

V. Hesiod's Fable

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Hesiod's telling of the fable of the hawk and the nightingale is celebrated as the first appearance of the beast fable in western literature. In view of this fact it is a little surprising that interpreters have paid it so little attention. Taken by itself, as a fable, it may not seem that much need be said about it. It seems to follow the familiar pattern pretty well. But when one tries to understand it in the light of what Hesiod is trying to say in this section of the *Works and Days*, there is undeniably some difficulty; and the efforts of the commentators can hardly be said to have overcome this difficulty.

When anyone, including Hesiod, tells a fable in a given situation, we expect that there will be an understandable application to that situation. We want to be able to point a finger and say, "De te fabula narratur." We feel justified in asking to whom this fable in Hesiod applies and how; but when we try to make the application within Hesiod's frame of reference, it is not immediately apparent how this is to be done. Hesiod says (*Op.* 202), "And now I shall tell a fable for kings even though they themselves know" (sc. "it" or "what I mean"). Obviously then it applies to the kings. But does it? What does the fable say (203-11)?

Thus did the hawk address the speckle-necked nightingale when he had seized her and was carrying her far aloft in his claws; and she whimpered pitifully as she was pierced through and through by his crooked claws, but masterfully did he bespeak her: "Simple creature, why do you cry out? One far mightier now holds you, and you will go wherever I take you even though you are a singer; and I will make a meal of you if I like, or I will let you go. But he is a fool who is ready to match himself with his betters; he loses victory and suffers disgrace to boot."

There is certainly some ambiguity here. In view of what Hesiod has previously said we might naturally expect the fable to show the kings the error of their ways. We must equate the hawk with

the kings but, far from getting his just deserts, the villain of a hawk is triumphant and adds insult to injury by lecturing his victim. Worse yet, not only does the hawk speak the moral himself, but it is not the kind of moral we would expect *Hesiod* to draw. The whole fable, including the moral, is natural enough in its cynical tone for the fables as we know them, but the moral simply does not suit Hesiod's purpose. The usual approach to this problem is to disregard the expressed moral and draw one's own. This works reasonably well except that it leaves the fable and the reason for its existence at this point unexplained.

Another approach is to delete lines 210–11 containing the moral as spoken by the hawk. This was the solution of Aristarchus, who objected that it was not appropriate for a dumb animal to moralize; and he has been followed, for example, by Goettling and Rzach. No one is likely to take Aristarchus' ground for objection seriously; and the fact that Aesopic fables, by a convention common in early times, often end with a gnomic sentence in the mouth of the last or only speaker points positively to the authenticity of this moral.¹ But even if we pluck out the offending moral, we are still left with a residuum of perplexity.

The fable itself requires more attention than it is usually given. It must be looked at as a fable which presumably had an existence independent of the use Hesiod made of it. I have said that it appears to be normal enough, but is this so? If we look for parallels among the Aesopic fables, we naturally strike on that of *The Nightingale and the Hawk* (Perry 4). This fable, however, has little in common with that of Hesiod. The animal persons are the same, the one carries the other off, and they speak to each other. What they say, however, is different, and the point of the Aesopic fable is the same as that of the proverb "a bird in the hand." It does not seem to offer any help toward an understanding of Hesiod. Let us look then at a structurally typical example of Aesopic fables in order to have something to which we may compare our specimen, *The Goose that Laid the Golden Eggs* (Perry 87):

Hermes was worshipped with unusual devotion by a man, and as a reward he gave the man a goose that laid golden eggs. The man couldn't wait to reap the benefits gradually, but, without delay, he

¹ See B. E. Perry, "The Origin of the Epimythium," *TAPA* 71 (1940) 391–419, for the history of this device.

killed the goose on the supposition that it would be solid gold inside. He found out that it was all flesh inside, and so the result was that he was not only disappointed in his expectation but he lost the eggs.

This fable is typical in construction and is divided into three parts. The first sentence sets the stage, the second tells what the man did, and the third tells the result. This simple formula will obviously not fit all fables, but it can be taken as a general rule that the first element, the setting of the stage, is seldom omitted.

