

Lecture-seminar 8: Phaedrus and the underdog

Phaedrus key facts:

- Phaedrus wrote 5 books of verse fables.
- His work is usually dated from late in reign of Augustus until after the fall of Tiberius' minister Sejanus (i.e. 30sCE)
- He styles himself as Roman heir to the Aesopic tradition (Aesop = c.620-564BCE)
- He was apparently born in Thrace and came to Rome a slave before being freed by Augustus.
- He tells us he was one of the freedmen persecuted by Tiberius' powerful confidant Sejanus.

1. The weak and the strong

1.1: The wolf and the lamb

Driven by thirst, a wolf and a lamb had come to the same stream; the wolf stood above, and the lamb at a distance below. Then, the spoiler, prompted by a ravenous gullet, alleged a pretext for a quarrel. "Why," said he, "have you made the water muddy for me *while I am* drinking?" The fleece-bearer, trembling, answered: "Pray, Wolf, how can I do what you complain of? The water is flowing downwards from you to where I am drinking." The other, disconcerted by the force of truth, exclaimed: "Six months ago, you slandered me." "Indeed," answered the lamb, "I was not born *then*." "By Hercules," said the Wolf, "then it was your father who slandered me;" and so, snatching him up, he tore him to pieces, killing him unjustly.

This fable is applicable to those men who, under false pretences, oppress the innocent.

1.5: The cow, the goat, the sheep and the lion

An alliance with the powerful is never to be relied upon: the present fable testifies the truth of my maxim.

A cow, a she-goat, and a sheep, patient sufferer when wronged, were partners in the forests with a lion. When they had captured a stag of vast bulk, thus spoke the lion, after the prey had been divided into shares: "Because my name is lion, I take the first; the second you will yield to me because I am courageous; then, because I am the strongest, the third will fall to my lot; if anyone touches the fourth, woe betide him.

Thus did ruthlessness seize upon the whole prey for itself.

1.9: The sparrow and the hare

Let us show, in a few lines, that it is unwise to be heedless of ourselves, while we are giving advice to others.

When hare that had been pounced upon by an eagle was sending forth piercing cries, the sparrow scoffed at him, saying, "Where now is that fleetness for which you are so remarkable? What made your legs so slow?" While the sparrow was speaking, a hawk seized him unawares, and as he shrieked aloud with vain complaints, the hawk killed him. The Hare, almost dead, as a consolation in his agony, exclaimed: "You, who so

lately, free from care, were ridiculing my misfortunes, have now to deplore your own fate in the same tone of complaint.”

2. Vulnerable bodies, scathing wit, and the fight to survive

1.18: The woman in labour

No one returns with good will to the place that has done him a mischief. Her months completed, a woman in labour lay upon the ground, uttering woeful moans. Her husband entreated her to lay her body on the bed, where she might with more ease deposit her ripe burden. “I feel far from confident,” said she, “that my pains can end in the place where they originated.”

1.19: The dog and her puppies

The fair words of a wicked man are fraught with treachery, and the following lines warn us to shun them. A bitch, ready to give birth, having pleaded with another that she might give birth to her offspring in her kennel, easily obtained the favour. Afterwards, when the other dog asked for her place back again, she renewed her entreaties, earnestly begging for a short time until she might lead forth her pups when they had gained sufficient strength. When the time was up, the other dog began more urgently to press for her abode: “If” said the tenant, “you can prove yourself a match for me and my litter, I’ll move out.”

Cf. 1.15: The Ass and the Shepherd

In a change of government, the poor change nothing beyond the name of their master. This little Fable proves the truth of this statement. A timorous old man was feeding an ass in a meadow. Frightened by a sudden alarm of the enemy, he tried to persuade the ass to flee, lest they should be taken prisoners. But the ass replied leisurely: “Pray, do you suppose that the conqueror will place double panniers upon me?” The old man said, “No.” “Then” answered the ass “what does it matter to me whom I serve, so long as I have to carry my panniers?”

3. Social ambition

1.3: The vain jackdaw and the peacock

The truth that one ought not to plume oneself on the merits which belong to another, but ought rather to pass his life in his own proper guise, is illustrated by Æsop as follows:—A jackdaw, swelling with empty pride, picked up some feathers which had fallen from a peacock, and decked himself out with them; upon which, despising his own kind, he pushed his way into a handsome flock of peacocks. They tore the feathers from the impudent bird, and put him to flight with their beaks. The jackdaw, saddened at being roughly handled in this way, attempted to return to his own kind; but he was rejected by them, and had to bear the burden of an ugly disgrace. Then one of those whom he had formerly despised said, “If you had been content with our station in life, and had been ready to put up with what nature had given, you would neither have experienced the first humiliation, nor would your misfortune have had to feel the additional pain of this rebuff!”

