

## Our Fabled Childhood: Reflections on the Unsuitability of Aesop to Children

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Aesop's *Fables* occupy a uniquely important position in the history of modern children's literature, both in theory and practice. Aesop has regularly featured in theoretical discussions of the literature suitable for children, and selections of his *Fables* have been published in many more versions than any other ancient text including the *Odyssey*.<sup>1</sup> The English Enlightenment philosopher John Locke recommended Aesop for children in his treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693),<sup>2</sup> but he also published his own *Aesop's Fables, in English & Latin, Interlineary* (1703) for practical use in home education. Locke's interest in Aesopic fables as pedagogical material guaranteed that other prominent thinkers would turn their attention to these ancient morality tales, and consider whether they were really suitable for children. In this essay, which is unashamedly polemical, I develop my own response to this question. It is based less on my professional experience as a classical scholar, who has published on the consumption and understanding of the Aesopic *oeuvre* in Antiquity,<sup>3</sup> than on my personal experience as an avid childhood reader and as a stepmother, mother, and aunt who has read often to several small but very different children. Just how suitable for children are Aesop's *Fables* in reality?

Skilled writers for children, ever since William Godwin's pathbreaking, imaginative, and hugely influential *Aesop, Fables, Ancient and Modern Adapted for the Use of Children from Three and Eight Years of Age*, which first appeared in 1805 under the pseudonym Edward Baldwin, have scored notable publishing successes with radically rewritten small collections of the ancient fables.

1 On which, see Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey* (London–Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 26–27.

2 John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. Charles Eliot, "The Harvard Classics," vol. 37 (New York: Collier, 1910, ed. pr. 1693), 265. See further, Edith Hall, "Aesop the Morphing Fabulist," in Helen Lovatt and Owen Hodkinson, eds., *Changing the Greeks and Romans: Metamorphosing Antiquity for Children* (forthcoming).

3 Edith Hall, *The Theatrical Cast of Athens: Interactions between Ancient Greek Drama and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 11; Edith Hall, "The Aesopic in Aristophanes," in Emmanuela Bakola, Lucia Prauscello, and Mario Telo, eds., *Greek Comedy and the Discourse of Genres* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 277–297.

Godwin's combined household with his second wife, Mary Jane Clairmont, contained no fewer than five children, so it may not in practice have been difficult to find one to put on his knee. Godwin even placed a stone carving of Aesop on the lintel above the entrance at 41 Skinner Street, where he and his wife moved their juvenile library in 1807.<sup>4</sup> Godwin made the fables far more attractive by shearing them of their stern "morals" and accompanying them with delightful visual illustrations. His example has been followed by innumerable authors ever since. But have all their efforts at surgical enhancement of the ancient fabulist really been worthwhile? Should the radical Godwin have heeded Locke less and paid more attention to the radical responses to Aesop he must have encountered in Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Tom Paine? For in *Émile: Ou, de l'Éducation* (1762), Rousseau had expressed the adamant opinion that Aesop can do a child far more harm than good. Children, Rousseau argues, have not achieved maturity in understanding what they read, and so it is immaterial if a child, even at the age of fifteen, remains illiterate.<sup>5</sup> Rousseau identifies the type of material generally given to children to read, but which simply wastes their time, as including the Bible and La Fontaine's versified version of the ancient fables (1662), which was in Rousseau's day the most popular text for teaching literacy in France. In fables, Rousseau claims, there is "nothing intelligible or useful for children," and anyway "reading is the plague of childhood."<sup>6</sup> There are further problems, he warns, inherent in the fables as mental food for childhood thought: they give children a false sense of their own intellectual powers by allowing them to think they can decode the jokes. Worse, children often identify with the figure they perceive as the "winner" in the fables, such as the fox who flatters the crow to his self-advantage in *The Fox and the Crow*. Fables therefore encourage them to feel superior to other people and to attend to their own self-interest rather than the interests of the community.<sup>7</sup> Tom Paine went even further than Rousseau in his denunciation of what we would call the ideological damage that Aesopic fables can do to the young mind. In *The Age of Reason*, Part II (1795), he stated that "with respect to Aesop, though the moral is in general just, the fable is often cruel; and the cruelty of the fable does

4 Peter H. Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), 273–274.

5 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile: or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 117.

