In 1998, the author had published *Cognitive Space and Patterns of Deceit in La Fontaine’s Contes* with Rookwood Press in Charlottesville, Virginia. This new book expands the deceit thematic to cover the *Fables* as well. It is no mere cosmetic do-over of the 1998 work, however, but explores entirely new avenues, and features up-to-date research. Like its predecessor, it displays far-reaching, first-rate scholarship. It is divided into two parts: “Illusions et fausses perspectives”, and “Paroles piégées et détournements”, plus an introduction, a short conclusion, and an extensive bibliography (18 pages) and index. The first part is further divided into three chapters, dealing respectively with relativism in the *Fables*, magic in the *Contes*, and specularity, exclusively devoted to La Fontaine’s longest fable, “Les Filles de Minée,” next-to-last in the last book of fables. The second part, consisting of four chapters, deals with strategic lies, casuistry in the *Contes*, the theme of the false promise—and in the *Contes*—and the seduction of a young shepherdess in the tale titled “La Clochette”.

The introduction presents clearly the author’s methodology, laying out a plan for the book itself. The conclusion (barely over 2 pages) relates the thematic (or, rather, the multiple thematics) of the book to broad currents of thought and diverse perspectives of the 17th century, while at the same time showing that La Fontaine’s “ample comédie aux cent actes divers” functions both as an anamorphic mirror that reflects a universe that is deceitful and devious in many ways, and as a vast exercise in the polysemic theatricality of language, keeping in mind that theatre is essentially deception.

In the first chapter, after an exposé of the rebirth of relativism since the Renaissance, Grisé examines the multiple ways in which La Fontaine expresses it in his fables. Drawing upon Jean-Pierre Collinet’s studies and his superb Pléiade edition of the *Fables* and the *Contes*, as well as numerous other sources, she embarks upon a taxonomic study of relativism, dividing it in two main categories: cognitive and moral. Cognitive relativism subdivides in turn in perceptual, egocentric, and proportional. To illustrate those subcategories, she cites—among many others—such fables as “Le Chameau et les bâtons flottants” (IV, 10) and “Le Cerf se voyant dans l’eau” (VI, 9), which present visual distortions and false perceptions. She examines masterfully the interplay of imagination vs. reality. She exemplifies egocentric relativism with “L’Âne portant des reliques” (V, 14). Proportional relativism is to be found everywhere in the fables, she says, pointing out the numerous comparisons between the strong and the weak, the cunning and the naïve, the big and the small (47), etc.
Grisé introduces La Fontaine’s moral (cultural) relativism by broadly surveying predecessors who explicitly spoke about moral relativism, citing—Isn’t it quasi-mandatory?—Montaigne’s “Des cannibales” and his “Apologie de Raymond Sebond.” La Mothe Le Vayer and even Pascal are also brought to bear in that prelude. Here again, an abundance of fables illustrate this reality: “La Perdrix et les deux coqs” (X, 7), “La Tortue et les deux canards” (X, 2), and others. Particularly interesting is her study of “Le Loup et le chien” (I, 5), where she presents the competing ideologies as relative liberty vs. absolute liberty, with the wolf opting for the latter, despite the corollary of a life of deprivation, which of course has its own drawbacks, something that La Fontaine implicitly values over the comfortable but restricted life of the dog. Grisé asks whether the wolf can comprehend the concept of relative freedom (the dog is not completely free, yet not completely enslaved either). She cites Marie-Odile Sweetser and Ralph Albane’s 2002 Studi francesi article on the subject. It is an interesting micro-study with the larger framework of the one on moral or cultural relativism in La Fontaine.

Follows a section on inter-species cultural relativism that shows how La Fontaine, rejecting the Cartesian view of animals as machines, endows them with the ability to bear moral judgments, which generally show Man as wanting, as in “L’Homme et la couleuvre” (X, 1). Grisé concludes that La Fontaine sees animals as moral beings deserving of tolerance and a certain respect (60), certainly an enlightened attitude in that day and age.

She goes on to examine the role of magic and its implications in La Fontaine’s Contes, an excellent way, she says, to display his skepticism at a time rife with stories and rumors about supernatural practices, including black masses. His skepticism goes also hand in hand with eroticism, such as the tale titled “L’Abbesse”, whose strange illness (mal d’amour) requires male “company” as a remedy. Grisé cites on that subject both Ambroise Paré and Hippocrates. She makes it clear, however, that La Fontaine did not consider “hysteria” a real disease, but uses it as a theme for amusing tales, whereby he displays both his skepticism and his penchant for raciness, something that can be found in abundance in the Contes. Grisé also comments on the author’s propensity to display the lustfulness of male clergy, whether secular or regular.

