

## Suspense and Reversal: The Curfew Law in *The Seven Sages*

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This essay examines the medieval curfew law through its earliest literary appearance in the ‘Puteus’ fabliau, part of the *Seven Sages of Rome* frame narrative. Both tale and frame reveal how the curfew operated through twin mechanisms of suspense and reversal that functioned both as narrative techniques and juridical principles. The fabliau’s strategic repetitions and syntactic inversions formalize the law’s formal logic: the medieval curfew generated compliance through anticipatory suspense rather than through force alone, while its authority began in a single transformative moment when the curfew bell reversed legal status instantaneously from authorized to forbidden. The ‘Puteus’ tale exposes what legal archives omit—that the curfew transformed domestic space into obligatory domains of confinement, producing domestic order through nightly interdiction. The *Seven Sages* frame extends the curfew’s configuration across seven days, where storytelling becomes a technique of juridical deferral. Each day’s narrative concludes with the ritual closing of gates and windows, aligning the frame’s structure with the curfew’s temporal rhythm.

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## Introduction

Before appearing in any extant civic ordinance, municipal decree, or administrative record, the word ‘curfew’ (*cuevrefus*) was used in poetic verse. To be precise, the curfew appears as a prominent narrative element in the 12th-century Old French fabliau ‘Puteus’ (The Well), one of the tales contained within the widely-disseminated frame narrative, *Sept Sages de Rome* (*The Seven Sages of Rome*).<sup>1</sup> Translations deriving from the Old French verse versions, the oldest group of texts of the ‘Western’ tradition of the *Seven Sages*, number in the hundreds across many languages: Middle English, Middle Scots, Welsh, Latin, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish, Czech, Polish, Russian, Armenian, and more.<sup>2</sup> When the frame narrative was translated into these languages, the ‘Puteus’ tale provided the earliest use of the word ‘curfew’ in several different vernaculars. The Italian translation, *Il Libro dei Sette Savi di Roma*, supplied the first recorded word for curfew, *coprifuoco*, in that language.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the word ‘curfew’ (*corfu*, *corfour*) entered the English vernacular when a Middle English translation of the *Seven Sages* was copied in the famous Auchinleck Manuscript by a scribe living in London between 1320–40.<sup>4</sup>

From this philological point of departure, this essay examines what the ‘Puteus’ tale and the *Seven Sages* frame narrative reveals about the curfew law—and, conversely, what the curfew reveals about these narrative forms, the fabliau and the frame narrative. The essay argues that in both the tale and the frame, the curfew operates through the twin mechanisms of *suspense* and *reversal*—each sustaining the other. In this configuration, suspense and reversal are seen both as narrative effects but also as

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<sup>1</sup> This mid-12th century verse version of the *Sept Sages* (Speer and Foehr-Janssens (eds. and trans.), 2017) is known as version K, named after the first editor of the printed version (H. A. Keller, in 1836). Scholars generally agree that there was likely a verse archetype from which it derives that was composed at a considerably earlier date. Gaston Paris called this archetype Version V which he dated to around 1155, while subsequent scholars have argued for a later date, with Mary Speer dating it between 1155 and 1190. The manuscript Paris, B.N. fr. 1553 (K) from which the above cited text derives dates to 1285–1290 (Speer, 1989: 18).

<sup>2</sup> Speer, 1989: 18.

<sup>3</sup> The *Tesoro della lingua Italiana delle Origini* lists the 13th century *Il Libro dei Sette Savi di Roma* as the first appearance of the word. It cites a later 15th century Italian prose version of the same work: *Era usanza adunque in Roma che se niuno fosse preso nella terra, di notte, adpresso coprifuoco, come che fosse di gran ligniaggio e bene inparentato, ch’e’ fosse messo in prigione infino alla mattina [...]* (It was the custom in Rome, then, that if anyone was taken in the city, at night, after curfew, even if he were of great lineage and well-connected, he should be put in prison until morning) (D’Ancona (ed.), 1864).

<sup>4</sup> Found in the Auchinleck MS. 85 recto to 99 verso, this Middle English version [A] likely reproduced an earlier translation, now lost, that derived from the French A-group. While this is the earliest known ME version, there are several other versions: [R] MS. Rawlinson poet. 175, Bodleian Library; [D] Cambridge University Library MS. Dd., 1, 17; [C] MS. Cotton. Galba E IX; [F] Cambridge University Library MS, Ff. II, 38; [Ar] MS Arundel 140; [E] MS. Egerton 1995; [B] Balliol College, Oxford, MS 354; [As] The Asloan MS. While the Middle English version I reference the most is version A, I also cite divergences that are found in other Middle English versions, all cited in Brunner, ed., 1933.

the very mechanisms through which the curfew's legal authority was exercised during the late Middle Ages. As a medieval legal tool, the curfew operated as a mechanism of preemptive governance, producing compliance not primarily through overt force but through the cultivation of anticipatory dread of being spotted and arrested at night. This law obtained its authority in a single transformative moment: when the bell struck the designated hour of curfew, legal statuses reversed instantly from permissible into proscribed and the city closed in on itself, first through the closure of the city gates, followed by the closure of doors and windows throughout the city. What had been permissible became proscribed, transforming the streets themselves from public commons into prohibited space. The curfew's power thus resided in suspense—in both senses of the term—as the anxious anticipation it incited and the formal cessation it enforced.

