

# X Rated Aesop



## A New Translation of the Famous Fabulist Reveals Ancient Greek Life in the Raw

When authors and translators Robert and Olivia Temple first got interested in the tales of Aesop, they were surprised to learn that over 100 of them had never been translated into English. They also discovered that the fables in their original form were not the pretty purveyors of Victorian morals that people had been led to believe. Rather, they were full of humor, insight, excoriating wit, and bawdiness, as well as many fascinating glimpses of everyday life in ancient Greece.



Lest you get the wrong impression, this is not the world of inner-city Los Angeles in the 1990s but that of Aesop, the misshapen slave whose barbed tongue brought him to fame in Greece in the early 6th century BC. Sound familiar? A tattered copy of *Aesop's Fables*—all cute illustrations and twee Victorian morals—probably sits primly among your childhood memorabilia. But as husband and wife Robert and Olivia Temple, the authors of the first-ever English translation of the complete fables of Aesop, discovered, the real fables were a great deal more acerbic than the “sugary children’s stories that many might imagine them to be.”

“Aesop’s fables are part of the psychic furniture of everybody’s childhood,” Olivia suggests. The couple became interested in traditional fables after Robert undertook an English translation of the Sanskrit epic of Gilgamesh, the oldest recorded story in the world. “The last gift my grandmother gave me before she died was a copy of *Aesop’s Fables*,” he confesses. “But it wasn’t for sentimental reasons that I first became fascinated with Aesop. Actually, I thought his fables would make good television entertainment.” A television drama producer as well as an author, Oriental expert, and scholar of ancient languages, Robert was quick to spot Aesop’s potential as an animated storyteller for children.

### Through the Keyhole

As none of the translations “seemed quite right,” Robert went back to the original ancient Greek texts. He soon realized that these ruthless and often lewd tales were never intended for children at all. To his surprise, over 100 of Aesop’s fables had never been translated into English. Why were these particular stories overlooked?

“They were mostly either very weird or rather saucy,” he says. “My guess is that they didn’t fit in with the conventional image of classical Greece, which is a very idealized one. Most scholars don’t seem to believe that real people lived in ancient Greece; Aesop’s fables give us a portrait of contemporary mores which is much closer to real life.”

Certainly, some of the less esoteric or allegorical tales afford irresistible glimpses through the keyhole of ancient Greek households. Tales of troublesome wives, spoiled sons, entrepreneurial fishermen, effeminate asses, and transsexual hyenas are enough to bring out the voyeur in even the most puritanical classicist. “Such insights enable us to have the kind of understanding of ancient Greek life that does not come from reading Plato or Thucydides. Here we are face to face with peasants, tradesmen, and ordinary folk, not mixing with the educated classes,” Robert points out.

Ironically, in his day Aesop was equally popular among high-brow intellectuals and laymen. The great comic playwright Aristophanes quotes him repeatedly. Aristotle was another great fan; indeed it is largely thanks to his extensive compilation that many of Aesop’s fables have survived. “Ninety-five percent of ancient Greek literature has been lost; so it’s very important that what does survive is properly preserved,” Robert says.

### Animal Magic

Given the “extraordinary liberties” previous translators had taken, he was determined to render Aesop as accurately as possible. This involved extensive and meticulous research, because the original text was littered with colloquialisms and idioms that were not included in any classical dictionaries. “The language Aesop uses is startling in its simplicity. It’s rather rough and ready. To draw an analogy with modern Greece, to dismiss Aesop would be like refusing to read demotic Greek today and only reading *katharevousa*.”

Besides excavating ancient Greek slang, the Temples also dug up whatever they could about the shadowy figure of Aesop himself. “He is rather like a movie star—everyone thinks they know him but in fact they only know him from certain

## The New Fables

Following are excerpts from *Aesop: The Complete Fables* by Robert and Olivia Temple. (The morals herein are exclusively those of Aesop and do not necessarily reflect those of *Odyssey* or its publisher. Just kidding.)

### The Fisherman Who Played the Flute

A fisherman who was a skilled flute player made his way to the sea one day, taking with him both his flute and his nets. Taking up a position on a projecting rock, he started to play the flute, thinking that the fish would be attracted by the sweetness of his tune and would, of their own accord, jump out of the water to come to him. But, after much effort, no fish had come, and so he put his flute aside. He then picked up his casting-net and threw it into the water, catching many fish. He took the fish out of the net and threw them on to the shore. When he saw them wriggle he cried out to them: “You bloody fish, when I played the flute you wouldn’t dance. But as soon as I stopped you started up!”

*Some people always do things at the wrong moment.*



### The Hyena & the Fox

They say that hyenas change their sex every year and become alternately male and female. Now, a girl hyena, fancying a fox, reproached him bitterly for rejecting her advances and driving her away from him when she had wished to become friendly with him.

“It’s not to me you should complain,” retorted the fox, “but to your own nature, which gives me no way of knowing whether you would be my girlfriend or my boyfriend.”

