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Jean de La Fontaine: The Fables of La Fontaine

(1668)

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Genre: Fable. Country: France.

When the first *Fables choisies, mises en vers par Monsieur de La Fontaine* [*Selected Fables, set to verse by M. de La Fontaine*] were released in 1668, the poet was forty-seven years old. From then on, he would continue to experiment with a poetic form which he turned towards a wider audience. La Fontaine made his fables a humble but crucial vantage point on human nature and the society of his time, in the manner of La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680)'s *Maximes* and La Bruyère (1645-1696)'s *Caractères*. He thus expanded the genre's potential, as his style benefited from his practice of many other literary forms: tale, epic, idyll, novel, and dramatic genres. Indeed, the *Fables*' lyrical quality results from their versatility, their allusive yet suggestive manner, their musical and rhythmical inventiveness, and from the discrete yet intimate presence of the fabulist behind the scenes.

If, today, La Fontaine's *Fables* are cherished as one of the most familiar works of French literature, many of his apologues first circulated sporadically, and often anonymously. They appeared as independent booklets (*Le Curé et le Mort* [*The Priest and the Dead Man*] and *Le Soleil et les Grenouilles* [*The Sun and the Frogs*], 1672), or were slipped into composite collections, such as *Poésies chrétiennes et diverses* (1670), a Jansenist collection, *Les Fables nouvelles et autres poésies* (1671), *Ouvrages de prose et de poésie des sieurs de Maucroix et de La Fontaine* (1685), and the 1693 anthology *Recueil de vers choisis* collected by Dominique Bouhours (1628-1702). Some fables were even read in front of the prestigious Académie Française after La Fontaine was admitted in 1684, while others appeared in the *Mercurie galant*, a gazette intended for the elite readers of the epoch. The dissemination of certain poems thus preceded the publication of each new volume of *Fables choisies*. After the 1668 edition, which was organized into six books, the second edition was published in 1678 (books 7-8) and 1679 (books 9-11). Finally, a last book was released in 1694, a year before La Fontaine's death. These twelve books were assembled posthumously into a single volume, forming La Fontaine's "ample comédie à cent actes divers / Et dont la scène est l'univers" ["ample comedy in a hundred different acts / Whose stage is the universe", *Fables*, V, 1]. The editorial history of the *Fables* thus gives a full account of the variety of intentions and the diversity of forms and tones that are La Fontaine's signature style. It is important to note that this project evolved dramatically over the course of twenty-six years. All three editions prove very different in style, and draw from varied sources.

The first six books result from an amalgamation of three traditions: satire, education, and humanism. Being secretly influenced by the Roman fabulist Phaedrus (c. 15 BC - c. AD 50), they continued the ancient use of apologue as a satirical tool. But they were strategically placed under Æsop's name: the poems are preceded by *La Vie d'Ésope le Phrygien* [*The Life of Æsop the Phrygian*], they use the Æsopic corpus as their main source, and many fables even include the Greek fabulist among their characters. This volume plays with the didactic

tradition of the genre. Since Antiquity, Apologues have served as a canvas to train rhetorical and stylistic skills. *La Cigale et la Fourmi* [*The Cicada and the Ant*], the first poem of the volume, elaborates on the first exercise from an ancient textbook still extensively used at the time: the *Progymnasmata* by Aphthonius (second half of the 4th century). Furthermore, the collection is rooted in La Fontaine's appreciation for humanist apologues left by Italian poets such as Gabriele Faëro (*Centum fabulae*, 1563) and Giovanni M. Verdizzoti (*Cento Favole*, 1570). In France, this scholarly tradition is reminiscent of medieval practices, both in its popular and literate forms (such as Marie de France's fables). It also meets the new culture elaborated in "Parlements" [courts of law] and erudite circles from the 16th century onwards, as fables, like proverbs, adages and other gnomic forms, conveniently and pleasantly express the truth, or prove arguments in a simple and clear manner.

La Fontaine's "tour de force" consists in the way in which he adapts all three styles of writing for the public of the *salons*. He thus metamorphoses a satirical tool into a wider and wiser means of highlighting human flaws. He also changes a rhetorical material into a poetic one, an erudite manner into a familiar one – and, lastly, a popular and collective good into a refined and subjective artefact. The apologue finds a place among other witty poetic forms valued by the *honnêtes gens*, the educated elite. In this perspective, their brevity is one of their most praised features, and their moralities often appear as quips rather than universal and impersonal rules. La Fontaine transcends a standardized expression of moral rules in favour of an ethical personal inquiry.

1668 was the year when Louis XIV's son, to whom the work is dedicated, started his training as future king. La Fontaine participated in a vast movement of publications devoted to his education. After 1674, La Fontaine came under the protection of Mme de Montespan (1640-1707), Louis XIV's mistress. She was impressed by La Fontaine's fame among the worldly public, and her benevolence influenced the direction of the second major installment of his *Fables*. While the first *Fables* were evocative of an archaic French style, La Fontaine adopts a more lyrical and intimate tone in the second instalment, allowing himself digressions as his poems grow longer, his narratives become less mechanical, and his models diversify. He credits Pilpay (or Bidpai) for providing him with new themes, new settings, and new characters thanks to the French translation entitled *Le Livre des lumières* [*The Book of Lights*, 1644]. La Fontaine draws heavily from Oriental and Indian sources, such as *Kalila and Dimna* by the Persian Ibn-al-Muqaffa, *Panchatantra* by Bidpai, Saadi, and Alcmán. It should be noted that many Oriental sources had been previously assimilated to Occidental ones, as the Eastern and Western fable traditions were derived from a common origin. For example, *La Laitière et le Pot au lait* [*The Milkmaid and the Milkpot*] (VII, 9) might have come from the *Panchatantra* through Latin translations, or through Bonaventure des Périers' adaptation in a Western setting. In fact, approximately twenty of the ninety-eight fables in the volume are directly imitated from Oriental sources. The exoticism of these fables serves to reinforce complicity with the reader and to enhance the poems' efficiency. Allusions to the East, which are widespread throughout the collection, highlight the fictitious nature of the tales and playfully emphasize their direct connections to the reader's world. Oriental fables also play an important role as narrative models. La Fontaine exploits a formal characteristic of Eastern apologues: the inclusion of one story in another, the different parts of the poems weaving subtle connections together. In short, whatever sources he draws from, La Fontaine Orientalizes his material. He also gives more importance to actual contemporary facts and figures, be it international events (*Le Rat qui s'est retiré du monde* [*The Rat who withdrew from the World*], VI, 3), or court characters as Louis XIV's legitimized son (*Pour le duc du Maine* [*To his Lordship the Duke of Maine*], XII, 2).

