The short story cycle in Western literature: modernity, continuity and generic implications

The thesis of the short story cycle (SSC) as a modern form has been proposed by a number of scholars, leading them to consider works belonging to the pre-modern tradition (often symbolically represented by the duo Decameron/Canterbury Tales) as «historical precedents» (Luscher 153; Kennedy 9) in which the ‘external’ framing device «is primarily an excuse for grouping together a potpourri of tales» (Dunn & Morris 21).

Other studies on the SSC however tend to focus on the historical continuity of the genre, albeit on different grounds: some reconsider the function of the framing device and the possibility of relatedness between the various pieces (Alderman 14, 63; Nagel 2), while others insist on the open structure of the story cycle and the multidimensionality inherent to the form (Lundén 7; March-Russell 107). The focus on continuity links SSC theory to non-Anglo-Saxon theories, such as Italian macrotext theory (Corti, Segre, Cappello) and Francophone théorie du recueil (a.o. Ricard, Audet). This diachronic shift of perspective has various theoretical implications, regarding not only questions of genre history and genre memory, but the autonomy of the genre itself as well: does the genericity of the SSC depend on the short forms it contains?

This paper aims to investigate the theoretical contraposition between modernity and continuity of the SSC (recueil de nouvelles structuré, raccolta di narrative breve strutturata) in Western literature. It further proposes an interaction between the three cited theories, by insisting on their complementarity and by the application of SSC theory on Romance literature.

(Provisional) bibliography