



International Conference on Education, Psychology and Humanities

Hosted Online from Moscow, Russia

Date: 28th June, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

FRAME NARRATIVE, PLOT, AND MOTIF TYPOLOGY IN THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS AND BOCCACCIO'S DECAMERON

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ABSTRACT

This article compares the narrative organization of *The Thousand and One Nights* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* through the categories of frame narrative, narrative situation, temporal design, embedded storytelling, plot circulation, and ethical function. The study does not assume a direct genetic dependence between the two works. Instead, it distinguishes documented transmission, probable mediation, and typological parallelism, thereby avoiding the common methodological error of treating similarity as proof of borrowing. A comparative-narratological analysis shows that both collections transform a situation of crisis into a productive storytelling order. In *The Thousand and One Nights*, Shahrazad's narration postpones death and gradually re-educates sovereign power; in the *Decameron*, ten young Florentines answer the social disintegration caused by the plague by constructing a temporary community governed by time, rules, themes, and reciprocal listening. The two frames therefore perform more than a connective or decorative function: they determine how the embedded tales are interpreted. At the same time, their compositional logics differ. *The Nights* is based on potentially open-ended continuation, suspense, interruption, and hierarchical address, whereas the *Decameron* is based on a closed numerical architecture, rotating authority, thematic days, and collective evaluation. The article proposes a six-parameter matrix for comparing framed tale collections and demonstrates that the strongest relationship between the two works lies not in the



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identity of individual stories but in their shared understanding of storytelling as a technology of survival, social regulation, and ethical reflection.

KEYWORDS: The Thousand and One Nights; Decameron; frame narrative; comparative literature; motif; plot; narratology; typology; storytelling.

Introduction

The Thousand and One Nights and Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron occupy central positions in the history of framed tale collections. Both works unite numerous relatively autonomous narratives within a larger story-world, and both place storytelling in a moment of extraordinary danger. These broad similarities have often encouraged claims of direct influence. Yet a responsible comparative study must separate resemblance, historical contact, and demonstrable textual dependence. Similar narrative solutions may emerge through circulation across languages and regions, through shared participation in older tale traditions, or through independent responses to comparable human problems. For this reason, the present article treats the two collections as historically unequal but analytically comparable narrative systems.

The textual history of The Thousand and One Nights is cumulative. It bears traces of Indian, Persian, Arabic, and later editorial environments, and no single author or stable original version can account for the collection as a whole. The ninth-century fragment studied by Nabia Abbott provides early evidence for a "Thousand Nights" tradition, while later Syrian and Egyptian manuscripts reveal continued compilation, adaptation, and expansion (Abbott, 1949; Marzolph and van Leeuwen, 2004). The form known to modern readers is therefore the result of a long process of oral-written interaction, manuscript transmission, translation, and editorial intervention.



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The Decameron, by contrast, is an authored fourteenth-century Italian work with a deliberately closed architecture: one hundred novellas told by ten narrators over ten designated storytelling days. Boccaccio adapts heterogeneous materials—classical exempla, medieval Latin and vernacular narratives, mercantile anecdotes, fabliaux, saints' lives, oral tales, and Mediterranean story traditions—within a carefully controlled authorial design. Its frame responds to the Black Death in Florence and organizes the activity of the brigata, the group of seven women and three men who leave the city and establish a temporary, rule-governed community in the countryside (Forni, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to identify the structural and functional correspondences between the two collections without reducing their relationship to a simple source-and-borrowing formula. The article asks three questions: (1) how does each frame transform crisis into narrative order; (2) how do temporal structure, narrator distribution, and embedding govern the interpretation of individual tales; and (3) at what level can shared plots and motifs be discussed as typological or historically mediated phenomena?

The originality of the study lies in a six-parameter comparative matrix that integrates structural and pragmatic analysis. Rather than considering the frame as an external container, the article examines it as a dynamic interpretive mechanism. This approach makes it possible to show that the collections resemble each other most strongly in the cultural work assigned to storytelling, while differing substantially in authority, temporality, closure, and social organization.



