

AESOP'S FABLES



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FROM THE PAGES OF *AESOP'S FABLES*

Honesty is the best policy.
(page 30)

Necessity is the mother of invention.
(page 32)

Do not count your chickens before they are hatched.
(page 40)

Look before you leap.
(page 58)

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(page 60)

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(page 93)

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(page 99)

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(page 102)

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(page 135)

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(page 137)

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(page 173)

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(page 213)

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AESOP

Aesop may not be a historical figure but rather a name that refers to a group of ancient storytellers. And if a man named Aesop did exist, it is unlikely that he committed any of his immortal fables to paper. After his presumed date of death several centuries passed before the first reliably known written collection of the stories appeared. What, then, is known of this elusive author, of whose true identity, like Homer's, we have but a hazy impression?

Tradition says that around 620 B.C., Aesop was born a slave in one of the ancient city-states in Asia Minor, on the Greek island of Samos, or in Ethiopia or another locale. A man named Xanthus owned him first, and then Iadmon; because of Aesop's marvelous wit and capacious intellect, Iadmon gave him his freedom. According to Plutarch, Aesop served as a shrewd and capable emissary to the wealthy Croesus, king of Lydia, who employed the fabulist in his court, where he dined with philosophers and from which he traveled on ambassadorial missions. The brilliant storyteller reportedly journeyed throughout Greece, doing business for Croesus and delighting the citizens of many cities with his fables.

As the fables that bear his name suggest, Aesop must have been a clever and wisely observant man, but according to one account of his death, his keen sense of human behavior was his undoing. Croesus had entrusted Aesop with a fortune in gold and sent him as an emissary to Delphi, with instructions to spread the sum throughout the land. But the avarice of the citizens disgusted Aesop, and he declined to hand out the money. Sadly, his mistrust of the people was well founded, for they executed Aesop, some say by hurling him from a cliff-top.

The death of Aesop the man had little impact on the life of his works, and collections of "Aesop's fables" grew and flourished through the ages, in both written and oral form. They were among the first printed works in the vernacular European languages, and writers and thinkers throughout history have perpetuated them to such an extent that they are embraced as among the essential truths about human beings and their ways.

THE WORLD OF AESOP AND HIS FABLES

- c. 2000 B.C. In ancient Mesopotamia proverbs and fables featuring animals are recorded on clay tablets. Probably based on older material, now lost, such stories were most likely invented independently in more than one place; prehistoric travelers carried them back and forth across the world.
- c. 620 Aesop was born a slave or possibly captured into slavery at an early age; his birthplace might have been Thrace, Phrygia, Samos, Athens, Sardis, or Ethiopia. As a young man he was taken by a slave trader to what is now Turkey. When no one would buy him, he was taken to the island of Samos, where a man said to be a philosopher called Xanthus purchased him as a servant for his wife. Later he was owned by Iadmon, a Samian, who gave Aesop his freedom.
- Seventh–sixth centuries The Seven Sages of Greece—Solon of Athens, Chilon of Sparta, Thales of Miletus, Bias of Priene, Cleobulus of Lindos, Pittacus of Mitylene, and Periander of Corinth—are revered as the source of the highest practical wisdom. According to Plutarch, Aesop is a guest at one of the sages' banquets.
- c. 560 Aesop's cunning, wisdom, and oratory had freed

- him from slavery, but this year they will cost him his life. The citizens of Delphi, offended by perceived insults to their aristocracy and the god Apollo, plant a golden cup in his baggage, then accuse him of having stolen it; they execute Aesop by throwing him off a cliff.
- 425 In his *History* of the Greco-Persian wars, the Greek historian Herodotus writes about Aesop.
- 422 In his comedy *Wasps*, Aristophanes notes that, at banquets in ancient Athens, a common entertainment was the telling of anecdotes and comic stories in the style of Aesop.
- 360 Plato records in his dialog *Phaedo* that Socrates, in prison awaiting execution, had diverted himself by writing some of Aesop's fables in verse.
- c. 300 In Athens, Demetrius Phalareus may compile the first collection of fables attributed to Aesop, but it will not survive after about 900 A.D. In India, the first of the didactic *Jataka* tales are written and will continue to be recorded until about 400 A.D.; many are based in ancient folklore and have close parallels in Aesop. Part of the canon of sacred Buddhist literature, the collection—some 550 anecdotes and fables—depicts early incarnations of the Buddha.
- c. 100 In India, a Sanskrit collection of tales is collected that will form the basis for the *Panchatantra* (see third and fourth centuries A.D.).
- First century The Roman poet Horace records, in his *Satires*, one of the most famous of Aesop's fables, "The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse" (no. 141).
- c. 15 B.C. Phaedrus is born as a slave in Thrace; at a young age he moves to Italy, where he gains his freedom. He will live until 50 A.D.
- First century A.D. In Rome, Phaedrus records the oldest surviving collection of Aesopic fables in Latin iambic verse; the five books of his collection contain

