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Straparola: The Revolution That Was Not

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Abstract
Inspired by Ruth Bottigheimer’s 2002 book, Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition, this article examines her proposition that the sixteenth-century Italian author Giovanni Francesco Straparola invented the "rise tale," in which a lowly hero or heroine climbs the socioeconomic ladder with the help of a magical benefactor. It investigates Bottigheimer’s evidence for this claim as well as her argument that Straparola’s literary invention was a projection of the emerging Italian middles class in the sixteenth century. Contrary to Bottigheimer’s proposition, it is found that tales with similar form were told in classical Greece and in medieval Europe and that the belief in magical fairies was known in Europe long before Straparola’s time.

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Straparola: The Revolution That Was Not

Inspired by Ruth Bottigheimer’s 2002 book, Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition, this article examines her proposition that the sixteenth-century Italian author Giovanni Francesco Straparola invented the “rise tale,” in which a lowly hero or heroine climbs the socioeconomic ladder with the help of a magical benefactor. It investigates Bottigheimer’s evidence for this claim as well as her argument that Straparola’s literary invention was a projection of the emerging Italian middle class in the sixteenth century. Contrary to Bottigheimer’s proposition, it is found that tales with similar form were told in classical Greece and in medieval Europe and that the belief in magical fairies was known in Europe long before Straparola’s time.

Ruth Bottigheimer wrote her book Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition (2002) with zeal, conviction, and erudition. In this work, she proposes a history of the fairy tale that reverses the fundamental axioms of folklore and fairy-tale scholarship. Her conclusion is refreshing but wrong, totally wrong. This is neither an opinion nor an interpretation but a fact. Despite the book’s erroneous proposition and conclusion, however, it is a work that questions a fundamental tenet of folklore scholarship and folktale history, and therefore it commands a reflection upon and re-examination of the very assumptions that are at the foundation of folklore studies.

At issue in Bottigheimer’s thesis is the priority of orality in relation to emergent literacy. When societies shift their modes of communication, either radically or, more likely, by slowly tilting the balance between them, the relation between those modes of communication becomes a critical point of study. In nonliterate societies, whether ancient or contemporary, the priority of orality is taken for granted, while in media-saturated societies the interface between various modes of communication is the norm. In the period in which orality and literacy shift positions in culture, however, the social and cultural fault lines between them become apparent and require inquiry. Folklore scholarship has always assumed the priority of orality in relation to the history of literature. Bottigheimer challenges this fundamental tenet of folklore, arguing that in the Renaissance, when southern- and central-European societies reshaped themselves, popular literacy obtained such a central position that it had an impact on oral tradition rather than the other way around. As her test case she has chosen the
fairy-tale genre, which is central in folklore thought and scholarship, and one of the fairy-tale genre’s earlier authors, Giovanni Francesco Straparola (c. 1480–c. 1557), who anthologized tales and presented them to an urban readership.

Early in her book Bottigheimer boldly states:

The rise tale plot [more on that concept later] as Straparola envisaged it was altogether new to Europe’s storytelling tradition and cannot be found anywhere in Europe before Straparola created it. In saying “altogether new” and “Straparola created it,” I consciously reject a deeply ingrained and widespread prejudice against the concept of literary creation of tales that have long been defined as quintessentially “folk” in nature. I do so, because no evidence supports that belief, despite the nearly universal assumption that authors like Straparola “appropriated popular lore,” imitated “origini orale,” or “wrote down oral tradition.”

Folk genesis of European fairy tales was a manufactured notion that nineteenth-century nation-builders desperately needed to support their shaky ideological enterprise. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, early spokesmen for German national unity, enjoyed high personal, political, and academic regard in Germany as well as throughout Europe. In addition, the Grimms’ Tales had a foundational effect on the subsequent collection, presentation, and understanding of traditional tales from other parts of Europe. As a result, the Grimms’ public espousal of the folk origin for fairy tales gave enormous momentum to their view, which was maintained without being publicly questioned, until the Göttingen school of folk narrative research gave credence to book historical approaches to folk narrative in the 1970s. (2002:6)1

This statement of purpose contrasts sharply not only with the views of the scholars whom Bottigheimer quotes but also with the conventional wisdom that has accompanied earlier studies of Straparola’s primary work, Le piacevoli notti (Pleasant nights; published 1551–1553). The conventional view is summed up by William George Waters, who translated Straparola’s tales into English in 1894:

One of the chief claims of the “Notti” on the consideration of later times lies in the fact that Straparola was the first writer who gathered together into one collection the stray fairy tales, for the most part brought from the East, which had been made known in the Italian cities—and in Venice more especially—by the mouth of the itinerant story-teller. These tales, incorporated in the “Notti” with others of a widely different character, were without doubt the principle source of numerous French “Contes des Fées” published in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Perrault, Madame D’Aulnoy, and Gueulette took from them many of their best fables; and these, having spread in various forms through Northern and Western Europe, helped to tinge with a hue of Orientalism the popular tales of all countries—tales which had hitherto been largely the evolution of local myths and traditions. (Waters in Straparola [1551–1553] 1894, vol. 1:xv)2

In the marketplace of ideas, claims for novelty and change naturally hold a higher intellectual ground than those of stability. They evoke the future, progress, and a fresh perspective that gives new life to an old and tired discourse. Any critique of the new is liable to be labeled conservative, regressive, and stodgy—an anathema to any opinion.
Nevertheless, even revolutionary ideas require a check of factuality. They draw their force from the discovery of a human or physical reality that was shrouded by religious beliefs, by ideologies, or, simply, as Thomas Kuhn (1962) proposed, by an erroneous cognitive paradigm. If, however, after lifting the curtain of prejudice, a fata morgana mirage appears, then any proclamation of the new becomes illusionary and vacuous.

Moreover, new ideas, as old ones, can have their own “deeply ingrained and widespread prejudice” (Bottigheimer 2002:6). Bottigheimer does not hesitate to spell out her own belief and, for that matter, the agenda that she advocates when she states that she “consciously reject[s] a deeply ingrained and widespread prejudice against the concept of literary creation of tales that have long been defined as quintessentially ‘folk’ in nature” (2002:6). Implicit in this statement of advocacy is her own desire to unseat European oral narrative tradition from its position of primacy, at least as far as fairy tales are concerned, and to accord European literary authors a creative role in the formation of the fairy-tale tradition.

