In the Time of *al-Fiṭaḥl* When Stones Were Still Moist and All Things Spoke: Very Short Arabic Animal Fables and Just-So Stories

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Abstract

Scholarly attention to speaking animals in Arabic has focused mainly on the larger collections such as *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, the two sections with animal fables in *Alf Layla wa-layla*, and the lengthy, brilliant debate in *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*. Animal fables such as found in the *Pañcatantra*, *Aesop*, and *Kalīla wa-Dimna* are usually short. There are even shorter fables, however. Arabic literary anthologies contain numerous ultra-short narratives figuring speaking animals, which have been studied less often. This article is concerned with their form and characteristics, and their reception in Arabic literature. Often they are about animal behaviour and characteristics rather than allegories for human behaviour.

Keywords

Arabic literature – fables – speaking animals

Scholarly attention to speaking animals in Arabic has understandably focused mainly on the larger collections such as *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, the two sections with animal fables in *Alf Layla wa-layla*,¹ and the lengthy, brilliant debate in *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*. I shall not discuss them here, nor is there any need to deal with the speaking creatures in the Qur'ān, where a hoopoe and an

1 *Alf Layla wa-layla*, I, 288–306 and, in the cycle of King Jalī'ād and his son Wird Khān, IV, 142–172 (tr. Lyons, *The Arabian Nights*, I, 613–650, III, 441–502, respectively).

ant speak and where the expression *manṭiq al-ṭayr*, the speech of birds, has received ample attention.² Animal fables such as found in the *Pañcatantra*, *Aesop*, and *Kalīla wa-Dimna* are usually short. There are even shorter fables, however. Arabic literary anthologies contain numerous ultra-short narratives figuring speaking animals, which have been studied less often, the main contributions being Brockelmann's article "Fabel und Tiermärchen" published in 1926³ and Karimi, "Le conte animalier," of 1975.⁴ Franz Rosenthal also discusses some animal fables, mostly Aesopic, found in a manuscript.⁵ Brockelmann and others were particularly interested in the possible origins, whether western or oriental, of the several fables. Brockelmann and Karimi show that not all Arabic animal stories can be traced to non-Arabic sources. In this article I am not primarily interested in origins and sources but rather in the forms, functions, and characteristics of those fables. It will be seen that they vary considerably in form or function and that the short narratives may have shifting shapes and serve different purposes, including philological explanation, fanciful zoological information, moral instruction, literary enjoyment, and humour, usually combined to the point of making it impossible to distinguish clearly between categories. These very short fables lack the at times ponderous style of *Aesop* and *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and as a rule they do not explicitly provide a moral. They are often introduced by expressions such as *mimmā taqūlu l-'Arab 'alā alsinat al-bahā'im*, "Among things the Arabs say on the tongues (i.e., put into the mouth) of beasts." Their brevity may reach the level of near-incomprehensibility. In the seminal literary anthology by Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), *Uyūn al-akhbār*, one finds:⁶

2 See, e.g., Jāhīz, *Ḥayawān*, IV, 8–9, 22, VII, 50–58; Murtaḍā, *Amālī*, II, 349, 352–353 on the speech of animals (sūrat al-Naml, Q 27:16: *manṭiq al-ṭayr*; Q 27:18 the speech of the ant; Q 27:22–26: the speech of the hoopoe); see Miller, Man is Not the Only Speaking Animal. Other speaking animals are found in many stories in connection with Solomon/Sulaymān and other prophets. A frog speaks to David/Dāwūd (Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, II, 85–86); a lizard speaks to the Prophet "in fluent, correct, clear, distinct Arabic that was understood by all the people" (ibid., II, 79). People other than prophets also encounter speaking animals. Sufyān al-Thawrī claims to have been addressed by a dog (Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, VII, 74; I owe this reference to Christopher Melchert) and wolves spoke to Rāfi' b. 'Umayra, Salama b. al-Akwa', and Uhbān b. Aws, nicknamed Mukallim al-Dhi'b (see Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, I, 362; Tha'ālibī, *Thimār al-qulūb*, 386–387 and many other sources).

3 Brockelmann, Fabel und Tiermärchen.

4 Karimi, Le conte animalier; the author does not refer to Brockelmann's article.

5 Rosenthal, A Small Collection. For a general survey of animal fables in Arabic, see Irwin, The Arabic Beast Fable. On speaking animals mostly in the larger collections such as *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, *al-Namir wa-l-tha'lab*, and *al-Asad wa-l-ghawwāṣ*, see Wagner, Sprechende Tiere in der arabischen Prosa.

6 Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn al-akhbār*, II, 74; cf. Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *'Iqd*, VI, 235.

وقالت العرب فيما تقول على ألسنة البهائم: قالت المعزى: الاسْتُ جهوى،
والذنب أوى؛ والجلد رُقاق، والشعر دُقاق.

Among the things the Arabs say on the tongues of beasts: The goats said, "The arse bare, the tail curled, the skin thin,⁷ the wool fine."

If this is a fable, then the point of this, apart from offering rhymed prose, is not clear, for why should goats describe themselves in such a pitiful fashion? It is partly solved when one finds longer versions, as in Ibn Durayd's (d. 321/933) dictionary *Jamharat al-lughā*:⁸

قال أبو زيد: قيل للعنز: ما أعددت للشتاء؟ قالت: الذنب ليّا، والاسْتُ جهوى.
(...) وقيل للضأن: ما أعددت للشتاء؟ قالت: أجزّ جُفالاً، وأولّد رُخالاً، وأحلب
كُبّاً ثقالاً، ولن ترى مثلي مالا. وقيل للحمار: ما أعددت للشتاء؟ قال: جبهة
كالصّلاة وذنباً كالوتر.

Abū Zayd said:⁹ The goat was asked, "What have you prepared for winter?" She¹⁰ replied, "The tail is curled, the arse is bare!" The sheep was asked, "What have you prepared for winter?" She replied, "I am shorn of my fleece, I am made to give birth to lambs, I am milked filling heavy pails. You will not see anyone like me in wealth." The donkey was asked, "What have you prepared for winter?" He replied, "A forehead like a stone slab and a tail like a bow-string."

Not all problems are solved, for it is not clear how the donkey will protect himself against winter's harshness with a hard forehead and string-like tail, or if the wealth produced by the sheep will help her; whereas the goat merely seems to complain of having scant protection. The bit about the sheep is also found in Ibn Qutayba, separately and again without the question about winter.¹¹ A yet fuller version is given by al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) in his *Muzhir*, quoting Ibn

7 *ʿIqd* has *ziqāq*, "(for) water-skins."

8 Ibn Durayd, *Jamhara*, 1302. The lexicographical glosses have been omitted.

9 Presumably Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī (d. ca. 215/830), but the text is not found in his *Nawādir*; Zabīdī, *Tāj* (JHW) quotes it saying it is from Abū Zayd's *Kitāb al-Ghanam*.

10 I have used "she" and "he" rather than "it" in my translations referring to speaking animals.

11 Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn al-akhbār*, 11, 78.

Durayd and adding a quotation from the *Amālī* of Thaʿlab (d. 291/904),¹² which to the above-mentioned animals adds a dog, who says that his preparation for winter consists in wagging his tail and lying down at the door of his master. The shape-shifting nature illustrated by this tale is compounded by yet another version involving a human instead of animals, a version that may be older than the animal one. Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868–9) quotes the following:¹³

قِيلَ لَأَعْرَابِيٍّ: مَا أَعَدَدْتَ لِلشَّتَاءِ؟ قَالَ: جُلَّةٌ رَبَوضًا، وَصِصِيَّةٌ سَلَوَكًا، وَشَمْلَةٌ
مَكُودًا، وَقُرْمُوصًا دَفِيئًا، وَنَاقَةً مُجَالِحَةً. وَقِيلَ لآخر: مَا أَعَدَدْتَ لِلشَّتَاءِ؟ قَالَ:
شِدَّةَ الرِّعْدَةِ.

