

Phaedrus's Optimism

The first-century CE Roman fable-writer Phaedrus is usually characterized as intensely pessimistic and as someone whose chief advice is for the weak to submit to the strong (among others, Adrados 2000; Bloomer 1997; Champlin 2005; Holzberg 2002; Nøjgaard 1979; and Polt 2014). In this talk, I will suggest that this view of Phaedrus is misguided, and I will do so through one of his bleakest-seeming fables: “The Wolf and the Lamb” (Fable 1.1). In this fable, a wicked wolf tries to start a quarrel with a lamb by falsely accusing him. After the lamb twice rebuffs the wolf’s accusations, the wolf accuses him a third time and then slaughters the lamb before he can reply. Despite this dark picture, this fable demonstrates three important aspects of Phaedrus’s optimism: (1) the truth works, (2) the truth is a weapon against the strong, and (3) the fables themselves are effective tools to combat injustice.

First, I will show through a comparison of this fable with the versions found in Babrius and in the *Aesopica* that the truth is far more effective in Phaedrus than it is elsewhere. In Phaedrus 1.1, the wolf is “driven back by the strength of the truth” (1.1.9: *repulsus ille veritatis viribus*). When the lamb is allowed to reply, his expression of the truth defeats the wolf. In fact, the wolf is only able to kill the lamb by stopping his speech. In both Babrius 89 and *Aesopica* 155, the truth has no effect on the wolf at all. In both, the lamb replies all three times to the wolf and is eaten anyway. Not so in Phaedrus, for whom the truth has an unbeatable power—if it is allowed to be spoken.

Second, I will make it clear that in Phaedrus, the truth is a weapon specifically aimed against the strong. As is usual in Phaedrus, spatial positioning is a mark of social class. The wolf is upstream (1.1.2: *superior*) and the lamb is downstream (1.1.3: *inferior*). Hence, although the

moral of the fable applies to anyone who oppresses the innocent (1.1.15: *qui...innocentes opprimunt*), it is clear that this fable is about the strong who oppress the weak. Furthermore, I will argue that this moral is spoken to the strong: “This fable has been written because of those men / who oppress the innocent with invented charges” (1.1.14-15: *Haec propter illos scripta est homines fabula / qui fictis causis innocentes opprimunt*). This fable does not tell the weak that this is their lot in life. It calls out the wickedness of the strong.

Finally, I will argue that this fable demonstrates the special power of fables. If, in the fiction of the fable, the expression of truth is inherently powerful and has the ability to ward off evil, then the fable’s moral takes on a new power. Just like the lamb, the fable points fingers, identifying men who tell lies and oppress the innocent. The moral does not merely describe the unfairness of the world, but it explicitly fights back against injustice by naming it. The fiction here is that a reader could speak this fable in the presence of real wickedness, and that this expression of truth would be as effective as it (initially) is for the lamb. This may be a fantasy, but it is a fantasy with meaning for the powerless especially, who are encouraged to speak up against injustice—not to submit.

Bibliography

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