

Convention and Originality: La Fontaine's Four Elegies

by
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Many modern scholars have examined La Fontaine's imaginative reworking of classical themes, techniques, and conventions in his *Fables* and *Contes*.¹ Critics, however, have generally neglected the numerous classical influences in his other poems and specifically in his four love elegies, originally published in 1671. In his 1977 book *The Brazen Tower*, John Lapp briefly analyzed mythological imagery in these four elegies and suggested that definite similarities existed between them and the love elegies of Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus.² In this essay, we will explore John Lapp's insight and show how La Fontaine utilized conventional Roman love elegies in order to create four witty and thematically unified elegies.

A conventional Roman love elegy is a formal speech in which a highly "self-centered" poet addresses his beloved, attempts in vain to persuade her to sleep with him, and laments her apparent infidelity or indifference to him.³ Despite overt and repeated rejection by his beloved the Roman elegist rarely abandons the hope that she will eventually grant him her sexual favors. Such self-deception and wish fulfillment are commonplace in Roman love elegies.

Modern critics have argued persuasively that it is inappropriate to conclude that a Roman love elegy expresses the sincere passion of a poet.⁴ When speaking to his beloved Delia, Tibullus merely assumes the *persona* of an egotistical lover whose sole desire is to satisfy his emotional and sexual needs.⁵ In reading the love elegies of Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus, we should not look for the expression of true sentiment. Rather, we should admire the wit, the "refined delicacy of expression," and the skill of these elegists in describing how obsessive passion causes people to behave irrationally.⁶ The modern scholar Georg Luck has also drawn our attention to the exquisite irony in

many Roman love elegies. The speeches of the "self-centered" poet to his beloved are totally ineffective and yet perfectly structured "in the rhetorical manner" (Luck, 417). We can thus also interpret conventional Roman love elegies as parodies of well-crafted discourses so popular among Roman orators. In his four elegies, La Fontaine exploited the complex conventions of Roman love elegies in order to produce elegant comic and stylistic effects. Understanding the literary conventions of Roman love elegies enables us to appreciate the true originality and artistry of La Fontaine's four elegies.

La Fontaine's four elegies illustrate imaginative variations on traditional situations in Roman love elegies. In his "Élégie première," La Fontaine addresses the god of love and laments that an unspecified but significant "nombre d'inhumaines" has refused to satisfy his sexual desires.⁷ He begins this elegy with a series of plaintive questions:

Amour, que t'ai-je fait? dis-moi quel est mon
[crime:
 D'où vient que je te sers tous les jours de victime?
 Qui t'oblige à m'offrir encore de nouveaux fers?
 N'es-tu point satisfait des maux que j'ai soufferts?
(La Fontaine, II, 601)

It does not even occur to this "self-centered" lover that his own personality may well explain why so many women have refused him their sexual favors. His obtuseness strongly suggests that we should not interpret this elegy as a sincere autobiographical poem on love. Moreover, John Lapp (114) reminds us that all the beloved mentioned by La Fontaine bear the names of pastoral lovers from Roman love poems.

In this elegy, creative and ingenious uses of *amplification* enable La Fontaine to describe at great length his failures in love. Near the beginning of this elegy, La Fontaine refers to Amarille who "attendit longtemps à se rendre facile" (La Fontaine, II, 601). The following twenty lines expand on this remark. For fifteen

lines, La Fontaine describes with much humor a series of sexual fantasies. After a full year, Amarille finally invites him to her house and La Fontaine expresses his pleasure by an elegant triple repetition:

Ni joueur, ni filou, ni chien, ne me troubla.
(La Fontaine, II, 602)

Upon arriving at the closed door of her house, he is told:

"Venez demain, dit-on, la clef s'est égarée."
Le lendemain l'époux se trouva de retour.
(La Fontaine, II, 602)

Here La Fontaine finds himself in a stock situation from Roman love elegies. He is a conventional "exclusus amator," who expresses his frustration in front of the closed door of his beloved.⁸

He then describes eight separate rejections which only serve to increase La Fontaine's sense of sexual inadequacy. Even the sexually liberated Philis, whose "coeur est soupçonné d'avoir plus d'un vainqueur" (La Fontaine, II, 602), will not sleep with him. The reasons other women present for not sleeping with him amuse his readers but humiliate the vain lover. Chloé affirms that La Fontaine would die if she were to make love with him. The excessively polite Caliste "répondait d'amitié quand je parlais d'amour" (La Fontaine, II, 603). Like La Fontaine's "Matrone d'Ephèse," the young widow Clymène

... a beaucoup de charmes;
Mais pour une ombre vaine elle répand des larmes;
Son coeur dans un tombeau fait voeu de s'enfermer.
(La Fontaine, II, 603)

La Fontaine, however, soon realizes that the grieving but beautiful Clymène is still "capable d'amour" (La Fontaine, II, 603) for the living but not for him. In reading his "Elégie première," we are definitely impressed by La Fontaine's skill and humor in expanding on the conventions of Roman love elegies.

