

# “Another Story for Another Time”

## The Many-Strandedness of a Jewish Woman’s Storytelling Tradition

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It has long been a misleading commonplace that every story is made up of a beginning, a middle, and an end. Much actual storytelling, by contrast, is many-stranded. Subplots are standard in novels and movies; mass-mediated storytelling proceeds along multiple plotlines in large multi-episodic series and many-stranded franchises, in film and TV, printed graphic and text fiction, and games, augmented by compendious fan fiction;<sup>1</sup> forcing writers, fans, and critics to struggle to manage continuity and canonicity,<sup>2</sup> just as authors and compilers of medieval romance cycles did before them.

Scholarly art terms have been coined to define the resulting narrative forms. *Entrelacement* is a “literary technique in which several simultaneous stories are interlaced in one larger narrative,”<sup>3</sup> a kind of interweaving that pervades chivalric romance and its derivations. *Digression* is a term still used (Neidorf 197–204) to refer to a storyteller’s flashing back and forward between tales that do not unfold concurrently, as happens throughout *Beowulf*. Literary texts such as the *Thousand and One Nights* are constructed around a third type of many-strandedness: the embedded tale within a tale, situated within a larger frame story (Irwin; Nelles). Gittes describes how Petrus Alfonsi’s *Disciplina Clericalis* drew on eastern traditions of frame story and furnished models for western authors such as Gower and Chaucer (Gittes).

Gittes is one of many who notes (147) that such many-strandedness is typically

oral or oral-derived. Many-strandedness is, indeed, usual in cycles of legendary and/or mythic oral epic; as Ong notes, single performances of an epic will cover only a fraction of the total corpus of a tradition, and singers may disavow even the possibility of complete performances of an epic cycle (Ong 144). Framing and other forms of many-strandedness have been noted in living oral tradition (Haring 229–45), and Irwin cites Dégh’s 1944 discussion of frame-tale telling by contemporary storytellers in Hungary (Irwin 36). Weinreich, with respect to the Jewish oral wonder tale, or *vunder-mayses*, mentions “more complex tales” with some parallel plotting (B. S. Weinreich 65–68).

Despite this tantalizing empirical evidence, standard scholarly analyses of the oral folktale (e.g., Holbek; Lüthi; Propp) have often stated or assumed that “folk narrative is always single-stranded” (Olrik 137). Wonder-tales are still usually archived, published, indexed, and analyzed as stand-alone tales. Standard analyses of the folktale, such as those of Propp and Holbek, concede that folktales may contain more than one move, but any tendency to many-strandedness is still generally seen as vestigial in the case of the folktale. This article concerns one striking exception to this rule. In at least one living folktale tradition—here termed for convenience the Marks-Khymberg tradition after the Anglo-Dutch Jewish family that has maintained it<sup>4</sup>—many-strandedness, transcending even the frame story in structural complexity, is a governing principle.

The Marks-Khymberg tradition is unusual in its form and content. It derives from the Netherlands, from Jewish communities whose storytelling is only sparsely recorded in modern times, and which experienced immense dislocation and destruction in the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, this tradition has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention, and evidence is mostly internal, comprising the oral testimony of the current main tradition bearer, the professional Anglo-Dutch Jewish storyteller and educator Shanaleah Khymberg (Shonaleigh Cumbers), who was mentored in the tradition throughout childhood by her grandmother, Edith Marks. Family tradition recalls that Edith Marks was born near Enschede in the Netherlands around 1910, and lived there, until she was caught up, with thousands of others, in the Holocaust. She survived the war, and then moved to southern England to be reunited with her few surviving relatives. She then passed the family tradition on to her granddaughter, during Shonaleigh’s childhood.

As Shonaleigh recalls, Edith Marks was (as she described herself) a *drut’syla*.<sup>5</sup> In family parlance this word defines the role of a hereditary female

storyteller-in-residence to a particular Jewish community: a role passed down from grandmother to granddaughter. Edith Marks is remembered as having practiced as a storyteller in the Netherlands before the war in this fashion, and she continued to practice throughout war, deportation, and internment. After 1945, Dutch-Jewish communities did not, and could not, reconstitute themselves in anything approaching their prewar state, and in any case Edith Marks had moved to England. For the rest of her life she was therefore in the curious predicament of being, so to speak, a community storyteller without attachment to a community. She was based in southern England in the early 1980s and was familiar with the College of Storytellers, one of the founding institutions of the contemporary storytelling movement in the United Kingdom (see Heywood, *New Storytelling*). And in these years, she was, of course, mentoring her granddaughter.

Thereafter, as Shonaleigh herself explains:<sup>6</sup>

When I'd finished, and after *bubbe* had died, I was telling, but in family circles and in friends' houses . . . then I went to drama school. And I didn't think I could make a living as a storyteller, 'cause I didn't think anything existed outside my own rarefied experience! . . .

So I was working in theatre. . . . I met you [the author], came across the storytelling scene in Sheffield, which at that time had quite a vibrant storytelling scene going on, at the Grapes.<sup>7</sup> And I kind of thought, "Bloody hell! This is storytelling! And it exists! It's not storytelling as I know it, but it's storytelling!"

And I got very excited about that, and I suddenly thought, ". . . maybe I could do this. . . . let's do this, this could be amazing!" But from the storytelling clubs—we then traveled round lots of clubs. We went to things like Shaggy Dog in Hebden Bridge,<sup>8</sup> Festival at the Edge<sup>9</sup> when it had only been going a couple of years . . .

So I thought in my head that people wouldn't want these huge latticed stories. Indeed, I'd got no idea how they'd have received those. So I cherry-picked. What I did is, I went through all the stories in my head, and I cherry-picked stories that were quite short. None of them were over twenty-odd minutes, really, twenty or thirty minutes. And most of them were funny. . . . And then that kind of carried on.