6 *Ibid.*, 113, 116.

7 *Ibid.*, 112, 115; see further Dennis M. Welch, "Blake and Rousseau on Children's Reading, Pleasure, and Imagination," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 35.3 (2011): 204–205.

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more injury to the heart, especially in a child, than the moral does good to the judgment.”<sup>8</sup>

Before deciding whether I fundamentally agree more with Locke and Godwin or with Rousseau and Paine, I must first clarify my own broad-spectrum theoretical view of children’s literature. My thinking has been fundamentally affected by a study of children’s books which has almost nothing to say about ancient Greek or Roman literature—Jacqueline Rose’s seminal *The Case of Peter Pan*, the first edition of which was published in 1984. Subtitled, provocatively, *The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, Rose uses J.M. Barrie’s immortal story *Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up*, a 1904 stage drama first published as a novel in 1911, to support her argument that the very concept of children’s fiction is “impossible.” There is, she says, no body of literature which rests so openly on an acknowledged *difference* between writer and addressee. The adult writer addresses a child reader only as an acknowledged superior in age, education, and experience. This address has little to do with what a child might want, but a great deal to do with “what the adult desires—desires in the very act of construing the child as the object of its speech.”<sup>9</sup> What is at stake in *Peter Pan*, which fixes its hero in a liminal state where he can never grow up, is the investment of adults in the idea of childhood, of a primitive, innocent, or lost state, a pre-sexual and natural (rather than cultural) state to which the child has special access. But this adult investment is a delusion: there is actually “no child behind the category of “children’s fiction,” other than the one which the category itself sets in place.”<sup>10</sup> When Locke or Godwin imagined children reading Aesop, the category “child” had emerged exclusively from their adult brains.

My second point concerns the convention of zoomorphic humans, or animals with human sensibilities and consciousness, a convention that holds a privileged position in culture produced for children generally. It is crucial to note that the animal protagonists in Aesopic fables deemed suitable for children are far more interested in food than in indulging other “animal” appetites. There is a marked lack of interest in sex, gender roles, and reproduction in the twenty or thirty Aesopic fables that are most often reproduced in children’s editions. Jacqueline Rose would probably observe that this, while saying nothing at all about very young humans, says a good deal about what adults think

8 Thomas Paine, “The Age of Reason,” in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1945), vol. 1, 543.

9 Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (London–Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), 2.

10 *Ibid.*, 10.

children ought *not* to be concerned with. But there is also, of course, the issue involved in making these animal protagonists talk to each other comprehensibly in human speech. There is no actual child behind the category of fiction for children, a category to which Aesop's *Fables* are commonly understood as belonging. There is only a *fantasy* child reader constructed by the adults rewriting the ancient tales. So why do we always assume that children want to hear fictional animals talking to one another at all? Most specialists in children's literature never ask themselves this intriguing question directly. In *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Explanation* (1981), for example, Nicholas Tucker proposes a range of psychological functions that humanised animals can perform to the psychological benefit of the child reader: most importantly, he argues, children are protected from the pain of certain psychological scenarios—for example, the death of a parent—provided that the bereavement is suffered by an animal.<sup>11</sup> Famous examples include the elephant calf whose mother is shot by huntsmen in *The Story of Babar the Little Elephant* (originally *Histoire de Babar le petit éléphant* by Jean de Brunhoff, 1931), the fawn in *Bambi* who likewise loses his mother (the 1942 Walt Disney animated film was based on the novel *Bambi. Eine Lebensgeschichte aus dem Walde* by the Austrian Felix Salten, 1923), and Simba the lion cub in Disney's *The Lion King* (1994), whose father Mufasa is killed early in the storyline.

