**Aesop the Morphing Fabulist**

**Edith Hall**

In his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), the philosopher John Locke said the child had a need for ‘some easy pleasant book... wherein the entertainment that he finds might draw him on,’ and recommended Aesop's Fables as ‘the best, which being stories apt to delight and entertain a child, may yet afford useful reflections to a grown man.’ [[1]](#endnote-2) Locke here seems to approve of Aesop as the provider of ethical instruction for the very young. But he subsequently published a version of a selection of the *Fables* as an example of an ideal text for instruction in Latin by any individuals seeking to teach themselves, *Æsop’s Fables, in English & Latin, Interlineary, for the Benefit of those who not having a master would learn either of these tongues*.[[2]](#endnote-3) Aesop, for Locke, was therefore good *either* for teachingchildren, because he could function as a vehicle for ethical examples imparted without tears, *or* for individuals at any age desirous of learning a language. Ideally, perhaps, the *Fables* could impart ethics and linguistic skills at the same time. But Aesop’s *Fables*—in different selections from the several hundred transmitted from antiquity in the manuscript tradition—were, within not much more than a century of Locke’s version, also destined to be presented as the content of what is widely regarded as the first ‘children’s book’ in the fully modern sense, that is as a volume designed to appeal to the imagination of a child and stimulate his or her powers of visualisation. The book was William Godwin’s *Aesop, Fables, Ancient and Modern*, [*Adapted for the use of Children from Three and Eight Years of Age*](http://copac.ac.uk/search?title=Fables,%20ancient%20and%20modern%20:%20Adapted%20for%20the%20use%20of%20children%20from%20three%20and%20eight%20years%20of%20age), which first appeared in 1805, under the pseudonym of Edward Baldwin.

Godwin’s publishing ventures, and in particular his *Aesop*, took the discussion of what children should be given to read forward by several strides from the Lockean analysis. He added to the classical literary critical notions of the pleasurable (*hēdu*, *dulce*) and useful (*ōphelimon*, *utile*), which are explicitly referenced in Locke’s discussion, the revolutionary new concept that a children’s story might have an appreciably different narrative rhythm from that which might appeal to adults. Even more innovative was Godwin’s desideratum that a book for a child would also stimulate his or her reflective and imaginative capacities:

Fables then should not be dismissed in a few short lines, but expanded in language suited to the understanding of children: If we would benefit a child we must become in part a child ourselves. We must prattle to him: we must expatiate upon some points: we must introduce quick unexpected turns which if they are not wit, have the effect of wit to children. Above all, we must make our narrations pictures, and render the objects we discourse about, visible to the fancy of the learner.[[3]](#endnote-4)

It was through thinking how to rewrite the ancient fables in a more extended way, which stimulated the Romantic notion of ‘fancy’, that Godwin developed his new style and mode of expression, perfectly complemented by the suggestive engravings of William Mulready.

It is instructive to compare Godwin’s treatment of any particular fable with that of his Aesopic precursor Samuel Croxall, whose 1722 Anglican and decidedly Whiggish version, not explicitly aimed at children, was the most famous at the time in Britain. Croxall’s Aesop swiftly supplanted Sir Roger L’Estrange’s much larger and more ambitious collection of translated fables (1669), and became the version of choice in the English-speaking world for the entire 18th century. (Nor did it yield immediately to Godwin’s book: it still had a major impact on the childhood imagination of the poet Robert Browning.[[4]](#endnote-5)) In 'The dog in the manger', for example, Godwin’s narrative moves at a leisurely pace that allows the reader to see clearly how the roles of the characters are fulfilled, and the characters themselves, rather than a stern godly ‘voiceover’, draw the moral through what they say and do: ‘Silly dog, says the little boy, if I were as naughty as you, I should give you nothing to eat, as you prevented papa's horse from eating. There is a plate of meat for you; and remember another time, that only naughty dogs and naughty boys and girls keep away from others what they cannot use themselves.’ Moreover, Godwin's characters are more flexible and psychologically developed than in any previous version of Aesop. Godwin’s dog in his manger finally gives in, defeated by hunger, while Croxall's 'envious ill-natured cur, getting up and snarling at him, would not suffer him to touch it'. In his preface, Godwin explains that he had tried to adapt the material to make it appropriate to the emotional and cognitive needs of the child:

I have fancied myself taking the child upon my knee, and have expressed them in such language as I should have been likely to employ when I wished to amuse the child and make what I was talking of take hold upon his attention.[[5]](#endnote-6)

Godwin’s combined household with his second wife, Mary Jane Clairmont, contained no fewer than five children, so it may not in practice have been difficult to find one to put on his knee.

