

2009

Review Of "Aesop's Fables In Latin: Ancient Wit And Wisdom From The Animal Kingdom" By L. Gibbs

Jeremy B. Lefkowitz

Swarthmore College, jlefkow1@swarthmore.edu

[Let us know how access to this work benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-classics/>

 Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jeremy B. Lefkowitz. (2009). "Review Of "Aesop's Fables In Latin: Ancient Wit And Wisdom From The Animal Kingdom" By L. Gibbs". *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*.
<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-classics/5>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Swarthmore College Libraries. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classics Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Laura Gibbs, Aesop's Fables in Latin: Ancient Wit and Wisdom from the Animal Kingdom. Mundelein, Ill.: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2009. Pp. xxxi, 366. ISBN 9780865166950. \$34.00 (pb).

 bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2009/2009-12-24.html

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2009.12.24

Reviewed by Jeremy B. Lefkowitz, Swarthmore College (jlefkow1@swarthmore.edu)

Word count: 2038 words

Aesop's Fables in Latin is a wonderful new resource for second-year Latin courses and for independent learners who have completed an elementary program. Laura Gibbs, an innovative online instructor (see below) and author of a noteworthy recent translation of Aesop's fables,¹ has taken a collection of Latin fables from the seventeenth century and repackaged it as a serious and smart intermediate reader. *Aesop's Fables in Latin* is made up of 80 of the original 110 Latin fables composed by the writer and translator Robert Codrington (1602-1665) for a trilingual fable book (Latin, French, and English) that became famous primarily because of its illustrations (of which Gibbs has included 40) by the English artist Francis Barlow (d. 1704). All of the fables are presented with extensive notes and instructive commentary (see below), and more than half of them are also adorned with one or more apposite proverbs in large shadowed textboxes. There is something refreshingly unfashionable about an intermediate reader that features the work of an author who is emphatically neither canonical nor ancient, and, moreover, one who is linked rather tenuously to an essentially anonymous ancient fable tradition. After all, most contemporary Latin programs aim to move students toward highly-valued and (usually) classical Latin authors as early as possible. But *Aesop's Fables in Latin* is anything but a radical break with tradition. Although Codrington's compositions may be of limited use as literary- or cultural-historical documents, fables (whether or not ascribed to "Aesop") have held a prominent place in Latin (and Greek) curricula for more than two millennia. As one reads through Gibbs's meticulous and thoughtful presentation of these fables it is easy to see why they have endured for so long in the classroom.

It is traditional for Aesop's fables or similar *narratiunculae et fabulae* to serve as the inaugural steps of the intermediate level. This is true for Greek as well as Latin, and for antiquity as well as modernity, as reflected in ancient educational texts such as the *Progymnasmata*, in which students with a basic knowledge of Greek grammar were asked to compose original fables and to manipulate known Aesopic fables by expanding or contracting the animals' speeches and inventing new morals.² Collections of Aesop's fables remained as one of the most common first narratives encountered by students until well into the eighteenth century, but in many popular nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin readers (e.g., Jacobs or Andrews) they were reduced to only a few specimens on the opening pages before giving way to historical and mythological narratives from authors like Caesar and Livy.³ In the twenty-first century they have essentially disappeared from Latin and Greek classrooms. In general, it seems that fables enjoy curricular success in periods when there is an emphasis on the acquisition of reading and composition skills as ends in themselves, while they fall out of favor in times when the primary criterion behind curricular design is the literary value of the selected texts, either because of the potential of highly-valued texts to promote students' interest in studying Classics or so that those students who do not continue beyond the intermediate level can be exposed to as many of the

best authors as possible before moving on to other pursuits. Because fables are self-contained, complete units of meaning, they allow teachers and students to work through entire stories in one sitting in a way that even the most carefully excerpted passages cannot rival; they allow students to appreciate the ways in which Latin tells stories with a beginning, middle, and end, with no need for contextualization. But because they are anonymous tales that can be downright vapid (despite their many charms), they may make students better readers of Latin texts but they do not necessarily make students more interested in learning about the classical world: thus their current position on the margins of the curriculum.

