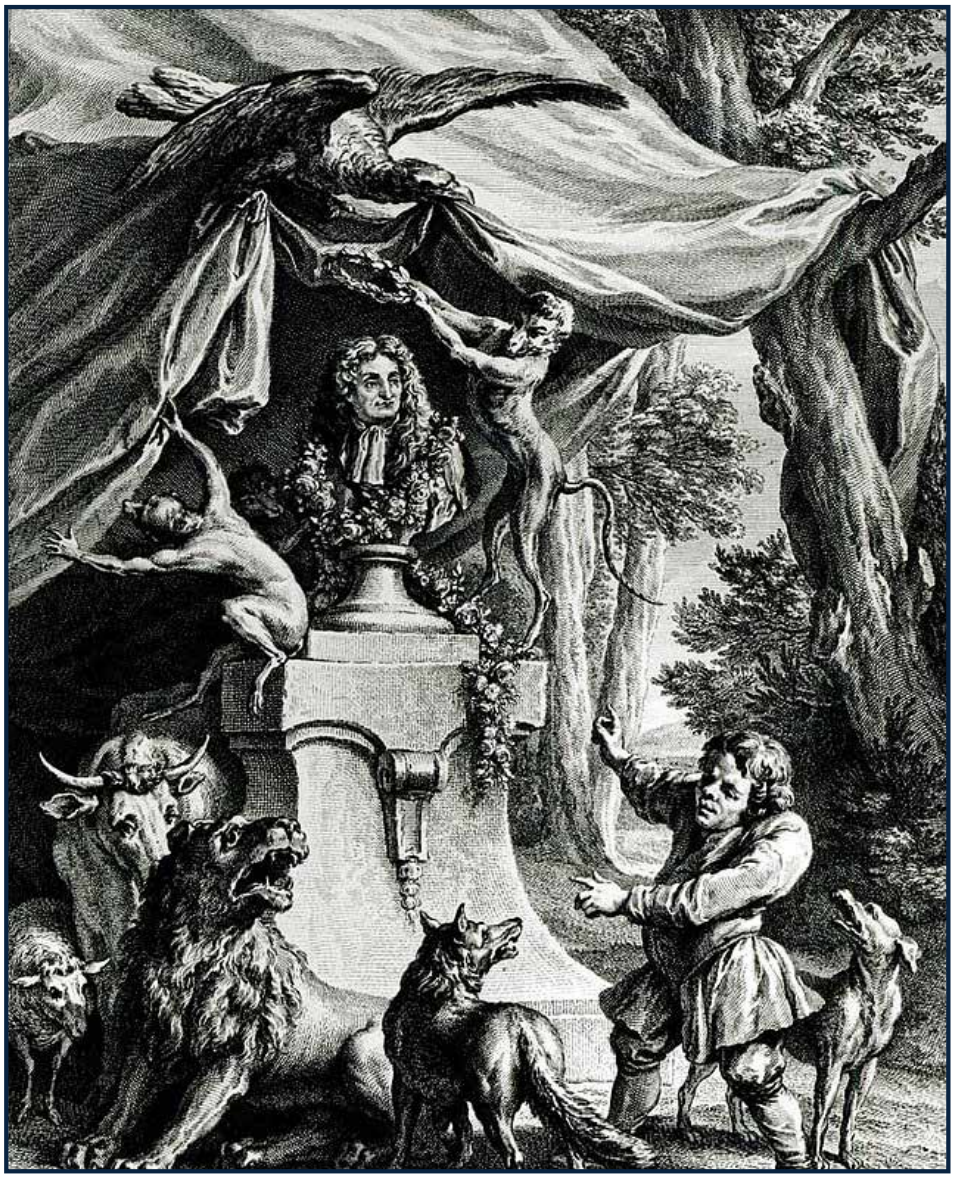
Thomas Banks

The Aesop of France

The firm line drawn between books for children and books for grown-ups is not so old as we might suppose. While we take for granted a certain taxonomy of reading that divides works into categories premised on the idea of a book being appropriate to one age group or another, this is simply another one of our modes of thinking alien to generations past. The tales of Aesop or the *Arabian Nights* were not intended by their authors as entertainments strictly for children, however many educators and book publishers in later ages have supposed that this precisely was their wish. Had any of us met John Bunyan, and asked him if his *Pilgrim's Progress* were meant for the young or the mature, he probably would not have allowed that we had framed the question properly. One lesson we might draw from these considerations is that whatever good we take away from the reading of any book, long or short, simple or complex, is not wholly dependent on the time of life when that book finds us. The practices and fashions that consign some types of reading to one or another stage of life are founded more on whim than reason.

