

Aesop's Arrival in Japan

Classical scholars have known for a long time that Aesop was a bit of an odd fellow. He looked odd, spoke oddly (for a slave at least), and made up very odd stories. In this paper I would like to present another oddity concerning Aesop: his reception in Japan. Aesop has enjoyed a strong reception in many parts of the world but Japan has in some senses crowned him king of Classics. When first introduced by the Jesuits, *Aesop's Fables* was the only classical work to survive the *Sakoku* period, a period in which the Jesuits were slaughtered, their ships turned away, and their printings burned as blasphemy. Through this carnage, the *Fables* survived. The Japanese people loved the *Fables* so much that it was reprinted during the *Sakoku* 11 times, more than the corresponding period in England. The love for Aesop and his *Fables* was so great that in one of these editions Aesop appeared dressed in Japanese garb in a Japanese setting.

I intend to discuss why the *Fables* had such a strong reception in Japan, a topic which has received no attention from our field and no adequate attention in any field. I will accomplish this by reviewing the scant prior scholarship on the subject; discussing the political, social, and literary climate the time of the *Fables'* import; and compare examples from the *Fables* with Japanese folklore contemporary to the time of its reception.

To date there have only been three articles of any length dealing with Aesop in Japan. I will summarize these and follow up on their conclusions. Of these, J.S.A. Elisonas' *Fables and Imitations* presents the most conclusive study. Elisonas proposes that the *Fables* received such a strong reception because it was not Christian-centric, educational yet unoffensive, and they "ingeniously imparted universal morals"(Elisonas 2002). I will discuss these reasons and supplement them where necessary to achieve a fuller account of the reception.

The remainder of my paper will be spent examining specific cultural elements which made Japan ripe for the reception including: zoomorphic narratives, i.e. narratives in which animals speak, being present and popular in Japan, common moral ground (though by no means total), and finally similarity in both plot structure and animal role in contemporary Japanese folklore to the *Fables*. For an example of this last comparison, the fox in both cultures (Greece and Japan) was nearly universally presented as a sly and mischievous female figure. When the Japanese reader received the *Fables* the image of the Japanese fox, the *kitsune*, must have been near to their mind when reading of a similar wily female fox.

For over two hundred years the *Fables* survived alone in Japan as a classical source. As classical scholars have now begun to turn to Japan as a potential area of research (Watanabe 2009), *Aesop's Fables* is among the best texts to study in this new area.

Select Bibliography

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