

# TO DELIGHT AND INSTRUCT

## JEAN DE LA FONTAINE'S *FABLES* FOR CHILDREN

**Céline Zaepffel**

Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

*More than 350 years after their first publication, Jean de La Fontaine's Fables (1668) are still republished every year in French children's books, used in school curricula, and often considered as a way of both delighting and instructing children at the same time. This is an important aim in the history of French literature since Nicolas Boileau's Art poétique (1674), inspired by Horace's Ars Poetica (19 BCE). It became a significant principle in French children's literature too, especially after Jan Amos Comenius' Orbis sensualium pictus (1658), the first picture book for children, was translated into French in 1666. Because they have been written in the same context as the Orbis sensualium pictus and officially dedicated to the aspiring future king, the Fables have often been considered a delighting and instructing book for children, while the efforts made by authors, illustrators, and editors in their adaptations show it is not entirely obvious that they are indeed meant for children. Therefore, I argue that they seem to be taught in France primarily for traditional reasons in order to reinforce national and cultural cohesion, which is a practice that is worth being questioned and discussed.*

An overview on the Legal Deposit of the Bibliothèque nationale de France shows that Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables*, published for the first time in 1668, are still republished every year in several editions, many of them intended for children.<sup>1</sup> Of the more than 80,000 children's books published from 2007 to 2018 and listed in the Study of the French Legal Deposit in 2018, around 3,800 books are poetry books, among which there are 99 adaptations or republications of the fables of Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695), Aesop (c. 620-c. 564 BCE), Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian (1755-1793) or even anthologies of several of these

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper presents preliminary hypotheses and ideas that are part of doctoral research on illustrated fables in French pedagogy from 1500 to 2010 for the NWO project *Aesopian Fables 1500–2010: Word, Image, Education* directed by Prof. dr. P.J. Smith, expected in January 2021.

authors.<sup>2</sup> These books were mostly published in France (ninety-two books) but also in the Francophone parts of Belgium (five) and Canada (two). Seventy-eight of these books rely exclusively on the *Fables* of La Fontaine, and four books bring several authors together, always including Jean de La Fontaine. Despite its established popularity, the French government has further promoted the book from 2008 to 2010, and every year since 2017, when it offered various editions of it to all the children leaving primary school for secondary school, by means of a national initiative named “Un livre pour les vacances”.<sup>3</sup> The editions published in 2018 and 2019 are introduced by Jean-Michel Blanquer,<sup>4</sup> the French Minister of Education, who links this national project with a famous tradition in French literature: *plaire et instruire* (to delight and instruct). Today’s appeal of the *Fables*, however, seems debatable, especially as summer reading, let alone the decision to offer children a book that they did not choose themselves: these fables were not originally intended for children and do not always seem moral enough to educate them.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, considering the many editions of Jean de La Fontaine’s *Fables*, the omnipresence of this piece of literature in French schools, and the frequency of the argument of *plaire et instruire* in the editors’ catalogues and other media dealing with the *Fables*,<sup>6</sup> one can believe they do both delight and instruct their young readers. If not, why would they be so frequently republished and used at school? This article aims to rethink this generally admitted idea by giving an overview of the evolution of the principle of *plaire et instruire* in French literature, and especially in children’s literature, considering at the same time whether it applies to the *Fables* as a children’s book, in order to finally posit another reason for why the *Fables* survived until today as school material that is both popular and elitist.

---

<sup>2</sup> Bibliothèque nationale de France, *Observatoire du dépôt légal: La Jeunesse*, [https://multimedia-ext.bnf.fr/docs/Observatoire\\_depot\\_legal/Observatoire\\_DL\\_2018.pdf](https://multimedia-ext.bnf.fr/docs/Observatoire_depot_legal/Observatoire_DL_2018.pdf) (study), [https://multimedia-ext.bnf.fr/docs/Observatoire\\_depot\\_legal/Focus%20jeunesse%20-%20Indicateurs%20du%20dépôt%20légal%202018.xlsm](https://multimedia-ext.bnf.fr/docs/Observatoire_depot_legal/Focus%20jeunesse%20-%20Indicateurs%20du%20dépôt%20légal%202018.xlsm) (data).

<sup>3</sup> The French for “a book for holidays”. Ministère de l’Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, “Opération ‘Un livre pour les vacances’ - édition 2019,” *Eduscol*, <http://eduscol.education.fr/cid130373/operation-un-livre-pour-les-vacances-edition-2018.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Jean de La Fontaine, Joann Sfar, and Jean-Michel Blanquer, *Fables* (Futuroscope: Réseau Canopé, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Claire Lesage, “Trahison et Chance, la destinée enfantine et scolaire de La Fontaine”, in *Jean de La Fontaine*, ed. Claire Lesage (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France/Seuil, 1995), 208-21.

<sup>6</sup> A comparison between the descriptions of several editions of Jean de La Fontaine’s *Fables* on the website of La Fnac (<https://livre.fnac.com/>), a French bookshop, proves the recurrence of this argument in editors’ catalogues.