However, Bottigheimer sets her goals still higher. The consideration of Giovanni Francesco Straparola as a literary innovator is just the first step in her analysis of the rise of the “rise tale” in European literature. As is suggested by the title of her first edited book, *Fairy Tales and Society* (1986), Bottigheimer is concerned not only with the literary qualities of the fairy tales but also with the impact that they have on social life. She seeks to identify the social causes for the emergence of (what she defines as) a new literary form, and she proposes “first, that Straparola himself invented the previously undocumented tales, and that he did so specifically for Venetian readers in the context of generally faltering and occasionally recovering mid-century economy; second, that his newly invented tales were the first to address the aspirations of urban artisanal readership” (Bottigheimer 2002:2). Later she re-affirms her position in terms of reader-response theory (Iser 1978, 1989; Nardocchio 1992; Tompkins 1980):

> The plots and the language of Straparola’s tales suggest that he composed some and edited others in response to the tastes of a newly emerging reading public that could afford to buy stories. The buyership for Straparola’s stories undoubtedly included many prosperous merchants and members of Venice’s hereditary nobility. But in terms of sheer numbers the potential readership for his tale collection was composed principally of literate urban artisans and craftsmen, as well as their wives and other literate but not necessarily well-off women. (Bottigheimer 2002:31)

Bottigheimer explains that new socioeconomic opportunities had a transforming effect on the fairy-tale literary pattern and that Straparola projected into the fairy tale the opening of new venues for upward mobility in the social and economic spheres. In addition, the wider literary dissemination made possible by the printing press facilitated the effects that economic trends had upon literary creativity and upon the projection of social aspiration into narratives. In Bottigheimer’s words, the tales “were composed within a highly urbanized society for readers within that society. Straparola provided newly conceptualized literary provender for a public hungry for promises of a better life. In ‘Costantino’ [discussed below], the last rise tale he composed, he offered readers a generally passive and most virtuous hero, for whom magic brought about a fantasy future of marriage and wealth” (2002:17–8). Thus, Bottigheimer argues, Strap-
Giovanni Francesco Straparola and the Fairy (Folk) Tale

Before Bottigheimer promoted Straparola as the literary revolutionary who invented a distinct fairy-tale form, literary historians had regarded Giambattista Basile as the European writer who first introduced oral tales into the print world. Basile’s Lo cunto de li cunti overo Lo trattenemiento de peccerille (The tale of tales, or, Entertainment for the little ones; published 1634–1636; also known in its 1674 edition as Il Pentamerone) was long considered to be the first collection of European fairy tales. Nancy Canepa, for example, remarked that Basile’s work was “the first integral collection of literary fairy tales to appear in Western Europe, and contains some of the best-known of fairy-tale types (Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and countless others) in their earliest literary versions. Lo cunto marks the passage from fairy tale . . . as an oral, popular genre to the artful and sophisticated ‘authored’ fairy tale: Basile reinvents the fairy tale in literary form” (1999:11). Bottigheimer’s proposition would transfer the crown of the literary fairy-tale inventor from Basile to Straparola.

Straparola offers drama, mystery, allusive notes, and literary presentation that can beguile the most insightful critic and still leave room for imagination. His English translator writes that:

[The name of Straparola] has been handed down to later ages as the author of the “Piacevoli Notti” (Facetious Nights) and no other account, for the reason that he is one of those fortunate men of letters concerning whom next to nothing is known. He writes himself down as “da Caravaggio”; so it may be reasonably assumed that he first saw the light in that town, but no investigator has yet succeeded in indicating the year of his birth, or in bringing to light any circumstances of his life, other than certain facts connected with the authorship and publication of his works.” (Waters in Straparola [1551–1553] 1894, vol. 1:xi; cf. Straparola [1551–1553] 1898, vol. 4:237; Zipes 2001:869)

One hundred and eleven years later, Bottigheimer reiterates that “[t]he life of the man known to the world since 1551 as Giovan Francesco Straparola is a nearly blank sheet” (2002:45), and she notes that she can only sketch his speculative biography. It is evident that Straparola was an aspiring poet, an epigone of the Italian humanist Petrarch, for as a young man in 1508 he published a volume of love sonnets called Opera nova (see Straparola [1551–1553] 1894, vol. 1:xiii; [1551–1553] 1898:4, 243; Bottigheimer 2002:68–9). Apparently, his literary ambitions continued to simmer for forty-two years, without much luck, until he finally was able to publish the two volumes of Le piacevoli notti in 1551 and 1553.

Straparola may have been many things, but original he was not. He joined a respected line of Italian authors who wrote novella collections in the tradition of the Decameron (composed c. 1350) of Giovanni Boccaccio. Like Boccaccio himself, and like Giovanni Sercambi in his Novelle ([1374] 1995), Sabadino Degli Arienti in Le Porretane ([1483] 1981), Gerolamo Parabosco and Gherardo Borgogni in Diporti ([1550] 2005), Anton Francesco Grazzini in Le Cene ([1545] 1989), and Agnolo Firenzuela in
Ragionamenti ([1548] 1971), to name just a few, Straparola placed his characters in a situation of temporary isolation and then had them entertain each other by telling stories. This Italian literary school of Boccaccio’s imitators also introduced new dimensions into the frames of narrative sequences. Within the literary tradition of frame narratives (Belcher 1994; Gittes 1983, 1991; Haring 2004, 2007; Irwin 1995; Kuhns 2005; Nelles 1992), it is possible to distinguish two types, the Asian and the European. The Asian frames involve scenes of either instruction or dramatic and suspenseful delays of execution, in which there is a single listener and a clear, continuous division between the narrator(s) and the audience. By comparison, in the European and particularly the Italian tradition, the narrative frame has primarily an amusement value. In their use of this literary device, the Italian authors tend to reproduce a storytelling situation in which audience and narrators alternate in their roles throughout the occasion.

