Brutus the Fool

Mortio dictus est: viginti milibus emi.
redde mihi nummus, Carthilane: sapit.

—Marvial, Epigrams 8.13

Non v'ha dubbio che quel che si narra in specie di Bruzo presenta per la maggior parte
te caratteristiche della leggenda e della poesia popolare.

—G. De Sanctis, Storia dei Romani, 1926

Aut fatuum aut regem nasci oportet—“It is well to be born either a King or a
Fool,” or so the saying goes: in both cases, paradoxically, the advantages are
the same. Traditional wisdom holds that the Fool and the King—the bottom
and the top of the pyramid, the two extreme points of the spectrum—are
actually more alike than their differences might lead us to believe. Brutus,
able unable to be King, was clever enough to follow the wisdom of the prover:
becoming a Fool, he shielded himself from the treacheries of his deceitful
cousin Tarquin. Only he, with his superior intelligence, understood that the
Fool is closest to the King and that by taking just a short step he could slip
into the place of the King. And by then it was too late for his enemies; for
the truth is, no one expected it.

In following this paradoxical strategy, Brutus has well-known and noble
fellows: not only Hamlet, that other “false fool” who sought vengeance for

1. Sen. Apoc. 1.1. Cf. Otto 1890, 299, who believes the proverb was “re-adapted” by Seneca,
but gives no reason for this assumption.

2. In the course of this essay, I will refer exclusively to the story narrated by Saxo Grammaticus
in Gesta Danorum, with some Nordic variants as collected by Gollance 1926 and others, rather than
to the (perhaps better known) versions of François de Belleforest and William Shakespeare. Further
information is taken from Hansen 1983.
his father’s death from a murderous and incestuous uncle and then became lord of the land, but also Khusràw, son of Siyavish. As Firdawsi recounts in the *Book of Kings*, Khusràw’s uncle, Afrasyab, had had his brother, the king, murdered. Khusràw feigned madness at his uncle’s court in order to allay any fear that he might retaliate, finally succeeding in his efforts to retake his father’s throne. In the company of such false madmen we may also number David, at the court of King Achis; Odysseus, who feigned madness to avoid going to Troy until he was betrayed by the hateful Palamedes; and Solon, who, when war broke out between Athens and Salamis, resorted to a similar expedient in order to express certain disagreeable opinions without risk of danger.

The closest analogies run among the stories of Brutus, Hamlet and Khusràw. With only slight variation, the same web of familial relationships presents a young man who avenges the murder of his father (Tarquin killed Brutus’ older brother as well as his father) and reclaims his rightful position on the throne from a murderous maternal uncle (Brutus), paternal uncle (Hamlet) or maternal grandfather (Khusràw) by the same stratagem: feigning insanity. Given that the same “plot” appears to have existed in Rome, Denmark and Persia, it is certainly understandable why De Santillana and Von Dechend would take such striking correspondences between these stories as the basis for hypothesizing a single mythic “architecture”: a man who speaks of the heavens and of Time in a forgotten language. As attractive as this theory is, it is also improbable and flawed, above all in sacrificing the story itself to its presumed “meanings,” as if the tale did not

8. These stories have been the subject of numerous “genetic” and comparative studies, in which Brutus has been compared to heroes of the Irish, Indian and Finnish traditions (Jiriczek, Lessmann, Zenker and Setälä: cf. Jones 1986, 126 and 145). As a “type,” this legend was also of great interest to Freudian psychoanalysis, because of the relationship between Oedipus and Hamlet (recognized already by Freud 1966, 246): cf. Rank 1987, 86ff.; Jones 1986, 126ff.; and, more recently, Bloom 1996, 331ff., on Hamlet and Freud. On the relationship between the stories of Brutus and Hamlet, see above all Powell 1894, 28ff.; Davidson 1980, II, 59f. n. 64. There are also some scant mentions in Frazer 1911, 291 n. and 505ff. A detailed comparison between the tales (and other Nordic variants of the Hamlet story) goes beyond our interests here: Hansen 1983, 25ff., interpreting these stories as related “genetically.” Wiseman 2003 identifies different “layers” of the Brutus legend to show how variations in the narrative reflect changes in sociopolitical context.
merit interest of its own, as if to make it attractive the scholar’s task were to find other (and in particular “metaphysical”) references within it. But the story itself is worth listening to, for it is the tale of a Fool who poses riddles to his “wise” and “intelligent” enemies—in other words, the tale of a “truth” that conceals and camouflages itself in “error” in order to remain true, and with such an insinuating force that it bends the powerful to the Fool’s will. This is certainly a worthwhile theme, even if behind the Fool’s riddling it is impossible to discover some raison raisonnante that, once the veil of Time has been removed, resurfaces with archaic solemnity to address the universe’s greatest questions. Patience if Hamlet remains Hamlet and Brutus remains Brutus; after all, is that so little? Nothing is gained—and probably much is lost—by swapping Hamlet for some astral philosophy. Perhaps it is only that we have lost the habit of reading stories, then, and our inability to pay attention to them makes us wish to change them into something they are not. Worse still, perhaps we have lost the habit of listening to stories. And our sources recount the story of Brutus so fragmentarily and so weakly that it has become almost incomprehensible; certainly, some patience will be required.

The Hero Speaks and Acts Nonsense

Dionysius of Halicarnassus recounts that Tarquin, believing Brutus to be truly dim-witted, dispossessed him of all his paternal inheritance but what was strictly essential. Thereafter, Tarquin permitted him to live with his sons—not out of any consideration for the bond of kinship that united them (Tarquin was Brutus’ avunculus, “maternal uncle”), but “to make the boys laugh by speaking nonsense and doing what only the truly stupid do.” At this point, we should probably imagine the narrator enumerating a series of examples demonstrating the hero’s stupidity—the nonsensical things said and done by Brutus that would eventually earn him that nickname, meaning “dull, stupid.” But what exactly did Brutus say or do that was so foolish?

11. Dion. Ant. Rom. 4.68.2. Cf. Liv. AUC. 1.66.8. Niebhrur’s (1873, I, 423ff.) thesis that the legend of “feigned stupidity” was created to provide an aetiological explanation for this cognomen is well known (and was taken up by Accame 1949, 251 as well as by Alföldi 1965, 83, with slight modifications). Pais (1926, II, 170ff.), on the other hand, transformed Brutus into a divinity (against De Sanctis 1956, 394ff.). Cook (1905, 300ff.) reached the same conclusion independently of Alföldi, and also divinized Lucretius Tricipitinus and others (against Pignaniol 1917, 256). On the problem of the historicity of this figure, see Mommsen 1864, 111ff.; Cook 1905; Groh 1928, 290ff., particularly in relation to the sources; Gjerstad 1962, 48 n. 1; Alföldi 1965, 83; Bloch 1965, 77 and above all Momigliano 1975, 293ff. Vague remarks in Gagé 1976, 57ff.
We know nothing concretely, because Dionysius limits himself to a few generic hints and other sources are completely silent on this score; apparently, this was part of the story that was not deemed worthy of transmission. We can suppose, however, that this part of the story did in fact exist, because structurally it is necessary to the plot. So we know only that we could have known and that we have been unlucky, which can only increase our displeasure.

Two long fragments of a *tragoedia praetexta* by Accius bearing the title *Brutus* have survived.¹² The first contains the account of one of Tarquin the Proud’s dreams, and the second the explanation that was given of this dream by certain dream interpreters. In brief, Tarquin’s dream and its interpretation go something like this: the “most beautiful” of a pair of rams is sacrificed by a king, understood metaphorically as Tarquin’s murder of Brutus’ older brother; the second ram, however, attacks the king, making him fall to the ground, understood metaphorically as Brutus overturning the king’s power.¹³ The seers’ interpretation naturally emphasizes the link between the ram (*aries*) in Tarquin’s dream and the man Tarquin considered “to be as stupid as an animal” (*esse . . . hebetem aeque ac pecus*). We do not know at what point in the action of the Accian *praetexta* this dream occurred—indeed, we know nothing whatsoever of the plot. However, judging from the dream’s outline of a character thought to be “dull” (*brutus*), but who is in reality quite astute, it is reasonable to assume that the subject of the play was Brutus and his adventures as (false) *stolidus*, employing on stage all the resources of the bewildered and bedeviled Fool who conceals beneath his ambiguous phrases a burning desire for revenge. If that is the case, what we have is a “Hamlet” produced over 1700 years before Shakespeare’s masterpiece—or better, what we would have had, had the nameless divinity in charge of conserving classical texts not demonstrated her avarice once again, thereby favoring the primacy of the pale Danish prince.

But to continue. Suetonius recounts that the emperor Claudius, who seems to have been truly stupid, once attempted to rehabilitate his reputation by claiming that he was only feigning stupidity:

> ac ne stultitiam quidem suam reticuit simulatamque a se ex industria sub Gaio, quod aliter evasurus perversurusque ad susceptam stationem non fuerit, quibusdam oratiunculis testatus est: nec tamen persuasit, cum intra breve tempus liber editus sit, cui index erat moron epanastasis, argumentum autem stultitiam neminem fingere.¹⁴

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¹². Fr. 19ff. Ribbeck³.
¹⁴. Suet. *Claud.* 38.3. Last and Ogilvie’s (1958, 476ff.) interpretation is somewhat too
And not even his own stupidity did he conceal, claiming in some speeches that he had feigned it on purpose under Gaius [i.e., Caligula], because otherwise he would have been destined to succumb and would not have reached the position that he had. But he did not succeed in convincing anyone, because sometime afterward a book was circulated that was entitled *The Refutation of the Idiots*, the argument of which was that no one can fake stupidity.

Writing those *oratiunculae* in his own defense, Claudius must have invoked the legendary paradigm of Brutus in demonstration of the shrewdness of his own *stultitia* (or, if nothing else, to indulge his natural tendency for historical scholarship). Moreover, in sustaining the thesis that stupidity cannot be feigned, his detractors must have made reference to the story of someone who had in fact been successful at this. Unfortunately, nothing remains of these texts—although admittedly much worse losses have occurred.

How, then, are we to imagine Brutus in his disgraceful role of *ludibrium* at the king’s court? When Tarquin sends his sons to Delphi, he sends Brutus as their companion for the sole purpose that they may mock and insult their cousin: Brutus, in other words, is chosen specifically for derision and abuse. This is the normal fate of the Fool, however. Before reaching the throne, Claudius had been considered precisely “one of the *ludibria* of the court.” Thus Suetonius:

> quotiens post cibum obdormisceret . . . olearum aut palmularum ossibus incessabatur, interdum ferula flagrove velut per ludum excitatatur a copreis. solebant et manibus sterentis socci induci, ut repente expergefactus faciem sibimet confricaret.

Whenever he would fall asleep after a meal, he would be attacked with olive or date pits. At times, the entertainers would keep him awake by hitting him with sticks or rods, as if in jest. They also had the habit of putting women’s slippers on his hands, while he snored, so that he would rub himself on the face when he woke up.

Reductive: according to their understand, the source of Claudius’ pretext was “evidently the myth of Brutus in Livy.” But why only Livy? On this passage of Suetonius, see also Guastella’s (1999, 209) remarks, with sources and bibliography on the truth or falsity of Claudius’s stupidity.

18. Suet. *Claud.* 8. See also Guastella’s (1999, 149) note, with other useful references.
Besides suffering the indignations required by the script, the false Fool must also have done everything in his power to confirm the impression of his own stupidity—“talking nonsense and doing what only the truly stupid do,” as Dionysius says. Khusrâw’s grandfather Afrasyab asks him: “Wouldn’t you like to learn how to write? Don’t you want to take revenge upon your enemies?” and the boy responds: “There is no more cream in the milk: I’d like to chase all the shepherds from the desert.”19 After his father and two older brothers are murdered, a similar question is posed to Brjám, the “Hamlet” of modern Icelandic folklore, and his little brothers:20 “Where do you feel the pain most?” Brjám’s younger brothers beat their chests and so are killed, while Brjám slaps his rear and sneers—and so is spared, deemed too stupid to be dangerous. Brjám leads directly to Saxo Grammaticus’ Amelethus (Amleth)21 who, upon returning from his tryst with the future Shakespearian Ophelia, is mockingly interrogated about their love making. “On what couch?” his enemies ask, to which he answers: “On a mare’s hoof, a cock’s crest and the roof beams.”22

The “false Fool” must not only speak but also act nonsense. Before the eyes of Menelaus and Agamemnon, Odysseus yokes an ox and a horse and goes about Ithaka with a dunce’s cap (pileus) on his head.23 It is a shame that the celebrated painting by Euphranor of Corinth no longer stands in the sanctuary of Artemis at Ephesus; as Pliny describes it, it depicted “Ulysses, feigning madness, as he yokes an ox with a horse, men wearing the pallium as they think, and a leader as he sheathes his sword” (Ulixes simulata insania bovem cum equo iungens et palliati cogitantes, dux gladium condens).24 Here, the conspicuous stupidities of the (false) fool arouse the doubt and concern of those “thinking” men (cogitantes) who observe him. Solon, too, went about in public “completely unkempt in the manner of the insane” (deformis habitu more vecordium), with the dunce’s cap on his head,25 and David, disguising his appearance at the court of Achis, stumbled upon the shutters of the door and let himself fall, drool running down his beard.26 Finally, at the court of Feng, Amleth lay on the floor covered in ash, trying to harden some curved rods in the fire;27 later, he mounted a horse backwards (leading

21. See below, 68ff.
22. Sax. Gramm. 3.6.11.
23. Hyg. Fab. 95. For the pileus, see Schöne 1872, 125ff., but with caution; Samter 1894, 535ff.; and Lanza 1997, 41ff., on the “cap” worn by Solon.
25. Justinus 2.7; Plut. Sol. 8.1f.
27. Sax. Gramm. 3.6.6.
it by its tail instead of its reins);\textsuperscript{28} and when his companions pointed out an abandoned ship’s rudder on the shore and told him it is a huge knife, he responded that it was perfect for cutting a huge side of ham.\textsuperscript{29} And so forth.

