

Translating Political Humour in *Kalila wa Dimna*

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Abstract for Masters

Translating Political Humour in *Kalila wa Dimna*

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This thesis examines how political humour changes under shifting conditions of power. My argument focuses on “The Lion and the Hare,” a central fable of *Kalila wa Dimna*. My close comparison of Ibn al-Muqaffa’s Arabic text and Ramsay Wood’s modern English adaptation shows how humour functions differently in contexts where risky political speech exposes speakers to severe government punishment than in contexts where such danger is less common.

In the Abbasid milieu (mid–8th century CE), humour and animal allegory enable indirect political critique under conditions of surveillance, patronage, and sovereign volatility. In this context, humour allows critique to circulate without it becoming easily legible as accusation.

Ramsay Wood’s 2008 Penguin Classics English adaptation reveals how these dynamics shift when sovereign power is removed. Writing for a contemporary Anglophone audience insulated from political reprisal, Wood extracts the fable from its original narrative frame and reshapes its humour. This contrast demonstrates how translation reorganizes the meanings and risks of humour, shifting responsibility for critique from characters and narrators within the fable to a protected readership.

By treating translation as a political act rather than a neutral transfer, this thesis emphasizes that *Kalila wa Dimna* is political storytelling whose humour is inseparable from the historical conditions of its production. The project contributes to debates on the politics of humour and the challenges of translation across historical periods and cultures.

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Dedication

For writers, thinkers, and artists who have worked under censorship and authoritarian constraint, and who have found ways to speak when speech itself was at risk.

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1. Introduction

This project begins with the eighth-century Arabic adaptation of *Kalila wa Dimna* by Ibn al-Muqaffa¹ and asks how its political humour travels across languages and historical conditions. Derived from the Sanskrit *Pañcatantra*¹, *Kalila wa Dimna* circulated across empires, carrying with it a mode of animal allegory attuned to the dangers of proximity to sovereign power. In the early Abbasid court, where speech could incur suspicion or reprisal, humour functioned as a strategy of indirection: it allowed critique to be voiced without appearing as open accusation. Laughter, in this context, was not merely aesthetic or entertaining; it was a means of navigating political vulnerability through implication, displacement, and narrative framing.

Humour, however, is neither stable nor universal. It depends on linguistic nuance, shared conventions, and historically specific structures of risk. When humour is translated, especially humour directed at authority, it cannot move intact from one language into another. Its timing, tone, and degree of legibility shift. What appears as a veiled critique in one context may register as a harmless fable in another. This thesis, therefore, asks how political humour survives translation, what risks are reduced or reconfigured in the process, and what the movement of *Kalila wa Dimna* from Arabic into modern English reveals about the ethics of translating laughter across unequal historical and political conditions.

By reading *Kalila wa Dimna* as both a literary text and a political intervention, this study examines how humour operates as a strategy of speech under differing political structures.

¹ On the text's transmission from Sanskrit through Middle Persian (Pahlavi) into Arabic, see François de Blois and Dimitri Gutas.

Throughout this thesis, “humour” refers not just to words intended to provoke laughter, but witty uses of narrative indirection, timing, and allegory to speak about power without triggering immediate punishment. Ibn al-Muqaffa’s Arabic rendition of *Kalila wa Dimna* emerged within the Abbasid Caliphate, a political order marked by intense power struggles in which speech carried real consequences for those perceived as overstepping their place (Crone 18). In this environment, all kinds of indirectness were necessary to criticize authority without openly opposing it. Rhetorical strategies of indirectness allowed critique to circulate without attaching itself to a particular speaker. Figures such as the lion who governs through fear, the jackal who flatters to advance, and the hare who survives by hesitating model forms of speech calibrated to this authoritarian political climate.

In *God’s Rule: Government and Islam*, Patricia Crone notes that the Abbasid revolution was not only a struggle fought through armies and banners, but also through competing claims to authority that rulers treated as politically unruly and dangerous (Crone 94). Because ideas themselves carried political risk, direct critique became untenable. In such conditions, humour offers a way to register criticism without naming it, shifting confrontation into indirection. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s² account of carnival, this thesis reads humour not as rebellion but as a limited inversion that exposes authority to misrecognition while preserving deniability

² While Bakhtin’s theory emerges from early modern European contexts, this thesis draws on his account of inversion and ridicule heuristically rather than as a totalizing model.

(Bakhtin 19). Ibn al-Muqaffa‘’s political ingenuity lies in translating opposition into narrative form, making critique legible without making it lethal.

It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that the dominant humour theories mobilized in this thesis—particularly those associated with Henri Bergson and Mikhail Bakhtin—emerge

from European intellectual traditions. Classical humour theory often presumes contexts in which laughter, even when directed at power, can circulate without immediate material consequence. By contrast, the Abbasid court culture in which Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ wrote exposed speakers to surveillance, the reprisal of patrons, and risks of punishment. Rather than rejecting European humour theory, this thesis examines the limits of those models when applied to Eastern literary cultures.

Ibn al-Muqaffa‘’s Arabic translation constituted an ideological intervention, transforming a work of Indian statecraft into the Arabic *adab*³ tradition, where literature functioned simultaneously as ethical instruction and political counsel⁴. When *Kalila wa Dimna* later entered English literary circulation, translators and critics aligned its humour with interpretive frameworks shaped by Orientalism. Rather than reading the text as historically situated,

³ *Adab* denotes a classical Arabic literary culture encompassing ethical instruction, social conduct, and political counsel, rather than literature in the modern aesthetic sense.

⁴ I return to the concept of *adab* in greater detail in later chapters, where I examine its literary and political functions within Abbasid court culture.

Anglophone reception often aestheticized it as timeless moral folklore. Therefore, I approach translation as a practice that can contain as much as it transmits.

This thesis traces these transformations through a comparative reading of Ibn alMuqaffa's Arabic text and Ramsay Wood's⁵ modern English adaptation. My analysis shows how humorous forms operate differently across linguistic and ideological contexts. In the

Abbasid milieu, animal allegory enables an indirect critique under conditions in which misjudged speech could provoke punishment. In Wood's adaptation, the same humour is reshaped to align with contemporary expectations, shifting responsibility for political meaning away from narrators and characters and onto interpretation by a protected audience. Translation thus emerges not as a neutral conduit but as a site where humour survives by changing form.

I centre Ramsay Wood's *Kalila and Dimna: Fables of Friendship and Betrayal* as the primary English version for analysis because it is the most widely circulated contemporary Anglophone adaptation, openly embracing narrative fluency and modern resonance. Wood does not pursue strict philological fidelity; instead, he prioritizes literary qualities by expanding dialogue, sharpening pacing, and amplifying comic timing. For a study concerned with how humour shifts across historical and cultural frameworks, this stylistic self-awareness makes his version especially revealing. Wood's prose reframes Ibn al-Muqaffa's text within modern English literary conventions, where clarity and immediacy take precedence over calibrated

⁵ Wood describes his version as a "retelling" rather than a philological translation, a distinction that informs this thesis's analysis of ideological mediation rather than textual fidelity.

ambiguity. I therefore approach his adaptation as more than a simple interpretive intervention. Emerging within a late-modern Anglophone literary marketplace shaped by postcolonial publishing circuits and the circulation of “global” folklore as narrative entertainment, Wood’s *Kalila and Dimna* operates under markedly different conditions from those that structured Abbasid courtly counsel.

My study compares Ramsay Wood’s English adaptation with my direct translations of selected passages from the Arabic text. As a native Arabic speaker trained in literary analysis, I am attentive to the lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical features that bear directly on the politics of indirection. These translations are not offered as definitive alternatives, but rather as analytic tools that allow closer attention to how meaning is structured in the Arabic prose.

The thesis also focuses primarily on “The Lion and the Hare” because the episode condenses the political logic of the larger work into a single, sharply structured encounter between sovereign force and rhetorical agility. Unlike the extended intrigue of “The Lion and the Ox,” this fable stages the mechanics of counsel, calculated lateness, and provocation within a compact narrative arc. The hare’s deliberate delay in presenting himself to the lion is not incidental; it creates the conditions for storytelling, redirects sovereign anger, and exposes the king’s volatility. Therefore, its formal economy provides a concentrated site for examining how humorous indirection operates both as a strategy of survival and as a critique of sovereign impulsiveness.

Once translation is understood as a shift in the conditions that authorize humour, a larger tension comes into view. At the centre of this analysis lies a paradox: authoritarian systems attempt to suppress disagreement, yet humour survives by altering how it speaks. Rather than

confronting power directly, it moves into allegory and narrative displacement. In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Henri Bergson argues that laughter exposes rigidity within social systems (9). However, when humour is translated, the social context that enables it to reveal such rigidity may shift. Lawrence Venuti's critique of domestication in *The Translator's Invisibility* explains this difference. Venuti shows how translations that minimize cultural difference for target audiences can also soften or redirect humour's critical edge, accommodating readers at the expense of the political tensions that originally animated the joke (19). As I will show, in Wood's version, political humour does not disappear; it becomes more overtly theatrical and less structurally risky.

Methodologically, this study combines comparative close reading, historical contextualization, and theoretical analysis. Reading the Arabic and English versions together foregrounds the mechanisms through which humour is preserved or reshaped as it moves across languages and periods. Engaging humour theory, translation studies, postcolonial critique, and Arabic literary history, the thesis treats *Kalila wa Dimna* not as a static repository of moral instruction, but as a dynamic site where questions of power, speech, and survival remain in play.