But, *pace* Nicholas Tucker, in my personal experience, dressing the dying parent/bereaved child relationship up in animal form offers no protection whatsoever to emotionally sensitive children. The death of Mufasa in *The Lion King* upset one of my children so much, when she was six years old, that we had to leave the cinema.

So we need to ask why adults invariably assume that very small children want books about animals—that is, that they want to learn about human relationships through fictions enacted by non-human surrogates. It is not a good enough defence to assert that children “really do” like animals, however much documentary evidence can be accumulated of children happily consuming books or cartoons about animals, since children do not actually get the choice: from the day of their birth they are bombarded with heavy artillery of soft bunnies, squashy ducklings, blankets adorned with cows and sheep, and tactile teddy bears. They are taught from long before they can speak that they are supposed to smile if someone waves a cuddly stuffed animal or a spoon shaped like a duck in their tiny faces. So what we are talking about is not children's “natural” attraction to stories about animals, but adults' *acculturated desire* to

11 See Nicholas J. Tucker, *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

make their offspring smile at animals and consume stories about talking animals. This apparently obvious point bears closer examination.

Most “Aesopic” fables commonly reproduced for children feature talking animals, although many of the ancient fables available to us via the manuscript tradition feature exclusively human personnel. Here we have briefly to address the thorny problem of what constitutes the Aesopic text that finds itself, rather remotely, reproduced in books for children. Many different manuscript collections of fables have been preserved. As the most erudite classical philologist must admit, it is impossible conclusively to sort out what is an Aesopic fable as opposed to one preserved in the Latin collections of Phaedrus, or the fifth-century Avianus. The great scholarly collections of Émile Chambry (1927—the text applied by Olivia and Robert Temple in their useful Penguin edition of 1998) and Ben Edwin Perry (1952) each contain over three hundred. For these reasons, most people adapting the fables for children have not concerned themselves with the “original ancient text”—however that is to be defined and located—but with reprocessing previous modern-language versions. The usual number selected for children’s publications is between ten and thirty. The English-language edition (1999) by Sally Grindley (author of the bestsellers *Shhh!*, 1999, and *Wake Up Dad!*, 1988), illustrated by John Bendall-Brunello, is not untypical. It contains eighteen fables, including the hard core of favourites which are rarely omitted: *The Hare and the Tortoise*, *The Fox and the Grapes*, *The Hare and the Hound*, *The Lion and the Mouse*, *The Fox and the Crow*, *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, *The Jackdaw and the Doves*, and *The Mice in Council*.

The preference for the animal fables in children’s collections of Aesop is, to introduce my third point, closely related to the issue of *power*. The poet Eric Ormsby, acknowledging the huge cultural influence of children’s books, wrote in his review of Seth Lerer’s *Children’s Literature: A Reader’s History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (2008), that “to shape the minds of the young through books is to exercise power over the future.”<sup>12</sup> And the *Fables* of Aesop, perhaps the most influential “children’s book” of all time, are transparently all about power. A large proportion of the most popular and often anthologised fables directly address the relationship between beings of disparate power, whether physical or intellectual. A good deal of them play on the theme of *force majeure*—for example, *The Wolf and the Lamb*, *The Hare and the Hound*, *The Eagle and the*

12 Eric Ormsby, “Out of Aesop’s Overcoat: Two Histories of Children’s Literature,” *The New York Sun*, June 18, 2008, available online at <http://www.nysun.com/arts/out-of-aesops-overcoat-two-histories-of-childrens/80183/> (accessed Nov. 20, 2015). See also Seth Lerer, *Children’s Literature: A Reader’s History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago, Ill.–London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