A Bedouin was asked, “What have you prepared for winter?” He replied, “A large basket for dates, a scoop that is easy to handle, a cloak that will last, a warm hole in the ground, and a milk-yielding she-camel.” Another was asked, “What have you prepared for winter?” He replied, “Intense shivering.”

So what is the moral of this fable in its several versions? The answer is that it is no true fable at all, or at least not a fable in the traditional sense of a short animal tale that offers a lesson or moral. I have omitted the lexicographical explanations that accompany the texts in many of the sources, but these explanations provide a clue: they are part of lexicography, examples of old Arabic eloquent diction, with *gharīb* and *sajʿ*, and they provide information about the traditional nomadic or semi-nomadic life of the Bedouin Arabs. Brockelmann briefly mentions this kind of sayings in his “Fabel und Tiernmärchen,”¹⁴ justifiably, because the texts about the sheep and the goat are more than mere lexicography and eloquence, for they are also aetiological texts, or, to use Kipling’s term, just-so stories. A version from *al-Azmina wa-l-amkina* by al-Marzūqī (d. 421/1030) makes this clearer:¹⁵

12 Suyūṭī, *Muzhir*, II, 546–547. Thaʿlab’s *Amālī* are his *Majālīs*, but the text has not been found there. The oldest source is Aṣmaʿī, *al-Shāʿ*, 54.

13 Jāḥiẓ, *Bayān*, III, 230–221; cf. Marzūqī, *Azmina*, 267.

14 Brockelmann, *Fabel und Tiernmärchen*, 119–120, on versions of this story.

15 Marzūqī, *Azmina*, 270.

ويقال: إنَّ الضائنة والمعز خيرتا فقليل للضائنة أيما أحبَّ إليك الستارة أم الغزارة، فاختارت الستارة، فسترَتْ وقلَّ لبنها وصارت الغزارة للمعز وهتك سترها وكشف فرجها.

It is said that the ewe (*dā'ina*)¹⁶ and the goat (*ma'z*) were given a choice. The ewe was asked, "Which would you rather have, cover (*sitāra*) or plenty (*ghazāra*)?" She chose cover. Thus she was covered but her milk was scant. The goat got plenty but "her cover was rent" (*hutika sitruhā*, meaning "she was disgraced") and her genitals bared.

The ewe's "cover" is not only her thick fleece but especially the fatty tail that covers her backside; the goat shamefully lacks such a cover.

There are several such aetiological tales that give fanciful explanations of the appearance and other characteristics of animals. A well-known one is the story of how the frog lost his tail.¹⁷ Here is the version offered by al-Jāhīz in his *al-Ḥayawān*:¹⁸

وتقول الأعراب: خاصم الضبُّ الضفدعُ في الظَّما أيُّهما أصبر، وكان للضفدع
 ذنب، وكان الضبُّ ممسوح الذنب، فلما غلبها الضبُّ أخذ ذنبها فخرجا في الكلا،
 فصبرت الضفدع يوماً ويوماً، فنادت: يا ضبُّ، وردداً وردداً! فقال الضبُّ:
 أصبح قلبي صريداً لا يشتهي أن يردا
 إلا عراداً عريداً وصلينا بَرِداً
 فلما كان [في] اليوم الثالث نادت: يا ضبُّ، وردداً وردداً! [قال]: فلما لم يُجِبها بادرت
 إلى الماء، وأتبعها الضبُّ، فأخذ ذنبها.

16 The edition wrongly has *dāniya*.

17 Brockelmann, *Fabel und Tiermärchen*, 118; Karimi, *Le conte animalier*, 51; Jāhīz, *Ḥayawān*, v, 528 (summary), v1, 125–128; Ibn Qutayba, *Ma'ānī*, 641; Maydānī, *Majma' al-amthāl*, 1, 400 (at the proverb *arsaḥ min dīfda'*, "having a scrawny behind like a frog," as in Zamakhsharī, *Mustaqṣā*, 1, 139–140; Tha'ālībī, *Thimār al-qulūb*, 634; Ma'arrī, *Sāhil*, 181. For a version with a fish instead of a frog, see Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, 11, 78. The first two *rajaz* lines, but not the fable, are found already in Khalīl, *al-Ayn* (JZ', §RD).

18 Jāhīz, *Ḥayawān*, v1, 125–126.

The Bedouins say that the lizard (*dabb*) and the frog (*difdi'*) disputed about which of them could endure thirst better than the other. The frog had a tail and the lizard had only a stunted tail, but when the lizard had won he took the frog's tail. They had gone out to feed. The frog endured thirst for a day and another day. Then he cried out, "Lizard, to the water, to the water!" The lizard said,¹⁹

My heart will not let me,
It does not want to drink
But only to take hard 'arād²⁰
And cold *ṣilliyan*.²¹

On the third day the frog cried out, "Lizard, to the water, to the water!" Receiving no reply, she²² hurried to the water. The lizard followed her and took her tail.

Al-Jāḥiẓ continues with a poem of thirteen lines about rain by Ibn Harma (d. 176/792), which contains the following lines:²³

ع في يَدَاءِ قِرَوَاجِ	فَقَالَ الضَّبُّ لِلضَفْدِ
مَ مِنْ كَرْبٍ وَتَطْرَاجِ	تَأْمَلْ كَيْفَ تَنْجُو الْيَوْمِ
وَمَا أَنْتَ بِسَبَاحِ	فَإِنِّي سَابِحٌ نَاجِ
نِ أَبَدَى خَيْرَ إِرْوَاجِ	فَلَمَّا دَقَّ أَنْفُ الْمُرِّ
لَبَّ بِالْمَاءِ سَحَاجِ	وَسَحَّ الْمَاءُ مِنْ مُسْتَحِ
عَ عَوْمًا غَيْرَ مَنَجَاجِ	رَأَى الضَّبُّ مِنَ الضَفْدِ

The lizard said to the frog
in the empty desert,

19 Verses in *rajaz* metre.

20 Said to be a plant, hard, eaten by camels, growing in places remote from water (see Lane, *Lexicon*).

21 Said to be a plant with a thick stem, eaten by camels and donkeys (see Lane, *Lexicon*).

22 In al-Jāḥiẓ's version the frog is female/feminine, even though the form used is the masculine *difdi'*, not *difdi'a*.

23 Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, VI, 127; Ibn Qutayba, *Ma'ānī*, 641 (the first three verses); Ibn Harma, *Shi'r*, 95–96. On this poem see Salhi and Alqarni, *New Images in Old Frames*, 78–79.

“Think how you can be saved
 today from distress and mishap!
 For I shall swim and save myself
 but you cannot swim!”
 When the nose of the clouds was crushed (like perfume)
 it made the water smell good (?),²⁴
 And the rain poured down from
 the udders of a cloud,
 The lizard saw that the frog
 was not a successful swimmer.

The connection between these lines and the prose story is tenuous. There is no mention of tails and one would think that frogs are by no means inferior to lizards in swimming; perhaps the poem has only a part of the story. Al-Jāhiz then quotes a verse by the *mukhaḍram* poet al-Kumayt b. Tha'laba that is more to the point:²⁵

على أخذها يومَ غِبِّ الوُرُودِ وعند الحكومة أذنايها

When they took, the day after coming to the water,
 at the arbitration, their tails.

