

Aesop and Fable: A God of Small Things?

Hour 25

April 21, 2016

The question I would like to raise for today's discussion is, "Who was Aesop?" Or rather, "What was Aesop?" The name of Aesop appears as far back as the 7th century bce, and continues into the present. The fable stories named for him are not likely to have all been his inventions, yet the presence of this eponymous ancestor accompanies most recountings of the traditional stories. A teller of short stories, who assembles rotating casts of animal, human and even divine characters, Aesop is at times a slave, a freedman or a wise man. An old man, or of an indeterminate age, Aesop both participates in every day life and also isolates himself within the creative moment. I recommend for this discussion ancient Greek fables about the fox who crawls into a hole and struggles to find her way out again, alongside variants from India, Rome, and the twentieth century.

The Greek terms for fable - *ainos*, *muthos*, *logos* – also serve to create the identity of Aesop himself. The fable as riddle, or *ainos*, suggests an Aesop who can see a bigger picture than others, even casting his sight forward into the future. Fable as *muthos*, according to Theon, is a "false story picturing truth"

(μῦθος ἔστι λόγος ψευδῆς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν). The ability to move in speech, from falsehood to truthfulness locates Aesop as a trickster figure, capable of falsehoods that reflect reality. Aristotle, on the other hand, offers the idea of fable as *logos*, or a rhetorical form of evidence, one appropriate for a popular audience. Here Aesop is a demagogue, hero or failure, depending on his ability to persuade the people. Each of these angles on Aesop suggests a creative intelligence, a searcher for breadth who channels insights through the vivid figures of animal characters. This creativity seems to lie at the heart of the storyteller's ability, and thus is suitable to shaping the legend of Aesop. I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Focus Passage #1

The Fables are making a visit to Aesop; they are fond of him because he takes care of them. For, while Homer and Hesiod also cared for fable, and furthermore Archilochus in his lines to Lycambes, Aesop, however, makes all the affairs of men into fables. He shared the ability to speak with animals in order to express human thought, since he cuts short greedy behavior and drives away insolence and deceit. A lion explains these points for him, and a fox, and a horse, and – by Zeus – even the tortoise is not without a voice. Through these animals, children come to learn the affairs of life. And so the Fables, since they are honored because of Aesop, wait at the wise man's door to tie ribbons in his hair and to crown him with a wreath of olive shoots. And I suppose he is weaving a fable, as his smile and his eyes

fastened on the ground show this. The painter knows that the concerns of Fables require that the spirit be at ease. The painting even inquires into the persons of the fables because it places the wild animals joining with men, a chorus around Aesop, altogether representing his players. The fox is painted as the leader of the chorus because Aesop uses him as a messenger for most of his themes, just as comedy makes use of Daos.

- Philostratus, *Imagines* 1.3

Focus Passage #2

A fox driven by hunger, when she spied in the hollow of the root of an oak tree bread and meat left behind by some shepherds, entered this space and devoured/ate it down. Having her stomach swollen up, when she was not able to exit, was groaning and lamenting [her fate]. A fellow fox, passing by, when she heard her sighing, approached and asked the cause. On learning what had happened, she said to her companion, "but you must remain there until [you become] such as you were when you entered, and in this way will you slowly come out."

- anonymous, *Collectio Augustana* 24

Focus Passage #3

An old oak tree had a hollow in the root. In the hollow lay the leather pouch of a rugged goatherd, all full of stale bread and meat. A fox ran in and ate up this pouch. Her stomach, as is likely, was inflated; she no longer had the ability to get out of the narrow hole.

Another fox, approached the one weeping, mocking, “Stay!” said, “until you are hungry. You will not go out until first you have your stomach as big as when you entered.”

– Babrius, *Mythiambi Aesopei* 86

Focus Passage #4

In a certain region was a jackal whose throat was pinched by hunger. While wandering in search of food, he came upon a king’s battle ground in the midst of a forest. And as he lingered a moment there he heard a great sound. This sound troubled his heart exceedingly, so that he fell into deep dejection and said: “Ah me! Disaster is upon me. I am as good as dead already. Who made that sound? What kind of a creature?” But on peering about, he spied a war-drum that loomed like a mountain-peak, and he thought: “Was that sound its natural voice, or was it induced from without?” Now when the drum was struck by the tips of grasses swaying in the wind, it made the sound, but was dumb at other times.

So he recognized its helplessness, and crept quite near. Indeed, his curiosity led him to strike it himself on both heads, and he became gleeful at the thought: “Aha! After long waiting food comes even to me. For this is sure to be stuffed with meat and fat.”

Having come to this conclusion, he picked a spot, gnawed a hole, and crept in. And though the leather covering was tough, still he had the luck not to break his teeth. But he was disappointed to find it pure wood and skin, and recited a stanza:

‘Its voice was fierce; I thought it stuffed/
with fat, so crept within;/
And there I did not find a thing/
Except some wood and skin.’

So he backed out, laughing to himself, and said: “I thought at first that was full/ Of fat....”

– Visnu Śarma, *Pancatantra* 1.2, “The Greedy Jackal”, translated by Arthur W. Ryder, 1925

Focus Passage #5

Once by chance a pinched little fox had crept through a narrow chink into a bin of corn, and when well fed was trying with a stuffed stomach to get out again but in vain. To him a weasel hard by said: "If you wish to escape from there, you must go back lean to the narrow gap which you entered when lean."

If challenged by this fable, I give up all. I neither praise the poor man's sleep, when I am fed full on capons, nor would I barter my ease and my freedom for all the wealth of Araby.

- Horace, *Epistles* 1.7.29-36

Focus Passage #6

Pooh stopped by his friend Rabbit's house for a visit. Reluctantly (but aware that his guest will not soon depart) Rabbit offers Pooh a snack, and Pooh silently eats his honey. After emptying the pot of honey, Pooh says his goodbyes and heads out. Unfortunately, he becomes stuck in the rabbit hole and can neither get out nor step back into the warren. Rabbit tries to push Pooh out. Piglet comes by and tries to help as well but without success. Finally, Rabbit declares that Pooh will have to wait until his stomach settles (and shrinks) before they can try again.

- prose paraphrase of A.A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*, "Pooh goes visiting and gets into a tight place", 1926