to, “Telle us som murie thyng of adventures./Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures,/Keepe hem in stoor til so be he that ye endite/Heigh style as whan that men to knyges write” (Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales. 189 l. 15-18). The Host appears to hold some respect for the Clerk, as he acknowledges the Clerk’s intellectual capacity and ability to speak with highly articulate terms and lofty themes. Specifically, the Host wants
the Clerk to tell an amusing tale of adventure and excitement, but to limit his use of rhetoric at first, in order to contrive a gradual growth in the complexity of the language, as is done in those high-style stories told to nobles. The Clerk responds to the Host by accepting his request, however, the Clerk chooses to tell a specific tale of lofty themes, a tale that he acquired through a poet of high and lofty styles: Francis Petrarch. “He is now deed and nayled in his cheste” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales.* 189 l. 29). The Clerk specifically denounces Petrarch and his message with him; in doing so, Chaucer attempts to make a statement concerning Petrarch’s version of the Griselda tale, that his ‘High-Style,’ meant for kings/tyrants, is one that is contradictory to a true understanding of Griselda, “Griselde is deed and eek hire pacience,/And bothe atones buryed in Ytaille,/For which I crie in open audience” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales.* 207 l. 1177-79). Not only Petrarch, but Griselda is dead in Italy; to the Clerk, Griselda’s tale, and the thematic messages that was meant to be considered through her tale, died with Petrarch’s translation from the original Italian to the high and lofty Latin. This would seem relevant in considering Petrarch’s attempt to make the Griselda tale timeless and universal, Leonard Michael Koff writes, “The reference to Petrarch...where Petrarch, the living source of poetic inspiration, is a corpse...and the abrupt retreat from Petrarch’s gloss of Boccaccio...where we are reminded that Griselda is dead, too, imply...that Chaucer means to return his *Clerk’s Tale* to history, insisting it is not a ‘literary and historical terminus’” (Koff 282-83). By firmly rooting Petrarch and Griselda within the world, dead and buried in Italy, Chaucer attempts to contrast the ‘agelessness’ of Petrarch’s epistles — Chaucer places Griselda firmly within Earthly space and time, establishing
the story of Griselda into a material and worldly understanding of Walter’s abusive actions rather than to conceptualize this interaction as that of divine intervention. Chaucer seeks to interpret Griselda through a frame that has not yet been contrived in this frame tradition; he creates a platform through which an “objective reporter” may contemplate Griselda through her actions, or inaction, rather than through Walter’s activities.

This platform, through which Chaucer seems to reframe the interpretation of Griselda, appears to emerge not only within the disposition of the Clerk, but his choice of description and the presentation of the tale. The Clerk reproaches Walter’s actions, like Dioneo, claiming him to be corrupt and abusive, however strikingly different than Dioneo in his description of Griselda; while Boccaccio and Petrarch are mostly concerned with Griselda’s appearance as her mark of virtue, Muriel Whitaker notes that,

“In ‘The Clerk’s Tale,’...Griselda’s body is initially almost invisible. Chaucer declines to describe the colour of her hair and eyes, or the fairness of her complexion, though the phrase ‘bright of hewe’ may summarise such features as blond hair, blue eyes, lips like red roses and teeth like pearls. Instead, he urges her humility, diligence, abstemiousness, virginity, respectfulness and filial love…” (Whitaker 88).

Although the Tale of Griselda, in Chaucer’s version, is told by a man, that man is a Clerk, unlike Dioneo, who understands the need for agency amongst a deterministic world, and refuses the sway of social hierarchy or of patronage so much so that he rejects to notice the world as a product of merely its appearances; the world is an intermingling of the spiritual and the material, one’s divine kudos to bring rise to their perceived beauty. To the Clerk, Griselda’s beauty may go unsaid while there are more
redeeming qualities worthy of mentioning — traits that allow her to traverse adversity and to remain content with the little she can control.