4. Key questions to ask of Phaedrus' *Fables* within the framework of this module:

- Is this really light reading, or is its lightness a veil for risky, subversive political commentary and performance?
- To what extent are the fables performances of power? Can there be any real transfer of power to those who are genuinely vulnerable or socially marginalized?
- What is the role of humour in all this? And how much power is the reader granted to 'enable' the voice of the slave, the freedman, or the person in the gutter, to rise up and sound out, authentically and authoritatively?
- Do we get a brave new insight into imperial Roman culture through Phaedrus, or are these fables just tweaked versions of the same old stories?
- Is being a slave, or slave-like, just a literary trope, shorthand for all things 'Aesopic'?
- And what would be the point of (an aristocratic?) Phaedrus experimenting in the poetry of the low, the ugly, the vulnerable and the powerless?

6. Prologue to book 1

Aesopus auctor quam materiam repperit,
hanc ego polivi versibus senariis.
Duplex libelli dos est: quod risum movet
et quod prudenti vitam consilio monet.
Calumniari si quis autem voluerit,
quod arbores loquantur, non tantum ferae,
fictis iocari nos meminerit fabulis.

5

The matter which Æsop, the inventor of *Fables*, has provided, I have polished in iambic verse. The advantages of *this* little work are twofold—that it excites laughter, and by counsel guides the life of man. But if any one shall think fit to slander it because not only wild beasts, but even trees speak, let him remember that we are joking around in fables.

Compare **Prologue to Book 2**, vv.2-4 ('Nothing is sought in fable other than the mistakes of mortals be corrected, and that one may sharpen his wits by a close application of them')

SEMINAR (group discussion): read the Prologue to the third book of Fables, and consider the questions that follow...

Prologue to book 3

Phaedri libellos legere si desideras,
 uaces oportet, Eutyche, a negotiis,
 ut liber animus sentiat **uim carminis**.
 "Verum" inquis "tanti non est ingenium tuum,
 momentum ut horae pereat officii meis." 5
 Non ergo causa est manibus id tangi tuis,
 quod occupatis auribus non conuenit.
 Fortasse dices: "Aliquae uenient feriae,
 quae me soluto pectore ad studium uocent."
 Legesne, quaeso, potius uiles nenias, 10
 impendas curam quam rei domesticae,
 reddas amicis tempora, uxori uaces,
 animum relaxes, otium des corpori,
 ut adsuetam fortius praestes uicem?
 Mutandum tibi propositum est et uitae genus,
 intrare si Musarum limen cogitas. 16
 Ego, quem Pierio mater enixa est iugo,
 in quo Tonanti sancta Mnemosyne Ioui,
 fecunda nouies, artium peperit chorum,
 quamuis in ipsa paene natus sim schola, 20
 curamque habendi penitus corde eraserim,
 nec Pallade hanc inuita in uitam incubuerim,
 fastidiose tamen in coetum recipior.
 Quid credis illi accidere qui magnas opes
 exaggerare quaerit omni uigilia, 25
 docto labori dulce praeponens lucrum?
 Sed iam, "quodcumque fuerit," ut dixit Sinon
 ad regem cum Dardaniae perductus foret,
 librum exarabo tertium Aesopi stilo,
 honori et meritis dedicans illum tuis. 30
 Quem si leges, laetabor; sin autem minus,
 habebunt certe quo se oblectent posterum.

Nunc, fabularum cur sit inuentum genus,
 breui docebo. Seruitus obnoxia,
 quia quae uolebat non audebat dicere, 35
 affectus proprios in fabellas transtulit,
 calumniamque fictis elusit iocis.
 Ego illius pro semita feci uiam,
 et cogitauit plura quam reliquerat,
 in calamitatem deligens quaedam meam. 40
 quodsi accusator alius Seiano foret,
 si testis alius, iudex alius denique,
 dignum faterer esse me tantis malis,
 nec his dolorem delenirem remediis.
 Suspicione si quis errabit sua, 45
 et, rapiens ad se quod erit commune omnium,
 stulte nudabit animi conscientiam,
 huic excusatum me uelim nihilo minus.
 Neque enim notare singulos mens est mihi,
 uerum ipsam uitam et mores hominum 50
 ostendere.
 rem me professum dicet fors aliquis grauem.
 Si Phryx Aesopus potuit, si Anacharsis Scythes
 aeternam famam condere ingenio suo,
 ego litteratae qui sum proprior Graeciae, 55
 cur somno inerti deseram patriae decus,
 Threissa cum gens numeret auctores deos,
 Linoque Apollo sit parens, Musa Orpheo,
 qui saxa cantu mouit et domuit feras
 Hebrique tenuit impetus dulci mora? 60
 Ergo hinc abesto, Liur, ne frustra gemas,
 quom iam mihi sollempnis dabitur gloria.
 Induxi te ad legendum? Sincerum mihi
 candore noto reddas iudicium peto.