Akin to the just-so stories are texts about the onomatopoeic names of birds. In his book on proverbs al-Maydānī (d. 518/1124) writes:²⁶

قالت القطاة للحجل: حَجَلٌ حَجَلٌ، تَفَرَّ في الجَبَلِ، من خَشْيَةِ الرَّجُلِ، فقال لها
 الحجل: قَطَا قَطَا، قَفَاكَ أَمْعَطَا، يِضْكُ ثِنْتَانِ وَيِضِي مَاتَا

24 Interpretation of the verse unclear. The editor of Ibn Harma's poetry explains the second hemistich as “(the lizard) smelled a human being,” but this does not explain the word *khayr*, and the presence of humans is unexpected. My interpretation is based on the fact that the dictionaries connect *arwaḥa* with smelling and water, which seems supported here by the mention of “nose.” Salhi and Alqarni translate it as “the frog showed that it could escape best,” which may be correct but seems to contradict what follows about the ineffectiveness of the frog's swimming.

25 Jāhiz, *Ḥayawān*, v1, 128; Maydānī, *Majma' al-amthāl*, 1, 400; Zamakhsharī, *Mustaqṣā*, 1, 140. Unfortunately, no more lines of the poem are known.

26 Maydānī, *Majma' al-amthāl*, 11, 215; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (HJL); a different version in Tha'alibī, *Thimār al-qulūb*, 644.

The sandgrouse (*qaṭā*) said to the partridge (*ḥajal*), “Partridge, partridge (*ḥajal, ḥajal*), you flee to the mountains (*tafirru fī l-jabal*), out of fear for man (*min khashyati l-rajul*)!”²⁷ The partridge replied, “Sandgrouse, sandgrouse (*qaṭā, qaṭā*), your neck is hairless (*am’aṭā*), your eggs are (only) two and my eggs are two hundred!”²⁸

In this story the birds pronounce each other’s names. Rather better known and more logical is the saying that the sandgrouse, *qaṭā*, pronounces his own name; poets called it *ṣādiqa*, “speaking the truth.”²⁹ These poets, explains al-Jāḥiẓ, present the bird as giving truthful information, “even though the sandgrouse does not intend this.” The Arabs, he continues, take anything they can hear and understand as clear speech (*bayān*), as when Dhū l-Rumma says that sheep call for water (*mā*). The *zāgh* (rook, or crow, or jackdaw, or chough?) also cries out his name, *zāgh zāgh!*, after reciting a poem in eloquent Arabic, *bi-lisān faṣīḥ ṭaliq dhaliq*, in a story.³⁰

The just-so stories are different from the moralistic tales such as those in *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. The typical Aesopic fable or *Kalīla wa-Dimna* tale uses speaking animals to speak about the human world and teach a moral lesson. A lion or a fox may be chosen because the former is strong and the latter is clever, but the fables do not explain the lion’s strength and the fox’s cunning, which are taken for granted as being obvious. The aetiological tales, however, are specifically about the speaking animals themselves, not about the human world.³¹

Some tales contain neither aetiology nor morality but merely describe events in the animal world, at the same time offering glimpses of Bedouin life. A lizard speaks again in a story quoted (twice) by al-Jāḥiẓ:³²

27 Or “fearfully, cowardly,” reading *min khashyati l-wajal* as in *Lisān al-‘Arab*.

28 *Mīṭā*, instead of the correct *mīṭātān*, “two hundred,” for the sake of the metre and (poor) rhyme.

29 Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, v, 287 quotes verses by al-Kumayt and al-Farazdaq; cf. *ibid.* v, 578–579. See also Tha’alibī, *Thimnār al-qulūb*, 482; Maydānī, *Majma’ al-amthāl*, I, 515–516 (*aṣḍaq min qaṭāh*, “more truthful than a sandgrouse”); Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, II, 253, 255 and many other sources.

30 Jarīrī, *Jalīs*, II, 71–72; Sarrāj, *Maṣāri’ al-‘ushshāq*, I, 85–86; Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, II, 2. Among onomatopoeic bird names is surely the *‘aq’aq* (magpie), as al-Damīrī says (II, 148), who remarks that al-Jāḥiẓ thought otherwise and connected the name with the verb *‘aqqa* (“being a bad parent”). But al-Damīrī misrepresents al-Jāḥiẓ, who does not posit an etymological connection (see *Ḥayawān*, III, 180, v, 151, VI, 478).

31 There are aetiological tales in which animals do not speak; for some examples see Karimi, *Le conte animalier*.

32 Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, IV, 165 and VI, 132–133; he quotes al-Aṣma’ī.

إِنَّ الضَّبَّ قَالَ لابنه: إِذَا سَمِعْتَ صَوْتَ الْحَرَشِ فَلَا تَخْرُجَنَّ! قَالَ: وَذَلِكَ أَنَّهُمْ
يُرْعَمُونَ أَنَّ الْحَرَشَ تَحْرِيكَ الْيَدِ عِنْدَ جُرِّ الضَّبِّ، لِيُخْرَجَ إِذَا ظَنَّ أَنَّهُ حَيَّةٌ—قَالَ:
وَسَمِعَ ابْنَهُ صَوْتَ الْحَفْرِ فَقَالَ: يَا أَبَاهُ هَذَا الْحَرَشُ؟ قَالَ: يَا بَنِيَّ، هَذَا أَجْلٌ مِنَ
الْحَرَشِ! فَأَرْسَلَهَا مِثْلًا.

A lizard said to his son, "If you hear the sound of scratching (or tapping, *harsh*) you must not go outside!" *Harsh*, they say, is moving the hand near the burrow of a lizard, so that it would come out, thinking it is a snake. The son heard the sound of digging and said, "Daddy, is this scratching?" "Son," the father replied, "This is worse than scratching!" This became a proverb.

And, indeed, the saying is found in collections of proverbs.³³ Three anonymous *rajaz* lines quoted in Sibawayh's *Kitāb* are said to have been spoken by yet another lizard (this paper seems to be teeming with lizards) whose burrow has been targeted, probably by Bedouins, who are often described as being fond of lizards:³⁴

أَهْدَمُوا بَيْتَكَ لَا أَبَا لَكَ وَحَسِبُوا أَنَّكَ لَا أَخَا لَكَ وَأَنَا أَمْشِي الدَّائِلَى حَوَالِكَ

Have they destroyed your house? Woe!
And did they think you had no brother?
And I scurrying around you!

The story behind these lines, if ever there was one, is lost. Al-Mubarrad (d. 285/898), in a chapter on "Lies of the Bedouins" (*takādhīb al-a'rāb*), relates

33 Mufaḍḍal, *Fākhīr*, 235–236; Abū 'Ubayd al-Bakrī, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, 471; 'Askarī, *Jamhara*, 1, 66, 269; Maydānī, *Majma' al-amthāl*, 1, 244–45; Zamakhsharī, *Mustaqṣā*, 11, 50–51, 384; see also Ibn Qutayba, *Ma'ānī*, 643; Ibn Durayd, *Jamhara*, 512, 1141; Murtaḍā, *Amālī*, 1, 235; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (*HRSh*); Baghdādī, *Khizāna*, x1, 462. See also Brockelmann, *Fabel und Tiermärchen*, 121.

