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Soon after the completion of illustrations for *Dead Souls*, Ambroise Vollard gave Chagall another commission to illustrate the French masterpiece *Les Fables de La Fontaine*. This choice for a foreign artist instead of a French native immediately provoked certain indignation: “Everyone knows that La Fontaine is universal. That is why he is called classic. But Chagall is not classic. He is the exact opposite of a classic, in fact. Chagall is Slavic,” criticized Hubert Colleye in the paper of Antwerp *La Métropole* on 9 March 1930.

Vollard was emphatic about his own choice, nevertheless. “Why Chagall?” defended Vollard in the article “De La Fontaine à Chagall” for the evening paper *L’Intransigeant* before he held the exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in Paris: “Precisely because his aesthetic seems to me very close and in a sense akin to La Fontaine’s, both dense and subtle, realist and fantastic.”

It seems that the idea of re-illustrating the *Fables*, a classic which already inspired a long list of illustrators, came from Vollard himself due to his expectation of making innovative *livres de peintres* which accentuated artistic expression rather than literary interpretation. On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to assume that Chagall, as an artist with strong personal opinions, also accepted this suggestion out of his own inclination. In fact, born in a Hasidic family where stories and allegories were integrated with daily lives and beliefs, Chagall tends to create his visionary world on a fabular basis, as his canvases often fill up with images of animals and folklores.

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For Chagall, as well as for numerous readers, the visualization of the *Fables* signifies the return to one’s childhood memory. Partly owing to his lack of proficiency in French, which made the critics disqualify him as an illustrator for *La Fontaine*, Chagall apparently decided which fables to illustrate on the basis of his poetic instinct.\(^{157}\) However, by skipping some of the most best-known and strongly moralistic pieces, such as “La Cigale et la Fourmi”, “Le Rat des Villes et le Rat des Champs” and “Le Lièvre et la Tortue”, he chose the fables according to his own artistic ideas but not the traditions of LaFontainian illustrations: “No, this is not for me,” said Chagall after listening to his wife reciting the fables.\(^{158}\) Obviously, it was not *La Fontaine’s* elegant form of classical verses that caught Chagall’s attention, but the nature of an eloquent bestiary that corresponded to the painter’s own pictorial context.

The attitude Chagall held towards his illustrations for *Les Fables de La Fontaine* might be traced to Chagall’s other work, in which the teachings of Hasidism in his childhood always function as a key to understand his works. This spiritual sect of Judaism gives Chagall’s works an allegorical appearance with flying cows, roosters and donkeys shuttling around a human village. It is a world closer to a child’s naïve imagination than an adult’s sophisticated interpretation. Accordingly, the embodiments of Hasidic thoughts in Chagall’s illustrations—the morals in the form of stories, the solemn theme in a merry tone, and the mellow co-existence between human beings and animals—all correspond to the nature of the *Fables*. The combination of a French appearance with Russian and Hasidic cultural backgrounds explains the specificity of Chagall’s illustrated version of the *Fables*. Therefore, despite its un-classical or un-French appearance, some contemporary critics started to find Chagall’s illustration surprisingly innovative and appropriate for a new look of *La Fontaine’s Fables*. \(^{159}\)

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\(^{157}\) The illustrated fables chosen by Chagall primarily come from the first five books of *Les Fables*, like most illustrators have done, probably because those fables are more familiar to readers. Among Chagall’s 100 fable illustrations, 65 come from the first five books, and only 35 from books 6-12.

\(^{158}\) “Ça, ce n’est pas pour moi.” According to Pierre Courthion’s explanation in 1929, it was Madame Bella Chagall who read the contents of the *Fables* in a high voice to the painter Chagall, and after listening he’d decide whether it is chosen or not. See Didier Schulmann, *Chagall illustrateur des Fables de La Fontaine, ou Comment quitter la Russie et devenir français*, *Marc Chagall: Les Fables de La Fontaine*, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris, 1995, p. 26. Another result of this reading could be seen in a misunderstanding of the text: in the illustration for the fable of “Le Chène et le Roseau” (illu. 12), Chagall painted a bush of red roses instead “reed” in the text, which seems to be a confusion between French words “roseau” and “rose”.

\(^{159}\) It was only after Vollard’s death, and also when the sense of anti-Semitism became alarming, that the public started to appreciate his choice of illustrator. Ever since the positive comments by Robert Roy in 1941, the majority of critics continued with this
Chagall made one hundred watercolour drawings for the chosen fables, but when it came to the process of execution, the publisher encountered unsolvable technical problems and Chagall was forced to compromise on copper plates and hand-colour some copies afterwards. It is difficult to judge whether the original watercolour drawings are better than the hand-coloured prints. However, even in black and white, the final engravings bear almost the same pictorial effect as the watercolour ones.

Chagall thus created his colourful world of Fables. His illustrations can be seen as a two-dimensional theatre. On the basis of an analysis of the comical tones of the pictorial narration, the characters of animals, humans and gods, and the formal devices of colour and details, I will explore Chagall’s Fables illustrations from different perspectives.

1. From Epic to Comedy

The content of La Fontaine’s fables is always the same, but through the history of fable illustrations, illustrators have used very different styles. In fact, one of the biggest problems of fable illustrations is that well-known images can become stereotypes. Since the first illustrated edition of Fables de La Fontaine by François Chauveau, all illustrators have struggled to break from the fixed image of every fable. Unlike the illustrations of long stories, fables are either short scenes with simple actions, or plain dialogues or thoughts from animal characters. It is therefore a difficult task for an illustrator to visualize the simple plots point of view. For more details and experts of their comments, see trans. Allen, Ibid., p. 19-23.

This edition of Fables was published as two volumes; each contains one frontispiece illustrated by Chagall as well. Owing to the publisher Vollard’s death in a car accident, 200 copies of this edition were printed and published by Tériade as late as in 1952, among which 85 copies were hand-coloured by the artist; 15 copies were reserved as hors commerce for collectors. All 200 copies were sign in black and white ink by the artist. See Patrick Cramer, Marc Chagall: the Illustrated Books: Catalogue Raisonné, Cramer, 1995, p.68.

To meet the artist’s original ideas, this chapter would focus its main concern on the watercolour works, if available.

On 31 March 1668, Les Fables choisies mises en vers par M. de La Fontaine was published as six books containing 124 fables with 118 vignettes illustrated by François Chauveau. As an acquaintance of La Fontaine himself, Chauveau’s illustrations bear the recognizable clarity and directness to the essence of the fables which form the successive iconology of La Fontainian illustrations. See Gérard Gréverand, ’Illustrations et illustrateurs’, La Fontaine et les artiste, Tourai: La Renaissance du Livre, 2002.
different from other competitors. This is the main reason why the tradition of fable illustrations often appears to use the same stereotypical iconography.

