

Preface - Hungry Like the Wolf

Jean de La Fontaine's 1668 fable "The Wolf and the Dog" tells the story of a hungry wolf who encounters a sleek and well-fed dog, and compliments him on how well he looks. The dog tells the wolf he too could be as plumply happy if he would only follow him: you just have to chase away bad men and beggars, he says, and please the master, and in return you get lots of food and caresses too. The poor hungry wolf weeps with pleasure, and trots alongside the dog eagerly. But along the way he notices the dog's fur is rubbed away at his neck; the dog explains, reluctantly, that the collar by which he is attached is "perhaps" the reason. "Attached?" says the horrified wolf, "can't you run anywhere you like?" "Not always," says the dog, "but it doesn't matter." But the wolf declares it matters so much that despite his hunger he doesn't want food at that price: he runs off, and, the narrator tells us, is still running today, away from bonds, across boundaries.

La Fontaine had his problems with patronage: he knew what it was to feel one's neck chafed, and he lets us feel the awkwardness of it in the fable. Like many of us institutionalized creatures, the dog displays what the critic Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism," persuading himself that his collar is not as bad as it looks. La Fontaine's fable lets us feel both the hungry desire for security and the rub of the collar. If we're not brave enough to run like the wolf, it lets us at least peep over the fence at those who make a break for it.

In an increasingly constrained academy, postgraduates might well scoff at a secure old dog worrying about the collar's rub: I'm well fed, as dogs go, and my collar is a comfortable one. This old dog hopes that the participants in this conference soon find a collar that gives them a similar room to wriggle, but that every now and then they manage – perhaps at conferences like this one – to find room to run, still.

Katherine Ibbett, Reader in Early Modern Studies, French, UCL