*PLAIRE ET INSTRUIRE: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MOTTO*

As early as 19 BCE, a prominent Roman lyric poet named Quintus Horatius Flaccus, better known as Horace, advised poets to both instruct and delight their readers in his practical guide, the *Epistle to the Pisos* or *Ars Poetica*.<sup>7</sup> As Horace explains, it is important for the poet to always keep the reader in mind when writing: “He who joins the instructive with the agreeable, carries off every vote, by delighting and at the same time admonishing the reader” (Fig. 1).<sup>8</sup>

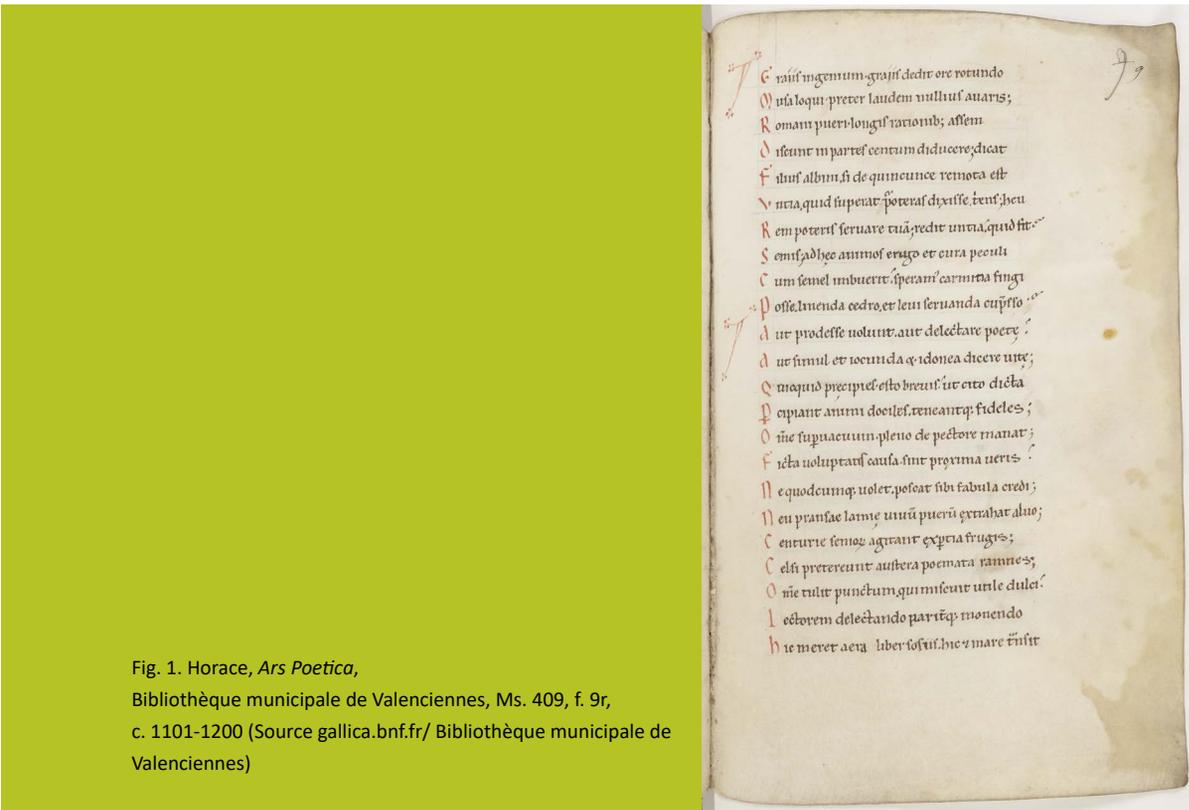


Fig. 1. Horace, *Ars Poetica*,  
Bibliothèque municipale de Valenciennes, Ms. 409, f. 9r,  
c. 1101-1200 (Source gallica.bnf.fr/ Bibliothèque municipale de  
Valenciennes)

<sup>7</sup> Horace, *Ars poetica, Epistolae et Sermones*, twelfth century, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84525906.image>.

<sup>8</sup> “Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci,/lectorem delectando pariterque monendo”, trans. C. Smart and E. H. Blakeney, The Poetry Foundation, *Ars Poetica*, accessed 26 July 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69381/ars-poetica>.

In this case, delighting the reader is not meant to make him or her learn better; it is not a way of transmitting a lesson more efficiently. Pleasure and instruction seem to have the same value for Horace and are both necessary in order to write a successful poem. Nevertheless, literature has ever since more or less combined instruction with pleasure, however prioritizing sometimes one aim over the other. According to Raymond Lebègue's article "Horace en France pendant la Renaissance", Horace's verses were still read and imitated during the Middle Ages throughout Europe, but were rarely quoted.<sup>9</sup> He was rehabilitated during the Renaissance, like many classical authors. Horace's complete work has been translated into French for the first time in 1501, followed by many other translations between 1501 and 1550, including some for students.<sup>10</sup> It was finally thoroughly reconsidered during French Classicism, which was indeed a perfect context to bring back Horace's advice, since Classicism exhorted authors to follow poetics, themes, and texts as defined in Antiquity. Inspired by Horace, the French poet Nicolas Boileau then published his own advice to poets in *L'Art Poétique* in 1674.<sup>11</sup> His adaptation became a reference, a guide to write according to the principles of Classicism, especially the verses meant to both delight and instruct: "May your prolific muse everywhere in her wise lessons mix the pleasant with the sound and useful".<sup>12</sup>