Over these years Shonaleigh told relatively few of her family stories in public. I had first met Shonaleigh in 1993, when I was a graduate student in folklore at

Sheffield University's National Centre for English Cultural Tradition, and she was working in theater. We met through a shared interest in live storytelling events around our adopted city of Sheffield, South Yorkshire. She began working as a professional storyteller soon afterward, around 1994, telling a very wide range of stories in a range of professional settings. Having been telling and listening in private circles for most of her life, she quickly grew concerned that her family tradition might easily be travestied or misappropriated in the very different atmosphere and culture of the contemporary public storytelling movement, so she protected the tradition by hardly sharing it publicly at all. In her public storytelling in those years the family stories manifested but little—but whenever they did, I (and Shonaleigh's son Isaac, and others) were sedulous in our petitioning for more.

But I kind of had a shift in my brain round about 2000 . . . I suppose it was the end of 2008, beginning of 2009, Isaac started studying for his bar mitzvah because we'd joined a reform *shul* [synagogue] . . . and I started telling in that shul. And realising that I had a profound connection to my Jewry through the stories, and they were received in a different way when I told them in *shul* from when I told at a storytelling club. . . .

And I started to think very deeply. . . . “What's going to happen if I don't pass any of this on?” And so about 2009 I did an experiment, I suppose, I got about ten friends together, a bunch of friends, and said, “Look, this is going to sound really crazy, but—” . . . [I] told them about the tradition, and said, “Can I try passing some stuff on to you?” . . . And they very benevolently said yes!

Shonaleigh continued to lead residential courses based on the family tradition for a number of years. From around 2011 she was also beginning to describe, discuss, and (eventually) tell the stories themselves to groups of listeners. This enabled more systematic research and documentation, which began in earnest in 2011 and is ongoing (see Heywood and Cumbers).

So I kind of went from hiding it, really, through insecurity, that I didn't think people would want to listen to *that!* . . . to hiding it because I didn't want people to have it, to kind of getting nudged through guilt by my own kid and my community . . . to start trying to pass it on in my own haphazard way.

In this way, over twenty years of shared storytelling at work and leisure,<sup>10</sup> I slowly became aware of the nature and scope of the Marks-Khymberg tradition as Shonaleigh held and practiced it, and I began to take a leading role in documenting it. I never met Shonaleigh's *bubbe*,<sup>11</sup> but I came to hear a lot about her. Accordingly, from 2011 onward, we have generated, and begun to analyze, an audiovisual archive of Shonaleigh's public and private storytelling and oral testimony. This ongoing research yields the primary material for the following outline description of the Marks-Khymberg tradition in its context, culminating in a preliminary analysis of one sub-cycle of tales. Of necessity this analysis is provisional and incomplete, but it serves to indicate the content of the tradition and to hint at the work that remains to be done.

### The Marks-Khymberg Tradition and Repertoire

Shonaleigh remembers as a child speaking a mixture of Yiddish and Dutch, with some English, in conversation with her grandmother. She now tells her grandmother's stories in English, and has for many years been fluent in no other language, although Yiddish and Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) phrases occasionally creep spontaneously into her storytelling in the course of a long telling.

Shonaleigh recalls that, before her death in the late 1980s, her *bubbe* taught her twelve story cycles, along with a method of oral memorization and interpretation that she termed the *drash* or *midrash*.<sup>12</sup> Newcomers to the tradition are forcefully struck by its sheer scope. Individual stories vary in duration from a couple of minutes to half an hour and more. Single stories are extensively interwoven to form sub-cycles, which in turn are ordered into the twelve large cycles mentioned previously. Each cycle is named in honor of one of the eminent sages of Jewish history, from Tannaitic sages of late Temple times to Hasidic *tzadikim* still active in the early nineteenth century. Although much of this material is richly documented in the sacred literature of Judaism and in modern ethnography, Shonaleigh (who is dyslexic) learned this material from Edith Marks, as she recalls, orally, and has made very little, if any, personal use of writing in recalling and retelling her stories.<sup>13</sup>

For the time being the total number of stories in the twelve cycles remains a matter of surmise, but it appears manifestly very large. To illustrate: the sub-cycle

titled *The Ruby Tree*, now fairly thoroughly documented, contains, as recorded, more than fifty individual stories. *The Ruby Tree* is one of the five so-called Gem Cycles,<sup>14</sup> which, together, form about half of the large Cycle of Manasseh, one of the twelve large cycles.<sup>15</sup> *The Ruby Tree* is a substantial piece of storytelling—Shonaleigh recalls being taught that it was traditionally told over the eight nights of Channuka—but its fifty stories are still only a very small part of the total Marks-Khymberg repertoire.

As regards content, the stories so far recorded are set in the well-attested world of Jewish historical and religious legend, interwoven in the characteristic way with biblical material, tales from rabbinical scriptural exegesis, and other sources.<sup>16</sup> Settings range from the Ashkenazi Pale of Settlement to Paradise itself, via Eretz Israel, the Sephardi Levant, and other places both known and imagined; characters range from the personified Shekinah or divine Presence to angels and demons, prophets and other biblical figures, legendary heroes and heroines of rabbinical Judaism, and the vainglorious kings, shrewd princesses, and bemused, resilient, and resourceful everymen and everywomen of folktale. The repertoire also includes humorous tales, mainly at the expense of human foibles; in Jewish terms it would be natural to think of these as *Chelm*<sup>17</sup> or numbskull stories, but in the folklorist's conventional terminology they resemble *Schwänke*. There is a significant overlap too with rabbinical fables and exempla (teaching stories, including the Chasidic *khsidische mayse*), which have roots in the Talmud and other core texts of rabbinical Judaism. Strictly speaking, however, in terms of genre, most documented Marks-Khymberg stories might appear, to the outsider at least, to qualify as legends (cf. Yiddish *mesoyres*; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Wex): they recount marvelous, sometimes magical, events in realistic settings. In terms of plot and structure, however, even the most legend-like stories resemble wonder tales (cf. Yiddish *vunder-mayse*; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Wex).

Between May 2013 and August 2016, we<sup>18</sup> made video and/or audio recordings, supplemented by written notes, of Shonaleigh telling the sub-cycle of *The Ruby Tree* on nineteen occasions. Five of these were in private homes; one was at a private function held on commercial premises hired for the purpose; six were stand-alone public events; and seven were arranged as part of a larger public event, such as a course or conference. Sixteen were in England and three in Wales.

Importantly, Shonaleigh never told, and never tells, the entire sub-cycle on any single occasion, nor would she consider it traditional practice to do so.

Each individual telling was, and typically is, a selection. Equally importantly, the selection was made, and is made, not by the storyteller, but by her listeners. The easiest and clearest way to explicate all this is to give a general outline of the sub-cycle's fabular structure,<sup>19</sup> made by comparative induction from all nineteen recordings, and then to trace the route followed through this structure on a specific narrative occasion.

### Mapping the Labyrinth: The Fabular Structure of *The Ruby Tree*

The centerpiece of *The Ruby Tree*, as Shonaleigh has so far told it, is the story of "The Eagle Prince." This tale revolves around the conception, birth, youth, marriage, and (ultimately) death of an enchanted prince, named Barathabas.<sup>20</sup> It begins with a king and queen who long for a child. To heal the queen's barrenness, the king, Thebas, sets out to obtain a magical pomegranate from the eponymous Ruby Tree. But the witch who watches the Ruby Tree—the *makhshef*<sup>21</sup>—catches him in the act. Thebas has to bargain. The fruit is given but the child, Barathabas, is born under the *makhshef*'s curse.

However, the infant Barathabas is not taken, but lodged in a tower by his parents to protect him. The curse takes effect notwithstanding when Barathabas attains majority at age thirteen. Thereafter, Barathabas is transformed into a monstrous eagle for the duration of each full moon. From this point, Barathabas appears—so to speak—less as a male Rapunzel and more as an animal bridegroom.<sup>22</sup>

In his eagle form, he is the slave of the *makhshef*, who forces him to harvest golden threads from the beams of the sun. These the *makhshef* weaves into a magical dress of woven gold, which compels love at first sight—of which, more later. Each month, as the moon wanes from the full, Barathabas is recalled to his human form when, regularly but as if by chance, he overhears the music of the prophet Elijah, in his familiar character of a wandering musician and wonder worker. The music has the property of recalling the bestial and degraded Eagle Prince to a sense of his humanity. This transformation occurs each month.

So much for Barathabas—for the moment. But the sub-cycle has a co-protagonist, a princess named Hanaleah, who takes center stage in the tale of *The King's Three Beautiful Daughters*. This begins with a royal father promising a gift each to his three daughters on his return from war. To his youngest daughter, Hanaleah,

he gives the prophet Elijah's marvelous violin, which he has obtained, as if by chance, from the mysterious and immortal prophet-wanderer. For Hanaleah's elder sister he brings the magical dress of woven gold, which he has similarly obtained by apparent chance, without knowledge of its provenance.

By these two objects, Hanaleah and her family are now drawn unknowingly into the saga of the Eagle Prince. The elder sister generously gives the golden dress to Hanaleah, and Hanaleah steps out under the full moon wearing the magical dress and playing the magical violin. She is abducted by the Eagle Prince. Despite the trauma of abduction, Hanaleah agrees to marry Barathabas once his human form is restored.

From now on, Hanaleah's story and that of her husband are closely intertwined. Hanaleah resolves to break the curse. She travels to the Ruby Tree, accosts the makhshef, and dupes her into confiding the means to break the curse. The terrible catch is that, in order to do so, Hanaleah has to destroy Elijah's violin, her one remaining treasure (since the golden dress was destroyed by the Eagle Prince during the abduction). Through her own presence of mind, in this moment of ordeal and supreme sacrifice, Hanaleah not only endures but also triumphs—within limits, at a cost.

She manages to destroy the makhshef. But she balks at the final sacrifice of the violin. The Eagle Prince remains cursed. Years pass. In the end, Barathabas dies—and on the day of his funeral, the widowed Hanaleah, having told her grandson the whole story, is transformed into an eagle herself and flies away.

So described, it is not hard to see that the central narrative structure of *The Ruby Tree* comprises two concurrent stories, interlaced by the exchanges of two magical objects—the dress and violin—and by their convergence into the story of the makhshef's downfall at the hands of the women of the Thebas dynasty, in which the violin (and, to a lesser extent, the dress) features significantly a second time. This fabular structure is consistent across all nineteen tellings of *The Ruby Tree*. It could be represented by some such figure as shown in Figure 1.

But this is only the centerpiece of a much larger narrative structure. On various occasions of the nineteen tellings, we also heard equally substantial stories about the respective birth and parentage of Barathabas and Hanaleah. These four tales may now be summarized:

First, in the tale of “The Silver Thread of Fear,” we hear how Barathabas's future mother, a goatherd's daughter, was born, like her future son, Rapunzel-style, by the consumption of a magical herb by her own mother, obtained by a bargain



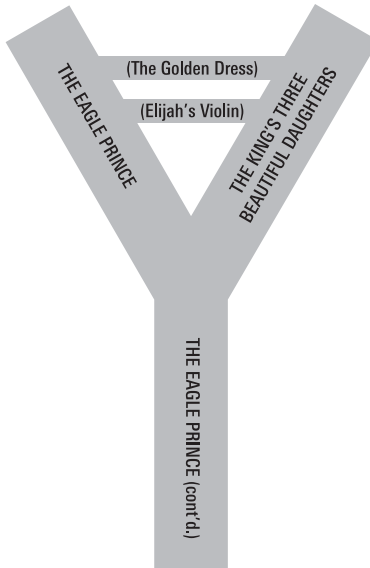


FIGURE 1.

with another makhshef. This makhshef is male and takes the goatherd's daughter. She grows up in captivity to the makhshef. In time, he announces his intention to marry her. In order to escape him, she obtains the eponymous magical silver thread from the Moon and uses it to weave a tapestry, which enables her to transport herself and her whole family to a far distant country.

Second, running in sequence from the conclusion of the foregoing tale, there is a short tale that recounts how the goatherd's daughter meets prince Thebas following her escape, but she refuses his offer of marriage until the pampered prince learns practical skills beyond those of the average courtier. Thebas duly embarks on a long journey to learn the arts of silversmithing, wood carving, and goat-herding. This episode, although slight, appears to be narrated as a separate story.

Third in this sequence comes the long tale of "The Sandalwood Chest," which concerns tasks undertaken by prince Thebas, Barathabas's future father, in order to win his bride. Thebas apprentices himself in turn to a silversmith, a wood carver, and a herder. He helps to break a curse on the silversmith's betrothed and enables the marriage to take place; the full story of this is told in a separate tale, "Gideon the Silversmith," which in turn links to tales of a completely different sub-cycle, "The Opal Forest." Thebas also studies under a wood carver and learns to make

(among other things) a sandalwood box, or chest. Finally, he learns goat-herding with a farmer and teaches wood carving in turn to the farmer's young son, Tobias (who will grow up to play a major part in the events of a third Gem Cycle, "The Diamond Girl and the Goathorn Bee"). Thebas's own adventures accomplished, he returns and presents the goatherd's daughter with the sandalwood chest that he has made himself. She now accepts him; the wedding takes place, and the childlessness of the marriage furnishes the initial impetus for the tale of "The Eagle Prince."

Running concurrently with this sequence is the tale of "The Twice-Lost Wife," which treats Hanaleah's parentage. In youth, Hanaleah's future mother lost the love of her life and settled for a more humble but devoted courtier, Hanaleah's future father. Having given birth to three daughters, including Hanaleah, she dies. This leaves the stage set for the tale of "The King's Three Beautiful Daughters," summarized above.

Like the tales of Thebas, the saga of Hanaleah's wider family establishes links with other areas of the total repertoire, including the sub-cycle of "The Emerald Sea," but also extending far beyond the scope of the present essay. The saga takes place against the background of a protracted war, which Shonaleigh always refers to as "the beset borders." A story titled "The Sweetest Sound" accounts for the beginnings of this war, in a slave revolt engulfing many kingdoms.

If we were to add these tales and links to other sub-cycles as extensions to the rough schema above, it might look like Figure 2.

The general outline of the whole sub-cycle is now clearly in the process of revealing itself. The account might be extended, but for brevity's sake this must suffice. It is enough to reveal the striking way in which prose tales—which resemble wonder tales, in structure and also in content—interlink, as we have already described, in a manner more commonly associated with the legendary and mythic content of forms like oral epic. A certain amount of additional detail must be added to fill out the picture of the ground already covered.

First, as became clear over the course of the nineteen tellings, at three fixed points in the sub-cycle, as so far mapped, the characters tell each other fairly self-contained stories, producing tales within tales of the type described. First, Thebas's mentors tell him various tales in the course of his journeys of discovery, as narrated in "The Sandalwood Chest." Second, the queen, Thebas's wife, tells a number of short stories to her son, the infant Barathabas, while he shelters from the threat of the curse in the tower. Third, toward the sub-cycle's conclusion,

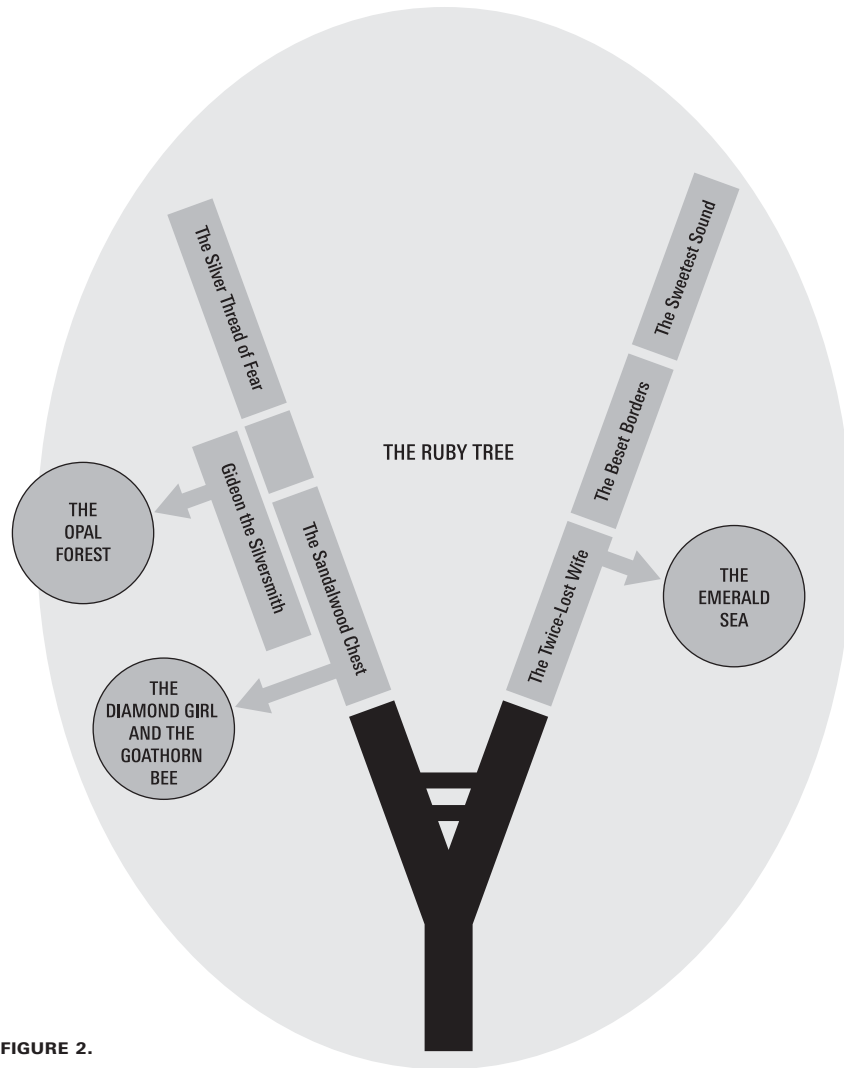


FIGURE 2.

Hanaleah—having learned these stories, and others, from her husband Barathabas—tells them again to the makhshef at the foot of the Ruby Tree as part of her confidence trick, aimed at worming the secret of the curse out of her. The ruse succeeds when the makhshef in turn boastfully relates various stories of her previous misdeeds.

Some of these stories are short, self-contained, and often humorous (and in

some instances mildly scatological). In fact, they are often drawn from distant and unrelated sub-cycles and cycles in the total repertoire. But this is not immediately apparent, and in this context they function as stand-alone anecdotes or short humorous tales. They may be felt as brief interludes or respites from the serious and often harrowing content of the main storylines.<sup>23</sup>

Second, narration of the sub-cycle is pervaded by more or less glancing reference to tales from the body of creation myth and legend set in the earliest times. The most relevant and frequently told examples of these in Shonaleigh's tellings of *The Ruby Tree* include the tales of "The Northern Lights" and "The Screaming Stones," since these pertain directly to the mythic origin and nature of the Ruby Tree itself. Figures 1 and 2 are therefore considerable simplifications of the fabular structure they represent, which is itself only a fraction of the total structure of *The Ruby Tree*. Having surveyed this general outline of the fabular structure of the core portion of *The Ruby Tree* sub-cycle, its working-out in practice may be illustrated through more detailed consideration of a single narration.

### Paths through the Labyrinth: Narrating *The Ruby Tree*

In 2016, the International School of Storytelling at Forest Row in East Sussex took over the hosting of Shonaleigh's three-year course, *Walking the Wildwoods*. From Tuesday, August 16, to Thursday, August 18, 2016, during a five-day residential stay for course participants, three evening-long storytelling sessions were convened in the friendly, informal setting of the school's Storytelling Hut after the activities of the day and an evening meal had both been concluded. The account that follows relates to the first of these three sessions. For reasons of concision, only the first part of the session is discussed in detail.

Early on the Tuesday evening, a happily expectant group of about twelve to twenty course participants and other listeners gathered in the Hut for a 7:30 p.m. start, expecting to hear Shonaleigh tell for an hour or longer at a stretch. I was also on hand to record, annotate, and observe. Over the three evenings, Shonaleigh was to tell most, but not all, of *The Ruby Tree*.

A little after 7:30 p.m. on the first evening, facing an expectant group of listeners, Shonaleigh made some welcoming, introductory and explanatory remark. Then, as the listeners settled, she opened the storytelling with a short unaccompanied sung recitation of the Shabbat hymn:

*Hinei ma tov u'ma-nayim*  
*Shevet ach-im gam ya-chad.*<sup>24</sup>

The group having settled, she then launched straight into the main saga of the sub-cycle, beginning—as she usually does—at the very end of the action:

On the day that King Barathabas died, the sky was dark. Not because it was night, not because it was cloudy. It was dark because five hundred and forty-seven eagles had come to pay tribute to the death of that king. . . And at the top of the tallest tower, there sat the king's wife, old now and weary. . . .

Standing next to her was her grandson, a young man of seventeen, eighteen summers . . . and he looked at her with fearful eyes, and said, "Grandmother, how am I to rule a kingdom when he [i.e., the dead king] was a monster, a beast, half a man, half demon . . . ? I don't know the story. I don't know what to do."

The whole of the rest of the sub-cycle, narrated over the following three evenings, consisted of the queen's answer to her grandson's anguished question. In this sense, the whole of *The Ruby Tree* was, strictly speaking, narrated by Shonaleigh as an embedded tale within a frame tale, although it was easy to forget this.

The queen in her answer begins with a description of a landscape:

At the edge of the world there is a great cliff, and that cliff goes down, down, down to an Emerald Sea,<sup>25</sup> and that Emerald Sea stretches out to a far distant horizon where the night sky meets it . . . and there is a great curtain . . .

The curtain is, of course, the Aurora Borealis, the Northern Lights. She went on:

And why that curtain is there? That is another story . . .

And the listeners, recognizing the cue, chorused:

. . . for another time!

This was the first of many instances of this call-and-response formula on that and the following two evenings.