To give credence to his fiction, Straparola placed a historical figure, Ottoviano Maria Sforza (1477–c. 1541) in the leading role of his group (Ady 1907; Bottigheimer 2002:92–3; Lubkin 1994). This narrator is a scion of a powerful family in Milanese politics who together with his daughter Lucretia, a widow, flees to the island of Murano. On the island, twelve women and four men gather around them and together engage in storytelling and other forms of entertainment. They do so for thirteen nights, telling seventy-four stories in all. Only about one-third of these stories are original. According to Waters,

It is impossible to indicate precisely the sources of the fables seriatim, seeing that in many cases there was available for Straparola a choice of origins. An approximate reckoning would give fifteen fables to the novelists who preceded him, twenty-two to Jerome Morlini [Waters refers to Girolamo Morlini’s Novelle e favole, published in 1520], four to mediaeval and seven to oriental legends, thus leaving twenty-eight to be classed as original. Towards the close of his work it would appear that his imagination must have been stricken with sterility, or that he became indolent, for of the concluding twenty fables nineteen are mere translations from Morlini. It is not improbable that such a wholesale borrowing as this may have been the cause of the charges of plagiarism to which allusion has already been made. From beginning to end he certainly made free use of all the storehouse of materials which were available, selecting there from whatever subjects pleased him, and working them up to the best of his skill. It was unreasonable to censure him on this score, seeing that in what he did he merely followed the fashion of the age. (Waters in Straparola [1551–1553] 1894, vol. 1:xxv–xxvi)

Waters continues his discussion by drawing upon folklore scholarship. He points out that Straparola’s literary conduct, or perhaps misconduct, followed not only the fashion of the age but also the tradition of oral storytelling. In borrowing tales and passing them on to new audiences, Straparola acted as an oral storyteller in the garb of a writer. Using the relatively new media of print, he continued a behavior common and appropriate to oral culture. Within this new era, his work became a reservoir of tales culled from diverse sources, a reservoir that, as John Colin Dunlop long ago pointed out, was very popular in France ([1896] 1970, vol. 2:212). Le piacevoli notti thus became a source for literary fairy-tale writers who did not have direct access to oral tradition.

In order to authenticate the storytelling situation that he created, Straparola did not
rest with the employment of the two historical figures, Ottoviano Maria Sforza and his daughter Lucretia. To shore up the reality of his fictive storytelling situation, he inserted authentication notes in each volume of *Le piacevoli notti*, stating that he took down the tales in the language and style that the narrator told them. In the first volume he created a presumably fictive figure, Orfeo dalla Carta,6 who validates that “[Straparola] wrote his fables not as he wished to write them, but as he heard them from the ladies who related them, adding nought thereunto and taking nought therefrom” (Straparola [1551–1553] 1894, vol. 1:xxvii–xviii). Two or three years later, in the introduction to his second volume, Straparola addresses readers in his own voice and claims: “Of a truth I confess they [the tales] are not mine, and if I said otherwise I should lie, but nevertheless I have faithfully set them down according to the manner in which they are told by ten ladies gathered together for recreation” (Straparola [1551–1553] 1894, vol. 2:xv). These statements may have been printed to ward off malicious rumor, as Waters contends (Straparola [1551–1553] 1894, vol. 1:xii), or they may have been, simply, a literary strategy of authentication. In either case, together with the fairy tales in the collection, they won their author a place in the metaphoric Hall of Fame of Folktales. Even the Grimm brothers declared Straparola as their precursor in the collection of oral tales (Grimm and Grimm [1812–1815] 1980, vol. 3:285–90).

In contrast, however, Bottigheimer argues that the reflection the Grimm brothers saw in this distant mirror was distorted. In her view, Straparola did not dip into the fountains of oral folk traditions, as the Grimm brothers imagined, but was instead a literary innovator who influenced the patterns of oral tales. The invalidation of Bottigheimer’s argument, the declared purpose of this article, will deal first with a methodological issue that is essential to her thesis. Then, after a critique of one of her examples, I present three illustrations, in descending chronological order, of “rise tales” that were known before Straparola’s *Le piacevoli notti*. Finally, I conclude with some broader comments about fairy tales and society.

**The Rise Tale: Form and Theme**

Bottigheimer considers Straparola the “godfather,” not of the fairy-tale genre in general, but of a specific subform for which she proposes the term “rise tale.” As she states emphatically, “It was Straparola’s great and lasting contribution to the European literary heritage to have invented rise tales” (2002:2). Departing from previous scholarship, she rejects the idea that Straparola borrowed these tales from oral tradition:

My position diverges sharply, for I have concluded, first, that Straparola himself invented the previously undocumented tales, and that he did so specifically for Venetian readers in the context of a generally faltering and occasionally recovering mid-sixteenth-century economy; second, that his newly invented tales were the first to address the aspirations of an urban artisanal readership; and third, that his new rise plot both anticipated and precipitated that plot type in subsequent collections. (2002:2)

Bottigheimer’s thesis rests upon two tenets: the identification of the rise tale as a unique narrative form and its absence from previous documentation in European languages. The first is a methodological issue, while the second is historical-literary.
The methodological identification of the “rise tale” draws implicitly upon the morphological study of the folktale that Vladimir Propp ([1928] 1968) formulated in the context of Russian formalism (Erlich 1965; Jason 1977; Steiner 1984). Bottigheimer does not associate her formulation directly with folktale morphological analysis, but she relates herself to this school indirectly, through a reference to the narrative grammar that Tzvetan Todorov has proposed. In the 1960s Todorov introduced Russian formalist theory into France and became an influential contributor to narrative analysis (1965, 1969, 1973). To paraphrase his compatriot Claude Brémond, Todorov was a part of Propp’s French legacy, one of the postérité Français de Propp (Brémond 1973:59–80). Although Bottigheimer herself has not formulated her narrative analysis and typology in terms of either Russian formalism or French structuralism, the terms that she uses, “rise tale” and “restoration tale” and their descriptions, evoke these theories. She herself underscores the possibility of such a methodological association by referring to, and finding support for her insights in, Todorov’s writings. Todorov himself has not used either of the terms that Bottigheimer adopts, nor has he made such a distinction between fairy-tale forms. On the contrary, by postulating “the existence of a universal grammar” (Todorov [1968] 1977:108), he seeks in narratives correlates to language, assuming that it is possible to identify fundamental grammatical concepts in narrative and in culture more broadly. Pursuing such a possibility, he postulates that “an ideal narrative begins with a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force. There results a state of disequilibrium; by the action of a force directed at the opposite direction, the equilibrium is re-established; the second equilibrium is similar to the first, but the two are never identical” (111). Bottigheimer interprets this statement as a description of a “restoration tale” (Bottigheimer 2002:11), but in doing so she appropriates Todorov’s universal form of narrative to a particular type that she has delineated in the fairy-tale tradition. Obviously, the pattern described by Todorov fits the “restoration tale,” but it likewise fits any other narrative. The transitions from one state to another that he describes are not unique to any particular form.