The folkloristic typology related to “The Fool” (feigned or not) is too vast—but also too predictable—to require further examples. Psychoanalysts, who have created a clinical profile of the (false) Fool’s behavior, note that this personality displays markedly “infantile” characteristics, such as a love for riddles, a predilection for dirty or obscene substances, general ineptitude and so on.\textsuperscript{30} Possibly. What is certain is that the Fool’s behavior consistently demonstrates a tendency to subvert the behavioral norms that others accept, creating a kind of “world of opposites.”\textsuperscript{31} In the stories about true Fools (“simpletons”) collected by Thompson,\textsuperscript{32} we find characters who confuse a gourd with an ass’s egg,\textsuperscript{33} who sow boiled seeds,\textsuperscript{34} who cover rocks lest they catch cold,\textsuperscript{35} and so forth. Structurally speaking, the Fool tends to put into contact cultural artifacts that, in typical behavior, have no relation to one another. And he does so by taking advantage of “contiguities” that are completely unforeseeable—metaphorical, analogical, purely linguistic and so on. The result is a world that is methodologically unexceptionable but manifestly absurd. The Fool explores the residues of cultural codes and how to short circuit them. He hits the right keys at the wrong moment and stands there waiting to see what happens.

\textit{An Eater of Bitter Figs}

Perhaps I was being overly pessimistic in stating our complete ignorance of Brutus’ foolish deeds. Though it is scant and vague, there is in fact some evidence of what he did and said at Tarquin’s court. Moreover, as we shall see, it is evidence of a sort of serene, subtle madness, and I do not believe that Brutus acquired his fame (let alone his \textit{cognomen}) exclusively on the basis of such behavior. But it is all that remains.

Macrobius illustrates through various examples what the Romans referred

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Sax. Gramm. 3.6.8. On this motif, see Davidson 1980, 60 n. 65: it is a popular form of \textit{ludibrium} common to many northern cultures.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Sax. Gramm. 3.6.10. Cf. Davidson 1980, 60 n. 67.
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Jones 1986, 140ff.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} In the sense of Cocchiara 1963, who does not, however, deal specifically with the theme of “The Fool” and his actions.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Thompson 1966\textsuperscript{2}. See also Thompson 1967, 269ff.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Thompson 1966\textsuperscript{2}, J 1772.1.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Thompson 1966\textsuperscript{2}, J 1932.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Thompson 1966\textsuperscript{2}, J 1873.2.
\end{itemize}
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Among the texts he cites is a fragment of the historian Postumius Albinus regarding Brutus:

et Postumius Albinus annali primo de Bruto: ea causa sese stultum brutumque faciebat, grossulos ex melle edebat.\(^{37}\)

Postumius Albinus writes about Brutus in the first book of his \textit{Annales}; from this he showed that he was stupid and slow: he used to eat bitter figs in honey.

Brutus, pretending to be a fool, used to eat \textit{grossuli ex melle}. Albinus’ text suggests a link between the two, and this impression is enhanced by the peculiarity of the act itself: why ever would Brutus have had to eat \textit{grossuli ex melle}? In other words, perhaps this is one of the deeds of the false Fool, miraculously transmitted thanks to Macrobius’ pedantic erudition.

The absence of any context makes interpreting the fragment difficult, of course. Nevertheless, something can be said about it. According to Macrobius, “figs which are not yet mature are called \textit{grossuli}” (\textit{grossuli appellantur ficus quae non maturescunt}). These are the same figs that Columella advises shaking from their branches if one wishes the tree to produce again and yield ripe, edible figs.\(^{38}\) Apparently, then, \textit{grossuli} are what Pagani called \textit{bottoncelli}—the hard and gristly “budlets” that represent the first stage of the fig’s growth,\(^{39}\) and which no one would ever willingly eat. Furthermore, the expression \textit{ex melle} indicates that Brutus’ \textit{grossuli} were “in honey” or “dipped in honey.”\(^{40}\) Assuming that this unique choice of snack relates to the practice of conserving certain types of fruit in honey as \textit{delikatessen}, it is still odd that Brutus would be in the habit of eating not ripe, good figs in this way, but hard and tasteless green ones.\(^{41}\) Although Apicius and others tell us that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{grossi} ("immature figs").\(^{36}\)
  \item Always translate the fragment into Latin. Macrobius himself (praef. 13–14) informs us that Postumius had written his \textit{Annales} in Greek, so the Latin translation seems rather curious. See Peter 1870, cxiii; it has also been suggested that fr. 2 and 3 Peter do not belong to the Greek \textit{Annales}, but the \textit{poiēma} mentioned by Polybius (39.12.2): see Münzer 1953, coll. 902 ff.
  \item \textit{grossuli} are what Pagani called \textit{bottoncelli}—the hard and gristly “budlets” that represent the first stage of the fig’s growth.
  \item \textit{ex melle} indicates that Brutus’ \textit{grossuli} were “in honey” or “dipped in honey.”
  \item Assuming that this unique choice of snack relates to the practice of conserving certain types of fruit in honey as \textit{delikatessen}, it is still odd that Brutus would be in the habit of eating not ripe, good figs in this way, but hard and tasteless green ones.
\end{itemize}
various fruits—and above all figs—were dipped in honey (or sugar) when not yet fully ripe, and that even sour fruits like quince and bitter roots like inula were eaten so, it is unlikely that worthless, tough “buds” such as grossuli would form any part of the Roman diet. Instead, in this strange alimentary act there seems to be some hint of the hero’s “foolishness,” as in fact Albinus himself explicitly affirms (“from this he showed that he was stupid and slow: [namely the fact that] he used to eat bitter figs in honey”). Brutus the Fool eagerly devours as a delicacy something disgusting; while others eat good fruit in honey, he eats the hard, gristly buds of green figs. This must have been a cause of great amusement at Tarquin’s court.

In the long series of stories that regard him, the Fool frequently eats things that others would never think of consuming. This act is consistent with what has been defined as the basic principle of the Fool’s behavior: “false identification of an object.” In other words, someone is “a fool” when he does not correctly identify things, confusing one thing for another and confounding their attributes and functions. The “theory” of this principle is essentially articulated by Firdawsi’s tale of Khusrāw: there, Piran advises the young man on how to go about pretending to be a fool. “Chase reason from your mind,” he suggests. “If he [Afrasyab, from whom Khusrāw must defend himself] says ‘war,’ respond ‘marriage.’” When the dreaded interview with his grandfather finally happens, the boy passes the test, and Afrasyab is truly convinced that the boy is harmless: “He’s mad. I say ‘head’ and he responds ‘foot.’”

The principle of “false identification of an object” functions particularly well in the alimentary code, when the structure of cultural models distinguishing what is edible from what is not—a structure capable of signifying the opposition between “human” and “non-human,” “nature” and “culture”—is confounded by the Fool’s behavior. Cacasennus devours a bowlful of glue, mistaking it for gruel, while Marcolfa obstinately refuses to eat the bread offered to him by the king, instead preferring his own “bread concoction.” There are frequent scenes of this type in the cycles of the North American Trickster, as well: he boils water thinking that he is cook-

42. On quince, see Plin. Nat. hist. 16.50 and 65; Col. De re. rust. 12.47.2; Apic. 1.12.3; etc. On inula, see Plin. Nat. hist. 19.21.
44. Firdousi 1976, II, 34.
45. Croce 1943, 177.
46. Croce 1943, 166.
47. Of course, the complex figure of the “Trickster” (buffoon and demiurge, god and scoundrel) cannot be reduced to the typological linearity of the “Fool”: but the Trickster’s “stupidity” nevertheless appears to have a primary role in the stories about him, as part of the intricate bundle of his distinctive characteristics. See the interesting considerations of Miceli 1984.
ing a fish (that has in fact escaped), and declares the soup to be delicious; he eats certain seeds, and develops a terrible rash; he abuses some medicine, and suffers the effect of laxatives. Most inept by far, however, is Bertoldinus, to whom a doctor prescribes an assortment of pills to ingest and a “cure” to take “below.” But the latter is covered in honey, which causes the fool to swallow the “cure” and to use the pills “below.” He justifies this by saying, “Leave it to one who knows. Do you think I’m mad? It is you who have misunderstood the doctor’s orders: do you really wish me to put this thing below, when it is covered in honey? I would really be an idiot then. It must be taken orally, while these little pellets must be used below. I have a brain, too, you know!” Naturally, the honeyed cure “sticks in his throat and will not go up or down,” and poor Bertoldinus almost suffocates.

We do not know whether Brutus, eating his grossuli ex melle, committed an error of alimentary identification as grave as Bertoldinus’, but it is curious to note that in Roman medicine grossi played an important role. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the hero—like a Fool—consumed the wrong food and “from this he showed that he was stupid and slow: he used to eat bitter figs in honey,” as Postumius says. Certainly, someone like that does not arouse suspicion that he is merely biding his time until he can avenge his parents.

It is perhaps disconcerting to imagine the same Brutus who swore on the blood of Lucretia, who chased out the tyrant Tarquin and who killed his traitorous sons without regret foolishly devouring disgusting green figs in honey. But it is interesting to compare the picture of the hero intent on his “foolish” meal with his depiction on a coin minted by M. Brutus around the year 59 B.C.E. On one side, the coin represents a man with a round head covered by abundant hair and a thick beard. His face is gaunt, his nose noble and pointed, his brow marked by a deep furrow, his eyes set off by a conspicuous crease, almost a bag. Such iconography, which may go back to the portrait (imago) of Brutus carefully preserved by his descendants, is profoundly suggestive: this is the severe and decisive Brutus, the first

48. Radin, Jung and Kerény 1965, 44.
51. Croce 1943, 131.
52. Cf. Cels. De med. 5.12 (grossi in aqua cocti have an epispastic function); Plin. Nat. hist. 23.125 (raw grossi aid the removal of warts); 23.128 (they are helpful against flatulence and, when cooked in water, help the mumps; in wine, they protect against scorpion bites, etc.); see also Marc. Empir. 10.82.
54. Cic. Phil. 2.26 (a statue of Brutus, with sword drawn, stood instead on the Capitoline: Plut. Brut. 1; Dio Cass. 43.45; Plin. Nat. hist. 37.4; Suet. Iul. 80; cf. also Bettini 1988b, 190ff.). As
consul of Rome. Imagining him off somewhere in Tarquin’s palace slurping up *grossuli ex melle* while the members of the court laugh at him as someone who “does not even know how to eat,” increases the mystique surrounding his character.

## The Hero Is Like an Animal

Through deeds of this type, Lucius Junius acquired the *cognomen* “Brutus.” What does this adjective mean? In the archaic language, the meaning of this term appears to have been that of *gravis*—i.e., “weighty, heavy.” Later, used in reference to someone’s mental faculties, the originally physical sense of “heaviness” came to signify “stupidity.” Similar lexical developments—where a word denoting something physical is transferred to the intellect to indicate a lack of intellectual vivacity—can be cited: *hebes* (“smoothed, rounded; blunted”) and *tardus* (“slow”) both also come to mean “stupid.” (In Greek medicine, on the other hand, “stupidity” presupposes the prevalence of the element of water over the element of fire; in some sense, then, the fool is imagined as “watery”). The intellect is something intangible, and so to represent its force or weakness Roman culture relied upon kinesthetic metaphors.

Brutus is a “foolish” hero (or at any rate one who pretends to be a Fool), whose name directly signifies his stupidity. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Hamlet, the philosopher-prince of Denmark, owes his name to a comparable linguistic mechanism. Powell and Gollancz have shown that the name of the hero of this ancient saga—Amloði—was used in medieval Icelandic, Norwegian and Danish (and indeed is still used) as a substantive meaning “dunce” or “simpleton.” A Middle English reworking of the *Historia de prelis*, moreover, twice contains the word *Amla* or *Amlaugh* used as a term of derision together with words like “monkey” and “ass.” Although it is impossible to determine whether the word’s meaning in the sense of “stupid” precedes its use as a proper name (cf. *brutus* > *Brutus*) or whether

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52.  Fest. *De sign. verb.* 31 Lindsay, *brutum antiqui gravem dicebant*; cf. Lucr. *De re. nat.* 6.105; Hor. *Carm.* 1.34.9; *TLL II*, 2216). On *Brutus* as a *cognomen* (and on *cognomina* derived in general from deficiencies in mental capacity), see Kajanto 1965, 264ff. and Alföldi 1966, 713ff.


