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

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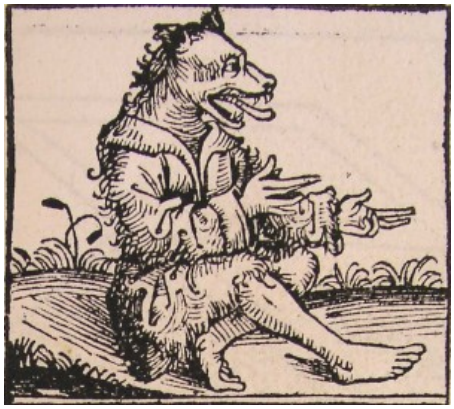
§0. In a work of mine on fables, dating back to 2011, I noted a distinction made in the ancient world between two kinds of fable. In the first kind, ordinarily known as the 'Aesopic' fable, the storytelling concentrates on animals as characters—from here on I refer to them generically as beasts—whereas 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.

Photo of Alex Stevens as a werewolf from the supernatural daytime drama Dark Shadows. Image via Wikimedia Commons.



From the Nuremberg Chronicle (Schedel'sche Weltchronik). Image via Wikimedia Commons.

§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:

> κλέπτης κατέλυσεν ἔν τινι πανδοχείῳ. διέμενεν δὲ ἐκεῖ ἡμέρας τινὰς προσδοκῶν κλέψαι τι. ὡς δὲ οὐκ ἠδύνατο τοῦτο ποιῆσαι, μιᾷ τῶν ἡμερῶν ἰδὼν τὸν πανδοχέα ἐνδυθέντα χιτῶνα ὡραῖον καὶ καινὸν—ἦν γὰρ ἑορτή—καὶ καθεζόμενον πρὸ τῆς πύλης τοῦ πανδοχείου καὶ οὐδένα ἄλλον τυχόντα ἐκεῖ, ἐπελθὼν[1] καὶ ὁ κλέπτης ἐκάθισεν πλησίον τοῦ πανδοχέως καὶ ἤρξατο διηγεῖσθαι μετ' αὐτοῦ. καὶ διηγούμενοι ὥραν ἱκανὴν ἐχασμήσατο[2] ὁ κλέπτης καὶ ὁμοῦ μετὰ τὸ χασμῆσθαι[3] ὠρυᾶτο ὥσπερ λύκος. ὁ δὲ πανδοχεύς φησι πρὸς αὐτόν· "τί οὕτως ποιεῖς;" καὶ ὁ κλέπτης ἀπεκρίθη· "νῦν ἀναγγελῶ σοι· ἀλλὰ δέομαί σου, ἵνα φυλάξῃς τὰ ἱμάτιά μου· ἐνταῦθα γὰρ καταλείψω. ἐγώ, κύριέ μου, οὐκ οἶδα, πόθεν μοι ἐπέρχεται τὸ χασμῆσθαι[4] οὕτως, ἢ διὰ τὰς ἁμαρτίας μου ἢ διὰ ποίαν αἰτίαν, οὐ γινώσκω—ὅταν οὖν χασμηθῶ[5] τρεῖς βολάς, γίνομαι λύκος ἐσθίων ἀνθρώπους." καὶ ταῦτα εἰπὼν ἐχασμήσατο[6] ἐκ δευτέρου καὶ πάλιν ὠρυᾶτο καθάπερ καὶ τὸ πρῶτον. ἀκούσας οὖν ταῦτα ὁ πανδοχεὺς καὶ πιστεύσας τοῦ κλέπτου ἐφοβήθη καὶ ἀναστὰς ἠβούλετο φυγεῖν. ὁ δὲ κλέπτης δραξάμενος αὐτὸν τοῦ χιτῶνος παρεκάλει αὐτὸν λέγων· "ἀνάμεινον, κύριέ μου, καὶ λαβὲ τὰ ἱμάτιά μου, ἵνα μὴ ἀπολέσω αὐτά." καὶ παρακαλῶν αὐτὸν ἀνοίξας τὸ στόμα ἤρξατο χασμῆσθαι[7] ἐκ τρίτου. ὁ δὲ πανδοχεὺς φοβηθείς, μήπως φάγῃ αὐτόν, κατέλιπεν τὸν ἑαυτοῦ χιτῶνα καὶ εἰσελθὼν δρομαίως[8] εἰς τὸ πανδοχεῖον κατησφαλίσατο εἰς τὸ ἐνδότερον. καὶ ὁ κλέπτης λαβὼν τὸν χιτῶνα ἀπῆλθεν. οὕτω πανθάνουσιν οἱ τὰ μὴ ἀληθῆ πιστεύοντες.
>
> 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 just like 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." After saying this, he went wide-open-mouth a second time and, once again, he began howling just as before. The innkeeper, hearing this and believing the thief, was terrified, and he stood up, wanting to run away. But the thief grabbed him by the man's khiton and called out to him, saying: "Wait, sir, and take my clothes, so that I won't lose them." And, as he was calling out to him, he opened his mouth wide and, with mouth wide open, he started to howl for the third time. But the innkeeper, terrified as he was and fearing that he would be eaten, left behind his own khiton and, entering the inside of the inn at full speed he barricaded himself there. Meanwhile the thief took the khiton and went off. So [the moral of the story is]: this is what happens to those who believe things that are not true.

§2. On the surface, this fable is purely Sybaritic—but only if we opt for a simplistic way of reading the story. In terms of such a reading, this story features one human in the act of duping another human by pretending that he can turn into a beast that eats humans. And there is no real beast in the story, is there? The thief's story about a man who turns into a man-eating wolf cannot be believed, can it? You get duped if you believe a story like that. That is the moral of the story, isn't it? But what if the story, in terms of the story itself, is true? What if humans can turn into beasts that eat other humans? Then the moral of the story becomes double-edged: don't believe what is not believable—but look out if it's believable. Suppose the thief was truly a werewolf, that is, a man who turns into a wolf and eats other humans. Certainly the innkeeper believed the story when it was told to him by the would-be werewolf. And if he was right to believe the story, then he did the right thing to run away: the thief may have stolen his finery, but losing your finery is far better than losing your life to a wolf, if the thief is truly a wolf.

§3. In fact, wolves in beast fables are thieves in their own right. A most revealing example is Aesop Fable 234, 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 thievishly predadory 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 metaphorphosis 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.

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Notes

[1] The codex has ἀπελθὼν.

[2] The codex has ἐχασμίσατο.

[3] The codex has χασμῖσθαι. I prefer χασμῆσθαι to Perry's reading χασμεῖσθαι, since the "itacism" of the scribe extends to η, not only to ει.

[4] The codex has χασμῖσθαι. I prefer χασμῆσθαι to Perry's reading χασμεῖσθαι.

[5] The codex has χασμιθῶ.

[6] The codex has ἐχασμίσατο. I prefer χασμῆσθαι to Perry's reading χασμεῖσθαι.

[7] The codex has χασμῖσθαι.

[8] The codex has δρομέως.

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

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