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Citation	Nagy, Gregory. 2019.06.21. "On a fable about the hawk as a strongman." Classical Inquiries. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.
Published Version	https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/on-a-fable-about-the-hawk-as-a-strongman/
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Classical Inquiries

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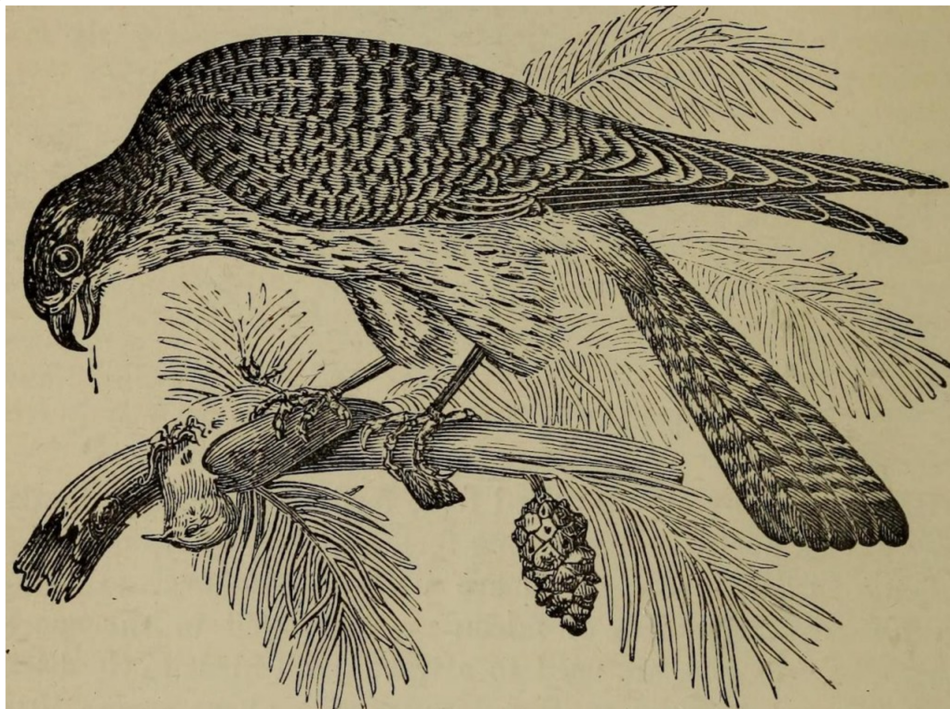
On a fable about the hawk as a strongman

June 21, 2019 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy Comments off

2019.06.21 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In what is generally agreed to be the earliest attestation of a fable in Greek literature, we read about a hawk that has just captured another bird. The fable is embedded in the Hesiodic Works and Days, lines 202–212, where the captor is boastfully saying to his captive that he has the power to do anything with his prey. Since the hawk is a predatory bird, we can already guess what he will say next in the story. And he does say it: I have the power to devour you. In the illustration for this posting, I show a logical ending for such a story: we see a hawk, with beak already dripping with blood, as he starts feasting on a bird he has just caught. In terms of the fable, as I will argue, the hawk is like a predatory strongman, feasting on the lives of his fellow humans—since he has power over them. But there is more to the story, as I hope to show.



From Johann Matthäus Bechstein, The natural history of cage birds: their management, habits, food, diseases, treatment, breeding, and the methods of catching them (London: 1888), 28. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. The first time I ever published an analysis of this fable was in 1979. Already then, I concentrated on the fact that this Hesiodic fable about the hawk in Works and Days 202–212 calls itself an ainos and declares that this ainos is intended for kings who are presumed to understand the moral of the story (Nagy 1979|1999:238–240 = 12§18, 312–313 = 19§4). Here is the relevant wording, at line 202:

> νῦν δ’ αἶνονβασιλεῦσιν ἐρέω φρονέουσι καὶ αὐτοῖς
> Now I will tell an ainos for kings, aware [phroneontes] as they (presumably) are.

Then I published further analysis of this ainos (for now, I define the word simply as a coded message), in an article on Hesiod (Nagy 1982:58–59), rewritten in a book (Nagy 1990b:65–66), followed by even further analysis in another book (Nagy 1990a:255–257 = 9§§7–8, especially in notes 37 and 38) and in a later article (Nagy 2011 §§125, 127, 138c).