1. Allegory and the Management of Risk: How to Criticize a King (Indirectly)

The Court as Listening Chamber

While I was writing this thesis, Jimmy Kimmel briefly joined the growing roster of public figures declared “cancelled” for a joke that failed to land. His absence was short-lived: viewers rallied, and his show returned within days. In his opening monologue, Kimmel remarked, “Our leader celebrates Americans losing their livelihoods because he cannot take a joke” (“Everything Jimmy Kimmel Said”). I invoke this episode not to equate contemporary media controversy with premodern censorship; the stakes are vastly different. However, it does foreground a recurring political tension: those who wield power rarely welcome ridicule, and yet -- despite and because of its threat to power -- ridicule persists as a means of testing authority. The Abbasid court predated Trump’s United States by centuries and doled out consequences far more severe, but its sensitivity to speech was comparable in many respects.

This chapter argues that the humour in *Kalila wa Dimna* is structured by Ibn al-

Muqaffa' 's proximity to sovereign rulers who feared and suppressed any form of critique. In the early Abbasid milieu, risky speech carried grave consequences. Biographers associate alMuqaffa' 's execution with his involvement in politically charged counsel and writings that challenged caliphal authority⁶. He wrote within a court that combined extraordinary cultural ambition with acute political insecurity. On the one hand, early Abbasid rulers sought to legitimize their dynasty by transforming Baghdad into a cosmopolitan centre of learning,

sponsoring translations from Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit into Arabic, and cultivating a literary culture that rivalled that of the Mediterranean world (Crone 18). This ambition helped inaugurate what later historians describe as the translation movement, consolidating Arabic as a dominant language of scholarship.

On the other hand, however, beneath this flourishing exterior, the regime governed by way of a fragile and volatile coalition. Having only recently overthrown the Umayyads, the Abbasids ruled over Arab elites, Persian converts, and competing religious factions whose loyalties remained uncertain and frequently contested (Crone 130). Caliphs governed amid factional suspicion, aware that stories, poems, and fables could circulate beyond the court and shape political perception (Crone 130). Informants, rival advisers, and shifting alliances meant that speech delivered in counsel could be weaponized. Ibn al-Muqaffa' entered this environment

⁶ Accounts of Ibn al-Muqaffa' 's execution vary, and scholars continue to debate the precise causes and circumstances of his death. See Crone, Gutas, and de Blois.

as a court intellectual whose literary brilliance was both celebrated and feared, drawing constant scrutiny (Crone 130).

Patricia Crone observes that the Abbasid revolution succeeded not merely through military force but through ideas—many of which appeared dangerously unruly to those in power: “Throughout the first century of their caliphate, the Abbasids were plagued by problems caused by the Ghulat⁷ in the revolutionary armies” (94). The Abbasids mobilized large numbers of Iranian converts whose religious vocabularies drew on Zoroastrian, Manichaean, and Buddhist traditions. Once incorporated into Islam, these groups often redirected their fervour

toward imams imagined as quasi-divine figures, pledging forms of loyalty that ignored doctrinal boundaries and unsettled caliphal authority (Crone 94).

Alarmed by such excesses, Ibn al-Muqaffa⁸ famously likened reliance on these volatile allegiances to “riding on a lion” (Crone 94). The image resonates uncannily with *Kalila wa Dimna*, for to ride a lion is to project mastery while depending on a force that can neither be controlled nor safely abandoned. This anecdote and the fable share the same imaginative grammar: sovereignty appears powerful yet unstable, and proximity to it always entails danger.

Crone further notes that the caliph’s authority attracted followers whose exaggerated reverence—treating the imam as one who could “make the mountains move” (94)—also posed a

⁷ *Ghulat* refers to groups characterized by theological excess, particularly the attribution of divine qualities to human figures; *ghulūw* denotes such excess more broadly.

political threat. *Kalila wa Dimna* dramatizes this logic through the lion's unstable sovereignty. The animals approach him with ritualized deference, proposing their bargain with carefully measured language: “فلك علينا في كل يوم دابة يرسل بها إليك في وقت غذائك” (“You shall have from us, each day, a beast sent to you at the hour of your meal”). The phrasing converts arbitrary violence into a scheduled obligation. A misjudged phrase could provoke rage. When the hare finally appears, the narrative emphasizes the lion's volatility: “فغضب وقام من مكانته” (“He became angry and rose from his place”). The hare survives by fabricating the existence of a rival lion and recounting the encounter in a way that deliberately inflames the king's instinctive rage, redirecting his violence toward an imagined threat. Both Crone's historical account and the fable imagine sovereignty as a force that demands constant negotiation—a power whose magnitude produces its own fragility.

Recognizing the dangers of such instability, Ibn al-Muqaffa' proposed a characteristically sober remedy. He urged the caliph to impose a catechism purged of *ghulūw* (excess), to be memorized by military leaders as a safeguard against doctrinal and political fragmentation (Crone 130). As Crone emphasizes, the stakes extended beyond theological disagreement to the nature of authority itself. The Abbasids claimed an indivisible mandate of political and religious

obedience, yet Shi'ite⁸ extremism and Kharijite⁹ radicalism repeatedly challenged that claim from opposing directions (130).

Against this backdrop of surveillance and suspicion, Ibn al-Muqaffa' opens his book with narrative deferral: “...زعموا أن أسداً”—“They say that a lion...” From the first verb, *za'amū* (“they say” or “they allege”), the text deflects authorial responsibility to an unnamed chain of voices. Under conditions in which direct counsel could prove dangerous, even a fictional narrative must be strategic. To understand how this strategy works, we must notice how al-Muqaffa' characterizes sovereign power before a word is spoken.

⁸ “Shi'ite extremism” refers here to movements that elevated the Imam to divinely sanctioned or salvific status in ways that exceeded Abbasid political theology.

⁹ The Kharijites were an early Islamic sect that rejected centralized authority and maintained that leadership depended strictly on moral and doctrinal purity rather than lineage.

Opening a Dangerous Narrative: Staging Authority in Arabic and English

The Arabic version of “The Lion and the Hare” opens with a simple image “ زعموا أن أسدا “ ك ان في أرضٍ كثيرة المياه والعشب، وكان في تلك الأرض من الوحوش في سعة الماء والمرعى شيء كثير، إلا أنه لم يكن ينفعها ذلك لِحَوْفهم من الأسد.” (They say that a lion once lived in a land rich with water and grass. In that land, many wild animals were enjoying abundant water and pasture. However, none of them could truly benefit from it because they all feared the lion.) Ramsay Wood’s English adaptation begins instead: “Various animals once lived in a delightful forest surrounded by many pleasant meadows. Bloody kills by a fierce and hungry lion, however, continually shattered the peace.”

From the outset, the two openings construct distinct narrative worlds. Ibn al-Muqaffa’s decision to open with *za‘amū*—“they say”—situates the tale within the *adab* tradition, where narrators circulate knowledge through chains of oral and collective transmission rather than individual authors and readers (Gruendler 5). In *The Rise of the Arabic Book*, Beatrice Gruendler explains that classical Arabic prose developed within a book culture that valued mediation and layered address; readers did not simply “grow up with” this idiom but learned it through rhetorical training and interpretive discipline (5). The phrase “they say” prevents the narrative from being attributed to a single person and instead embeds it in a collective voice, diffusing responsibility rather than concentrating it.

By reducing the layered narrative framing of the Arabic text and presenting the episode through more direct narration, Wood increases the legibility of its source and diminishes the plausible deniability of the collective. Writing for a modern Anglophone readership that encounters the fable as world literature rather than as courtly counsel, Wood operates within a literary marketplace that privileges narrative clarity and psychological immediacy. In a context

where writers do not fear severe corporal punishments for political critique, humour need not conceal itself. The comic exposure of sovereign paranoia persists, but the conditions that once made that exposure dangerous no longer apply. What in the Arabic text operated as protective distance becomes, in English, descriptive clarity.

The Arabic text presents the story as something transmitted and retold; Wood frames it as a self-contained narrative world available for observation. This shift alters how authority is staged. The lion's power appears immediately visible and emotionally excessive, which makes it easier to ridicule. Sovereignty becomes something that can be interpreted and judged from a distance rather than navigated. Wood's translation here does not eliminate the lion's power; rather, it shifts the reader's relationship to it from participant to spectator. By removing the layered and diffuse attribution of Ibn al-Muqaffa's version, Wood reduces the plausible deniability that shielded critique in a court culture where speech could attract scrutiny or punishment.

This reframing alters how readers encounter and interpret power. In Ibn al-Muqaffa's version, the animals inhabit a land "rich with water and grass," yet they cannot benefit (*yanfa'u*) from it "for fear of the lion." The verb *nafa'a*¹⁰—to profit, to derive use—carries economic and ethical resonance. The narrative does not describe destruction; it describes blocked utility. Resources exist, but fear prevents their use. Authority here governs by structuring access rather

¹⁰ The root *n-f-ʿ* denotes benefit, usefulness, or profit, and frequently appears in ethical and economic registers in classical Arabic prose.

than by staging constant violence. In *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, Josef W. Meri notes that *Kalila wa Dimna* entered Arabic as a “mirror of princes,” composed in the

refined prose of Abbasid secretarial culture (Meri 432-433)¹¹. The genre did not simply offer moral tales; it trained rulers in the ethics and mechanics of governance. In his introduction, Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ explicitly outlines the work’s fourfold purpose: to engage youth through fable, to delight princes, to circulate among scribes and painters, and to instruct philosophers in its wisdom (Meri 432–33). Read within this advisory tradition, the opening does more than describe a cruel lion. It stages a political lesson. The problem is not episodic violence but ineffective governance. Abundance exists, yet the people’s fear of their ruler renders this abundance unusable. Tyranny does not eliminate resources; it reorganizes access to them.

