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## Found in Translation: Strategies by which Translators Render the *Fables* of Jean de la Fontaine Accessible to Anglophone Readers

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### Abstract

Literary translation, particularly that of poetry and other works in verse, presents many challenges because these works convey meaning not only through words themselves, but through images, sounds, and structural devices that often resist passage from one language to another. Nevertheless, a skillful translator can often use the poetic techniques of the receptor language to create a text that offers the receptor language's native speakers an experience analogous to that of native speakers of the text's original language in reading the original text. This article illustrates strategies of successful poetic translation, using one of Jean de la Fontaine's fables, "*Le Lion et le Moucheron*" ("The Lion and the Gnat"), as an example. Part One explicates the original French text, noting the contributions of characterization, diction, and structure to the fable's cumulative effect. Part Two examines four English translations of the same fable, comparing the techniques by which Elizur Wright, Sir Edward Marsh, Marianne Moore, and James Michie seek to recreate the didactic and entertaining qualities of La Fontaine's narrative.

### Part One: "Le Lion et le Moucheron"

To present a collection of animal fables for discussion in a literary salon in seventeenth-century France was roughly equivalent to a present-day scholar attending an MLA session to read a paper on Dick and Jane. French schoolboys were often instructed to reformulate or expand on Aesop's and Phaedrus' fables, but outside the classroom these fables were little discussed. They were a pedagogical tool, a source of lessons in composition and logic, not of interest to literature enthusiasts.

However, Jean de la Fontaine (1621-1695), in publishing the first six books of his fables in 1668, won for the genre a prominent position on the literary scene, gaining loyal followers among adults and children alike. Frank Hamel reports of the more daring salon-goers, who had been "surfeited with heroic romance, love-songs, and historical epics," that they "appreciated the innocent verses with as much gusto as they had shown for those of a less harmless tendency" (197-198). Hamel illustrates La Fontaine's popularity among younger readers with a story told by the Abbé de Pons, who once presented his six-year-old nephew with copies of two fables, instructing him to memorize both. One fable was by La Fontaine's contemporary Houdart de Lamotte, the other by La Fontaine himself. "When the Abbé returned to hear them recited," Hamel recounts, "the child repeated the latter glibly, but had been unable to commit to memory a single line of the former" (256).

The genre of the fable attracted—and still attracts—readers for many reasons; the simplicity of the storyline, the

novelty of animals and inanimate objects endowed with the powers of speech and reason, and the sense of wholeness and closure offered by the moral are a few of its sources of appeal. To these assets La Fontaine added the lure of his own poetic style. "The secret of his method," Hamel writes, "was to draw inspiration from outside without in the least fettering his own poetic muse. . . His language is supple and full of motion. He was an artist of words" (199).

The first section of this essay will examine La Fontaine's poetic voice and his narrative strategies as they are exemplified in one fable, "*Le Lion et le Moucheron*." This fable offers especially strong examples of La Fontaine's subversion of stock types in his use of animal characters, and of his manipulation of the poem's metrical elements to complement the mood and the story's events.

## Initial Expectations

Even before the opening line of "*Le Lion et le Moucheron*," the fable's title introduces an image of two contrasting characters—the huge size and strength of the lion juxtaposed with the tiny wings and fragile body of the gnat. The names of the two animals establish expectations concerning their roles because they are associated with similar animals that appear in La Fontaine's other fables.

In La Fontaine's fables the gnat, or *moucheron*, is synonymous with insignificance and helplessness. Two other fables, "*Le Corbeau Voulant Imiter L'Aigle*" and "*Le Goutte et L'Araignée*," offer a gnat a walk-on role as a spider's prey, but this fable is the only one in which a gnat is a principal character. By default, the reader expects the gnat to be a weak and foolish victim.

