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The Fabulist in the Fable Book

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Classics

by

Kristin Leilani Mann

2015

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# ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Fabulist in the Fable Book

by

Kristin Leilani Mann

Doctor of Philosophy in Classics

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Kathryn Anne Morgan, Co-Chair

Professor Amy Ellen Richlin, Co-Chair

Four fable books survive from Greco-Roman antiquity: (1) the *Life and Fables of Aesop* (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), a collection of Greek prose fables; (2) Phaedrus's *Fabulae Aesopiae* (1<sup>st</sup> century CE), a collection of Latin verse fables; (3) Babrius's *Μυθίαμβοι Αισώπειοι* (1<sup>st</sup> century CE), a collection of Greek verse fables; and (4) Avianus's *Fabulae* (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE), a collection of Latin verse fables. The thesis of this dissertation is that in each of these fable collections, the fabulist's presence in the fable book – his biography, his self-characterizations, and his statements of purpose – combine to form a hermeneutic frame through which the fables may be interpreted. Such a frame is necessary because the fable genre is by nature multivalent: fables may be interpreted in many different ways, depending on their context. For embedded fables (that is, fables embedded in a larger narrative or speech), the fable's immediate context influences the fable's interpretation. In the fable books, however, there is no literary context; the

fables stand as isolated narratives. The fabulist himself, I argue, takes the place of this missing context, and thus provides the reader with an interpretive framework. Such a framework does not outright control the interpretation of the fables (the fables remain multivalent), but it does provide a field of plausible interpretations. Furthermore, because each fable book has a different hermeneutic frame, each text is unique, despite using much of the same material. Thus, in the *Life and Fables of Aesop*, the *Life* serves as a guide for how to use the *Fables* that follow, a guide that is aimed at low or powerless individuals. Phaedrus's collection demonstrates the usefulness of fables as a form of coded speech, for slaves and for other disempowered individuals. Babrius's collection explores the usefulness of fables in education, and teaches the readers how to think about and apply fable wisdom correctly. Finally, Avianus's fable collection is concerned not only with the boundaries of genre – with what is and is not appropriate for the fable genre – but also with the nature of display and ornamentation itself, an important issue in late antique culture. These four fable books have not, on the whole, received much scholarly attention, and there has been little attempt to read them as coherent works of literature in their own right. By considering the overall purpose and hermeneutic frames of each of these collections, this dissertation fills an important gap in scholarship.

The dissertation of Kristin Leilani Mann is approved.

Alex C. Purves

Joseph F. Nagy

Kathryn Anne Morgan, Committee Co-Chair

Amy Ellen Richlin, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

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## VITA

- 2008 B.A. (*summa cum laude*), Classics and English  
Northwestern University  
Evanston, Illinois
- 2008-2009 College of Letters and Science Fellowship  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2009-2010 Teaching Assistant  
Department of Classics  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2010 M.A., Classics  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2010-2011 Graduate Research Mentorship  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2011-2012 College of Letters and Science Fellowship  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2012 Mellon Fellowship  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2013-2014 Teaching Assistant  
Department of Classics  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2014 UCLA Distinguished Teaching Award for Teaching Assistants  
UCLA Classics Department Distinguished Teaching Award
- 2014-2015 Dissertation Year Fellowship  
University of California, Los Angeles

## PRESENTATIONS

Mann, Kristin (March, 2010) View and Display in Herodotus. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Pacific Northwest / Classical Association of the Canadian West.

- (March, 2012) How Could It Be Pure? Bird Violence in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of Classical Association of the Middle West and South.
- (March, 2013) The Separation of Human and Animal in Aesop and Babrius. Paper presented at *Homo Animalis: Man and Animal in the Ancient World*, Boston University.
- (January, 2015). Dual Audience in Phaedrus. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Classical Studies.

## Introduction

This dissertation, *The Fabulist in the Fable Book*, focuses on the four fable collections that have survived from Greco-Roman antiquity: (1) the *Life and Fables of Aesop* (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), a collection of Greek prose fables; (2) Phaedrus's *Fabulae Aesopiae* (1<sup>st</sup> century CE), a collection of Latin verse fables; (3) Babrius's *Μυθίαμβοι Αισώπειοι* (1<sup>st</sup> century CE), a collection of Greek verse fables; and (4) Avianus's *Fabulae* (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE), a collection of Latin verse fables. I argue that in each collection, the author's biography serves as a framing narrative that guides the interpretation of the fables. Essentially, each fabulist emphasizes the part of his identity that explains for what purpose he is writing fables, and this gives the reader a hermeneutic frame through which to interpret the text. My aim is to demonstrate that each of these four fable collections can be considered a work of literature in its own right, not a collection of unrelated and randomly chosen stories. In what follows, I will sketch out the background – much of which may not be familiar to many readers – for these fable books.

### I. Defining the Greco-Roman fable

Defining the ancient fable is a difficult enterprise, and one that has occupied much scholarship. The problem, as many scholars before me have recognized, is that the scope of the ancient fable extends well beyond what we today commonly imagine a fable to be, that is, a fictional, miniature story involving talking animals that teaches a moral lesson. Nearly every

aspect of that modern definition is transgressed by the fables that survive from the ancient world. Greco-Roman fables are not always presented as fictional: Phaedrus tells a fable about Augustus, based (or so he claims) on something that happened within his memory.<sup>1</sup> Fables are not always short; Babrius's Fable 95 is more than a hundred lines long. Fables most often involve talking animals, but there are many examples of fables that include only human characters, or animals that do not speak.<sup>2</sup> Fables are not always moral in outlook: sometimes they are etiological, or end with a humorous quip, or contain no overt moral at all. As van Dijk states, many scholars, in the face of this variety, "resign themselves to a theoretical aporia."<sup>3</sup>

One early but still relevant discussion of the fable's definition is that of B. E. Perry, whose 1959 article classifies the fable genre, considers its overall purpose, and reconstructs its history. Perry declares that it is impossible to find a definition of "fable" that covers everything that has been labeled a fable in antiquity, especially since some things that have been called "fables" are not proper fables.<sup>4</sup> Perry attempts to distinguish the fable by distinguishing it from other, similar genres.<sup>5</sup> A fable is a story, not a generality or an ekphrasis. A fable is "a particular action or series of actions that took place once in the past through the agency of particular characters," not a hypothetical situation or a generalization, like a simile. A fable is fictional, unlike the historical *exemplum*. In the end, however, Perry asserts that the best fable definition is

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<sup>1</sup> Fable 3.10.8: *narrabo tibi memoria quod factum est mea* ("I will narrate for you something that happened within my memory").

<sup>2</sup> For animals not talking in fables, cf. for instance Babrius 11, Babrius 111, and Avianus 9. In Avianus 9, in fact, the fable's humor turns on the animal (a bear) not talking.

<sup>3</sup> Van Dijk 1997: 34.

<sup>4</sup> Perry 1959: 18. One of Perry's strictest requirements is that a fable must be a story; anything that is not a story, even if it is labeled a fable and included in a fable collection, is not a true fable for Perry.

<sup>5</sup> Perry 1959: 18.

the one given by the first century CE rhetorician Theon:<sup>6</sup> “a fable is a fictitious story picturing the truth” (μῦθος ἐστὶ λόγος ψευδῆς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν). Perry’s strategy – defining a fable by what it is not – is the method also followed later by van Dijk. After an extensive overview of how each previous scholar defined the fable genre,<sup>7</sup> van Dijk falls back on the same method as Perry: defining the fable by distinguishing it from other genres that might be confused with it.<sup>8</sup> The difficulty, as both Perry and van Dijk acknowledge, is that the ancient fable has a wide purview, and any definition broad enough to cover all Greco-Roman fables is too broad to be worth much of anything.

In one sense, the question of what a fable actually is matters less for this project than for many. My topic is the fable collections, and I will consider any story that appears in those collections to be a fable.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, for me, an abstract definition of the fable genre matters far less than what each author himself considers a fable to be; each of the fabulists I examine posits his own definition of the fable genre and its purpose. However, it is also true that in order

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<sup>6</sup> Perry 1959: 22.

<sup>7</sup> Van Dijk 1997: 4-36.

<sup>8</sup> Van Dijk 1997: 36: “Fables are past-tense stories, comparisons, similes and animal descriptions are not; fables are metaphorical, animal stories, fairy tales and (historical) *exempla* are not; fables are fictitious, myths are not (at least not in the same sense); fables are graphical, whereas allegories need an exegesis.” He does not, however, think that there is any practical difference between a fable and a parable. Cf. also Blackham 1985: xi-xvii, who defines the fable based not on its narrative form but on how it is used. Nagy 1979: 235-240 and 1990: 148-150 discusses the meaning of the word *ainos*, which can refer to praise poetry, to admonition, or to the animal fable (1990: 150). In all cases, one key element of *ainos*, as Nagy argues, is exclusiveness: the *ainos* may only be truly understood by the intended audience (1979: 239-240; 1990: 149). Thus for Nagy the coded language of fables is a key part of the genre.

<sup>9</sup> Contra Perry 1959: 17-19, who states that the fable collections contain stories that are not proper fables. I take Perry’s point that some of the “fables” in the collections are not even stories: Phaedrus, for instance, will sometimes interrupt the fables for a poem that simply discusses his authorial purpose (cf. Fable 4.2 for an example). However, I would count as a fable something like Phaedrus 5.8, which Perry considers to be an ekphrasis rather than a fable (1959: 18). It is true that Phaedrus 5.8 does not contain a traditional narrative, but it can be interpreted metaphorically (as Bajoni 1999 demonstrates) and it is included by Phaedrus in his fable collection. I would therefore consider it to be a fable.

to recognize how each author is putting his unique spin on the genre, it is important to have a working definition of what a fable traditionally is. Thus I, like many scholars today, will borrow the definition used by Theon.<sup>10</sup> The advantage of this definition is that it is not only ancient, but also vague enough to cover the vast majority of the fables that have survived from antiquity. It also points to an important feature of the fable genre to which I will return often: the fable genre expresses a truth, but does so in coded language: fables “picture” (but do not outright state) the truth. Theon’s definition, then, provides a background against which to consider how each of the fabulists plays with and alters the fable genre for his own purpose, and why each one chose to employ the coded medium of the fable.

For example, Theon’s definition maintains that the fable genre is fictional, which highlights Phaedrus’s inclusion of fables that are supposedly true. Phaedrus is pushing back against the traditional idea of a fable by insisting that even the real, present-day world can produce fables.<sup>11</sup> Avianus, for his part, insists that the fable genre has no need for truth.<sup>12</sup> Like Phaedrus, he is clearly playing on his audience’s expectations for what the fable should be. Thus, this dissertation will have it both ways. I will consider why each author defines the fable as he does, while at the same time considering how this definition stacks up against the more common definition of the fable that Theon provides. In the end, however, I will never exclude any story that appears in a collection: if the author calls it a fable, then I will read it as one.

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<sup>10</sup> For discussions of Theon and the fable genre, cf. Blackham 1985: xi, Christes 1979: 209; van Dijk 1997: 175-177 (with a discussion on how to define each of the terms in Theon’s definition); Küppers 1977: 173-174; Perry 1959: 22; Perry 1965: xix; Uden 2009: 113; and Zafiroopoulos 2001: 9.

<sup>11</sup> On Phaedrus’s “true” fable about Augustus, cf. especially Henderson’s chapter on the subject (2001: 33-55).

<sup>12</sup> In his dedicatory epistle, Avianus claims that he has chosen the fable genre because “in fables, elegantly composed falsehood is proper and the necessity of truth is not incumbent” (*praef.* 3-5: *in his urbane concepta falsitas deceat et non incumbat necessitas veritatis*). This matter will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 4.

Abstract definitions aside, we can observe some characteristics shared by many Greco-Roman fables. First, there is the moral, which often accompanies the fable and which explains either what lesson is taught by the fable (“This fable teaches that liars will be punished”) or states for whom the fable is intended (“This fable is for liars”).<sup>13</sup> The moral can either come before the fable proper, in which case it is known as a promythium, or at the end of the fable, in which case it is called an epimythium. Sometimes a fable will contain no overt moral, but will rather end with a quip spoken by one of the fable characters.<sup>14</sup> This is not, strictly speaking, a moral, insofar as it is not given in a third-person, authorial voice, but such an ending will often leave the meaning of the fable perfectly clear. In the four fable books, the fables of the *Life and Fables of Aesop* and of Phaedrus usually have epimythia, whereas many fables of Babrius and Avianus do not.<sup>15</sup> As for promythia (which do occasionally appear in Phaedrus), Perry argues that they originate from rhetorical handbooks, collections of fables intended for use in oratory.<sup>16</sup> In such handbooks, the promythia served as a sort of index, allowing the orator to see at a glance to whom the fable applied, without needing to read the fable itself.<sup>17</sup> They are consequently less common in the fable collections.

Another common feature of fables – at least after the fifth century BCE – is their ascription to Aesop. The *Life of Fables of Aesop*, which is anonymous, claims that Aesop is the

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<sup>13</sup> These two types of moral are discussed by Holzberg 2002: 89.

<sup>14</sup> The final quip is especially common in Babrius; cf. Morgan 2007: 80-82.

<sup>15</sup> About a third of Avianus’s fables do not include morals. For Babrius, not having a moral is the norm.

<sup>16</sup> Perry 1965: xv-vi discusses the distribution of promythia in Phaedrus. They are more common in the first book, but then become less and less common.

<sup>17</sup> Perry 1959: 35 and 1965: xv. Perry bases his conclusions on fragments of a rhetorical (the Rylands papyrus) in which, according to Perry, the promythia were clearly an indexing tool.



author of the fables,<sup>18</sup> and all of the verse fabulists cite Aesop as their source. It is important to keep in mind that although Aesop's name is virtually synonymous with the fable genre in these collections, Aesop is not generally considered to be the inventor of fables, even by ancient authors. The "historical" Aesop lived on Samos at the end of the seventh century BCE, according to Herodotus,<sup>19</sup> which means that fables predate him. In fact, as Martin West demonstrates in his 1984 article, it was not until the fifth century BCE that fables and the name of Aesop came to be synonymous. While it is thus unsurprising that fable collections circulated in the first century CE or later attribute their fables to Aesop, it is nevertheless also true that the actual origin of fables is up for debate. Thus Phaedrus is able to claim that fables were invented by slaves without specifying where or when (*3 prol. 27-37*), while Babrius can assert that Aesop was only the first fabulist for the Greeks and that fables existed elsewhere before him (*2 prol. 1-6*). Such differences demonstrate that although Aesop's importance was not under debate, the original source of fables was.

The characterization of Aesop also varies from source to source. In the *Life and Fables of Aesop*, Aesop is a hideously ugly but highly intelligent slave, who uses his wits to avoid trouble, and whose exploits often involve the gross and/or sexual. Phaedrus portrays Aesop as a slave, and in fact never mentions or alludes to Aesop's having been freed. In direct contrast, Babrius never mentions Aesop's status as a slave, but instead portrays Aesop as a wise old man, a teacher. Avianus in turn rewrites the most ancient and well-known story about Aesop – his death

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<sup>18</sup> The ascription to Aesop not only appears in the title, but is also implied in the *Life*. There is a moment in the *Life* (G100) when the character Aesop writes down his fables and deposits them in a library, thus implying that the *Fables* that follow might be those very fables.

<sup>19</sup> Hdt. 2.134. This is the earliest testimonium of Aesop that we have.

at Delphi – by claiming that Aesop and Apollo had a friendly relationship.<sup>20</sup> Each of these characterizations of Aesop relates directly to the way in which the fabulist uses his fables: Phaedrus emphasizes the usefulness of fables as a coded language for slaves, and so portrays Aesop as a slave. Babrius writes fables as education, and so depicts Aesop as a wise teacher. Avianus aims to glamorize the fable genre by pretending that it has a divine source, and so makes Aesop and Apollo friendly. The mutability of the character of Aesop makes such alterations possible.

Thus, although the fable genre may bring with it certain expectations, it is above all a highly flexible genre. Knowing what the fable genre usually does allows us to see what is unusual about the texts of Aesop, Phaedrus, Babrius, and Avianus.

## II. A Brief History of Fables

The fable collections are a fairly late phenomenon. Phaedrus and Babrius are both dated to the first century CE, and Avianus is dated to the late fourth or early fifth century CE. The collection attributed to Aesop is another matter entirely; although there are some scholars who claim that a version of Aesop's biography was probably circulating in the fifth century BCE,<sup>21</sup> the version that we have seems to have been composed in the first or second century CE. These fable collections were all circulating in the imperial age.

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<sup>20</sup> On Aesop's death at Delphi being the oldest attested story about him, cf. Nagy 1979: 282 and Kurke 2011: 53.

<sup>21</sup> The so-called *Volksbuch* was a hypothetical text that scholars imagined must have existed in the fifth century BCE, in order to explain the circulation of stories about Aesop. This theory has since been more or less abandoned, although some scholars – such as Martin West – insist that some sort of written account of Aesop must have existed back in the fifth century. For a detailed account of the scholarly history of this debate, cf. Kurke 2011: 19-22.

In his 1959 article, Perry reconstructs a history of the Greco-Roman fable, and argues that the fable genre went through three recognizable stages in its history: (1) fables in context; (2) fables in rhetorical handbooks; and (3) fables in literary collections.<sup>22</sup> The first stage – that of fables in context – does not end when the second stage begins; fables continue to be used in context throughout antiquity. However, in what Perry identifies as the first stage, this is the only use of fables; they never appear in collections, since collections are a feature of a later age. The earliest embedded fable that we know of is the fable of the hawk and the nightingale from Hesiod's *Works and Days*.

The second stage is the most tentative. Perry argues that in the Alexandrian Age, fables began to be collected into rhetorical handbooks. These were functional rather than literary works: they existed so that the orator could more easily find a fable to insert into his speech, a fable that could be expanded or changed as needed. The first of these rhetorical handbooks – so far as we can tell from the evidence – was that of Demetrius of Phaleron, an Athenian orator and statesman of the fourth century BCE.<sup>23</sup> A brief excerpt of his work has been found, and based on the simplistic writing and on the fact that each fable is alphabetical and begins with a promythium, Perry argues that Demetrius's collection was one of these rhetorical handbooks.

The third and final stage, according to Perry, is the one that I will focus on: the appearance of literary fable collections. Under this umbrella, Perry would count Phaedrus, Babrius and Avianus, all of whom wrote fables in verse. Perry does not have a high opinion of the quality of these verse fable collections, calling the authors “second-rate poets” and their

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<sup>22</sup> Perry 1959: 28-29. Holzberg 2002: 12-15 expands slightly on Perry's original analysis.

<sup>23</sup> The evidence for Demetrius's fable book is collected by Perry 1962, although this article perhaps goes too far in ascribing any and all references to fables to Demetrius's lost collection.

books “a string of unrelated fables.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Perry does consider this a new stage in the history of the fable genre, and he admits that the fabulists themselves considered their works to be literary. I will question some of Perry’s assumptions, in particular his claim that the fables in these collections are unrelated to each other. Furthermore, I include the *Life and Fables of Aesop* as one of these literary collections, which Perry would not because the fables in that collection are in prose.<sup>25</sup> The *Life of Aesop* certainly has literary aspirations, and although the prose fables are simple, that does not mean that they do not have stylistic aspects as well.<sup>26</sup>

The most useful aspect of Perry’s history, at least as far I am concerned, is the break he observes between the literary fable collections and the other uses of fables. The fables in literary fable collections differ from embedded fables because they are told in isolation, without a literary context, and they differ from Perry’s description of the rhetorical handbooks because they are in fact literary, not the raw material for an oration. The distinctive nature of these collections is one reason that they need to be studied as a group.

### **III. Fables: A Multivalent Genre**

Fables are an inherently ambiguous genre: they are open-ended stories that can be interpreted in various ways, depending on their context. As an illustration, consider the fable of “The Crow and the Fox,” as related in the *Aesopica*:

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<sup>24</sup> Perry 1959: 29.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Perry 1962: 342: “Told in verse a fable had the literary rating and recognition of poetry...but, told in prose without a context, a fable was nothing but subject-matter in theory and had no recognized place of its own in the field of literary forms, fashions, and endeavors.”

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Holzberg 2002: 86-88 for the argument that the prose fables are kept intentionally simple because such a style suits Aesop, their supposed author. He notes that the fables nonetheless have a clear tripartite structure and are well-balanced, indicating that they were composed thoughtfully.

Κόραξ κρέας ἀρπάσας ἐπὶ τινος δένδρου ἐκάθισεν. ἀλώπηξ δὲ θεασαμένη αὐτὸν καὶ βουλομένη τοῦ κρέως περιγενέσθαι σταῖσα ἐπῆνει αὐτὸν ὡς εὐμεγέθη τε καὶ καλόν, λέγουσα καὶ ὡς πρέπει αὐτῷ μάλιστα τῶν ὀρνέων βασιλεύειν, καὶ τοῦτο πάντως ἂν γένοιτο, εἰ φωνὴν εἶχεν. ὁ δὲ παραστῆσαι αὐτῇ θέλων ὅτι καὶ φωνὴν ἔχει, βαλὼν τὸ κρέας μεγάλα ἐκεκράγει. ἐκείνη δὲ προσδραμοῦσα καὶ τὸ κρέας ἀρπάσασα ἔφη “ὦ κόραξ, καὶ φρένας εἰ εἶχες, οὐδὲν ἂν ἐδέησεν εἰς τὸ πάντων σε βασιλεύειν.”

A crow seized some meat and sat in a tree. A fox, seeing him and desiring the meat, stopped and praised him for being large and handsome, saying that of all the birds, he was the most suitable to be king, and that he would be king, if only he possessed a voice. The crow, wishing to prove to the fox that he had a voice, dropped the meat and croaked loudly. The fox, running up and snatching the meat, said, “Oh crow, if you also had brains, you would have everything you needed to be the king of all.” (*Aes.* 124)

The meaning of this fable depends on the point of view from which it is read. This fable could be read as a warning not to be as foolish as the crow, if given a moral such as “You also should be wary of flatterers” or “Stick to what you know.” It could also be read not as a warning to the crow, but as critique of those who, like the crow, are vain. The moral given in the *Aesopica* is ambiguous as to whether this fable is intended as a warning or a critique, simply stating that “This fable is suitable for the thoughtless man” (πρὸς ἄνδρα ἀνόητον ὁ λόγος εὐκαιρος). As a critique, this fable might also valorize the fox’s cleverness; thus the (perhaps spurious) moral in Phaedrus’s version of this fable states that “This incident proves how strong cleverness can be” (Ph. 1.13.13: *hac re probatur quantum ingenium valet*).<sup>27</sup> This variety in meaning is one of the hallmarks of the fable genre.

Because of this ambiguity, the writer or orator telling the fable must in some way guide the audience’s interpretation. For our earliest extant fables, that guide to interpretation was the fable’s context, as these fables were embedded in other literary works. This was not necessarily a

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<sup>27</sup> The moral appears in Manuscript P but not Manuscript D, and Perry (1965: 208) theorizes that the moral more properly belongs to a different fable. It is true that the second line of the moral (“Intelligence is always stronger than *virtus*” [*virtute semper praevalet sapientia*]) does not fit this fable very well, as the crow is not remarkable for *virtus*. The first line, however, fits well enough.

straightforward matter; the authors who use embedded fables quite often take advantage of the inherent ambiguity of the fable in order to create a richly meaningful text.

Perhaps the best example is the widely-discussed fable “The Hawk and the Nightingale” from Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (lines 202-212). This fable launches *in medias res* with a hawk telling a captured nightingale that he can do whatever he wishes with her, since he is the stronger. Since there is no moral or explicit interpretation given by the author, subsequent scholars have debated from whose perspective this fable is meant to be read. Is it a message to the nightingales of the world, urging them to submit to the stronger because that is how the world works? Is it a critique of the hawk, revealing the savagery of those who believe that their strength gives them the right to do whatever they want? Is there an inherent contrast between the savage animal world portrayed in the fable and the human world which is governed by law? All of these interpretations are possible, and each of them relies on clues in the surrounding narrative itself.<sup>28</sup> In fact, as Nagy argues, Hesiod hints in the introduction to this fable that its meaning can only be understood by certain listeners: νῦν δ’ αἴνον βασιλεῦσιν ἐρέω φρονέουσι καὶ αὐτοῖς (“Now I will tell a fable to the kings themselves who are aware”).<sup>29</sup> Hesiod does not shut down the competing interpretations, but he does provide a rich network of clues for the reader looking for an answer.

Fables embedded in oratory are often more straightforward, since they are being used to make a specific point for an argument. In the *Life of Aesop* – to give a fictional example – Aesop tells the fable of the wolves, the dogs, and the sheep to the Samians.<sup>30</sup> The Samians have just

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<sup>28</sup> Studies on this fable are numerous. For a sampling, cf. Steiner 2007: 4-10 (the nightingale is the hero and the winner in the larger narrative), Daly 1961b (the fable illustrates a contrast between the savage animal world and the just human world), and Zafiroopoulos 2001: 13-14 (the hawk is a negative exemplum).

<sup>29</sup> Nagy 1979: 239. He argues that the *ainos* is by nature an “exclusive” message.

<sup>30</sup> G96-98.

decided to hand Aesop over to Croesus, who wishes to kill Aesop for helping the Samians resist him. In the fable that Aesop tells, the sheep are convinced by the wolves to hand over the dogs, their protectors. The wolves kill the dogs, and then turn on and kill all the sheep, despite their promise not to. Aesop ends the fable by declaring that one should not hand over “useful men” (G97: τοὺς χρηστοὺς) lightly. In this case, the meaning of the fable has been clearly telegraphed: this fable is a warning to the Samians not to hand over Aesop. Aesop does not need to state explicitly that this is a fable about himself and the Samians; the surrounding context makes that clear.

In both cases, the surrounding context provides clues to the reader as to how the fable may be interpreted. Although (as Hesiod shows) this is not necessarily an easy matter, the reader still has something to go on, a guide to interpretation. However, a question remains: what happens if the fable has no context at all? This is the case for the fable books of Aesop, Phaedrus, Babrius, and Avianus, in which the fables stand as unconnected items in a collection. In some cases, a guide to interpretation is provided by the moral, but even this is not necessarily a straightforward matter. In the case of the fable of the fox and the crow in the *Aesopica*, the moral is ambiguous as to whether the fable is a warning or a critique. Or, as we saw from the example of Aesop among the Samians, there is often another step: Aesop tells the Samians that the fable is about not handing over useful men, but the secondary meaning (that the useful man in this case is Aesop himself) is not explicitly stated, but can only be inferred from the context. Furthermore, the moral – when it is given – is not necessarily the final determiner of the fable’s meaning. As will be seen in the chapter on Phaedrus, a normalizing moral can be placed on a fable that critiques the status quo, in order to mitigate the meaning of the fable itself. In that case,

the tension between the moral and the content of the fable is itself part of the fable's meaning.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, in the cases of Babrius and Avianus, morals are often omitted, leaving the reader with no interpretative pointers at all.

It is my thesis that the fabulist himself serves as this missing context: the fabulist's identity and his self-professed reason for writing fables provide a hermeneutic frame through which to interpret the fables. This means that although all four collections include many of the same fables, these fables should be interpreted differently depending on the text in which they appear. This also means that each of these collections has an over-arching purpose, just as each fabulist has a part of his identity which he particularly emphasizes. This flies against the older scholarly consensus that these fable collections are simply collections of unconnected fables, chosen and arranged at random. This opinion is starting to change, and I hope to add more reasons for abandoning it.

#### **IV. Theoretical Background and Approaches**

For the most part, the presence of the fabulist's voice within the fable books is limited to the prologues and epilogues that frame the collections of fables. Each of Babrius's two fable books begins with a prologue, Avianus's collection is prefaced with a dedicatory epistle, and Phaedrus's collection includes both prologues and epilogues for nearly every book. Although the fabulist's voice does sometimes bleed into the fables themselves (for Phaedrus especially), the fabulist's presence in the fable book is mostly limited to the paratext. As such, the work of Gérard Genette is highly relevant to my project.

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<sup>31</sup> Thus it is not strictly true that, as Blackham 1985: 176-177 argues, the morals shut down interpretive possibilities.



In 1987, Genette published his *Seuils* (translated into English in 1997 by Jane Lewin), a book that defines and discusses the concept of paratext. Genette defines paratext as elements outside of the text that accompany it – such as the author’s name, the preface, illustrations, and the like.<sup>32</sup> Genette’s book not only discusses the types of paratext that can accompany the text, but also makes a bold statement about what the purpose of such paratext is:

Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (1997: 2)

Essentially, Genette argues that the paratext is a site not only to provide the reader with information, but also a site where the author can influence and control the reader’s interpretation.<sup>33</sup> This is especially the case, says Genette, with the preface,<sup>34</sup> which has two main purposes: “*to get the book read and to get the book read properly*” (1997: 197). Genette argues that in order to get the book read “properly,” the author must provide the reader with pertinent information (such as why the text was written and for whom), and may go so far as to inform the reader as to what the proper interpretation of the text actually is.<sup>35</sup> Genette admits that such authorial statements are not necessarily sincere, but maintains that even insincere statements of intent still influence the reader’s approach to the text, since the reader is forced to take a position

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<sup>32</sup> Genette 1997: 1.

<sup>33</sup> Genette 1997: 10-11.

<sup>34</sup> Genette distinguishes between various types of preface, based on such factors as who writes them and when they are written (1997: 196).

<sup>35</sup> Genette 1997: 209-229.

either for or against the author's stated interpretation.<sup>36</sup> Essentially, the paratextual preface becomes the place where the author tries to influence how the audience will read the text that follows.

Genette's focus on authorial intention and on the paratext as a site for the author's control over the text may strike some as going too far, as Genette himself admits.<sup>37</sup> The idea of "authorial intention" has been the subject of much criticism, since it is an inherently problematic concept. We as readers cannot know what the author's intentions were (assuming that the author even possessed some sort of singular, concrete intention), nor is there any guarantee that "authorial intention," if it exists, will translate directly and in the same way to every reader of the text.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, as Francesca Martelli argues, more problems arise when one considers the chronological process of writing, editing, and preparing a text for circulation:

But the same – or similar – questions apply: are we to locate these authors' final intentions in the original epigram or ode circulated on its own and for a particular occasion? Or in the new format it derives from being published alongside other poems in the papyrus roll or codex? Deciding where the author's final intentions reside – at the end of one textual process, or at the start of another – is as arbitrary a game as deciding where to locate a point of textual origin or closure, and invariably sends us chasing after the elusive traces of a process that always begins and ends elsewhere. (2013: 5)

Martelli's book focuses on Ovid, and on how the textual revisions that Ovid advertises influence the reading of his texts. Her criticism of "final intentions" is also relevant to my project,

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<sup>36</sup> Genette 1997: 222-224.

<sup>37</sup> Genette 1997: 408: "The relevance I accord to the author's purpose, and therefore to his 'point of view,' may seem excessive and methodologically very naïve. That relevance is, strictly speaking, imposed by my subject whose entire functioning is based – even if this is sometimes denied – on the simple postulate that the author 'knows best' what we should think about his work... This view, held almost unconditionally for centuries, is today, as we know, assailed for fairly diverse reasons, wherein a certain formalist approach ("There is no true meaning to a text") and a certain psychoanalytic approach ("There is a true meaning, but the author cannot know it") paradoxically hit it off well. This debate leaves me personally fairly perplexed, if not indifferent, but I don't think it has to be pursued here: valid or not, the authors' viewpoint is part of the paratextual performances, sustains it, inspires it, anchors it."

<sup>38</sup> As discussed by Martelli 2013: 6.

however. Phaedrus and Babrius both publish multiple books of fables, and in the case of Phaedrus at least, these books were probably published at various times during his life. For both authors, subsequent prologues revise and question the information provided by previous prologues: Phaedrus's relationship with his predecessor Aesop develops and changes over the five prologues, and Babrius's account of the origin of fables is different in his second prologue from the one given in his first. Such changes over time necessarily complicate any efforts to determine what the authorial intentions are for these texts.

Nevertheless, despite these reservations, Genette's concept of the paratext as a site for authorial influence remains relevant. I will not speak of what the "intentions" of these fabulists are, for those are impossible to know, but I will speak of the "hermeneutic frame" that is provided by the prologues and epilogues or (in the case of Aesop) by the biography that precedes the fables. As Genette argues, the prologues demand a response, and they influence the ways in which the texts are read. In the case of the fable collections, as I argue, the fabulist's voice takes the place of the literary context that provides the interpretative frame for embedded fables. Like a literary frame, the fabulist's presence does not outright control the interpretation of the fables, but it does provide clues for how the fable can be interpreted. Differences between these hermeneutic frames – from Phaedrus framing his fables as coded speech by the low to Babrius framing his as being about the nature of education – create differences in how the fables are read and interpreted. These frames are not explicit enough to dictate a single authoritative interpretation, but they do provide a scope of plausible interpretations.

Also relevant to this project is the work that has been done by scholars on other poetry books and letter collections, in which the scholar's goal is to demonstrate an overarching plan

that informs the entire collection.<sup>39</sup> As I discussed above, one of my goals is to demonstrate that these fable collections are not filled with unrelated or randomly chosen fables, but that the fables work together to create a complete text. Such work has already been done for various kinds of anthologies, from Propertius<sup>40</sup> to Horace<sup>41</sup> to Cicero.<sup>42</sup> Several observations that have come from these diverse analyses are important for my project. First, there is the simple fact that an “overarching plan” does not mean that the collection will be homogeneous, or that each and every poem will work together towards a singular goal, as Matthew Santirocco points out with reference to Horace.<sup>43</sup> Individual poems can have diverse goals and interpretations, but that does not mean that the collection has been thrown together at random. Furthermore, as Mary Beard points out for Cicero’s letters, our analysis of the collection’s arrangement should not be limited to a consideration of the *author’s* arrangement:

No editor is ideologically neutral; every edition is founded on a series of *choices* (omissions, juxtapositions, emendations and excerpts) that combine to offer a loaded *representation* of the letter-writer and the relationships instantiated in the letters (2002: 120).

Thus, it does not matter much for my argument whether the *Life and Fables of Aesop* were assembled by their author or by a later editor, nor whether the alphabetization of Babrius’s

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Genette 1997: 201: “One theme of value-enhancement which, for an obvious reason, is characteristic of prefaces to collections (of poems, novellas, essays) consists of showing the unity – formal or, more often, thematic – of what is likely to seem *a priori* a factitious and contingent jumble of things that end up together primarily as a result of the very natural need and very legitimate desire to clean out a drawer.”

<sup>40</sup> Cf., as examples, Hutchinson 1984 (Propertius’s first book) and Putnam 1980 (Propertius’s third book).

<sup>41</sup> I.e., Santirocco 1980 (Horace’s *Odes*) and Zetzel 1980 (Horace’s *Satires*).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. especially Beard 2002, who argues that the original organization of Cicero’s letters (not the chronological order often used by modern editors) is relevant and meaningful. Cf. also Gunderson 2007, who argues for a literary rather than a historical interpretation of Cicero’s letters.

<sup>43</sup> Santirocco 1980: 44-46. Santirocco points out that Horace’s *Odes* are undeniably heterogeneous, but that this does not mean that the poetry book itself is artlessly arranged. He also compares this to Alexandrian poetry collections, which are much more regular and which therefore do not serve as good comparanda for someone like Horace.

collection is the work of Babrius himself or not. I will consider the fable collections as they have come down to us, and I will count as ideologically significant what fables are included and how they are arranged. Although I would not go so far as to argue that the order of each and every fable is significant, I would argue that the fables that are included in each collection have been chosen for a reason, and that the collections make use of broad organizational strategies that are important for the interpretation of the text. For instance, the alphabetization of Babrius's fable book can and should be connected to the educational nature of the text, and the choice to end the first book of fables with the letter lambda is not accidental, as I discuss in my third chapter.

Finally, although I refer frequently to these fabulists by name and talk about their self-characterization, I do not mean to engage in the biographical fallacy. For the most part, the only information we have about these authors comes from the texts themselves. There are no outside testimonia for either Phaedrus or Babrius (aside from Avianus's mention of them),<sup>44</sup> and as for Avianus, the only other representation we have of him is in Macrobius's *Saturnalia*, in which the fabulist is a character, not an accurate representation of the man himself. Thus, when it comes to putting together biographies of these fabulists, the only information available is very often what they say about themselves within the texts. Such statements must obviously be taken as only part of the story, as there is no way to know how true they are. Babrius claims that he is a tutor to the son of King Alexander, but there is no way to know whether that is an authorial fiction or a biographical fact. However, the level of reality that attends the fabulists' self-characterizations does not, in the end, matter to my project in the slightest. What matters is their authorial pose – what the authors tell us about themselves and why.

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<sup>44</sup> The only certain testimonium for these two fabulists is provided by Avianus, who includes both fabulists in his list of predecessors.

In this perspective, I am much indebted to Ralph Rosen's response to persona theory. Persona theory maintains that there must be a disconnect between the authorial "I" of the text and the author of that text: to conflate the two is to engage in the biographical fallacy. Rosen points out that persona theory, although useful, is limited:

While "*persona* theory" has been highly successful in reminding readers that we need not *necessarily* hear a poet's autobiography every time he speaks with his own voice in a poem, it does not fully *solve* the problem of how to interpret the satirist's voice; it merely defers it and makes it more complicated. (2007: 220)

What matters, Rosen argues, is why the author chose to write in that persona, and what this persona means for the interpretation of the text. This is exactly the approach I bring to the fabulists' self-characterizations: regardless of whether or not their self-characterizations are "real," what matters is why the authors chose to present themselves in the way that they do.

In the end, my analysis is firmly text-based. Although we cannot know how Phaedrus intended his fable collection to be read, an analysis of his prologues still reveals important clues as to what sort of hermeneutic frame provides the context for his fables. Although the texts have been altered and in some cases mangled by time and by later readers, the texts as they exist are still meaningful. For all these reasons, I believe, following Genette, that the paratext can and should influence the reading of the text proper. It is time to consider what sort of responses are engendered by the paratexts of the fable collections.

## **V. Review of Previous Literature**

The study of fable collections has changed greatly in the last two decades. For many years, these fable collections were not read as literature. Instead, the scholarship on them focused on source criticism, on examining the manuscript tradition and determining what the original

form of these texts might have been.<sup>45</sup> As Leslie Kurke aptly observes for Aesop,<sup>46</sup> there was a sense in which these texts were put into “quarantine” due to their mangled state: with no reliable and complete text to rely on, the fable collections were pushed aside. However, that is clearly not the whole story, as other fragmentary texts have been widely studied (one thinks, for instance, of the fragments of Pindar or of Archilochus). Equally important in the segregation of these texts was the sense that they simply were not worth studying.<sup>47</sup> This combination of low expectations plus the poor state of the texts meant that these books were virtually never read as texts worthy of interpretation.

This is not to say that important work was not done during the twentieth century and earlier. The manuscript work of B. E. Perry remains highly influential: his *Aesopica* is monumental, and his Loeb of Babrius and Phaedrus remains one of the best translations. Perry is also responsible for much of the groundwork in fable studies: his reconstruction of the history of the fable genre remains influential, as does his discussion of how the fable genre should be defined. Not all of Perry’s conclusions have stood the test of time, as I will discuss in more detail in the relevant chapters. Nevertheless, his work looms large in the scholarship of anyone working on fables.

More recently, there has been a proliferation of scholarship that aims to consider these texts on their own terms. Partly this is due to renewed scholarly interest in ancient popular

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<sup>45</sup> Holzberg 2002: 5-6 and Kurke 2011: 27-29 provide succinct overviews of the older scholars who focused on source criticism. Holzberg discusses which of these scholars produced texts still useable today; Kurke concentrates more on the problems inherent in source criticism.

<sup>46</sup> Kurke 2011: 5.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Holzberg 2002: 76-77 for a collection of older scholars’ harsh judgments.

culture and non-elite discourses,<sup>48</sup> and partly due to scholars seeking out texts that needed attention. In what follows, I will briefly discuss the scholarly works that are most important to this dissertation as a whole. This review is not intended to be exhaustive; each of the chapters will contain its own literature review for the scholarship relevant to that particular text. The following have proven most vital to the dissertation as a whole, insofar as they represent the new attitudes that have developed towards the fable genre.

In 2001, Niklas Holzberg published his *Die antike Fabeln* (translated into English in 2002 by Christine Jackson-Holzberg). This book was intended as a readable introduction to the genre, accessible to those who might not be familiar with the field.<sup>49</sup> Holzberg had observed that the scholarship that existed on the fable genre was so specialized as to be daunting and difficult for anybody not already familiar with fable studies. Holzberg's book, in contrast, not only lays out the relevant issues in plain terms, but also includes extensive lists of further scholarship for those who wish to pursue fables further. Most importantly, Holzberg is one of the first scholars to provide a reading of each of the fable collections.<sup>50</sup> He does not provide an overarching interpretation of the collections, but he does show, by analyzing a few fables from each author, that the fables are artfully crafted and can be considered literary.

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<sup>48</sup> Hansen's *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Culture*, published in 1998, was a milestone in this trend, in that he made the texts teachable as a group. The texts in Hansen's anthology had mostly been published before, but they had received little scholarly attention. As Laura Gibbs writes in her review of this book, "Hansen has thus done us a valuable service by putting these stories back into circulation and, at the same time, providing a solid introduction to the general question of 'popular literature' in the ancient world." Hansen's publication demonstrates the new market for such previously ignored texts.

<sup>49</sup> Holzberg 2002: 7.

<sup>50</sup> In addition to the four collections of my study, Holzberg also separately treats the *Aesopus Latinus*, a fourth century CE prose collection that seems to be largely based on Phaedrus (2002: 95-104). Perry 1965: xcix, on the other hand, treats the *Aesopus Latinus* as one of the prose paraphrases of Phaedrus, a perspective with which I agree.



However, because Holzberg's book is intended to be simply an introduction to the fable genre, he does not push his analysis very far. In fact, he often stops himself, declaring that such-and-such does not fall under the purview of his analysis. For instance, he tantalizingly suggests that Avianus owes much to Phaedrus, not merely to Babrius as is commonly assumed, but then says that that is a matter for another time.<sup>51</sup> This is not a shortcoming of his book; its limited scope is what makes it readable and user-friendly.

A larger issue in Holzberg's work is his overarching assumption that fables have nothing to do with non-elite subject matter. He declares early on that "what the figure of Aesop definitely does not personify is the common people's spirit of rebellion against oppressive rule" (2002: 16), and he maintains this position throughout his work, arguing that none of the fable authors combat the status quo. In making this argument, Holzberg is reacting against Crusius's 1913 article, which argued that fables as a genre represent the attempt of non-elite individuals to protest against their treatment. Holzberg argues that fables have such a wide variety of uses that it is impossible to declare that the genre has a single purpose.<sup>52</sup> This position is perfectly fair, as the fable genre is certainly not monolithic. In practice, however, Holzberg never allows for the fable genre to represent any sort of social critique from below. He is chiefly interested in how fables are used by those in power.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Holzberg 2002: 65.

<sup>52</sup> Holzberg 2002: 16-19. On the use of fables in "high" genres, cf. Fraenkel 1920 (on fable formulas in Sophocles) and Havas 1989 (on Livy's fable of the body rebelling against itself).

<sup>53</sup> For example, there is the way that Holzberg discusses the theme of "the weak vs. the strong" (2002: 16). He asserts that such a theme appears only twice in the archaic and classical periods: in Hesiod and in Aristophanes. He then argues that in Hesiod, the fable of the hawk and the nightingale never questions the authority of the kings to whom the fable is told. He does not discuss further Aristophanes's use of Aesop, even though the fables in Aristophanes are certainly being used from a bottom-up perspective. Thus, although Holzberg does not explicitly state that fables are never used from a bottom-up perspective, his analysis leaves this distinct impression.

However, as has recently been argued by Sara Forsdyke and Leslie Kurke, it is a mistake to assume that the fable genre – even when it appears in elite, written sources – has nothing to say about or to those on the lower end of the social hierarchy. “Elite” and “non-elite” cultures are not separate, monolithic entities, and there is no strict division between them. Both Forsdyke and Kurke argue that elite authors make use of popular, non-elite culture, and that it is possible to uncover the popular traditions that underlie written texts and to use that evidence to reconstruct some of the oral culture that has been lost.<sup>54</sup> For both scholars, Aesop and the fable genre are important elements in this reconstruction, precisely because fables are associated with the low. As Forsdyke points out, “something about the fable – either its actual popularity among slaves or the content of these early fables – caused the Greeks to associate it with a slave.”<sup>55</sup> This important matter will be discussed in more detail in the chapters on Aesop and on Phaedrus, as both authors – I will argue – use fables to speak about and to those on the bottom, even if their fables also speak to those higher up the social ladder. For the moment, I merely wish to point out that “written” does not automatically mean that a text is wholly elite or possessed only of a top-down perspective.

Still, although I do not entirely agree with Holzberg’s analysis, his work remains a landmark study for fables, insofar as it is one of the first to group all the texts together and treat them as worthy of interpretation. Another important recent trend in fable studies is for individual fable collections to receive a fuller, non-source-related treatment. This has not yet occurred for Avianus,<sup>56</sup> but the other three fable collections have each been the subject of a recent study: for

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<sup>54</sup> Kurke 2011: 2-15, 22-24 and Forsdyke 2012: 6-10.

<sup>55</sup> Forsdyke 2012: 62.

<sup>56</sup> Uden’s 2009 article, although short, does posit an interpretative framework for Avianus’s fables, and so perhaps Avianus’s full-length treatment is not far off.

Aesop, there is Leslie Kurke's *Aesopic Conversations* (2011); for Phaedrus, there is John Henderson's *Telling Tales on Caesar* (2001); and for Babrius there is Tom Hawkins's *Iambic Poetics in the Roman Empire* (2014). The importance of these three studies cannot be understated: each of them treats its fable collection as an interesting and useful work in its own right, and each of them reads for interpretation.

Kurke's *Aesopic Conversations*, which will be discussed in detail in my first chapter, considers the ways in which the figure of Aesop has been coopted for various kinds of criticism from below, and argues that Aesop's influence, even on prose authors such as Herodotus and Plato, has been vastly understated. In the first half of the book, Kurke considers in detail various stories about Aesop, including the *Life of Aesop* with which I am concerned. Kurke does not consider the *Life of Aesop* as a text per se, but rather uses various versions of the *Life* to access traditions about Aesop that may have been circulating much earlier. Although her reading is compelling, she mostly excludes the fables themselves from her analysis.<sup>57</sup> By considering what effect the *Life of Aesop* has on the *Fables of Aesop*, I take a different approach, both by including the fables in my analysis, and by considering the entirety of Manuscript G as one complete text.

Henderson's *Telling Tales on Caesar* considers a specific group of Phaedrus's fables: the ones on Roman topics. Henderson argues that Phaedrus takes fables and puts a decidedly Roman spin on them. Or, as Henderson himself puts it, Phaedrus's fable book asks, "If Aesop came back to haunt Rome—where would you expect to find him, and how would he ply his trade—of cheek, nous, street cred?" (2001: 4). Through a close reading of these fables, Henderson demonstrates that each one takes a dual perspective: a perspective from above, and a perspective

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<sup>57</sup> Kurke 2011: 44-45.

from below. Henderson's reading is valuable, in that he explores how the multivalent nature of the fable genre can result in fables that can be read from different viewpoints. Again, this book is limited in scope (Henderson does not analyze Phaedrus's collection as a whole), but it represents a positive trend toward reading the fable collections as literature.

Finally, there is Tom Hawkins's *Iambic Poetics in the Roman Empire*, which includes a chapter on the fables of Babrius.<sup>58</sup> One of Hawkins's major contributions is that he does not read Babrius in isolation (as I mentioned above, fable collections are often "cordoned off" from other works of literature), but rather considers how Babrius's collection can be seen in relation to other iambic works, particularly those of Callimachus. Hawkins's focus is different from mine; he concentrates solely on how Babrius fits into the larger iambic tradition, whereas I am interested in Babrius's views on the merits of fables as education.

One other scholar deserves mention in the introduction, even though he is not working on the fable collections per se: Gert-Jan van Dijk, who wrote his *AINOI, LOGOI, MYTHOI: Fables in Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Greek Literature* in 1997. This work's approach is the opposite of mine, as van Dijk considers only fables outside of the fable collections. Nevertheless, his book is extremely useful. Part 1 deals with the theoretical basis for the genre – modern definitions, ancient definitions, ancient terminology – and gives a detailed review of scholarship. Part 2 analyzes the fables found outside the fable collections (in Greek only), and Part 3 provides the texts themselves. Van Dijk's approach is thorough and practical, and, much like Holzberg, he provides a reader-friendly introduction to the genre.

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<sup>58</sup> Hawkins 2014: 87-136.

Thus, although fable studies are beginning to come into their own, much work still needs to be done. Aside from Holzberg's introductory treatment, the fable collections still lack a holistic, interpretative reading that considers the purpose of each work as a whole. Furthermore, it is important to move beyond the scholarly aporia engendered by the poor state of these texts. It is true that we do not know whether Manuscript G of the *Life and Fables of Aesop* is the original form of the text, or simply one editor's vision, or even when the two halves were put together. It is true that Phaedrus's five-book collection is missing nearly two books, and that there is debate over whether Babrius's collection was originally alphabetical or whether the alphabetization is the work of a later editor. Nevertheless, it is still important and valuable to consider the texts we have, and to provide a reading of them. Manuscript G was circulating in the early centuries of the Roman Empire. Phaedrus and Babrius can still be analyzed, even with parts of their texts missing. If more versions are found, then these analyses can be improved and deepened. Until then, I will consider what we do have, and I will demonstrate that, fragmentary or not, these are texts worth reading.

## **VI. Scope and Contribution of This Dissertation**

*The Fabulist in the Fable Book* has four chapters, each of them focused on one of the four fable collections. I begin with Aesop, not so much for chronological reasons (as the exact chronology of this text is not known), but because the figure of Aesop is vital for the understanding of the other three collections. I then proceed through the other three fable books in order, from Phaedrus to Babrius to Avianus.

In Chapter 1, I discuss the *Life and Fables of Aesop*, an anonymous text which has survived in many different versions. The oldest and best version is Manuscript G, a text whose

original version probably dates to the first or second century CE. Manuscript G contains a prose biography of Aesop (the *Life*) and a collection of more than two hundred of his fables (the *Fables*).

My chapter argues that the *Life of Aesop* serves as a practical guide for how to use the *Fables* that follow: the *Life* may be divided into four sections, and each one teaches a lesson that is relevant to the proper or improper use of fables. Tellingly, each of these lessons seems directed at the low. In the first section (Chapters 1-90), Aesop is still a slave, and he does not tell any fables. Instead he employs common strategies used by fable characters, and so avoids trouble. In so doing, Aesop demonstrates how fables are useful for slaves and other powerless individuals: fables teach the powerless how to act cunningly around those who have power. In the second section (Chapters 91-100), Aesop, now freed, uses fables in oratory, in order to give political advice. This section teaches the reader how to be safe when giving advice in the political arena, even to those who are superior. The third and fourth sections, in contrast, warn against using fables in the wrong way. In the third section (Chapters 101-123), during which Aesop works for a Babylonian king, Aesop uses writing and speaks openly, instead of relying on orality and implicitness as he always had before. Although Aesop is ultimately successful in this section, his methods are presented as problematic, and perhaps unsuitable for a low individual like Aesop. In the final section (Chapters 124-142), when Aesop is at Delphi, Aesop's fables fail in their persuasive function because Aesop attempts to speak from a position of power and refuses to acknowledge that he is at the mercy of the Delphians. Even though Aesop is once again ultimately successful (insofar as the Delphians are punished after his death), the section warns against the low trying to tell fables as though they are on top.

The importance of this reading is twofold. First, I join scholars such as Leslie Kurke who have argued that even though the *Life of Aesop* is a written text that must have been circulated in elite circles, this does not mean that it has nothing to say to or about non-elite individuals.<sup>59</sup> Aesop, as an ugly slave, is the lowest of the low, and yet he is ultimately successful in nearly everything he does. Aesop's success means that this story should not be read as a text that attempts to silence or punish Aesop (as, for instance, it has been read by Holzberg and by Hopkins<sup>60</sup>). However, just because this text celebrates Aesop, it does not follow that all of Aesop's actions are therefore valorized or correct. I part ways with Leslie Kurke in arguing that although Aesop is ultimately the hero of the story, his methods in the final two sections are called into question by the narrative, and ultimately do not serve him well.

Secondly, by reading the text in this way I demonstrate that the *Life of Aesop* is vital for the reading of the *Fables*. Often the *Life* has been read as its own text; even Kurke omits the *Fables* from her analysis. As I will show, however, the *Fables* not only help clarify some of the *Life*, but the *Life* serves as a practical guide for how to use the *Fables*. It is thus important to consider the two as one complete text.

The second chapter focuses on the *Fabulae Aesopiae* of Phaedrus, a five-book collection of fables in Latin verse, dated to the early first century CE. In my second chapter, I argue that Phaedrus's collection of fables demonstrates and celebrates the usefulness of fables as a method of covert speech. Phaedrus emphasizes the connection between fables and slavery, both by stressing Aesop's identity as a slave and by stating that fables were originally created by slaves

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<sup>59</sup> Kurke 2011: 6-13.

<sup>60</sup> Holzberg 2002: 81-83; Hopkins 1993.

who wished to speak their feelings in code. By thus focusing on the connection between fables and the voices of slaves, Phaedrus encourages his readers to imagine what sort of meaning the fables might have if spoken by slaves. These fables are not presented as a transcription of slave fables, by any means, but they are presented as the sorts of fables that slaves might tell.

On another level, Phaedrus himself makes use of fables as a method of covert speech. Phaedrus deliberately impersonates the slaves he claims invented fables, by matching his own use of fables as closely as possible to theirs. In other words, just as the original slaves used fables to talk in a coded manner about their experience of slavery, so too does Phaedrus. This suggests that Phaedrus might in fact be the freedman that the title of his work claims he is.<sup>61</sup> If not, Phaedrus is at the very least adopting that persona.

This text also has a political dimension: Phaedrus's third prologue mentions Sejanus, and the fables themselves seem to have been written under Tiberius. By emphasizing the usefulness of fables as a method of covert speech for slaves, Phaedrus also establishes the usefulness of fables for other disempowered groups. He thus advertises the usefulness of the genre for any people who wish to speak their feelings in code.

Phaedrus's connection to slavery has of course been noticed before; scholars like Keith Bradley have previously considered to what extent Phaedrus's fables can be read through the lens of slavery.<sup>62</sup> However, my work goes further than that of previous scholars in two important ways. First, I argue that the connection between fables and covert speech is one that informs the fable book as a whole, and that Phaedrus is deliberately creating a parallel between himself and

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<sup>61</sup> For the contrary opinion, that Phaedrus could not have been a freedman, cf. Champlin 2005.

<sup>62</sup> Bradley 1987: 151-153.



the slaves who invented fables. Previous work on Phaedrus and slavery has tended to concentrate on merely the third prologue and a few choice fables; I demonstrate that the connection goes much further and that it is a connection that informs the collection as a whole.

Secondly, I argue against the scholarly consensus that Phaedrus's fable book demonstrates resignation towards the status quo – that the only advice Phaedrus offers to those on the bottom is that their life will be hard and that is just the way it is. This mistaken interpretation stems from reading only the surface of Phaedrus's text, not the underlying meaning. Phaedrus's fables make use of a number of methods of plausible deniability, such as using animal characters to provide distance from human concerns, ending on a normative note so as to mitigate the often subversive content of the fable proper, and explicitly addressing fables to those in power, even when the fables also include a message for the powerless. By identifying these methods and considering what kinds of messages lie beneath them, I demonstrate that Phaedrus critiques common slave-holding rhetoric and gives voice to common slave concerns and fears. His fables do contain a message that challenges the status quo, but it is one that is presented covertly, and so has been largely missed by a readership that rarely considers the book as a whole.