In his later writings Todorov made further theoretical distinctions that are relevant to the delineation of literary genres. He suggested that “[g]enres are . . . entities that can be described from two different viewpoints, that of empirical observation and that of abstract analysis. In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalized, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification. A genre . . . is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties” (1990:17–8). Such an approach would actually accommodate Bottigheimer’s morphological description if her “rise tale” were thought of as one of the narrative possibilities within the fairy-tale form rather than as an emerging contrast to its other permutations.

This position of the “rise tale” within the fairy-tale corpus becomes clearer in the context of Claude Brémond’s analysis of the morphology of the French folktale. Brémond proposes to consider “the French fairy tale as being the development of an action which goes through phases of degradation and improvement according to a continuous cycle” that includes a “State of deficiency,” a “Procedure of improvement,” a “Satisfactory state,” and a “Procedure of degradation” (1970:251). The French fairy tales—and for that matter, the Italian fairy tales as well as other tales throughout
Europe and beyond—can have their start at any point in this cycle. Narrators, oral or literary, follow rather than break the literary conventions of their society when they start or end their stories at any stage of the cycle. In other words, neither the initial nor the final state of affairs of the protagonist is a generic distinctive feature of the fairy tale. The plots of European fairy-tale writers tended to comply with the convention of a final “satisfactory state” or equilibrium, but such a state is not necessarily conclusive; rather, it can set the stage for another cycle of narrative ups and downs. Such continuous transformations do not alter or extend beyond the generic horizons of the tale but are permutations within its generic boundaries. From this perspective, the “restoration” and “rise” tales that Bottigheimer perceives in the corpus of Straparola’s narratives are but two morphological patterns that are available to him within the corpus of tales that he has accessed.

**On Cats and Fairies**

In Bottigheimer’s schema, a plot line of upward socioeconomic mobility is necessary but insufficient for the identification of a narrative as a “rise tale.” In addition, she argues, the hero or heroine needs to accomplish his or her transition “from rags to riches” through the mediation of magic or with the assistance of a human or animal agent who possesses supernatural powers. In the “rise tale,” the amelioration in social class is not instrumental but supernatural. Bottigheimer (2002:14–8) illustrates the differences between magical and instrumental mediation by comparing two classical tales: ATU 545B (“Puss in Boots”) and ATU 1651 (“Whittington’s Cat”). At first glance this is a very instructive comparison. The two tale types share the same agent of change—a cat. Both are tales of fantasy, or at least partially so. Yet, in spite of these similarities, they are not comparable. They are tales of two different genres, the fairy tale and the legend, that are made distinct from each other by the speakers’ and listeners’ attitudes toward the narrated events and by the rhetorical strategies that communicate them. These two genres can and do occur simultaneously in many societies, in Europe and elsewhere, and the occurrence of one or the other does not represent a literary-historical development or necessarily indicate a change in culture and society.

The Grimm brothers articulated the distinction between these two genres: “The fairy tale is more poetic, the legend is more historical; the former exists securely almost in and of itself in its innate blossoming and consummation. The legend, by contrast, is characterized by a lesser variety of colors, yet it represents something special in that it adheres always to that which we are conscious of and know well, such as a locale or a name that has been secured through history” ([1812–1815] 1981, vol. 1:1). The attributes identified by the Grimm brothers—localization, historical personality, and belief in the historicity of the narrated events—outlasted intellectual fashions and continue to be associated with the legend genre (Bascom 1965:4–6; Dégh 2001; Oring 2008; Tangherlini 1990, 1996). These features are rhetorical devices that are used to persuade listeners of the historicity and validity of narrative, and they are absent from overtly fictive narratives in which no such persuasion is necessary.

As a fairy tale, “Puss in Boots” is a story about a cunning cat. It was made famous by Charles Perrault ([1695–1697] 1989:263–8; see analysis in Lang 1888:lxiv–lxxxiii; Si-
monsen 1992:74–80; Soriano 1968:171–9), but it was first introduced to literature by Straparola in *Le piacevoli notti* (night 11, story 1). The tale became a classic in the fairy-tale literature and is often included in anthologies (e.g., Opie and Opie 1974:110–6; Zipes 2001:390–405). It is the story of a cat that the youngest of three brothers inherits. The cat requests from his master a pair of boots and proceeds, through a series of tricks and cunning actions, some of which involve magic, to promote his master, to introduce him to the king’s court, and to have the princess fall in love and marry him. As a fairy tale, the story is not about a specific individual, and it has some supernatural features like a talking animal, an ogre, and magical transformations.

“Whittington’s Cat,” on the other hand, is a legend rather than a fairy tale, the fantastic elements in it notwithstanding. It is a tale that explains how the Lord Mayor of London, Richard Whittington, became a wealthy man. Whittington was a historical figure, and being the son of Sir William Whittington, a wealthy knight of Pauntley, in Gloucestershire, he hardly came from a poor background. Throughout his life, he was very charitable with his money, frequently supporting the sick and the poor (Barron 1969; Hope 1989:27–30). “Whittington’s Cat” explains the source of his wealth: In an unknown country, in a feast in his honor, he was handed a bat that he was told he could use to kill the mice that would crowd the dinner table and compete for the food. There were no cats in this country to help control the mice. Whittington presented his hosts with a cat that preyed on the mice and was rewarded with diamonds and gold. The story that this legend invokes, about the cat in the land of mice, was known in Europe in the fourteenth century and earlier in Asia. Its first known European documentation was made by Father Arlotto Mainardi in the fifteenth century (Wesselski 1910, vol. 1, tale no. 68), and it was well known in Europe during the sixteenth century (Kasprzyk 1963, tale no. 103).

The presence or absence of magical mediation in the acquisition of wealth and the rise to social prominence is indeed a critical difference between these two tales, but it has neither historical nor generic significance. Tales about supernatural miracles, holy men, fairies, and animals that enriched mortals were told in legends and fairy tales both before and after the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, the time when Richard Whittington lived and then became the subject of a legend about a cat-less land, and both before and after the sixteenth century, when Straparola incorporated into his anthology a version of “Puss in Boots.”