Wood’s adaptation reframes this logic. He replaces benefit with “peace” and ambient fear with “bloody kills,” and he represents authoritarianism not as a systemic but as a moral disturbance. Violence now appears as spectacle rather than as a structuring condition of everyday life. The fable thus centers on individual cruelty disrupting harmony instead of on the political

¹¹ Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ appended his own introduction to *Kalila wa-Dimna*, emphasizing its instructional purpose (Kristó-Nagy 13). He begins with an epistle to the ruler, in the tradition of the *Mirror for Princes*, effectively presenting the reigning sovereign as the embodiment of ideal kingship. Because a full examination of this political framing would require sustained analysis of Abbasid court ideology and panegyric discourse, I do not pursue it in this thesis.

organization of social life. Where Ibn al-Muqaffa' embeds critique in the texture of the world, Wood translates it into a narrative event. This translation increases the legibility of the situation but confines the critique to the familiar mechanics of a single plot.

The two openings also presume different audiences and different relations to risk. Ibn alMuqaffa' wrote within an Abbasid court culture marked by factional instability and ideological

scrutiny. As Patricia Crone notes, caliphal authority faced recurrent challenges from sectarian movements and competing claims to religious legitimacy (94). In such an environment, speech could not be politically neutral. Indirect address and narrative mediation functioned less as stylistic ornaments than as practical safeguards within a volatile system of patronage and surveillance. The phrase "they say" performs strategic self-effacement, allowing critique to circulate without attaching itself to a singular, punishable speaker.

Wood addresses an Anglophone audience who encounters the tale as global folklore rather than as political counsel. By removing narrative distance, Wood transforms allegory into entertainment. Readers are invited to identify, dramatize, and mock authoritarian power directly. In Lawrence Venuti's terms, such translation practices aim "to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar" (19). These translation practices also risk contributing to what Venuti calls an "insidious domestication of foreign texts," rewriting them to fit the expectations of transparent discourse that prevail among many English speakers (20–21). In this process, the fable's original conditions of danger recede.

Across both openings, translation mediates the tension between allegory and moralism, between humour as a strategy of survival and humour as a vehicle of instruction. In Ibn

alMuqaffa's version, tyranny does not erupt in isolated acts of cruelty; it reorganizes everyday life, converting abundance into deprivation and solidarity into coerced consent. Wood reframes this logic through the idiom of order and reason, recasting its political charge. A fable about fear as a condition of governance becomes a story about mismanagement and correction.

In the Arabic text, humour does not appear as open defiance. From its opening gesture of narrative mediation, the story establishes a distance between the statement and the speaker. That distance persists in the hare's strategy: she never accuses the lion directly but recounts an encounter with a rival, allowing insult and provocation to surface through reported speech. The critique remains embedded within the tale itself, circulating through narration rather than attaching itself to a single, accountable voice.

In Wood's adaptation, the humour is more direct. The narrator openly describes the lion's violence and expands the dialogue to highlight absurdity. Readers encounter authority as something visible and interpretable rather than as something to be navigated cautiously. The shift does not eliminate humour, but it changes its position: what in the Arabic text depends on displacement and timing becomes, in English, explicit characterization. Translation thus reshapes the legal and cultural conditions under which it is voiced.

A Secretary Between Worlds: Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ as Mediator

Born Rōzbeh in Fars to a Zoroastrian family, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ entered the Islamic political world through conversion rather than inheritance (Meri 346). His family name, al-Muqaffaʿ (“the shrivel-handed”), preserved the memory of punishment inflicted on his father, a Sasanian tax official disciplined under the Umayyads (Meri 346). When Rōzbeh converted to Islam—facilitating his advancement within the emerging Abbasid order—he adopted the name ʿAbd Allāh, marking his formal entry into Muslim political life¹². The figure who emerged from this transformation occupied a structurally liminal position: Persian by heritage, Muslim by affiliation, and Abbasid by employment.

Josef Meri notes that Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ became “a prolific translator and the author of original works on ethics and statecraft,” drawing on his training in Pahlavi to access Sasanian royal histories and advice literature (346). This background positioned him uniquely within the Abbasid court. He stood at the intersection of traditions—Sanskrit statecraft refracted through Persian literary culture and rendered into refined Arabic prose. His translation of *Kalila wa Dimna* from Pahlavi into Arabic was not merely a literary transmission; it was cultural mediation within a court that was negotiating its own legitimacy.

That mediation becomes visible in the diction of the fable itself. When the animals negotiate with the lion, they speak in a vocabulary of governance: “وقد رأينا لك رأيا فيه صلاحٌ لك... وأمّلتنا” (We have devised for you a plan that contains rectitude [*ṣalāḥ*] for you and security

¹² The name “ʿAbd Allāh” translates directly to “the follower of God” and is widely used in Islam.

[āmn] for us...). The terms *ṣalāh* (rectitude, proper order) and *āmn* (security) belong to the semantic

field of political theory and administrative discourse (Crone 149–52). The animals do not plead; they propose terms. Their offer converts arbitrary violence into regulated tribute. The scene models the logic of advisory literature: how to survive power by recalibrating it rather than confronting it directly. Within a “mirror for princes” tradition, such language instructs rulers by dramatizing the consequences of misrule and the necessity of measured governance (Crone 149–52).

Wood’s English retelling transforms this register into satire: “We would like to propose the alternative concept of regulated sacrifice [...]” Here, the lexicon shifts from political prudence to procedural irony. What appears in the Arabic text as collective calculation becomes, in Wood’s rendering, the articulation of an “alternative concept.” Both versions stage regulated sacrifice, yet Ibn al-Muqaffa’s diction remains embedded in the idiom of Abbasid statecraft rather than refracted through modern bureaucratic parody.

This difference reflects Ibn al-Muqaffa’s own precarious positioning. As a bilingual secretary operating within a court marked by factional volatility, he inhabited a world where counsel and danger were never fully separable. Later accounts associate his execution with politically sensitive advice that angered the caliph al-Manṣūr. Whether apocryphal or not, these narratives underscore the risks attached to proximity and speech. *Kalila wa Dimna* emerges from this atmosphere. Animal allegory enables indirection: rulers can recognize themselves without being directly named.

In this context, translation functioned as political mediation. By bringing *Kalila wa Dimna* into Arabic, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ helped integrate non-Arabic traditions of statecraft into Abbasid courtly discourse (Gruendler 6). The translation refined inherited materials into polished Arabic prose suited to secretarial culture while preserving their capacity to question how rulers exercise authority. The text legitimizes governance even as it exposes its fragility.

Kalila wa Dimna emerges from a translation culture that did not merely transmit knowledge but recalibrated it for courtly use. The text offers rulers exemplary conduct in the form of animal counsel, yet the very structure of that counsel reveals how easily authority can become unstable, reactive, or self-deceived. It is within this charged environment that the Abbasid concept of *adab*¹³ takes shape—a term that encompasses literary discipline and political tact (Meri 66). *Adab* governed not only what could be said but also how and when it could be said. It demanded eloquence without insolence, instruction without accusation. For a writer such as Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, whose prose addressed rulers indirectly through fable, this discipline was protective. To write within *adab* was to calculate tone, framing, and implication with care, aware that misjudged candour could carry consequences. Attending to this courtly constraint explains the formal pressures shaping the text’s indirection. It prepares us to see how political critique survives by adjusting itself to the limits imposed upon speech.

¹³ In Arabic, *adab* is often translated as “etiquette,” yet in its Abbasid literary context, the term designates a broader intellectual tradition encompassing ethical formation, cultivated speech, and courtly instruction.

Indirect Speech as Political Practice: Risk, Surveillance, and Abbasid *Adab*

If *adab* names the ethical and cultural discipline of Abbasid literary life, it also names the conditions that made speech dangerous. Proximity to the caliph promised patronage and advancement, but it also exposed writers to scrutiny. A sentence offered as counsel could be read as an accusation; a witty remark could be interpreted as defiance. Under such conditions, direct political critique carried material risk—loss of position, imprisonment, or death.

Writers, therefore, relied on indirection. Techniques such as *ta 'rīd* (allusive hinting), *kināya* (circumlocution), and allegorical displacement allowed criticism to circulate without fastening it to a single, punishable voice.¹⁴ Instead of naming a ruler, the story named a lion. Instead of issuing an accusation, it narrated a misjudgment. By embedding critique within animals, a text interrupts the immediate identification of speaker and statement. Responsibility is dispersed across narrative layers. In Abbasid court culture, humour and allegory were not

¹⁴ *Ta 'rīd* refers to indirect insinuation or oblique reference; *kināya* denotes allusive or metonymic expression in which meaning is conveyed through substitution, displacement, and indirection. For discussions of these concepts in Arabic poetics and *adab* culture, see Suzanne Stetkevych, Beatrice Gruendler, and Stefan Sperl.

decorative devices added to critique after the fact. They were structural mechanisms that enabled critique to appear at all.

Therefore to treat the humour of *Kalila wa Dimna* as merely stylistic misses what its form accomplishes. Under Abbasid rule, indirect speech was not a matter of aesthetic preference but a practical necessity. Writers depended on patronage, faced censorship, and understood that explicit rebuke of a sovereign could end a career—or a life. *Kalila wa Dimna* builds indirection

into its architecture. It speaks through animals. It nests stories within stories. It attributes claims to unnamed narrators. Each of these devices weakens the link between political observation and an identifiable author. By separating critique from a clearly accountable speaker, the text lowers the immediate risk of reprisal while still making patterns of rule visible.

