

The Motif of “The Animal Left Behind” in Classical Literature

A common folktale motif is the “Parliament of Animals” (Thompson B230), in which all of a group of animals (such as birds) are summoned for a consultation, profess their ignorance about the matter in question, but then receive information by the animal that was last to arrive (Thompson B232; cf. Frazer 354). Related to this, but apparently unclassified, is a motif (or perhaps “sub-motif”) we can refer to as “The Animal Left Behind.” In these cases, the last animal to arrive was late because it had not been invited or informed about the assembly in the first place. This tardy animal is usually old, lame, blind, or similarly afflicted with a condition that is implied to be the reason the other animals neglected it. Versions of B230 as well as of “The Animal Left Behind” are widespread in later European folklore, appearing in tales from Hungary, Romania, modern Greece, and Germany, among others. Frazer (350-55) and Hansen (462-69) mention B230 in relation to the story of Melampus, with reference to Pherecydes and Eustathius, but provide no broader discussion of the motif in relation to ancient Greek and Roman folklore despite evidence that the motif may have been known as early as the age of Homeric epic. In fact, a number of stories from classical literature provide additional examples of the motif, allowing for a more detailed analysis of the motif’s popularity and significance.

This paper approaches the scholarly lacuna on this motif in several ways. First, it provides numerous additional examples of the motif in classical literature and elsewhere, including Lucian (*Philopseudes* 11-13; see Ogden 65, 77, and 88), a related story in Hyginus (*Fabulae* 26), another about King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (which appears in both the Jewish Midrash Hagadol and the Islamic Quran), and another from classical Ottoman poetry (“The Wind-Demon”). Notably, the stories share some striking similarities, suggesting less variation over centuries and cultures than might typically be expected.

Next, this paper examines the types of creatures involved in the stories – which are almost always either birds or snakes – and why these particular animals might be the focus of the motif. This includes discussion of the animals' chief characteristics. Birds, because they fly over vast swaths of territory, see and hear much, and (in the stories) pass knowledge to each other and to humans. Snakes, alternatively, are considered dangerous, and gathering them together proves to be an efficient way to dispose of them. This section also discusses the apparent bias against the animals' disabilities – a bias overturned by evidence of the neglected animals' wisdom, which itself then provides a reminder to respect the elderly and other undervalued members of society.

Lastly, this paper analyzes various differences in the types of assemblies. Convocations of birds and, less frequently, of mixed animals (combining dragons and wolves, for example) tend to be informational, while those of exclusively snakes appear to be solely for the purpose of highlighting magicians' abilities to destroy snakes or drive them out of a territory, often via music, Pied Piper-like, as in the stories from Lucian (a Chaldean magician) and Hyginus (Medea as snake-charmer), and the later Irish story of St. Patrick. Moreover, there are distinct kinds of assembly: in one kind, an animal shows up late for the gathering but is the only one with the crucial information, while in the other kind – usually “The Animal Left Behind” – an animal is initially not invited, but is then summoned by the other animals (but does not necessarily have crucial information).

Taken all together, the evidence suggests the following: 1) There are more examples of motif B230 and its variants from classical literature than previously realized; 2) Motif B230 may be even more widespread than originally thought; and 3) “The Animal Left Behind,” with its early origins in ancient Greece, comprises a sub-motif in its own right, a specific variant on the

larger pattern. Moreover, these stories provide unexpected cultural commentary about a number of longstanding societal beliefs, such as attitudes about the nature of disability as well as about the ability of music to charm both animals and people. This is a reminder that folklore, which is often derided as somehow less scholarly than other fields of inquiry, is not comprised simply of useless stories, but rather serves as a repository of cultural touchstones.

Bibliography

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