Jean de La Fontaine is not mentioned in *L'Art poétique*, probably because his relationship with King Louis XIV became compromised due to his frequent criticism of the King, which might have convinced Nicolas Boileau to distance himself from La Fontaine.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, La Fontaine seems to have followed Horace's advice too, especially in his *Fables*, published in 1668 and dedicated to the dauphin, the aspiring future king. Among other examples, he indeed writes in the introduction:

---

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Lebègue, "Horace en France pendant la Renaissance," *Humanisme et Renaissance* 3 (1936), 141-64.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-64.

<sup>11</sup> Nicolas Boileau, *Oeuvres diverses du sieur D\*\*\*, avec le Traité du sublime ou du merveilleux dans le discours, traduit du grec de Longin*, (Paris: Denys Thierry, 1674), 134-42.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 137 : "Qu'en savantes leçons votre muse fertile / Partout joigne au plaisant le solide et l'utile", trans. Céline Zaepffel.

<sup>13</sup> Laurent Dandrieu, "Le Soleil, l'Écureuil et les deux Baladins" in *Le Figaro hors-série, Dans le secret des fables de La Fontaine. L'ami retrouvé* (2018), 42-49.

I do not doubt, Monseigneur, that you entertain a favourable opinion of compositions which are at once so useful and so agreeable; for what more can one desire than the useful and the agreeable? It is these that have been the means of introducing knowledge amongst men.<sup>14</sup>

That the *Fables* were dedicated to the dauphin practice relies on a long tradition, and perhaps also on Jean de La Fontaine's desire to prove his devotion to the king, since he was no longer welcomed at Versailles after having officially supported Nicolas Fouquet, arrested for peculation and lèse-majesté by order of the king in 1661.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the *Fables* were associated with a child through their dedication to the young prince, and even though it is unknown whether they were actually written for children or not, this association has stuck. The *Fables* was considered educative for children since its release: descriptions of the *Labyrinthe de Versailles* by travellers tend to confirm this hypothesis. Indeed, in 1669, Charles Perrault advised Louis XIV to add to the maze created in 1665 by the landscape architect and principal gardener of the Château de Versailles, André Le Nôtre, thirty-nine fountains representing Aesopian fables for the wanderer to admire as he walks the garden.<sup>16</sup> These fountains were erected between 1671 and 1674, reproduced into a book engraved by Sébastien Leclerc (Fig. 2), and finally destroyed in 1775 because there were poorly preserved. Under each of them, four verses written by Isaac de Benserade helped the wanderer understand the allegorical meaning of the fountains.

Jean de la Fontaine did not contribute at all to the project, but the success of his *Fables* may have influenced the king when he chose the fables he wanted to see reproduced in the maze, since twenty-four of the thirty-nine fountains were based on fables made famous by Jean de La Fontaine a few years earlier.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the dedication of his *Fables*

---

<sup>14</sup> Jean de La Fontaine, Gustave Doré, *The Fables of La Fontaine translated into English Verse by Walter Thornbury and illustrated by Gustave Doré*, (London: Cassell, Petter and Galpin, 1886).

<sup>15</sup> Timothée Chevalier, "La Composition d'un bosquet-recueil, de l'ornement aux quatrains," in *Le labyrinthe de Versailles: du mythe au jeu*, ed. Élisabeth Maisonnier and Alexandre Maral (Paris: Magellan & Cie/Bibliothèque municipale de Versailles, 2013), 187-201.

<sup>16</sup> Élisabeth Maisonnier, "Représenter le labyrinthe : construction d'une image," in *Le labyrinthe de Versailles*, 78-99.

<sup>17</sup> Maisonnier, "Représenter le labyrinthe: Construction d'une image," 78-99.

