CHAPTER EIGHT: QISSA AND ORAL NARRATIVE

Modern printed qissas have much in common with oral narrative.[1] Even physically, individual qissa texts are almost as ephemeral as individual oral performances. They are printed on cheap rough paper, and bound so poorly that they often come apart during the first reading. Their luridly illustrated covers are eye-catching when new, and help to promote quick sale. Since buyers dislike old, dusty, faded copies, publishers sell leftovers as waste paper, and print new editions of their staples at least every few years. An edition may be as small as 1,000 copies--a number not that much greater than the audience a skilled story-teller might attract at a fair. At least one publisher in fact links his printed texts specifically to oral performances: he never publishes sangits unless they have previously been performed by a troupe, and their salability thus assured.[2]

Like oral narratives, printed qissas are totally responsive to the demands of an immediate audience. Small publishers cater absolutely to the taste of the local public: they constantly search for new salable stories, readily plagiarize and imitate each other's best-sellers, and instantly drop from print whatever does not sell.[3] The text of each story itself is also subject to modification in successive reprintings. Printed qissas are, like oral tales, "the product of evolution," and are "dependent on the circumstances of continuity, variation, and selection."[4] In this sense they represent the continuing of oral narrative traditions in a newly available mode. Oral narrative art in North India is generally in a state of decline, as traditional narrators fight a losing battle with the seductive power of the Hindi film.[5] Yet qissa publishing continues apace, and several major publishers find that business is improving. In many senses, qissas are twentieth-century successors to traditional oral tales, and can legitimately be studied as such. They are the new vehicle in which traditional tales travel among their traditional public.

Of course the new medium opens up new possibilities. As we have seen, it permits a greater degree of textual fixity than can exist in oral narrative. This possibility is exploited in textually stable, single-source qissas like **Qiṣṣah-e Ḥātim Ṭāf**, **Siñhāsan battīsī**, and **Qissā totā mainā**. It is conspicuously not exploited in varying qissas like **Sārañgā Sadāvríj** and **Shīt Basañt**. Much more study of this and other printed genres will be needed before such printed transmission of folk literature can be fully understood.

But in general, the most notable fact about qissa literature is that it does not take

_____

[1]By "oral narrative" I mean narrative which is neither memorized word-for-word nor read aloud from a text, but which, even if the plot is predetermined, has its exact words chosen in the telling.

[2]Interview with Paṇḍit Rādhā Ballabh Gauṛ, Shyām Press, Hathras, U. P., 16 November 1977.

[3]One major publisher says that sometimes he commissions qissas, and sometimes writers come on their own and bring their works. In either case he gives a lump sum payment and assumes total control of the text. Its future depends entirely on public reception: it's kept in print exactly as long as demand continues. Interview with Mr. B. N. Trivedī, Shrī Loknāth Pustakālay, Calcutta, 10 January 1978.

[4]Willard Rhodes, "Folk Music, Old and New," in Bruce Jackson, ed., **Folklore and Society: Essays in Honor of Benjamin A. Botkin** (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1966), p. 13.

[5]Films were made of many qissas in the 1930's: the S.A.M.P. records mention printed play-synopsis-cum-songbooks for **Chahār darvesh**, **Gul-e bakāvalī**, **Gul o Ṣanobar**, **Ḥātim Ṭāf**, **Lailā Majnūn**, and "**Vikram charitra**." But film fashions have changed considerably since then.

advantage of the new possibilities offered by the medium of print. Most centrally, the qissa narrator is invariably an exact "representation" of an oral story-teller.

The traditional, oral narrative consists rhetorically of a teller, his story, and an implied audience. The non-traditional written narrative consists rhetorically of the *imitation*, or *representation*, of a teller, his story, and an implied audience.

Rhetorically, the use of writing permits the individual, creating narrative artist to add an important level of complexity and of potential irony to this story. This added level consists of the potential or actual "ironic disparity between the knowledge and values of the author and those of his narrator."[6] Such latent complexities are never developed by qissa writers. Rather, their "representation" of a teller approximates as closely as possible to a real teller, and the author identifies himself wholly and unselfconsciously with this teller.