In his *Les Fables de La Fontaine: quatre siècles d'illustration*, Bassy classifies the traditions of fabular illustrations into four categories: French, Italian, Flemish and English. The French tradition is largely influenced by the style of miniatures and the illustrations usually appear as delicate and well-organized emblems, as in the works of Chauveau and Oudry, for example. The Italian tradition is based on mythological themes from the Renaissance, hence the grand style and the dramatic gestures of figures. The Flemish tradition, in the manner of Brueghel, is distinct from its rural atmosphere where the legends are often presented in a solid and realistic way. Lastly, similar to the tradition of caricature, the English tradition is dominated by its burlesques or comical appearances. Consequently, the style of fable illustrations could range from plain and straightforward illustrations or delicate and grand illustrations to the humorous and satirical ones. We find that works from illustrators of later generations still fit within these traditions, or at least a combination of them.

In the 19th century key figures introduced a freestyle version of artists’ works to renew the *Fable* illustrations. For instance, the rich collector Antoni Roux who invited Gustave Moreau to make dreamy watercolours for his compilation of the *Fables* (1881-85), or the renowned dealer Ambroise Vollard who commissioned Marc Chagall to create a series of colour engravings. Though with distinct personal styles, these “fables des artiste” also inherited the old traditions of fabular illustrations, albeit consciously or unconsciously. For Chagall, his works bear caricatural and humorous forms but he omits the satirical and political implications of the fable, which an artist like Daumier would have most likely included.

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163 Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686-1755) was a French Rococo-style painter and engraver. Known for his naturalistic paintings, Oudry amused himself by drawing 276 sketches for the fables of La Fontaine during 1729-35, and later on Charles-Nicolas Cochin undertook the responsibility to engrave these plates for him.


165 Gustave Moreau (1826-98) the Symbolist painter was originally commissioned to produce watercolours for the *Fables of La Fontaine* by his patron Antoni Roux for an edition including other works by major illustrators of the day, such as Doré, Lami, Baudry, Derôme, Raffaelli and so on. In 1881, nearly 150 watercolours were exhibited at the Cercle des Aquarellistes, held at the Galerie Durand-Ruel. Owing to Moreau’s outstanding works, Roux decided to commission Moreau to illustrate the whole work. However Roux’s *Fables* proposal was never published; Moreau’s watercolours remain in private hands nowadays.
The question should therefore focus on how Chagall’s illustrations, apart from his initial fable choices, capture the comical nature of fables without carrying the old burden of didactics. Before answering this question, we must examine how the language used in fables corresponds to the illustrations. Quintilian made a clear distinction between two language modes: pathos and êthos. The former concerns the language used to express emotions and grand styles (i.e. the language of tragedies), while the latter mode, êthos, concerns the normal and sometimes moral language used in comics, speeches, and fables in this case. Unlike the self-indulging language of epics, fabulists write in a more distant, almost critical voice.

On the other hand, when converted to visual images, the genre of the fable can be translated into both epic and comical tones which correspond to the aforementioned traditions of illustrations. Doré’s work is a good example of the former style. Continuing with the effect he pursued for the illustrations of Dante’s *Inferno*, Doré’s illustrations successfully invoke the epic atmosphere through his use of black and white chiaroscuro. For example, in “Le Lièvre et les Grenouilles” (fig. III-1), he increases the dramatic effect with shadow, and the upstanding figure of the hare appears fearsome compared to the tiny frogs. Doré thus imagines La Fontaine’s rhymes according to the classical mode of epic language. On the contrary, artists who envision the LaFontainian world through comical language tend to respond in a humorous way. In fact, due to the nature of the language mode of the fable, more and more artists, including Chagall, found it suitable to employ the comical or caricatural way for fable illustrations.

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167 Published as *The Vision of Hell* (1866) and *Il Purgatorio ed il Paradiso* (1867), the productive illustrator Gustave Doré produced voluminous and impressive illustrations for Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. His creations of *Les Fables de Lafontaine* were executed in the same year and published in 1868.
Once again, when we try to examine the tones employed in the fable illustrations, frontispieces can serve as a starting point to reveal what attitudes the illustrators hold towards the creation of the fable itself, what language they tend to use to interpret the stories, and how they regard the relationship between the original text and their own work. As a special page in an illustrated book, the frontispiece usually plays not only the role of introducing the content of the illustrated text, but also of embodying the illustrators’ views towards the entire work. Moreover, in the case of *Fables*, the frontispieces might even show the status of La Fontaine, how La Fontaine’s world is seen by the illustrators, and the relationship between humans, animals and nature.

In Romeyn de Hooghe’s work of 1685, for example, the satirical function of the fable is emphasized by the presence of the satyr (fig. III-2). In Cochin’s work, the role of La Fontaine appears to be an intimation of nature and animals (fig. III-3) while Cham’s caricaturist representation shows La Fontaine as a language teacher of the animals (fig. III-4). The iconography is a testimony to

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how the views of nature and animals have changed in different periods.\textsuperscript{169}

The above examples all show that the image of La Fontaine himself as the poet or creator is a repeated motif for a fable frontispiece. However, the ultimate role of the author is ignored by artist-illustrators in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century: they do not represent him anymore in the frontispiece.\textsuperscript{170} In this view, Benjamin Rabier's frontispiece\textsuperscript{171} for his comic fables displaces his emphasis from the sophisticated poet to childhood innocence (fig. III-5). Here, instead of the figure of the poet-lecturer, a child takes the role of reciting the fables to these cartoon-faced animals. The world of fables no longer belongs to adult writers, but is constructed by the imagination of a child-reader. The return of infanthood is emphasized in this piece.\textsuperscript{172}

Moreau's rather mysterious frontispiece shows a seemingly unrelated image (fig. III-6): a woman half-covered in colourful drapery leaning on a

\textsuperscript{169} For further arguments, see Kirsten H. Powell in her 'The art of making animals talk: constructions of nature and culture in illustrations of the Fables of La Fontaine', \textit{Word & Image} 12, no. 3, 1996, 251-272, where she shows examples (some of which are demonstrated here) of the relationship between La Fontaine and his illustrators through the representation of frontispieces.

\textsuperscript{170} In order to focus on the comparison of Chagall with his contemporary illustrators, I choose artists who have something in common, namely Benjamin Rabier, Gustave Doré, and Gustave Moreau, due to their shared ideas that illustrators have the freedom to break through existing stereotypes and create images according to their own artistic styles. In this view, Rabier echoes Chagall with his innovative strip forms for \textit{Fables} which broke through the classical traditions of fable illustrations, while Doré's works create a similar sense of drama through the use of black-and-white chiaroscuro as well as in Chagall's etchings. On the other hand, Moreau's poetic presentation could serve as a good parallel with Chagall's work.