As a result of this preemptive compliance, few traces of the enforcement of the curfew survive in the historical record. This is why the legal archive of curfew breakers is so limited: not simply because many medieval records have been lost, but because most inhabitants complied with the law before enforcement became necessary. The history of the curfew law is largely a history of compliance, a record limited in advance, an archive whose very limitations testify to the law's effectiveness. And yet, while court rolls and civic registers preserve only faint traces of curfew enforcement, literature offers another kind of repository. Tales like 'Puteus' captures what legal documents omit: that the twin mechanisms of suspense and reversal generated anxious self-regulation through the anticipation of both the bell's cessation and the instant transformation it would bring.

This essay examines both the Old French verse version (K) of the *Sept Sages* tradition and the Middle English translations, tracing how the curfew operates as a narrative and juridical mechanism across the textual tradition. By reading these versions in dialogue with one another, the essay reveals how the curfew's double logic of suspense and reversal manifests consistently across languages. Where the versions diverge, these differences illuminate distinct aspects of the curfew's operation.

The essay proceeds in three parts. First, it shows how the 'Puteus' tale presents the curfew as a decisive mechanism in the production of domestic order, transforming the home into an obligatory domain of confinement through its nightly interdiction. Second, it examines how the tale's syntactic symmetries, its strategic formal repetitions, and its generic constructions harness both the law's temporal mechanics of suspense and its logic of reversal. Finally, the essay traces how the curfew's dual logic of suspension and reversal radiates outward to structure the entire *Seven Sages* frame narrative, operating simultaneously as thematic motif and structural principle. Throughout the

*Seven Sages*, the suspension of the day's activity by the curfew and suspense as a literary device are bound together in the same moment of legal and literary innovation. The law becomes a delaying narrative device, a *retardatio*, that slows the plot's progression to build suspense. Throughout, the essay contends that the convergence of juridical and narrative suspense and reversal in these texts makes legible the structural logic underlying the curfew's force in medieval governance: that the curfew's authority depended on the uncertainty of when enforcement would arrive but also on its capacity to instantaneously reverse the conditions of civic life, as swiftly as the city gates close at dusk, transforming open access into enforced enclosure and innocent activity into illicit trespass.

### Law, Desire, and Domesticity

The 'Puteus' tale begins its narrative by defining the curfew law with striking precision. Anyone—regardless of wealth, nobility, or gender—found on the streets after the curfew bell has sounded would face immediate arrest and public punishment in the morning:

Itel coustume avoit a Romme  
 que il n'i avoit si riche homme  
 tant fust haus hom ne parentés,  
 puis que cuevrefus fust sonnés,  
 s'il fust seus trovés en la rue,  
 ne dame, tant fust bien vestue,  
 por chou k'il fuissent mains de trois,  
 k'il ne fussent pris demanois.

A la quemugne erent livré  
 et l'endemain erent fusté

(Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: 2175–2184).

There was a custom in Rome that anyone, however rich, or of high lineage, if caught in the street after curfew rang, was arrested immediately, unless accompanied by at least two other people. They were handed over to the municipal courts and beaten the next day.<sup>5</sup>

The law's universality is emphatic: wealth, nobility, and lineage offer no exemption to one found wandering the streets after curfew. By establishing the terms of the curfew

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<sup>5</sup> Translation here and throughout are my own.

law at the fabliau's outset, the threat that would befall anyone found breaking curfew is made unequivocal. The question that lingers is not whether the law will strike, but when.

The fictional formulation of the curfew corresponds precisely to actual legal practice from the Middle Ages, dating to nearly the same period as the Old French manuscript (1285–1290). Take, as a paradigmatic example, the 1285 London statute called the *Statuta Civitatis Londonii*, written in Norman French, which prescribes the same procedure: anyone found wandering the streets after the curfew bell has tolled (*apres Coeverfu*) shall be taken by the Keepers of the Peace, imprisoned overnight in the Tun—a prison built specifically to house nocturnal offenders—and in the morning presented before the guardians, aldermen, or mayor until charged with transgressing the curfew and punished according to custom:

*E si nul seit trove alant encontre la fourme avantdite ou qe il seit encheson de tart venir en vyle seit pris par les gardeyns de la pes & seit mys en le tonel la quel pur tiels meffesours est assigne e lendemeyn seit amene e presente devant le gardeyn ou le meyre de la Citee qe pur tens serra e devant les aldermans e solong ceo qe il troveront qil eit trespasse e a ceo seit costumers seit puny.*

[‘And if anyone is found going about contrary to the [curfew] shall be taken by the keepers of the peace and be put into the Tun, the place of confinement appointed for such offenders, and on the morning shall be brought and presented before the Warden, or the Mayor of the City for the time being, and before the Aldermen; and if they find that he has broken this custom, he shall be punished’] (*The Statutes of the Realm*, 1963: 1.102, translation modified).