The lion's expected role is the direct opposite of the gnat's. Many fables feature a lion who dominates the plot and his fellow animals. The lion is nearly always associated with authority and physical strength, and the narrator often gives the lion an elevated title such as "*Seigneur du voisinage*" in "*La Génisse, la Chèvre, et la Brebis en Société avec le Lion*," (2), "*roi des animaux*" in "*Le Lion et le Rat*" (7) and "*Le Lion et l'Âne Chassant*" (1), "*terreur des forêts*" in "*Le Lion Devenu Vieux*" (1), or "*Monseigneur le Lion*" in "*Tribut Envoyé par les Animaux à Alexandre*" (35). The lion's character and his use of power are pivotal issues in many fables. La Fontaine frequently uses a lion (as do fabulists in general) to make statements about how humans in authority ought or ought not to handle their power. La Fontaine's lions can be placed into two categories. First are the tyrannical, greedy, and clever lions who, through threats or trickery, are able to claim the lion's share of the supplies, as in "*La Génisse, la Chèvre, et la Brebis en Société avec le Lion*" and "*Tribut Envoyé par les Animaux à Alexandre*." Some tyrant-lions put animals to death for having horns, as in "*Les Oreilles du Lièvre*," or for making a displeasing remark, as in "*La Cour du Lion*." A second category consists of lions who are worthy rulers; they know their subjects' strengths and weaknesses, and they do not abuse their power. The lion in "*Le Lion et le Rat*" demonstrates these qualities in agreeing not to eat the unoffending rat. Likewise, the lion-monarchs in "*Le Lion et l'Âne Chassant*" and "*Le Lion s'Allant en Guerre*" recognize the talents of the donkey and the hare, and so are able to gain their cooperation.

In several fables, the lion's authority (whether used benignly or oppressively) is defied, and the lion's expectation of kingship is reversed. La Fontaine depicts lions who are overpowered, tricked, or forced into a dependent role through hubris, physical weakness, or sheer foolishness. The conquerors can be animals, like those who laugh to see the lion powerless in his old age in "*Le Lion Devenu Vieux*," or they may be humans who catch the lion with nets, as in "*Le Lion et le Rat*," or through feminine attractions, as in "*Le Lion Amoureux*." At times, a weak but wise creature is unable to defy the lion outright but manages to outsmart and escape from him. This is the case of the fox in "*La Cour du Lion*" and of the hare in "*Les Oreilles du Lièvre*."

The sharply contrasting traditional roles of lion and gnat in La Fontaine's fables thus provide clues concerning the relationship between the two main characters in "*Le Lion et le Moucheron*," and clues concerning the moral that will be conveyed through that relationship. The gnat is expected to hold a position of weakness and subordination, the lion one of power (though the possibility of losing that power is always present). The irony of "*Le Lion et le Moucheron*" appears in the way in which the narrator teasingly uses the story's action—as well as the imagery, sound, connotation, stanza structure, and meter that reinforce this action—not simply to reverse the reader's expectations, as is the case in many lion fables, but to fulfill and frustrate them simultaneously and to conclude with a double-sided moral that contains warnings for proud lions and defiant gnats alike.

## Plot and Diction

As the fable opens, the lion dismisses the gnat: "*Va-t-en, chétif insecte, excrément de la terre*" (1). The lion's contempt fits the preconceived image of a despot addressing an unimportant subject. Even in this opening, however, the pompous wording of the insult undermines the idea of the gnat's insignificance; it is odd that the lion should berate a feeble insect by quoting a line by François de Malherbe (1555-1628): "*Va-t-en à la malheure, excrément de la terre*" (qtd. in Danner 97).

The belligerence of the gnat's response does not match his traditional image as a victim; nor does his manner of addressing the lion—his use of the informal pronouns *tu* and *toi* (5, 7) rather than the more deferential *vous*—a far cry from the "*Votre Majesté*" by which, in another fable, a lamb addresses a wolf ("*Le Loup et L'Agneau*" 10). The gnat's defiance of the lion suggests that he will take his place among those lafontainian heroes who manage to subdue a lion. He himself, it is clear, is firmly of this opinion as he declares "*la guerre*," sounds "*la charge*," and becomes "*le Trompette et le Héros*" (4, 10, 11). Even while describing the boldness of the gnat, however, the narrator foreshadows his defeat; the contrast between the elevated language and the tiny warrior is no greater than the one separating his ambition from his destiny. This mock-heroic language has more than one object of mockery.

