The Tale Within a Tale

When a bard sings of Beowulf, he begins not with the beginning, but with the end: the old king's fatal fight with the dragon. A man sitting in King Harold's hall calls out, requesting

Unlike Temple, Alder does not give the reader the entire plot of The Song of Roland or "The Battle of Brunanburh" or Beowulf. Instead, she presents snatches of poetry. In The King's Shadow, the character Evyn is given the task of choosing a song for the hall. After singing the song, Evyn reflects on the significance of the battle.

20th-century teenager transported into the Middle Ages.

allows readers to make the connection themselves instead of having Evyn comment on them. She allows Evyn to be a boy of his time, the 11th century; not, like Temple's heroine, a

Brunanburh" (the poem is recorded in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle), his reaction is personal: he, who can never sing again, should have stood in this bard's place. The significance of

resonate throughout the novel, even after Evyn's tongue is cut out and his dream of being a storiawr vanishes. Later, when Evyn hears another bard singing about "The Battle of

Like Temple, Elizabeth Alder incorporates references to The Song of Roland and Beowulf into her novel, The King's Shadow. However, Alder's purpose in including medieval works

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Students in a Chaucer class often are. The tale was popular in the Middle Ages, as its survival in so many manuscripts attests; versions of the story in English, French, Italian, and

as the obedient Christian) or thinking of the tale as an exemplum of wifely obedience. Yet Temple's characters are filled with anger and disgust by the plot, the way modern

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"a hard, or storiawr, sings the song:

The appearance of Chaucer's tales, composed between 1360 and 1400, in The Ramsay Scallop, a novel set in 1299, is less problematic than it might seem. Few of his plots were

Middle Ages.

Unlike Temple, Alder does not give the reader the entire plot of The Song of Roland or "The Battle of Brunanburh" or Beowulf. Instead, she presents snatches of poetry. In The King's Shadow, the effect poetry has on the listener is more important than what happens in the poem, although in both novels the poems comment in some way on the action of the novel. When a bard sings of Beowulf, he begins not with the beginning, but with the end: the old king's fatal fight with the dragon. A man sitting in King Harold's hall calls out, requesting...
Alder's use of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle shows another method of incorporating medieval literature into a modern novel. The plot of The King's Shadow owes much to the Chronicle. Alder bases the structure on events recorded therein, and she heads individual chapters with passages from the Chronicle—"Then Duke William sailed from Normandy with a great fleet," for example. In the last chapter of the novel, after the death of Harold, entries from The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle become part of the text itself as Eyn—denied speech, but given tone by means of pan and parchment—begins to record for posterity the events he witnessed. Eyn's writing in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recalls Julian's help in embossing the Beverley Gospels in The Striped Ships. Both novels are set at the end of the ninth century, and both characters record the history they witnessed first-hand. (For another recent novel based on events recorded in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, see Joan Elizabeth Goodman's The Winter Hare.)

**Allusions to Medieval Works**

Let us now shift our gaze from the novel to the real world: the legendary outlaw who people Michael Cadnum's In a Dark Wood (1998). The Robin Hood novel has become a genre in its own right: Teresa Tomlinson's The Forest Wife (1993), Monica Furlong's Robin's Country (1995), and The Outlaws of Sherrwood (1988), by Robin McKinley are recent representatives that follow Geoffrey Trease's 1934 novel, Bows Against the Barons. But Cadnum provides a twist—both in his presentation of Robin Hood and in his use of medieval literature.

In a Dark Wood

In a Dark Wood tells the story of Robin Hood's Robin to the unlikely perspective of Geoffrey the Sheriff of Nottingham. Cadnum cunningly borrows from medieval texts in a surprising way, using bits of well-known tales like puzzle pieces. After you see one allusion, you start looking for others, the way you look through the Sunday-morning cartoon that challenges kids to find seven things that don't belong in this picture. Once you see the tennis shoe in the apple tree, you can't stop searching for all seven figures. But Cadnum neither identifies his sources nor gives the answers upside down at the bottom of the page; he doesn't even include an author's note. And many of his allusions are so esoteric that only a medievalist would catch them.