\textsuperscript{171} Born in 1864, the French illustrator Benjamin Rabier is known for his design of "La vache qui rit". Rabier produced his comic-style illustrations for \textit{Les Fables de La Fontaine} with the publisher Jules Tallandier in 1906.

This female personification of the Fable (the title word of “Fable” appears beside her head) is holding a comedy mask and a whisk in her hand. The title of this perplexing frontispiece “Allegory of Fable” hints at the way Moreau sees the nature of fables: the didactic function in comical disguise. Furthermore, the whole image is reinforced by delicate details from Moreau’s own imagination, where he often applied these bizarre elements, and hence creates another level of artistic interpretation.

On the other hand, Chagall’s two frontispieces (for two volumes respectively) show neither the bust/portrait of the sage-like poet nor the figures of the interpreter or allegory, but rather the conversations of animals themselves. The two frontispieces display the two kinds of language and emotion. The piece for volume 1 indicates the cunning and sarcastic dialogues between “The Crow and the Fox” (fig. III-7), while the one for volume 2 depicts the emotional and self-indulging dialogues between the “Two Pigeons”. Essentially, fables are the imaginative world of talking animals. Chagall obviously tries to retreat from the adult world back to the purely animal world untainted by moral interpretation.

2. Moral or Not?

How does a verbal moral exist in a non-spoken image? If we compare Doré’s “Le Renard et les Raisins” (fig. III-8) with Chagall’s work of the same title (col. 35), we notice the difference between a “moralized” and an “un-moralized” interpretation. In Doré’s title-piece for this fable, he relates the animal moral to human relationships by juxtaposing the fox with two gentlemen looking up to a group of ladies behind a fancy fence. In another full-page illustration to this fable, the fox is totally omitted; the moral of unfulfilled desire is translated fully into an interaction between human beings. In contrast, Chagall’s illustration emphasizes solely the face of the fox and a bunch of grapes. The focus is on the animal, instead of morality.
“[Chagall] n’eut pas recours au procédé d’humanisation des animaux ou à la lecture morale de l’œuvre; [...], il traduisit le mystère des choses simples.”173

The contrast between Chagall and Doré’s works is merely one of the examples implying how stories function differently for every reader. The representation of the bestiary shows if and how artists relate these stories to the human world.

This anthropomorphization of fabular animals is not unique to Doré, however. In the English tradition of fabulist illustrations, animals are often either personalized as real human beings or dressed up in human suits, making them even more cynical. Early illustrators, like Grandville174, are the best examples. For the above fable “Le Renard et les Raisins” (fig. III-9), he displays a parallel vision of the “fable”—the fox coveting the grapes above the high wall on the right—and the “reality”—the dressed-up animals which are again mocking the real human world. This “parody within a parody” creates a double reference and thereby heightens the sarcasm.

Besides dressed-up animals, another dimension of this anthropomorphization indicates another characteristic of fables: talking animals. The ability to talk is the main difference between humans and animals; hence in the world of fables, the boundary is blurred with the existence of talking animals. “The art of making animals talk” becomes the conventional concept and function of fables. This is also the significance of Cham’s frontispiece in which La Fontaine plays the intermediate role of a beasts’ language teacher who brings them across the line toward the human world. Moreover, Rabier’s frontispiece contributes another level to the view of talking animals: his animals are not only “talking” but actually “laughing”, which is another facial expression unique to human beings. Here, as Moreau’s Fable demonstrates, the artist actually puts a comedy mask on the animal’s face to emphasize the funny or the mocking function of fable stories.

In Chagall’s fable world, however, we rarely see this crossover between humans and animals. In his illustrated world, animals do not have to be “dressed up” as human or bear human expressions, but are themselves independent personages with abilities to think and communicate. Without the need for anthropomorphization, the moral or didacticism is reduced to a minimum. It is this pure bestial world where animals retain their own appearance as being “animal” that makes Chagall’s Fables distinguishable from others. The

174 Jean-Ignace-Isidore Gérard, pseudonym J.J. Grandville, is a French caricaturist and book illustrator. His illustrated version of Les Fables de La Fontaine was first published in 1838.
relationship between different characters will be discussed in the following section.

3. Characters

Animals

In literature every novel or poem may project its own separate fictional world with its own characters and situations, whereas in Chagall’s oeuvre, all paintings refer to one total fictional universe, a construct outside the paintings, but to which all those paintings refer.

With the premise of the existence of “talking animals”, La Fontaine’s fables appear to be a theatre on paper enacted by animal characters, human beings, gods and others, while animals also play an important part in Chagall’s own artworks. In fact La Fontaine also characterizes his own fable texts as follows:

Une ample comédie à cent actes divers

Et dont la scène est l’univers

Hommes, dieux, animaux tout y fait quelque rôle

As an animal lover, Chagall depicts the animals from his hometown with strong sympathy. While never clearly explained, his love for animals manifests itself through general ideas such as warmth, emotion, and nature. More specifically, he identifies the image of a cow/calf with himself or his beloved. In his renowned oil painting “I am the village” (fig. I-1), for instance, a man with a green face offers a bunch of grapes to a cow (or a calf) whose head contains an animal character.


image of a woman milking a cow. The image of the cow/calf replaces the role of a beloved. Besides the overall motif of the nostalgia for the Russian hometown, “I am the village” displays the harmonious co-existence between animals and humans. This intimacy is further revealed in another picture, “The Rooster” (1929, fig. III-10), painted during the same period when Chagall made the illustrations for the *Fables* and in which the images of humans and animals can almost be seen as an integrated unity. The harlequin-dressed woman embraces the giant rooster’s neck in such a close way that the bodyline of the human can be seen as the extension of the rooster. The intimacy here is echoed by the cuddling couple in the boat in the far background.

The closeness between animals and human beings is further testified in Chagall’s “Dedicated to my Fiancée” (1911, fig. III-11). Here, a man with a bull’s head is resting his elbow on a table while a woman climbs onto his back, legs encircling him, and spits into his mouth. This work was almost refused by the Salon des Indépendants because of its overt sexual implications. Chagall’s affinity with animals is therefore expressed as the image of the animal-human hybrid. Another example of this hybrid image is the image in “Listening to the Cock” (1944, fig. III-12). We see a total upside down world: a big coockerel (despite the egg in his body) in the red dawn of the lower part of the picture, a human couple’s face with the body of a cow in the upper background of the dark night, and a reversed tree as well and falling crescent moon. The bizarre image of the hybrid couple paradoxically invokes the warmth and nostalgic feeling for one’s hometown, symbolized here by the crowing rooster and the little house next to them. This hybrid image is not merely a costume play like Grandville’s caricatural depiction of dressing and talking animals, but Chagall’s own contemplation of the interaction between animals and human beings. Through this radical representation of physical fusion, the empathy and identification between animals and humans is praised to the highest extent.