In spite of the influence of these seventeenth-century intellectuals, the *Fables* cannot be characterized as purely philosophical poetry. Lucretius' *De Rerum natura* is a distant model. La Fontaine has a playful relationship with erudition. His irony and levity blur the lines. Philosophy is but one of the many discourses that constitute a multivocal work. Two debates illustrate the importance of Epicurism and the way La Fontaine reformulates its main notions. The first one is related to Descartes' definition of animal as a machine, a mechanism ruled by instinct, deprived of reason and will. In his *Discours à Madame de La Sablière* (IX), La Fontaine refutes this radically dualist approach that defines intelligence as alien to the body. To him, living beings form a single community, and animals are intelligent beings. This strengthens the relevance of the animal metaphor,

fundamental to the apologue, and enhances the power of imagination as a link between body and soul – thus defining poetry as a suitable means to reach truth. A second crucial notion derived from Epicurism is the one of pleasure. But, if pleasure is a significant value conveyed by the poems, it is clearly not defined as the absence of emotions and passions put forward by Epicurism. Peace of mind is valued but never achieved, it is praised as an asymptotic ideal, and portrayed in an elegiac and nostalgic light. Allusions to philosophers and philosophies help define the nature of poetry as opposed to the turmoil of the world. La Fontaine celebrates the power of imagination as necessary to human nature. Accepting our follies and faults might be the only way to achieve wisdom. This position brings La Fontaine closer to the Augustinian disenchantment that was widespread in the culture of the elites: his *Fables* show affinities with Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)'s thought about religion.

The third and last instalment, published in 1694, is composed of twenty-nine new poems. Despite its title, *Fables choisies*, it includes two tales, *La Matrone d'Éphèse* [*The Matron of Ephesus*] after the *Satyricon* by Petronius (c. AD 27 - 66 AD), and *Belphegor*, after Machiavelli (1469-1527), two poetic pieces translated from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and a poem "imitated from Theocritus", *Daphnis and Alcimadure*. It can be argued that La Fontaine's rewriting of his models transforms these different pieces into fables. Nevertheless, this enlarging of the genre is striking. Another originality of Book XII lies in the dialogue with Louis de Bourbon at its opening. La Fontaine portrays himself as an old poet playing with the king's grandson, pretending to be his pupil. More generally, the nostalgic tone of the collection makes it a somehow disillusioned meditation on human nature, far from the initial didactic role of the genre.

Despite the multi-faceted evolution of La Fontaine's project and style, some features remain constant, such as a complex game with the expression of morality, very often made implicit, mischievous, allusive or only partially relevant. While his extensive use of dialogue turns the apologue into a tiny theatrical stage, La Fontaine's mastery of irregular verse and its potential for rhythm and music gives his fables a conversational and familiar tone. Instead of preaching or teaching, the poet becomes the reader's accomplice and confidant, and his work serves as a school for wit. References to current political events add to that impression, as well as his use of well-known material. In his *Préface* dated 1668, La Fontaine praises the pithy style of Latin fables, and explains how he chose to compensate the lack of concision in French language by giving his poems a cheerful tone, which he maintains throughout his work: he shrewdly harmonizes many shades, from the slightly farcical to the utterly tragic, adopting a prudent distance towards society and royal power.

La Fontaine was not the first French writer to publish fables, but his predecessors used the genre as a material for moral meditation. His real achievement consists in the poetic depth of his work, one that transcends its didactic, political, satirical, and philosophical dimensions. The apologue becomes a crucible where literary possibilities meld, a real-world response to the impossibility of Epic – La Fontaine and his contemporaries could only observe the failure of epics written in French in the 1650s. As La Fontaine often illustrates the power of speech and fiction, his fables' reflexive quality participates in their modernity. There lies the political essence of these poems. La Fontaine's position towards Louis XIV and absolutism has been depicted in many irreconcilable ways. Rather than the quest for an unobtainable body of governing maxims, their political nature might lie in the way they solicit the readers' interpretive skills and sharpen their ability to see the world more clearly.

The success of the *Fables* was immediate, as proven by Mme de Sévigné's enthusiastic comments in her correspondence. Though they were not meant for children, they have been used for didactic purposes even during the poet's lifetime: Fénelon, the preceptor to Louis XIV's grandson to whom the last book is dedicated, had his pupil rewrite them. They have been translated and imitated by many writers, like the Anglo-Dutch Bernard de Mandeville (1670–1733). The text was illustrated many times since its first edition where François Chauveau's engravings, with their small size and their witty compositions, offer a perfect counterpart to the poet's manner. Later, Gustave Doré and other artists from around the world have interpreted and transposed the fables into ever-changing contexts, paying their tribute to this familiar yet unique literary work.

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