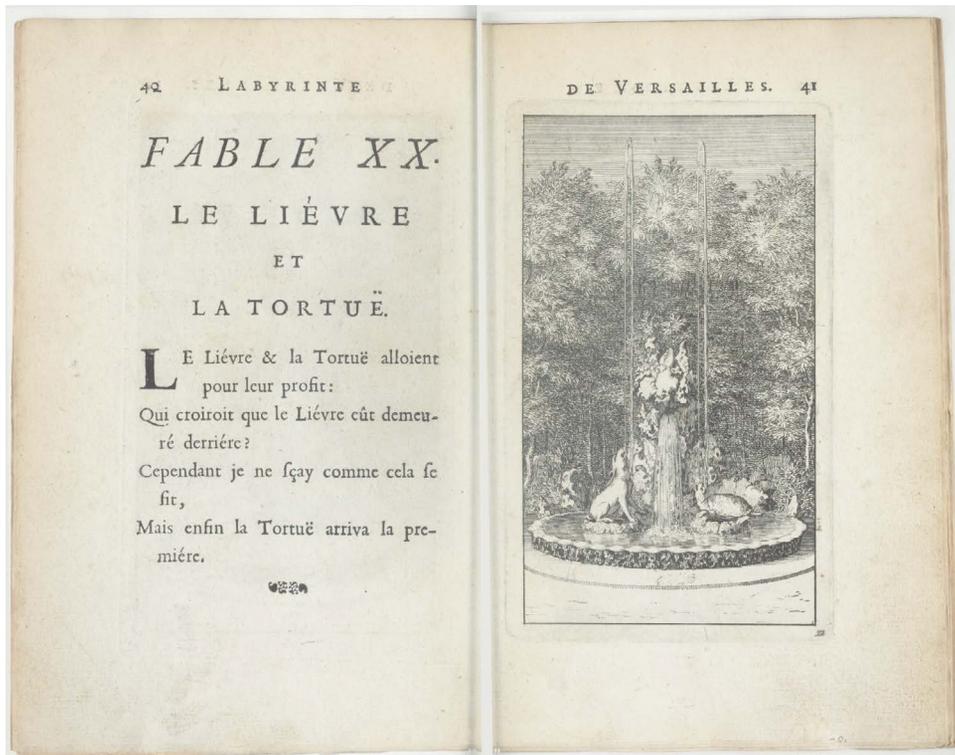


Fig. 2 Charles Perrault, Isaac de Benserade and Sébastien Leclerc, *Le labyrinthe de Versailles* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1677), 40-41 (Source gallica.bnf.fr/BnF)

truly influenced the way the visitors considered the maze: Martin Lister, an English traveller, described it as “ad usum Delphini” in 1698.<sup>18</sup> Nothing other than La Fontaine’s *Fables* seems to link the dauphin and the genre.<sup>19</sup> This example shows that they were obviously considered instructive for at least one child, without explaining why besides their dedication, nor why the principle of ‘to delight and instruct’ became an aim for children’s literature in general.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Lister, *A Journey to Paris in the Year 1698* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1699). The term “ad usum delphini”, used by Martin Lister in his book, means “for the use of the dauphin”, trans. Céline Zaepffel.

<sup>19</sup> Chevalier, “La Composition d’un bosquet-recueil, de l’ornement aux quatrains,” 187-201.

There is another earlier book that changed the whole landscape of children literature in Europe by explicitly applying the principle of *plaire et instruire* to a young audience: in 1658, Comenius published the *Orbis sensualium pictus*<sup>20</sup> in order to complete and adapt his first vocabulary book *Janua linguarum reserata* (1629), considered too difficult for young children. The *Orbis sensualium pictus* was promptly translated into several European languages, with a French version published as early as 1666.<sup>21</sup> His introduction, a simplified and summary version of the pedagogy explained in his “Schola infantiae” in *Opera didactica omnia* (1657),<sup>22</sup> influenced European pedagogues such as John Locke (1632-1704) and teachers such as François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon, also known as Fénelon (1651-1715), for decades.<sup>23</sup> According to Comenius, it was important to respect the natural rhythm of children, but also to adapt the educational discourse to them as individuals with special needs. Pleasure is the best way for them to learn, and can best be found in pictures, which makes them the most efficient way of delighting children:

Which such Book, and in such a dress may (I hope) serve,  
I. To entice witty children to it, that they may not conceit a torment to be in the school, but dainty fare. For it is apparent, that children (even from their infancy almost) are delighted with Pictures [...]  
Let [this book] be given to children into their hands to delight themselves withal as they please, with the sight of the pictures, and making them as familiar to themselves as may be, and that even at home before they be put to school.<sup>24</sup>

The necessity of delighting and instructing the reader becomes a tool that helps teach children efficiently, through the pleasure offered by pictures. Thanks to those on the left-hand

---

<sup>20</sup> Full original title: *Orbis sensualium pictus, hoc est, omnium fundamentalium in mundo rerum, et in vita actionum, pictura et nomenclatura.*

<sup>21</sup> Annie Renonciat, “De l’Orbis sensualium pictus (1658) aux premiers albums du Père Castor (1931): formes et fonctions pédagogiques de l’image dans l’édition française pour la jeunesse,” in *La pédagogie par l’image en France et au Japon*, ed. Marianne Simon-Oikawa and Annie Renonciat (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 55-73.

<sup>22</sup> Johann Amos Comenius, *J. A. Comenii Opera didactica omnia* (Amsterdam: Christophorus Cunradus, 1657).

<sup>23</sup> Renonciat, “De l’Orbis sensualium pictus (1658) aux premiers albums du Père Castor (1931),” 55-73.

<sup>24</sup> Johann Amos Comenius, *The orbis pictus of John Amos Comenius*, trans. Charles Hoole, (Syracuse: C.W. Bardeen, 1887).

side of each opening, children are then able to easily identify all the things they are supposed to name, and finally read in Latin on the right-hand side of each opening. With this book, not only did new illustrated literature appear, all meant for children, but this literature also gave itself an aim: helping young readers grow up. Therefore, even if nothing in the *Fables* indicates their suitability to delight and instruct children, their historical and cultural context closely linked them to this tradition, while Comenius' pedagogy likewise applied this principle to children.