As the battle progresses, the characters continue, paradoxically, both to fill their roles and to break from them. The lion, almost from the outset, is a defeated enemy—the gnat's bite drives him nearly wild. Nevertheless, even in his madness he retains a touch of his leonine force; his roar can still cause "*alarme universelle*" (17), with trembling bystanders rushing for cover. He likewise keeps his powers to injure and to destroy. Now, however, he has no one but himself on whom to exercise these powers. His teeth and claws have a duty to bloody him (24-25), so that when the gnat has finished with him,

he is “*sur les dents*” both figuratively and literally (29): he is worn out, and he bears not only the gnat’s tooth marks, but his own as well. Richard Danner points out that to underline the contradiction of the lion’s strength and helplessness, La Fontaine uses three puns. The lion is “*la bête irritée*” (24)—a beast—but his stupidity could well deserve the term *bête* as an adjective. He beats the air (*battre*) until he himself is beaten by his own fury (*abattre*) (28, 29). While he makes his tail “*résonner*” around his flanks (27), he is unable to use his other end, his head, for *raisonner* (Danner 100).

The gnat, for his part, seems on the surface to cast off his traditional feeble role entirely. The deliberation with which he “*prend son temps*” before the attack suggests that he possesses the reasoning power that his large opponent lacks, and this, along with his ability to move quickly and effectively when he “*fond sur le cou*,” allows him to create “*alarme universelle*,” to triumph, to laugh at his enemy, and to retire “*avec gloire*” (13, 17, 23, 30). Even in the midst of his successful fight, however, the narrator downplays the gnat’s heroism with the epithets “*avorton de mouche*” and “*insecte*” (19, 30). Even when the gnat is accorded the more respectable title of “*ennemi*” to the lion, this title is accompanied by the belittling adjective “*invisible*” (23). These reminders of the gnat’s natural weakness help to prepare the reader for the sudden reversal in his fortune. As he announces his victory, he meets the ambush of a spider’s web. Having long thwarted the expectations of the reader (and of the lion), the runt of a fly finds that it is his turn to meet a nasty surprise. The description of his death—“*Il y rencontre aussi sa fin*” (34)—is as plain and matter-of-fact as that of his conquest is grandiose: as the story halts at its anticlimax, the language is suddenly and suitably deflated. The gnat and the diction are together put in their places and stripped of their pretensions. The contradictory dramatic impact of the moment—the tragedy of a conqueror’s sudden death blended with the banality of an insect trapped in a spider’s web—is underlined by the continued use of present tense. In line 12, the narrator switches from past tense to present to lessen the perceived distance between reader and event, thus intensifying the drama of the battle. This use of present tense could have stopped at the battle’s end, but instead it continues to the end of the apologue. This continued use of present tense reminds the reader that contrary to what the gnat may think, the action is not yet over—the table still has time to turn, and turn it does.

The fable’s conclusion is a double reversal. First, the lion loses his expectations of kingly dignity and joins the vanquished lions of other fables. Then the gnat, after thwarting the expectations of the lion and the reader, proves unable to break permanently from his customary role. For all his audacity and apparent success, his final fate is the fate of all lafontainian *mouche*rons: the spider’s web. Danner suggests that La Fontaine may be taking advantage of the phonetic similarity between *Lion* and *Mouche*ron, and of the latter’s higher syllabic count, to counteract the difference in physical size between the two animals and to introduce the idea of the gnat’s being the lion’s equal, or even his superior, where wit and agility are concerned (97). It is equally possible, however, to interpret the rhyming of the two names as a reinforcement of the similarity between the faults and the fates of the animals. For both, the downfall is the result of hubris and carelessness. The lion thinks that thanks to his physical strength and his royal title, he can insult the gnat with impunity, but in so doing, he provokes the gnat to declare war; he learns too late the lesson that La Fontaine offers to the powerful and arrogant persons—the human lions—in his audience: “*entre nos ennemis / Les plus à craindre sont souvent les plus petits*” (36-37). The gnat, for his part, supposes himself immune to all danger after his victory. “*Il va partout l’annoncer*”—this suggests that he is so intent on proclaiming his valor that he goes everywhere without knowing exactly where he is (32). As a result, he survives the “*grand péril*” only to perish “*pour la moindre affaire*,” a likely fate, as the moral says, for humans who become heedless in the flush of success (38-39). The resemblance between the characters—and the names—of the two animals creates a symmetry that belies the contrast of their physical statures.