Despite one reviewer objecting to the extent of the alterations in the original fables, and even to the possible anti-Christian implication that could be drawn from one tale,[[6]](#endnote-7) Godwin’s Aesop did very well, running through at least nine editions before 1821. Rewriting Aesop fundamentally shaped Godwin’s views of storytelling for children. Three years later, in 1808, he commissioned and published Charles and Mary Lamb’s *The Adventures of Ulysses*, the first *Odyssey* written specifically with children in mind.[[7]](#endnote-8) Indeed, Aesop’s *Fables* and the *Odyssey* have subsequently been turned into more children’s books than any other ancient texts, by a very wide margin. They are also the two ancient texts that have been most susceptible to transformation into other media – there were Aesop and Odysseus animated cartoons by 1950, and they can both be watched on television, listened to on audiobooks, and seen in all kinds of theatre. Aesop and Odysseus have arrived on playing cards, porcelain, and postage stamps. But when it comes to depth of cultural familiarity and ubiquity, Aesop actually knocks the Homeric *Odyssey* out of the water on almost any criterion of measurement. Aesop has been read by children at earlier ages, for further back in history, and has produced many more rewritings and printed editions. Aesop has achieved the kind of talismanic status that makes him susceptible to translation even into dead languages, including ancient Aztec (by a group of scholars based in Germany let by Gerdt Kutscher, in 1987).

For these simple little tales for children, as they are commonly stereotyped, have been regarded as supremely important by an extraordinary string of famous thinkers, from Hesiod, Democritus and Socrates,[[8]](#endnote-9) to Martin Luther, who believed that good Protestants should be able to read Aesop as well as the bible in their native tongue.[[9]](#endnote-10) Writers who have turned their pens to rephrasing Aesop—often through the intermediary of the Latin slave-fabulist, Phaedrus—include the twelfth-century poet Marie de France, Aphra Behn, Henry Fielding, and Samuel Richardson.[[10]](#endnote-11) Admirers have included Richard Bentley, William Congreve, John Vanbrugh, Charlotte Bronte, and John Stuart Mill, who read Aesop in Greek when still a small boy, the first Greek author he ever studied.[[11]](#endnote-12) At the end of this article the argument will turn to Aesop’s remarkable claim to a position amongst the top handful of books in global history, conclusively beaten into second place only by the Christian bible. Yet Aesop has always had a complicated and fluctuating identity as well as a massive presence, so this article explores four of his *Fables*’ mutations, or shifting historical aspects, as they have interacted with thinking about literature for children.

First, almost from the minute they appear in the Greek historical record, in a world where learning to read was by no means automatically connected with childhood rather than adulthood, it is often difficult to determine whether Aesop should be included in the category ‘children’s literature’ at all. Secondly, his *Fables* have carried heavy cargo in the form of their associations with another social boundary in addition to that between illiterate child and literate adult—I mean the boundary between different social classes. Thirdly, from the moment that the New Testament began to circulate in Greek, the apparent similarity of some of the *Fables* to the form of the parable in the gospels led to Aesop being equated or identified with Jesus, even if the parallel was always an unsatisfactory one. Fourthly, their adoption on the Christian elementary curriculum resulted in their exportation around the European world empires from the Renaissance onwards. To attempt a cultural history of Aesop would be to attempt a cultural history of the human race, at least in the West and wherever Europeans have travelled. Aesop has more of a claim to be a global cultural property than any other ancient Greek or Roman text or author. Indeed, judging by the inventories of books distributed in the New World by the Spanish in the 16th and 17th centuries, Aesop has been taken very quickly wherever Europeans have gone: according to one scholar, ‘Aesop was one of the authors most read in the New World’.[[12]](#endnote-13) This international dissemination in turn underlay the prevalent impact they have had in encouraging parallels to be drawn the world over between Aesop’s *Fables* and indigenous traditions of storytelling, especially about trickster figures and talking animals. By illustrating these four specific facets of the cultural history of the consumption of Aesop’s *Fables*—age groups, class distinctions, Christianity and internationalism—I hope to stress the instability, in terms of the theory and practice of cultural history, of the borderline between the phenomenon of ‘children’s literature’, and literary history more widely.

First, although Aesop’s *Fables* are intricately bound up with the history of the teaching of literacy, literacy has not always been something normally or necessarily considered to be acquired exclusively in childhood. That the ancient Greeks and Romans saw Aesop as an author to be read as early as infancy *may*, however, be implied by an important story in Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 5.15. The story reports that the art of fable was bestowed upon Aesop by Hermes, the god of words himself, because the Horai had told Hermes a fable about a cow when he was still in swaddling clothes; as he gave Aesop the gift, Hermes said, ‘You keep what was the first thing I learnt myself.’ Some critics make no bones about their view that there was children’s literature even in Greco-Roman antiquity, and that it included Aesopic Fables: the structure and language used by Seth Lerer whenever he addresses antiquity in his influential study, *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (2008), imply that he recognizes no distinction between one and the other. But, frustratingly, we can’t actually prove that Aesop was part of the curriculum of children until they were rather older, at a stage when class, status, leisure and access to education begin to interfere with the picture in a society where literacy may have been as low as fifteen or twenty per cent of the total population. The composition of a fable (*muthos*) was certainly the first exercise attempted by students beginning their studies of rhetoric and Quintilian (2.4.4) says that grammarians were beginning to encroach on the rhetors’ territory by teaching fable. Raffaela Cribiore has written brilliantly on the importance of Aesop in the Greek-speaking communities of Hellenistic and Roman ancient Egypt.[[13]](#endnote-14) She has also pointed to the significance for later centuries of the *Hermeneumata* or *Colloquia*, medieval school handbooks in Greek and Latin that probably derive from third-century Gaul; they are preserved in eight different manuscripts, were but originally composed by Eastern Greek teachers rooted in an ancient school tradition.[[14]](#endnote-15)