### FABLES: A LEGITIMATE SYMBOL OF *PLAIRE ET INSTRUIRE*?

Adults, the main book prescribers to children, seem to have long undertaken the mission to always instruct or educate children through children's literature, even if they did not themselves read only to learn.<sup>25</sup> This logic results in a highly edifying kind of literature, among which Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables* take a primary place. One reason for this phenomenon, could be the oral origins of fables, and their "legendary creator" Aesop,<sup>26</sup> which places them in the category of popular culture. Popular culture, oral culture, and childhood are often considered to be linked, as is demonstrated by the genres of legends, riddles, popular songs, fairy tales, and fables. The latter two in particular are often confused, as La Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie did, since installations based on *Fables* entered an exhibition called *Once Upon a Time: Science in Fairy Tales* (Fig. 3).<sup>27</sup>

An important part of the *Fables* is their moral role — more essential than in fairy tales<sup>28</sup> — which makes them instructive. However, the fact that a moral is expressed in fables does not actually make fables moral for children. For example, *The Fox and the Crow* tells its reader about a fox who flatters a crow to make it speak, in order to steal the cheese it keeps in its beak by making it drop it by opening its beak to respond. With this fable,

---

<sup>25</sup> Francis Marcoin and Christian Chelebourg, *La littérature de jeunesse* (Paris: Colin, 2007), 79-81.

<sup>26</sup> Antoine Biscéré, *Jean de La Fontaine et la fable ésopique: Genèse et généalogie d'une filiation ambiguë*, unpublished dissertation (Paris: Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> *Il était une fois la science dans les contes*, 3 October 2017-4 November 2018 at La Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, Paris; trans. Céline Zaepffel.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Paul Sermain, "Fables, contes, nouvelles: Liaisons poétiques," *Féeries* 7 (2010), 9-19.

Fig. 3 Installation inviting children to play with Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables* at the exhibition *Il était une fois la science dans les contes*, from 3 October 2017 to 4 November 2018 at La Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, Paris (Source Céline Zaepffel)



children are taught that they could be fooled by flattering people, but might also learn that they can get what they want by flattering weak people. In *Émile ou de l'Éducation* (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated this very clearly:

Emile will not learn anything by heart, not even fables, not even the fables of La Fontaine, simple and delightful as they are [...]. Men may be taught by fables; children require the naked truth.

All children learn La Fontaine's fables, but not one of them understands them, [...] for the morality of the fables is so mixed and so unsuitable for their age that it would be more likely to incline them to vice than to virtue.<sup>29</sup>

Many authors tend to prove his idea when re-moralizing the *Fables* for children. Instead of writing new fables that would suit children better, they choose to adapt Jean de La

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (Project Gutenberg, 2004).

Fontaine's *Fables*. An interesting example of this phenomenon is *Quelques fables de La Fontaine* (1936), written and illustrated by Georges Ripart.<sup>30</sup> The author announces his project of re-moralizing the *Fables* from the very beginning of the book, since as a frontispiece — the first illustration in a book facing the title page — he draws a balance, the symbol of justice, weighing a sad fox on one side and an happily avenged crow on the other (Fig. 4).

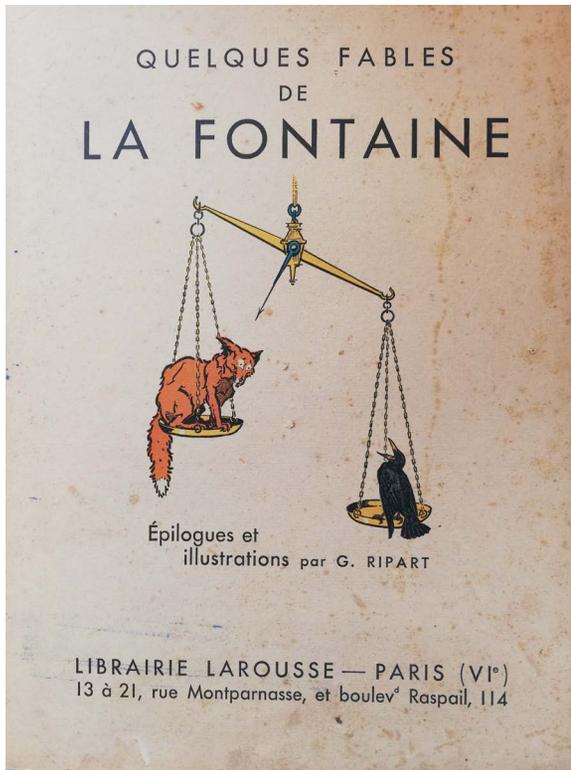


Fig. 4. Frontispiece of Georges Ripart, *Quelques fables de La Fontaine* (Paris: Larousse, 1936) (Source Céline Zaepffel)

The whole book is built on this duality: sixteen fables are reproduced and illustrated in black and white on the left-hand side of each opening, while an added epilogue by the author is illustrated in colour. These epilogues are meant to do justice to the animals who are the original losers of each fable, positioning them as victims of their mean and immoral

<sup>30</sup> Georges Ripart, *Quelques fables de La Fontaine* (Paris: Larousse, 1936).

counterparts in many of Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables*. Thus, in this new version of *The Fox and the Crow* (Fig. 5), the Crow later lets another cheese fall after taunting the Fox. When the Fox jumps on it in order to eat it, he realizes that it is fake as it breaks his teeth.