Humour in *Kalila wa Dimna* is not only politically cautious; it is formally disciplined. The fables do not announce revolt but distribute critique through narrative substitution: sovereign instability appears as a lion's rage and courtly manipulation as a jackal's flattery. The opening phrase displaces authorial ownership, attributing the story to an unspecified chain of transmitters and thereby diffusing responsibility before the narrative unfolds. This gesture reflects a broader literary culture in which attribution and rhetorical control were central to prose composition. As Beatrice Gruendler observes, classical Arabic prose was not simply spoken language set down in writing but a cultivated medium acquired through sustained study and training (5). Writers were educated to calibrate tone, implication, and address with precision. In such a system, indirection was not merely defensive; it was a mark of stylistic competence. The

fable's protective distance thus emerges from a literary culture that valued controlled expression as a sign of mastery.

Nowhere were these constraints more acute than in the Abbasid chancery, where administrators prized *al-balāgha wa-ḥusn al-kitāba*—eloquence and stylistic polish—yet rhetorical distinction increased visibility, and visibility carried risk (Meri 66). Proximity to the ruler meant that a phrase could be read as counsel, criticism, or insolence, depending on who was listening. Ibn al-Muqaffa' 's career unfolded within this atmosphere of interpretive danger. When, in “The Lion and the Hare,” the animals formalize their agreement—“فلك علينا في كل يومدابة يرسل بها إليك في وقت غذائك” (“Then you shall have from us, each day, a beast sent to you at the hour of your meal”)—the language is contractual and almost bureaucratic. The animals do not plead; they stipulate terms. The syntax mirrors administrative prose, transforming desperation into regulated exchange. Even the submission is framed in disciplined language.

The phrase *fī waqt ghadā`ik* (“at the time of your meal”) schedules violence. Terror becomes regulated tribute. Language administers domination without naming it as such—the compact mirrors bureaucratic order: predictable, contractual, contained. Indirection does not erase violence; it reframes it in a form that can be spoken.

The stakes of misjudged speech were not theoretical. Meri recounts that when Ibn alMuqaffa' drafted a letter urging clemency toward a rebellious relative of the caliph al-Manṣūr, the caliph read its phrasing as insolent. The governor of Basra subsequently ordered Ibn alMuqaffa' 's execution (Meri 346). Whether embellished in later accounts or not, the episode reflects a broader condition of Abbasid court life: rhetorical dexterity could be reclassified as defiance. Speech without a narrative cover exposed its author directly. The contrast with the

fable is instructive. In the story, the hare survives because she¹⁵ introduces a fictional rival lion, redirecting sovereign rage toward an image of it. In life, when indirection failed or proved insufficient, speech became lethal.

The linguistic culture that sustained such strategies required trained readers. Beatrice Gruendler explains that a defining feature of classical Arabic was that “no one grew up with it”; it was “a formal idiom to be acquired through study” (5). The Abbasid polity fostered a cosmopolitan environment in which speakers of Aramaic, Persian, Greek, and Romance

languages participated alongside users of numerous Arabic dialects, producing, as Gruendler describes, a situation of “multiglossia” layered beneath the learned ‘*arabiyya*’¹⁶ (5). Literary prose, therefore, circulated within a stratified linguistic order: it was not the spontaneous record of speech but a cultivated register requiring education to produce and to interpret. This environment trained readers to attend to nuance. Meaning often resided in implication rather than declaration, and indirection did not obstruct understanding but activated it.

The rapid expansion of book culture further shaped this interpretive community. Abbasid Baghdad, Hugh Kennedy notes, may have been the first place where an author could earn a living “by writing books to be sold in the market to a literate public” rather than relying solely on patronage (qtd. in Gruendler 6). The standardizing force of the ‘*arabiyya*’ thus levelled

¹⁵ I note here that in the Arabic text, the hare is female, whereas in Wood’s translation, the hare is rendered as male.

¹⁶ ‘*arabiyya*’ translates to “Arabic.”

linguistic access while broadening authorship, extending reading beyond the ruling elite to an emerging urban sub-elite (Gruendler 6). Within such a marketplace of disciplined prose, rhetorical control was not optional. Writers addressed a readership trained to detect allusion, displacement, and layered address—competencies that made indirection legible rather than opaque.

Form and politics thus cannot be separated. As Gruendler notes, *Kalila wa-Dimna* entered Arabic literature as a “redacted book,” marked by a preface, subdivision into chapters, and internal cross-references—features associated with deliberate literary design (Gruendler 156). Its intricate structure of embedded sub-tales and dispersed wisdom sayings further signalled formal sophistication (Gruendler 156). However, this architecture did not guarantee stability: despite its carefully constructed format, the work “was not preserved as a whole” but fragmented in its

ninth- and tenth-century transmission (Gruendler 156). Form alone could not secure textual integrity. Within this context, Ibn al-Muqaffa’s prose became a model for secretaries precisely because of its “elegant and limpid” clarity (Gruendler 156). That clarity, however, was not neutral transparency. In a courtly environment attuned to implication, lucidity combined with allegory allowed politically charged insight to circulate under the cover of exemplary prose.

That calculation is visible in the grammar itself: when the animals propose tribute, the phrasing avoids any accusation of tyranny; it speaks in terms of *ṣalāh* (rectitude) and *āmn* (security), presenting submission as mutual benefit rather than coercion. The lion is never named as unjust. Instead, injustice is implied through its consequences. The language performs compliance while exposing misrule when this layered structure of indirection is later translated

into contexts where sovereign reprisal no longer governs literary production, its protective dimension risks receding from view, leaving only the appearance of stylistic elegance without its original political urgency.

In *Kalila wa Dimna*, humour does not dilute criticism; it determines how criticism can be spoken. The fable does not name an unjust ruler. It stages a lion whose rage exposes the consequences of misrule. It does not accuse; it narrates. By placing judgment in the mouths of animals and embedding rebuke within reported speech, the text separates political observation from a single, exposed author. What might appear indirect is, in this context, deliberate control over who speaks, how, and at what moment.

With that framework established, the next chapter turns to the mechanics of the fable itself. It examines how the hare structures delay, how she introduces the rival lion, and how the timing of insult and anger produces the lion's self-destruction.

2. "The Lion and the Hare:" Wit as Survival

Comic Asymmetry: The Narrative Structure of *Kalila wa Dimna*

In the Arabic *Kalila wa Dimna*, "The Lion and the Hare" does not circulate as a freestanding fable. It is embedded within "The Lion and the Ox," the longest and structurally dominant narrative in the collection. As István T. Kristó-Nagy notes, this opening chapter establishes the text's central political concern: the danger of proximity to power and the strategies by which court favour is pursued and defended (9). The narrative follows Dimna, an ambitious jackal who seeks to reshape the lion's judgment through calculated speech, despite Kalila's repeated warnings about the risks of intervention.

The placement of “The Lion and the Hare” within this larger narrative is not incidental. Dimna recounts the tale in order to justify his own interference in the sovereign’s affairs. The hare’s story is therefore not a neutral moral anecdote; it is introduced as an argumentative precedent. Dimna deploys it to demonstrate that intelligence can redirect brute force and that speech can govern strength. The tale functions rhetorically: it models an intervention that Dimna himself intends to practice.

This positioning complicates any simple moral interpretation of “The Lion and the Hare.” On its surface, the hare’s success appears to endorse cunning. She does not challenge the lion’s authority directly; she invents a rival who has insulted it. The lion’s rage shifts from hunger to humiliation, and it is this imagined insult—not physical confrontation—that drives him toward the well. The inversion is clean: perception is manipulated, authority misreads, and power collapses. Within the embedded tale, the stratagem works.

However, the larger narrative unsettles this apparent endorsement. Dimna’s use of precedent is morally ambiguous. He cites the hare not to preserve communal survival, but to rationalize his own ascent at court. The same principle—speech redirecting power—enables both liberation and destruction. The embedded tale authorizes manipulation in one context (survival under tyranny) while the frame narrative demonstrates its danger in another (ambition within court politics). The structure does not simply celebrate cunning; it stages its double edge.

This ambiguity shapes how we interpret the hare’s success. Within her own episode, she frees the animals by redirecting sovereign perception. The story appears to reward intelligence over violence. However, because the tale is nested within Dimna’s trajectory—one that culminates in accusation, exposure, and execution—her success cannot be read as an

uncomplicated triumph. The embedding ironizes the lesson without negating it. Intelligence can dismantle brute authority; it can also entangle the speaker in lethal politics. The structure refuses to let the fable settle into moral clarity.

This structural tension produces what Simon Critchley calls “comic asymmetry.” The hare is physically negligible, politically disposable, and yet the only figure capable of strategic recalibration. Simon Critchley claims that “humour is a paradoxical form of speech and action that defeats our expectations, producing laughter with its unexpected verbal inversions, contortions and explosions” (Critchley 19). The hare’s success depends precisely on this inversion. The joke does not begin in clever dialogue but in ontology. The reader is asked to entertain the absurdity of the hare as a political agent at all. In a world structured by predatory sovereignty, the hare’s survival seems improbable; her capacity to redirect sovereign action is almost inconceivable.

The Arabic and English versions negotiate this asymmetry through distinct structural strategies. Their divergence lies in how they expose sovereign rigidity—and thus in how they shape the conditions under which laughter becomes possible. The lion, by contrast, appears absolute but responds mechanically. His reaction is immediate—he “became angry and rose from his place.” He does not assess plausibility; he reacts to perceived insult. In Bergsonian terms, he becomes comic because his authority functions through rigidity. Rigidity becomes fully comic when it no longer depends on accident but “extracts by natural processes, from its own store, an inexhaustible series of opportunities for externally revealing its presence,” like “a mind always thinking of what it has just done and never of what it is doing” (Bergson 51).

However, the episode's embedding prevents the comic inversion from resolving the political problem. In Wood's English retelling, where "The Lion and the Hare" appears as an independent fable, the asymmetry resolves within the episode itself. The lion dies; the trick succeeds; the arc concludes. The imbalance between predator and prey remains a narrative device culminating in reversal.

