[Jean de La Fontaine](http://s77.n15.n84.n66.static.myhostcenter.com/literature/history1La_Fontaine1.html)  
[**"Fables"**](http://s77.n15.n84.n66.static.myhostcenter.com/literature/history1La_Fontaine1.html) ***Illustrations by J. J. Grandville*  
  
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born July 8?, 1621, Château-Thierry, France  
died April 13, 1695, Paris

poet whose Fables rank among the greatest masterpieces of French literature.

**Life**La Fontaine was born in the Champagne region into a bourgeois family. There, in 1647, he married an heiress, Marie Héricart, but they separated in 1658. From 1652 to 1671 he held office as an inspector of forests and waterways, an office inherited from his father. It was in Paris, however, that he made his most important contacts and spent his most productive years as a writer. An outstanding feature of his existence was his ability to attract the goodwill of patrons prepared to relieve him of the responsibility of providing for his livelihood. In 1657 he became one of the protégés of Nicolas Fouquet, the wealthy superintendent of finance. From 1664 to 1672 he served as gentleman-in-waiting to the dowager duchess of Orléans in Luxembourg. For 20 years, from 1673, he was a member of the household of Mme de La Sablière, whose salon was a celebrated meeting place of scholars, philosophers, and writers. In 1683 he was elected to the French Academy after some opposition by the king to his unconventional and irreligious character.

**The Fables**The Fables unquestionably represent the peak of La Fontaine’s achievement. The first six books, known as the premier recueil (“first collection”), were published in 1668 and were followed by five more books (the second recueil) in 1678–79 and a twelfth book in 1694. The Fables in the second collection show even greater technical skill than those in the first and are longer, more reflective, and more personal. Some decline of talent is commonly detected in the twelfth book.

La Fontaine did not invent the basic material of his Fables; he took it chiefly from the Aesopic tradition and, in the case of the second collection, from the East Asian. He enriched immeasurably the simple stories that earlier fabulists had in general been content to tell perfunctorily, subordinating them to their narrowly didactic intention. He contrived delightful miniature comedies and dramas, excelling in the rapid characterization of his actors, sometimes by deft sketches of their appearance or indications of their gestures and always by the expressive discourse he invented for them. In settings usually rustic, he evoked the perennial charm of the countryside. Within the compass of about 240 poems, the range and the diversity of subject and of treatment are astonishing. Often he held up a mirror to the social hierarchy of his day. Intermittently he seems inspired to satire, but, sharp though his thrusts are, he had not enough of the true satirist’s indignation to press them home. The Fables occasionally reflect contemporary political issues and intellectual preoccupations. Some of them, fables only in name, are really elegies, idylls, epistles, or poetic meditations. But his chief and most comprehensive theme remains that of the traditional fable: the fundamental, everyday moral experience of mankind throughout the ages, exhibited in a profusion of typical characters, emotions, attitudes, and situations.

Countless critics have listed and classified the morals of La Fontaine’s Fables and have correctly concluded that they amount simply to an epitome of more or less proverbial wisdom, generally prudential but tinged in the second collection with a more genial epicureanism. Simple countryfolk and heroes of Greek mythology and legend, as well as familiar animals of the fable, all play their parts in this comedy, and the poetic resonance of the Fables owes much to these actors who, belonging to no century and to every century, speak with timeless voices.

What disconcerts many non-French readers and critics is that in the Fables profundity is expressed lightly. La Fontaine’s animal characters illustrate the point. They are serious representations of human types, so presented as to hint that human nature and animal nature have much in common. But they are also creatures of fantasy, bearing only a distant resemblance to the animals the naturalist observes, and they are amusing because the poet skillfully exploits the incongruities between the animal and the human elements they embody. Moreover—as in his Contes, but with far more delicate and lyrical modulations—the voice of La Fontaine himself can constantly be heard, always controlled and discreet, even when most charged with emotion. Its tones change swiftly, almost imperceptibly: they are in turn ironical, impertinent, brusque, laconic, eloquent, compassionate, melancholy, or reflective. But the predominant note is that of la gaieté, which, as he says in the preface to the first collection, he deliberately sought to introduce into his Fables. “Gaiety,” he explains, is not that which provokes laughter but is “a certain charm . . . that can be given to any kind of subject, even the most serious.” No one reads the Fables rightly who does not read them with a smile—not only of amusement but also of complicity with the poet in the understanding of the human comedy and in the enjoyment of his art.