### Meter and Rhyme Scheme

The rhythmic elements of the fable—the length and grouping of its lines—create a pattern of expectations, unsettlement, and symmetry that complements the irony of plot and diction. Like most of La Fontaine’s fables, this one uses long lines of twelve syllables and shorter ones of eight, not alternating the lengths by any predictable rule, but rather using the length that best serves the image or action of a given line, allowing the poem’s form to echo its sense. In “*Le Lion et le Mouche*ron,” the lines are almost equally divided between long and short: twenty-one of the thirty-nine lines are alexandrines, while eighteen are shorter. The eight-syllable lines are densely clustered in the first half of the poem (fourteen before the twentieth line, four after), the portion containing the gnat’s declaration of war and the description of his battle preparations. The brevity of these lines reinforces the insect’s small size, bold words, and rapid movement. Of the few twelve-syllable lines that do appear in the fable’s first half, nearly all of them are focused on the lion’s grandeur or strength—his high-flown denunciation of the gnat, his royal title, and his roar that causes hearers to tremble and hide themselves. In the second half of the fable, line length continues to play a role in the creation of mood and meaning. Here, longer lines serve to slow the pace, although energetic verbs such as “*déchire*” and “*bat*,” grammatical devices such as the anaphora of “*tantôt*,” and the continued use of present tense ensure that the tempo is not slowed excessively (26, 28, 20-21). The primary subject matter of the poem’s second half includes the exhausted lion’s clumsy attempts to relieve his itching, the gnat’s stately victory parade, and the didactic epilogue—slower-paced events appropriately conveyed in dignified alexandrines. Two of the exceptional eight-syllable lines near the fable’s end narrate the quick, sudden concluding events of the apologue: the spider’s ambush and the gnat’s death (33-34). The final line, “*Qui périt pour la moindre affaire*,” is likewise brief, evoking the smallness and apparent insignificance of potentially deadly objects (39).

Rhyme scheme, like line length, does not follow a set pattern. The most common unit, or rhyme cluster, is the ABAB quatrain, but other types of rhyme clusters, such as the couplet, the ABBA quatrain, and a quatrain with an extra A line tacked onto the end, are scattered at irregular intervals throughout the fable. This apparently haphazard distribution of rhymes gives a feeling of unpredictability that matches the plot’s flouting of readers’ expectations.

The mood of caprice and quick movement is also intensified by the fable’s scarcity of complete pauses—that is, pauses marked both by end punctuation and by the final line of a stanza. Sentences and rhyme clusters rarely end together; it is common for one idea or image to conclude in the middle of the rhyme cluster (though generally not in the middle of a line) and be followed by another, which overflows into the following cluster. For example, the first fourteen lines consist of three quatrains and a couplet. The first three lines of the first quatrain are the lion’s insult to the gnat. The fourth line introduces a new idea, the gnat’s declaration of war, which continues past the end of the first quatrain to fill the second. The third quatrain opens with the image of the gnat blowing his trumpet, and that quatrain’s last line describes the beginning of the gnat’s first attack, a description that overflows into the subsequent couplet. This enjambment not of sentences and lines, but of ideas and line clusters, creates the impression of continual, impulsive movement, which is an accurate description for

much of the fable's action. The rhyme clusters that are end-stopped, such as the second quatrain and the first couplet, offer a natural pause and the closing-off of an episode, making the fable manageable and comprehensible despite the unpredictability of its rhythmic elements. This closing-off is conspicuously absent in the final line of the apologue. "*Il y rencontre aussi sa fin*" concludes the story's action, but it leaves a dangling three-line fragment of a quatrain that must be finished with the introduction of the moral: "*Quelle chose par là nous peut être enseignée?*" (34-35). Thus the stanza structure supplies a reminder of the interdependence between the fable's narrative and its moral.