Gibbs has stripped all of the fables in *Aesop's Fables in Latin* of their original morals, reformatted them (punctuation and capitalization have been updated), and reorganized them according to the difficulty of the Latin. While the simplest fables are not easy to incorporate into a first-year course, anyone who has completed such a course ought to be able to handle even the most difficult ones. For example, the very first fable in the book uses indirect statement as well as subjunctives introduced by both *cum* and *quod* (topics some textbooks do not treat until their final chapters), while the last two fables have the gerund, deponent verbs, indirect questions introduced by *uter* and *quomodo*, and a causal subjunctive. The most distinctive feature of *Aesop's Fables in Latin* is the way in which Gibbs has constructed a total of 80 discussions of Latin grammar and style adapted to the 80 fables, so that each fable (e.g., "Fable 48: DE LEONE ET URSO") is also devoted to a particular mini-lesson (e.g., "Gerunds in the Ablative Case").

Each Latin fable is preceded by a brief Introduction and a Grammar Overview. The Introductions provide some background information, including references to one or two extant Greek, Roman, or English versions of the same fable (these citations are not detailed, however, e.g., just "Townsend," "L'Estrange," "Plutarch," or "Phaedrus"; and sometimes they are even more vague: "a medieval version" (143) and an "ancient Roman" (275) version). Gibbs then discusses one item of Latin grammar or style before each fable in the Grammar Overviews, including topics such as unusual verb forms, points of syntax, "little" words (postpositive particles, correlatives, and relative pronouns), word formation, and stylistic matters. The issues covered range from the very specific ("*huc* and *illuc*"; "*cum* + subjunctive"; "Frequentative Verbs") to the more general ("Adjectives and Adverbs," on the ways in which Latin often uses an adjective where English would use an adverb; and "Ambiguous Parts of Speech," with reference to the diverse functions of the perfect passive participle). Each fable nicely demonstrates the lesson of its Grammar Overview, but, because the fables were not originally composed for this purpose, many of the grammatical features best exemplified in one fable in fact surface in comparable ways throughout the other fables, and a few of the fables do not have particularly distinctive grammatical features. Thus, one may have encountered a certain phenomenon a few times by the time it receives its own Grammar Overview; this is not, however, a major problem because the goal of *Aesop's Fables in Latin* is to improve reading skills, not to introduce grammatical concepts. Moreover, Gibbs has provided cross-references so that one can track where the various topics under discussion will be illustrated again later or where they may already have been encountered.

For example, in a particularly lucid discussion of the postpositive particle *vero* before "The Lion, the Donkey, and the Rooster" (Fable 60), Gibbs is able to refer to earlier overviews of *quidem* and *autem*, both of which function like *vero* to build meaningful relationships between one sentence and the next. Drawing on these earlier discussions, she writes: "Like *quidem* (see Fable 23), *vero* strongly affirms the statement, but at the same time, like the postpositive particle *autem* (see Fable 16), *vero* also emphasizes a contrast with the previous statement. If you had to try to express those two functions in a single phrase in English you could say 'but indeed' or 'but as a matter of fact.' So, pay attention to the use of *vero* in the fable you are about to read, and see how it carries out both these affirmative and adversative functions as it connects the two sentences. (For more postpositive particles in Latin, see the notes to Fable 66)" (p. 239). In the fable, the word performs its dual function clearly--but, more importantly, it does so at a crucial moment in the story (the whole of which is only six lines long) to very dramatic effect. The *asinus* assumes that the *leo* is intimidated by him and so he goes on the attack: *ut vero procul a gallicino persecutus est, conversus Leo Asinum devorat*. A life-and-death usage of *vero*: where else other than in Aesop can you get so much out of *vero* in so little time?