Babrius's two-book collection of fables is the focus of Chapter 3. This fable book, written in Greek verse, has been dated to the late first century CE. Babrius presents himself as a tutor working for an eastern king, using fables to educate the prince. However, as I argue, Babrius's fables are not simply moral lessons for a prince; rather, Babrius's fables teach his audience how best to interpret and use information, including the information presented by the fables themselves. In essence, his fables teach a person how to learn. Understanding this aspect of Babrius's pedagogical strategy is important because it helps explain a number of puzzling

features of Babrius's fable collection, such as his lack of expressed morals, his focus on characters' inner thoughts, and the contradiction between his first prologue (which asserts that fables are set in a peaceful and idyllic Golden Age) and the fables themselves (which portray a world of savagery and violence). Essentially, Babrius creates a fable book that requires careful thought in order to be correctly interpreted, and which simultaneously teaches the audience the tools needed to perform that interpretive work.

Babrius's role in education has been discussed before, but the pedagogical strategy that brings together his whole collection has not. Scholars like Maria Becker contextualize Babrius in the wider history of education, and discuss the role of Babrius as a school text.<sup>63</sup> While the role of fables in rhetorical education is important, such studies fail to consider the educational value of simply reading Babrius's text. Other authors have begun to consider deeper themes in Babrius that inform the collection as a whole, such as Tom Hawkins, who considers Babrius as an iambic poet, and Richard Hunter, who examines Babrius's debt to Hesiod.<sup>64</sup> This chapter adds to such thematic readings by bringing to light another important aspect of Babrius's work.

At the end of the chapter, I suggest that Babrius's fable collection can be viewed in light of the intellectual climate of the Second Sophistic, as described by scholars such as Tim Whitmarsh.<sup>65</sup> Education – παιδεία – was an all-consuming, self-defining obsession for intellectuals of the Second Sophistic, from Lucian lambasting hypocrites who only pretend to be learned to Plutarch presenting education as a self-making phenomenon.<sup>66</sup> Babrius's fable

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<sup>63</sup> Becker 2006.

<sup>64</sup> Hawkins 2014; Hunter 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Whitmarsh 2001.

<sup>66</sup> For Lucian, see especially Richter 2011: 148-149; for Plutarch cf. Whitmarsh 2001: 98-99.

collection, which considers how and why fables are a good medium for education, must be inspired by the intellectual climate of his day.

The final fable collection studied is the *Fabulae* of Avianus, written in the late fourth or early fifth century CE. Avianus's collection consists of forty-two fables written in elegiac couplets, as well as an introductory epistle addressed to a Theodosius. Much – perhaps even the majority – of previous scholarship on Avianus has focused on the joint questions of who Avianus's dedicatee Theodosius was and who Avianus himself might have been. For the most part, scholarly consensus now maintains that Avianus's dedicatee is Macrobius Theodosius, author of the *Saturnalia*, and that Avianus himself most likely spelled his name Avienus. My dissertation does not dispute these claims; in fact, I offer additional evidence for the identification of Macrobius with Avianus's dedicatee, and for the common assumption that the Avienus who is a character in the *Saturnalia* is our fabulist.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that there is a disconnect between Avianus's dedicatory epistle, in which he promises to make the fable genre elegant, and the fables themselves, which repeatedly demonstrate that outward beauty is at best worthless and at worst actively harmful. In fact, Avianus has a number of fables that denigrate humble animals who take pride in dress that does not suit them (such as Fable 5, about a donkey who puts on a lion skin), thus calling into question Avianus's own supposed project of dressing up the humble fable genre in elevated style. Furthermore, a major component of Avianus's high-style treatment of the fable genre is epic language: Avianus "dresses up" his fables by repeatedly quoting and/or alluding to Vergil's poetry. This epic allusion may at first glance seem unproblematic, since classical allusion is a common feature of late antique style and since Avianus's dedicatee, Macrobius, was himself a lover of Vergil. However, the way in which Avianus makes use of Vergil calls into question any

such simple reading. Epic language and epic strategies are repeatedly associated with failure and humiliation in the fables themselves, while simplicity and cleverness – the hallmarks of the fable genre – are associated with success. In the end, Avianus not only demonstrates the ridiculousness of trying to make a humble genre like the fable elegant, but he also stains Vergil by using his poetry in situations that can only bring the epic language into a state of bathos.

This focus on the unsuitability of high style for a humble genre is not merely a question of literary sensibilities, however. Avianus's lambasting of "dressing up the low" has political and social ramifications as well. As has been demonstrated by such scholars as Michele Salzman, James Uden, and Michael Roberts,<sup>67</sup> displays of wealth and of power were markers of elite culture in the late antique period: members of the elite were distinguished by the way they dressed, by the public displays they were able to fund, and by their education and literary taste. However, as various emperors expanded and altered the boundaries of who could be elite, display became a less reliable marker of true elite status.<sup>68</sup> On another level, then, Avianus's fables are a critique of those who attempt to use display to alter low status. Fables are useful for what they are: humble stories that teach simple lessons. Moving beyond that – moving into the territory of high culture and of epic – can only be a failed venture because fancy dress will never make the low high.

At the same time, by staining Vergil through association with the humble fable, Avianus also mocks the literary taste of his day, in which classical allusion played a big role. Certainly there is an element of teasing in Avianus's dedicatory epistle to Macrobius, a man who so valued

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<sup>67</sup> Salzman 2002; Uden 2009; Roberts 1989.

<sup>68</sup> On the ways in which the definition of the aristocracy changed over time, cf. especially Salzman 2002: 28-39.

Vergil. Avianus promises to give Macrobius exactly what he loves: new poetry with a Vergilian flavor. Instead, Avianus produces poetry that brings Vergil into low company. It is this second element that helps explain Macrobius's own characterization of Avienus in the *Saturnalia*. In the *Saturnalia*, Avienus is a foolish young man who does not understand the value of antiquity – at least, not until he is taught better. This characterization of Avienus is a response, I argue, to the disrespect Avianus accorded to Vergil in his fables.

Avianus's fables have not yet received the scholarly attention that the other fabulists have begun to receive. Aside from Uden and Küppers, both of whom provide interpretative readings of the dedicatory epistle and some of the fables, there has been little effort to produce an interpretation of Avianus's fable collection as a whole. Like me, Uden offers a reading of how Avianus's concern for style in the introductory epistle influences his fables, although his focus is much different. Uden argues that Avianus is influenced by the public and often gruesome public punishments used in the late antique period, and so often uses grotesque images of violence in his fables.<sup>69</sup> My chapter brings out a different side of Avianus, first by showing that Avianus's dedicatory epistle is not a straightforward valorization of style for style's sake, but a tongue-in-cheek attempt to make the fable into a high genre. Second, I demonstrate how the many fables about the hollowness of exterior beauty call the epistle into question, and what this overall theme has to say about the society in which Avianus was writing.

To sum up: this dissertation will demonstrate that the presence of the fabulist in the fable book is key for the interpretation of the fables. The personal statements or life story of the fabulist, as expressed in the paratext, gives each fable collection a different hermeneutic frame.

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<sup>69</sup> Uden 2009.

Such a frame does not force the reader to read the fables in one particular way, but it does point the reader toward interpretations that are plausible. Each collection can and should be seen as a work of literature in its own right.

## Chapter 1

### **The *Life and Fables of Aesop*: An Instruction Manual for the Low**

The *Life and Fables of Aesop* is, in many ways, a difficult text to work with. It is a late text, in poor condition, with a complicated manuscript tradition. Furthermore, it is compounded of two genres that have not historically been held in high esteem: the novel and the fable book. Even in its own time the *Life and Fables of Aesop* was not held in high regard. In fact, it was particularly susceptible to later alterations, since it was not considered to be a literary text of high enough value to merit preservation in its original form.<sup>1</sup> This ancient scorn did not disappear in the modern age; from as early as 1697, when Richard Bentley tried to prove that the *Life of Aesop* must be a medieval forgery because of its low quality,<sup>2</sup> up until the twentieth century, when even scholars who worked on Aesop disparaged him,<sup>3</sup> the *Life and Fables of Aesop* has often been dismissed as being a poor text, hardly worth reading.

That view is starting to change – but mostly for the *Life*, not the *Fables*. The scholars currently working on Aesop tend to concentrate on the *Life*, on the biography of Aesop that precedes the collection of fables, while ignoring or minimizing the *Fables* themselves. The reasons for this imbalance are clear. The *Life* is, on the surface, a more interesting text. It has a

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<sup>1</sup> Perry 1936: 1.

<sup>2</sup> Lefkowitz 2008: 64-66.

<sup>3</sup> As discussed by Holzberg 2002: 76-77.

narrative; it exists as a unit. The fables, in contrast, are seen as interchangeable and lacking in authorial purpose. They are assumed to be no more than their surface: little stories that teach an often painfully obvious moral lesson. For these reasons, there are very few scholars who study the *Fables* with an eye toward their content or interpretation, as opposed to their manuscript tradition. There is Nøjgaard, who studies the narrative structure of individual fables, Holzberg, who looks briefly at groups of fables that center on common themes, and Zafiroopoulos, who examines the ethical perspective of the *Fables* as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Notably, of the three, it is only Zafiroopoulos who examines the *Fables* as a complete text. However, as I will show, to read just the *Life of Aesop* or just the *Fables* is to read only half of the text, for the *Life* and the *Fables* are intended to be read together.

For me to use the word “intended” is, perhaps, problematic. The *Life and Fables of Aesop* is an anonymous text, and one which has most likely been changed by many subsequent editors. Furthermore, scholarly consensus holds that the *Life* and the *Fables* were conceived of and written separately and were only put together at some later date.<sup>5</sup> Even if there is “intention” in the text that we have, it is impossible to know whether it is the intention of the original author or a subsequent editor, and the latter is more probable by far.<sup>6</sup>

This is not to say that there are no reasons to examine the *Life and Fables of Aesop* as one complete text, however. As the manuscript work of Perry demonstrates, the *Life* and the *Fables*

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<sup>4</sup> Holzberg 2002: 85-86, with a summary of Nøjgaard; Zafiroopoulos 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Holzberg is, to my knowledge, one of the only people to argue that there is at least a possibility that the *Life* and the *Fables* are the work of a single person, although even he seems to think it unlikely (2002: 75-6).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Beard 2002, who discusses the role of the editor in the arrangement of Cicero’s letters: “No editor is ideologically neutral; every edition is founded on a series of *choices* (omissions, juxtapositions, emendations and excerpions) that combine to offer a loaded *representation* of the letter-writer and the relationships instantiated in the letters.” She believes – as do I – that the choices made by an editor are well worth our attention, even if they are not the choices of the author.



were most likely combined at a fairly early date.<sup>7</sup> The oldest form of the text that we have, Manuscript G, contains *Life G* followed by the *Augustana* collection of the fables. According to Perry, this text probably comes from an archetype of the first or second century CE.<sup>8</sup> If this is true, then it means that the version of the text that was current in the early days of the Roman Empire (when, for instance, Phaedrus and Babrius were active) contained the biography and the fables together.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, most of the manuscript branches contain the *Life* and the *Fables* together (although in some cases it is a truncated version of the *Life* – perhaps a summary of the missing biography).<sup>10</sup> Although it is impossible to know what the original versions of these texts were, or when exactly they were first combined, it does seem likely that the combination of the biography and the fables is fairly ancient, and that this is the version that would have been read in the early days of the Roman Empire. I will focus almost exclusively on the *Life and Fables of Aesop* as represented by Manuscript G, which is the most complete and the earliest version of the *Life and Fables*. There are some lacunae in *Life G* (particularly when it comes to sexually explicit content), but these may be reconstructed from another manuscript, Manuscript W.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Perry (1936 and 1959) is still the authority on the manuscript tradition of Aesop.

<sup>8</sup> Perry 1936: 24-25. Perry argues, in view of the prominent role of Isis and some of the Latinate vocabulary, that the archetype of the versions we have (which is probably not the oldest written text) “can hardly be earlier than the first century B.C.” (p. 25). Kurke argues that Aesop’s assimilation in the *Life* to the “traveling rhetor or sophist of the Roman imperial period” provides additional evidence that this text dates to the early imperial period (2011: 69).

<sup>9</sup> Perry 1936: 2 says that in Manuscript G we have a text “which is in all essentials... ancient, and from which, in spite of its many corruptions, we may gain a fair idea of the form in which this naïve biography was current in the early centuries of the Roman empire.”

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Perry 1936: 76: “In general, it has become quite evident to me, thanks to the recovery of the old Augustana *Life* in the Morgan manuscript and to a closer knowledge of the tradition in the Westermann *Life*, that the two texts, *Life* and *Fables*, have, in the broad outlines of their evolution and apart from Class IV, an almost exactly parallel history as far back as either can be traced in our manuscripts.” For a helpful summary of the manuscript situation, cf. Holzberg 2002: 74.

<sup>11</sup> On the differences between G and W cf. Perry 1936: 4-24. *Life W* was discovered in 1845 by Anton Westermann, and seems to be an epitome. There is also a version of the text edited by the Byzantine scholar Maximus Planudes,

Not only were the *Life* and the *Fables* combined at an early date, but they also work together as a complete text. This is, I think, the biggest disadvantage to studying them separately. Perhaps the biggest contribution the *Life* makes to the *Fables* is legitimization: the *Life* “proves” that the *Fables* are the actual work of Aesop, by recording the moment that Aesop writes down his fables and stores them in a library:

Αἴσωπος οὖν αὐτῷ συγγραψάμενος τοὺς ἰδίους λόγους καὶ μύθους, τοὺς ἄχρι καὶ νῦν ὀνομαζομένους, κατέλιπεν εἰς τὴν βιβλιοθήκην...

Aesop then wrote down his own fables and stories, as they were long ago and even now called, and he left them in the library... (G100)

The emphasis in this passage is on the permanence of Aesop’s work and on the fact that it is *his* work. Aesop writes down “his own fables” (τοὺς ἰδίους λόγους), a pleonasm that emphasizes that the fables stem from Aesop and nobody else. Aesop then leaves the text in a library, thus explaining how it survived. This passage implies that the fables in the *Life and Fables of Aesop* could be the very work that Aesop wrote and left behind in the library. This is important. Martin West<sup>12</sup> has demonstrated that during the fifth century BCE, fables came to be closely associated with Aesop. Before this, authors such as Hesiod or Archilochus could tell fables without giving any source; fables were just stories, not the work of any particular figure. In the fifth century, however, fables came to be associated so strongly with Aesop that telling a fable became tantamount to telling a fable of Aesop.<sup>13</sup> This close connection between Aesop and fables can

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which, aside from stylistic differences, is very close to W. On the relationships between the three versions of the *Life*, cf. Holzberg 2002: 72-74 and Kurke 2011: 16-21.

<sup>12</sup> West 1984.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. van Dijk 1993: 173-174. This can be seen, for instance, in the *Birds* of Aristophanes, in which the chorus is criticized for not being familiar enough with their Aesop (line 471), as though “Aesop” is synonymous with “fables.”

also be seen in all of the fable collections that survive: the *Life and Fables of Aesop*, which is anonymous, is ascribed to Aesop. Phaedrus, Babrius and Avianus (all of whom present themselves as literary men writing fables) identify Aesop as their source. For a fable collection to be presented as the *Life and Fables of Aesop* is for it to be marked as “the real thing.”<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, this is the text we have. That may seem like too obvious a point to make, but I believe that it is worth emphasizing. Unless we make a truly extraordinary papyrus find, we will never have access to the original text. What we do have is a text that probably dates to the second century CE, which contains a popular novel about the fabulist Aesop and more than two hundred of “his” fables.<sup>15</sup> A person reading this text would have read first the biography, and then the fables. That is the form of the text that this dissertation will study.

Finally, and most importantly, the *Life* serves as a guide for how to use the *Fables*, and this matter has not, to my knowledge, been explored at length. Patterson does something similar, when she argues that the *Life* “offers us, if we read its narrative episodes thoughtfully, a set of propositions that explain what the Aesopian fable can do best, though it does not control these functions exclusively.”<sup>16</sup> She goes on to explain that the *Life* dramatizes what makes fables effective: (1) it speaks to “unequal power relations,” (2) it shows that those who are not in power must speak in a coded language; (3) it demonstrates that texts need a named author “to acquire cultural resonance,” (4) it shows that wit leads to freedom, and (5) it shows that “basic issues

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<sup>14</sup> For the idea of “brand names” in the ancient world, cf. Flemming 2007: 269-270.

<sup>15</sup> The various manuscript traditions contain mostly the same fables, although there are fables that appear in later manuscripts that are not present in G. Perry’s 1952 text contains all of the *Augustana* fables, followed by those fables that appear only in later manuscripts. For the purposes of this dissertation, I count and include only the 231 fables from the *Augustana* collection.

<sup>16</sup> Patterson 1991: 15.

require basic metaphors.” In essence, Patterson argues that the *Life* dramatizes the particular power contained in the fable genre. This is certainly true. My focus, however, has a more practical bent: the *Life* teaches the attentive reader not just why fables are useful, but also how to use (or not use) them effectively. Thus, the *Life* provides practical instruction, as do the *Fables* themselves.<sup>17</sup>

In arguing that the *Life* influences how the *Fables* are read, I am taking the *Life* as a sort of prologue to the *Fables* – a paratext, if you will, which, in Genette’s formulation, is something that necessarily influences the interpretation of the text proper.<sup>18</sup> Of course, the *Life of Aesop* is not, strictly-speaking, a prologue; it is its own text. Nevertheless, the *Life* does in some ways condition how the *Fables* must be read and by whom. As such, it has certain functions similar to the function of paratexts in Genette’s formulation.

For me to argue that the *Life* serves as a guide for using the *Fables* may seem odd, given that very few fables actually appear in the *Life*. Aesop does not tell any fables until he is freed, so that his first fable appears in chapter 93.<sup>19</sup> He then tells three fables in quick succession,<sup>20</sup> after which he tells no more until the end of the *Life* when he visits Delphi in chapter 124.<sup>21</sup> All in all,

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<sup>17</sup> On the practical wisdom of the fables, cf. Zafiroopoulos 2001. Zafiroopoulos examines the ethics of Aesop’s fables, and concludes that their focus is to give *practical* advice on how to manage an unfair existence. In a more negative vein, Daly 1961a: 12 argues that the fables are far too cynical to be intended for children; they must be aimed at equally cynical adults.

<sup>18</sup> See above, pp. 13-16.

<sup>19</sup> Aesop does tell a few stories while he is a slave, several of which have been incorrectly called fables by some scholars. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, however, the fables told by Aesop in the *Life* are clearly marked, and the stories he tells as a slave cannot be considered fables.

<sup>20</sup> G93, G96, and G99.

<sup>21</sup> He then tells six fables in rapid succession: G129, G131, G132, G134, G140, and G141.

the *Life* contains only nine fables, six of which are told at Delphi. In a work with 142 chapters, these nine fables are very few and far between.

The infrequency with which Aesop tells fables does not mean that the rest of the *Life* is not still concerned with proper and improper uses of fables, however. Telling fables is only one way to use them. Another, equally valid method is to live according to the strategies and behaviors that fables recommend. In the first part of the life, Aesop may not tell any fables, but he acts the part of a fable character by consistently using fable strategies to avoid trouble and teach his enemies a lesson. Aesop thus teaches the reader, through his actions, not only how to implement fable wisdom, but also that such strategies are successful. This, as James C. Scott has shown, was a common way that the Brer Rabbit Tales were used by African American slaves:

It goes without saying, as well, that these tales had an instructive, cautionary side. Identifying with Brer Rabbit, the slave child learned, as he or she learned in other ways, that safety and success depended on curbing one's anger and channeling it into forms of deception and cunning, where one's chances of success were greater. What they taught, the tales also celebrated as a source of pride and satisfaction. (1990: 164)<sup>22</sup>

Fables can be told by the low, and the low can use fables as a model for how best to act around superiors. The *Life of Aesop* covers both of these aspects, by first having Aesop play the part of a fable character, and then by having him tell fables in public and/or political situations. The *Life* also dramatizes the wrong way to use fables, by placing Aesop in situations where he either does not tell fables when he should – and thus fails to persuade – or uses fables but in the wrong way.

Of course, it is not uncontroversial for me to claim that the *Life of Aesop* is a text that speaks to the low. Keith Hopkins, for example, reads the *Life of Aesop* as a text about slave owners' anxieties about slavery, arguing that "Roman masters needed slaves in order to be

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<sup>22</sup> On fables as a method of teaching practical strategies to non-elite individuals, cf. also Forsdyke 2012: 71.

masters, and they needed stories about slaves in order to work through and recreate some of the problems which their own social superiority invariably caused” (1993: 21). Ultimately, Hopkins argues that Aesop represents the embodiment of the slave owners’ fear, brought up so that it can be laughed away.<sup>23</sup> However, even Hopkins admits that “its simple prose style and unaffected humour suggest that [the *Life of Aesop*] had a broader appeal among social strata well below the literary and power elites” (1993: 12). Hopkins does not, in the end, focus on the non-elite appeal of the *Life of Aesop*, however, concentrating instead on how it would have appealed to Roman slave-holders.

It is important to note that “elite” and “slave-owning” were not categories that precisely overlapped in the Roman world, nor are “elite” and “non-elite” unproblematic as terms.<sup>24</sup> Not only could slaves and poor men own slaves, but the term “elite” can encompass many different types of elite: those with political power, those with education, those with great wealth. Not all “elite” men had all of these traits (or had them in the same way), and many slaves and former slaves had some or all of them. A slave could be educated, and a freed slave could attain great wealth. In a similar way, the term “non-elite” can in no way designate a monolithic group. There were many different types of slaves in Roman society, whose experiences and perspectives would have varied wildly depending on where they worked, how their owner treated them, whether they were male or female, whether they were educated, and so on. “Non-elite” might also designate the free poor – again, a highly varied group. Furthermore, as Kathy McCarthy has argued, the highly stratified nature of Roman society meant that nearly every person was

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<sup>23</sup> Hopkins 1993: 22.

<sup>24</sup> On the variations among “elite” and “non-elite” people, and on the fluid nature of Roman social classes, cf. Richlin 2014: 218-219.

beholden to somebody's power.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, a broad distinction can be made between those who have power – those with wealth, those with political power, those with freedom – and those who do not have power – those on the lowest ends of the social scale. It is my contention that the *Life of Aesop* speaks more to the latter than to the former.

Leslie Kurke admits that since this text was committed to writing, and since it was circulated (presumably by upper-class people), it is impossible to identify the work as some sort of pure version of “popular culture.” Nevertheless, she argues that the *Life of Aesop* can be used as evidence for popular, oral traditions.<sup>26</sup> Kurke maintains that because the *Life of Aesop* seems to preserve in written form orally circulating tales for which there is much earlier evidence, and because the manuscript tradition preserves so many variations of the *Life* (suggesting that the tradition was living and open to revision), it is possible to see the *Life of Aesop* as, at the very least, preserving real oral and popular traditions about Aesop.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, Kurke concludes:

I am not thereby claiming that Aesop represents the veiled fantasies of actual slaves in the ancient world (like Brer Rabbit for slaves in the antebellum South)—although it is possible that the figure did serve this function in strands of the oral tradition largely unrecoverable to us. I would suggest rather that already by the fifth century BCE the figure of Aesop had floated free from any particular context and passed into the common discursive resources of the culture, available as a mask or alibi for critique, parody, or cunning resistance by any who felt themselves disempowered in the face of some kind of unjust or inequitable institutional authority. That is to say, starting in the fifth century and for centuries thereafter, “Aesop” was a readily available cipher or “ideoggenre” for all kind of parody or critique from below. (2011: 12)

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<sup>25</sup> McCarthy 2000: 19-21.

<sup>26</sup> Kurke 2011: 6. Cf. also Forsdyke 2012: 3-17. Forsdyke, whose goal is to uncover evidence of Greek popular culture using elite, written sources, similarly argues that it is possible to detect popular, non-elite culture that has been appropriated by elite texts.

<sup>27</sup> Kurke 2011: 6-7. On the anonymity of the text as evidence for the openness of the tradition, cf. also Jedrkiewicz 1989: 17-18.

Leslie Kurke rightly shows caution in not stating that the *Life of Aesop* can be taken as slave narrative, although she also does not claim (as does Hopkins) that the *Life of Aesop* is a chiefly top-down narrative.<sup>28</sup> Although this text could well have been enjoyed by readers who were wealthy, or powerful, or who owned slaves, it remains a text that also speaks to those on the bottom, whether slaves or those in other conditions of powerlessness.<sup>29</sup>

In the end, I agree far more with Kurke than I do with Hopkins: the *Life of Aesop* has too much to say about and to non-elite experiences for it to be taken as a text mostly aimed at slave-holding, elite men. In fact, I would be slightly more liberal in taking this text as speaking to the actual experience of slaves than does Kurke; certainly Aesop spends a large portion of the text as a slave, and the novel never stops being concerned with Aesop's status as either a slave or a former slave. Especially for a text that might have been circulating in the early days of the Roman Empire, there may well have been overlap between "non-elite" and "former slaves" among the readers of this text. Such readers may have appreciated and identified with Aesop the slave. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I will simply focus on what the *Life of Aesop* has to teach about the proper and improper use of fables, specifically for those on the bottom, whether slave or free.

The *Life* may be divided into four sections, each of which teaches the reader a different lesson relating to the proper use of fables:

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<sup>28</sup> For the contrary view, that fables are inherently aristocratic and anti-democratic, cf. duBois 2003.

<sup>29</sup> On non-elite culture as something enjoyed by both elites and non-elites, cf. Kurke 2011: 7-8 and Forsdyke 2012: 6-9.



- (1) Chapters 1-90: Aesop, while a slave, plays the part of a clever fable character, thus dramatizing one way to use fables: namely, living according to the strategies they recommend. In this section, Aesop teaches people lessons through his actions.
- (2) Chapters 91-100: Aesop, now a freedman, tells fables, thus dramatizing a second way to use fables: namely, telling them in order to persuade others to take your advice. In this section, Aesop teaches people lessons through his words.
- (3) Chapters 101-123: Aesop travels to Babylon, where he becomes the political advisor of King Lycurgus. In this section, Aesop does not tell any fables; instead, he teaches using direct precepts, which causes his adopted son to commit suicide. This section also highlights the danger of writing, by twice employing the motif of the false letter. This section serves as a negative exemplum, dramatizing the dangers for the loss of openness and of writing.
- (4) Chapters 124-142: Aesop, at Delphi, is threatened by the Delphians and cannot save his life, despite telling a string of fables. This section serves as a negative exemplum, showing that fables are ineffective for the teller if they are misused (although the genre, even in this case, is not without power).

As this brief summary shows, each section of the *Life* dramatizes a different lesson that is directly related to how a person should correctly use the *Fables* that follow. Importantly, these are all lessons for those on the bottom. Section 1 teaches the slave how to interact with fellow slaves and with his owners. Section 2 teaches how to tell fables in situations in which the audience holds all the power. In both cases, the strategies are adapted for use in a situation of gross power imbalance. Significantly, the last two sections are negative exempla in which the

strategies used do not suit someone on the bottom. In Section 3, Aesop relies on writing and explicitness, even though orality and implicitness are the weapons of the weak. In Section 4, Aesop attempts to speak from a position of power, refusing to admit that the Delphians have any power over him. Because such strategies are ill-suited to Aesop's actual social status, they have disastrous consequences.

These "disastrous consequences" do not, however, indicate that this is a work that curbs or illegitimizes folk heroes like Aesop. Aesop himself remains a heroic figure throughout the work: his death at Delphi is in many ways a heroic death, and his wits never leave him. Nevertheless, in terms of the specific strategies taught by the *Life*, there is a definite hierarchy, and only strategies that show an awareness of power imbalances meet with success. The reader can enjoy and root for Aesop, all the while coming to understand how to use (or not use) fables in a successful way. Thus, the work teaches practical strategies for the low while at the same time reveling in the antics of Aesop.

### **I. Chapters 1-90: Aesop the Slave (Aesop the Fable Character)**

Chapters 1-90 of the *Life* concern Aesop's time as a slave. When the *Life* opens, Aesop is the mute slave of an unnamed master. Aesop gains a voice, however, after a priestess of Isis is impressed with his piety and prays to Isis that Aesop's voice be restored (G6-8).<sup>30</sup> Aesop's sudden ability to speak worries his slave overseer, who contrives to get Aesop sold (G9-11). Aesop then becomes the property of the philosopher Xanthus, who lives on Samos, and most of the rest of this first section is concerned with Aesop's exploits while Xanthus' slave. Again and

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<sup>30</sup> On the role of Isis (and other Egyptian elements) in the *Life*, cf. Dillery 1999 and Finkelpaerl 2003.

again, Aesop outwits and shows up Xanthus, until finally Aesop earns his freedom by being the only person who can interpret an important portent for the Samians. This section of the *Life* is concerned with the role of fables as a practical guide to behavior: Aesop is successful, despite his enslavement, because he acts like a fable character.

I previously asserted that Aesop tells no fables in the first section of the *Life*, a claim that must now be substantiated. In making this argument, I am following the work of van Dijk, who argued in his 1995 article that there are thirteen fables told in the *Life*, all of them linked thematically and verbally with their context.<sup>31</sup> In order to make this argument, van Dijk must demonstrate that three stories that have sometimes been called fables (W37<sup>32</sup>, G48, and G125) are in fact not true fables: W37 and G125 are similes, and G48 is “a *description* of common behaviour” (emphasis his).<sup>33</sup> I agree with van Dijk’s reasoning here, although, as I will show, there is an additional reason to discount all three of those moments from being true fables. Van Dijk does, however, count G33, G67, and G68 as fables, which I would not. The difference lies in what the definition of a “fable” is, so far as the *Life* is concerned; by this definition, the five stories told by Aesop the slave (W37, G33, G48, G67, and G68) should not be considered fables.<sup>34</sup>

Defining a fable is a tricky matter. As seen in the introduction, it is difficult to create a fable definition that covers every story in a fable collection without making it so vague that it is

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<sup>31</sup> Van Dijk repeats these arguments in his 1996 article, in which he also discusses other ancient novels that contain fables.

<sup>32</sup> This moment – in which Aesop explains to the gardener why weeds grow better than vegetables – is missing from G. It can, however, be supplemented by W.

<sup>33</sup> Van Dijk 1995: 33.

<sup>34</sup> Holzberg 2002: 79-80 similarly claims that Aesop only tells fables in the Samian section and the Delphi section, although he does not explain why he does not consider Aesop’s slave stories to be fables.

useless.<sup>35</sup> Fortunately, the *Life* circumvents this problem by marking its fables with the generic term *logos*.<sup>36</sup> There are nine indisputable fables told in the *Life*,<sup>37</sup> and in all nine cases, the story is introduced either by somebody asking for a *logos* or by Aesop declaring that he will tell a *logos*.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, the word *logos* is not used of any of the stories Aesop tells while a slave. There is a difference at least in terminology, then, between the stories Aesop tells while a slave and the stories he tells while free.

That this labeling of the stories as *logoi* matters is shown in the very first fable Aesop tells. After Aesop has been freed, the Samians ask him to give them advice (G93: γνώμην δός). Aesop responds: γνώμην μὲν οὐ δώσω, λόγῳ δὲ τινὶ λέξω ὑμῖν (G93: “I will not give you advice, but I will speak to you with a fable.”).<sup>39</sup> The point of the correction (not a *gnome* but a *logos*) is to mark off the fable as something special, a new kind of didactic speech.<sup>40</sup> This careful terminology is particularly important since Aesop earns his freedom by distinguishing between slave speech and free speech: he tells the Samians that he cannot interpret their portent for them

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<sup>35</sup> Van Dijk 1997 examines the history of scholarship on the question of a fable’s generic definition, only to conclude that, faced with this difficulty, most scholars either “resign themselves to a theoretical aporia,” or create a definition that omits stories actually found in fable collections (p. 34).

<sup>36</sup> *Logos* is one of the three common terms for fable – the other two being *ainos* and *mythos*. Cf. van Dijk, 1993 for a discussion of the terminology of the Greek fable.

<sup>37</sup> G94 (the difference between freedom and slavery), G96-97 (the war between the wolves and the sheep), G99 (the poor man and the locust), G129 (the widower and the farmer), G130-131 (the stupid girl), G133 (the frog and the mouse), 135 (the eagle and the dung beetle), G140 (the farmer and the donkeys) and G141 (the incestuous man).

<sup>38</sup> The only possible exception is G135, in which the introductory phrase that uses the word *logos* has been marked as corrupt and excised from the text by Perry. However, I would suggest that, since every other fable is introduced with the word *logos*, the original uncorrupt version of this passage probably contained a similar sort of introduction.

<sup>39</sup> G93.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Kurke 2011: 132 and 147 on the difference between *gnome*, explicit political advice, and the fable, which represents implicit advice.

until he is free, because a slave cannot speak properly to free men.<sup>41</sup> As a slave Aesop happily gave advice, *gnome*;<sup>42</sup> now, as a freedman, he leaves that sort of speech behind and instead speaks in a new way, through fables. Telling fables thus becomes a mark of a freedman’s speech. From that moment on, every fable Aesop tells is labeled as a *logos*.

The term *logos*, then, is marked in the *Life*, and it is applied only to those stories Aesop tells while free, not the stories he tells while a slave. Still, if that were my only reason for calling some stories “fables” and others not, then my argument would be circular. I wish, then, to look very briefly at the three stories that van Dijk calls fables that are told by Aesop the slave: G33, G67, and G68. All three of these are, according to van Dijk, etiological fables. G33 explains where dreams come from, G67 explains why people look at their own feces, and G68 explains why different amounts of wine have different effects on a person.<sup>43</sup> It is certainly true that the “etiological fable” is a subset of the fable genre for which we have plenty of examples; Perry, in fact, argues that etiological fables “are among the most genuine and best attested by ancient authors.”<sup>44</sup> The question, then, is why the *Life of Aesop* does not label these etiological stories as fables, as *logoi*.

The answer can be found in the *Fables*. Almost all of the fables in this collection are given a moral, and the moral always links the fable either to a situation (“This shows that work is

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<sup>41</sup> G89. Aesop first claims that it is not his place, as a slave, to speak (οὐκ ἔστιν εὐλογον δοῦλον ἐλευθέρῳ δήμῳ σημεῖον διαλύσασθαι) and then says that what he needs is “the free speech of freedom” (τὴν παρρησίαν τῆς ἐλευθερίας). On this moment cf. particularly Fields 2009: 71-78. I will discuss this moment in more detail in my second section.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. G95; G71.

<sup>43</sup> Van Dijk 1995: 135-137.

<sup>44</sup> Perry 1936: 18.

its own reward”) or to a type of person (“This fable is told for liars”).<sup>45</sup> These fables are, as Zafirooulos has shown, highly practical stories that give pragmatic advice,<sup>46</sup> and it is the morals that give the fables this pragmatic function. With such a practical focus, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are no etiological stories to be found in the *Fables*. In fact, even fables that seem to be etiological, and which may have been so in their original form, are given morals that distance them from this etiological function. For example, the fable of the eagle and the dung beetle (Fable 3) seems to be, at least on one level, an etiological fable about the eagle’s mating season. In this fable, the eagle is being harassed by the dung beetle, until finally Zeus changes the eagle’s mating season to be when the dung beetle is not active. If read without the moral, this fable seems to explain the eagle’s egg-laying season. The moral of the fable, however, makes the fable into a story about vengeance: the fable, according to the moral, teaches that no one is so small that they cannot take vengeance when they are wronged. This moves the fable away from its etiological meaning.<sup>47</sup> This trend is repeated in all of the seemingly etiological Aesopic fables; in all cases, the fables are given a moral that is not etiological.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> These two types of moral are discussed by Holzberg 2002: 89.

<sup>46</sup> Zafirooulos 2001.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Rothwell 1995: 235-236, who discusses what he sees as the dual etiological/moral meaning of the eagle and dung beetle fable. Cf. also Nøjgaard 1979 who argues that fables are amoral in their basic form, and that the morals are later additions that are intended to moralize the fables. When Steiner claims (2008: 85) that the fable of the eagle and the dung beetle is purely etiological in the fable collection, she is presumably not counting the moral.

<sup>48</sup> Seemingly etiological fables include Fable 3 (“The Eagle and the Dung Beetle”), Fable 39 (“The Swallow and the Birds”), Fable 103 (“Hermes and the Craftsmen”), Fable 105 (“Man’s Years”), Fable 106 (“Zeus and the Turtle”), Fable 108 (“Zeus and Men”), Fable 109 (“Zeus and Modesty”), Fable 117 (“The Camel Who Wanted Horns”), Fable 163 (“The Bees and Zeus”), Fable 166 (“The Ant”), and Fable 171 (“The Bat, The Bramble, and the Coot”). For the majority of these fables (3, 39, 106, 117, 163, 166, and 171), the fable provides an etiological explanation for something in the animal world, but the moral teaches a lesson specifically about human behavior. The fables that give an etiological explanation for something in the human world (103, 105, 108, and 109) contain a moral that specifies for what sort of person they are told: so, for instance, Fable 103 explains why craftsmen are liars, and then states that the fable is useful for a mendacious person. Once again, there is a distance between the seemingly etiological function (“Why all craftsmen are liars”) and the moral, which is directed at a single individual (“This is for a mendacious person”).

The three etiological stories in the *Life*, however, are purely etiological and are not given a moral. They are introduced as a way to answer a question or explain a given situation: the story about the origin of dreams is used to explain why Aesop's owner's wife should not be concerned about having had a false dream.<sup>49</sup> The story about why men look at their own feces is given in answer to Xanthus's question about this very matter. The story about the wine cups is told to explain why Xanthus is getting ornery by drinking too much. In no case are the stories given a separate, generalizing moral, which is a key part of the fables in the collection. This is not to say that the etiological stories in the *Life* do not have any other function. The story of why men look at their own feces is told to insult Xanthus, and the story of the wine cups is told to convince Xanthus to stop drinking. Nevertheless, these stories are at their core etiological, which may explain why, so far as the narrative of the *Life* is concerned, these stories are not called fables, *logoi*.

However, although he does not tell fables in the first part of the *Life*, Aesop still teaches lessons by playing the part of a fable character. This trend begins with the very first episode recorded in the *Life*: the fig incident (G2-3). The *Life* opens with a story about two slaves who decide to eat their owner's figs and then blame it on Aesop. Since Aesop is mute at this point, his fellow slaves assume that he will not be able to defend himself and will hence make a perfect patsy. Aesop, however, defends himself using a clever scheme. When his owner accuses Aesop of having taken the figs, Aesop drinks warm water and then forces himself to throw up, thus proving that his stomach was empty of figs. He then indicates, through signs, that the other two

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<sup>49</sup> This story can also be seen as a criticism of Apollo and as the beginning of Aesop's role as a seer, as Kurke demonstrates (2011: 61-67). On Aesop's relationship to Apollo, cf. also Nagy 1979: 289-290 and 302-303, for the argument that Aesop has an ambiguous relationship with Apollo.

slaves should be forced to throw up as well. This is done, and the slaves are proven guilty of stealing the figs. The important point comes at the very end of the event, when the slaves learn their lesson:

δερόμενοι δὲ ἐκεῖνοι ἔγνωσαν ἀσφαλῶς ὅτι ὁ κατὰ ἄλλου μηχανευόμενος κακὸν αὐτὸς καθ' ἑαυτοῦ τοῦτο λανθάνει ποιῶν.

They were flogged, and they learned well that the one who plots evil against another forgets that he is doing that evil against himself. (G3)

This is, for all intents and purposes, a moral, one that is very similar to morals that appear at the end of the *Fables* themselves. Fables 115 and 191, in fact, give morals that are virtually identical to this one. The whole fig incident could be seen as sort of fable, in which Aesop is a character rather than the narrator. Importantly, in this “fable,” Aesop plays the role of the *successful* fable character, the one who gets out of trouble through cleverness. He is thus parallel both to the fox, the archetypal “clever” fable animal,<sup>50</sup> and to the series of animals in the *Fables* who act to unmask liars.<sup>51</sup> Aesop’s success in this incident is important: he could, after all, also teach lessons through his actions if he himself were punished (something we will see, for instance, at Delphi). Instead, it is his fellow slaves who are punished as a direct result of Aesop’s actions. The message of this “fable” is nominally directed at these fellow slaves; they are the ones who learn (ἔγνωσαν) that plotting against the innocent leads to trouble. On a more general level, however, this fable is a message of hope, directed at the readers: they, identifying with Aesop,

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<sup>50</sup> For examples of the fox’s cleverness, cf. Fables 10, 12, 81, 124, and 142. One might also think of the famous red-figure cup that shows Aesop talking with a fox – a visual representation, perhaps, of Aesop’s particular affinity for that animal. Cf. Baker 1969: 574ff and duBois 2003: 170-171.

<sup>51</sup> Fables about liars include Fables 5, 14, 20, 28, 33, 66, 73, 126, 136, and 210. In all cases, the liar is either punished or, at the very least, recognized as being a liar by another character.



learn that their own tormentors may be punished, and they also learn how using cleverness might get them out of a sticky situation.

In the fig incident, Aesop uses cleverness because he finds himself at a disadvantage. The other slaves believe that they can take advantage of Aesop because Aesop is mute and so cannot defend himself with words (G2); they fail to realize that Aesop is able to defend himself through his actions. First, however, Aesop must supplicate his master to obtain the opportunity to defend himself. Aesop is on the point of being beaten (G3: μέλλων δαίρεσθαι) when he throws himself at his master's knees and begs him to delay the beating (G3: πεσὼν εἰς τὰ τοῦ δεσπότητος γόνατα παρεκάλει μικρὸν ἐπισχεῖν). This act of supplication has its intended effect, and Aesop is able to prove his innocence. Aesop's supplication emphasizes his position of powerlessness, and thus the efficacy of the techniques recommended by fables: fable cleverness can save even a mute slave on the point of being beaten by his angry master.

Of course, in this first incident, Aesop has little choice but to rely on his actions rather than on his words, since he is still mute. Significantly, this trend of “teaching through behavior” continues even after Aesop gains his voice. For instance, after Aesop's new-found ability to speak so alarms the overseer Zenas that he contrives to have Aesop sold (G9ff.), Aesop ends up as the property of the slave-trader Ophelion. Ophelion is not at first interested in buying Aesop, because he is actually looking for pack-animals.<sup>52</sup> Because he cannot find any animals to rent or to buy, he buys Aesop instead, and makes Aesop and the other (human) slaves carry the baggage in the place of the missing animals.<sup>53</sup> When it comes time to divide the baggage, Aesop gets out

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<sup>52</sup> G12: ὁ δὲ Ὀφελίων λέγει αὐτῷ “Ζηνᾶ, μὴ τι ἔχεις κτήνη μισθώσασθαι ἢ πωλῆσαι;” ὁ δὲ Ζηνᾶς· “οὐ, μὰ τὸν Δία· σωματίον δὲ ἔχω ἀρρενικὸν πωλῆσαι εὐωνον, εἰ σὺ θέλεις.” (“Ophelion said to him, ‘Zenas, don’t you have an animal to rent or to buy?’ And Zenas said, ‘No, by Zeus. But I have a male slave who’s cheap to buy, if you want’”).

<sup>53</sup> G17: ὁ δὲ σωματέμπορος πρὸς τὰ σωματία εἰσελθὼν φησιν “παιδία, στέρξατε τὴν ἑαυτῶν τύχην· μὰ τὴν ὑμῶν σωτηρίαν, κτήνη οὔτε μισθώσασθαι οὔτε ἀγοράσαι εὔρον. τοιγαροῦν διέλεσθε τὰ σκεύη· αὔριον γὰρ περῶμεν εἰς

of his work through a clever scheme: he supplicates the other slaves and asks to be allowed to carry the heaviest basket of all, which contains the bread. The other slaves mock him for this, calling it a burden that even an ox could not carry (G19). Aesop proves cleverer than they, however. First he gets out of actually carrying the basket by dragging it up hills by his teeth and then by “teaching” it (G19: ἐδίδασκεν) to roll down hills while he rides on top. In pulling the baggage with his teeth not his hands, Aesop acts like an animal, and by “teaching” the basket to roll down the hill, he alludes to the didactic purpose of his actions. The crowning moment of Aesop’s scheme comes later, when all of the bread is divided and eaten. Now Aesop is carrying an empty basket, and he runs ahead of the other slaves who are still weighed down by their nonperishable burdens.

In this incident, Aesop literally plays the part of an animal: he (and the other slaves) take on the role of the missing pack animals. Unlike the other slaves, Aesop acts like a clever animal; he gets out of carrying his baggage through his intelligence. In this he may be compared to the donkey of Fable 180,<sup>54</sup> who gets out of carrying his load of salt by falling down in a river, thus dissolving the salt. Aesop does better than the donkey, for he gets away with his scheme, whereas the donkey is found out and punished with a load of sponges. Aesop’s role as a “better” fable animal than actual fable animals is perhaps alluded to by the comment made by his fellow slaves:

“δοκῶ δὲ ὅτι ὁ νεώνητός ἐστιν, ὁ σαπρός, ὁ ἄρων τὸν γούργαθον, ὃν οὐκ ἐβάσταζεν κτήνος.”

“I think that’s the new guy, the ugly one, who carried the basket of bread, which an ox

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τὴν Ἀσίαν.” (And the slave trader came in and said to the slaves, “Slaves, cherish your fate. By your safety, I did not find any pack animals either to rent or to buy. Therefore divide up the equipment. For tomorrow we’re going into Asia”).

<sup>54</sup> On donkeys as a slave analogue, cf. Bradley 2000.

couldn't carry.” (G19)

Aesop is, in other words, better at being a pack animal than a pack animal. Pack animals do not, after all, tend to be clever characters; even the donkey of Fable 180 only realizes that he can dissolve his load of salt in the river after accidentally falling. Aesop, as an archetypical “trickster slave,” brings cleverness to the role of pack animal and is therefore more successful.

It is important to note that Aesop's successful scheme is once again preceded by an act of supplication: he falls to his knees before his fellow slaves (G17: ὑποπεσῶν) and begs them to allow him to carry something light, since he is new. When his fellow slaves respond that Aesop does not need to carry anything, Aesop insists that he must carry something lest he be ashamed. The other slaves then allow him to pick whatever baggage he wants, so that Aesop is able to choose the bag with the bread. As was the case in the fig incident, Aesop is only able to get away with his scheme after first prostrating himself. In this case, the prostration is before not his owner, but before his fellow slaves. This is partly because, as the new slave, Aesop is at the bottom of the slave pecking order. More than this, however, the prostration allows Aesop to be put in a position where he can choose his own baggage: in order to shut him up, the other slaves tell him he can take any baggage he wants. This is a calculated kind of humility.

As was the case in the fig incident, Aesop's actions in this scene have a didactic function. The other slaves are impressed by his cleverness, and one declares, “Although this little man is lacking in beauty, he has brains” (G19: ταῦτα τὰ ἀνθρωπάρια τὰ λειπόμενα τῆ μορφῆ φρένας ἔχει). This is a common moral found in the *Fables*, meaning that this slave has learned from Aesop's actions a lesson that could also be taught in a fable.<sup>55</sup> This lesson – directed as much at

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<sup>55</sup> For fables that teach that brains triumph over physical appearance, see Fables 12, 27, and 108. Fables 219 and 229 teach a lesson that is somewhat similar, insofar as they teach that beauty does not matter, not without might or health respectively. In all cases, the message is that physical beauty matters not at all, unless the person has other, more

the reader as at Aesop's fellow characters – is offered not through Aesop's words (Aesop, in fact, does not speak again after he offers to carry the bread), but through his actions. In both the fig incident and this baggage incident, then, Aesop plays the part of a successful fable character, and his behavior presents the reader with a positive exemplum.

In a final example, Aesop's role as teacher is made even more explicit. After Aesop is bought by the philosopher Xanthus, he and his new master engage in endless rivalry:<sup>56</sup> Xanthus tries to find excuses to beat Aesop, and Aesop avoids them through his cleverness. One series of incidents deserves particular mention, for Aesop gives an explanation for his behavior. Xanthus orders Aesop to bring an oil flask and some towels to the bath, warning him to be sure to do no more and no less than he is ordered (G38). Aesop is annoyed by this order, and decides to teach Xanthus a lesson:

Αἴσωπος πρὸς ἑαυτὸν εἶπεν “οἱ τῷ νῷ περίπικροι περὶ διακονίαν δεσπότηι κακοδαιμονίας ἑαυτοῖς γίνονται παραίτιοι. ἐγὼ τοῦτον τὸν φιλόσοφον παιδεύσω, ἵνα μάθῃ πῶς αὐτὸν δεῖ ἐπιτάττειν.”

Aesop said to himself, “Masters who are extremely harsh in their mind about the service they get become responsible for their own misfortune. I will teach this philosopher, so that he may learn how he ought to give orders.” (G38)

Here, Aesop's behavior has an explicitly didactic function: he will prove to his master, through his actions, that one should not be too controlling. Aesop teaches Xanthus this lesson by repeatedly taking his orders too literally: since Xanthus ordered Aesop to bring the oil flask, Aesop brings only the flask, with no oil inside (G38). When Xanthus orders Aesop to cook

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valuable qualities. On the ways in which the beauty vs. intelligence dichotomy is a theme of the fables, cf. Lefkowitz 2008: 67-68.

<sup>56</sup> The rivalry between Aesop the clever slave and Xanthus the philosopher may be read (and often has been) as a battle between two different kinds of wisdom. For a summary, cf. Kurke 2011, especially Chapter 2. Cf. also Daly 1961a: 21, Winkler 1985: 282, and Finkelppearl 2003: 43.

“lentil,” Aesop cooks only a single one (G39-41). When Xanthus tells Aesop to give a present to “her who loves me,” Aesop gives it to Xanthus’s dog (G44-45).<sup>57</sup> Eventually, Xanthus admits that he has been defeated: he has learned his lesson and asks Aesop to desist from this behavior. Aesop agrees to do so (G64).

In this series of incidents, Aesop has a particular goal: he wishes to teach his master that punishing slaves for nitpicky reasons does not lead to better behavior; it instead encourages the slave to adhere so closely to his master’s explicit orders that the master does not get what he wants. Allowing the slave room for his own interpretation and agency is the only way for a profitable master-slave relationship.<sup>58</sup> Aesop is, in other words, trying to alter his master’s behavior by teaching him a lesson. This is, of course, the very goal of a fable; when Aesop starts telling fables as a freedman, his goal is always to influence the behavior of the audience.<sup>59</sup> However, there are clear differences between how Aesop acts with Xanthus, and how Aesop acted in the first two incidents I discussed. For one thing, taking orders too literally is not typical behavior for a fable character; there are no instances in the *Fables* of an animal using that particular trick to get out of trouble. Aesop does rely on his wits, which is certainly a characteristic that fables valorize. However, in the first two incidents I examined, there were

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<sup>57</sup> It is significant that Aesop insults Xanthus’s wife by feeding Xanthus’s dog her present; not only is dog imagery a common trope in invective, but, as Deborah Steiner has observed, “[m]etaphoric representations of the impact of slander and blame also suggest a more particular link between invective and canine activities: the abuse and/or his words bite and feed off the victim much as the dog does his prey” (2001: 157). Thus, in shaming Xanthus’s wife by feeding her present to a dog, Aesop’s activates a common invective trope.

<sup>58</sup> On the slave’s intelligence as a common tension in the master-slave relationship, cf. Hopkins 1993: 14. Cf. also Knapp 2011: 147-153. Knapp discusses a broad array of evidence for how slaves negotiated their relationship with their owners.

<sup>59</sup> He tells two fables to the Samians to influence their political decisions, and one fable to Croesus to convince him not to kill him, as we will examine in the next section. The fables told at Delphi are, to a large extent, aimed at keeping the Delphians from killing him.

specific fables that taught the same moral or portrayed animals using the same strategies as Aesop used. That is not the case here: Aesop is acting the part of a trickster slave, but he is not actively borrowing strategies from any particular fable.

Furthermore, with Xanthus, Aesop not only outsmarts and shows up his master, but also does not resort to prostrating himself the way he did before his master in the fig incident or before his fellow slaves while with the slave trader. In fact, Aesop speaks boldly and even insultingly to Xanthus's students,<sup>60</sup> Xanthus's wife,<sup>61</sup> and even to Xanthus himself.<sup>62</sup> Despite this bad behavior, Aesop is never beaten so long as he is technically following Xanthus's orders; in fact, Xanthus and his wife are repeatedly described as being "unable" to beat Aesop without a pretext.<sup>63</sup> This is clear slave fantasy: Aesop's cleverness gives him power over Xanthus, who never seems to remember that he can beat Aesop whenever he wants.

In fact, one could almost claim that it is Aesop who has the power in his relationship with Xanthus: Aesop knows that Xanthus will only beat Aesop if Aesop fails in their battles of wits. As the cleverer of the two, Aesop thus (ironically) has the advantage. This in turn explains why Aesop does not prostrate himself to Xanthus or rely on typically fabular behavior: Aesop does not need to do so, because the advantage in the relationship is his. Of course, on a literal level Aesop does not have power in this relationship nor is he in control. As the owner, Xanthus automatically has any advantage he wishes. Yet within the frame of the narrative, Xanthus is

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<sup>60</sup> G24 and G55.

<sup>61</sup> At G32, Aesop insults Xanthus's wife in a long speech.

<sup>62</sup> At G49, Aesop laughs at his master's inability to answer a question and then claims he is actually laughing at whatever teacher Xanthus studied under.

<sup>63</sup> Thus G43, G50, G56, G61, G63, and G77.

portrayed as never being willing to take advantage of his position over Aesop unless Aesop makes a mistake.<sup>64</sup> The only exception is when Xanthus refuses to free Aesop, despite having promised that freedom would be the reward if Aesop solved a riddle.<sup>65</sup> This breaking of the established rules between Xanthus and Aesop occurs near the end of their time together, in order to set up for the scene in which Aesop does manage to gain his freedom.

Aesop's didactic actions throughout the first section thus associate him with fable characters to varying degrees. When he needs to, Aesop employs supplication and strategies straight from the *Fables* in order to get his way. Other times, when the danger is less, he is more akin to a trickster slave acting out slave fantasy, with less of a direct connection to a typical fable character. There is, however, one way in which Aesop's connection to fable characters does not waver, even during his time with Xanthus: Aesop's extreme ugliness causes him to be repeatedly and explicitly compared to animals throughout the first section of the *Life*.<sup>66</sup>

At G11, Zenas declares that Aesop is so ugly that he is a “dog-faced baboon” (κυνοκέφαλον), rather than a man.<sup>67</sup> Aesop's ugliness makes him appear non-human, animalistic.

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Hopkins 1993: 18-19. Hopkins argues that “almost against his will, the philosopher is trapped by his profession into being stolidly reasonable, into not punishing his slave without good reason.” On Aesop's relationship with Xanthus as pure fantasy, cf. Hopkins 1993: 21.

<sup>65</sup> G78-80. Aesop is also twice beaten while a slave, which could be considered a failure on his part, given the constant struggle between his owner, who wants to beat him, and Aesop, who wants to avoid a beating. One of these two episodes, however, is missing from Manuscript G, and can only be reconstructed from W, so the exact nature of Aesop's “failure” is unclear. The other is only a partial failure; Xanthus starts to beat Aesop for misreading an omen, but when Aesop points out that he did not in fact misread the sign, Xanthus stops the beating.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Papademetriou 1997, who has written a book about Aesop's ugliness in the *Life*. Papademetriou is interested chiefly in situating Aesop's ugliness in the larger context of Greek narrative tropes about beauty and ugliness. Cf. also Lefkowitz 2008, who discusses the ways in which Aesop's ugliness is considered a key determinant of his value by others, and how Aesop repeatedly proves that wisdom can come in ugly packages. Nagy 1979: 315-316 discusses Aesop's connection to animals and the similarity between the animals to which Aesop is likened and the animals that appear in blame poetry.