The patterns of line length and rhyme clustering ensure that the fable's rhythm plays a role in conveying the story and the themes. The use of shorter and longer lines to describe, respectively, the nimble gnat and the inept lion, reinforces the contrasts between the two, while the matches and mismatches between ideas and rhyme clusters paces the verse with a combination of movements and pauses.

## Part Two: The Lion and the Gnat

With the sounds and meanings of individual words, La Fontaine pieces together phrases, images, stanzas, and episodes. These elements, when combined, form dynamic characters, narrative action, irony, and moral, all contained within a fable that offers entertainment for children and complexity for scholars. The task of English translators is to re-create this finished product as nearly as possible with a different set of raw materials—English words. Translating La Fontaine's work is a threefold challenge. The first is that which attends all forms of translation. It involves the need for what Eugene Nida terms a "natural equivalent," "natural" words being those that do not sound foreign to a native speaker of the receptor language; in Nida's words, "a good translation should not reveal its nonnative source" (19). The second challenge applies in particular to the translation of poetry: the translator must re-create not only the text's literal sense, but the sensory and emotional experience that the poet creates, making words, sounds, images, and rhythms cooperate in an organic whole. The third is specific to La Fontaine: a successful translation, like the original, must be both a children's story and a work of literature, entertaining but not empty, insightful but not indigestibly didactic. In the English renderings to be examined below, Elizur Wright, Sir Edward Marsh, Marianne Moore, and James Michie tackle these challenges. These four translators use a variety of techniques to reconstruct the elements of "*Le Lion et le Moucheron*"—the contrast between the two main characters, the lively pace of the action, the double reversal of expectations, and the emerging lessons—in order to make them accessible to English-speaking readers.

### The Characters

As already noted, La Fontaine's characterization of the two animals is the foundation for many key elements of the fable: the mock-heroic military diction, the ironic reversal of expectations, and the two morals. The translators, like La Fontaine, use epithets, figurative language, images, and word play to depict the statures and personalities of the lion and the gnat.

In order to show the lion's progression from power to helplessness, La Fontaine uses epithets that mirror his gradual loss of control. At the time of the gnat's first bite, the lion is called by the neutral, technical term "*le quadrupède*," which is later replaced by "*la bête irritée*," then by "*le malheureux Lion*" (15, 24, 26). Edward Marsh's translation similarly begins the battle scene by styling the lion a "great beast" and later highlights his helplessness with the words "victim" and "wretched monarch," using the terms "great" and "monarch" to highlight the height of power from which the lion falls (14, 24, 26). While describing the lion's rage, Marsh, like La Fontaine, depicts the lion's teeth and claws as soldiers or subjects fighting under the lion's command, showing that the last vestiges of the lion's authority can be used only in his undoing. The lion's "array of tooth and claw" is "engaged in drawing his own blood" (24-25). Here Marsh uses the word "engaged" in a double sense: they are busy or employed in drawing the lion's blood, and they are also committed to doing it, soldiers honor-bound to obey their general's command.

While Marsh stresses the lion's fallen grandeur, Marianne Moore's descriptions of the lion emphasize the contrast between his physical strength and mental weakness. Moore's lion has a pronounced ridiculous side. At the outset of the poem, the lion's insult to the gnat is followed by the narrator's comment, "The lion affected this tone / In addressing the little one" (2-3); even in the opening lines, Moore hints that the lion's authority and his scorn of the gnat may be "affected" —tinged with false pretensions. After the gnat's initial attack, the lion duly showcases his ability to frighten the animals in the neighborhood: they "rushed underground" as his roar "held them terrorbound" (16, 18). Some of the narrator's hyperboles, however—"Lightning shot from his eyeball" and "the lion really lost his head," for instance—have a cartoonish flavor that suggest that however much the listening animals may quake at the lion's fury, author and readers need not heed it except to laugh.