If you desire, **Eutyche**, to read the little books of Phaedrus, you must keep yourself disengaged from business, so that your freed mind may relish the **force of the poetry**.

"But," you say, "my genius is not of such great value that I should waste a moment of time on it that could otherwise be used for my own pursuits." There is no reason, then, why the book should be touched by your hands, given it is suited to 'busy' ears. Perhaps you will say, "I'll get some holiday time, which will allow me to study with no weight on my chest."

Seriously, I ask you - will you really prefer to read worthless little poems rather than devoting attention to your domestic concerns, to spending time with your friends, hanging out with your wife, relaxing your mind, and refreshing your body, in order that you may return more efficiently to your usual duties?* You must change your purpose and your mode of life, if you're intent on crossing the threshold of the Muses. I am he who my mother brought forth on the Pierian hill, upon which hallowed Mnemosyne, nine times fruitful, bore the choir of Muses to thundering Jove: although I was born *almost* in the very school itself, have entirely erased all care for acquiring wealth from my breast, and with the approval of many have applied myself to these pursuits. But I am still *only with difficulty* received into the choir of the Poets. So what do you imagine becomes of the guy who seeks, with ceaseless vigilance, to

amass great wealth, preferring the sweet pleasures of gain to the labours of learning?

But whatever, come of it what may (as Sinon said when he was brought before the King of Dardania), I will now trace a third book with the pen of Æsop, and dedicate it to you, in acknowledgment of your honour and your goodness. If you read it, I shall rejoice; but if otherwise, at least posterity will have something with which to amuse themselves.

Now will I explain in a few words why the genre of Fable was invented. Because slavery, which is liable to punishment, did not dare to say what it wanted to say, it couched its sentiments in Fables, and eluded censure with its fictitious games. In place of its foot-path I have made a road, and I have invented more than I inherited, selecting some points - to my own misfortune. But if any man other than Sejanus had been the informer, if any other man had been the witness, if any other man had been the judge, I would confess myself deserving of such terrible evils; and I wouldn't try to 'soothe' my pain with remedies such as this! If anyone shall make erroneous assumptions, seizing on the common element in all this, all he will do is stupidly reveal his subjective convictions. Nevertheless, I would want to be excused even by a man like this; for it is no intention of mine to point at individuals – I only want to describe life itself and the manners of mankind. Perhaps someone will say that I undertake a weighty task. If **Æsop of Phrygia**, if **Anacharsis of Scythia**—could, by their genius, found a lasting fame, why should I – after all, I am more closely related to learned Greece! - forsake the glories of my country in a spirit of sleepy inertia? Especially as the Thracian race numbers gods among its own authors, and Apollo was the parent of Linus, a Muse of **Orpheus**, who moved rocks and tamed wild beasts with his song, and held the current of Hebrus in sweet suspense.

Away then, envy! And don't groan in vain, because actually solemn fame is due to *me* now. Have I induced you to read on? I beg that you will give me your sincere opinion of them with your well-known honesty.

Questions:

Group 1: How does Phaedrus represent himself and his poetry here?

Group 2: What is the relationship between slavery and poetry in this poem?

Group 3: Analyse the poem's ending. What kind of power-play is going on here? Try to untangle the contradictions, and pay attention to Phaedrus' use of myth.

***Poetry as work/play: important models and parallels**

1. Plato, *Phaedrus* 227b:

Socrates

What was your conversation? But it is obvious that Lysias entertained you with his speeches.

Phaedrus

You shall hear, if you have leisure to walk along and listen.

Socrates

What? Don't you believe that I consider hearing your conversation with Lysias "a greater thing even than business," (*Pind. Isthm 1.1*), as Pindar says?

Phaedrus

Lead on, then.

2. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 1.50-3

'As for what follows, you should apply unoccupied ears and a keen intelligence detached from daily worries to true philosophy. In this way my gifts, set out for you with faithful dedication, will not be discarded in contempt before they have been carefully considered.'

3. Martial Epigrams 5.80

'If you have the time, Severus, give something less than an hour---and you may count me your debtor for it---to read and criticize my silly little poems. It is tough to give up your holidays; yet I beg you to endure and put up with the loss for once. However, if you peruse them in company with the eloquent Secundus----(but am I not too bold?)---this little book will owe you much more than it owes to its master. For it will be released from all anxiety, and will not see the rolling stone of the tired Sisyphus,¹ if polished by the Censor's file of learned Secundus, together with my friend Severus.