THEME
BORROWED PLUMES:
PHAEDRUS’ FABLES, PHAEDRUS’ FAILURES

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quam dulcis sit libertas breuiter proloquar.
(Phaed. 3.7.1)
Let me speak out briefly about how sweet freedom is.
The fable is a trap, and you are an animal...1

Introduction

Phaedrus writes in a period when speaking out, even briefly, could prove catastrophic.2 He suggests that his own choices sparked a prosecution by Sejanus but, despite this calamity, he will run the same risks. Consider his programmatic aetiology:

nunc, fabularum cur sit inuentum genus, breui docebo. seruitus obnoxia, quia quae uolebat non audebat dicere, affectus proprios in fabellas transtulit, calumniamque fictis elusit iocis.
(Phaed. 3 prol. 33–7)
Now, in brief, I’m going to teach you how the fable genre came about. The slave, liable to punishment, because he daren’t say what he wanted to say, translated his state of mind into fables, and avoided malicious prosecution with made-up jests.

With first-hand access as Augusti libertus (“a freedman of Augustus”), it is not difficult to construct a Phaedrus who criticizes high level inequalities and injustices:

humiles laborant ubi potentes dissident.
(Phaed. 1.30.1)
The poor suffer when the mighty fall out.

1 Keenan (1995) 141.
in principatu commutando ciuium
nil praeter dominum, non res mutant pauperes.

(Phaed. 1.15.1–2)

When the first-ranked changes, nothing changes for the poor—except their master.

Moreover, Phaedrus succeeds: not another Sejanus/Tiberius statistic like Cremutius Cordus, he emerges as spokesman for Cordus’ lost libertas (“freedom”):

haec propter illos scripta est homines fabula
qui fictis causis innocentes opprimunt.

(Phaed. 1.1.14–5)

This fable was written on account of those men who oppress the innocent with made-up law-suits.

Phaedrus’ Fables sizzle: the “borrowed plumes” (cf. 1.3: “sueling” Sejanus?); amittit merito proprium qui alienum adpetit (“he who seeks another’s, rightly loses his own,” 1.4.1); numquam est fidelis cum potente societas (“partnership with the mighty is never to be trusted,” 1.5.1); habent insidias hominis blanditiae mali (“evil men’s flatteries are a trap,” 1.19.1). Read rightly (= wrongly), this is exciting (= relevant) stuff:

contra potentes nemo est munitus satis;
si uero accessit consiliator maleficus,
uis et nequitia quicquid oppugnant ruit.

(Phaed. 2.6.1–3)

Against the powerful, no one is protected enough: but if an evil-doing adviser is added, anything that violence and vileness might attack, will fall.

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4 Cordus’ Tacitean “defense”: libertas in speaking of dead, not libertas as anti-imperial “watchword”? Wirszubski (1950) 163–7: “merely the courage to keep one’s dignitas alive.”