Translators' treatments of the gnat—his small stature, his bravery, and his mischief—vary as much as their treatments of his brawny opponent. Elizur Wright, like La Fontaine, uses heroic, warlike images that he repeatedly undercuts with references to the gnat's diminutive size, foreshadowing the brevity of his triumph. Wright frequently relies on archaic language for an elevated effect, an especially effective device in the first line, when the lion tries to call attention to the gnat's insignificance with the elaborate epithet, "paltry insect, nature's meanest brat"—certainly a far cry from the opening of James Michie's version, which takes La Fontaine's use of "*excrément de la terre*" very seriously, making the lion shout, "Buzz off, you miserable insect, little turd!" (Wright 1, La Fontaine 1, Michie 1). Wright continues to use quaint and inflated diction in describing the gnat's preparations for battle:

As one that did no fear owe,  
Himself he blew the battle charge  
Himself both trumpeter and hero. (9-11)

Other archaisms contribute to Wright's humorously heightened tone throughout the narrative, as when the gnat bites "full sorely nettle" the lion, the lion's efforts at resistance are declared "bootless," and the gnat leaves the battlefield "with verdant laurel" (14, 31, 34). These terms, however, are interspersed with belittling descriptions of the gnat's physical appearance. He is called "one poor gnat," a "pygmy fly," and "viewless foe" (18, 22, 24). "Viewless" is especially telling, a double-edged word that may be understood simply as "invisible" (as in the original), but also carries a connotation of short-sightedness, a suggestion that is especially apropos in the light of the myopic gnat's final fate. Wright's elevated battle

language, continuously undermined by the unflattering epithets of the chief warrior, takes a decidedly ironic turn in the final lines of the apologue, when the narrator recounts that “Straight on the valiant conqueror goes / A spider’s ambushade to meet” (40-41). The ambush is depicted here as an enemy that the gnat is boldly preparing to face, rather than what narrator and readers know it to be—a trap into which the gnat blunders, heedless and helpless.

Like Wright, Moore highlights the contrast between the gnat’s glorious expectations and his inglorious end by alternating condescending terms such as “little one” with more glamorous ones such as “Mars’ insect” (3, 30). Moore builds on this technique by fusing both sides of the gnat’s nature in phrases that depict his insecthood and his warriorship simultaneously. His battle calls and trumpeting are likened to an insect’s buzz, so that “*déclara la guerre*” becomes “shrilled a challenge to war,” and “*lui-même il sonna la charge*” becomes “his gnat note rang out” (La Fontaine 4, 10; Moore 4, 11). In this way, Moore does not merely intersperse the narrative with reminders of the attacker’s lowly station, but doubles the thrust of these reminders by planting them in the heart of the gnat’s bravest moments. Moore also dilutes the gnat’s claims to military prowess by combining the description of the battle with the idea of taming the lion. The lion, worn out by his rage, is “self-tormented till tame” (28); the gnat’s victory shout is “his last taunt to the tamed” (32); after the gnat is caught by the spider, the narrator concludes that “he never would tame lions again” (34). This repetition of the word “tame” suggests that the gnat views the conflict not as the overthrowing of an oppressor but as the civilizing of a rough and rude creature, and his own role not primarily as conqueror, but as a showman or performer.