In the Arabic text, however, asymmetry reverberates beyond the episode. The imbalance between the lion and the hare mirrors that between the ruler and the counsellor. When Dimna later manipulates the lion's perception in "The Lion and the Ox," the structural parallel becomes clear: he attempts to do politically what the hare did narratively. The embedded tale thus foreshadows his own intervention. The difference is not in technique but in position. The hare acts under immediate threat; Dimna acts from ambition. The structure does not condemn cunning outright, but it distinguishes between survival and opportunism.

The frame narrative prevents readers from abstracting the hare's stratagem into universal political advice. Instead, it situates manipulation within a hierarchy governed by proximity to power and by consequence. Wit can redirect authority, but it does not abolish it. Speech may mislead a sovereign once, but it does not neutralize the system that makes such speech dangerous.

Wood's structural revision alters this dynamic. By extracting the tale from Dimna's rise and fall, the adaptation preserves the visible contrast between brute force and cleverness but removes the afterlife of risk. The lion's defeat does not echo forward into court suspicion or punishment. The inversion becomes complete and self-contained. What in the Arabic text

operates as precedent within an ongoing political drama becomes, in English, a satisfying resolution.

The difference between the two is not just political but also broadly ethical. In the Arabic text, manipulation is shown to be effective and perilous. In Wood's version, it is effective and contained. The comic asymmetry in the Arabic text unsettles hierarchy without dissolving it; in Wood's adaptation, it culminates in a sense of closure.

For this reason, the structure of *Kalīla wa Dimna* matters. The embedding of "The Lion and the Hare" within Dimna's political manoeuvring ensures that humorous rhetoric remains tethered to its consequences. The hare's stratagem succeeds, but the authoritarian political logic returns under altered conditions. The text neither wholly authorizes nor wholly condemns manipulation. It stages it, tests it, and then shows what happens when the same technique is deployed closer to the power source.

With that structural framework clarified, the next section turns to the mechanics of the episode itself: how delay is introduced, how insult is framed through reported speech, and how timing transforms perception into fatal action.

Sovereign Speech: Why Does Wood's Lion Talk Too Much?

"The Lion and the Hare" is a fable about sovereignty and how sovereignty speaks. The lion's authority is enacted through his voice: his injunctions, threats, questions, and oaths. In both versions, the lion's speech establishes his place at the top of the hierarchy before any physical action occurs. He does not explain himself; he demands an explanation. When the hare arrives late, he erupts—"Who are you?"—demanding and accusing in a single outburst. His speech is immediate, unqualified, and unaccountable. He commands; others respond. However,

the two versions construct different kinds of rulers: the Arabic lion is plausible as a terrifying caliphal analogue; Wood's lion is irritable and increasingly comic. Reading their speeches side by side registers the difference between authority under real political risk and authority reimagined as moral entertainment.

In the Arabic text, the lion speaks in a register that aligns him with the idiom of Abbasid governance. When the hare finally appears, having deliberately delayed her arrival, the lion's first reaction is not a joke but a sharp interrogation: “ثم تقدمت إليه وحدها رويدا ، وقد جاع؛ فغضب وقام ” (Then she came forward to him alone, slowly, and he had grown hungry; so he became angry and rose from his place toward her. He said to her, “From where have you come?”) The lion “rises from his place,” a gesture that in courtly prose often signals a shift from repose to judgment or action. The verb *ghadiba* (“he became angry”) precedes the direct speech, so that the question carries the weight of already-activated rage. The lion immediately interrogates, demanding an account.

To situate this scene historically, the lion's mode of address reflects broader Abbasid models of authority. As Patricia Crone observes, caliphal rule depended less on open deliberation than on decisive vigilance: legitimacy rested on the ruler's ability to respond quickly, eliminate uncertainty, and transform information into command (Crone 97). Within such a framework, speech functioned as an instrument of action rather than a means of discussion. A sovereign's words were expected to be brief and enforceable. An extended explanation or visible hesitation risked signalling weakness. The lion's sharp, economical demand—“From where have you come?”—thus mirrors a political culture in which authority was affirmed through prompt judgment rather than conversational exchange.

This environment also clarifies the conditions under which humour could operate. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin analyzes medieval and Renaissance European culture, distinguishing between official, ecclesiastical seriousness and the sanctioned space of carnival laughter. In that context, he argues that “merely amusing, meaningless, and harmless laughter was also tolerated, but the serious had to remain serious, that is, dull and monotonous” (Bakhtin 51). Laughter could exist, but only insofar as it was contained within a recognized festive sphere that did not permanently unsettle institutional authority. Carnival, in Bakhtin’s formulation, temporarily inverts hierarchy; it degrades the high and elevates the low, but only within a bounded festive space—when the carnival ends, the serious order returns (51).

However, the Abbasid court was not a European carnival square. It was a space defined by physical proximity to sovereign authority, where speech circulated among advisers, courtiers, and rivals under the possibility of punishment. In that environment, light entertainment—jokes that amused without implicating authority—posed little threat. Humour that exposed the volatility or insecurity of rule, by contrast, risked sanction. The hare’s strategy, therefore, cannot resemble the public, collective inversions of carnival laughter that Bakhtin describes. She does not mock the lion before a crowd or stage a temporary reversal of hierarchy. Instead, she speaks alone, in private proximity to power, redirecting the lion’s anger without openly challenging his authority. Her speech is quieter, more exacting. It operates through indirection. Instead, the hare practices what Lisa Bhungalia describes as refusal: a gesture that does not confront authority directly but disavows its authorizing force (388). In “A Liminal Territory: Gaza, Executive Discretion, and Sanctions Turned Humanitarian,” Bhungalia explains that to “laugh or smile in

the face of power is not necessarily an expression of opposition; it is a refusal to recognize the authoritative figure itself” (388).

Interestingly, Bhungalia opens her essay with a line from Mikhail Bakhtin: “Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter” (*Rabelais and His World*). However, the political implications of that claim shift across theoretical contexts. For Bakhtin, carnival laughter temporarily degrades and uncrowns authority, suspending hierarchy in a collective spectacle of inversion. Even in its subversive energy, however, carnival remains cyclical; the suspension ends, and the order it mocked resumes. Laughter releases pressure. It lowers the high, but the hierarchy reconstitutes itself.

Bhungalia complicates this containment. Rather than treating laughter as a temporary inversion of hierarchy, she reads it as a refusal to affirm authority. Power depends on being acknowledged—on subjects addressing the ruler as sovereign, repeating his titles, and behaving as though his authority is natural and unquestionable. Refusal interrupts that pattern. It withholds the recognition that power requires in order to appear stable. In this sense, laughter does not simply relieve tension within an existing order; it disrupts the repeated gestures that make that order seem inevitable. It exposes as absurd what has been treated as unquestionable.

This distinction sharpens the hare's actions. She does not taunt the lion, nor does she invite the other animals to laugh at him. There is no spectacle, no public humiliation, no temporary lowering of rank. Her intervention takes place entirely within the court's logic. She arrives late, speaks deferentially, and recounts what has happened as if she were merely reporting an incident.

The decisive move is narrative. The hare introduces a second lion. In a forest governed by a single sovereign, the mere suggestion that there is another ruler is disruptive. The hare does not confront the lion with this suggestion directly. Instead, she tells him about a recent encounter:

فتعنى أسد في بعض تلك الطريق، فأخذها مني، وقال
أنا أولى بهذه الأرض وما فيها من الوحش. فقلت: إن هذا غذاء الملك أرسلني به
الوحش إليه، فلا تعتصنه، فسبك وشتمك، فأقبلت مسرعة لأخبرك.

(Then a lion confronted me along the road, seized him from me, and said, “I have a greater claim to this land and to all the beasts within it.” I replied, “This is the king’s food; the animals sent me with it to him, so do not take it.” However, he insulted you and cursed you. So I hurried to inform you.)

The invented rival does three things at once: he claims the land, seizes tribute, and insults the reigning king. Each act touches a different pillar of sovereignty—territory, taxation, and honour. The hare does not challenge the lion’s strength; she reports that it has already been challenged. Her speech forces the lion into a choice. If he ignores the rival, he appears unable to defend his domain. If he pursues him, he must act on the hare’s account.

The lion chooses pursuit. The humour lies not in mockery but in arrangement. The hare never attacks the lion. She presents him with a scenario that activates his anger, pride, and territorial vigilance. When he sees his reflection in the well, he responds as he has been prepared to respond to a rival who challenges his authority. His death follows from that logic.

The scene does not show power being overthrown by force. It shows authority collapsing under the pressure of its own habits. The hare does not weaken the lion; she guides him toward

an image that confirms his fear of rivalry. What appears comic is the precision of the trap: the hare supplies the story, and the lion supplies the reaction.

Under a regime where seriousness must remain serious, humour cannot survive as open derision. It survives through displacement. The hare's indirection enacts precisely the kind of quiet defection Bhungalia describes: a subtle but consequential disinvestment in the "normal order of things" (389). The lion's fall is not a carnival catharsis. It is the exposure of a sovereign order that cannot withstand even the rumour of its own reflection.

If indirection is required for the creatures to survive in the Arabic text, what changes when that pressure is removed? Why does Wood's lion speak at such length? The difference cannot be reduced to modern tone or stylistic looseness. It lies in how each version treats the consequences of speech. In Ibn al-Muqaffa's text, the lion speaks briefly and acts immediately. His anger appears in a compressed clause: he becomes angry, he rises. No explanation follows. No justification is required. His words are few because his authority does not need reinforcement. Speech triggers action without delay.

