

The Silence of History

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Sit down and lend me your ears as I recount the tale of King Papyrus as it was told to me. A great kingdom there was in the lands of golden fields where autumn leaves gilded¹ the rolling hills. One fateful autumn morning which followed a night of such a wind that no leaves still grasped the trees did the people of the fields of gold come to the castle of King Papyrus in a great hue and cry.² For indeed the castle windows flooded with an amber light not from the rising sun but from the golden fields ablaze. Our kind Papyrus bade his people tell of their woe, but such was the clamour of the many voices that he had them return to silence, for he could not harken all at once. An agreement, though, formed from every lip: a dragon had come and gone.

Papyrus took leave and returned with parchment,³ quill,⁴ and ink, for a learned man he was, and he knew the memory of this dragon, if not immortalised in his archive, would one day become lost to the silence of history. But only about three recounts could he inscribe, for he had a mere one roll of parchment. Whose tales would he choose?

Amongst the people before him was the ploughman and the knight, the grocer and the merchant. In the corner sat the friar,⁵ the beggar, and his daughter. As the baron told of villages razed,⁶ the clerk tallied the survivors, and with the mercer⁷ comforting the grieved, the weaver mended the poor beggar's cloak. Which three of these should our King hear? First was bade the knight to speak, for bound to chivalry he was, and could thus tell no mistruth.

“Ye have the best witness chosen, for I myself fought the beast.” The knight to the crowd orated his tale with flair. “A dragon of scales orange as birch sap and wings wide as a city ward

¹ Covered or tinged with gold or a golden colour, especially in illuminated manuscripts.

² A clamor of alarm or protest, especially in a medieval city after a crime has been committed.

³ The skin of a sheep or goat prepared for writing upon.

⁴ A writing utensil made from the hollow shaft of a feather.

⁵ A member of a mendicant order (such as the Franciscans) combining monastic life and outside religious activity and originally owning neither personal nor community property.

⁶ To burn or destroy to the ground.

⁷ A merchant dealing in fabrics.

flew down from the midnight clouds and set the fields of gold ablaze. I donned my armour and climbed upon the grocer's roof to face the devil. 'Woe betide⁸ thee,' said I to the beast, 'for mine blade thy heart shalt pierce lest thou our city leave posthaste!' I charged the dragon and in its scales did I lodge my sword. Alas, Fortuna⁹ smiled on me not, for the beast survived the blow. But should more and better arms be supplied to me, then when next the devil its head here shows, I shall rend it from its body and mount it on my wall!"

The people cheered for the heroic knight. Our King Papyrus, however, said naught, but instead wrote carefully the knight's words. Next was bade the friar speak, for a well-learned man of the robe might lend his wisdom best.

"You have the best witness chosen," said the friar, "for I offer forewarning from the scriptures. I saw out my window against the stars the dragon fly. Its scales were red as the flames of perdition¹⁰ and its wings, wide as a street, visited your subjects as the ten plagues visited Egypt.¹¹ For I fear the dragon is the wrath of God for sins here committed. When the Pharaoh heeded not the word of God, greater plagues befell. I, like Moses, proclaim the dragon shall return hither to bring your ruin should ye not propitiate¹² the Lord with haste. A kingly donation to Rome,¹³ I feel, shall appease Him, and an expansion to my church as well."

King Papyrus, sweat on his brow, inscribed the words of the friar with dread. He thought what might his sin have been but found no answer. He remarked, however, on differing of the size and colour of the beast between the two accounts. Content to save this thought for later, he

⁸ A warning that there will be trouble (woe) if someone does something specified.

⁹ Roman goddess of fortune or luck.

¹⁰ Another name for hell.

¹¹ In the Book of Exodus, God inflicts ten increasingly devastating plagues upon Egypt as punishment for the Pharaoh continuously refusing to release enslaved Israelites.

¹² To gain or regain the favour or goodwill of.