*Jackdaw*. They demonstrate that it is simply *inherent in nature* that big powerful animals beat smaller weaker ones. Very closely related to these power fables is the group that underlines the stupidity or pointlessness of aspiring to things which are not naturally yours or are too good for you: *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, *The Fox and the Grapes*, and *The Cockerel and the Jewel*. Not dissimilar is the type that suggests that gratitude for what you have already secured is more sensible than trying to increase your possessions: a prime example here is *The Dog and the Shadow*. Another whole set, while recognising that some entities are naturally more powerful than others, suggest that cunning can help to even up the balance, most famously in *The Hare and the Tortoise*. A further strategy for dealing with discrepancy in power is a system of reciprocal favours, as in *The Lion and the Mouse* or *The Bat and the Weasels*. A corollary of these, however, is *The Gnat and the Bull*, which shows that small entities can *think* they are being noticed when they try to curry favour with the great, but *they may not even have been noticed at all*. There are also a disturbing number that stress that different groups are *naturally* irreconcilable—*The Jackdaw and the Doves*, for example—while others suggest that masses are not as effective as individual leaders: *The Mice in Council* and *The Frogs Who Wanted a King*.

So, what is going on here? Telling a very small child a fable entitled, for example, *The Lion and the Mouse*, is to attempt to impose a complicated piece of ideology about reciprocal favours between agents of radically disparate physical power. What we are doing is confusing, and this is the core of my argument in this essay. We are trying to drag children out of the natural world of *force majeure*, and into the world of human mechanisms for mitigating the imperative of *force majeure*. But we do so by demonstrating the nature of these mechanisms through examples from the non-human world where no such mechanisms are in operation. This process reveals our own deep ambivalence about the nature of the child, conceived as an animal, who needs to be acculturated as a human, through the twin mechanisms of speech and social contracts. I think it is inherently mystifying that we use animals, the very creatures from which we are trying to differentiate our children, to make this point. We do so by *fantasising* that they—animals—do indeed have speech and social contracts. That is the fantastic hypothesis we ask our children to accept when we offer them Aesop's *Fables*. And in justifying this peculiar practice, we take comfort in the authority that the *Fables'* great antiquity and classical provenance seem to bestow upon them.

Some introductions to collections of Aesopic fables even try to harness the idea that the fables were designed for ancient children, and so modern children who read them are just the latest generation to partake in a tradition of awe-inspiring Antiquity, imbibing through Aesop some “universal” and



time-transcending moral truths. But even the evidence that Aesop was a “children’s author” in Antiquity is extremely controversial. Although Aesop’s *Fables* are intricately bound up with the history of the teaching of literacy, literacy has not always been something normally or necessarily considered to be acquired exclusively in childhood. That the ancient Greeks and Romans saw Aesop as an author to be read as early as infancy just *may*, however, be implied by an important story in Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (5.15). The story reports that the art of fable was bestowed upon Aesop by Hermes, the god of words himself, because the Horai had told Hermes a fable about a cow when he was still in swaddling clothes; as he gave Aesop the gift, Hermes said, “You keep what was the first thing I learnt myself.”

Some critics make no bones about their view that there was children’s literature even in Graeco-Roman Antiquity, and that it included Aesop’s *Fables*: the structure and language used by Seth Lerer whenever he addresses Antiquity in his influential, aforementioned study, *Children’s Literature: A Reader’s History from Aesop to Harry Potter*,<sup>13</sup> imply that he recognises no distinction between one and the other. But, frustratingly, we cannot actually prove that Aesop was part of the curriculum of children until they were rather older, at a stage when class, status, leisure, and access to education begin to interfere with the picture in a society where literacy may have been as low as fifteen or twenty per cent of the total population. The composition of a fable (*muthos*) was certainly the first exercise attempted by students beginning their studies of rhetoric, and Quintilian (2.4.4) says that grammarians were beginning to encroach on the rhetors’ territory by teaching fable. Raffaella Cribiore has demonstrated the importance of Aesop in the Greek-speaking communities of Hellenistic and Roman ancient Egypt.<sup>14</sup> She has also pointed to the significance for later centuries of the *Hermeneumata* or *Colloquia*, mediaeval school handbooks in Greek and Latin that probably derive from third-century Gaul; they are preserved in eight different manuscripts, were but originally composed by Eastern Greek teachers rooted in an ancient school tradition.<sup>15</sup>