In both the fabliau and the statute, the curfew law operates through a distinctive formal mechanism of immediate reversal and suspension. In a single moment, after the nightly bell tolled, the entire civic and domestic order was meant to close in on itself as the city underwent a spatial reconfiguration—the gates were closed, cleaving the city from the country; the doors and windows on private homes were secured, delimiting the inside from the outside. At once, the curfew's legal force suspended the ordinary operations of the day: all civic activities ceased, public markets halted, social gatherings dispersed, and the use of public space was restricted. Once the curfew law came into effect, day became night, the permissible became proscribed, and those remaining outside became immediately guilty. These binary reversals and immediate suspensions left no intermediate ground and no time left.

What distinguishes the ‘Puteus’ tale from the *Statuta Civitatis Londonii* is that the former supplies the detailed dimensions the latter omits: a narrative that captures the curfew law’s structural function by presenting a phenomenology of anticipated enforcement. The tale achieves this by mobilizing the curfew as a narrative device, where it serves as a source of narrative suspense.

The plot of the ‘Puteus’ tale in the Old French and Middle English *Sept Sages* centers on a wealthy Roman burgess and his new wife, whose domestic life becomes fatally entangled with the enforcement of the curfew law.<sup>6</sup> One night, the wife secretly slips out to meet a lover while her husband sleeps. After her tryst, she hurries home before the curfew bell has rung. However, once she arrives back at her marital home, she discovers that her husband has locked her outside as the curfew approaches. The wife begs her husband to open the door before the night watchman arrives. After he refuses, she becomes desperate; the bell could ring at any moment, and she could be arrested by the night watch. The looming threat produces a state of panic. As the curfew draws ever nearer, and suspense builds, the wife frantically threatens to throw herself into the nearby well—the *puteus* from which the tale takes its name—and tosses in a stone to feign her suicide.<sup>7</sup> Hearing the splash, the husband rushes out in horror, only for his wife to dart inside and bolt the door behind him. Now, he is the one trapped outside as the curfew approaches. This time, the curfew’s impending arrival produces an acute form of suspense that carries the dread of inevitability. As a burgess tasked with maintaining civic and domestic order, he knows what awaits him. When a watchman appears, the wife refuses to let her husband inside just as the curfew bell concludes its ringing. With that, the husband is arrested and paraded through the city at dawn, beaten like a thief while his wife lies warm in bed beside her lover, whose after-curfew arrival remains conspicuously unaccounted for within the poem.

Beneath the tale’s comic treatment of marital betrayal lies an insight absent from legal archives and untheorized by scholars and critics: that the medieval curfew was

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<sup>6</sup> The detail of the curfew law has been omitted in the contemporaneous version of the *Seven Sages* titled the *Dolopathos*, written by Joannes de Alta Silva. In the *Dolopathos*, not only is there no mention of the curfew law, but the husband is ultimately let inside by the wife after he promises not to lock her out again. Analogues or derivatives of the ‘Puteus’ tale appear in a range of other sources where the curfew law is also omitted: Sanskrit, *Śukasaptati* (*Seventy Tales of the Parrot*); Persian, *Marzbān-nāma* (*The Tales of Marzuban*) by Sa’d-al-Din Varāvini; Ottoman Turkish, *Nasreddin Hoca Monogatari*; Latin, *Disciplina Clericalis* by Petrus Alphonsi, *Speculum Morale* by Vincent of Beauvais; Italian, *The Decameron* 7.4 by Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Novelliere* by Giovanni Sercambi; Spanish, *Arcipreste de Talavera*; French, *Fabliaux ou Contes* edited by Legrand d’Aussy, *George Dandin* by Molière; English, *The Amorous Widow* by Thomas Betterton; German, *Der Renner* by Hugo von Trimberg, *Das Weib im Brunnen* by Hans Sachs.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Goedeke gave the Latin title to this and other tales of the Western group of the *Seven Sages* in his *Orient und Occident* (Goedeke, 1866).

a decisive mechanism in the production of domestic order. By rendering public space off-limits after nightfall, the curfew transformed the home into an obligatory domain of confinement, a spatial enclosure that both defined and enforced the boundaries of legitimate domesticity. The repetitive enforcement of this law each night severed the bonds of alternative socialities—the nocturnal gatherings, the informal economies, the unsupervised forms of intimacies and solidarities that flourished beyond household walls.