¹³ Synecdoche for the Papacy.

returned to the task at hand. Space now remained for one more tale. He lastly bid the baron speak, for to neglect a landed lord of such high a station was to invite dissent into one's court.¹⁴

“You have the best witness chosen,” said the baron, “for I say the dragon poses little threat. As I rode hither yestereve I spotted the drake flying past and I attest it was of a yellow alike to sheaves of wheat and borne by wings no wider than this narrow hall. I have heard of similar young beasts in other lands downed by nets and slain by cudgels.¹⁵ Trust me, your majesty. No costly arms or donations are required. Your barons are taxed enough as is. I know a man familiar with the dragon-hunting fashions of afar. Grant me a modest stipend and I shall organise a defence of light weight to your purse.”

Though Papirus mentioned it not, the divergences between the accounts irked him thoroughly. Whereupon the remaining parchment was filled with the baron's words, the fires had died away and our kind Papirus, hand and belfry¹⁶ worn, bade his aweary people return home.

Now in the company of himself alone, Papirus over the three tales perused, finding the scission between them sharp. For how could a dragon be orange, red, and yellow too, with wings wide as a hall, a street, and a city ward? Each recounter was a witness himself and was of such respectable a station as to ne'er speak mistruth. But committing all three to his archive would leave the true story unknown. Forced he was to choose which two to condemn to the silence of history and which to preserve forever. But whose tale spoke true?

Thereupon a voice rough as stone and light as cloud came to him. The beggar's daughter had hidden away and, after the masses had long since left, she approached the mighty King with

¹⁴ The royal court, a group of the nobles and clergymen closest to the king. Many conspiracies against monarchs originated in their courts.

¹⁵ A short heavy club.

¹⁶ A bell tower. Used metaphorically to refer to one's mind.

no bow, no formal attire, no strength of word, nor noble character. Papyrus beseeched¹⁷ her to find her father but she avowed there was something he must first be told. Such a beggar's daughter was likelier to tell fable than truth. But Papyrus, ever tender-hearted, sighed and, setting her upon his lap, obliged her request.

“You have a lowly witness chosen,” said the girl, “but I too the dragon saw. I awoke last night to screams as father lifted me and ran. I saw the dragon fly from the fields of wheat over the church and perch upon the grocer's gable.¹⁸ And what a beauty she was. Her scales reflected the white-speckled black of the sky, a million mirrors dancing in the stars, impossible to tell where dragon ended and sky began. People ran. A lantern fell. Fire spread. The orange, red, and yellow licks glistened in the dragon's scales. She saw me, the dragon did, though she gave no chase. She cocked her head, curious like a cat. My sight was blocked when father rounded a corner, but I later spotted the beauty flying off beyond the clouds.”

King Papyrus heard the girl through her whole tale aghast. The schism betwixt the other stories now confessed its true nature. No lie had this day been told, yet mistruth would have reigned supreme had Papyrus not heard the peasant girl. Thus was chosen the tale of the beggar's daughter for his archive. But his scarce parchment had already been filled.

How, you may be wondering, do I now know the tale of the beggar's daughter if it was never written? Shoot not Mercury,¹⁹ as I merely tell this tale as it was told to me. Yet this same question I too bore and as curiosity draws the dragon, it too rewards the studious. For I hear tell that in an archive somewhere far away a single roll of parchment can be found wherein lies naught but large blots of ink surrounded by scrawled marginalia²⁰ which recount the tale of the

¹⁷ To request earnestly.

¹⁸ The triangular end of a roof.

¹⁹ Roman god who serves as messenger for the other gods.

²⁰ Notes in the margins of a page.

beggar's daughter. But hold above a candle and the light through the blots shall the truth unveil. For the tales of the knight, the friar, and the baron were all entombed under the blots and in the space between those lines of palimpsest²¹ is inscribed the words of a young girl and her tale of a dragon bright as flame and dark as night.

You, dear reader, are not unlike to Papyrus. You hear voices which you regard and forsake those deemed lesser. For you cannot hear all. Those so heard become history. Those so forsaken become silence.

²¹ Writing material (such as a parchment or tablet) used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased.