Bettina Bildhauer

Every Narrator Is Biased

The Polyphonic Poetics of 'The Seven Sages of Rome' in a German Version

Abstract This article demonstrates that a German-language verse version of 'The Seven Sages' from the first half of the 15th century, entitled 'Of the Seven Masters', has a sophisticated polyphonic poetics. 'Of the Seven Masters' shows that any single narrative and interpretation is necessarily biased by the particular situation of the narrator or interpreter, and that any decision based on such a single version and understanding of a narrative is rash. This is illustrated not only by the fifteen embedded stories and their interpretations but also within the frame narrative by three different accounts and interpretations of the central scene of sexual violence, neither of which justifies the quick decision and violent actions that follow. 'Of the Seven Masters' makes explicit that this one-sided narration even includes the heterodiegetic narrator, who in the prologue is presented as an interpreter of limited skill whose interpretations are biased by a specific didactic intent and who is on a par with the seven sages as only one of multiple voices.

Keywords 'Seven Sages of Rome'; Poetics; Frame Narrative; Interpretation; Narration

Contact

Prof. Dr. Bettina Bildhauer,
University of St Andrews,
School of Modern Languages,
St Andrews, KY16 9PH,
United Kingdom,
bmeb@st-andrews.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1055-9441

Vernacular mediaeval poetics were long believed to be underdeveloped until scholars learned to decipher the sophisticated poetics that are woven into the narratives, prologues, and epilogues themselves

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rather than abstracted into rhetorical handbooks.[1] A similar shift of view has begun for our understanding of 'The Seven Sages of Rome',[2] one of the most widely distributed – and currently most widely underestimated – narratives of mediaeval and early modern Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Though often still seen as a fairly schematic collection of successful examples and unsuccessful counterexamples,[3] 'The Seven Sages' likewise has a sophisticated poetics. As I will aim to show here, the text emphasises the situation-specific and one-sided nature of any version and interpretation of events, including that provided by the heterodiegetic, omniscient narrator.

'The Seven Sages of Rome' demonstrates the impossibility of arriving at a universally accepted interpretation of any given situation using the particularly relevant and sensitive example of sexual violence. The text includes two conflicting accounts of a non-consensual sexual encounter by the two characters involved, a man and a woman: the woman presents it as attempted rape by the man, and the man presents it as sexual violence by the woman combined with a false rape accusation. Research so far has entirely dismissed the woman's version of events as false and accepted the man's account and interpretation because the crucial heterodiegetic narrator's version broadly fits in with the man's account. The present article argues that we should not simply trust the heterodiegetic narrator's account because the tale explicitly teaches that any version and interpretation of events can only ever be limited.[4] I show this in a German-language verse version of 'The Seven Sages' from the first half of the 15th century, entitled 'Of the Seven Masters' ('Von den sieben Meistern') by its modern editor Adalbert KELLER.[5] 'Of the Seven Masters' makes obvious that any account of a situation and its interpretation, however valid, will leave certain elements of the events unexplained and will be limited by the specific situation and rhetorical aim of its narrator. Much like the classic film 'Rashomon' (dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1950), 'Of the Seven Masters' gives several different and contradictory accounts of the same incident of sexual violence, without any one authoritative version or 'truth' emerging. In the following, after a brief introduction to 'Of the Seven Masters' (Section 1), I will situate and explain my understanding of polyphonic poetics in the context of existing scholarship on 'The Seven Sages' (Section 2), then analyse how this poetics is explicitly expressed in the prologue and in narratorial comments (Section 3) and show how the text draws attention to the fact that the multiple versions of the incident of sexualised violence cannot be resolved into a universally accepted single truth (Section 4).

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[1] Haug 1985 was fundamental for this recognition in German-language literature and beyond.

[2] See, for example, Lundt 2002 and Foehr-Janssens 2020, though this position has not yet received much scholarly discussion.

[3] For instance, Steinmetz 2000; Obermaier 2010. For a brief rebuttal of Steinmetz's position, see Roth's review (Roth 2003) and Steinmetz's reaction (Steinmetz 2003).

[4] I have made a similar case with reference to Johannis de Alta Silva's Latin version of 'The Seven Sages', 'Dolopathos' (1184–1212): Bildhauer 2020; Johannis de Alta Silva 1913.

[5] Keller 1846. All translations are mine.

1 'Of the Seven Masters'

The German-language transmission of 'The Seven Sages' comprises at least fourteen different versions in a total of forty-four manuscripts and sixty-seven print editions: eleven German versions of the influential Latin 'Historia septem sapientum', plus three other versions.[6] I will here analyse one German verse version of the 'Historia septem sapientum', written around 1400–1450 in Hesse (version I. 2. b in GERDES' classification).[7] The embedded stories are in the standard order of the 'Historia' and framed by a brief interpretation by each narrator before the tale and a longer one by either each narrator or by the emperor (for an overview, see Appendix, Tab. 1). This version survives in four manuscripts:

- Erlangen, Universitätsbibliothek, Ms. B 11, written in High German / Bavarian in 1476;
- Frankfurt, Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek, Ms. germ. Qu. 12, written in Rhine Frankish in 1471, illustrated by Hans Dirmstein in Frankfurt;
- Hamburg, Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek, cod. germ. 1, written in Swabian in 1454;
- Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Donaueschingen cod. 90, written in Swabian in 1452.

KELLER's edition is based on the Erlangen manuscript, partially compared to a handwritten 19th-century copy (Berlin, ms. germ. fol. 460) of the Dirmstein manuscript in Frankfurt. A critical edition is not available. I will cite KELLER's edition, as this is more accessible than the manuscripts, as well as drawing on the illustrated Frankfurt manuscript.[8]

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[6] Gerdes 1992.

[7] Ibid., col. 1186.

[8] Keller 1846, pp. 15–241.

2 The Polyphonic Poetics of a Training in Flexibility Overcoming Exemplarity

The limited scholarly discussion of the 'Seven Sages' tradition in general, and of its German versions and variants in particular, has not yet reached agreement on fundamental literary questions, such as how its poetics works, what genre best describes the text, or whether it can usefully be read as misogynistic. The fact that such issues have not been settled in itself suggests the complexity of the text's way of making meaning, which has long been underestimated due to its succinct narrative style, its use of simple language and poetic form, and its often domestic settings. Walter HAUG's 1991 terse characterisation of the poetics of 'The Seven Sages' as a "training in flexibility" is still one of the best, though he subscribes to the teleological and Eurocentric view that Boccaccio then surpassed this model, a claim that is rightly criticised by Bea LUNDT.[9] HAUG describes this story matter as a kind of mental agility training, making the mind more flexible: "Wisdom and truth are achieved by overcoming thinking in examples through telling examples".[10] 'The Seven Sages' overcomes exemplarity as a pattern of thought, insofar as the sages and the empress tell their stories to make one particular, limited point, and their interpretations do not exhaust the richness of the narratives. Each interpretation is exposed in its utilitarian didactic intent by being explicitly connected back to the context of its telling, illustrating the power of clever rhetoric.[11] Each of the sages' interpretations aims either to discredit women in general or the empress in particular, or to warn against rash decisions and, with that, against the emperor's decision to have his son executed. Each interpretation by the empress aims to discredit advisers and sons in general and, with that, the seven sages and Diocletian, and in this way is clearly biased to make a point in the given situation. On the level of the plot, the hapless emperor is swayed fourteen times in opposite directions, which over time might suggest to thoughtful readers or listeners that he does not change his mind from the right to the wrong view multiple times, but that both views are one-sided.

In 'Of the Seven Masters', this poetics of juxtaposing multiple one-sided narratives and interpretations is more stringently carried out than in other versions.

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[9] Haug 1991, p. 273: "Einübung in Flexibilität"; Lundt 2002, e. g. pp. 265–267.

[10] Haug 1991, p. 275: "Weisheit und Wahrheit werden dadurch erreicht, daß man im Exempelerzählen das Denken in Exempeln überwindet." Haug speaks about the whole tradition, but in a footnote indicates specifically the Latin 'Historia septem sapientium'. His further claim that this narrative strategy is able "to banish violence" ("die Gewalt zu bannen"; ibid.), both on the level of plot and through not forcing the stories into a corset of a single meaning, overlooks that the threat of violence in the plot is only averted for the son, not for the empress, revealing his own gendered bias.

[11] Schwarzbach-Dobson 2018 makes the latter point for narrative uses of examples in general.

For every one of the embedded stories, the empress or the respective master gives an interpretation both before and after the narrative that ties it directly back to the situation at hand, and almost always to the specific aim of discrediting women or sons and sages (see overview in Appendix). A story such as 'Canis' in many versions is interpreted as showing the dangers of rash action (here, of killing a faithful dog that seems to have killed a baby but turns out to have actually saved the baby's life). In 'Of the Seven Masters', the narrative is subtly adjusted to include female nurses who have misinterpreted the situation and give the dog's owner a false account, and the master interprets the story accordingly to show that women's words cannot be trusted.

'The Seven Sages' overall poetics of polyphony, wisdom, and multiple interpretations is in this way at odds with the limited, one-sided interpretation displayed by each of the individual narrators and interpreters in the plot. Similar to the famous 'Rashomon' model, while the story as a whole shows the subjective bias of any one account of events, each character provides just such a one-sided story and interpretation. I will show in the following section that this works not only for the embedded stories but also for the heterodiegetic narrator's account of the events of the frame narrative. The text (or the implied author) sets the frame narrative up so that it can be read at face value as a misogynistic tale that additionally warns against bad advisers, but also as a tale that urges more sophisticated readers to recognise this clear bias as such. The sexual assault in this view becomes a paradigmatic example of an event of which there are opposing accounts, whose interpretation depends on the interpreter's awareness that any interpretation is incomplete. This is not to say that the facts of the sexual assault cannot be established or that no legal or moral judgement can be reached, which would be problematic given the sensitive content of sexual violence. 'The Seven Sages' instead aims to show that no single account represents the views of all those involved, that no universally acceptable 'truth' can emerge, not even from the heterodiegetic narrator. Each narrative can be interpreted in different ways, and the point is not to decide which interpretation is right or wrong but to become aware that the available information and interpretation is always limited. The frame narrator is, in this sense, just one more voice in what Yasmina FOEHR-JANSSENS for a French version of 'The Seven Sages' calls a "polyphonic use of tale-telling".[12]

Sabine OBERMAIER elaborates on the poetics of such frame narratives with embedded narratives with reference to the 'Panchatantra' tradition as, citing HAUG's words, "an education in critical, situational thinking, a 'training in flexibility'".[13] She specifies three specific interpretative methods that these texts illustrate in their plots and teach their recipients: being aware that any story needs to be understood in the context of the specific situation in which it is told, being aware that any interpretation does not exhaust a story and necessarily leaves gaps, and interpreting sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively, and knowing when to do which. Obermaier in a later article specifically excludes 'The Seven Sages' from this tradition, arguing instead that this text offers two different models: the sages as 'reliable' interpreters whose conclusions map convincingly onto their stories and the empress as an 'unreliable' interpreter whose interpretations do not fit her stories.[14] Such a distinction between reliable or unreliable interpreters, I propose here, is too crude and uncritically follows the narrator's misogynist bias against the empress. Instead, 'Of the Seven Masters' promotes the situation-specific, 'gappy', and literal-*cum*-figural 'Panchatantra' model of interpretation, as I will show in the following with reference to the frame narrative.

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[12] Foehr-Janssens 2020, p. 173.

[13] Obermaier 2001, p. 58. Similarly, Obermaier 2004.

In my reading, the heterodiegetic narrator's frame narrative is no less biased towards a particular rhetorical aim than the embedded stories. 'Of the Seven Masters' makes clear that the frame narrative is not exempt from one-sided recounting and interpretation in two ways: the prologue presents the narrator as on a par with the masters as only one of multiple voices and as an interpreter of limited skill whose interpretations are biased by a specific didactic intent (see Section 3 below), and the central scene of sexual violence and consent is recounted within the plot in three versions that are all in some ways one-sided and do not justify the rash violent decisions that follow, urging scepticism towards any one single interpretation (Section 4).

3 The Poetics of the Prologue: Exposing the Heterodiegetic Narrator's Bias

The narrator of 'Of the Seven Masters' does not exempt himself from being just one of many voices interpreting stories and draws attention to the fact that both his choice of story and his interpretation are just as biased as that of the empress and the masters in the plot. The text reveals this poetics through portraying the narrator in at least one manuscript as an eighth master (see Section 3.1), explicitly describing the narrator as a bad interpreter (Section 3.2), and making clear his didactic intent of warning against women and against bad advisers, so that everything he says can be interpreted as biased towards making this point (Section 3.3).

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[14] Obermaier 2010. This is broadly also the view taken by Lundt 2001, e. g. p. 266 with reference to the version in Johannis Gobi's 'Scala Coeli', and by Steinmetz 2000 with reference primarily to the 'Historia septem sapientum'. Roth's extensive review (Roth 2003) of Steinmetz 2000 criticises this argument, and Steinmetz's rebuke of Roth's review (Steinmetz 2003) does not add much substance. Cf. Bildhauer 2020.

3.1 The Narrator as Another Sage

In the Frankfurt manuscript of ‘Of the Seven Masters’, a beautiful drawing of the relevant master as a mature white man in an elegant gown and cloth cap making speaking gestures introduces several of the sages’ stories. A similar drawing of the heterodiegetic narrator with the same physical characteristics, clothes, and pose is inserted after the prologue at the start of the plot, suggesting that the omniscient narrator is another such master. The caption, included in KELLER’s edition, calls the heterodiegetic narrator explicitly a *meyster*, that is, “master” in the sense of teacher, scholar, and figure of authority: “Here the master starts his story, which you shall understand well” (*Hie vahet der meyster sin ryyde an, | Die sollent er no wol virstan*).[15] The seven sages in this story, too, are consistently termed ‘masters’ rather than ‘sages’, ‘wise men’, or ‘advisers’, as in other versions. The fact that Dirmstein uses the same term for the narrator as for the seven sages suggests that, for him, the narrator is not fundamentally different from the sages and is, instead, one more voice in a polyphonic whole. The narrator figure appears as just another character in the plot rather than as a superior external authority.

3.2 The Narrator as Bad Interpreter

The narrator in the prologue describes himself as a bad interpreter, which might further caution us against simply trusting him:

> *Man liszet in den alten buchen,*
> *Wer es kan eben suchen,*
> *Manig wedelich gedichte*
> *Vnd auch wunderliche geschichte,*
> *Des ich leyder nit enkan,*
> *Ich vnd manig tümber man,*
> *Wann ich yn der geschriefft ein kint.*
> *Vil leut sehent vnd sind doch blindt,*
> *Ich mein, dy do leszen kunnen,*

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[15] Keller 1846, p. 18, ll. 8 f. The illustrated Frankfurt manuscript is available digitally with a description with further references at https://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/msma/content/titleinfo/3654381.

> *Pfaffen schuler vnd nvnnen,*
> *Vnd der geschriefft leyder nit verston.*
> *Mit denselben ich wol gan.*[16]

This is a contradictory statement insofar as the narrator at first claims that he cannot read (not even enough to find stories in old books, an implausible but not uncommon claim). He then writes that he is among those who can read, but not understand, stories and poems. Following the second claim, it is tempting to resolve the contradiction ("I can't read"/"I can read") by taking the first use of 'reading' figuratively, in the sense of 'understanding' or 'interpreting' ("I can't understand but I can read"), though it is not clear why interpretative skills would be necessary simply to identify poems and stories in old books. In any case, by conspicuously naming himself as an incompetent interpreter and making contradictory statements, the narrator warns recipients against taking his comments and claims at face value.

3.3 The Narrator's Didactic Bias: Warning against Women and against Bad Advisers

The prologue also makes explicit that the narrator is biased due to having a clear didactic intent: to warn against women and against bad advice. This suggests that his tale should be interpreted as one-sided as part of an attempt to show women and bad advisers in a negative light.

The prologue in this variant foregrounds the topic of women. The plot is introduced as centred on a woman with sexual desires, using the judgmental term "unchaste": "one reads that an empress had unchaste intentions" (*Man liszet, das eyn keyszerine* | *Hat gar unkeusche synne*).[17] She is contrasted with the Virgin Mary, who in the opening prayer is portrayed as an ideal empress with child, foreshadowing Principian's idealised first wife in the plot. The narrator then extends this into the familiar misogynistic idealisation of good women and demonisation of bad women in general. He warns his audience of "youngsters" (*ir jungen*) to beware of bad women and expresses this in the strongest sexist terms: "nothing on earth is more evil than the trickery of a deceitful woman" (*Kein ding auff erden boszer ist,* |

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[16] "Whoever can look for it can read in old books many a handsome poem and wondrous story. Unfortunately I can't do that, I and many dumb men, because I am a child when it comes to writing. Many people see and are still blind. I mean those who can read – clerics, students and nuns – and unfortunately don't understand writing. I am among those." Keller 1846, p. 17, ll. 9–20.

[17] Ibid., p. 18, ll. 10 f.

Den eynes valschen weybes list).[18] In this way, it is clear from the start that the narrator aims to make a point, much as the sages, the empress, and the son do, and we have to read his story-telling and comments as geared towards this intention.

The prologue also offers another brief pre-interpretation of the story, stating that it will show that bad instruction often leads to the bad instructors being shamed. After his statement about not knowing how to interpret, the narrator continues:

> *Dor vmb, ir jungen, so ist mein rat,*
> *Dy weile eür eins das jugent hat,*
> *So volgent der schule vnd guter lere,*
> *So widerfert euch gute vnd ere;*
> *Wann wer do leret boszheyt,*
> *Es wird ym an dem letzten leyt,*
> *Es sigent man, frawen, knecht,*
> *Dy fleyssent sich zu tunde recht.*
> *Wer auch den andern wil betriegen*
> *Mit auffsatz und mit falschem liegen,*
> *Der wurd selber gerne geschant;*
> *Das saget vns disz buch zu hant,*
> *Das will ich alle huten,*
> *Ob ich es kan betütten.*[19]

This statement starts with the recommendation that recipients listen to school teaching and *lere*, meaning advice or instruction, but then turns its attention to the instructors themselves. The idea that bad advisers will get their comeuppance implies that one should not necessarily trust advisers and must distinguish between good and bad advice. The narrator's claim that "the book shows us that" bad advisers end up being shamed most likely refers to the empress, as she is the only character in the frame narrative who meets a bad end (though it might also apply to the sages in some of the empress' embedded stories, in particular 'Sapientes'). So this statement again might reveal a bias against the empress, but also introduces as a second aim of the narrative to warn against bad advisers. This wish to protect the recipients from bad advice concludes the passage, though the narrator once more draws attention to his limited and potentially insufficient interpretative skill ("if I can interpret this"). He also implicitly includes himself in the category of advisers (who cannot necessarily be trusted) when he introduces this passage with "this is my advice", thus again precluding a simple reading of his statements as reliable.

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[18] Ibid., p. 19, ll. 13 f., 29.

[19] "Because of that, you young ones, this is my advice: while you are young, do attend school and follow good instruction, then good things and honour will come to you. For whoever teaches evil will end up suffering because of this. Those men, women and servants who try to do the right thing will win. Whoever betrays others with deception and false lies will often be shamed themselves. This book tells us that. I want to protect everyone from that, if I can interpret it." Ibid., p. 17, l. 21–p. 18, l. 5.

This specific framing means that we should interpret the narrator's story as part of two didactic intentions: aiming to show the negative consequences of bad advice and warning against bad women. Both can come together when the empress is depicted as a bad adviser, but a doubt is also raised about the masters and the narrator. In any case, the explicit emphasis on having to distinguish bad from good advice also means that we can see the narrator as biased in that direction and can choose to understand his interpretation of the story as one-sided. This gives us the option of mistrusting the narrator's reading of the empress as evil. The prologue, in this way, comes close to explicitly stating and performatively illustrating that the book will offer mental agility training and provide an opportunity to learn how to negotiate advice.

4 Biased Narration, One-sided Interpretation, and Rash Reaction in the Frame Narrative

The structure of 'The Seven Sages', much like the prologue, emphasises that any narrative – the sages' or the empress' – is specific to the situation in which it is told and biased by the narrator's circumstances and intent. 'Of the Seven Masters' draws attention to the fact that the frame narrative itself, with its crucial scene of sexual violence, is not excluded from such bias. The three accounts of the events – by the empress, the son, and the heterodiegetic narrator – each show the teller's bias. Though the heterodiegetic narrator's report can be read as the definitive version of the sexualised encounter, a more sophisticated understanding includes it in the list of one-sided versions that receive an interpretation specific to the interpreter's situation and that do not justify the immediate judgement and violent action that ensues. In addition, the crucial question of the son's lack of consent is expressed in a fourth embedded written story or metaphor that likewise receives a one-sided interpretation followed by a rash decision for violent action, which makes clear that we should be aware of the bias in all four cases. In this final section, I will discuss each of the three accounts in the plot in turn: the son's written note to the empress (Section 4.1), the empress' complaint to the emperor (Section 4.2) and the son's counteraccusation (Section 4.3). The addressees in the plot take these narratives at face value as a basis for a violent reaction, which is against the poetics of multiple voices and flexibility and particularly alerts recipients to the fact that we should mistrust all single versions, including the narrator's fourth version.

4.1 The Empress' Rash Interpretation of the Son's Note

'Of the Seven Masters' presents the core issue of the son's lack of sexual consent as a written narrative-within-the-narrative that is a one-sided account of the events, receives a one-sided interpretation, and provokes a hasty, violent reaction. In the bedroom, the son does not speak in response to the empress' claim that she is still a virgin and wants to sleep with him, and he turns away when she attempts to kiss him and to show him her breasts. Due to his muteness, she then asks him to clarify his consent or lack thereof in writing: "What is your will?" (*Wie stet dein wille dir?*)[20] The son answers using an extended metaphor:

> *Mein vater hatt einen bomgarten,*
> *Der sol vff in allein warten.*
> *Wo ich den zerbrech,*
> *Got selber es an mir recht.*
> *Ffraw, du solt mich erlon,*
> *Des ich sunde vnd schande han.*[21]

The son's note needs interpreting insofar as it is a metaphor, in the basic definition of saying something figurative beyond the literal. Insofar as it reports one (hypothetical) event, the breaking of the orchard, it might even be considered to meet the minimum requirement of a story: that something happens. In any case, the son's note is a valid but one-sided account. It presents the situation from the son's point of view: he is worried about violating his father's possession and about the damage that would do to his own reputation. He sees both himself and the empress mainly in relation to his father. The empress' interpretation of this metaphor or mini-narrative as expressing a lack of consent is likewise correct but one-sided. She rightly interprets the orchard figuratively to stand for herself, who is cast as the emperor's possession for his use, and the "breaking" of the orchard figuratively for having sex with her. This reading reveals that if the son had sex with the empress, this would be problematic for the emperor primarily because the empress would no longer be his exclusive possession, and her 'fruit' or offspring no longer guaranteed to be his.

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[20] Ibid., p. 40, l. 18; p. 41, l. 14.

[21] "My father has an orchard, which shall serve him alone. If I break it, God himself avenges it upon me. Lady, you should spare me from doing something which would bring me sin and shame." Ibid., p. 41, ll. 20–25.

The empress' interpretation of the note as expressing the son's lack of consent is valid and morally just, and she rightly stops her sexual assault on this basis. Her interpretation is nevertheless necessarily limited by her own situation. Most importantly, the fact that the son mentions the possibility of breaking the orchard, that is, of having sex, from which he only recoils with reference to the patriarchal authority of God and his father, opens up the – swiftly dismissed – alternative option that, were it not for God and his father, he might consent. This might have occasioned some solidarity between the empress and the son, rather than the deathly competition between him and her that her reaction unleashes. That the interpretation is one-sided means that according to the poetics of flexibility, it should not be used alone as the basis of a decision and of violent action, but the empress does just that. However we judge the empress' interpretative skill, the mere speed and force of her reaction marks it out as problematic in the value system of a text whose central structure is delay:

> *Do dy fraw das gehorte,*
> *Von vntugende sie torte*
> *Balde sie den brieff zereis*
> *Vnd mit den zenen dor in beysz.*
> *Sie zereisz ir gewant schon*
> *Vnd auch ires hobtes kron.*[22]

Her violent reaction of attacking the letter, her own clothes, and the symbol of her imperial status in the same physical movement is impressively tactical, as she immediately seems to have an alternative plan of raising an accusation against the son. It does not, however, model the considered interpretation that the 'Seven Sages' tradition advocates.

The fact that the crucial question of the son's consent within the heterodiegetic narrator's account of events is presented as a metaphor in need of figurative reading warns against taking the narrator's account at face value by drawing attention to the status of the whole episode as a narrative and to the need to interpret expressions of consent. That the son's letter, not unlike the embedded fifteen tales, presents just one version of events becomes even clearer when the same orchard metaphor recurs in the context of father–son relationships in the following two embedded stories told by the empress. The orchard figures in 'Arbor' as a father's possession despoiled by a son, and in ‘Aper’ as a patriarchal emperor’s possession despoiled by a wild boar. ‘Aper’ also covers the issue of patrilinear succession and ensuring lineage, insofar as the killing of the boar allows a shepherd to acquire the emperor’s daughter as a wife. Much as these embedded narratives by the empress are one-sided to achieve a particular purpose, so is the son’s letter and, by extension, the narrator’s wider account of the scene of sexual violence.

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[22] "When the lady heard this, she raged from vice: she immediately tore apart the note and bit into it with her teeth. She tore her beautiful robe and also broke the crown on her head." Ibid., p. 41, ll. 26–31.

In the Frankfurt manuscript, the biasedness of any report of events is further emphasised when the narrator’s account of the sexual violence is actually omitted and replaced by a captioned image stating that the empress assaults the son but giving few details. This has so far been assumed to be a simple loss of a folio from the manuscript,[23] but the account – using the same phrasing as KELLER’s edition – is actually reinserted later in the story but, crucially, as the son’s version in his own words. This draws attention to the fact that the narrator’s account of events is very much on the son’s side and might as well be that of just another character.

4.2 The Emperor’s Rash Interpretation of the Empress’ Version

Within the plot, the emperor first hears about the sexual assault in the empress’ version, which contrasts with what recipients have already heard from the narrator:

> *Herre, ich clag dir meyn vngemach.*
> *Das ist nit der sun dein,*
> *Want es mag wol der tuffel sein.*
> *Ich furte in her eyn in guten trewen;*
> *Das musz mich no vnd ymer rewen.*
> *Er wolt mich betrogen han,*
> *Das ich seinen willen hett getan.*
> *Do ich das nit tet zu hant,*
> *So hat er zerriszen meyn gewant*
> *Vnd hat mir meyn kron zubrochen.*
> *Lestu, herre, das vngerochen,*
> *So hast keine trew zu mir,*
> *Also ich, lieber herre, han zu dir.*[24]

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[23] E. g. Weimann 1980, p. 31.

[24] “Lord, I complain to you of my suffering. This is not your son. For it might as well be the devil. I led him in here in good faith; I have to regret this now and always will. He wanted to deceive me, so that I would do his will. When I didn’t do that at once, he tore my gown and broke my crown. If you, lord, leave this unpunished, you have no loyalty to me, as I have to you, dear lord.” Keller 1846, p. 42, ll. 12–24.

This is a story in the sense that it recounts events: the son's assault. The emperor interprets it correctly but one-sidedly again, taking "this is not your son" to mean figuratively that Diocletian does not act in a way that makes him worthy of being Principian's son. The empress, however, might also have toyed with the literal meaning: that Diocletian might not be the emperor's genetic offspring, drawing attention to the central problem of producing heirs when the women who bear them cannot be trusted. If his son had sex with his wife, the emperor's main problem would not be adultery as such, but the risk that the empress' child would not be the emperor's. If the emperor had realised that the empress feeds into his central insecurity, he might have been more suspicious of her motives and become aware that she might want to manipulate him.

Crucially, however valid the interpretation, it does not justify the emperor's rash and violent reaction that follows immediately after the empress' speech:

> *Der keyser wont, si hett sie wor,*
> *Do sie sasz mit geraufften hor;*
> *Sein muot wart mit zorn entbrant,*
> *Seynen eygen suon hiesz er zu hant*
> *An einen galgen hencken.*[25]

Immediately sentencing his son to death without a legal trial is not the careful consideration urged by the overall structure of the tale. The embedded narrative 'Gaza', told by the empress on the third day, also centres on self-inflicted injuries that are misread as genuine, and retrospectively draws further attention to the emperor's undue haste.

4.3 The Emperor's Rash Interpretation of the Son's Version

After seven days of silence, the son can finally speak and give his own version of events. This, however, is not the cathartic moment of 'the truth' being told; instead, he dramatically reveals that one of the empress' ladies-in-waiting has a penis and, as he concludes without further explanation, therefore must be the empress' male lover. He then gives a very brief, one-sided account of his non-consensual sexual encounter:

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[25] "The emperor thought she truly had it [loyalty to him], as she sat there with dishevelled hair. He became infuriated. He immediately ordered his own son to be hanged on a gallows." Ibid., p. 42, ll. 25–29.