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the hero’s name began to function as a generic term because of the fame of his saga,\textsuperscript{61} the fact remains that Hamlet’s name also suggests, in some way, the theme of the hero’s stupidity.

\textit{Tarquin’s Dream and Ovine Stupidity}

Returning to Brutus and the meaning of \textit{brutus} in Latin: Insofar as they are endowed with a “heavy” intellect, animals also belong to the category of \textit{bruti}\textsuperscript{62} and, for this reason, may be used directly as models of stupidity. In Accius’ \textit{Brutus}, Tarquin tells of his dream:

\begin{quote}
\textit{visus est in somnis pastor ad me appellere pecus lanigerum eximia pulcritudine; duos consanguineous arietes inde eligi praeclarioremque alterum immolare me; deinde eius germanum cornibus conitier, in me arietare, eoque ictu me ad casum dari . . .}
\end{quote}

I dreamed that a shepherd drove his wool-bearing flock of extraordinary beauty toward me. From it two rams were chosen of the same stock, and I was sacrificing the more outstanding of the two. Then its brother pointed its horns at me, and drove at me, and from the blow I fell to the earth.

And the \textit{interpretatio} given by the seers:

\begin{quote}
\textit{proin vide ne quem tu esse hebetem deputes aequi ac pecus is sapientia munitum pectus egregie gerat teque regno expellat . . .}\textsuperscript{64}
\end{quote}

Therefore take care that he whom you deem stupid as a beast does not rather have a mind extraordinarily rich in genius, and drives you from your throne.

The interpreter’s explanation does not use the adjective \textit{brutus} (substituted here by \textit{hebes}), evidently not to give away the joke too soon by mentioning

\textsuperscript{61} Gollancz 1926, 31ff. On the possibility of a Nordic “translation” of \textit{Brutus}, see Powell’s (1894, 403) refutation. On the problem of Hamlet’s name, Davidson’s (1980, 59 n. 63) remarks are full and informative; see also Hansen 1983, 6f.
\textsuperscript{62} Plin. \textit{Nat. hist.} 9.87; 11.183; cf. \textit{TLL} II, 2215.
\textsuperscript{63} Fr. 19ff. Ribbeck\textsuperscript{3}.
\textsuperscript{64} Fr. 33ff. Ribbeck\textsuperscript{3}. 
the hero by name. Furthermore, of the two rams, the one that is chosen for sacrifice by the king is defined as *praeclarior* (“more outstanding”), which corresponds to the fact that Tarquin had deemed the elder of the two Junii superior (and therefore dangerous) and had killed him for that reason. This is effectively what Dionysius says of Brutus’ brother, too: “He showed his noble genius.” The dream, then, begins to lay bare Tarquin’s mistake in choosing (and killing) the better of the two brothers in appearance. But this is not what interests us here. Even more important is that in the symbolism of the dream, Brutus—the Fool—is transformed into an animal, specifically a ram: that is, he who is deemed to be “just like an animal” (*aeque ac pecus*) because of his intellect actually becomes a *pecus* in the dream. Even working with Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* in hand, there would be nothing objectionable in this. The linguistic metaphor—*brutus* referring both to “animal” and to “fool”—is simply transformed into a dream image, Brutus coming to be represented in the form of an animal. But as always with symbols, the figure is complex and merits more detailed analysis.

In Roman culture and Roman folklore (and elsewhere too) the sheep and the goat exemplify stupidity, as demonstrated not only by the imagery of proverbial and conventional language, but also by the creative imaginings of poets. The last scene of Plautus’ *Bacchides*, for example, turns on a long identification between two old men and sheep (*oves*) that the two shrewd sisters would have been very happy to “sheer” and that they find “stupid” (*stultae*).

The sheep (*ovis*) as an embodiment of stupidity in Roman culture suggests another interesting parallel with the story of Brutus: Quintus Fabius Maximus, the future Cunctator, once merited the nickname *Ovicula* (“Sheepish”), a name that Plutarch tells us was given him “for the tame and slow character that he had shown in infancy.” After describing Fabius’ tranquil nature, his
indulgence of his companions and so forth, the historian also records the fact that he “learned his lessons slowly and with great difficulty.” Moreover, among those who did not know him well he had nourished “the suspicion that he was stupid and lazy.” In other words, the future Fabius Maximus had gotten off to an anything but promising start! Furthermore, if one excludes the trait of tameness, Fabius’ adolescence seems to resemble closely that of Titus Manlius, the future Torquatus. As a young man, Torquatus too appeared “slow,” although he demonstrated a certain roughness of character as well (above all in the episode of the tribune Marcus Pomponius). But he, like Fabius, also played a role of the highest order in Roman affairs, at least after his famous encounter with the giant Gallic warrior. More specifically, however, we are told by Seneca that Titus Manlius had had “a brutish and obtuse childhood” (adolescentiam brutam atque hebetam) and by Livy that he was considered by everyone to be “of sluggish and obtuse intellect” (hebetis atque obtusi cordis). For this reason, his father had decided to send him to the country; and in fact, Livy emphasizes, it seemed quite fitting that he would then be living “among the animals” (inter pecudes).

A (false) Fool who as a boy carries the name of Brutus is represented as an aries; one who is “slow” who, again as a boy, was nicknamed Ovicula; and one who is hebes who is deemed by his father fit only for confinement out in the countryside inter pecudes: similar stories about heroes who spend their youth in folly (falsely in the case of Brutus; truly in that of Fabius and Manlius) only to mature to greatness and heroism. Lévi-Strauss’ traditional opposition of nature and culture—no doubt a fundamental opposition, but one which tends to be abused because of its generality—can be easily (and quite fittingly) applied here. The dunce—that is, the marginalized, the outcast—acquires a “natural” or animalesque name or symbol, while standing against him is the culture of men who deride and reject him as an animal, only to discover later that he is truly great. One dunce that is clever and decisive; another that is tame and reflexive; and another that is rough and brutal: it is curious that at Rome the greatness of heroes—even those who are most significant to the city’s history—is tied to such paradigms.

There is more to say about Fabius Maximus’ cognomen, Ovicula. Specifically, Plutarch’s report that “he learned his lessons slowly and with great difficulty” reminds us of a passage of Plautus that gives the impression of being proverbial. In Persa, the slave woman Sophoclidisca laments the fact that her mistress feels the need constantly to repeat her orders. Reasoning that

70. Liv. AUC. 7.4ff. On the story of Torquatus and his father, see Bettini 1988b, 18ff.
71. Sen. De ben. 3.37.4.
72. Liv. AUC. 7.4.
73. Liv. AUC. 7.4.
such repetition would be appropriate for someone *indocta* (“uneducated”), *immemor* (“forgetful”) or *insipiens* (“stupid”), she concludes that her mistress must consider her *barda* (“stupid, slow”) and *rustica* (“a bumpkin”)—and yet, it has been five years since she joined her mistress’s service, “when, meanwhile, if a sheep had come to school, I believe it would have learned to read and write already.” Evidently, the “sheep at school” that learns to read and to write is a paradigm of comic absurdity. This suggests a possibly proverbial and folkloric context for the attribution of the name Ovicula (“Sheepish”) to a person who has difficulty learning in Roman culture, just as in certain folkloric traditions of Asian and northern Europe there exist stories centered around the strange and absurd consequences of a country bumpkin sending an ox to school. Such stories may explain Sophoclidisca’s utterance; likewise, figurative and proverbial expressions like Sophoclidisca’s may frequently be transformed into ironic and silly stories.

Returning to our inventory of the various animalesque representations of stupidity in Roman culture, it is worth noting the fate of *hircus* (“he-goat”). In Plautus, the rude country slave Grumio receives from the slick city slave Tranio the nickname *rusticus hircus* (“rustic he-goat”). Earlier, Tranio had defined him also as *frutex,* an expression meaning literally “piece of wood,” but frequently also used in the sense of “stupid.” He who is like a he-goat is also stupid. Clearer still is the proverb that Petronius puts in the mouth of the freedman Trimalchio when he grows angry with Ascyltus: *quid nunc stupes tamquam hircus in ervilia* (“Why are you standing there stupidly like a he-goat in the vetch?”). This sense of *hircus* seems to corroborate the interpretation of those two lines of Catullus’ famous poem on the *salax taberna:*

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solis licere, quidquid est puellarum,
confutuere et putare ceteros hircos
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That only you are allowed to fuck all the girls in the world, and to consider all others he-goats?

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77. This is one of the ways in which novellas and stories frequently arise: cf. Šklovskij 1968, 205ff., regarding *calembour* such as “The Devil and Hell,” which is transformed narratively into the novella of Boccaccio by the same name.
81. Petr. *Sat.* 57.11.
82. Cat. *Carm.* 37.4–5.
I do not believe that Catullus is alluding here to the legendary “stench of the he-goat” (hirci odor) (or worse, to the he-goat’s sexual potency—just the opposite of what the sense demands). He is simply stating that the contubernales should not think of everyone else as stupid “goats” whose girlfriends can be snatched from under their noses: in effect, Catullus is warning them that “we will not remain here like some hirci in ervilia.”

The term vervex (“wether”) has a similar sense. The aforementioned freedman of Trimalchio had earlier apostrophized Ascyltus, asking quid rides, vervex (“what are you laughing at, you wether?”). Similarly, Juvenal tells us of men who are born “in the country of the castrated bulls and under an opaque sky” (vervecum patria crassoque sub aere). Consider, moreover, the formation of balatro (“babbler; jester, buffoon”), which is obviously connected with balare (“to bleat”), denoting the sound made by the sheep. It is interesting to note that in the scholia to Horace’s poems balatrones are defined as rustici homines inepti et triviales (“rustic fellows, inept and buffoonish”). The rustici and inepti—who have no idea of the ways of this world—are assimilated to sheep via balare, just as the awkward Grumio, the rough and stupid (frutex) country slave, was defined as hircus rusticus.

The use of the sheep and the he-goat as paradigms of “stupidity” in Roman culture should now be clear. Of course, Aristotle had already claimed that sheep and goats are “foolish” animals and modern parallels can also be cited. Perhaps it is most interesting, however, to note the function that this paradigm plays in the iconographic tradition. In his monumental exegesis of symbols written in 1556 and entitled Hieroglyphica, Pierio Valeriano, for example, addresses the representation of “stupidity” in art. The beautiful woodcut that opens the paragraph regarding this theme depicts a kneeling king, wearing a royal mantle and crown and touching the earth with his hands; next to him stands a sheep. The author remarks:

in primis autem significatum illud super ovem comperi, ut ex eius simulacro stultitia significaretur: nam usurpatione vulgi, ovis cognomento insipientes appellantur.

83. Petr. Sat. 57.2.
86. Hor. Sat. 2.3.166; cf. Jerome, Ep. 95.4. It is nevertheless difficult to provide a precise description of the meaning of balatro: cf. Ernout-Meillet 1965, s.v.
88. I mean expressions, in Italian, such as “castroneria” (“stupidity” < castrone, “wether”) and “pecorone” (“muttonhead”); cf. also August. Ep. 26, quidam tante sunt futilitatis, ut non multum a pecoribus differant: quos moriones vulgo appellant (“some are so stupid that they do not differ much from sheep; popularly, they are called ‘moriones’”).
89. Pierio Valeriano 1556, 74ff.
First of all, I discovered this meaning concerning the sheep, that stupidity is represented by its depiction: for in vulgar usage, stupid men are called by the nickname “sheep.”

Fifty years later, Cesare Ripa, in his 1776 treatise *Iconologia*, likewise noted the importance of the sheep in representations of “stupidity.” According to Ripa, “Foolishness” should be represented as “a nude woman smiling and laying obscenely upon the ground with a sheep next to her,”90 while “Stupidity” should instead be pictured as “a woman who rests her hand upon the head of a goat”91 and “Ineptitude” as “a woman seated with her head bowed, and next to her a sheep.”92

Returning, finally, to Tarquin’s dream. It is clear that Brutus’ transformation into an *aries* (“ram”) depends upon a model of ovine stupidity that was widespread in Roman cultural representation, underlying various proverbial sayings, *cognomina*, poetic images, linguistic metaphors and so on. As a symbol, however, the ram is capable of expressing a further meaning, equally operating in the story as the hero’s “stupidity.” An *aries* is not simply an *ovis*: instead, it is a strong, horn-bearing animal that is above all prone to the act of *arietare*—that is, “butting with the horns,” as rams do. Brutus’ animalsque representation is therefore capable of signifying not only his stupidity but also the force with which he is destined to overthrow the power of the king. To use a Freudian expression, Brutus’ representation as a ram operates in the dream as a true and proper symbolic “condensation”: the *aries* represents his “stupidity” (he is *hebes aequa ac pecus*, as the seer says) as well as the hidden and dangerous force that will allow him to drive Tarquin from the throne. At the same time, it is impossible to deny the connotations of “kingliness” and “nobility” that are expressed by the image of the ram and that fully enter into the complex bundle of symbolism, enriching its efficacy and explaining Accius’ choice of symbol (if it was he who first elaborated the episode of the dream).93 This symbolic condensation leads directly to the next part of the story, to the singular gift that Brutus offers at Delphi. Before considering that, however, another detail of the legend warrants our attention.

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90. Ripa 1766, V, 233ff.
92. Ripa 1766, II, 216.
93. Cf. the observations of Fauth 1976, adding also the evidence of Artem. 2.12, where the connection between “ram” and “king” is clear.
A Talking Dog

As Ogilvie notes, Zonaras recounts a unique element of the Brutus story. Tarquin had in fact been terrified by a series of disquieting dreams: in a garden, some vultures attack a gathering of young eagles; a serpent appears while the king is feasting with his companions, causing them to flee. Livy includes the dream of the serpent, while Dionysius adds a story about a pestilence. In all cases, the result is the same: Tarquin’s two sons, Titus and Arruns, are sent to consult the oracle at Delphi. The god responds: “Tarquin will be dethroned on that day, when a dog will speak with a human voice.” Pliny appears to preserve a trace of this version, saying that among his notes were omens “that a dog spoke . . . and a serpent barked, when Tarquin was expelled from the kingdom” (canem locutum . . . et serpentem latrasse, cum pulsus est Tarquinius ex regno). Besides the manifestation of omens recurring in Roman tradition such as an animal speaking with a human voice, it is hard to imagine that the god’s enigmatic response does not allude in some way to the action of Brutus, since in fact it is he who will bring about Tarquin’s fall from power. It is possible, then, that the oracular response alludes also to the hero’s feigned brutalitas, to his animal nature that, in the end, resolves itself unexpectedly (and ruinously for the king) into the most human of capacities: speaking. Indeed, lacking a human voice (aphasia) appears to be one of the specific characteristics that define what is brutus in Roman culture. A fragment of Aphranius reads: non possum verbum facere: obbrutui (“I cannot speak a word: I have become brutus”). Furthermore, one of the characteristics of Titus Manlius, the future Torquatus—the tardus who was considered inter pecudes—was precisely that he was infacundiore lingua impromptior (“rather slow with a rather ineloquent tongue”), and Claudius was well known for his confused and difficult speech. As for the image of the “dog,” it is likely brought into play in order to designate a person neglected, mistreated and despised by all. When Plautus’ Amphitryon finally reaches his palace, he ends with a grand and noble salutation to his

94. Zon. Hist. 7.11. The difference in the versions is noted by Ogilvie 1965, 318.
95. Liv. AUC. 1.57.
96. Dion. Ant. Rom. 4.69.
97. In Zonaras, Brutus is not named. He is named, however, a few lines below when the story of the embassy is told from the beginning (including the gift of the “stick,” the god’s response, etc.). Probably Zonaras simply concatenated two different versions of the story, without mentioning this expressly.
99. Fr. 418 Ribbeck.
100. On Torquatus, see Liv. AUC. 7.4; on Claudius, see Suet. Claud. 4.6 and 30; Dion. Ant. Rom. 60.2.2; and esp. Sen. Apo. 5.2.
wife; but Alcmena is not so enthused, believing not only that she has already seen him, but that she has just left his company. Sosia remarks, “Although he is long awaited, she greets him hardly more than anyone would greet a dog” (exspectatum eum salutat magis haud quisquam quam canem). \(^{101}\) Brutus, kept at the palace as a ludibrium for the entertainment of the members of the court, is treated no better. It is likely, therefore, that the god’s enigmatic pronouncement figures the moment at which Brutus will be revealed through the image of a “dog that begins to speak like a man.” Zonaras goes on to say that Tarquin was relieved by the oracle’s words because “he thought that the prophecy would never come true.” What he did not imagine was that the “dog” was already in the palace, and that it was already preparing to speak with a human voice.

If this hypothesis is correct, Brutus’ stupidity appears to have been realized (at least in the version of the story given by Zonaras) not so much in his “speaking and acting nonsense” as in his vague and dull muteness (a kind of generic infacundia like Titus Manlius’). Brutus went about the palace in these conditions, despised and mocked by the powerful—“like a dog.”

**The Hero Poses One Riddle and Solves Another**

Dionysius recounts that a pestilence descended upon Rome, afflicting young boys and girls and, in particular, pregnant women, who suffered the plague’s worst affects when giving birth. \(^{102}\) Tarquin therefore dispatched his sons Arruns and Titus to consult the oracle at Delphi and with them he sent Brutus—but only as an amusement for his two sons (“so they could mock and insult him,” according to Dionysius; “more as an amusement than as a companion,” according to Livy). \(^{103}\) Having reached Delphi, the two Tarquins dutifully offered magnificent gifts to the god at the temple, whereas Brutus offered only a piece of wood. Naturally, this provoked the ridicule of his cousins (katagelasantes): \(^{104}\) they failed to realize, however, that Brutus had in fact hollowed out the piece of wood and hidden inside it a bar of gold—an offering that Livy describes as “an enigmatic image (per ambages) of his own genius.” \(^{105}\) Thus, the hero goes to the oracle not only to interrogate the god, but also to pose riddles. Moreover, when Titus and Arruns receive a response from the god to the question they had been sent to ask,

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105. Liv. *AUC.* 1.56.
they ask another question, wishing to know which of them would take the throne after their father’s death. To this further enquiry, the divine voice of the oracle responds that the kingship will fall to whoever “first . . . gives his mother a kiss” (primus . . . osculum matri tulerit). Titus and Arruns conspire to keep their brother Sextus, who had remained at Rome, in the dark and agree to give their mother a kiss both at the same time so as to divide the kingdom between themselves. What they did not understand was that the god’s response was a riddle and that to gain the throne they would first have to solve that riddle. Brutus would eventually “solve” the god’s cryptic response by kissing the earth, reasoning that the earth itself is the mother of all men. But before doing so, he posed a riddle of his own—the riddle of the gold inside the piece of wood. What was the meaning of this enigmatic act? To understand its significance, it is necessary to examine some of the other details of the story: in particular, the theme of pestilence.

An Oedipal Plague

In Propp’s terms, pestilence functions in narrative as the “initial lack” or loss that a hero must somehow remedy. Immediately following the onset of plague, in fact, the hero is sent to the place where he will have to confront and surmount his main task. The pestilence afflicting Tarquin’s Rome is akin to other plagues of what we might call an “Oedipal” type, targeting young boys and girls and especially pregnant women. This plague occurs, moreover, in a city whose king is a criminal—an assassin known to have conspired with a sister-in-law as perverse as he. Tarquin had murdered his father-in-law, Servius Tullius, the former king, and in the act’s grim denouement mutilated the king’s corpse under the wheels of a cart. Not content with this, Tarquin also murdered his brother and his own wife, his brother-in-law (Brutus’ father) and his son (Brutus’ brother and Tarquin’s uterine nephew). Furthermore, Tarquin had engaged in sexual acts with his accomplice, his own sister-in-law. Besides killing his own father and his close relatives, that is, Tarquin had also committed incest. It is difficult to imagine there is not some link, then, between the pestilence and the king’s criminality. Frequently in the ancient world (but also in many non-Western cultures), the interpretation of natural calamities and in particular of “fléaux” is articulated in terms of guilt and impurity: homicide, sexual transgression and similar crimes are thought to provoke the anger of divinity, bringing pestilence or famine.

It is possible, then, that the pestilence unleashed upon Rome at that time functioned as a clear signal of the king’s fast approaching hour of reckoning. In Livy’s account, a serpent in Tarquin’s palace replaces the pestilence as motivation for sending the embassy to Delphi; grim omens presage the coming ruin of the king and, on the narrative level, motivate sending Brutus and the two Tarquins to the oracle. Prompting the expedition to Delphi, the pestilence, the serpent in the palace (and it is no less a serpent that “barks,” as Pliny says) and the flock of young eagles attacked by vultures in Zonaras all represent equivalent elements in the story from the point of view of narrative function. Yet, we must emphasize again how fragmentary and disconnected the narrative is in our sources. We are not told explicitly what questions the Tarquins ask of the oracle regarding the omens or the pestilence, nor the answer that the god offers in response. What should Tarquin do? What is the meaning of all the terrible portents? Our sources do not contain any hint of such questions; at best, the version by Zonaras offers a fragment of the response in the image of the dog speaking with the human voice. But it is clear that these are the scattered remains of a shipwrecked story.

Two Intelligent Brothers and the Third, A Fool

Returning to the narrative function of the pestilence or omens—an element in which the “folk-tale” structure of the Brutus legend is most readily

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108. Liv. AUC. 1.56. Livy’s narrative is analyzed from a stylistic perspective by Burck 1934, 170ff.
110. Zon. Hist. 7.11. According to Schachermeyr 1932, the theme of “omens” is taken from Accius or Ennius, again attributing to a poet the connection between the embassy to Delphi and these prodigious events (or pestilence).
111. This is noted also by Parke and Wormell 1956, I, 267.
112. A section of Paulus Festus’ Epitome on the institution of the ludi tauri (fr. 479 Lindsay) may also be cited in connection with the pestilence as recounted by Dionysius; cf. also Paul. Fest. De sign. verb. fr. 479 (Lindsay), regnant superbo Tarquinio, cum magna incidisset pestilentia in mulieres gravidas. Moreover, Serv. in Aen. 2.140 notes that Tarquin was ordered to establish the ludi tauri “from the book of the fates” (e libris fatalibus), on account of the fact that “every birth of the women turned out badly” (omnis partus mulierum male cedebat). Others suggest that these games were instituted by the Sabines proper pestilentiam . . . ut luces publica in has hostias verteretur; cf. Liv. AUC. 39.22; Wissowa 1912, 388 and 488; Gagé 1955, 62 n. 1 and 67ff. Servius also associates their name with the sacrifice of sterile heifers (quae [vacca] sterilis est, taurea vocatur: unde ludi tauri dicit). This agrees with a statement in Paul the Deacon’s Epitome of Festus (fr. 479 Lindsay) that the ludi tauri were held in honor of the dei inferi, to whom sterile heifers were sacrificed (Bettini 1988b, 232).
apparent, as many scholars have noted.\footnote{De Sanctis 1956, 394; Parke and Wormell 1956, 267ff.; Ogilvie 1965, 218: but this recognition has never inspired any study of the nature and function of this structure.} As we have seen, the “hero” of the tale—Brutus—is accompanied by two companions, Arruns and Titus, his cousins, in accordance with the typical folkloric figure of triplication.\footnote{Discussion and bibliography in Bettini 1988b, 150 and n. 29, and 242.} Through this mechanism, a foolish hero, sent only as a \textit{ludibrium} for his companions (but who will overcome the test), is set in contradistinction to two intelligent companions (who actually are destined for defeat). The paradigm is regular here; in fact it is identical in terms of its narrative content to the structure of numerous other fables. The paradigm typically involves three brothers—two who are intelligent and one who is considered a fool—setting off together or individually to accomplish a specific task. In carrying out this task, or when the Fool asks permission to undertake it along with his “good” brothers, they mock him, misunderstanding his behavior and mistaking his naïve (but actually decisive) actions.

In the Norwegian fables told by Asbjørnsen and Moe, for example, “Cinder Boy” is the third of three brothers. He is described as a boy “without salt in the gourd,” someone who “was not good at anything, who didn’t do a darned thing; he just kept himself planted next to the hearth like a cat, digging around in the ash and whittling sticks of pine to light in the fire.”\footnote{Asbjørnsen and Moe 1962, 114.} When he learns what his task will be—to be called a liar by the princess,\footnote{Asbjørnsen and Moe 1962, 110.} to make the princess laugh,\footnote{Asbjørnsen and Moe 1962, 112.} to cut down an oak tree that provides shade for the palace\footnote{Asbjørnsen and Moe 1962, 619.} and so forth—Cinder Boy asks his father’s permission to accompany his brothers, but they only laugh at him when he reveals his wish to attempt the task.\footnote{Cf., e.g., Asbjørnsen and Moe 1962, 342.} More specifically, they insult him when he seems to treat certain apparently worthless things as absolutely crucial. For example, when he wishes to go and see who is cutting wood on the mountain (and in doing so discovers the “giver” who grants him the magical means of fulfilling the “initial lack”), his brothers tell him: “You’re just like a child! You ought to learn how things go in the world.”\footnote{Asbjørnsen and Moe 1962, 620.} Similarly, in a Russian fable entitled \textit{The Fool and the Birch}, three brothers—two who are intelligent, one who is a fool—go to market to sell their inheritance.\footnote{Afanasjev 1953, 541ff.} The Fool claims to have sold his part to a birch tree and is mocked by his two brothers—“oh, what a
fool!”—but through this ridiculous barter he has in fact obtained a hoard of treasure.123 In another Russian fable, The Princess Who Solves Riddles,124 Ivan the Fool is the third of three brothers and is mocked by his father when he wishes to go propose a riddle to the princess:125 “Where do you think you’re going, fool? She has beheaded many men, all much better than you.”126 Of course, the Fool succeeds, shrewdly suggesting to the princess the only riddle she is incapable of solving.