In his "Élégie deuxième," La Fontaine portrays himself as a totally subservient lover to his indifferent mistress Clymène. La Fontaine also compares his misfortunes in love with the hazards of a sea voyage. John Lapp (117) and Robert Hallowell have demonstrated that these are both conventional themes for Roman love elegists who "recognized only the grimmer aspects of the sea."⁹ Anyone who travels by sea or enters into a love relationship does so at grave risk to his health or psychological well-being. It is obvious that physical and sentimental voyages are of a different nature, but La Fontaine develops with much humor this conventional comparison.

He begins his "Élégie deuxième" with the extended metaphor of an unsuccessful sea voyage:

Me voici rembarqué sur la mer amoureuse,
 Moi pour qui tant de fois elle fut malheureuse,
 Qui ne suis pas encore du naufrage essuyé,
 Quitte à peine d'un voeu nouvellement payé.
 Que faire? mon destin est tel qu'il faut que j'aime.
 (La Fontaine, II, 603)

Our knowledge of Roman love elegies teaches us that any crossing of "la mer amoureuse" will inevitably result in unhappiness and frustration. By including the words "tant de fois," La Fontaine subtly suggests that love has brought him so much suffering that it would be too painful for him to recall each woman who rejected him. La Fontaine even proposes that we view him as a tragic lover dominated by the malevolent power of "le destin." It is obvious that a tragic vision of the world has little in common with conventional love elegies. We, however, are amused by his tongue-in-cheek assertion that the absolute power of love in his life is comparable to the role of fate in a tragic or epic work.

So that we do not deceive ourselves into thinking that La Fontaine actually believes in this preposterous comparison, he assures us:

Hélas! qu'il est aisé de se flatter soi-même.

(La Fontaine, II, 603)

He is clearly playing with this artificial comparison in order to amuse his learned readers. His "Élégie deuxième" then demonstrates the unfortunate results of our inability to resist the inexorable force of love. The "self-centered" lover has lost all self-respect and he declares:

Je veux brûler, languir, et mourir s'il le faut.

(La Fontaine, II, 604)

The evident masochism in this line reveals the dangers inherent in the conventional belief that a lover must always yield to the whims of his beloved. He then proceeds to describe the extraordinary pleasure he derives from serving his indifferent mistress. Although Clymène is "cruelle" toward him and demands that he be nothing more than her "esclave," La Fontaine claims to be incredibly happy. He concludes his "Élégie deuxième" with this remark to Clymène:

Et, si vous le voulez, mes langueurs, mon trépas,
Clymène, tous ces biens ne vous manqueront pas.

(La Fontaine, II, 604)

He has become so emotionally unstable that he no longer realizes that life is more important than requited love. In his "Élégie deuxième," La Fontaine amuses us by taking the conventions of Roman love elegies to ludicrous extremes.

Roman love elegies frequently consist of ineffective but ingenious speeches in which an egotistical lover tries to persuade his beloved to respond to his passion. In his third and fourth elegies, La Fontaine observes this rhetorical convention. He addresses Clymène directly and presents several arguments in a vain attempt to convince her that she should prefer his "ardeur" which "augmente tous les jours" (La Fontaine, II, 609) to the memory of her dead lover Cléandre.

He realizes that the grieving but beautiful Clymène still loves the dead Cléandre more than him. La Fontaine concludes that if he were to die, then Clymène would probably hold him also in high esteem. Unfortunately, nothing short of his death will end Clymène's indifference toward him.

By the beginning of his "Élégie quatrième," La Fontaine has come to accept an unpleasant truth. Clymène never has loved him and most probably never will love him. Despite this realization La Fontaine still feels intense jealousy because Clymène has not even attempted to conceal her continuing love and admiration for the dead Cléandre. In addition, La Fontaine tries repeatedly to deceive himself into believing that someday Clymène will respond favorably to his passion. In reading his fourth elegy, we are impressed by La Fontaine's artistry in describing both the lucidity and the self-deception of this egotistical lover.