The qissa author thus reproduces in his printed text the constraints of the oral narrative situation. These constraints are twofold: the constraints of oral composition, and those of oral presentation. Oral composition must depend on some form of traditional "grammar": on some "limited number of patterns selected from the total language of the culture by which metrically (in the case of poetry), syntactically, and semantically appropriate utterances are formed."[7] Only the availability of such a "grammar" can permit rapid, extemporaneous oral composition before an audience. And of course this "grammar" shapes and limits possible utterances. The term "grammar" itself serves to remind us that the available patterns extend to every level of language: nouns, verbs, modifiers, phrases, sentences, larger units of speech.

The constraints of oral presentation, on the other hand, are audience-based. They can be summarized in what Michael D. Cherniss calls the "criterion of immediate rhetorical effect": the oral narrator "must first of all concern himself with the immediate effect of his words upon the audience," and the audience in turn "must concern itself with one thing at a time, and demands that the poet's work be intelligible at a single performance."[8] The oral narrator cannot risk upsetting, confusing, or boring his audience; he cannot strive for the kind of complex effects which depend on rereading or on a "close reading," nor can he seek to create for any other public than his immediate hearers. Thus he rarely makes radical experiments. He begins his story at the (chronological) beginning, develops it through few or many traditionally appropriate episodes, and ends it at the (chronological) end. We have seen that even the longest Persian qissas and Urdu dastans were linear and episodic in this way: they consisted of many variations on a few themes, of many sequential statements using the same limited "grammar."

But if qissa writers retain the constraints of oral narrative, they also benefit by inheriting the guidance of an established story-telling tradition. What P. J. C. Field says of Malory could be said of almost any qissa writer:

He wrote in a strong tradition which settled the relationship between author and audience, and even provided many of the phrases which expressed or implied that relationship....His structural technique was simple: to begin at the beginning, to go on until he came to the end, and then stop....[H]is method of narration is...unobtrusive, scenic, and impersonal. It rarely gives complicated judgements, panoramic views, or intrusions into the action.

_____

[6]Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, **The Nature of Narrative**, pp. 52-53.

[7]Scholes and Kellogg, **The Nature of Narrative**, p. 50.

[8]Michael D. Cherniss, "Beowulf: Oral Presentation and the Criterion of Immediate Rhetorical Effect," **Genre** 3 (September 1970):214-215.

In **Morte Darthur** the narrator "is always present, but he faces towards the story." And he tells the story as straightforwardly as possible, seeming to observe and record each action as it happens, rather than to analyze or manipulate the course of events.

> [H]is extraordinary stylistic simplicity, compounded of normative vocabulary and elementary syntactical patterns, is so unobtrusive as to convince the reader of the truth of what he is being told. The persona which emerges from the pages is naive enough to be trusted implicitly.[9]

Similar narrative effects are achieved in qissa literature, and by similar stylistic means. The narrative organization is wholly temporal: sentences frequently begin with "then" (**phir**, **tab**). Or, "having heard/said/done" (**sunkar**, **kahkar**, **karke**) something, the subject of the sentence then does something else--still a strictly temporal relationship. This "having done" construction is a ubiquitous form of narrative organization; at the risk of clumsiness, I have preserved most of its occurrences in my translations. Qissa sentences are, like Malory's, usually paratactic, simply "one fact laid end to end with the next."[10] Eugene Vinaver maintains that such parataxis leaves "room for two distinct forms of expression": in one form, the "absence of casual connectives may be merely apparent; they may be there even though they are not expressed; our mind then rushes into the artifically created verbal vacuum to supply by its own cogitations all that the poet has deliberately left unsaid." By contrast, "genuine" parataxis "invites simple acceptance, not elaboration; it does not conceal continuity and cohesion in silent intervals, but dispenses with such things."[11]

Both kinds of parataxis are found in qissa literature. Vinaver's controlled or "apparent" parataxis is well illustrated by the conclusion of Ḥātim's adventure in the Baths of the Whirlwind, translated in Chapter III.