Brutus the Fool and Ivan the Fool share certain curious similarities. On one hand, there is the Roman Fool, the third of three cousins, who poses riddles at Delphi, offering the god a piece of wood (actually filled with gold) and solving riddles himself. On the other hand, there is the Russian Fool, the third of three brothers, who poses riddles that are impossible to solve and like Brutus acquires the kingship (by winning the hand of the princess). Yet the most interesting analogies run between Brutus and Khusràw, especially in his enigmatic speech to his grandfather, and between Brutus and the prince of riddlers, Hamlet. Even Saxo Grammaticus’ Amleth employs a brand of “clever” speech that probably has roots in the Nordic riddling tradition.127 (In certain cases, the author himself seems not to understand the full meaning of what Amleth says!)128 In any case, there is little doubt that the hero, speaking like a Fool, actually poses kenningar (riddles) in perfect skaldic style. For example, when Amleth and his companions traverse a beach and come upon a ship’s rudder, they tell him that it is a huge knife, to which Amleth responds, “With this, you can cut a huge side of ham” (meaning the sea). When they ask him to look at the sand and call it flour, Amleth responds, “The storms of the spraying sea have ground it.”129 Amleth, in other words, understands tricky speech. He also poses riddles that others find incomprehensible. When he returns home after making love to a young girl (the future Shakespearian Ophelia), he is mockingly asked, “On what couch have you made love?” and responds, “On a mare’s hoof, on a cock’s crest and on roof beams.” Making his way to the rendezvous, Amleth had in fact collected pieces of all of those

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123. Afanasjev 1953, 541.
125. The tale corresponds to a frequent type: see Thompson 19662, 224ff., type 851.
128. The historian of the Danes, himself far from the world he was describing, appears in these cases to be more a faithful “reporter” than a creative artist, which seems to speak in favor of his reliability: Powell 1984, 400.
129. Sax. Gramm. 3.6.10. The second of these riddles is cited by the skald Snaebiörn (Koch and Cipolla 1993, 152 n. 41).
things; by placing them on the ground where he and his lover would lie down together, he would not have to lie.\textsuperscript{130} His enemies, naturally, did not see the truth hidden beneath his absurd words and responded only with laughter.\textsuperscript{131}

Capable of understanding enigmatic speech, Amleth not only poses riddles, but also solves them, like Brutus. Consider the episode of Amleth’s tryst with the future Ophelia. The hero’s enemies devise this encounter in order to reveal, finally, whether or not Amleth is feigning stupidity. For this purpose, they even send a group of spies into the forest to report on his behavior. And Amleth would have been discovered, if one of his brothers had not remained loyal to him and come to his aid. The young man catches a fly, to which he fastens a piece of straw as a tail, leaving it to fly about in a spot through which Amleth must pass on his way to meet the girl. The prince notices this insect with a strange tail, stops out of curiosity, and recognizes “the silent warning to watch out for a trick” (\textit{tacitum cavendae fraudis monitum}).\textsuperscript{132}

As a result, Amleth brings the girl to a place where no one will be able to spy on them. Naturally, the enigmatic formulation of a warning does not pose a problem for the (false) fool: he who continuously poses riddles also knows how to solve them. On the other hand, the absolute incapacity of those around the hero to comprehend what he is doing and saying remains consistent.

This brings us back to Ivan the Fool, a character who, like Brutus and Amleth, evinces a privileged connection between riddling and stupidity in culture and in creative narrative. The (false) Fool’s way of speaking is enigmatic in its very structure: accordingly, he is also capable of solving the unsolvable. The riddle, like a dream or an oracle, speaks a language that is simultaneously both above and below culture: to understand and to formulate riddles, one must have a mind that is capable of encapsulating these two contradictory characteristics. This, then, is the nature of the (false) Fool: he is too clever, too intelligent to be understood and is thus mistaken for one

\textsuperscript{130} Sax. Gramm. 3.6.11.

\textsuperscript{131} The interpretation given of Amleth’s obscure allusions is that the names of the objects listed also denote the varieties of grass that formed the lovers’ “bed” (Koch and Cipolla 1993, 152 n. 43): but the text speaks of \textit{borum omnium . . . particulae} (“fragments of all these”), an expression not particularly apt to describe vegetation. On Koch and Cipolla’s interpretation, taken from Davidson 1980, 61 n. 71, who in turn took it from Dollerup 1975, see below, n. 193. Amleth has now assumed the characteristic language of the Fool: Segre 1990, 89ff.

\textsuperscript{132} Sax. Gramm. 3.6.10. For various attempts at explaining this, see Davidson 1980, 60, n. 69, with bibliography. None of the interpretations seems convincing, and the \textit{oestrum} fitted with a blade of straw remains enigmatic: see Hansen 1983, 132f. Purely as a suggestion, I mention the possibility that the Italian proverb “aver la coda di paglia” (“to have a guilty conscience,” but literally “to have a straw tail”) may rest upon folkloric stories of this type (or vice versa).
“lacking sense.” He is like a riddle—a discourse so profound that it unites that which cannot be together and is thus close to “senselessness.”

The Gold in the Sticks: “Stupid” Wood, Ill-Omened Wood

The unique offering made by Brutus to the god at Delphi is an enigma in itself; but how did the hero “pose” this riddle? Dionysius tells us that Brutus hollowed out the center of a log and placed a golden ingot inside it, and that this constituted his offering to the god. He does not bother explaining the meaning of Brutus’ strange behavior. Livy, however, does so in the following way: “He is said to have brought as a gift for Apollo a golden rod encased within a log of cornel hollowed out for this purpose, an enigmatic image of his own nature” (aureum baculum inclusum corneo cavato ad id baculo tulisse donum Apollini dicitur, per ambages effigiem ingenii sui).

In this way, the offering functions as a riddle symbolically figuring the hero’s own feigned stupidity. The “false Fool” is represented as a “container” of worthless material that conceals a heart of gold. In some sense, then, the story reproduces its own basic narrative isotopy in the form of a riddle. Brutus’ hollowed-out log reiterates the concealed, deceptive nature of his “stupidity.” This symbolism functions in the case also of rings; ancient dream theory states that “solid rings are better in every case; hollow rings . . . indicate tricks or betrayals, because they hide something inside them.” In other words, what is hollow or hollowed out signifies deceit. But what of the material composition of Brutus’ peculiar offering? The meaning of “gold” is clear: what is aureus is by nature also eximius (“valuable”). It is not accidental that “stupidity” is often defined in Latin as plumbeus; in an opposition articulated according to metallurgic categories—worthless/precious, dull/splendid—he who is truly stupid is “leaden,” whereas he who conceals his superior intelligence is aureus.

What, moreover, is the meaning of the “log” concealing or enveloping...
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the gold? The sources speak of a “wooden log”: in one case, the type of wood is specified as elder (sabucus), in another as cornel (cornus). The symbolism becomes clearer when we recall that in Latin the system of terms denoting (pieces of) wood—codex (“bark”), frutex (“bush”), truncus (“trunk”), stipes (“trunk”)—are used as insults referring precisely to “stupidity.” (In the iconological tradition, furthermore, someone stupid could be represented with a reed or wooden cane in his hand.)

It appears, then, that Brutus, in dedicating a piece of wood to the god, intended to signify—through the language of folklore—his own “stupidity” as a frutex or stipes. Is there any further meaning to the choice of sabucus (“elder”) and cornus (“cornel”)? According to Lucilius, sabucus was considered the worst variety of wood—ardum, miserinum, atque infelix lignum sabucum vocat (“He calls the sabucus a kind of wood that is dry, pitiful and unlucky”). Besides being “unlucky” (infelix), the elder was also considered “dry” and—as far as can be told from a corrupted text—worthless. What impression would Brutus’ offering have made, then, in comparison to the no doubt sumptuous gifts presented to the god by the young Tarquins? To offer such a worthless piece of wood, Brutus must really have been a fool—a metaphorical frutex. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe how figurative language seems to have preserved, even after so many centuries, the markedly negative characterization of the sabucus, precisely in relation to

139. The question does not seem to have troubled scholars, and the few interpretations that have been given are not convincing. Pais (1926, 170 n. 1) makes a reference to the cult of Apollo kníncios (cf. Frazer 1898, 333), treating this as a sort of “Delphic” symbol. Gagé 1955, “sans doute (?) . . . affabulation d’un symbole delphique” (or even a transposition of an ancient symbol of the gens Iunia unknown to scholarship). Fauth (1976, 501) hesitatingly refers to this as an allusion to the “Hirtenstab” detectable also in the scepter of the Tantalids. Mastrocinque (1988, 19 n. 10) suggests that “the primary meaning of this anecdote was that of a consecration of the regal scepter to Apollo,” but the context does not point in that direction. On the Delphic episode, see more recently Feldherr 1997, 144ff., who reveals how “the concealed or hidden meaning” was characteristic of Tarquin’s mode of communication, since he speaks to his sons in ambages just as Brutus speaks in riddles.

140. Dion. Ant. Rom. 4.69.3; Dio Cass. 2.11; Zon. Hist. 7.11.
141. Anon. De vir. illustr. 10.2.
142. Liv. AUC. 1.56.
143. Cf., e.g., Ter. Heaut. 877; Petr. Sat. 74.
144. Cf., e.g., Plaut. Most. 13; Apul. Apol. 66.
145. Cf., e.g., Cic. De nat. deor. 1.84; Plin. 19.
146. Cf., e.g., Ter. Heaut. 877; Cic. Piz. 19; De har. resp. 5; Petr. Sat. 43.3; Claud. Eutr. 1.126.
147. Ripa 1766, IV, 347 (design of C. Mariotti incised by C. Grandi) and 349.
148. Fr. 733 Marx.
149. The text is corrupt (unlikely an iambic correction miserinum: cf. Lindsay 1894, 7ff.): TLL VIII, 1130 for other possible cases of miserinum. Cf. Bettini 1988a, 89ff.
150. André 1964, 85.
151. Cic. De re pub. 2.24.6 (Tarquin), dona magnifica Apollinem misit (apparently referring to the preceding embassy: Altheim 1938, 263ff.; Parke and Wormell 1956, 267ff.).
152. The sabucus is called frutex by Plin. Nat. hist. 16.179.
“stupidity.” In Giulio Cesare Croce’s Bertoldino, Marcolfa says of his stupid son, “He is so awkward and stupid, I don’t know if he is made of stucco or of elder-wood (sambuco).” Elder is a worthless kind of wood: hollow, pithy and unfit for kindling even when it is dry. It is hollow, just as a stupid person is “hollow.” Little wonder, then, that this term comes to designate the worthless and foolish man.

In Livy, the type of wood chosen by Brutus for his offering is instead “cornel” (cornus). For Latin speakers, this plant came in two varieties: mas and femina. Cornus mas corresponds to our “cornel,” a plant of reddish and very hard wood. This variety of cornel was in fact so valued by the Romans for its hardness and rigidity that they fashioned their hastae (“spears”) from it. Cornus femina, on the other hand, is our “dogwood”—what Pliny calls sanguineae frutices—a shrub with soft wood and large reddish leaves. It is hard to imagine that Brutus used cornus mas for his purposes; as Pliny describes it, this variety of wood is “one of the strongest and hardest.” Elsewhere we learn that it does not have pith (medulla) and that it is tota ossea (“all bone”). Hollowing out a log of cornel wood would have been a real feat! Furthermore, the mention of sabucus—a soft and malleable type of wood—invites us to believe that we are dealing with cornus femina, which Pliny defines as ligno . . . fungosa et inutilis (“with spongy wood and useless”). And elder is, again according to Pliny, fungosi generis. In other words, sabucus and cornus femina are two varieties of wood that one could conceivably hollow out, and which might serve ideally for concealing an ingot or “rod” of gold. Therefore, if, as appears most likely, Livy is referring to the cornus femina (corneo cavato ad id baculo), we should conclude that in this case as well Brutus is represented as choosing a particularly useless and worthless type of wood to make his ridiculous offering.

Brutus’ choice of offering connotes the traits of uselessness, worthlessness and “stupidity,” but also something worse. The elder tree is defined in Roman culture as arbor infelix, a characterization related to the fact that it produces bacam nigrum (“a black berry”); moreover, it was associated with the so-called furcae sabuceae (“The Forks of Elder”), which featured centrally

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153. Croce 1943, 104.
154. Plin. Nat. hist. 105.228. On the differences between the two species, the different critical meaning, etc., see Bayer 1971, 9ff.; André 1964.
161. Tárquitius Priscus in Macr. 3.20.25.
in the supplicia annua of the dog. But dogwood, sanguineae frutices—the other type of wood indicated by the sources as Brutus’ choice for his “stupid” offering—is also arbor infelix. This particular detail—that these two varieties of plant are infelix—is likely also relevant to the story. In evaluating any story of folklore, the ethnographic context (considered as a complex of the beliefs about the particular facts and particular elements that the story puts in play) is surely significant. We must pay a great deal of attention, therefore, to the specific meanings that the story’s “objects” have for the culture in which it operates. The two types of wood that Brutus uses in the different variants of the story are both “ill-omened,” “unlucky”: infelices. According to Tarquitius Priscus, the arbores infelices as a class fall under the protection of the infernal gods, and Pliny defines these same plants as “trees . . . condemned by superstition” (arbores . . . damnatae religione). In short, they would not be considered at all appropriate for use as an offering to a god. Besides being “stupid,” such an offering would perhaps be deemed unsuitable also from a religious or ritual point of view. As Livy explains, Brutus intended to represent himself—his own “outside” and his own “inside”—in his offering. As regarded his “outside,” Brutus must have wished to suggest the image not only of stupidity but also, in some way, of what was “negative” or “ill-omened.”

