

“FABLES LESS AND LESS FABULOUS”

The English Verse Fable in the Nineteenth Century

THE FABLE OF THE FABLE'S DEATH

There is a general consensus that the fable lost its importance in nineteenth-century Europe. No doubt it had flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when La Fontaine's *Fables* came out between 1668 and 1694, when Gay's *Fables* appeared in 1727 and 1738, and when Lessing published three books of his *Fabeln* in 1759. From the Romantic period onwards, however, traditional fables and their modern imitations alike went through a sharp decline in prestige in Germany, France, and England. Around the year 1800 there was already talk among critics of “the death of the fable”.

In our days this metaphor is taken literally. It is a case of a self-fulfilling obituary: since no fables are looked for in the nineteenth century, none are found. Literary histories covering that period have completely lost sight of the genre. This is not due to a restricted notion of what is *literary*, taking into account only texts of a certain complexity and sophistication. Studies focussing on the social context, like Amy Cruse's compendious works *The Englishman and His Books* (1930) and *The Victorians and Their Books* (1935), treat a broad range of unsophisticated texts, but there is no mention of any fables. In Germany, Lothar Hönnighausen's magisterial study of symbolic and allegorical forms in the second half of the nineteenth century, *Präraphaeliten und Fin de Siècle* (1971), covers a variety of allegorical-typological texts but does not say a word about fables or parables. Theo Elm, in his book *Die moderne Parabel*, calls the nineteenth century “a period without parables”¹.

¹ Amy Cruse, *The Englishman and His Books* (London, 1930) and *The*