> Then he sighed painfully from his troubled heart and said, "Oh Ḥātim! You shouldn't look upon your own death. It's better to tie a bandage over your eyes and take this one remaining arrow and, trusting in God, shoot it also and finish it, because to live like this is worse than dying." This time, he stared at the parrot, tied a bandage over his eyes, repeated "God is great," and shot that arrow too.
>
> > At that moment the parrot's soul took wing, and she fell out of her cage. At the same time a whirlwind came, clouds lowered, lightning began crashing, and it grew dark.

We readers realize quite clearly that Ḥātim's blindfolding himself and invoking God have called forth divine aid. We know that the divinely guided arrow has killed the parrot. We know that the whirlwind and the storm signify the end of the **ṭilism**. But the narrator tells us none of these things explicitly; in fact Ḥātim himself does not know them, but faints, thinking he has been turned to stone.

Similarly, in the course of his fifth adventure Ḥātim, traveling in a magic boat, encounters rivers of blood, then silver, then gold. When he tries to drink, his hand turns to silver in the silver river, and is cured in a fountain of fresh water. He collects precious stones, and is rebuked by the two Devs for his greed (in a passage translated in Chapter III). His journey continues.

---

[9]Field, **Romance and Chronicle**, pp. 143-144, 153-155.

[10]Field, **Romance and Chronicle**, p. 41.

[11]Eugene Vinaver, **The Rise of Romance** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 6.

> After some days another river came into view. He, having seen this, became extremely joyous. Because he was very thirsty. When he arrived near it and looked on its bank thousands of pearls were scattered like gravel, but each one was the size of an egg, so that the eyes were assaulted by their glistening and there was no limit to their value.
>
> Ḥātim, having become greedy, wanted to pick up ten or twenty. In the meantime he remembered the advice of those two [Devs]. Having become afraid, he abandoned that action and sat down on the riverbank. What does he see, but its water is like milk and honey. He was really thirsty, and drank his fill. In short, he passed well through this too, and went on...[12]

After following Ḥatim so far, we as readers know that just as the pearls are a temptation to him, so his enjoyment of the milk and honey river is a reward for surmounting that temptation. But the narrator never tells us so. He merely reports a series of Ḥatim's thoughts and deeds, without comment, until the final, deceptively simple observation, "In short, he passed well through this too."

An even more striking example appears in the climax (translated in Chapter IV) of the twenty-first statuette's story. Vikram has been responsible for the deaths of two lovers, and in his repentance feels he can live no longer. "Just as he was about to sit on that pyre and burn in the fire, the **baitāl** came and seized his hand and said, 'Why do you give up your life?'" Vikram explained. "The **baitāl** said, 'I'll just bring some nectar from the underworld, you revive both of them.'" In this brief, laconic exchange, the reader senses much more than the narrator explicitly says. The reader realizes that luckily the **baitāl** has heard of this matter at the last minute and has rushed to the scene. The reader realizes that when the **baitāl** seizes Vikram's hand the gesture is an urgent one forbidding him to mount the pyre; that the **baitāl**'s question to Vikram is no idle one, but expresses deep concern. Rather than remonstrating uselessly, as the chief minister has done, the **baitāl**, with a minimum of talk, proposes to save Vikram's life. His few words are instantly realized in action: "Having said this, the **baitāl** quickly brought nectar from the underworld, and gave it to him."

We as readers know that the baital is in a bondage to Vikram from which he would be freed by Vikram's death. Throughout the **Siñhāsan battīsī** Vikram never speaks to his **baitāl**s except to command them, nor do they speak to him except in humble obedience. In this unique case the **baitāl** has not been summoned or commanded in any way. On the contrary: he has come voluntarily, and forcefully interfered with his master's expressed intention. Despite its paratactic structure, this anecdote gives us a clear sense of the **baitāl**'s unforced loyalty and affection for Vikram. In this instance, as in those involving Ḥatim, the narrator tells us only "the facts," in the flattest and least organized way. Paradoxically, this very flatness makes the narrative all the more credible and impressive: the narrator seems "naive enough to be trusted implicitly."