Looking at Hesiod's fable in the light of this observation, we note that it begins *in medias res*: "Thus did the hawk address the speckle-necked nightingale when he had seized her and was carrying her far aloft in his claws." No introductory stage setting is given, not even so much as the brief introduction to the Aesopic fable of *The Nightingale and the Hawk*, which opens with the statement, "A nightingale perched on a high oak and was singing her usual song." In the Aesopic fable there is no need for a more elaborate introduction, since the hunger of the hawk is sufficient motivation for his pouncing on the nightingale.² The omission of such a preamble by Hesiod may or may not be significant, but it is worthwhile to consider the point. If we read the fable carefully, two points stand out. First, the hawk says, "You will go wherever I take you, *even though you are a singer (kai aoidon eousan)*." This allusion to the nightingale as a singer may be no more than an illustration of the hawk's insensitivity to "finer things," but it may also hint at a cause for the hawk's carrying off the nightingale. In other words the nightingale's singing may have had something to do with the hawk's carrying her off. The second point is that the hawk, in moralizing, says, "He is a fool who is ready to match himself with his betters; he loses the victory and suffers disgrace to boot." These words seem to imply clearly that the nightingale had matched herself with the hawk, had indeed entered into a contest with the hawk. Following these hints we

² The Latin fable of *The Nightingale and the Hawk* (Perry 567) is again a very different kind of story, but it does have its stage setting. It begins, "In nidum lusciniæ cum sederet accipiter, ut specularetur auritum, parvos in illo invenit pullos." It continues to tell how the nightingale returned and asked the hawk to spare her young. The hawk said, "I will if you sing well for me." The frightened nightingale sang poorly, and the hawk took this as an excuse for eating one of the nestlings. This fable will only serve as an additional example of the general kind of opening Hesiod's fable presupposes. The framework of the story is quite different, and so is the hawk's pretext.

may with some justification suppose that Hesiod's fable properly began with a statement that the nightingale was inordinately proud of her singing and either bragged that she was the finest of the birds or challenged the other birds to a contest. If something like this was the original sense of Hesiod's fable, it would have given the hawk a motive beyond that of plain hunger or rapaciousness; and the moral he is made to draw would have its justification, at least within the fable.

If we turn again to Hesiod's purpose in the light of all this, it is tempting to identify the nightingale with Hesiod's brother, Perses, since he is the one who has been having to do with those mightier than himself. Still the fable will not apply to the facts in this way either, for Perses had not, as far as anyone knows, been matching himself with the kings, but only currying favor with them. The more common attempt to equate Hesiod himself, as a singer, with the nightingale is no more successful, if we assume the kind of opening I suggest, than it is otherwise; Hesiod has not here been matching himself with kings, though he may do so in another mood (*Theog.* 94–96). I fear that the attempt to make such equations is doomed to failure from the outset, and I only hope that this analysis of the fable may serve to make that fact clear.

I also believe that it should be clear that the moral stated by the hawk is part of the fable, that it is appropriate to the hawk in the situation presupposed by the fable, but that it is not at all the lesson Hesiod wishes to teach by telling the fable. The question remains: what lesson does he wish to teach, and to whom? The answer to the second part of this question is patent. He addresses himself throughout this part of the poem to Perses, the prodigal brother who toadies to the kings and flouts justice, for whom everything that Hesiod says should have its pertinence; and at this point he also specifically draws the kings into his audience. He makes this clear in the sequel to the fable by addressing himself first again to Perses (213–47) and then to the kings (248–73) in balanced passages of almost equal length.

As to the substance of what Hesiod wishes to teach by the fable, he says that the kings know. From the fable it is obvious that the one thing the kings know, and know very well, is that they, like the hawk, have power and that, if they choose to use it violently, no man less powerful than they can say them nay. This they know, but Hesiod has something more to teach them. Curiously

enough, however, it is not by means of the fable that he teaches it. If we want to know what the lesson is, we must follow the thread of his thought patiently and reflectively; patiently, because it is Hesiod's way to interrupt himself with comments on thoughts as they occur to him, and reflectively, because it is also his way to cling tenaciously to his theme and, though it may be submerged like the pattern thread in a brocade, to bring it again to the surface when he reaches the proper place in his design.