Early in the novel, a character "used the London word for egg, ey, not the local (Norther) eyren". Teachers who have studied the history of the English language might recognize this accidental allusion to William Caxton's "Preace to the Aedned" in which Caxton—"living before the standardization of the English language—wonders which form of a word he should print: 'lo, what should a man in these days now write—eggs or eyren?'" Unfortunately, Cadnum makes a small mistake: the different forms of the word in Caxton are not ey and eyren, which are the singular and plural of the London dialectal form. The -en ending is the plural form; we still use it in children, oxen, and brethren.) Caxton's "Preace" is often anthologized in college texts such as The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, but high school readers are likely to have trouble locating it.

Perhaps this allusion was accidental. Perhaps not. Consider: A few pages later, Geoffrey speaks to an abbeys, who "laugh through her nose, like a Frenchwoman". If the line makes you think of Chaucer's Princess, you're right. Within the same page the abbeys is described in a paragraph right out of The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales:

"Her gray habit was crisp and rare, and a band of coral around her wrist. Every eleventh braid of her rosary was jade, and a golden brooch hung from the beads, engraved with the latter A. Round the peak of the A ran a crown, and in fine letters . . . were the words Amor Vincit Omnia. (30-31)

Here, the allusion is more straightforward and recognizable. If not before, many English teachers' noses would be aquiver at the familiar scent of the last phrase, Love Conquers All. Compare the relevant lines from Chaucer:

Of small aboute hire arm she bar A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene, On which ther was first write a crowned A, And after Amor vincit omnia. (GP lines 118-121)

The doctor, too, is modeled on Chaucer's Doctor of Physic, and wears "blood-red, slashed with blue, and the lining was shiny taffeta" (51). The description comes again from the General Prologue, but it is hereby Tavaleau views in passages that Chaucer and in Tavaleau's vision allows students to engage close textual reading as well as comparison. Further allusions enrich the text in a similar way. If the sheriff is having an affair with a woman like the Princess, what does that reveal about his character?

Cadnum's touch is light; readers who see the allusions will be pleased, while those who don't will still enjoy the story. And Cadnum doesn't overload it: the novel's franklin is just a franklin, "Epicroc owens son" (GP line 336), nor does Sir Roger, the old Crusader knight, seem to be modeled on Chaucer's Knight. Cadnum seems to be having fun and inviting his readers to do the same; games and gaming are an important part of the story, so why not make them a part of the texture of the tale?

Later, we meet a miller with wide black nostrils who carries a cove and plays the bagpipe, more allusions to the General Prologue of The Canterbury Tales, thus tempting the reader to see Chaucer everywhere—The Friar's Tale, for example, in the sentence: "A wagon was sunk into mud, and a peasant pushed from behind to help the ox". In The Friar's Tale, two men, one dressed in green and carrying bow and arrows, come across a carter whose cart is stuck in mud; in the novel, two men, one dressed in green and carrying bow and arrows, see a peasant whose wagon is stuck in mud. In Chaucer, the man in green is really the devil (and I must say, a rather likable devil!), and the other is a summoner who will shortly be taken to hell. In Cadnum's novel, the two men are Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham. Whether or not the allusion was intended, paired with the other Chaucerian references, it enriches Cadnum's text. It allows us to look for similarities amongst the characters of the summoner and the sheriff, and the devil (who, in Chaucer, dresses as a woodsman and who comes from the North) and Robin Hood, who has told the sheriff that he has journeyed "from north of here". Is Robin Hood like the devil in Chaucer's tale, who sports with the summoner? Other allusions enrich the text in a similar way. If the sheriff is having an affair with a woman like the Princess, what does that reveal about his character?