<sup>67</sup> ὁ δὲ Ζηνᾶς· “παίζεις, δέσποτα; οὐκ οἶδας αὐτοῦ τὴν ἀμορφίαν; τίς αὐτὸν θελήσει ἀγοράσαι καὶ κυνοκέφαλον ἀντὶ ἀνθρώπου ἔχειν;” (And Zenas said, “Are you joking, master? Don't you know how ugly he is? Who would want to

At G14 the slave-trader Ophelion cannot decide whether to call Aesop a crane, a turnip, a pot, a jar, or a goose egg,<sup>68</sup> demonstrating that Aesop’s ugliness makes him seem not just inhuman, but also inanimate. At G26, Aesop calls himself a bird to explain why he is talking so much.<sup>69</sup> In calling himself an animal to explain why he is talking, Aesop provides an interesting variation on the theme of the talking fable animal. At G30, a slave-woman asks Aesop where his “tail” is (Aesop, of course, responds obscenely by explaining that his “tail” is in front).<sup>70</sup> Finally, at G87, the Samians compare Aesop to a whole host of animals and inanimate objects, wondering whether they should call him a frog, a boar, a jar, a monkey, a jug, a piece of cook’s equipment, or a dog in a basket.<sup>71</sup> Thus, Aesop’s ugliness becomes a constant reminder of Aesop’s connection to animals and to other low objects: he looks like a whole hodgepodge of animals and things, as people are constantly pointing out.<sup>72</sup> Aesop’s ugliness also underlines Aesop’s

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buy and own a dog-faced baboon instead of a man?”). On the use of dog imagery in invective, cf. Steiner 2001: 156-157.

<sup>68</sup> ἐπιστραφεὶς δὲ ὁ σωματέμπορος θεωρεῖ τὸν Αἴσωπον τοιοῦτόμορφον ἀπόμαγμα καὶ λέγει “οὗτος τῆς γερανομαχίας σαλπιστῆς ἐστίν. οὗτος ριζοκάλαμός ἐστιν ἢ ἄνθρωπος; οὗτος εἰ μὴ φωνὴν εἶχεν, εἰρήκειν ἂν ὅτι ἢ χυτρώπους ἐστίν ἢ ἀγγεῖον τροφῆς ἢ χηνὸς ᾠόν.” (Turning, the slave trader saw Aesop, such a piece of human garbage, and said, “This must be the trumpeter in the battle of the cranes. Is he a turnip or a man? If he didn’t have a voice, I would have said he was a pot or a jar or a goose egg”). On the religious connotations of the word ἀπόμαγμα here, cf. Lefkowitz 2008: 73-74.

<sup>69</sup> ὁ Ξάνθος· “τί οὖν πολύλαλος εἶ;” ὁ Αἴσωπος· “τὰ πολύλαλα στρουθία πολλοῦ πωλεῖται.” (Xanthus said, “Why are you so chatty?” Aesop said, “Talkative sparrows sell for a lot”).

<sup>70</sup> ἡ δὲ λέγει “σὺ εἶ ὁ νεώνητος;” Αἴσωπος λέγει “ἐγὼ εἰμι.” ἡ παιδίσκη εἶπεν “ποῦ ἐστίν ἡ κέρκος σου;” (And the slave-woman said, “Are you the new slave?” Aesop said, “That’s me.” The girl said, “So where’s your tail?”)

<sup>71</sup> Οἱ δὲ Σάμιοι, ἰδόντες τὸν Αἴσωπον καὶ γελάσαντες, ἐπεφώνουν “ἀχθήτω ἄλλος σημειολύτης, ἵνα τοῦτο τὸ σημεῖον διαλύσῃται. τὸ τέρας τῆς ὄψεως αὐτοῦ! βάτραχος ἐστίν, ἢ τροχάζων, ἢ στάμνος κήλην ἔχων, ἢ πιθήκων πριμπιλάριος, ἢ λαγνίσκος εἰκαζόμενος, ἢ μαγεῖρου σκευοθήκη, ἢ κύων ἐν γυργάθῳ;” (But the Samians, seeing Aesop and laughing, shouted, “Bring us another interpreter to interpret this portent. What a monstrosity of sight is here! Is he a frog, or a running boar, or a pot-bellied jar, or a captain of monkeys, or a crafted jug, or a piece of cook’s equipment, or a dog in a basket?”)

<sup>72</sup> In fact, the combination of Aesop’s animal-like ugliness and his muteness makes him very animalistic in the beginning of the *Life*: cf. Heath 2005: 15. Lefkowitz 2008: 61 observes that there is very little evidence for Aesop’s ugliness being part of the tradition outside of the *Life*, except perhaps for the famous vase that may depict Aesop talking with a fox.



position as a slave: slaves are human possessions, but Aesop, because of his ugliness, appears to be more possession than human.<sup>73</sup> In the eyes of those who comment, Aesop's ugliness dehumanizes him. At the same time, Aesop's ugliness, and the constant comparison of him with animals or inanimate objects, provides a thematic connection between how Aesop acts and how Aesop looks: as a talking animal/object, Aesop looks like a character from a fable, and he frequently acts like one as well.

This constant comparison between Aesop and animals is a feature only of the first part of the *Life*, when Aesop is a slave. Once Aesop is freed, people stop comparing him to animals – in fact, they more or less stop commenting on his appearance at all. The only comment made about Aesop's appearance after he is freed is made by Croesus, who grumpily compares Aesop to a “riddle” (αἴνιγμα) and a “portent/monster” (τέρας), because he is angry that Aesop prevented him from conquering Samos.<sup>74</sup> Such words are not explicitly animalistic, although Croesus is calling Aesop non-human (and something that needs interpretation). However, once Aesop tells Croesus a fable, Croesus comes to admire him and makes no further comments about Aesop's appearance. Thus, it seems that once Aesop becomes a fabulist (something that can only happen after he is freed), his ugliness is no longer important. His appearance does not change, of course, but the sudden lack of comment makes it seem that it has. There is a difference between Aesop the (human) fabulist and Aesop the (animal) slave.

The first section of the *Life*, then, shows one successful way to use fables: namely, living according to the strategies they teach. By acting like a clever fable character, Aesop the slave is

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<sup>73</sup> On the association between slaves and animals, cf. Bradley 2000, who discusses the phenomenon in ancient and modern thought, and then uses it as a way to read Apuleius.

<sup>74</sup> G98.

successful. Readers could similarly adopt the strategies recommended by the fables and hence be successful, or they could take comfort from Aesop's ability to punish liars and avoid trouble. In other words, Aesop's behavior is didactic on two levels: just as it teaches other characters lessons, so it ought to teach the readers lessons as well. The first section also demonstrates that living like a fable character is useful for the low specifically: it is when Aesop lacks power or is in active danger that he falls back on the techniques of a fable character.

## **II. G91-100: Aesop the Freedman (Aesop the Successful Fabulist)**

The characterization of Aesop changes in the second part of the *Life*. Once Aesop is freed, he no longer plays the part of a fable character; instead, he becomes the narrator and the author of fables. His ugliness is no longer described or even mentioned, and he is no longer explicitly or implicitly compared to an animal. He becomes a human being, an orator,<sup>75</sup> who successfully teaches people lessons through his words. Nevertheless, the power relations remain unequal: Aesop consistently tells fables to those who have power over him, and he still employs calculated humility to gain the audience's favor. Furthermore, the fable's function as an implicit, rather than a direct, form of speech is highlighted as one way for Aesop to persuade his superiors without danger. Whether he is a slave acting out fables or a freedman telling them, Aesop continues to demonstrate the value of fables for the low.

Before Aesop can begin telling fables as a freedman, he must first be freed. In fact, the very factors that guarantee the success of Aesop's bid for emancipation also determine the

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<sup>75</sup> As Kurke 2011: 69 notes, Aesop's characterization here, which bears much resemblance to that of a traveling sophist, is mostly likely a function of the text's actual date in the first or second century CE, rather than of the dramatic date.

success of Aesop’s fables. At G81, the Samians ask Aesop’s master Xanthus to interpret a portent for them. Because Xanthus cannot do it, he brings in Aesop, who promises to interpret the omen for him. When the Samians first see Aesop, they laugh and mock him for his ugliness.<sup>76</sup> Aesop responds with a brief speech in which he points out that a man’s worth is not determined by his appearance but by his actions. This impresses the Samians; they call him a “clever” (κομψός) man and ask him to go ahead and interpret the portent. The narrative continues as follows:

Αἴσωπος ἐπιγνοὺς ἑαυτὸν ἐπαινούμενον, παρρησίας λαβὼν καιρὸν ἤρξατο λέγειν. (89)  
“ἄνδρες Σάμιοι, οὐκ ἔστιν εὖλογον δοῦλον ἐλευθέρῳ δήμῳ σημεῖον διαλύσασθαι· ὅθεν περιθετέ μοι τὴν <τῶν> εἰρημένων παρρησίαν, ἵνα ἐὰν μὲν ἐπιτύχω ὡς ἐλεύθερος τὰς πρεπούσας τιμὰς ἀπολάβω, ἐὰν δὲ ἀμάρτω μὴ ὡς δοῦλος, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἐλεύθερος κολασθῶ. ἐὰν οὖν ἐμοὶ τὴν παρρησίαν τῆς ἐλευθερίας περίθητε, μετὰ πάσης ἀδείας ἄρξομαι λέγειν.”

Aesop, recognizing that he was being commended, seized the opportunity for free speech and began to speak. (89) “Men of Samos, it is not proper for a slave to interpret a sign for a free demos. Therefore, bestow on me the freedom of speaking, so that if I hit the mark, I can receive the appropriate honors as a free man, but if I mess up, I may be punished not as a slave, but as a free man. If you should bestow on me the free speech of freedom, I will begin to speak with complete courage.” (G88-89)

Aesop’s emancipation depends on three factors: the disposition of the audience, his recognition and seizure of *kairos*, and the content of his speech. When Aesop first arrives, the Samians are hostile toward him, and they do not wish him to speak. Aesop’s first step, then, is to make them propitious toward him by reminding them that they must judge him by his actions not by his appearance. It is only after Aesop recognizes (ἐπιγνοὺς) that he is being commended (ἐαυτὸν ἐπαινούμενον) that he is able to seize his opportunity (καιρὸν) for free speech

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<sup>76</sup> On the importance of Aesop being an *ugly* narrator of fables, cf. Lefkowitz 2008: 68-69. Lefkowitz observes that one difference between the collected fables and the fables in the *Life* is that the latter are told by an ugly Aesop, and that “anyone hearing the ugly Aesop tell a fable has, in important ways, already begun learning something about how fables work” (p. 69). In other words, realizing that Aesop is wise despite his outside appearance prepares the audience to accept that wisdom also exists in fables.

(παρρησίας). Thus, the disposition of the audience is important; Aesop must first avert their hostility before he can make use of the *parrhesia* that will earn him his freedom.

Second, Aesop's emancipation depends on the fact that he seizes the opportunity (καιρὸν) provided by the audience's good-will. The theme of *kairos* is an important factor in the *Fables* as well, as Zafiropoulos discusses:

The notion that underlies many of these fables is that a prerequisite for a successful action is that it matches the καιρός, a word that in the *Augustana* means both "time" and "condition." The ethical agent should seek the timing and conditions that best guarantee success for his action. The idea of action in accordance with καιρός was a prevalent one in Greek thought and once again the *Augustana* presents us with an idea that cannot be limited to a single phase of Greek culture but rather runs through its history. (2001: 60)

The joint importance of "time" and "condition" is obviously relevant here: Aesop waits (timing) until the audience is favorable toward him (condition) before he asks for his freedom. Thus, the first point – the disposition of the audience – is actually subsumed under this second point: the audience's favor can be considered part of the *kairos* that Aesop must take advantage of.

Third, the content of Aesop's speech is important, for Aesop makes use of *parrhesia* to earn his freedom. As Fields points out in her analysis of this passage, Aesop essentially uses *parrhesia* to ask for *parrhesia*, and succeeds:

There is a twist on the expected association between slavery and lack of *parrhēsia*; here it is not just freedom that makes frank speech possible but the use of frankness aids in the self determination of freedom. (2009: 72)

In essence, Aesop differentiates between slave speech and free speech, and argues that he cannot speak to the Samians in the proper way unless he is freed. In making this argument, Aesop is already making use of *parrhesia*; he seizes *parrhesia* for himself and uses it to officially earn his *parrhesia* by being freed. However, it is also important that Aesop emphasizes the power that the Samians have over him: his argument for being freed is that if he speaks freely, then he should be rewarded or punished as befits a free man. Either way, his fate will still be in the Samians'

hands, and Aesop is still putting himself at risk by speaking. Aesop admits to this and makes the risk explicit.

I have lingered on the moment of Aesop's emancipation because, as we will see, the same factors that guarantee the success of Aesop's bid for freedom (a well-disposed audience, opportunity, and suitable content) also determine the success or failure of Aesop's fables. In fact, all three of these factors can be subsumed under the umbrella of *kairos*: a fable must be told under the right conditions, and it must have a content that is appropriate for the situation at hand and for the speaker's social status. Furthermore, Aesop's emancipation is important because it is only after Aesop is made a free man that he begins to tell fables. Spoken fables are presented in the *Life* as part of the public, political discourse, a realm which Aesop cannot access until he is freed. Strikingly, all three of the fables that Aesop tells are associated with political freedom: the first two fables prevent the Samians from making decisions that would lead to their enslavement, and the third guarantees that Croesus will stop trying to conquer (and enslave) them. Aesop, by gaining his freedom and with it the ability to tell fables publicly, is able to use the fables to ensure the continued political freedom of his hosts.

This, then, is the other side of fables. We saw already that in the first part of the *Life*, Aesop makes use of fable strategies in order to gain victories despite his enslavement, thus alluding to the role of fables as a reservoir of advice and strategies that are useful for the enslaved, the poor, and the downtrodden. At the same time, as we see here, fables have a role in the public political discourse: they are useful for oratory, for influencing political decisions.<sup>77</sup> Aesop still speaks from a position of relative powerlessness, and the role of fables in granting

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<sup>77</sup> On the role of fables in oratory, cf. Perry 1959: 22 and Kurke 2011: 156-157.

him safety in speaking is still important. Still, there is an important difference between acting out fables and telling them. In order to demonstrate this latter use of fables, Aesop must be freed.

Aesop tells his first fable right after he is freed. The Samians have just received word from Croesus that they can either pay tribute to him or face war. The Samians ask Aesop for advice, but Aesop refuses, pointing out that if he advises them not to pay tribute, he will make himself an enemy of Croesus. The Samians ask him a second time for advice, *gnome*, and Aesop responds that he will instead tell them a *logos*, a fable:

τοῦ Διὸς κελεύσαντός ποτε, τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ὑπέδειξεν ὁ Προμηθεὺς ὁδοὺς δύο, μίαν ἐλευθερίας καὶ μίαν δουλείας. καὶ τὴν μὲν τῆς ἐλευθερίας ὁδὸν ἐποίησεν ἐν ἀρχαῖς τραχεῖαν καὶ δυσέκβατον καὶ ἀπόκρημνον καὶ ἄνυδρον, τριβόλων τε γέμουσαν, ὄλην ἐπικίνδυνον, τὸ δὲ τέλος πεδῖον ὀμαλόν, περιπάτους ἔχουσαν, καρπῶν γέμουσαν ἄλσει, ἔνυδρον, ἵνα τὸ τῆς κακοπαθείας ἔλθῃ εἰς ἀνάπαυσιν τέλος ἔχουσαν [τὸν ἐλεύθερον ἀέρα λαβόντες]. τὴν δὲ τῆς δουλείας ὁδὸν ἐποίησεν κατ' ἀρχὰς πεδῖον ὀμαλόν, εὐανθῆ καὶ ἠδεῖαν πρόσοψιν ἔχουσαν καὶ πολλὴν τρυφὴν, τὸ δὲ τέλος αὐτῆς δυσέκβατον, ὄλον σκληρὸν καὶ κρημνῶδες.” (95) ἐπιγνόντες δὲ οἱ Σάμιοι τὸ συμφέρον ἐκ τῶν τοῦ Αἰσώπου λόγων ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἀνεφώνησαν τῷ γραμματεφόρῳ λέγοντες τὴν τραχεῖαν ὁδόν.

“Once upon a time, at Zeus’ order, Prometheus showed to men two roads, the road of freedom and the road of slavery. He made the road of freedom rough and difficult in the beginning, steep and dry, full of thorns, entirely dangerous, but in the end he made it a smooth plain, good for walking, full of fruit groves, well-watered, where the struggle reaches its end in rest. But he made the road of slavery a smooth plain in the beginning, having a flowery and pleasant appearance and much luxury, but in the end it was difficult, entirely hard and precipitous.” (95) The Samians, recognizing from Aesop’s words their advantage, shouted with one accord, telling the emissary that they would take the hard road. (G94-95)

This fable meets all of the criteria of *kairos* that I mentioned above. First, it is told at the right time, as the Samians have just asked Aesop for his advice. The fable’s content is also well-suited to the situation at hand, as the fable has a clear relationship to the choice the Samians must make. Finally, the Samians are receptive to Aesop’s words. This is partly because, as I said, they are looking for his advice. But there is more to it than that. This fable of Aesop’s does not contain a moral – Aesop does not explain what this fable has to do with the Samians’ situation;

he does not even state explicitly that the road of freedom is better. It is up to the Samians to draw this conclusion, and they do so by recognizing (ἐπιγινόντες) in Aesop's fable what is advantageous to them (τὸ συμφέρον). The Samians, in other words, must interpret the fable themselves. Kurke, in her analysis of the difference between direct and indirect political advice in Herodotus, concludes that fables are particularly effective because "they empower [the] audience by giving them the agency to interpret and apply them for themselves."<sup>78</sup> We see this principle in action here: it is partly *because* the Samians must interpret the fable for themselves that they take its advice so readily.<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, by leaving the fable open to the Samians' interpretation, Aesop grants himself safety: he said that he did not want to tell the Samians directly to turn down Croesus lest he make himself Croesus's enemy (G93). By giving advice through a fable, Aesop essentially gives advice to the Samians without actually *telling* them what to do. In so doing, he demonstrates a fable's ability to grant the teller safety by providing plausible deniability.<sup>80</sup> Aesop could always point out that he never even mentioned Croesus at all; it was the Samians who came to that conclusion all on their own.

Of course, Croesus still recognizes that it is Aesop who is responsible for convincing the Samians not to accept his proposal, and he sends another ambassador to convince the Samians to

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<sup>78</sup> Kurke 2011: 147. Cf. also page 201, where she notes that this "audience participation" involves an audience that has more power than the speaker.

<sup>79</sup> On the use of "figured speech" in antiquity, see especially Ahl 1984. Ahl's article focuses on ancient rhetorical theory about "figured speech," relying heavily on Demetrius and Quintilian, but also using authors such as Plato, Thucydides, Aeschylus, and Philostratus as examples. His basic point is that the ancients prized figured language (and in fact felt it to be more artistic, useful, and safe than direct speech), and that we as modern readers must be careful not to overlook the presence of figured language, especially in later authors.

<sup>80</sup> On the "plausible deniability" inherent in a coded genre like the fable, cf. Richlin 2014: 200-202, Ahl 1984, and Scott 1990: 19; 162-166.

surrender Aesop to him (G96). The ambassador gives a speech (which is not given in the text), which convinces the Samians to hand Aesop over. Aesop then acts as follows:

ὁ δὲ ἐλθὼν εἰς τὸ μέσον [ὁ Αἴσωπος] λέγει “ἄνδρες Σάμιοι, κάμοι εὐκταῖόν ἐστιν παρὰ τοῖς τοῦ βασιλέως ποσὶν ἀποθανεῖν. θέλω δὲ εἰπεῖν ὑμῖν ἓνα λόγον, ἵνα μετὰ τὸν ἐμὸν θάνατον ἐπὶ τοῦ μνήματός μου χαράξητε. (97) καθ’ ὃν καιρὸν ὁμόφωνα ἦσαν τὰ ζῶα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, λέγω δὴ τοὺς λύκους καὶ τὰ πρόβατα πόλεμον ἐσχηκέναι πρὸς ἀλλήλους. οἱ δὲ λύκοι ὑπερέχοντες κακῶς ἔσκυλλον τὰ πρόβατα, συμμαχήσαντες δὲ οἱ κύνες τοῖς πρόβασιν ἀπεδίωξαν τοὺς λύκους. οἱ δὲ λύκοι διωχθέντες ὑπὸ τῶν κυνῶν ἓνα πρεσβευτὴν ἔπεμψαν πρὸς τὰ πρόβατα. ἐλθὼν οὖν ὁ λύκος καὶ στὰς εἰς τὸ μέσον ὡς δημηγόρος ἔλεγεν πρὸς τὰ πρόβατα ‘ἐὰν θέλετε μῆτε πολεμεῖν μῆτε πολεμεῖσθαι, δότε ἡμῖν τοὺς κύνας ἐκδότους, καὶ μετὰ πάσης ἀδείας κοιμᾶσθε, μηδεμίαν πολέμου ἔχοντες ὑποψίαν.’ τὰ δὲ πρόβατα μωρὰ ὑπάρχοντα καὶ πεισθέντα παρέσχον τοὺς κύνας ἐκδότους. οἱ δὲ λύκοι διεσπάραζαν αὐτούς. μετὰ δὲ χρόνον ὑπεβάλοντο οἱ λύκοι τὰ πρόβατα. ἔδει δὲ οὖν ὑμᾶς <κατὰ> τὸν μῦθον μὴ εἰκῆ τοὺς χρηστοὺς παραδιδόναι.”

(98) Οἱ δὲ Σάμιοι νοήσαντες πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς εἰρηῆσθαι τοὺς λόγους κατέσχον τὸν Αἴσωπον. ὁ δὲ Αἴσωπος οὐχ ὑπέμενε, ἀλλ’ ἅμα τῷ πρεσβευτῇ ἀπήει πρὸς τὸν Κροῖσον.

Coming into the middle [Aesop] said, “Men of Samos, it is desirable for me to die at the feet of the king. But I would like to tell you one fable, which you should carve onto my tombstone after my death. (97) During the time when animals had the same speech as humans, I say that the wolves and the sheep were at war with each other. The wolves, being stronger, mistreated the sheep terribly, but the dogs, fighting together with the sheep, drove the wolves away. The wolves, after being driven away by the dogs, sent one envoy to the sheep. This wolf, then, coming and standing in the middle like a demiurge, said to the sheep, ‘If you wish to neither make war nor have war made against you, give us the dogs as hostages, and then sleep with complete security, with no suspicion of war.’ The sheep, being foolish and believing him, handed over the dogs as hostages. The wolves tore the dogs to pieces. After a time the wolves defeated the sheep. It is necessary for you, according to this fable, to not hand over useful men lightly.”

(98) The Samians, understanding that these words were spoken for their own good, were going to keep Aesop. But Aesop did not remain, but went to Croesus together with the envoy. (G96-98)

This time, the Samians do not ask Aesop for advice. They have, in fact, already made the decision to send Aesop to Croesus. Aesop, then, must carve out the opportunity for fable-telling himself. He does so by disingenuously claiming that he is merely telling them the story that he wishes to be carved on his tombstone. This lie has a dual purpose: it reminds the Samians indirectly that they are sending Aesop to his death, and it creates the necessary opportunity for



fable-telling. It also, once again, reminds the Samians that they have power over Aesop, and that Aesop accepts this (or so he claims).

The fable is also appropriate in its content, for once again it is perfectly matched to the situation at hand, and presents the Samians with a clear one-to-one correspondence: they are the sheep, Aesop the dog, and Croesus and his men the wolves.<sup>81</sup> This time, Aesop also gives a moral, explaining that this fable teaches that a city should not hand over “useful men” lightly. Aesop does not, though, draw an explicit connection to the situation at hand, insofar as he does not say directly that he is the “useful” man that they should not hand over. This, again, is a matter of safety. Since Aesop’s pose is that of a man who has already decided to go quietly to his death, he cannot say explicitly that the Samians are making a bad decision. Nevertheless, the Samians easily reach this conclusion themselves: they understand (νοήσαντες) that the fable is spoken for their own good (πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς). They then decide to keep Aesop. Aesop, however, decides to go to Croesus anyway. The narrative thus eats its cake and has it too; the story moves forward by having Aesop go to Croesus, but the fable still succeeds in its persuasive function. This second fable, then, like the first, shows a keen sense of *kairos* and is hence successful.

The third and last fable in this section is told by Aesop after he arrives at Croesus’s court. When Aesop first shows himself to Croesus, Croesus, angry that Aesop has ruined all of his plans, insults his appearance, calling him a “riddle” (ἀίνιγμα) and a “portent” or “monster”

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<sup>81</sup> Steiner has repeatedly demonstrated that dog imagery is strongly associated with invective speech (cf. especially 2001: 156-157 and 2002: 311-312). We have already seen that Aesop is twice insulted by being compared to a dog (at G11 and G86). Thus, it is significant that Aesop here aligns himself not simply with a dog, but with a heroic dog: the guardian of the sheep. The wolves become the canine villains in this story, and are naturally enough associated with eating (cf. Steiner cited above). Aesop thus recasts the association between himself and a dog as not an insult, but a positive attribute.

(τέρρας).<sup>82</sup> As Lefkowitz points out,<sup>83</sup> Aesop’s ugliness is treated as a sign that needs interpretation: it is not only Aesop’s fables that beg interpretation, but Aesop himself. Lefkowitz connects Croesus’s reaction to that of the Samians upon initially seeing Aesop: the Samians also call him a τέρρας and mockingly ask for a second interpreter to explain Aesop himself.<sup>84</sup> However, there is an important difference between the way the Samians treat Aesop’s riddling body, and how Croesus does so. The Samians wish for an interpreter to determine which type of animal or inanimate object Aesop should be called; all they are sure about is that Aesop cannot be human, for his body is much too ugly. Croesus’s emphasis is different:

“Ἴδε τίς ἐκώλυσέν με πόλιν ὑποτάξαι, καὶ τέλη λαμβάνειν οὐκ εἴασεν. καὶ εἰ μὲν ἄνθρωπος οὐ χαλεπὸν, ἀλλ’ αἴνιγμα καὶ τέρρας τῶν ἀνθρώπων.”

“Behold here is the one who prevented me from conquering the city, and who did not allow me to achieve my ends. If he were a man it would not be difficult, but he is an enigma and a portent of men.” (G98)

It is not so much Aesop’s body that begs interpretation, as what Aesop has done. Croesus is puzzled that Aesop stopped him from conquering a city, as opposed to the Samians, who were merely puzzled by Aesop’s grotesque body. Furthermore, Croesus calls Aesop an “enigma and a portent of men” (αἴνιγμα καὶ τέρρας τῶν ἀνθρώπων). He does not tie Aesop’s bewildering appearance to animals or inanimate objects, as do the Samians. Instead, he ties it to humans: Aesop may not be human, but he is a riddle or a portent of humans. We see once again that Aesop, once freed, is associated with the human world rather than the animal one.

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<sup>82</sup> G98.

<sup>83</sup> Lefkowitz 2008: 70.

<sup>84</sup> G87.

Aesop first tries to assuage Croesus's anger using a simile: he compares Croesus to a wounded man, and then explains that he, Aesop, is like a physician who cures a man's character, not his body (G98). Aesop adds that if Croesus kills him, a man who gives good advice, then he will receive nothing but bad advice thereafter. Aesop also repeatedly mentions that he is at Croesus's mercy: he twice refers to his position "at Croesus's feet" and freely admits that Croesus has the power to kill him (G98). Even the fable he subsequently tells places all the power in Croesus's hands, as Kurke notes.<sup>85</sup> This mix of simile, advice, and a humble attitude is not entirely unsuccessful: Croesus smiles, showing that his anger is beginning to dissolve, and asks Aesop to tell him some fables. Aesop, of course, obliges:

ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς θαυμάσας αὐτὸν καὶ μειδιάσας ἔφη “δύνασαι προσθῆναι, καὶ πρὸς τὴν εἰς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τύχην λόγους εἰπεῖν;” ὁ δὲ Αἰσωπος λέγει “καθ’ ὄν καιρὸν ἦν ὁμόφωνα τὰ ζῶα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, <λέγω δὴ> πένητα ἀπορούμενον τροφῆς ἐπιλαβέσθαι [δὲ] ἀκρίδας τὰς λεγομένας <τερετιστρίας> καὶ ταύτας ταριχεύειν καὶ πωλεῖν φανερῆς τιμῆς. πιάσας δὲ τινα ἀκρίδα ἠθέλησεν αὐτὴν ἀποκτείνειν. ἡ δὲ ἰδοῦσα τὸ μέλλον πρὸς τὸν ἀνθρώπον εἶπεν ‘<μὴ με μάτην ἀποκτείνης.> οὔτε γὰρ στάχυν ἠδίκησα οὔτε κλάδους ἢ βλαστούς, οὔτε ἀκρέμονας ἔβλαψα· συγχρόνῳ δὲ πτερῶν καὶ ποδῶν ἀρμονία χρηστὰ φθέγγομαι. ὁδοιπόρων εἰμι ἀνάπαυμα.’ ὁ ἀνθρώπος συμπαθῆς τοῖς λόγοις αὐτῆς ἀφῆκεν αὐτὴν μητρὶ τῇ ἐρημίᾳ. ὡσαύτως κἀγὼ προσπίπτω τοῖς γόνασίν σου. ἐλέησόν με· οὔτε γὰρ ἰσχυρὸς εἰμι ὥστε τινὰ στρατιὰν βλάψαι, οὔτε εὐπρεπῆς ὥστε ψευδομαρτυρῆσαι κατὰ τινος καὶ διὰ τὸ κάλλος τῆς ὄψεως ἀδίκως πεισθῆναι. ἐν εὐτελεῖ δὲ σωματίῳ φρενήρη φθέγγομαι βίον τῶν μερόπων ὠφελῶν.” (100) ὁ βασιλεὺς συμπαθήσας αὐτῷ τοῖς λόγοις ἔφησεν “ἐγὼ σοὶ τὸ ζῆν δώσω· αἴτησαι δὲ ὃ θέλεις καὶ παρέξω σοὶ.” Αἰσωπος εἶπεν “καταλλάγηθι Σαμίους.” ὁ βασιλεὺς· “κατήλλαγμαί.”

The king, marveling at him and smiling, said, “Can you do another thing, and tell me fables about the fate of men? Aesop said, “During the time when animals had the same speech as humans, I say that a poor man who lacked food used to catch the grasshoppers that are called hummers and would pickle them and sell them for a clear price. He grabbed a certain grasshopper and was about to kill her. But she, seeing what was about to happen, said to the man, ‘Do not kill me in vain. For I did not do harm to your grain nor your branches nor your shoots, nor did I harm your twigs. But I make good music through the joint harmony of my wings and feet. I am a solace for travelers.’ The man, sympathetic because of her words, let her go back to her mother, the wilderness. In just this way I fall at your knees. Pity me. I am not strong so that I might harm your army, nor

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<sup>85</sup> Kurke 2011: 134.

am I good looking so that I might bring false testimony against anyone and be believed unjustly on account of the beauty of my appearance. In my cheap body I speak sound things, thus helping the life of articulate men.” (100) The king, sympathetic toward him because of his words, said, “I will grant that you live. Ask me whatever you wish and I’ll provide it for you.” Aesop said, “Make peace with the Samians.” The king said, “I will make peace.” (G99-100)

The story is, once again, well-matched to the situation. This time, in fact, Aesop makes the connection explicit: he not only gives a moral, but also explains step by step how it corresponds to the present situation: he tells Croesus exactly how he, Aesop, is like the grasshopper, and how Croesus is like the man who catches grasshoppers. Even though there is nothing left to interpret, the narrative still makes it clear that it is Croesus himself who must make the final step: for Croesus, having become sympathetic toward Aesop because of his words (συμπαθήσας αὐτῷ τοῖς λόγοις), grants Aesop his life and promises to do as he asks. Once again, the audience response is important. In this case, Aesop’s explicitness is part of his calculated humility: he emphasizes the fact that he, like the grasshopper, is completely at Croesus’s mercy, and he begs Croesus to take pity on him. This prostration, combined with the fable, helps make Croesus receptive to what Aesop has to say.

These three fables provide the reader with positive exempla for how to use fables in oratory. Fables are useful in public, political discourse, so long as they are told in the right way and have the right content. Even as an orator, Aesop remains at the bottom: he is always speaking his fables to those who have power over him, and the fables help him negotiate this power imbalance safely. However, the *Life* provides not only these positive exempla of fables, but also negative exempla. Before Aesop goes to Delphi, he spends time in the courts of various eastern kings. This section of the *Life* is strange for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that Aesop does not actually tell any fables in these chapters. Nevertheless, before I turn to the

Delphi section and the end of Aesop's life, I wish to briefly consider what work these chapters about Aesop in the east are doing in the larger narrative of the *Life*.

### **III. Chapters 101-123: Aesop in the East (The Dangers of Writing and of Openness)**

Before Aesop goes to Delphi, there is a long section (G101-123) in which Aesop travels around to various eastern kings, offering advice and solving riddles. Most of this section is spent either at the court of the Babylonian King Lycurgus, or at the court of the Egyptian King Nectanabo. Lycurgus and Nectanabo are engaged in a riddle contest (which takes the place of war for these kings in those days<sup>86</sup>), and Aesop, acting as Lycurgus's agent, wins the contest for him.

This section, which I will refer to hereafter as the Babylonian Section, has often been marked out as an interpolation by modern scholars, for a number of reasons.<sup>87</sup> First, the narrative seems to be taken largely from the *Life of Ahiqar*, a popular near eastern narrative that was circulating as early as the fifth century BCE.<sup>88</sup> Ahiqar's name has been changed to Aesop, and some events occur in a different order, but the plot is largely the same. Hence, it is often seen as a portion of a different text, awkwardly inserted into this one. Furthermore, the Croesus section ends with a statue of Aesop being made. A second statue is made after the Babylonian section, as if the author (editor?) has to go back and awkwardly resume where the narrative was before the Babylonian section. Even Aesop's character seems different in the Babylonian section. He does

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<sup>86</sup> G102.

<sup>87</sup> Adrados 1979: 94.

<sup>88</sup> Kurke 2011: 176-179 provides a summary of what we know about this work. She notes that it was widely translated into many eastern languages, and that there is some evidence that it was known in Greece as early as the fifth or fourth century BCE. For a comparison of Ahiqar and Aesop, cf. also Adrados 1979: 98-105.

not tell any fables; rather, he is a giver and a solver of riddles. He adopts a son, who betrays him, and whose suicide Aesop (inadvertently?) causes by lecturing him too harshly. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the whole section seems unnecessary for Aesop's narrative trajectory: the story works if Aesop goes from a successful slave to a successful freedman and then meets his end at Delphi. The Babylonian section does not add anything to this trajectory, or so some scholars claim, and hence feels like an awkward insertion.

Holzberg and Kurke, however, argue that far from being an awkward insertion, the Babylonian section is fundamental to the work as a whole. Holzberg's argument is partly based on his analysis of the work's overall structure, and partly on his analysis of the work's major themes.<sup>89</sup> In essence, Holzberg argues that the Babylonian section exists because Aesop must meet with too much success, since it is this excess that leads to Aesop's hubris which in turn leads to his death.<sup>90</sup> Kurke, in contrast, argues that the Babylonian section reiterates Aesop's ascent to the position of an archaic sage, and that it emphasizes the sage's role in the political arena.<sup>91</sup> As is also the case in the two scholars' analyses of the end of the *Life*, Holzberg reads this section as being part of Aesop's trajectory toward defeat, and Kurke sees it as a valorization of Aesop.

Although I agree that this section feels like an awkward insertion, and I would not be surprised if there is an earlier version of the Aesop tale that leaves out the Babylonian section, I am chiefly interested in why the editor made this choice. If in fact there is a version of the tale that goes from Croesus to Delphi, then why insert the Babylonian section at all? I do not agree

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<sup>89</sup> Holzberg 2002: 80-81. This analysis reworks his earlier argument from his 1993 article.

<sup>90</sup> Kurke 2011: 185-186 takes issue with what she sees as Holzberg's "moralizing" reading of the *Life*.

<sup>91</sup> Kurke 2011: 185.

with Holzberg's view that the section exists to give Aesop too much success; for I believe that Aesop's "hubris," such as it is, is already established before the Babylonian section, when he writes down his fables and receives a statue in his honor, thus angering Apollo and motivating his death at Delphi. Although I agree with Kurke that this section is largely positive for Aesop – as it shows Aesop winning every contest in which he engages – there is simultaneously a negative undercurrent in this section that problematizes Aesop's actions. Although Aesop himself generally meets with success (except, notably, in the case of his adopted son who commits suicide), Aesop's methods have begun to shift in a dangerous direction. Rather than telling fables, Aesop in this section teaches through direct precepts, and instead of merely speaking, he begins to rely on writing. Both of these methods are portrayed as ambivalent at best.

The first problem manifested in this section is that of writing. Aesop writes down his fables just before the Babylonian section and leaves them in a library (G100), and this is also the point at which the first statue of Aesop is made: after returning from Croesus's court, Aesop sets up a shrine to the Muses on Samos, in which Mnemosyne is depicted as the leader of the Muses, rather than Apollo (G100). Ellen Finkelpearl connects these two events, and argues that Aesop gets into trouble "when the fables and their teller take on lasting physical form."<sup>92</sup> Because Aesop is a former slave and his medium is the *telling* of fables, it is problematic for him to create a lasting form for either himself or his work. In fact, Finkelpearl argues that the writing down of the fables is as much a transgression as is the statue,<sup>93</sup> although it is only the latter that angers Apollo. Finkelpearl's theory, I believe, receives additional confirmation in the rest of the

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<sup>92</sup> Finkelpearl 2003: 45.

<sup>93</sup> Finkelpearl 2003: 46. Cf. Morgan 1994: 386: "Both writing and statues share the same weakness: they are essentially dead and fruitless. Moreover, a piece of writing will always need its author to come to its aid and explain what it means/he meant."

Babylonian section, since this portion of the *Life* contains a series of incidents connected to writing and its inherent danger.

While in Babylon, Aesop adopts a son. This son soon turns on him and tries to bring about Aesop's death by sending Lycurgus a fake letter sealed with Aesop's ring (G103-104). The letter, purportedly written by Aesop, offers help to the enemies of Lycurgus. Lycurgus believes the letter and so orders Aesop's death; Aesop only escapes because he is hidden by one of his friends. This incident underlines the danger inherent in writing. Writing is a source of lies, and writing, it seems, is a thing that can lead directly to Aesop's execution. Furthermore, the false accusation made against Aesop by his son points ahead to the false accusation that will soon be made by the Delphians.

This incident may also be compared to Aesop's interaction with Croesus. In that case, Aesop actually did help a king's enemies, insofar as he used his words to convince the Samians to resist Croesus. However, Aesop is able to avoid execution at the hands of Croesus because their interaction is in person: Aesop humbles himself and uses a fable to win Croesus over. With Lycurgus, the interaction is moved away from oral speech, the realm in which Aesop is particularly skilled, and into writing. The false letter seals Aesop's fate as soon as it is read, and there is no opportunity for Aesop to defend himself. Significantly, the letter is revealed as fake just as soon as Aesop is able to talk to the king directly (G107). After the king is posed a riddle that he cannot answer and begins to long for Aesop, Aesop is revealed as having been alive the whole time, and is given the opportunity to explain himself. He then takes an oath that he is telling the truth about his innocence, and this oath is deemed to be more reliable than the physical seal that had been falsely planted on the fake letter. The spoken word is proven to be more powerful than a physical, written object.



At the end of the Babylonian section, the “fake letter” motif appears again, this time with a more positive spin. Aesop himself uses a fake letter to win a riddle duel with Nectanabo, the king of Egypt (G121 ff.). Aesop has been ordered to produce something that Nectanabo and his court have never seen nor heard of, and if he fails, Lycurgus will have to pay tribute to Nectanabo. Nectanabo’s courtiers see this as a foolproof plan, since no matter what Aesop brings, they can simply claim that they have seen it. Aesop outsmarts them by bringing in a forged letter, which claims that Nectanabo owes the King of Babylon a great deal of money (G122). When the courtiers say that yes, they have seen that document, Aesop says that they must then pay the money. Nectanabo immediately protests that he has never seen that letter before, and the courtiers back him up. Aesop then declares that he has won the bet.

In this case, the writing serves a more positive function; it allows Aesop to win the riddle battle on behalf of his patron. Nevertheless, Aesop’s letter, like the letter that his son used, is false: writing is still a source of lies and deception. These two fake letters bookend the Babylonian section, and they both underscore the danger inherent in writing. It is interesting, in fact – and problematic – that Aesop coopts the very form of communication that nearly led to his own death at the hands of his son. He is no longer using the form of communication that was given to him by Isis and the Muses, namely, oral communication.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, there is an important connection between a popular, non-elite culture and oral communication: popular culture is often oral in nature, which is part of the reason that it is so difficult to find evidence for it.<sup>95</sup> As Scott argues, “the great bulk of lower-class cultural expression has typically taken an oral

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<sup>94</sup> G7: Isis gives Aesop a voice, and she and the Muses endow him with the ability to invent and compose fables.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Horsfall 2003, whose project is to uncover the culture of the Roman plebs despite its oral nature. Cf. also Forsdyke 2012: 3-7 for oral popular culture in ancient Greece, and how Forsdyke attempts to uncover it using elite sources. On Aesop’s writing down of his fables as a transgression, cf. Finkelpearl 2003: 46-47.

rather than a written form. Oral traditions, due simply to their means of transmission, offer a kind of seclusion, control, and even anonymity that make them ideal vehicles for cultural resistance” (1990: 160). In other words, writing is simply too dangerous for those on the bottom. By writing down his fables, and by making use of the fake letter strategy that nearly undid him, Aesop proves willing to step away from the oral culture in which he is so skilled, and into the (elite?) realm of writing.

There is an important distinction to be made here. Aesop’s writing down of his fables and his use of the fake letter are both successful enterprises: the fables survive (or, at least, such is the fiction of the *Life and Fables of Aesop*), and Aesop’s fake letter leads to his climactic victory over Nectanabo. However, Aesop’s success does not undo the problematic nature of writing for a non-elite hero. Writing remains ambivalent, as Aesop’s near-death thanks to a letter demonstrates. This distinction between Aesop himself (who, throughout the *Life*, is always victorious in the end) and the medium that Aesop uses (which can fail) is an important one, and will be seen all the more clearly in the final section.

Beyond the dangers of writing, the Babylonian section also underscores the dangers of openness, of not talking in the coded language of fables. Aesop does not tell any fables in this section, not even at times when one might expect a fable. After Helios, Aesop’s adopted son, fails in his attempt to get Aesop executed, Lycurgus wishes to execute Helios. Aesop refuses, explaining that if his son is killed, that would be a cover for his guilt. But if he lives, then he would remain a *τρόπαιον* to his *συνειδήσεως* (G108). The use of *τρόπαιον* here is notable; Aesop essentially declares that his son must live as a trophy of his own guilt, a monument to the fact that he did wrong and then was defeated. Aesop does, however, decide to educate his son:

“Ἐπάκουσον τῶν ἐμῶν λόγων, τέκνον Λῆνε, δι’ ὧν καὶ πρότερον παιδευθεὶς οὐ δικαίως μοι χάριτας ἀποδέδωκας. καὶ νῦν οὖν φύλαξον τούτους ὡς παρακαταθήκην.

“Listen to my words, my son Linos,<sup>96</sup> even though you were educated with them earlier and did not return just thanks to me. But now therefore guard these words as a trust.”  
(G109)

Aesop promises to educate his son using *logoi*, which might lead the reader to expect a series of fables. Instead, Aesop launches into a long series of precepts, which instruct his son on a wide variety of life matters. Not only are these not fables, but they are not, for the most part, even fable morals. Aside from the first precept, “Honor god,” which is frequently found in the *Fables*,<sup>97</sup> none of the other precepts appear as fable morals. The main reason for this seems to be one of perspective; most of the advice Aesop gives to his son is advice for those who have power, teaching lessons such as “Care for your slaves” (G109) and “Take care of your wealth” (G110). The fables, in contrast, tend to teach lessons that are useful to those on the bottom. As an illustration, consider this precept, which Aesop gives to his adopted son:

τὸν καθημερινόν σου βίον ζήτει πρὸς τὸ λαμβανόμενον καὶ εἰς αὔριον ἀποθησαυρίζειν· βέλτιον γὰρ ἐχθροῖς καταλιπεῖν ἢ ζῶντα τῶν φίλων ἐπιδέεσθαι.

“Strive to put aside for tomorrow some of today’s livelihood; for it is better to leave something behind for one’s enemies than to beg of one’s friends while living.” (G110)

Planning for the future is certainly something taught by fables, but the focus there is rather different; the fables teach that one should not let go of small gains in the hopes of future large gains.<sup>98</sup> Whereas the precept urges the listener not to fear having too much, the fables teach that

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<sup>96</sup> In Manuscript G, Aesop’s son is called Linos throughout this passage, although he is elsewhere called Helios. Perry points out that Ainos is the name of Aesop’s son in Manuscript W, so there is clearly confusion between the two manuscripts here. Cf. Perry 1952: 69.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Fables 36, 77, 99, 173, 174, and 178 as examples.

<sup>98</sup> As in Fable 4 and Fable 18.

one should never expect a lot. The difference in perspective is clear. Aesop is not only teaching lessons applicable to those with power, but he is no longer using wisdom taken from his fables.<sup>99</sup>

Aesop's decision to use precepts to educate his son instead of fables is particularly striking given that the *Life of Ahiqar* does include fables as a teaching method for the son.<sup>100</sup> This means that in adapting the Ahiqar section for Aesop, the editor deliberately left out fables as a teaching method. Holzberg suggests that the reason is one of context: the *Life of Aesop*, he points out, never includes fables that are told out of context, whereas the *Life of Ahiqar* does. Holzberg argues, in essence, that "out of context fables" are being saved for the fable collection itself. However, such an argument does not explain the second striking feature of this passage: namely, that Aesop's teaching causes his son to commit suicide:

ὁ δὲ Λῖνος λυπούμενος ἐπὶ τῷ ἡδικηκέναι αὐτὸν καὶ διὰ λόγων μεμαστιγῶσθαι ἀποκαρτερήσας τοῦ βίου ἀπέληξεν.

And Linos, grieving on account of the wrong he had done Aesop and on account of having been flogged by his words, ended his life through starvation. (G110)

The text is explicit that two factors contribute to Aesop's son's suicide: his guilt over the wrong done to Aesop, and the verbal lashing he received. Aesop's precepts are not portrayed as being helpful or gentle, but as being a physically painful and demeaning punishment. We have discussed already that fables, as a genre, are known for being a gentle type of speech: they get their message across by telling it in an oblique and pleasurable manner.<sup>101</sup> They are thus non-

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<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, these precepts do bear striking similarities to the wisdom of the Seven Sages, as Kurke demonstrates (2011: 181). Kurke also observes (2011: 180) that with only two exceptions, there is no overlap between the precepts taught in the *Life of Ahiqar* and the precepts that appear in the *Life of Aesop*. The two exceptions are (1) not to reveal what you hear in the king's court and (2) to be friendly to those you meet.

<sup>100</sup> Holzberg 2002: 84.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Kurke 2011: 131.

confrontational and cause pleasure rather than pain.<sup>102</sup> Aesop's harsh, relentless advice to Helios is the opposite: it is direct and unsoftened, and it causes Helios so much grief that he takes his own life. Had Aesop given this advice through a series of enjoyable fables, the result might have been different.<sup>103</sup> Once again, we can see Aesop's methods beginning to fray. He is starting to rely on the dangerous form of communication that is writing, even after seeing its potentially lethal consequences. Furthermore, he is giving advice without using fables, a method which has terrible consequences.

In essence, the Babylonian section is included, I would argue, as a way to prepare the reader for the disastrous events at Delphi that are about to occur. It is not so much that Aesop has achieved too much success and hence gets hubristic, as Holzberg argues, nor is this section a straightforward valorization of Aesop in the political realm, as Kurke suggests. Aesop has become a much different person from the man who was given the divine gift of speech by Isis and the Muses. Even though Aesop himself comes through the section unscathed – and, in fact, achieves great success and fame - the negative aspects of his newly chosen media are made clear: writing and openness lead to death, and they are at best ambivalent as modes of communication for the low.

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<sup>102</sup> Cf. again G100, in which Croesus becomes sympathetic to Aesop because of his fable.

<sup>103</sup> That the death of Aesop's son is not the outcome Aesop wanted is indicated in two ways. First, in G108 Aesop prevents the king from killing Helios, saying that he preferred him to stay alive as a monument to his guilt. Secondly, after Helios's death Aesop "mourns" (G110: *πενθήσας*) him, indicating that this was not the outcome he desired.

#### IV. Aesop's Death (Aesop the Unsuccessful Fabulist)

If the first three fables that Aesop tells in the *Life* serve as positive exempla of the right way to use fables, then the six fables that Aesop tells at the end of the *Life* serve as negative exempla. These fables, which are told after Aesop has been falsely accused and condemned to death by the Delphians, prove unable to save Aesop's life. This is a striking failure on the part of Aesop's fables, which previously had always managed to persuade their audience. The question, then, is why Aesop's art is unsuccessful at Delphi. As I will show, this failure comes about because the fables told by Aesop at Delphi do not have the *kairos* that his previous fables did – they are either poorly matched to the situation (as is the case for the first two and the final two) or they are simply ill-received by the non-receptive audience (as is the case for the middle two). Part of the reason for this failure in reception is that Aesop attempts to speak fables as though from a position of power, rather than using the studied humility that he so successfully employed with the Samians and with Croesus. Furthermore, Aesop begins to ignore the advice of his own fables, and hence acts in a foolish manner. Thus, the end of Aesop's life serves as a warning against using fables in the wrong way.

In claiming that Aesop's fables are unsuccessful in their persuasive function at Delphi, I am not therefore claiming that *Aesop* fails at Delphi or that the Delphians or Apollo are in the right. Kurke rightly takes issue with Holzberg, who reads Aesop's *Life* as a lesson against hubris: Aesop, in Holzberg's view, becomes too successful and too proud, angers Apollo, and so pays the price.<sup>104</sup> Kurke dismisses this reading, saying that "Holzberg's reading is predicated on a

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<sup>104</sup> The reading of Hopkins 1993 is similar, although since Hopkins's focus is on how the *Life* encapsulates the anxieties of slave owners, he argues that Aesop's death "reflects...the endemic hostility to the clever slave in Roman society" (p. 25). Like Holzberg, Hopkins thus takes Aesop's death as the end, and does not consider as important the vengeance that comes after Aesop's death. Cf. also Adrados 1979: 95, who also argues that Delphi represents the only time that Aesop does not win.

moralizing (even Christianizing) notion that as a divinity, Apollo can do no wrong. In addition, it seems to me, his model of a shift from Aesopic piety to Aesopic hubris fails to do justice to much of the narrative of the *Life* and the reader's experience thereof."<sup>105</sup> Holzberg does go too far in his analysis, although it is also true that, moralizing or not, angering a divinity is never a good idea: Aesop can, in fact, be called "impious" in his behavior toward Apollo, even though there is also a criticism of Apollo encoded in the text, as Kurke demonstrates.<sup>106</sup> Kurke admits, however, that even without a moralizing reading, a person could still argue that "the Delphi section represents the failure of Aesop's (divinely inspired) wisdom and *logoi*, formerly so efficacious."<sup>107</sup> Kurke ultimately contends that even this reading is false, and that both the moralizing and the non-moralizing readings rely too heavily on the scene in which Aesop's friend criticizes his behavior in Delphi, and in which Aesop admits that he has "lost the sense he had before" (G130-131).<sup>108</sup> Kurke, who reads this scene as a parody of "high" wisdom, argues that it cannot be taken as a serious condemnation of Aesop's behavior at Delphi.<sup>109</sup> Kurke also emphasizes that Aesop's death is hardly the end of the story; the Delphians are punished for their killing of Aesop.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Kurke 2011: 185-186.

<sup>106</sup> Kurke 2011: 60-69; 199-200.

<sup>107</sup> Kurke 2011: 186.

<sup>108</sup> Kurke 2011: 186.

<sup>109</sup> Kurke 2011: 77-93; 213-224.

<sup>110</sup> Kurke 2011: 91.

Kurke is right, I think, that there are many different issues at play here. There is parody, there is a criticism of the Delphians, there is scapegoating,<sup>111</sup> and there may even be the underlying notion of Aesop as the divine sage who must die, as Kurke suggests.<sup>112</sup> I think Kurke is incorrect, however, in assuming that because Aesop's death is avenged and because this section condemns Apollo and the Delphians, Aesop himself is wholly in the right. We observed in the last section that even when Aesop is victorious, his victory can still be problematic, especially as concerns his methods. Just as it was problematic for Aesop to make use of direct speech and writing in the Babylonian section, so too at Delphi Aesop uses his fables in an ineffective way. The fact remains that Aesop tells fables that are intended to persuade the Delphians, and the fables fail in this function, as the narrative repeatedly emphasizes:

ταῦτα δὲ αὐτοῦ εἰπόντος, μηδὲ οὕτως πειθομένων τῶν Δελφῶν...

While Aesop was saying these things, and the Delphians were in no way being persuaded... (G 134)

Οἱ Δέλφιοι μὴ ἀνασχόμενοι ἀπήγαγον αὐτὸν καὶ ἔστησαν ἐπὶ τὸν κρημνόν.

The Delphians, not being deterred, led him and stood him on the cliff. (G140)

οἱ δὲ οὐ μετενόουν.

But they did not change their minds. (G141)

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<sup>111</sup> Aesop has often been seen as a *pharmakos* figure in the end of the *Life*. Perhaps the most well-known treatment is that of Nagy 1979: 280-288 (critiqued by Kurke 2011: 75-94), but this theory may also be found in Adrados 1979: 105-110; Compton 1990; and West 1984: 117. Although Kurke critiques many of the parallels that have been drawn between the deaths of Neoptolemus and Aesop as scapegoats, she too reads scapegoating as an important feature of the end of the *Life*. Cf. particularly 2011: 85-93, in which she reads Aesop's insulting fables as part of a contest of scapegoating: the Delphians are attempting to treat Aesop as a scapegoat, while Aesop attempts to scapegoat them (by, for instance, using fables to accuse them of sexual crimes, crimes against xenia, crimes against the divine, and so on).

<sup>112</sup> Kurke 2011, Ch. 4, particularly pgs. 185 ff.



One might compare this to the audience responses after each of Aesop's first three fables:

ἐπιγνόντες δὲ οἱ Σάμιοι τὸ συμφέρον ἐκ τῶν τοῦ Αἰσώπου λόγων...

The Samians, recognizing from Aesop's words their advantage... (G95)

Οἱ δὲ Σάμιοι νοήσαντες πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς εἰρῆσθαι τοὺς λόγους...

The Samians, recognizing that the words were spoken for their own good... (G98)

ὁ βασιλεὺς συμπαθήσας αὐτῷ τοῖς λόγοις...

The king, feeling sympathetic toward him because of his words... (G100)

The Samians and Croesus have positive responses to Aesop's fables, and they are persuaded to adopt the course that Aesop recommends. The Delphians, however, are not persuaded no matter how many fables Aesop tells. It is important to keep in mind that both the Samians and Croesus were initially hostile toward Aesop, just like the Delphians, and yet Aesop is still able to win them over. In Delphi, by contrast, Aesop is unable to persuade the Delphians not to execute him. That failure on the part of Aesop's fables needs to be addressed, especially since they were so effective before.

Furthermore, not only do Aesop's fables fail to persuade their audience, but Aesop himself gets into trouble at Delphi precisely because he ignores advice that his own fables teach. We saw in Part 1 that as a slave, Aesop embodied the teachings of his fables. Here at the end, Aesop instead acts in direct contradiction of his own teaching. The immediate cause of Aesop's trouble at Delphi lies in Apollo's anger at the shrine Aesop builds that excludes Apollo (G100). Although Kurke is certainly right that a god's anger does not necessarily mean that the offending party is morally wrong, it is also true that, as Zafiroopoulos has shown, the *Fables* repeatedly

warn against offending the gods.<sup>113</sup> This has a practical rather than a moral aim: people should not anger the gods because doing so will lead to trouble. The *Fables* present the gods as self-interested entities who will not intervene in most human affairs unless their own status is threatened. One might use Fable 36 as an example. In this fable, a man bets that he can prove the oracle at Delphi false. He has a bird under his coat, and asks the oracle whether what he holds is alive or dead – planning to kill the bird if the oracle says “alive” and to let it live if the oracle says “dead.” The oracle is not fooled, however, and rightly declares that the bird’s life or death is in the man’s hands. This fable, according to the moral, teaches that “the divinity must not be trifled with” (τὸ θεῖον ἀπαρεγγεῖρητόν ἐστιν). This fable, which is even set at Delphi, teaches a lesson that Aesop would have done well to learn.

