

AN OMANI FOLKTALE

ASYAH AL-BUALY

[74]

Omani folk literature reaches all social classes and consists of different types of folk genres. It includes proverbs, which summarize human life experiences, and folk songs, which groups of people sing for special occasions such as weddings, birth celebrations, and Islamic festivals. In addition, it includes narrative forms such as fables and other folktales, stories of lunar eclipses, jinn or spirit tales, and *sira*, or tales that glorify a hero who may or may not have been an historical figure.

The following is an Omani folktale that, although told for entertainment, also contains the complex dualities and recurring contradictions of human relationships. The fable is titled "Tale of Fadil or Ramadu." Fadil is an Arabic male name that means "praiseworthy," and Ramadu comes from the word *ramadi*, meaning "gray."

TALE OF FADIL OR RAMADU

Once upon a time, there was a merchant who had an only son named Fadil. Fadil's mother died when he was an infant. His father remarried a woman who hated Fadil and always tried to get rid of him so that she could have the full attention and love of his father. Fadil had a horse named Insiyah (from *ins*, meaning "human beings," a name often used in Omani folklore for a domesticated animal that possesses human qualities).

A merchant, Fadil's father was away from home from early morning till late evening. During his father's absence, the stepmother would abuse Fadil by starving, cursing, and hitting him. When she would send Fadil to the *kuttab*, the Koran (Qur'an) school where her brother was the teacher, he would continue to torment Fadil by hitting and humiliating him.

One day, while the stepmother and her brother were planning to rid themselves of Fadil for good by killing him, the horse Insiyah listened attentively, and later gave Fadil full details of this conspiracy.

On the following day, the stepmother, who had always neglected Fadil, offered him a clean plate full of food. Fadil knew that the food had been poisoned, and so he refused and ate from the saucepan in the kitchen, saying he wanted to leave the good food for his stepmother.

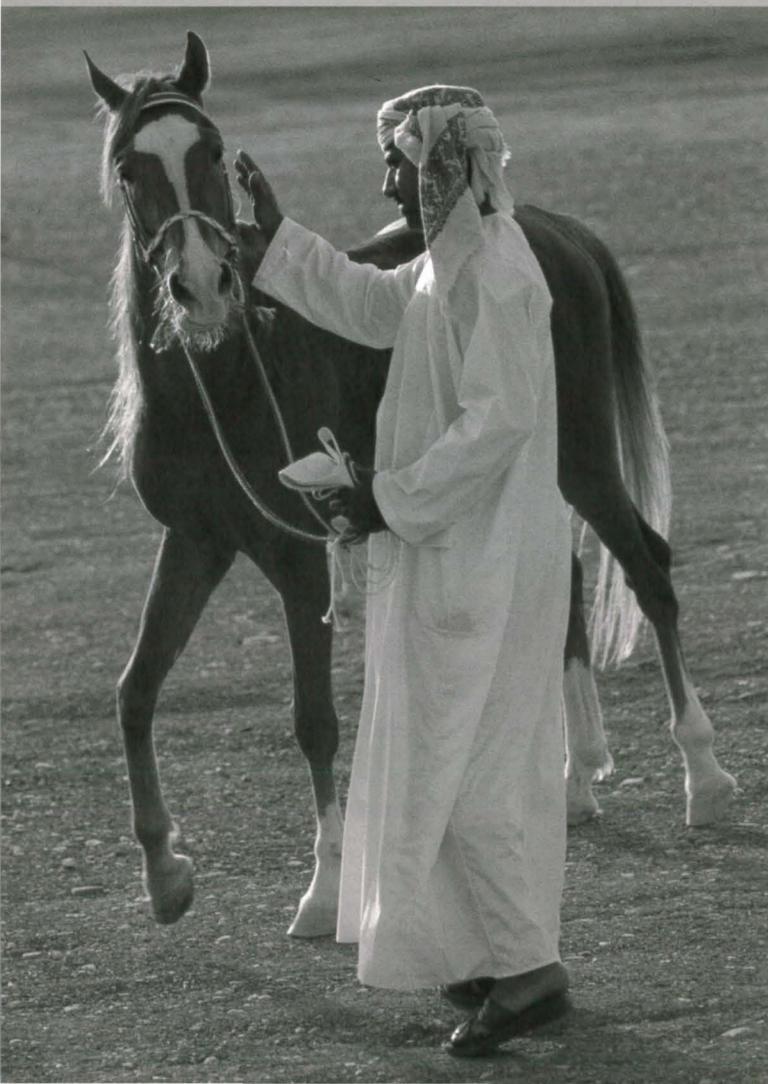
Then he refused to wear a clean shirt offered by his stepmother, because he knew that it too had been treated with poison. He picked the shirt up with a stick and burned it in the garden, saying that his father would buy him a new shirt.