In classical Greece, too, it is probable that Aesop was used to teach small children literacy, for example at Athens where citizens needed to be able to decipher at least basic civic documents. But we lack a clinching piece of evidence that Athenian citizen boys were taught to read (a duty which traditionally devolved on their own fathers[[15]](#endnote-16)) with the help of written collections of fables. We do not even know whether a physical collection existed as early as the fifth century BC. The earliest certain recension and collection was made by Demetrius of Phalerum (perhaps during his regency at Athens of 317-307 BCE), at least according to Diogenes Laertes’ biography of Demetrius (*Lives* 5.80). This collection, which has not survived, may have been a repertory of fables designed for consultation by rhetoricians (see Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.20). The Athenian local colour to some Aesopic fables may also be attributable to the Demetrian recension.[[16]](#endnote-17) The question of whether reading Aesop was primarily associated with the distinction between childhood and adulthood, or with socio-cultural status, depends on how we interpret a particular passage in Aristophanes’ *Birds*. In this comedy an Athenian named Pesithetairos, who has taken himself off into voluntary exile, wants to persuade the birds to rebel against the supremacy of the Olympian gods. Here he proposes to the chorus of birds that they, rather than the Olympians, had once ruled the universe (466-75):

**Peisthetaerus** I feel great pain on your behalf, because you were once kings.

**Chorus** We were kings? Who were our subjects?

**Peisthetaerus** Everything that exists—first me, then this man here, and Zeus himself. You birds are more ancient than Cronus and the Titans and Earth, and prior to them.

**Chorus** Even prior to Earth?

**Peisthetaerus** Yes, by Apollo,

**Chorus** By Zeus, I never knew that!

**Peisthetaerus** That’s because you are so under-educated (*amathēs*) and unquestioning and have never studied your Aesop ([οὐδ᾽](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=ou%29d%27&la=greek&prior=polupra/gmwn" \t "morph) [Αἴσωπον](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=*ai%29%2Fswpon&la=greek&prior=ou%29d%27" \t "morph) [πεπάτηκας](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=pepa%2Fthkas&la=greek&prior=*ai%29/swpon" \t "morph)). He is the one who tells us that the lark was the first creature to be born, even before Earth. His father died of disease, but Earth did not exist then, and so he lay unburied for five days. The lark, at a loss for a solution, gave his father a grave in his own head.

Peisthetairos here elaborates an aetiological story about the origins of the universe which sounds like a parody of theogonic poetry. His aim is to flatter the birds’ sense of their species’ historic importance. Manipulating myth in order to buttress the contingent political claims of a particular city-state or ethnic group was of course customary in classical Greek diplomacy, and Aristophanes is certainly here creating humour out of the absurd lengths to which such argumentation could go. But in order to impress these allegedly under-educated birds, the authority he chooses to cite is an Aesopic fable, rather than Homer or Pindar (or, like the Sausage-seller in *Knights*, an Apolline oracle).[[17]](#endnote-18)

The verb used here, [πεπάτηκας](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=pepa%2Fthkas&la=greek&prior=*ai%29/swpon" \t "morph), may conceivably be a joke referring to the birds’ lack of hands and fingers with which to handle a papyrus, since the primary meaning of *pateō* is ‘tread’. Many translators choose to retain here the idea of physically handling a text, by translating [πεπάτηκας](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=pepa%2Fthkas&la=greek&prior=*ai%29/swpon" \t "morph) as, for example, ‘thumbed’. But there is a direct parallel, indeed a Platonic one, for the *pateō* meaning, purely metaphorically, ‘study’ a book: in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates remarks to Phaedrus that he has studied his Tisias very carefully ([ἀλλὰ](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=a%29lla%5C&la=greek&prior=*swkra/ths" \t "morph) [μὴν](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=mh%5Cn&la=greek&prior=a%29lla%5C" \t "morph) [τόν](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=to%2Fn&la=greek&prior=mh%5Cn" \t "morph) [γε](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=ge&la=greek&prior=to/n" \t "morph) [Τεισίαν](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=*teisi%2Fan&la=greek&prior=ge" \t "morph) [αὐτὸν](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=au%29to%5Cn&la=greek&prior=*teisi/an" \t "morph) [πεπάτηκας](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=pepa%2Fthkas&la=greek&prior=au%29to%5Cn" \t "morph) [ἀκριβῶς](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=a%29kribw%3Ds&la=greek&prior=pepa/thkas" \t "morph), 73a).