But what, precisely, did the curfew suspend? What forms of sociality did it render illegitimate, and what desires did it seek to contain? The question of why and how such a law came to exist—its social rationale and originary purpose—reveals a striking divergence between the fictional account offered in the ‘Puteus’ tale and that given by legal statutes like the *Statuta Civitatis Londonii*. The latter justifies the law through administrative necessity: it combats ‘many evils, such as murders, robberies, and homicides’ (*multz des mals com des murders, Robberyes, e homycides*) and protects citizens who ‘have been beaten and poorly treated’ (*Batues e mal tretes*; *The Statutes of the Realm*, 1963: 1.102). The ‘Puteus’ tale, by contrast, offers a radically different etiology—one that locates the curfew’s primary function not in the prevention of violence or criminality but in the regulation of erotic transgression and the production of the domestic sphere.

According to the fabliau, the curfew was a law first introduced into the city of Rome for reasons pertaining not to security, unrest, nor even for fire prevention, despite what the etymology of *coeverfu* (from *couvrir*, ‘to cover,’ and *feu*, ‘fire’) might suggest. Instead, the curfew was instituted in Rome to restrict the nocturnal excesses of bachelors whose misplaced licentious desires led them to kiss and caress, strangely enough, not other humans but statues:

pour c’iert a Romme l’estaulie  
 qu’il i avoit tel legerie  
 a ces ymages donoioient  
 cil baceler et acoloient.  
 pour chou les fist on ennaser  
 et les testes des bus sevrer.  
 Je vous di bien sans trecherie  
 d’illuec commença l’iresie!

Because licentiousness reigned in Rome: bachelors and young men courted statues and kissed them, which is why the noses of the statues were destroyed, and their

heads were broken off. I tell you, without any deception, that this is the beginning of heresy (Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: 2189–2196).<sup>8</sup>

How are we to understand the attribution of the origin of the curfew law with the beginning of heresy? While it is not clear what narrative utility this detail provides within the fabliau, this account of the law's providence opens the possibility that the curfew was meant to contain such unruly passions within the sanctioned sphere of home and marriage, redirecting desire from public idolatry to private conjugality.

The 'Puteus' tale makes this production of domesticity explicit through its own fantastical account of the curfew law's origins. Not only is the curfew law the pivotal motif around which the tale turns, but its very invention, as recounted in the Old French text, leads to the fabliau's central social and narrative relation: the bond between husband and wife. This fictional provenance of the curfew law provides the catalyst for the marriage between the tale's two protagonists: a rich burgher and his new wife. The burgher, who had long remained a bachelor, is redirected toward the stabilizing institution of marriage by the curfew. This account of the curfew's invention reveals that domesticity and the family were not spontaneous formations but social formations that had to be brought about by the force of law. Without the law's nightly prohibition, desire would be unrestrained, leading to such idolatrous acts at night. The curfew law was instituted to ensure that the marital relation was the sole legitimate form of desire by foreclosing all alternatives.

While the curfew law's origins are fictitious and the idolatrous acts it was meant to combat are fantastical, the social world that is detailed within the fabliau is rendered with precise realism. By centering the tale around a rich burgher and his wife, the tale illuminates the network of medieval urban relations and the role the curfew played in demarcating and disciplining city life through its apparatus of decree, bell, watchman, prison, and judge. As citizens who dominated urban governance, burghers made up a specific class within medieval society. They controlled urban governance despite comprising only a minority of inhabitants in cities like London or Paris. They alone held the political and economic rights to the city and bore responsibility for maintaining

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<sup>8</sup> As Yasmina Foehr-Janssens and Mary Speer note (Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: 233 n.84), the reasons given for the origin of the curfew are not very precise. Could this be connected to the trope of idolatry within courtly literature? Could it be connected to the idea, proposed in Raoul de Presles's commentary on Augustine's *City of God*, that Troy became doomed to fail only after the city reverted to fleshly lusts and idolatry? Or might the reason for this detail be connected, as Alfons Hilka suggests, to a vestige of narrative elements found in the lost eastern sources of the story. Another alternative is that these statues (*ymages*) functioned like the *ymage de ivuire* carved by Pygmalion in the *Roman de la rose*. Cf. Robertson, 2014: 257–72; Edwards, 2017: 229–247.

its regulatory apparatus—controlling streets, city squares, assemblies, marketplaces, guild halls, and market stalls. These freedoms came with obligations to uphold the law: by participating in ward governance, sitting on juries, and even serving on nightly patrol watches. ‘[The burgess] was thus’, writes Christian Liddy, ‘an institution of regulation and control’ (Liddy, 2017: 21). Hence, when the burgess in the ‘Puteus’ tale is ultimately arrested, he is captured by a watchman who knows him well, and is taken to be ‘judged by his peers’ (*pers jugiés* ; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: 2319), i.e. fellow burgesses.

The burgess governed not only communal space but also what Felicity Riddy terms “‘Burgeis” domesticity’—the ordering of private, domestic, and commercial domains (2008: 14–36). This private space was reproduced anew each day by the curfew’s domestic confinement. Therefore, when we find the burgess locked out of his own home, he is in total violation of his position as both citizen and husband. The narrator’s summation of his predicament is uncompromising—the burgess ‘could no longer enter the house of which he was the master’ (*ne puet entrer / en la maison dont estoit sire*’; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: 2332–33). By the tale’s end, his final humiliation is compounded: the husband has lost control over both his domestic domain and the public sphere—a double dispossession that inverts the very bases of the burgess’s social function.