Meanwhile, this hybrid image offers another dimension of reading Chagall’s *Fables* illustrations. One example is the wolf in “Le Loup devenu Berger” (col. 29) who attempts to deceive the flock by dressing up as a shepherd. But in Chagall’s illustration, the red-dressed wolf stands upright like a real person at the edge of the dark green background, while the shepherd leans forward on his stick almost as horizontally as a four-footed sheep, with similar pink and white colours. This shows not only the cross-dressing of an animal but also an actual interchange taking place between human and animal identities.

Chagall’s own animal affiliation continues in his illustrations of La Fontaine’s *Fables*. Apart from the physical hybrid, the motif of human-animal

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mixture reappears in Chagall’s fable world through similar features or expressions of humans and animals. In “Le Lion devenu Vieux”, for example, the face of the old lion who looks out toward the audience bears the expression of a thinking human; or, the hollow eyes and the plain face of the boy who almost drowns (L’Enfant et le Maître d’école, illu. 10) reduce the human characteristics to a minimum. On the other hand, there is the cat that is transformed into the shape of a girl but still wearing the expressionless animal face (La Chatte métamorphosée en Femme, col. 25). Bearing the most explicit motif of “metamorphose”, this fable story offers illustrators ample opportunities to depict the image of a “hybrid”. In Grandville’s illustration, for instance (fig. III-13), he applied the unmistakable face and gesture of a real cat to a female human figure. On the contrary, what Chagall did here is simply hint at the transition: an elongated neck, a pair of ear-like buns in her head, and a nearly-scary face with human nose and mouth but without any eyebrows or hair. This is not just a misplacement of physical elements, but a new creature standing right between animals and human beings.

In Chagall’s world of the Fables, animals do not need to be personalized and humans do not need to be animalized. What is represented is the very coexistence of animals and humans. As the main protagonists themselves, animals in Chagall’s Fables possess humanity within their animal shapes; they cross and blur the boundary between animals and human beings. This is also what LaFontainian fables carry out: the nature of human beings and animals are not very different from each other.

**Humans**

“The Dream” (fig. III-14), one of Chagall’s oil paintings created at the time when he was beginning to produce the Fables illustrations, testifies to the dreamy, naïve but witty relationship between animals and humans presented in Chagall’s fable world. With a hint of reference to Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream where the character Bottom was bewitched and transformed into a donkey, the image here represents a girl who is carried by a donkey (some say it is a giant rabbit) in an upside

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178 This statement originally comes from Schulmann, *Ibid.*, upon which I base my interpretation of the illustrations in question.
down night. As the title points out, this is a dream world in which human beings are guided by self-aware animals, and it corresponds to the views in other *Fables* illustrations. Far from superior to animal characters, human characters are often shown as selfish, ridiculous and being mocked through the artist’s pictorial devices, including physical up-and-down positions as shown in “The Dream”, unreal or exaggerated proportions, and unconventional gestures of humans and animals. Examples are shown below.

In “La Poule aux oeufs d’or” (illu. 59), the story of a hen who lays golden eggs describes the greediness and ignorance of human beings. Therefore, in Chagall’s picture, the hen is dramatically enlarged and confronts the tiny, fatuous farmer on the right side. Through the confusion of perspective, the juxtaposition of these two uneven figures displays the theme of the fable itself: man’s greediness makes him worthless. Likewise, the marginalized position of mankind is shown in the illustration of “Les deux Perroquets, le Roi et son Fils” (col. 96). In this somehow bizarre fable, the old bird speaks with extreme wisdom and sharpness, while the father and son from the royal human family are absorbed with anger and anguish. This is clearly shown through the following compositional devices: occupying the centre of the composition, the old parrot covered with sparkling feathers shines against the dark background, echoed by the young bird with a hint of strong colours in the left corner. On the other hand, the image of the human king is barely seen as a shadow; neither of the two human figures are exposed completely. The position of the human is again marginalized and, instead of being shrunk, tarnished.

In the illustration for "Le Rat et l’Éléphant" (col. 85), we find another example of Chagall’s interpretation of the superior/inferior relationship between animals and human beings. The human figures on the elephant’s back are deliberately shrunk out of proportion; each of the three layers on the elephant contains more than one person in their full size. Compared to Doré’s piece with dignified characters (fig. III-15), Chagall’s human beings are represented as tiny and unreal puppets from theatre, as if they could be flushed away by the flow of...
free colours at any moment. Here, the humans who are supposed to rule the giant animals now turn out to be the toys in the cage. Human beings are no longer the rulers of animals; on the contrary, they are but a vulnerable and pathetic species.

With regard to the animal-human relationship in Chagall’s *Fables*, “Le Lion amoureux” (ill. 40) is a unique example. In this fable, a lion—the king of forest—falls in love with a human girl, but is slain after agreeing to pull out all his fearful teeth and claws. In the original fable, the animal character plays the deceived and defeated role. Nevertheless, unlike numerous illustrators who depicted the lion at his moment of weakness (Doré [fig. III-16], Grandville, etc.), it is clear that Chagall chose the opposite. In this illustration, the lion stands upright like a real young man, with his eyes looking deeply into those of his beloved and “arms” tightly clasped around her neck in an almost suffocating gesture, while the human girl, with a pale look, helplessly clings to her “lover” like a lifeless doll. In the pictorial world, the animal is shown in full dominancy and therefore the strong/weak relationship between humans and animals is reversed.

Chagall’s world of the *Fables* shows the co-existence of humans and animals, with the latter obviously playing a more important role. As in the artist’s other works, “The Dream” especially, it is animals that lead the human-child on the fantastic journey of dreams and imagination.