Having mentioned Aesop already, I should mention also that the classic animal fable is, along with the fairy tale, perhaps the literary form most frequently mischaracterized as being essentially a thing for children. There is no real reason why stories of human "types" represented in the forms of animals should be less attractive to men and women than to boys and girls, and some such tales may even be more fully enjoyable in adulthood. *The Monkey and the Dolphin*, for instance, in which the pretentious simian of the title claims to be a member of one of the noble families of Athens, and then, having tried to support one falsehood with another, is exposed and horribly punished for his dishonesty, belongs, I think, to this class. A six-year-old can read it and find it amusing, but only someone who has encountered and (more to the point) been guilty of snobbery and self-advertisement in its less elegant forms can really be pained by the story as one ought to be. There is more in Aesop than easy laughter.



Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686–1755), Allegorical portrait of Jean de La Fontaine (1621–1695) surrounded by animals from his fables, with Aesop at lower right.

As simple as the fable is, the genre enjoyed its greatest popularity in that most complicated of societies, the France of the *grand siecle*. The same courtiers we meet in the

memoirs of Saint-Simon, the *noblesse d'epee* who attended King Louis XIV with such ceremony at his *lever* and *coucher*, who delighted in the music of Lully and the furniture of Bulle, and whose every daily activity involved its own elaborate etiquette, found hours of leisure for the animal tales of Jean de La Fontaine, the period's master of the form. The *Fables Choisies,* his most read book then, remains his most read book now, though it has passed from the halls of the great and stylish to the shelves of the modern primary school. The popularity he enjoyed during his own lifetime was not the result of his originality as an author, for in his fables he invented little. The reader of Aesop who picks up La Fontaine for the first time will find little there to surprise him. La Fontaine belongs rather to the class of great craftsman, great reshapers of old tales and stories than to the ranks of purely "creative" genius. This is not to say that he is a lesser artist, for he is a very great artist indeed. If he worked with largely inherited materials, a reading of even a handful of his best poems is enough to show that he improved what he had inherited in his handling of it.

La Fontaine was one of the small number of verse writers whose poetical talents and abilities as storytellers stand on an equal footing. Chaucer is one of these, and Ovid another. Much of the excellence of La Fontaine's tales in verse lies in the easiness of their narration spiced with a sharp and deftly handled irony—their distinctively French element. The stories are lifted from the Greek, but *Le Loup et Le Chien* and *Le Corbeau et Le Renard* are every bit as much La Fontaine's as Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is Shakespeare's, however much of its plot the Bard borrowed from old Plutarch.

Unlike Shakespeare, La Fontaine had very little of what we call the romantic imagination. Matthew Arnold's definition of art as a "criticism of life" is not as widely applicable as that great Victorian hoped, but it applies fairly well to La Fontaine, whose fables are nothing if not a criticism on the thousand forms of *betise* the mind and soul of man falls into in this still most pleasant, however imperfect, world in which he finds himself. La Fontaine smiles at our foolishness as he dresses it in fur and feathers, and expects that we will smile at ourselves. He never mocks us or lets our irremediable fatuity drive him into savagery or bitterness; in this lies the difference between him and Jonathan Swift, a no less great, though much less companionable writer.