This is especially poignant when we remember that Aesop builds his offensive shrine to the Muses right after he writes down his fables. This means that Aesop, even though he writes fables that teach repeatedly that you must not offend the gods,<sup>114</sup> nevertheless turns around and immediately offends one himself. This is precisely why Aesop’s friend, at Delphi, asks him how he could be so foolish despite his own learning (G130).

Furthermore, the folly of ignoring one’s own teaching or of being undone by one’s own special talent is itself a lesson taught by the fables. A recurring character in the fables is the person who gets into trouble because of a special talent, or who simply cannot use his own power to save himself. There is an astronomer who falls into a hole because he is too busy looking at the stars (Fable 40), a nightingale who is caught because of her singing (Fable 48), a sorceress

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<sup>113</sup> Zafiroopoulos 2001: 136-137.

<sup>114</sup> Other fables that warn against offending the gods include Fables 77, 99, 173, 174, and 178.

who can appease divine wrath but cannot prevent humans from killing her (Fable 56), and a prophet who cannot foretell his own death (Fable 161). Like the astronomer and the nightingale, Aesop gets into trouble with Apollo because of his special talent; his fables lead to success which leads to Aesop building a temple that offends Apollo. Like the sorceress and the prophet, Aesop then proves unable to extricate himself from trouble, despite his talent at telling fables.

In essence, Aesop, by offending Apollo and by not propitiating the Delphians, acts in a way that contradicts his own teaching, as represented by the *Fables*. Aesop's death, then, serves as its own lesson against ignoring the teaching of the *Fables*: if you do not take their advice, then you might end up like Aesop. As in Section 1, Aesop acts like a fable character, but this time he plays the part of someone who acts foolishly and is killed as a result, thus teaching the audience to avoid that behavior.<sup>115</sup> With Aesop acting in such a manner, it perhaps becomes less surprising this the fables he tells similarly fall flat.

Again, this is not to say that Aesop's death cannot be considered heroic, nor even that Aesop himself necessarily intends all of his fables to be effective. At a certain point, the narrative makes it clear that Aesop has given up, and begins to tell fables in order to shame the Delphians, rather than to persuade them, as we will see. Furthermore, I certainly agree that there is one sense in which the fables are highly effective: as Kurke and others have pointed out, the fables about the vengeance that will come after Aesop's death come true.<sup>116</sup> For all of these reasons, it is not possible to read the ending as Holzberg did, as simple and moralizing. Aesop goes out in a blaze

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<sup>115</sup> On the fabulistic qualities of the ending of the *Life*, cf. Holzberg 2002: 90-91 and Holzberg 1996. Holzberg sees the entire *Life* as one big fable, and views the ending as a condemnation of Aesop's impiety. I agree that Aesop plays the part of a fable character at the end of the life, although I do not believe that the end of the *Life* outright condemns him.

<sup>116</sup> Kurke 2011: 188-189.

of glory, and he never loses the reader's sympathy. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Aesop's problems at Delphi are caused by his own mistakes, and that the fables that Aesop tells at the end of the life are literally ineffective: none of them produce any useful response or altered behavior in the audience. It is that difference that I wish to address.

When Aesop first comes to Delphi, he becomes angry because the Delphians watch his performance but do not pay him (G124). Aesop then insults the Delphians, first by commenting on how pale they are (G124), and then by comparing them to a piece of driftwood that looks significant from far away, but that is revealed as worthless upon closer inspection (G125). Aesop then declares that in the same way, the Delphians have failed to live up to Aesop's expectations, and that they "act in a way not unworthy of [their] ancestors" (G125: οὐδὲν γὰρ ἀνάξιον τῶν γονέων ποιεῖτε). The Delphians ask who their ancestors are, and Aesop explains that they are slaves brought by the Greeks as offerings to the god:

ἐκ τούτων ὑμεῖς γεννηθέντες ἀνελεύθεροί ἐστε ὁμοίως τοῖς δεδεμένοις· ἐκεῖθεν γὰρ ὄντες πάντων Ἑλλήνων <δοῦλοι> καθεστήκατε.

"You, being born from them, are slavish,<sup>117</sup> just like men in bondage. For being of such origin, you have been ordained as slaves of all the Greeks." (G126)

This insult turns the normal power relationship between Aesop and his audience on its head. In previous instantiations of fable telling, Aesop always assumed a subjugated position, and then told fables that asked for help or consideration from those who had power over him. In this case, Aesop is forcing his audience into the subordinated position: the Delphians are still slaves, unlike Aesop himself, who is a freedman and acts like a free man. Unsurprisingly, the Delphians are

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<sup>117</sup> On the dual meaning of ἀνελεύθεροί, as referring both to "stingy" behavior and to "servile" behavior, cf. Kurke 2011: 71. Essentially, Aesop associates the Delphians' rude refusal to pay him as evidence for their slavish ancestry.

enraged,<sup>118</sup> so they plant a cup in Aesop’s baggage and then accuse Aesop of stealing from the temple. Despite his protestations of innocence, he is thrown into jail to await execution.

It is while he is in jail that Aesop tells his first two fables. A friend visits Aesop in jail and asks, “What have we come to?” (G129: τί γέγονεν τὰ ἡμῶν;). Aesop “answers” this question through the fable of a farmer who sees a beautiful widow mourning the death of her husband (G131). Hoping to find a way to sleep with this woman, the farmer pretends to have recently lost his wife, and to be mourning her death. He suggests that he and the widow find comfort by sleeping with each other. While they are having sex, the farmer’s oxen are stolen. When he realizes this, he begins to cry in earnest. When the woman asks him why he is crying, he responds, “Because now I have something to mourn!” Aesop ends the fable by linking it to the situation, telling his friend, “And you ask me why I’m mourning when you can see the fate that holds me?”<sup>119</sup>

In some respects this fable has *kairos*. It is told at an opportune time, insofar as Aesop’s friend asks him a question, thus giving Aesop an opening to respond with a fable. Furthermore, since this man is a friend, he is presumably receptive to Aesop’s words. Where this fable fails is in its content, for if one examines the fable’s link to the current situation, it does not fit terribly well. The “moral” of the fable is that Aesop’s friend should not ask stupid questions – which means that the friend must correspond to the widow, making Aesop the deceptive and unethical

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<sup>118</sup> Cf. Kurke 2011: 69-70. Kurke argues that Aesop’s previous two insults against the Delphians (that they are pale and that they are like driftwood that only seems important from afar) could be seen in the context of Aesop as a traveling sophist who is justifiably angry about not being paid. However, as the text progresses, argues Kurke, “Aesop’s abuse of the Delphians... goes far beyond what would be necessary to critique their nonreciprocation of a traveling sophist” (2011: 69).

<sup>119</sup> G129: ὥστε καὶ σὺ ἐρωτᾷς με διὰ τί κατολοφύρομαι, βλέπων αὐτὸς τὴν κατέχουσάν με τύχην;

farmer.<sup>120</sup> Aesop is, in essence, painting himself as the guilty party: a man who foolishly lies and loses his property as a result. This is the opposite of what Aesop wants, seeing as he so desperately protested his innocence before. Furthermore, the fable has no effect on the friend at all. He does not realize anything or feel anything, as was the case for the Samians or Croesus. In fact, the friend's only response is to ask the same question in different words, asking why Aesop had to insult the Delphians in their own city when he was at their mercy. Not only is the friend unaffected emotionally by the fable, but he does not heed its "do not ask questions" message.

In response to his friend's second question, Aesop tells another fable (G130), one even odder and more sexually explicit than the first. In it, a stupid girl is told by her mother that she needs to get some "sense" (*noos*) put in her. Later the girl comes upon a man having sex with his mule. When she asks what he is doing, he says that he is putting some sense into the animal. The girl then asks that he do the same for her. After they have sex, the girl runs home to tell her mother, who says sadly, "My child, you've lost what sense you had." This fable is again linked to the current situation, when Aesop says, "It's turned out the same way for me, my friend, for in coming to Delphi I lost the sense I had" (G131: ὁμοίως καὶ ἐμοὶ συνέβη, φίλε· ἀπώλεσα γὰρ καὶ ὄν πρῶτον εἶχον νοῦν εἰς Δελφοῦς εἰσελθὼν).

Once again, Aesop links himself to the fable's losing character; he, like the foolish girl, literally "asked for" his own predicament. When Aesop told his fables to the Samians or to Croesus, he would parallel himself to innocent victims (like the dogs in the wolf, sheep and dog fable) or to the clever, victorious characters (like the grasshopper). Here, he links himself to the

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<sup>120</sup> Cf., though, van Dijk 1993, who argues that this fable is also connected to its context through subtle wordplay surrounding the word λύω: Aesop's inability to find a solution to his situation is parallel to the man's distress that someone else *untied* his oxen (pp. 142-43).

character who is the butt of the joke. Furthermore, this fable does not exactly answer the friend's question; the friend asks why Aesop insulted the Delphians, and Aesop's response is to say, in essence, "I was just stupid." Yet the point of the friend's question was that Aesop has not been stupid in the past, so why now? Aesop's fable does not in any way answer that question. Once again, the fable appears to have no effect on the friend – he merely leaves after crying many tears.<sup>121</sup>

Of course, part of the reason that these fables have no effect on the friend is that Aesop makes no effort to convince him. This too is a difference, as previously Aesop only told fables when he wished to persuade the audience of something. Aesop, like the man who lost his oxen or the girl who lost her virginity, has lost something that he cannot get back. For that reason, Aesop sees no need to explain or to mourn, much like Socrates<sup>122</sup> when he similarly refused to evade his end. Such a stance could be read as noble, although the explicit and salacious nature of the fables brings any such nobility into a state of bathos. The important point for my argument is that the fables do not have any effect on Aesop's friend, the audience of the fables.

The Delphians then come to collect Aesop (G132). They tell him that they are going to throw him off a cliff, and Aesop, seeing that they are threatening him, orders them to listen to his fable:

Αἴσωπος ἰδὼν αὐτοὺς ἀπειλουμένους ἔφη “λόγον ἀκούσατε.” οἱ δὲ ἐπέτρεψαν αὐτὸν λέγειν.

(133) “ὅτε ἦν τὰ ζῷα ὁμόφωνα, μῦς φιλιάσας βατράχῳ ἐκάλεσεν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ δεῖπνον καὶ εἰσήγαγεν αὐτὸν εἰς ταμιεῖον πλούσιον πάνυ, ἐφ’ ᾧ ἦν ἄρτος, κρέας, τυρός, ἐλαῖαι, ἰσχάδες· καὶ φησιν ‘ἔσθιε.’ καλῶς ληφθεὶς ὁ βάτραχος φησιν ‘ἐλθὲ καὶ σὺ παρ’ ἐμοὶ δειπνήσων, ἵνα σε καλῶς λάβω.’ ἀπήγαγεν δὲ αὐτὸν εἰς λίμνην καὶ φησιν ‘κολύμβησον.’

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<sup>121</sup> G131: καὶ πολλὰ δακρύσας ὁ φίλος αὐτοῦ ἀφίστατο.

<sup>122</sup> On other connections between Socrates and Aesop, cf. Lefkowitz 2008: 77-78 and Compton 1990: 338-341.

ὁ δὲ μῦς· ‘κολυμβῆσαι οὐκ ἐπίσταμαι.’ ὁ βάτραχος· ‘ἐγὼ σε διδάξω.’ δῆσας τε λίνω τὸν πόδα τοῦ μῦδος πρὸς τὸν ἴδιον πόδα [ἔδρασε] <εἰς τὴν λίμνην> καὶ τὸν μῦν ἔσυρεν. ὁ δὲ μῦς πνιγόμενος εἶπεν ‘νεκρὸς ὢν ζῶντά σε ἐκδικήσω.’ ταῦτα εἰπόντος αὐτοῦ καταδύς ὁ βάτραχος ἔπνιξεν αὐτόν. κειμένου δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦ ὕδατος καὶ ἐπιπλέοντος, κόραξ ἤρπασεν τὸν μῦν σὺν τῷ βατράχῳ συνδεδεμένον, καταφαγὼν δὲ τὸν μῦν ἐδράξατο καὶ τοῦ βατράχου. οὕτως ὁ μῦς τὸν βάτραχον ἐξεδίκησεν. ὁμοίως καὶ γὰρ, ἄνδρες, ἀποθανῶν ὑμῖν μόρος ἔσομαι· καὶ γὰρ Λύδιοι, Βαβυλώνιοι, καὶ σχεδὸν ἡ Ἑλλὰς ὅλη τὸν ἐμὸν καρπίσονται θάνατον.”

(134) ταῦτα δὲ αὐτοῦ εἰπόντος, μηδὲ οὕτως πειθομένων τῶν Δελφῶν ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ τὸν κρημνὸν ἀπαγαγόντων αὐτόν, κατέφυγεν ὁ Αἴσωπος ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τῶν Μουσῶν.

Aesop, seeing that they were threatening him, said, “Listen to a fable.” And they gave him permission to speak.

(133) “Once when animals spoke the same language, a mouse who was friends with a frog invited him to dinner and led him into a very rich storeroom, in which there was bread, meat, cheese, olives, and dried figs. And the mouse said, ‘Eat.’ After the frog had helped himself well, he said, ‘Come and have dinner with me, so that I can entertain you well.’ The frog led the mouse to the swamp and said, ‘Dive in.’ The mouse said, ‘I don’t know how to dive.’ The frog said, ‘I will teach you.’ He tied the leg of the mouse to his own leg with string, dove into the pond, and dragged the mouse in. The mouse, drowning, said, ‘Although I am dead, I will have my revenge on you the living.’ While the mouse was speaking, the frog dove down and drowned him. While the mouse lay floating on the surface of the water, a hawk seized him and also the frog who was bound to him, and after the hawk ate the mouse he seized upon the frog. In this way the mouse took his revenge on the frog. In the same way I, gentlemen, although I die, will become death for you. For the Lydians, the Babylonians, and almost all of Greece will reap my death.”

(134) When Aesop said these things and the Delphians were in no way persuaded but continued to lead him to the cliff, Aesop fled into the shrine of the Muses. (G132-134)

In many ways, this situation is similar to the situation in which Aesop told his second fable to the Samians. The Delphians, much like the Samians, have adopted a course that will lead to Aesop’s death. They have already made their decision, and do not ask Aesop for advice. In both cases, Aesop must carve out his own opportunity for fable telling. Among the Samians, Aesop pretends that he is telling a story to be inscribed on his tombstone and insists that he is not trying to change their minds. In this instance, in contrast, Aesop *orders* the Delphians to listen to his fable (G132: *λόγον ἀκούσατε*), once again indicating that he sees himself in a position of



power over them. The Delphians then give him permission to speak, indicating that they see themselves in the position of power. This is a power struggle, one in which Aesop refuses to acknowledge that he is at the mercy of the Delphians. Thus, although he is allowed to speak, he does not speak from a position of deliberate obsequiousness, as he always had before.

This helps explain why the Delphians, unlike the Samians, refuse to heed Aesop's words, despite the fact that both fables detail the terrible consequences that will result from Aesop being harmed. When Aesop told his first fable to the Samians, Aesop waited until they were commending him – until they were well-disposed toward him. The same thing happened when Aesop told his fable to Croesus: Aesop first humbled himself and made Croesus smile, and then told his fable. Here, Aesop does nothing to make the Delphians well-disposed toward him before he tells his fable. In fact, Aesop tells his fable after noticing that the Delphians are “threatening” (ἀπειλουμένους) him. No audience could be less receptive, and so it is little wonder that the fable does not have its intended affect.

The same is true of the next fable that Aesop tells, the fable of the eagle and the dung beetle (G134-139.). This time Aesop does not ask the Delphians for permission to speak, but simply launches into the fable while the Delphians drag him away from the Muses' shrine. Once again, Aesop tells this fable as though from a position of power, not even giving the Delphians a chance to say no. The fable tells how a rabbit, who is about to be killed by an eagle, begs the dung beetle for help. The dung beetle supplicates the eagle in Zeus's name, asking him not to kill the rabbit. The eagle ignores him and kills the rabbit. The dung beetle then takes revenge on the eagle by repeatedly smashing his eggs, no matter where the eagle tries to hide them. Eventually the eagle takes the eggs and gives them to Zeus, thinking that they will be safe there. But the dung beetle gets the eggs there too – he flies past Zeus with his arms full of dung. Zeus is so

surprised and disgusted that he jumps up and lets the eggs fall to the floor. The dung beetle then tells Zeus what happened, and Zeus admits that the eagle deserved his fate. Still, Zeus does not want the race of the eagles to die out, so he asks the dung beetle to be reconciled. The dung beetle refuses. Zeus then changes the mating season of the eagle so that the eagles have their eggs when dung beetles are not around. Aesop concludes by telling the Delphians that they must remember the dung beetle and not do dishonor to Aesop, their guest.<sup>123</sup>

This fable is certainly appropriate to the situation: it, like the previous fable, warns that if the Delphians kill Aesop, they will face vengeance.<sup>124</sup> The fable does not have quite as neat a one-to-one correspondence as the previous fable, however: Aesop must be both the rabbit, who is unfairly killed, and the dung beetle, who is angry that his supplication is ignored. The dung beetle also plays a double role, as both Aesop and as Aesop's future avengers.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, Aesop implies that Zeus, as the god of guests, will punish the Delphians for ignoring Aesop's supplication. Yet Zeus in the fable does not punish the eagle – in fact, although he admits that the dung beetle has just cause to be angry, he still helps the eagle survive the dung beetle's wrath by changing the eagle's mating season. The fable, then, is slightly more ambivalent than Aesop needs it to be. Still, this is a fable about vengeance exacted by someone who has been wronged, and hence it fits the situation.

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<sup>123</sup> G139: ὁμοίως καὶ ὑμεῖς, ἄνδρες Δέλφιοι, μὴ ἀτιμάσητε τὸ ἱερόν τοῦτο εἰς ὃ (ὄν cod.) ἐγὼ κατέφυγον, κἂν εἰ μικρὸς ἐστὶν ὁ ναός, ἀλλ' ἐνθυμήθητε τὸ τοῦ κανθάρου καὶ αἰδέσθητε Δία Ξένιον καὶ Ὀλύμπιον. (“In the same way also you, men of Delphi, do not dishonor this shrine into which I have fled, even if it is a small temple, but consider what happened with the dung beetle and respect Zeus Xenios and Olympian.”)

<sup>124</sup> Van Dijk 1995: 146-47 suggests that the addition of Zeus in the second fable raises the stakes – the Delphians will not just anger other human nations; they will also anger the gods.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. Steiner 2008: 85, who discusses the dung beetle's dual role in this fable. Steiner also points out that the dung beetle is associated with invective, and so there may be a connection between Aesop's insults toward the Delphians and his association with the dung beetle here (2008: 99-100).

The problem once again lies in the fact that the Delphians have no intention of listening to Aesop. Aesop does not gain their favor before he tells the fable; he does not even give himself an excuse to tell the fable. He simply tells it. He then associates himself with the dung beetle who, in the fable, has all of the power, and the Delphians with the eagle, who is relentlessly pursued and ultimately powerless. Once again, the fable has no effect on the Delphians, who continue to drag Aesop toward the cliff. These middle two fables, then, fail in their intended purpose, at least so far as Aesop is concerned. The fables do prove prophetic, as Aesop's death will be avenged, just as the fables predict. But they are not persuasive for the Delphians; they do not dissuade the Delphians from killing Aesop. The Delphians are simply too hostile to listen, and Aesop is hardly making an attempt to change their minds.

Aesop, though, manages to tell two more fables before he is killed. These two fables come after Aesop has realized that his death cannot be prevented:

Αἴσωπος βλέπων τὸν ἑαυτοῦ μόρον ἔφη “ἐπειδὴ παντοίως ὑμῖν ὁμιλῶ καὶ οὐ πείθεσθέ μοι, ἀκούσατέ μοι τόνδε τὸν λόγον.”

Aesop, seeing his own fate, said, “Since I spoke to you in all sorts of ways and you are not persuaded, listen to this fable.” (G140)

This moment is important. Aesop is no longer trying to dissuade the Delphians from killing him, as he has now realized that his death will come.<sup>126</sup> This, again, strengthens the thesis that Aesop's previous fables failed in their persuasive function: Aesop has only now truly given up. The final two fables, then, serve merely to insult the Delphians further, especially since Aesop once again orders them to listen.

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<sup>126</sup> Kurke also notes, as do I, that these final two fables are stripped of any persuasive function: they are purely insulting (2011: 89-90).

Aesop first tells the story of a man who is killed when his donkeys pull his cart over a cliff in a storm (G140). As the man dies he laments that he died at the hands of donkeys. Aesop says that he too is lamenting that he is dying at the hands of slaves, not reputable men.<sup>127</sup> Of course, calling the Delphians slaves is the very insult that got Aesop into trouble with them in the first place. Aesop is emphasizing the fact that as far as he is concerned, the Delphians are beneath him.

The final fable told by Aesop is missing from G (probably because of its sexual content), but can be reconstructed from W. Aesop tells the story of a woman who is raped by her father and says that she would rather have submitted to a hundred men than to him (W141). Aesop says that he too would prefer to be dragged through many nations rather than be killed by the Delphians.<sup>128</sup> Once again, this is a straightforward insult to the Delphians, rather than an attempt to change their minds.<sup>129</sup>

This last two fables, then, could be said to succeed in their purpose, insofar as they are told in order to insult the Delphians, and they certainly do that. We have seen, however, that in the *Life* fables are used to persuade or to teach. In using them simply as insults, Aesop is reverting to the same behavior that got him into trouble among the Delphians to begin with. He has not, it seems, learned his lesson. Furthermore, the explicitness with which Aesop insults the Delphians (for he explains the fables' insulting meaning at the end of each one) may be

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<sup>127</sup> G140: ὡσαύτως οὖν κἀγὼ δυσφόρως ἔχω, ὅτι οὐχ ὑπὸ ἀξιολόγων ἀνδρῶν ἀλλ' ὑπὸ καταπτύστων δουλαρίων ἀπόλλυμαι. ("In the same way I am upset, since I am dying at the hands not of reputable men, but of abominable slaves").

<sup>128</sup> G141: "ἄνδρες Δέλφιοι, ἤβουλόμην Συρίαν, Φοινίκην, Ἰουδαίαν μᾶλλον κυκλεῦσαι ἢ ἐνθάδε <παραλόγως ὑφ' ὑμῶν> [παρ' ὑμῶν ἀναγκασθῆναι] ἀποθανεῖν." ("Men of Delphi, I would choose rather to be dragged through Syria, Phoenicia and Judaea than to be forced to die here unreasonably at your hands").

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Van Dijk 1993: 149.

connected to the danger of openness we observed in the Babylonian section: Aesop has also not learned, it seems, that direct and harsh words can lead to death.

These last six fables are all ineffective, insofar as they literally have no effect on their audiences. Nor do they prevent Aesop's death. The reason for this, as I have shown, is that the fables lack the *kairos* that Aesop's first three fables had: the fables he tells at Delphi are either ill-suited to the occasion, or are simply told to an audience that is too hostile to listen, thanks to Aesop's refusal to speak from a position of humility. Because of this, Aesop is killed. In a wider sense, then, the whole Delphi sequence can be seen as a warning against using the fables in an ineffective manner.

Again, it is important to keep in mind that even though Aesop's fables do not prevent his death, Aesop is certainly successful in the end: his fables prove prophetic, and the criminal Delphians are punished. Much as we saw in the Babylonian section, the *Life* thus has it both ways. It shows how problematic it is for those on the bottom to use fables in the wrong way, whether by being too explicit, or by committing them to writing, or by trying to speak fables as though from a position of power. At the same time, the *Life* never stops celebrating or reveling in Aesop as a character: Aesop is ultimately successful at whatever he does. This tension between the way the narrative treats Aesop and the way it treats his fables may be partly due to a desire on the part of the editor to leave Aesop as a heroic figure, but that is not the whole story. Once Aesop writes down his fables, Aesop the character is separated from his fables, which can now survive apart from him. Even if Aesop dies, the fable genre still retains its power without him, and thus the *Life* ends with Aesop's prophetic fables coming true, even if Aesop is no longer alive to see it.

The Delphi section of the *Life*, then, is didactic on several levels. First, it serves as a negative exemplum about how *not* to use fables: Aesop's Delphic fables are ineffective because Aesop does not use them in the appropriate way. On a broader level, Aesop's death, brought about by his impiety and by his failure to internalize his own teaching, is its own lesson against ignoring the teaching that will follow in the *Fables*. At the same time, however, the *Life* teaches that fables have power, even after Aesop is dead.

## V. Conclusion

As I have shown, the *Life* of Aesop serves two purposes that are relevant to the *Fables*. First, it establishes the authenticity of the *Fables* by presenting them as the work of Aesop himself. Second, and more importantly, the *Life* teaches the reader why and how the *Fables* are useful. In the first part of the *Life*, when Aesop is a slave, he incorporates the strategies of a clever fable character into his own behavior and is hence successful. Fables teach advice and strategies that are useful for the enslaved, the poor, and the downtrodden. In the second part of the *Life*, when Aesop is freed, Aesop tells fables as part of a public, political discourse, thus showing how they are useful in the political sphere for someone who must speak to those who have power over him. Fables are persuasive, but only if the fables have the necessary *kairos*. The final two sections of the *Life* explore the problems that can arise when those who are still low overstep, either by making use of writing and openness, or by telling fables in an inappropriate way. Fables are effective – but only if you take their advice and use them in the correct fashion.

## Chapter 2

### Phaedrus: Fables as Covert Speech

*Phaedri Augusti Liberti Fabulae Aesopiae* is a five-book collection of fables, written in Latin verse and dated to the early first century CE. Our knowledge about this text and about its author is almost entirely based on details within the text itself, since there is little in the way of outside testimonia.<sup>1</sup> Phaedrus, as his biography commonly runs, was a freedman of Augustus who wrote his first two books of fables during the reign of Augustus's successor Tiberius. Phaedrus's status as Augustus's freedman comes from the title of the book, which identifies him as *Augusti Libertus*.<sup>2</sup> That Phaedrus wrote under Tiberius, not Augustus, comes from Fable 2.5, in which Tiberius appears as the current emperor. In the third prologue (line 41), Phaedrus claims that his first two books caused Sejanus, the prefect of the Praetorian Guard under Tiberius, to prosecute him. This has led many scholars to assume that the last three books were

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<sup>1</sup> Only Martial and Avianus mention Phaedrus; Martial calls a Phaedrus *improbis* (*Epigr.* 3.20), but there is no guarantee that this is a reference to the fabulist Phaedrus (cf. Duff 1935: 149; Önnersfors 1987: 431-433; and Perry 1965: lxxvi n.1). Avianus, who is certainly talking about our fabulist, lists Phaedrus as one of the most important fabulists alongside Aesop, Babrius, and Socrates (*Prolog.* 7-9). He, however, is writing in the early fifth century CE. More problematic, in fact, is the fact that Phaedrus is missing from his contemporary Seneca. Seneca claims in his *Consolatio ad Polybium* that no Roman author has attempted to write in the fable genre (8: *Aesopeos logos, intemptatum Romanis ingeniis opus...*). This should not be used as evidence that Phaedrus post-dates Seneca, however. It is more likely that Seneca is either unaware of the fabulist, or does not consider him worthy of mention. Cf. Perry 1965: lxxiv n.1 for a discussion of the Senecan evidence, or Champlin 2005: 101 for the argument that Seneca does in fact provide a *terminus post quem*.

<sup>2</sup>*Augusti* could, of course, refer to any emperor, but it is most likely refers to Augustus, since Augustus appears as a character in Fable 3.10, an anecdote Phaedrus claims comes from the recent past.

written after Sejanus's death, when it became safe to complain about the prefect.<sup>3</sup> This dating is all speculative, of course, since there is no reason to assume that Phaedrus intends to provide accurate biographical detail. Nevertheless, the scholarly consensus maintains that Phaedrus wrote sometime in the early or mid-first century, since the majority of his allusions are to that period.<sup>4</sup>

Although scholars are in agreement about the general date of Phaedrus's fable book, there is more debate about whether or not Phaedrus was actually a freedman. To be more precise, Phaedrus's freedman status, which for many years was accepted without question, has recently come under scrutiny. The title of Phaedrus's book appears in the principal manuscript, P,<sup>5</sup> but, as Edward Champlin points out, there is no way of knowing when or how that title came to be attached to the fables. Champlin argues that the title was most likely derived from Phaedrus's self-characterization as a man of low birth, combined with the longstanding tradition of fables as the genre of slaves.<sup>6</sup> Tom Hawkins, following Champlin, speculates that Phaedrus's supposed freedman status is a direct result of the third prologue, in which Phaedrus asserts that fables were invented by slaves.<sup>7</sup> Both of these scholars assume that the title is nothing but a bit of

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<sup>3</sup> Phaedrus also mentions that he wrote his last two books when he was quite old: 3 *epil.* 15-19: *languentis aevi dum sunt aliquae reliquiae, / auxilio locus est: olim senio debilem / frustra adiuuare bonitas nitetur tua...* ("While some of my weakening life remains, / there is a place for your help: one day your generosity / will strive in vain to help me, crippled by old age..."). Fable 5.10, which is about an old dog, is often seen as an allusion to Phaedrus's old age.

<sup>4</sup> The only firm *terminus ante quem* is provided by Avianus. Cf. n. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Perry 1965: lxxiii.

<sup>6</sup> Champlin 2005: 99.

<sup>7</sup> Hawkins 2014: 129-130.



biographical fantasy, concocted by Phaedrus's later editors, who took Phaedrus's fictional persona too literally.<sup>8</sup>

These scholars may well be right that the title is nothing but fiction. However, to move from this conclusion to the conclusion that Phaedrus was a freeborn lawyer, as does Champlin,<sup>9</sup> or that Phaedrus is merely "beholden to the power of patrons," as does Hawkins,<sup>10</sup> is to miss an important point. The title, regardless of whether or not it reflects biographical fact, means one of two things: either Phaedrus identified himself as a freedman, or his fables focused so much on slavery that later readers assumed that Phaedrus must have had experience with slavery himself. Either way, Phaedrus's authorial persona has close ties to slavery. What matters is not so much whether or not this is true, but what this persona means for the interpretation of Phaedrus's fables.<sup>11</sup> As I will show, Phaedrus's persona – and in particular his relationship with his servile predecessors – is vital for the correct interpretation of his fables.

The fable book itself has survived in much better condition than the *Life and Fables of Aesop*, although the situation is far from ideal. The main issue is that the text itself is not complete as we have it. Books 1, 3, and 4 seem largely complete, but Books 2 and 5 are so short

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<sup>8</sup> This is similar to the debate that has occurred about the biography of Horace. Horace identifies himself as the son of a freedman in *Satire* 1.6 and *Ep.* 1.20.20. At first, this was taken to be simple biographical fact. Then Gordon Williams demonstrated that the identification of Horace's father as a freedman does not sit well with the way that Horace's father is characterized elsewhere in Horace's poems (2005: 139-150), and within *S.* 1.6 itself, the phrase *libertino patre natum* is always marked out as if in quotation marks. It represents, says Williams, not biographical fact but an insult applied to Horace by other people (2005: 140). Gowers, following Williams, concludes that "the 'freedman father' is simply a rhetorical strategy to give H. a personal history equivalent to that of humble but outspoken philosophers like Bion" (2012: 222).

<sup>9</sup> Champlin (2005: 115) bases this conclusion largely on the amount of legal vocabulary used by Phaedrus. A knowledge of the law does not mean that Phaedrus was either freeborn or a lawyer, however.

<sup>10</sup> Hawkins does not, to be fair, completely shut out the possibility that Phaedrus is a former slave, but he certainly deemphasizes this angle (2014: 129-130).

<sup>11</sup> In this perspective, I am indebted to Ralph Rosen's analysis of persona theory. Cf. my introduction, p. 19.

that they are most likely missing a large portion of their original fables. Each book starts with a prologue and ends with an epilogue, except for Books 1 and 5, whose epilogues seem to be missing.<sup>12</sup> The prologues give limited information about what may be found in the book that follows, which can sometimes be helpful in the reconstruction of missing fables.<sup>13</sup> Some of the missing material is preserved in Perotti's Appendix, a collection of fables excerpted from Phaedrus which are otherwise not preserved.<sup>14</sup> This text, which is preserved in two manuscripts, was originally transcribed by Niccolo Perotti in the fifteenth century. Perotti's Appendix has two problems, however: it does not give any indication about where in the original work the fables appeared, and it leaves out the morals, choosing instead to turn them into the fables' titles. Thus, although Perotti's Appendix is very useful in giving us material not otherwise preserved, it does not help with the reconstruction of Phaedrus's original text. There are also prose summaries of Phaedrus, which at least tell us what other topics appeared in Phaedrus, although they give neither the original version of the fable nor any indication of the fables' original manuscript position.<sup>15</sup> The incompleteness of Phaedrus's text is particularly unfortunate because it is clear from the progression of the prologues (which I will discuss below) that Phaedrus gave his fable

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<sup>12</sup> The last fable in Book 5 (Fable 10), in the words of Henderson, "makes a very odd '*Epilogue*-substitute'" (1999: 317), since it is about a very old dog that can no longer perform its duties (and Phaedrus, as we know from the epilogue of Book 3, was concerned about growing old), and since it mentions the book's dedicatee in the moral.

<sup>13</sup> The prologue to Book 1, for example, apologizes for the presence of talking trees. Since there is no fable in Book 1 that features talking trees, scholars have long assumed that at least one such fable is missing. Cf. Hawkins 2014:129, who points out that Babrius also mentions talking trees in his first prologue and then does not include them. Hawkins assumes Babrius does this pointedly, but agrees that in Phaedrus's case there is probably a fable missing.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Perry 1965: xcvi-iii.

<sup>15</sup> The prose paraphrases come from three manuscripts, all of which (according to Perry) come from a common source (Perry 1965: xcvi-xcix).

collection an overarching plan.<sup>16</sup>

In the previous chapter, I argued that the *Life of Aesop* serves as a guide for how to use the *Fables*: the biography shows how the slave and the free(d)man might use fables in the proper way. I thus argued that the *Life* influences the reading of the *Fables*, although I admitted that the *Life* is not, properly speaking, a paratext. However, for the other three fabulists that I study, Genette's concept of the paratext helps illuminate the relationship between the prologues and epilogues (the paratext) and the fables themselves. As Genette argues, paratextual material helps create "a more pertinent reading" of the text proper (1997: 2). Genette connects this to the author's purpose, and argues that the paratext is the place where the author can try to influence the reading of his text in the way that he prefers (1997: 408). I will not go so far as to claim that Phaedrus's authorial intention can in any way be known, but I will follow Genette in seeing Phaedrus's paratext as a site that creates a hermeneutic frame through which Phaedrus's fables may be interpreted. In his paratext, Phaedrus presents himself as a freedman who emphasizes the servile origin of fables, so that his audience knows that his fables are about slavery.

Phaedrus emphasizes the longstanding connection between slavery and fables, both by playing up their connection to Aesop (who is resolutely and unambiguously Aesop the *slave*) and by stating that fables owe their invention to slaves wishing to speak their feelings in code. By emphasizing that the sources of his fables are slaves, Phaedrus encourages the audience to imagine what meaning the fables might have in the mouths of slaves. However, Phaedrus's text

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<sup>16</sup> Henderson 1999 undertakes a reconstruction of Phaedrus's text, largely based on what can be detected regarding Phaedrus's authorial plan. See in particular pp. 316-317, in which Henderson offers a possible reconstruction of the five books, including speculation on what kind of material is missing from each. For specific work on the manuscript tradition of Phaedrus, cf. Finch 1971a and 1971b; Holzberg 2002: 39-40; Önnarfors 1987; and Perry 1965: xcvi-c.

is far from a straight transcription of slave tales. Whatever their origin, these fables have been moved by Phaedrus into the literary realm: he is not a slave speaking oral fables, but rather a poet using fables to create a text. Thus, these fables function on another, literary level. This level also has close ties to the theme of slavery. Phaedrus undertakes a constructed, literary impersonation of the *servitus* mentioned in the third prologue, by adapting his own use of fables as closely as possible to the use originally employed by slaves. In other words, just as slaves used fables to talk in a coded manner about their experience of slavery, so Phaedrus also uses fables to talk in a coded manner about his experience of slavery. Thus, the fables are both the *sort of* fables that slaves tell, and the actual fables of a freed slave who wishes to demonstrate how fables function as a method of covert speech.

In making this argument, I am indebted to the work of James C. Scott and Sara Forsdyke. Scott's book, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), is a study, based largely on his own and others' field work, which examines the ways in which subordinated groups speak under domination. Scott's focus is on what he calls the public transcript and the hidden transcript. The public transcript is what is spoken or done openly, before an audience that includes one's non-social peers (thus, for example, what a master says before his slaves or what a slave says in the presence of his owner). Generally speaking, the public transcript will conform to what those in power wish to hear. The hidden transcript is what is spoken in private, before an audience that includes only one's social peers (so, for example, what a slave says in the presence of family and/or close friends who are fellow slaves). The hidden transcript, because it is not spoken in the presence of those in power, allows the subordinates to comment on or contradict the public

transcript.<sup>17</sup> However, Scott explains that the public and hidden transcripts are not monolithic categories: there are types of speech that fall somewhere in between them.<sup>18</sup> For example, a subordinate may speak in the presence of his superiors (thus, the speech is part of the public transcript by definition), but in a way that insinuates part of the hidden transcript into the discourse in a coded or covert fashion. In such a situation, the message must be disguised either by disguising the messenger (through anonymity or costume) or by disguising the message (by speaking in code).<sup>19</sup> In the latter case, the speech will very often have a double meaning: one meaning that is innocuous, and one meaning that is subversive. This grants the subordinates a certain amount of safety, for they can always deny that the subversive meaning was intended. This plausible deniability also has benefits for those in power. It gives them an “out” if they choose not to recognize or respond to the subversive content; they too can pretend that only the innocuous meaning was intended.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the double meaning allows the subordinate to speak with more safety and allows the superior to save face, even if the message is understood.

Scott analyzes the Brer Rabbit stories, told by African American slaves, as an example of this middle-of-the-road, coded speech.<sup>21</sup> The Brer Rabbit tales were animal fables told by slaves about the clever Brer Rabbit and his adventures outwitting Brer Fox and Brer Wolf. Such stories,

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<sup>17</sup> Scott first defines these terms on pp. 2-4. He emphasizes (p. 4) that the difference between the public and hidden transcripts is a difference in audience and in agenda, but that it would be an oversimplification to claim that the public transcript is “false” and the hidden transcript “true.”

<sup>18</sup> This is the subject of Chapter 6: “Voice under Domination: The Arts of Political Disguise.”

<sup>19</sup> Anonymity is discussed by Scott pp. 140-156; more elaborate forms of code are discussed pp. 156 ff. For the use of “figured speech” in antiquity, cf. Ahl 1984.

<sup>20</sup> Scott 1990: 156. Cf. also pp. 50-52, in which Scott points out that facts that contradict the public transcript can be widely known so long as they are not publicly mentioned: those in power are not concerned with what their subordinates know, as much as with controlling the public stage.

<sup>21</sup> Scott 1990: 163-166.

Scott argues, articulated sentiments that could not be expressed openly, such as the slaves' desire to have revenge on their owners. These tales also celebrated and taught strategies for dealing with one's owners, such as relying on cunning instead of showing anger openly.

It is important to note that these Brer Rabbit stories were not merely circulated among slaves, but were also spoken in the presence of the slave owners.<sup>22</sup> This means that although the fables certainly had meaning for any slaves in the audience, since they expressed sentiments that many slaves must have felt, they also had meaning directed at the slave owners. As Scott explains, part of the reason for using this coded speech in public is the overwhelming desire to speak something of one's real feelings directly to power, even if the only way to do so is in middling, mitigated speech.<sup>23</sup> If the superior understands nothing of a code, then the gesture is useless. If the message is too explicit, then the danger becomes too great. Thus, this double message, spoken before a mixed audience that includes those in power, is a delicate balancing act.

There is a methodological problem in this analysis, to which Scott readily admits. We have written records of the Brer Rabbit tales, but these records were not written by the slaves themselves. They were, at best, written down by ex-slaves, or often by whites.<sup>24</sup> We do not have any record of the actual fables told by slaves in the presence of slave owners. This means that we

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<sup>22</sup> Scott 1990: 164.

<sup>23</sup> Scott 1990: 164: "The place of such tales as part of the public transcript suggests a line of interpretation. It suggests that, for any subordinate group, there is tremendous desire and will to express publicly what is in the hidden transcript, even if that form of expression must use metaphors and allusions in the interest of safety." Cf. pp. 155-156.

<sup>24</sup> Scott 1990: 163. For other comparative material, cf. Gates 1988, who discusses the history of African American slave literature and slave fables, and Genovese 1976, for forms of resistance that developed in the African American slave community. Milosz 1962 discusses literature produced under more modern totalitarian regimes.

are at least one step removed. As Scott argues, what we most likely have are sanitized versions of the fables, or a selection of those fables that best fit the public transcript.<sup>25</sup> Thus, even if we know that slaves used the Brer Rabbit tales to insinuate parts of the hidden transcript into the public transcript, we have no way of recreating that original speech act. All we can do is analyze the written records that remain.

Sara Forsdyke, who analyzes popular culture in ancient Greece, runs into a similar problem. The goal of her book, *Slaves Tell Tales* (2012), is to uncover evidence of Greek popular culture, even though her only sources for the ancient Greek world are elite, written texts. She is left with the problem of how to use elite sources to uncover evidence of popular, often oral, non-elite culture. Forsdyke's solution is to use one of two methods, depending on the audience for which the text was produced.<sup>26</sup> If the text was produced by an elite writer for an elite audience, then she analyzes images or words that do not seem to fit with the elite context. Such elements, she argues, are likely to be holdovers from the original, popular context of the images. On the other hand, if the text was produced by an elite writer for a mixed audience (in other words, an audience made up of both elite and non-elite people), then Forsdyke considers what meaning the text might have had for the elite parts of the audience and what meaning it had for the non-elite parts. In other words, she looks for a dual interpretation corresponding to the dual audience. Forsdyke also steps back and asks: why did the elites make use of popular culture in their texts, and why did they allow images to remain that did not suit the elite contexts? Furthermore, what

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<sup>25</sup> Forsdyke 2012: 60 makes a similar observation for ancient Greek fables, arguing that because the fables we have are preserved in elite contexts, there is a definite selection bias that makes the fables skew more toward the elite perspective.

<sup>26</sup> Forsdyke 2012: 9-10.

social work was done by texts with dual messages? She concludes that such texts were a site of negotiation between elites and non-elites, allowing them to address real social conflict.

In her analysis of the genre, Forsdyke focuses on the earliest Greek fables,<sup>27</sup> arguing that later fables have a greater elite bias.<sup>28</sup> Although I disagree that later fable collections fall solely into the elite domain, Forsdyke's approach is relevant to them. She points out that in Greek tradition, the fable has a longstanding association with slavery (due, in large part, to its association with Aesop). This means, according to Forsdyke, that "something about the fable – either its actual popularity among slaves or the content of these early fables – caused the Greeks to associate it with a slave."<sup>29</sup> For this reason, Forsdyke feels justified in examining the Greek fables that are found in elite texts (such as Hesiod) for evidence of what the fables might have meant in a non-elite context.

The work of both Scott and Forsdyke has an obvious applicability to Phaedrus. Phaedrus gives an etiology for fables that would be very much at home in Scott's study: fables were originally a way for slaves to speak their feelings (i.e., the content of their hidden transcript) in the presence of their owners, using coded speech (fables).<sup>30</sup> Because Phaedrus associates fables so closely with slavery, it becomes important to ask – as Forsdyke does for the fables in the Greek tradition – what meaning these fables would have from a slave's perspective, regardless of whether or not the fables "really" came from slaves. It is also important to consider, as both Scott

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<sup>27</sup> Forsdyke 2012: 59-73, 78.

<sup>28</sup> Forsdyke 2012: 60.

<sup>29</sup> Forsdyke 2012: 62. Cf. also Knapp 2011: 128, who says that "fables, while applicable to a wide range of statuses, were rightly seen in antiquity, as now, as in many cases expressing genuine attitudes and strategies of slaves."

<sup>30</sup> 3 *prol.* 33-37.



and Forsdyke do, how the written nature of the fables affects the message, and how different segments of Phaedrus's audience might have responded differently to his text.

I am far from the first scholar to notice the connection between Phaedrus and slavery, but in general, this topic has received only perfunctory treatment. Phaedrus is often cited in works on Roman slavery, due to his self-proclaimed identity as a freedman and the fact that he links the creation of the fable genre to the coded speech of slaves. This leads scholars like Bradley, Bajoni, Daube, and Richlin to examine what Phaedrus might tell us about the slave experience.<sup>31</sup> Bradley argues that even if Phaedrus's etiology for the fable genre is not historically accurate, it is still true that many of Phaedrus's fables pertain to slavery, and he (like Daube) lists a few fables to prove his point.<sup>32</sup> Bajoni's article analyzes Fable 5.8, in order to show that even fables that do not seem at first glance to be about slavery can still be interpreted through that lens.<sup>33</sup> Richlin compares Phaedrus's assertion that fables are coded slave speech to the similar use of coded speech in Roman comedy.<sup>34</sup> All of these scholars address some aspect of Phaedrus's connection with slavery, but none of them provide a systematic reading of Phaedrus's entire text in light of this theme, as this chapter will.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Bradley 1987; Bajoni 1999; Daub 1972; Richlin 2014: 5.

<sup>32</sup> Bradley 1987: 151-153; Daube 1972: 54-56.

<sup>33</sup> Bajoni 1999. Fable 5.8 is about a statue of *kairos*, which Bajoni links to the slave's need to seize any and every opportunity to escape.

<sup>34</sup> Richlin 2014: 200-202. For the contrary opinion, cf. McCarthy 2000, who argues (pp. 17-18) that because Roman comedies occurred during "publicly funded religious festivals," they must have catered to elite views, and were unlikely to give voice to slave perspectives. McCarthy compares this to fables, which she does see as "the ideal literary form to be passed around within the slave community without ever having to be performed before a mixed audience" (p. 18 n. 27).

<sup>35</sup> In fact, it is fairly rare for a scholar to attempt an interpretation of Phaedrus's entire text, rather than concentrating on select fables or on the manuscript tradition. Recently, there have been two holistic readings of Phaedrus. Holzberg 2002, whose book on the fable collections includes a chapter on Phaedrus, is mostly introductory, with some analysis of the fables. Holzberg's main conclusion is that Phaedrus is characterized by a "conformist ideology"

A slightly different but related topic in the scholarship concerns Phaedrus's "resignation" to the difficulties of life as a poor man and/or slave. The scholarly consensus maintains that Phaedrus is completely pessimistic and encourages the downtrodden simply to accept their fate.<sup>36</sup> It is true that Phaedrus makes frequent comments about the unfairness of life, and also tells fables in which the underdog faces abuse without recourse. This is especially true in Book 1, in which nine out of the thirty-one fables involve the weak suffering at the hands of the strong and/or being told to accept their lot.<sup>37</sup> Although this theme becomes less frequent in Books 2-5, there are still fables in every book that either present the weak as suffering with no recourse, or carry a message of resignation.<sup>38</sup> Influenced by these fables, scholars have tended to characterize Phaedrus as someone who sees the world as fundamentally unfair and tells the downtrodden that their lot will never improve.<sup>39</sup>

The problem with this view is that it accounts for only one side of Phaedrus. Phaedrus notices and comments on the unfairness of life, it is true, but this is not to say that he is passive

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paired with "relentless criticism of contemporary morals" (p. 49). Henderson 2001 gives a lively, in-depth reading of Phaedrus's Roman fables.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Adrados 2000: 154, Bloomer 1997: 73-75, Champlin 2005: 115-166 (he lists "preaching resignation" as one of Phaedrus's four core beliefs), Christes 1979, duBois 2003: 170-188 (on fables more generally), Duff 1960: 143-144, Henderson 2001: 81, Holzberg 2002: 48-49, Nøjgaard 1979: 41, and Rothwell 1995: 235-6.

<sup>37</sup> I count Fables 1.1 ("The Lamb and the Wolf"), 1.2 ("The Frogs Asked For A King"), 1.3 ("The Boastful Jackdaw and the Peacock"), 1.5 ("The Cow and the She-goat, the Sheep and the Lion"), 1.8 ("The Wolf and The Crane"), 1.24 ("The Burst Frog and the Cow"), 1.27 ("The Dog and the Treasure and the Vulture"), 1.30 ("The Frogs Fearing the Conflicts of the Bulls"), and 1.31 ("The Kite and the Doves").

<sup>38</sup> Book 2: Fables 2.4, 2.5 and 2.6; Book 3: Fables 3.6 and 3.18; Book 4: Fables 4.1, 4.4, 4.14 and 4.19; Book 5: 5.7 and 5.10; Perotti Index: Fables P3, P17, P20, P21, and P26.

<sup>39</sup> Tom Hawkins goes so far as to say that "Phaedrus's presentation of Aesop, the comments that preface most of his fables, and his own musings about fables all cultivate a stronger social awareness of the workings of the vertical hierarchies and power imbalances that, far from being breaches of decorum to be corrected, form a key organizational principle for Roman society" (2014: 134). For Hawkins, then, Phaedrus focuses solely on the reality of power imbalances.

or resigned. In fact, as I will show, Phaedrus uses his fables actively to critique slaveholding rhetoric and to fantasize about a world in which the downtrodden have power and can take revenge on their oppressors. This is, as Scott and Forsdyke both show,<sup>40</sup> a common way that fables are used by slaves and other subjugated groups: the fables become a way to criticize those in power covertly, and to express fantasies about a different and better world. Because this aspect of Phaedrus is expressed in coded language, and because it coexists with fables about the unfairness of life, it has often been missed.

Phaedrus's authorial statements therefore become important as a hermeneutic frame for his fables. As I will show in the remainder of this chapter, the interpretation of Phaedrus's fables is predicated on an understanding of Phaedrus's relationship with his two predecessors. First there is Aesop, who is mentioned in each of Phaedrus's prologues and in nearly every one of the fable books. Aesop is Phaedrus's main *literary* predecessor (in much the same way that Lucilius is for Horace), and so Phaedrus is concerned both to pay Aesop the proper homage, and to distinguish his own text as doing something different from and better than Aesop's. Phaedrus's other, and in some ways more important, predecessors are the unnamed slaves of the third prologue, whose method for using fables as covert speech will be described and utilized by Phaedrus. Whereas Phaedrus distinguishes himself from Aesop, he associates himself as closely as possible with the slaves of the third prologue, so that the reader will understand that Phaedrus is also using fables to talk covertly. Both Aesop and the original fabulists are slaves, and so there is no doubt that Phaedrus's fables have a strong connection to slavery. The question of how

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<sup>40</sup> Scott 1990: 162-166; Forsdyke 2012: 59-72.

Phaedrus himself uses fables must be determined based on how Phaedrus frames his relationship to each of his predecessors.

## I. Phaedrus and Aesop

Phaedrus's relationship to Aesop has much in common with Horace's relationship to Lucilius, as Hawkins discusses in his brief section on Phaedrus in his *Iambic Poetics in the Roman Empire*. Hawkins, noticing that Phaedrus applies the phrase *naris emunctae* to Aesop, just as Horace does to Lucilius,<sup>41</sup> draws a connection between the poetic purposes of Horace and Phaedrus:

Phaedrus's Aesop here assumes precisely the role of the inspired but scruffy model for a more refined stylist that Lucilius has played for Horace. Phaedrus thus lays claim to being the heir to Horatian (and through him Lucilian) satire that has been infused with Aesopic material. (2014: 132)

Hawkins and Champlin both connect Horace/Lucilius to Phaedrus/Aesop, and they both draw the same conclusion: that Phaedrus associates himself with Horace because Phaedrus sees himself as a writer of satire.<sup>42</sup> This becomes connected, in the arguments of both scholars, to Phaedrus's supposed lack of servile origins: Phaedrus is a freeborn man writing satire (of a sort), just like Horace.

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<sup>41</sup> Hawkins 2014: 132. In Phaedrus, the phrase appears in Fable 3.3.14 (the fable in which Aesop recommends that the shepherds be given wives) and in Horace it appears in *S.* 1.4.8. This also noticed by Champlin 2005: 109.

<sup>42</sup> Hawkins suggests that Phaedrus's habit of giving his fables introductory frames is a satiric element (2014: 132-33), as is his tendency to comment on social hierarchies (2014: 133). Champlin 2005: 209-210 similarly connects Phaedrus and Horace, and states that Phaedrus alludes to Horace because he wishes "to be taken seriously as a satirist" (p. 210). Champlin argues that Phaedrus's chatty persona, his allusions to contemporary Rome, and his realism are an attempt to blend satire and the fable genre. In Champlin's opinion, however, "the marriage failed and left no heirs" (p. 210). Champlin has an appendix of Phaedrus's allusions to Horace, pp. 117-120.

I would like to take a slightly different angle. I agree with Hawkins that Horace's relationship to Lucilius is a model for Phaedrus's relationship to Aesop. The point of comparison, however, is not so much that both Phaedrus and Horace are writing in the same genre, but that each of them has the same awkward, binary relationship with his predecessor: they wish to give their predecessor the proper amount of credit and praise, yet at the same time, they are concerned to distinguish themselves and to demonstrate that their own poetry is better. Horace credits Lucilius as the inventor of satire, and humbly declares that he would never venture to take Lucilius's crown.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Horace is eager to distinguish his own poetry from that of Lucilius: Lucilius was longwinded, whereas Horace is concise; Lucilius attacked everybody, whereas Horace eschews personal attacks.<sup>44</sup> Horace, in essence, has made improvements on Lucilius's satire.

Phaedrus's relationship to Aesop shows a similar mixture of praise and criticism.<sup>45</sup> Regardless of how much praise Phaedrus appears to be heaping on Aesop, he is always careful to allude to those things that make his own text unique. Phaedrus also pays less respect to Aesop in each prologue, until he declares, in the fifth and final prologue, that Aesop's name is nothing but window dressing. Essentially, Phaedrus uses Aesop's famous name to convince people to read his fable book, but then pulls a bait-and-switch, revealing that the fables are (and had always

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<sup>43</sup> S. 1.10.46-49.

<sup>44</sup> Gowers 2012: 8-10; Muecke 2007: 109-115; Tarrant 2007: 67.

<sup>45</sup> For previous work on Phaedrus and Aesop, cf. Bloomer 1997: 75; Duff 1960: 139-140; Hawkins 2014: 130-131; and Holzberg 2002: 45. Hawkins and Holzberg both discuss Phaedrus's changing relationship to Aesop. Bloomer points out that Phaedrus associates himself with Aesop as part of his campaign to associate himself with the lower classes, a view with which I agree. Duff notices that Phaedrus is not merely translating Aesop; he is engaging with and altering Aesop.

been) the result of Phaedrus's own literary genius.<sup>46</sup> Like Horace's relationship to Lucilius, Phaedrus's relationship to Aesop is binary in nature.

Phaedrus's relationship to Aesop is complicated, however, by the difference between how Phaedrus characterizes Aesop as a person, and how Phaedrus characterizes Aesop's text. As a character in Phaedrus's own fables, Aesop is wily and dirty-minded and funny, acting the part of the trickster slave. His text, however, at least according to Phaedrus, did not inherit these lively qualities: Phaedrus is at pains to show that he transformed Aesop's dry, prose fable text into lively, funny and meaningful poetry. This is an important difference between Horace/Lucilius and Phaedrus/Aesop: for Horace, Lucilius is first and foremost a satirist. For Phaedrus, Aesop is simultaneously a fable character and a fable author, and the two identities do not always sit comfortably with each other.