**Gods**

Besides animals and man, other illusory beings perform in this fable play. Characters like Olympian gods, monsters and other creatures are all part of the imaginative world. While Greek mythology appears as a motif in La Fontaine’s *Fables*, mythological elements are also frequently implied in Chagall’s art. The way he represents these images of mythological figures is another way of understanding Chagall’s interpretation of La Fontaine’s world.
In the illustration for “Le Paon se plaignant à Juno” (col. 24), Chagall’s composition shows a strong affinity with Doré’s work (fig. III-17). The positions of the two peacocks are almost identical; both of them look up towards the goddess standing on the pedestal in the top-left corner. Doré, as usual, applies this bestiary to the human condition: the peacock that envies a nightingale’s lovely voice is personalized in the far background as a long-robed woman who leans toward her companion playing an instrument. On the other hand, Chagall obviously does not care about the human analogy, replacing Doré’s realistic background of Greek temple remains with abstract sparkling dots. Dragged out of human civilization, the two characters seem to float in a transcendent universe where the goddess is dressed in the form of a semi-bird. She wears a few bird feathers on her head and a pair of white wings stretches out from her back as she spreads her arms. The white feathers and costume contrast with the peacock’s colourful tail. Once again, Chagall emphasizes the animal roles by identifying the goddess with a bird image; the angel-like goddess plays the role of hybrid human and animal figures. While borrowing from an existing illustration, Chagall proves his ability recreate the fable world in his own vision.

Death is a universal phenomenon. It shows its presence in
almost every religion, legend and folklore. Therefore, in the tradition of fable illustrations, images of Death vary with the cultural background or the artist’s inclination. In Grandville’s piece (fig. III-18), for example, Death is shown as a skeleton with a captain’s accessories symbolizing Death’s fearfulness and triumph. This reminds us of the Death who leads humans toward the end of their life journey in Thomas Rowlandson’s *The English Dance of Death* \(^{179}\) (fig. III-19) in the English cartoonist tradition. Another example of Death, represented according to a specific cultural context, is an anonymous Chinese version in which Death is depicted as Yama with his two ox-headed and horse-faced demons. \(^{180}\) Yet there are also images of Death that seem to be the result of the artist’s own invention. For instance, Doré chose to use a haunting shadow to display a horrifying atmosphere that echoes his illustrations for Dante’s *Inferno*, 1857. Later on, in Moreau’s work, Death becomes a bewitching female figure as one of Moreau’s femme fatales. \(^{181}\)

Death appears twice in Chagall’s *Fables*, namely in his illustrations of “La Mort et le Malheureux” (ill. 7) and “La Mort et le Bucheron” (illu. 8). At first glance, Chagall’s Death is also a sexless skeleton; however, this skeleton is clearly not the image of power and guidance as in Grandville’s illustrations. If we compare the two Deaths in Chagall’s “Le Malheureux” and “Le Bucheron”, it is obvious that, with both wearing tricorns and half-costumes, Chagall’s Death is actually the harlequin in comedies, or rather, the juggler in Chagall’s own *Cirque* (fig. III-20). \(^{182}\)

It is also interesting to note that in these two Death illustrations, the depictions of human characters somehow also mirror the LaFontainian spirit. Just as “La Mort et le Bucheron” is known as La Fontaine’s reflection of the Aesopian

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\(^{179}\) Emerged from medieval ages, the topic of “The Dance of Death” itself is an intriguing iconology. The image of a skeleton living, leading and “dancing” with human beings was repeatedly depicted and widely spread through prints. In Rowlandson’s version, published in 1816, the topic is represented as the free-style caricatures which turn the solemn theme of life and death into a farce of life.

\(^{180}\) In Chinese folklore, Yama is the king of Hell and his two attendants are named Cattle Head and Horse Face. The image mentioned here comes from North China, 20th century. See *Fables de La Fontaine*, Éditions du Chêne, 2005.


\(^{182}\) Chagall started to create gouaches for the series *Le Cirque* in 1927, the same year he worked on *Les Fables*. Similar to the fate of other illustrations of Vollard’s commission, owing to the publisher’s abrupt death in 1939 and the outbreak of WWII, it was not until 1967 that these gouaches of *Le Cirque* finally got published under the legendary publisher Tériade’s management. *Le Cirque* series contained 23 colour lithographs and 15 pieces of black and white when it was first published.
version “La Mort et le Malheureux”, Chagall’s woodman appears in a more relaxed, even tranquil attitude. The tense and frightening relationship between human and Death in the former picture is released as a witty reply in the latter: “C’est, dit-il, afin de m’aider/ À recharger ce bois; tu ne tarderas guère.”

The harlequin or juggler image of Chagall’s Death therefore testifies once more to the overall tone in the artist’s Fables. Rather than sophisticated morals, we can assume that what catches a child-reader’s attention is funny stories with talking animals and other creatures. In Chagall’s Fables de La Fontaine, animals, humans and gods coexist merrily together without the boundary of rank or class. Here, humans are no longer superior to animals and gods might serve as entertainment for the world. We have already seen the hybrid image of animals and humans, but the merging of all these beings can still be proven in further examples.

Other deities appear in the illustration series, such as Jupiter, Mercury and Fortune. It is interesting to point out that these images of gods retain similar traits of a clown or juggler joyfully playing tricks to the world of animals and humans. As “deus ex machina”, these deities are depicted as either descending from the clouds or flying through the sky in unexpected ways. When the small frogs asked for a king of their own (“Les Grenouilles qui demandent un Roi”, ill. 30), Jupiter the heavenly king is shown upside down in the sky, with his hand making gestures of sending the crowned crane to earth. Against the far-below horizon, the two figures are implied as floating in the sky, or coming down from another dimension unknown to the earthly creatures.

Just as La Fontaine uses the more intimate form of “Jupin” instead of “Jupiter” in this witty fable mocking different governmental systems, Chagall’s Jupiter does not resemble the bearded statue in “Le Statuaire et la Statue de

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183 Fables I, 16, line 15 & 16.

184 “Jupin en a bientôt la cervelle rompue.” (Fables III, 4, line 23) For more details about the linguistic usages of playful and ridiculous connotation in La Fontaine’s fables, see Maya Slater, “La Fontaine et les Dieux”, Fabuleux La Fontaine: Études réunies par Kees Meerhoff et Paul J. Smith, Rodopi, 1996, esp. p.31.
Jupiter”, but rather a playful vaudevillian performing on a hanging bar. This is also the gesture of Mercury in “Le Bucheron et Mercure” when coming down from the sky to comfort the woodcutter who lost his axe. Here the messenger god, with his feet unseen beyond the picture frame, also appears as hanging down from some invisible swinging bar. This playful trait is further shown by the image of his ambiguous sexuality: the male god appears like a female figure.

When Mercury reappears in the illustration of “Le Chartier embourbe” (illu. 70), again with a feminine body, he is not shown as descending from heaven but flying joyously across the clouds. This horizontal position seems less intrusive to the earth than the vertical hanging/descending one, and hence displays another, more harmonious relationship between gods and all creatures in the *Fable* world. Likewise, when the goddess Fortune passes by and warns the boy who carelessly sleeps on the edge of the well (“La Fortune et le jeune Enfant”, illu. 58), she is not shown as standing on her wheel and supporting the child in the way Doré has done (fig. III-21), but flying horizontally above the well echoing the gesture of the sleeping boy.