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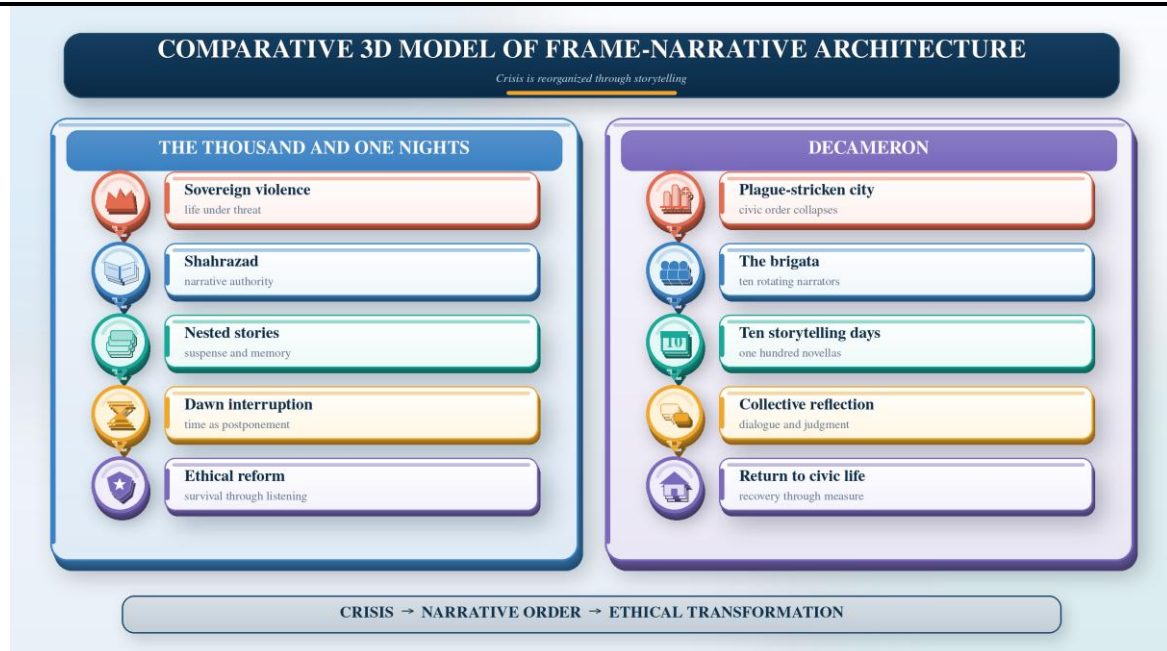


Figure 1. Comparative architecture of the two frame narratives. Source: developed by the author.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Research on The Thousand and One Nights has established the composite and historically layered character of the collection. Mia Gerhardt's analysis of storytelling techniques remains important because it treats the Nights as an artfully organized narrative tradition rather than a miscellaneous storehouse of folktales (Gerhardt, 1963). Robert Irwin emphasizes the collection's manuscript history, cultural settings, and changing reception, while Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen document the international circulation of its tales, motifs, translations, and adaptations (Irwin, 2004; Marzolph and van Leeuwen, 2004). Jack Goody's discussion of oral and written storytelling is also relevant: the transmission of tale collections cannot be explained by a rigid opposition between



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“oral” and “literary” forms, because writing repeatedly fixes, rearranges, and returns narrative materials to performance (Goody, 2010).

Scholarship on the Decameron has similarly moved beyond reading the frame as a convenient device. Pier Massimo Forni argues that the interaction among the ten narrators is fundamental to the work’s narrative form. The tales do not exist in isolation; their placement, theme, teller, and response within the brigata create additional meanings (Forni, 2015). The Decameron Web project likewise describes the frame as a self-conscious representation of storytelling as a social, oral, conversational, and critical process (Brown University, 2026). These approaches support the premise that a frame can regulate interpretation, not merely connect stories.