34 Sibawayh, *Kitāb*, 1, 176, see also Jāhīz, *Hayawān*, vi, 128 (where the lines are attributed to Abū Ziyād, i.e., Abū Ziyād Yazīd b. 'Abdallāh al-Kilābī); Ibn Qutayba, *Ma'ānī*, 650, and many other sources. Abū Ziyād al-Kilābī, a Bedouin who settled in Baghdad, author of a *Kitāb al-nawādir* (2nd half of 2nd/8th century, see Sezgin, *Geschichte*, 11, 86, Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 1, 121), also composed a strange poem with multiple rhymes, or rather a series of short poems, containing a dialogue between a Bedouin and a hyena, quoted in Jāhīz, *Hayawān*, vi, 443–445 (summarised in Karimi, *Le conte animalier*, 53–54).

that Abū ‘Umar al-Jarmī asked Abū ‘Ubayda (d. 210/825) about who composed them. He replied, “The Bedouins say that the lizard said them to his young (*ḥisl*) in the days when things still spoke (*ayyām kānat al-ashyā’ tatakallam*).”³⁵ Al-Tha‘alibī (d. 429/1038) discusses this interesting mythical epoch in his *Thimār al-qulūb*, in the entry of *zaman al-ḥiṭaḥl*, “the time of *al-ḥiṭaḥl*.”³⁶ The passage is worth looking at in some detail.

رَمَنَ الْفِطْحَلُ: من أمثال العرب: كان ذلك رَمَنَ الْفِطْحَلُ؛ قال رؤبة:

إِنَّكَ لَوْ عُمِّرْتُ عُمُرَ الْحِجْلِ أَوْ عُمِرْتُ نُوْحَ زَمَنِ الْفِطْحَلِ
وَالصَّخْرُ مَبْتَلٌ كَطِينِ الْوَحْلِ كُنْتُ رَهِيْنٌ هَرِمَ أَوْ قَتْلُ

وسئل عن زمن الفطحل، فقال: أيام كانت الحجارة رطبة، وإذ كل شيء ينطق. وزعم بعض أهل اللغة أن زمن الفطحل هو زمن الخصب والسعة، وأنهم أرادوا برطوبة السلام ابتلال الصخر، ورفاهية العيش، واتصال الغيوث، وصدق الأنواء. وقال الخليل: زمان الفطحل زمان لم يخلق الناس بعد.

“The time of *al-ḥiṭaḥl*” is one of the sayings (*amthāl*) of the Arabs, who say, “That was in the time of *al-ḥiṭaḥl*.” Ru‘ba [b. al-‘Ajāj, d. 145/762] said,³⁷

Though I³⁸ may live as long as a young lizard
Or as long as Noah in the time of *al-ḥiṭaḥl*,
When rocks were still wet like the clay of mud,
I will (in the end) be a victim of decrepitude or be killed.

35 Mubarrad, *Kāmil*, 11, 215; similarly, Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Tadhkira*, VII, 340–341 (*min akādhībihim*), Suyūṭī, *Muzhir*, 11, 504.

36 Tha‘alibī, *Thimār al-qulūb*, 642–644. He quotes passages from Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, V, 202–206 on the motif of the rocks and the prickly plants being soft.

37 See Ru‘ba, *Dīwān*, 128; Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, IV, 202; Ibn Qutayba, *Ma‘ānī*, 648; Mubarrad, *Kāmil*, 11, 217; Qālī, *Amālī*, I, 234; ‘Askarī, *Jamhara*, I, 254; Maydānī, *Majma‘ al-amthāl*, 11, 59, 176; Zamakhsharī, *Mustaqṣā*, 11, 213; Marzūqī, *Amkina*, 170; Damirī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, I, 234, and many other sources, including dictionaries such as Zabīdī, *Tāj al-‘arūs* (FṬḤL). The *Dīwān* has *fa-qultu law ‘ummirtu*, “So I said, were I to live ...”

38 Tha‘alibī, *Thimār al-qulūb* and some other sources have ‘ummirta and, in the fourth line, *kunta*, but the context in the poem requires the first person, as in the *Dīwān*.

He³⁹ was asked about the expression “the time of *al-fiṭahl*.” He explained: “The days when the stones were still wet, when all things could speak.” Some lexicographers say that “the time of *al-fiṭahl*” was a time of fertility and plenty.⁴⁰ With the “wetness of stones” they meant that the rocks were moist, that life was opulent, rain fell steadily, and the rain-stars were reliable. Al-Khalil⁴¹ says, “The time of *al-fiṭahl* is the time when people had not yet been created.”⁴²

It is likely that Ru’ba did not know the exact meaning of *al-fiṭahl* and it is clear that the Arab lexicographers did not have a clue about the meaning and origin of the word, which is in fact an Arabicised form of Pthail, the name of the Mandaean demiurge who created the earth from muddy clay.⁴³ To Ru’ba the word merely represented “a soggy primordial time,” as Kevin van Bladel aptly put it. Al-Tha’alibī continues:

قال القاضي أبو الحسن عليُّ بنُ عبد العزيز: أمّا قولهم: أيام كانت الحجارة رطبة
وإذ كل شيء ينطق، فهما من الأمور التي يتداولها جهلة الأمم، وهو كالظاهر بين
أغفال العرب والعامة؛ هذا ابن أمية بن أبي الصلت—وهو من حكماء العرب
والمختصين منها بالرواية—يقول:

39 Although the context suggests that this is Ru’ba, Van Bladel has found in an unpublished commentary on Ru’ba’s poetry by Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb that it was in fact al-Aṣma’ī (*From Sasanian Mandeans to Šābians*, 16 note 37; for another translation of the lines by Ru’ba see 15–16).

40 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (FṬḤL): *ataytuka ‘ām al-fiṭahl wa-l-hadmala, ya’nī zaman al-khiṣb wa-l-rif*.

41 Khalil, *al-Ayn*, III, 334 (entry FṬḤL). See also Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandeans to Šābians*, 15–17.

42 According to a story told in ps.-Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’ al-zuhūr* (possibly by al-Suyūṭī), 44, animals stopped speaking soon after the creation of man. “When Adam was ploughing the earth with two oxen one of them stopped and Adam beat it with a stick he held in his hand. Then God the Exalted made that ox speak. It said, ‘Why do you beat me?’ ‘Because you did not obey me!’ The ox replied, ‘God was kind to you since He did not beat you when you disobeyed Him!’ Adam cried and said, ‘O God, everything scolds me, even animals!’ Then God commanded Jabrā’il/Gabriel to wipe (*yamsah* ‘*alā*) the tongues of animals, striking them dumb. They had been speaking before Adam’s descent.”

43 See Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandeans*, 2, 16; Kraeling, *The Mandaic God Pthail*, 156–157, on the lines by Ru’ba, with Ahlwardt’s German translation. The first to connect al-Fiṭahl with the Mandaean (or “Šābian”) Pthail was De Goeje.

وَإِذْ هُمْ لَا لَبُوسَ لَهُمْ عُرَاءُ وَإِذْ صُمُّ السَّلَامُ لَهُمْ رِطَابُ
بَايَةٌ قَامَ يَنْطِقُ كُلُّ شَيْءٍ وَخَانَ أَمَانَةُ الدِّيكِ الْغُرَابُ

Al-Qāḍī Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz⁴⁴ says: That they speak of the days the stones were still wet and that everything could speak, that is what is current among ignorant nations. It is also evident among gullible Arabs and the common people. Ibn [*sic*] Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt, one of the sages of the Arabs and who specialised in transmitting (such ideas), says,⁴⁵

When they did not wear clothes and were naked
and when the solid rocks were still wet,
As in the divine sign:⁴⁶ “Then all things stood up speaking.”
and the crow betrayed the trust of the cock.