To the grace, ease, and delicate perfection of the best of the Fables, even close textual commentary cannot hope to do full justice. They represent the quintessence of a century of experiments in prosody and poetic diction in France. The great majority of the Fables are composed of lines of varying metre and, from the unpredictable interplay of their rhymes and of their changing rhythms, La Fontaine derived the most exquisite and diverse effects of tone and movement. His vocabulary harmonizes widely different elements: the archaic, the precious and the burlesque, the refined, the familiar and the rustic, the language of professions and trades and the language of philosophy and mythology. But for all this richness, economy and understatement are the chief characteristics of his style, and its full appreciation calls for keener sensitivity to the overtones of 17th-century French than most foreign readers can hope to possess.

**Miscellaneous writings and the Contes**La Fontaine’s many miscellaneous writings include much occasional verse in a great variety of poetic forms and dramatic or pseudodramatic pieces such as his first published work, L’Eunuque (1654), and Climène (1671), as well as poems on subjects as different as Adonis (1658, revised 1669), La Captivité de saint Malc (1673), and Le Quinquina (1682). All these are, at best, works of uneven quality. In relation to the perfection of the Fables, they are no more than poetic exercises or experiments. The exception is the leisurely narrative of Les Amours de Psiché et de Cupidon (1669; The Loves of Cupid and Psyche), notable for the lucid elegance of its prose, its skillful blend of delicate feeling and witty banter, and some sly studies of feminine psychology.

Like his miscellaneous works, La Fontaine’s Contes et nouvelles en vers (Tales and Novels in Verse) considerably exceed the Fables in bulk. The first of them was published in 1664, the last posthumously. He borrowed them mostly from Italian sources, in particular Giovanni Boccaccio, but he preserved none of the 14th-century poet’s rich sense of reality. The essence of nearly all his Contes lies in their licentiousness, which is not presented with frank Rabelaisian verve but is transparently and flippantly disguised. Characters and situations are not meant to be taken seriously; they are meant to amuse and are too monotonous to amuse for long. The Contes are the work far less of a poet than of an ingenious stylist and versifier. The accent of La Fontaine the narrator enlivens the story with playfully capricious comments, explanations, and digressions.

**Personality and reputation**Though he never secured the favour of Louis XIV, La Fontaine had many well-wishers close to the throne and among the nobility. He moved among churchmen, doctors, artists, musicians, and actors. But it was literary circles that he especially frequented. Legend has exaggerated the closeness of his ties with Molière, Nicholas Boileau, and Jean Racine, but he certainly numbered them among his friends and acquaintances, as well as La Rochefoucauld, Mme de Sévigné, Mme de La Fayette, and many less-well-remembered writers.

The true nature of the man remains enigmatic. He was intensely and naively selfish, unconventional in behaviour, and impatient of all constraint; yet he charmed countless friends—perhaps by a naturalness of manner and a sincerity in social relationships that were rare in his age—and made apparently only one enemy (a fellow academician, Antoine Furetière). He was a parasite without servility, a sycophant without baseness, a shrewd schemer who was also a blunderer, and a sinner whose errors were, as one close to him observed, “full of wisdom.” He was accommodating, sometimes to the detriment of proper self-respect, but he was certainly not the lazy, absent-minded simpleton that superficial observers took him for. The quantity and the quality of his work show that this legendary description of him cannot be accurate: for at least 40 years La Fontaine, in spite of his apparent aimlessness, was an ambitious and diligent literary craftsman of subtle intelligence and meticulous conscientiousness.

He was an assiduous and discriminating reader whose works abound in judicious imitations of both the matter and the manner of his favourite authors. He was influenced by so many 16th- and 17th-century French writers that it is almost invidious to mention only François Rabelais, Clément Marot, François de Malherbe, Honoré d’Urfé, and Vincent Voiture. The authors of classical antiquity that he knew best were Homer, Plato, Plutarch—these he almost certainly read in translation—Terence, Virgil, Horace, and Ovid. Boccaccio, Niccolò Machiavelli, Ludovico Ariosto, and Torquato Tasso were his favourites among the Italians. La Fontaine was no romantic; his work derives its substance and its savour less from his experience of life than from this rich and complex literary heritage, affectionately received and patiently exploited.

Too wise to suppose that moral truths can ever be simple, he wrote stories that offer no rudimentary illustration of a certain moral but a subtle commentary on it, sometimes amending it and hinting that only the naive would take it at face value. Thus, what the Fables teach is trivial in comparison with what they suggest: a view of life that, although incomplete (for it takes little account of man’s metaphysical anguish or his highest aspirations), is mature, profound, and wise. Enjoyed at many different levels, the Fables continue to form part of the culture of every Frenchman, from schoolchildren to such men of letters as André Gide, Paul Valéry, and Jean Giraudoux, who have given fresh lustre to La Fontaine’s reputation in the 20th century.

***Leslie Clifford Sykes  
Ed.***