The Tenacity of Folklore:
The Dunce, the Gold and the Wood

Brutus offers the god an image of his true self and of his own true intelligence, concealed beneath a façade of “stupidity.” Like Plato’s Silenus—the worn wooden box that conceals a statue of the god—Brutus’ “log” also manifests two contrasting characteristics. In this sense, the object that Brutus offers to the god appears to function as an oxumōron, a figure of speech that unites in a single syntagm two words or elements of opposite meaning, like Horace’s concordia discors or Milton’s “darkness visible.” The most noble and

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163. Tarquitius Priscus in Marc. 3.20.2f. Patricides were also punished by means of virgae sanguineae: Modest. Dig. 48.9.9.1. The specifically infelix and negative (and also markedly Roman) character of the cornus femina makes it unlikely that Brutus’ offering is an allusion to the cult of Apollo Kraneios, as Pais thought.
165. Macr. 3.20.3.
desirable material—gold—is placed inside the most worthless and maligned material—a piece of useless and “unlucky” wood. The object is thus “oxy-

moronic” in the same way that the “false Fool” himself is oxymoronic, with his sapiens insipientia. Better yet, the false Fool is himself the oxymoron par excellence, since the meaning of that Greek rhetorical term is “clever fool.” To designate the simultaneous coincidence of two opposites, and the linguistic effect produced by this, Greek culture hit upon the metaphor of “clever 
stupidity.” Perhaps we had not realized that Brutus, Amleth and the other 
“false Fools” of folklore are in fact rhetorical figures—in a very literal sense.

Amleth's Unci: Wooden Hooks and Clever Tricks

When we first encounter Hamlet, or Amleth, in Saxo Grammaticus,¹⁶⁸ we

find him wallowing in the dirt next to the hearth. In this, he is practically identical to the Norwegian “Cinder Boy” mentioned above.¹⁶⁹ Cinder Boy, moreover, in the opening tableau of his story,¹⁷⁰ was intent on tempering by flame certain sticks of pine that had been brought to light the fire. Amleth dedicates himself to a similar task: he tries to harden certain wooden unci (“curved stakes”) in the fire. Whenever someone asks what he is doing, he responds that he is making “sharp darts for avenging my father” (acuta . . . in ulti
don patris specula), provoking the laughter, or surprise, of his interlocu-
tors: no one has ever heard of a curved arrow before. But others are suspi-
cious: is the Fool hiding something? Why care so much for fashioning these useless—senseless—objects? They are not useless and senseless objects, of course. As Saxo notes, “this thing would later aid his design” (ea res proposito eius postmodum opitulata fuerit). Indeed, in making those unci, Amleth too “was representing the hidden genius of the master through the practice of a modest art” (exiguae artis industria arcanum opificis ingenium figurabat), just as Brutus intended his “log of gold” as a cryptic symbol of himself and of his intellect.¹⁷¹ Yet what was the (false) Fool’s dark design, and how did it involve those wooden “hooks”? The story continues: Upon his return from Britain, where he had cleverly uncovered the treacherous intentions of his companions, Amleth takes advantage of the drunken stupor into which the entire Nordic kingdom has fallen to set a trap for his enemies—quite liter-
ally, since he contrives to bring down upon their heads a heavy curtain that

hangs suspended from the palace ceiling, staking it to the ground with the very same wooden hooks (unci) for which he had been mocked (the curtain is also symbolic in the fact that it had been woven by his mother). He then sets the palace on fire, killing all inside. Unlike Brutus’s “log,” Amleth’s hooks conceal no golden rod inside: they are, as Amleth himself affirms, “sharp darts for avenging my father” (acuta spicula in ultionem patris). But the unusual, enigmatic, even incomprehensible shape of Amleth’s unci, correlating to the false Fool’s hidden purpose, also represent both his own “empty” stupidity and his superior intelligence: “the hidden genius of the master,” as Saxo says. So in this case too it is an object—and specifically a piece of wood—that operates as a symbol of the nature of the false Fool, reproduced in the form of a material “riddle.”

The narrative function played by the unci in Amleth’s tale may be confirmed by the traditional interpretation of this episode enshrined in an Old Icelandic play on words: in that language, the word krókr means both “hook” and “clever trick.” While Saxo’s account does not explicitly point to this interpretation, it is also possible that he himself did not comprehend the fullness of meaning with which the episode was endowed in his Nordic source, and was therefore limited to transmitting only the letter of the story, so to speak (which he nevertheless succeeded in doing, even without that additional meaning). If this hypothesis is correct, Amleth’s “wooden hooks” are a verbal guise for what are simultaneously “clever tricks”—again reproducing, on the linguistic level, what the narrative structure already makes clear: that the Fool’s “sticks” symbolize at once his stupidity and his superior ability.

A Dry Birch Full of Gold

Returning to the gold in the sticks: The Russian fable known as The Fool and the Birch represents a distinct and widespread type in folklore: the same basic narrative underlies, for example, the story of Vardiello in Basil’s Pentameron, part of Giufà’s Sicilian cycle, and certain Georgian tales. In the Russian version of this story, three brothers—two of whom are intelligent, while the third is stupid—receive an inheritance from their father. When the brothers go to the market in the city to sell their individual parts, the third brother—

172. Sax. Gramm. 3.6.24. The technique used for the murder recalls that of fishing for salmon (where a net is fixed precisely with stakes): Davidson 1980, II, 62 n. 81. Davidson’s (1980, II, 62 n. 81) observation that Amelethus here takes on the behavior of the “trickster” is astute.
175. Pitré 1875, 190; Wardrop 1894, 165ff.
the Fool—passes by a forest where he notices the branches of a birch tree rustling in the wind. From this, he somehow gathers that the birch wishes to make an exchange: the birch wishes to buy the lamb that the Fool has received from his father. From the movement of the branches, the Fool also divines the exact price he will receive in return for the animal. Accepting the birch’s terms, the Fool declares that he will pass by again the next day to collect his payment. When he does so, he finds no money at all—only the bones of the unfortunate animal that he had left tied to the trunk of the tree the day before and that wolves had devoured during the night. The Fool returns home empty-handed, resolving to pass by again the next day. This pattern repeats itself for a number of days, until the Fool grows so angry that he brings an axe to forest and begins striking the dry trunk of the birch tree—in a hollow of which, to his surprise, he finds a small treasure hidden there by a group of bandits.

The fable of the Fool and the birch tree, then, deals again with a stupid man, (a piece of) dry wood (or some other worthless material: in Giufà, the tree is replaced by a statue made of chalk), and a hidden trove of gold. Here, too, the Fool demonstrates (this time accidentally) that he is far more shrewd than his “intelligent” brothers, given his success in bartering a lamb for a true fortune. From this point of view, the fable belongs to the type that Thompson defined as “the good deal.” Of course, the narrative use to which the single “components” of the generic type are put is different here than in the tale of Brutus. But also in the case of Brutus the fable concludes with a “good deal” for the Fool. And we must not forget that folklore, as Jakobson and Bogatyrëv explain, operates precisely according to a principle of economicity: folk narration is above all a restricted and regular way of telling stories, inclined to using and reusing a circumscribed number of linguistic and compositional elements to produce tales that are both a little bit the same and a little bit different. In other words, it is likely that in the composition of this fable the same symbolic “material” was used to create episodes similar to that of Brutus’ “gold in the sticks”: the “dry wood,” expressing the greatest “stupidity” and greatest “worthlessness,” and a “heart of gold” signifying the polar opposite—the Fool’s hidden intelligence (or economic fortune). In short, once again we see in operation the well-known principle of folktales that Fools and foolish deeds often triumph over those who believe themselves to be wise.

176. Thompson 1966, 244ff., type 1642.
177. Cf. also Propp 1975, 141ff.
178. At a greater level of complexity (and also “sophistication”), this phenomenon characterizes also the plots of Plautine comedy: Bettini 1991b.
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Hamlet’s Sticks

Saxo Grammaticus relates that when Amleth travels to Britain in the company of two faithless companions whose real purpose is to murder him en route, he shrewdly hits upon a means of escape: he devises a stratagem whereby the very king who is supposed to kill Amleth (according to Feng’s perfidious plan) will instead end up killing the prince’s would-be assassins. The false Fool’s profound genius defeats even the king of Britain, who, apprised of the situation by certain revelations he receives from Amleth, has Amleth’s companions hanged. Amleth ingeniously feigns grief over their deaths, as if the favor done to him by the king were an offense: he thus also receives from the British sovereign some recompense for the loss of his men. This recompense is given to Hamlet in the form of gold bars, naturally, which the prince then “took care to liquefy and infuse secretly into hollowed out sticks” (liquatum . . . clam cavatis baculis infundendum curavit). Amleth returns home with these sticks filled with gold, and immediately goes to the palace, still ragged and unsightly from his journey. Again feigning madness, he finds king Feng and the members of his court celebrating his funeral (they believe that Feng’s plan has worked and that Amleth is already dead); his arrival obviously causes some bewilderment, but the surprise soon turns again to ludibrium as the guests begin to blame Amleth for being alive. He is asked, finally, where his companions are, but “showing the sticks that he was carrying, he said, ‘Here they are—the one and the other’—and you could not know whether he meant this more in jest or more in truth” (ostensis quos gestabat baculis ‘hic’ inquit ‘et unus et alius est.’ quod utrum verius an iocosius protulerit, nescias).

The episode is telling and merits discussion—not in order to deal with a part of the story that extends beyond the horizon of our interest (and which Hansen has in any case already discussed in some detail), but because the question has general and rather interesting methodological implications. At least upon first consideration, it seems likely that Saxo drew the theme of the “hollowed out sticks” directly from the Brutus story. It even seems possible to identify his source: Valerius Maximus. Indeed, Stephanius notes (ad loc.) an explicit linguistic analogy between Valerius’ tale of Brutus and Saxo’s tale of Amleth in the expression obtunsi . . . cordis used by both authors in the

179. Sax. Gramm. 3.6.16ff. On this motif, see Davidson 1980, II, 62 n. 76.
180. An example of “wergild”: on this custom, see Davidson 1980, II, 62 n. 79.
181. The theme occurs elsewhere in myth and folktale: he who is “the farthest” (because deceased) turns out, paradoxically, to be the “closest”: cf. Hyg. Fab. 92; Bettini and Borghini 1980, 121ff. and 138ff.
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Further, and more convincing, linguistic evidence can also be cited: the expression that Saxo uses to indicate the stratagem of the “gold in the log” (aurum...liquetum...clam cavatis baculis infundendum curavit) is modeled directly after Valerius’ text (aurum...clam cavato baculo inclusum tulit). Here, Amleth functions as a true calque of Brutus, and François de Belleforest was correct when, in his reworking of Saxo’s Amleth, he transformed the Danish hero into an accomplished student of Latin who had adopted the behavior of the “false Fool” precisely in imitation of Brutus. In certain cases, literary invention goes hand in hand with philology—and sometimes even precedes it.

Saxo adapted the episode that he had found in Valerius Maximus to the structural demands of his own tale, doubling the number of logs (to bring them into alignment with the “plurality” of Amleth’s companions) and giving them a new symbolic value and a narrative function. Brutus’ “gold in the sticks” concealed the hero’s feigned stupidity; Amleth’s “gold in the sticks” permits the hero to make an affirmation that is simultaneously both true and false: encased in those sticks is the “value” of his lost companions in gold, though it would be absurd to claim that “they” are really there. Nevertheless, Saxo’s reelaboration correlates to a constant feature of Amleth’s story: as Powell suggests, Amleth is “punctilious of verbal truthfulness.” Amleth’s “fastidiousness” of speech was noted independently by Jones, who interpreted this from a Freudian perspective as part of Amleth’s markedly “infantile” character. Amleth’s scrupulousness for expressing the “truth” in the false statements by which he tricks...
his enemies is in fact detectable in all of the riddles the hero poses to his enemies. As Saxo says, “Desiring to be considered averse to falsity, he so mixed deceit with truth-telling that truth was never lacking in his words, but neither was the true measure of his cunning betrayed by the hint of truth” (falsitati enim alienus haberi cupiens, ita astutiam veriloquio miscuit ut nec dictis veracitas deesset, nec acuminis modus verorum indicio pateretur).