This verse refers to the just-so story about how the cock lost the use of his wings and became a prisoner forced to cry out at dawn, which is told in another poem by Umayya and mentioned in al-Jāḥiẓ’s *al-Ḥayawān* and later sources.⁴⁷ The cock and the crow were drinking together. When it was time to pay the crow offered to get money and went off, leaving the cock with the taverner as surety, but he betrayed him and did not return.

Al-Tha‘alibī goes on to say that the idea of the rocks being soft and then hardening was not intended as a kind of scientific explanation but the result of fancifully imagining a primeval epoch in which animals could speak as rational beings and when the branches of the *sa’dān* (a prickly plant) and the twigs of the *sayāl* (wild artichoke?) were still soft and green.⁴⁸ It is possible, he says,

44 He is also known as al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī (d. 392/1001), author of *al-Wasāṭa*, on the poet al-Mutanabbī. The quotation is not from this book and has not been found elsewhere.

45 Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt, *Dīwān*, 23–24; Khalīl, *al-Ayn*, III, 334 (line 1b only); Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, IV, 196–197; Ibn Qutayba, *Shi’r*, 459; idem, *Ta’wīl mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth*, 410; Maqdisī, *al-Baḍ’ wa-l-ta’rikh*, III, 25; ‘Askarī, *Awā’il*, 43; Ma’arrī, *al-Ṣāhil wa-l-shāhij*, 249; Jawālīqī, *Sharḥ Adab al-kātib*, 202; Baghdādī, *Khizāna*, I, 249.

46 Maqdisī, *al-Baḍ’ wa-l-ta’rikh*: *bi-annahu qāma*. For *bi-āyati* with the following genitive taken by a sentence, compare the examples in Baghdādī, *Khizāna*, VI, 512–519. I have translated *āya* as “divine sign” because it does not strictly refer to a Qur’ānic verse here, even though there is an obvious connection to Q Fuṣṣilat 41:21: *anṭaqanā llāhu lladhī anṭaqa kulla shay’in*.

47 Umayya Ibn Abī l-Ṣalt, *Dīwān*, 153; Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, II, 319–321, 325–326; Abū l-Tayyib al-Lughawī, *Marātib*, 88–89; Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, X, 222–23; Brockelmann, *Fabel und Tiermärchen*, 118–119.

48 See Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, IV, 205.

that by this those who invented the stories intended to instil wisdom in people, wanting to make them familiar with understanding things, by inventing parables (*amthāl*) mixed with some jesting (*hazl*), incorporating seriousness in the fun (*mazḥ*), so that people would be more receptive. People with undiscerning minds would therefore believe that animals could speak and express themselves. They invented additional stories. The Arabs were particularly adept, more than all other nations, because they are so fond of speech and gifted with the ability to be versatile in their speech. They composed poetry and rhymed prose, such as what is told about the lizard and his ability to endure being without water better than any other living being.⁴⁹ Thus far al-Thaʿlibī.

Animal fables receive very little attention in traditional Arabic literary criticism, which had little interest in narrative, especially when unadorned, anonymous, and in prose. There is no *sajʿ*, *badīʿ*, or poetry in *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Ghafūr al-Kalāʿī, a sixth/twelfth-century Andalusian literary critic, is exceptional in having a chapter in his *Iḥkām ṣanʿat al-kalām* devoted to *maqāmāt* and *ḥikāyāt*.⁵⁰ After quoting four *maqāmas* by Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī he turns briefly to fables:⁵¹

ومن الحكايات المختلفة والأخبار المزورة المنمقة كتاب (كليلة ودمنة) وكتاب
(القائف) لأبي العلاء المعري، وقد تكلموا فيه على السنة الحيوان وغير الحيوان.

Among the invented tales and fictional, embellished reports (*min al-ḥikāyāt al-mukhtalaqa wa-l-akhbār al-muzawwara al-munammaqa*) are *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and *al-Qāʿif* by Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī, in which they speak quoting animals and non-animals.

Al-Maʿarrī's *al-Qāʿif* is lost, as is his own commentary on it, *Manār al-qāʿif*,⁵² but al-Kalāʿī quotes four brief stories, three of which are about animals that speak. Abū l-ʿAlāʾ's fables are admirably short, as fables should be. He uses *sajʿ* sparingly and it does not detract from the quick flow of the narrative. Al-Kalāʿī says that he prefers Abū l-ʿAlāʾ's fables to *Kalīla wa-Dimna*,⁵³ because they are beautifully written, with *iḥsān* and *ibdāʿ*, *wa-huwa aktharu min Kalīlata wa-Dimnata waraqā, wa-afṣaḥu ṭalaqā, wa-atyabu shamīman wa-ʿabaqā*, which I

49 See above, "How the frog lost his tail."

50 Kalāʿī, *Iḥkām*, 198–210.

51 Kalāʿī, *Iḥkām*, 208–10; also quoted in *Taʿrīf al-quḍamāʾ bi-Abi l-ʿAlāʾ*, 451–453.

52 Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ*, III, 160; Šafadī, *Wāfi*, VII, 103; Ḥājjī Khalifa, *Kashf*, II, col. 1827.

53 Kalāʿī, *Iḥkām*, 210.

find difficult to translate but which seems to say that al-Kalā'ī thinks that the fables of al-Ma'arrī are more lush, run faster, and have more flavour (literally, “fragrance”) than *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. Perhaps al-Kalā'ī likes the rhymes and the artifice, or possibly also the unveiled sarcasm evident in this and other fables, with their ambiguities. Since these fables are relatively unknown I quote one of them here:⁵⁴

حضرت النملة الوفاء فاجتمع حوالبها النمل فقالت نادبتُها: يرحمك الله! أمِنَ شَعيرة
مَجْرورة، وَبُرّة مَمْطورة، وَأَنَارَ سُفْرة مَنْشورة؟ قالت لهنّ: لَا تَجَزَعْنَ، فَقَدْ ذَخَرْتُ
عِنْدَ اللَّهِ ذَخِيرَةً مِّنْ ذَخِرَ مِثْلُهَا جَدِيرٌ بِالرَّحْمَةِ، وَذَلِكَ أَنِّي لَمْ أَسْفِكْ دَمًا قَطْ.

An ant (*namla*) was dying. The other ants gathered around him. A female mourning ant said, “God have mercy on you! Is there a grain of barley dragged (*majrūra*), a grain of wheat on which the rain has fallen (*mamṭūra*), or the remains of a tablecloth that was spread (*manṣūra*)?” The ant replied, “Do not worry, for I have amassed with God a store that entitles the one who stored it to mercy: I have never shed blood.”

We may wonder if al-Ma'arrī was wholly serious about this dying ant: why should it be rewarded for not having done what it could not have done, and since when can ants enter Heaven? In the second fable a small bird whose chicks had been the victim of a snake year after year nevertheless refrains from gloating when the snake has turned blind; it reads as a counter to the tale of the crow and the snake (*al-ghurāb wa-l-aswad*) in *Kalīla and Dimna*, in which the crow, helped by a cunning jackal, has his revenge on the snake who has eaten its chicks.⁵⁵ In the third fable there is a blind lion who becomes a herbivore, which would sound ridiculous coming from most writers; Abū l-'Alā', a confirmed vegan from conviction, rather than forced by his blindness, might actually have been semi-serious about such an animal. These are no just-so stories but moral tales of a vegan and pacifist. He was fond of letting animals speak, as is obvious from other works of his, notably *al-Ṣāhil wa-l-shāḥij* but also *Risālat al-ghufrān*, where a lion, a wolf, an oryx, an onager, and several snakes speak. It is somewhat disappointing, therefore, that he, like others, dismissed the fable of the frog and the lizard as “lies (*akādhīb*), produced by

54 Kalā'ī, *Iḥkām*, 209.

55 Ibn al-Muqaffa', *Kalīla wa-Dimna* (Beirut, 1922), 81–84, (Beirut, 1984), 94–96.

people of Scriptures, the Jews and the Christians, heard by Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt and others, who versified them.”⁵⁶ And he says this, incongruously, in his *Epistle of the Neigher and the Brayer*, a book full of speaking animals. However, with al-Maʿarrī there is always a chance that his tongue is in his cheek.