Phaedrus's complex relationship to Aesop comes into play in the very first words of Phaedrus's first prologue:

*Aesopus auctor quam materiam repperit,  
hanc ego polivi versibus senariis.*

The material which Aesop discovered as author,  
I have polished up in lines of senarii.  
(1 *prol.* 1-2)

Phaedrus here gives Aesop credit as the source of all of the fables that Phaedrus uses. The position of Aesop's name is extremely prominent: the first two words of Phaedrus's own text are *Aesopus auctor*. At the same time, however, Phaedrus has already begun the process of

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Tarrant 2007: 67: "Perhaps Horace was eager to associate himself with Lucilius, for all his faults of style, because Lucilius was the sort of literary figure Horace aspired to be, moving easily among the great men of his time and respected by them. Poetic kinship with Lucilius might therefore dilute awareness of the social gap separating Horace from the exalted company he had succeeded in entering." In this reading, Lucilius is Horace's gateway into literary circles, much as Aesop is for Phaedrus.

differentiating his text from that of Aesop: Aesop's fable book is written in prose, but Phaedrus has "polished" (*polivi*) the fables and set them in *senarii*. Phaedrus's meter, iambic senarius, has clear ties to Roman comedy,<sup>47</sup> and has particular associations with clever slaves, as Timothy Moore shows.<sup>48</sup> Phaedrus's move from prose to iambic senarii has two important implications, then. First, it indicates that Phaedrus's text has ties to Roman comedy, both in subject matter (since slavery is one of Phaedrus's main focuses) and in tone (since, as we will see, Phaedrus emphasizes his fables' humor). Second, it shows that Phaedrus is changing the nature of the text; he may be using Aesop as a source, but the fables are being adapted to suit his own purposes. Thus, even while Phaedrus gives Aesop credit as his source and predecessor, he is quick to mention his own innovations.

In this prologue, Aesop's characterization is simply that of a fable *auctor*. This characterization is maintained within the fable book itself. When Aesop appears as a character (as he does twice in Book 1), it is only in the context of telling fables: Fable 1.2 is presented as a fable that Aesop once told to the Athenians, and Fable 1.6 is supposedly told by Aesop at the wedding of his neighbor.<sup>49</sup> In both cases, the framing narrative for the fable depicts Aesop as a wise man who tells fables in order to instruct his audience. Elsewhere in Book 1, Phaedrus presents fables that are explicitly labeled as Aesop's, although without any sort of elaborate

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<sup>47</sup> As Duff 1935: 153-4 notes.

<sup>48</sup> Moore 2012: 176. Moore's larger argument is that the iambic senarii often denote a character who is in control of the situation, at least in Terence and Plautus. He connects this to the fact that iambic senarii are not accompanied by music: music "represents an element over which the actor, and by implication the character, does not have complete control." When the music stops, therefore, and the iambic senarii begin, it represents the fact that *this* character is in complete control of the scene. Unsurprisingly, then, given the clever slave's ability to control the comedy's plot, this slave uses iambic senarii more often than anyone.

<sup>49</sup> Fable 1.2.1-9; Fable 1.6.1-2.

framing narrative, as with Fables 1.3<sup>50</sup> and 1.10<sup>51</sup>. This is a simple and uncomplicated depiction of Aesop: he is a man who told fables during his life, and whose fables Phaedrus is translating into verse.

In the prologue of Book 2, Phaedrus, although still giving most of the credit to Aesop, nevertheless maintains that any jokes in the fables are his own:

*Exemplis continetur Aesopi genus;  
nec aliud quicquam per fabellas quaeritur  
quam corrigatur error ut mortalium,  
acuatque sese diligens industria.  
5 quicumque fuerit ergo narrandi iocus,<sup>52</sup>  
dum capiat aurem et servet propositum suum,  
re commendetur, non auctoris nomine.  
equidem omni cura morem servabo senis;  
sed si libuerit aliquid interponere,  
10 dictorum sensus ut delectet varietas,  
bonas in partes, lector, accipias velim,  
ita, si rependet illi brevitatis gratiam.*

What is Aesopic in kind is contained in exempla,  
nor is anything else sought in fables  
than that the error of people may be corrected,  
and that a diligent man may sharpen himself through hard work.  
5 Therefore, whatever joke will appear in this narration,  
so long as it captures the ear and preserves its purpose,  
should be commended for its substance, not for the name of the author.  
I will preserve the manner of the old man with great care;  
but if it pleases me to insert something,  
10 so that variety in words might delight the senses,  
I hope you will accept it in good spirit, reader,

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<sup>50</sup> 1.3.1-3: *Ne gloriari libeat alienis bonis, / suoque potius habitu vitam degere, / Aesopus nobis hoc exemplum prodidit* (“So that a person might not be permitted to show off assets not his own, / but may lead his life instead with his own attire, / Aesop published this exemplum for us.”)

<sup>51</sup> 1.10.1-3: *Quicumque turpi fraude semel innotuit, / etiam si verum dicit, amittit fidem. / hoc adtestatur brevis Aesopi fabula* (“Whoever has once been marked with the reputation for base deception, / even if he speaks the truth, he is not trusted. / This is attested by a brief fable of Aesop.”)

<sup>52</sup> This *iocus* is an emendation, as manuscripts *P* and *R* (Phaedrus’s main manuscripts, both of which derived from the same source, as Perry 1965: xcvi-xcvii discusses) both give *locus*. However, this emendation is fairly secure: *locus* would not give good sense, and even more importantly, Phaedrus very frequently uses vocabulary for jokes and joking in descriptions of his text, as I discuss below, pp. 141-145.



so long as my brevity gives recompense for this.  
(2 *prol.* 1-12)

Phaedrus begins the prologue by defining three characteristics of the Aesopic fable: they consist of *exempla*, their only purpose is to correct human error, and they allow the reader to improve himself through hard work. Therefore, says Phaedrus, any jokes that are encountered should be judged on their own terms, rather than on the “name of the author.” This is a cagey way for Phaedrus to assert that the jokes should not be credited to Aesop; they should be judged on their own merit (because they are Phaedrus’s own addition). Phaedrus does not say outright that the jokes are his, but he does imply it in the lines that follow, in which he asserts that it may please him to make some additions (2 *prol.* 9: *si libuerit aliquid interponere*) for the sake of *varietas*. The implication is that what Phaedrus has added are the jokes he mentioned in line 5. Even so, Phaedrus reassures the reader that he is still preserving Aesop’s *morem* (2 *prol.* 8). The fables are still Aesop’s, and they are still Aesopic; Phaedrus has simply added a bit of flair.

Despite Phaedrus’s continued insistence in this prologue that he is indebted to Aesop, he again differentiates his text from that of Aesop. Aesopic fables are characterized as a collection of *exempla*, which will allow the diligent (*diligens*) person to improve himself through hard work (*industria*). Diligence and hard work are qualities associated with good, honest slaves,<sup>53</sup> which may seem like an odd characterization of Aesopic fables, given Aesop’s well-known characterization as a slave who only worked as hard as he had to. One possibility is that Phaedrus is being disingenuous here, and that his characterization of Aesop’s text is a joke. More likely, however, is that Phaedrus is (mis)characterizing Aesop’s text in this way so as to distinguish his

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. Richlin’s *Plautine Comedy as Slave Theater* (forthcoming): Chapter 6, pp. 41-50 for an analysis of how good slaves speak in Roman comedy.

own. This seems especially likely given the difference in the vocabulary Phaedrus uses to describe his own project versus that of Aesop. Aesop's text is made up of *exempla*; Phaedrus's will contain *ioci*. Aesop's text is associated with diligence and hard work; Phaedrus's with *varietas* and with doing what is pleasing (*libuerit*), a highly-charged word in relation to Roman slavery. In other words, if Aesop's text is associated with the vocabulary of the good slave, Phaedrus's is associated with the vocabulary of the clever (and bad) slave.<sup>54</sup> This is similar to the contrast in the first prologue between Aesop's prose and Phaedrus's *senarii*: using a comic meter and adding jokes are both ways to turn a (dry) prose text into something lively and comic. This is a subtle move on Phaedrus's part; he does not so much distinguish himself from Aesop, but rather distinguishes his text from Aesop's text.

Within the rest of Book 2, Aesop appears twice. In Fable 2.3, a man who has been bitten by a dog gives the dog some bread dipped in his blood, because he heard that that would cure him. Aesop warns him not to do this, lest the other dogs learn that guilt (*culpa*) is being rewarded.<sup>55</sup> The moral of this fable is that *successus inproborum plures allicit* ("The success of bad men attracts many," 2.3.7). Aesop here is not the teller of the fable; he is a fable character whose role is to give the man advice. In so doing, he corrects the man's *error*, the very thing that Phaedrus states Aesopic fables are intended for. Once again, the characterization of Aesop in the prologue and in the fables matches.

Aesop appears again in Book 2 in the epilogue, this time with marked significance.

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<sup>54</sup> *Varietas* is related to the adjective *varius*, which is used in Plautus to describe the skin of flogged slaves. *Libuerit*, from the verb *libet*, is frequently used by slaves in Plautine comedy to express free will and a sense of entitlement.

<sup>55</sup> 2.3.4-6: *tunc sic Aesopus: "Noli coram pluribus / hoc facere canibus, ne nos vivos devorent, / cum scierint esse tale culpa praemium"* ("Thus said Aesop: 'Don't do this / in front of any more dogs, lest they eat us alive, / when they know that such is the reward for guilt.'").

Phaedrus asserts that the Athenians honored Aesop with a statue, despite his slave status:

*Aesopi ingenio statuam posuere Attici,  
servumque collocarunt aeterna in basi,  
patere honoris scirent ut cuncti viam  
nec generi tribui sed virtuti gloriam.  
5 quoniam occuparat alter ut primus foret,  
ne solus esset, studui, quod superfuit.*

The Athenians set up a statue for the genius of Aesop,  
and they placed a slave on an eternal pedestal,  
so that everybody might know that the road of honor lies open  
and glory is gained not by birth but by virtue.  
5 Since another prevented me from being the first,  
I went after what was left over, so that he would not be the only one.  
(2 *epil.* 1-6)

This is the first time that Aesop has been explicitly labeled as a slave within the work, although this poem recalls Aesop's very first appearance in Fable 1.2, since Aesop is once again a fabulist for the Athenians. This passage is important for Aesop's status in Phaedrus as a whole. It implies that Aesop has always been a slave – and always will be. The Athenians create a statue for Aesop's genius, which immortalizes a *slave* (not a fabulist, not a freedman) for eternity. This implies that Aesop either was never granted his freedom (and thus was immortalized as a slave), or was still seen as basically a slave despite being freed. Phaedrus, it seems, is now asserting control over Aesop's biography: Aesop may gain his freedom in the *Life of Aesop*, but in Phaedrus, Aesop's emancipation never fully materializes. In fact, within Phaedrus, Aesop is never anything but a slave. Sometimes his status is left obscure (such as when he is referred to merely as a *senex*), but he is never explicitly labeled as a freedman. This is part of a larger theme in Phaedrus, namely, that the fable genre belongs to or is particularly associated with slaves. For Phaedrus, Aesop's slave status is his essential characteristic, and therefore Aesop's freedman status is never mentioned.

In Book 3, Phaedrus's characterization as a person and as an author begins to materialize in force. He uses his own name for the first time as the opening word of Book 3, in contrast to the *Aesopus auctor* with which he began Book 1. He also provides the first concrete biographical information about himself, when he compares his own life, dedicated to the arts, to the life of his dedicatee Eutyclus,<sup>56</sup> who dedicated his life to money:<sup>57</sup>

20 *ego, quem Pierio mater enixa est iugo,  
in quo Tonanti sancta Mnemosyne Iovi,  
fecunda novies, artium peperit chorum,  
quamvis in ipsa paene natus sim schola,  
curamque habendi penitus corde eraserim,  
nec Pallade hanc invita in vitam incubuerim,  
fastidiose tamen in coetum recipior.*

20 I, whom my mother bore on the Pierian peak,  
on which holy Mnemosyne, fruitful nine times,  
bore to thundering Jove the chorus of the arts,  
although I was nearly born in a school itself,  
and removed from the deepest part of my heart any concern for possessions,  
nor did I apply myself to this life with Athena unwilling,  
nevertheless I have been received into their company with disgust.  
(3 *prol.* 17-23)

The position of *ego* at the beginning of this passage is again emphatic: Phaedrus is staking out a clear place for his own authorial presence. This is in spite of the fact that the entire passage seems more metaphorical than biographical: to be born on the Pierian peak, to be nearly born in a

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<sup>56</sup> Eutyclus's name makes him sound like a freedman, as "Eutyclus" is an attested slave name. For a discussion of Eutyclus, cf. in particular de Lorenzi 1955: 44-48 and Henderson 2001: 66-71. De Lorenzi attempts to determine Eutyclus's historical identity, by sifting through all the literary and inscriptional evidence for the name in the first century. Henderson also considers various possibilities for Eutyclus, including the Eutyclus mentioned in Josephus (*Jewish Archives* 18.168-237), who denounced Agrippa. However, Henderson is more interested in what Eutyclus might represent for the text: either as a real reader (2001: 66-67) or possibly as a non-reader, a symbol of "the best patron a vulgar fabulist could aspire to" (p. 67).

<sup>57</sup> 3 *prol.* 1-5: *Phaedri libellos legere si desideras, / vaces oportet, Eutyche, a negotiis, / ut liber animus sentiat viam carminis. / "Verum" inquis "tanti non est ingenium tuum, / momentum ut horae pereat officiis meis"* ("If you wish to read the little books of Phaedrus, / you need to take a break from business, Eutyclus, / so that your free mind may experience the road of song. / 'But,' you say, 'your talent is not worth enough, / that a moment of time may be lost from my duties'").

school – these things sound more like Phaedrus staking a claim for his poetic value than giving actual details about his birthplace.<sup>58</sup> Regardless of whether Phaedrus’s Pierian birthplace is metaphorical or literal, Phaedrus’s larger purpose in this passage is clear: he is inserting himself into the wider poetic tradition, a tradition that is, for the first time, separate from Aesop. Phaedrus asserts that his own birthplace is the same as the birthplace of the Muses, thus linking himself to goddesses who dwell in the prologues of many ancient poets. This implies that Phaedrus is owed – by birthright – a place among established and socially accepted authors like Hesiod and Ennius.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, since the Muses are the teachers of Aesop in the *Life*, Phaedrus is essentially bypassing Aesop to go back to Aesop’s divine source. Instead of being merely a translator or an adapter of the fabulist Aesop, Phaedrus here states that he is a poet, and attaches that claim to his Pierian birthplace and to the larger poetic tradition.<sup>60</sup>

Phaedrus’s poetic confidence continues to flourish throughout this book. In Book 3, Aesop frequently appears as a fable character – not a teller of fables, but a member of the fable cast. This begins with Fable 3.3, in which Aesop appears at the end of the fable only in order to provide the dirty punch line: that sheep are giving birth to human-headed offspring because the shepherds do not have wives.<sup>61</sup> Aesop’s three other appearances similarly present him as a clever

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<sup>58</sup> But cf. Champlin 2005: 103-106. Champlin argues that these lines actually allude to Phaedrus’s Roman birth. He connects Phaedrus’s assertion that he was “nearly born in a school” to the “threshold of the Muses” mentioned in lines 15-16. He argues that the “threshold of the Muses” cannot refer to their mountain, since a mountain does not have a threshold. A Temple of the Muses would have a threshold, however, and so these lines most likely refer to the Temple of the Muses in Rome – especially since there was a school attached to this temple. Hence, when Phaedrus mentions the Muses’ threshold and his birth near a school, he is indicating that he was born in Rome itself.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Henderson 2001: 61.

<sup>60</sup> Phaedrus does mention his debt to Aesop in line 27, when Phaedrus says that he “will plow a third book with Aesop’s stylus” (3 *prol.* 27: *librum exarabo tertium Aesopi stilo*). These lines, which must be interpreted closely with Phaedrus’s explanation of the invention of fables, will be discussed in the next section.

<sup>61</sup> Fable 3.14-17. We know from Varro that whether to send women along with slave shepherds was an issue in the ancient world. Varro, at least, recommends that women should be sent with the men to prepare their food and make

and witty *character*: in Fable 3.5 Aesop tricks a man who hit Aesop with a stone into getting himself crucified; in Fable 3.14 Aesop shames a man who dares to mock him by presenting him with a philosophical conundrum he cannot answer; and in Fable 3.19 Aesop (now explicitly labeled a slave) shuts up an annoying man with a witty retort. In all four of these instances, Aesop is a clever and intelligent speaker who knows how to get even. In no case is Aesop a fabulist or a giver of advice; he is just more clever than the men who try to abuse him.

Here we see most clearly the difference between how Phaedrus characterizes Aesop's fables and how Phaedrus characterizes Aesop himself. The fables are dry (or at least, Phaedrus claims that he added jokes) and they encourage hard work and self-correction, qualities of a good slave. Aesop himself, however, acts like a stereotypical clever slave, just as he does in the *Life of Aesop*. This disconnect between the character of Aesop and the character of his fables is a result of the different purposes for which Phaedrus is using each of them. Phaedrus is concerned to distinguish his own text from Aesop's, and therefore he emphasizes the differences between the two. At the same time, it is important for Phaedrus's larger project that Aesop be a slave, and the character of the slave Aesop has been well-established by the larger tradition. Phaedrus is left, then, with a clever and witty slave who nevertheless produces a book of morally upright *exempla*, an odd and not entirely comfortable combination.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, in Book 3 as a whole, Phaedrus reduces Aesop to a member of the fable cast;<sup>63</sup> a clever character, to be sure, but then, so is the fox. To put it another way: the more

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the shepherds work harder (*De Re Rustica* 2.10.6-7). On the conditions that faced slave shepherds, cf. Shaw 2001: 11-12.

<sup>62</sup> It may be possible that Phaedrus is reacting to the actual disconnect between the *Life of Aesop*, in which Aesop is a clever slave, and the *Fables*, which, as Zafiroopoulos 2001 has shown, give practical advice and teach traditional morality. Aesop's fables are, in fact, less exciting than one might expect based on the *Life*.

<sup>63</sup> This point also made by Hawkins 2014: 131.

Phaedrus flexes his muscles as an author, the more Aesop becomes just another character. This, then, is not only a recharacterization of Aesop; it is also a recharacterization of Phaedrus.

Phaedrus is demonstrating one more way in which he is going beyond Aesop: he is becoming an author at the same time that Aesop is becoming a mere character.

In the prologue to Book 4, Phaedrus once again foregrounds himself, this time with a focus on his literary purpose. He explains how he had planned to stop writing fables, but then realized that that was a bad idea:

*Cum destinassem terminum operi statuere,  
in hoc ut aliis esset<sup>64</sup> materiae satis,  
consilium tacito corde damnavi <meum>.  
nam si quis etiam talis est tituli <appetens>,  
5 quo pacto divinabit quidnam omiserim,  
ut illud ipse incipiat famae tradere,  
sua cuique cum sit animi cogitatio  
colorque proprius? ergo non levitas mihi,  
sed certa ratio causam scribendi dedit.  
10 quare, Particulo, quoniam caperis fabulis,  
(quas Aesopias, non Aesopi, nomino,  
quia paucas ille ostendit, ego plures sero,  
usus vetusto genere sed rebus novis,  
quartum libellum cum vacaris perleges.*

When I had resolved to make an end of my work  
in order that there would be enough material left for others,  
I silently condemned my plan in my heart.  
For even if someone is seeking such a title for himself,  
5 how will he divine what I omitted,  
so that he himself might begin to hand this down to fame,  
when the intention and moreover the perspective  
of each man's mind is his own? Therefore it is not fickleness  
but steadfast thought that gave me a reason for writing.  
10 Therefore, Particulo, since you are charmed by fables,  
(which I call Aesopic, not Aesop's,  
since he shows a few, but I sow more,  
using an old form but new substance)  
I hope you'll read the fourth little book when you have the time.

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<sup>64</sup> Perry 1965 prints *asset* here, which I assume is a typo. Both Mueller 1876 and Brenot 1924 have *esset*.

(4 *prol.* 1-14)

This prologue foregrounds Phaedrus and demotes Aesop in a number of ways. Phaedrus once again begins with himself, not Aesop, and he asserts that he has his own intention and his own perspective. Phaedrus puts his own spin on the fables, and this matters: Phaedrus cannot stop writing because he has no guarantee that a new writer would understand what Phaedrus had left out and carry on. Aesop, for his part, is relegated to an aside, in which Phaedrus explains that the fables do not belong to Aesop; they may be Aesopic in form, but most of the material is Phaedrus's own creation. This is a far cry from the first prologue, in which Phaedrus presented himself as a versifier of Aesop. Phaedrus now states that he sows his own material, and that it is more material than Aesop produced.

Furthermore, the dedicatee mentioned in this prologue has a highly significant name. Particulo's historical identity is unknown, as we have no attestation for his name.<sup>65</sup> I suggest that this is because Particulo is not an actual individual; he is an archetype, and his name was chosen for its meaning as the Latin word *particulo*, or "co-heir." This word is only attested once, in the dictionary of Nonius Marcellus, an antiquarian working in the fourth or fifth century CE. Nonius defines the word *particulones* as *coheredes* ("co-heirs") and then cites a line from the *Praeco Posterior* of Pomponius: *age modo, istic garri; particulones producam tibi*. (Non. 6.20: "Well then, chatter there; I will lead out coheirs to you.") "Coheir" is a particularly fitting name for a man like Particulo, who copies Phaedrus's work into his library and thus becomes a coheir in the work's fame (4 *prol.* 17-18). Furthermore, Pomponius was a writer of *Atellanae fabulae* (Atellan farce) from the first century BCE. This means that not only was he a humorous writer, like

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<sup>65</sup> Perry 1965: lxxvii.



Phaedrus, but he also wrote (a different kind of) *fabulae*. He is exactly the sort of author that Phaedrus might allude to. The mention of Particulo here, in Phaedrus's fourth prologue, underscores Phaedrus's belief that his work will survive – and deserves to survive.

Furthermore, in Book 4, as was not the case in the previous books, this meditation about the exact nature of Phaedrus's debt to Aesop is not limited to the prologue. Phaedrus returns to the question within the fable book itself. Fable 4.22 deals with the question of what in the fable book is Aesop's, and what Phaedrus's. The fable is addressed to Envy, *Livor*,<sup>66</sup> who Phaedrus fears will credit Aesop with anything good and Phaedrus with anything bad:

*quicquid putabit esse dignum memoria,  
Aesopi dicet; si quid minus adriserit,  
a me contendet fictum quovis pignore.*

Whatever he will think worthy of memory,  
he will say is Aesop's. Whatever makes him smile less,  
he will guarantee on any security was fashioned by me.  
(4.22.3-5)

It is striking, given Phaedrus's insistence that he made the fables more comic, that Phaedrus is here worried that readers will assume that anything that makes them smile more must be from Aesop. Phaedrus fears – or at least claims to fear – that Aesop's reputation is so overpowering that anything good will be credited to him, even Phaedrus's own jokes (a subtle way to mention that Phaedrus's jokes are good). Phaedrus, however, maintains that the entire book belongs to himself, no matter its quality:

*sive hoc ineptum sive laudandum est opus,  
invenit ille, nostra perfecit manus.  
sed exsequamur coepti propositum ordinem.*

Whether the work is inept or praiseworthy,

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. Champlin 2005: 118. Champlin connects Phaedrus's addresses to Envy with those of Horace. His point is with reference to Fable 4.8, but it is also relevant here.

he invented it, but our hand perfected it.  
But let us follow the order I proposed in the beginning.  
(4.22.7-9)

For the most part, this is nothing new – Phaedrus is once again staking a claim for the entire work being his. What is new is that this argument occurs not in a prologue or epilogue, but within the body of fables themselves. Phaedrus’s poetic voice has broken out of the prologues. In fact, throughout this book Phaedrus dedicates large chunks of fables or sometimes (as here) entire fables to discussing his poetic purpose.<sup>67</sup> This demonstrates that Phaedrus’s need to discuss and establish his own authorship is becoming more important.

Aesop appears as a frequent character in Book 4, and his roles are much more varied than they were in previous books. Aesop first appears in the middle of Book 4, suddenly brought on stage to solve the riddle contained in a will.<sup>68</sup> In Fable 4.7, one of those “fables” that are an excuse for Phaedrus to discuss his poetic purpose, Aesop’s name is used as a stand-in for the fable genre.<sup>69</sup> In Fable 4.16, an old man, who may well be Aesop, since Aesop is the only aged storyteller that Phaedrus employs, gives a risqué account of why *molles* men exist.<sup>70</sup> Finally, in

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Fable 4.2, 4.7, and 4.26. Fable 4.2, which will be discussed more in the next section, asserts that the fables contain deeper meanings below their jokes. In Fable 4.7, Phaedrus mocks the critics who do not appreciate his work. Finally, Fable 4.26 is a fable about how poets are honored by the gods. On Fable 4.26, cf. Bellonzi 1973, who analyzes the fable in light of Phaedrus’s poetic persona.

<sup>68</sup> Aesop’s sudden appearance in the fable is lampshaded by the use of *subito*: *Aesopus media subito in turba constitit* (4.5.29).

<sup>69</sup> Phaedrus responds to a critic who does not like the fable genre by playfully offering to create a tragic fable: *et in coturnis prodit Aesopus novis* (4.7.5). Here, the association between “Aesop” and “the fable genre” works particularly well, since *coturnis*, which is metonymically used to mean “tragedy,” literally refers to stage boots. Aesop, whose name can serve as a shorthand for the entire fable genre (West 1984), can be imagined wearing the boots, the stand-in for tragedy.

<sup>70</sup> Fables 4.15 and 4.16 seem to have originally been a pair; Fable 15 explains where lesbians come from, and Fable 16 where *molles* men come from. In both cases their origin is tied to a mistake made by Prometheus during the creation of man. The fables are not complete, presumably because of their obscene subject matter.

Fable 4.18, Aesop simply appears in the framing narrative as a man who tells a fable, a characterization much more akin to Aesop's characterization in Book 1. In this book, then, Phaedrus presents Aesop with a range of characterizations: Aesop is a fabulist and a clever problem-solver and a teller of dirty stories. Amid this variation, Phaedrus presents himself in a more solid and definitive light as The Author, the one whose purpose and whose perspective determine the content of the entire fable collection.

Book 5 of Phaedrus is, unfortunately, nowhere near complete; only ten fables and the prologue remain. Still, it is clear from the prologue that Phaedrus brought his relationship with Aesop to its logical conclusion:

*Aesopi nomen sicubi interposuero,  
cui reddidi iam pridem quicquid debui,  
auctoritatis esse scito gratia;  
ut quidam artifices nostro faciunt saeculo,  
5 si marmori adscripserunt Praxitelen suo,  
detrito Myn argento, tabulae Zeuxidem.*

If I interpose the name of Aesop anywhere,  
a man to whom I have already paid whatever I owe,<sup>71</sup>  
know that it is for the sake of his authority;  
just as certain craftsmen will do in our age,  
5 if they inscribe "Praxiteles" on their own marble  
or "Mys" on their polished silver, "Zeuxis" on their paintings.  
(5 *prol.* 1-6)

The comparison Phaedrus makes between his work and the work of craftsmen is instructive.

In the case of the craftsmen, the "brand name" that the artist inscribes onto his own work does not mean that the famous predecessor had anything to do with his work.<sup>72</sup> The work is wholly

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<sup>71</sup> Hawkins 2014: 131 writes of this line: "Even as [Phaedrus] claims to have paid off his debt (or, perhaps, purchased his freedom: *cui reddidi iam pridem quicquid debui*, *Prol.* 5.2) he still remains under the artistic patronage of Aesop's reputation."

<sup>72</sup> For an interesting discussion of this phenomenon in the ancient world, cf. Flemming 2007: 269-270, who discusses the use of "brand names" among medical writers.

that of the anonymous craftsmen, but they borrow the name of a more famous member of their trade in order to make their work more attractive to the audience. Phaedrus admits openly that he will be doing the same thing with Aesop; if he name-drops “Aesop” at any point, it is only because people will recognize the name.

In admitting that artists sometimes use a predecessor’s name just for the sake of popularity, Phaedrus casts doubt on the whole rest of his work. Phaedrus has been stamping his work with Aesop’s name from the beginning, but here he implies that he was only doing that for the sake of prestige. In essence, Phaedrus used Aesop’s name as a lure, encouraging people to read his book by citing his more famous colleague. At this point, confident that his work will now stand on its own merit, Phaedrus reveals that the work has been his the whole time. In so doing, he encourages his readers to rethink their opinion of the entire collection of fables. He is also making the strongest claim for his own authority that we have seen thus far: Aesop’s name is now nothing more than window dressing, with no actual force.

The rest of Book 5 is in poor shape. Of the ten fables extant, none include Aesop as a character. It would be striking if Phaedrus did not include Aesop at all in his fifth book; this would then represent a complete break from his famous predecessor. But with so little of the book remaining, it is impossible to make that claim. In fact, it may be unlikely that Aesop was left out of Book 5 completely, given how much Aesop there is in Perotti’s Appendix. This fifteenth-century collection gives no clue about the original placement of its thirty-two fables (see above, p. 103). Five of them include Aesop. If nothing else, it seems likely that at least some of Perotti’s Appendix comes from Books 4 and 5 of Phaedrus’s original text, since Perotti includes some fables in which Phaedrus talks about himself as a writer, a phenomenon that did

not begin (as we saw) until Book 4.<sup>73</sup>

There are also some tantalizing similarities among the Aesop fables of Perotti's Appendix. In two of them, Aesop takes an arrogant man down a peg: in Fable P9 he reassures a bad writer that self-praise is all right (since praise will not come from any other source); in Fable P13 he cuts down a boastful athlete by pointing out that he should not boast when his only accomplishment is beating a weaker athlete. Even more strikingly, the other three fables all have to do with slavery. Fable P17 presents Aesop as a slave, dealing with his ill-tempered mistress. Fables P12 and P20 show Aesop dealing with the slaves of other households. In Fable P12 Aesop tries to convince a father that he needs to rein in his excessively angry son, who is abusing his slaves. In Fable P20, Aesop convinces a slave not to run away from his abusive master.

Is it possible to say anything about these fables, despite not knowing their position? For the most part, all we can say is that these fables reinforce the conclusions we have already drawn. Aesop is not a storyteller in any of them; he is clever and has a particular talent for cutting people down to size through his wit. This is similar to the Aesop we saw beginning in Book 3. It is unfortunate, however, that we do not know the placement of the fables that involve Aesop and slavery. Since Aesop's slave status is the key aspect of his character for Phaedrus, it would be significant if Aesop's connection to slavery also underwent a development of some sort. As it is, it is impossible to say.

One thing is clear, however: Phaedrus's self-presentation is closely tied to his characterization of Aesop and of Aesop's fables. Because Phaedrus's changing relationship to Aesop is such a large part of the prologues and even the fables themselves, it serves as a sort of

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<sup>73</sup> Henderson 1999: 317 argues that the bulk of Perotti's Appendix originally came from Book 5 of Phaedrus.

backdrop for the entire fable book: a framing narrative, if you will. This framing narrative, instead of giving details about Phaedrus's life, tells the story of how Phaedrus the author lost his dependency on Aesop and became a unique author in his own right.

The most basic reason that this framing narrative exists is, of course, the one I have discussed already: Phaedrus needs to prove that even though he is writing fables, that does not mean he is merely copying Aesop, in much the same way as Horace must prove he is doing something different from Lucilius. At the same time, Phaedrus wants to make use of Aesop's famous "brand name" in order to make his fable book appealing to audiences. Phaedrus, then, accomplishes both of these tasks in a particularly clever way. He features Aesop's name prominently in the beginning, and then gradually weans the audience off of Aesop's authority by taking credit for more and more of the work. Thus, this framing narrative serves as a way for Phaedrus to both hook the reader and establish his own authorial merit. Furthermore, Phaedrus emphasizes the changes he has made to Aesop's text: Phaedrus turned a prose collection of *exempla* into a book of *senarii* full of jokes and rich meaning. In the next section, we will examine in more detail what these changes mean, and how they affect the interpretation of Phaedrus's fables.

However, there is more going on in this framing narrative than just a new author trying to outdo his predecessor. After all, Phaedrus depicts Aesop in a particular way: as a clever slave. We have seen already that in the Book 2 epilogue, Aesop is immortalized forever as a slave when the Athenians "placed a slave on an eternal pedestal" (2 *epil.* 2: *servum...collocarunt aeterna in basi*). This casting of Aesop as the eternal slave reverberates through Phaedrus's whole text, and it is particularly striking because Phaedrus is the only one of the three post-Aesop fabulists to depict Aesop in such a light. Both Babrius and Avianus present Aesop as a wise old man, but

never make his slave status explicit.<sup>74</sup> Phaedrus, then, is placing great emphasis on Aesop *the slave*. This has two consequences for the interpretation of Phaedrus's text. First, it keeps the theme of slavery in the forefront of the audience's mind, without Phaedrus having to label himself as a slave explicitly. Since slaves, by Phaedrus's own admission, prefer indirect speech, this is an ideal way for a (former) slave and fabulist like Phaedrus to tie his fables to slavery in an indirect manner. Phaedrus does not talk about his own slave experience; he uses Aesop as a stand-in. Second, it is one iteration of a theme that will be discussed more in the next section: fables have their origins in slave narratives. The inventors of the fable genre were slaves, and the most famous writer of fables, Aesop, was a slave as well. By making Aesop into an eternal slave, Phaedrus skirts the delicate question of which fables Aesop spoke as a slave, and which he wrote down when he was free. In Phaedrus, all fables told by Aesop are slave fables.

## II. The Third Prologue: Fables and Coded Slave Speech

Phaedrus wishes to distinguish his fables from those of Aesop, but he wishes to align his use of fables as closely as possible with that of the slaves who appear in the third prologue.

Phaedrus mentions these anonymous slave fabulists only once (3 *prol.* 27-37):

*sed iam, "quodcumque fuerit," ut dixit Sinon  
ad regem cum Dardaniae perductus foret,  
librum exarabo tertium Aesopi stilo,  
30 honori et meritis dedicans illum tuis.  
quem si leges, laetabor; sin autem minus,  
habebunt certe quo se oblectent posterii.  
Nunc, fabularum cur sit inventum genus  
brevi docebo. servitus obnoxia,  
35 quia quae volebat non audebat dicere,*

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<sup>74</sup> The contrast between Babrius's and Phaedrus's depictions of Aesop is also discussed by Hawkins 2014: 130. Hawkins emphasizes that while Babrius portrays Aesop as a wise, ancient source, Phaedrus writes about him "far more frequently and intimately."

*affectus proprios in fabellas transtulit,  
calumniamque fictis elusit iocis.*

But now, “whatever kind it will be,” as Sinon said  
when he had been brought to the king of the Dardanians,  
I will plow a third book with Aesop’s stylus,  
30 dedicating it to your honor and worth.  
If you read it, I’ll be happy; however, if not, then certainly  
those who come later will have something with which to amuse themselves.  
Now, why the genre of fable was invented,  
I will teach briefly. Slaves, being vulnerable,  
35 since they did not dare to say what they wished,  
transferred their own feelings into fables,  
and escaped a charge of slander through made-up jokes.

The etiology Phaedrus gives for fables is one that fits perfectly with Scott’s analysis of the hidden and public transcripts. Because slaves are vulnerable (*obnoxia*, a word that brings with it the sense of being liable to face harm because of one’s status), they are unable to say what they wish. To use Scott’s formulation, this means that the slave is unable to speak his hidden transcript in public, for fear of being punished. Instead, the slave transfers his feelings (*affectus*) into fables and thus escapes a charge of slander (*calumnia*). In other words, the fables allow the slaves to speak some part of their feelings in public without being punished for giving voice to their complaints.

It is important to recognize that the *servitus* credited with inventing fables in this passage should not be conflated with Aesop. Such conflation may be tempting, given that Aesop is the slave whose name is practically synonymous with the fable genre.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, Aesop is mentioned directly before this passage:<sup>76</sup> Phaedrus claims he is writing with Aesop’s *stylus*, and

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<sup>75</sup> West 1984.

<sup>76</sup> This argument is made by Hawkins 2014: 129. He states that because Aesop is mentioned before and after this passage, “this generic slave and the particular example of Aesop blur together.” This is slightly misleading: the mention of Aesop before the passage is intended to distinguish Aesop from the etiology, as I will discuss shortly. The mention of Aesop after this passage comes fourteen lines later and in quite a different context.



then launches into an explanation of why fables were invented. There is also the fact that, in the beginning of the first prologue, Phaedrus stated that Aesop was the *auctor* (originator / author) who *repperit* (invented / discovered) fables. With all of those pointers, it is tempting to interpret this passage as merely giving more information about why Aesop invented fables.

Such a reading is problematic, however, for several reasons. First, the subject of the sentence that begins in line 34 is *servitus*, a collective noun referring to slavery itself, or to a body of slaves. This word does not refer to a single, specific slave; it deliberately diffuses responsibility for the invention of fables to slaves/slavery as a whole. Phaedrus is deliberately avoiding naming names. It would thus be a particularly odd way to refer to a single, named slave like Aesop, especially since Phaedrus shows no hesitation in naming Aesop elsewhere.

Second, although Aesop is mentioned directly before this passage, in line 29, the way in which he is mentioned implies that his presence is a lie or a red herring. Phaedrus claims that he will write with Aesop's *stylus* in the same sentence as he puts the words of Sinon into his own mouth. Sinon is an archetypal liar, the man who pretended to have been abandoned by the Greeks so that he could convince the Trojans to accept the Trojan Horse.<sup>77</sup> Sinon claimed that the horse was one thing (a dedication to Athena) to hide that it was another (a hollow horse full of Greek soldiers), and the Trojans believed him. This, I would suggest, is an analogy for what Phaedrus does with Aesop and his fables. He pretends they are merely a translation of Aesop, so that they will be accepted, when in reality they have something else under the surface: they are a

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<sup>77</sup> On Sinon, cf. Champlin 2005: 97-98 and Henderson 2001: 60. Champlin notes Sinon's role as a trickster figure, and connects this to the epilogue of Book 3, in which Phaedrus quotes a line from Ennius's *Telephus*. Both figures, Champlin notes, are liars dressed in rags. On the reference to the *Telephus*, cf. Richlin 2014: 201-202, for how "Ennius conflates the dangers of outspokenness for plebians and slaves" (p. 202). Henderson suggests that Sinon is "the incarnation of the principle of the irresistible power of *powerlessness*." Sinon, much like Phaedrus perhaps, has power because he (seems) helpless.

form of coded speech with a hidden meaning. In essence, by mentioning Aesop while in the guise of Sinon, Phaedrus hints that the Aesopic nature of his fables may not be the truth. He then follows this with a new etiology, one that is resolutely not about Aesop.<sup>78</sup> He is, to continue my analogy, showing what is inside the “Trojan Horse.” This is not to say that Phaedrus does not make use of Aesop’s text: there is ample evidence that Phaedrus’s fable book owes much of its material to Aesop.<sup>79</sup> Rather, Phaedrus is here hinting that his fables are not *merely* a translation of Aesop. Phaedrus’s fables have hidden meanings, like those of the original slave fabulists, and unlike Aesop’s.

Finally, my reading of the passage is not contradicted by what Phaedrus said in his opening prologue. In fact, the first prologue fits perfectly with this analysis, but only if each of the words is given a specific shade of meaning. The word *auctor* may mean “originator,” but it can also refer more generically to an author. The verb *reperio* may refer to “inventing,” but it can also refer to “rediscovering” – stumbling upon and using what was already there.<sup>80</sup> This means that the first prologue has a sort of double meaning: it may either mean that Aesop is the originator who invented fables, or that Aesop is an author who found and made use of fables. It is not until the third prologue that this matter may be settled definitively: once Phaedrus states that the original invention (cf. line 33, *inventum*) of fables is owed to those anonymous slaves, it becomes clear that Aesop merely used a genre already in existence. On the one hand, there is

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<sup>78</sup> This may also help explain the disconnect between Aesop the clever slave, and Aesop’s fables. Phaedrus creates a contrast between the way Aesop uses fables – to give life advice – and how the slaves of the third prologue use them, and then aligns his fables with the latter.

<sup>79</sup> For a thorough breakdown of which fables Phaedrus owes to Aesop, which to other sources, and which are original, cf. Adrados 2000: 125-166.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Kurke 2011: 191. Kurke argues that in the larger tradition, Aesop possesses “a special ‘power over things,’” which means that he has a particular talent for making use of whatever happens to be lying around.

nothing particularly revolutionary about not crediting Aesop with the invention of fables: ancient authors were more than aware that fables as a genre predated the slave Aesop who, according to legend, was born on Samos at the end of the seventh century BCE.<sup>81</sup> What is striking about Phaedrus's etiology is that he still credits slaves with the invention of fables, even without Aesop. It is common to consider fables a slave genre because Aesop told them (although the cause-and-effect relationship is muddy); here Phaedrus declares that even though fables predate Aesop, they are still fundamentally a slave genre.<sup>82</sup>

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the core of my argument is that Phaedrus impersonates the *servitus* of the third prologue by using fables to talk about slavery. As the term "impersonating" implies, Phaedrus is not operating identically to the *servitus*: he is a freedman, not a slave; he is writing a text, not telling oral tales; and he is talking to an audience of freedmen and freeborn men, not to an audience of fellow slaves and his owners. It is in this gap between how a slave tells fables and how a freedman impersonating a slave *writes* fables that much of Phaedrus's playful literary genius shines through. In what follows, I will talk in detail about the points of correspondence and difference between Phaedrus and the *servitus*.

The first two words of Phaedrus's fable etiology are *servitus obnoxia* ("slaves, being vulnerable"). This points to one of the key features that will link Phaedrus's use of the fable to that of the slaves: both Phaedrus and the slaves who invented fables must use a form of coded

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<sup>81</sup> West 1984: 105-106. In this excellent article, West points out that even ancient writers were aware that Aesop could not have invented fables, since fables predate him: nevertheless, by the fifth century "reading Aesop" and "reading fables" came to mean much the same thing. On Aesop as a historical figure, cf. West 1984: 116-120. DuBois 2003: 173 notes that fables predate Aesop even within the *Life of Aesop*, since fables are mentioned before Aesop starts telling them.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Forsdyke 2012: 60-61. She suggests that fables might have become attached to Aesop's name *because* of their use among slaves.

speech because they will be prosecuted for speaking openly otherwise. In Scott's analysis of the Brer Rabbit tales, he emphasizes the fact that the slaves told these tales before a mixed audience that included their owners.<sup>83</sup> This was the reason they needed the plausible deniability afforded by the fable genre: they were expressing sentiments (such as revenge fantasies) that could get them into trouble if the owner admitted to understanding the underlying meaning. This is most likely the meaning that is intended by Phaedrus's use of the word *obnoxia*: the slaves are vulnerable or open to harm because of their owner's presence. It does not necessarily need to be an immediate presence: the very fact that the owner exists means that slaves are open to harm and cannot speak openly.

Phaedrus faces a similar danger, thanks to the fact that Sejanus is one of his readers. Sejanus is mentioned at a key point in Phaedrus's text: in the third prologue, directly after Phaedrus has explained the servile origin of fables:

40 *ego illius pro semita feci viam,  
et cogitavi plura quam reliquerat,  
in calamitatem deligens quaedam meam.  
quodsi accusator alius Seiano foret,  
si testis alius, iudex alius denique,  
dignum faterer esse me tantis malis,  
nec his dolorem delenirem remediis.*

45 *suspicione si quis errabit sua,  
et, rapiens ad se quod erit commune omnium,  
stulte nudabit animi conscientiam,  
huic excusatum me velim nihilo minus.  
neque enim notare singulos mens est mihi,*

50 *verum ipsam vitam et mores hominum ostendere.*

I made a road in the place of their<sup>84</sup> path,  
and I thought up more things than they left behind,

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<sup>83</sup> Scott 1990: 164.

<sup>84</sup> Grammatically, *illius* refers back to *servitus* (3 *prol.* 34), which I translate as “slaves,” and so I use plural pronouns in my translation.

- 40 choosing certain things to my calamity.  
 But if anyone other than Sejanus were the accuser,  
 if anyone else were the witness, anyone else the judge,  
 then I would confess myself worthy of such punishments,  
 nor would I soothe my pain with these remedies.
- 45 Whomever makes a mistake because of his own suspicion,  
 and, applying to himself what is common to all,  
 lays bare his guilt with his foolish mind,  
 I hope that I may nevertheless be forgiven by him.  
 For it is not my intention to brand individuals,
- 50 but in truth to display life itself and the character of mankind.  
 (3 *prol.* 38-50)

Phaedrus here creates a parallel between himself and the slaves he has credited with inventing fables. The slaves face harm because their owner is in the audience; Phaedrus faces harm because Sejanus is his reader. Phaedrus does not say exactly what he did to anger Sejanus, but he implies that it was something he wrote in a previous fable book. He implies that some of the subjects he added while expanding upon his predecessors' fables (3 *prol.* 39: *cogitavi plura quam reliquerat*) are the very things that got him into trouble with Sejanus (3 *prol.* 40: *in calamitatem deligens quaedam meam*).<sup>85</sup> It is not necessary to take Phaedrus at his word that he got into trouble with Sejanus; it is more likely that Sejanus is a bogeyman, a representation of the danger that Phaedrus faces in writing fables.<sup>86</sup> The point of mentioning Sejanus in this way, directly after the etiology for the servile origin of fables, is to demonstrate that Phaedrus also

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<sup>85</sup> Holzberg takes Phaedrus at his word, and concludes that powerful individuals believed that Phaedrus was criticizing them, Sejanus among them (2002: 49). He does not consider which fables might have been offensive (declaring that they would have been too well disguised for us to recognize them). De Lorenzi considers a number of fables that might be interpreted politically, assuming that some one of them must have offended Sejanus (1955: 109-132). However, I agree most with Henderson, who suggests that Phaedrus never got into trouble with Sejanus *per se*, but rather that Sejanus represents "a perversion of justice" (2001: 65).

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Keane's analysis of the function of Sejanus in Juvenal's *Satire* 10 (2015: 30-36). Keane argues that Sejanus, although he lived generations before Juvenal, might still function in the *Satires* as "an exportable cipher functioning in a more contemporary story" (p. 131). In a similar way, Sejanus can be a bogeyman in Phaedrus, regardless of whether Phaedrus had an actual experience with him.

faces potential harm because of his fables, just like the *servitus*.<sup>87</sup> The precise way that this passage unfolds is highly significant for this interpretation. First Phaedrus states that the slaves that invented the fable genre had to make use of fables to express their feelings in code. Next, he declares that he is doing the same thing, only he is adding his own material (3 *prol.* 38-39: *ego illius pro semita feci viam, / et cogitavi plura quam reliquerat*). Then he states that this very activity (namely, doing the same thing as the *servitus* only more so) led to trouble with Sejanus (3 *prol.* 40: *in calamitatem deligens quaedam meam*.) Phaedrus's text is dangerous because it both imitates and expands upon the way in which the original slave fabulists used fables.

The presence of Sejanus in the role of Phaedrus's hostile reader necessarily brings with it a political reading.<sup>88</sup> Being subjugated as a free(d)man under a hostile ruler has similarities to being subjugated as a slave under a hostile master: in both cases, free speech can lead to real harm. By including Sejanus in this way, Phaedrus not only establishes his own need for coded speech (thus tying himself closely to the *servitus*), but also advertises the usefulness of his fables as coded political speech.<sup>89</sup> Just as slaves used fables as a way to speak under domination, so too Phaedrus's readers might make use of fables in the difficult political climate of the early empire. Phaedrus's fables are never simple: on one register, they express sentiments that slaves cannot express openly because of their status. On another register, they express sentiments that might

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. Henderson 2001: 62, who argues that Phaedrus "lines up behind the inventor of his genre, with a radical aetiology for Fable before claiming his own credentials as a worthy successor: if a prudent slave might cover protestation with obliquity, this hard-headed palace freedman could well take on the mantle of Aesop as self-proclaimed victim of domineering Sejanus."

<sup>88</sup> On the political vein in Phaedrus, cf. also Fields (forthcoming), "King, Tyrant, and Emperor in Imperial Fable"; Hawkins 2014: 128-134; and Polt 2014.

<sup>89</sup> He also, in a subtle way, advertises the impressive clout of his fables: Sejanus does not go after small threats.

appeal to those oppressed politically.<sup>90</sup> Both readings are possible, and both can be found in many of the same fables, as we will see.

In admitting that writing fables is dangerous – and that doing so actually got him into trouble – Phaedrus creates a problem for himself. If, as I argue, Phaedrus intends to show how useful fables are as a form of plausible deniability, then it is problematic that this plausible deniability failed so utterly in the case of Sejanus. In other words, if telling fables is a good way to talk subversively without getting into trouble, then why does Phaedrus advertise the fact that writing fables actually got him into real trouble? That would seem to undercut the effectiveness of fables as a coded medium. Here is where it matters so much that it is *Sejanus* who is Phaedrus's archetypical hostile reader. For Sejanus is not just any hostile reader. He is the worst possible reader. As Perry points out, being a victim of Sejanus would earn a person sympathy from anyone:

As a prosecutor [Sejanus] was greatly feared and hated by many who rejoiced at his downfall, brought about by the emperor's letter from Capri (see Dio Cassius 58.19, Juvenal *Sat.* 10.71). For this reason almost anyone was likely to sympathize with Phaedrus as one of his victims and to feel that his verdict in this case, whatever it was...was unjust. (Perry 1965: 256-57).

Sejanus was an infamous and unreasonable prosecutor, somebody with the power to get anybody into trouble, and the paranoia to prosecute anyone on any suspicion. As discussed above, plausible deniability can still function even if the hostile readers understand the meaning that

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. Forsdyke 2012: 21-33, for a discussion of the similarities and differences between slaves and the free poor. Cf. also McCarthy 2000: 19-21. McCarthy's book argues that the slaves in Plautus were meaningful for a free audience because in so highly a hierarchical society as Rome, nearly everyone was subordinate to someone. As McCarthy writes, "The clever slave presents a character who is specifically marked with the attributes of slavery and yet stands in for all those who are actually or potentially subordinated to others (in other words, the whole audience). This heroic character, then, slides back and forth between being a figure of difference for the majority of the audience and a figure of sameness, a site for sympathetic identification" (p. 20). Phaedrus's text could certainly have the same sort of function even for readers who never experienced slavery.

underlies the coded speech: plausible deniability allows those in power the freedom to ignore the slight, to pretend that it was not understood. Sejanus, however, is just the sort of reader who would refuse to take the “out” provided for by plausible deniability, and would instead prosecute the poor fabulist. This is why Phaedrus is so emphatic that it is only Sejanus who would be such a horrible reader: if anybody other than Sejanus had been Phaedrus’s prosecutor, witness, and judge, then Phaedrus would believe himself worthy of punishment. Phaedrus has Sejanus occupy every role in this imaginary trial: Phaedrus would have been fine if Sejanus had only been his prosecutor, or only his judge, or only his witness. It is only in a nightmare world in which Sejanus is Phaedrus’s judge and jury that Phaedrus’s fables would fail to protect him.

In essence, the presence of Sejanus allows Phaedrus to eat his cake and have it too. It allows him to demonstrate the danger inherent in writing fables while still maintaining the effectiveness of the genre. In fact, directly after the Sejanus passage, Phaedrus expresses hope that if anyone else gets “confused” about the innocuous nature of his fables, that person will forgive him, once he realizes that the fables are not meant to condemn any single person. In other words, Phaedrus admits that other readers may suspect that his fables have a malicious meaning, but he believes that those readers, not being Sejanus, will take Phaedrus at his word when Phaedrus claims (disingenuously) that his fables mean no harm.

Both Phaedrus and the original slave fabulists, then, need some sort of plausible deniability because they are at risk. Phaedrus states that the slaves were able to escape a charge of slander (*calumnia*) through *fictis...iocis*, “made-up jokes.” *Fictis iocis* is a packed phrase. On the one hand, it foregrounds the medium: the jokes are protected because they are made-up or fashioned (*fictis*):<sup>91</sup> in other words, jokes in the form of a fable provide safety. On the other hand,

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<sup>91</sup> Phaedrus frequently applies the adjective *fictus* to his own work. Cf. 1 *prol.*7; 2 *epil.* 13; and Fable 4.22.5.



it is also significant that Phaedrus emphasizes the presence of *ioci* in the fables: these fables are humorous, and that matters.

We have seen already that Phaedrus uses the humorous nature of his fables to distinguish them from the (presumably dry) fables of Aesop. In the first prologue, Phaedrus highlights that he turned the fables into *senarii*, the meter of comedy and of slaves, whereas Aesop wrote in prose. In the second prologue, Phaedrus insists that the only purpose of Aesopic fables is self-improvement, but that jokes have been added by him. We have also seen how this characterization of Aesop's fables does not quite fit, since Aesop as a character frequently makes jokes – and often obscene ones.<sup>92</sup> This wit did not make it into the written fables, at least according to Phaedrus.

I suggest that Phaedrus emphasizes jokes – even to the extent of pretending they are what distinguish him from Aesop – because of the precise ways in which jokes grant safety to the person who tells them. According to Amy Richlin's interpretation of Freud's theory of humor,<sup>93</sup> the speaker (A) makes a joke about someone else (B) to an audience (C). The joke creates a sense of camaraderie between A and C, as they laugh at the expense of B, who is usually either absent or abstract. The members of the C group will generally not take the joke as being applied to them, even if they are members of the B group; they will assume that the joke applies to other members of their group.<sup>94</sup> This helps protect the joke-teller from a hostile reaction.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. Fable 3.3, about the shepherds needing wives – to prevent them from committing bestiality. The fable is set up like a riddle: the sheep are giving birth to mysterious, human-headed offspring and nobody knows why, until Aesop shows up with the punchline: the shepherds need wives.

<sup>93</sup> *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960: 133).

<sup>94</sup> Richlin 2014: 178 refers to this as the “‘Richard Pryor in Long Beach’ rule,” referring to a concert video that shows white audience members laughing while the standup makes jokes about white people.

<sup>95</sup> For humor and satire, see especially Richlin 1992: 60-61 and for comedy, Richlin 2014: 178-179.

Furthermore, there is the fact that a joke, thanks to its format, can always be easily excused by the claim, “It’s just a joke!” Thus, even if an audience member does become angry or takes the joke as directed at them, the joke-teller has an out. It is important to note that the excuse “It’s just a joke” can be imagined to cover a great deal of explicitness. This is illustrated by the story of Eunus, as told by Diodorus Siculus.<sup>96</sup> Eunus was the leader of the first Sicilian Slave War, and was himself a slave. Before the slave revolt started, Eunus used to state at dinner parties, in front of his owners and their friends, that he would be king of Sicily one day. This statement, overt as it was, was never taken seriously; it was treated as a joke by the guests, who would kiddingly ask Eunus to spare them once he became king. Eunus, despite not hiding in the least that he intended to take over Sicily, was able to make statements about his intentions with immunity because nobody took them seriously. Even if this story is entirely fictional, it nevertheless illustrates that jokes can be imagined as providing safety, even for a slave, in the mind of an ancient author like Diodorus Siculus.

Both of these methods – the ABC model and the “It’s just a joke” defense – are important to the way that Phaedrus uses jokes in his fable collection. In the very first prologue, Phaedrus tells the reader not to get angry that there are talking trees, because, after all, Phaedrus is only joking:

*calumniari si quis autem voluerit,  
quod arbores loquantur, non tantum ferae,  
fictis iocari nos meminerit fabulis.*

If someone wishes to slander me,  
because trees talk, not just animals,  
let him remember that we are joking with made-up fables.  
(1 *prol.* 5-7)

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<sup>96</sup> Diodorus Siculus 34/35.2.7-8. Cf. Shaw 2001: 79 ff.