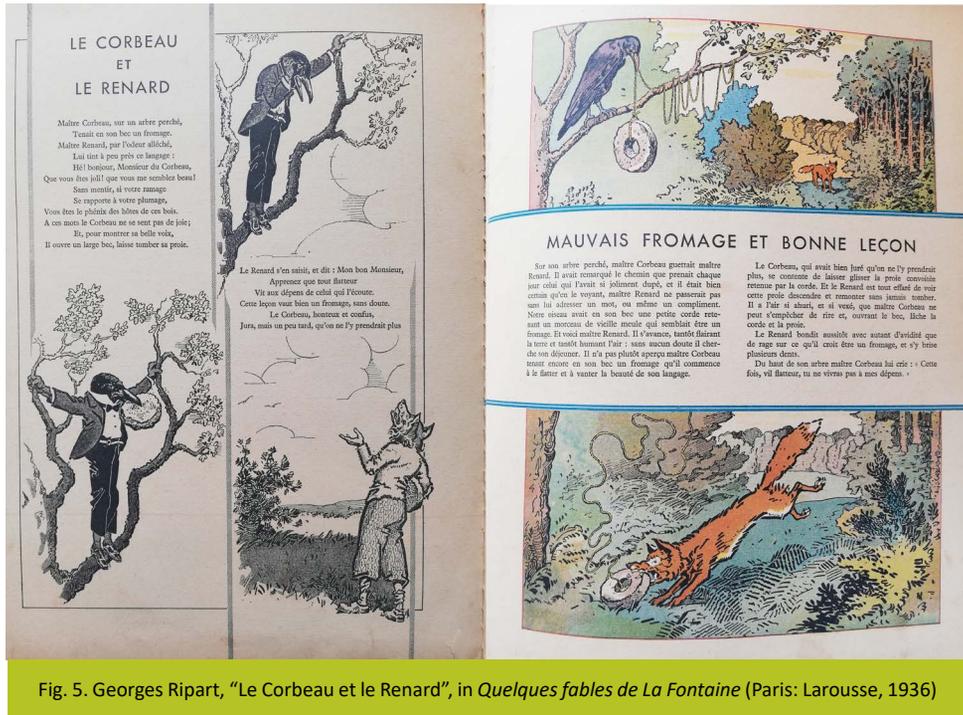


Fig. 5. Georges Ripart, "Le Corbeau et le Renard", in *Quelques fables de La Fontaine* (Paris: Larousse, 1936)

Other authors have tried to simplify the *Fables*, such as A. Carrière-Doisin with *Les fables mises en action* in 1787.<sup>31</sup> He not only re-moralized some of them, but also adapted them into short theatre plays with dialogued epilogues explaining their meaning. In his introduction, he answered Rousseau by stating that, when performing fables, children understand them better because they seem less abstract. Nevertheless, the *Fables* became the French incarnation of *plaire et instruire* for children, even in their original versions. One of the best-known *Fables'* frontispiece shows how this principle, linked to Comenius' pedagogy, participates in the way *Fables* are used and transmitted in French pedagogy (Fig. 6).

<sup>31</sup> A. Carrière-Doisin, *Les fables mises en action, suivies de pièces fugitives et de quelques comédies*, par M. C\*\*\* (Paris: De Senne, 1787).

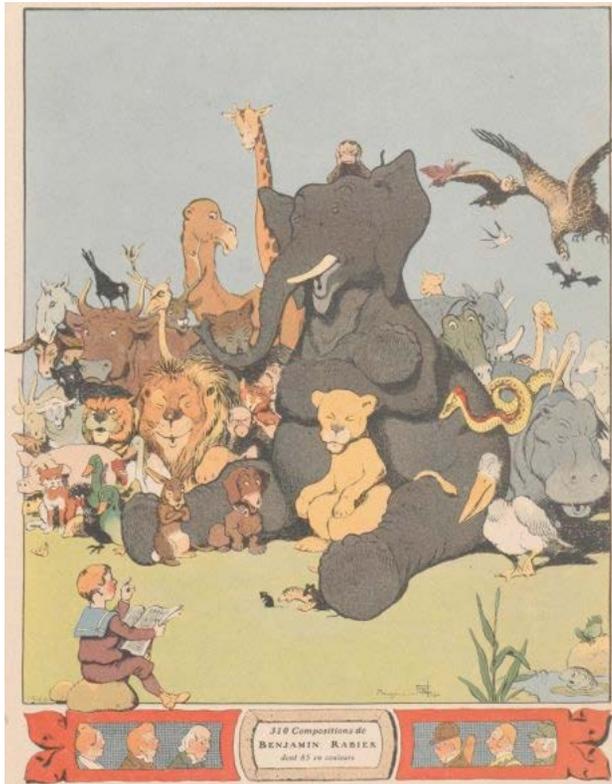


Fig. 6. Frontispiece of Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables*, by Benjamin Rabier (Paris: Jules Tallandier, 1906) (Source Céline Zaepffel, facsimile)

In this frontispiece from Benjamin Rabier,<sup>32</sup> the child adopts the teacher's position, which recalls Comenius' pedagogy inviting pedagogues to help children become active in their own education by letting them manipulate the book as much as possible and explain its content by themselves. On the other side, the anthropomorphized and colourful animals, by looking disobedient, promise the reader that he will have fun while reading this book. Besides these examples, the *Fables* have been adapted into many different media including prints (Fig. 7), rebus,<sup>33</sup> or even board games (Fig. 8), in order to help children understand or memorize them in their original versions.