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The novel's texture is further enhanced by possible allusions to a visual source, the Luttrell Psalter, a 14th century illuminated manuscript that contains scenes of rural English life so accurate that they have been used as the basis of an open-air museum in England. In Cadnum's novel, we read, "A horse dragged a wooden frame weighted with a stone, the comblike teeth of the frame breaking the earth into perfect lines". For an illustration of this scene, see folio 171 recto of the Luttrell Psalter, where, in the bottom margin, two scarecrows are shown as "like half a man miraculously endowed with the power to fight or at least kill magpies". A reader already alerted to the Luttrell Psalter scene might be reminded of another similar scene in Cadnum's novel, which shows a peasant whose wagon is stuck in mud. In Chaucer, the man in green is really the devil (and I must say, a rather likable devil!), and the other is a summoner who will shortly be taken to hell. In Cadnum's novel, the two men are Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham. Whether or not the allusion was intended, paired with the other Chaucerian references, it enriches Cadnum's text. It allows us to look for similarities amongst the characters of the summoner and the sheriff, and the devil (who, in Chaucer, dresses as a woodsman and who comes from the North) and Robin Hood, who has told the sheriff that he has journeyed "from north of here". Is Robin Hood like the devil in Chaucer's tale, who sports with the summoner? Other allusions enrich the text in a similar way. If the sheriff is having an affair with a woman like the Princess, what does that reveal about his character?

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--Look back at the story of Roland and the ensuing discussion of heroism in The Ramsay Scallop (169-175). How do you define the word hero? What qualities do your heroes possess? In your opinion, is Roland a hero? Keeping in mind that he is the hero of The Song of Roland, compare modern and medieval ideas of heroism.

--Choose a familiar story to retell (like Cinderella or Snow White). Use Cadnum's technique of employing or alluding to characters from The Canterbury Tales in your retelling. Explain why you would use a particular character of Chaucer's in each instance: for example, what details from Chaucer would help to characterize Cinderella's wicked stepmother?

--Write a short proposal for a novel, contemporary or historical, in which you will incorporate characters, plot elements, or events from a medieval text in the way Cadnum, Alder, or Temple do. You might base your entire novel on a medieval tale or event, or you might employ only snippets of information culled from your knowledge of the Middle Ages. Explain your rationale: how will your inclusion of these details enrich the text?

--Turn the tables and have the medieval characters from The Ramsay Scallop tell a thoroughly modern story, such as the life and success of Bill Gates. How would Nora and Thomas react to such a tale? How would their reactions differ from your own? Why?

--In The King's Shadow, Eynn reverses The Song of Roland and Beowulf because he wants to be a bard, or singer. He memorizes traditional, formulaic verses. If this story were updated to the 20th century, what would Eynn want to be—a rock and roll star? A poet? What songs or poems would be appropriate for the 20th century Eynn to memorize? Why?

--Choose any of the novels and rewrite a short scene from the point of view of a different character in the same book. Consider the age, religion, gender, nationality, and social class of each character as you decide which details will be important. You may need to invent details that the first teller did not include. For example, if Nora, not Etienne, told the story of Patient Griselda in The Ramsay Scallop, how might it differ? Think about how a real girl of Nora's time period would tell the story as opposed to how Nora tells the story.

--Find a copy of the Luttrell Psalter. Compare the visual impression of one of the pictures with the descriptions in Cadnum's novel. Which do you believe gives a more accurate vision of rural life in the late Middle Ages? Why?

--Write your own description of medieval agricultural activities, using a picture from The Luttrell Psalter as a guide.

Works Cited


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Choose from 500 different sets of flashcards about medieval period literature on Quizlet. Excessive pride leads to downfall/pride... What kinds of things were people in the middle ages searching... what are the most influential themes in medieval literature? what archetypes are in medieval literature? Song of Roland theme. People in the Middle Ages were often tr... What kinds of things were people in the middle ages searching... the church and pride before the fall. what are the most influential themes in medieval literature? 140 terms. lucybazis. 14 History and Influences of Romance Literature Medieval Romance effectively combines ancient heroic epics, mysticism of Jewish and Muslim writers, Christian theology, and Celtic, Norse, Persian and Greco-Latin myths and stories in one place.* These include: Embellished “history” that disregards time and fact. Are set in a mystical place and time (the Dark Ages) Present supernatural elements, and magical powers from the pagan world Have a hero who is on a noble adventure or quest Have a loose, episodic structure Include elements of courtly love Embody ideals of chivalry Time frame of a year and a day Conventions of Medieval Romance. During the later middle ages, chivalry had become largely as system of etiquette and the knights