The birds are so very uneducated, the implication seems to be, that they haven’t ‘even’ studied Aesop, which in turn suggests that Aesop may have been regarded as an element in rudimentary education.[[18]](#endnote-19) Perhaps he was regarded (as he was in later antiquity and is again today) as an author to whom little children were introduced at the same time as they learned their alphabet. If this is the case, then the reasons become obvious for the popularity of Aesop amongst the least educated of the Athenian citizenry—the ones who were perhaps only just functionally literate; the ‘default’ or bottom-line text to which orators, oracle-mongers or comic poets alike could refer, because they could assume their audience were familiar with it, was the Aesopic fables, in whatever form they were available in the fifth century BCE.[[19]](#endnote-20)

On the question of the date at which written collections of Aesop became available, further illumination has often been sought once again in Plato, this time in the section of the *Phaedo*. When Cebes is prompted by the imprisoned Socrates’ proposed ‘Aesopic’ aetiology for pleasure and pain to ask him about his recent poetic compositions--versions of Aesop’s fables and a hymn to Apollo—Socrates answers (61b),

So first I composed a hymn to the god whose festival it was; and after the god, considering that a poet, if he is really to be a poet, must compose myths and not speeches, since I was not a maker of myths, I took those of Aesop, which I had at hand and knew, and turned into verse the first I came upon ([διὰ](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=dia%5C&la=greek&prior=muqologiko/s" \t "morph) [ταῦτα](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=tau%3Dta&la=greek&prior=dia%5C" \t "morph) [δὴ](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=dh%5C&la=greek&prior=tau=ta" \t "morph) [οὓς](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=ou%28%5Cs&la=greek&prior=dh%5C" \t "morph) [προχείρους](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=proxei%2Frous&la=greek&prior=ou%28%5Cs" \t "morph) [εἶχον](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=ei%29%3Dxon&la=greek&prior=proxei/rous" \t "morph) [μύθους](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=mu%2Fqous&la=greek&prior=ei%29=xon" \t "morph) [καὶ](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=kai%5C&la=greek&prior=mu/qous" \t "morph) [ἠπιστάμην](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=h%29pista%2Fmhn&la=greek&prior=kai%5C" \t "morph) [τοὺς](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=tou%5Cs&la=greek&prior=h%29pista/mhn" \t "morph) [Αἰσώπου](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=*ai%29sw%2Fpou&la=greek&prior=tou%5Cs" \t "morph), [τούτων](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=tou%2Ftwn&la=greek&prior=*ai%29sw/pou" \t "morph) [ἐποίησα](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=e%29poi%2Fhsa&la=greek&prior=tou/twn" \t "morph) [οἷς](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=oi%28%3Ds&la=greek&prior=e%29poi/hsa" \t "morph) [πρώτοις](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=prw%2Ftois&la=greek&prior=oi%28=s" \t "morph) [ἐνέτυχον](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=e%29ne%2Ftuxon&la=greek&prior=prw/tois" \t "morph)).

My interpretation of this passage is not that Socrates has a papyrus text of Aesop available to him in prison, like a bible in a Mormon hotel, but that Socrates uses Aesop because these are stories which he, like everyone else, knew off by heart, and this is something which Cebes would immediately understand. Christopher Rowe translates, ‘I just took the stories that I had to hand and actually knew, which were Aesop’s, and turned into verse the first ones that happened to occur to me’,[[20]](#endnote-21) and he has confirmed that he interprets the passage as I do.[[21]](#endnote-22) Although ‘the first ones that occurred to me', *hois prōtois enetuchon*, could just mean 'the first ones I lighted on in my text', this interpretation of the Greek seems quite unlikely since one would naturally come across the first items in the text, and *hois prōtois enetuchon* isn't the obvious way of saying 'I started at the beginning'). But it is much more telling that the evidence for Plato's use of *procheiros* (‘at hand’) shows that *procheiros* for him has no tendency to imply physical proximity: for example, at *Theaetetus* 200c, something is metaphorically ‘at hand’ because it is available in the intellect (*dianoia*). But the fact that Socrates knows some Aesopic fables off by heart, as I would imagine almost all of his fellow citizens did, does not mean that there was no written collection of the fables available in late fifth-century Athens (see below). On the contrary, I would imagine that the one cultural phenomenon would very likely go in tandem with the other, at least as soon as writing technologies had become accessible and used in elementary education.

To fast forward nearly two millennia, and the era of printing, the question of whether Aesop should be imagined as the literature of childhood becomes once again academically contested. Lerer, while arguing that Aesop must always have appealed to children, insists at the same time that ‘Europe’s first printers used Aesop’s Fables not just to sustain a literary heritage or offer guidance to the young, but to affirm their own authority as makers of the texts of culture’.[[22]](#endnote-23) During the 1470s and 1480s, Aesopic volumes with elaborate illustrations were amongst the very first books published in European vernaculars – German, French, and Caxton’s influential English edition, with famous woodcuts, of 1484. One group is easily identifiable as designed for school work. A Latin school book printed between 1512 and 1514 by Wynkyn de Worde at Westminster is entitled *Aesopus. Fabule Esope cum Comento* [*sic*]. The title page woodcut shows a schoolmaster teaching three boys or youths, who are seated on a school bench and holding books from which they read. These boys, however, are certainly not very young, and they are learning not English but Latin. Their Aesop is equivalent to that other mainstay of the medieval and early Renaissance school curriculum, *The Distichs of Cato*. Both Cato and Aesop were enormously helpful in teaching Latin, the mother-tongue of nobody by the time of Chaucer, and they were often treated as a pair.