The formula *another story for another time* (also occurring in unexceptional variant forms such as *other stories for other times*) requires some explanation. It is central to Shonaleigh's telling of her family stories since it is the main device governing the selection of tales for telling on any particular occasion. Shonaleigh

and her listeners may repeat it many times in the course of even a fairly short and simple storytelling event.

The function of the phrase is to mark a point of juncture between two or more stories. Such points of juncture usually transpire part of the way through the telling of a story, in a way that interrupts its telling. Depending on the listeners' reactions to the interruption, Shonaleigh may digress from the old tale immediately, in order to begin the new. Or, she may bypass the new tale and continue with the old. Moreover, if the digression is followed, another point of juncture may arise in the new tale, and the telling of a third tale may be commenced.

In this way, in the course of a sustained telling, Shonaleigh and her listeners may quite easily find themselves at three or more removes from the tale with which the telling began. Usually, they find their way back to the main story before the end of a narrative event, as each story concludes and Shonaleigh resumes each tale from the point at which she left off—usually, but not always; for, depending on listeners' preferences, time constraints, and other factors, it is possible that a digressive strand might become the focus of listeners' attention in its own right. The overall effect is both immersive and strikingly nonlinear, and the demands of the form on the storyteller's presence of mind, and capacious memory, are self-evident. To this extent it may be an arbitrary imposition even to consider the tales of the Thebas dynasty, as I have hitherto done, as the central or core tales of *The Ruby Tree*.<sup>26</sup> But so far, in fact, Shonaleigh really has treated the Thebas dynasty as the main protagonists and narrated the tales accordingly, as far as her listeners have permitted.

On this occasion, the listeners were familiar with the *other stories* formula by the time Shonaleigh mentioned the Northern Lights, and so there was no doubt about her reasons for pausing a moment after the response had died away. For a moment, there was silence, as Shonaleigh waited to see if anyone would request the new tale. But on this occasion they did not, and the tale—an etiological myth of the Northern Lights—remained untold (it is documented in other recorded tellings).

Having negotiated the point of juncture in this way, Shonaleigh continued smoothly:

And so, if you come back from the curtain of the heavens, there is a tree . . .

This opened into a long description of the nature and origins of the eponymous Ruby Tree: a description that connects it to a very large body of creation story. Shonaleigh described, more or less as incidental detail, how the tree was

planted by the prophet Elijah and how its roots stretched down to the four biblical rivers of Paradise.<sup>27</sup> In the course of this description she steered past some possible links to other tales of Elijah (“There are many stories of Elijah: more stories than I can tell you this night”) and continued along the main spine of the sub-cycle.

The tree’s fruit (pomegranates) can cure barrenness, and the prophet plants it as a gift to humankind, but a greedy makhshaf finds it, curses it, and builds a stone wall to keep people away from it:

**SHONALEIGH:** . . . and bound together again with the spit of her mouth and the snot of her nose, those stones screamed. But why those stones screamed—well, that is another story—

**AUDIENCE IN CHORUS:** —for another time.

**LISTENER 1:** I’d like to hear that story.

**L2:** Yes, I’d like to [*inaudible*].

**S:** You’d like to hear that story?

[*Laughter*]

**S:** Okay! [*pause; approx. 4 seconds*] At the beginning of the world, the Creator made many things . . .

The tale of “The Screaming Stones” was now underway. By requesting it, the listeners had found themselves catapulted straight back into the mythic world of creation, to hear the tale of how, in the beginning, loose stones were allotted the role of vessels of human prayer by the divine Creator. But to complicate matters further, this new tale proved quickly to be replete with references to other facets of the mythic world. Accordingly, narration of *The Screaming Stones* had not even proceeded beyond the initial scene-setting stage before another link emerged, requiring negotiation. Another story, a mythic tale of “The Envious Moon,”<sup>28</sup> was then offered, requested, and begun—and immediately led to yet another link, to a tale concerning the creation of earthworms. Here, at last, the listeners refused in order to proceed with “The Envious Moon.” This complex juncture was navigated as follows, beginning with the early, soon-to-be-interrupted scene-setting in “The Screaming Stones.”

**S:** . . . and when he [the Creator] had finished [the work of creation], well, after the moon had brought envy into the world, and how the Moon did that, well, that is another story—

**A:** —for another time.

**L3:** [*inaud*] I would like to hear that story.

[*laughter*]

**S:** Okay! It's very interesting . . . how the moon brought envy into the world. [pause, approx. 10 seconds] The sun and the moon gave out equal light. The night sky was dark and cold, and the earth was finished as far as the Creator was concerned. There were . . . animals of every kind, who had all been given their allotted tasks and quarters, even the worms, but that is another story—

**A:** —for another time.

[*pause*]

**S:** When all of these things rose . . .

Narration was now at a mere two removes from the main story of the Ruby Tree, where the evening's telling began. And so the story of "The Envious Moon," beginning from "The sun and moon gave out equal light," continued to its conclusion, and the interrupted narration of "The Screaming Stones" then resumed, leaving the telling at one remove from the main story. In the course of telling "The Screaming Stones," Shonaleigh bypassed more tales related to the several types of gemstone and mineral already listed in the course of the story of the stones ("Every stone has its story— more stories than I could tell you this night"), but the listeners allowed Shonaleigh to conclude the tale of the stones without further digression.

Once it was concluded, the transition back to the main spine of the sub-cycle was navigated as follows:

**S:** . . . and so when the makhsheft— to get back over here!<sup>29</sup>—started to pull the stones, and they realized that they were being used . . .

And then the storyteller took up the main story from where she had first left off, with the makhshef building the wall around the stricken Ruby Tree.