This is Chagall’s vision of the gods in the *Fables*. Rather than a superior or a dominant power, the deity represents a more mellow and frisky being who enters the world as a funny surprise. Chagall’s *Fables* embody a child’s joyful view more than an adult artist’s one.

4. Colour

...This splendid rush of colour in which blazing reds, opaque blacks, acid greens, opulent yellow, and radiant mauves mingle, the prodigious alchemy  

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1 It is interesting to point out that in conventional iconography, Mercury is often depicted with a winged hat and winged sandals, which are cleverly blurred away in Chagall’s depiction.
revealed by an examination of the tiniest portion of the surface of these images, or their fabulous inventiveness and touching sweetness of spirit.186

“Dripping” might be the most applicable word to describe the colours in Chagall’s poetic illustrations of *Fables*. The original sketches of gouaches he made for the intended prints shine with free-flowing colour strokes like those seen in “Le Rat et l’Éléphant” where watercolours rush down and blend into the whole composition. It is this free dripping of colours that speaks for its own sake instead of following confined contours, and therefore marks Chagall’s poetic and dreamy atmosphere. For example, in the illustration for “Le Soleil et les Grenouilles” (col. 67), the reddish sunlight seems to drip through the green brushes, down to the white, yellow, red and blue stream. Contrary to most depictions of this fable, the main characters, the frogs, are not shown in sight at all. Without the title, it would be difficult to recognise it as an illustration to a known fable but a painter’s landscape with masterly colour-play. It is more a dreamland of imaginary visions than a literal translation of the text.

The free-flow of colours even washes away the boundaries between objects. In the piece “La Souris métamorphosée en Fille” (col. 90), the lines are vaguely depicted, while the colours seem to be dyed all over the print spontaneously. The chromatic effect merges the female figure with the mountain and the sky as one picturesque background. The fable itself describes an unrealistic story in which the sun, the wind and the mountain are all possible “fiancés” to a mouse-girl. Chagall wittily avoided the possible absurdity of showing a tiny mouse/girl with other huge non-animals, but created a harmonious image in which every combination seems to be true and natural.

While the “dripping” effect creates the dreamy air in Chagall’s illustrations, the bright colours reflect the switch from the gloomy Russian mood in *Les Âmes Mortes* to the sunny air in the French countryside.187 Obviously, in Chagall’s *Fables* colours do not respect the lines of contours but also not common logic. In


187 In 1926, Chagall and his family made an intensive trip to central and southern France. The stay in Toulon was their first visit to the Mediterranean, where the bright landscape obviously made a great impact on the artist. During this time, Chagall made other paintings of flowers and nature, which showed distinct differences in light and colour from his previous paintings. For the detailed record of his trip in France, see Wullschlager, *Chagall: love and exile*, London: Allen Lane, 2008, p.329.
the illustration for "La Grenouille qui se veut faire aussi grosse que le Boeuf", the ox is coloured in an eccentric way: a green head, a yellow body and a blue-purple rump. It stands out against the bright-red ground; its head looking toward the tiny black frog—which is omitted in the later engraving version—in the right-bottom corner. The colours do not help the interpretation of the fable itself, but it pleases the eye with bright and brave contrasts and creates a poetic atmosphere.

As Nicolas Surlapierre has argued, “[t]his is no longer the moral of the poet; this is the moral of the painter.”\(^{188}\) Another plate testifying this “painter’s moral” is that of the fable “Le Loup et le Cigogne”. Here the pinky-purple wolf is dotted with white brushstrokes which continue to the stork in dark green and blue tones. These humorous colours reaffirm that this is not a real world, but an imaginary one in which the poetics of the painter rule.

Besides the arbitrary use of colours, the rendering of dark backgrounds also serves as a frequent means of “making the colours talk”. The piece of “Le Paon se plaignant à Junon” we saw earlier is a typical example. Similarly, in “Le lion et le Moucheron”, the artist imitates the effect of wood engravings through which white lines shine out against black backgrounds to create a strong visual effect. A surrealistic atmosphere is evoked by the way that white fur and brushes of bright colours on the lion float in the edgeless darkness with a white hint of the goat, again vanished in the finished version.

Although the coloured drafts were not executed for the published plates, the later black-and-white engravings still display equally painterly effects, which is essentially different from the clear linear etchings and massive drypoints of the previous illustration series Les Âmes Mortes. The artist still used the same engraving techniques, but based on the colourful drafts, he successfully created a picturesque palette with the gradation of grey and black. Take “L’Âne chargé d'éponges et l'Âne chargé de sel” (illu. 19) for example: while this watercolour piece plays with funny but harmonious colours like blue, green and yellow ochre, the non-coloured one shows a white donkey in black water and a black one in a medley of grey tones. Chagall proves that even without colours, he is still able to evoke warmth from a cold palate.

\(^{188}\) “Ce n’est plus la morale du poète, c’est la morale du peintre.” Surlapierre, Nicolas; Tériade, Alice, et al, Tériade & les livres de peintres, Musée Matisse, Le Cateau-Cambrésis, 2003, p.51.
5. Decors

Apart from the colour arrangements and the familiar Chagallian animals scattered around, the entire illustration series is shown as a stage-like setting with uncommon spatial deployment.

Known for breaking or discarding perspective principles, Chagall often chose a dramatic composition of a flat, shallow or abstract space, so as to enhance the dreamy and imaginary sense in his works. The illustrations for the *Fables* are no exception either; most of them demonstrate an ambiguous treatment of space. Frequently, the objects in the illustrations are jammed in a shadow foreground, as if it is a performance on a limited stage. It becomes more obvious when a confining wall in the background is “pushed” forward, such as the illustrations of “Le Loup, la Chèvre et le Chevreau” (illus. 47) or “Le Renard et le Bouc” (illu. 31). Without the chance to see beyond the backdrop, the audience is obliged to focus on the plots on stage; hence in these pictures, what is important is the imagined stories themselves, not the trompe l’oeil of pictorial principles. The audience is watching a show unfold before their eyes, and this is how the sense of stage performance is created.

Even if the pictorial space is not absolutely confined, most objects are displayed in a close-up or a flat viewpoint. An example of this spatial flatness can be found in “La Vieille et les deux Servantes” (illus. 56) where the old lady and the two servants on the bed seem to be displaced on a flattened surface. The arrangement of the two nudes, one lying on the front and the other on the back, is a common composition in Chagall’s paintings, like a repeated phrase in his vocabulary, and here it enhances the unreal sense in the picture.

