

Sheep in Aesop's and Phaedrus's fables

Commentary on [Marino & Merskin](#) on *Sheep Complexity*

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Abstract: Sheep feature in various animal fables. Marino & Merskin suggest that “we” view sheep as “docile, passive, unintelligent, and timid,” but animal fables do not support this view. In Aesop's and Phaedrus's fables, sheep are a primary target of injustice; but they are not passive targets. Sheep endure injustice actively and honestly. They are intelligent, aware and outspoken about their own condition.

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Animal fables have contributed to people's moral education for centuries. They have played a key role in sustaining, encapsulating, and transmitting popular stereotypes about animals across communities and generations. Marino & Merskin (2019) claim that we view sheep as “docile, passive, unintelligent, and timid.” But they do not provide robust cross-cultural evidence that humans share this view, widely, across times and communities. In fact, some of the most popular animal fables in Latin and Greek paint a more textured picture of the character and abilities of sheep. Sheep are a primary target of injustice in these fables; but they are not passive targets. Sheep endure injustice actively and honestly. They are intelligent, aware, and outspoken about their own condition.

One of the earliest surviving records of animal fables comes from the writer Phaedrus, who introduced the new genre to Latin literature in the 1st century. The five surviving books of Phaedrus's *Fabulae* include over a hundred fables. Sheep, goats, does, billy goats, or lambs figure in seven fables — a relatively small space in comparison to the number of fables in which dogs, foxes, donkeys, or deer appear.

These seven fables attribute virtues like intelligence, prudence, and patience to sheep. *The Wolf and the Lamb* (Liber 1, Fabula 1), one of Phaedrus's most famous fables, describes a meek, but intelligent lamb, quick to rebut a wolf's accusations with the force of truth and good reasoning — although, in the end, the lamb will not be able to overcome the wolf's ravenous violence.

The lamb in *The Dog and the Lamb* (Liber 3, Fabula 15) possesses good insight too. Here, a dog admonishes a lamb, who is floundering about among a flock of goats, to go and join his mother among the other sheep. With a lucid and outspoken reply, the lamb explains to the dog why he decided to stay with goats, concluding: "Kindness and care, not kinship, constitute parentage."

The Sheep and the Stag (Liber 1, Fabula 15) corroborates an image of sheep as intelligent, prudent animals, capable of avoiding traps by making reliable inductive inferences about the character and deceitful intentions of other animals.

Despite their intelligence and prudence, the sheep in Phaedrus's fables face a series of injustices. A cow, a goat, a sheep, and a lion team up to hunt a stag in *The Cow, the Goat, Sheep, and the Lion* (Liber 1, Fabula 5). In introducing the sheep, Phaedrus tells us she has been a patient target of injustice. But, as the fable develops, the sheep does not receive any different treatment from the powerful lion, who will exclude the sheep, as well as the goat and the cow, from a feast with the fruits of their hunt. In *The Sheep, the Dog and the Wolf* (Liber 1, Fabula 16), a sheep suffers from another injustice, from the lies of a dog and a wolf. But this does not dishearten the sheep, which demonstrates confidence in an otherworldly justice, when, at the end of the fable, she finds the wolf dead.

Goats, billy goats in particular, are the protagonists of two fables, where they are associated with more negative traits such as gullibility and indignation. In *The Fox and the Billy Goat* (Liber 4, Fabula 8), a sly fox, who got into trouble, persuades a thirsty and credulous billy goat to go down a well so that the fox can escape the well at the expense of the goat. Male goats complain to Jupiter that female goats grew a beard like theirs in *The Does and the Billy Goats* (Liber 4, Fabula 15). Here, while does are said to be frivolous in growing a beard like the males, billy goats are indignant, as they have lost their male prerogative of having a beard.

In these seven fables, sheep, lambs and alike are bullied by strong and deceitful animals. But, in most of the cases, it is not ignorance and dullness that cause sheep's misfortune. There are few cases in which gullibility and inexperience make sheep an easy target of abuse. In the majority of the fables, however, sheep attempt to oppose violence with reason, and show a stoic acceptance of unavoidable and enduring injustices.

Similar traits are ascribed to sheep in earlier Greek fables attributed to Aesop. In this collection (which includes 358 Fables), sheep figure in six fables: lambs in Fables 221 and 222, ewes in Fables 230 and 231, and sheep in Fables 94 and 231. These Greek animal tales, which precede Phaedrus's fables and anticipate most of the themes discussed above, present two interesting variations.

Unlike their Latin counterpart, Aesop's fables display sheep as a collectivity, as a flock. A flock is urged to take a collective decision on how to deal with an offer by the wolves in Fables 217 and 218. The wolves ask the sheep to surrender the dogs who guard them, arguing that the hostility between the sheep and wolves is the dogs' fault. In one fable, the flock is persuaded by this argument, paying the price for naïveté with their lives. In the other, an old ram intervenes to remind the sheep that there will be no safety for the flock after this wretched deal.

As in Phaedrus's fables, Aesop depicts lambs, ewes, and *individual* sheep as intelligent animals who are often too weak to resist the violence and traps of stronger animals. The flock, in contrast to individual sheep, appears naïve. Flocks of sheep are tempted to take wrong decisions about their safety because they underestimate the danger represented by wolves, and over-trust wolves' false promises.

Whereas Aesop does sometimes associate flocks of sheep with gullibility, more often he associates human shepherds with imprudence and simple-mindedness. In seven fables, shepherds lose their flocks because they underestimate the threat of wolves. In light of how sheep are portrayed in Aesop's and Phaedrus's fables, the suggestion that sheep are traditionally depicted as mono-dimensional, dull animals is not altogether correct. Popular Latin and Greek fables, which have influenced popular culture and morality in several regions in Europe and the Mediterranean basin for centuries, represent sheep as articulated, complex animals — very much in line with the scientific evidence Marino & Merskin helpfully review.

References

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