Marsh’s characterization of the gnat sharply contrasts with those of Wright and Moore. Far from downplaying the gnat’s military might with reminders of his size or suggestions of “taming,” Marsh makes the gnat’s boldness and ingenuity the primary focus for most of the narrative, while his physical shortcomings are scarcely mentioned. Even the lion directs his contempt more to the gnat’s offensiveness than to his weakness, calling him “vile insect, ordure of creation” (1). Where La Fontaine uses the word “*invisible*,” Marsh substitutes “elusive,” implying that the gnat’s ability to remain undetected may be due not so much to his smallness as to his agility and quick wits (23). The moral likewise contains no direct mention of small enemies; while La Fontaine cautions against the dangers of “*les plus petits*” enemies, Marsh gives the more general remark that “it is unwise / To judge an adversary by his size” (La Fontaine 37; Marsh 34-35). Marsh’s gnat is calculating and skillful. Before attacking, he “buzzes round in circling track,” waiting for the best moment (11). Rather than undercutting the tension of the approaching battle, as Moore does with the treble-toned onomatopoeia of “shrilled a challenge to war” (4), Marsh’s “buzzes” completes the image of the insect flying in leisurely circles, watching his opportunity all the while. Marsh’s gnat deliberately “chooses his time,” then swiftly goes into motion, “swooping down” (12). Even his bites are not haphazard; he “probes” one area after another, seeing what target yields the most satisfying effect (19). In Marsh’s depiction, the gnat is not only clever, but distinctly mean-spirited, emerging almost as a villain as the lion takes on characteristics of the victim or tragic hero. The gnat is called a “misbegotten fly” and a “torturer” who uses “fiendish art” to plague his victim and then enjoys watching the suffering he has caused (18, 23). The narrative is replete with allusions to his craft and cruelty, as well as with exalted battle imagery such as “Champion and trumpeter in one,” “Nothing for miles but fear and flight,” and “The horn that rang his challenge rings his win” (10, 16, 31). It is only at the end that the gnat’s littleness and insignificance become evident. Like La Fontaine, Marsh abruptly deflates his diction at the moment of the gnat’s death, using only eight words to say, “He struck a spider’s ambush, and fell in” (33). Thus, Marsh’s diabolically ingenious gnat commits the same error and meets the same unglamorous end as the punily heroic gnats of the other translators.

### Meter, Rhyme, and Tempo

Texts in verse often require translators to face a dilemma: retaining the exact meaning of the original at times requires taking liberties with rhythm and rhyme, and vice versa. Whatever is sacrificed in such cases, the final effect of the poem is weakened because, as discussed in Part 1, La Fontaine’s choices regarding line length and rhyme scheme have an important impact on the pace of the action, the portrayal of the animals, and even on the link between story and moral. The decisions of Moore, Michie, Wright, and Marsh regarding their translations’ architectural elements have an equally strong influence on the story they are transmitting to English-speaking readers.

Moore and Michie both follow La Fontaine’s lead in adopting an irregular rhyme scheme, reinforcing the fable’s images of swift, confused motion and unpredictable changes of fortune. Moore actually copies La Fontaine’s own rhyme scheme and even seeks to reproduce La Fontaine’s original sounds as far as possible, although, as David Rubin points out, this goal requires her in several cases to use half rhymes, an appropriate device in modern free verse, but a “startling anachronism” in the rewriting of a seventeenth-century French work (210). Moore rhymes “air” and “war” for La Fontaine’s “terre” and “guerre” (1, 4); “eyeball,” “all,” and “intolerable” for “étincelle,” “universelle,” and “harcelle” (15, 17, 19); “bear” and “career” for “soustraire” and “affaire” (38, 39). Michie, for his part, organizes his translation into a rhyme scheme of his own, characterized by unusually long rhyme clusters that may be as many as eight lines long, clusters with scrambled rhyme schemes such as ABCBDCAD or ABACCB. The length of these clusters ensures continual movement from one idea to the next. The fable’s thirty-nine lines, in fact, contain only three complete pauses in which stanza and sentence break off together: one after the episode of the battle and the lion’s defeat (28), the next after the gnat’s triumph and death (34), and the third after the moral (39). Michie thus uses rhyme and enjambment to underline the interconnectedness and rapid succession of the narrative’s events.