The intended readership of the other early printed Aesops, those in modern languages, is unfortunately much less easy to define. There is no hard and fast rule for distinguishing between those meant for the very young, and those aimed at a much wider age group including adults. A controversy rages over the intended readership of Caxton’s edition; Warren Wooden thinks that the coordination of picture and text, the ‘pithy little dramas usually featuring talking animals, and the simplicity of style’, made it ‘a natural book for children’.[[23]](#endnote-24) Ellis, however, sees John Ogilby as author of ‘the first version for children’ in his verse edition of 1651,[[24]](#endnote-25) followed by L’Estrange. But Aesop, with its suitability to visual illustration, has been used since before the invention of the printing press to learn to read mother-tongues as well as Latin or Greek, and has always been introduced much earlier in any individual’s education – and here an important point needs to be made. ‘Much earlier in any individual’s education’ does not automatically signify early childhood. The automatic connection of the act of learning to read with juveniles is itself a dangerous one to make when speaking of other times and places. Teaching tools for encouraging basic literacy are definitely not phenomena that can be studied under the exclusive heading of elementary children’s literature. People have always learned to read at all ages, especially in cultures with high levels of adult illiteracy, and have always acquired radically different functional levels of reading ability.

The tropes of social distinctions by age and by class, in relation to knowledge of Aesop, frequently became confused in the rhetoric of later ages. Take this frontispiece engraving to Philip Ayres’ 1689 *Mythologia ethica, or, Three centuries of Aesopian fables in English prose: done from Aesop, Phaedrus, Camerarius, and all other eminent authors on this subject.* The image depicts a rural idyll, with Aesopic animals looking on in the background. Cheiron the centaur is teaching the young Achilles, and the implication in conjunction with the title page is that is teaching him the fables of Aesop. The Latin inscription beneath the engraving comprises two verses (418-19) from Germanicus Caesar's translation of Aratus’ Greek astronomical poem, *Phaenomena*, where the poet is describing the constellation Centaurus: ‘*Hic erit ille pius Chiro, iustissimus omnes / Inter nubigenas, et magni doctor Achillis.*’ (Here will be seen that virtuous Cheiron, the most upright of all the cloud-born ones, and teacher of great Achilles). But it will be noted that Achilles in the picture, far from being a small boy, has the stature, appearance and clothing of a refined young man.

Ever since the first printed editions, Aesop often featured in the biographies of prodigious self-educators who succeeded in learning to read, often in adulthood, and consequently to extract themselves from poverty and obscurity. A French teenaged farm-boy from Lorraine, by name of Valentin Jamerey-Duval, was illiterate until he came across an illustrated edition of Aesop’s *Fables*. So drawn was he to the visual images that he asked some of his fellow-shepherds to explain the stories, and subsequently to teach him to read the book. As a result he developed an insatiable appetite for reading, and became a librarian to the Duke of Lorraine. [[25]](#endnote-26) At the other end of the social scale, however, the future Edward VI began reading his Latinised Aesop at the age of seven years old, and a Christmas theatrical entertainment called *Aesop’s Crow* was prepared for his amusement in 1552.[[26]](#endnote-27) These last examples underline the question of whether it is even legitimate to talk about ‘children’s literature’ or ‘literature for children’ as a recognised or recognisable category at all, at least prior to the late 18th century. What is the precise difference between a school book that teaches a child to read, whether in his or her native tongue or in another language, and a specimen of ‘children’s literature’?

An important piece of documentary evidence here is the ‘Medici Aesop’, a beautifully illustrated 15th-century manuscript collection of fables now in the New York Public Library (Spencer MS 50). It has been cogently argued that it was made for a Florentine child, the eight-year-old Piero de Medici (son of the most powerful man in the city, Lorenzo di Medici), in order to help him learn Greek.[[27]](#endnote-28) But it is that very pedagogical function which (according to some theorists) disqualifies these early Aesops for children from the category of what we understand by ‘children’s literature’, since the text is primarily a medium through which another language could be learned. Ineed, for learning another another language regarded as vital to a formal training that will turn Piero into an unusually educated man and humanist qualified to take up his position in the Florentine elite. The same could be said of Aesop being used to teach royal princesses the language appropriate to their gender and class in late 17th-century England: French. A fascinating volume by Pierre de Lainé, tutor to Princess Mary (the future Queen Mary) and her sister Anne, published in 1677, includes a telling collection of texts in under the title *The Princely Way to the French Tongue.* There are extracts from the bible transposed into dialogue form, *Together with a larger explication of the French grammar, choice fables of Aesop in burlesque French, and lastly some models of letters in French and English*.

Literacy, whether in classical languages, acquired modern languages, or mother tongues, has just as often signified differences in social class as in stage of development towards adulthood. This takes us into the second of the four aspects of Aesop which have been most unstable in the course of the reception of his *Fables*. The slippage between these two boundaries confuses our understanding of the social role of the *Fables* over the centuries. Yet the question of the ideological import of the *Fables* has always been rather fraught. There seems to be little doubt amongst classical scholars that the fables reflect at some level their prehistoric origins as ‘low’ or ‘popular’ culture, oral stories generated and circulated by slaves and lower-class individuals in antiquity. The biographical tradition which construed Aesop as a slave, especially as recorded in the *Life*, has of course fuelled this reading of his *Fables.* But agreement stops there as to how ‘progressive’ the ideology of the fables is. Some, such as Kenneth Rothwell, have identified Aesop’s *Fables*, especially in the classical period (he is discussing Aesop in Aristophanes), as the literature of the underdog, with a slightly subversive content.[[28]](#endnote-29) But Page DuBois in *Slaves and Other Objects* has argued persuasively that the Fables operated in antiquity in a rather reactionary way. She thinks that in ‘naturalising’ what are actually human social inequities by comparing them with inherent biological and natural differences between animals, the stories suggest that human inequities are immutable and unchallengeable as well.[[29]](#endnote-30) My own view is that the *Fables* actually worked in both ways – they are indeed expressions of the tensions that underpinned a society based on slavery, but expressed that tension dialectically in ways that spoke with an equally loud voice to people on both side of the power divide. Moreover, I would argue that it is in the lucid crystallising of this tension that they were recognised as important in antiquity and have gone on to maintain their status as a classic almost ever since.