This trajectory—from master to outcast, from authority to abjection—exposes the curfew’s formal generic logic. The curfew, with its binary logic of before/after, permitted/prohibited, operates through the same principle of suspense that precedes an instantaneous reversal that so often defines the genre of the fabliau—a brief, pithy narrative form that exposes social contradictions through comic reversal. This is a genre that proves an especially well-suited genre for the introduction of the curfew. After all, the fabliau is a genre of restrictions and transgressions—it takes prescriptive rules, conventions, and social structures that govern society and subjects them to comic unraveling through narrative inversion. It is a narrative form that is organized around the trouble of bad timing—the sudden twist, the inopportune surprise, and the rapid comic reversal. Within this condensed form, suspense functions as a principle of narrative economy, heightening the temporal pressure that precedes reversal and ensuring that it arrives with maximal force. The curfew’s temporal mechanism—its production of suspense through threatened enforcement—becomes the tale’s structural principle. Within this genre of brevity, dialectical compression, and inversional logic, the curfew reveals its essential operation: power exercised not through constant surveillance but through the management of anticipation and the threat of instantaneous transformation.

### Narrative Economy and Legal Efficiency: Suspense and Reversal

The curfew's ability to invert, suspend, and build suspense depends upon an enforcement apparatus that, paradoxically, need not be omnipresent to be effective. In the French version of the 'Puteus' tale, the curfew was enforced by 'three hundred watchmen, armed with large swords' (*'Trois .c. gaites a Romme avoit, / cascuns .i. grant glaive tenoit'*; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: 1285–9). However, the Middle English version makes no reference to this vast law enforcement institution aside from mentioning a single watchman. Yet, with only one, the narrative effect is the same. This is because the curfew governs through suspense, in the affective, literary sense. Its authority depends not on the certainty of enforcement, but on the uncertainty of when and upon whom enforcement will be brought to bear—the apprehension of being apprehended. The unpredictable presence of the lone watchman meant that only one enforcer was required to induce suspense within the tale. In fact, the enforcement of the law occurs well before the watchman appears, in the anxious self-regulation that precedes his arrival, as witnessed from by the wife and then by the husband. This is because the curfew law was designed to preempt transgression, to limit the need for arrest. It ensured that the streets were already cleared before any violations were possible and before the need for force arose.

The operation of suspense and reversal is legible even within the tale's syntactic constructions, both in the Middle English and the Old French versions. The Middle English version renders this reversal through strategic repetition of a single couplet. When the wife first realizes her predicament, she frantically begs her husband to let her inside before the curfew bell rings: 'A, lat me in, sire, paramour, / Men sschal sone ringe corfour' ('Ah, let me in, sir, my love, / they shall soon ring the curfew bell'; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 1445–6). But once their positions reverse and the husband finds himself trapped outside, the tale folds in on itself—the same couplet now becomes his plea: 'lat me in, dame, paramour, / Men sschal sone ringe corfour' ('let me in, lady, my love, / they shall soon ring the curfew bell'; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 1477–8). The Old French version achieves a similar effect through repeated threats. The husband warns his wife twice within this condensed poem: 'you will not enter, and you will never sleep with me again!' (*'n'i enterrois! / Ja mais od moi ne vous girrois!'*; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 2209–10; 2231–2). When the reversal occurs, the husband draws attention to how swiftly his wife has shifted her allegiance (*'tost vous est tot tornés vo cuer!'*, 'your heart has turned so quickly!'; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 2276), only to hear his own threat echoed back at him: 'you will not enter, and you will never sleep with me again!' (*'n'i enterrois, / ne ja mais od moi ne girrois!'*; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 2283–4). The fabliau genre derives much

of its comic force from strategic repetition, and the ‘Puteus’ tale exploits this technique to underscore its inverted symmetry. This reversal and repetition marks the poem’s climactic moment.

While the husband pleads to be let inside, the watchman hears their quarrel as the curfew bell begins to ring (‘corfour belle ringge gan’; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 1486). The watchman remains caught in an awkward legal position as the curfew bell continues ringing. According to the description of the law given at the tale’s outset, the curfew takes effect only after the bell has finished tolling—not when it begins, nor while it rings. Both versions specify this temporal precision: the Old French states that enforcement begins only ‘after curfew has been rung’ (‘*puis que cuevrefus fust sonnés*’; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 2178), while the Middle English renders this as ‘after corfu’ (Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 1419). This is not merely a philological observation but a legal one: as long as the bell continues to ring, the curfew remains held in abeyance. In that suspended moment—when the bell has not yet ceased, and the law has not yet begun—the watchman does not yet have the authority to enforce the law. Because the law depends on the discretion of the bell ringer, the precise moment of its activation, its entry into force, is inherently uncertain. This uncertainty produces a state of anxious suspense, shadowed by the imminent arrival of the law.