The phrase he uses, *fictis iocari*, is noticeably similar to the *fictis iocis* that Phaedrus uses to describe slave fables in the third prologue, and the word he uses for the readers' getting angry, *calumniari*, is similar to the *calumnia* that the slaves avoid through their use of fables. In thus recommending that the readers not get angry because he is only joking, Phaedrus is using the same strategy that he later attributes to the slaves: he is trying to stave off anger using the "just joking" defense. Furthermore, under the ABC model, Phaedrus is casting his sympathetic readers as the C group and his critics as the B group: Phaedrus says, in essence, "Other readers might get mad about the talking trees, but everybody else gets that it is only a joke." This enlists the readers on Phaedrus's side, encouraging them to laugh and not get angry.

Later, in the second fable of Book 4, Phaedrus goes further. Instead of merely characterizing his fables as jokes, Phaedrus underlines the way in which humor works to conceal deeper meanings:

*Ioculare tibi videmur: et sane levi,  
dum nil habemus maius, calamo ludimus.  
sed diligenter intuere has nenias;  
quantam in pusillis<sup>97</sup> utilitatem reperies!*

5 *non semper ea sunt quae videntur: decipit  
frons prima multos, rara mens intellegit  
quod interiore condidit cura angulo.*

We seem to you to be telling jokes: and indeed we  
play around with a light-hearted reed, so long as we have nothing more serious.  
But examine these trifles diligently;  
how much utility you will find in what is small!  
Things are not always what they seem: the initial façade

5 *deceives many, a rare mind understands  
what care has hidden in an interior corner.*

(4.2.1-7)

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<sup>97</sup> *Pusillis* here refers most directly to small things – or “trifles.” But the adjective *pusillus* is also to refer to “little men,” and hence the lower classes (cf. *TLL* 10.2.2738.51-75).

Phaedrus uses the verb *ioculare*<sup>98</sup> to describe what his fables are doing, but this time the joking is attached to the verb *videri*: the fables give the *appearance* of being jokes. Phaedrus then warns the reader not to be taken in by the surface meaning of the fables: if you look closely, you will find the utility (*utilitatem*) hidden below the surface.<sup>99</sup> This is something that only a rare mind (*rara mens*) can manage – a bit of flattery, again, to enlist the reader on Phaedrus’s side.

Phaedrus here makes it explicit that his jokes are a cover for a deeper meaning, which a person can uncover only if he pays careful attention. To anyone else, it will appear that the jokes represent all the fables have to offer. This is, of course, the very method that Phaedrus claims the first slave fabulists used: they tell fables that appear to be mere jokes, but which hide deeper meanings beneath the surface.

In this way, Phaedrus’s emphasis on joking can be connected to another aspect that he emphasizes: the fact that the fables must be read carefully so that their deeper meaning may be discovered. There are fables in which Phaedrus either does not give a moral (insisting that the reader should be able to figure it out) or gives multiple morals. In both cases, Phaedrus is placing the burden of interpretation on the reader, encouraging his audience to read actively and take a closer look at the fable text to mine it for meanings.

For example, in the first fable of Book 3 (right after the prologue in which Phaedrus tied the invention of fables to the slaves’ desire to speak with double meanings), Phaedrus links the interpretation of the fable to the readers’ knowledge of Phaedrus. He tells a fable of a woman

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<sup>98</sup> The normal infinitive for *ioculor* is of course *ioculari*. The OLD posits an alternate infinitive, *ioculare*, based solely on this passage of Phaedrus. The text may not be secure, but the sense remains clear.

<sup>99</sup> Phaedrus urges the reader to study his fables *diligenter*: a callback, perhaps, to the diligent reader of Aesop’s fables from the second prologue. Diligence, when applied to Aesop’s fables, leads to self-improvement. When diligence is used with Phaedrus’s fables, a reader discovers the hidden meanings. This, again, is the difference between the fables of Aesop and those of Phaedrus, at least according to Phaedrus.

who smells an empty wine jar, and then declares that the smell is so good that she knows that the wine that it once contained must have been excellent. Then, rather than give the moral as usual, Phaedrus closes in a peculiar way, by merely saying, *hoc quo pertineat dicet qui me noverit* (3.1.7: “What this pertains to, the one who knows me will say”). This moral seems, at first glance, to be frustratingly ambiguous.<sup>100</sup> The key, however, is exactly what Phaedrus says that it is: a knowledge of Phaedrus reveals the meaning of the fable. As we have seen, Phaedrus insists throughout his fable books that his fables only *appear* to be empty and silly; the reader who examines them closely will be rewarded by finding their hidden significance. The wine jar, then, is best taken as a metaphor for Phaedrus’s fables: they seem empty, but the truly dedicated reader can “sniff out” their true meaning.<sup>101</sup>

Later in Book 3, Phaedrus has another fable with a similar moral, only this time he openly mocks those who do not understand him. Fable 3.12 is the well-known story of the rooster and the pearl: the rooster finds a pearl in a dung heap, but because roosters have no interest in money, the pearl’s value is lost on him. Phaedrus ends the fable with the line, *Hoc illis narro qui me non intellegunt* (3.12.8: “This story is for those who do not understand me”). The implication, of course, is that readers who do not understand Phaedrus are like the rooster: unable to see true value even when it is staring them straight in the face. In fact, the readers are in a certain way worse than the rooster. The rooster understands that he is missing something; he says to the pearl, *ego quod te inveni, potior cui multo est cibus, / nec tibi prodesse nec mihi*

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<sup>100</sup> Various interpretations for this fable are collected by Bajoni 1997: 291. For instance, Brenot argues that Phaedrus is referring to the decline of Rome, Perry that Phaedrus is referring to his own old age, Bajoni that Phaedrus is referring to the longevity of his own work.

<sup>101</sup> This meaning was suggested to me by Amy Richlin.

*quicquam potest.* (3.12.6-7: “Since the one who found you is I, for whom food is worth more, / there’s no benefit to you and none for me.”).<sup>102</sup> The rooster, then, knows the pearl is valuable; he just cannot access that value himself. The readers who do not even understand Phaedrus, who do not see value in him, are much worse. Once again, the fable makes it clear that understanding Phaedrus is necessary for understanding (and hence valuing) his fables.<sup>103</sup>

Fables such as these make it clear that Phaedrus’s fables can have hidden meanings, and that Phaedrus believes that knowledge about the author is a requirement for understanding what the fables truly mean. In fact, it is striking how explicitly Phaedrus states that his fables have hidden meanings. He states that slaves used fables to encode their feelings, and then declares outright that he is doing the same thing. He claims that he is joking, but then claims with equal forthrightness that his jokes conceal deeper meanings. In Book 4, he abandons any pretense of subtlety and says repeatedly that his fables warrant close reading because of how much meaning they contain. This, of course, begs a question: is it fair to claim that Phaedrus is “talking in code” if Phaedrus says explicitly that there is a code? After all, how hidden could Phaedrus’s messages truly be if Phaedrus tells the reader directly that the messages are there, and even drops enormous hints that the “hidden” messages have to do with slavery?

The answer to this objection is two-fold. First, Phaedrus’s explicitness must be balanced against his constant insistence that he is “just joking.” One of the major advantages of the “just

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<sup>102</sup> Hunger is frequently a theme in Plautine comedy, and hence connects to slaves: cf. Richlin’s *Plautine Comedy as Slave Theater* (forthcoming), Ch. 2: 58-70.

<sup>103</sup> One might add to this list Fable 4.11. This fable starts out as a straightforward etiological fable about why lamps cannot be lit from a sacrificial flame. Then, at the end of the fable, Phaedrus privileges his own interpretative voice and lists other interpretations that this fable could have (4.11.14-15: *quot res contineat hoc argumentum utiles / non explicabit alius quam qui repperit*). In so doing, Phaedrus highlights the fact that a single fable can have many interpretations, and also recognizes the power of readers and encourages further thought.

joking” defense is that it can cover an enormous degree of explicitness, as in the case of Eunus. Phaedrus’s claim that he is “just joking” casts doubt onto everything else he says – even what he says about his fables having hidden messages. So long as there is doubt, there is plausible deniability. This may in fact be why Phaedrus emphasizes the humor inherent in the fables, as opposed to other lines of defense.<sup>104</sup>

Secondly, there is a reason that Phaedrus is so explicit about the presence of hidden messages in his fables, namely that he is not a slave telling fables, but rather a freedman writing them. An actual slave telling fables in the presence of his owner must be extremely careful, for he is running a real and immediate risk of punishment.<sup>105</sup> It would be counterproductive for a slave to preface his fables by declaring openly that the fables contained a dangerous hidden message. The situation for Phaedrus is different. Written fables had a variety of uses, many of them entirely normative in nature. Therefore, if Phaedrus wants his audience to “get” it – to understand that his fables have a subtext that has to do with slavery, that he is writing fables in *this* way and not in some other way – then he has to be more explicit than our hypothetical slave. He must tell the reader, in some way, that that a double meaning exists, or else he runs the risk

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<sup>104</sup> Holzberg makes a similar observation about Phaedrus’s (joking) insistence that his work is not serious literature: “Phaedrus himself assumes that, if he stresses the serious nature of his poetry’s message in such a paradoxical fashion, his readers will laugh and be even less likely to take him seriously. This means, however, that he can simply use truth to disguise truth, as it were. And only readers who can see through this trick will appreciate that the substance of Phaedrus’s fables is as profoundly significant as the wisdom camouflaged by the fool with cap and bells” (2002: 50). Holzberg does not attribute this disguise to Phaedrus’s desire to say anything particularly revolutionary; quite the contrary, Holzberg insists that “nowhere in Phaedrus’s fables are ordinary folk encouraged to defy the authorities” (2002: 48) and that Phaedrus has a “conformist ideology” (2002: 49). Yet I would suggest that there is a very real tension between Holzberg’s admission that Phaedrus is using “truth to disguise truth” and his conviction that Phaedrus is conformist. For if Phaedrus is only saying normative things, then why would he bother to disguise this truth?

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Scott 1990: 50-52, 156.

that nobody will interpret his fables in this way. Thus, Phaedrus's explicitness has a definite literary purpose.

So far, we have established that Phaedrus, like the *servitus* of the third prologue, must use coded speech because he is vulnerable. Also like the slaves, Phaedrus masks his speech using fables and jokes to provide plausible deniability. The last step is to examine what sorts of messages – which parts of the hidden transcript, to use Scott's formulation – are being expressed through the use of covert speech. First, a few caveats. One, when I say that Phaedrus is saying things that “cannot be said openly,” that restriction must be recognized as occurring on two levels. First of all, by emphasizing that his fables originate in the fables told by slaves, Phaedrus encourages the reader to imagine what meaning his fables would have if told by slaves. Thus, many of the fables express things that a slave could not say openly to his owner, even if they are being transcribed by an ex-slave for a different audience. This formulation works even if Phaedrus is merely telling *the sort of* fables that slaves told, rather than providing real examples of actual slave fables. For instance, Phaedrus could provide an example of a revenge fantasy fable that uses plausible deniability, in order to mimic the way real slaves tell (their own) revenge fantasy fables.

On another level, Phaedrus himself is making use of plausible deniability to talk about slavery. Manumission would not automatically mean that the freed slave had the freedom to talk openly about slavery. As noted at the outset, it is a commonplace that discussions of slavery in elite texts tend to adhere to elite viewpoints. Forsdyke refers to this as selection bias: the reason that fables appearing in elite texts tend to be conservative is that these are the fables selected by elite authors and the ones that elite audiences wished to read.<sup>106</sup> In a similar vein, Scott points out

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<sup>106</sup> Forsdyke 2012: 60.



that published versions of the Brer Rabbit tales most likely represent the most sanitized or inoffensive versions, the ones that adhere most closely to the public transcript.<sup>107</sup> There is pressure to adhere to the public transcript, regardless of the author's social status. Thus, while Phaedrus's freedman status would have given him more freedom to write what he wished than he would have had as a slave, it did not give him the freedom to say anything he wished. This is especially true since many of Phaedrus's fables that seem to be about slavery can also be interpreted politically. This political dimension adds an extra reason that Phaedrus needs plausible deniability, as we saw with Sejanus.

At the same time, Phaedrus's use of plausible deniability has another motivation, one not related to providing Phaedrus himself with safety. Part of Phaedrus's project, as I suggested before, is to show how effective fables are as a method of covert speech. This is a skill important not only for slaves, but also for anyone who wishes to speak under an oppressive regime. By using his fables in much the same way as slaves might, Phaedrus demonstrates the power of his genre. Thus, his fables work as covert speech on three levels: they are the (sort of) fables that the original slave fabulists may have told, they are fables written by an ex-slave about the slave experience, and they are fables with a political dimension written at a time when such political speech could be dangerous.

One final caveat: slave experience is highly varied, so it may seem reductive of me to talk about "slave experiences" as if there is a universal set of experiences that all slaves share. Roman slaves could have vastly different qualities of life, depending on the use made of them, the character of the owner, the gender and age of the slave. However, Phaedrus appeals to common

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<sup>107</sup> Scott 1990: 163.

elements, such as a lack of autonomy, the fear of punishment, the need to watch one's mouth, hunger and pain, the desire for revenge. These general feelings and experiences, tied as they are to the basic fact of being under somebody else's power, would have appealed to most if not all slaves.<sup>108</sup>

### III. Slave Experience in Phaedrus

With these caveats in mind, it remains to examine some of Phaedrus's fables more closely. Two general types of slave fable stand out: (1) fables that critique the rhetoric of "paternal ownership" used by Roman slave owners and (2) slave fantasy. For each of my examples, I will demonstrate both how the fable makes use of plausible deniability, and what sort of hidden message it contains that necessitates it.

Fable 3.7 not only has to do with the slave experience, but also critiques and undermines common rhetoric used by slave owners to control their slaves.<sup>109</sup> In this fable, a starving wolf comes upon a well-fed dog. The wolf asks the dog how he manages to live so well, and the dog explains that the wolf could live just as easily, if he were willing to serve a master (3.7.7-8: *Eadem est condicio tibi, / praestare domino si par officium potes*). The wolf asks for more details, and the dog gives a description of his life:

10        *"Quod?" inquit ille. "Custos ut sis liminis,  
a furibus tuearis et noctu domum.  
adfertur ultro panis; de mensa sua  
dat ossa dominus; frusta iactat familia,  
et quod fastidit quisque pulmentarium.  
sic sine labore venter impletur meus."*

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<sup>108</sup> Cf. Knapp 2011: 132-141, who gives a basic overview of what must have been common slave experiences.

<sup>109</sup> On this fable, cf. also Bradley 1987: 152. For a more political reading of this fable, as well as the versions that appear in Babrius and Avianus, cf. Fields (forthcoming), "Chained Animals and Human Liberty."

10 “What duties would I have?” asked [the wolf]. “You would be a guard at the threshold,” [said the dog] “and you would guard the house from robbers at night. Bread is brought automatically; from his own table my master gives me bones, and the household throws out scraps, and whatever delicacies anyone is tired of. Thus without labor my stomach is full.”  
(3.7.9-14)

This description wins over the wolf, who is tired of the harsh conditions in the wild, and he agrees to follow the dog. As they are walking, however, the wolf notices that the dog’s neck is worn bare (*collum tritum*).<sup>110</sup> When he asks about this, the dog admits that he is kept chained up during the day, and is not allowed to wander free. At this, the wolf changes his mind, and declares that he would prefer his hard free life to the dog’s slavery. This fable, according to the promythium, demonstrates *quam dulcis sit libertas* (3.7.1).

As Bradley argues in *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, this fable has clear applicability to the slave experience. Bradley points out that not only does this fable speak to the slave’s desire for freedom, but it also alludes to the use of slave collars and the *ergastulum* for human slaves. Bradley concludes that:

The story, from a servile point of view, is a lament that the material comforts of slavery do not compensate the absence of freedom. An expression of such dissatisfaction, however, clearly could not be articulated openly. (1987: 153)

This is indeed the basic message of the fable, since the wolf, the protagonist, ultimately chooses the hard life over the “easy” slave life.<sup>111</sup> However, it is worth pointing out that the dog’s speech is all about how the material comforts of slavery *do* “compensate the absence of freedom.” In

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<sup>110</sup> *Collum tritum* appears as an insult against Cicero in the *Suasoriae* of Seneca the Elder (6.12): Cicero is said to have a “worn neck” because Pompey and Caesar subjugated him. Here again, we see the intersection between literal enslavement and figurative, political enslavement.

<sup>111</sup> A choice reminiscent of the one posed in Aesop’s fable about the two roads, the road of freedom and the road of slavery (*Life* G94-95).

fact, the dog presents an altogether rosy picture of his slavery: he deemphasizes the work he has to do (3.7.14: *sic sine labore venter impletur meus*) and plays up the benefits. Even when the wolf notices the mark of the collar, the dog insists that it is nothing: he is allowed to be free at night, and therefore being chained up during the day is not so bad.<sup>112</sup> Most importantly, the dog asserts that his good fortune is a reward for his service: he insists that the wolf can gain the same *condicio* by offering *officium* to a master (3.7.7).

The dog, in essence, claims that slavery is a good deal for him, and that so long as he does good work, his masters will reward him with a pleasant life. As Bradley points out (1987: 21-26), this is exactly the sort of attitude that Roman slave owners hoped to instill in their slaves. The agricultural writer Columella, a contemporary of Seneca the younger, recommends relatively humane treatment for slaves, not for humanitarian reasons, but for practical reasons. Columella urges owners to give their slaves good clothing that will protect them from the elements – in order that the slaves be able to do work in inclement weather.<sup>113</sup> He recommends that masters test the quality of their slaves' food and clothing, and that they should allow slaves to air grievances if they feel they have been treated unjustly (1.8.18) – because such “justice and care” (*iustitia et cura*) has economic payoffs (1.8.19-20). Most importantly, Columella asserts that fair treatment of slaves is necessary because of the attitudes it fosters in the slaves. For instance, Columella recommends that masters ask their slaves for advice, not because the slaves are

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<sup>112</sup> 3.7.21-24: “*Unde hoc, amice?*” “*Nil est.*” “*Dic, sodes, tamen.*” / “*Quia videor acer, alligant me interdium, / luce ut quiescam, et vigilem nox cum venerit: / crepusculo solutus qua visum est vagor.*” (“How did that happen, friend?” “It’s nothing.” “Tell me anyway, please.” / “Since I seem spirited, they tie me up during the day, so that I may rest when it’s light and so that I may keep guard when night comes: / at dusk, being loosed, I wander wherever seems best”). The dog first tries to insist that his wounded neck is nothing, and then that his being tied up is mitigated by his freedom during the night.

<sup>113</sup> Col. 1.8.9-10: *Id si fiat, nullus dies tam intolerabilis est, quo non sub divo moliri aliquid possit.* (“If this is done, there is no day so intolerable that the slave is not able to do something under the open sky”).

particularly knowledgeable,<sup>114</sup> but because being consulted makes the slaves work more willingly (1.8.15: *libentius*). Columella also warns that slaves who feel they have been treated unfairly are more dangerous: *saevitia atque avaritia laesi magis timendi sunt* (1.8.17: “Those who have been injured by cruelty or greed are more to be feared”). In this way, Columella links the proper treatment of slaves to the attitudes it creates in them: slaves who are treated well will work enthusiastically, and slaves who are treated poorly are dangerous.<sup>115</sup>

Nor was this view limited to Columella; it is a widespread notion in Roman literature that slaves should be treated with some degree of kindness so as to foster obedience.<sup>116</sup> In particular, Bradley identifies four common incentives that masters used as a means of social control for their slaves: decent living conditions, the ability to have a family, holidays, and the possibility of freedom.<sup>117</sup> At least two of these incentives are mentioned by the dog in the fable. First, the dog insists that being chained up during the day is not so bad because he is free at night, which alludes to the practice of giving slaves limited time off in order to make up for the near-constant work they do otherwise. Second, and most prominently, the dog insists that he lives a much better life as a slave than the wolf does free.<sup>118</sup> In other words, the dog is parroting back the very

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<sup>114</sup> 1.8.15: Columella brags that he talks with his slaves “as if he is talking to rather knowledgeable people” (*quasi cum peritioribus*).

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Bradley 1987: 22.

<sup>116</sup> Bradley 1987: 23-25. Bradley discusses other agricultural writers such as Varro, Cato, and Xenophon, of course, but also points out that this idea can even be found in authors not writing directly about slave management, such as Tacitus and Pliny. Cf. also Knapp 2011: 133-134 who discusses the common ideology of these agricultural writers.

<sup>117</sup> Bradley 1987: 25. Bradley admits that this point has often been made – important scholarship is listed 1987: 25 n. 24. Holidays are discussed at length later in the first chapter (pp. 40-44). Chapter 2 details the family life of slaves, and Chapter 3 discusses the role of (promised) emancipation.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Bradley 1987: 82 for a discussion of Epictetus’s rant about how much more difficult life is for the freed slave than for the slave who still has a master.

attitude that Columella and those like him hope their slaves will adopt: he performs his *officium* because he is rewarded with enough food and limited freedom; such benefits make his slavery a good deal. It matters little whether the dog actually believes his own rhetoric: Phaedrus gives no information about what the dog's real thoughts are. What matters is that the dog does his work and expresses aloud the exact attitudes that his master would want him to express.<sup>119</sup> His masters control his public transcript, and therefore his hidden transcript does not matter.

In the real world, the attitude parroted by the dog would be the only one permitted to be spoken aloud. In this fable, however, the wolf can declare that a hard but free life is vastly superior to the so-called benefits of slavery:

...*Fruere quas laudas, canis;*  
*regnare nolo, liber ut non sim mihi.*"

...“Enjoy what you praise, dog,” [said the wolf]  
“I do not wish to live like a king, if I am not free.”  
(3.7.26-27)

The wolf here mocks the very notion that any sort of material comfort could make up for a lack of freedom. The wolf uses the word *regnare* to describe the dog's lifestyle, a biting sarcastic description. Of course the dog does not really “live like a king,” no matter what he claims; *regnare* is the exact opposite of *servire*, and the two can never be equivalent.<sup>120</sup> This, however, is

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<sup>119</sup> Columella also spends some time describing how a slave overseer should interact with the slaves under his control (1.8.1-14). It is important that the overseer be the sort of authority the other slaves will respect (1.8.3-4) and who will encourage the other slaves to work hard (1.8.10-11). On large estates, slaves were frequently the ones in charge of their fellow slaves; thus it is important for the owners that the slaves instill the right work ethic in each other. In the fable, this translates into the dog's willingness to recruit the wolf into adopting the same lifestyle as him.

<sup>120</sup> The noun *rex* is a common way to refer to a rich man in comedy. Cf., as examples, Plaut. *Rud.* 931 and *Poen.* 671. It is also used in Horace: *C.* 2.14.11, *S.* 1.2.86 and 2. 2.45. Instead of the noun, Phaedrus uses the verb *regnare* to mean “to be rich” (or, as I translated, “to live like a king”) so as to provide a more striking contrast with the verb *servire*. On kings standing in for proverbially wealthy people, cf. Richlin's “Kings of Comedy” (forthcoming): 5-8.

a dangerous perspective for a slave to hold. If masters wish to control their slaves by treating them well, by giving them material comforts, then it is problematic if the slave openly rejects all of that in favor of the one thing the master does not wish to grant: actual freedom. Of course, freedom is the ultimate incentive for Roman slaves: masters could use the promise of emancipation to instill obedience in their slaves. The problem here is that the wolf is unwilling to “earn” freedom by putting up with slavery, as a slave should; only liberty is good enough for him. The implication is that if slaves had a choice about whether or not to be a slave, as the wolf has in this fable, then they would resolutely refuse slavery, no matter the “benefits” offered. In essence, this fable asserts that the rhetoric of paternal or generous masters is hollow; there is no such thing as a slave who lives well.<sup>121</sup>

A comparison of this fable with the similar fable of Babrius demonstrates the degree to which Phaedrus’s fable has to do specifically with the *rhetoric* of slave-owners, and with the idea that slaves can be taught to use this rhetoric in defense of their own enslavement. The dog in Babrius does not make a speech about the benefits that come to him by serving a master. Instead, when the wolf asks him why he is so well fed, the dog simply replies, “A wealthy man feeds me.”<sup>122</sup> The wolf then mocks the dog for putting up with an iron collar in return for food. In Babrius, the contrast is simply between being well-fed but chained versus being hungry but free.

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<sup>121</sup> Something similar happens in Roman comedy with the good/bad slave dichotomy, as Richlin’s *Plautine Comedy as Slave Theater* (forthcoming) shows (Ch. 6, pp. 41-50). She analyzes a number of speeches made by the “good” slaves of Plautine comedy, and demonstrates that these speeches are always undercut by subsequent events in the play. In essence, “the lesson evidently taught by the speech is the opposite of what it actually teaches.” In a similar way, the speech of the dog (representative of the good slave) is undercut by the wolf’s declaration that freedom is always better.

<sup>122</sup> Babrius Fable 100.4: “ἄνθρωπος” εἶπε “δαμνίης με σιτεύει.” This fable still has resonances with slavery, since this dog also wears an iron collar. But this connection is much less explicit: the dog does not even use the word “master” to describe his owner, but simply calls him a “rich man.”

Phaedrus contrasts the arguments that can be made in defense of “comfortable slavery” versus the difficult free life.

Despite how explicit Phaedrus’s fable is in its criticism of the owner’s rhetoric, it retains its plausible deniability thanks to its form. No matter how explicit the wolf is about his love of freedom, he is still a wolf, talking about his desire not to be a pet. He is not a slave, or a poor man, talking about his desire to be free. There is a buffering distance, then, between the animals and the human issues they represent. This allows Phaedrus (or the original slave who might have told this fable) to talk about the emptiness of slave-owners’ rhetoric within a safe venue: even though it is clear enough that this is a fable about slavery, both master and slave have an “out” if they do not wish to acknowledge this subversive meaning. It is worth remembering that this fable occurs in the third book, the very book whose prologue links the creation of fables to slaves’ desire to talk about their lives safely. This fable shows this done in a brilliant fashion.

Making use of animal characters is not the only way that fables can grant plausible deniability, however. In Fable 20 of Perotti’s Appendix, Phaedrus similarly critiques the slave owner’s rhetoric, concentrating on the (often broken) promise of emancipation. This time, however, he uses human characters. The plausible deniability, then, must come from another source. In the case of this fable, the plausible deniability is granted by the moral, which is conservative and helps mitigate the more subversive content of the rest of the fable.

In this fable, a runaway slave encounters Aesop. When Aesop asks why he is running away, the slave provides a catalogue of abuses he has suffered at the hands of his master:

*“plagae supersunt, desunt mihi cibaria.  
subinde ad villam mittor sine viatico.  
domi si cenat, totis persto noctibus;  
sive est vocatus, iaceo ad lucem in semita.  
emerui libertatem, canus servio.*

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*ullius essem culpae mihi si conscius,  
aequo animo ferrem. numquam sum factus satur,  
et super infelix saevum patior dominium.  
has propter causas et quas longum est promere  
15 abire destinavi quo tulerint pedes.”*

“There is an excess of blows, and not enough food.  
Often I am sent to the villa without provisions for the journey.  
Whenever my master dines at home, I stand for the entire night;  
and if he is invited out, I lie in the street until day.  
10 I have earned freedom, yet I am a white-haired slave.  
If I were conscious of any guilt in myself,  
I would endure this equitably. I am never full,  
and beyond this I, unlucky, endure a master’s harsh power.  
On account of these reasons and others which would be long to tell,  
15 I have decided to run away to wherever my feet may carry me.”  
(P20.6-15)

Aesop is not moved by this catalogue of abuses. He tells the slave not to run away, because running away will only lead to more trouble:

*“Ergo,” inquit “audi: cum mali nil feceris,  
haec experiris, ut refers, incommoda;  
quid si peccaris? Quae te passurum putas?”*

“Therefore,” [Aesop] said, “listen: you experience these disagreeable things, when, as you say, you have done no wrong. What if you commit a transgression? What things do you think you will suffer then?”  
(P20.16-18)

This argument immediately convinces the slave, and he decides to go home.

The argument Aesop uses to convince the slave not to run away is vague to the point of sounding moralistic. He declares that if the slave is mistreated while behaving well, then he should just imagine what he will experience if he does wrong. The simplest reading of this advice is that Aesop is warning that a master who is so cruel as to hurt his slave when the slave

does nothing wrong will be that much more cruel if the slave does misbehave.<sup>123</sup> Of course, someone might retort that the slave will only be punished if he is caught running away, whereas if he stays he will continue to receive the abuse he suffers day-to-day. Aesop closes down this objection by not including any sort of “if you are caught” clause.<sup>124</sup> Aesop talks as though running away will unavoidably lead to more suffering, and the slave does not question this. In this fable, even the most abused slave can easily be talked out of running away.

In many ways, this fable seems to be a slave-owner’s fantasy. Recall Columella’s warning, discussed above, that slaves who are mistreated must be feared (1.8.16). Slave owners were well aware that slaves who were abused for no reason were liable to fight back. In this fable, strikingly, even an abused slave is not to be feared; he barely makes it to his neighbor’s house<sup>125</sup> before he decides it is better to simply put up with the abuse forever. The person who gives him this advice is another slave, Aesop. In this universe, slave neighbors police each other, and encourage normative behavior.<sup>126</sup> This, then, is the sort of fable that scholars point to when they argue that Phaedrus’s fables preach resignation: this fable’s most obvious meaning is that a slave should just resign himself to any abuse that his owner heaps on him, without trying to escape.

In reducing the fable to its surface message, however, readers miss the other important

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<sup>123</sup> Compare the advice offered by the *lorarius* to the bound captives in Plautus’s *Captivi*: *indigna digna habenda sunt, erus quae facit*. (200: “Undeserved things must be held as deserved, if the master does them”). These lines are discussed by Richlin’s *Plautine Comedy as Slave Theater* (forthcoming): Ch. 2, pp. 27-28.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. *Captivi* 116-124 (discussed by Richlin’s *Plautine Comedy as Slave Theater* (forthcoming): Ch. 2, pp. 25-27). There, Hegio compares slaves to wild birds, who cannot be caught once they have escaped.

<sup>125</sup> P20.2: Aesop and the slave know each other because they are neighbors (*notus e vicinia*).

<sup>126</sup> This recalls Phaedrus’s characterization of Aesop’s fable book from the second prologue: here we see Aesop the slave encouraging his audience to act the part of good slaves, much like his fables.

thing that this fable does: it allows the slave to air his grievances.<sup>127</sup> After all, the moral of the fable is based on a very simple message: you may suffer even if you do everything your master says, but you can always suffer worse if you run away. All that is needed for that message to be presented is lines 11-12, when the slave explains that he would endure these abuses if he were conscious of having done some sort of wrong. It is that statement that Aesop responds to; the catalogue of abuses is, itself, not necessary for the fable's message. Their presence must be explained in some other way.

Furthermore, it is worth considering the exact nature of the abuses that the slave mentions. He is beaten too much, and is not given enough food – not at home, and not when he is sent on a journey. He is forced to stay awake all night, whether his master dines at home or at a friend's house. Most strikingly, the slave declares that he has earned his freedom (P20.10: *emerui*) but has not been granted it; instead, he is still a slave despite being an old man.<sup>128</sup> In other words, his owner has broken the implied social contract between masters and slaves. As Bradley points out, the potential for any and all slaves to “earn” their emancipation was a way through which the owners exerted social control.<sup>129</sup> Slaves could earn their freedom through

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<sup>127</sup> A similar phenomenon can be observed in Plautine comedy. Cf. Richlin 2014: 182-183: “The stage enables slave characters to do onstage what can rarely have happened in real life: they comment publicly on these beatings, they wish the same in return to those who beat them, often in asides to the audience, enlisted as witnesses on the side of the slave.”

<sup>128</sup> This reverses the dichotomy in Plautus's *Captivi* 119-121, in which Hegio pretends to doubt the *lorarius*'s desire for freedom because the *lorarius* has not been saving his money. In that scene, the owner places the burden of being freed squarely on the slave: if he really wanted to be freed, he would work for it. Here in Phaedrus, the slave's plight is all the more pitiable since he has “earned” (*emerui*) his freedom (possibly by saving up his money), but is still not granted his freedom. Cf. Richlin's *Plautine Comedy as Slave Theater* (forthcoming): Ch. 2, pp. 26-27.

<sup>129</sup> For the possibility that *all* slaves might have believed that freedom was a possibility for them, even slaves on farms or in the mines, cf. Bradley 1987: 104. “Earning” freedom meant overcoming a large number of hurdles, as Bradley discusses in his third chapter (cf. esp. 86 ff). Thanks to legislation introduced by Augustus, slaves could not be freed before age 30, and they had to be of good moral character: slaves who had ever been branded or thrown in chains could not be freed. Augustus's legislation also limited the number of slaves who could be freed per

loyalty or obedience, through performing a particularly valuable service to the master, or simply through saving up enough money to buy freedom.<sup>130</sup> In Phaedrus's fable, the slave has by all accounts earned his freedom: he has given his master loyal service for many years and has never done wrong. Nevertheless, freedom is denied him. This is because no matter what the rhetoric of emancipation was, in practice, emancipation remained "an act of generosity which resided in the control of the master alone, not of the slave" (Bradley 1987: 97).

This fable, then, allows a slave to complain that the implied contract between masters and slaves ("work hard and you can earn your freedom") is no contract at all; it is a promise that the master can choose to ignore with impunity.<sup>131</sup> The slave, if this happens, has no real recourse: as this fable points out, the slave can only run away or endure it. Once again, then, we have Phaedrus holding the common slave-owners' rhetoric up to scrutiny, in order to show that it is bogus. Such a message, since it allows a slave to declare aloud that the slave-owner's "promise" of freedom is disingenuous, is subversive, for if obedience does not guarantee freedom, then the slave has less motivation to obey. Even more subversively, this argument is put in the mouth of a human slave who is talking about slavery. There is no plausible deniability through animal characters, as was the case for the last fable we examined. Instead, the plausible deniability is granted through Aesop, who convinces the slave not to run away and thus ends the fable on a

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household. Such legislation not only restricted the kinds and number of slaves who could be freed; it also required that any slave who hoped for freedom exhibit long-term and steadfast loyalty to the owner.

<sup>130</sup> That slaves felt their freedom was "owed" to them is shown by an inscription recorded by Bradley 1987: 96: *debita libertas iuueni mihi lege negata morte immatura reddita perpetua est.*

<sup>131</sup> Bradley 1987: 152 reads a similar allusion in Fable 1.8 ("The Crane and The Wolf"), in which the wolf promises a reward if the crane can remove a bone from his throat, but then reneges on their deal. Bradley argues that "this is reminiscent of the striking of compacts between slave and master for manumission, as in the Pedanius Secundus affair... , on which the master always might renege, and the use of a potential reward as an inducement to compliance is also noticeable. The fable expresses the slave's realization that a slave-owner cannot, ultimately, be trusted, and that a trusting slave only harms himself."

normative note. In other words, the supposed moral of the fable is at odds with the rest of the fable.<sup>132</sup> the moral may make the rest of the content safe, but it also allows that content to exist.

In those two fables, then, Phaedrus criticizes the ways in which slave owners try to use incentives in order to instill obedience in their slaves: the wolf of Fable 3.7 recognizes that there is no such thing as “pleasant” slavery, and the human slave of Fable P20 learns that there is no guarantee that a master will free the slave who works hard. In neither of these fables is the message an optimistic one: the wolf may avoid slavery, but the dog has no such prospect, and the human slave is convinced that returning to his abusive owner is his best option. There are some fables, however, which have a more optimistic bent, namely, fables that depict images of slave fantasy.

By “slave fantasy” I mean desires or outcomes that a slave might hope for but not reasonably expect.<sup>133</sup> One of the most common such fantasies, as Scott points out, is the revenge fantasy:<sup>134</sup> those who are unable to defend themselves against abuse, or take vengeance for it, or even react to it, may take comfort in revenge fantasies, usually ones in which a weak but clever character outsmarts his abuser and escapes unpunished. Phaedrus includes two separate but related kinds of revenge fantasies: fantasies in which an abuser is punished by the gods or some other unknown force, and fantasies in which the abused party gets to take revenge for himself. Insofar as these fantasies express the slave’s desire to see the owner wounded or humiliated, they represent part of the slave’s hidden transcript, and hence must make use of some sort of plausible

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. Beavis 1990: 6 who argues that since “morals are secondary,” they do not necessarily go with the fable very well, and more than one can be given.

<sup>133</sup> Slave fantasies are also a large part of comedy: on this subject, cf. Richlin 2014: 187-195. For a discussion of slave fantasy in Greek fables, cf. Forsdyke 2012: 61-66.

<sup>134</sup> Scott 1990: 37-41 and 162-163.

deniability if they are spoken by slaves or if they appear in a published (and public) text.

Some fables, such as Fable 1.17, present a world in which the gods actively intervene to punish wrongdoing:

*Solent mendaces luere poenas malefici.  
Calumniator ab ove cum petere canis  
quem commendasse panem se contenderet,  
lupus citatus testis non unum modo  
5 deberi dixit, verum adfirmavit decem.  
ovis damnata falso testimonio  
quod non debebat solvit. post paucos dies  
bidens iacentem in fovea conspexit lupum:  
“Haec” inquit “merces fraudis a superis datur.”*

Wicked liars often pay the penalty.

When a dog, a false witness, claimed that he was seeking from a sheep a piece of bread which he had entrusted to her, a wolf, summoned as witness, said that she did not just owe one piece of bread, but in truth he claimed that she owed ten. The sheep, condemned by false testimony, paid what she did not owe. After a few days, the sheep saw the wolf lying in a pit. “Here,” she said, “are the wages of fraud given by those above.”  
(1.17.1-9)

The conflict in this fable is between the powerful and powerless. The sheep under normal circumstances cannot hope to win against the wolf,<sup>135</sup> and here her situation is made worse by the fact that the wolf is allied with a dog. Generally dogs in fables are the protectors of sheep. Here, the dog’s alliance with the wolf underlines how truly alone the sheep is. Unsurprisingly, the sheep loses her case.

However, even though the sheep herself has no way to beat the dog and the wolf, the gods take care of the matter for her. The wolf ends up trapped in a pit, and the sheep gives the

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<sup>135</sup> Of course, normally the wolf attacks the sheep in a physical attack, not an attack in court – cf. Fable 1.1. Here, although the conflict has been turned into a legal battle, the basic antithesis between predator and prey remains. On the legal language in this and other fables, cf. Moretti 1982: 229.

moral: “those above” (*superi*) will punish liars. In this fable, then, the sheep’s powerlessness does not mean that she is without recourse. The gods take care of the punishing for her, making up for her lack of resources. This may be considered a slave fantasy, insofar as it posits a world in which the powerful will face punishment for the wrongs they do to the powerless, even if the powerless can take no action themselves. Thus, although this fable is not dealing directly with slave characters or slave concerns (and, in fact, works from the perspective of anyone who has been wronged by those more powerful), it does present an optimistic view of the world’s justice that fits in well with a slave fantasy perspective.<sup>136</sup>

Such optimism is not universal in Phaedrus, however. In fact, this fable and others like it coexist with other fables in which those who suffer never get recourse. This contradiction is discussed by Adrados, who argues that Phaedrus is an optimist struggling against a world that is manifestly unfair.<sup>137</sup> That psychological reading is not necessary, however, since Phaedrus himself gives an explanation for this seeming contradiction in Fable 5.4.

In this fable, Phaedrus tells the story of a farmer who sacrifices his pig, and then orders that the pig’s remaining food be given to a donkey. The donkey refuses the food, however,

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<sup>136</sup> There is also a link between this fable and the etiology of the third prologue thanks to this fable’s use of *calumniator* to describe the wolf. The slaves of the third prologue avoid a charge of *calumnia*, or slander, through their use of fables. Slaves are commonly the victims of slander (one thinks of Aesop, falsely accused of stealing figs in the opening of the *Life of Aesop*). The sheep, like a slave, is unable to defend herself against slander because her accusers are more powerful than she.

<sup>137</sup> Adrados 2000: 164: “The poet is not totally at ease on an ambiguous terrain: that of affirming the prevalence of good when not only the traditional fable that he continued to cultivate, but also his personal experiences show that this is very often not the case.” Adrados develops this view by trying to determine which fables have been altered or invented by Phaedrus, and which are merely borrowed, assuming that the borrowed fables are less important when it comes to uncovering Phaedrus’s perspective. This view is a little problematic, as even the borrowed fables were selected by Phaedrus for a reason. However, for another attempt to uncover what in Phaedrus is original, cf. Moretti 1982.

pointing out that the last animal that ate that food was killed.<sup>138</sup> Phaedrus ends the fable by talking in his own voice about what the fable might mean:

*Huius respectu fabulae deterritus,  
periculosum semper vitavi lucrum.  
sed dicis, "Qui rapuere divitias, habent."  
10 numeremus aedum qui deprenti perierunt;  
maiozem turbam punitozum reperies.  
paucis temeritas est bono, multis malo.*

Frightened by the consideration of this fable,  
I have always avoided dangerous profit.<sup>139</sup>  
But you say, "Those who have stolen wealth, have it."  
10 Come, let us count those who have perished after being caught;  
you will find that the crowd of the punished is greater.  
Rashness is good for a few, but an evil to many.  
(5.4.7-12)

Technically, this fable is intended to teach the audience to avoid dangerous profit, just like the donkey who refuses food after he sees that the one who ate it was killed. Yet the "moral" of the fable is less a simple lesson, and more Phaedrus's meditation on the nature of crime and punishment. Phaedrus claims that he himself is convinced by this fable to avoid dangerous profit, but he anticipates that his readers will be more skeptical, perhaps because they have seen thieves who are rich and have faced no punishment. Phaedrus makes it clear that even if *some* thieves escape punishment, that does not mean that there is no justice in the world. Rather, most thieves are punished, and that should be enough of a deterrent for everyone else. Phaedrus thus addresses

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<sup>138</sup> The surface meaning of this fable seems to be that the donkey is afraid that if he eats the pig's food, he too will be sacrificed. An alternative interpretation is possible, however: namely that the donkey simply refuses to profit from another animal's pain. This may speak to what must have been a common slave dilemma: the discomfort of profiting from another slave's loss.

<sup>139</sup> Of course, in the third prologue, Phaedrus claims that he has disregarded all profit in his pursuit of poetry (3 *prol.* 21). Here he claims that he has avoided profit because this fable has taught him its danger. In both cases, the avoidance of wealth is linked to Phaedrus's particular brand of poetry (fables), although his focus shifts to suit the argument of the moment, a particularly fitting way for a fabulist to behave.



the very contradiction that scholars have noticed in his fables: that sometimes Phaedrus presents a world in which the wicked get away with their crimes, and sometimes he presents a world in which divine justice operates. This is Phaedrus's explanation.

It is also worth pointing out that Phaedrus frames his notion of justice in terms of the likelihood of suffering: thievery (and other forms of "dangerous profit") should be avoided because they are likely to bring punishment. They are too dangerous to be worthwhile. This is similar, in fact, to the sort of logic Aesop uses in P20 when he convinces the slave not to run away: running away is likely to bring suffering, and so must be avoided. This is a resolutely practical way of looking at the world, and one that must have been common among slaves and the poor. What is significant about Phaedrus's stance is that he does not limit this viewpoint to the powerless: the powerful also, in Phaedrus's world, are likely to face punishment for their crimes. This is clear not only from fables like the one seen above, in which the wolf is punished through divine intervention, but also from this fable about the donkey who refuses the dead pig's food. Phaedrus asserts that profit (*lucrum*) is dangerous, a perspective that incorporates both the wealthy and the downtrodden: both pursue wealth, albeit in different ways, and both are liable to face the harm that the unscrupulous acquisition of wealth can bring.<sup>140</sup>

This, again, can be viewed through the lens of slave fantasy. If the world operates according to a higher justice, then the slave can take comfort that his owners' crimes will be punished, even if the slave himself has no recourse, legal or otherwise. At the same time, this fable acknowledges that sometimes there is no justice, while insisting that this does not detract

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<sup>140</sup> I translated *rapere* with the sense "steal," as is often the case. However, *rapere* often carries the idea of force: it is not merely to steal, but to take by force. Therefore, it also works as a verb for those in a position of power, who are able to use force to acquire wealth.

from the basic justice according to which the universe operates. Even that sort of realism can be considered part of the fantasy; after all, it allows the slave who faces injustice to continue believing in the basic justice of the universe.

Even more striking are fables in which the powerless character takes revenge himself. This is even more of a fantasy, insofar as it creates an even more unlikely scenario: not divine justice, but justice by the lowliest. Perhaps the best example is Fable 1.28, which is Phaedrus's take on the famous fable of the fox and the eagle.<sup>141</sup> This fable, which appears as early as Archilochus,<sup>142</sup> is given a new spin in Phaedrus, for Phaedrus changes the ending in order to give the fox agency in her revenge:

*Quamvis sublimes debent humiles metuere,  
vindicta docili quia patet sollertiae.  
Vulpinos catulos aquila quondam sustulit,  
nidoque posuit pullis escam ut carperent.  
5 hanc persecuta mater orare incipit,  
ne tantum miserae luctum importaret sibi.  
contempsit illa, tuta quippe ipso loco.  
vulpes ab ara rapuit ardentem facem,  
totamque flammis arborem circumdedit,  
10 hosti dolorem damno miscens sanguinis.  
aquila, ut periculo mortis eriperet suos,  
incolumes natos supplex vulpi tradidit.*

People, however lofty their station, ought to fear the humble, since revenge lies open to skillful cleverness.

Once an eagle grabbed the cubs of a fox and placed them in her nest for her babies to seize as food.  
5 The mother, tormented by this, began to beg that the eagle not bring so much grief to miserable her. The eagle ignored her, since she was safe in such a high place. The fox seized a burning firebrand from an altar, and surrounded the whole tree with fire,  
10 mixing grief for her enemy by condemning her offspring.

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<sup>141</sup> Cf. Bradley 1987: 152.

<sup>142</sup> On the fable in Archilochus, see particularly Steiner 2012: 12-26.

The eagle, in order to seize her own from the danger of death,  
returned the cubs to the fox unharmed, acting as a suppliant.  
(1.28.1-12)

The basic story of this fable is the same as the one that appears in Aesop and (presumably) Archilochus: the eagle tries to eat the fox's young, and then her nest burns. However, Phaedrus's take on it is unique, insofar as he gives fox more agency and the fable a happy ending. In Aesop's full version of the fable, the eagle eats the fox's cubs, but then accidentally sets her own nest on fire after robbing an altar.<sup>143</sup> In such a telling, the fire acts as a sort of divine punishment: it comes from an altar, and in Archilochus the fox actually prays to Zeus to avenge her wrong.<sup>144</sup> The fox, however, does not take the revenge herself, and her cubs are certainly not saved. This original telling of the fable is more in line with the fables we previously examined, in which evildoers are punished by the gods. Phaedrus, however, changes the narrative so that the fox takes successful revenge by herself. The fox gets the firebrand, and sets the ground around the tree on fire. The eagle, fearing for her chicks, becomes a suppliant (1.28.12: *supplex*) and returns the fox's cubs. The implication is that returning the cubs is the only way to convince the fox to put out the fire so that the eagle's young are not killed. The fox, then, despite being a literally lowly and powerless creature, is able to save herself, humble the eagle (who must come down from her nest), and save her children. Particularly telling is the fact that Phaedrus characterizes the fox's actions as evidence of *sollertia* – cleverness is, after all, the key trait of the trickster figure so often featured in revenge fantasies.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Fable 1.

<sup>144</sup> Arch. frag. 94 (Campbell).

<sup>145</sup> Scott 1990: 41.

That Phaedrus's fable has to do with social class specifically is made clear through his emphasis on the spatial differences between the eagle and the fox. The eagle feels secure because of her high position (1.28.7: *tuta...ipso loco*); surely a fox who must remain on the ground will be powerless to harm her. Yet the fox does manage to harm the eagle, and she does so by setting the ground on fire. This is significant. In Archilochus and Aesop, the eagle sets her nest on fire; the flames threaten her at her own level, as it were. In Phaedrus, the fox sets the ground on fire, yet this is still such a threat to the eagle that she relents. In other words, the fox, despite being humble, and despite using only the weapons available to her on the ground, is able to bring the eagle down as a suppliant. The imagery of this fable is quite clear, and if it were not, the first lines make it so: the eagle represents those who are high in station (*sublimes*), the fox those who are humble (*humiles*) but who possess cleverness (*sollertia*).<sup>146</sup> The high are told to recognize that the humble, because of their cleverness, can pose a threat.

The applicability to slave fantasies is clear. The fox, just like a slave, faces abuse from someone much higher than she is. Her children are taken away which, as Bradley notes, was a common slave fear.<sup>147</sup> As was not the case in the actual slave experience, however, this fox was able to take revenge, get her children back, and punish the eagle. Despite the fantasy element of this fable, it retains its plausible deniability partly through the animal characters (as we saw before) and partly through the fable's ostensible top-down perspective. The fable claims to be warning the powerful to watch out for the weak: this is a normative moral, and hence helps

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<sup>146</sup> Bajoni 1999: 322 argues that in Aesop, animals and humans are distinguished by *logos*, whereas in Phaedrus they are distinguished by *sollertia*. Bajoni suggests that this makes Phaedrus's fables more Roman and highlights the importance of practical intelligence.

<sup>147</sup> Bradley 1987: 59-63.

mitigate what happens within the fable. In other words, there is a dual perspective. From a top-down perspective, this fable supports the common elite bias that the downtrodden are dangerous and not to be trusted. Read from the opposite perspective, however, this fable can be seen as a revenge fantasy of the weak against the strong.

Fable 3.2 is another revenge fantasy, although it grants even greater power to the abused party than does Fable 1.28. In this fable, a panther falls into a pit. Humans find her there, and half of them beat her with clubs and stones, taking advantage of her being trapped. The other half feel sorry for her and throw down bread. At night, they all go home, assuming that she will die during the night. Instead, she escapes from the pit, comes to their village, and kills all those who harmed her. She spares the ones who gave her bread, however, explaining that she remembers who hurt her and who helped her. She is only bringing vengeance to the ones who did her wrong.

In a certain sense, this fable would be difficult to map onto slavery, as the animal character, the panther, is a powerful predator. Normally in fables, the slave analogues are beasts of burden, like the donkey,<sup>148</sup> or weak but clever characters, like the fox. In this fable, in contrast, there is the panther, which is neither domesticated nor weak. Nevertheless, this fable can still be used to talk about class thanks to the spatial differences. The panther falls down into a pit, meaning that she is literally lower than the humans who harm or help her. It is, in fact, the humans' position above her that allow them to abuse her, as the first line indicates: *solet a despectis par referri gratia* (3.2.1: "It is common for the despised to pay back in kind"). This moral asserts a kind of equality between the despised and their abusers: the despised will literally give an "equal return" (*par...gratia*) to their oppressors. The word *despectis* comes from the verb

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<sup>148</sup> Cf. Bradley 2000: 112-124 and Knapp 2011: 132-133, both of whom discuss the donkey as a slave analogue in Apuleius.

*despicio*, which literally means “to look down on,” with a secondary meaning of “despise.” The panther is despised because the humans are in a (literal) position to look down on her. Moreover, the panther’s escape from the pit is put in terms of emancipation: the panther “frees” herself (3.2.10: *sese liberat*) and so is able to exact revenge. This fable, then, like the fable of the fox and the eagle, can be considered a slave fantasy: it presents a world in which even those who are despised and abused can hope one day to free themselves and take revenge on those who harmed them. Of course, within the law it is impossible for slaves to free *themselves*; hence the fantasy.

Both of these fables retain their plausible deniability through their animal characters, and through their morals. The fable of the fox and the eagle is ostensibly a warning for the powerful, not a consolation for the weak, and the panther in the pit is ostensibly a morality tale about kindness, not the story of a runaway slave murdering her oppressors. The revenge fantasy is a secondary meaning, which can easily be denied if necessary. A third fable (3.5), on the other hand, is notable in that it features human characters, and thus has less distance between its primary and secondary meanings.

In this fable, a man throws a stone at Aesop. Aesop thanks him, gives him a penny, and tells him that if he wants more he should try throwing a stone at a rich man. Aesop promises that the man will receive a “proper reward” (3.5.7: *dignum...praemium*). The man takes his advice and throws a stone at a rich man, at which point he is crucified. The moral, as stated by the fable itself, is *successus ad perniciem multos devocat* (3.5.1: “Success calls many to destruction”). Once again, as we saw with Fables P20 and 1.28, there is a tension between the “safe” moral and the actual action of the fable. After all, the man in the fable is not exactly “successful;” he is tricked by Aesop into believing that he has been successful, and that the same action will receive similar results if he tries it with a different person. In reality, Aesop is using the rich man to exact

revenge on the person who has wronged him. In other words, here there is a slave character<sup>149</sup> tricking a persecutor into getting himself crucified.<sup>150</sup> Not through direct agency, but through cleverness – the weapon of the slave.

The revenge fantasy fables I have examined so far are fairly extreme: the fox uses arson, the panther kills her oppressors and devastates the countryside, and Aesop gets his tormentor crucified.<sup>151</sup> There is, however, one fable that is even more extreme than the ones we have examined so far, for it contains an unmistakable image of slave rebellion:<sup>152</sup>

*Nimiam securitatem saepe in periculum homines ducere*

*Feles habebat gallus lepticarios.  
hunc gloriose vulpes ut vidit vehi,  
sic est locuta: "Moneo praecaveas dolum;  
5 istorum vultus namque si consideres,  
praedam portare iudices, non sarcinam."  
postquam esurire coepit felum societas,  
discerpsit dominum et fecit partes funeris.*

How too much security often leads men into danger.

A rooster had cats as litter bearers.  
When a fox saw him being carried around in style,  
he spoke thus: "I warn you to beware of a trick;  
for if you were to consider the faces of these cats,  
5 you would think that they were carrying their prey, not a burden."  
After the society of cats began to feel hungry,  
they ripped their master to shreds and divided his body.  
(P18.1-7)

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<sup>149</sup> Aesop is not explicitly identified as a slave in this fable. However, as Hawkins 2014: 131 points out, the action of this fable creates "a three-tiered hierarchy in which Aesop holds the lowest status." This, combined with Aesop's slave status in other fables, points to the conclusion that Aesop is also a slave here.

<sup>150</sup> Cf. the story of Aesop and figs in *Life of Aesop* (G2-3), in which Aesop is accused of stealing some figs but manages to trick his accusers into revealing their guilt.

<sup>151</sup> Cf. Scott 1990: 163 for a discussion of the often extreme violence expressed in revenge fantasies.

<sup>152</sup> Open rebellion was fairly rare in the Roman Empire, cf. Bradley 1987: 31.

Because this fable comes from Perotti's Index, we do not know precisely what the original moral of the fable is, although we can deduce it from the title. This fable, it would seem, warned people not to become complacent simply because they felt so safe: even the rich and powerful might be at risk. The actual fable, however, presents the very striking image of a group of litter bearers (and therefore slaves) tearing their master to pieces, with the notable phrase *discerpsit dominum*. The image of slaves killing and dismembering their master is hard to ignore.

Furthermore, the animals chosen to represent the slaves and master in this fable are surprising. As I mentioned, slaves are generally represented by working animals,<sup>153</sup> but here the slave characters are predators, cats, and the master is the prey. Such an arrangement implies that the violence is inevitable, even natural: of course the cat-slaves will turn on their rooster-master.<sup>154</sup> Thus, not only does this fable present an analogue for slave rebellion, but it also implies that this rebellion is inevitable. This in and of itself is not a revolutionary notion; the fear of slave rebellions is a common elite concern. The image of the complacent rooster who allows himself to be torn apart by slaves could function as a warning to masters to beware their slaves, much as the ostensible message of the fox and eagle fable warns the elite to beware the cleverness of the low. The moral of the fable certainly implies as much. What pushes this into slave fantasy territory is that the fable ends on the striking image of the cats tearing apart their

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<sup>153</sup> Cf. P24, in which a shepherd asks a goat not to betray him to their master. Human slaves and animal slaves are fellow slaves in the world of the fable.

