

My name is Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan, born in Granada in Spain but brought up young in Fez in Morocco. When I was captured by Christian pirates and taken to Rome in 1518, I had to change my name to Giovanni Leone. I became Leo Africanus.

Actually, I was accustomed to change by then. I had to adjust my language and my manners often when I served as ambassador to different lands for the Sultan of Fez.

Then, as I became a servant in the pope's household in Italy, I tried to change things myself. Maybe I could get the Christians and Muslims to listen to each other instead of killing each other. I learned Italian and Latin and wrote books telling the Christians about Africa and Islam. I teamed up with Jacob Mantino, a Jewish scholar with his own hardships, and we did an Arabic-Hebrew-Latin dictionary together.

Here, too, there were changes. The Italian editor of my Africa book, which he published in the 1550, made me sound much more of a Christian believer than I really was. He did what he thought worked for his time and place.

I told a story about such a predicament. Once there was a bird who could live either on the land or the sea. He lived in the air till the tax collector came around, and then flew to the water and stayed with the fish till the collector came to them. And thus he lived without paying any taxes. I will do like the bird. If the Africans are being vituperated, I'll use as an excuse that I was not born in Africa, but in Granada. And if the Granadans are being railed against, I'll find the excuse that I was not brought up in Granada.

My books got read and commented on over the centuries, and came into hands of an elderly Jewish lady, named Natalie Zemon Davis, a historian of impostors, women, and peasants in early modern times. She wrote about me as a trickster, a figure beloved in both Christian and Muslim tales, and as a man between worlds. I didn't mind these changes: they placed me in an honorable Arabic literary tradition and on the whole acting for the good.

Even more to my liking, I came to the attention of people in the theatre world, especially Antony Cimolino, director of the Stratford Festival. Soon after Natalie Davis was telling my story to Wajdi Mouawad, playwright, director, and actor in Québec and Paris. Wajdi knew my part of the world, for he had been born into a Maronite Christian family in Lebanon.

Wajdi's play has me as its inspiration, but I am not at the center of its plot. Rather it follows the love between two graduate students in New York, a Jewish lad, Eitan, studying genetics and an orphaned Arab lass, Wahida, doing her thesis on me. Their wish to marry arouses opposition from his family, especially from his father David, who turns out in a surprising discovery to have mixed ancestry himself. I try to console David with a message of self acceptance, using the bird story as my illustration.

The couple finally decide to go their separate ways for a time, with Eitan calling for an end to enmity between their two peoples.

Wajdi took my bird story for his title: *Tous des Oiseaux, Birds of a Kind*. To my delight, the play was received with enthusiasm both in its Canadian and Parisian

premieres in 2018 and continued to win rave reviews over the years in the many theatrical settings where it was performed. When it inspired political commentary, it was along the line of opposing anti-Semitism and favoring understanding between Jew and Muslim. The actors over the years, many of them Jews (including Israelis) and Arabs, certainly felt this to be the case. And Jacob Mantino and I, from our place in literary limbo, applauded.

What was our surprise, then, in the past months to learn that a group of Jewish students in Germany and some associated adults were denouncing the play— *Vögel* in its German title— as “anti-Semitic.” What can be their politics such that they would make so troubling and absurd an accusation? so Jacob and I have been asking each other. What kind of teaching are they getting in their literature courses such that they are so unable to follow the lines of a play, its messages and challenges as offered by its actors?

Jacob and I are familiar with literary denunciations from our own day in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: the Catholic inquisitors with their lists of prohibited books and the Muslim religious scholars who found some texts suspect. But we are surprised to be hearing in Munich in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the kind of prejudice expressed against *Vögel* such that Wajdi has understandably felt it can not be performed there at the current time.

Jacob and I are shaking our heads in disappointment and looking forward to the day when the bird’s message and the love of Eitan and Wahida can once again be shown on the Munich stage.

Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan, as told to Natalie Zemon Davis at the suggestion of her daughter Hannah Taïeb