Furthermore, sometimes the dramatic sense goes so far that the spaces appear purely abstract. In “L’Aigle, la Laie et la Chatte” (illus. 32), like “Le Renard et les Raisins”, the background is just a hinted space; the blue colour makes the tree look like it is floating in the air. Another example is “Le Cheval s’étant voulu venger du Cerf” (illus. 45), where the white figures appear against a dark background. There’s no implication of depth or perspective in the blackness, just a smooth abstract surface like a Chinese ink painting. Similarly, in "La Femme noyée" (illus. 39), the sea of the edgeless darkness evokes an intriguing space where the upper or lower reaches of the river are no longer distinguishable.

In the above examples, the spaces are just slightly implied but not represented as reality.\(^{189}\) This gives his works a naïve or primitive look, as if from

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\(^{189}\) Chagall’s two-dimensional and imaginary device is not, however, similar to Walter Crane’s planar dimension in his compositions for *Baby’s Own Aesop* (1887), which are meant for purely decorative purposes. A distinction must be drawn between these two
a child’s perspective. The pictorial principles are not significant for a child when watching the interaction between the animals, humans and deities.

This is a joyful perspective. As the warm sunshine in the southern French countryside brightens up Chagall’s canvas, his colourful and painterly illustrations of Fables also vary from those of the previous Les Âmes Mortes. While the peasants and little houses with red roofs in the Fables illustrations still remind us of the traditional rural style in Russia, the orthodox churches which appear in “Over Vitebsk” or “Au-dessus de la ville” gradually change into the typical Catholic belfries of France, such as the white church in the background of “Le Meunier, son Fils et l’Âne” (illus. 28). Despite occasional remnants of Russian elements, Chagall’s Fables mark the turning point of his cultural identity.

6. Conclusion

The illustrations in Les Fables testify once more to the different dimensions of the theme of nostalgia. On one hand, a move away from the hometown, an expectation of a foreign land and a longing for identification with a new environment make themselves felt. Like the fables of La Fontaine themselves, these illustrations show the appearance of the French countryside with a hint at Oriental roots. On the other hand, the sense of nostalgia can also be recognized in the retreat to a child’s perspective and an Arcadian world in which animals coexist in harmony with humans. This is the world of Les Fables from a Russian painter’s perspective, which justifies Vollard’s choice in the first place.

Boym’s distinction of two categories of nostalgia turns out to be productive again in Chagall’s Les Fables de La Fontaine. Firstly, the subject of Les Fables itself brings up the artist’s childhood experience of living with animals and through the use of bright colours he evokes memory of the south of France. All of these dimensions fulfil the first category of nostalgia. Secondly, an emphasis on animal characters reflects the longing for a purer human status, which can be harmonious with animals and nature, and as naïve and humble as a child. This is the reflective sense of the longing for the Arcadian pastoral that is lost and dreamed of.

Les Fables demonstrates an overlap between Chagall’s identification with Russia with his identification with France, and the sense of nostalgia that manifests itself in Les Fables therefore refers to a longing for both places. However, through Boym’s categories, another sense of nostalgia is brought to the kinds of illustrative styles.

190 For more details about the Russian and French representation, see Schulmann, Ibid.
fore and refers to the spiritual world which transcends the experience of the local to a more universal experience: the experience of an infant’s joy to appreciate all creatures without any bias, judgement or moralism.
7. Appendix: Selected Fables

Fables I, 15 La Mort et le Malheureux

Un Malheureux appelait tous les jours
La mort à son secours.
O mort, lui disait-il, que tu me sembles belle !
Viens vite, viens finir ma fortune cruelle.
La Mort crut, en venant, l'obliger en effet.
Elle frappe à sa porte, elle entre, elle se montre.
Que vois-je! cria-t-il, ôtez-moi cet objet ;
Qu'il est hideux ! que sa rencontre
Me cause d'horreur et d'effroi !
N'approche pas, ô mort ; ô mort, retire-toi.
Mécénas fut un galant homme : 
Il a dit quelque part : Qu'on me rende impotent,
Cul-de-jatte, goutteux, manchot, pourvu qu'en somme
Je vive, c'est assez, je suis plus que content.
Ne viens jamais, ô mort ; on t'en dit tout autant.

Fables I, 16 La Mort et le Bucheron

Un pauvre Bûcheron tout couvert de ramée,
Sous le faix du fagot aussi bien que des ans
Gémissant et courbé marchait à pas pesants,
Et tâchait de gagner sa chaumine enfumée.
Enfin, n'en pouvant plus d'effort et de douleur,
Il met bas son fagot, il songe à son malheur.
Quel plaisir a-t-il eu depuis qu'il est au monde ?
En est-il un plus pauvre en la machine ronde ?
Point de pain quelquefois, et jamais de repos.
Sa femme, ses enfants, les soldats, les impôts,
Le créancier, et la corvée
Lui font d'un malheureux la peinture achevée.
Il appelle la mort, elle vient sans tarder,
Lui demande ce qu'il faut faire
C'est, dit-il, afin de m'aider
A recharger ce bois ; tu ne tarderas guère.
Le trépas vient tout guérir ;
Mais ne bougeons d'où nous sommes.
Plutôt souffrir que mourir,
C'est la devise des hommes.

**Fables II, 17 Le Paon se plaignant à Juno**

Le Paon se plaignait à Junon :
Déesse, disait-il, ce n’est pas sans raison
Que je me plains, que je murmure :
Le chant dont vous m’avez fait don
Déplaît à toute la Nature ;
Au lieu qu’un Rossignol, chétive créature,
Forme des sons aussi doux qu’éclatants,
Est lui seul l’honneur du Printemps.
Junon répondit en colère :
Oiseau jaloux, et qui devrais te taire,
Est-ce à toi d’envier la voix du Rossignol,
Toi que l’on voit porter à l’entour de ton col
Un arc-en-ciel nué de cent sortes de soies ;
Qui te panades, qui déploies
Une si riche queue, et qui semble à nos yeux
La Boutique d’un Lapidaire ?
Est-il quelque oiseau sous les Cieux
Plus que toi capable de plaire ?
Tout animal n’a pas toutes propriétés.
Nous vous avons donné diverses qualités :
Les uns ont la grandeur et la force en partage ;
Le Faucon est léger, l’Aigle plein de courage ;
Le Corbeau sert pour le présage,
La Corneille avertit des malheurs à venir ;
Tous sont contents de leur ramage.
Cesse donc de te plaindre, ou bien, pour te punir,
Je t’ôterai ton plumage.