Yet the trouble with dialectically complex texts which crystallise the tension between different social perspectives–a tension which some people used to call an ideological manifestation of class struggle–is the ease with which they can be appropriated *by either side* in their subsequent reception. But more than any other ancient text, including Greek tragedy, the *Fables* of Aesop reveal a wholly divergent and contradictory reception in political terms. On the one hand, DuBois’ argument about the reactionary naturalisation of what are actually social divisions and hierarchies has been demonstrated in countless conservative or elitist readings. These include the witty Jacobite Aesopic satires well discussed by Hanazaki and Patterson.[[30]](#endnote-31) They also include such horrors of Nazi chidren’s literature as *Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid’ und Keinem Jud bei seinem Eid!* (‘Don’t trust a fox, or the promise of a Jew’) by Elvira Bauer, which sold at least 70,000 copies, and is ‘horrifyingly sadistic.’[[31]](#endnote-32) On the other hand, partly because Aesop and his Roman admirer and epigone Phaedrus were (or were said to be) slaves themselves, and partly because the appeal of the *Fables* transcended social boundaries maintained by the acquisition of literacy, they have proved magnetically attracted to radicals and revolutionaries of a much more modernising kind.

Sometimes this has directly affected the way the *Fables* have been retold. Walter Crane, for example, was not just a brilliant graphic designer and chromolithographer, but an ardent socialist, close friend of William Morris, Marxist and Trade Union supporter. *The Baby’s Own Aesop* (1887) uses short, rhymed versions of the fables, which Crane says in his Preface he has reproduced from a manuscript kindly lent to him by the wood-engraver to whom he had been apprenticed, William James Linton. Crane adds, however, ‘I have added a touch here and there’. But since Linton was as radical in his own Chartist-nationalist-republican way as the more socialist-internationalist-Marxist Crane, it is virtually impossible to tell which of them is responsible for the very individual character of the morals, embedded within the frame of the picture and text: King Log and King Stork, for example, demonstrates simply ‘DON’T HAVE KINGS’; the reader is told firmly that ‘The Farmer’s Treasure’ shows that ‘PRODUCTIVE LABOUR IS THE ONLY SOURCE OF WEALTH’. This kind of reception of Aesop reached its zenith in the revolutionary Marxist Hugo Gellert’s *Aesop Said So* (1936), in which the fables are retold to address their North American context, from an extreme leftist perspective.[[32]](#endnote-33)

The demonstrable susceptibility of the *Fables* to such radical political reinterpretation – to support any type of political agenda -- does not, however, fully explain their popularity across time in books designed to manipulate the political opinions of adults rather than children. This has, I believe, far more to do with the sheer familiarity of the texts, which allows Nazi ideologues or Crane or Gellert (or more recently Malcolm X, who read them in Charleston State Prison and recommended to his followers[[33]](#endnote-34)) to make their points through a set of metaphors to which a large proportion of their readership had access as very small children indeed. To reformulate an Aesopic fable is therefore to reawaken ancient infantile memories, and ancient narrative patterns, providing both the pleasure of the remembered and the memory of the authority which the printed word and the contents of books can exert over developing minds. It may also actually reactivate knowledge of stories absorbed in the more formal context of a school curriculum.

The third shifting aspect of Aesop’s *Fables* has been their relationship with Christianity. Aesop’s fables were so widely approved as constituents of the Medieval and Renaissance syllabus partly because they were felt to be compatible, like the Stoicism of Cato, with Christian morality. Martin Luther, briefly mentioned above, changed the course of Aesopic history in terms of the attractiveness of the *Fables* to Protestants when he translated twenty of these fables in 1530, expressing his great admiration for them in the Preface, and was urged by his collaborator Philipp Melanchthon to complete the whole. Gottfried Arnold, the celebrated Lutheran theologian, and librarian to Frederick I, king of Prussia, mentions that the great Reformer valued the Fables of Aesop next after the Holy Scriptures.[[34]](#endnote-35) Aesop has ever since been found – to my mind, rather puzzlingly given its rather brutal, even Nietzschean conception of power relations -- compatible with the education of Christian readers. This is partly because the morals can be made to sound similar to commandments delivered to the Jews on Mount Sinai, which makes Aesop a bit like Moses; a good illustration of this type of parallel is the underlying moral, ‘Thou shalt not envy’, as expressed in Benjamin Harris’ telling of ‘The Hawk and Birds’ in his *The Fables of Young Aesop* (1700).[[35]](#endnote-36) Another factor is the parallels people have always heard between the idioms of the parables of the New Testament as told by Jesus and the idiom of the Fables.[[36]](#endnote-37) Such coupling of Aesop with the bible was still common enough in the 1950s: Pamela Travers, the author of the ‘Mary Poppins’ books, was once asked what stories she would recommend for contemporary children and she replied: ‘The nursery rhymes, the fairy tales, the Bible, and, of course, Aesop’s Fables.’[[37]](#endnote-38)