In classical Greece, too, it is possible that Aesop was used to teach small children literacy, for example at Athens where citizens needed to be able to decipher at least basic civic documents. But we lack a clinching piece of evidence

13 See above, n. 12.

14 Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton, N.J.–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 179–180, with the evidence of Raffaella Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1996), nos. 230, 231, 232, 314, 323, 409, and 412.

15 Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, 15.

that Athenian boys were taught to read with the help of written collections of fables. We do not even know whether a physical collection existed as early as the fifth century BC. The earliest certain recension and collection was made by Demetrius of Phalerum (perhaps during his regency at Athens of 317–307 BC.), at least according to Diogenes Laërtius's biography of Demetrius (*Lives* 5.80). This collection, which has not survived, may have been a repertory of fables designed for consultation by rhetoricians (see Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.20). The question of whether reading Aesop was primarily associated with the distinction between childhood and adulthood, or with sociocultural status, entirely depends on how we interpret particular passages in Aristophanes' *Birds* (466–475) and Plato's *Phaedo* (61b).<sup>16</sup>

Whether Aesop should be imagined as the literature of childhood *after* the invention of the printing press is also academically contested. Lerer, while arguing that Aesop must always have appealed to children, insists at the same time that "Europe's first printers used Aesop's fables not just to sustain a literary heritage or offer guidance to the young, but to affirm their own authority as makers of the texts of culture."<sup>17</sup> During the 1470s and 1480s, Aesopic volumes with elaborate illustrations were among the very first books published in European vernaculars—German, French, and Caxton's influential English edition, with famous woodcuts, of 1484. One group is easily identifiable as designed for school work. A Latin school book printed between 1512 and 1514 by Wynkyn de Worde at Westminster is entitled *Aesopus. Fabule Esope cum Comento [sic!]*. The title page woodcut shows a schoolmaster teaching three youths, who are seated on a school bench and holding books from which they read. These boys, however, are certainly not very young, and they are learning not English but Latin. Their Aesop is equivalent to that other mainstay of the mediaeval and early Renaissance school curriculum, *The Distichs of Cato*. Both Cato and Aesop were enormously helpful in teaching Latin, the mother tongue of nobody by the time of Chaucer, and they were often treated as a pair.

The intended readership of the other early printed Aesops, those in modern languages, is unfortunately less easy to define. There is no hard and fast rule for distinguishing between those meant for the very young and those aimed at a much wider age group, including adults. Aesopic fables, with their suitability to visual illustration, have been used since even *before* the invention of the printing press to learn to read mother tongues as well as Latin or Greek, and have always been introduced much earlier in any individual's education. Here an important point needs to be reiterated. "Much earlier in any individual's

<sup>16</sup> Hall, "The Aesopic in Aristophanes," 287–292.

<sup>17</sup> Lerer, *Children's Literature*, 52.



education” does not automatically signify early childhood. The automatic connection of the act of learning to read with juveniles is itself a dangerous one to make when speaking of other times and places. Teaching tools for encouraging basic literacy are definitely not phenomena that can be studied under the exclusive heading of elementary children’s literature. People have always learned to read at all ages, especially in cultures with high levels of adult illiteracy, and have always acquired radically different functional levels of reading ability.

