The Birth of the Fable

Video Transcript

Aesop is the name associated with a collection of Greek fables that have become a significant part of the stories and morality associated with Western civilization.

While scattered details of the life of Aesop are cited by multiple ancient sources, including Aristotle, Herodotus, and Plutarch, his existence remains unclear and no writings by him survive. It’s possible that “Aesop” was no more than a name invented to provide a source for fables centering on beasts, so that “a story of Aesop” became synonymous with “fable.”

The fables attributed to Aesop are generally brief tales depicting the interactions between animals who act like humans. They contain the "bare minimum" of a story: character(s), a short plot, and a message. Their message is generally explicit and presented either before or after the fable.

The fables originally belonged to the oral tradition and probably date back to 7th century BCE. However, they were not collected until Demetrius Phalereus produced the first-known collection of Aesop’s fables in the 4th century BCE. Phaedrus generated another collection in Rome in the 1st century CE, and this latter collection proved incredibly influential on the use of Aesop’s fables by later writers, such as the 17th-century French poet Jean de La Fontaine.

Collections of Aesop's fables were among the earliest books printed and were distributed in a variety of languages. They were initially packaged for adults, covering religious, social, and political themes. They were also put to use as ethical guides in the education of children from the Renaissance onward. This ethical dimension was reinforced in the adult world through depiction in sculpture, painting, and other illustrative means, as well as adaptation to drama and song.

Can you remember the first time you encountered a fable by Aesop? Perhaps it was the “Tortoise and the Hare,” “The Lion and the Mouse,” or “Belling the Cat.”
What was it about the fable that you remember? Why or how did it appeal to you?

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