*This relates to the sexually ambiguous man.*

### The Beaver

The beaver is a four-footed animal who lives in pools. A beaver’s genitals serve, it is said, to cure certain ailments. So when the beaver is spotted and pursued to be mutilated—since he knows why he is being hunted—he will run for a certain distance, and he will use the speed of his feet to remain intact. But when he sees himself about to be caught, he will bite off his own parts, throw them, and thus save his own life.

*Among men also, those are wise who, if attacked for their money, will sacrifice it rather than lose their lives.*



roles he has played." Indeed, Aesop's life story is as strange and distorted by the reports of others as his fables.

Born in Thrace, Aesop was apparently captured in war and sold into slavery. Although liable to sale and deprived of all rights for the rest of his life, Aesop earned his living—and notoriety—as a clerk or confidential agent, outwitting his contemporaries in the courtroom with his devastatingly brilliant animal tales. (Indeed, his name became synonymous with all animal tales, including many folk tales borrowed from Libya and Egypt.)

Animals are Aesop's trademark. "Representing human types as animals has the advantage of a profound simplicity, but it is not simplistic," writes Robert in his introduction. As well as ample scope for thinly disguised political satire, animals provide an ideal metaphor for the bestial amorality of the pre-Christian society which Aesop inhabited. It seems that the law of the jungle really did prevail in classical Greece.

Until now, this dark and dirty savagery was bleached by compilers and translators. Keen to propagate their own ethics, they tacked on epigrammatic morals whose earnest tone sits rather awkwardly with the rawness of the fables themselves.

Though Robert is the first to admit that "some of them are truly appalling, even idiotic," the morals did serve a practical purpose. Collections of fables served as reference manuals for orators, demagogues, or lawyers who relied on their razor-sharp repartee. A quick flick through the morals reveals a quip for every occasion: One could apply this fable to men who make protestations of virtue but who behave like rascals; liars are caught out by their deeds; this fable refers to men who have magnificent bodies but poor judgment; this fable fits those who borrow with ease and who pay with difficulty. Robert also delights in their incongruence: "As long as one realizes the nature and origin of the morals, they develop a kind of kitsch fascination in themselves, like taking an interest in ornamental teapots."

### Wine, Wit & Repartee

For non-professional readers, collections of fables were a sort of ancient Greek joke book—a useful source of witty anecdotes, cutting comments, and caustic one-liners.

Sophisticated Athenians might brush up on their fables before attending a "symposium"—an ancient Greek dinner party. "After guests had gorged themselves, a myrtle branch would be passed around the dinner table. Whoever was handed the branch had to perform a party piece—usually they would sing a song, recite a poem, or relate a fable," Robert says. Do he and his wife make a habit of reciting fables at dinner parties in London? "Heavens no!" he chuckles, sounding horrified. However, Olivia admits that the couple did meet the editor of Penguin Classics, who subsequently commissioned the translation, at a dinner party.

The reaction to *The Complete Fables* has been extraordinary. It has already been reprinted three times since it was first published in London in January and has sold over 10,000 copies in the United States since March. "We really decided to do it as a labor of love," laughs Olivia. "But it's turned into a best-seller!"

So what is the secret of Aesop's enduring and universal appeal? Perhaps it's his disarming combination of dry realism, crude humor, and a style that is completely unaffected. And of course, he taps into that most unsavory and widespread of human emotions: *schadenfreude*.

"We have always laughed at people slipping on banana skins, so why not laugh at Aesop's fables?" Robert asks. If the Temples' exhaustive research and erudite translation have been vindicated by their success, so has the author of the originals. "Ever since Aesop was captured and sold into slavery, people have done whatever they liked with him," Robert sighs. "I think it's about time he was given some respect." ☛



### The Lion & the Frog

A lion, hearing a frog croak, roared back, thinking that such a sound must come from some large creature. He waited for a while, then saw the creature emerge from the pond, went up to it and crushed it with his foot, saying:

"So much noise from one so small!"

*This fable applies to people who are all noise and have no substance to them.*

### Herakles & Athena

Herakles was making his way through a narrow pass when he spotted something on the ground which looked like an apple.

He decided to crush it, but the object doubled its size. When he saw this Herakles stamped on it more violently than before and struck it with his club. The object swelled in volume and became so big that it blocked the road. The hero Herakles then dropped his club and stood there in a state of amazement. As this was going on, Athena appeared before him and said:

"Stop, brother. This thing is the spirit of dispute and quarrels. If one leaves it alone, it stays just as it was before. But if you fight it, see how it blows up."

*This fable shows that combat and strife are the cause of untold harm.*

### The Middle-Aged Man & His Mistresses

A middle-aged man who was going gray had two mistresses, one young and the other old. Now she who was advanced in years had a sense of shame at having sexual intercourse with a lover younger than herself. And so she did not fail, each time that he came to her house, to pull out all of his black hairs.

The young mistress, on her part, recoiled from the idea of having an older lover, and so she pulled out his white hairs.

Thus it happened that, plucked in turn by one and then the other, he became bald.

*That which is ill-matched always gets into difficulties.*