Of course uncontrolled or "genuine" parataxis is also common in qissa literature. An extreme example is the **Siñhāsan battīsī**'s account of Vikram's birth and conquest of the throne (translated in Chapter IV), so opaquely flat and simple in style that its narrative content is obscured. Such a paratactic narrative style can thus be used ineptly--or with a sophisticated feeling for literary effect. Or, in between these two extremes, it can be a straightforward way to tell a traditional story.

----

[12]Ḥaidarī, **Ḥātim Ṭāʾī**, p. 224.

Parataxis "works" because of the audience's familiarity with the narrative material and techniques involved. As Gillian Beer notes, a "lack of causal links" is "typical of much oral literature based on an oral tradition."[13] And qissa literature is, as we have seen, thoroughly grounded in oral narrative tradition: it draws freely on themes, episodes, and motifs familiar to its audience from countless folktales. Parataxis is the line of least resistance in traditional narrative. Why should the narrator intrude into the proper, established course of the story, to answer questions no one asks? The action of the story may shift from track to track, as one episode succeeds another, but it always runs on greased rails.

Qissa description is an abstract and stylized as its action. Every garden is "beautiful," "very beautiful," or "most beautiful," and contains "many different kinds" of trees, flowers, and birds, with perhaps a fountain as well. Or it is as beautiful as the heavenly garden of a god, or the most beautiful the hero has ever seen. (See for example the mynah's garden in Chapter V.) Similarly, every heroine is Parī-like, or equal to the moon in beauty; or her beauty and graces are the wonder of the age. Or she is beyond all words--or on seeing her the hero simply faints. We never know enough about any garden or heroine to distinguish them from others of their kind. But of course we never have occasion to do so, for characterization is as stylized as description. Its familiarity may even be used for humorous effect: a Parī says to a Dev, "Listen, I've seen such a mortal, your mountain-like eyes have never beheld his equal." The Dev replies, "Well, why should I believe you! Because I know that generally no matter how ugly a man may be, Parīs fall madly in love with him. Then having endured hardships, they regret it. So keep quiet, and be off with you!"[14]

Particular qissas also create their own sense of familiarity, as we have seen, by periodically repeating similar but slightly rearranged events. Ḥātim's adventures, the statuettes' stories of Vikram, the repartee of the parrot and the mynah, Sāraṅgā and Sadāvrīj's various attempts at lovemaking and conciliation, all show recurring patterns which make them more enjoyable and easier to understand. Such recurring patterns appear not only within qissas but also among them. Sometimes this recurrence takes the form of creative transformation of a borrowed idea: we have seen in Chapter V that the **Baitāl pachchīsī**'s third story may well have inspired **Qissā totā mainā**, which in turn may have suggested the lovers' tale in **Sāṛhe tīn yār**. And sometimes the words themselves are borrowed outright--i.e., plagiarized.[15]

But such "plagiarism" in qissa literature is merely the written counterpart of the constant mutual borrowing of shared traditional elements found among reciters in many oral genres. Speaking of the English ballad, Ruth Finnegan emphasizes the common "stock-in-trade of themes, plots, phrases and stanzas on which the ballad singer (or other poet) can draw." And H. J. Chaytor describes the uninhibited mutual interchange among oral reciters in medieval Europe:

> To give a public recitation of a poem was to make it common property. The ideas that we associate with such terms as "plagiarism," "copyright," or "author's rights" simply did not exist....No one troubled about an author, as long as he did not publish

---

[13]Beer, **The Romance**, p. 28.

[14]**Kissā sāṛhe tīn yār**, by Paṇḍit Bhavānī Shaṅkar (Mathura: Lālā Shyāmlāl Hīrālāl, 200 p., Hindi), p. 105.

[15]Qissa publishers are disgusted by their competitors' unethical behavior in this respect; each one I spoke to was the only one in the industry who disdained such practices.

heresy or slander, and no one had any compunction in borrowing what they pleased from his works.[16]

Writers of modern printed qissa borrow from each other with just as much freedom--and just as little compunction.