The comparative method employed here combines narratology with the historical-typological method. Narratology identifies levels of narration, embedding, temporal interruption, recurrence, narrator roles, and closure. Historical-typological comparison then asks whether a common feature is best explained as a universal narrative strategy, a shared genre convention, circulation through intermediary traditions, or a documented genetic relationship. Three evidentiary labels are used throughout the analysis:

- 1. Documented transmission** refers to a relationship supported by identifiable texts, translations, manuscript history, or recognized intermediary sources.
- 2. Probable mediation** refers to a plausible route of circulation supported by historical and formal evidence but not sufficient to prove direct borrowing by Boccaccio from the Nights.
- 3. Typological parallelism** refers to a functional or structural similarity that can be analyzed without asserting historical dependence.

This distinction is crucial. Motif similarity alone cannot establish direct influence, especially when a tale type circulated widely in Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Latin,



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French, and Italian traditions. The object of comparison must therefore include not only “what happens” in a tale but also who tells it, to whom, under what danger, at what point in the collection, and with what consequence.



Figure 2. Evidence model for evaluating comparative and intertextual claims.

Source: developed by the author.

Materials and Methods

The primary materials are the frame story and selected embedded narratives from *The Thousand and One Nights*, consulted through the Husain Haddawy translation based on Muhsin Mahdi's Arabic edition, and the *Decameron*, consulted through G. H. McWilliam's English translation and reference to the Italian text where necessary (Haddawy, 1990; Boccaccio, 1995). The analysis also uses studies of the collections' textual history, narrative form, and international tale tradition.



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The comparison follows six parameters: (1) initiating crisis; (2) configuration of narrators and audience; (3) temporal organization; (4) principles of embedding and continuation; (5) plot and motif circulation; and (6) ethical-pragmatic outcome. Each parameter is examined first within each work and then comparatively. Particular care is taken not to compare isolated plot summaries outside their framing contexts.

Table 1. Six-parameter comparison of the narrative systems

Parameter	The Thousand and One Nights	Decameron	Comparative significance
Initiating crisis	Shahriyar's serial execution of brides	Plague and civic disintegration in Florence	Storytelling begins as a response to threatened life and broken social order
Narrator system	Shahrazad as principal narrator; multiple embedded narrators	Ten rotating narrators within the brigata	Concentrated persuasive authority versus distributed social authority
Audience	A sovereign whose decision determines life or death	A peer community that listens, comments, and takes turns	Hierarchical address versus reciprocal participation
Time	Nightly continuation, interruption at dawn, potentially open extension	Ten regulated storytelling days within a fourteen-day retreat	Suspensive open time versus calendrical and numerical closure
Embedding	Deep nesting and chains of stories within stories	Primarily one principal level of novellas within the frame	Proliferating narrative depth versus architectonic sequence
Primary effect	Survival, postponement, transformation of sovereign judgment	Psychological recovery, social discipline, ethical testing	Narrative as an instrument of restoration



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Results and Discussion

Crisis as the Condition of Storytelling

In both works, narrative begins where ordinary social relations have failed. In *The Thousand and One Nights*, betrayal produces a catastrophic generalization: Shahriyar converts private injury into a political and gendered regime of violence. Each marriage becomes a death sentence, and sovereign power loses the capacity to distinguish one individual from another. Shahrazad enters this system voluntarily and places discourse between command and execution. Her stories do not defeat power through open confrontation. They reorganize attention, delay action, create curiosity, and repeatedly require the ruler to choose another night of listening.

In the *Decameron*, the plague dissolves religious, familial, legal, and civic bonds. Boccaccio's introduction depicts a city in which customary obligations no longer reliably govern behavior. The brigata's departure is not a simple escape into pleasure. It is an attempt to establish proportion and order in response to a world made formless by mass death. The elected rulers of each day, the distribution of tasks, the agreed limits of recreation, and the scheduled tale-telling transform free time into a social institution.

The typological correspondence is therefore precise: both frames convert an uncontrolled crisis into a controlled sequence of speech. Yet the political shape of that conversion differs. Shahrazad works within an asymmetrical relation and seeks to humanize a ruler whose authority remains intact. The brigata constructs a miniature republic of temporary, rotating authority. The *Nights* imagines narrative as intervention in sovereign violence; the *Decameron* imagines narrative as collective self-government after institutional collapse.