Bottigheimer’s choice of Straparola’s version of “Puss in Boots” as an illustration of the literary fairy tale is valuable, perhaps precisely because this tale undermines her own argument. Straparola’s tale is the story of Soriana, a widow from Bohemia, and her three sons. The youngest of these sons, Costantino Fortunato, inherits her cat, the least of her possessions. Cunningly and magically, this cat enables him to rise in wealth and social rank. In this tale, European folk religion and folk literature converge and mutually influence each other, for the function of cats as agents of magical transformation in fairy tales builds upon supernatural associations, which are themselves distant reflections of the position of cats in the mythology of the ancient world. In ancient Egypt, cats were an object of religious belief and ritual, and according to the first century BCE Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, if an Egyptian kills a cat “whether intentionally or unintentionally, he is certainly put to death, for the common people gather in crowds and deal
with the perpetrator most cruelly, sometimes doing this without waiting for a trial” (1933–1967, vol. 1:285). Bast, the cat goddess in Egypt, was a benevolent deity and a healer of disease. She was worshipped in ritual, festivities, and pilgrimages (Herodotus 1960, vol. 1:353–4; Briggs 1980, vol. 1:3–4). And although the cult of Bast was not transferred to Rome, the related cult of Isis was (Corsu 1977; Dunand 1973, 1979; Heyob 1975; Solmsen 1979; Witt 1971). Mildred Kirk (1977:22–3) explains that Isis was “derived from Bast” and that she preserved Bast’s association with the sacredness of cats.

In European countries, cats were stripped from their position as objects of worship in religious cults and ritual, but they retained their supernatural powers. Often they were considered the tangible representations of witches and fairies (Bobis 1999; Briggs 1967:72–4; Saint-Hilaire 1997). Straparola himself stated that “this cat of Constantino’s was a fairy in disguise” ([1551–1553] 1894, vol. 2:209). This association was not his own literary innovation but rather a known belief upon which he constructed his tale. The belief in such fairies was an integral part of the medieval world; these beings inhabited the supernatural realm together with elves, goblins, ghosts, and witches, and they interacted with humans both malevolently and benevolently (Ashliman 2006; Briggs 1967, 1976; Maury [1843] 1974; K. Thomas 1971:587–614). Katherine M. Briggs explains that “[t]he mentions of fairies in medieval manuscripts are, indeed, sparse, but they cover most of the types that we shall come across later” (1967:3). The slim documentary evidence of fairies in the belief systems of medieval European societies is not a testimony for their absence, and ignoring their documented presence creates a blind spot in the practice of literary empiricism. After all, ephemeral beliefs and communications occur regardless of their documentation. The meager references to fairies in contemporaneous writings are a function of the nature of medieval documents and of the attitude toward the fairies rather than a testimony to their true prevalence in belief systems. With no church and no cult to support them, the fairies were relegated to the cultural periphery. Consequently, the evidence of their significance can be inferred most readily from the testimony about their vanishing: comments about their disappearance attest to their earlier presence. In the words of Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath”:

In the Old days of King Arthur, today
Still praised by Britons in a special way,
This land was filled with fairies all about. ([1387–1400] 1993:176)

Three hundred years after Chaucer, Robert Kirk wrote The Secret Commonwealth (modern editions include R. Kirk [1690] 1976 and R. Kirk [1690] 1990), in which he also describes the vanishing world of the fairies and other supernatural beings in which peoples in northern Europe believed. In oral traditions there is an acceptable gap between the occurrence of a story and its discovery and documentation. Vladimir Propp addressed this issue succinctly: “The contemporary absence of certain forms will not contradict the over-all theory if one realizes that those centuries in which the tale led an intense existence are irretrievably lost to science. Just as we conjecture on the basis of general astronomical laws about the existence of those stars which we cannot see, it is also possible to assume the existence of tales which have not been collected” ([1928] 1968:114). By attributing to Straparola the invention of the “rise
tale,” Bottigheimer considers documentation as creativity. She is right that Straparola assembled and documented traditional fairy tales that were told in Italy and other European countries, but she is wrong in assuming that he authored them or formulated their narrative principles.

Philippe D’Alcripe and His Tall-Tale Collection

The fairy beliefs and their narrative representation were a hidden European tradition that circulated orally. With the emergence of popular print they ventured, with the help of authors, into the visible world. Historians of the European literary fairy-tale tradition describe a clear trajectory that begins with Straparola and continues with Basile, Perrault, and Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy and her circle and that concludes with the brothers Grimm (Zipes 2001; Canepa 1997). However, early literary interest in oral tales can also be seen in the tall-tale collection La nouvelle fabrique des excellents traits de vérite (The new fabrication of some excellent truths), published in Paris in 1579 under the pseudonym of Philippe d’Alcripe (whose real identity is still a mystery). Gerald Thom- as, who translated this collection into English, notes that “Philippe d’Alcripe’s collo- quial style . . . is typical of oral storytelling” (1977:2) and concludes his introduction by saying that “Philippe d’Alcripe was one of the first authentic folklore collectors” (4).

Fairy-tale scholars have hardly paid any attention to d’Alcripe because he primarily recorded tall tales that have a humorous theme. In his collection, however, there is one version of tale type ATU 750A (“The Three Wishes”) that is a parody of fairy tales.11 It is a story about three brothers who were traveling through the Lyons forest and met there, at eleven o’clock at night, three fairies who appeared to them as three beautiful maidens. The fairies invited the young men to dance with them, and they did so until dawn. As a reward, the fairies granted to each of the young men any wish he desired. The eldest, who by law would have been the sole inheritor of their father’s property, wished that their “calf will cure of scurf anyone who sticks his fingers up its arsehole.” And so it happened. The sick lined up behind the calf and were cured. Ashamed by his older brother’s undignified wish, the second in line wished his broth- er to be blind in one eye, and he became so immediately. In his anger, the first in line began to curse his brother with a whole slew of diseases, and seeing his anguish, the youngest brother then decided to help the second brother by wishing him to be to- tally blind (G. Thomas 1977:142–3).