In medieval Europe--to carry the analogy a step further--even written works had many of the stylistic features of oral ones, since most of them were, like Malory's, "limited in concentration and complexity by being composed for reading aloud."[17] Modern printed qissas too are excellently suited for reading aloud. They show the same "normative vocabulary and elementary syntactical patterns" which Field perceives in **Morte Darthur**. Simple tenses and verb forms are preferred to complex ones, direct discourse to indirect. Proverbs and stock phrases abound. In dialogue, vocatives are constantly used. A vocative "divides the speech into significant portions, and often implies a deliberateness in the speaker which has a dignity of its own. The speaker is aware both of what he has to say, and to whom he is saying it." Strong feelings are expressed by exclamations, or told to us (usually in a single adjective) by the narrator: "having become angry," the subject acts. Such limited, conventional forms of expression can quickly grow monotonous. Or, in the hands of a skillful story-teller, this "apparent inability with words" can make characters seem "more dignified and direct, more capable of suffering and courage and human incoherence." The whole effect is one of simplicity and emphasis, "characterised more by force and colour than by exactness and discrimination," and "fortified by the intensives of ordinary speech."[18]

Qissa literature ignores typographical conventions, as it does most of the other possibilities of print. Paragraphing is either nonexistent or erratic, and quotation marks are never used. Changes of speaker must therefore be explicitly marked, in words, before each speech, as they commonly are in oral narrative. "Then he said," "Then the mynah said," "Having heard this, the parrot said," "Having heard the words of the parrot, the mynah said, 'Oh Parrot'"--all these are typical ways of marking a change of speaker. Every change of speaker in every passage translated in this study is marked in advance with some such phrase. In all my reading of qissa literature I can scarcely recall any exception to this rule. The pace and rhythmic flow of the narrative are thus largely governed by such conventional speech-markers shared with most oral tales.

Moreover, characters almost always simply "say" (**kahnā**): rarely do they ask, answer, shout, beg, etc., and rarely is their manner of speech adverbially described. Even crucial thoughts and strong emotions are usually reduced to a few words which a character "says in his heart." This tendency can be observed in all the passages I have translated. Question marks and exclamation points are also uncommon, and often inappropriately used (though I have adjusted them a bit in translation). At points where an oral story-teller would enliven dialogue and convey its full flavor through gesture, facial expression, and tone of voice, qissa writers have not learned (or do not choose) to use verbal and typographical devices for the same purpose.

In fact, it often appears that qissa writers have not learned (or do not choose) to use even the simplest typographical device: the mark which ends a sentence. Since neither Hindi

---

[16]Ruth Finnegan, **Oral Poetry; its Nature, Significance, and Social Context**, p. 145; H. J. Chaytor, **From Script to Print; an Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature** (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1945), p. 123.

[17]Field, **Romance and Chronicle**, p. 11.

[18]Field, **Romance and Chronicle**, pp. 82, 114, 122, 128.

nor Urdu offers a choice between capital and small letters, the beginnings of sentences cannot be marked. If the sentence endings are not marked either, the result can be quite confusing to the reader. Here is how the **Siñhāsan battīsī**'s version of the Dev's warning to Vikram, translated in Chapter IV, appears in the original:

> in your city are an oilman and a potter who are planning to kill you but among you three whoever kills both will reign. the oilman rules the underworld and the potter having become a yogi performs austerities in the forest says in his heart having killed the raja i would put the oilman in the boiling cauldron of oil and having given a sacrifice to the god i would rule and the oilman says having killed the yogi i would rule the three worlds and you did not know this for this reason i have warned you that you should be saved from them now what i say you listen to it! the yogi having killed that oilman has gotten control of him thus the oilman lives on a siras tree when that yogi comes to invite you then having played a trick he will take you away you having accepted the invitation go there when he says prostrate yourself then say i do not know how to prostrate myself.

Such prose may not literally be read aloud, but it must be read slowly and carefully, word by word, in order to follow the changes in speaker and the changes in tense. In effect it must be "read aloud" to oneself; it certainly cannot be skimmed or glanced over quickly without becoming totally opaque to the brain.

