



FABLE

FABLE, a kind of story often defined as “an animal tale with a moral” (*Funk and Wagnalls*, s.v. “Fable”; cf. Thompson, 1977, p. 10). There is no exact Persian equivalent of the term, but the words *afsāna*, *dāstān*, *hekāyat*, *qeṣṣa*, and *samar* are used to refer to such stories.

Joseph Jacobs defined the fable as “a short, humorous, allegorical tale, in which animals act in such a way as to illustrate a simple moral truth or inculcate a wise maxim” (1892, p. 204). In other words, the fable is a tale in which animals, acting as *dramatis personae*, behave like people while keeping their animal traits. Although this view is still held by a large number of scholars, especially non-folklorists, it has also raised some serious objections. Ben Edwin Perry, following the observation of the classical rhetorician Aelius Theon, has suggested that the fable is a rhetorical form of expression which dramatically communicates an idea or a truth of some kind in a metaphorical manner (Perry, 1984, pp. xix, xxiv, xxxiv). Works recognized as fables may come from oral or literary sources, appear in prose or verse form, vary greatly in terms of length, and serve as vehicles for social commentary and satire as well as for philosophical and moral instruction. In particular, the assumption that the fable is “an animal tale” has been challenged. Some fables are not animal tales at all (Brunvand, p. 129; Dolby-Stahl, p. 298). Fables may have gods, heroes, plants, and even inanimate objects as their *dramatis personae* (Schwarzbaum, 1979, p. v; for fables without animals as main characters see, e.g., *Wakīlīān*, p. 30; *Pāyanda*, pp. 136, 163; *Daly*, no. 8, 30, 316, 443, etc.). One type of fable, which is apparently of Asian origin but also occurs in the Aesopic



corpus, is the tale of contention between two rivals, each claiming to be superior to the other, or more useful to man. These rivals are not necessarily animals (Perry, p. xxvi-xxvii; cf. *Draxt ī asūrīg*, q.v.). A fable may take the shape of a fairy tale, an animal story, a novella, a myth, a debate between two rivals (including various body parts), or—a type especially common in Persian—an exposition providing the context of a sententious or witty remark (Perry, p. xxiii). It may, or may not involve dialogue. As for the fable's moral, many fables do not seem to have a specific moral point (Wienert, 1925, p. 86; Perry, pp. xxi-xxii). Indeed, fables which do come with a maxim often seem to be open for interpretation. This point has been convincingly demonstrated by an analysis of the fable “Sour Grapes” (Dolby-Stahl, p. 302). The old definition, therefore, has been largely abandoned in favor of more accurate ones. Thus, the *International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore* (II, p. 94) defines the fable as “a short, usually monoepisodic narrative with animals, occasionally humans or gods, as *dramatis personae*. It is a literary genre which is used to illustrate ethical and moral teachings. The teachings may be placed in the introduction (promythium), or in the ending (epimythium) of the narrative.” Such fables may vary greatly in terms of length, may be written in prose or verse.

The traditional definition of fable has found a strong following among Persian scholars. For instance, ‘Abd-al-Laṭīf Tasūjī states in the introduction to his Persian translation of *Alf layla wa layla* (p. 1): “Philosophers sometimes express their thoughts in the guise of tales. Occasionally they put their sayings in the mouths of domesticated or wild animals. Their intention is to teach and give advice, so they adopt this strategy to get the common people interested in their statements.” Abu’l-Qāsem Enjavī (q.v.), one of the foremost Persian folklorists, agreed but noted: “We should add to Tasūjī’s statement that the philosophers themselves did not create these tales; rather, they used as vehicles of instruction tales which were prevalent in the oral tradition. This shows the great importance of the folk narrative for the written literature of various peoples, including the Persians” (Enjavī, p. xiv).

Ebn al-Nadīm writes in the *Fehrest* (q.v) that the ancient Persians were the first to compile books of fabulous stories (*asmār*, *korafāt*, which they kept in their treasuries (ed. Tajaddod, pp. 363-64;). In some of these stories, he adds, animals were the *dramatis personae*. Thereafter, the Parthian (Aškānī) and Sassanian kings expanded upon these collections, and finally the Arabs translated them into Arabic. In so doing, they adorned the plain language of



the original with all manner of literary artifice. He further refers to a collection of tales, possibly containing fables, compiled by Abū ‘Abd-Allāh Moḥammad b. ‘Abdūs Jahšiyārī.

The most famous collection of fables in Persian is the *Kalīla wa Demna* (q.v.). In Ebn al-Nadīm’s time the authorship of the book was attributed to a variety of peoples—from the ancient Persians, to the Indians and Parthians. Collections of fables must have existed in pre-Islamic Persia, as Ebn al-Nadīm (ed. Tajaddod, p. 364) refers to one called *Ketāb al-dobb wa’l-ṭa’lab* (The book of the bear and the fox). He mentions at least two recensions of *Kalīla wa Demna*, one in seventeen chapters and the other in eighteen. He further claims to have seen one with two extra chapters, which implies that the version he saw contained either nineteen or twenty chapters, depending on which of the other two texts he took as a basis for his comparison (p. 364). Clearly, *Kalīla wa Demna* had been versified by the time of Ebn al-Nadīm, as he explicitly refers to such versifications by Arab and Persian poets. The author of the *Fehrest* further mentions the existence of abridged versions of the text, as well as selections from it. He then provides a list of fable collections among which he mentions *Ketāb Bīdpā fi’l-ḥekma* (the Book of Bīdpāy on wisdom; p. 365).

A number of well-known fables, popular throughout the world, are to be found also in Persian folk and literary traditions: the fable of the dog who let go of the meat in his mouth for the reflection of the meat in the water (Daly no. 133; Boḳārī, p. 66; Amīnī, p. 283), that of the lion who, mistaking his own reflection in a well for a rival, dived to his doom (Aarne/Thomson and Thompson-Roberts, type 92; Rūmī, pp. 44-64); the fable about dividing the kill between the lion, the wolf (ass), and the fox (Daly, no. 149; Rūmī, pp. 149-154; Amīnī, pp. 24-25); the one about the dog, the rooster, and the fox (Daly, no. 252; Varāvīnī, pp. 170-72); and many others. Ulrich Marzolph believes that Jalāl-al-Dīn Rūmī adopted most of the animal tales which appear in his *Maṭnawī* from Greek and Indic sources (1992, I, p. 98).

See also [KALĪLA WA DEMNA](#).

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