- some 94 fables. Later editors will rely heavily on Phaedrus as a source for their "Aesop's fables."
- Second century Babrius, probably a Hellenized Roman, assembles the oldest extant collection of Aesopic fables in Greek. It includes more than 200 fables, 143 of which are still extant in verse form; 57 others have survived paraphrased in prose. Babrius's Aesopic fables will also serve as a source for later editors.
- Third–fourth centuries In India, the *Panchatantra* is compiled; many of these 87 animal fables were ancient oral folktales.
- 400 Flavius Avianus rewrites in Latin verse 42 of the Greek fables from the Babrius collection. Although these stories are not as succinct as the best fables, the collection will be influential in medieval Europe and often used in schools.
- c. 1000 The great collection of Arabic short fiction *The 1001 Nights*, also known as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment*, is compiled; based on Indian, Persian, and Arabic folklore, many of the individual stories are undoubtedly even older. In addition to romantic tales of fantasy and magic, *The 1001 Nights* also contains a number of Aesop-like animal fables.
- c. 1160–1190 Marie de France, the greatest woman author of the Middle Ages, composes 103 original fables in French verse; called *ysopets*, they are in the Aesopic tradition.
- c. 1300 The Byzantine scholar Planudes Maximus compiles a well-regarded collection of Aesop's fables and writes the earliest known biography of Aesop. His most likely fictional descriptions of Aesop portray him as monstrously deformed. However, ancient texts that refer to Aesop make no mention of any such deformity.
- 1330 The popularity of fables attributed to Aesop leads to new literary creations in the same tra-

- dition. This year, an anonymous English scribe writes *Gesta Romanorum* (Deeds of the Romans); among the 283 recorded “deeds” are a dozen animal fables similar to those of Aesop.
- c. 1450 Movable-type printing is developed, greatly facilitating the publication of fable collections in vernacular languages throughout Europe.
- 1461 The first book printed in German is a collection of fables attributed to Aesop and Flavius Avianus; compiled by Ulrich Boner, it is titled *Der Edelstein* (The Precious Stone).
- c. 1476 Heinrich Steinhöwel publishes *Esopus*, a collection of fables in Latin and German; translated into French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, and Czech, it will become an international best-seller.
- 1484 William Caxton publishes an English translation of the French version of Steinhöwel’s *Esopus*; it is among the first books published in English.
- 1668–1694 Jean de La Fontaine publishes about 240 poems in the Aesopic tradition; many readers today know Aesopic fables primarily through La Fontaine’s rendition.

INTRODUCTION

“Don’t count your chickens before they are hatched!” “He is a wolf in sheep’s clothing.” “She has a sour-grapes attitude.” “They are killing the goose that laid the golden eggs.” “He demands the lion’s share.” “Don’t be like the boy who called ‘wolf!’ ” These expressions are so much a part of our everyday language and culture that they seem to have been with us forever, and that is almost the case, for the fables that produced these proverbial sayings are indeed even older than (to name but three) the modern English, French, and German languages where today they are so much at home. The fables behind these sayings are those of arguably the most famous storyteller of all time, the legendary Aesop. Who was the man who created these timeless literary gems?

