

LA FONTAINE'S FABLES

[Reviewer Unknown]

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Edited and Annotated by Jakub Safar
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LA FONTAINE'S FABLES.¹ Boston: Tappan and
Dennett.

We are glad that Mr. Wright² has published this cheap edition³ of his faithful and terse translation,⁴ for it can now be put within the reach of all, and give instructive delight to many

¹ Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695) is best known for perfecting the genre of fables in verse, published a 124 fable collection in six books: *Fables choisies, mises en vers* 1668-1694. He claimed that even when his fables involved plants and animals, he always strived to depict human nature. On the subject of animals he also published *Discours à Mme de La Sablière* (1679), “refuting René Descartes’s claim that animals were a kind of machine” (Shaw).

² Elizur Wright, Jr. (1804-1885) is best known for being the “father of life insurance” in the United States. In his early years, though, he was a very active abolitionist, founding the *Weekly Chronotype* newspaper and translating La Fontaine on the side. After travelling to England in 1846, Wright became interested in insurance reform, publishing an exposé of corrupt business practices, and later becoming Insurance Commissioner of Massachusetts in 1858.

³ The edition referred to here is either the 5th (printed in 1842) or 6th edition (printed in 1843) of La Fontaine’s Fables. Both editions were specifically designed for use in schools for the education of children and were thus more cheaply constructed and printed in larger runs. Furthermore, these two editions of Wright’s translations were revised due to multiple criticisms from parents and teachers regarding five of the more “unsuitable” fables. The fables *The Bitch and her Friend*, *The Mountain in Labour*, *The Young Widow*, *The Women and the Secret*, and *The Husband, the Wife, and the Thief* were replaced by fables of Wright’s own creation *The Fly And The Game*, *The Dog And Cat*, *The Golden Pitcher*, *Party Strife*, and *The Cat and the Thrush*.

a poor little child whose means of intellectual enjoyment are limited to the scanty superfluity which is left from the hard earnings of its parents, after the wants of life are supplied.

The wood cuts⁵ are exceedingly well reduced by Hartwell from the wonderful originals of Grandville,⁶ the Hogarth⁷ of the brute creation, and painter of low life among animals; and though the finer touches of character in the faces are necessarily lost, those in the attitudes⁸ are faithfully preserved.



⁴ Wright had never before translated a French book, and was the first person to translate La Fontaine's Fables into English. His version is still the most common today, despite others having translated the work since then. It is a remarkable feat of scholarship on Wright's part to have both translated and organized the printing and selling of his translation with little help from others.

⁵ The process referred to here is more likely wood engraving than woodcut. They are similar processes, but wood engraving was far more common, and allowed artists much more control over detail, nearly rivaling metal engravings. The original prints of Grandville were created using metal engravings, but wood engravings produce similar results and are far more economical to produce.

⁶ Jean-Ignace-Isidore Gérard (1803-1847), worked under the professional name J. J. Grandville. A prolific illustrator, Grandville is best known for his nearly Surrealist fantastical book illustrations and political caricatures. His most famous series are *Un Autre Monde* (Another World) and *Scènes De La Vie Privée Et Publique Des Animaux* (Scenes From The Public And Private Lives Of Animals).

⁷ William Hogarth (1697-1764) was one of the most famous engravers of the 18th century. The reviewer most likely refers to his most well-known series of "pictured morality" *Rake's Progress* and *Harlot's Progress*. These series depicted the systematic moral downfalls of man and woman, in a series of progressively more horrific and depraved scenes. "The Hogarth of the brute creation" means that Grandville also produces scenes depicting the embodiments of vice, but with animals rather than people.

⁸ The reviewer here means that although the wood-engravings of Hartwell are not as artistically detailed as Grandville's, they do preserve the "idea" within the illustrations.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The genre of “Children’s Literature” was drastically changing during the late 18th and 19th centuries. Many different aspects of the literary scene influenced the preconceived notions of a Literature written specifically for children. With the advent of a mass printing culture, the ability to print cheap books changed the role of the printed text in the working-class and lower-class household. No longer a luxury, books could now be sold to parents for their moral and educational benefits to their children. Simultaneously, a changing societal conception of “childhood” coming from Romantic poets like Wordsworth and the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that a moralizing, unenjoyable literature was detrimental to the development of children into adulthood. It is in this atmosphere that Elizur Wright was translating La Fontaine’s Fables, doing so solely for the entertainment of his child. It is perhaps due to a devotion to the artistic *expression* of La Fontaine’s Fables that Wright’s translation continues to be so successful, and also explains his displeasure at omitting certain fables in the school editions of his translation. The reviewer of this printing of La Fontaine’s Fables seems to be aware of and aligned with a more modern view of the benefits of Children’s Literature, and therefore advocates for a book that is both “delightful” and “intellectual,” challenging the conservative notion of a Children’s Literature that is moralizing at the expense of being entertaining.

JAKUB SAFAR



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