Because he is not yet empowered to enact the law, the watchman’s own authority is held in suspense. In this moment before the law comes into effect, the watchman begins to plead on the husband’s behalf. The Middle English version captures his appeal directly: he urges the wife to ‘let him inside before the bell concludes’ (‘Leten him [in] ar corfu ende’; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 1490). By virtue of their shared social rank, the watchman reveals that he knows the burgess personally and had ‘never heard an evil word said against him’ (‘And neuer of him no qued ne herde’; A, 1489). The wife, undeterred, refuses this appeal. At that precise moment, the bell falls silent—‘Corfour belle no lenger rong’ (‘Curfew bell no longer rang’; A, 1499)—and the law’s suspended state collapses into immediate enforceability. The bell’s silence enacts a series of reversals: the law comes into effect, the husband becomes criminal, and the watchman, who had just sympathized with him, becomes the impersonal instrument of his arrest.

As the moment of its executability approaches, the law’s formal conditions intensify the tale’s narrative stakes. As the curfew approaches, the nearer the moment of reversal and the greater the suspense: juridical timing and narrative tension converge at the instant the bell stops, the law takes effect, and the tale reaches its climax. Hence, once the law comes into force, the logic of the tale plays itself out, leaving the poet to admit that there is little more to tell (‘What helpeþ hit lenger tale’; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 1501) other than to reveal that during the night, the wife sleeps in her warm bed with her

lover as the husband spends the night in jail. In the morning, he guiltlessly suffers his punishment:

Amorewe þe burgeis was forþ ifet,  
 And his honden biforen him knet,  
 And þourgh þe toun he was ilad,  
 Lohtliche driuen and bigrad,  
 Ase a þef. Þis meschaunce,  
 Gelteles he suffred þis penaunce (Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 1505–10).

[In the morning the burgess was taken, with his hands bound before him, and led through the town. He was driven throughout the city and basely flogged like a thief.]

What the ‘Puteus’ tale makes legible is the way suspense functions across multiple registers and affects different actors in distinct ways. The wife dreads the bell’s completion while trapped outside, experiencing suspense as the anxious apprehension of awaiting enforcement. For the husband, on the other hand, suspense takes the form of inescapable doom. Even the night watchman, the agent of enforcement, is subject to suspense, his power deferred until the precise moment the law becomes executable. During those liminal moments while the bell continues to ring, he possesses no authority.

The fabliau thus exposes details about the curfew that no legal document can fully capture: that the curfew’s power operates through two interlocking mechanisms—suspense and reversal—that function identically as juridical and narrative principles. Suspense becomes the law’s most effective instrument of coercion, generating anxious self-regulation through the dread that precedes enforcement. But equally crucial is the law’s capacity for instantaneous reversal: the burgess transforms from enforcer to criminal, the wife from supplicant to accuser. These mechanisms prove inseparable from one another—suspense builds precisely because reversal can strike at any moment, while reversal carries force only because suspense has prepared its ground. Within the ‘Puteus’ tale, the curfew’s juridical operations and the fabliau’s narrative techniques are revealed to be expressions of the same formal logic.

### **Framing Device**

The curfew’s logic of suspense—its capacity to defer, to hold in abeyance, to establish and enforce temporal limits—operates not only within the compressed narrative economy of ‘Puteus’ but radiates outward to structure the entire architecture of the *Seven Sages* frame narrative. Embedded as one tale among many in this intricate narrative

cycle, the ‘Puteus’ tale participates in a larger and more elaborate frame of stories designed explicitly to suspend judgment, to defer legal consequence, and to exploit the temporal mechanics of delay as both juridical strategy and narrative necessity. The curfew, therefore, appears in the *Seven Sages* at multiple registers simultaneously: on the level of content and on the level of form. This dual operation reveals how the curfew functions as both thematic motif and structural principle, embedding its capacity for temporal suspension across the structure of the text as a whole.

The Middle English and Old French *Seven Sages* centers on a prince whose stepmother falsely accuses him of rape and demands immediate execution. In a seven-day trial, the emperor, the prince’s father, must decide whether to execute his son according to his wife’s demands. The prince, forewarned by his seven tutors through astral divination, remains silent throughout the trial, knowing that only by maintaining silence until the seventh day can he survive. In the Middle English version, the emperor’s advisors persuade him to delay his son’s death sentence until morning (‘respit til amorewe’; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 502), inaugurating what becomes the frame’s defining structure: each day the execution is postponed until the subsequent morning.

