

Absolutely fabulous

Riddle: Who is known to many but familiar to none?

Answer: Aesop.

There can be no ancient author of whom a greater number of misconceptions circulate than Aesop. A large proportion of the population 'thinks it knows him' because they 'read Aesop's Fables' when they were children. People will repeat 'Aesop' morals, such as 'Haste Makes Waste', and 'Pride Comes Before a Fall', which they have remembered since childhood. They are convinced that they thus *know* Aesop.

But the truth is quite different. The morals familiar to so many are not authentic. They were invented by Victorian so-called 'translators'. The famous Croxall translation of Aesop's Fables is much more than 50% Croxall, and many of the later 'translations' were simply rehashed or reworded Croxall. The earlier Le Strange translation was much more reliable, but it fell out of fashion because it was in such antiquated language that by Victorian times it was considered unreadable by the public.

A false Aesop has thus been set loose upon the world for a century and a half, like a kind of Frankenstein monster, and he has lumbered clumsily into the bedrooms of countless children and mumbled into their ears inauthentic words which have about as much connection with the true Aesop texts as this article has with a speech by Cicero.

There have also been about a hundred fables which have never been translated into English until now in any form, even a distorted one. We cannot understand why the Loeb Library never did Aesop. They expended a lot of time and scholarly effort upon Babrius and Phaedrus, who were affected versifiers and dilettantes who turned fables into puff-pastries, but Aesop's Fables were only given an incomplete – and not always reliable – précis treatment in an appendix, as if Aesop were the poor relation whom one did not produce at dinner parties.

Since the Loeb Library chose to hide Aesop in a broom cupboard, we decided to bring him out into the air, dust him thoroughly, and show him off. The result: Penguin Classics 1, Loeb Library 0.

There are of course a number of shocks in store for the squeamish. There is, for instance, Fable 262, entitled 'The Asses Appealing to Zeus':



Aesop and his character the fox.

One day, the asses tired of suffering and carrying heavy burdens so they sent some representatives to Zeus, asking him to put a limit on their workload. Wanting to show them that this was impossible, Zeus told them that they would be delivered from their misery only when they could make a river from their piss. The asses took this reply seriously and, from that day until now, whenever they see ass-piss anywhere, they stop in their tracks to piss too.

The real Aesop is very coarse stuff, and we have not shrunk from accuracy. Greek peasants were rude folk, and their jokes were rough. There is very little compassion in Aesop, mostly a 'kick him while he's down' mentality, as Fable 240, 'The Ant', shows:

Once upon a time, the ant used to be human – a farmer who, not content with his own yield, kept an envious eye on his neighbour's harvest and stole it. Zeus was angered by his greed and changed him into the insect that we call an ant. But, even though his body was altered, his character was not. To this day he still traverses the fields collecting other people's wheat and barley and storing it up for himself.

We have altered a number of treasured translations to accord with accuracy, as with Fable 32, 'The Fox and the Bunch of Grapes':

A famished fox, seeing some bunches of grapes hanging [from a vine which had grown] in a tree, wanted to take some, but could not reach them. So he went away, saying to himself: 'Those are unripe.'

The word *omphakes* can indeed mean 'sour', but we thought it was more accurate to translate it as 'unripe', since when Greeks spoke of grapes being *omphakes* they tended to mean they weren't ripe yet, and any sourness was the result of the unripeness. Or is our re-translation simply a case of sour grapes?

There were a number of words in Aesop which do not appear in Liddell & Scott, so that sent us on some thrilling chases involving a great deal of fun. Fable 75 has a bird in it called a *botalis*.

Olivia and Robert Temple sing the praises of Aesop.

We won't spoil your own fun by telling you what it is. So before you all rush out and buy our *Aesop: The Complete Fables*, we set you this puzzle: what is the bird in that fable who chats to the bat? The answer is to be found in Aristotle's zoological works. And no, it is *not* a canary!

Some of the fables required the working out of incredibly obtuse puns, without an elucidation of which the fables make no sense at all. We even show how the unknown Hebrew author of the Biblical *Book of Judges* who borrowed an Aesop fable missed the joke entirely and got the meaning wrong; so misunderstandings of the puns have been going on for many millennia! The most bizarre of the puns explains Fable 294, 'The Child and the Raven', but we keep that one up our sleeve too. You must go out and spend your hard-earned £5.99 to get the answer. But here is a tasty little morsel to make you really sick in the meantime:


Fable 292. 'The Child Who Ate the Sacrificial Viscera'

Some shepherds sacrificed a goat in the countryside and invited their neighbours. Among these was a poor woman who brought her child with her. As the feast progressed, the child, whose stomach was distended with too much food, felt ill and cried: 'Mother, I'm bringing up my guts!' 'Not yours,' she replied, 'but those you have eaten.'

Readers of *ad familiares* will not need to be told that the viscera of the sacrificial animal were eaten first at such feasts.

We close with a very exasperated animal indeed, Fable 321, *The Sheared Sheep*:

A sheep who had been clumsily sheared said to the person who had done it: 'If it's my wool you want, then cut higher up. If you want my meat, then just kill me and get it over with. But don't keep torturing me like this.'

If it's our book you want, then why not just get it over with? 

• Aesop: The Complete Fables, translated by Olivia and Robert Temple, has just been published by Penguin.