Next, she shows that La Fontaine does not shy away from deviltry. The tale titled “Belphégor,” reprising the Machiavelli one, appears in print for the first time in 1682 (to be incorporated in 1692 in Book XII of the Fables). Grisé performs a very skilled comparative analysis of the two stories, with quotations from both authors (she quotes the original Italian which she then footnotes in French), pointing out that, unlike Machiavelli, La Fontaine
seeks not to determine the true nature of women, but to find out whether marriage is indeed what precipitated so many men into Hell. Her analysis occupies almost 7 pages (82-88). Then comes a disquisition on the old theme of the Devil deceived by feminine wiles (a comic portrayal of the Devil). The treatment follows a now-familiar pattern: an introductory section recalling the sources and origins of the topos, invariably with abundant documentation testifying to Grisé’s scholarship, followed by the analysis of the La Fontaine text(s) proper. The two examples chosen include the familiar topos of the Devil deceived by a cunning peasant, concerning crop sharing, which can be found in Rabelais. Equally in Rabelais (Quart Livre), we find the rather raunchy “L’Isle de Papefiguière,” reiterated by La Fontaine in verse, where a woman scares off the Devil, who is to fight her husband in a clawing match, by revealing to the Devil her (enormous) genital slit, claiming that her husband inflicted that gash on her for practice.

Magic is a corollary of relations with the Devil, as Grisé shows in four Contes: “Joconde,” “La Gageure des trois commères,” “Le Petit chien qui secoue de l’argent et des pierrières,” and “La Coupe enchantée.” After the mandatory introductory passages and evocation of those stories’ sources, she demonstrates how magic (real or false) can help distort perception, primarily in the case of a woman’s infidelity to her husband.

Chapter 3 is occupied in its entirety by an analysis of “Les Filles de Minée” (XII, 28), a reflection by Grisé on instability and ambiguity generated by illusions and magical spells. The tale is found originally in Ovid’s Metamorphoses (IV, v. 1-415). The essay is illustrated by the reproduction of a drawing by Fragonard, showing the three daughters of Minaeus transformed into bats by an angry Bacchus. With a great deal of erudition, Grisé compares the La Fontaine version to the Ovid original, listing the variations the fabulist brought to the original tale, both in the names of the daughters and the nature of the tales they spent the day telling. She calls the fable a specular text because the daughters of Minaeus decide, instead of engaging in religious celebrations (that day is the feast of Bacchus) to stay at home and engage simultaneously in weaving cloth and telling stories, two activities that mirror each other. The textual analysis is quite elaborate, using extensively the metaphor of weaving and the weaving loom as a text-producing machine. It makes for very interesting reading. Grisé concludes that the fable carries a double message: overt and covert. The first is an open condemnation of narrative activity, since Minaeus’s daughters were turned into bats by an angry god for spending their time telling stories instead of honoring him; but the implicit one is that the fable is in fact a celebration of narrativity and of the seductive power of narrative poetry.
One quibble I may have with her interpretation of the fable’s end is that she says “…le narrateur-fabuliste abandonne ses héroïnes et tire des événements du récit la leçon qu’il faut respecter les fêtes des dieux (126).” Rather, I detect an ironic intention in La Fontaine’s words, that one must observe feast days, not out of piety, but rather for fear of punishment. La Fontaine’s libertinism is abundant enough in the Contes to warrant such an interpretation in a fable.

The second part of the book opens on Chapter 4: “Mensonges stratégiques”. It is prefaced by a detailed historical examination of mendacity, from a literary, historical, and theological standpoint. The key fable here is “Le Dépositaire infidèle” (IX, 1). She cites Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas on what constitutes a sinful lie, and what is permitted. Of course, she examines the purpose of lying in La Fontaine, concluding that lying may be justified for a good end, or to recover one’s stolen goods. She goes on to examine other types of lying, such as the lie of aggression (Le mensonge d’attaque), which can be used to dupe or to seduce, or the lie by infiltration, which, she says, functions somewhat like a Trojan horse (144-145), to convey a (true) message under false appearances. She examines flattery next, in the Fables, several of which she uses as exemplars to analyze the fate of flattery, as in “La Matrone d’Éphèse” (XII, 27), whereby the object of flattery is seduction, or “Les Animaux malades de la peste” (VII, 1), whereby the fox’s flattery is applauded, or again in “La Cour du Lion” (VII, 6), whereby the monkey is punished for the same thing. Curiously, “Le Corbeau et le renard” (I, 2) is left out; perhaps that one is too obvious. She goes on to examine other kinds of lying, such as the “mensonge pieux” in its various forms, and lying by omission (keeping silent about something). All these varieties of lying are analyzed in a thorough and elaborate fashion, with a wealth of examples and solid theoretical and historical foundations.

