

## Through the looking glass

The oriental roots of Mickey Mouse and Brer Rabbit are a well-kept secret. But for centuries animal fables have bridged the divide between east and west, finds Marina Warner

The celebrated polemic that Edward Said mounted in his 1978 study *Orientalism* has come under heavy artillery recently, and his attackers, in their often abusively personal animus against Said (Christopher de Bellaigue in the *Times Literary Supplement* takes a swipe at his shoes), do less than justice to an argument that his oeuvre develops - an alternative story about intercultural exchange and influence over *une longue durée*, as displayed so vividly in the *West-Eastern Divan Orchestra*. Said's thinking about culture enriched the polemical thrust of *Orientalism*, evolving his thinking and giving it nuance: I once went to hear him lecture at Cambridge on Berlioz's *Troyens* fully expecting scathing comments about the representation of Trojan barbarians (subalterns), but, instead, he dwelt admiringly on the opera's musical perfections.

There is a counter-narrative about the Orient and western culture, one opposed to hostility and greed as the operating dynamics of culture. It traces the mutual interrelationship of literature, stressing this symbiosis against ideas of ethnic fingerprinting and cultural clash. In this respect, Brer Rabbit and Mickey Mouse are the descendants of the jackal Dimna and his friends in the 8th-century Arabic story cycle *The Mirror for Princes*, also known as *Kalila wa Dimna* (*Kalila and Dimna*) after its animal protagonists. It reprises many of Aesop's fables, and both collections descend from a Persian version, itself deriving ultimately from the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*, written in the 2nd century BCE. La Fontaine, the defining ironist of French worldly wisdom, willingly admitted his dependence on both Aesop and *Kalila wa Dimna*, but few people know that proverbial chestnuts about cunning and folly, such as "The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing", "The Ass in the Lion's Skin", "The Raven and the Swan", "The Tortoise and the Eagle" or "The Lion and the Mouse", have non-western origins.

The animal fable as a principle of civilisation appears under the name of many western philosophers and moralists, including Swift and Voltaire. Ros Ballaster, in her study *Fabulous Orient: fictions of the east in England 1662-1785*, cites a wonderful example of such storytelling in action from the *Spectator* of 1712, where the essayist Joseph Addison relates how a cunning vizier tells his tyrannous sultan that he's been taught by a dervish how to understand the speech of birds. They spot a pair of owls haunting a ruin, and the sultan challenges his vizier to listen and report back on what they are saying. So the vizier approaches the birds, but comes back prevaricating and saying that he dare not tell his master. The sultan insists, naturally, and with a great show of reluctance the vizier tells him that the owls are discussing the marriage of their son and daughter, and they are bargaining over the dowry. The father of the groom demands fifty ruined villages. The father of the bride retorts that fifty is nothing; he will lavish on her five hundred. And the bird then blesses the sultan: "Long life to Sultan Mahmoud! While he reigns over us we shall never want for ruined villages."

When the vizier relays this to the sultan, the sultan is ashamed - so the story claims - and restores the places he has destroyed, ceasing to ravage his people. Addison remarks that "among all the different Ways of giving Counsel, I think the finest, and that which pleases the most universally, is Fable . . ."

The fabulist's art of covert political persuasion in a strategic effort to survive has returned strongly to the public arena: telling a story about cross-currents, encounters, imitation and exchange between Muslim and other groups in history has inspired Middle East Now, a very full programme of art and activities at the British Museum, as well as the hugely ambitious Festival of Muslim Cultures, taking place nationwide over the coming year. (Its programme includes the play version of *The Mirror for Princes* as well as the exhibition "Bellini and the East", currently at the National Gallery.) Both have Middle Eastern money behind them - from Gulf states including Saudi Arabia - as well as, in the case of the festival, the backing of the Home Office and other UK supporters such as Prince Charles.

Storytellers offer "a place for the wise man to find himself", Walter Benjamin writes in his essay "The Storyteller", picking up a thread in the most ancient ideas about narrative. The act of telling has some part to play in enlightening the listener, and the narrator usually has a very important stake in the outcome. *A Thousand and One Nights* moves through a labyrinth of tales to lift the misogyny of the sultan who is poised to cut off the head of the storyteller, Scheherazade - and, eventually, it succeeds. These ancient stories strive to persuade in order for the storyteller to survive. Scheherazade is the most famous, but Aesop's biography - an imaginary Byzantine romance - also tells how he manages by the cunning of his tongue to emancipate himself from slavery.

Ibn al-Muqaffa, writer and courtier, a Zoroastrian-turned-Muslim, was the translator into Arabic of *The Mirror for Princes*; the Kuwaiti playwright/director Sulayman al-Bassam has placed him as the storyteller at the centre of his ambitious staged version. Al-Muqaffa practised the courtly art of fabulism with success for a time, and in his play, al-Bassam has braided together al-Muqaffa's rise with parables of statecraft featuring the rascally jackal Dimna and the loyal Ox, whom he shafts to rise in favour with his ruler, the Lion. Al-Muqaffa enciphered through these fables the ferocious struggles of the medieval Abbasid conquerors who established their fabulously wealthy tyranny over Baghdad and Basra in 750CE. Al-Bassam previously created *The al-Hamlet Summit*, and *The Mirror for Princes* also rings with Shakespearean power struggles (especially from *Macbeth* and *King Lear*) as we watch al-Muqaffa gradually lose influence over his prince, until he is imprisoned, tortured and killed on stage in a scene that recalls present-day horrors.

Animal fables are intrinsically comic, however, and they don't really go with a Jacobean gorefest; masking and busking and puppetry (all brought into play by the production) also struggle against the passionate tirades declaimed by the international cast, and the lofty allegory that is being sought. *The Mirror for Princes* is inventively staged, ferociously acted, but baffling: who here is ruining the villages? Mirrored screens bracket the action throughout, reflecting the audience and making us part of the action. But are we perpetrators? Victims? Is this a view from the Gulf of the war in Iraq now? Are the atrocity-drunk Abbasids vehicles for Saddam Hussein's regime? For the Americans and ourselves now? Or yet others in the conflict? The play ends with a long, chilling curse on the city and people of Baghdad, spoken by the lover of Ibn al-Muqaffa, weightily named Asia.

As I left the Barbican after the London production, I saw the Iraqi ambassador's dark, shuttered car whisk away into the night, a police car latched on to it so closely it looked as if it were being towed. What effect does al-Bassam want to have - could he have - on this prince, on this listener? In the midst of the complexities of Gulf politics, past and present, the shaping persuasion of his narrative remains inscrutable, his mirror clouding up for me as soon as I wiped it. Except for one argument: about the power of stories themselves to bring about destruction - or creation. The Mirror for Princes asserts the fabulist's *raison d'être*, to speak and survive, with possibly uncomfortable political consequences for al-Bassam himself.

The Mirror for Princes runs between 12 and 17 June at the Oxford Playhouse, Beaumont Street, Oxford OX1 (01865 305 305). [www.oxfordplayhouse.com](http://www.oxfordplayhouse.com)

**Marina Warner, newstatesman** Arts & Culture (UK)  
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Phantasmagoria: spirit visions, metaphors and media by Marina Warner is published by Oxford University Press in October (£18.99)

Kalila wa Dimna: the animals

The lion and the ox Two friends between whom the crafty jackals Kalila and Dimna sow dissension.

The crane An envious character who tries to hunt like a hawk. As a result, he gets stuck in the mud.

The weasel Fights off a snake to save the life of a child. For his pains, he is killed by the child's over-hasty father.

The tortoise Hard-headed, he refuses to take the advice of his wise friends, the geese.