

THE TRIAL OF BROTHER WOLF

A description of the opening scene:

We find ourselves in the square in front of the main church near Assisi in Italy. A huge crowd has gathered there to attend the open air public trial of a very unusual suspect, a wolf. On the platform at the entrance to the church dignitaries, clergy and jurists sit in solemn session. The plaintiffs in this case are the widows whose husbands were killed by the wolf, which is now sitting under guard in a corner of the square. A cleric whose face is partially concealed by his lowered hood stands behind a lectern placed at the foot of the platform. A large number of birds perched in adjacent trees and the ledges of buildings is attracting many people's attention. We overhear two members of the public as they await the opening of the session.

Giacomo.

Ah, there you are at last Paolo. I thought you wouldn't make it.

Paolo

Sorry for the delay, domestic problems as usual, but thanks for keeping a place for me. What's the world coming to? A wolf on trial!

Giacomo

Yes, there's something very odd in all this, to say the least. Just look at those birds. The sparrows and thrushes aren't so scary but what about those crows and buzzards! I think that that hooded gentleman over there has something to do with it. Apparently he's the wolf's defence counsel.

Paolo

Then he's the Devil's advocate, quite literally.

Giacomo

For sure, but wait. The session is beginning. Even those squawking crows have quietened down.

Town Mayor

Good people of this town.. As you are only too well aware our town has been afflicted by a great loss of sheep and livestock in recent weeks and, worse still, by fatal attacks on two of our most reliable and conscientious workers in the fields that grant us nourishment and prosperity. What brings us then to the trial of the infernal being that has caused so dire a tragedy if not the earnest desire to affirm our trust in divine mercy, not neglecting to inquire within ourselves whether it is not our sinful actions that are at least partly to blame for this affliction. It seems as though even the birds of the air so sense the solemnity of the present occasion. I invite the presiding judge to conduct the proceedings in the trial of the accused wolf

Presiding Judge

As in any trial the jury must hear both sides of the respective case for and against the defendant and that jury consists of every adult member of this town.

From the public

Kill the thing. We are ourselves the witnesses of the hound's foul deeds.

Presiding judge

True, and the wives and children of its victims and those who have suffered great losses in property and revenue claim satisfaction for this animal's crimes by exacting its death by the sword and the burning of its body. But before we pronounce judgment let us grant the beast's legal counsel the right to oppose our judgment, clear and unanswerable as it is.

The defending counsel

I plead for the life of my client, for Brother Wolf, whom I so name for sharing with us all the same source and parentage, for we and all living creatures are children of the same holy mother.

A priest

Blasphemy! The Blessed Virgin had but one child, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Francis (earlier defending counsel)

That I do not dispute, for the Pope himself has attested my fidelity to the Church and her doctrines and has granted me the right to preach to all and sundry in any street, lane, byway, field or forest. (Makes face fully visible by drawing back his hood)

Gasping and sighing

A voice from the public

'Tis Francis the friar blessed by Heaven to converse even with animals.

Francis

I speak of another holy mother but not one in the form of one living person. This mother is all around us. Look over there beyond the graves where our forbears lie in her bosom and behold green fields and orchard trees heavy with fruit, see cattle grazing on yon meadow and admit they all find in Mother Earth their origin, daily sustenance and final resting place. Even Brother Worm has a place in the great scheme of things in passing on the nutriments derived from rotting flesh to the soil from which new life in lush vegetation springs up to greet the sun.

A local gardener

That be true, my best cucumbers and marrows (squashes) grow in the part of my garden closest to the cemetery.

Judge

Brother Francis, with all due respect, can you expect us to show mercy to an animal which, if released into the wilds, will wreak yet more havoc on our town and people?

Francis

I have not presented my case in full. but let us judge this case by the same yardstick we apply to the trial of a human defendants. Did Brother Wolf kill your sheep and cattle out of blood lust? Did Brother Wolf do no more than exercise the right of self-defence when it was his life or the life of those attacking him? Availing myself of the heaven-sent power of conversing with animals, a power not unlike that which enabled Balaam to talk to a she ass, I ascertained why Brother Wolf had no option but to kill only slow-moving and easily hunted prey such as lambs and poultry. In his youth he injured his front paw when running through bracken, so badly in fact that he couldn't keep up with the pack and was left to fend for himself. Remember the story of Androcles, whom destiny rewarded for the time he found a lion cub that had also injured its paws. He cleaned the wounded limb and covered it with bandages. When he in later life was thrown to lions in the Colosseum he encountered the selfsame lion he had tended and instead of eating him the lion fawned and cuddled against him affectionately. The crowd was so impressed by this miracle that the emperor spared Androcles and released him from slavery.

Judge

Venerable friar, what you say touches us greatly but even if we allow that mitigating circumstances pertain in this case how can we be sure that you client will not resume his former grizzly habits?

Francis

I myself concede the rightness of your argument, M'lud, and plead for the acquittal of my client only if two further conditions are fulfilled. Namely these: Only those who have suffered the most from the consequences of Brother Wolf's plunders have the right to grant him forgiveness. Brother Wolf, for his part must show genuine remorse for the pain and anguish he has caused, promising never again to as much as scratch any human being. But I propose one caveat. The town must undertake to provide Brother Wolf with a daily provision of food so that he will not starve as a result of pledge never again to assail the people and livestock of this town.

Judge

Plaintiffs, do you then find it in your hearts to forgive this animal after all the sorrow and harm it has caused you.

Spokeswoman.

After all the holy friar has told us we have pondered his message. Will killing this unfortunate animal bring back to life our husbands and the fathers of our children? From the death of Abel onwards violence has bred ever more violence in an unending chain till God taught us that only by forgiving can this unending chain of revenge be broken until one day the wolf and the lamb shall dwell together in peace. If we, by forgiving Brother Wolf, can hasten that blessed day, we forgive.

Francis

Brother Wolf, raise your right paw if you sincerely rue the harm you inflicted on the innocent townsfolk of this place and share their sorrow and grief, raise you right paw and wail as to the full moon with all your might.

Brother Wolf fulfills this condition

The mayor

Townspeople, do you accept the terms set out by Brother Francis to feed Brother Wolf every day until the day of his death. If so, acclaim by a unanimous aye.

Aye.

The case against Brother Wolf is hereby closed.