

Dē vulpe et uvā
About the fox and the grapes
A fable of AESOP as told by PHAEDRUS (1st century)

Coācta famē vulpēs
in altā vīneā
ūvam appetēbat summīs
saliēns vīribus;

A hunger drives the fox. She leaps
At grapes with all her might,
But cannot reach, so off she creeps
From vines at such a height.

Quam tangere ut nōn potuit,
discēdēns ait:
nōndum est mātūra; nōlō
acerbam sūmere.

She says, “The grapes are not ripe yet.
I do not want them sour.”
If you insult what you can’t get,
Learn from this tale of ours.

Quī verbīs ēlevant quae nōn
possunt facere,
āscribere dēbēbunt
exemplum sibi hoc.

Aesop did not write his fables down, so what we have is later retellings, many of them in poetic form. Phaedrus’s poems in Latin comprise our oldest surviving collection of Aesop’s fables.

The rhythm of first-century Roman poetry is based on syllable length (including vowel length), whereas English poetry (and later Latin poetry) is based on stressed syllables. The word order has been changed to fit modern stress-based song rhythm. The original word order in Phaedrus is:

Famē coācta vulpēs altā in vīneā
Ūvam appetēbat summīs saliēns vīribus;
Quam tangere ut nōn potuit, discēdēns ait:
Nōndum mātūra est; nōlō acerbam sūmere.
Quī facere quae nōn possunt verbīs ēlevant,
Āscribere hoc dēbēbunt exemplum sibi.

The Latin text is from Phaedrus 4.3, “De vulpe et uva,” in Phaedrus, *Fabulae Aesopiae*. Edited by L. Mueller. Leipzig. B. G. Teubner. 1876. *Persens Digital Library*. Macrons added by AFM.

English translation by Adam F McCune. A more literal translation would be, “Driven by hunger, a fox was reaching for a cluster of grapes on a tall vine, leaping with her utmost strength. And when she was not able to touch it, departing, she said, ‘They are not yet ripe; I do not want to eat sour grapes.’ Those who lighten with words what they are not able to do, they ought to apply this example to themselves.”

Both the Latin and the English texts can be sung to the folk tune *Lazarus*, which is used for songs such as “The Star of the County Down.”