The high profile of Aesop’s *Fables* has also been supported by their relationship with Christianity. These morality tales were widely approved as constituents of the mediaeval and Renaissance syllabus partly because they were felt to be compatible, like the stoicism of Cato, with Christian ethics. Martin Luther changed the course of Aesopic history in terms of the attractiveness of the *Fables* to Protestants when he translated twenty of them in 1530, expressing his great admiration for them in the preface, and was urged by his collaborator Philipp Melanchthon to complete the whole. Gottfried Arnold, the celebrated Lutheran theologian, and librarian to Frederick I, King of Prussia, mentions that the great reformer valued the *Fables* of Aesop second only to the Holy Scriptures.<sup>18</sup> Aesop has ever since been found—to my mind, rather puzzlingly given his rather brutal, even Nietzschean conception of power relations—compatible with the education of Christian readers. This is partly because the morals can be made to sound similar to the Ten Commandments, which makes Aesop a bit like Moses; a good illustration of this type of parallel is the underlying moral, “Thou shalt not envy,” as expressed in Benjamin Harris’s retelling of *The Hawk and Birds* in his *The Fables of Young Aesop* (1700).<sup>19</sup>

The extent of the cultural penetration of Aesop’s *Fables*, related as we have seen to their perceived suitability as vehicles for the transmission of literacy, foreign-language skills, and morals compatible with Christianity, remains unparalleled. It in turn has underlain, or at least been a factor, in the character of countless new classics of children’s literature, and this is my fourth point. Aesop’s *Fables* have, since the mediaeval period, appeared alongside or even merged completely with fables from non-classical traditions: the outstanding example is the fables of Reynard the fox-trickster derived in turn from the twelfth-century *Le Roman de Renart*. The cultural presence of Aesopic fables

18 Ernst Thiele, ed., *Luthers Fabeln nach seiner Handschrift und den Drucken neubearbeitet* (Halle: Niemeyer, 21911, ed. pr. 1888); Arno Schirokauer, “Luthers Arbeit am Aesop,” *Modern Language Notes* 62 (1947): 73–84; Manfred Schultze and Walter Simon, *Martin Luther, Briefe und Aesop-Fabeln: Codex Ottobonianus Latinus 3029* (Zürich: Belser, 1983).

19 Benjamin Harris, *The Fables of Young Aesop, with Their Morals* (London: printed and sold by Benjamin Harris, 41700, ed. pr. 1698), 36–37.

has certainly encouraged the collection of indigenous fables in other traditions, such as the Swahili animal fables of Kenya and animal-dominated allegorical wisdom stories of the poor of Haiti, who originally came by and large from Africa; these stories are held by some to have descended directly from Aesop himself, seen not as a Greek but an African, by etymologising his name as a corruption of Aithops.<sup>20</sup> In Russia, which has had a very distinct and important Aesopic tradition since the first Russian translation appeared in 1700, the poetic fables of Korney Chukovsky (1882–1969), through which countless Soviet citizens taught their children to be careful of the great Cockroach, Stalin, as well as to read, are regarded as a national treasure. For the cultural presence of the *Fables* has had another, much more subterranean impact on children's literature in the form of newly invented stories featuring talking animals and often strong moral or even political lessons.<sup>21</sup> From Beatrix Potter to Walt Disney, whose first three animations featured talking animals (namely the *Alice Comedies* with Julius the Cat, 1923–1927; *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*, 1927; and of course *Mickey Mouse*, 1928), to the spin-offs from Hugh Lofting's 1920 *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, the central place Aesop took in the education of children for so many centuries must be held at least partly responsible.

Mentioning a commercial publishing phenomenon as successful as Beatrix Potter, let alone the Walt Disney Empire, brings us to my fifth and final point: money. One of the most important factors that must be considered is the commercial importance of the market in books for children. Indeed, it is the most lucrative sector of the book market in the world. In *The Child and the Book*, Nicholas Tucker justifies spending several pages analysing the appropriateness of animal stories for children, with the specific example of the tales of Beatrix Potter, on the grounds of what he calls their continuing "appeal to children." While conceding that sales figures "can only be a crude indicator of a book's popularity, since it is adults who make such purchases," he nevertheless insists that Beatrix Potter's "high sales over the last fifty years tell their own story," since "adults will not go on indefinitely buying books for younger readers which are meant to give pleasure but no longer do so."<sup>22</sup> Well, I have to confess to utter scepticism about this line of thinking. Adults buy books that are directed at them by relentless and cunning marketing campaigns, and a

20 See James W. Ivy, "The Wisdom of the Haitian Peasant: Or Some Haitian Proverbs Considered," *The Journal of Negro History* 26 (1941): 493.