From what we have seen so far, it seems possible to draw the following conclusion: the episode of Amleth’s “sticks” is modeled off a classical source—Valerius Maximus—but reworked according to the generic “isotope” of the narration into which the episode is inserted. There would seem to be no problem with this interpretation—if we were not in the fortunate position of being able to place our own reconstruction in doubt.

Conon of Lampsacus, a Greek mythographer straddling the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E., recounts a story known as The Milesian and the Trove of Money, as follows: A certain inhabitant of Miletus, seeing his city threatened by the Persian Harpages, travels to Taormina in Sicily to deposit his money with a banker friend and then returns home. Once the danger has passed, he returns to Taormina to claim his money; his banker friend, however, though admitting to have accepted the man’s deposit, refuses to give it back. After long argument, the Milesian finally summons the banker before a magistrate. The banker, therefore, contrives a stratagem: “he hollowed out a stick as if it were a flute, and hid the money that the Milesian had given him inside it, after liquefying it.” He then appears in court supporting himself on this stick, feigning some malady of the feet. Finally, at the established moment, he offers the stick to the Milesian, swearing that he is returning his deposit. The Milesian becomes enraged, grabs the stick and throws it to the ground, shattering it to pieces—and thus the trick is discovered.

This story, similarly recounted by Stobaeus, has many points of contact

191. Similarly for the rudder/cultrum for cutting the ham/sea (Sax. Gram. 3.6.10); for the pulvinum/cock’s crest; and so forth (3.6.11: Amelethus actually carried pieces of these objects in his pocket).

192. Sax. Gramm. 3.6.9.

193. This narrative isotope, fundamental to the story, seems to have escaped the notice of Davidson 1980, II, 61 n. 71, who, following Dollerup, interprets as “names of plants” with a sexual connotation the “mare’s hoof,” “cock’s crest” and “roof beam” in Sax. Gramm. 3.6.11. Yet Saxo says explicitly that Amelethus carried with him pieces of these objects vitandi mendacii gratia; moreover, it is for this very reason that Amelethus’ statement appears absolutely absurd.


195. Stob. Ecl. 12.85.3. Hansen (1983, 33) has demonstrated that the motif in question recurs elsewhere in other folktales (without giving the two Greek examples, however). He has noted, more-
with Saxo’s story—perhaps more even than the story of Brutus has with tale of Amleth. In particular, the narrative function of the gold in the stick is identical: the gold in the stick permits the hero to evade the “principle of truth,” since his affirmation is simultaneously both true (the deposit really is there) and false (to all appearances, it is just a stick). What should we conclude from this similarity between the two stories? It is doubtful that Saxo Grammaticus knew Photius’ version, let alone Stobaeus’—although there have been scholars who have claimed, for other reasons, that Saxo knew certain Greek epitomes of Roman history. Two possibilities remain, then. First, Saxo, or his source, may have reused a folkloric motif already well known in Greece, at least in the first years of the Christian era. At the very least, the fact that such tales were circulated orally suggests this possibility. Second, Saxo, in reworking Valerius, may have independently given the motif of “gold in the stick” the same symbolic value (i.e., of concealed intellectual superiority) that this motif had once had in the past. Combining these two interpretations yields a third possibility, however: that Saxo reworked the letter of Valerius’ story—his exemplary Latinity as well as his authoritative narrative exemplum—shaping it to the outline of a folkloric theme known to him by other means.

Whatever hypothesis one chooses (and I admit I am somewhat partial to the third), one thing remains certain: folkloric creation again demonstrates the characteristics of regularity and economicity. Paradigms, motifs, structures tend to be used and reused in distant (and independent) contexts with a truly surprising degree of consistency. Only in the telling of folktales does narrative appear subject to a kind of rigid grammaticality: traits and motifs constantly repeat, elaborated in similar ways and responding to similar narrative demands. In this regard, Propp made a truly paradoxical assertion: “The phenomenon of universal resemblance [between fables] does not represent a problem for us. For us, the absence of such resemblances would be inexplicable” (my emphasis).

over, that this makes a borrowing from Valerius Maximus improbable, considering instead various “derivationist” proposals advanced by preceding scholars.

196. From this point of view, the motif of Amleth’s “gold in the stick” in Saxo and Conon is similar to that of Prometheus who hides fire in the narthēx; or of Hannibal who, in order to escape unnoticed from Crete, hides his gold in statuis, quas secum portabant (Justin 32.4).


198. For other adaptations of Nordic themes to classical models in Saxo, see in particular Davidson 1980, 7.

199. Propp 1966, 148. Cf. also Thompson 1967, 7, “[fables] have as definite form and substance in human culture as the pot, the hoe, or the bow and arrow, and several of these narrative forms are quite as generally employed.”
Chapter 2. Brutus the Fool

The Hero Falls To Earth

As we have seen, Brutus immediately comprehends what is hidden in the enigmatic—because superficially unambiguous—words of the Delphic oracle’s response. When Titus and Arruns go on to ask the god which of them will inherit their father’s crown, the divine voice responds that the kingdom will pass to whomever “first . . . gives his mother a kiss” (primus . . . osculum matri tulerit). Titus and Arruns therefore contrive to keep this secret from their brother Sextus, and to kiss their mother at the same time, so as to divide the kingdom equally between themselves. Brutus, however, realizes immediately that the god of Delphi is speaking in figures and “solves” the riddle by kissing the earth, reasoning that the earth is the “mother” of all men. Yet in Livy’s account, Brutus does not simply kneel to kiss the earth, but “slipping as if he had fallen, he touched the ground with a kiss, obviously because (as he thought) the earth is the common mother of all mortals” (velutis prolapsus ceclidisset, terram osculo contigit, scilicet quod ea communis mater omnium mortalium esset). Pretending to fall to the ground, Brutus kisses his “true” mother and thus gains power. Dionysius’ account is somewhat different on this score. He sets the scene of this episode not before the temple of Delphi, but at the moment of Brutus’ disembarkation in Italy. In this way, “mother earth” (terra mater) takes on the additional aspect of “fatherland” (terra patria). Dionysius gives no hint of the theme of the feigned fall, moreover: Brutus simply kneels to kiss the earth, performing an ancient ritual gesture commonly practiced by those returning home after a long journey. It is hard to imagine these two transformations of the story are not in some way related. Setting the episode in the context of Brutus’ return home, there is no need to “motivate” the kiss; disembarking, Brutus simply kneels and kisses the earth, an act to which no one would give a second thought. Ovid, on the other hand, retains the theme of “pretending”: “Lying prone he gave kisses to mother earth, believed to have stumbled” (ille iacens pronus matri dedit oscula terrae / creditus offenso procubuisse pede). Here Brutus trips, rather than slips, but this constitutes a “fall” nonetheless—and a feigned one at that.

200. Liv. AUC. 1.56.
201. Dion. Ant. Rom. 4.69.3.
202. Fraenkel 1962, II, 256 n. to v. 503; Ogilvie 1965, 228; on the kiss given to the earth, see in particular Lot 1949, 435ff.
203. In Propp’s (1966, 80) sense of the term. See also Tomaševskij 1968, 326ff.
Stupidity Drags You Down

The richest version of the Brutus story—there is little sense in speaking about the “true” version of a story of this type—is that which contains the feigned fall to earth. This act in fact corresponds to the story’s fundamental narrative isotope, known already from the *aries* of Tarquin’s dream (the “stupid” ram that, in reality, is strong) and above all the *baculum cavatum*. Brutus “conceals” in his fall an act that will turn out to be decisive for his future, just as in the worthless material of the “stick” he conceals gold and just as, in general, in all of his “foolish” behavior he conceals his true genius. Enveloped within the clumsy, negative act of falling, he conceals another act that presupposes his superior intelligence and that will be crucial for the final resolution of the story. Let us look more closely, then, at this new manifestation of Brutus’ cleverness.

Instability of the legs and a kind of “attraction” towards the ground—a tendency, that is, to exchange the naturally and normally erect posture of a human being for a prostrate position on the ground—appears to be characteristic of the Fool (or of he who pretends to be a Fool). Claudius’ hesitating gait—*dexterum pedem trahere*—is frequently mentioned. In this way, the Fool’s “slowness” of intellect (cf. *tardus*) has a physical complement in his plodding step. Similarly, David, pretending to be mad at the court of Achis, “let himself fall in their hands, stumbling on the door shutters.”

David—like Brutus at Delphi—stumbles and falls; similarly, Amleth was first introduced to us “lying abject on the ground” (*abiectus humi*). In a later variant of the story of Hamlet known as the *Ambales saga*, told by Arni Magnusson at the end of the seventeenth century C.E., *Ambales* is called Amlōði (literally, “stupid”) because “he continually lies in the hearth room before the ashes.” So too “Cinder Boy” habitually wallows in the ashes of the hearth; wishing to go out in the world to perform a hero’s deeds, he is told: “But remain among the ashes, stay lying in the ashes!” In the iconological tradition, moreover, “stupidity” is represented as “a nude, smiling woman, lying on the ground lasciviously,” and “foolishness” is represented as “a woman poorly dressed, with a piece of iron on her head . . . because like iron she is heavy, and she naturally stands low, just like the fool, who

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207. Sax. Gramm. 3.6.6.
211. Asbjørnsen and Moe 1962, 342.
212. Ripa 1766, V, 80ff.
never raises his intellect.” I have already remarked that in Latin “stupidity” is often characterized as “like iron” (plumbeus): for example, at the end of Terence’s *Heautontimoroumenos*, Menedemus says of himself, “Anything said of the stupid is appropriate in my case as well: ‘blockhead,’ ‘trunk,’ ‘ass,’ ‘piece of iron’” (*in me quidvis harum rerum convenit / quae sunt dicta in stulto: caudex stipes asinus plumbeus*).\(^{214}\)

Cesare Ripa, thoroughly familiar with symbolic language, probably captured the most abstract and general connection between “stupidity” and “the earth” when he explained that the stupid man “never raises his genius” and is therefore like iron, “which by nature falls down.” Doubtless, in cultural representation the opposition of “high” and “low” also functions as an indication of the distance that separates, on one hand, spirituality and intelligence, and, on the other, brutality and violence.\(^{215}\) The mind is “high” and all that is spiritual, all that makes Man what he is, tends also to be “high”: after all, Man is a creature whose face is turned “upward.”\(^{216}\) Conversely, “stupidity” naturally tends “down” to earth, and, with its uncertain gait, its stumbling, its falling, its Hamletic position “lying abject on the ground” (*humi abiectus*), reconfirms its own animal nature, its own brutishness, its own “brutus-ness.” Those who are stupid are like animals, which “nature made prone,” as Sallust says.\(^{217}\)

As mentioned above, the adjective *brutus* originally had the meaning of “heavy”: he who is *brutus* is, by nature, “low.” To make a paretymological joke like those dear to the ancient poets,\(^{218}\) in falling to the earth, Brutus becomes, in effect, *brutus*. His cousins Titus and Arruns, standing in the temple of the Delphic oracle, would probably not have given this another thought; they would have found it normal for one so stupid, so *brutus*. Perhaps Brutus’ fall even caused them to laugh. But understanding what impression it would have given—in other words, its cultural meaning—requires some further observations.

Mala Omina

By nature, symbols tend to disappear along with the cultures that produce

\(^{213}\) Ripa 1766, V, 320ff.
\(^{215}\) On the opposition high/low in Roman culture, see Bettini 1988b, 176ff. and 196ff.
\(^{216}\) The philosophical *topos* of man’s uniqueness as an animal that stands erect and looks “upward” is well known: cf., e.g., Cic. *De nat. deor.* 2.65; Hor. *Sat.* 2.2.79; Ov. *Met.* 1.85ff.; Pers. *Sat.* 2.61; Vitru. 2.1.34; Aug. *De civ. Dei.* 22.24.21.
\(^{217}\) Sall. *Cat.* 1, *natura . . . prona finxit*.
\(^{218}\) See Risch 1947, 72ff., and Bettini 1972, 261ff.
them. Often, a symbol’s meaning—that is, the sense-relation that it has with the historical-anthropological context—changes until it becomes incomprehensible. In our society and culture, the act of falling probably has no more meaning than that it is an embarrassing nuisance (“I fell like an idiot!”—the topical phrase is indicative) or the harbinger of an ugly bruise. If one has a sufficiently Bergsonian “anesthésie du coeur,” one may brush off one’s own stumbling with a laugh or show compassion for another’s by rushing to lend a helping hand. Certainly, one does not feel any sense of “disturbance,” nor fear anything “hidden” in the event of a fall. But things were different in the ancient world.