In Wood's retelling, the lion does not move so quickly. He insults the hare ("you dolt," "you stupid twitch-nose"), swears ("Who the hell are you?"), Moreover, threatens violence ("I will break your back"). He demands clarification, repeats himself, and elaborates on his outrage. Instead of a single movement, there is a sequence of verbal escalations. Anger unfolds in dialogue before it produces action.

This difference reshapes how power appears on the page. In the Arabic text, the lion's authority is assumed. He does not have to communicate his dominance; it is embedded in the scene's structure. In Wood's version, authority must be spoken aloud. The lion refers to himself

as “the lion who owns this territory.” He rehearses his entitlement before acting upon it. Power becomes something declared rather than something exercised.

Wood also alters the register of sovereignty. The rival lion mocks the reigning one as someone who “sits about all day and waits for his food.” The hare refers to a “four o’clock appointment.” The dispute is described as “poaching.” These phrases relocate the conflict into a vocabulary drawn from modern bureaucracy and property law. The forest begins to resemble a regulated territory governed by appointments and ownership claims rather than a lethal hierarchy governed by instinct and dominance. Authority is framed through recognizable institutional metaphors.

Most significantly, Wood’s lion speaks as though his words do not themselves constitute power. He boasts, curses, and threatens without restraint. Nothing in the narrative suggests that excessive speech might diminish his authority or expose insecurity. His language accumulates rather than concentrates force. In Ibn al-Muqaffa’s version, by contrast, speech is compressed because it carries immediate consequences. A command moves; anger produces action. Words are not ornamental but performative. The economy of language mirrors the centralization of power: just as authority is concentrated in the sovereign, so too is force concentrated in each utterance.

This difference in speech prepares the ground for what Lawrence Venuti calls domestication: “Fluent translation enacts an insidious domestication of foreign texts, rewriting them in the transparent discourse that prevails in English” (20–21). Venuti argues that translation often works to “bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar” (19). In the Arabic text, the lion’s authority is difficult to read because it is not explained. He speaks

briefly. He reacts. His words carry consequences without commentary. Wood's version cannot leave him so spare. For an Anglophone readership encountering the tale as literary entertainment rather than courtly counsel, authority must be made audible and interpretable. The lion, therefore, speaks more. He clarifies, threatens, complains, and elaborates.

As the lion speaks at greater length, the reader is given time to step back from him. His rage is no longer immediate; it unfolds in dialogue. The added exchanges create space between impulse and action. That space allows interpretation. What appears in the Arabic text as a swift, dangerous reflex becomes, in Wood's version, something performed and heard. The expansion of speech makes the scene easier to follow for an Anglophone readership accustomed to explicit characterization and psychological detail. Authority is no longer abrupt and opaque; it is articulated, dramatized, and made legible. Translation does not remove power from the scene, but it reshapes it for readability. The lion remains dominant, yet his dominance becomes theatrical rather than sudden.

Readability changes how authority feels. What was once abrupt and potentially lethal becomes expressive and, at moments, faintly ridiculous. The difference is not minor. In the Arabic edition consulted, Ibn al-Muqaffa's version of the tale occupies approximately one page. In contrast, Wood's retelling extends to roughly fourteen pages—differences in formatting and publication design account for some variation, but not for this scale of expansion. Wood substantially enlarges dialogue and descriptive detail. Length alters force. The more the lion speaks, the more room the reader has to assess him rather than react to him. His anger no longer operates as an immediate command; it becomes a trait, something observable and interpretable.

Authority shifts from a condition that must be navigated carefully to a condition that can be watched, measured, and judged.

Venuti describes this effect as the illusion of transparency: “By producing the illusion of transparency, a fluent translation masquerades as true semantic equivalence... while excluding the very difference that translation is called on to convey” (21–22). Wood’s version reflects this transparency in the lion’s speech. The lion explains himself, boasts, curses, and elaborates at length. In Ibn al-Muqaffa’s version, by contrast, sovereign speech is brief because it is consequential: a command triggers action; anger results in immediate violence. Words must be measured because they carry force. Wood’s expansion changes that dynamic. When the lion speaks at length without immediate consequence, speech no longer functions as an act of command; it becomes characterization. The reader is invited to observe and interpret him rather than to experience his words as dangerous. The lion talks more because the translation relocates political risk. Sovereign speech is no longer embedded in a setting where language can provoke punishment; it is embedded in a modern literary context where speech is narratively safe and therefore expandable.

Crucially, this shift is shaped by address. As Lawrence Venuti observes, translation may communicate a foreign text, but it is always “limited by its address to a specific reading audience” (19). Wood writes for readers who encounter the fable as literature rather than as indirect practical advice. In this context, the lion’s violence is framed as a disturbance—he “shatters the peace”—and his death as a return to peace and balance. The episode closes cleanly. While the Arabic text demonstrates how to survive under a volatile ruler, the English text

illustrates how an arrogant ruler destroys himself. The English reader is invited to judge the lion, not to calculate around him.

Venuti's distinction between domestication and foreignization explains what is at stake. A foreignizing translation, he argues, would "do wrong at home," resisting cultural fluency in order to preserve the strangeness of the source text and to stage an alien reading experience (21). Such strategies often face resistance from publishers because they challenge readers' expectations (310–11). Wood's adaptation does not pursue that route. It smooths the fable into recognizable narrative conventions, expands dialogue, and clarifies motivation. The resulting parable is not a mistranslation exactly so much as a political repositioning.

Seen in this light, translation does more than carry a story across languages; it rearranges how authority is represented on the page. Wood's lion does not simply sound different from Ibn al-Muqaffa's. He occupies a different position within his narrative world: he is a different character altogether and a synecdoche for an altogether different political system. The critique of power remains, but the terms on which that critique unfolds have changed.

Placing the two versions side by side makes this shift visible in syntax and pacing. Where danger governs speech, language contracts. Where danger recedes, language expands. The lion's register, therefore, reflects and shapes the political environment he inhabits. If the lion's speech reveals how authority performs itself, the hare's speech reveals how one survives it. The next section turns to her timing, her reported dialogue, and the precise structure of her indirection to show how rhetorical maneuver—not physical force—reorganizes the scene.

Calibrated Speech: How to Kill a Lion

Sovereign power in the fable regulates who may speak, when, and with what consequence—and resistance to this power therefore must navigate these implicit regulations. The hare cannot oppose the lion directly. A direct challenge would lead to her immediate death. Instead, she must find language that will diminish sovereign authority without appearing to threaten it.

The hare's first tactic is delay. By arriving after the appointed hour, she exposes herself to real danger. In a system structured around regulated tribute—"at the hour of your meal" (في وقتغذائك)—lateness is not an inconvenience; it risks being read as defiance. The lion's anger is recorded in a single compressed movement: he becomes enraged and rises from his place. The narrative does not elaborate. Anger here is decisive. Within Abbasid courtly discourse, as panegyric and advisory literature repeatedly emphasize, honour and reputation require vigilant defence; misjudged speech can trigger retaliation. Delay, therefore, is not comic play. It is calculated exposure.

The hare converts that exposure into rhetorical leverage. She begins by redefining her position: "أنا رسول الوحوش إليك" — "I am the messenger of the beasts to you." The word *rasūl* ("messenger") marks her not as disposable prey but as an envoy entrusted with delegated speech. In classical political thought, the messenger carries words without authoring them. By claiming this role, she elevates her plea to a report. She speaks not for herself but as an intermediary. Responsibility shifts from individual rabbit to collective transmission. She then introduces disruption: another lion intercepted her and seized the offering. Lateness now has a cause. Hunger is displaced by political injury.

The rival lion allegedly declares: “أنا أولى بهذه الأرض وما فيها من الوحش” — “I have more right to this land and what is in it.” The conflict shifts from appetite to sovereignty. The hare does not accuse the lion of weakness. She reports that another has already acted as king, claiming territory and disregarding tribute. In a courtly culture attentive to territorial legitimacy and rank, such a claim destabilizes rule itself. The hare attributes the provocation to another voice. She reinforces her loyalty by narrating her resistance to this intruder: she recounts reminding the rival lion that the meal belonged to the king. Even the insult enters the narrative as a quotation: “He insulted you and cursed you, so I hurried to inform you.” She does not interpret the affront. She delivers it. The lion supplies outrage for himself.

Ramsay Wood’s adaptation preserves the skeleton of this structure—delay, provocation, redirection—but alters its stakes. Wood opens theatrically: “The hare tarried along the way until he was very late indeed.” Delay reads as mischievous timing rather than mortal exposure. When the hare arrives, he calls out in a “meek and hesitant voice.” The tone infantilizes him rather than elevating him diplomatically. The lion’s reply—“Who the hell are you?”—renders authority loud and irritable rather than compressed and lethal.

The rival lion’s insult expands accordingly. In Ibn al-Muqaffa’, the affront is concise: a rival claim to land and a curse. In Wood, it becomes a theatrical parody: the lion “sits about all day and waits for his food to be delivered.” Kingship is reframed as masculine bravado and entitled competition. The lion’s insult is designed to amuse readers.

This shift in the recent English translation is an instance of what Emily Apter calls “the politics of readability.” In *The Translation Zone*, Apter argues that standards of “readability” shape which texts enter dominant literary circulation and under what terms (140). Readability is

not neutral; it privileges fluency and clarity aligned with Anglophone norms. Wood's brisk dialogue and explicit insult streamline the hare's calibrated indirection into immediately recognizable satire. What in Arabic demands interpretive vigilance becomes, in English, transparent as a comic narrative turn.