The stepmother and her brother suspected the horse Insiyah of informing Fadil of their plans and decided to get rid of the horse.

In her third deceitful act, the stepmother pretended that she was seriously ill and slept all

Like the hero Fadil, many Omanis have a close relationship with their animals. Horses are especially valued.

PHOTO BY/COURTESY ABDULRAHMAN BIN ALI ALHINAI



day. She put dry bread and dry date-palm leaves under her mattress. When her husband returned in the evening, she tossed and turned, producing sounds like broken bones as the bread and leaves snapped. She was trying to convince her husband she was suffering with fever pain in her bones and mumbled to him that the doctor prescribed a horse's liver to cure her.

When the husband hesitated, she immediately said she understood that slaughtering the horse Insiyah would pain his son, who was so greatly attached to the horse. The husband's response was that she was more important than the horse, which could easily be replaced with another.

At dawn, Fadil discussed this new conspiracy with his horse Insiyah. They agreed that while Fadil was at school, Insiyah would neigh three times—first when dragged from the stables, second when reaching the slaughtering area, and the third time when being prepared for slaughter.

When Fadil heard the first neigh, he asked his teacher for permission to go home, but the teacher refused. At the second neigh, Fadil asked for permission to go out for a drink, but the teacher refused again. But on the third neigh, Fadil slipped by the teacher and ran out of the class to the slaughtering place, where his father was preparing to kill Insiyah.

The astonished father explained his intentions to Fadil. Fadil humbly asked his father to grant him a final farewell ride on the horse. His father agreed but asked Fadil to return as quickly as possible, because of his stepmother's suffering.

Fadil jumped on Insiyah and rode away far from home. He wrote to his father informing him of his wife's mistreatment. He then returned briefly to satisfy his father's yearning for him but left again and continued to write more details. The father revealed his knowledge to his wife only when Fadil informed him of his wife's pretended illness.

But it was too late. Fadil had already returned and left for the third time. He crossed several deserts and settled in a wealthy emirate, disguising himself as a poor servant by spreading gray ashes on himself, which caused the local people to call him Ramadu.

There, over the course of several episodes, Fadil was able with his horse's help to save the emir and his emirate from a cruel king who intended to conquer the emirate and marry the emir's daughter by force. Eventually, Fadil married the princess and lived happily ever after.

Such tales share many features with folk literature from around the world. For example, as much as the Omani tale represents Omani society, its structure is not unlike the tales of many other nations. But this particular fable articulates profound concepts connected to Omani ethics—beginning with the names of its eponymous hero, Fadil and Ramadu. These indicate the boy's embodiment of bravery, self-sacrifice, and unselfishness.

Fadil's departure from home at a very young age reflects an Omani value on adventurous, courageous behavior that faces the unknown for the sake of achieving a lofty goal. Fadil embodies an ideal Omani, who can overcome disappointments in life such as the cruel treatment of the stepmother and her brother, the Koran teacher, who should have been models of exemplary behavior.

The Omani people encourage perseverance. This theme is confirmed by a common proverb to the effect that any action should be performed at least three times to achieve perfection. In other words, repetition is necessary for success. This was expressed in our fable by key incidents being repeated three times.

In Omani society and many others, human nature searches for complete happiness. Therefore, it is not surprising that our fable ends with a happy ending in which Fadil and the emir's daughter share love and marriage.

ASYAH AL-BUALY is Assistant Professor in the Department of Arabic Literature and Language, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University. Born in Zanzibar, she holds a Ph.D. from Cairo University and has published a number of scholarly and popular articles on literature and the arts.