

Complete Fables of Gaius Julius Phaedrus Illustrated

THE FABLES: PROSE TRANSLATION

*Translated by Henry
Thomas Riley, 1887*

Flourishing in the first century AD, Gaius Julius Phaedrus was a Roman fabulist and the first recorded versifier of Aesop's fables into Latin. Very few facts are known about Phaedrus and there was little mention of his work during late antiquity. It was not until the discovery of a few imperfect manuscripts during the Renaissance that his importance as a teller of fables emerged. His fables survive in five books, accompanied with various prologues and epilogues.

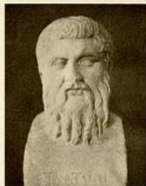
Traditionally, the *Aesopica* is a collection of fables credited to Aesop, a slave and storyteller believed to have lived in ancient Greece between 620 and 564 BC. Of diverse origins, the didactic tales associated with his name have descended to modern times through a number of sources and continue to be reinterpreted in different verbal registers.

Regarding Phaedrus' life, scholars have deduced from autobiographical hints in the extant fables a few

facts. He was born in Macedonia, probably in Pydna, in c. 15 BC and he came to Rome as a slave and was freed by Augustus. He probably served as a teacher for a time, before his first book of his poems appeared in the reign of Tiberius. However, envious competitors interpreted the morals of his fables as critical of the current regime and he was tried by Sejanus, the Emperor's powerful official. In the prologue of the third book, Phaedrus pleads with a Eutyclus to intercede on his behalf, which appears to have been successful. He survived these unstable times into old age, possibly serving under Claudius. Phaedrus went on to complete two more books of fables and died towards the middle of the first century AD. Still, these few statements are regarded by some scholars as dubious.

Gaius Julius Phaedrus

- Born c. 15 B.C in Pydna of Roman, Macedonia
- Died 50 AD in Italy
- Roman Fabulist
- First writer to Latinize books of fables, producing it in iambic metre of Greek prose fables and made extensive use of Aesop's Fables



The first writer of fables in Latin, retelling the Aesopic tales in a loose iambic metre, Phaedrus remains an important writer in the history of world literature. The dates of composition and publication are unknown, though Seneca the Younger, writing between 41 and 43 AD, recommends in a letter to Claudius' freedman Polybius that he turn his hand to Latinising Aesop, 'a task hitherto not attempted by Roman genius', implying that nothing was known of Phaedrus' work at that time. By the mid-80s Martial was imitating Phaedrus and mentions his mischievous humour (*improbi jocos Phaedri*). The next reference to Phaedrus is a homage by his fellow fabulist Avianus, written much later in the fourth century.

A ninth century manuscript of Phaedrus' fables was only discovered in France towards the end of the sixteenth century and published in 1596 by Pierre Pithou as *Fabularum Aesopiarum libri quinque*. It was followed by two more editions before century's end. Close to the beginning of the eighteenth century, a manuscript of the fifteenth century bishop Niccolò Perotti was discovered at Parma, containing sixty-four fables of Phaedrus, of which thirty were previously unknown. These new fables were first published in 1808, and their versions were afterwards superseded by the discovery of a much better preserved manuscript of Perotti, held in the Vatican Library and published in 1831. Scholars realised that Phaedrus' work had also

served as the basis for mediaeval fable collections that survived under the name of Romulus.

Phaedrus' fables are composed in a lively terse and simple Latin verse, with some elaborate style, and serving as excellent models for students of the language. They were not written only to amuse and teach, but also to provide compelling satirical comments on the turbulent social and political life of first century Rome.

PREFACE.

IN THE TRANSLATION of Phædrus, the Critical Edition by Orellius, 1831, has been used, and in the *Æsopian Fables*, the text of the Parisian Edition of Gail, 1826. The Notes will, it is believed, be found to embody the little that is known of the contemporary history of the Author.

H. T. R.

BOOK I.

THE PROLOGUE.

THE MATTER WHICH *Æsop*, the inventor of *Fables*, has provided, I have polished in Iambic verse. The advantages of *this* little work are twofold — that it excites laughter, and by counsel guides the life of

man . But if any one shall think fit to cavil, because not only wild beasts, but even trees speak, let him remember that we are disporting in fables.

Fable I. THE WOLF AND THE LAMB.

DRIVEN BY THIRST, a Wolf and a Lamb had come to the same stream; the Wolf stood above, and the Lamb at a distance below. Then, the spoiler, prompted by a ravenous maw, alleged a pretext for a quarrel. “Why,” said he, “have you made the water muddy for me *while I am* drinking?” The Fleece-bearer, trembling, *answered* : “Prithee, Wolf, how can I do what you complain of? The water is flowing downwards from you to where I am drinking.” The other, disconcerted by the force of truth, *exclaimed* : “Six months ago, you slandered me.” “Indeed,” answered the Lamb, “I was not born *then* .” “By Hercules,” said *the Wolf* , “*then ’twas* your father slandered me;” and so, snatching him up, he tore him to pieces, killing him unjustly.

This Fable is applicable to those men who, under false pretences, oppress the innocent.

Fable II. THE FROGS ASKING FOR A KING.