Michie’s and Moore’s translations also resemble each other in their free-verse-like use of irregular meter. Here again, Michie breaks from the letter of La Fontaine’s example but follows his spirit by varying line length according to a given line’s subject matter. Thus, shorter lines are generally used to describe quick, sudden actions such as “He sounded the attack,” “And everyone round about, / Terrified, hid,” and the line in which the lion “At last collapsed, all in” (9, 15-16, 28). As with the rhyme scheme, Moore reproduces La Fontaine’s pattern of longer and shorter lines; for distinguishing the long from the short, however, she relies more on indentation than on syllable counts—her long lines may be anywhere from nine to thirteen syllables, her short from six to twelve. By indenting the lines that are intended to be “short,” Moore follows La Fontaine’s example in focusing shorter lines on the gnat’s rapid movements in the first half of the fable and using longer lines to slow the pace of the second half. For both Moore and Michie, unpredictable line lengths add extra emphasis to the fable’s atmosphere of mix-up.

Wright and Marsh, in contrast to Michie and Moore, use relatively simple rhythmic elements in their translations. Both consistently use iambic feet, principally tetrameter interspersed with pentameter and, in Wright’s case, trimeter. Because the English stress system differs widely from the French, this regular iambic flow is more comfortable to most English

readers than the unpredictable rhythms of La Fontaine's meter (or Moore's and Michie's imitations of it). Wright's and Marsh's rhyme schemes are simpler as well. Marsh, like La Fontaine and his more recent translators, uses several variations of rhyme clusters, but simplifies the rhyme scheme by using more couplets than La Fontaine or Moore, and three times as many as Michie does. Wright, for his part, chooses a rhyme scheme as straightforward as Michie's is scattered, consisting exclusively of couplets except for three quatrains that call attention to the principal turning points of the fable—the gnat's declaration of war, the initial attack on the lion, and the moral (3-6, 9-12, 43-46). These versions of the fable, more orderly in their rhythms and sound devices, cannot, as the others do, use their verse structures to emphasize the frantic unpredictability of the story's events, and the brevity of the two translations' rhyme clusters entail a greater number of pauses between stanzas. Marsh compensates for these slowing factors and retains his version's brisk tempo through several strategies. Like La Fontaine, he underlines the intensity of the struggle between the two animals by recounting it in present tense. He also quickens his narration through the use of energetic verbs such as "thuds," "pummels," "totters," "darts," and "struck" (27, 28, 29, 30, 33). For Wright, however, readability comes at a higher cost. In order to maintain the smooth consistency of the stanzas and rhythm, Wright includes thoughts not mentioned by La Fontaine in order to lengthen lines to the requisite number of feet. On a few occasions, he inserts entire lines in order to fill out a stanza, as when the gnat prepares to attack "as one that did no fear owe," when each of the lion's teeth and claws "Had got its proper beauty / By doing bloody duty," or when the lion is wearied "Though so fierce and stout" (9, 27-28, 33). The result is a translation five lines longer than any of the other versions and seven lines longer than the original, with commentary that slows the battle's action and leaves the impression that the author views the story as a filling for the stanzas, rather than the stanzas being a vehicle for the story.

## Conclusion

In his biography of La Fontaine, published in the first decade of the twentieth century, Frank Hamel reviewed the then-available English translations of La Fontaine and concluded that "La Fontaine's work is so French in essence that translations can rarely be satisfactory," and that "the subtle, graceful humor of the Fables is only to be found at its best in the originals" (249). More recent scholars echo Hamel's conviction; "I concluded," writes Rubin, "that something did not permit La Fontaine safe passage into English, or at least not consistently" (204). The past century, it seems, has not produced a magic formula for the perfect rewriting of the French fables in what Hamel terms the "cruder and colder language" of English (250). Despite these inescapable limitations, several of the past century's translators, undertaking to produce English renderings of La Fontaine's work, have created versions that show a keen understanding of the fabulist's themes and the devices with which he conveys them. Through their use of images, irony, rhythm, and sound, Moore, Michie, Marsh, and Wright make it possible for English-speaking readers to enjoy La Fontaine's stories and to appreciate his wit. One may argue, and argue rightly, that significant disparities exist between the original text and each of the translations. But that simply means that French is not English and English is not French, and that is not news, is it?

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