In addition to a "List of Most Frequently Used Words" in the preliminary pages and a full glossary in the back of the book, there is also a Vocabulary on the page facing each fable, with an average of about fifteen to twenty items, including animal names and any words not counted among the most frequent (at the extremes, Fable 42 has thirty-one glossed words and Fable 67 has nineteen glossed verbs alone). Underneath the text of each fable are Grammar Notes, which draw attention to whatever phenomenon is discussed in the Grammar Overview and additionally address any difficult or unusual forms. The things Gibbs most consistently remarks upon in the Grammar Notes are ablative absolutes; the antecedents (implied or

expressed) of relative clauses; idiomatic phrases and usages; and uses of either the indicative or subjunctive mood whenever the other of the two was also grammatically possible. On the rare occasions that Codrington's Latin reveals its lateness, this is also addressed in the notes (e.g., on p. 209, the use of *ut non* is contrasted with *ne* in Classical Latin). Here, too, Gibbs provides a thorough network of internal references, carefully tracking and acknowledging everything both already learned and still to-be-learned, so that the student is continually reminded that what was just observed in a recently-read fable still obtains.

Gibbs has ambitiously joined one of the oldest methods of teaching Latin to some of the newest instructional tools by partnering *Aesop's Fables in Latin* with her own expansive online universe of Aesop- and Latin-related material through LatinViaFables.com (as advertised in the opening paragraph of the book, p. xv). LatinViaFables.com is a social network created by Gibbs on [Ning](http://Ning.com); in addition to its primary function of providing a forum for people interested in Aesop and in reading Latin more generally, LatinViaFables.com also has a vast selection of supplemental material, notes, and commentary on the fables in the book under review, including audio files of Gibbs reading each of the book's 80 fables and video with slideshows of illustrations from diverse sources. There are also several valuable pedagogical supplements to the book, including Latin text of the fables with macrons added (macrons are found only in the glossary of the book); grammar notes on the numerous proverbs accompanying the fables; re-tellings of the fables in simpler, punchier Latin; the original morals that accompanied each fable in Codrington's Latin from the 1687 publication; facsimile pages of the 1687 book with Barlow's illustrations; and many, many other interactive applications and games (including crossword puzzles based on the vocabulary of individual fables). The site is well worth a visit for anyone curious about the latest tools for teaching Latin. In particular, there is an enlightening variety of testing applications for vocabulary building and grammar review (including flashcards, games, and innovative online quizzes), each of which Gibbs has posted for everyone's use through [Quia](http://Quia.com), and several re-usable widgets and javascripts for [Latin instructors](http://LatinInstructors.com). An experienced and clearly trailblazing online instructor, Gibbs also maintains a clear-eyed [blog on how to use these technologies](http://blog.onhowtousesthesetechnologies.com) in and out of the classroom. For those who find themselves in need of still more Latin fables and proverbs after all this, there are links to daily updates from [Gibbs's main blog](http://Gibbs'smainblog.com) (as well as a steady stream of Aesopica in the form of [tweeps](http://tweeps.com)).

Aesop's Fables in Latin also contains an "Introduction" (xv-xxxi), which includes a particularly useful section entitled "Study Tips and Strategies for Reading Latin" (xviii-xxiii), as well as a full glossary and three indices (a grammar index, a list of characters, and a general index). All entries in the indices that refer to pages in the "Introduction" (xv-xxxi) appear to be incorrect.

In short, this experiment has succeeded brilliantly in making the old school new again. I especially recommend it to students exhausted by a year of elementary Latin, when the accumulation of forms and rules makes it difficult to believe that one can ever truly enjoy reading Latin for its own sake. Aesop's menagerie of forceful and memorable fabulae is here to help.

Notes:

1. *Aesop's Fables*, translated by Laura Gibbs (Oxford University Press, 2002). Some readers of BMCR will also be familiar with <http://www.mythfolklore.net>, the homepage for all of Gibbs's online projects.
2. *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, translated with introductions and notes by George A. Kennedy (Leiden: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).
3. See Bonnie F. Fisher, *A History of the Use of Aesop's Fables as a School Text from the Classical Era through the Nineteenth Century* (Ph.D. Diss. Indiana University 1987).
4. This URL actually triggers a redirect to Gibbs's page on Ning, where one notices immediately that Gibbs's web activities amount to far more than a few bonus features to this book.