

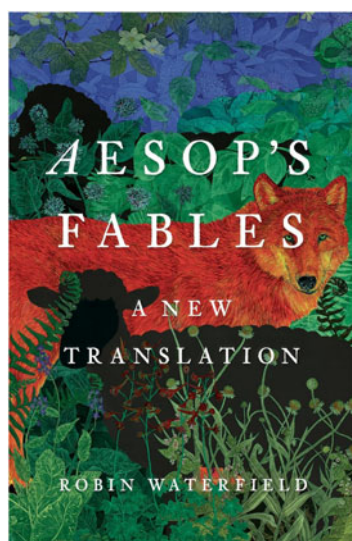
Book Review

Aesop's Fables. A New Translation

Waterfield (R.) Pp. viii+325. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2024. Cased US\$30. ISBN: 978-1-5416-0484-1.

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Everyone knows some of these tales, even if they do not know where they come from. It was this mysterious Greek author who told us about sour grapes, crying wolf, and being a dog in the manger. The actual Aesop is as unknown as the actual Homer, and throughout antiquity 'Aesop once said' would introduce tales of human foibles, often dressed in the allegorical guise of animal stories. Even Socrates was given to producing Aesopic tales in verse, according to Diogenes

Laertius (2.42). Their Greek style is deceptively simple – indeed, the first 14 of the 'Greek Stories' in Taylor and Waite's *GCSE Reader* are by Aesop, and his short engaging tales make for excellent unseen material.

In translation, Aesop has been seen as good material for young children to read: cartoonish tales of talking animals and some safe life lessons thrown in, telling us (e.g.) to look before we leap (Fable 140) and to avoid teaching grandmother to suck eggs (Fable 185). Waterfield's new book is unlikely, however, to find its way on to the Early Years curriculum in the near future. Even the most broad-minded parent might balk at reading to their 4-year-old the tale (Fable 351) of the girl who thought that her dim wits would be solved by allowing a man whom she saw 'fucking a donkey' to take her virginity: or that of the compliant husband (Fable 344) who invited his wife to have sex with her lover inside his house, or the bizarre Fable 333 asking 'why we examine our own shit'. This translation does not, then, spare any blushes, but then these fables are not a million miles away from the ribald world of old comedy – the slave Xanthias in Aristophanes' *Wasps* (line 64) describes that play as a 'little tale with a moral' – or from the world of the diatribe

in the hands of Bion of Borysthene, or the tales told by and about Diogenes the Cynic. The tale of the 'belly and the body' (Fable 22) finds its way into both Roman history (Livy [2.32] puts it into the mouth of Menenius Agrippa) and the New Testament (1 *Corinthians* 12.14–23). When Roman satirists such as Horace (*Satires* 1.1.32–8) used Aesop's fable of the ant and the cicada (Fable 46), they knew that their readers would spot the reference. These fables are not, then, primarily aimed at children, and the modern relevance of some of them is very striking – Fable 197 ('The Wethers and the Butcher') is impossible to read now without hearing in one's head Martin Niemöller's poem 'First they came for the Communists . . .'. The Fables give us social criticism – doctors in particular get a fair amount of stick for being crooks (e.g. Fable 363) – and some of the critique of (e.g.) avarice is close to that found in Theophrastus' *Characters*. There is sharp political criticism of the sneering despotic Demetrius of Phalerum (Fable 334) who mocks the pre-eminent poet Menander as 'a nancy who dares to come into my presence swiveling his hips', and some (less targeted) political satire in tales such as Fable 239 ('The King of the Monkeys'). Named individuals (Simonides, Socrates, Diogenes, and of course, Aesop himself) walk onto the pages of these stories, and the woman from Sybaris is mocked (Fable 4) for her manner of speech (here rendered into broad Scots).

Many of these fables can be triggering when read today (*caveat lector!*): there is abuse of a Black slave (Fable 361), misogyny (e.g. Fable 371), transphobia (the gender-fluid hyenas in Fables 203 and 218), and what looks now like homophobia (Fables 398 and 392). Waterfield's selection of 400 tales (from the 700 or so we know of) lets us read these stories as they are: they are neither sensationalised nor sanitised. This new translation (following in the footsteps of Gibbs in the Oxford World's Classics series [2008] and Temple in Penguin [1998]) is always readable and always faithful to the Greek. Where Aesop is coy (as in his use of the medical term ἀρχός for the more colloquial term προκτόρ for 'rectum' in Fable 398), Waterfield is also discreet ('backside'), but he is not afraid to use US slang where it makes the tale flow better. The town mouse and the country mouse 'decided to hang out together' in Fable 58, the 'sociopathic cat' managed to 'put the wind up' the family of pigs living below her, the widow in Fable 354 is 'crying phony tears', and the eagle is feeling 'blue' in Fable 112 – but I wonder if his use in Fable 370 of the word 'faggot' (for ῥάβδος ['stick']) might upset or confuse his US market.

The main drawback with the book is that it has no index and no list of all the titles, so finding your chosen fable is not easy. The production quality is high: I did not see any typos and the text is elegantly printed on good paper in a very readable font. There is an excellent introduction and some concise and helpful notes at the back of the book. Waterfield gives us both the Aesop we expect – all those tales which we have known since infant school – along with a darker and more mature world of social and political commentary, which deserves to be read afresh.

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