La Fontaine was born a member of the bourgeois classes that have supplied, in France as well as Britain, the majority of the nation's great writers. His father Charles held the position of "Master of Waters and Forests", an office whose occupant was charged with seeing that the estates of the nobility were secured against unlicensed use by poachers and their like. The poet himself was born in 1621. The course of his early education appears to have little interested his father, and what reading he had was the result of the wandering curiosity of the boy himself. Like Shakespeare, he had little Latin and less Greek. When it came time for his parents to choose a profession for him, they decided on the priesthood, and La Fontaine found himself briefly enrolled in the Paris seminary of the Oratorians. That he had no vocation to Holy Orders was soon apparent, if it was not already obvious to the future poet himself, who much preferred the life of the town to the life of the parish, and Rabelais to Saint Augustine. The irregularity of his studies was not disadvantageous to him in every respect; the literary pursuits he followed in his own free hours served to fortify him against the false elegance and mere "correctness" that a chilly classicism has in the past sometimes imparted to students for whom Aristotle and Quintillian are sacred names. Indeed, La Fontaine has less of the pedant in him than any equally great French writer of the period, Moliere alone excepted. He took from such books as he read all the best lessons he could; the earthy atmosphere of the old Medieval *fabliaux*, the salty honesty of Montaigne, the ingenious bawdiness and bizarre name-puns of Rabelais; and to all of these something of his own, which may be described as an appearance of prodigal ease in his every tale and poem; which is not to say that he did not need to learn his craft. As a matter of fact, his talent took longer than that of most poets to make its existence known to the reading public and to La Fontaine himself. His first efforts—the occasional play, epigram, and verse epistle—did not claim a great deal of instantaneous attention, and the first collection of the *Fables* did not appear until La Fontaine was well into middle age. During the years when he made his first slow steps as a poet, La Fontaine enjoyed the patronage of Nicolas Fouquet, the minister of finance during the later years of King Louis' minority. When Louis came of age and began to exercise power on his own, he was convinced (though he little needed convincing) to humble the vastly wealthy Fouquet, who had managed to make himself one of the most powerful men in the whole of the kingdom. Fouquet was brought to trial for the embezzlement of public funds, and fell harder than even unequivocal proof of his guilt would have demanded; Louis saw to it that he was imprisoned, even when his original trial had ended with a sentence of banishment. Having witnessed the ruin of his patron, La Fontaine learned, if the lesson still needed learning, that it is dangerous for lesser beasts to find themselves between the paws of the royal lion.

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His association with the fallen Fouquet did not bring with it the end of La Fontaine's career, though the king and some of those close to him remained prejudiced for a long while against the aspiring author. When the *Academie Francaise* toward the end of the poet's life admitted him to its membership, the still unimpressed Sun King gave his blessing in the less than enthusiastic words "*Vous pouvez recevoir La Fontaine; il a promis d'etre sage*" ("You may receive La Fontaine, as he has promised to be wise"). And it is true that wisdom found him slowly, if at all. He was careless in the management of his pecuniary affairs; the office he had inherited from his father, the old inspector of woods and streams, he was forced by his financial embarrassments to sell for quick cash; his wife and he eventually chose to separate, and to the raising of their only child he contributed close to nothing. Justly or not, there has always lingered around his name the reputation of the idiot savant, and, even if we make

allowances for a poet, it remains apparent that he was less than ordinarily capable of managing his own life. But for all this, he was well-liked by most, and even between him and his estranged wife there grew no permanent roots of bitterness. The pious were not immune to his attractions, and some of Pascal's erstwhile associates at Port-Royal enlisted him to oversee the compilation of a book of devotional poetry. He formed friendships with Moliere and Racine. He found his way into the good graces of patrons who filled the place of Fouquet. His collections of versified tales and fables followed one another in close succession into the hands of an increasingly satisfied public. His very lack of social adroitness endeared him to some, even if it raised more than a little raillery in his lifetime. His slipshod manner of dress, forgetfulness, and pathetic simplicity have since then begotten more than a little misunderstanding, leading some to think him a Wordsworthian spirit born out of due time, when really he was nothing of the sort. In his *Landmarks of French Literature*, Lytton Strachey wrote of him that "He loved nature, but unromantically, as he loved a glass of wine and an ode of Horace, and the rest of the good things of life." He may have written of fields and streams and woods and the life that fills them, but he was no disciple of the Gospel of Nature, and a century later Rousseau, the invincibly humorless apostle of that religion, found much to blame in the works of this ironic *farceur*. The resentment the Genevese exile felt toward La Fontaine is, I suspect, but one more example of the impatience of the dogmatic ideologist for the easygoing epicurean. Brains of a less high temperature than Rousseau's have been more appreciative of the fabulist. Flaubert thought him the most perfect of French writers, and the tasteful and wise Madame de Sevigny, after a first reading of his tales, declared them immortal.