The consequences of making a "readable" translation are structural. In Ibn al-Muqaffa', the difficulty in interpreting the fable mirrors the real dangers writers and readers faced. Their anxiety and uncertainty are like the hare's. Incautious speech may have fatal consequences. In Wood, readability stabilizes meaning. The hare's insult to the lion is clear; the joke is accessible; the danger is contained by the end of the episode. In the Arabic text, speech is sparse because authority does not need to explain itself. The lion rises, commands, and acts. In Wood's version, speech expands before any action is taken. The lion insults ("you dolt," "you stupid twitchnose"), swears, and performs his dominance in extended dialogue. As his words continue, the reader gains more distance.

Apter's broader claim about the relocation of exposure in translations clarifies what occurs here. Translations may reorganize who bears the risk in a story (3, 15). In the Arabic fable, the speaker is exposed and vulnerable. The reader's interpretation must be quiet and cautious, just as a hare's survival depends on the precision of her words and what remains unsaid. In Wood's adaptation, exposure retreats into the distance. The reader watches rather than shares the hare's danger. The joke remains, but its peril moves. The humour survives translation, but it amounts to a different joke with much less at stake. In Arabic, the hare models how to speak to power without getting destroyed. In English, she models how wit defeats tyranny, inside

a fantasy space of pure literary entertainment. Both lions fall. However, the victory is far more significant and striking in the Arab version.

The Lion's Death: Comic Catastrophe and its Aftermath

The comedy of "The Lion and the Hare" intensifies with the lion's death. In both Ibn alMuqaffa's Arabic and Ramsay Wood's English adaptation, the lion dies because he believes he sees a rival lion in the water, though what he really sees is himself. Instead of just standing up, he fights his imaginary rival, which causes him to drown. However, in the Arabic version, in keeping with its controlled linguistic economy, the narrative's pace is tightly regulated. After hearing the hare's report of his rival's insults, the lion rushes to the well. The narration is compressed at the decisive moment:

فانطلقت الأرنبُ إلى جُبِّ فيه ماءٌ صافٍ، فأخطأت فيه، وقالت: هذا المكان. فاطلع الأسدُ فرأى فيه ظلَّهُ وظلَّ الأرنبِ، فظنَّهما الوحوش، فاغتمَّ، وألقى بنفسه إلى الجبِّ فهلك.

(The hare went to a well filled with clear water and pointed to it, saying, "This is the place." The lion looked into it and saw his reflection and the hare's reflection, and he took them to be the beasts. He was enraged and threw himself into the well and perished.)

The comedy here depends on what Henri Bergson calls "mechanical rigidity." Comedy, he argues, emerges when life "regards itself as a work of art," freed momentarily from the urgency of self-preservation (9). What remains visible in that neutral zone is "a certain rigidity of body, mind and character" that society seeks to correct through laughter (9). "This rigidity is the comic," Bergson concludes, "and laughter is its corrective" (9). The lion embodies this rigidity in the way he enacts his sovereignty through repetitive automatic responses: his hunger

produces rage; an insult enflames hot pursuit. When confronted with the idea of another lion claiming his territory, he cannot imagine verifying the threats or negotiating them. He simply reacts as he always reacts to any perceived challenge to his dominance: with violence.

The hare's stratagem works because she understands this predictability. She does not invent a physically superior rival; she invents a claim to kingship. The lion's response follows the established pattern. He must confront the challenger. He must prove himself. His authority moves mechanically, "always thinking of what it has just done and never of what it is doing," to borrow another of Bergson's phrases (9). The well becomes lethal not because the lion is weak, but because he cannot break his habits.

In the Arabic version, the lion's rigidity is nevertheless dangerous. His anger at the imaginary rival still carries genuinely threatening consequences. The comic moment, therefore, arises not from his humiliation alone but from watching him behave automatically in response to it. The reader's laughter functions as a corrective, in Bergson's sense: it reveals the political inflexibility that threatens collective survival. The lion's death is therefore not merely a clever reversal; it is the punishment of sovereign rigidity by its own momentum.

Wood retains the basic plot of this scene but sets it up differently. Before the well, the lion's insults are extended and theatrical. The hare reports that the rival lion has mocked the king at length, calling him lazy and unworthy. The reigning lion is framed as a bully—"old Death Jaws"—whose violence is already the subject of satire. By the time he reaches the water, the reader has been positioned against him. His humiliation feels deserved.

When Wood's lion roars into the well, the absurdity is heightened. The reader stands outside the illusion and recognizes immediately that he is confronting himself. The fall into the

water is pure slapstick. The tyrant is undone by his own stupidity. The structure is clear: comic justice trumps cruelty.

In Ibn al-Muqaffa', the effect is less overtly moral. The lion's death does not feel like punishment for vice so much as the logical outcome of a particular disposition. He cannot tolerate a rival: the structure of his political authority makes others always dangerous. The hare exploits this vulnerability. The king's response to the fictional rival—rage, pursuit, confrontation—follows from his own need to maintain uncontested supremacy. The well does not merely punish him; it exposes how easily sovereign pride converts rumour into action.

What changes across the two versions is not the event but the meaning attached to it. In Ibn al-Muqaffa', the leap reveals how authority can collapse under the pressure of its own suspicion. In Wood, the leap confirms that tyranny deserves to fall. The first exposes a vulnerability within power; the second delivers a moral satisfaction.

This contrast also distinguishes the hare's role in the two versions. In the Arabic fable, she survives and attacks by speaking indirectly. The pattern mirrors the conditions under which the story itself circulates: only oblique political critique will make the rounds. In Wood's retelling, the hare's strategy reads as a triumph of the clever over the dull, and the reader is encouraged to laugh openly.

From Reflection to Accusation: Counsel After the Hare

The tale does not end with the lion's death. "The Lion and the Ox" continues, and once Dimna recounts the story of the hare, the narrative returns to the court, where the lesson of the well is redeployed for a different purpose. If the hare demonstrates how sovereign impulsiveness may be exploited, Dimna demonstrates how sovereign insecurity may be cultivated. The shift is

subtle but crucial. The lion in “The Lion and the Hare” is undone by appetite and wounded pride; the lion in “The Lion and the Ox” is destabilized by suspicion. He is not defined solely by violence but by anxiety—anxiety about loyalty and the possibility of rivals within his own circle.

His vulnerability does not stem from a lack of force but from the structural instability of sovereignty itself. The tale’s courtly setting echoes the political logic Patricia Crone identifies in Abbasid governance, where authority, though outwardly absolute, was sustained by a constant anxiety about its own indivisibility. As she observes, power was understood as indivisible: it “could only be delegated, not shared... He received it in full or lost it in full... There was no halfway house” (276). Such a model leaves little room for ambiguity. Authority must remain absolute, or it collapses. Crone further suggests that this insistence on absolutism reflected a deeper instability: “political power was fragile, all the surface grandeur notwithstanding: government had to be absolutist merely to survive” (276).

Read in this light, the lion’s fear of Shanzaba’s¹⁷ growing influence is structurally consistent. A ruler whose legitimacy depends on indivisible sovereignty cannot tolerate even symbolic equality. Dimna understands this. Where the hare manipulates anger, Dimna

manipulates the anxiety that absolutism produces. He does not challenge the lion’s authority directly; he magnifies the suspicion that authority, once divided, dissolves. The court thus becomes a laboratory of sovereign fragility, and the lion’s paranoia emerges not as personal weakness alone but as a political condition.

¹⁷ Shanzaba is the name of the ox.

Dimna perceives this structural fault and recalibrates the lion's judgment accordingly. Rather than introducing new fears, he intensifies those already embedded in absolutist rule, directing the king's suspicion toward Shanzaba until proximity itself appears treacherous. The manoeuvre recalls the atmosphere of Abbasid court politics, where authority, imagined as indivisible, was constantly threatened by rival influence. Situating the fable within this historical logic reveals that the lion's paranoia is not incidental characterization but an allegorical condensation of a political system sustained by vigilance and mistrust.

It is within this atmosphere of structural insecurity that Dimna begins to operate. The lion's anxiety is not an incidental weakness but a condition of rule, and Dimna understands that such a condition can be activated. Political fragility is translated into a narrative strategy.

In the Arabic text, this recalibration unfolds with calculated compression. The narration notes that Dimna refrained from entering upon the lion for many days (ثم إن دمنة ترك الدخول على (الأسد أياما كثيرا). Absence itself becomes a technique. When he finally appears, the lion immediately demands an account: "What has kept you from me for so long?" (ما حبسك عني (منذ زمان لم أرك؟). The exchange is compressed and deliberate. Dimna does not advise abstractly; he phrases suspicion as inevitability. By urging the lion to "observe" and to treat hesitation as proof of ambition, he converts possibility into presumption. The speech does not describe danger—it creates it. When he asserts, "He who conceals his advice from the ruler has betrayed himself," he embeds a warning within loyalty. By citing a trusted but unnamed authority, he accelerates suspicion while shielding himself from direct accusation. Counsel thus emerges as both obligation and threat. Speech is no longer descriptive; it compels. It moves the king toward preemptive violence.

Wood's retelling transforms this scene into a psychological drama. Dimna hides in the forest, "rehearsing his plans," before reappearing in a sunlit meadow where he approaches the lion with visible dejection. The lion reassures him, invites him to sit, and encourages him to speak openly. Description expands—for instance, Wood details Dimna's hesitant movements and the lion's gentle voice—and the pacing slows; gestures and interior hesitations take the place of procedural urgency. In Wood's version, the lion gently says, "Speak your mind without fear," in contrast to the terse exchange in the Arabic text, where the lion demands, "What has kept you from me for so long?"