21 On Aesop's reception in various regions of the world, see also the other chapters from this part of the volume.

22 Tucker, *The Child and the Book*, 57.

boxed set of Beatrix Potter books or a cute and colourful edition of Aesop are both almost impossible to avoid in any shops or catalogues selling equipment, of any kind, for children. I do wonder how many of those boxed sets lie as unused as those in my house, displaced whenever a choice was actually offered to the very young by books on any subject whatsoever with some degree of interactive opportunity—fluffy panels, pop-up sections, flaps to lift, or buttons to push that set off music or some other sound effects. I suspect that Aesop's *Fables* these days falls into that depressing category of the text that adults *think* that children want, or—worse—think that their adult friends who have had children will approve of as a gift. Call me a cynic if you like.

The *Fables'* status as a market commodity is connected with their attractiveness to some very able and interesting artist/illustrators, notable among whom have been Walter Crane, whose *The Baby's Own Aesop* (1886), like his *The Baby's Opera* (1877), was a marvel of decorative book production—the true connoisseurs' art nouveau. My own favourite is probably Milo Winter's gorgeous images for McNally & Co. in 1919. Enchanting illustrations often help the packaging, presentation, and marketing of the *Fables* as a potential heirloom that somehow offers continuity through a family line just as it offers cultural continuity with ancient Greece: a typical sentence to find in a preface is this, in Sally Grindley and John Bendall-Brunello's *Aesop's Fables for the Very Young* (see above): they hope their book “will be treasured, read and re-read for generations to come.” That type of marketing is cleverly aimed at adults wanting something very grown-up and abstract and a great deal more than a book for children—they want a continuous genealogical line, a family tradition, and to inscribe themselves into the memory of future generations. When all is said and done, therefore, the phenomenon of “Aesop for children” is much better understood as the phenomenon of “Aesop for adults who dictate what children are given to read.” I end up agreeing with Rousseau and Paine rather than with Locke and Godwin.

Yet rather than with Enlightenment and radical thinkers I conclude, instead, with the fable of a fascinating twentieth-century woman of whom few today have ever heard, Edith Farr Ridington of Maryland. After studying Greek and archaeology at Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Ridington taught Classics at McDaniel College in western Maryland as an adjunct professor for several decades in the middle of the twentieth century. She was particularly interested in Aristotle. In the journal *Classical World* for 1963 she reviewed a selection of children's books that used classical material, and confided that when faced with no fewer than three new collections of Aesopic fables that had appeared that year:

My experience with my own children tells me that any fable has a limited appeal to the modern youngster, and a whole book of them, I am afraid, would bore him excessively.<sup>23</sup>

Ridington's reviews of classically informed children's literature appeared annually for a while, and given her scepticism it is no surprise to find her only two years later, faced with the next tranche of new Aesops for children, declaring herself "somewhat puzzled by the proliferation of Aesop's *Fables*."<sup>24</sup> Ridington, a mother of four as well as a professor of Classics, who nurtured a passion for reading in her children as they have detailed to me in emails, was experienced at the parental coalface. And that experience allowed her to see with unprecedented clarity that the proof of the Aesopic pudding, when it comes to maintaining that it is a pudding really suitable for children, can only lie in its eating.

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23 Edith Farr Ridington, "Review: Some Recent Historical Fiction and Juveniles, vi," *Classical World* 56.9 (1963): 278.

24 Edith Farr Ridington, "Review: Some Recent Historical Fiction and Juveniles, xi," *Classical World* 59.3 (1965): 77.