The Lion and the Fox in *Aesop's The Complete Fables*

By Lillian R. Parrotta

I focused my analysis on one story from *Aesop's The Complete Fables* in particular: #200, "The Lion, the Bear, and the Fox." However, I show how key components that operate in #200 also operate in #205, #209, and #270. All of these stories have a fox and a lion as two of the three characters, and I look at their relationship to determine meaning. They are all also a part of the same grouping from our class readings, Aesop Day II, where we looked at stories that have a conflict between two resolved by a third. (In Aesop's many stories, I paired my analysis down to a group within a group.) I believe the presence of a third party enriches the conclusions we can make. With just two, it is very easy to view a fable as an isolated incident–something that happens between two individual parties doesn't usually mean it is a cultural trend. The addition of a third makes this more possible. With more than three, we start to have a more complex thus longer tale. So, three parties is the medium where we can make cultural conclusions from very short tales. I have also sectioned my essay to give clarity, but not because the breaks are representing turns within a story. Lastly, I looked at the stories without the written morals at the end of them. My conclusions are drastically different from Temple's. For further study, I would have then analyzed how they change the structure of the tales, but I wanted to pair down my pool for analysis and to make my conclusions come from as specific of a group as possible. Now, our first story.

#200 - "The Lion, the Bear, and the Fox"

In the first sentence of #200, we get the initial situation: a lion and a bear have found a dead fawn. It isn't clear whether or not they were together beforehand, or if they both happened

upon this scene at around the same time. I believe though that they were together; it's not likely that two animals found the carcass at the exact same time. I also think Aesop would have mentioned that this was an accident, because he does so in other stories. By him not laying out the exact situation means to me that we are to assume these animals were together. (At this point, we as readers are used to these unlikely pairings.) It's also important to note that they *found* the dead fawn. There was no hunt, i.e. effort, in finding this food. We are being primed with "good luck," which is a seed of development. Here, it sparks the beginning of the middle and is the reason the rest of the story takes place. Without the luck of finding the carcass, the story is just about a lion and a bear.

Our first turn–now in the middle of the story–is with the lion and the bear fighting: they "were battling over who should have it" (Temple 150). What is interesting here is that they aren't considering splitting the fawn up, or working together to find another one, etc. There is no thought of compromise–*the companionship ends once food, or survival, is on the table*. It's important to note that this conclusion can only be made if we are assuming the lion and bear were companions at the beginning of this story, which is the interpretation I'm proposing. To continue, because these two animals choose to fight, they are telling us one of two things, or a combination of both. First, I interpret their actions as telling us that they both see themselves as unequivocally *above* the other. These are both physically strong animals who think they each deserve 100% of the carcass. Otherwise, we would see one conceding, like we do in #209. The second possibility is that they see themselves as *equals* because otherwise one would initiate the conceding/compromise. In #209, we don't see the donkey or the fox trying to pick a physical fight with the lion–obviously the lion would win (and more on that later). Because each enters the fight, we know that both think it's possible to win. With either explanation for the fight, there

is this base idea of machismo and hierarchy, which are seeds of development for this story. These qualities forcefully push the story along its tracks and drive development. Here, they fuel the violence of the story and lead to the rest of the events.

The lion and bear almost kill each other in their fight. The seed of machismo comes up again: “They mauled each other so badly that they lost consciousness” (Temple 150). Because neither could give up, or relent on their quest to prove their machismo, they almost died over a dead fawn. Because it isn’t a big or rare prize, we can consider the battle to mean something more. I say it’s their machismo that drives them to keep on fighting. Neither can admit they’ve had enough until their bodies give out, so it’s almost as if the fight becomes about proving their machismo. This might be the first recorded game of chicken. This is also reflective of the engrained hierarchy within them–they both *really* believe they deserve it over the other. These seeds push the story along again here because they inform the next big turn of the story.

Before getting into the next turn, we have a provisional ending to discuss: when the fight ends. The beginning was them finding the carcass, the middle started with their fighting, and we have an ending when they almost killed each other because that is a “result” or resolution to their fight. This could have been the final end. It would have been very open-ended, but there is enough in these first two sentences to contain a mini-story. Instead, we have a large turn, with the presence of the fox “who happened to pass by” (Temple 150). We are returning to the seed of “good luck” that the lion and the bear had when they first discovered the fawn. This good fortune is the reason for the second half of the story (and also informs the moral).