The very short, anonymous tales with speaking animals are found scattered in many sources, such as the dictionary of animals by al-Damīrī (d. 808/1405), *Hayāt al-ḥayawān al-kubrā*, and the several books on proverbs such as *Jamharat al-amthāl* by Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī (d. ca. 404/1010) and al-Maydānī’s *Majmaʿ al-amthāl*. Clusters of them are also contained in several thematically arranged anthologies, notably *Nathr al-durr*, the large anthology of prose by al-Ābī (d. 421/1030),⁵⁷ *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabāʾ* by al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. early 5th/11th century),⁵⁸ and in Ibn al-Jawzī’s (d. 597/1201) *al-Adhkiyāʾ*, a book about clever people, or rather clever creatures, because the last two chapters are about clever animals.⁵⁹ Other clumps of tales are offered by Ibn Abī ʿAwn (d. 322/934) in his *al-Ajwiba al-muskita*,⁶⁰ al-Ḥuṣrī’s (d. 413/1022) *Jamʿ al-jawāhir*,⁶¹ Ibn Ḥamdūn’s (d. 562/1166) anthology *al-Tadhkira al-Ḥamdūniyya*,⁶² and al-Marzūqī’s *al-Amkina wa-l-azmina*.⁶³

Such clusters usually offer a mélange of Aesopic and other Greek fables⁶⁴ and “indigenous” Arabic tales. Among the sixteen fables with speaking animals offered by al-Ābī, for instance, one finds familiar Aesopic tales, such as the one about the lion, the wolf, and the fox, in which the fox says he has learned a lesson from the severed wolf’s head;⁶⁵ the fable known as “Sour Grapes” involving

56 Maʿarrī, *al-Ṣāhil wa-l-shāḥij*, 249.

57 Ābī, *Nathr al-durr*, VII, 275–279: *Amthāl wa-nawādir ʿalā lisān al-bahāʾim*.

58 Rāghib al-Iṣbahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt*, II, 415–417: *Hikāyāt ʿan al-bahāʾim*.

59 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Adhkiyāʾ*, 298–308, Ch. 32: *Fī mā dhukira ʿan al-ḥayawān al-bahīm mimma yushbihu kalām al-ādamiyyīn*; 309–314, Ch. 33: *Fī dhikr mā ʿarabat hu l-ʿArab al-ḥukamāʾ mathalan ʿalā alsinat al-ḥayawān al-bahīm mimma yadullu ʿalā l-dhakāʾ*. Ibn al-Jawzī’s *al-Mudʿhish* also contains some short fables with speaking animals (418–419: silkworm and spider; 419: bear and human; 450: frog; 474: a bird speaking *bi-lisān al-ḥāl*).

60 Ibn Abī ʿAwn, *Ajwiba*, 126–127, in a section entitled *Min amthāl al-Yūnāniyyīn*.

61 Ḥuṣrī, *Jamʿ al-jawāhir*, 367: *Nawādir yuhkā ʿan ghayr al-nās*.

62 Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Tadhkira*, III, 141–42, VII, 221–22, 250–51, VIII, 239–40.

63 Marzūqī, *Azmina*, 269–270: *Fīmā wuḍiʿa ʿalā alsinat al-bahāʾim*.

64 Wholly Greek in origin are the animal fables fancifully ascribed to individual Greek philosophers in the anonymous seventh/thirteenth-century *Fiqar al-ḥukamāʾ*, 234–236, 239–242, 244–245, 247–248, 249–251, 253–254, 257–259, 263–266, 293–294, 296. I thank Ignacio Sánchez for this reference.

65 Ābī, *Nathr al-durr*, VII, 275, cf. Perry’s Index no. 149 and cf. no. 339 “The Lion’s Share,” several versions (for this index see Babrius and Phaedrus, *Fables*, 419–611). See also Brockelmann, *Fabel und Tiermärchen*, 99–100. Found also in Jarīrī, *Jalīs*, II, 160; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Tadhkira*, VII, 222; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Adhkiyāʾ*, 268; Damīrī, *Hayāh*, I, 176; etc.

a fox;⁶⁶ or “The Fox and the Thornbush.”⁶⁷ Some fables quoted by al-Ābī are non-Aesopic but known from other sources, such as the tale of the bird (*qun-bura*) who is caught but escapes and teaches his catcher three lessons, found in other Arabic sources such as *al-Iqd al-farīd* and Ibn Ḥamdūn’s *Tadhkira* but also in *Bilawhar wa-Būdhāsf*;⁶⁸ or the well-known story of the two owls who expect a bride price of numerous ruins if a certain vizier or governor (variously identified) remains in office.⁶⁹ Another tale looks Aesopian, faintly reminiscent of “Fox and Crow”⁷⁰ yet very different and with an interesting punchline:⁷¹

قالوا: وجد بعيرٌ وأرنبٌ وثعلبٌ جُبنةً، فاصطلحوا على أن تكون لأكبرهم سِتًّا. فقال الأرنبُ: أنا وُلِدْتُ قبل أن خلق الله السماوات والأرض. فقال الثعلبُ: صدق فإني حضرتُ وقت ولادته، فأخذ البعير الجُبنةَ بفيه، ورفع رأسه وقال: من رأيي يعلم أي لم أولد البارحة.

They say that a camel (*ba’ir*), a hare (*arnab*), and a fox (*tha’lab*) found a piece of cheese. They agreed that it should go to the oldest of them. The hare said, “I was born before God created the heavens and the earth.” The

- 66 Perry’s Index, 15. Ābī, *Nathr al-durr*, VII, 275; Ibn Abī ‘Awn, *Ajwiba*, 126; ‘Askarī, *Jamhara*, II, 68; Maydānī, *Majma’ al-amthāl*, II, 62; Tha’alibī, *al-Tamthīl wa-l-muḥāḍara*, 358; Raghib al-Iṣbahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt*, II, 416. The four last-mentioned sources quote three anonymous lines of poetry: “You who blame Salmā, I find you are like a fox || Who wanted a bunch of grapes, but, seeing it was too high for him, || Said, ‘Those are sour!’ when he saw he could not reach them.”
- 67 Perry’s Index, 19; Ābī, *Nathr al-durr*, VII, 276; Ibn Abī ‘Awn, *Ajwiba*, 126–127; Rosenthal, *A Small Collection*, no. VIII; Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, II, 73 (no. 285).
- 68 Ābī, *Nathr al-durr*, VII, 277–278; Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *Iqd*, III, 68; Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Tadhkira*, VIII, 239–40; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Adhkīyā*, 309–310; *Bilawhar wa-Būdhāsf*, 66–68, “The Fowler and the Nightingale” (French tr., 108–109). It became known in Europe too, see Petrus Alphonsi, *Disciplina clericalis*, tr. Hermes, 189–190, English tr., 141–142 and 186–87 note 116; and in *Gesta Romanorum: Entertaining Moral Stories*, no. 167 (“Of hearing good counsel”), 347–348, notes pp. 457–460. On this tale see also Marzolph, 101 *Middle Eastern Tales*, 38–44.
- 69 Ābī, *Nathr al-durr*, VII, 278–279 (with Abū Ayyūb al-Mūriyānī as the vizier of al-Manṣūr); cf. Mas’ūdī, *Murūj*, I, 293 (set in the time of Bahrām b. Bahrām b. Hurmuz); Rāghib al-Iṣbahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt*, I, 101; Ibn Badrūn, *Sharḥ Qaṣīdat Ibn ‘Abdūn*, 29–30; Ṭurtūshī, *Sirāj al-mulūk*, 370; Damirī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, I, 160; Ibshihī, *Mustaṭraf*, I, 108; Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a’skā*, II, 83; 1001 *Nights*, in the cycle of The Forty Viziers. On this tale see Marzolph & Van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, I, 280 and Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, II, 103 (no. 414).
- 70 Perry’s Index, no. 124.
- 71 Ābī, *Nathr al-durr*, VII, 275–276.

fox said, "He has spoken the truth, [276] and I was present at his birth." Then the camel picked up the piece of cheese with his mouth, raised his head, and said, "Whoever sees me knows that I wasn't born yesterday."