The narrative was published almost thirty years after Straparola’s Le piacevoli notti, but as a tale in oral circulation the story of the three stupid wishes dates back to late antiquity.12 Furthermore, as a parody, the object of the tale’s ridicule must have been either fictive or historical tales that earlier narrators told. It is reasonable to assume that the tale recorded by d’Alcripe mocks narratives about wish-granting fairies and further that tales about such fairies had been known before d’Alcripe committed the parody to writing. The subject of the story, like that of the “rise tale” form, is a quest for eco- nomic success by protagonists to whom the rural inheritance rules no longer apply. They could have used magic in their quest for success in the urban environment. The message of the tale, however, is a rejection of the power of magic as means for eco- nomic success. Philippe d’Alcripe’s narrator strips Straparola’s cat of its boots before it has a chance to put them on. In other words, narratives about economic success through
the power of magic were told before Straparola made use of them, and, by his time, or shortly thereafter, they had already become an object of mockery.

**The Rise Tale in Manuscripts**

In the era before print, manuscripts evidenced tales that were likely in oral circulation. In *Fairy Tales from Before Fairy Tales* (2007), Jan Ziolkowski studies Latin texts of tales that subsequently turned up in European vernacular oral traditions, such as ATU 333 (“Little Red Riding Hood”) and ATU 425C (“Beauty and the Beast”). But Latin was not the only language of medieval European manuscripts; Arabic and Hebrew were also employed. While the Arabic writers largely resided in the Near East, in North Africa, and in Muslim Spain, the Jews who continued to write Hebrew in their Diaspora could be found, among other places, in central Europe. Sharing the Hebrew language with Jews in the Near East, they were agents of transmission of folktale repertoires from east to west (Ginzberg 1937). Their manuscripts provide evidence of the spread of tales of magic, either orally or through manuscript transmissions into European countries. These narratives fused together Jewish and European themes and evolved into tales that entered the canon of European fairy tales.

One such story is a version of ATU 310 (“The Maiden in the Tower”), which in its Jewish and medieval Jewish-European renditions is a “rise tale” *par excellence*. Its protagonist is a youth who is magically elevated from rags to riches. Yoav Elstein (2004:80–2) identified forty-one versions of this tale type in the Jewish tradition. The first dates back to the eighth or ninth century; it was copied from a manuscript in the Bodleian Library of Oxford University and published by Shelomoh Buber in his 1885 introductory essay to *Tanhuma* (a *midrashic* commentary on the Pentateuch from late antiquity). Three other versions are from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and are from European countries. One of these versions (Elstein 2004, tale no. 4) is actually a theological-mystical fable that summarily alludes to the tale of “The Maiden in the Tower.” It appeared in section Mishpatim 99a of the *Zohar*, the central book of the Kabbalah tradition, the main part of which was likely composed between 1270 and 1300 in Spain by Moses de Leon. A somewhat lengthy quotation may be valuable, demonstrating the use of the tale in a literary-theological and mystical discourse:

When the ancient one had reached this point he paused, and the two rabbis prostrated themselves before him, wept and said: “Had we come into this world only in order to hear these thy words from thy mouth it were sufficient.” Said he: “Associates, I did not begin to speak to you merely in order to tell you what I have told up till now, for, surely, an old man like myself would not limit himself to one saying, making a noise like a single coin in a jug. How many human beings live in confusion of mind, beholding not the way of truth whose dwelling is in the Torah, the Torah which calls them day by day to herself in love, but alas, they do not even turn their heads! It is indeed as I have said, that the Torah lets out word, and emerges for a little from her sheath, and then hides herself again. But she is like unto a beautiful and stately damsel, who is hidden in a secluded chamber of a palace and who has a lover of whom no one knows but she. Out of his love for her he constantly passes by her gate, turning his eyes towards all sides to find her. She, knowing that he is always haunting the palace, what does she do? She opens a little door in her hidden palace, discloses
for a moment her face to her lover, then swiftly hides it again. None but she notices; but his heart and soul, and all that is in him are drawn to her, knowing as he does that she has revealed herself to him for a moment because she loves him. It is the same with the Torah, which reveals her hidden secrets only to those who love her.” (Sperling, Simon, and Levertoff 1934, vol. 3:301)

The use of “The Maiden in the Tower” as a metaphor for the relationship between the Torah and its learners can be meaningful only when a broad cultural familiarity with the tale is assumed. This passage indicates that writers or speakers could assume a common knowledge of the tale, making its detailed exposition unnecessary. Indeed, there is further evidence, dated to the thirteenth century, that verifies the knowledge of this tale in medieval Europe. The following version, embedded within another tale, occurs in a manuscript from northern France that is currently available in the Bodleian Library in Oxford (oriental manuscript no. 135). The story begins with a conflict and reconciliation between King Solomon and Hiram, King of Zor, and it combines several familiar themes in Jewish narrative traditions, including King Solomon’s knowledge of the languages of birds and his command over them to shade him from the blazing sun (see Ginzberg 1909–1939, vol. 4:125–76). As the birds hover above him, Solomon overhears an eagle utter a prophecy that “Joshua, the High Priest, will die and his daughter will marry a bastard.” In order to prevent such a social embarrassment, Solomon locks Joshua’s daughter up in a tower and appoints a woman to guard and care for her. The maiden was barred from any contact with the world outside, but one day an eagle dropped an infant into the tower, and when he grew up, he and the maiden became lovers and she became pregnant. When King Solomon learned about it, he had no choice but to give his blessing to the union.

In this version, the summary description of “The Maiden in the Tower” focuses on the princess’s confinement and the control over her choice of mates, but implicit in this tale is also the destiny of the bridegroom, who magically enters the tower and is elevated from destitution to royalty. This is therefore a rise tale both literally and metaphorically. The manuscript tale anthology in which this story is included is considered “the earliest and largest in scope of the extant medieval collections of Hebrew tales” (Yassif 1984:411; see also Beit-Arié 1985). Some of its narratives are exclusive to the Jewish tradition; others, including the present tale, are known internationally. The recording of such a tale in this manuscript demonstrates the existence of “rise tales” in Europe prior to the sixteenth century. It is indeed possible to interpret such a narrative as involving a kind of social projection, expressing the aspirations of a depressed and oppressed social class. Clearly, the narratives operate in this way in many societies, not just in sixteenth-century Venice.