Over the next seven days, a duel of words ensues between the empress and the prince’s defenders, who are none other than the seven sages announced by the title of the work. While the empress tells a story to convince her husband to order the execution immediately, each day one of the seven sages counters with a tale—including ‘Puteus’—in order to persuade the emperor to defer judgment until the following morning. In order to hear the story of each sage, the emperor must first agree to issue a one-day reprieve ‘until the morning when the prime bell rings’ (‘*trusch’a demain, prime sonnant*’; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 1152), the hour when the nightly curfew was commonly lifted in medieval cities. The emperor, driven by his appetite for storytelling, accepts by granting a respite until the morning. The precise timing of the morning hour of prime is repeated in the Old French version on lines 1151–2, then verbatim in line 2098, lines 3677–8, and again in lines 4195–6.<sup>9</sup> The practice of bellringing to keep track of time shaped the legal day itself, the *dies juridicus*. Paul Brand suggests that during the Middle Ages, the court would sit from *hora prima* to *hora nona* of the day, a duration which produced what he called ‘the lawyer’s day’ (Brand, 2001: 87). It is precisely within this legal day that the frame narrative is set, from the prime bell until the time of curfew.

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<sup>9</sup> Where the text does not explicitly mention the prime bell, it simply demands a reprieve until the following day (*jusch’a demain*, lines 1685, 3068, 3921). For a discussion of the significance of the word ‘respite’ and the role it plays in this frame narrative see Deleville, 2025.

Each day, the sages strategically use narrative suspense as a juridical technique, withholding their tales in order to first induce the suspension of the sentence. The emperor makes this decision to delay not because of the soundness of the evidence, nor out of affection for his son, but rather because of his insatiable appetite for storytelling. The emperor's lust for stories mirrors his wife's illicit desires, while the sages' strategic deployment of narrative suspense exploits this appetite to defer death. Unwilling to defer his enjoyment, the emperor willingly postpones his judgment. Suspense here governs two registers at once—the deferral of death and the deferral of satisfaction—revealing that the same temporal mechanism that enforces law can also suspend it. In this sense, suspense functions both as an instrument of coercion and as a means of putting it off. Like the curfew that can both produce guilt, as in the punishment of the burgess, and defer its pronouncement, as in the prince's reprieve, the law's temporal machinery proves reversible, capable of both enforcing and postponing its own authority.

This formulaic exchange repeats throughout both the Old French and Middle English versions with striking consistency. In the Old French, the sages demand a reprieve 'until tomorrow, when prime rings' ('*trusch'a demain, prime sonnant*'; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 1152) to which the emperor responds by granting a 'respit' ('*respitiés*'; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 1152). The Middle English renders this exchange similarly, with the emperor declaring 'I grant a respit' ('*Respit i graunt*'; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 693). This pattern recurs across all seven days of the trial.

Only once the first sage's story is complete has the first day been completed.<sup>10</sup> Each day's conclusion follows the same ritual sequence in both versions: the court disperses, the sage departs from the town, and the gates close behind him.<sup>11</sup> The Middle English version A describes this pattern repeatedly: 'The court departed, the master took his leave, and it soon began to become evening' ('*Ʒe court wente, Ʒe maister tok leue, / Hit gan sone to wexen eue*'; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 847–9), followed by the closing of windows and gates ('*Whan men leke windowe and gate*'; A, 1527). The Old French similarly marks these nightly closures: 'It was late, the court departed, the gates were closed,' ('*Il fu tart, la court departi, les portes furent closes*'; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 119). This repeated rhythm—from day-time deliberation to

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<sup>10</sup> Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 1400 *le premier jor li a passé*; Brunner, ed., 1933: E, 497, 'Whenne evynne come'; B, 512, 'Whan eve came'. A, 511, 'An euen late Ʒe emperour / Was brow to bedde wiz honur.'

<sup>11</sup> Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 847–9 'Ʒe court wente, Ʒe maister tok leue, / Hit gan sone to wexen eue. / Ʒemperour com to chaumbre anon.' 1524, 'Ʒe maister went out of Ʒe toun.' 1527, 'Whan men leke windowe and gate.' 1528, 'Ʒemperour com to chaumbre late.'; Fr. A, 119, 'Il fu tart, la court departi, les portes furent closes. [...].'

evening dismissal to nocturnal enclosure—aligns the frame narrative with the temporal structure of the curfew itself.

In the morning, the infrastructure of nighttime confinement reverses: gates unlock, doors and windows open, and the court reconvenes. The Middle English versions document this daily transformation through formulaic repetitions in which the gates are unlocked ‘Men vn[l]ek gate’; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 2241), the doors and windows unbarred (‘Men vnlek dore and windowe’; Brunner, ed., 1933: E, 1389). Within this repeated daily reversal, the frame narrative operates within the temporal boundaries marked by the curfew’s nightly closure and morning release.<sup>12</sup> At the end of the day, as night falls and the city is once again sealed.

This repeated sequence of delay, narration, and nightly withdrawal aligns the frame narrative with the cadence of the legal day marked by the curfew. In the ‘Western’ tradition of this frame narrative, the curfew motif serves as an emblematic expression of the underlying narrative law inherited from the *Book of Sindibad* and the ‘Eastern’ *Seven Sages* tradition. In contrast to frame narratives like *The Arabian Nights*, where storytelling is structured around the duration and suspension of the night, the stories told by the sages in *Seven Sages* takes place within the duration of the juridical day.

