

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

Coácta fáme vúlpes
in álta vínea
úvam appetébat súmmis
sáliens víribus;

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 tángere ut non pótuit,
discédens áit:
nóndum est matúra; nólo
ácerbam súmerē.

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.

Qui vérbis élevant quae non
póssunt fácere,
ascribere debébunt
exémplum síbi 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 vīnēā
Ūvam appetēbat summīs saliēns víribus;
Quam tangere ut nōn potuit, discēdēns ait:
Nōndum mātūra est; nōlō acerbam sūmere.
Quī facere quae nōn possunt verbīs élevant,
Āscribere hoc debēbunt exemplum síbi.

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 to the text with the original word order by AFM; accents added to the singable text by AFM (note that *exemplum* would be stressed on its first syllables based on normal pronunciation rules, but is marked as stressed on the penultimate syllable based on the stress in derivatives in multiple languages).

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.”