In his "Élégie quatrième," La Fontaine utilizes an extended and elegant personification in order to express the power of jealousy over his mind. He describes his feelings thus:

Des douleurs qu'on endure en servant une belle
 Je n'avais pas encor souffert la plus cruelle.
 La Jalousie aux yeux incessamment ouverts,
 Monstre toujours fécond en fantômes divers,
 Jusqu-là, grâce aux dieux, n'en avait pu produire
 Que mon coeur eût trouvés capables de lui nuire.

(La Fontaine, II, 606)

His conception of a love relationship is totally conventional. He assumes that a suitor must remain passive and willingly accept many "douleurs qu'on endure en servant une belle." John Lapp (117) correctly remarks that these four elegies illustrate a "*précieux* acceptance of pain for pleasure." La Fontaine further believes that there is a necessary progression in the suffering of an unhappy lover, who first encounters indifference and rejection from his beloved and then experiences frustration and jealousy.

There is no respite from jealousy. "La Jalousie" with its "yeux incessamment ouverts" suggests a mythological monster and may represent an indirect reference to Argus, the one-hundred-eyed giant entrusted with guarding the heifer Io. Unlike Argus, however, this monster is "fécond en fantômes divers." this may constitute a reference to Cléandre, clearly a "fantôme," or may suggest the endless fears of jealous lovers.

Near the end of his "Élégie quatrième," La Fontaine finally provokes a mildly favorable response from Clymène. In their witty dialogue, however, each comment by Clymène is marvelously ironic and only serves to remind La Fontaine that he will never replace Cléandre in Clymènes heart. As a conventional lover, he composes love poems for Clymène. His sentimental verses, however, merely remind her that "Cléandre ... avait cet art aussi" (La Fontaine, II, 608). We can safely assume that Clymène preferred his poetry to La Fontaine's because of her profound love for Cléandre. Unfortunately, this will not be the only affront to La Fontaine's vanity. When he expresses his passion directly to Clymène, she remembers: "Il en faisait autant, mais avec plus de grâce" (La Fontaine, II, 608). Not only does Clymène still prefer Cléandre to La Fontaine but she also believes that he was more eloquent and thus more persuasive than La Fontaine can ever be.

Since their publication in 1671 La Fontaine's four love elegies have attracted little scholarly attention. This critical oversight may well be attributed to the enduring and well-deserved popularity of his more famous *Fables* and *Contes*. Another explanation, however, is possible. Modern readers do not generally admire conventional love poetry. Even Kirby Flower Smith, who edited Tibullus' works, concluded: "The conventional love affair of the elegy follows simple lines, the beaten paths of antique as well as of modern sentiment do not lead to the highest ground."¹¹ Smith's remark expresses succinctly the common misconception that an effective love poet must describe personal insights into the meaning of love. Our analysis has shown that it is incorrect to interpret La Fontaine's four elegies from such a sentimental perspective.

The profound originality of his four elegies consists rather in the artistry by which he utilized conventional Roman love elegies in order to create four witty and well-crafted poems. We hope that our essay will encourage fellow scholars to explore further the vast and fascinating subject of classical elements in the works of La Fontaine.

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Notes

¹Modern studies on this aspect of La Fontaine's works include Jean-Dominique Biard, *The Style of La Fontaine's Fables* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966) and Renée Kohn, *Le Goût de La Fontaine* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).

²John D. Lapp, *The Brazen Tower* (Saratoga, California: Anna Libri, 1977), pp. 114-119.

³Georg Luck, "Love Elegy," in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature: Latin Literature*, ed. E. J. Kenney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 412.

⁴Luck, pp. 411-417, R.O.A.M. Lyne, *The Latin Love Poets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 186-189, and Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani, *Les Thèmes amoureux dans la poésie française: 1570-1600* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1975), pp. 221-222.

⁵Walter Wimmel, *Tibull und Delia* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1976).

⁶Michael C. J. Putnam, *Essays on Latin Lyric, Elegy, and Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 174.

⁷La Fontaine, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Pierre Clarac (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), II, 601. In this essay, all

quotations from La Fontaine's four love elegies come from the second volume of this critical edition.

⁸Frank O. Copley, *'Exclusus Amator': A Study in Latin Love Poetry* (Madison: American Philological Association, 1956).

⁹Robert E. Hallowell, *Ronsard and the Conventional Roman Elegy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1954), p. 33.

¹⁰Leo Spitzer, "Die Kunst des Übergangs bei La Fontaine," *PMLA*, 53 (1938), 393-433.

¹¹*The Elegies of Albius Tibullus*, ed. Kirby Flower Smith (New York: American Book Company, 1913), p. 70.