The Clerk concludes his tale claiming the unknowability, and even irrationality, of expecting to find a Griselda, “No wedded man so hardy be t’assaille/His wyves pacience in hope to fynde/Grisildis, for in certein he shal faille” (Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. 207 1180-82). By concluding the tale by rebuking Walter, and claiming the impossibility of the existence of Griselda, Chaucer exposes the absurdity of Griselda’s, and the frame’s, prior iterations as a method of elitist manipulation of context and of fundamental religious values. “...the dismissal of the possibility of ever finding Griselda’s ‘nowadays’ speaks to fears Chaucer is implicitly addressing in the *Clerk’s Tale* about a God whom we cannot know and in whom we can only trust. The only surety in a world created by such a God is our echoing voice, text for text” (Koff 286). The Clerk’s meditation becomes a symbolic satirization of Petrarch’s disposition concerning the divine allegory of Walter; the Clerk professes his frustrations with the world, and his contentedness that, like Griselda’s loyalty, the divine is an entirely unknowable thing. To fall into anxious distress, abusing those around out of anger and frustration, is foolish, a childish and ignorant display of one’s connection to their spirituality. If the God of this world is unknowable, with enigmatic intentions, then the only method humanity has to analyze the divine is to know and to observe God’s creations, to speak and to translate ideas of this Earthly plane, and to converse and expand the breadth of worldly knowledge. Walter is abhorrent for his actions and, like the Host, he refuses to accept the limitations of his knowing, an agency concerning the fate of his life; Walter seeks to conquer the frame
by understanding the intentions of the divine and of mortality. The frame breaks down to symbolize not the process of life, nor the conclusive nature of death, but to emerge a disgruntling anxiety that may only exist when one acknowledges the frame. One must come to accept, to become content with knowing that Griselda, the frame, is unknowable, and to live in the present and fading mysterious beauty of this material reality.

The historical lineage of the frame narrative seems to be one that attempts to analyze context and the bounds of that context, to know where context ends and how that lack of understanding affects how one maneuvers this material plane of existence. Boccaccio, influenced by Boethius, presents the frame as a dichotomy conflicted with itself when attempting to reconcile the bounds of mortality and the extension of the divine, as the notions of Boethianism promote a single higher truth that becomes manipulated through the presentation of fortune. Although fortune is to be conceived lightly, the deterministic reality of Boethianism allows for the elite to justify their material position through a divine and spiritual foundation. It is this philosophy that persuades the original Western frame to denounce prior corruption for an advanced and manipulated ideal that only seemingly creates more corruption, rather than reduce that plague. Chaucer seems to attempt to combat this motivation of the frame, and attempts to reconcile this propensity for corruption within Boethianism by establishing a duality of the frame, that the limits must not be conceived of only through an objective position outside of the frame, from the position of God, the author, but must be understood, as well, from a subjective position inside of the
frame, observing the physical manifestations of God, the author. It is of pure and
good intention to appreciate and find value in the impermanence of one’s position
inside of the frame. It is here that Chaucer introduces Arabic philosophy, as
represented by Petrus Alfonsi, in order to contrast the possibility of corruption within
Boethian modes of thought. The Arabic philosophy supports a notion of materiality
and the benefit of sharing wealth and produce rather than spirituality, for humans are
material creatures who find pleasure within the experiences of this world. The frame
narrative, after *The Canterbury Tales*, becomes a mode of narration charged by a
frame that will ever be paradoxically self-critical, for that is the true representation of
the frame: an unknowable and uncontrollable thing from within where humanity must
come to accept the anxiety, and beauty, of impermanence.

**Experiencing the Frame: *If on a winter’s night a traveler***

*The Tale of Griselda* stands in this tradition as the ultimate metaphor for the
frame: to attempt to understand that which limits perceptive boundaries is futile, for
inherent meaning is not provided by a source but is represented through physical
manifestations of belief, namely one’s actions. It is this dilemma that Walter refuses
to acknowledge, that it is through inaction that Griselda truly represents her
unknowable intention. Although these notions come from Medieval theology— how
to understand the intention of God— it would seem relevant and enlightening to
conclude this thesis with a representation of the frame that seemingly directly
responds to this tradition through the use of postmodern theory about the signifier and
the signified. Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* intervenes into the
frame tradition and attempts to contemplate a modern perspective of that encroaching
limitation, however, this interpretation is truly not much different than Chaucer’s own notions of the frame. By expounding Calvino’s novel, I hope to represent the trajectory of the frame tradition and how the intermingling of philosophies create an undue tension, leading the reader to mar, yet accept, the frame.

*If on a winter’s night a traveler* is famous particularly for its use of second-person narration, placing the reader of the novel within the text in order to experience the deep limitations of the frame for themselves. As Chaucer places himself as a character within his own text in order to breach the boundary of the frame and to project an objective perspective within the subjective world of the frame. What is significant concerning the author holding a narrative position in their own text is that the author’s character knows what exceeds the bounds of the frame, and as the author, motivates and decides the continuation of the narrative. However, by placing the reader into the novel, the objective perspective within the text is lent to an entity who is incapable of motivating the story, for they are not the ‘creator’ of this world, but merely a passive observer. By placing ‘you, the reader’ as the protagonist, it makes the reader feel as though they hold some agency within the novel, some position that is afforded at least independent thought or decision-making; however, it is this narrative style that limits the readers autonomy further by designating the thoughts and actions of the authorially-prescribed narrator as the thoughts and actions of the reader, regardless of whether the reader believed those thoughts or wished to continue in that manner. Like the characters of the frame attempting to reconcile their position in the frame, the reader too becomes subject to the inexplicable anxiety that the frame brings forth: the knowledge that the present material reality is propelled by a system
of fortune, one that consistently entertains readers’ whims, however rejects any possibility for closure.