<sup>32</sup> Jean de La Fontaine and Benjamin Rabier, *Fables de La Fontaine illustrées par Benjamin Rabier* (Paris: Jules Tallandier, 1906).

<sup>33</sup> Ville d'Epinal, "Les collections du musée de l'image," [https://webmuseo.com/ws/musee-de-l-image/app/collection/record/6302?vc=ePKH4LF7w6yelGA1iKUSSsKCJug0kHuKoTUikWIHH0\\_wAQBJOCOM](https://webmuseo.com/ws/musee-de-l-image/app/collection/record/6302?vc=ePKH4LF7w6yelGA1iKUSSsKCJug0kHuKoTUikWIHH0_wAQBJOCOM).



Fig. 7. "Fables de La Fontaine N° 5, L'enfant & le maître d'école" (Pellerin & Cie, Épinal, 1895), (Source gallica.bnf.fr/BnF)

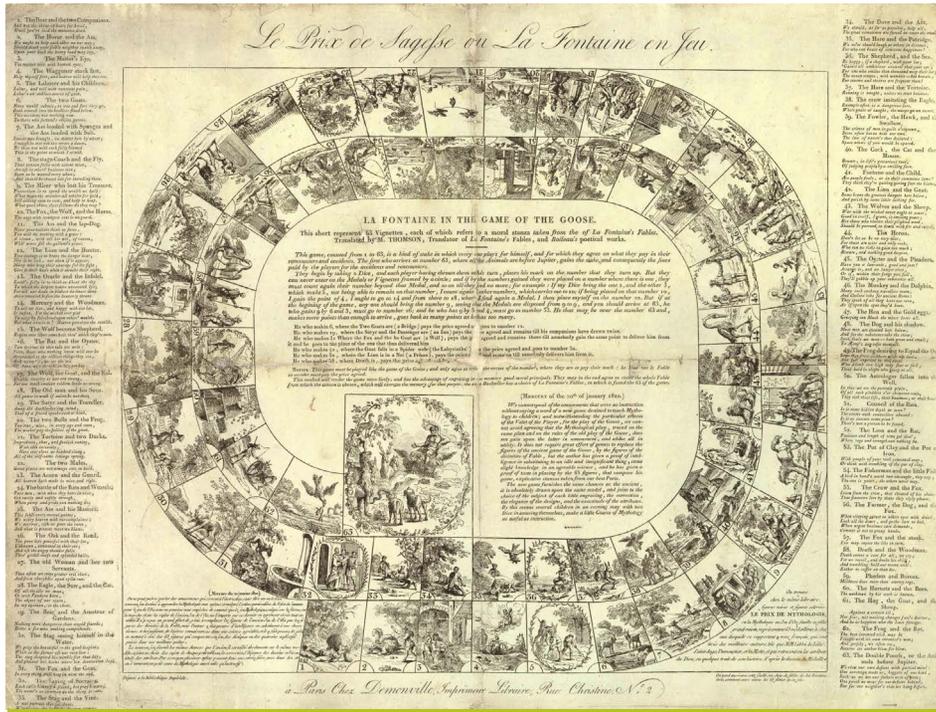


Fig. 8. Le Prix de Sagesse ou La Fontaine en Jeu (Paris: Demouville, 1897), (Source British Museum)

In 1914, Maurice Bizeau, a French teacher, also imagined triptychs illustrated by Benjamin Rabier and meant to be hung on classroom walls. They sum up a few of the *Fables* into three important episodes, enabling the teacher to show children these pictures one by one while they recite them.<sup>34</sup> Already in 1818, Lambert Aîné used the power of pictures to help children memorize the *Fables* too, by inviting them to first read one fable, and then to try to recite or explain it by placing the animals into a landscape after cutting them from the book (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Lambert aîné, *Le Jeu Des Fables, Ou Fables de La Fontaine Mises En Action, Avec Figures Coloriées et Découpées, Dessinées et Gravées Par Lambert Aîné* (Paris: Lambert, 1818), (Source Céline Zaeffel)

These are only a few examples among many others, but they all aim to make the *Fables* more accessible to children, showing how many pedagogues shared their opinions on the use of the *Fables* in children's education over centuries.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, transmitting Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables* to children seems to both question pedagogues and require efforts from their adaptors, which proves that they are not intrinsically delightful and instructive for children. Why would it be worth making such an effort?