In the Roman world, any act of “falling” or “stumbling”—*procumbere, prolabi, pedem offendere, impingere* and so forth—provoked an immediate sense that something was wrong. Such an occurrence in fact constituted a *malum omen* (“ill omen”), presaging only misfortune.\(^{219}\) When Myrrha, accompanied by her nurse, makes her midnight journey to an incestuous meeting with her father, an owl warns her three times with its “gloomy song” (*funereum carmen*) and three times the girl stumbles (*pedis offensi*), called back by this *signum* of coming misfortune.\(^{220}\) Myrrha is about to commit the terrible act of incest and her stumbling signals the imminent monstrosity she is about to undertake. Ovid also recounts that Protesilaos, setting out for the Trojan War, stumbled on the threshold:\(^{221}\) *pes tuus offenso limine signa dedit* (“your foot, stumbling on the threshold, gave omens”). Protesilaus should not have gone to Troy: he was destined to die there and his stumbling indicated he was committing a grave mistake. Arriving in Africa, Caesar “fell to the earth as he disembarked” (*prolapsus . . . in egressu navis*), an event that aroused great dismay among his soldiers.\(^{222}\) How could they undertake an act of war with a commander who “fell to earth” just as he was entering the theater of operations? Surely some terrible disgrace awaited them. Falling, in short, “gives an omen” (*dat signum*), as Ovid says: it is a signal that whatever is about to happen or whatever is being done is bound

\(^{219}\) The model is well known and has been frequently studied: cf. Ogle 1911, 252ff., in particular on the house-door, and therefore also on stumbling on the threshold; McCartney 1920, 217ff. who rightly analyzes the phenomenon of “stumbling” in general, rather than focusing solely on the threshold of the home; Riess 1893, coll. 29ff. and 1939, coll. 350 ff.; Frazer 1931, 136ff.; Pease 1920, 486; Bömer 1980, 155. There are numerous examples: Liv. *AUC.* 5.21.16 (cf. Val. *Max.* 1.5.2), Camillus falling after the capture of Veii, presaging his banishment and the fall of Rome at the hands of the Gauls; [Caesar], *Bell. Hisp.* 23, etc. The relevant passages are collected by Ogle 1911 and Bömer 1980.


\(^{221}\) Ov. *Her.* 13.87ff.

\(^{222}\) Suet. *Iul.* 59; Dio Cass. 45.58.3; Frontin. *Strat.* 1.12.2.
to have woeful consequences. In other words, the “meaning” of stumbling or falling is guilt, error, and imminent disgrace.

Stories of Stumbles and Falls

Negligible superstitions? Naïve folk beliefs? Long ago we stopped treating as such any cultural model that is simply different from our own. With its cultural semantics, language demonstrates that fear of falling—signaling guilt, error or disgrace—is not an insignificant Aberglaube, but a window on very different way of conceiving one’s relationship with destiny. In fact, even a simple survey of the terms that Latin uses to denote guilt, blame and disgrace reveals that most are taken precisely from the domain of “stumbling” or “falling.” Peccare, the most common term designating both the act of “making a mistake” and the act of “transgressing,” is derived from pedica (“trap for the feet; fetter”). A man who “makes a mistake” (peccat) is one who “falls into a trap,” one who has his feet bound by fetters. The same is true of labi, signifying both the act of “slipping” and the act of “failing” or “making a mistake.” He who “fails” (prolabitur) is one who “slips.” Moreover, offendere (“to stumble”) also denotes “failure” and “ruin.” Even scelus—one of the key terms in the vocabulary of guilt and transgression—probably belongs to the same semantic matrix, if indeed this word is related to the Sanskrit skhalati (“make a false step”) and Armenian sxalim (“make a false step, commit an error”). Scelus denotes both “disgrace” and, with the additional sense of personal responsibility, “guilt,” or the act of transgression. Here, too, a “false step” is imagined as disgraceful and transgressive. As with peccare, the “false step” or “pitfall” is related on the one hand with mistakes, and on the other with moral guilt or fault. The language of the Gospel reveals the same metaphor in its use of the verb skandalizomai: this term is normally translated (already in the Vetus Latina) in the sense of “to be scandalized” or “to feel scandal,” but skandalon again refers to a “trap” in which the foot is caught. So, for example, in the King James Version of the “Parable of the

224. Augustine (Conf. 10.53) perhaps did not imagine that he was reusing an ancient metaphor, when, in regard to his tormented inclination toward the beautiful, he affirmed: ego autem haec loquens atque discernens etiam itis pulchrii gressum innecto. Augustine fell into the “trap” of the beautiful: in short, “he misstepped” (peccat).
225. Cic. Pro Clu. 23.63 and 36.98; Verr. 7.131; Sen. Ep. 96; etc.
227. Cf. e.g., Plaut. Most. 563; Liv. AUC. 22.10.15.
228. Chantraine 1968, II, s.v.
Part 1. Mythology

Sower,” when we read that “And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground . . . when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word’s sake, immediately they are offended (skandalizontai),” we should imagine that they “stumble” into affliction and that for this reason they fail. In symbolic language, “stumbling” or “falling” reveals not only that an action is wrong, but also that this action is, in some way, presaging some disgrace or a negative, blameworthy event.

Culturally speaking, the fear of falling—a belief that falling represents, in its various forms, a negative signum—thus appears capable of motivating an entire series of linguistic metaphors. At any rate, the analogy between the two cultural spheres—that of folk beliefs in mala omina and that of linguistic metaphor—seems too close for their relationship to be purely coincidental. We ought instead to think of the gap between the “literal” and “metaphorical” uses of terms such as labi, offendere and peccare as actually quite narrow, since between these two poles of the figure rests Roman culture’s living knowledge that a fall or stumble directly indicates that something or someone is ill-fated, that such an event is written into the hidden mechanism regulating the meaning of human action, and brutally reveals its awful inflections. When Ovid encourages us to avoid grandiosity and to “slacken the sails,” he explains: “For you are worthy of crossing the space of life without stumbling and of enjoying a splendid fate” (nam pede inoffenso spatium decurrere vitae / dignus es et fato candidiore frui). Having a favorable destiny, in other words, is the same as “not stumbling” in the journey of life.

The notion that “stumbling” and “falling” is related to error and failure can be expressed in other ways than in cultural beliefs (i.e., considering it a signum) or by means of linguistic metaphor. A certain type of fable frequent in European and Indian folklore involves an individual who comes to know a certain special name or magical formula, who then stumbles—and, in stumbling, instantly forgets what he has learned. In this way, the belief (or the metaphor) assumes the form of a narrative; the belief in “stumbling” as a foreboding signum becomes a story about a person who knows something important, but then stumbles . . . bringing about the failure of his or her endeavors. The underlying link is always the same. The act of falling or stumbling betokens—or indeed produces—some negative turn of events. In

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230. Ov. Trist. 3.4.33–34.
fact, the association between “falling” and “forgetting” specifically is quite powerful in itself. Speaking about the fragility of memory, Pliny remarks, “[the memory] feels the damage caused by disease, falling and even fear” (morborum et casus iniurias atque etiam metus sentit).\footnote{233} Pliny goes on to tell the story of one man who forgets the alphabet after being struck by a rock; and of another who forgets his own mother, relatives and friends after falling from a high roof.

**Falls and Stumbles in the Unconscious**

When I said that our own culture no longer perceives the act of stumbling as a negative “sign,” nor associates this occurrence with someone’s error or fault, perhaps I was being too hasty. If we believe at all in the existence of the unconscious mind—that mysterious reservoir in which our personal and collective past are preserved—we easily discover there the ancient symbolism of “falling” in all its gloomy splendor. Even if one does not believe in the unconscious, nevertheless it is interesting to find that the act of falling plays a significant role in the symbolic and iconological “dictionary” that Freud so tirelessly constructed through his research. Freud’s interpretation of “falling” fits very well, moreover, with what we have already seen. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*,\footnote{234} Freud explains the carelessness of the woman who stumbles over a heap of stones as she is out buying a new painting for her children’s room as self-punishment for an abortion that she had had some short time ago. Freud (or more accurately, the woman) relates her fall to a “sin,” an error that she perceives herself to have committed. The same symbolic value of “falling” plays an important role in the case of young Hans:\footnote{235} his phobia about “falling off a horse” is related to his unconscious desire to see his father fall—that is, die.\footnote{236} Hans himself describes the desire he has for his father “to smash against a rock, nude [that is, “barefoot”].”\footnote{237} This desire is bound up with the fact that Hans has seen his friend Gmunden,\footnote{238} with whom he was similarly engaged in sexual rivalry, actually “stumble against a rock” and “fall.” As may be seen, in this kind of interpretation the fatal fall, the fall viewed as a defeat and stumbling are all entwined in dynamic symbolic production. Freud analyzes one of his
own dreams in a similar way, in Dream and Telepathy: his son has gone to war and in a dream he sees his son standing on a wharf, wearing not his military uniform but a ski suit, the same he had been wearing when he had had a skiing accident. The young man stands, moreover, on a footstool—an object that Freud closely associates with falling from his own memories of infancy. Freud interprets this dream as signifying that his son had been killed in war. In Freudian dream interpretation, the theme of “falling” thus reclaims all its ominous meaning.

**Brutus and Caesar**

But let us return, finally, to Brutus. Falling to earth, or stumbling, the hero makes manifest—in the outward “envelope” of that action—precisely the opposite of what is about to happen. At that moment, by kissing the earth, he gains supreme power, yet gives the impression that this event is inauspicious. The moment is a crucial one—it concerns who will be the king of Rome—and Brutus falls. And yet his superior intelligence permits him to transform a moment of disgrace and error—*prolabi, peccare, scelus*—into one of great fortune. Earlier, through his offering to the Delphic god, Brutus had symbolized himself as a “container” of wood that was not only “stupid” but also “ill-omened” (*infelix*). The symbolic structure of the two actions is identical.

As mentioned above, Caesar slips and falls to earth when he disembarks in Africa—a *malum omen* at a crucial moment that creates panic among his soldiers. Caesar cleverly recovers the situation, however: “turning the omen to good, he said: ‘I hold you, Africa’” (*verso ad melius omine ‘teneo te’ inquit ‘Africa’*). In Frontinus’ version of the story, Caesar says not “Africa” but “mother earth” (*terra mater*), while in Dio Cassius he actually seizes hold of and kisses the earth, shouting: “I have you, Africa!” The situation should be familiar to us—at a crucial moment, someone “stumbling” and then suddenly “holding” the earth (not to mention the references to “mother earth” and a “kiss” given to her). To neutralize the *malum omen* signified by his stumble, Caesar adopts the behavior of Brutus, applying the paradigm of someone who, in the act of falling (and therefore producing an evil omen),

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239. Freud 1977b, 384.
240. Suet. *Iul.* 59, Cf. Gugel 1970, 5ff., who compares Caesar’s behavior with his famous contempt for omens. Perhaps it would be better to explore the link between Caesar and the “earth,” which appears also in his incestuous dream (Suet. *Iul.* 7): cf. Ogilvie 1965, 218.
242. Dio Cass. 42.58.3.
in fact establishes for himself a privileged relationship with the earth, the “mother of all men.”

Caesar’s act provides a concrete example of how a paradigm offered by myth may function in “real” life in the form of a repetition. It is not important whether the mythic paradigm influenced Caesar’s actual behavior in ingeniously (and quickly) adapting a traditional schema to the moment of his unfortunate stumbling, or the writer in recounting or readapting the story. The fact remains that this episode from Brutus’ story had an important place within Roman culture, also from the perspective of its fortune: because it was constructed with good, authentic materials, this episode persisted in not only Caesar’s, but also Roman society’s imagination.

The Narrator’s Nostalgia

We have reached the end of our discussion—not, however, without a certain feeling of nostalgia and even some regret for having spoken so long about a story we know so little about. Not only because of the trouble that the writer—and the reader—has taken, but perhaps above all because this is most immediate and incontrovertible proof of the magnitude of our loss. Looking back at this point, we see that we have lost a uniquely Roman way of telling stories—one similar in ways to that evoked so often above in our attempt to render its likeness from European folklore, from Saxo Grammaticus and so forth. They are simple stories, certainly. But they are also stories full of meaning, stories in which we see coalesce a set of patterns that, though basic and similar to so many others, is still capable of natural and profound symbolic expression. These plots, motifs and symbols are in fact the product of an ancient process, all that remains of the countless occasions of storytelling consumed in the arc of time and distance—at least until a certain motif, a particular symbol triumphs because of its richness and its efficacy, giving rise to new stories. But we have lost this Roman “telling.”

Recollecting the conclusions of the so-called “Indianist” theory of the origin and diffusion of the fable, Joseph Bédier once observed that classical antiquity appears not to have known most of the fables that were so widely circulated in the Middle Ages. The observation is as interesting as it is disconcerting. Did the ancient world not have fables? The answer must certainly be “no.” Roman society had its folktales, as we have seen; it is only that this mode of narration was not deemed worthy of transmission, of being

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243. It is very likely that this is a typical schema. Cf. Frontin. _Strat._ 1.21.1, where a similar anecdote is attributed to Scipio.
244. Bedier 1893, 253ff.
enshrined into literature. For this reason, Roman folk-telling vanished with the words and with the "ouidire" of those who practiced it. We have other Roman ways of telling stories—love literature, historiography, epic and so forth. These are inarguably beautiful. But we no longer possess the popular tradition of storytelling—and that is why we have been compelled to seek it out (not without some difficulty!) embedded in the so-called “best” texts (the only ones that have been transmitted to us), like small fossil shells, far from the sea.