Here we must recall that his theme in this portion of the poem is justice (*dikē*) and violence (*hybris*). This theme appears in the description of the men of the iron age, who respect the man of violence and take justice into their own hands (180–201). It is immediately on the heels of this passage that the fable is introduced, to be followed in turn by the address to Perses (213–47) and to the kings (248–73). To Perses he says, "Hearken to *justice* and foster not *violence* which, in the long run, brings disaster even to the powerful. *Justice* means blessings for all, while the *injustice* of a man in power often brings calamity on his whole people." To the kings he says, "Remember that Zeus' guardians are among you, watching your actions, and that *Dikē* sits beside Zeus and reports to him any wrong against herself."

What follows in lines 274–85 is addressed again to Perses and is obviously the conclusion of Hesiod's reflection on the theme of justice and violence, for from that point on he turns to the theme of work. What he says to Perses here is, "Lay this up in your heart, hearken to justice and dismiss violence (*biē*) utterly from your mind. This law Cronion has established *for fish and beasts and winged birds, to devour one another*, for there is no justice among them; but to men he has given justice which is much the best thing." Here, then, is Hesiod's moral, the lesson he wishes to illustrate through the fable; and to make sure that we do not miss the point of the illustration, he has summed up the fable again in the words of line 271 ff. It is the law of the wild *for fish and beasts and winged birds* (like the hawk and the nightingale) to *devour one another*; but—and here begins what Hesiod has to add to the fable—while for men (like the kings and Perses) there is also violence, the consequences of which have already been described in the address to the kings (248–73), there is, besides, justice, the fruits of which were pictured in the address to Perses (213–47).

What must be realized about Hesiod's use of this fable is that

the only paradigmatic value he intends it to have is as an illustration of the ruthless exercise of might. None of the other details of the fable, including its moral, has any significance for Hesiod, for Perses or for the kings.

As far as I can see, this interpretation leaves only one loose end. It may be objected that no explanation has been offered as to why Hesiod presents his fable without a normal opening, particularly if he expects his audience to be able to recall what he omits. Without pretending to know more than we have any business to know about why a poet writes as he does, we may suppose that he was not depending on his audience to recall the opening of the fable at all. We may, in fact, find an explanation for his suppression of the stage-setting introduction to his fable—if we are right in supposing that such a suppression is involved—in his desire to emphasize the arbitrariness of the hawk's assertion of the right of might, which would be the more striking if we were not reminded of any justification for it. Finally, if we seek a parallel to the kind of distracting excess of detail represented by Hesiod's telling of this fable, we may find it in the exuberance of some of the Homeric similes. As B. E. Perry has observed of the Homeric simile, "It is a familiar fact that the poet is not always content to illustrate just the particular point for which the comparison is made; often through concentration on the image before him he adds details that have nothing to do with the narrative and which do not belong logically in the comparison."³ We have only to recall the simile (*Il.* 4.141–45) of the Maeonian or Carian woman staining ivory with purple to make a cheek-piece for horses. The piece lies there in the room, and many horsemen long to have it; but it is kept as a prize for a king, an ornament for the horse and the pride of the driver. And what does this simile picture? The way the blood from Pandarus' arrow stained the white of Menelaus' thighs when it pierced his belt-buckle and broke the skin beneath.

This approach to the fable permits us to give an interpretation that is consistent with itself and with the context in which the fable appears. Hesiod wished to use a striking example of *hybris*. He chose a familiar fable and suppressed the opening because he considered it either unnecessary or inappropriate to

³ "The Early Greek Capacity for Viewing Things Separately," *TAPA* 68 (1937) 414.

his purpose. If what remains of the fable in his presentation of it, including the moral, is misleading to us, this is because he has chosen to retain details which are appropriate to the fable but superfluous to the making of his point. Then, lest we miss the point, he has stated the law of the wild that it illustrates.