

Definition: **fable** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Literary genre which takes the form of a short allegorical tale, intended to convey a moral. The oldest extant fables are the Greek tales of Aesop and the Indian stories of the *Panchatantra*. Other notable collections of fables were made by Jean de La Fontaine and John Gay. See *also* allegory

Summary Article: **FABLE**

From *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*

A brief verse or prose narrative or description, whose characters may be animals ("The Cicada and the Ant") or inanimate objects ("The Iron Pot and the Clay Pot") acting like humans; or, less frequently, personified abstractions ("Love and Madness") or human types, whether literal ("The Old Man and the Three Young Men") or metaphorical ("The Danube Peasant"). The narrative or description may be preceded, followed, or interrupted by a separate, relatively abstract statement of the fable's theme or thesis.

I. History

Despite suggestions that the *Panchatantra* (transcribed ca. 3rd c. BCE) is the fountainhead of the Eur. fable, the genre probably arose spontaneously in Greece with Hesiod's poem of the hawk and the nightingale (8th c. BCE), followed by Archilochus's fragments on the fox and the eagle (7th c. BCE). The first collection of Gr. fables is attributed to Aesop (6th c. BCE) and is known to us through Maximus Planudes' 14th-c. ed. of a prose text transcribed by Demetrius of Phalerum (4th c. BCE). Phaedrus and Babrius were the first to cast the fable into verse, and their works attained such popularity that fables became part of school exercises.

Phaedrus (1st c. CE), the first fabulist we may reckon a poet, imitated Aesop in Lat. iambic senarii (see SENAR-ius) but also invented many new fables, recounted contemp. anecdotes, and introduced political allusions. Babrius, writing in Gr. (2nd c. CE), went further by inventing racy epithets and picturesque expressions while enlarging the formula of the genre in the direction of satire and the bucolic; his *Muthiamboi Aisopeioi*, originally in ten books, is in choliambics (see CHOLIAMBUS), the meter of the lampoon. A famous collection by Nicostratus, also of the 2nd c., is now lost. Avianus (4th c. CE) paraphrased and expanded Babrian models, which he enriched with Virgilian and Ovidian phraseology for *mock-heroic effect. *Romulus*, a 10th-c. prose trans. of Phaedrus and Babrius, was later versified and enjoyed celebrity into the 17th c. But the best med. fabulist was Marie de France, who composed 102 octosyllabic fables (ca. 1200) combining Gr. and Lat. themes with insight into feudal society, fresh observation of man and nature, and Gallic irony. The *Ysopets* (13th and 14th c.) were Fr. verse trans. of older Lat. fables.

The Eur. beast epic, in particular the *Roman de Renart*, owes much to many fables as told in antiquity and in their med. Lat. forms (notably Babrius and Avianus) and to Marie. It, in turn, influenced many fables, esp. those in the *Ysopets* and in Robert Henryson's late 15th-c. *Moral Fabillis of Esope*—an innovative version in lowland Scots Eng. Beast epic differs from fable not only in magnitude and in its exclusively animal cast of characters but also in its single, mock-heroic modality.

Bestiary differs from fable in its emphasis on the symbolic and allegorical meanings of the features or

traits attributed to its subjects, animals both legendary and real.

The *Fables choisies et mises en vers* of Jean de La Fontaine (1621–95) are both summative and innovative. In the first two collections (1668), the Fr. poet adapted subjects and techniques from trans. of Phaedrus, Babrius, and Avianus, incl. Gilles Corrozet's *Fables du très ancien Esope Phrygien* (1542), which anticipated La Fontaine's use, in the same poem, of *vers mêlés*. The second collection and subsequent additions (1678–79; 1693) contained materials from Indic sources, incl. *Le Livre des Lumières*, a 1644 trans. of fables based on an 8th-c. Ar. version of the *Panchatantra*. Two features distinguish La Fontaine's *Fables* from their forerunners: first, they make thematically significant use of pastiche and parody across a wide spectrum of modes and genres; and second, they are systematically philosophical, setting forth, extending, and revising an Epicureanism derived from Lucretius and Pierre Gassendi.

La Fontaine was widely imitated during the 17th and 18th cs.: in France, by Eustache le Noble (1643–1711) and J.-P.-C. de Florian (1755-94); in England, by John Gay (1685-1732); in Spain, by Tomás de Iriarte (1750-91); and in Germany, by C. F. Gellert (1715-69). G. E. Lessing (1729-81) modeled his fables on Aesop.

In the first two decades of the 19th c., the Rus. Ivan Adreyevich Krylov (1768-1844) won wide acclaim for his trans. of La Fontaine and his original fables, still read for their satire and realism of matter and lang. The verse fable trad. was carried on in America by Joel Chandler Harris, who drew on Af. Am. trads. in his Uncle Remus collections (1881-1906).

II. Types

All fables are didactic in purpose but may be subdivided by technique into three categories: the assertional, the dialectical, and the problematic. Assertional fables plainly and directly expound simple ideas through a harmonious union of precept and example. The Aesopic trad.—ancient and mod.—is in the main assertional. Certain versions of the *Panchatantra* and other Indian collections are dialectical. They present assertional fables in a sequence where each is clarified, nuanced, or even corrected by those that follow. Problematic fables feature moral dilemmas or enigmatic presentation. Among the devices used to "problematize" a fable are omission of the thesis statement, unreliable or playful narration, subtle allusion to other literary works, verbal ambiguity, abstruse metaphors, and symbolism. Many fables by La Fontaine, Ambrose Bierce, and James Thurber are problematic because of one or more of these devices.

See FABLIAU, NARRATIVE POETRY.

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