A comparative approach to beast fables in Greek songmaking, Part 1: A would-be Aesopic werewolf

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:

A comparative approach to beast fables in Greek songmaking, Part 1: A would-be Aesopic werewolf

May 31, 2019 | By Gregory Nagy

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§0. In a work of mine on fables, dating back to 2011, I noted a distinction made in the ancient world between two kinds of fable. In the first kind, ordinarily known as the 'Aesopic' fable, the storytelling concentrates on animals as characters—from here on I refer to them generically as beasts—whereas the characters we find in the second kind of fable, known as 'Sybaritic', are ordinarily humans, not beasts. In what follows, I analyze briefly a fable that seems Sybaritic on the outside but reveals Aesopic elements in the deep structure of its storytelling. The story is commonly known as The Thief and the Inkeeper, but the first of the two characters, when we examine the subtext, is not just a thief: more than that, he is a would-be werewolf, that is, a man who could turn into a wolf in other versions of the story. My analysis of this fable is intended to show the usefulness of approaching comparatively the beast fables attributed loosely to Aesop. A comparative approach helps understand such fables not only in their prosaic phases but also, more generally, in the broader context of ancient Greek songmaking.

§1a. First, I offer some background. The work I mentioned in the introductory paragraph, Nagy 2011 (see the Bibliography), is an extension of earlier work, Nagy 1990a (11§21 = pp. 324–325, with n59; §35 = pp. 334–335), where I first noted the distinction made by the ancients between Aesopic and Sybaritic fables.
As we read in the scholia for the Birds of Aristophanes (471), Sybaritic fables were distinct from Aesopic fables in that they featured talking humans as the main characters, not talking beasts. It is relevant, as I show in the earlier work I just mentioned, Nagy 1990a (again, 11§21 = pp. 324–325, 11§35 = pp. 334–335), that the prose of Herodotus frequently refers to and even engages in a Sybaritic mode of making fables. Then I argued in the later work, Nagy 2011 (§§99–120), that both the Sybaritic and the Aesopic kinds of fables could be composed not only as prose but also as poetry or even as song. Not only that: I also argued that sung fables represent the oldest attested form of Greek fable-making. This aspect of my argumentation, to which I will return in Part 2 of my essays on fables, is relevant to the fact that the title of these essays features the word songmaking with reference to the making of fables in the broadest possible sense of the word making.

§1b. Second, I now present the text of The Thief and the Innkeeper as edited by Perry (1952), along with my working translation (I also include a small apparatus, where I disagree with Perry about some minor textual details):

Fable 419 ed. Perry (= Fable 301 ed. Hausrath), taken from the Codex Laurentianus LVII 30:

A thief checked in at an inn. He was staying there for several days, expecting to steal something, but he wasn’t able to. Then, one day, he spotted the innkeeper wearing a beautiful new khiton—you see, there was a festival going on. There he was, sitting in front of the entrance to the inn. As it happened, no one else was there, and so the thief went up and also sat down there, right next to the innkeeper, and he began to strike up a conversation with him. They were conversing for quite a while and now the thief opened his mouth, and, keeping his mouth wide open, he started to howl like just a wolf. The innkeeper says to him: “What is this, what are you doing?” The thief replied: “Well, I will tell you now. But first I must ask you to guard my clothes, since I will leave them right here. I don’t know, sir, what’s getting into me when I go open-mouth like this. It may be either because of sins I committed or for some other such reason. I just don’t know. In any case, whenever I go wide-open-mouth three times, I turn into a wolf that eats humans.”

A thief who stole a finery of the innkeeper in Aesop Fable 419, where a wolf gains the trust of a shepherd by not slaughtering and eating the sheep in the shepherd’s flock—that is to say, the wolf abstains while the shepherd is present, but he turns back to his thiefily predatory ways whenever the shepherd is absent, thus stealing the property of humans by surreptitiously eating their sheep. So also the thief who stole the finery of the innkeeper in Aesop Fable 419 may have
been a such a wolf—in disguise. Now, after his successful theft, this thief will have better clothes to wear the next time he turns into a wolf.