A further reason why Christian educators liked Aesop was certainly its lack of what they saw as dangerous supernatural elements. In a world where Christian fundamentalists can still try to get Harry Potter banned on the ground that it promotes witchcraft and occultism, it should not be forgotten that Aesop must have seemed a safe alternative to the fairy tale tradition of stories for children. This is certainly one reason why John Newbery (sometimes said to be the founding father of children’s literature in the earlier 18th century, even though his books are thoroughly didactic) thought Fables were so ideal: he not only included several in his seminal *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* of 1744, but subsequently published his own *Fables* *in Verse* under the Greco-Hebraic pseudonym ‘Abraham Aesop’ (1765). He disliked intensely the idea of misleading young minds with the irrational or the fantastic. Newbery was the main conduit for the dissemination of the rational, enlightenment Lockean idea of educational reading for children in the USA, and it was his influence that led to one or two extreme ‘rationalising’ reactions to Aesop’s *Fables*. Take one anonymous book published in New York in 1815 but much influenced by the Evangelical educationalist Hannah More, for example, a collection of children’s reading entitled *The Happy Family: or, Winter Evenings’ Employment* (New York, 1815). It includes a retelling of ‘The Lion and the Mouse’, adorned with one of the beautiful Aesopic woodcuts by the Northumbrian artist Thomas Bewick. But in a section inserted before the fable, entitled ‘THE LION,’ the children learned about actual lions–their rage, fearlessness, and horrible roaring. They learned that *in reality* a lion would devour a mouse, not befriend it.[[38]](#endnote-39) The fable was probably reprinted because of its instructive fable that (Christian) charity would receive its reward. But towards the end, the author returns to the admonitory tone, and states that children must be careful of any lions they actually encounter in exhibitions of fauna.[[39]](#endnote-40) This realistic explanation was felt to be necessary to prevent children being misled by the unscientific nature of fiction.

The ease with which Aesop could and can be accommodated to Christianity also explains the ease with which his *Fables* have spread with European colonistsand imperial administrations all over Planet Earth. Aesop’s status as a ‘world author’ as well as a children’s author is the last of his aspects to be discussed here. As mentioned earlier, Aesop in Spanish went to the New World in substantial quantities even in the 16th century. British imperialists not only took Aesop in English abroad wherever they went, but were always concerned to provide versions in the native languages of the people they conquered, or with whom they otherwise interacted commercially, in order to foster literacy among them. Aesop had made it into Chinese by 1850, Pushto (Afghanistan/Pakistan) by 1871, Japanese by 1872, Maori, Korean, Swahili, and Turkish by 1900 and Fijan by 1902.[[40]](#endnote-41) British imperial educators and missionaries in India were particularly convinced that their native targets needed to read Aesop in their own languages: besides John Gilchrist’s 1802 polyglot Aesop in Hindi, Persian, Arabic, Bengali and Sanskrit of 1803,[[41]](#endnote-42) Marathi, Kannada, and Gujarati printed editions were all published by 1852.[[42]](#endnote-43) Some of these were retranslations of canonical earlier editions such as that of Croxall or LaFontaine. Across the Atlantic, in 1893, some earnest North Americans decided to translate into the Sioux language Dakota, in a single volume, Aesop’s *Fables* and a life of Abraham Lincoln.[[43]](#endnote-44) To trace the history of the translation of Aesop more recently, during the postcolonial period and in tandem with the rising nationalisms that followed the breakup of the Soviet Eastern bloc, is to trace an *equally* politicalhistory, since ethnic groups and nation states wishing to assert independence and an autonomous cultural identity often manifest this in the cultural sphere by translating Aesop into their language – Tamil in 1969, Bosnian in 1994, Macedonian in 1996, Kurdish in 2002.[[44]](#endnote-45)

Aesop should therefore be celebrated as one of the ancient authors with the greatest claim to the status of ‘world literature’ as defined by David Damrosch—namely, an author who has risen above all linguistic and historical boundaries, and has proved infinitely linguistically translatable—and culturally transferable—to the most divergent national and ethnic traditions and milieux. He must be granted a supremely honoured place in what Pascale Casanova has inspiringly entitled ‘the world republic of letters’.[[45]](#endnote-46) Aesop’s *Fables*  have completely transcended not just national or ‘Indo-European’ traditions of literature, but geopolitical and linguistic barriers of a much more global kind. They have also interacted with and stimulated new initiatives in the compelling and timeless generic form of the fable and the ‘Aesopic’, cryptic, faux-naïve fabulist-narrator. Fables have since the medieval period appeared alongside, or even merged completely, with fables from non-classical traditions, beginning with the twelfth-century fables of Reynard the fox. The cultural presence of ‘Aesopic’ fables has certainly encouraged the collection of indigenous fables in other traditions, such as the Swahili animal fables of Kenya and animal-dominated allegorical wisdom stories of the poor of Haiti, who largely originated in Africa; these stories are held by some of them to have descended directly from Aesop himself, presented not as a Greek but an African, by etymologising his name as a corruption of Aithops.[[46]](#endnote-47)