Chapter 5 is devoted to casuistry in the works of La Fontaine. She cites two of the tales in the Deuxième partie des Contes: “Les Frères de Catalogne” (originally from the Cent nouvelles nouvelles) and “Le Calendrier des vieillards” (originally from the Decameron). Her analysis and presentation of casuistry in the two tales are straightforward, following the usual overview of the history and use of casuistry in the Ancien Régime. In seeking to uncover casuistry in the Contes, she examines equally other tales: “Pâté d’anguille” (originally from Les Cent nouvelles nouvelles, X), “Les Troqueurs,” and (of course) “La Fiancée du roi de Garbe.”

From casuistry to false promise: the latter is the theme of Chapter 6. Grisé defines false promise as “…une subversion du pacte implicite qui assure dans un acte de communication la transmission de la vérité” (181). She goes on to give several excellent examples of false promise, from “La
Grenouille et le rat” (IV, 11) and “Le Renard et le bouc” (III, 5) to such tales as “A Femme avare, galant escroc”, and “Pâté d’anguille”, with detailed analyses and explanations. Of course, in the tales, it is the expectation of sexual favors that is subject to false promises.

Like the third chapter, which was devoted to a single text, “Les Filles de Minée,” the seventh and last one is devoted to a single tale, “La Clochette” (1685), which La Fontaine composed without any reference to older sources, and which deals with a rather delicate topic, the rape of a 13-year-old shepherdess, or rather, “cowherdess.” Grisé shows the author to be aware of the controversial nature of the story by citing the seventeen first verses of the poem (203), whereby La Fontaine explains to the reader what he’s about to do and why. Follows a very erudite digression on the medieval pastourelle, which Grisé relates to the tale at hand (A pastourelle is generally the tale of an encounter between a knight and a shepherd girl, often ending with the male protagonist forcing himself on the female, but as often with the girl escaping rape through clever discourse or some other narrative device). She quotes an extensive fragment in Old French of a pastourelle (which she identifies as an excerpt from no. XXXV in vol. 3 of an 1870 edition by Karl Bartsch—205); she translates it immediately below in modern French. Follows a two-page disquisition on the reception of the pastourelle genre, which, while informative, seems to stray a bit from the subject at hand, as is the passage analyzing in detail why Isabeau, the heroine of the tale, herds cows rather than sheep. The tale consists of the cowherd girl losing track of one of her heifers, which is spirited away by a young cad intent on having his way with the girl. Upon returning home at night, she is ordered by her mother to go back in the darkness of the woods to look for the lost animal. Her would-be seducer uses the heifer’s cowbell to entice the girl deeper and deeper in the wood, where he eventually rapes her. Grisé’s conclusion is not unexpected: the tale is a cautionary one, meant to serve as a warning to girls who venture alone in the dark woods (215). She compares it to other tales featuring a (sexual) predator, such as Little Red Riding Hood, concluding that “La Clochette,” with its elaborate narration, is more than a moral tale, attempting to please as much as to instruct, somewhat perhaps like Molière. The chapter closes on another Fragonard illustration.

A book of such extensive scholarship is bound to present a few flaws, although none detract seriously from the quality of the work. I noted some small lapses in proofreading, resulting in minor spelling and/or agreement errors, such as “détallé” for “détaillé” (p. 172 fn 27). In an apparently more serious lapse, Grisé seems to imply that (p. 174) in “La Fiancée du roi de Garbe” (1666), La Fontaine may have sought inspiration from the 1666
version of *Tartuffe* (v.1487-1492). That may well be, but her bibliography does not mention Molière (or Poquelin), much less which edition of his works she used for the 1666 version of *Tartuffe*, although the index cites him 6 times.

Despite such glitches, the book is one that unites first-rate scholarship with a comprehensive reading of La Fontaine from the point of view of deceit, misperception, and illusion, and does so in elegant, easy-to-read prose, remarkably free of jargon. A must-have for anyone contemplating work on La Fontaine, whether for publication or for the teaching of a graduate course.

Francis Assaf