Such prose is the main medium of virtually all qissas in print. While narrative verse works too have been called qissas, none of these are in print today. Even **Sārañgā Sadāvríj**, which we have seen to contain unusual amounts of verse, always has a prose framework in modern editions. Frye has observed that in general "oral verbal culture expresses itself in continuous verse and discontinuous prose," while a "writing culture" tends toward "continuous prose and discontinuous verse."[19] In this sense modern qissas have evolved as part of a writing culture. But though the prose is continuous, the discontinuous verse is also emphasized, whether its intent be rhetorical ("Indeed, some poet has truly said that..."), narrative,[20] or purely decorative. Inserted verses are treated as ornaments, and a succession of different metrical forms is displayed like an arrangement of flowers. One of the perennials contains within its 200 pages verses labeled **bait**, **bhajan**, **chaubolā**, **dohā**, **gazal**, **kavitt**, **khematā**, **lāvanī**, **rāginī**, **rekhtā**, **rekhtā qavvālī**, **savaiyā**, **sher**, and **soraṭhā**. Such a mixture of Hindi and Urdu metrical forms is the rule rather than the exception.[21] A few of the older qissas also show traces of the kind of rhyming prose used by **dāstān go**s to facilitate oral composition. But most of them rely on inserted verses as their only form of verbal adornment.

Although written qissas are composed of the same traditional narrative elements used in oral tales, there is no reason to believe that any written qissa exactly resembles any actual oral performance. In the case of Persian qissa narration, convention "dictated how a battle description should be structured, for example, but there was no strict convention about larger structural matters such as pacing, climaxes, and the like."[22] And "pacing, climaxes, and the like"

---

[19]Northrop Frye, **The Critical Path; An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), pp. 41-42.

[20]Most of the few qissas that include some narrative verse are published by the Shyām Press of Hathras, the principal North Indian **sāñgīt** publishers. Their writers perhaps tend to break into verse out of habit.

[21]**Kissā sāṛhe tīn yār**, by Paṇḍit Bhavānī Shañkar (Mathura: Lālā Shyāmlāl Hīrālāl, 200 p., Hindi).

are exactly the aspects of oral narrative most governed by the immediate performance situation: by audience mood and response, by the time available for the performance, by the need to end at a point which will create maximum interest in the next performance, etc. Deprived of such effective *ad hoc* guidelines for narrative development, the qissa writer makes his own (instinctive or calculated) choices about the length and progression of his narrative. Even if he were an oral narrator by profession (which qissa writers almost never are), his sense of timing would be altered by the exigencies of written recording: not only would he lack a proper audience, but he would be obliged to dictate at a speed which a scribe could follow, or compose at the pace of his own handwriting. And it would be strange if he did not sometimes correct errors in the resulting text, or insert improvements. Given such different creative difficulties and opportunities, it would be extraordinary if any written qissa were an exact transcript of any actual oral narrative.

Methodological problems crop up sooner or later in any attempt to identify a special, unique "oral narrative" style.[23] Certainly the technical constraints of oral composition and oral presentation limit the "concentration and complexity" of oral narrative, as we have seen. But written texts can naively retain, or deliberately (with artistic intent) reproduce, *all* such effect without exception. On this fact many theories have foundered. Ruth Crosby, for example, maintained that medieval European romances were specifically "intended for oral delivery." She argued that "the surest evidence of the intention of oral delivery, is the use of direct address not to the reader, but to those listeners who are present at the recitation." Further evidence includes "excessive repetition" of such elements as "introductory phrases, descriptive phrases, expletives, and formulas."[24] The presence of such devices, however, reveals not the author's desire for oral presentation, but the author's (conscious or unconscious) attempt to imitate an oral presentation. Crosby's thesis may be correct, but the evidence she gives is inherently unable to prove it.

The best-known and most influential attempt to isolate an "oral narrative" style is the oral-formulaic theory of Milman Parry, Albert B. Lord, and their followers, which is based on the analysis of Yugoslav oral poetry. The canonical text of the school is Lord's **The Singer of Tales**, a brilliant work which has come to be recognized as a classic in the study of oral poetry. Lord's approach is based on the notion of "formula," defined as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given idea." The use of a traditional stock of well-known formulas permits a poet to compose orally, in verse, during the course of his performance; it clearly provides a basic and widespread technique of oral narration. But the oral-formulaic approach has been extended by Lord and others to all oral art, and set up as an infallible touchstone for discriminating between "oral" and "written" modes of compostion. Lord makes the claim quite explicitly:

> Formula analysis...is, therefore, able to indicate whether any given text is oral or "literary." An oral text will yield a predominance of clearly demonstrable formulas, with the bulk of the remainder "formulaic," and a small number of nonformulaic expressions. A literary text will show a predominance of nonformulaic expressions, with some formulaic expressions, and very few clear formulas.[25]

[22]Hanaway, "Formal Elements," p. 143.