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Narrator, Audience, and the Distribution of Authority

Shahrazad is not merely a transmitter of tales. Her knowledge, timing, memory, and rhetorical judgment constitute the central agency of the frame. Dunyazad's request initiates the nightly performance, but Shahrazad controls selection and interruption. Shahriyar is at once audience, judge, and potential executioner. This arrangement gives every embedded story a pragmatic pressure: narration must remain compelling enough to preserve the narrator's life and continue the ethical process begun by previous nights.

The Decameron distributes narrative agency among ten named members of the brigata. The daily monarch selects a theme, but authority rotates, and Dioneo's privilege to depart from the assigned topic prevents order from becoming mechanical uniformity. The narrators respond to one another, repeat or invert themes, and create local sequences of argument. A tale about ingenuity may answer an earlier tale about deception; a tragic example may be repositioned by a comic one. Consequently, the unit of meaning is not always the isolated novella but the novella in its day, sequence, and conversational setting.

This difference alters the social theory implicit in the two collections. In the Nights, wisdom is concentrated in a narrator who must persuade power. In the Decameron, practical intelligence circulates among women and men and becomes the property of a listening community. Nevertheless, both works present narrative competence as a form of authority distinct from force, wealth, and official status.

Temporal Design: Suspense and Closure

The temporal logic of The Thousand and One Nights depends on postponement. Dawn interrupts the story, and incompleteness creates a bridge between present danger and future narration. This device does more than produce suspense. It converts time itself into an ethical resource. Each additional day is evidence that



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the king has not repeated the previous act of violence. Repetition is therefore not static: the same situation returns, but the relation between narrator and listener slowly changes.

The Decameron announces closure from the beginning. Ten narrators, ten storytelling days, and ten tales per day yield one hundred novellas. The group's retreat lasts longer than the storytelling schedule because certain days are reserved for religious observance and rest. Numerical design limits excess and produces formal completeness. Whereas Shahrazad keeps the future open because closure initially means death, the brigata requires closure because their experiment must end in a return to civic life.

The contrast may be summarized as "survival through continuation" versus "recovery through measured completion." Both systems discipline time, but they assign opposite values to narrative ending. In the Nights, ending is repeatedly deferred until political transformation becomes possible. In the Decameron, ending confirms that the group can enter and leave its alternative social order without losing self-command.

Embedding and Narrative Memory

The Nights is famous for complex embedding. A character begins a story in which another figure tells a further story, and the listener must retain several unfinished narrative levels. Such structures imitate the cumulative memory of a tradition formed across periods and communities. They also train the reader to recognize analogy: one character's danger is interpreted through another character's account of a comparable danger.

The Decameron normally maintains a clearer boundary between frame and novella, although narrators may introduce reported speech, anecdotes, and subsidiary accounts. Its primary complexity is horizontal rather than vertical. Meaning develops through the ordered relation among one hundred tales, the



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themes of individual days, and the comments of the brigata. Thus, the Nights tends toward recursive depth, while the Decameron tends toward sequential architecture.

This finding modifies the broad claim that the works share the “same” frame narrative. Both are framed collections, but their frames generate different reading practices. The Nights asks the audience to navigate narrative depth and deferred completion. The Decameron asks the audience to compare variations arranged across a finite structure.

Plot, Motif, and the Problem of Influence

The international tale tradition makes direct attribution difficult. Merchant journeys, sudden reversals of fortune, clever replies, tests of fidelity, disguise, recognition, generosity, unjust accusation, and providential rescue occur across Arabic, Persian, Indian, Hebrew, Latin, and European vernacular literatures. Their presence in both collections does not by itself prove that Boccaccio read or heard a version of The Thousand and One Nights.

Historical contact nevertheless matters. Medieval Mediterranean cities connected traders, translators, pilgrims, diplomats, captives, scholars, and performers. Boccaccio’s experience of Naples and the mercantile world gave him access to a cosmopolitan narrative environment. Some materials could reach Italian literature through Arabic-Iberian, Hebrew, Latin, French, or oral intermediaries. Works such as Petrus Alfonsi’s *Disciplina clericalis* demonstrate that Eastern exempla entered Latin Europe through identifiable channels. In individual cases, therefore, probable mediation is a stronger explanation than independent invention, even when the Nights cannot be established as Boccaccio’s direct source.