<sup>154</sup> Cf. duBois 2003: 176-177. DuBois argues that fables are inherently conservative, because they present animals as having "fixed essences" that determine their status and behavior. Hence, if slaves map onto certain species of animal, then that assumes that slaves also have fixed essences and an unchanging servile nature. This fable, however, shows that in actual practice, the fables are not as rigid with respect to social class as duBois assumes. Cf. Blackham 1985: 11 for the variety in how fable animals act. Also relevant is Blondell's discussion of how characterization works in Plato (2002: 8-10). Blondell argues that the Socrates in each of Plato's dialogues must be analyzed as a unique character, although there are obviously continuities across the dialogues. In a similar way, although the animals in fables certainly have characteristics that tend to be consistent, the animal must be read according to how it acts in the individual fable, not merely by its archetype.



master. The cats face no repercussions; they successfully take bloody vengeance on their oppressor, and the fable ends before any consequences are shown.

Thus far we have examined two ways in which Phaedrus's fables are applicable to slavery: they can be used to undermine the rhetoric used by slave owners to control their slaves, and they can comfort the oppressed through revenge fantasies. The revenge fantasies I have examined so far are extreme, insofar as the oppressors are taken down with direct violence and often killed. There are other revenge fantasy fables, however, that are less extreme: rather than using violence, the slave uses other means to get revenge on his owners. This is a more realistic type of fantasy, insofar as the characters often use resources or techniques that could be used by actual slaves.<sup>155</sup> Still, the element of fantasy remains, for the fable characters never face punishment for their misbehavior.

For example, Fable 17 of Perotti's Index contains a fable in which Aesop, here explicitly identified as a slave, uses silence as a power play against his mistress.<sup>156</sup> The fable begins with Aesop getting beaten after telling his mistress that she should stop wearing makeup: not because she is beautiful without it, but because her bed will have more rest if her true ugliness is allowed to show.<sup>157</sup> Later, the mistress' bracelet is stolen. She gathers together all the slaves and demands that they tell her the truth about the bracelet's whereabouts; otherwise, they will be beaten. Aesop responds:

*“Aliis minare; me” inquit “non falles, era;*

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<sup>155</sup> Bradley 1987: 31-32 lists ways in which slaves might have resisted their enslavement, from open rebellion and/or violence, to running away, and finally to deliberate poor performance as a form of sabotage.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. Daube 1972: 55-56. Cf. also Heath 2005: 18: “Silence is often associated with passivity and powerlessness, but it also has force if controlled and used in the right settings.”

<sup>157</sup> On the (often misogynistic) treatment of women in Phaedrus, and the extent to which Phaedrus's depiction of women conforms to reality, cf. de Maria 1987. For the view that folklore is not inherently sexist, cf. Maclean 1987, who discusses the presence of a female oppositional voice in folktales more generally.

*flagris sum caesus, verum quia dixi modo.*”

“Threaten others;” he said, “you will not trick me, mistress.  
I was beaten with whips, since I told the truth just now.”  
(P17.15-16)

The title of this fable is *Quam noceat saepe verum dicere* (“How harmful it often is to tell the truth”). One imagines, then, that the actual moral of the fable is that telling the truth can get a person into trouble. The fable itself, however, is useful in terms of slave power, for Aesop makes use of silence as a power play: he refuses to tell his mistress the truth about her bracelet because she beat him earlier for telling the truth. He is, in essence, using her own rhetoric against her: she cannot punish the truth one minute and then demand the truth the next minute.<sup>158</sup> This is similar to how Aesop acts in the *Life and Fables of Aesop*, in which he frequently uses his owners’ words against them. These two strategies – using the owners’ words against them and using silence as a power play – are realistic, insofar as real slaves might have tried them. This remains in the realm of fantasy, however, since Aesop faces no punishment for his final, saucy remark. Or at the very least, the fable ends before any punishment is revealed.

A more extreme version of this may be found in Fable 1.15:

*In principatu commutando civium  
nil praeter dominum, non res mutant pauperes.  
id esse verum parva haec fabella indicat.  
Asellum in prato timidus pascebat senex.  
5 is hostium clamore subito territus  
suadebat asino fugere, ne possent capi.  
At ille lentus: “Quaeso, num binas mihi  
clitellas impositurum victorem putas?”  
senex negavit. “Ergo quid refert mea  
10 cui serviam, clitellas dum portem unicas?”*

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<sup>158</sup> Daube 1972: 56 connects this to Epictetus, who recommended that slaves use their master’s rhetoric against them. Cf. also Scott 1990: 18, who discusses other historical examples of oppressed parties who use their oppressors’ rhetoric against them.

When the leadership of the citizens changes,  
the poor change nothing except their master.

This fable indicates that this is true.

5 A timid old man was feeding his donkey in a meadow,  
when he was suddenly terrified by the shouting of the enemy;  
he urged the donkey to flee, so that they would not be captured.  
But the stubborn donkey said, "I ask you, do you think that  
the conqueror will place two packs on me?"  
The old man said no. "Therefore, what difference does it make to me  
10 whose slave I am, so long as I am only carrying one pack?"

(Fable 1.15.1-10)

This fable functions on both a macro and a micro level.<sup>159</sup> On the macro level, the fable (as the moral indicates) is about a change of government: such a change makes no difference to the poor. Yet the action of the fable itself has to do with slavery. This is made explicit by the donkey, who uses the phrase *cui serviam* ("whose slave I am"): what is at stake for the donkey is not a change in government, but a change in masters. Hence, even though the fable as a whole may be about politics, it still has something to say about slavery.

This donkey, much like Aesop in the previous fable we examined, makes a power play through inaction. Aesop refused to speak; here, the donkey refuses to move. He has no motivation to help his owner escape the enemy, and so he simply remains where he is.<sup>160</sup> What the fable does not make explicit (but which is clear enough after a moment's thought) is that the donkey is, in essence, letting his master be made a fellow slave. The old man is fearful lest they be captured (1.15.6: *ne possent capi*): he is facing human slavery if the donkey does not help him escape. The donkey is using his inaction to do violence against his master – or rather, to allow others to do the violence for him (you might compare Aesop tricking the man into getting

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<sup>159</sup> Cf. Daube 1972: 54-55.

<sup>160</sup> One might contrast stories of loyal slaves, such as Appian's account of the slaves who remained loyal during the proscriptions. On this subject, cf. Parker 1998.

himself crucified).

In both of these fables, a slave or a slave-analogue uses a real-world strategy (silence or inaction) as a power play. In both cases, the fable ends before any sort of punishment is meted out, leaving the audience with the impression that this tactic was successful. Thus, although the morals do not connect these fables explicitly to slavery, the content in the fables themselves is easily applicable to the slave experience.

I have not, of course, examined even the majority of fables in Phaedrus that might have to do with slavery.<sup>161</sup> What I have shown is what these fables have to say about the slave experience, and why the fable medium is important as a way of providing plausible deniability for things that could not be said openly. Phaedrus's fables question the rhetoric that slavery could ever be pleasant or that freedom is something that a slave can earn; they imagine a world in which the gods mete out punishment against those who abuse the weak, a world in which the oppressed can take violent revenge for themselves, or simply one in which a clever retort or passive resistance is successful at no cost. All of these interpretations, however, are only available for the reader who is willing to look beyond the animal characters and the normative morals to the messages encoded within the text. Such a reader not only gets more out of Phaedrus, but also comes to understand the usefulness of fables as a method of covert speech.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

As I argued in the first chapter, the *Life of Aesop* teaches the audience how to use the fables that follow in the most effective manner. These lessons are specifically aimed at the low:

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<sup>161</sup> Bradley 1987: 150-153 has a list of fables he has noticed, although it too is not exhaustive. Cf. also Bajoni 1999 who argues that Fable 5.8 should be interpreted through the lens of slavery.

the *Life* teaches the low why acting according to fable wisdom is a good idea, and how speaking through the medium of fables can protect the speaker from danger. In many ways, Phaedrus proves himself the heir of this perspective. He picks up on the notion that fables represent a form of coded and therefore protected speech, and he explores it in his book of poetry. Like Aesop, Phaedrus teaches that fables are useful as a form of speech for the low specifically, although in Phaedrus such usefulness is tied more explicitly to the political climate of the early Roman Empire.

However, Phaedrus is not an uncritical receptor of Aesop. Not only does Phaedrus explore the usefulness of covert speech for the current political situation, but he also makes significant changes to the character of Aesop's text. Phaedrus may, for the most part, characterize Aesop in much the same way that Aesop is characterized in the *Life*, but Phaedrus also sanitizes Aesop's fables themselves, makes them seem like nothing more than a dry text full of moral advice. By going over Aesop's head and declaring that the "real" inventors of the fable genre were (other) slaves, and by explicitly aligning himself more closely with those unnamed slaves than with Aesop, Phaedrus presents himself as a better heir to the fable genre even than Aesop himself. For Phaedrus, what matters most of all is how fables are used: giving life advice is not the best use for fables; covert speech is.

As we will see in the chapters that follow, Phaedrus's emphasis on the fable genre as inherently connected to slaves will not be maintained in Aesop's other predecessors. Babrius and Avianus, although they too make ample use of the fable's multivalent nature, do not emphasize the fable genre's servile origins or its usefulness as a form of covert speech. They emphasize other aspects of the fable genre and of Aesop himself. The servile nature of fables remains the focus only of the *Life and Fables of Aesop* and of Phaedrus.

### Chapter 3

#### Babrius: Fables as Education

*It appears very probable, however, in the light of internal evidence derived from the text of his book as we know it, that [Babrius] was a hellenized Italian living in Syria, or somewhere near by in Asia Minor, in the second half of the first century after Christ; that he was a tutor to the son of a 'King Alexander,' ...that the first of his two books of fables was published a number of years before the appearance of the second book...; and that the two books together contained originally a total of something like 200 fables succeeding each other in an order different from the alphabetical order in which they appear in the principal manuscript of his work, codex A.*

--B. E. Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus* (1965), xlvii

Thus B. E. Perry summarizes what is known about the fabulist Babrius, based on statements made within the fable book itself. This is a necessary strategy, since the only external testimonium we have of Babrius comes from Avianus, a fabulist who writes in the fourth or fifth century CE and who lists Babrius as one of his influences.<sup>1</sup> Avianus's testimonium confirms only that Babrius existed and wrote two books of fables, which does not get us very far. Beyond that, we have only the text of Babrius itself (the second half of which is in poor shape, with most of the fables missing), which of course leaves the scholar in an awkward position. There is no necessary reason to accept anything that Babrius says in his text as historical fact, and yet

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<sup>1</sup> *Epistula ad Theodosium* lines 14-15: *quas Graecis iambis Babrius repetens in duo volumina coartavit* ("These Babrius returned to with Greek iambics and he compressed them into two volumes"). I use the text of Duff 1934 for Avianus.

without those statements, we have nothing. The only practical solution is to do exactly what Perry does: summarize what we think we might know, while admitting that the source of the information means that nothing is actually known.

Although Perry limits himself to conclusions drawn from Babrius's own text and is explicit that this is what he is doing, the above summary is not without problems. Babrius does state explicitly that he is a tutor to "the son of King Alexander" (2 *prol.* 1), but everything else in Perry's summary is inferred from textual hints, not explicit assertions. For example, that Babrius was a "hellenized Italian living in Syria" is a simple-sounding statement actually derived from a number of smaller hints: Babrius's name is Italian, or so we think based on inscriptions from Umbria,<sup>2</sup> yet he wrote in Greek and mentions Arabs and camels in his fables.<sup>3</sup> Since Arabs are not traditional fable characters, their presence could be explained by placing Babrius in an eastern locale or, at the very least, accepting that this is Babrius's authorial pose.

Much scholarly debate has occurred over the historical identity of the King Alexander mentioned by Babrius in his second prologue and the Branchus mentioned in the first prologue. Scholars who believe that Babrius's King Alexander is a historical figure tend to point to the Alexander appointed by Vespasian to rule over Syria in 72 CE, as this is the only individual named Alexander from the time period in which Babrius is assumed to be writing.<sup>4</sup> However, as

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<sup>2</sup> Perry 1965: lii-iii; Morgan 2007: 329; Rutherford 1883: xix. Perry also argues that the "metrical peculiarities" of Babrius's verse point to his Roman origin: "The most distinctive feature of the Babrian choliambic line is the never-failing selection of a Greek word accented on the penultimate syllable in the last foot. This, as Crusius was the first to point out, is without parallel elsewhere in Greek iambic poetry, but is inevitable in the Roman scazon or choliambic line... Only a poet who was influenced by familiarity with the Latin accentuation... would be likely to introduce such a convention into Greek verse" (liii-liv).

<sup>3</sup> Fables 8 (The Arab and his Camel); 40 (The Camel in the River); 57 (How the Arabs Became Liars); 80 (Dancing is Not for the Camel).

<sup>4</sup> Holzberg 2002: 60; Morgan 2007: 326-330; Perry 1965: xlvi-1; Rutherford 1883: xxiii. This King Alexander is mentioned by Josephus, *Antiq. Jud.* xviii.140. Perry argues in favor of this identification largely because this King Alexander fits with the assumed date of Babrius's text, and his position in Syria would allow Babrius his place in the

Hawkins has recently pointed out, it is problematic to assume that Babrius is writing his fables for a real king. For one thing, while there is no historical attestation for the name Branchus,<sup>5</sup> it is a name known from mythology and literature. Branchus is a son of Apollo with prophetic powers, and that is also a name that appears in Callimachus’s poetry.<sup>6</sup> Hawkins argues that the inclusion of Branchus’s name is one of many allusions to Callimachus that appears in Babrius, and so the “son of King Alexander” is probably fictional as well. Since Babrius gives no details about either of his dedicatees beyond their name, this seems the safest approach. Babrius may state that he is writing to a prince, but there is no reason to see this as anything other than a literary fiction.

Furthermore, there is reason to doubt Perry’s assertions that (1) Babrius’s two books of fables were published separately with many years intervening and (2) the order was not originally alphabetical. Both of these conclusions are drawn from four lines in Babrius’s second prologue, in which Babrius complains about his would-be imitators:

- 10 ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ δὲ πρώτου τῆς θύρης ἀνοιχθείσης  
 εἰσῆλθον ἄλλοι, καὶ σοφωτέρης μούσης  
 γρίφοις ὁμοίας ἐκφέρουσι ποιήσεις,  
 μαθόντες οὐδὲν πλεῖον ἢ ’μὲ γινώσκειν.
- 10 After the door had been opened by me first,  
 others came in, and with a more learned muse  
 they publish poems similar to riddles,  
 having learned nothing more than to know me.  
 (2 *prol.* 9-12)

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east. Furthermore, Josephus tells us that Alexander was a known advocate of Greek learning, which could explain why a Roman like Babrius was writing in Greek. Morgan gives a highly detailed account of the family and political connections of this Alexander (2007: 326-330).

<sup>5</sup> This is admitted even by Morgan 2007: 330, although she believes that Babrius’s pupils are historical figures.

<sup>6</sup> Hawkins 2014: 88, 101, 110.



Based on these lines, Perry argues that Babrius published his first book of fables, then enough years transpired to allow imitators to spring up, and then Babrius wrote his second book of fables. This in turn leads Perry to conclude that Babrius's two books of fables could not have divided the alphabet over two books, with alpha through lambda in the first book, and mu through omega in the second book. For if many years transpired between the two books, Perry argues, then they must each have been stand-alone, with the entire alphabet in each book.<sup>7</sup>

Such a reconstruction is needlessly complicated, especially since it works against the text as we now have it.<sup>8</sup> Babrius's anger against his supposed imitators does not require a long biographical explanation: to complain about one's less talented imitators is traditional, and, as I will show, these lines fit perfectly into Babrius's wider authorial stance. Since there is an internal reason for these lines to exist, no external reason is needed, especially not one that requires us to assume that Babrius's text was reordered by later editors.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as Holzberg discusses, there are other reasons to accept the alphabetical ordering of Babrius's fables. Babrius often begins his fables with the name of the animal but no article, and this would follow the tradition of Sumerian fable books which were organized alphabetically. Also, Babrius begins his second

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<sup>7</sup> Perry 1965: lv-lix. Cf. Vaio 1984: 198, who argues that Babrius's fables were not alphabetical based on an early manuscript containing four fables not in alphabetical order.

<sup>8</sup> The principal manuscript of Babrius is Codex A, which contains 122 fables in verse. Various other Babrian fables which do not appear in A can be found in the other principal manuscripts: Codex V (containing twelve otherwise unpreserved fables in verse), Codex (B) (a collection of 148 prose paraphrases), Codex G (containing four new verse fables), and T (wax tablets written by a student which contain thirteen very corrupt fables, four of which are not otherwise preserved). On these manuscripts, cf. Perry 1965: lxi-lxix and Crusius 1897. For the purposes of this chapter, I rely on the text of Perry, which prints 143 fables, chiefly based on Codex A but supplemented by the other manuscripts.

<sup>9</sup> To be fair, there is ample evidence that some later additions were made to Babrius's text: in particular, it seems that many of the morals that we have are not genuine (cf. Perry 1965: lxi-lxvi). However, there is a difference between editors adding morals, which is a relatively small change, and editors reordering all of the fables, which would be much more substantial. The two alterations could easily have happened together, but the one change does not necessitate the other.

fable book with the word  $\mu\tilde{\theta}\theta\omicron\varsigma$ , which makes sense for an author who always intended to have the second half of the alphabet in the second book.<sup>10</sup> Essentially, the balance of the evidence is in favor of leaving the fables in their current alphabetic order.

I, then, will accept a modified version of Perry's summary for use in this chapter. Babrius's stance is that of a prince's tutor who lives in the east, although there is no reason to accept this as historical fact. Furthermore, I will assume that Babrius's original work was similar to the one that has come down to us: two fable books, each with a prologue, and originally with half of the alphabet in each book. The text as we have it contains a complete or nearly complete first half, but is missing much of the second half. Both books were addressed to Babrius's pupil, Branchus, the son of King Alexander.<sup>11</sup> In this reconstruction, I differ from Perry and Rutherford, and most closely follow Holzberg.

More recently, scholarship on Babrius has moved away from questions of historical identity to an examination of the text itself. Much fruitful work has been done on Babrius's literary dependencies and on the significance of Babrius's decision to write fables in iambic verse. Tom Hawkins, in his *Iambic Poetry in the Roman Empire* (2014), discusses Babrius's place in the iambic tradition and the ways in which Babrius makes use of Callimachus. Hawkins argues that Babrius is flexible in his engagement with the iambic tradition, writing a fable book that mostly adheres to elite viewpoints, but which also appeals to non-elite perspectives. Richard

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<sup>10</sup> Holzberg 2002: 53-55.

<sup>11</sup> There is longstanding debate about whether the "Branchus" mentioned in the first prologue is the same as the "son of King Alexander" mentioned in the second prologue. Much of this debate stems from the theory, discussed above, that the two fable books were published separately. Perry, for instance, worries that Branchus would not still have been young enough to enjoy fables by the time the second book was published, and so assumes that there are two separate boys being addressed (Perry 1965: lvi-lvii). On this issue, cf. also Rutherford 1883: xi-xii, who calls the debate "trivial," and Oldaker 1934: 87, who pleads uncertainty. Since I believe that the two halves of the fable book were originally published together, I see no good reason to assume a different addressee in the second half, since no new name is given.

Hunter considers Babrius's debt to Hesiod, in terms of literary allusions, authorial pose, and other thematic connections.<sup>12</sup> Both of these authors demonstrate that Babrius actively engages with other writers, and that his fables are deepened through the use of clever literary allusions. As Luzzatto demonstrated long ago, Babrius is a well-educated and well-read man, and his fables reflect this.<sup>13</sup> Luzzatto connects this to Babrius's role as a teacher: he is familiar with classical literature because he is an educator.<sup>14</sup>

Hawkins, Hunter, and Luzzatto all demonstrate that Babrius's style and content are deliberate and thoughtful, and that as such, Babrius's stylistic choices can be used to better interpret the fable collection as a whole. This is an important advance in the study of Babrius, which had previously focused mostly on textual history and on Babrius's biography. In this chapter, I will discuss another important dimension that informs Babrius's text as a whole: his pedagogical strategy. As I will show, Babrius is not merely interested in using fables to teach moral lessons; instead, he uses his fables to teach his audience *how* to learn. In other words, Babrius is interested in giving his pupils useful strategies for correctly interpreting information, for avoiding mental pitfalls, and for telling the difference between qualified and unqualified teachers. Understanding Babrius's pedagogical strategy is important not only because it brings to light an important theme that runs through Babrius's collection, but also because it helps explain a number of puzzling features of Babrius's text, such as the lack of morals, the psychological focus, and the disconnect between the first prologue and the fables themselves.

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<sup>12</sup> Hunter 2014: 227-256. Luzzatto 1975: 19-20 also has a list of Hesiodic allusions in Babrius, but without analysis.

<sup>13</sup> Luzzatto 1975 details any and all literary allusions included in Babrius's fables. She includes not only intentional allusions, but also similarities in vocabulary, grammar, and the senses in which words are used.

<sup>14</sup> Luzzatto 1975: 51.

It is generally agreed that most of the fables in Babrius's original fable collection did not contain morals.<sup>15</sup> Morals were added by later editors, who, as Becker has shown, were motivated by the desire to clarify the more obscure or complicated fables of Babrius. Becker argues that, for the most part, Babrius's fables do not need morals: Babrius makes the meaning of the fable clear through pointed vocabulary and by telescoping the fable's end, so that putting a moral on the fable becomes superfluous.<sup>16</sup> However, not including morals is an unusual choice for a fabulist. The *Aesopica* and the collection of Phaedrus generally include morals, and in the case of Avianus, a good half of the fables do so. Furthermore, according to Theon, the first century CE rhetorician who discusses the fable genre, morals were vital to the use of fables in education.<sup>17</sup> Babrius's lack of morals needs explaining, and, as I will show, is a vital aspect of his pedagogical strategy. Babrius encourages active thought in his pupils and wishes them to learn how to interpret data for themselves. Therefore, forcing his pupils to rely on clues within the fables themselves in order to determine the moral allows them to practice the strategies Babrius maintains are vital to education.

It has also been observed that Babrius, more than any other fabulist, is interested in the internal processes that his characters undergo before they make a decision.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Phaedrus, who generally focuses on external conflict (one animal trying to outsmart or take advantage of another), Babrius focuses far more on internal conflict, on the thought processes of his

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<sup>15</sup> Becker 2006 discusses this at length. She points out that even in Codex A (in which morals were added by later editors), only 61 of the 144 fables contain morals, and many of those morals are considered spurious.

<sup>16</sup> Becker 2006: 174.

<sup>17</sup> Hunter 2014: 238. Becker clarifies that these morals were only deemed necessary if the fable's message was being used as a lesson in and of itself (2006: 149).

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Holzberg 2002: 57-58, who notes that Babrius often prefers internal to external conflict. Cf. also Zafiroopoulos 2001: 35 and Nøjgaard 1979: 35.

characters. This, again, is a puzzling feature of Babrius that can be explained easily through an appeal to Babrius's desire to educate: since Babrius wishes his students to learn how to think and how not to think, he illustrates good and bad thought processes through his fable characters. Babrius is thus not so much concerned with what behaviors will lead to bad outcomes, as what thought processes will lead to the behaviors that lead to bad outcomes.

Finally, there is the disconnect between Babrius's first prologue – which asserts that the fables took place in the Golden Age, a time of justice during which animals and humans were friendly with one another – and the fables themselves, which portray a world of conflict, violence, and injustice. This disconnect is sometimes commented upon, but has not been adequately explained.<sup>19</sup> In my analysis of the first prologue that will follow, I will demonstrate that by creating a contrast between the world of the fables and the world of the prologue, Babrius encourages his students to use the fables as evidence to disprove the myth of the Golden Age. Such a contrast between paratext and text fits perfectly with Genette's analysis of the paratext: as Genette says, an author's stated purpose in the prologue may be contradicted by the text that follows. When this happens, the reader is "compell[ed]...to take a position, positive or negative, in relation to it" (1997: 224). In just this way, the contrast between Babrius's first prologue and the fables themselves forces Babrius's readers to make a judgment about what to believe: the prologue or the fables. Once again, active learning is Babrius's key goal.

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<sup>19</sup> Hawkins 2014: 134-136 recognizes that the first fable seems jarring and out of place after the prologue, but his explanation is not entirely satisfying. Rather than concentrating on the fact that violence and conflict occur in the first fable, he concentrates on the *type* of violence, seeing this fable as a representation of how naked force is overpowering. He then suggests that "we can wonder if the bygone era mentioned in the prologue might refer not to the mythical Golden Age but, rather, to the earliest era of iambic fables when the Fox still could get the better of the likes of the Eagle and the Monkey." However, those early iambic fables were still full of conflict and violence, and thus would also not suit the peaceful and just age described in the prologue.

In demonstrating Babrius's interest in fables that teach his pupils how to think, I am taking a different tack than has previously been taken with regard to Babrius's relationship with education. It has of course previously been observed that Babrius presents himself as an educator; there have, as I discussed above, been many attempts to determine the identity of Babrius's pupil or pupils. There have also been attempts to contextualize Babrius's fables within the wider history of education. Becker, for instance, discusses the role of fables as school texts, and the popularity of Babrius's fable book in imperial schools.<sup>20</sup> She demonstrates that fables were used for reading and dictation practice, and as the raw material for various kinds of writing exercises: the translation of verse into prose, the shortening or expansion of a story, the application of the fable to a historical event, and the addition of various morals.<sup>21</sup> This practical use of Babrius in schools is important, but simply reading Babrius's fables also has its own educational value.

Thus, in this chapter I will not only refine the picture that Babrius presents of himself as an educator, but will also show how this pose influences the fables themselves. I will begin where Babrius does, with an analysis of the first prologue, here quoted in its entirety:

5 Γενεὴ δικαίων ἦν τὸ πρῶτον ἀνθρώπων,  
 ὃ Βράγχε τέκνον, ἦν καλοῦσι χρυσεῖην,  
 μεθ' ἦν γενέσθαι φασὶν ἀργυρῆν ἄλλην·  
 τρίτη δ' ἀπ' αὐτῶν ἔσμεν ἢ σιδηρεΐη.  
 ἐπὶ τῆς δὲ χρυσεῖς καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν ζώων  
 φωνὴν ἔναρθρον εἶχε καὶ λόγους ἦδει  
 οἴους περ ἡμεῖς μυθέομεν πρὸς ἀλλήλους,  
 ἀγοραὶ δὲ τούτων ἦσαν ἐν μέσαις ὕλαις.

<sup>20</sup> On the role of the fable genre in education, cf. especially Becker 2006: 168-169. On Babrius specifically, cf. pp. 169-171. In fact, we have found wax tablets of Babrius that appear to be written by a student, based on the errors. On these, cf. Hesselning 1892-1893.

<sup>21</sup> Becker 2006: 168-169. Cf. also Anderson 1993: 47-53 for a discussion of sophistic education in this time period more generally. Luzzatto 1975: 68-69 argues that several of Babrius's fables are in fact modeled on common rhetorical exercises.

10 ἐλάλει δὲ πεύκη καὶ τὰ φύλλα τῆς δάφνης,  
 καὶ πλωτὸς ἰχθὺς συνελάλει φίλῳ ναύτῃ,  
 στρουθοὶ δὲ συνετὰ πρὸς γεωργὸν ὠμίλουν.  
 ἐφύετ' ἐκ γῆς πάντα μηδὲν αἰτούσης,  
 θνητῶν δ' ὑπῆρχε καὶ θεῶν ἑταιρείη.  
 15 μάθοις ἂν οὕτω ταῦτ' ἔχοντα καὶ γνοίης  
 ἐκ τοῦ σοφοῦ γέροντος ἧμιν Αἰσώπου  
 μύθους φράσαντος τῆς ἐλευθέρης μούσης·  
 ὧν νῦν ἕκαστον ἀνθίσας ἐμῇ μνήμῃ  
 μελισταγῆς σοὶ λωτοκηρίον θήσω,  
 πικρῶν ἰάμβων σκληρὰ κῶλα θηλύνας.

The race of just men existed first,  
 Branchus my child, which they call golden,  
 after which they say another race, silver, came to be;  
 and we are third after them, the iron generation.  
 5 And in the Golden Age the other living creatures also  
 possessed an articulate voice and knew words  
 such as we speak to one another,  
 and they had meetings in the middle of the woods.  
 The pine chatted and the leaves of the laurel,  
 10 and the swimming fish chatted with the friendly sailor,  
 and sparrows spoke intelligent things to the farmer.  
 Everything grew from the earth without it asking anything in return,  
 and friendship existed between mortals and gods.  
 You can learn and form a judgment that the state of the world was thus  
 15 from wise old Aesop  
 who spoke fables to us with a free muse.  
 Now, having embroidered each of these with my own memory,  
 I will give them to you, a honeycomb dripping honey,  
 after softening the harsh limbs of the bitter iambs.  
 (1 *prol.* 1-19)

That Babrius is writing a didactic text is obvious from the first two lines. The prologue is addressed to Branchus, whom Babrius calls τέκνον, child. One might contrast Phaedrus, who addresses his (adult and wealthy) dedicatees, or Avianus, who addresses his patron. Babrius, by addressing his text to a child, immediately activates the student-teacher dynamic. This impression is strengthened by the subject of Babrius's opening: the ages of man. This is an

imitation of Hesiod,<sup>22</sup> who wrote perhaps the most famous didactic poem we have, although it is far from an exact imitation. Instead of five ages of man, here there are merely three.<sup>23</sup> Babrius does not give a description of each of the ages, choosing instead to focus on the Golden Age only. If Babrius's model is Hesiod, then, he is making major alterations.<sup>24</sup> Babrius himself both underlines and obfuscates the question of his source, by attributing these ages of man to the indefinite plural: φασι, "they say." The question of sources will become more important later on; here, Babrius merely gestures to it.

Babrius's role as a teacher is further solidified through his characterization of Aesop. We recall that Phaedrus highlighted Aesop's identity as a slave, in order to strengthen the connection between his fables and the coded language of slavery. Babrius performs a similar trick, by presenting Aesop in the guise of a wise old man. Here in the prologue, Babrius characterizes Aesop as τοῦ σοφοῦ γέροντος... Αἰσώπου (1 *prol.*15), the wise old man Aesop. Just as Phaedrus uses the slave-Aesop as an analogue for his own slavery, so Babrius uses the wise teacher Aesop as an analogue for his own role.<sup>25</sup> Babrius further specifies that Aesop tells fables with a "free muse." The description of Aesop's muse as "free" works on two levels. At the most literal, this a reference to the fact that Aesop wrote in prose. At another level, characterizing Aesop's prose style in this way allows for an oblique reference to Aesop's having been freed. Aesop did not write down his fables until he was freed, at least according to the *Life of Aesop*. Here, Babrius

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<sup>22</sup> On Babrius's wider use of Hesiodic allusions in the fables, cf. Luzzatto 1975: 19-20. For a more in-depth account on the Hesiodic allusions in the first prologue, cf. Hunter 2014: 228-233.

<sup>23</sup> Hawkins 2014: 99-100 n. 25 observes that Babrius's sequence of gold, silver and iron is unique.

<sup>24</sup> The focus on the Golden Age as just does, however, strongly recall Hesiod, as Hawkins observes (2014: 102-103).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Hawkins 2014: 130-132 for a similar discussion about the different ways in which Phaedrus and Babrius use the figure of Aesop. For the most part, our readings of Aesop in Babrius and Phaedrus are much the same, although Hawkins ties it much more closely to genre, when he suggests that Phaedrus is a "satirical counterpart to the iambic Babrius" (p. 133).



condenses both Aesop's genre (prose) and his status (freedman) in one phrase: free (= without meter and without slavery) muse. On the one hand, Babrius thus firmly distances himself from slave Aesop.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, this sort of denial can only bring the matter to the reader's attention: Babrius's insistence that Aesop spoke with freedom reminds the reader that Aesop was not always free.

Babrius's characterization of the Golden Age has important implications for the kind of didactic text that he is writing. Babrius focuses on this age to the exclusion of the others for a simple reason: Aesop's fables, he claims, are set in the Golden Age, when animals could talk. He says this as if it is common knowledge, and yet it is worth pointing out that Babrius is the only one of the fabulists to make this connection.<sup>27</sup> In the *Life of Aesop*, Aesop introduces his fables as coming from a time when "animals and humans could speak with one other" (G96), but he does not specify that this time was the ideal Golden Age.<sup>28</sup> Phaedrus and Avianus make no

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<sup>26</sup> This point is also made by Hawkins 2014: 114, who connects it to his wider argument about Babrius using the (humble) fable to appeal to elite audiences. Hawkins also brings out an additional dimension, suggesting that this phrase "recalls the bold and even obstreperous manner of speaking that characterized the Aesop of legend" (2014: 100). Hawkins considers various other meanings for "Free Muse" later in his chapter (2014: 108-109).

<sup>27</sup> There is a certain lack of precision in the scholarship about what qualifies as a Golden Age, with some scholars – like John Heath – making no distinction between time periods that are labeled as the Golden Age specifically and other fantastical pasts that are given no such title. Thus, when Heath claims that the Golden Age setting is used in Aesop (Heath 2005: 12), he is conflating "a time when animals could speak" with the "Golden Age," which is not a phrase that is ever used in the *Life and Fables of Aesop*. There is not necessarily anything wrong in not making a distinction there; Heath in particular is making generalizations about how the Greeks thought about the fantastical past, so it is useful for him to consolidate. I, however, will draw a careful distinction between the Golden Age and non-specific fantastical past ages. This distinction matters to me because of the specific connotations that come with the Golden Age: the Golden Age is viewed as an ideal and peaceful time, which is not the case with all fantastical pasts. Nagy 1979: 314 does claim that the Golden Age is the traditional setting of fables, but he bases this on Babrius's testimony.

<sup>28</sup> The situation with Callimachus is similar: *Iamb* 2 speaks of a time during which birds and sea creatures and four-legged creatures could all talk (*Ia.* 2 fr. 192.1-3), but it does not specify that this was the Golden Age or an idyllic time – although this may well be because the text is so fragmentary. There is testimony from Philo (*De Confusione Linguarum* 6-8) that suggests that Callimachus may have portrayed this fabular past as a utopian time; Philo describes a time when animals could talk and claims that it was a time full of good things, in language that seems to recall Callimachus and so may be based on him (cf. Gera 2003: 31-32 for an analysis of Philo and Callimachus). If this is true, then Babrius may be basing his account of the Golden Age on Callimachus. Unfortunately, because of the fragmentary nature of Callimachus, this must remain conjecture.

attempt to set their fables in any specific time. Thus, although Babrius attributes the idea of a Golden Age setting to Aesop, we have no external evidence that Aesopic fables were traditionally set in the Golden Age, as Babrius claims.

In fact, the only other evidence we have for a connection between fables and an ideal Golden Age comes from Plato. In the *Statesman*, Socrates, while discussing whether the Golden Age was truly utopian, considers the humans' ability to communicate with the animals:

Εἰ μὲν τοίνυν οἱ τρόφιμοι τοῦ Κρόνου, παρουσίας αὐτοῖς οὕτω πολλῆς σχολῆς καὶ δυνάμεως πρὸς τὸ μὴ μόνον ἀνθρώποις ἀλλὰ καὶ θηρίοις διὰ λόγων δύνασθαι συγγίνε-  
(c) σθαι, κατεχρῶντο τούτοις σύμπασι ἐπὶ φιλοσοφίαν, μετὰ τε θηρίων καὶ μετ' ἀλλήλων ὁμιλοῦντες, καὶ πυνθανόμενοι παρὰ πάσης φύσεως εἴ τινα τις ἰδίαν δύναμιν ἔχουσα ἤσθετό τι διάφορον τῶν ἄλλων εἰς συναγυρμὸν φρονήσεως, εὐκρίτον ὅτι τῶν νῦν οἱ τότε μυρίῳ πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν διέφερον· εἰ δ' ἐμπιπλάμενοι σίτων ἄδην καὶ ποτῶν διελέγοντο πρὸς ἀλλήλους καὶ τὰ θηρία [μύθους] οἷα δὴ καὶ τὰ νῦν περὶ αὐτῶν (d) λέγονται, καὶ τοῦτο, ὥς γε κατὰ τὴν ἐμὴν δόξαν ἀποφήνασθαι, καὶ μάλ' εὐκρίτον.

If indeed the nurslings of Kronus, since they thus had much leisure and the ability to converse in words not only with men, but also with animals, used all these abilities for philosophy, talking with beasts and with one another, (c) and if they inquired from each nature whether someone, having an individual power, knew something distinct for the common store of knowledge, then it is easy to judge that they differed in happiness from those who live now by a thousand-fold. But if, after filling up on too much food and drink, they talked to one another and to the beasts about the sorts of things that are said about them now, (d) then this scenario also, as it seems in my opinion, is very easy to judge. (272b-d)

In this passage, Socrates compares the Age of Kronos<sup>29</sup> with the present age in order to determine which of them is happier. The key point of his comparison is how humans and animals would have made use of their speech in that fantastical past. If they used their speech to discuss philosophy, then the Age of Kronos was happier than the present one. If, however, animals and humans talked instead about “the sorts of things that are said about them now,” then it is easy to

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<sup>29</sup> Socrates is here discussing a supposedly ideal past and so, even though he does not specifically call it a “Golden Age,” he is referring to that sort of thing. In fact, Baldry 1952 shows that “Age of Kronos” or “Age of Saturn” is the traditional way of referring to the ideal age of the past until the time of Augustus, after which “Golden Age” became more common.

judge that the Age of Kronos was not happier. As John Dillon points out in his analysis of this passage, “the sorts of things that are said about them now” (or the “stories nowadays,” as Dillon translates) that Socrates mentions are mostly likely fables, “since we have no other evidence of communication with animals being a feature of the Golden Age.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, if the talking animals of the Golden Age talked as they do in fables, then the age was not so ideal. Fables thus become a way to judge whether or not the Golden Age was truly happy, by providing evidence about how talking animals would have behaved.

It is possible that connecting fables with the Age of Kronos is Plato’s innovation, since the Golden Age is not the traditional setting of fables. If so, then Plato and Babrius make much the same leap: they assume that fables, featuring as they do talking animals, must be set in the fantastical past, and thus are set in the Golden Age. Such a leap is hardly intuitive, however, for fables are so ill-suited to the Golden Age that it is hard to imagine that this was their traditional setting. Perhaps the one feature that is consistent in Golden Age imagery is peace and (easy) prosperity: there is no farming and no hunting, and all of the various living creatures get along.<sup>31</sup> Yet fables, at their core, are about conflict; they could not exist in a peaceful, utopic time. It follows that (fable) animals would not use their ability to speak to peacefully discuss philosophy, so that Plato seems to be using a straw dog argument here: he raises the issue of talking animals

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<sup>30</sup> Dillon 1992: 29-30. Williams 1981 argues that Babrius is deliberately alluding to this passage of Plato.

<sup>31</sup> For surveys of the use of the Golden Age in Classical literature, cf. Zanker 2010; Dillon 1992: 24-33; Singleton 1972; and Martin 1943. The use of the term “Golden,” as well as other terminology for the fantastical past, is discussed by Baldry 1952. On how the theme of “magical abundance” in the fantastical past can be seen as a part of non-elite culture, cf. Forsdyke 2012: 54-59.

in the Golden Age and then uses fables as evidence for what humans and animals would talk about, and then uses that to prove the Golden Age was not so ideal.<sup>32</sup>

Although Babrius, like Plato, asserts that the Golden Age is the setting for fables, he seems (at least in the prologue) to betray no awareness that there is a tension between the peaceful setting of the Golden Age and the conflict inherent to fables. Quite the contrary; Babrius goes out of his way to emphasize that in the Golden Age, the ability to communicate was used in an atmosphere of peace, friendship, and prosperity. In fact, Babrius places great emphasis on the peaceful and productive ways in which speech was used in the Golden Age: animals use their speech to hold assemblies, the fish and the fisherman talk in a friendly matter, and sparrows chat with farmers. Even the earth is personified: she gives freely without *asking* anything in return, as if she is also an intelligent entity participating in the atmosphere of generosity and goodwill. This is the exact opposite of the conclusion that Plato reaches in the *Statesman*, since Socrates implies that animals and humans would not use their speech in a productive manner. Babrius, on the other hand, insists (at least here) that the outcome would be the very peace and prosperity that the Golden Age is known for. This only makes sense, given how Babrius opens his prologue: he promises that the Golden Age is a time of justice, and hence, it comes as no surprise that the animals, trees, and humans all use their speech in just ways.<sup>33</sup>

More striking is the fact that Babrius links this characterization of the Golden Age to Aesop, stating outright that Aesop's fables are proof that the Golden Age is as Babrius describes:

μάθοις ἂν οὕτω ταῦτ' ἔχοντα καὶ γνοίης

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<sup>32</sup> I agree with Dillon 1992: 30-32 that although Plato technically leaves it as an open question whether humans did or did not take advantage of the Golden Age, the implication is that they did not.

<sup>33</sup> Hawkins connects Babrius's talk of justice to Hesiod, and argues that such a Hesiodic allusion "afford his fables a voice in the grandest possible debates about the workings of the cosmos and, writ somewhat smaller, the authority of earthly rulers who rely on Zeus' favor" (2014: 103).

15 ἐκ τοῦ σοφοῦ γέροντος ἦμιν Αἰσώπου  
μύθους φράσαντος τῆς ἐλευθέρης μούσης·

15 You can learn and form a judgment that the state  
of the world was thus from wise old Aesop  
who spoke fables to us with a free muse.

(2 *prol.* 14-16)

Babrius here implies that Aesop's fables will serve as *proof* that the Golden Age was exactly as Babrius has just described: a time of peace and friendship and prosperity. Of course, anyone who knows fables may be suspicious of this claim; we just saw that Plato uses fables to suggest that the Golden Age was the most ideal of times. This is why it is so important that Babrius links his claim to the perception of his readers. He does not simply state that the world was thus or that Aesop's fables will in fact prove anything; he tells his audience that they should learn and form a judgment themselves based on the fables that follow. Babrius thus invites his readers to use fables as evidence for what the Golden Age was like, but unlike Plato, he does not make the judgment himself. He leaves it as an open question for his readers.

Furthermore, although the combination of μάθοις and γνοίης in these lines may seem redundant, the two words do in fact indicate two different mental processes. μάθοις, "you may learn," refers to the information that the student will (passively) receive from the teacher, who is here Aesop. γνοίης, on the other hand, refers to the mental process that the student must go through in order to interpret the information: to form a judgment, to think, to know. Babrius is here instructing the student not merely to passively receive the fables, but to actively think about them. This suggests a two-tier pedagogical model, in which the student receives information from the teacher but then judges and forms a conclusion about that information himself. As we will see, this is the very process that Babrius illustrates and recommends in the fables themselves.

Babrius ends the prologue with an allusion to his own role in all of this. He will embroider (1 *prol.* 17: ἀνθίσας) Aesop’s fables with his own memory (ἐμῆ μνήμη) and will give them to Branchus, after softening the harsh limbs of the iambs. Babrius’s reference to “softening” the iambs most likely refers to Babrius’s subject matter.<sup>34</sup> By promising that he will “soften” the iamb, Babrius is promising to avoid or mitigate the harsh subject matter that is traditionally associated with the iambic meter. Hawkins convincingly argues that Babrius’s disavowal here is disingenuous,<sup>35</sup> and that by reminding the reader of the traditional sting of the iambic, Babrius is giving “a nod to his readers to kindle the latent iambic mode in his collection whenever the need or opportunity should arise.” Nevertheless, as Hawkins shows, Babrius does in fact use iambs in a way that is non-traditional; Babrius, like Callimachus, frequently uses iambs not to put the rich and powerful in their place, but to critique those on the bottom. Even so, Hawkins admits that Babrius is quite flexible in his ethical viewpoints; top-down fables coexist with bottom-up fables, and Babrius is perfectly happy to use the iambic mode to, say, put his rivals in their place. In other words, Hawkins demonstrates that although Babrius does in fact mitigate the harsh iambic in the majority of his fables, he does not break completely with tradition, but instead actively engages with it.

This metrical choice is also important to keep in mind when considering Babrius’s pedagogical strategy. As Hawkins discusses, iambs are generally used to teach a quite specific

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<sup>34</sup> As most exhaustively discussed by Hawkins 2014 (see especially pp. 96-98). Cf. also Holzberg 2002: 53 and Perry 1965: 4-5. There may also be a meter joke here, as suggested by Rutherford 1883: 4 n. 18. Rutherford does not explain further, but it seems likely that “softening the harsh limbs of the bitter iambs” (1*prol.* 19: πικρῶν ἰάμβων σκληρὰ κῶλα θηλύνας) refers to the act of changing an iambic meter into a choliambic meter (θηλύνας refers literally to “making it more feminine”). Perhaps since Babrius always ends his choliambic line on an unstressed syllable, his choliamb is considered more “feminine” than an iambic line would be. On Babrius’s habit of ending his lines with a word stressed on the penultimate syllable, cf. Perry 1965: liii-liv.

<sup>35</sup> Hawkins 2014: 96-98.

lesson: to chide those who have disrupted the social order, especially those on top.<sup>36</sup> In that sense, the iambic genre is used for education, but it is education of a very specific type, used to correct bad behavior after the fact. Babrius does something quite different with his iambs: he teaches his readers how to avoid bad behavior and bad situations in advance by learning how to think in the correct manner. This is new adaptation of the iambic genre,<sup>37</sup> which fits perfectly with Hawkins' characterization of Babrius as a metrical innovator.

Babrius also claims that he embroidered his fables with his own memory. As we will see, personal experience is a central tenet of Babrius's pedagogical strategy: he urges his students to rely on (and correctly interpret) their own experiences, and he praises teachers who teach based on their life experience. Essentially, by promising to add his own memory to the fables, Babrius is promising to make use of his own personal experience, as a good teacher should.<sup>38</sup>

We are left, then, with a prologue that foregrounds the role that fables play in education. Babrius takes on the role of a teacher, who will use the fables to educate his young pupil. Interestingly, Babrius does not say that he will use the fables to provide moral guidance, even though that is often their role. He may allude to this role of fables with his emphasis on the Golden Age as a time when men were just; if fables take place during this time, then a student might reasonably expect them to provide good, moral exemplars. This, however, must remain merely an inference for the pupil. What Babrius does promise explicitly is that the fables will show how the world used to be, implying heavily that the fable world is that of the ideal Golden

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<sup>36</sup> Hawkins 2014: 92.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *2 prol.* 6, where Babrius refers to his "new muse."

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Luzzatto 1975: 51, who argues that Babrius's multitude of literary allusions indicate that he was well-read and had a fruitful memory.

Age, as Aesop says, but ultimately leaving that judgment up to the student. Already, Babrius is foregrounding the importance of the student's own judgment, even as he establishes his own role as the teacher.

This neat little prologue is immediately torn apart once the fables begin, however, for the first two fables provide a sharp and deliberate contrast with the prologue. They do this by presenting a world in which gods, humans, and animals emphatically do not get along, and by making specific allusions to the prologue in a way that undermines it. In other words, these fables do not merely represent the sort of conflict that always occurs in fables; they present conflict that alludes specifically to the prologue in order to call it into question.

The very first fable, in fact, shatters the shaky paradigm of Babrius's first prologue, by presenting the reader with a world in which humans hunt animals:

Ἄνθρωπος ἦλθεν εἰς ὄρος κυνηγῆσων,  
τόξου βολῆς ἔμπειρος· ἦν δὲ τῶν ζώων  
φυγὴ τε πάντων καὶ φόβου δρόμος πλήρης  
λέων δὲ μῦνος προῦκαλεῖτο θαρσῆσας  
5 αὐτῷ μάχεσθαι. “μεῖνον” εἶπε “μὴ σπεύσης”  
ἄνθρωπος αὐτῷ, “μήδ’ ἐπελίσης νίκη·  
τῷ δ’ ἀγγέλω μου πρῶτον ἐντυχῶν γνώσῃ  
τί σοι ποιητόν ἐστιν.” εἶτα τοξεύει  
μικρὸν διαστάς. χῶ μὲν οἰστός ἐκρύφθη  
10 λέοντος ὑγραῖς χολάσιν· ὁ δὲ λέων δείσας  
ὄρμησε φεύγειν ἐς νάπας ἐρημαίας.  
τούτου δ’ ἀλώπηξ οὐκ ἄπωθεν εἰστήκει.  
ταύτης δὲ θαρσεῖν καὶ μένειν κελευούσης,  
“οὔ με πλανήσεις” φησίν, “οὐδ’ ἐνεδρεύσεις·  
15 ὄπου γὰρ οὕτω πικρὸν ἄγγελον πέμπει,  
πῶς αὐτὸς ἤδη φοβερός ἐστι γινώσκω.”

A man came onto a mountain to hunt,  
skilled in the shooting of a bow. A flight of all living creatures  
occurred, and their running was full of fear,  
and only a lion, taking courage, called for  
5 the man to fight. “Wait,” the man said to him. “Don’t be hasty.  
And do not hope for victory.  
Once you first encounter my messenger, you will know



what you must do.” Then he shot his bow,  
 standing a short distance away. And the arrow was buried  
 10 in the wet guts of the lion. And the lion, afraid,  
 hastened to flee into the lonely glens.  
 A fox stood not far from him.  
 When she urged him to take courage and stand firm,  
 he said, “You will not lead me astray, nor will you entrap me.  
 15 For when he sends such a bitter messenger,  
 I know already how fearsome the man himself is.”  
 (Fable 1.1-16)

The first line of this fable is emphatic and disturbing: a man, ἄνθρωπος, comes to the mountains to hunt. The word ἄνθρωπος links this first fable closely to the prologue, which promised in its first line that the Golden Age was made entirely of ἄνθρωποι δίκαιοι. The prologue also insisted that the Golden Age was a time when men and animals were friendly and there was no need for hunting or agriculture. Yet the very first line of this first fable ends with the word κνηγήσων, “in order to hunt.” The next line mentions that this man was skilled with the bow, implying a world in which hunting is so frequent that an individual can become an expert Bowman. The presence of the hunter in the mountain causes a mass exodus of all living creatures (1.2-3: τῶν ζώων...πάντων). Again, this provides a close link with the prologue, which used the phrase τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν ζώων to refer to the non-human creatures that possessed speech. By stating that *all* the animals fled, the fable posits a sharp divide between humans and animals: even the presence of a single human drives away all of the animals. This is not a world of friendship and solidarity; it is a world of sharp divides between the species.

It is still, however, a world in which animals and humans can communicate. In the prologue, Babrius insisted that the friendship among the various species led to friendly communication. Here, we see for the first time what that speech would actually be like. The lion uses speech to challenge the man to a fight, and the man uses it to taunt the lion before wounding him with an arrow. The speech between the animals is no less problematic. When the fox

recommends that the lion stand firm and face the man, the lion retorts that the fox will not trick or trap him (1.14: “οὐ με πλανήσεις” φησίν, “οὐδ’ ἐνεδρεύσεις.”). The lion assumes that the fox’s speech is meant as an act of deception and violence. For this to be his first assumption implies a world in which speech is not generally used for friendly ends.

This is a world that is far removed from the peaceful Golden Age promised in the prologue. The fact that so many problematic aspects occur in the first three lines – the man coming to hunt, the flight of *all* of the animals – demonstrates that this fable is meant to provide a sharp and deliberate contrast with the prologue. In the experience of the reader, Babrius has just promised that the fables will provide proof of what the Golden Age was like. The first fable that the reader encounters shows not a peaceful existence, but a world of conflict and deception. In the *Statesman*, Socrates implied that if animals could talk, this would not necessarily lead to a happier existence than the present age. Here, Babrius illustrates something similar, by showing that if animals could speak, that would not lessen the conflict inherent between humans and animals.

The undermining of the prologue that occurs in the first fable goes deeper than this, however. The fable ends with a quip by the lion, who explains his decision to flee: the man has sent such a bitter messenger, that the lion *perceives* (1.16: γινώσκω) how fearful the man himself is. The lion has taken the man’s arrow as proof that the man himself is too dangerous for the lion to face. Yet this conclusion is not a straightforward one. Nowhere, either in Babrius or in the wider collection of fables, is a human being himself ever a match for a lion. The one exception – which proves the rule – is Babrius 98, in which a lion falls so deeply in love with a human woman that he agrees to file down his teeth and pull out his claws. This allows the humans to beat the lion to death with clubs, an act of violence that is only able to occur because the lion has

first been stripped of his natural defenses. The lion of Babrius 1, with his teeth and claws intact, should be able to kill the human with no problem. Instead, the lion, misled by the violence of the man's arrow, makes the hasty (and incorrect) decision to flee. The fox – always the perceptive one in fables – calls the lion out on this, encouraging him to stand and face the human. The lion refuses to listen.

The lion, then, is misled by the man's (false) messenger. This is exactly parallel, I would argue, with the experience of a person reading Babrius. The prologue, as we now see, is a false messenger: it promised that the fables would depict a peaceful, Golden Age world in which animals and humans are friends, but what the fables actually show is a world of conflict and violence. The readers, unlike the lion, must not believe the "messenger," for if they do, they will be led astray as the lion was. The larger message of this fable seems to be "Don't trust the prologue."

This message is made clearer by the last, programmatic word of the first fable: γινώσκω. The lion flees because he observes what the man is like, yet any reader familiar with fables knows that the conclusion that the lion draws from this observation is false. In a similar way, when Babrius promises that Branchus can know (γνοίης) what the Golden Age was like based on the fables, the expectation is that Branchus will know that the Golden Age description is false, if he knows fables at all. Thus, there is a parallelism between the lion and Branchus: both must draw inferences from the evidence presented by another, so that they can *come to know* the truth. It is noteworthy, in light of these parallels, that the human in Fable 1 does not tell the lion what to believe; he merely sends an arrow and tells the lion to draw his own conclusions. The focus is on the lion's ability (or lack thereof) to draw the correct conclusion from what he perceives, not on the human's deceit. The lion, by drawing the wrong conclusion, serves as a negative paradigm

of a student. A good student, like Branchus and (presumably) the readers, must avoid being like the lion.

The first fable, then, not only dismantles the prologue in short order. It also provides the first example of what will be a recurring theme in Babrius: a “student” who gets into trouble because of a grim failure in perception. At the same time, it teaches a broader lesson about how to be a good reader: a good reader will not simply take the “messenger” (i.e. the prologue) at face value. The second fable does something similar, by once again undermining key aspects of the prologue while at the same time giving the perceptive reader clues about Babrius’s educational strategy. The difference is that that while the first fable focuses on a failure of perception, the second fable takes as its focus irresponsible teachers.

In Fable 2, a farmer loses his mattock. He questions his employees to see if someone has stolen it, but when this does not help, he takes them all into the city to put them under oath before the gods. He does this, the narrator explains, because “people believe” (2.6: δοκοῦσι) that rustic gods are useless, but city gods know everything. When the farmer arrives in the city, however, he overhears a herald asking for information about property stolen from a temple. Deciding that the gods cannot even keep track of their own property, the farmer chooses not to ask them for help finding his mattock. After all, the gods must be particularly useless if they must ask humans for help.

Several things are immediately striking about this fable. First, this fable opens with a farmer (2.1: ἀνὴρ γεωργός). The first fable was about a hunter; this second one is about a farmer. Those are the two categories of humans that should not exist in the Golden Age, and they are the subjects of the first two fables. Of course, there is also a farmer in Babrius’s own description of the Golden Age, the γεωργός of line 11 of the prologue. There is an important

difference, however, between the “farmer” of the prologue and the farmer of Fable 1. In the prologue, the γεωργός does not do any actual farming; all he does is chat with the sparrow while (presumably) collecting the produce that the earth offers of her own accord.<sup>39</sup> The farmer in Fable 2, by contrast, is undoubtedly a man who works the earth. The first line of Fable 2 describes how the man lost his mattock while digging trenches;<sup>40</sup> this leaves no doubt that this farmer must do work in order to produce food. In fact, the last word of the first line of Fable 2, ταφρεύων, is parallel to the last word of the first line of Fable 1, κυνηγήσων. Both of these fables begin with a human who should not exist in the Golden Age, and end their first line with an activity that should also not exist.