By this point, Shonaleigh had been storytelling, continuously, for approximately half an hour, and it is worth bearing in mind that the narration of *The Ruby Tree* as a whole was still very much in the scene-setting stage. Neither of the two main protagonists—Hanaleah or Barathabas—has even been born; the Ruby Tree itself had barely taken shape in the mythic tale world. The leisurely, meandering pace of narration through the drut'syla's world of story is essential to its method



and affect. Detailed explication of this half-hour episode is hopefully enough to convey the method and mood of many-stranded drut'syla storytelling, with clarity sufficient to excuse a more cursory précis of what remains.

Having accounted for the nature and provenance of the Ruby Tree, Shonaleigh introduced her first protagonist (“Time passed, and there was a king, whose name was Thebas”) and gave a brief account of his early wanderings, telling how, one day, he stumbles across an entire town that seems to have appeared from nowhere overnight—as indeed it has—and

**S:** how that town, and how that village, and how those goats, got there, is another story—

**A:** —for another time.

At this point I myself interjected: “I want to hear that one!” Once the general laughter had subsided, Shonaleigh launched—as I knew she now must—into the tale of “The Silver Thread of Fear.” Having told it, Shonaleigh then returned to Thebas’s discovery of the mysterious village, and his fateful meeting with the goatherd’s daughter. But Shonaleigh was soon diverted again by other listeners, in the normal way, since at this point Thebas proposes marriage to the goatherd’s daughter, and is promptly dispatched by her to learn his three useful trades.

This propelled Shonaleigh into a fuller narration of “The Sandalwood Chest,” but this tale was broken in turn by a narration of the previous history of “Gideon the Silversmith,” Thebas’s mentor, and in the telling of “Gideon the Silversmith” numerous other links to other stories were bypassed, including the noted links to other sub-cycles, “The Opal Forest” and “The Diamond Girl and the Goathorn Bee,” until Thebas was returned relatively promptly from his wanderings, and Shonaleigh guided her listeners back to the main spine of the sub-cycle in order to narrate the betrothal and wedding of Thebas and his commoner queen. Thebas obtains his parents’ consent for the unseemly match with a commoner by invoking a canonical and frequently cited, effectively proverbial tale:

**S:** They argued the sun up and the moon down, until finally he looked at his father and said, “I love that woman the way Rachel loved Akiba.” And when he heard that, he knew there was no argument. And why Rachel and Akiba? Well, that is another story—

**A:** —for another time.

But, before listeners could respond to the implied invitation to request the tale of “Rachel and Akiba,” Shonaleigh interposed: “I think that is probably a good place to stop. People are tired, yes?” But there was an audible murmur of disappointment from the listeners, so, knowing that she would be resuming the tale on the following night, she suggested: “Give me five minutes, and I can get us back—here, it would be a good place to start”—that is, on the morrow.

She suggested telling “Rachel and Akiba” on the following night, and then, fairly cursorily, narrated the wedding of Thebas and the goatherd’s daughter; the young queen’s scandalous childlessness, and Thebas’s fateful decision to travel to the famous Ruby Tree and obtain the pomegranate as the cure for barrenness. Thebas sets off—and Shonaleigh, having been storytelling without a break for almost an hour and a half, finally approached the *beginning* of the story of the sub-cycle’s central protagonist. She thanked the listeners, there was a round of applause, and the gathering began to disperse, to reconvene on the following two nights to follow the tale of *The Ruby Tree* to its conclusion.

## Conclusion

This brief and necessarily unsystematic description is hopefully enough to introduce the dialogic fluidity and scope of narration in the Marks-Khymerberg tradition, and its characteristic interwoven fabular form. The tradition invites more systematic analysis, which we hope to carry out. This could proceed from a number of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives (see, for example, Bauman).

In the present study, we have chosen to focus on the fabular structure of the large cycles and discovered that even this specific task presents extremely formidable challenges. One challenge, already noted, is the sheer scope of the material. The subject matter of this presentation represents no more than a fraction of the total material in *The Ruby Tree*, which itself is only one very small part of a much larger whole.

Another puzzle relates to the relative frequency of fixity and freedom in the drut’syla’s management of linkages between stories as she tells them. At the fabular level, as we have noted, the structure of a sub-cycle like *The Ruby Tree* must be stable and fixed—up to a point: “The Silver Thread of Fear” must always logically be a prequel to “The Eagle Prince,” and so forth. But the drut’syla’s freedom to range at will with her listeners across the fabular lattice of the tales may be greater

than this implies. As previously noted, during narration, tales within tales such as the story of “Rachel and Akiba” generally seem to be more free-floating than core episodes like “The Silver Thread of Fear” and can be referenced and cued in more than one context in the course of narration.

One could only analyze this aspect of Shonaleigh’s practice empirically by means of a thorough comparative analysis of a large corpus of repeated tellings of a single sub-cycle, and performance-centered analysis such as Bauman’s would be highly apposite. Under these circumstances it is possible that the creative element in the interlacement of stories is one of the many things about the earlier stages of the tradition for which external evidence is unlikely now to be plentiful. But there remains the possibility that the Marks-Khymberg family tradition is not the only drut’syla/dertseyler tradition still extant, and that other practicing tradition-bearers will one day come to public notice. That is a suitably hopeful speculation on which to conclude.

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#### NOTES

1. For *fanfiction* I cannot improve on the definition in *urbandictionary.com*: “when someone takes either the story or characters (or both) of a certain piece of work, whether it be a novel, tv show, movie, etc., and create their own story based on it.” “Fanfiction.” *Urban Dictionary*. [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fanfiction](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fanfiction), accessed April 15, 2017.
2. *Canonicity* in this sense is something different from the literary canonicity

discussed by (e.g.,) Lauter (see Lauter). *Canon* refers to authorized material that is recognized by producers and fans as authoritative and in continuity with its core mythos—material that is, so to speak, true within the fiction. As a franchise develops, not all spin-off material is automatically canon; fanfiction rarely is. I am indebted for this point to Ben Knight (Knight).