[23]On these problems see Ong, **Orality and Literacy**, which is not only interesting in itself but also provides an extensive bibliography.

[24]Ruth Crosby, "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages." **Speculum** 11 (1936):100-102.

When pushed so far, the theory naturally reveals weaknesses and strains. One very serious weakness is that Lord and others draw all their data from verse narrative, and then arbitrarily extend their conclusions to prose narrative as well. Their inclusion of "metrical conditions" in the definition of "formula," however, means that that concept cannot be applied to prose without substantial revision. Other difficulties are discussed by Finnegan in her thorough analytical study, **Oral Poetry**. She describes disagreements about the exact definition of "formula"--differences "as to whether the repetion is, for instance, of metrical, syntactic or semantic elements, differences also about how long a 'formula' can or must be." And most crucially, she raises the fundamental questions of whether an "oral-formulaic style" is always a sign of "oral composition," and concludes that it is not. She cites cases in which texts known to be composed in writing reveal an extremely high percentage of formulas. Thus "since there can be both an 'oral' and a 'literary' use of formulae one cannot necessarily discriminate between 'oral' and 'written' on the basis of a 'formulaic' style alone."[26]

The conclusion is inescapable: there can be *no* formal criteria by which "oral narrative" style can be infallibly differentiated from "written" style. Qissa literature provides a perfect case in point: a body of unequivocally *written* texts which retain all the constraints of oral narration, and ignore all the possibilities of written presentation. If we had better access to the best professional **dāstān goƒ** performances, they might provide another sort of case in point: oral narratives so elegantly developed and elaborated that they would seem to have required written composition. If the **Kathāsaritsāgara** was ever a cycle of oral narrative, it too, with its many successive layers of emboxed stories, would be such a case in point.

The disjunction of "oral" and "written" thus forms a kind of Scylla and Charybdis. Some scholars have steered between them, through various channels labelled "folk narrative." One scholar who did so was Axel Olrik; his "epic laws of folk narrative," first formulated in 1908, are still exciting and provocative to read. These principles are fascinating because, as Stith Thompson says, they are "for the most part obvious to any reader of folktales, no matter of what kind or from what part of the world."[27] They are as follows:

1. The story "does not begin with sudden action and does not end abruptly."
2. "Every time that a striking scene occurs in a narrative, and continuity permits, the scene is repeated."
3. "Three is the maximum number of men and objects which occur in traditional narrative." Large numbers "express only a totally abstract quantity."
4. "Two is the maximum number of characters who appear at one time" in one scene.
5. Contrasts always appear: the narrative is "polarized" into "young and old, large and small, man and monster, good and evil."
6. "Whenever two people appear in the same role, both are depicted as being small and weak."
7. In a series, the "principal" person will come first, the one "for whom the particular narrative arouses sympathy" will come last.

[25]Albert B. Lord, **The Singer of Tales** (New York: Atheneum, 1965), pp. 30, 130.

[26]Finnegan, **Oral Poetry**, pp. 70-71.

[27]Thompson, **The Folktale**, p. 456.

8.   "Folk narrative is always single-stranded" and devoid of temporal and other plot complexities.

9.   "Two people and situations of the same sort are not as different as possible, but as similar as possible."

10.   The story "rises to peaks in the form of one or more major *tableaux scenes*" which remain "sculptured" in the memory.

11.   The story has its own logic, full of animism, miracle, and magic; plausibility is based only on the "internal validity of the plot."

12.   "Unity of plot" is standard.