The methodological result is a hierarchy of claims. A documented intermediary permits an argument about transmission. A widespread tale type permits an



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argument about circulation. A shared narrative function permits typological comparison. These levels should not be collapsed. The comparison becomes more persuasive when it explains both resemblance and transformation: Boccaccio does not simply reproduce circulating material; he integrates it into a new sequence, assigns it to a particular narrator, and makes it answer the ethical and social concerns of the brigata.

Storytelling as Ethical Technology

The shared core of the two collections is pragmatic. Stories act upon listeners. Shahrazad's narratives repeatedly display the consequences of rash judgment, uncontrolled desire, injustice, gratitude, patience, and mercy. Their cumulative effect opposes Shahriyar's reduction of all women to a single category. Narrative restores particularity: each new character has circumstances, motives, and consequences that must be heard before judgment.

The Decameron likewise turns narrative into an exercise of judgment. Its tales rarely offer a single moral code. They stage conflicts among law, desire, social rank, religious office, intelligence, fortune, and compassion. The brigata's orderly exchange allows contradictory cases to coexist. Readers are required to evaluate not only what characters do but also how narrators frame those actions.

In both works, then, storytelling creates a protected interval between impulse and decision. Listening slows violence, expands comparison, and makes alternative judgments imaginable. This is the most significant typological correspondence between the collections. Their relation is not adequately captured by cataloguing similar plots; it is revealed by examining what narrative is made to accomplish within each frame.

Limits of the Comparison and Research Implications

The proposed matrix is an analytical model rather than a claim that the two collections were stable, equivalent objects at one historical moment. The



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Decameron has an authorial architecture that can be examined as a completed design, while the Nights survives through multiple manuscript families and later additions. A feature present in one printed translation of the Nights may not belong to the textual layer that could have circulated in the fourteenth-century Mediterranean. Comparative research must therefore identify the edition, manuscript family, and date of every tale used as evidence.

Translation presents a second limitation. English versions can conceal differences in formulaic repetition, register, naming, and narrative rhythm. Future research should compare Arabic and Italian passages directly and document intermediary Latin, Hebrew, French, or vernacular forms wherever a genetic relationship is proposed. Motif indexes are valuable for locating analogues, but a motif number cannot substitute for historical analysis because the same minimal action can acquire different meanings in different frames.

These limitations also indicate a productive research program. The six parameters can be applied to individual tale clusters, including stories of dangerous questions, unjust accusation, recognition after travel, mercantile risk, and exemplary generosity. Such studies should record not only plot correspondence but also narrator, audience, sequence, pragmatic purpose, and the transformation introduced by each redaction. The resulting evidence would permit a more precise map of narrative circulation between Arabic, Persian, Jewish, Latin, and Italian traditions.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that The Thousand and One Nights and the Decameron share a structural principle: a community or individual threatened by crisis creates order through serial storytelling. In the Nights, narrative postpones execution, challenges categorical judgment, and gradually reforms the



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listener's relation to power and gender. In the Decameron, narrative answers plague-induced disorder by establishing a temporary community based on rotation, measure, thematic organization, and reciprocal listening.

The six-parameter matrix also identifies decisive differences. The Nights privileges a principal female narrator, hierarchical address, interruption, open continuation, and recursive embedding. The Decameron privileges ten rotating narrators, peer exchange, numerical closure, thematic days, and horizontal sequence. These differences confirm that the works should not be described as versions of one compositional model.

Finally, the study establishes a cautious framework for discussing plots and motifs. Similarity must be classified as documented transmission, probable mediation, or typological parallelism. Such classification protects comparative literature from unsupported influence claims while preserving the importance of the medieval Mediterranean as a zone of narrative circulation. The strongest relation between the two works lies in their shared conception of storytelling as a technology of survival, social regulation, and ethical reflection.

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