> *Wann do sie mich noch ir begir*
> *Alles zoch zu ir nider,*
> *Do fant sie durch hasz den rat,*
> *Das sie mich belogen hat.*[26]

Though this tallies with the heterodiegetic narrator's report as regards the main fact of sexual violence committed by the empress against the son, the details do not match: the son does not mention the attempted kiss and baring of breasts, while the narrator does not mention the empress pulling the son down. While the son presents his resistance to her sexual aggression as the cause of her false accusation, the narrator had told us that her plan was always to have the emperor's heir killed out of jealousy, and that she asked for him to return to the court in the first place for that reason.

Most importantly, the emperor repeats the mistake of making a rash decision, taking the son's one interpretation of events to be 'the truth', which contradicts the overall poetics of flexible thinking. The emperor believes the son immediately and without hesitation, much as he had earlier believed his wife's version of the sexual encounter and had changed his mind with each of the interpretations of the embedded stories. He immediately condemns her to death. The son manages to delay the execution with another story, but after that, a court of justice is assembled "without any pause" (*on alles beiten*) and "in a huge hurry" (*mit eime ylen geswinde*).[27] After another brief account of the empress' sexual attack, we hear in a few lines that she confesses and asks to be pardoned, but that the emperor does not grant this and executes both her and her lover, which all those present applaud. The text ends a few lines later, after we have been succinctly told that Principian dies and Diocletian then successfully rules with the help of his advisers. The swiftness of the emperor's condemnation of his wife and her lover alone shows that the old emperor has not learned his lesson in wisdom and has again acted on just one, necessarily subjective, version of events, rather than giving both sides a hearing and arriving at a more nuanced understanding. This allows us to view the narrator's account, which takes the side of the emperor, the masters, and the son against the empress, as just as one-sided as each of the characters' stories.

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[26] "For when she pulled me entirely down to her as she desired, she made the hateful decision to betray me." Ibid., p. 196, ll. 19–22.

[27] Ibid., p. 239, ll. 14, 16.

5 Conclusion

This article aimed to show that the poetics of a ‘flexibility training’ that Haug has observed for the ‘Seven Sages’ tradition also works for ‘Of the Seven Masters’. This includes the frame narrative itself, which is just as biased in both the recounting and the interpretation of events as each of the embedded narratives. It uses the paradigmatic example of a non-consensual sexual encounter without witnesses as a contested narrative that can never take a final form and interpretation accepted by both parties. Scholars have contrasted the empress as an unreliable narrator of the sexual encounter and interpreter of the embedded stories with the seven sages as reliable narrators and interpreters of the embedded stories. All scholars so far have exempted the heterodiegetic narrator from presenting a one-sided view. I have, however, shown that the distinction between reliable and unreliable interpretation is too simple in the context of this poetics aiming to teach wisdom and scepticism towards both women and bad advisers. The text instead shows that every single version of the events is one-sided, and skill lies in accepting a plurality of voices.

6 Appendix

Table 1 | The embedded tales in ‘Of the Seven Masters’ and their interpretations

Day	Tale narrated by	Tale	Tale interpreted by	Interpretation given by the interpreter
1	Empress	‘Arbor’	Empress	Beware your son
	Master	‘Canis’	Master	Don’t listen to women
2	Empress	‘Aper’	Empress	Don’t trust your son
	Master	‘Puteus’	Master	Don’t trust your wife
3	Empress	‘Gaza’	Empress	You would be shamed if you let son live
	Master	‘Avis’	Emperor	This woman was a liar
4	Empress	‘Sapientes’	Empress	Your son and sages are plotting against you
	Master	‘Tentamina’	Master	Don’t follow women’s advice
5	Empress	‘Virgilius’	Empress	Your son and sages are undermining you

Table 1 | (continued)

Day	Tale narrated by	Tale	Tale interpreted by	Interpretation given by the interpreter
	Master	'Medicus'	Emperor Master	This man should not have killed his nephew rashly/women talk nonsense You'll regret rash killing due to a woman's words
6	Empress	'Senescalcus' + 'Roma'	Empress	Your son and sages will betray you
	Master	'Amatores'	Emperor	She was a deceitful wife
7	Empress	'Inclusa'	Empress	Don't trust sages
	Master	'Vidua'	Emperor	She was a deceitful woman
	Son	'Vaticinium' + 'Amici'	Son	I will forgive you, father

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