What makes the ‘World Literature’ status even more appropriate is that the *Fables* of Aesop, who (the Greeks said) was an Asiatic barbarian, take us back far beyond the Greeks to the cradle of world storytelling in the lands around the eastern Mediterranean. Fables similar to those associated with Aesop appear in the Aramaic papyrus of about 500 BCE recording the story and sayings of Ahikar. The papyrus was found in 1906 or 1907 in the Jewish temple at Elephantine, Aswan. The dialect in which the sayings themselves are expressed is however of greater antiquity, belonging to southern Syria in the 8th to 7th century BCE. The very antiquity of this papyrus makes it more likely that at least some truth lies behind Clement of Alexandria’s claim that sayings from the story of Ahikar were known, from a stele in Babylon, to none other than the philosopher Democritus (*Stromat*, i. 15, 69.4 = Pseudo-Democritus 68 B 299 D-K). Ahikar’s stance is that of adviser to his nephew, whom he has adopted having been unable to beget a son himself. The boy, according to the story, did not take kindly to being hectored by his adoptive father.[[47]](#endnote-48)

Yet it is to even further back in time than Syrian wisdom literature that we can trace at least two of Aesop’s *Fables*. One example is a proverb about she-dogs in a hurry giving birth to blind puppies, quoted in 421 in Aristophanes’ *Peace* 1075-9. The same proverb, amazingly, is partially preserved in a collection of Sumerian proverbs published in 1958: ‘The bitch is weakened... the puppies' eyes will not open.’[[48]](#endnote-49) The fable of the eagle and the fox in *Birds* 651-3 has also been traced to an archetype in Mesopotamia.[[49]](#endnote-50) Given the transformations, but also the sheer stamina and universal appeal to all age groups of the Aesopic *Fables* in world cultural history, it is difficult not to endorse the following conclusion drawn by Jerry Griswold, former Director of San Diego State University's National Center for the Study of Children's Literature, in an influential discussion of children’s literature: ‘If people had to choose only one literary work to send in a rocket ship out to distant galaxies and as representative of our lives on earth, that work might likely be Aesop’s *Fables*.’[[50]](#endnote-51) The next stage in the transformation of Aesop’s *Fables* may take him from literature of the world to literature beyond our galaxy.

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3. Godwin (1805) ‘Preface’, iii. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Leighton (1891) 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Godwin (1805) ‘Preface’, iii-iv. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Anon. (1806). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. On which see Hall (2008*a*) 26-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. For the appearances of Aesop in archaic and classical Greek literature, see Hall (2013), and the earlier chapters in the magnificent study by Leslie Kurke (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. See Simon and Schultze (1983). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. For Marie de France, see Mann (2009); for the text Behn supplied for the second edition of Francis Barlow’s illustrations to Aesop in 1677, see Hodnett (2007); for Fielding, see Brooks (1968); for Richardson, Whitley (1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. For Bentley, Swift and Congreve, see Lewis (1991). For Mill, see his autobiography, Mill (2009) 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Torre Revello (1957) 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Cribiore (2001) 179-80, with the evidence of Cribiore (1996), nos. 230, 231, 232, 314, 323, 409, and 412. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Cribiore (2001) 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Hall (2006) ch. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. So Keller (1862) 369-70. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. See further Hall (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. This is how the text is interpreted by Lerer (2008) 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. See Perry (1962) 287. But most scholars accept, on the evidence of Herodotus 2.134, that there had been very specific information circulating about Aesop in the fifth century (so West (1974) 25), and indeed many assume on the strength of this passage in *Birds* that there was a book on Aesopic wisdom of some kind available at Athens in the late fifth century (West (1984) 119-21). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Rowe (2010) 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Email of Monday 11th October 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Lerer (2008) 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Wooden (1986) 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Ellis (1968) 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Lyons (2001) 49; Hall (2008*b*) 316. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. It may have been a satirical assault on his sister Mary’s insistence on hearing the Mass: see Campbell (1934). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Fahy (1989) 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Rothwell (1995); this is the underlying assumption of much of Kurke (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. DuBois (2003) 170-88. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Hanazaki (1993-4); Patterson (1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. Hürlimann (1967)183. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. See Monoson (forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
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38. Anon. (1815) 8-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Anon (1815) 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. Thom, Robert (1850); Raverty (1871); James (1872); Aesop (1883); Methodist Church (Fiji) (1902). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. Gilchrist (1803). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. Bombay Native Education Society (1837); Elliot (1840); Aesop (1852). [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. Garvie, Kitts and Cox (1893). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. These dates *ante quem* have been established solely by searching under the relevant languages on the Worldcat database at <http://www.worldcat.org/advancedsearch>. It is possible that earlier versions in each of these languages exists, but even if that is the case, it is still significant that Aesop was translated at this precise historical moment. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. Damrosch (2003); Casanova (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. See Ivy (1941) 493. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. Kottsieper (2008); Hall (2013) 297. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. Gordon (1958) 69; see especially Moran (1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. Williams (1956). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. Griswold (2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)