Strikingly, it is not the fox who gains the prize, as no doubt he would have done in Aesop. One does not associate the camel with cunning or wit, or with eating cheese for that matter. The last sentence, "I wasn't born yesterday," is a remarkably old occurrence of this saying with the sense of "you cannot fool me." Another fable reminds one of the English saying "The owl thinks her own young fairest":⁷²

قالت الخنفساء لأمها: ما أُمُّرٌ بأحدٍ إلا بَرَقَ عليَّ. قالت: من حُسْنِكَ تُعوِّذِينَ.

They say that the dung beetle (or scarab beetle, *khunfusā'*) said to her mother, "Whenever I meet anyone they spit on me." "That is," replied the mother, "to ward off the evil eye, because you are so beautiful."

Few animals are more repulsive, to humans, than the dung-beetle. Nevertheless, beauty is relative and in the eye of the beholder. Erasmus, in his *Adages*, describes the beauties of the dung-beetle at some length in an essay on the saying *scarabaeus aquilam quaerit* ("A dung-beetle hunting an eagle"); it could have been written by al-Jāhīz:⁷³

As far as physical beauty goes, if only we keep our judgment free of vulgar prejudice, there is no reason to despise the dung-beetle. For if the philosophers are right when they say that the shape they call a sphere is not only the most beautiful but in every way the best (...) why should

72 Ābī, *Nathr al-durr*, VII, 277; Ibn Qutayba, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, IV, 41; Ḥuṣrī, *Jamʿ al-jawāhir*, 367; Tawḥīdī, *Baṣāʾir*, VIII, 116; Thaʿalibī, *al-Tamthīl wa-l-muḥāḍara*, 379; Zamakhsharī, *Rabīʿ al-abrār*, III, 525. Compare the anonymous verse "God made her appear beautiful to the eyes, just as | He made a child appear beautiful to its father," quoted in Ibn Qutayba, *ʿUyūn*, III, 95; Mubarrad, *Kāmil*, I, 305; Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, I, 196, in the section about the *juʿal* (also "dung-beetle," "scarab" or "black beetle," said to be bigger than the *khunfusā'*). An anonymous reader mentioned the Egyptian Arabic proverb *al-ʿird fī ʿen ummu ghazāl*, "a monkey is a gazelle in its mother's eye." It goes back, in fact, to ancient Greek (Perry's Index, no. 364, "The Ape Mother and Zeus").

73 Erasmus, *The Adages*, 297. Al-Jāhīz, as it happens, is not very positive about the *khunfusā'*, but he mentions the *juʿal*, with the mosquito, butterfly, fly, locust etcetera, among the creatures that should not be despised (*al-Ḥayawān*, III, 303).

the dung-beetle not seem beautiful which comes far closer to this shape than the eagle? (...) The colour of the dung-beetle, I think, no one will denigrate for it has the quality of jewels (...)

It will be clear by now, from this heterogeneous collection of quotations, that speaking animals fulfil many functions. They speak in the moralistic fables of the Aesopic kind; in a few aetiological, “just-so” stories; in proverbs or tales that purport to explain proverbs; in lexicographical sayings; in miracle tales involving prophets or pious people; in dreams, as when the famous musician Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (d. 188/804) dreams of a black and white cat who does not only speak but teaches him a beautiful song.⁷⁴ They are usually anonymous, but the moral and artfully crafted fables by al-Maʿarrī are an exception. The anonymous Bedouin tales are sometimes denigrated as the *takādhīb* or *akādhīb*, “lies” or “fictitious stories” of the Bedouin Arabs. They come in different lengths. Explaining the saying *ajraʾ min khāṣī l-asad*, “more daring than the man who castrated the lion,” al-Maydānī, in his book on proverbs, tells the story in a mere thirty-five words:⁷⁵

يَقَالُ: إِنْ حَرَأًا كَانَ يَحْرَثُ، فَأَتَاهُ أَسَدٌ فَقَالَ: مَا الَّذِي ذَلَّلَ لَكَ هَذَا الثَّورَ حَتَّى يُطِيعَكَ؟ قَالَ: إِنِّي خَصَّيْتَهُ، فَقَالَ: وَمَا الْخِصَاءُ؟ قَالَ: أَدْنُ مِنْي أَرْكَهَ، فَدَنَا مِنْهُ الْأَسَدُ مُتَقَادًا لِيَعْلَمَ ذَلِكَ، فَشَدَّهُ وَثَاقًا وَخَضَّاهُ.

It is said that a farmer was ploughing when a lion came up to him and asked, “How did you manage to tame this ox so that it obeys you?” The farmer replied, “I have castrated it.” “What is castration?” asked the lion. “Come closer and I’ll show you,” said the farmer. The lion came closer, compliantly, in order to find out. The farmer bound him tight and castrated him.

Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) pares it down to even fewer words, calling it “one of the fictitious stories (*takādhīb*)” of the Bedouin Arabs.⁷⁶ Abū ʿUbayd al-Bakrī

74 Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, v, 193–194.

75 Maydānī, *Majmaʿ*, i, 240. Thaʿālibī, *Thimār al-qulūb*, 383 mentions the expression *khāṣī l-asad* but does not give the story.

76 Zamakhsharī, *Mustaqṣā*, i, 46.

(d. 487/1094), however, offers what he calls a *ḥadīth ṭawīl*, a relatively long and bizarre tale that can no longer be called a very short animal fable:⁷⁷