In both versions, Dimna persuades the lion that Shanzaba's closeness has become a threat: honouring him as a near-equal destabilizes the hierarchy, and delaying to act will allow Shanzaba's ambition to harden into rebellion. The jackal instructs the king to scrutinize the ox, to interpret neutral gestures as signs of disloyalty, and to prepare to strike pre-emptively. Suspicion is reframed as prudence; pre-emption becomes self-defence. Yet the tonal difference matters. In Arabic, suspicion enters the court through compressed maxims and escalating counsel. In Wood, it grows through emotional pacing, reassurance, and scenic interruption. The scheme is identical, but the intensity and atmosphere of danger are not.

The contrast between the Hare episode and the Dimna episode clarifies the political logic of *Kalila wa Dimna*. In the well scene, the lion destroys himself through misrecognition: the hare exploits sovereign paranoia, redirecting violence inward until authority collapses under its own insecurity. In "The Lion and the Ox," by contrast, the lion destroys another through interpretation: Dimna manipulates counsel, reshaping the king's perception of loyalty and threat. The two episodes, therefore, dramatize distinct but related mechanisms of rule. The first exposes

the vulnerability of sovereign power to projection; the second reveals its dependence on advisory mediation. Together, they provide a map of political authority in the Arabic version: power is volatile, dependent on perception, and sustained through interpretive control.

The ethical valence of indirection shifts accordingly. The hare deploys narrative manipulation to dismantle tyranny and create temporary relief for the vulnerable. Dimna deploys similar techniques to consolidate fear and reinforce hierarchy. Indirection is therefore not inherently liberatory or oppressive; its ethical weight depends on its target and consequence.

In Wood's translation, however, these mechanisms are rebalanced. The hare's act reads more overtly as heroic cleverness, while Dimna's plotting becomes psychological drama. The structural analysis of sovereignty recedes, and individual character motivation comes to the foreground. Where the Arabic text offers readers a schematic understanding of how perception, counsel, and misrecognition sustain political power, Wood's version invites readers to evaluate personalities. The shift does not erase the political map, but it makes it less architectural and more theatrical.

Embedded within this larger narrative, the hare's tale no longer functions as an isolated moral anecdote. It becomes part of Dimna's rhetorical arsenal. He presents it as proof that cunning can overcome brute authority, thereby legitimizing his own intervention in court politics. The story authorizes intelligence as a form of political action. However, the structure simultaneously marks its limits.

Kristó-Nagy notes that the tale's embedding alters its political force (17). In the reconstructed Sanskrit recension, the hare's deception leads to the lion's death without narrative hesitation. In the Arabic tradition, however, Kalila agrees to Dimna's strategy only on the

explicit condition that it must not harm the lion—a restriction absent from the Sanskrit material (Kristó-Nagy 17). This modification signals discomfort with depicting the overthrow of a ruler, even allegorically. Kristó-Nagy traces this hesitation to ideological mediation introduced in the Pahlavi tradition.

This anxiety reshapes how the embedded hare tale functions within the larger narrative. Read in isolation, the episode appears triumphant: the hare deceives the lion, the lion attacks his reflection, and tyranny collapses. However, when the narrative returns to Dimna and the royal court, that triumph is reframed. The hare's stratagem becomes not a simple model of liberation but a demonstration of how narrative manipulation can direct sovereign violence. Wit proves effective—but its effectiveness is ethically unstable. The same techniques that eliminate a tyrant in one episode enable political intrigue in another. Dimna's eventual execution reinforces this warning: influence over sovereignty is powerful, yet it is never politically neutral.

In the Arabic version, the two episodes together provide a structural account of power. Narrative indirection can dismantle authority or reinforce it; its moral status depends on consequence and context. The fables, therefore, do not celebrate cleverness. They examine how perception, counsel, and misrecognition shape the exercise of rule.

Wood's 2008 retelling shifts that emphasis. The hare's victory and Dimna's intrigue read more distinctly as episodes of individual cunning within a morally legible narrative. The structural analysis of sovereignty recedes, while characterization becomes more prominent. Political instability remains, but it is filtered through psychological development and narrative expansion. The result is not the disappearance of political meaning, but a reorientation: authority

appears less as a fragile system sustained through interpretive control and more as a backdrop against which personalities act.

The difference reflects changes in audience and circulation. In the Arabic manuscript tradition, *Kalila wa Dimna* moved within elite and advisory contexts, where reflections on governance and counsel were directly resonant with courtly practice. Wood's 2008 translation circulates within a global literary marketplace as "world literature," addressed to a broad readership rather than to advisers or rulers. Detached from immediate political application, the fable's lessons become interpretive rather than procedural. Recognizing these shifts in circulation and audience clarifies how translation alters not only language but the perceived stakes of narrative action.

Read in this light, the transition from the well to the court clarifies the central question of this thesis: humour and indirection are not inherently subversive or conservative. They are techniques whose political force depends on structure, audience, and risk. In *Kalila wa Dimna*, the same narrative intelligence that frees the oppressed can also sustain suspicion and provoke lethal response. The embedded tale does not simply celebrate cleverness; it tests the cost of deploying it.

3. Conclusion: How Does Translation Reconfigure the Political Risk of Laughter?

Reading Ibn al-Muqaffa's Arabic *Kalila wa Dimna* alongside Ramsay Wood's English adaptation reveals that humour does not travel intact across languages. Its risks are redistributed as it travels. What appears, at the level of plot, to be the same comic episode—the hare's deception and the lion's fatal leap—operates within and marks the limits of fundamentally different political economies of speech.

In the Arabic text, humour is structurally asymmetrical. The lion—whose authority unmistakably evokes caliphal sovereignty—cannot laugh at himself. As Henri Bergson observes, laughter requires distance: one must momentarily detach from oneself in order to become comic (3). The lion’s incapacity for such detachment is not incidental; it is the condition of his rule. Sovereign authority depends on invulnerability to ridicule. To laugh at oneself would be to fracture the aura of awe and terror that secures obedience. Laughter, therefore, belongs elsewhere—to the hare, to the subordinate animals, and to the reader who recognizes the king’s epistemological fragility before he does.

This asymmetry structures the fable’s political force. The hare never insults the lion directly; he attributes insult to a fictional rival. Aggression is displaced, deniable, and therefore survivable. Under conditions in which speech may be fatal, humour becomes a technology of protection. The joke is intelligible to the audience but opaque to power. Its success depends precisely on that opacity.

Wood’s retelling reconfigures this distribution. His narrative establishes a more convivial relationship with the reader; animals exchange openly comic remarks; the lion is unmistakably marked as a bully. Laughter is shared rather than coded. While this produces narrative intimacy and accessibility, it alters the stakes of humour. What was once structurally reserved for those navigating acute political danger becomes general entertainment. The asymmetry that made laughter protective in the Arabic text gives way to a more inclusive, less precarious comic field.

The difference becomes especially visible in the lion’s death. In Ibn al-Muqaffa’s, the fall into the well exposes sovereign paranoia as self-destructive. The lion attacks his own reflection—his own projection of rivalry—and destroys himself in the process. The comedy is

diagnostic rather than triumphant. Even after his death, the text does not erase the broader necropolitical order that enabled him. A single plunge does not undo the daily contract of sacrifice that fed him. Laughter here carries residue; it is edged with recognition.

In Wood's version, by contrast, the lion's downfall reads as a narrative resolution. The tyrant is clearly named, the moral arc clarified, and the restoration of peace implied. Laughter reassures. It affirms that wit can defeat violence and that justice, however allegorical, prevails. The political critique remains, but its affective register shifts from cautionary to consolatory. The humour no longer needs to protect the speaker; it secures the reader.

These divergences foreground the ethical stakes of translation. As Lawrence Venuti argues, translation inevitably reconstitutes the foreign text in accordance with the receiving culture's expectations (18). Wood's adaptation domesticates not only diction and setting but also risk. The Arabic epistemological distancing—embedded in gestures such as *z'amū* (“they say that”)—registers narrative caution within a culture attentive to surveillance and reprisal. That caution disappears in English, replaced by fluency and immediacy. The opacity that once shielded critique gives way to transparency that clarifies moral instruction.

What is transformed, then, is not simply tone but the function of humour itself. In Ibn al-Muqaffa', humour functions as a survival strategy under authoritarian conditions. It is layered, deniable, and strategically indirect. In Wood, humour becomes pedagogical: a vehicle for ethical clarity and anti-tyrannical affirmation. Both are forms of critique, but they arise from different proximities to power.

The two versions produce different kinds of laughter. In the Arabic text, the humour emerges under the pressure of sovereign volatility; the joke depends on misdirection and timing.

In Wood's adaptation, the humour is openly framed and morally legible. The effect shifts with the conditions that produce it. It is a culturally situated practice shaped by the structures of authority within which it circulates. The lion's fall in the Arabic text is not merely a comic spectacle; it is an allegory of sovereign instability crafted within a regime where ridicule could be lethal. In English, the same fall becomes a morally legible emblem of justice restored.

To attend to this distinction is to recognize that translation does more than transmit stories. It recalibrates the relationship between humour and danger. What once required indirection becomes openly declared. What once demanded interpretive caution becomes pleasurable recognition. In this recalibration, something is lost: the charged proximity to power that made narrative manipulation a matter of consequence rather than craft. The fable remains political in translation—it does—but its politics shift from structural intervention to literary reflection. If *Kalila wa Dimna* first captivated Ibn al-Muqaffa' because it offered a way to speak near power without being destroyed by it, Wood's version invites readers to observe power from a safer distance. However, in a moment when public speech in North America is again marked by anxiety about authority, dissent, and the limits of critique, the possibility remains that future translations might restore the fable's sense of urgency—not by reproducing Abbasid conditions, but by recognizing that humour regains force when readers once again feel the stakes of speaking within reach of power.

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