The fox enters and is able to take the carcass for himself without the lion or bear attacking him because they can barely move. Even though we have the entrance of a new character, we know he will not become relevant again because of how his exit is described: he

“escaped with it” (Temple 150). Using the word escape brings a finality to the fox’s actions. There isn’t much room for anything to happen involving him because it gives the impression that he was successful and will continue to be successful–that’s his ending. As far as we’re concerned, the fox got lucky and lives happily ever after. Additionally, the fox is not the focus of the story. He is barely given dimension, and the only one he is given is a typical attribute of a fox; he is the sly fox. In this story, he just plays his role and acts as a function rather than a character. Even though this is true, we can still gain meaning from it when compared briefly to #205.

In #205, we have a lion again as a character. The important part is that he is “very old” and “ill in his cave” (Temple 153). Just like in #200, the lion is incapacitated. We start to see a common theme, or really a new seed that transcends sectioned stories, that creates an if/then situation. This new seed is a lion that is incapacitated, meaning lion that cannot physically harm the fox. Physical strength is a strong caveat when creating stories about conflict with various animal sizes because big can always win over small. So, in order to have these smaller animals win sometimes, Aesop had to create scenarios to take the physical fight out of the equation. In #200, the fox is only successful because the lion can’t hurt him; in #205, the fox can successfully play with vengeance because the lion can’t maul him. So, we have an if/then scenario created: if the lion, or the more ferocious animal, is incapacitated, then it is possible for the fox, or the animal that uses wit as weapon, to win a conflict.

We can use #270 as a juxtaposition since it has a healthy lion and fox. In #270, the fox actually instigates a conflict with the lion, which ends up costing him his life. We see that no level of outsmarting can overcome a physical advantage. It is important to realize that the lion

actually had a similar level of brains as he is able to outsmart and outfight the fox. We can gain that: if you're strong *and* smart, you're unbeatable. We are also starting to craft a list of how to have power in this world, and how that can change based on your attributes.

1. The perfect scenario–to be very strong and very smart
2. To be very strong
3. If strength has a cap for you, you have to be very smart. That is the only chance of a capped-strength party to win.
    a. Part of that intelligence is capitalizing when your strong enemies are weak (and thus knowing not to face them when they are strong).
4. If you have capped strength and are smart and you go against those in #1, your fate is sealed

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The list above is important because it reveals a common theme, or another seed that transcends story division: hierarchy. What's interesting is that Aesop doesn't explicitly tell us about it; he relies on the fact that we already know what it is. Actually, my whole essay depends on the fact that I can tease out a hierarchy across multiple stories, each with very little plot and background information. Aesop understands that we will create or look for our own hierarchy. A part of the reason this is possible is because we are reading about animals, who have a clear food chain of hierarchy. This gives us the option to look at them as "nature being nature" *without* having our opinions about it mean something about us. For example, if we were to read a story about three humans, we have been conditioned to have a hero and anti-hero, a right and wrong, a good person and a bad person. Especially in today's society, we are actively trying to get rid of the social hierarchy, so we would be more inclined to avoid seeing one. Hierarchy has been

equated to “bad,” which means we push back on its presence. With the animals, we don’t need to attach this same moral meaning, and so our inner hierarchy (survival mechanism, reptile brain) reveals itself. This is a very intriguing effect. The only stories I find myself caring about the outcome are when the animals have the inner workings of a human, like in #3. This is the only story that we were assigned where we hear about the fox’s *feelings*. I root for the fox in the place of the apathy the other stories bring up. Getting back to the hierarchy, the presence of it is a major beam in these stories, whether or not it is being followed.

Returning to our original story, #200, we have the lion and bear unable to prevent the fox from stealing the carcass. Because the alpha animals were down, the fox had a chance. The story ends with the lion and the bear realizing their mistake and the impact of their actions. The interesting thing is that we see them in unison again. They are both in the same headspace and coming back together again in companionship, even though here they are both equally hurt. So, while the ending has the lion and the bear in a different state, they come full circle and are companions again, just in a very different way.

Works Cited

Aesop. *The Complete Fables*. Translated by Olivia Temple and Temple Robert K G., Penguin, 2007.