Cinderella in Late Antiquity

The final example in this excursion dates back to late antiquity and involves the motifs and figures that appear later in the “Cinderella” story. Their occurrence in classical literature is well known, though most scholars date the first documentation of the full “Cinderella” story to ninth-century China (Mair, Steinhardt, and Goldin 2005:362–7).
Motif H36.1, Slipper test; Identification by fitting of slipper, appears as early as the ancient Greco-Egyptian legend of Rhodopis. Herodotus reported this legend in the fifth century BCE (Herodotus 1960, vol. 2:134–5), but in his version the slipper-test motif is absent. For him, the story of Rhodopis is a local ethnic legend, common among the Greeks in Egypt, in which they take pride by attributing, erroneously, the dedication of a small pyramid to one of their own. The legend explains why the name “Tomb of the Courtesan” is given to a small but exquisitely built pyramid. According to Herodotus, Rhodopis was a former slave who became a wealthy courtesan, one rich enough to be entombed in a pyramid.

In later versions told by the Greek geographer Strabo in the early first century CE (1917–1932, vol. 8:89–95) and by the Roman author Claudius Aelianus in the early third century CE (1997:200), the slipper-test motif is central. These versions retain Rhodopis’s status and beauty—she is a hetaera, a high-class courtesan—but her elevation to royalty is due to a fateful intervention. Here, an eagle snatches Rhodopis’s shoe while she is bathing and drops it into the lap of a king, who is so enthralled by the shoe that he determines to marry its owner (see also Hansen 2002:86–9; Hall 1904).

An eagle and a sandal also play a part in the etiological tale of the constellation Aquila. According to this stellar myth, as recorded by the Latin author Gaius Julius Hyginus around the end of the first century BCE, Mercury was struck by the beauty of Venus, but she rejected him. Jupiter felt pity for him and sent an eagle to snatch Venus’s sandal while she was bathing and hand it over to Mercury in Amythaonia, Egypt. Seeking her sandal, Venus came to Mercury, and “he, on obtaining what he desired, placed the eagle in the firmament in exchange for the services rendered” (Hyginus quoted in Condos 1997:34).

While the stories of Rhodopis and Aquila include a “Cinderella”-related motif, I would argue that the Greek tale of Aspasia, daughter of Hermotimus, can be viewed as a full-fledged “Cinderella” tale type (ATU 510A), antedating the Chinese version of the ninth century. This story includes a rise pattern, magic help, and virtuous behavior, and it thus represents a third-century European version, one peninsula removed, of the pattern that Bottigheimer thinks was invented by Straparola in Italy 1,300 years later.

A record of this tale is found in section 12.1 of the Varia Historia of Claudius Aelianus, a Roman who spoke Attic Greek well. As Claudius Aelianus presents the story, the mother of Aspasia died in childbirth. Aspasia grew up poor but with good manners, dreaming of a future with a noble and virtuous man. Yet, in addition to her poverty, an unsightly growth on her face diminished her prospects for a profitable marriage. The surgeon to whom her father took her for removing this growth refused to operate on her without pay, demanding a sum her father could not afford. Distressed and disappointed, Aspasia cried until she fell asleep. As she dozed off, she dreamed about a dove that transformed itself into a woman. “Be of good cheer!” the woman said. “Bid a hearty farewell to doctors and their drugs. Take all of Aphrodite’s rose garlands that have withered, crush them, and sprinkle them upon the growth.” The little girl heard and obeyed. The growth disappeared and Aspasia regained her beauty. Then, when the Persians invaded her town, she was captured and delivered to King Cyrus’s court. Cyrus preferred her beyond all of his other concubines, and he loved her because of her mod-
esty, liveliness, and intelligence (Claudius Aelianus 1997:162–3). In a later episode, Cyrus offers an expensive necklace to Aspasia, but she asks him to give it rather to his mother, again demonstrating her virtue (164–5).

The shoe- or sandal-test motif is absent from this story, but, explicitly and implicitly, it has all of the features of a “Cinderella” tale, including an orphan girl who is in competition with more established women in the court. Whatever her subsequent adventures are, Aspasia is a Cinderella of classical late antiquity, rising from the lowest to the highest levels of society with supernatural help. Straparola does not include a version of “Cinderella” in Le piacevoli notti; the first version of this tale in the literary fairy-tale tradition appears in Basile's collection as “La gatta Cenerentola” (The cat Cinderella) ([1634–1636] 1932, vol. 1:56–63; cf. Dundes 1982:3–13; Canepa 1999:83–9). Nonetheless, the tale in Varia Historia has all the features of the “rise tale” as identified by Bottigheimer.

**Conclusion**

Comparative analysis reveals the literary evidence of the availability of the “rise tale” in historical European societies and challenges, first, Bottigheimer's contention that Straparola was a literary innovator and, second, her constructed correspondence “between the rise of the newly invented tales and the aspirations of an urban artisanal readership” (Bottigheimer 2002:2). Her attempt to draw causal relations and correspontences between socioeconomic trends and literature requires the identification of Straparola's readers. Are they the artisans, as Bottigheimer claims, or do they include other groups to whose literary tastes Straparola tried to cater? In examining the emergence of print, readers, and readership, it is insufficient to conceive of the shift from orality to literacy in broad terms. Rather, as John Guillory observes, it is necessary to ask “Who reads? What do they read? How do they read? In what social and institutional circumstance? Who writes? In what social and institutional circumstances? For whom?” (1993:18). While in oral cultures, narrators have some control over the composition of their audience—they can make a conscious choice of which stories to tell and to whom—in a literary society, with the increased distance between artist and audience, authors do not know who their readers are. And lacking the necessary basic statistical information, neither do we. Nevertheless, the writers still can wish for or imagine particular readers and direct their stories to these readers. Straparola, like Boccaccio before him (Boccaccio 1982, vol. 1:5; discussed in Clements and Gibaldi 1977:180–2; Kuhns 2005:106–7), addresses “the ladies” multiple times in his opening remarks, both in his first volume ([1551–1553] 1894, vol. 1:xxvii; cf. [1551–1553] 2000, vol. 1:3) and in his second volume ([1551–553] 1894, vol. 2:3; cf. [1551–1553] 2000, vol. 2:425). If there is a possibility of establishing a social cause for the rise of these tales from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, then it is likely to be found in considering not the artisans but rather the emerging female readership.