§4. As we know from folklore about the generic werewolf—the etymology of the English word is ‘man-wolf’—he is in the habit of stripping naked and leaving his clothes behind when he starts his metamorphosis into a wolf. My favorite example comes from the “tombstones scene” in Petronius Satyricon 62, where the narrator tells what happened to him while he was gazing at tombstones along the roadside:

Deinde ut respexi ad comitem, ille exuit se et omnia vestimenta secondum viam posuit. Mihi anima in naso esse, stabam tanquam mortuus. At ille circumminxit vestimenta sua, et subito lupus factus est. Nolite me iocari putare; ut mentiar, nullius patrimonium tantifacio. Sed, quod coeperam dicere, postquam lupus factus est, ululare coepit et in silvas fugit.

Then, as I look back at my companion, he has stripped naked, placing all his clothes by the roadside. My heart goes right up into my nose. I just stood there, as if I were dead. Meanwhile, he pisses a circle around his clothes and then, all of a sudden, he has become a wolf. And don’t think I’m joking. I wouldn’t lie about this even for the sake of some great fortune. Anyway, as I was about to say, here is what happened after he turned into a wolf: he started to howl [ululare] and he ran off into the woods.

§5. Continuing at Satyricon 62, the narrator proceeds with his story. Without explaining why he did so, he says he reached for the clothes abandoned by his companion and tried to take them—only to find that these clothes had turned into stone. Frightened to death, the narrator now leaves the scene and makes his way to his destination—to an inn where he has been having an affair with a woman named Melissa, who is the innkeeper’s widow. Melissa tells our narrator that he has just missed a moment of terror at the inn: a wolf stole into the sheep pen there and slaughtered some sheep, but before he got away, he was wounded in the neck by a throw of a spear. Next morning, after spending the night at the inn, our narrator makes his way back to the primal scene of the metamorphosis, but he finds no clothes there. Instead, all there is to be seen now is a pool of blood. Again frightened to death, the narrator now goes home, where he finds his companion languishing in a sickbed, attended by a physician who is tending a wound in the man’s neck.

Our narrator finally reaches his conclusion: this man must be a versipellis. This Latin word, conventionally translated as ‘werewolf’, means literally ‘he whose hide has turned’—a meaning that I have analyzed comparatively in other work (Nagy 1990b:264–265; also 155–156). At this point, the story about the “tombstone scene” comes to an end, and the narrator concludes by swearing that the story is true, not false.

§6. Here I circle back to the moral of the story in Aesop Fable 419, The Thief and the Innkeeper. On the surface, the moral is saying here: don’t be duped by stories that are not true. But now we see that, from a comparative point of view, the story of the thief is ‘true’ in terms of the folklore surrounding werewolves. So the fable is not just Sybaritic, involving characters that are human only. It is also Aesopic, involving a beast who navigates between Sybaritic and Aesopic views of reality. The would-be werewolf in Aesop Fable 419 is true to his self as a man, since he cares about the clothes he leaves behind whenever he changes identities from man to wolf. And he would prefer to wear finer clothes each time his identity changes back from wolf to man. That is why he makes the gesture of asking the innkeeper to hold on to the clothes he now wears as a would-be man. But the would-be werewolf in this fable is also true to his self as a beast, since his mouth-wide-open rictus, which presumably shows his teeth, verifies his identity as the beast he becomes as he starts his howling all over again.

Bibliography


Notes

[1] The codex has ἀπελθὼν.


[3] The codex has χασμίσθαι. I prefer χασμίσθαι to Perry’s reading χασμεῖσθαι, since the “itacism” of the scribe extends to η, not only to ε.

On cases of wolfish rage experienced by Greek heroes

[5] The codex has χασμήν.

[6] The codex has ἐχασμύσατο. I prefer χασμύσαται to Perry’s reading χασμύσσαται.

[7] The codex has χασμύσσαται.

[8] The codex has δρομέως.

Tags: Aesop, Aristophanes, Fables, Petronius, Satyricon, The Thief and the Innkeeper, werewolf

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