3. “Entrelacement.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, [www.britannica.com/art/entrelacement](http://www.britannica.com/art/entrelacement), accessed March 24, 2017.
4. For a general introduction to the Marks-Khymberg tradition in context, see Heywood and Cumbers (219–37).
5. The spelling *drut’syla* was settled on in the 1990s by Shonaleigh, in consultation with friends, to capture the pronunciation of a word that she had heard in childhood on her grandmother’s lips and never seen written down. Clearly this word is/was the Yiddish *dertseyler* “storyteller” (cf. Yiddish (*der*)*tseyln*, German *erzählen*, “narrate”), which is well-attested (see Elzet, cited in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Wex; Weinreich, “storyteller / narrator / דערציילער”). Like the English *storyteller*, *dertseyler* carries numerous shades of meaning and does not always necessarily imply a hereditary woman storyteller as such (see Heywood and Cumbers). The prominent, apparently prevocalic /r/ in *drut’syla* may point to Flemish influence on the family speech (Heidi Kockaerts, personal communication).
6. Interview with author, January 29, 2018.
7. The *Yarns, Tales and Lies* storytelling nights ran monthly at the Grapes Inn, Trippet Lane, Sheffield, starting from 1993. At the time of writing its ultimate successor, renamed *Story Forge*, still runs monthly at the Fat Cat inn.
8. See <http://www.shaggydogstorytellers.com>. *Shaggy Dog Storytellers* (formerly *Tales at the Wharf*) has run at the Stubbing Wharf in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, since about 1994. For a detailed ethnographic account of Shaggy Dog and other storytelling clubs in England, see Heywood, *Storytelling Revivalism*.
9. Annual storytelling festival based in Shropshire, founded in 1992.
10. And eventual marriage, 10th Elul 5772 (August 28, 2012).
11. Yiddish “grandmother” (באָבע (“bobe”) - /'bɔbə/ ).
12. Not to be confused, strictly speaking, with rabbinic midrash, although a general affinity between the two bespeaks rabbinical influence on the development of the Marks-Khymberg repertoire. Cf. Noy, “Is There a Jewish Folk Religion?”
13. The general situation seems comparable to that pertaining in the case of modern *runot*-singers such as Marina Takalo and Mari Remsu. See Pentikäinen (104–12).
14. The other four Gem Cycles (sub-cycles in my terminology) are *The Diamond Girl*

*and the Goathorn Bee, The Opal Forest, The Emerald Sea, and The Sapphire Staff.*

We are currently (late in 2017) close to completing a digital audiovisual record of Shonaleigh's tellings of all five sub-cycles, which are all comparable to *The Ruby Tree* in scope.

15. Named for Menasseh Ben Israel (1604–1657). Manasseh was a prominent rabbi, writer, and editor, who was born on Madeira and settled in the Netherlands. Shonaleigh's attribution of a particular cycle to a figure such as Menasseh implies general influence rather than direct authorship, but, in fact many rabbis and spiritual leaders of Judaism were celebrated as storytellers in their lifetime and subsequently, and storytelling is central to Chasidic Judaism.
16. Many of Shonaleigh's stories, as we have found, are variants of tales cited and/or published in well-known collections such as (for example) Noy, *Folktales of Israel*.
17. The city in eastern Poland that has become a byword for foolishness in Jewish narrative humor.
18. Most recordings were made by me; the remainder by Isaac Cumbers.
19. In designating as *fabular* the stable, invariant arrangement of tales in chronological order—as distinct from the order of actual narration in real time on any specific occasion—I am following the useful and widely adopted narratological distinction between *fabula*/story and *sjuzhet*/narration. See Propp.
20. A more complete summary is given in Heywood and Cumbers.
21. A witch or sorcerer; in the Marks-Khymberg tradition, usually, but not invariably, female. Cf. Yiddish *makhshefye*, “evildoer/witch.” Weinreich, Uriel, “Witch.” Shonaleigh occasionally pronounces the word *makhsheft* with a final, apparently nonstandard /t/ and understands the word to imply the ability to magically shape-shift.
22. See (for example) tale type ATU425, in Uther.
23. It is at such points that the narrative most closely resembles a frame story.
24. Based on the Hebrew Psalm 133.
25. *The Emerald Sea* is the theme and title of one of the other Gem Cycles; in context, therefore, this is a glancing reference to a large body of stories that remained untold on this occasion.
26. For this reason, general affinities notwithstanding, I hesitate to analyze the typical Marks-Khymberg story as a frame tale. Shonaleigh's narration varies from telling to telling, such that today's frame story may often be tomorrow's embedded tale, and vice versa. Shonaleigh recounts that her *bubbe*'s characteristic response to inquiries concerning the way a particular story ends was to ask, “Well . . . where did you

join?" In fabular terms, the bulk of Shonaleigh's tales are not framed or embedded so much as latticed.

27. Cf. Genesis 2:10–14.
28. Where Shonaleigh supplies a title for a story I have endeavored to use it; otherwise, I have exercised editorial discretion and silently supplied one.
29. At such complex junctures in narration, Shonaleigh often moves a step or so to and fro around the room, so that she tells each story from its own distinct part of the available physical space. She ascribes this habit to the effects of her grandmother's *midrash*, the complex oral training system that assists in the recall of stories. Physical movement by the storyteller at the point of transition between stories also has the effect of clarifying matters visually for listeners.

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