This novel is about a reader who wishes to read Calvino’s new novel, however, consequent to returning home from the bookstore, you, the reader, find that the book includes misprints resulting in a lack of conclusions; the reader journeys to find text after text, each one meaning to be the previously misprinted novel, however exposes itself to be a completely different misprinted novel. This is the quintessential aspect to Calvino’s novel, the journey for narrative while finding abrupt and displeasing conclusions within those narratives. The frame never concludes because of a disparity of meaning within the world of the novel: the publications of structured text is merely that, for although the reader may be privy to the physical manifestation of language through the novel, the signifier, the true intentions of the novel are lost with the inaccessible intention, the signified, of the author.

The reader is not simply interested in continuing the book for his own sake, without your female counterpart, Ludmilla, you would never have journeyed down this path: Ludmilla pushes you to the local university, to the Publisher’s office, to the totalitarian nation of apocryphal text — however, Ludmilla never seemingly joins you in this journey, it is only the thought of her existence, the possibility for her noticing you, that motivates this journey forward, hoping for a reunion that, in actuality, ends in frustration and confusion. Ludmilla is conclusive, aloof, uninvolved, yet seemingly the catalyst to drive men mad. Although Ludmilla constantly changes her interests, she initially claims, “I prefer novels...that bring me immediately into a world where everything is precise, concrete, and specific. I feel a special satisfaction in knowing
that things are made in that certain fashion and not otherwise, even the most commonplace things that in real life seem indifferent to me” (Calvino 30). Ludmilla wishes to observe a conclusiveness to the world, a sense of control in knowing the bounds of experience, while she herself is not willing to commit to the journey in finding the closure that she so desires; instead, Ludmilla relies on the ingenuity of others and a lack of foresight that dissuades others of Ludmilla’s true fickleness. Ludmilla has a sister, Lotaria, who is quite the opposite of Ludmilla; she is calculable, theoretical, and involved, someone who can understand the trajectory of a story by simply understanding word frequency and register. She can know whether a novel is worthy of attention based on these simple facts alone, and if that novel does not meet her criteria based on her arbitrary algorithm, then that book must be superficial. After these depictions of the sisters of this novel, I think it is hardly a surprise in identifying the root meaning of their names that Lotaria is a representation of the Italian Lotería, ‘lottery/fortune,’ whereas Ludmilla is a Slavic name translating to ‘Dear Love of the People.’ Quite literally, it is Fortune and Fame who are at the center of this dilemma. Like Boethius and the Wheel of Fortuna, you, the reader, are subject to a similar fate in which the gods of this impermanent material reality manipulate humanity’s motivations in order to serve the frame through wily and illogical action that disregards human limitations.

What is it that Calvino wants you to think of the frame? Are we meant to relinquish our autonomy to Fame and Fortune, left in frustration once their fickle attentions have left us, or are we meant to accept Fame and Fortune’s impermanent pleasures? The reader themselves, not the protagonist but you who physically read
Calvino’s novel, becomes frustrated due to Ludmilla’s fickleness and the frame’s incessant behavior to end abruptly. About three-quarters into the novel, you have journeyed to the apocryphal nation and are held in prison, or not a prison, controlled by totalitarians, or revolutionaries, or counter-revolutionaries, or perhaps revolutionaries posing as counter-revolutionaries so as to gain rapport with the totalitarians who may as well be revolutionaries under the guise of totalitarian uniform. The apocryphal nation is one that has taken the signifier and the signified to an extreme, where nothing means anything; that which represents the identified can be anything for there is no true way of representing intention. It is in this convolution that the reader begins to suspect a tragic end and a disillusionment concerning Ludmilla and your journey. Thus, as quoted prior to the introduction of this thesis, Calvino proposes that you abandon the book. Four years ago, when I first read this novel, I agreed with Calvino and concluded my reading — Calvino’s novel is a book of no ends and thus, Calvino wishes that this meta-novel end in the same way. However, now after spending a year researching the philosophical foundations of the frame narrative, I return to Calvino to finish the novel, and what follows makes me feel no different than the Host of *The Canterbury Tales*. The proposal that Calvino puts forth is not meant to be taken seriously; it is a lesser individual who would take up the offer, someone who cannot recognize their own lack of control in a world bound by the fickleness of the frame.