When Athens¹ was flourishing under just laws, liberty grown wanton embroiled the city, and license relaxed the reins of ancient discipline. Upon this, the partisans of factions conspiring, Pisistratus the Tyrant² seized the citadel. When the Athenians were lamenting their sad servitude (not that he was cruel, but because every burden is grievous to those who are unused to it), and began to complain, Æsop related a Fable to the following effect: —

“The Frogs, roaming at large in their marshy fens, with loud clamour demanded of Jupiter a king, who, by *his* authority, might check their dissolute manners. The Father of the Gods smiled, and gave them a little Log, which, on being thrown *among them* startled the timorous race by the noise and sudden commotion in the bog. When it had lain for some time immersed in the mud, one *of them* by chance silently lifted his head

¹ This probably alludes to the government of Solon, when Archon of Athens.

² From Suidas and Eusebius we learn that Æsop died in the fifty-fourth Olympiad, while Pisistratus did not seize the supreme power at Athens till the first year of the fifty-fifth. These dates, however, have been disputed by many, and partly on the strength of the present passage.

above the water, and having taken a peep at the king, called up all the rest. Having got the better of their fears, vying with each other, they swim towards him, and the insolent mob leap upon the Log. After defiling it with every kind of insult, they sent to Jupiter, requesting another king, because the one that had been given them was useless. Upon this, he sent them a Water Snake,³ who with his sharp teeth began to gobble them up one after another. Helpless they strive in vain to escape death; terror deprives them of voice. By stealth, therefore, they send through Mercury a request to Jupiter, to succour them in their distress. Then said the God in reply: ‘Since you would not be content with your good fortune, continue to endure your bad fortune.’

“Do you also, O fellow-citizens,” said *Æsop*, “submit to the present evil, lest a greater one befall you.”

³ Pliny tells us that the “hydrus” lives in the water, and is exceedingly venomous. Some Commentators think that Phædrus, like *Æsop*, intends to conceal a political meaning under this Fable, and that by the Water-Snake he means Caligula, and by the Log, Tiberius. Others, perhaps with more probability, think that the cruelty of Tiberius alone is alluded to in the mention of the snake. Indeed, it is doubtful whether Phædrus survived to the time of Caligula: and it is more generally believed that the First and Second Books were written in the time of Augustus and Tiberius.

Fable III. THE VAIN JACKDAW AND THE PEACOCK.

THAT ONE OUGHT not to plume oneself on the merits which belong to another, but ought rather to pass his life in his own proper guise, Æsop has given us this illustration: —

A Jackdaw, swelling⁴ with empty pride, picked up some feathers which had fallen from a Peacock, and decked himself out *therewith* ; upon which, despising his own *kind* , he mingled with a beauteous flock of Peacocks. They tore his feathers from off the impudent bird, and put him to flight with their beaks. The Jackdaw, *thus* roughly handled, in grief hastened to return to his own kind; repulsed by whom, he had to submit to sad disgrace. Then said one of those whom he had formerly despised: “If you had been content with our station, and had been ready to put up with what nature had given, you would neither have experienced the former affront, nor would your ill fortune have had to feel *the additional pang* of this repulse.”

⁴ Scheffer thinks that Sejanus is alluded to under this image.

Fable IV. THE DOG CARRYING SOME MEAT ACROSS A RIVER.

HE WHO COVETS what belongs to another, deservedly loses his own.

As a Dog, swimming⁵ through a river, was carrying a piece of meat, he saw his own shadow in the watery mirror; and, thinking that it was another booty carried by another *dog*, attempted to snatch it away; but his greediness *was* disappointed, he both dropped the food which he was holding in his mouth, and was after all unable to reach that at which he grasped.

Fable V. THE COW, THE SHE-GOAT, THE SHEEP, AND THE LION.

AN ALLIANCE WITH the powerful is never to be relied upon: the present Fable testifies the truth of my maxim.

⁵ Lessing finds some fault with the way in which this Fable is related, and with fair reason. The Dog swimming would be likely to disturb the water to such a degree, that it would be impossible for him to see with any distinctness the reflection of the meat. The version which represents him as crossing a bridge is certainly more consistent with nature.

A Cow, a She-Goat, and a Sheep⁶ patient under injuries, were partners in the forests with a Lion. When they had captured a Stag of vast bulk, thus spoke the Lion, after it had been divided into s...s: "Because my name is Lion, I take the first; the second you will yield to me because I am courageous; then, because I am the strongest,⁷ the third will fall to my lot; if anyone touches the fourth, woe betide him."

Thus did unscrupulousness seize upon the whole prey for itself.

Fable VI. THE FROGS' COMPLAINT AGAINST THE SUN.

⁶ Lessing also censures this Fable on the ground of the partnership being contrary to nature; neither the cow, the goat, nor the sheep feed on flesh.

⁷ Some critics profess to see no difference between "sum fortis" in the eighth line, and "plus valeo" here; but the former expression appears to refer to his courage, and the latter to his strength. However, the second and third reasons are nothing but reiterations of the first one, under another form. Davidson remarks on this passage: "I am not certain that the Poet meant any distinction; nay, there is, perhaps, a propriety in supposing that he industriously makes the Lion plead twice upon the same title, to represent more strongly by what unjust claims men in power often invade the property of another."