**Fables III, 11 Le Renard et les Raisins**

Certain Renard Gascon, d’autres disent Normand,
Mourant presque de faim, vit au haut d’une treille
Des Raisins mûrs apparentemment,
Et couverts d’une peau vermeille.
Le galand en eût fait volontiers un repas ;
Mais comme il n’y pouvait atteindre :
Ils sont trop verts, dit-il, et bons pour des goujats.
Fit-il pas mieux que de se plaindre?
Fable IV, 1 Le Lion amoureux

Sévigné, de qui les attraits
Servent aux Grâces de modèle,
Et qui naquit toute belle,
À votre indifférence près,
Pourriez-vous être favorable
Aux jeux innocents d’une Fable,
Et voir, sans vous épouvanter,
Un Lion qu’Amour sut dompter ?
Amour est un étrange maître.
Heureux qui peut ne le connaître
Que par récit, lui ni ses coups !
Quand on en parle devant vous,
Si la vérité vous offense,
La Fable au moins se peut souffrir :
Celle-ci prend bien l’assurance
De venir à vos pieds s’offrir,
Par zèle et par reconnaissance.
Du temps que les bêtes parlaient,
Les Lions entre autres voulalaient
Être admis dans notre alliance.
Pourquoi non ? puisque leur engeance
Valait la nôtre en ce temps-là,
Ayant courage, intelligence,
Et belle hure outre cela.
Voici comment il en alla :
Un Lion de haut parentage,
En passant par un certain pré,
Rencontra Bergère à son gré :
Il la demande en mariage.
Le père aurait fort souhaité
Quelque gendre un peu moins terrible.
La donner lui semblait bien dur ;
La refuser n’était pas sûr ;
Même un refus eût fait possible
Qu’on eût vu quelque beau matin
Un mariage clandestin.
Car outre qu’en toute manière
La belle était pour les gens fiers,
Fille se coiffe volontiers
D’amoureux à longue crinière.
Le Père donc ouvertement
N’osant renvoyer notre amant,
Lui dit : « Ma fille est délicate ;
Vos griffes la pourront blesser
Quand vous voudrez la caresser.
Permettez donc qu’à chaque patte
On vous les rogne, et pour les dents,
Qu’on vous les lime en même temps.
Vos baisers en seront moins rudes,
Et pour vous plus délicieux ;
Car ma fille y répondra mieux,
Étant sans ces inquiétudes.
Le Lion consent à cela,
Tant son âme était aveuglée !
Sans dents ni griffes le voilà,
Comme place démantelée.
On lâcha sur lui quelques chiens :
Il fit fort peu de résistance.
Amour, Amour, quand tu nous tiens
On peut bien dire : "Adieu prudence."

Fables V, 13 La Poule aux Oeufs d’Or

L’avarice perd tout en voulant tout gagner.
Je ne veux, pour le témoigner,
Que celui dont la Poule, à ce que dit la Fable,
Pondait tous les jours un œuf d’or.
Il crut que dans son corps elle avait un trésor.
Il la tua, l’ouvrit, et la trouva semblable
A celles dont les œufs ne lui rapportaient rien,
S’étant lui-même ôté le plus beau de son bien.
Belle leçon pour les gens chiches :
Pendant ces derniers temps, combien en a-t-on vus
Qui du soir au matin sont pauvres devenus
Pour vouloir trop tôt être riches ?

Fables X,12, Les deux Perroquets, le Roi, et son fils

Deux Perroquets, l’un père et l’autre fils,
Du rôt d’un Roi faisaient leur ordinaire.
Deux demi-dieux, l’un fils et l’autre père,
De ces oiseaux, faisaient leurs favoris.
L'âge liait une amitié sincère
Entre ces gens : les deux pères s'aimaient ;
Les deux enfants, malgré leur cœur frivole,
L'un avec l'autre aussi s'accoutumaient,
Nourris ensemble, et compagnons d'école.
C'était beaucoup d'honneur au jeune Perroquet ;
Car l'enfant était Prince, et son père Monarque.
Par le tempérament que lui donna la parque,
Il aimait les oiseaux. Un Moineau fort coquet,
Et le plus amoureux de toute la Province,
Faisait aussi sa part des délices du Prince.
Ces deux rivaux un jour ensemble se jouant,
Comme il arrive aux jeunes gens,
Le jeu devint une querelle,
Le Passereau, peu circonspec,
S'attirera de tels coups de bec,
Que, demi-mort et traînant l'aile,
On crut qu'il n'en pourrait guérir
Le Prince indigné fit mourir
Son Perroquet. Le bruit en vint au père.
L'infortuné vieillard crie et se désespère,
Le tout en vain ; ses cris sont superflus ;
L'oiseau parleur est déjà dans la barque ;
Pour dire mieux, l'Oiseau ne parlant plus
Fait qu'en fureur sur le fils du Monarque
Son père s'en va fondre, et lui crève les yeux.
Il se sauve aussitôt, et choisit pour asile
Le haut d'un Pin. Là dans le sein des Dieux
Il goûte sa vengeance en lieu sûr et tranquille.
Le Roi lui-même y court, et dit pour l'attirer :
Ami, reviens chez moi : que nous sert de pleurer ?
Haine, vengeance, et deuil, laissez tout à la porte.
Je suis contraint de déclarer,
Encore que ma douleur soit forte,
Que le sort vient de nous : mon fils fut l'agresseur.
Mon fils ! non. C'est le sort qui du coup est l'auteur.
La Parque avait écrit de tout temps en son livre
Que l'un de nos enfants devait cesser de vivre,
L'autre de voir, par ce malheur.
Consolons-nous tous deux, et reviens dans ta cage.
Le Perroquet dit : Sire Roi,
Crois-tu qu'après un tel outrage
Je me doive fier à toi ?
Tu m'allèges le sort : prétends-tu par ta foi
Me leurrer de l'appât d'un profane langage ?
Mais que la providence ou bien que le destin
Règle les affaires du monde
Il est écrit là-haut qu'au faîte de ce pin
Ou dans quelque Forêt profonde,
J'achèverai mes jours loin du fatal objet
Qui doit t'être un juste sujet
De haine et de fureur. Je sais que la vengeance
Est un morceau de Roi, car vous vivez en Dieux.
Tu veux oublier cette offense :
Je le crois ; cependant il me faut pour le mieux
Eviter ta main et tes yeux.
Sire Roi mon ami, va-t'en, tu perds ta peine ;
Ne me parle point de retour ;
L'absence est aussi bien un remède à la haine
Qu'un appareil contre l'amour.