13.   "The greatest law of folk tradition is Concentration on a Leading Character."[28]

In almost every body of folk literature--including qissa literature--innumerable supporting examples can be found for each of these principles, and a number of exceptions as well. Any reader of folktales must concede, even if grudgingly, that their area of applicability is extraordinarily wide. Yet they are hardly the transcendent, binding "laws" which Olrik repeatedly asserts them to be. For Olrik achieves universality at the cost of tautological definition: whatever violates his laws of folk narrative, is not folk narrative, but "sophisticated literature."[29] He never defines "folk narrative" in any other terms than those of his laws. Moreover, Olrik considers these "laws" to actually impose themselves on human minds in some powerful, coercive manner. Yet it is by no means clear how the "laws" obtain their force. Still, Olrik's principles are so nearly universal that they continue to provoke the imagination. Whatever their methodological defects, they offer valuable insight into the structure of almost all simple stories, whether oral or written.

While Olrik was all-inclusive in his claims, Vladimir Propp began with a much more modest goal: to elucidate the structure of the classic Russian fairy tale. He assumed that the "fundamental components of a tale" were the "functions" or roles performed by its characters. These were "stable, constant elements in a tale," and he found them to be limited to exactly seven: villain, donor, helper, dispatcher, hero, false hero, and princess. These functions succeed each other in an invariable sequence, though not all functions are present in every tale.[30] Thus each tale may be structurally expressed by a sequence of letters designating the various functions in their various permutations. Propp's work is brilliantly suggestive: like Olrik's, it appears at once familiar and provocative to any reader of folktales. Yet Propp too runs into problems of tautology. He claims that fairy tales could be more precisely defined as "tales subordinated to a seven-personage scheme." But he finds that such tales have difficulty existing in their pure state: "uncorrupted tale construction is peculiar only to the peasantry--to a peasantry, moreover, little touched by civilization." At the first opportunity, it appears, "all kinds of foreign influences alter and sometimes even corrupt a tale."[31] Tales which do not conform to his scheme he declares "corrupted"--just as Olrik consigns the offenders to the domain of "sophisticated literature." Both Olrik and Propp achieve systematic rigor and lucidity by sacrificing all real

---

[28]Axel Olrik, "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative," in Alan Dundes, ed., **The Study of Folklore** (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 131-139.

[29]"When one finds such phrases as 'now the two stories proceed along together' in the Icelandic sagas, then one no longer has folk narrative; one has sophisticated literature." Olrik, "Epic Laws," p. 137.

[30]Propp, **Morphology of the Folktale**, pp. 21-22, 84.

[31]Propp, **Morphology of the Folktale**, p. 100.

commitment to comprehensiveness--to the study of whatever tales are really told, in whatever form they are really current.

Folklorists have long wrestled with such problems. Many tempting generalizations have failed them. Not all oral narrative is folk narrative, for sophisticated oral narrative like **dāstān go f** may be elegant elite entertainment. Conversely, modern qissas and other such written tales seem like nothing if not folk narrative. Nor is all simple narrative folk narrative: simplicity may be part of a sophisticated literary style. Conversely, folk narrative itself need not be simple, but may be structurally complex, with several layers of tales within tales. Dan Ben-Amos has recently summed up these and other theoretical difficulties, and proposed a new, contextual definition: "In sum, folklore is artistic communication in small groups."[32] This definition has conspicuous methodological advantages; it sweeps away many false problems, and suggests new insights and approaches. By this definition printed qissas might be sources or scripts for folklore, but only if they were read aloud to a small group would they, in the process, become "folklore."

For our purposes, however, it is not crucial to decide whether qissas are "folklore" by one definition or another. In the form in which they reach their buyers--and us--they are very definitely written texts, works of literature with a place on the continuous spectrum that extends from Jack and the Beanstalk to Ulysses. But as written texts, they have a peculiar problem of identity: in every possible way they imitate oral tales. They are narrated by a perfect representation of an oral story-teller, and retain the "grammar" of oral composition and the rhetoric of oral presentation. And they ignore the new typographical and other possibilities offered by the medium of print--except for textual stability, which they sometimes carefully preserve and sometimes completely disregard. Printed qissas are old wine in new bottles, and as yet the containers have had surprisingly little effect on the contents.

---

[32]Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," in Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman, eds., **Toward New Perspectives in Folklore** (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), p. 13.