The Man Aesop

Aesop (sometimes spelled Æsop, Æsopus, Esop, Esope, or—using the Greek form of his name—Aisopos) has been known in history and in legend since the fifth century B.C., or earlier, as a gifted Greek storyteller and the author of the world’s best-known collection of fables. However, it cannot be proven with any degree of certainty that he existed as a real person. Most modern scholars believe that Aesop was instead a name invented, already in antiquity, to provide attribution for a body of oral tales whose true authors were a number of anonymous storytellers. Martin Luther expressed this view some 500 years ago: “Attributing these stories to Aesop is, in my opinion, itself a fiction. Perhaps there has never been on earth a man by the

name of Aesop" (quoted in Jacobs, *History of the Aesopic Fable*, p. 15; see "For Further Reading").

Although it is possible that there was indeed a gifted Greek storyteller by the name of Aesop, his reputation expanded to legendary proportions in the decades and centuries following his death, and with time many more stories and deeds were credited to him than he could have composed and performed. Supporting this view, many of the earliest references to the stories of Aesop refer to Aesopic (or Aesopian) fables rather than Aesop's fables. In other words, Aesopic, an adjective, describes a kind of story and a literary tradition but does not claim to identify a specific author.

One thing is certain: Aesop, if he existed at all, did not leave behind a collection of written fables. His reputation is that of an oral storyteller, not an author of written literature. The oldest references to his fables refer to tales memorized and retold, not written and read. For example, from Aristophanes' comedy *Wasps* (written in 422 B.C.) we learn that telling anecdotes and comic stories in the style of Aesop was common entertainment at banquets in ancient Athens. More seriously, in 360 B.C. Plato recorded in his dialog *Phaedo* (section 61b) that Socrates, under sentence of death in prison, diverted himself by reformulating some of Aesop's fables. Plato's *Phaedo* quotes Socrates himself: "I took some fables of Aesop, which I had ready at hand and knew, and turned them into verse." The doomed philosopher did not have a book or manuscript of Aesop's fables in prison with him, if such a book or manuscript even existed at the time. He knew the fables from memory, as did the partygoers in Aristophanes' comedy.

The most frequently cited ancient reference to the man Aesop is found in the *History* of the Greco-Persian Wars written by the Greek historian Herodotus about 425 B.C. Here we learn that Aesop, the fable writer, was a slave of Iadmon, son of Hephaestopolis, a Samian, and that Iadmon's grandson (also named Iadmon) claimed and received compensation for the murder of Aesop. If this account is true, Aesop would have lived during the sixth century B.C. Apart from this sketchy biography, Herodotus recorded essentially no additional details about the fable writer.

However, later Greek and Roman writers were not so reticent. One body of literature is particularly relevant in this regard. Usually

referred to as *The Life of Aesop*, this work has survived in a number of medieval manuscripts by different anonymous compilers and is based on earlier accounts, now lost. The statements about Aesop's life history contained in the different versions of this work often contradict one another, or they are so miraculous and fantastic as to be unbelievable by modern standards.

The ultimate source of these accounts is undoubtedly folklore: anonymous legends told and retold by generations of oral storytellers. *The Life of Aesop* is today generally held to be fiction, but as is the case with many legends, there could be at least a kernel of truth in one or more of the episodes. The following biographical outline has been gleaned from different versions of *The Life of Aesop*, most prominently the accounts published by Lloyd W. Daly in his *Aesop without Morals* (pp. 31–90) and the *Everyman's Library* version of *Aesop: Fables* (pp. 17–45).

Aesop was born a slave, or possibly was captured into slavery at an early age. His birthplace is variously stated as Thrace, Phrygia, Ethiopia, Samos, Athens, or Sardis. He was dark-skinned. In fact, it is said that his name was derived from *Aethiop* (Ethiopian). He was physically deformed: a hunchback, pot belly, misshapen head, snub nose, and bandy legs are often mentioned. Although in his early years he suffered from a serious speech impediment, or—according to some—the inability to speak at all, he was cured through the intervention of a deity and became a gifted orator, especially skillful at incorporating fables into his speeches.