Female readers might have contributed to the transition of tales from orality to literacy. In the time leading up to the emergence of the literary fairy-tale tradition, the antecedents of Perrault's and the Grimms' tales were not children's stories but rather women's tales. Straparola had his stories told exclusively by ten women, while
two centuries before him, Boccaccio distributed the role of the narrator in the *Decameron* between seven women and three men. By the seventeenth century, Basile used a storytelling session set in the last five days of a woman's pregnancy as the frame for his tales, thus placing an exclusively female situation at the center of his story (see Canepa 1999). Any attempt to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between society and literature requires, first and foremost, the identification of the social trends that might have been the contributing factor for the emergence of a particular literary form. Textual analyses, and the authors’ own words, may provide a better clue for such a trend than theoretical models or ideologies.

Taking Straparola at his own words, his stories are sixteenth-century examples of popular women's literature, and they are geared toward his idea of feminine taste and fantasy. For that purpose he selected narratives from diverse sources, some from oral traditions, some from other authors, and some, no doubt, from his own invention. But the “rise tales,” as representatives of a pattern, were not his own creation. The documentations of oral narratives in ancient literary texts as well as in modern literature and mass media are only “floating buoys which signal the presence of submerged [tales]” (Wolfson 1956:vii), tales that in their totality did not reach the surface of literacy. Oral narrators and singers performed them in homes, halls, marketplaces, coffeehouses, and local festivals. Literary authors are not lessened by being alert to the spoken literature of their respective peoples. Straparola, for all his merits and follies, still made an important contribution to the folktale and fairy-tale traditions, without being an originator or an inventor of a narrative form. He deserves recognition for what he was and not for what he was not.

**Notes**

I would like to thank my friend Victoria Kirkham for her good counsel and erudite information about Italian literature.


2. This passage is from Waters’s introduction (Straparola [1551–1553] 1894, vol. 1:xi–xxvi), which also was published as a terminal essay in a later edition (Straparola [1551–1553] 1898, vol. 4:237–44). However, in that edition, this paragraph was omitted from the terminal essay and instead appears as part of a new foreword (1898, vol. 1:x). In his recent anthology, Zipes (2001:869–79) reproduced only the terminal essay, and hence this paragraph does not appear at all in his version.


4. Bottigheimer (2002:93–4) makes an interesting suggestion that in using Sforza’s daughter Lucretia Gonzaga as a figure in the group, Straparola intentionally conflates her with another Lucretia Gonzaga, who was Straparola’s contemporary in sixteenth-century Italy. This other Lucretia Gonzaga was tutored in her youth by the storyteller and author Matteo Bandello, and she later gained a reputation as a composer and teller of stories.

6. As Bottigheimer points out, “No one by that name is known to have existed in the Venice of Straparola’s days” (2002:107).
7. Waters notes that this dedication first appeared in the 1555 edition, but it is dated as having been written on September 1, 1553.
8. In her application of Brémond’s morphological analysis to African tales, Denise Paulme discerns seven plot types, in which improvement and degradation in the protagonist’s fortune may alternate, shift, and turn around (Paulme 1976:19–50).
10. In the context of a discussion about fairies, it may be necessary to distinguish between, on the one hand, the testimony about their vanishing from a belief system as a historical-religious development from, on the other hand, the belief that these supernatural beings are vanishing from sight and becoming invisible (see Briggs 1978).
11. ATU 750A has a very wide distribution, as is apparent in the recent revision of the tale-type index (Uther 2004). Unfortunately, a reference to Thomas’s translation of d’Alcripe is missing from the index’s bibliographical references for this tale type.
12. The earliest literary rendition of the tale in which a supernatural figure grants wishes to a mortal is the touching story of Baucis and Philemon in Ovid’s _Metamorphoses_ (8:631–720). In that version, the parodic aspect of wasted wishes is absent. However, the fable of “The Three Wishes” in the late Aesopic tradition retains the humor of the tale (see Perry 1952, tale no. 668; Perry 1965, tale no. 668; Ben-Amos 2006, tale no. 20).
13. Fishel Lachover (1951:44–51) noted that in Jewish literature, metaphoric allusions to “The Maiden in the Tower” occur both in earlier midrashic commentaries and in later mystical works. In both traditions there were partial references to the tale; various writers used its different narrative aspects as they considered fit for their rhetorical purposes. Like the version of the tale published by Buber, the midrashic books, _Midrash Rabbah: Exodus_ and _Midrash Rabbah: Deuteronomy_, date from the eighth and ninth centuries (or, at any rate, from no later than the eleventh century; see Shinan 1984:23). And, as in all midrashic books, the individual narratives and traditions included there might have existed in oral or literary circulation before their inclusion in these particular works. The exact place of origin and the path of dissemination of these books have not been determined, but there are indications that at least _Midrash Rabbah: Exodus_ was known in Spain in the thirteenth century (Shinan 1984:22). For the specific allusions to “The Maiden in the Tower” in the midrashic literature, see Simon Maurice Lehrman (1939:48) and Joseph Rabinowitz (1939:155). For the dating of midrashic books, see Herr (1971:1511). The later mystical books to which Lachover refers are _Seder ha-Yom_ (The day’s sequence; originally printed in Venice, Italy (Moses ben Judah ben Machir [1604]) and _Hemdat-Yamim_ (The joy of days; originally printed in Izmir, Turkey, in 1731) (Tsuri’el 2004). The latter book likely circulated in manuscript form for a long time prior to its publication.
14. The manuscript is described by Adolf Neubauer (1886:519–21), and its text has been published by Abraham Meir Habermann (1975:197–8) and by Yoav Elstein (2004:94–5). Habermann also reproduces in full a twelfth-century rendition of this tale found in the Cairo Geniza manuscripts; this version is currently located in Cambridge University Library’s Schechter-Taylor Collection, where it is designated as manuscript K27/19 (Habermann 1975:193–6; see also Kahle 1959). Habermann suggests the provenance of the latter manuscript to be Iran or another Near Eastern country. For a summary of the framing tale, see Elstein (2004:93) and Urbach (1973:70). For a bibliographical note about the role of the framing story in Jewish literature see Bin Gorion (1990, tale no. 38).

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