Throughout the novel, Calvino consciously cites the *Arabian Nights*. At first, it is utilized as a metaphor, likening the reader’s experience of the never-ending story in favor of, or in spite of, Ludmilla, fame, to Shahrazad’s plight. The cessation of
narrative, creating suspense from limitation, propels the plot forward while simultaneously preserving the storyteller’s, and the reader’s, existence in a suspended state that is the isolation of the character on a page; the only hope is to maintain the narrative in order to continue the narrative. However, perhaps this is not so simple according to Calvino, for the only parables that Calvino decides to elucidate are actually not tales found in the *Arabian Nights*, or seemingly anywhere. Even the foundations of context, and the plights interpreted therein, are still subject to the same corruptions as any other text. Although the *Arabian Nights* becomes a misrepresented object over the course of time and interpretation, like Griselda, there still may be a persistence of truth amongst the seemingly contradictory philosophies. If you continue the novel passed Calvino’s proposal, you are introduced to Gertrude-Ingrid-Corinna (we do not know her real name), a revolutionary posing as a counter-revolutionary that is infiltrating a revolutionary encampment so as to gain trust with the totalitarians. She is your savior, your interrogator, and your mission-handler, however, although her identity is as fickle as Ludmilla’s interest, it is in her care that you find the comfort for which you were searching all along. What is interesting is that we finally come to call her Alfonsina — Alfonsi — and she comes to promote notions of sustaining the chaos of unknowability and to simply find meaning or entertainment within that chaos; in the midst of your, the protagonist’s, descent into anxiety induced madness, Alfonsina says, “Stay calm and wait. Go on reading your book” (Calvino 215). Although this appears an arbitrary statement, this is the first time in the novel that someone encourages your reading for the sake of tranquility, to
enter a narrative world with the expectation to entertain, to distract from the ever-encroaching unknowability of the frame.

The novel concludes with your return home, since this final journey you have had no contact with Ludmilla or her sister, Lotaria. You decide to go to the library in order to perhaps find all of those books you did not have a chance to finish, but instead of finding narrative, you find the voice of the text represented in fellow readers at the library. Even though a lengthy debate ensues, where the desires of narrative are conceptualized through the notions of Ludmilla and Alfonsina (the revolution). However, the simple truth with which the readers finally conclude is one that represents the height of unknowability and a lack of control, yet an acceptance of impermanence in contrast to the only other option. “In ancient times a story could end only in two ways: having passed all the tests, the hero and the heroine married, or else they died. The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death” (Calvino 259). Thus, instead of accepting the inevitable death to which the narrative continuously seemed to lead, you, the reader, return to Ludmilla and marry her. After not reading this novel for four years, upon reading this, I promptly threw my book across my bedroom, only to return to it a day later with a new understanding. Why return to the fickle god who is not interested in your existence as a person, but merely your possibility to create story? I believe that Calvino means to return the perspective of the frame to a less understood character within the frame tradition: effectively, you, the reader, become the Monk of The Canterbury Tales. Knowing his place on the wheel and providing little care as to the swing of that wheel, the monk understands that this fickleness is merely a quality
of Fortuna’s nature, and to act in accordance with the whims of Fortuna is not morally depraved so long as one understands the true superficiality of impermanent reality.

I believe that Calvino uses the contradictions inherent within the philosophical foundations of the frame and accentuates the emotions that are contrived in reasoning one’s position within that frame; this narrative explores the anxiety of the unachieved, yet the allure of what is made known by the unachieved. We always try to accomplish that to which we set our minds, however we must be content with the aspects of the journey and the paths with which we are presented, because it is likely that our search will only lead to quite different and varying places. We may want to strive for life unending and ponder upon the greatness of staying at the top of the wheel of fortune, but to consider it unending is that very nature of anxiety. To defeat this cycle, one must be consoled, one must accept the infiniteness of the story, not just the limitations of the frame. By producing a narrative in the second person, Calvino pulls the audience into the narrative and they are forced to follow his convoluted path. The audience only wanted to read Calvino’s book, however, they are framed into adventures to infinitely find misprinted books that never happen to be Calvino’s true book. Along the way, we begin to care little about Calvino’s book and become latched onto each new iteration of short stories that you find along the journey; however, along the way, you never finished a single story, only fragments that motivate you forward towards new bodies of text. The experience of reading this text creates paradoxical scenarios of reader and what is to be read, author and that which is produced, truth and reality, as well as experience and the frame.


Raybin, David. “‘Manye Been the Weyes’: The Flower, Its Roots, and the Ending of