To inquire too closely into the nature of the *Fables'* perfection may cheat us of the pleasanter task of enjoying them, yet a few words on the individual virtues of La Fontaine as a poet and storyteller should not be amiss. He handles light material lightly, and does not fancy himself an educator, even if his chosen form is one that has historically been drafted into the service of pedagogy. La Fontaine is too good-natured an author to let the moral to which a fable points announce itself too loudly; as often as not he allows them their place, but does so in an offhand, even flippant manner that seems to beg us his readers, "enjoy me please, but do not take me too seriously; I am a jester and not a priestly counselor, and it will be so very embarrassing if you treat me otherwise". La Fontaine also was fond of weaving into the texture of his tales marks of his own time's manners and fashions; his animals, even apart from their language, are unmistakably French in all they do; his city mouse and country mouse, lunching at the abode of the former, enjoy a dish of ortolans; in his version of the tale of the two donkeys, the smug beast of burden is not simply carrying a load of coin but, we are told, coin collected for the *gabelle*, a notorious and widely hated tax on salt that long served as a main source of revenue for the national treasury (it was not abolished until 1946). In his story of the frog that exploded when swelling itself to imitate an ox, he closes his narration with the tart aside: "*Tout bourgeois veut batir comme les grands seigneurs.*" ("Every bourgeois sot now apes the nobleman.") The note of wry amusement sounds frequently in his stray remarks littered throughout the fables: "*Patte blanche est un point/ Chez les loups, comme on sait, rarement en usage.*" ("Among Wolfkind a clean white paw,/ As use and manners go,/ Has never been the general law,/ As common sense will show.") In his poetry there is nothing labored on the one hand and nothing haphazard on the other; the words seem to take their places on the page like a well-trained set of dancers take theirs upon the floor. There are a few artists of high rank whom one imagines happy in the act of making: Mozart is one, and La Fontaine another.

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Whatever happiness he drew from his writing was not a permanent fixture in his later life. The patroness whose house had been his home for many years died when he himself was in declining health, and the bewildering necessity of removal, an increasingly troubled conscience, and the decision, to which he was led by his confessor, to disown a great part of his collected writings weighed sadly on his final years. He did not cease to write. The last words that survive from his pen are an imitation of the *Dies Irae*, that awful and overpowering anonymous song of the Last Things that were his constant meditation as the end approached him. It came in 1695. His body, attired in the hair shirt of a penitent, was buried in the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents. His epitaph was of his own composition:

Jean s'en alla comme il etait venu,
Mangea les fonds avec le revenu,
Tint les tresors chose peu necessaire.
Quant a son temps, bein sut le dispenser:
Deux parts en fit, dont il souloit passer
L'une a dormir, et l'autre a ne rien faire.

(As Jean began, so did he make his ending:
With less thought given to saving than to spending.
For cash he cared but little, it would seem,
And, as for time, he thought best to redeem
That given him by using it two ways:
In sleep, and doing nothing all his days.)

That he did not put off his sense of humor in putting on the penitent's robe engages our affection for him all the more, and the nature of the affection we feel for him is different from that we bestow on sublimer intellects: we may revere with almost religious awe a Dante or a Tolstoy, but there is a corner of Parnassus reserved for writers who befriend their readers even as they move them. And it is here that La Fontaine belongs.

Thomas Banks lives in North Carolina and teaches online at the House of Humane Letters. His writings and translations have appeared in First Things*, the* New English Review*,* Quadrant*, the* St. Austin Review*, and* Crisis Magazine.