As a young man Aesop was transported by a slave trader to Ephesus (in modern Turkey). Because of his grotesque appearance, no one there would buy him, so he was taken to the island of Samos, where he was examined by Xanthus, identified in the manuscripts as “an eminent philosopher,” but a person whose existence cannot be verified historically. At first repulsed by Aesop's appearance, Xanthus changed his mind when the slave proclaimed, “A philosopher should value a man for his mind, not for his body.” Impressed with Aesop's astuteness, Xanthus purchased him as a manservant for his wife.

Aesop soon proved himself to be an irreverent and sarcastic trickster with a clever retort for every occasion. The following episode is typical of many others illustrating how Aesop's quick wit saved him

from punishment, sometimes deserved, sometimes not. Xanthus, wanting to know what fate awaited him on a particular day, sent Aesop to see if any crows were outside the door. According to popular belief, two crows would portend good fortune, whereas a single crow would be an omen of bad luck. Aesop saw a pair of crows and reported this to his master, who then set forth with good cheer. Upon opening the door, Xanthus saw only a single crow, for one of them had flown away, and he angrily turned on his slave for having tricked him into beginning a dangerous venture. "You shall be whipped for this!" said Xanthus, and while Aesop was being readied for his punishment a messenger arrived at the door with an invitation for Xanthus to dine with his friends. "Your omens have no meaning!" cried Aesop. "I saw the auspicious pair of crows, yet I am about to be beaten like a dog, whereas you saw the ominous single crow, and you are about to make merry with your friends." Perceiving the irony and the wisdom of this observation, Xanthus released Aesop and spared him the threatened punishment.

Aesop's cleverness extended from word to deed. An unrepentant trickster, his pranks ranged from tricking his fellow slaves into carrying the heavier burdens, to seducing his master's wife with her unwitting husband's apparent blessing. His tricks often were masked by feigned stupidity on his part, which has led commentators to compare him to the German Till Eulenspiegel and the Turkish Nasreddin Hoca, two of the world's most rascally, but beloved tricksters.

Aesop's legendary wisdom and shrewdness sometimes moved into the realm of the supernatural. He could solve seemingly impossible riddles and conundrums, foretell the future with uncanny accuracy, and unerringly discover hidden treasures. A master of human psychology, he understood what motivated people to act, and used this knowledge to manipulate them to his advantage. As his life progressed he moved to ever greater venues: from a trickster in a slave's workroom to a lecturer in a philosopher's auditorium to a diplomat and councilor in the courts of governors and kings.

With time his cunning, wisdom, and oratory skills brought him freedom from slavery, but in the end they cost him his life. At Delphi the citizens, offended by his lack of respect for their aristocracy and for their principal deity Apollo, planted a golden cup in his baggage, then accused him of temple theft.

Sentenced to die by being thrown over a cliff, Aesop pleaded his case with a series of fables, one of which was the story of "The Mouse, the Frog, and the Hawk" (no. 67 in the present collection). In this tale a frog and a mouse go swimming together in a pool with their feet tied together, but the mouse drowns. The frog, burdened by the dead mouse, is now an easy prey for a hawk, which forthwith captures and devours him.

Aesop compared himself to the mouse and the Delphians to the frog. "You may kill me," he predicted, "but my unjust death will bring you great misfortune." Aesop was executed near Delphi, and his dire prediction came true. Shortly after his death the region was visited with famine, pestilence, and warfare. The Delphians consulted the Oracle of Apollo as to the source of these calamities, and they received the answer that they were to make amends for the unjust death of Aesop. Accordingly they built there a pyramid in his honor.

Ancient Greek and Latin Collections

Unlike with later collectors, editors, and authors of tales, such as Charles Perrault, the Grimm brothers, and H. C. Andersen, it is not possible to establish an authoritative canon of stories attributable to Aesop, nor does there exist a standard version of Greek or Latin fables in the Aesopic style.

The first mentioned collection of fables attributed to Aesop is said to have been compiled in Athens by one Demetrius Phalareus about 300 B.C., but this work is no longer extant. It did not survive later than about 900 A.D., and it is not known how many stories this collection contained, nor which specific fables it included.