<sup>34</sup> Maurice Bizeau and Benjamin Rabier, *Les Fables de La Fontaine en action: L'auxiliaire du maître (guide et fablier)* (Paris: C. Delagrave, 1914).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Grandroute, "La fable et La Fontaine dans la réflexion pédagogique de Fénelon à Rousseau" *Dix-huitième Siècle* 13 (1981), 335-48.

### FABLES BINDING READERS ACROSS CULTURES AND GENERATIONS

By reading Jean-Michel Blanquer’s introduction for the edition of the *Fables* offered to children leaving French primary school, it appears that they are also a means to bind readers across cultures and generations: “You will discover poems that impressed generations of pupils before you. [...] [The beautiful illustrations by Joann Sfar] show how much these fables still feed our imagination, that they are bridges between our present and future”.<sup>36</sup>

This aim was already mentioned by Ralph Albanese, who studied the role that the *Fables* played in French pedagogy during the Third Republic (1870-1940) as a way for the state to teach children republican morals, intended to help them later integrate into social institutions.<sup>37</sup> According to him, *Fables* contributed to giving children a nationalist sentiment relying on an ideological and moral education, transmitted at school in a context of worldwide tensions.<sup>38</sup> Because of the flexibility of this material, the exploitation of the *Fables* by French schools turned them into pamphlets against the Germans during and between both World Wars, by depicting Germans as evil and the French as victims through aligning them with the *Fables*’ anthropomorphized animals.<sup>39</sup> Of course, the transmission of a cultural reference across generations does not always imply exploitation, using them to spread political opinions. However, it seems artificial to consider the *Fables* as something children must learn only because their parents and grandparents also learned, since this argument results in an infinite loop: the next generations will be in the same position as the current ones, learning the *Fables* – or any other traditional book – because generations before them did, even if the material may no longer be relevant to them anymore. What is more, the government’s current initiative seems essential on the one hand, for some children do not own any books at home, and pointless on the other, because it once again makes

---

<sup>36</sup> Jean de La Fontaine, Joann Sfar, and Jean-Michel Blanquer, “Préface”, in *Fables*, trans. Céline Zaepffel (Futuroscope: Réseau Canopé, 2018), 3-4.

<sup>37</sup> Ralph Albanese, *La Fontaine à l’école républicaine: Du poète universel au classique scolaire* (Charlottesville: Rookwood, 2003), 39-41.

<sup>38</sup> Ralph Albanese, “La Fontaine et l’identité nationale”, in *La Fontaine à l’école Républicaine*, 131-59.

<sup>39</sup> Thaïs Bihour, “‘Haro sur le baudet!’: la figure de l’Allemagne au prisme des Fables de La Fontaine en 1914-1918,” publication in progress in *Le Fablier* 30 or 31, 2019 or 2020.

schools a book prescriber for children, presuming that the majority of children would come to love the book anyway once they have read it.

### THE QUESTION OF SCHOOL AS BOOK-PRESCRIBER

Being a reader is not only about being able to read something from beginning to end, but also about being able to choose a book, to enjoy the freedom in doing so (Fig. 10), and to feel emotions while reading it.



Fig. 10 A child enjoying books: an allegory of the reader's freedom? (Source Céline Zaepffel)

The role of school as book prescriber has already been discussed in French literature. In his book *Comme un roman*, published in 1992, Daniel Pennac, a French writer and former teacher, begs adults and teachers not to use books to “torture” children with their pedagogy and most importantly, not to force them to read anything in order to analyze it. To underline his statement, he establishes ten Inalienable Rights of the Reader:

1. The right to not read
2. The right to skip pages
3. The right to not finish a book

4. The right to reread
5. The right to read anything
6. The right to escapism
7. The right to read anywhere
8. The right to browse
9. The right to read out loud
10. The right to not defend your tastes.<sup>40</sup>

As a teacher, Daniel Pennac agrees on the importance of making children read, but he believes that a teacher's priority is making them discover that they like reading. Of course, this does sound a bit utopic: prescribed readings could also be a good way of discovering pieces of literature some children would never have discovered by themselves, and to make them realize they are able to read books they thought were too difficult for them. However, it seems important first to stop using the principle of *plaire et instruire* as a pretext to ask children to recite the same texts throughout their whole schooling, sometimes without even ensuring that they understood it, and above all, to have the honesty to regularly question the choices made by educational institutions, especially when the argument for why a book is taught relies mostly on tradition. Nevertheless, this principle may have influenced the way the *Fables* are perceived in France today: they seem as elitist as popular, since they are both school material that is essential but difficult to learn, and poems which participate deeply in French culture and could later remind readers of their sweet old days at school.

Céline Zaepffel is based at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society, where she is currently preparing a doctoral dissertation on illustrated fables in French pedagogy from 1500 to 2010 for the NWO project *Aesopian Fables 1500-2010: Word, Image, Education*, directed by Prof. dr. P. J. Smith. She specializes in French children's literature and popular culture, with a particular interest in the relationship between pictures and text from the nineteenth century to the present.

---

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Pennac and Quentin Blake, *The Rights of the Reader*, trans. Sarah Ardizzone (Somerville: Candlewick Press, 2015).