

FABLES



EDITED BY
ANNE STEVENSON HOBBS

VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

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ENDPAPERS: Four plates from *Select Fables of Esop and Other Fabulists*, collected and edited by Robert Dodsley and printed by John Baskerville of Birmingham for Robert & James Dodsley in London, 1761 (8vo.) 221-1889

The eminent printer Baskerville departs from routine fable-book layout: normally one plate to every opening. Instead, twelve designs are crowded together in tabular form – in spite of accomplished vignette headpieces by Grignion after Wale, the illustrations were intended to take second place. Richardson did likewise in his 1740 *Aesop*, but he hoped to attract children, to ‘excite their curiosity, & stimulate their attention’ by including ten fables on each plate. Here, each picture is only one inch square yet contains all the essential elements skilfully dovetailed.

REVERSE OF FRONTISPIECE: ‘The Rival Fishes’ (detail) from the *Dialogus creaturarum*, 1509 12.viii.1865

TITLE PAGE: Aesop surrounded by symbols of his fables, from *Buch und Leben des hochberühmten Fabeldichters Aesopi*, a facsimile of Heinrich Steinhöwel’s German edition (printed in 1476/77 by Zainer of Ulm), edited by Richard Benz and published by Piper of Munich, 1925 L.1029-1947

The twenty-four symbols, read from right to left, are reminders of incidents in Aesop’s career and also of contemporary Renaissance interest in emblems and hieroglyphs: they follow the hieroglyphic pattern of a twenty-four-letter alphabet. Steinhöwel (pp. 13, 15, 34) had been responsible for the introduction of Humanist materials to Germany, but the inaccurate copying of the same symbols for Caxton’s English *Aesop* indicates a growing incomprehension of the original meanings.

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... there's a Great Difference, betwixt carrying the *Image* to the *Man*, and bringing the *Man* to the *Image*; Or, ... betwixt Pointing at the *Vice*, or at the *Person*.

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1. OF THE FOXE AND OF THE RAYSYNS

He is not wyse: that desyreth to have a thyng whiche he may not have: As reciteth this fable Of a foxe: whiche loked and beheld the raysyns that grewe upon an hyghe vyne: the whiche raysyns he moche desyred for to ete them.

And whanne he sawe that none he myght gete: he torned his sorowe in to loye: and sayd these raysyns ben sowre: and yf I had some I wold not ete them: And therefore this fable sheweth that he is wyse: whiche fayneth not to desyre that thyng the whiche he may not have.

Caxton (after Steinhöwel), 1483/84
as in the *Gregynog Aesop*, 1931

Vita Esopi fabulatoris clarissimi e greco latina. ¶ Rimiciu facta... [Mit] seinen fabeln von doctore heinrico steinhöwel geteütschet [and with fables from Romulus, partly versified by the Anonymus Neveleti, fables selected from Avianus and others, and the *Facetiae* of Poggio Bracciolini]. Fol. [Augsburg, Anton Sorg, c. 1479] 1474-1895

The extraordinary diversity of the Germanic fable world is met between the covers of one book: Steinhöwel's monumental two-language compendium, the '*Ulm Aesop*' (Zainer, 1476/77). Steinhöwel had studied medicine in Padua, where he came into contact with Humanist thought – and accordingly incorporated recently discovered Greek traditions and contemporary Renaissance 'short stories' into the wide variety of mediaeval sources available to him. He included Aesop's *Life*, an Eastern fable of Petrus Alfonsus, and Poggio Bracciolini's *Liber facetiorum* (1471), a collection of jests and *fabliaux* including 'The Miller, Son and Ass'. Steinhöwel's purpose was to offer the Latin fables in new clothing, providing them with texts in the vernacular and with illustrations (which relate to the German translation). For this he earned Luther's criticism that his fables were more entertaining than useful.

The *Ulm Aesop*, contrary to popular belief, was not the first printed fable-book, nor was it the only anthology to contain fables, but it obviously answered a demand and immediately had greater success than its rivals. Among the most celebrated editions based on Zainer was Sorg's of c. 1479, again a product of South-West Germany where there was a thriving community of printers. Through its French and English translations (Caxton's in particular) the fables became familiar throughout Europe.

Steinhöwel's was one of the earliest illustrated editions of the fifteenth century. Its designs were dependent on various manuscript sources (including the eleventh-century *Romulus* of the monk Ademar), the Netherlandish woodcut tradition, and – for half the cycle – on the primitive outline cuts in Boner's *Der Edelstein* (Pfister of Bamberg, 1461). This was the first printed collection of Aesopic fables and the first dated illustrated book, its designs taken from lost originals. *Der Edelstein* was already well-known in manuscript versions when Boner's edition appeared; it was an important model for fable illustration in Northern Europe. With a bold, expressive economy of line and strong characterisation, the series is a convincing piece of animal type-casting.

Of all late mediaeval fable designs, Sorg's were the most influential and the most often copied – though cut after the *Ulm Aesop* by an unidentified artist or artists and so derivative rather than innovative. These illustrations were much admired by

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Jacket illustration: 'The Stag Quenching his Thirst' by Willi Harwerth, from Klingspor's *Kalender für das Jahr* 1933

Jacket designed by Patrick Yapp