The oldest surviving collection of Aesopic fables was recorded in Rome in Latin iambic verse by Phaedrus during the first century A.D. Phaedrus was born as a slave about 15 B.C. in Thrace; at a young age moved to Italy, where he gained his freedom; and died about 50 A.D. Divided into five books, Phaedrus's collection contains some 94 fables. The opening lines of his prologue are instructive: "Aesop is my source. He invented the substance of these fables, but I have put them into finished form. . . . A double dowry comes with this, my little book: it moves to laughter, and by wise counsels

guides the conduct of life. Should anyone choose to run it down, because trees too are vocal, not wild beasts alone, let him remember that I speak in jest of things that never happened" (Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus*, p. 191). Later editors relied heavily on Phaedrus as a source for their "Aesop's fables."

The oldest extant collection of Aesopic fables in Greek was authored by Babrius (sometimes identified as Valerius Babrius) in the second century A.D. Apart from the deduction from his linguistic style that he was a Hellenized Roman, nothing is known about the person Babrius. His collection included more than 200 fables, 143 of which are still extant in their original verse form, with an additional 57 having survived in prose paraphrases. Like the collection of his predecessor Phaedrus, Babrius's Aesopic fables also served as a source for later editors.

Among the many classical authors who used Aesop-like stories in their own works, none is more important than the Roman satirist and poet Horace (65–8 B.C.). In fact, one of the most famous of all fables attributed to Aesop, "The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse" (no. 141), was first recorded by Horace in his *Satires* (book 2, no. 6). The context is revealing, showing how traditional fables were used in classical Roman society. The narrator relates that from time to time a man named Cervius would tell fables to his friends, and whenever one of them would "forget the dreads of wealth, he'd tell this one." The narrator continues by recounting the now-familiar fable in full. Some 200 years later Babrius recorded "The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse" in his collection of Aesopic fables, and it has been credited to Aesop from that time forth.

From the Middle Ages to the Present

Aesopic fables were highly valued in medieval and renaissance Europe for their ethical qualities, and many collections were assembled for educational use. The first of these were compilations in manuscript form and in Latin. An early and prominent example of these school texts was the compilation created in about 400 A.D. by Flavius Avianus, who rewrote in Latin verse 42 of the Greek fables from the Babrius collection. Although his stories lacked the compactness

and the sharp focus of the best fables, his collection was nonetheless very influential in medieval Europe, and was often used in schools.

The development of movable-type printing, beginning about 1450, greatly facilitated the publication of fable collections in vernacular languages throughout Europe. In fact, apparently the first book printed in the German language was a collection of fables. (The famous Gutenberg Bible of 1455 was in Latin.) This collection was the work of Ulrich Boner, a Swiss Dominican monk, who in about 1350 compiled a manuscript collection of fables titled *Der Edelstein* (The Precious Stone) and attributed to Aesop and Flavius Avianus. After circulating for more than a century in manuscript form, *Der Edelstein* was printed as a book in 1461, and is reputed to be the first book printed in the German language.

Another German-language author, Heinrich Steinhöwel (1412–1483), contributed even more to the European distribution of Aesopic fables in the vernacular. His *Esopus*, a bilingual collection of fables in Latin and German, was published in about 1476 and soon became, relatively speaking, an international bestseller. This book was translated into French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, and Czech. The French-language version of Steinhöwel's *Esopus* was translated into English and published in 1484 by William Caxton, the pioneering English printer. Thus a collection of Aesopic fables was also among the very first books published in the English language.

The popularity of fables attributed to Aesop from the Middle Ages onward led quite naturally to new literary creations in the same tradition. One such work was the so-called *Gesta Romanorum* (Deeds of the Romans), written in Latin by an anonymous English scribe about 1330. Only a few of the 283 recorded “deeds” relate to the Romans. Instead, the work presents a mixture of anecdotes, legends, and fables, all with appended morals, called “applications.” About a dozen of the stories are animal fables, similar in content, form, and function to those of Aesop.

Medieval imitations of Aesop led to a new word in French, *ysopet* (also spelled *isopet*), referring to a collection of freshly minted fables in the Aesopic tradition. The most famous of these *ysopets* are the *Fables* of Marie de France, numbering 103 and composed in French verse between about 1160 and 1190. Although she is celebrated as the greatest woman author of the Middle Ages, almost nothing is