The structure of this narrative cycle culminates on the final day when the prince can finally tell his story and convince the emperor of his innocence. Each proceeding day, the sages know that they simply need to delay the sentence until the last day of the trial. This makes their stories neither legal depositions, exactly, nor wholly persuasive narrative evidence, but rather a series of filibustering speeches. Unlike the empress, whose daily tales are told in hopes of bringing about an immediate judgment that day, the sages must delay the decision for another day while telling a compelling story that highlights the son’s unjust plight. Only once the emperor agrees to issue the suspension of his judgment will the sage begin his story each time. Such is the paradox, the driving force, of the *Seven Sages*: it continues only by delaying, it builds suspense through what has been called a ‘regime of suspension’ (Foehr-Janssens, 2015: 13–22).

On one such day, after the sage concludes the ‘Puteus’ tale, he warns the emperor that his own fate could be like that which befell the humiliated burgess in the tale (‘bifel þe burgeis richem’; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 1520). The sage reminds the emperor that he, too, occupies a position of domestic and civic authority that can be instantly reversed. Satisfied by this story, the emperor honors his pledge and issues a respite (‘respitiés’;

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Men vndede þe gates of þe paleis.’ 945, ‘Men vn[l]ek gate and halle dore.’ 2241, ‘Men vnlek dore and windowe.’ E, 1389, ‘Man vndyde the gatys all.’ E, 2194, ‘Whenne the gatys were vndoo.’ Ar, 1178, ‘þe gates wer vndo;’ B, ‘Than the gates were vndo;’

Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 2337), suspending judgment through the night ('I nel nowt do bi here to ni3t'; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 1522). The prince's death sentence hangs suspended—held in a state of juridical suspense that maps onto the temporal suspension of the curfew. As the prince remains confined in prison, the sage departs the city, the gates are locked, the windows latched ('men leke windowe and gate'; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 1528) and the emperor withdraws to his 'chamber late that evening' ('to chaumbre late'; Brunner, ed., 1933: A, 1528). This series of nightly closures and retreats demonstrates that the curfew's temporal structure extends beyond the individual tale, governing the entire narrative frame. Though 'Puteus' is the only tale to name the curfew explicitly, the rhythm of this nightly prohibition pervades the whole as each day's narrative concludes as evening falls, triggering the ritual shutdown of the palace and city.

On the eighth day, with the curfew lifted and the cycle of delay finally reaching its limit, the court assembles one last time after attending morning mass. At last, the emperor and empress, the court advisors, and the assembled barons gather to hear the words of the long-silent prince. He begins by explaining the necessity of his silence before offering his own *exemplum*, a final act of storytelling that does not defer judgment, but instead induces it. When his tale ends and the empress's deception is exposed, she exclaims in astonishment: 'Or parole!'—'He speaks, it seems to me!' (Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 2061). The prince's utterance brings about the long-awaited narrative and juridical reversal. The accuser becomes the accused, as the empress's position is instantaneously exchanged for that of the prince she had condemned. She promptly admits her crime, praising the prince's ability to 'withhold' ('*Atenance*'; Speer and Foehr-Janssens (ed. and trans.), 2017: K, 2066)—'Never did a man of his age show such self-control!'<sup>13</sup> Her praise unwittingly acknowledges what the entire frame narrative has demonstrated: that the power to withhold—desire, speech, judgment—determines who will suffer the ultimate reversal. The *Seven Sages*, like the curfew that structures it, is formed around the dual capacity for reversal and suspension—between sentence and reprieve, the opening and closing of the city gates, the withholding and unleashing of desire, between suspense and narrative closure.

### **In Conclusion (Without Further Delay)**

The medieval curfew emerges from this analysis as a generative principle that binds juridical authority to narrative form through suspense and reversal. While the 'Puteus' tale reveals how these mechanisms operate within the compressed timeframe of a

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<sup>13</sup> On the word *Atenance* see Barbier, 1947: 115–128.

single night—building anticipation toward an instant of legal and social inversion—the *Seven Sages* frame narrative demonstrates that suspense and reversal can structure extended narrative time. The frame reveals the scalability and repeatability of the curfew’s juridical logic. Across seven days, the daily suspension of the death sentence generates a self-perpetuating cycle of storytelling, where juridical deferral becomes narrative necessity.

Just as the curfew governed medieval urban life by transforming the threshold between day and night into a moment of acute juridical consequence, so too does narrative suspense transform the space between beginning and ending into the very texture of poetic experience. The law’s temporal structure—its capacity to suspend, defer, and ultimately enforce—becomes inseparable from the narrative structures that gave it its early written articulation. The convergence of juridical and narrative form demonstrates that the curfew’s authority depended equally on suspense and reversal, and that these mechanisms could be repeated anew each day and night.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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