§2. I offer here the shortest possible epitome of all that analysis, divided into parts A B C D E:

> A) In the story of the fable as retold in Works and Days 202–212, we read at line 208 that a hawk captures a nightingale—who is described as a lamenting aoidos ‘singer’. The

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capture is successful because the hawk is more powerful—or so he claims at lines 206, 207, 210, and that is why he has the ultimate power of devouring his prey, as indicated at line 209. The points of reference here are evident: For 'hawk', read 'king'. For 'nightingale', read 'poet' as the singer of tales.

B) Once the fable is told, the persona of Hesiod turns to the persona of Perses, his unjust brother, urging him at line 213 to support dikē 'justice' and to reject the opposite of justice, which is hubris. Hesiod warns Perses that the fulfillment of dikē is an eventual process, and that dikē will in the end triumph over hubris, as we read at lines 217–218.

C) Having defined justice as an eventual process, Hesiod addresses anonymous kings who had been called upon to adjudicate a dispute that he was having with his brother Perses. The kings had ruled in favor of Perses, the unjust brother, and against Hesiod, the just brother. In addressing these kings, Hesiod calls on them to reconsider their judgment, at line 269. He warns that the goddess Dikē, who is the personification of absolute justice, will punish those who make a judgment that is crooked.

D) The Works and Days, as a poem in progress, dramatizes the actual passage of time required for the workings of Dikē. At the beginning of the poem we find this goddess implicitly violated by the crooked judgment pronounced in the unjust brother's favor by the anonymous kings, who are greedy for bribes. At line 39 the judgment of the kings is still implicitly crooked as the poet begins to teach about Dikē, and the initial teachings are still pessimistic about the outcome of the struggle between hubris and dikē, as also about the power of the hawk/king over the nightingale/poet. By the time we reach lines 249 and 269, however, the initially crooked judgment at line 39 has been straightened out, becoming transformed into absolute justice, the symbol for which is a straight line. Perses is now urged to support dikē in the absolute sense of 'justice', at line 275, since those without justice will devour each other like wild beasts, as we read at lines 275–278.

E) The moral of the fable about the hawk and the nightingale has by now been made clear: the hawk/king who threatens to devour the lamenting nightingale/poet as proof of his power is utterly disqualified as an exponent of dikē 'justice'. Moreover, since only those kings who are phroneontes 'aware' will understand the fable, as we read at line 202, the greedy kings are implicitly disqualified from learning the moral of this story, in view of their general ignorance—indicated already at lines 40–41. And if the kings cannot be exponents of dikē, they are utterly without authority and their raison d'être is annihilated. In fact, after verse 263, the kings are never heard of again in the Works and Days. The only king who matters now is Zeus as absolute king of the cosmic order, and his judgement is tantamount to absolute justice.

§3. In the Hesiodic Works and Days, then, the poet has scored a victory over kings who are unjust. The moral of the fable about the Hawk and the Nightingale is not that "might makes right"—which is tantamount to what the hawk is boastfully saying to the lamenting nightingale. Rather, the poet's lament about injustice leads to the discrediting of unjust kings. And the absolute kingship of Zeus, which validates the absolute justice defined by the poet, can thus discredit the power that is claimed by the predatory hawk.

§4. In another version of the fable about the Hawk and the Nightingale, Aesop Fable 567 in the edition of Perry (1952), the hawk gets his comeuppance. While he is threatening the nightingale, the hawk himself gets caught by a bird-catcher, who traps him with a limed stick. So, a higher power has asserted itself here, just as the power of Zeus, with his absolute justice, can neutralize the judgment of crooked kings. It has been said about the explicit ending of Aesop Fable 567: "Hesiod seems not to have known of such an ending, or he would surely have used it" (West 1978;205). I would offer a different formulation: the implicit ending that we see in the Hesiodic Works and Days is even more effective than the explicit ending of Aesop Fable 567.

§5. Before I bring this brief essay to a close, I must note my awareness that more needs to be said, much more, about evaluating Hesiodic poetry as an effective instrument of social criticism. For those who are interested, I recommend especially the relevant analysis of Stephanie Nelson (1998:77–81), who also provides further bibliography. For my own closing here, however, I confine myself to a single additional thought. What the lamenting poet says about the moral outrage of "might makes right" applies not only to the crooked kings of the distant past. I think it applies just as effectively to the self-styled strongmen who dominate so much of today's troubled world.

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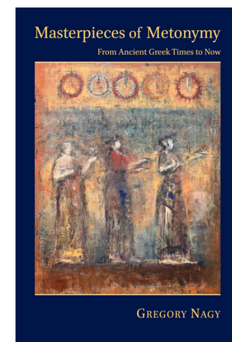

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