تَزْعُمُ الْعَرَبُ أَنَّ الْأَسَدَ مَرَّ بِحَرَاثٍ يَحْرِثُ بَشُورَيْنِ بَادِنَيْنِ، فَقَالَ لَهُ: يَا حَرَاثُ مَا أَصْنَعُ ثَوْرِيكَ! فَبَاذَا أَسْمَتَهُمَا؟ وَمَا الَّذِي تَطْعَمُهُمَا؟ قَالَ لَهُ الْحَرَاثُ: إِنَّمَا سَمِنَا لِأَنِّي خَصَيْتُهُمَا. فَقَالَ لَهُ الْأَسَدُ: فَهَلْ لَكَ فِي أَنْ تَخْصِيَنِي عَسَى أَنْ أَصِيرَ بِسَمْنِهِمَا. قَالَ: نَعَمْ. فَأَمَكُنْهُ مِنْ نَفْسِهِ فَخَصَّاهُ الْحَرَاثُ، وَمَرَّ عَنْهُ، وَدَمَهُ يَسِيلُ، وَفَرَّقِي إِلَى رُبُوعٍ مِنَ الْأَرْضِ وَأَقْعِي كَيْبًا مِمَّا حَلَّ بِهِ يَنْظُرُ مِنَ الْحَرَاثِ، فَإِذَا بَشَلْبُ قَدْ مَرَّ بِهِ. فَقَالَ لَهُ: مَا لِي أَرَاكَ حَزِينًا يَا أَبَا الْحَارِثِ؟ فَذَكَرَ لَهُ خَبْرَهُ مَعَ الْحَرَاثِ وَمَا دَهَاهُ مِنَ الْخِصَاءِ وَالْمَلَةِ. فَقَالَ لَهُ الثَّعْلَبُ: فَهَلْ لَكَ فِي أَنْ آتِيَ الْحَرَاثَ وَأَسْتَدِيرَ بِهِ عَسَى أَنْ تَمَكِّنَنِي فِيهِ فَرَسَةً فَاتَّزِلُكَ؟ قَالَ: نَعَمْ فَذَاكَ أَيُّهَا أُمِّي. فَضَى الثَّعْلَبُ، فَجَعَلَ يَرَاوِغُ الْحَرَاثَ وَيَطِيفُ بِهِ، فَتَنَاطَلَ الْحَرَاثُ حَجْرًا وَقَذَفَهُ بِهِ فَدَقَّ فَخْذَهُ، فَأَتَى الْأَسَدَ عَلَى ثَلَاثِ قَوَائِمٍ وَأَقْعَى مَعَهُ عَلَى الرَّايَةِ يَشْكُونَ بِثَمْنِهِمَا، وَمَا دَهِيَا بِهِ مِنْ ذَلِكَ الْحَرَاثِ. فَفَرَّتْ بِهِمَا نُعْرَةً، فَقَالَتْ: مَا لَكُمَا عَلَى هَذِهِ الْحَالِ؟ فَأَخْبَرَاهَا خَبْرَهُمَا، فَقَالَتْ: أَنَا آتِيَةٌ فَأَسْتَدِيرُ بِهِ حَتَّى أَدْخُلَ فِي أَنْفِهِ وَأَتَقَمَّ لِكَمَا مِنْهُ، فَجَرَّيَاهَا خَيْرًا، وَمَضَتْ فَجَعَلَتْ تَسْتَدِيرُ بِرَأْسِ الْحَرَاثِ وَتُرْوِمُ الْوُلُوجَ فِي أَنْفِهِ فَتَغَافِلُ لَهَا حَتَّى دَنَتْ فَقَبِضَ عَلَيْهَا، وَتَنَاطَلَ عَوْدًا وَدَسَّهُ فِي اسْتِهَا، وَأَرْسَلَهَا فَجَاءَتْ إِلَى الْأَسَدِ وَالثَّعْلَبِ وَهِيَ فِي شَرٍّ مِنْ حَالِهِمَا، قَدْ سَدَّ الْعُودَ دَبَّرَهَا وَأَثْقَلَهَا عَنِ الطَّيْرَانِ. فَبَيْنَا هُمَا عَلَى ذَلِكَ يَتَشَاكُونَ جَاءَتْ امْرَأَةُ الْحَرَاثِ بَغْدَائِهِ، فَتَقَدَّمَ الْحَرَاثُ إِلَيْهَا وَرَفَعَ رَجْلَيْهَا، وَجَعَلَ يَبَاشِرُهَا وَهُوَ بِمَرَأَى مِنْ تِلْكَ الدَّوَابِّ. فَقَالَ الْأَسَدُ: مَا تَرَوْنَ هَذَا الْمَشْثُومَ يَفْعَلُ بِهَذِهِ الْمَرْأَةِ الْمُسْكِينَةِ؟ وَاللَّهِ إِنِّي لَأُظَنُّهُ يَخْصِيْهَا، فَقَالَ الثَّعْلَبُ: مَا أَرَاهُ إِلَّا يَكْسِرُ فَخْذَهَا، فَقَالَتْ النُّعْرَةُ: لَا وَاللَّهِ بَلْ يَدْخُلُ اسْتِهَا عَوْدًا، فَكَانَتْ النُّعْرَةُ أَصْدَقَهُنَّ ظَنًّا.

The Arabs maintain that a lion once came past a farmer who was ploughing his field with two fat oxen. "Farmer," said the lion, "What fat oxen you have! How did you fatten them? What food did you give them?" The farmer replied, "They are fat because I have castrated them." The lion

77 Abū 'Ubayd, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, 504–505.

said, "Would you like to castrate me, so that I may grow as fat as they?" "Yes," the farmer replied. The lion submitted to the farmer, who castrated him. He left, still bleeding, and having ascended a hillock he squatted down, grieving about what had happened to him and keeping an eye on the farmer. A fox came past, who said, "Abū l-Ḥārith! Why is it that I see you sad?" The lion told him what the farmer had done to him and how the castration had hurt him. The fox said to him, "Would you like me to go to the farmer and make circles around him, so that I may have an opportunity to take revenge for you?" "Yes," answered the lion, "I would give my father and mother as your ransom!" The fox went to the farmer, moving around him while dodging him. The farmer took up a stone, threw it to the fox and broke its thigh. Limping on three legs the fox returned to the lion and squatted down with him on the hillock, lamenting their fate and what that farmer had done to them. A horsefly (*nu'ara*) came past. "What has happened to you two?" she asked. They told her their story. She said, "I shall go to him, fly around him and then creep into his nose, so that I can take revenge for you!" "God bless you!", they replied, and the fly set off and began to circle around the farmer's head, attempting to enter his nose. The farmer pretended to ignore her and when she got near he grabbed her. He took up a splinter and pushed it up her arse. Then he let her go. She returned to the lion and the fox in a state worse than theirs, with the splinter blocking her fundament and being too heavy to fly with. While they were lamenting, the farmer's wife came past with his lunch. The farmer went up to her, raised her legs and had intercourse with her in full sight of the animals. The lion said, "Do you see what that wretched man is doing with that poor woman? I swear to God, I think he is castrating her!" The fox replied, "No, he is in fact breaking her thigh!" And the horsefly said, "No, by God, he is putting a wooden splinter into her arse!" The horsefly was closest to the truth.

I suppose a moral may be extracted from the tale in its several forms, but it seems more likely that the story was invented to explain the hyperbolic expression. The longer, farcical version told by Abū 'Ubayd al-Bakrī, apart from being entertaining, could serve as an illustration of the unreliability of witnesses, all of whom will relate an observed incident to themselves and claim their subjective experience to be the truth. At the same time, it improves on the version of al-Maydānī and al-Zamakhsharī, because it is not clear why the lion would submit to being castrated in order to be tamed, whereas becoming fat, as in Abū 'Ubayd's version, would presumably be desirable. By dismissing the story as "one of their lies" instead of appreciating it as entertaining fiction,

al-Zamakhsharī, not the least of scholars, demonstrates his obtuseness in dealing with the genre of the fable, as do al-Mubarrad and others when they speak of the “lies of the Bedouins” and even al-Ma‘arrī when he mentions the “lies of Jews and Christians.”⁷⁸ Likewise, when al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī, quoted above by al-Tha‘ālibī, speaks of ignorant nations and gullible Arabs who believe stories about speaking animals, one is tempted to think that he himself is gullible in believing in the gullibility of those who tell fables and listen to them.

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78 On the problems of mediaeval *udabā’* in dealing with fiction in general, see Bonebakker, Nihil obstat; Drory, Three Attempts; and several studies in Kennedy (ed.), *On Fiction and Adab* and Leder (ed.), *Story-telling*.

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