Unlike the first fable, which focuses on mankind’s (violent and predatory) relationship with the animals, this second fable focuses on mankind’s relationship with the gods. The prologue insists that the Golden Age is a time in which *ἑταιρεία* exists between men and gods (1 *prol.* 13). *ἑταιρεία* is a word that implies friendship and equality, yet the relationship that exists in the second fable is far from that. First of all, the humans of this fable do not have universal respect for the gods; they despise country gods and respect city gods:

τῶν γὰρ θεῶν δοκοῦσι τοὺς μὲν εὐήθεις  
 ἄγροὺς κατοικεῖν, τοὺς δ’ ἐσωτέρω τείχους  
 εἶναί τ’ ἀληθεῖς καὶ τὰ πάντ’ ἐποπτεύειν.

For people believe that of the gods, the stupid ones  
 inhabit the countryside, but the ones within the walls  
 are truthful and oversee everything.

(Fable 2.6-8)

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<sup>39</sup> Hunter 2014: 231-233 also discusses the strangeness of a farmer being included in Babrius’s prologue. He points out that Hesiod’s Golden Age contains a similar ambiguity, as it makes reference to men working the fields despite the earth producing food on its own. He suggests, as do I for Babrius, that the “work” in Hesiod probably refers to harvesting.

<sup>40</sup> 2.1: Ἀνὴρ γεωργὸς ἀμπελῶνα ταφρεύων... (“A farmer, while digging trenches...”).

In part, of course, this is merely a little dig at rustics: even rustics believe that only stupid gods would live in the country.<sup>41</sup> Beyond that, this moment indicates that there is no smooth, unilateral *ἐταιρεία* between all men and all gods. The actual situation is more complicated than that. Even worse, the respect that people have for city gods is far from earned. The city gods themselves are useless; instead of finding their own property, they leave this up to the humans. This is not necessarily a comment on the capabilities of the gods; Teresa Morgan suggests that this fable is merely demonstrating the gods' lack of concern for human affairs: they could find their property if they wished, but they choose to not get involved.<sup>42</sup> It is left up to the human herald to look for a human with information about the robbery, and so the farmer rightly judges that turning to the gods is pointless. If they do not care to find their own property, they are hardly going to help him with his own. In this world, gods turning to men for help – which could be an indication of friendship – is judged to be a bad thing.

This failure of the relationship between humans and gods is framed in terms of a failure in knowing:

15           ὁ δὲ τοῦτ' ἀκούσας εἶπεν “ὡς μάτην ἦκω·  
κλέπτας γὰρ ἄλλους πῶς ὁ θεὸς ἂν εἰδείη,  
ὃς τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ φῶρας οὐχὶ γινώσκει,  
ζητεῖ δὲ μισθοῦ μὴ τις οἶδεν ἀνθρώπων;”

15           The farmer, hearing [the herald] said “I have come in vain.  
For how could a god know about other thieves,  
when he does not discern his own thieves,  
but seeks at a price some human who might know?”

(Fable 2.13-16)

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<sup>41</sup> For the contrast, common in this time period, between *pepaideumenoi* and *agroikoi*, cf. Whitmarsh 2001: 100-108.

<sup>42</sup> Morgan 2007: 56-57. She connects this to Fable 119 (in which praying to Hermes is revealed to be worthless).

The breakdown in the relationship between the lion and the man in the first fable was predicated on the lion's mistake in perception: he drew a false conclusion from the human's "messenger," and so fled from the human. Here, the failure of the gods is framed in quite similar terms. According to the farmer, the gods do not discern (2.15: οὐχὶ γινώσκει) the identity of the thieves who stole from them; therefore, they are unable to come to the aid of the farmer. It is important that the farmer uses γινώσκει here, which, as we have seen, refers to an active cognitive process – coming to a conclusion, discerning. The gods prove unwilling to actively engage in human affairs, to discern their own thief, and so the farmer is right to assume that the gods will not help him with his mattock. Once again, we see the programmatic word γινώσκω / γινώσκω appearing in empathic position.

There is a key difference between the first and second fables, however, in terms of *who* has the failure in perception. In the first fable, the lion was in the position of the student: he received information (the arrow), and then failed to draw the right conclusions. In the second fable, the gods are in the position of the teacher; they are supposed to be the ones who have special knowledge (the location of the farmer's mattock) which they will pass on. Unfortunately, because the gods do not choose to share their knowledge, they are useless as teachers. Thus, the first two fables work as a pair. They portray a hunter and a farmer (two occupations that should not exist in the Golden Age), they focus in turn on humans' relationship with animals and then with gods, and they focus on the failure of a "student" and the failure of a "teacher." In his first two fables, a big signpost to what will follow, Babrius has already begun to explore failures that can occur both on the side of the student and on the side of the teacher. So far, there has been no positive paradigm to replace the negative, no examples of good teachers or of good students.

These themes persist in Babrius's text as a whole, as Babrius uses his fables to teach about the proper methods of learning. I will take as my focus four paradigms that recur over and over again in Babrius: (1) Failures in perception (using evidence in the wrong way), (2) Successful interpretation (using evidence in the right way), (3) Bad authority figures (teachers who should be avoided and how to recognize them) and (4) Good authority figures (how to recognize a good teacher). These four paradigms all work toward one goal: teaching the audience how to learn actively and thus be a good student of Babrius.

### **I. Bad Students: Failures in Perception**

I made the case already that the lion of Fable 1 should be considered a bad student because he misinterpreted the "messenger" sent by the human. The lion was, in essence, a bad recipient of knowledge. That the lion's failure should be seen in terms of a failure to draw the correct conclusion from an observation is shown by the lion's emphatic use of γινώσκω, a word which also occurred in the prologue as one of Branchus's two aims. Fable 1, however, is hardly the only fable in which a character's success or failure depends on how well he interprets the evidence at his disposal. In fact, there are two behaviors that come under particular criticism in this text. The first is what I will call "willful blindness," namely, a refusal to accept the truth of self-evident facts.

The power of self-evident facts is demonstrated quite early in Babrius, with Fable 3. In this fable, a goatherd is attempting to bring in his goats for the night. When some goats refuse to come in, he throws a stone, which breaks off the horn of one she-goat. The goatherd begs the goat not to tell their master, and the goat replies that this is impossible. For even if she remains



silent, her horn will shout the truth. The fable thus presents the goat's broken horn as a piece of evidence too obvious to be ignored.

This fable also occurs in Phaedrus (Perotti's Index Fable 24). In Phaedrus, the focus is quite different: the fable turns on the goat's undeserved suffering at the hands of the shepherd. In Phaedrus's version, the shepherd breaks the goat's horn with his staff, seemingly for no reason, since there is no mention of the goat being disobedient. In Babrius, the goat refuses to come in when called, thus motivating her punishment, and the shepherd breaks her horn with a thrown stone. Babrius's shepherd then claims that he did not intend to hit the horn, which is plausible, since he threw the stone from a distance. The use of a staff in Phaedrus means that the blow occurred at close range, and the shepherd did not in any way intend to miss. In Phaedrus, then, when the goat claims that her horn "shouts that what you have done is wrong,"<sup>43</sup> the point is that the goat suffered undeservedly, and that wrongdoing cannot be hidden.

This moral dimension is missing from Babrius; the focus of the fable is on the mere fact that self-evident truths cannot be hidden:

ἡ δ' εἶπε “καὶ πῶς ἔργον ἐμφανὲς κρύψω;  
τὸ κέρως κέκραγε, κἂν ἐγὼ σιωπήσω.”

And she said, “And how can I hide a self-evident deed?  
The horn shouts, even if I am silent.”  
(Fable 3.10-11)

Here, the goat's broken horn is a self-evident deed, an ἔργον ἐμφανὲς. It represents evidence that cannot be hidden, and so cannot be ignored. It is significant that it is an ἔργον that breaks the cycle of deceit and mistaken perception that characterized the first two fables. Words may

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<sup>43</sup> P24.3-4: “*Quamvis indigne laesa reticebo tamen; / sed res clamabit ipsa quid deliqueris*” (“Although wounded undeservedly, I will nevertheless be silent; / but the matter itself will shout that what you have done wrong”). Cf. Morgan 2007: 79-80, for a discussion of Phaedrus's concern with absolute values. Phaedrus is far more likely to label someone's behavior as “wicked,” rather than merely to show bad consequences, Morgan argues.

deceive, like the words of the human in the first fable, and authority may prove useless, like that of the gods in the second fable. But a person who perceives an ἔργον for himself, as the master will in the aftermath of Fable 3, is unable to be fooled by words. We are starting to see the beginnings of a hierarchy that will inform Babrius’s text as a whole: words and teaching may prove false, but experience provides real proof.

However, some characters refuse to accept evidence that is self-evident. Such willful blindness comes under attack repeatedly in Babrius. We see this for the first time in Fable 7. In this fable, a man is traveling with a horse and a donkey. The donkey carries all of the man’s luggage, while the horse carries nothing. The donkey asks the horse to share the burden, warning that he will die if he has to continue to carry everything. The horse refuses – not because he does not believe the donkey, but simply because he does not wish to be bothered.<sup>44</sup> Soon after, the donkey does in fact die. The man then puts the dead donkey’s luggage onto the horse, in addition to the donkey’s flayed skin. The horse then mourns his past foolishness:

15 ὁ δ’ ἵππος “οἴμοι τῆς κακῆς” ἔφη “γνώμη·  
οὗ γὰρ μετασχεῖν μικρὸν οὐκ ἐβουλήθην,  
τοῦτ’ αὐτό μοι πᾶν ἐπιτέθεικεν ἡ χρεῖη.”

15 And the horse said, “Alas for my bad judgment.  
For that thing I was unwilling to share even a little of,  
necessity has now placed on me in its entirety.”

(Fable 7.14-16)

Here we see the noun γνώμη (7.14): the horse frames his mistake in terms of a failure of judgment. He made the wrong call by not listening to the donkey, and now he is suffering for it. The word γνώμη is emphatic not only because it occurs at the end of the line, but also because

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<sup>44</sup> Fable 7.7: ὁ δ’ “οὐ προάξεις;” εἶπε, “μή μ’ ἐνοχλήσης” (“The horse said, ‘Won’t you go on? Don’t weigh me down’”).

this is now the third time that a word related to γινώσκω / γινώσκω has served as the punchline to a fable. The horse, much like the lion of Fable 1, has poor judgment. Whereas the lion simply took the arrow as stronger proof than he should have, the horse, it seems, simply did not wish to listen. The horse faces much more serious consequences than does the lion: whereas the lion merely makes a fool of himself by running away, the horse is shackled by the weight of the donkey's burden and the donkey's flayed skin. Willful blindness, it seems, can have serious consequences.

In Fable 10, a pair of characters are both plagued by willful blindness, which earns them the wrath of the gods. In this fable, a man falls in love with his ugly slave-woman, and she uses this power to take advantage of him.<sup>45</sup> The slave-woman believes that Aphrodite is responsible for her good fortune, and so one day she sacrifices and prays to Aphrodite as her patron.

Aphrodite, angered by this, comes to her and sets her straight:

“μή μοι χάριν σχῆς ὡς καλήν σε ποιούση·  
τούτῳ κεχόλωμαί” φησιν “ὦ καλή φαίνη.”

“Do not thank me as if I made you beautiful.  
I am angry at that man,” she said, “to whom you *appear* beautiful.”  
(Fable 10.11-12)

In this fable, both the slave-woman and her owner demonstrate poor perception. The slave-woman believes that she is blessed by Aphrodite, when Aphrodite in fact detests her. The man believes that the ugly slave-woman is beautiful, even though she is clearly not. The description of the slave-woman is designed to make her as odious as possible, so that the reader feels no sympathy with a man who could find such a wretched creature beautiful. The slave woman is called αἰσχρῆς (10.1), has a penchant for dressing up in finery (10.3-4) and is always fighting

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<sup>45</sup> Hawkins 2014: 125-126 discusses this fable as an example of “erotic instruction,” a common iambic theme.



pretends, for when the woodcutter offers to show him not just the tracks but the lion himself, the hunter is too scared to accept the knowledge. The hunter is thus revealed not to be a sincere student: he is not interested in real knowledge, but merely the appearance of learning.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, he will never reach any useful end.

These three examples demonstrate the dangers that attend on willful blindness. The outcomes range from physical suffering (the horse who must now carry the donkey's baggage and skin) to looking foolish (the owner becomes his slave's slave) to pointless endeavor (the hunter has no intention of finding real prey). In all cases, these negative outcomes are a direct result of the character refusing to accept the evidence right before his eyes. This has obvious implications for Babrius's students and readers. Babrius can make his lessons as clear as he wishes to, but without a willingness to learn on the part of the student, no learning will occur.

Another sort of failure in perception that comes under criticism repeatedly in Babrius is a misinterpretation of facts. These fables differ from the stories of willful blindness insofar as the subject honestly tries to interpret the situation correctly, but simply gets it wrong. For example, in Fable 43, a stag makes erroneous value judgments about his horns and feet. The stag is very proud of his horns, since they are beautiful, but is ashamed of his legs and his hooves. When he gets chased by hunting dogs, his feet allow him to escape – at least until he reaches the woods, at which point his horns become entangled in the branches, and he is caught.<sup>48</sup> At that point, he mourns his poor judgment:

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<sup>47</sup> One might compare the book collector of Lucian's *Mistaken Critic*, as analyzed by Richter 2011: 148-149. Richter argues that the book collector's central mistake is that he does not care about possessing actual *paideia*, but only wants to give the appearance of having *paideia*. In fact, his true lack of *paideia* is shown through his lack of discernment (διόγνωσις). In a similar way, the hunter of Fable 92 wants to give the appearance of hunting a lion, but does not wish to confront the actual game.

<sup>48</sup> A strong parallel may be found in Fable 31, in which the mice decide that their generals should wear fancy hats, hats which subsequently prevent the mice generals from entering their holes and surviving.

15 “τί ταῦτ’;” ἔφη· “δύστηνος ὡς διεψεύσθην·  
οἱ γὰρ πόδες μ’ ἔσωζον, οἷς ἐπηδούμην,  
τὰ κέρατα δὲ προὔδωκεν, οἷς ἐγαυρούμην.”  
Περὶ τῶν σεαυτοῦ πραγμάτων ὅταν κρίνης,  
μηδὲν βέβαιον ὑπολάβης προγινώσκων,  
μηδ’ αὐτ’ ἀπογνῶς, μηδ’ ἀπελπίσης· οὕτω  
σφάλλουσιν ἡμᾶς ἐσθ’ ὅθ’ αἱ πεποιθήσεις.

15 “What is this?” [the stag] said. “I was miserably deceived.  
For my feet, about which I was ashamed, saved me,  
But the horns in which I felt pride betrayed me.”  
When you make judgments about your own affairs,  
do not judge in advance and interpret something as steadfast,  
but on the other hand do not give up and do not despair. For in that way  
it is possible for persuasive hopes to trip us up.  
(Fable 43.13-19)

The importance of this fable is marked in three ways. First, this is one of the few fables that has a moral,<sup>49</sup> and it is a moral that includes both a second-person address and a first-person pronoun. This is a moral that Babrius wants to mark as being of particular importance to Branchus, and also to himself. Furthermore, we see a clustering of words that have to do with perception: κρίνης (43.16), ὑπολάβης (43.17), προγινώσκων (43.17), and ἀπογνῶς (43.18). This makes it abundantly clear that the stag’s mistake is one of judgment: the value judgments he made about his feet and his horns were not only incorrect, but led to disastrous consequences. This emphasis on perception as the stag’s mistake is important, as it is possible to interpret this fable in other ways. In Phaedrus, for instance, this fable is used to talk about not despising what seems humble, thus lending the fable an interpretation that applies more to social class.<sup>50</sup> This is similar to the distinction we saw between Babrius’s Fable 3 and Phaedrus’s Fable P24, in which Babrius used

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<sup>49</sup> So far as I know, no scholar has marked this moral as spurious. For the moral being genuine, cf. Perry 1965: 58, Hohmann 1907: 58-61, and Immisch 1930: 156. Even Becker 2006, whose focus is on spurious morals, does not mention this fable.

<sup>50</sup> Phaedrus 1.12.1-2: *laudatis utiliora quae contempseris / saepe inveniri testis haec narratio est* (“This story is proof that you often find / that a thing which you despise is more useful than what you praise”).

the goat's broken horn to talk about self-evident facts, whereas Phaedrus used the same fable to talk about slave experience. Once again, Babrius is interested in perception and judgment, whereas Phaedrus is interested in issues of social hierarchy.

The stag's central mistake is that he judges his horns and feet based on their appearance, rather than on their usefulness. The stag values his horns because they are beautiful (43.5: καλοί), and despises his feet even though they are swift (43.10: ἴχνεσιν κούφοις). Weil's reconstruction of the first line, although doubted by Perry, captures this contrast brilliantly:<sup>51</sup> the stag is described with two adjectives: εὐκερως ("with beautiful horns") and ποδώκης ("swift-footed"). If accurate, the inclusion of ποδώκης would indicate that the stag knows, by experience, that his feet makes him swift, yet still he undervalues them. The lesson, regardless of whether the first line is accurate, however, is clear: the stag should trust the feet that he walks on, not his beautiful horns. In the moral that attends the fable, Babrius warns his pupil not to misjudge affairs as certain (43.17: βέβαιος) when they are not. The applicability of this moral to the fable turns on a clever pun: βέβαιος is an adjective related to the verb βαίνω, to walk. The stag should know that his feet are dependable because he walks on them; they literally support him. Such experience should be worth more than the shifting and unreal reflection in a pond, which is what allows him to see the beauty of his horns (43.1-5).

In fact, in Babrius's fables more generally, Babrius frequently recommends that a person should reject what is uncertain and hold to what is certain. This lesson appears no fewer than

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<sup>51</sup> Perry 1965: 56-57. The fable is preserved in A, (B), and T, although the three sources do not agree. T, a wax tablet on which some of Babrius's fables have been badly copied by a student, has most of the line above, except that it lacks ποδώκης and trails off at the end. Manuscript A lacks the line entirely, and Manuscript B, the prose summary, does not help with the exact wording of the verse. ποδώκης is obviously far from certain, and Perry is right to bracket it. However, it does perfectly capture the contrast inherent in the fable between beautiful horns and swift feet and foreshadows the end, which is something that Babrius often does in his first lines, so Weil had reasons for this clever reconstruction.

seven times.<sup>52</sup> We have seen an iteration of this already, with the broken goat’s horn of Fable 3, which represented a clear and indisputable ἔργον that words could not hide. There, I suggested that a contrast was being drawn between (untrustworthy) words and (certain) facts. Here we see a variation on that same theme: Babrius warns his pupil not to value appearance over utility. What is at stake here is the question of what the student should trust when making decisions: how does the student know what information or facts he should privilege as trustworthy, and which not? In this fable, Babrius begins to give an answer: you should depend on what has long been proven to be βέβαιος. As with the broken goat horn of Fable 3, Babrius values a person’s immediate and personal experience above anything else.

Another example of mistaken interpretation is provided by Fable 72, in which a jackdaw tries to win a beauty contest among the birds by borrowing feathers from everybody else, and almost gets away with this scheme, thanks to Zeus’s poor perception:

15 ὁ Ζεὺς δ’ ἐθάμβει, καὶ παρεῖχε τὴν νίκην,  
εἰ μὴ χελιδῶν αὐτὸν ὡς Ἀθηναίη  
ἤλεγξεν ἐλκύσασα τὸ πτερὸν πρώτη,  
ὁ δ’ εἶπεν αὐτῇ “μὴ με συκοφαντήσης.”  
τὸν δ’ ἄρα τρυγῶν ἐσπάραττε καὶ κίχλη  
20 καὶ κίσσα καὶ κορυδαλλὸς σὺν τάφοις παίζων,  
χῶ νηπίων ἔφεδρος ὀρνέων ἴρηξ,  
τά τ’ ἄλλ’ ὁμοίως. καὶ κολοιδὸς ἐγνώσθη.

15 And Zeus marveled [at the jackdaw], and would have given him the victory, had not the swallow, being an Athenian, been the first to cross-examine him by pulling out her feather. The jackdaw said to her, “Don’t falsely accuse me!” Then the turtle-dove tore at him and the thrush too  
20 and the jay and the lark who plays on the tombs, and the hawk who lies in wait for baby birds, and likewise the others. And the jackdaw was recognized.

(Fable 72.15-22)

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<sup>52</sup> Fables 6, 43, 45, 61, 73, 79, and 123.



Here, Zeus is fooled by the jackdaw's disguise, and the birds must reveal the truth of the matter. It is significant that the birds themselves recognize an avian impostor, whereas the god does not: the birds are experts in their own kind, especially since the jackdaw is using their feathers. When the swallow pulls out a feather, Babrius most likely means that she pulls out *her own* feather.<sup>53</sup> she recognizes something that comes from her own body. Zeus, in contrast, being no expert in birds, is fooled by the disguise. This connects to a wider theme in Babrius, which will be discussed in Sections 3 and 4 below, about what makes a good teacher. A large part of it is experience: those who try to teach outside their field are met with failure, whereas those who base their expertise on life experiences teach well. Or to phrase it as a fable moral: only birds can know about birds.

This fable ends with a form of γινώσκω: the jackdaw is “recognized” after being stripped of his borrowed feathers. Thus, Zeus' failure in perception, based on his lack of knowledge, is mitigated thanks to the birds. Zeus, like the stag in the previous example, represents someone who is unable to correctly interpret the evidence in front of him. This, again, is a lesson that is easily transferrable to the student of Babrius: Babrius is writing fables that beg interpretation, and so, for his fable book to be successful, the student must be capable of this feat. Otherwise, the student will reach the wrong conclusions like the stag and like Zeus.

Such fables help illustrate the reason that Babrius does not include morals in the majority of his fables. One of Babrius's central concerns is with the way a person perceives and judges the evidence at his disposal. Babrius writes fables that, for the most part, have a clear and evident point, but Babrius does not spell out that point for his readers. Instead, he requires his readers to

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<sup>53</sup> Thus, for instance, Perry 1965 translates as follows: “The swallow, like the true Athenian that she was, confuted him by being the first to pull out *her own feather*” (emphasis mine).

figure out the point for themselves. So long as the student is not willfully blind or a poor interpreter of evidence, this experience will be educational. Of course, so far we have only seen characters who represent failures in perception: bad students who should not be emulated. Fortunately, Babrius also has plenty of positive paradigms for his audience to imitate.

## II. Good students: Successful Interpretation

We have seen that in Babrius, characters come under criticism if they refuse to accept self-evident facts (willful blindness) or if they misinterpret the facts at their disposal. These fables are useful insofar as they show problematic mental processes that the student of Babrius must avoid. More useful, however, are the fables that show correct behavior. Such fables are much more common in Babrius than the negative ones, which is noteworthy, given that fables usually show more negative behaviors being punished than positive behaviors being rewarded. In fact, there is a series of fables in Babrius in which characters avoid disasters because they correctly interpret the evidence at their disposal. Such characters provide a direct contrast with the bad students examined in the last section.

Fable 97 and Fable 103 are similar; both involve animals who avoid death at the hands of a lion by noticing evidence that the lion means to kill them. In Fable 103, an elderly lion pretends to be sick in order to lure well-meaning animals into his cave, for whenever an animal drops by to wish the lion well, he is eaten by the lion. This goes on for a while until a fox stops by and refuses to come in, despite the lion's cajoling:

20 “σώζοιο” φησίν, “ἦν δ’ ἄπειμι, συγγνώση·  
πολλῶν γὰρ ἵχνη θηρίων με κωλύει,  
ὧν ἐξιόντων οὐκ ἔχεις ὃ μοι δείξεις.”  
Μακάριος ὅστις οὐ προλαμβάνει παίσας,  
ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς ἄλλων συμφοραῖς ἐπαιδεύθη.

“Get better,” said [the fox], “but if I stay away, forgive me.  
For the footsteps of all these animals restrain me,  
since you don’t have any footsteps leading *out* to show me.”

20 Fortunate is he who is not the first to make a mistake,  
but is himself taught by the misfortunes of others.

(Fable 103.17-21)

The applicability of this fable to education is made amply clear by the moral, which ends with the word ἐπαιδεύθη, “be taught.” The fox’s behavior represents a positive paradigm for the student. Just as the fox knew not to enter the cave by seeing the traces of all the animals who had gone in (and died) before him, so the student can learn by observing the misfortunes of others. This is, in fact, a perfect representation of education by fables, which are all about a student learning by hearing about the misfortunes of (animal) others. Significantly, the educational model presented in this fable involves the “student” (here, the fox) interpreting the evidence for himself. He looks at the footsteps of all of the dead animals, and realizes what that means for him. That is exactly the model that Babrius is following in his own fable book, with its lack of morals and its emphasis on how to correctly interpret evidence. Naturally enough, this positive paradigm is represented by the fox, the paradigmatically intelligent animal in fables.

Fable 97 also involves an animal avoiding death at a lion’s hands by noticing an abundance of evidence that the lion means him harm. In this fable, a lion says that he is going to perform a sacrifice to the mother of the gods and invites a bull to come to his den for dinner that night. The bull, who does not suspect anything (97.4: οὐχ ὑποπτεύσας), comes over. When he gets to the lion’s door and looks inside, he notices that there is an abundance of cooking implements, but no sacrifice.<sup>54</sup> He realizes that he is the intended sacrifice, and so he leaves. Later, the lion accuses him of never showing up. The bull says that he did come and can prove it:

ὁ δ’ “ἦλθον” εἶπε “καὶ τὸ σύμβολον δώσω·

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<sup>54</sup> 97.5-9. The bull notices the cauldrons, the cleavers and knives, and no meat save for a solitary chicken.

οὐκ ἦν ὅμοιον θῦμα τῷ μαγειρείῳ.”

The bull said, “I came, and I will show you proof.  
There was no suitable sacrifice in your kitchen.”  
(Fable 97.11-12)

The bull thus escapes death by correctly interpreting the evidence in the lion’s kitchen. This fable differs from Fable 103 insofar as the “student” character, the bull, is not a conspicuously clever animal, unlike the fox of Fable 103. In fact, at the beginning of the fable, when the lion invites the bull over, it may be obvious to the reader what is going to happen, but to the bull (incredibly) it is not. Lions are the archetypal predator in fables, and no animal that enters a lion’s den ever does well. This bull, who “suspects nothing,” by all rights should be killed. However, the bull is saved because he notices the abundance of evidence that the lion is planning to kill him.

A similar example of a “dumb” animal that learns by paying attention can be found in Fable 25. In this fable, a group of hares are planning to commit suicide because they are so cowardly. When they go to a pond to drown themselves, they observe a bunch of frogs leaping into the pond. Realizing that there are animals more cowardly than they are, the hares decide not to commit suicide.<sup>55</sup> The implication is that the frogs hear the hares coming, and so begin to leap into the water where they will be safe.<sup>56</sup> The hares, observing that there is at least one animal that will flee from their approach, realize that they are not the most cowardly animals in the world after all. This reading explains the emphasis in the beginning of the fable on how the hares are

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<sup>55</sup> Fable 25.9-10: “ἄψ νῦν ἴωμεν, οὐκέτι χρεὼν θνήσκειν· ὁρῶ γὰρ ἄλλους ἀσθενεστέρους ἡμῶν” (“Now let us go away; it is no longer necessary to die. / For I see that there are others weaker than us”).

<sup>56</sup> Thus Perry 1965: 37-39 translates, “But when they drew near to the broad pond and saw a crowd of frogs on the bank crouching and leaping into the deep slime *at their approach*, they came to a halt.” The emphasis is mine, indicating what Perry has added to the text.

“cowardly in spirit, and knowing only how to flee” (25.4 ψυχὰς τ’ ἄτολμοι, μούνον εἰδότες φεύγειν.) The hares believed that they had the distinction of being the one type of animal that would flee from everything, only to realize that frogs at least will flee from them. Like the bull in the previous example, these hares are able to overcome the deficiency in their character simply by paying attention to the evidence around them.

Fables such as these make a strong case for the efficacy of education. It is not uncommon for scholars to argue that fable characters are all types, each of whom has a set character that determines their every action.<sup>57</sup> For the most part, this is true. It is highly significant, then, that Babrius shows his fable characters acting against type thanks to their skill in observation: the bull learns the lion’s nature by observing the cave, and the hares, despite supposedly only knowing how to flee, are able to learn that they are not the most cowardly by observing the frogs. The ability to correctly interpret the evidence makes them better. If we apply this to Babrius’s theory of education, then it follows that education can overcome a deficiency of character, which is in fact an idea that was common in the Second Sophistic.<sup>58</sup> Like these characters, Babrius’s students can improve their character by paying attention.

However, all of the animals examined so far are able to escape disaster by paying attention to the *abundance* of evidence at their disposal: the fox notices many footprints, the bull notices the abundance of cooking supplies in the lion’s cave, and the rabbits see all of the frogs jump into the pond. Other fables provide a different model for how characters can make the right

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<sup>57</sup> DuBois 2003: 176-177 argues strongly that fable characters operate according to set types. Zafiroopoulos 2001: 29 takes a more nuanced approach, arguing that “it is true that the traditional patterns often influenced [Aesop’s] choices: the fox is often cunning, the lion strong, etc. But we also find the opposite: deviation from the rule and from the expected outcome.”

<sup>58</sup> Whitmarsh 2001: 130.

decisions: namely, by relying on their own life experience. To begin with a simple example, in Fable 17 an experienced rooster is able to see through a cat's disguise:

5 Αἴλουρος ὄρνεις οἰκίης ἐνεδρεύων  
ὡς θύλακός τις πασσάλων ἀπηρτήθη.  
τὸν δ' εἶδ' ἀλέκτωρ πινυτὸς ἀγκυλογλώχιν,  
καὶ ταῦτ' ἐκερτόμησεν ὄξυ φωνήσας·  
“πολλοὺς μὲν οἶδα θυλάκους ἰδὼν ἤδη·  
οὐδεὶς δ' ὀδόντας εἶχε ζῶντος αἰλούρου.”

5 A cat, who was lying in wait for some domestic birds,  
suspended himself from pegs as if he were a meal sack.  
A rooster, a prudent one with hooked spurs, saw him,  
and made fun of him, speaking in a shrill voice:  
“I know meal sacks, having already seen many.  
Not a one had the teeth of a living cat.”

(Fable 17.1-6)

The rooster attributes his ability to see through the cat's disguise to his experience: because he has seen many meal sacks, he knows what a meal sack should and should not look like. The bird's response is certainly tongue-in-cheek: a living cat does not look much like a meal sack, no matter what he might hope. Nevertheless, in framing it in this way, the rooster begins a theme that informs much of Babrius's work, for both the student and the teacher. Basing knowledge on your own experience is a good idea. As we saw already in the Fable 43, your own experience is dependable, βέβαιος. Unlike the stag in that fable who did not value his legs, despite using them his whole life, the rooster here does rely on past experience.

In Fable 101, a slightly more complex example, a particularly large wolf is given the nickname “lion,” and so comes to believe that he is a lion:

5 Λύκος τις ἄδρὸς ἐν λύκοις ἐγεννήθη,  
λέοντα δ' αὐτὸν ἐπεκάλουν. ὁ δ' ἀγνώμων  
τὴν δόξαν οὐκ ἤνεγκε, τῶν δὲ συμφύλων  
ἀποστατήσας τοῖς λέουσιν ὠμίλει.  
κερδῶ δ' ἐπισκώπτουσα “μὴ φρενωθεῖην”  
ἔφη “τοσοῦτον ὡς σὺ νῦν ἐτυφώθης·  
σὺ γὰρ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἐν λύκοις λέων φαίνῃ,

ἐν δ' αὖ λέοντων συγκρίσει λύκος γίνῃ.”

A certain wolf became large among his fellow wolves and they called him “Lion.” He, being stupid, could not handle the reputation, but leaving behind his tribe, he joined the company of lions.

5 A fox, mocking him, said, “May I never be so stuck up to such a degree as you have now been blinded. For you truly seem to be a lion among wolves, but in a group of lions, you become a wolf.”

(Fable 101.1-8)

The implication of this fable is that a lion will recognize a true lion, in much the same way that it was the birds who were able to see through the jackdaw’s disguise in Fable 72. Animals are able to recognize and make judgments about their own kind, since that is what they are most familiar with. The wolves, in contrast, not being familiar with real lions, think that a big wolf is enough like a lion to merit the name. It is experience (or lack thereof) that makes the difference. Notably, the wolf who thinks himself a lion is given the adjective ἀγνώμων, “stupid” (101.2) – that is, lacking in γνώμη. His central characteristic is that he is unable to make correct assessments about himself.

It is in light of these fables that I believe we should read Fable 13, whose point – thanks to the lack of the moral<sup>59</sup> – is difficult to uncover. In this fable, a farmer captures a stork along with a group of cranes that were destroying his fields. The stork beseeches him, asking the farmer to let him go since he is not a crane. The stork explains that his color shows that he is a stork, and that as such he is the holiest of birds. The farmer replies in this way:

10 κάκεϊνος “ὦ πελαργέ, τίτι βίῳ χάρεις  
οὐκ οἶδα,” φησίν, “ἀλλὰ τοῦτο γινώσκω,  
ἔλαβόν σε σὺν ταῖς ἔργα τὰμὰ πορθούσαις.  
ἀπολῆ μετ’ αὐτῶν τοιγαροῦν μεθ’ ὧν ἤλωσ.”

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<sup>59</sup> The moral given in the manuscript is thought to be spurious. Cf. Perry 1965: lxi-lxvi and 22-23.





natures. Here, the farmer does not accept that the stork can be judged as good simply because he is a stork. Instead, he decides that the stork should be judged based on the more immediate evidence at his disposal. The farmer, then, becomes a good model for Babrius's ideal reader, who does not rely simply on what fable characters are always like to make snap judgments, nor does he go for the obvious moral. Instead, Babrius's ideal reader interprets the evidence for himself and makes judgments based on his own experience. As we have seen throughout this section, such reasoned thinking leads to success, whereas ignoring or misinterpreting evidence leads to disaster.

### **III. Bad teachers**

Thus far, I have been emphasizing that Babrius's fables teach a person how to analyze and form judgments himself, based on his own experience. However, equally important for a student is choosing the correct teacher. We observed already, with reference to Fable 2, that authority figures are only as good as their willingness and ability to pass on knowledge. The gods may know the location of the farmer's mattock, but since they do not care to be involved in human affairs, they are useless to him. This is only one among many examples of "bad teachers" that appear in Babrius, teachers who must be avoided by the student who wishes to be taught well. There are three categories of bad teacher that Babrius's fables repeatedly critique: gods, glib liars, and pretenders.

Babrius's opinion of the gods is debated in scholarship. Rutherford calls Babrius "artificial and skeptical" in his treatment of the gods, and lists many of Babrius's most insulting fables.<sup>61</sup> Morgan argues the opposite, claiming that the gods are, on the whole, portrayed as

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<sup>61</sup> Rutherford 1883: xli-iv.

powerful and good.<sup>62</sup> There are two issues with Morgan's analysis, however. First, she tends to count negative evidence as positive. Hence, she argues that Babrius shows prayer working "when appropriate," yet all her examples show prayer failing because it is not appropriate.<sup>63</sup> Morgan may well be right that by teaching that inappropriate prayer fails, these fables aim to teach how to pray in the right manner, and thus operate from the viewpoint that the gods will listen if you pray correctly. However, I think it is significant that Babrius's fables about prayer – and, on the whole, his fables about the gods – are negative in nature. They demonstrate prayer and divine aid not working, with few positive examples to counterbalance this.

Second, because Morgan is attempting to define the ethical perspective of imperial fables as a genre, she makes no distinction between the various fable authors; she uses them all interchangeably, although the majority of her evidence is taken from Babrius. This elides the important differences between, say, the collections of Phaedrus and Babrius, some of which have already been noted in this chapter.<sup>64</sup> For instance, Phaedrus is much more positive in his portrayal of the gods than is Babrius, which means that considering the two authors as a single corpus is inherently problematic.

In Phaedrus, Jupiter's main role is to deal out punishment and display his wisdom. In Fable 1.2, the frogs ask for a king and then for a new king, and Jupiter teaches them a lesson. In Fable 4.17, Jupiter chides the goats who are mad because the she-goats have been given beards,

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<sup>62</sup> Morgan 2007: 77. Morgan is making an argument about fables in the Roman Empire more generally, but since she relies almost exclusively on fables from Babrius, this can be assumed to be her opinion of Babrius specifically.

<sup>63</sup> Morgan 2007: 76. She brings as evidence Babrius 23, in which a huntsman prays that he will find a thief and then meets with disaster when the "thief" turns out to be a lion (the moral then recommends that a person should not pray for anything ill-considered) and Babrius 78, in which a crow's prayer fails because he is a temple robber.

<sup>64</sup> Morgan 2007: 79-80 argues that Phaedrus's fable collection has no distinctive personality, except that Phaedrus is more concerned with right and wrong.

by telling them that their complaints are foolish. In Fable 4.19, Jupiter punishes the foolish dog ambassadors. In Fable 3.17, he praises Athena for her wisdom. In none of the fables is Jupiter tricked or made to look foolish; he is the king of the gods and his authority is never undermined. In Babrius, to be fair, there are fables in which Zeus acts as judge. In Fable 142, for instance, he chides the oaks that complain that they are always cut down by pointing out that the axes come from their own wood. Yet such fables coexist with fables in which Zeus is foolish and/or unjust, such as Fable 72, in which Zeus is fooled by the jackdaw's disguise, or Fable 85, in which Zeus wins an archery contest by cheating.

An even starker example of Phaedrus's and Babrius's different portrayals of the gods can be found in their treatment of Hermes/Mercury. In Babrius, Hermes often finds himself at the mercy of non-divine characters. To give three examples, in Fable 30, a craftsman who makes a Hermes statue gets to decide whether Hermes will adorn a tomb or be placed in a temple, thus leaving a god's fate in the hands of an artist. In Fable 48, Hermes must appear and ask a dog not to urinate on his statue – a decision that is left up to the dog, as Hermes cannot defend himself in any way other than asking. Most strikingly of all, in Fable 119 a man gets frustrated when his prayers to a Hermes statue go unanswered, and so breaks the statute, only to find gold inside. Giving up on prayer in favor of smashing a divine statue proves to be the best choice. This fable combines self-sufficiency (better to act than to waste your time praying) and disrespect for the gods (smashing an idol is a good idea).

Phaedrus's one fable about Mercury (P4) involves Mercury granting wishes to two women, a mother and a prostitute. The two women make wishes that backfire horribly, making them the object of ridicule. As in Babrius, Hermes/Mercury thus makes an appearance in a comic

fable, yet here, Mercury himself is in no way the butt of the joke. That honor is reserved for the foolish women.

Overall, then, Phaedrus portrays the gods as powerful and in control, whereas Babrius portrays the gods as far more human: they make mistakes, they act foolishly, and humans cannot often rely on their help. In this perspective, Babrius closely follows Aesop, who similarly has fables that portray the gods as all-powerful judges, but also some that portray the gods in silly or compromising situations.<sup>65</sup> Avianus, to jump ahead to the fourth century, will include only those fables of Babrius that portray the gods in a good or neutral light, omitting those that make the gods look the most foolish. Thus, the examples of Phaedrus and Avianus establish that Babrius's treatment of the gods is a deliberate choice. Babrius may be inconsistent in the way he portrays the gods, but the important fact remains that he is not shy about making the gods look foolish when it suits the fable.

For my purposes, what matters most is that Babrius's criticism of the gods (when it occurs) often comes down to a failure in the distribution of knowledge: the gods either do not know, or choose not to share, knowledge that they (should) have as divine beings. We have seen a couple of examples of this already, beginning with Fable 2, in which the gods do not locate the property stolen from their own temple, and Fable 72, in which Zeus is unable to recognize the impostor during his bird beauty contest.

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<sup>65</sup> To give just a few examples: Fable 88 involves Hermes realizing how cheap his statutes are; Fable 101 is the beauty contest in which Zeus is nearly fooled by the jackdaw's disguise; and Fable 105 is the fable of Zeus cheating at archery. On the other hand, there are Fables 3, 4, and 117, all of which involve Zeus meting out punishment to those who deserve it.

Fable 54 provides another example of gods being poor teachers. In this fable, a eunuch comes to a seer to inquire if he will have children. The seer looks at the victim's "divine liver" (54.2: ἀγνὸν ἦπαρ) and quips,

“ὅταν μὲν” εἶπε “ταῦτ’ ἴδω, πατὴρ γίνῃ,  
ὅταν δὲ τὴν σὴν ὄψιν, οὐδ’ ἀνὴρ φαίῃη”

The seer said, “Whenever I look at these, you are to become a father,  
But whenever I look at your appearance, you do not even appear to be a man.”

(54.3-4)

This fable chiefly serves as a joke at the eunuch's expense (for what kind of eunuch needs to consult a god about whether or not he will have children?), but as a teaching point, this joke is made possible through the failure of the oracle, as contrasted with the success of the seer's own eyesight. The oracle comes from the gods, a fact emphasized through Babrius's gloss that the liver that serves as the oracle is ἀγνὸν, divine. The information that it provides, though, is manifestly false: a eunuch cannot have children, yet the oracle says the opposite. In contrast, the seer's own eyesight, as emphasized by the phrase τὴν σὴν ὄψιν (“your visible appearance”), is much more accurate: he can tell simply by looking at the eunuch that he is not a proper man, and hence cannot be a father. The seer's eyesight, then, is more accurate than the god's oracle.<sup>66</sup> This fable resembles Fable 2, insofar as a failure of divine knowledge makes human knowledge necessary.

Babrius's undermining of the gods in fables such as these is part of a wider goal of emphasizing the importance of self-sufficiency for mankind.<sup>67</sup> In other words, in order to

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<sup>66</sup> One might compare Phaedrus, Fable P8, which also involves an oracle that speaks in vain. However, the difference is that in Phaedrus, the oracle gives excellent and truthful advice, but it fails because mankind is unwilling to accept it. In Babrius, by stark contrast, the oracle in fact gives false information and so the human rightfully rejects it.

<sup>67</sup> For self-sufficiency as a major theme in fable, cf. Morgan 2007: 71-72.

establish how important it is for humans to rely on their own knowledge and experience, Babrius downplays the importance of divine knowledge. This can be seen in a series of fables that emphasize human self-sufficiency at the expense of divine help. For instance, in Fable 20, an ox-driver gets his cart stuck in the mud and prays to Heracles for help, only to have Heracles appear – and tell him to push his own cart rather than waiting for divine aid. Similar is Fable 63, in which a hero appears and tells his worshipper that prayer to heroes is useless, because only the gods have the power to grant good things.<sup>68</sup> In Fable 49, Fortune wakes up a man who has fallen asleep beside a well, lest he blame her when he falls in even though it would be his own fault. In all cases, the message is one of self-sufficiency: do not rely on the gods or blame the gods, says Babrius, but instead, take responsibility for your own actions.

The gods, then, can represent one category of bad teachers, insofar as human knowledge is often portrayed as more reliable than the uncertain and sometimes unoffered wisdom of the gods. Another type of bad teacher that comes under repeated attack in Babrius is the glib speaker: someone who is convincing in words, but does not provide accurate knowledge. Fable 81, for example, teaches that words without facts are useless:

Κερδοῖ πίθηκος εἶπεν “ἦν ὄραξ στήλην  
 ἐμοὶ πατρώη τ’ ἐστὶ κάτι παππῶη.”  
 κερδῶ πιθήκῳ φησὶν “ὡς θέλεις ψεύδου,  
 ἔλεγχον οὐκ ἔχουσα τῆς ἀληθείης.”

An ape said to a fox, “That tombstone that you see  
 is my father’s and grandfather’s.”  
 The fox says to the ape, “Lie if you wish,  
 since I cannot make a cross-examination of the truth.”  
 (Fable 81.1-4)

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. Hunter 2014: 245. Hunter suggests that this fable may be connected to the Hesiodic idea that good things have abandoned earth, and that this is why human life is unhappy (he also cites *Aesopica* 224, in which good things explicitly abandon the earth). Thus, although the fable seems ostensibly positive (as the hero implies that maybe praying to the gods will work), it is essentially negative in outlook: heroes give only bad things because that is all that is available on earth.

The ape feels free to claim that the tombstone is his, since there is no way for the fox to check the truth of his statement. The moral, although most likely spurious, suggests that this fable is a warning that bad men will always lie if they think they can get away with it. However, it is notable that in this fable, the ape does not get away with lying. The fox recognizes that he is lying because he knows that his words cannot be checked. As a clever animal, the fox is not fooled. In a similar way, a clever person will not be fooled by “facts” that do not allow for cross-examination. This fable may also, on another level, be about reading – if either the fox or the ape could actually read what was on the tombstone, the matter would be cleared up much more quickly.

A similar warning against unfounded glib speech can be found in Fable 15, in which an Athenian and a Theban argue about whether Theseus or Heracles is the greater hero. The Athenian wins the argument by being a glib speaker (15.10: *στωμύλος*). In the end, the Theban must admit that he has lost – but only the argument:

ὁ δ' ἄλλος ὡς Βοιωτὸς οὐκ ἔχων ἴσην  
λόγοις ἄμιλλαν, εἶπεν ἀγρήη μούση·  
“πέπαυσο· νικᾷς· τοιγαροῦν χολωθείη  
Θησεὺς μὲν ἡμῖν, Ἡρακλῆς δ' Ἀθηναίοις.”

The other man, being Boeotian, could not make an equal attack in words, but he said with a savage muse,  
“Stop. You win. Therefore may Theseus be angry with us,  
and Heracles angry at you Athenians.”  
(Fable 15.11-14)

The Theban’s retort works because the reader knows that no matter who wins the argument, Heracles is the more powerful of the two heroes. In both this and the previous fable, then, the clever speaker may “win,” insofar as his opponent cannot prove him wrong, but that victory is hollow. Glib words without a foundation never triumph over self-evident facts. The Theban,

much like the bull of Fable 97 and the hares of Fable 25, may not be the most intelligent man (he certainly does not have the rhetorical training that the Athenian does), but that does not matter, because he relies on self-evident truth. The Athenian, who relies on nothing but words, is proved to be the greater fool.

We have already seen this dichotomy between words and facts: in Fable 3, the goat with the broken horn pointed out that even if she were willing to lie about what happened, her horn was an incontrovertible fact that would reveal the truth. This is part of a wider theme in Babrius of facts/deeds being valued over (hollow) words. Of course, this contrast between words and deeds is an extremely common one, but it is important that for Babrius, the specific contrast is often between clever words that are not founded on truth,<sup>69</sup> and truth that is self-evident through the correct interpretation of personal experience. Often in Babrius, clever speakers speak cleverly *because* they do not have the truth on their side. This is a different setup from what we find in Phaedrus, for whom clever speakers use their speech to make up for a power differential, not to make up for a lack of truth. For Phaedrus, clever speaking can be a valiant or commendable act. Not so for Babrius. His fables teach again and again that glib speakers will be shamed if such glib speaking is a cover for bad information.

The final category of bad teachers comes under criticism in Babrius: fakes, people who claim to be experts in something, but whose claim is disproved when they are unable to apply their so-called knowledge to themselves. This is a very common moral in fables, found in all the extant fable collections we have. This moral is common, I believe, because it is part of the basic

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Anderson 1993: 35-36 on the practice, common in the Second Sophistic, of sophists shaming their rivals for being frauds. Clever speaking was not inherently a bad thing for such men, of course, but faking cleverness was.



morality that fables tend to adhere to: going outside of your proper sphere is bad.<sup>70</sup> Thus, any animal that tries to undertake a “profession” outside of its sphere is portrayed as nothing but a pretender. In Babrius, however, the focus is different. Babrius does not emphasize the failure or the punishment of the pretenders, but rather the ability of their would-be victims to recognize them as fakes. This makes sense, given Babrius’s willingness to portray animals acting against their fable type. If they do so successfully, Babrius has no issue. If, however, they act incompetently because they go outside their sphere, then Babrius portrays them as needing to be unmasked as frauds.

An example of Babrius’s unique perspective can easily be seen in the fable about the frog/toad that wishes to be as big as an ox, found in both Babrius and Phaedrus. In Phaedrus, the frog sees an ox and is filled with envy (1.24.3: *invidia*) at the ox’s size. She tries to puff herself up, and makes herself bigger and bigger in an attempt to become larger than the ox, only to burst and die when she gets too big. The fable thus emphasizes the failure of the frog to outdo the ox, and warns against envy. In Babrius, there are key differences. For one thing, the toad never sees the ox. She comes home to find that one of her children has been trampled by a giant animal, and she puffs herself up and then asks if she is the same size as the animal (28.7-8: εἰ τοιοῦτον ἦν ὄγκῳ / τὸ ζῷον). Notably, the toad does not wish to be bigger than the ox; she wishes to imitate him. Furthermore, in Babrius, the toad does not kill herself. Instead, the fable emphasizes the ability of her children to recognize her foolishness:

...οἱ δὲ μητρὶ· “παῦε, μὴ πρήθου.  
θᾶσσον σεαυτὴν,” εἶπον, “ἐκ μέσου ῥήξεις  
ἢ τὴν ἐκείνου ποιότητα μιμήση.”

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Zafiroopoulos 2001: 71-79, who talks about “respecting limits” as one of the major themes of Aesop’s fables. Bloomer 1997: 77 makes a similar argument with reference to Phaedrus.

...The children said to their mother, “Stop. Do not inflate yourself.  
You will sooner burst yourself from the middle  
than you will imitate the size of that creature.”

(Fable 28. 8-10)

The use of μιμήση in the last line further establishes that this is not a fable about jealousy or trying to outdo someone greater, as in Phaedrus, but is a fable about imitation. The toad wishes to be the ox, at least in size, but she cannot. It is significant that Babrius ends his fable before we see the foolish toad mother kill herself. The children recognize her folly – they, after all, did see the ox, so they know that their mother cannot equal his size. Punishing the mother’s foolishness is not Babrius’s main point, then; his main point is that the children, because they witnessed the ox themselves, are able to recognize their mother’s folly. This fable nicely illustrates the difference between Phaedrus and Babrius when it comes to animals who go outside their sphere.

With that in mind, I turn to two examples of pretender fables that occur in Babrius, both of which involve animals that take on professions for which they are not suited. Fable 109 involves one who is specifically called a teacher:

“Μὴ λοξὰ βαίνειν” ἔλεγε καρκίνῳ μήτηρ,  
“ὕγρῃ τε πέτρῃ πλάγια κῶλα μὴ σύρειν.”  
ὁ δ’ εἶπε “μῆτερ ἢ διδάσκαλος, πρώτη  
ὀρθὴν ἄπελθε, καὶ βλέπων σε ποιήσω.”

“Do not walk crookedly,” said the mother to her crab son,  
“Do not drag out wandering paths on the wet rock.”  
He replied, “Mother, my teacher, first  
walk straight yourself, and watching you, I will do it.”

(Fable 109.1-4)

As in the previous fable, the emphasis here is on the child’s ability to recognize the foolishness of his mother. Notably, the foolishness relates explicitly to teaching: the son mockingly calls his mother his teacher, and tells her that the only way for her to teach is for her to master the ability herself. If she cannot walk straight, then she can hardly expect to teach someone else to do it.

Very similar is Fable 120, which involves a frog who is pretending to be a doctor. The frog boasts that his knowledge of drugs and healing is unrivaled, only to be mocked by a fox, who points out that if the frog were a good doctor, then he would not be so deathly pale himself. The frog is not a teacher, as was the crab, but he does present himself as an expert, one who supposedly has specialized knowledge that (only) he can impart to others. The fox, much like the crab son, rejects the frog as an authority because the frog cannot apply the knowledge to himself: if the frog could heal, then he would heal himself. Essentially, these pretender fables are a non-verbal counterpart to the glib speaker fables already examined. In both, a pretended knowledge is revealed to lack a foundation in the truth.

In all the categories of bad teachers I have discussed, the emphasis is usually on unmasking the bad teacher, not on punishing him or her. This suggests that Babrius's focus is still on what these fables mean to the student: he is not so much warning his audience to avoid being bad teachers, as he is giving the student resources in how to recognize and avoid bad teaching. This will become especially important to Babrius, who – as I will show in my final section – works hard to present himself as a good teacher who encompasses the sorts of qualities that his own fables present as valuable. Babrius is a teacher who follows his own teaching, unlike the pretenders he reviles.

#### **IV. Good teachers**

Good teachers are less prevalent in Babrius than are the bad ones, and they only come in one variety: the elderly.<sup>71</sup> Nearly everyone wise in Babrius is identified as being old, and these

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<sup>71</sup> This was a common notion in the Second Sophistic, as Whitmarsh shows. Whitmarsh, in fact, connects the idea of old men being wise with the valorization of Greek learning: “Moreover, in terms of broader cultural paradigmatics,

characters are often contrasted with a young person and/or a mob of young people who are acting foolishly. In Fable 21, a group of oxen plot to kill the humans, since the humans butcher them for meat. However, while the oxen are preparing themselves for battle, an old ox steps forward to stop them:

- 5 γέρων ἐν αὐτοῖς, πολλὰ γῆν ἀροτρεύσας,  
“οὔτοι μὲν ἡμᾶς” εἶπε “χερσὶν ἐμπείροις  
σφάζουσι καὶ κτείνουσι χωρὶς αἰκίης·  
ἦν δ’ εἰς ἀτέχνους ἐμπέσωμεν ἀνθρώπους,  
διπλοῦς τότε ἔσται θάνατος. οὐ γὰρ ἐλλείψει  
10 τὸν βοῦν ὁ θύσων, κἂν μάγειρος ἐλλείψῃ.”
- 5 And old [ox] among them, who had plowed much land,  
said, “These men slaughter us with experienced hands  
and they kill us without suffering.  
But if we fall into the hands of unskilled men,  
there will be a double death. For the sacrificer  
10 will never leave the ox, even if the butcher leaves.”  
(Fable 21.5-10)

In this way, the wise old ox (presumably<sup>72</sup>) forestalls his foolish brethren.

The wise ox in this fable is given two descriptors: he is old (21.5: γέρων) and he is one who has plowed many fields (21.5: πολλὰ γῆν ἀροτρεύσας). The mention of the plowing may seem like unnecessary ornamentation, simply a way to fill out the line. The mention of plowing is important, however, because it reminds the reader that the ox, because he is old, has a lot of life experience: many years on the job, as it were. We have seen already, with reference to the good students, that people who make decisions based on their own experiences tend to do well.

In a similar way, aged characters like this ox are wise *because* they have so much life

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the old man is figured as the site of distillation of Greek wisdom, the emblem of an ancient people aware of the art that lies beneath the surface of political power” (2001: 186).

<sup>72</sup> As is usual in Babrius, the results of the final quip are not specified. On Babrius’s tendency to end certain fables with a final quip but no moral, cf. Morgan 2007: 80-82.

experience; in the ox's case, because he has plowed so much land. This reading is given additional confirmation by the ox's specific reasoning about the butchers: experienced butchers are better than unskilled ones, because they kill more expertly. The ox, then, values experience even in his killers – a most bitter ending.

Another example of wisdom stemming from long life experience can be found in Fable 93, a fable that also appears in the *Life of Aesop*, albeit with a much darker ending. This fable is about a group of wolves that try to make a pact with a herd of sheep. The wolves offer to make a peace treaty with the sheep, but only if the sheep are willing to hand over the dogs, their guardians. In Aesop, the sheep agree to these terms, hand over the dogs, and are summarily slaughtered by the wolves.<sup>73</sup> In Babrius, however, an old ram warns the sheep not to make this foolish decision:

...ἀλλά τις γέρων ἤδη  
κρίδος βαθείη φρικὴ μαλλὸν ὀρθώσας  
“καινῆς γε ταύτης” εἶπε “τῆς μεσιτείας.  
ἀφύλακτος ὑμῖν πῶς ἐγὼ συνοικήσω,  
10 δι’ οὗς νέμεσθαι μηδὲ νῦν ἀκινδύνως  
ἔξεστι, καίτοι τῶν κυνῶν με τηρούντων;”

...But a certain old ram  
bristling from the roots, said,  
“What a strange mediation is this!  
How will I live with you without a guard,  
10 when it is because of them that it is now not possible for me  
to graze without danger, even with dogs watching me?”  
(Fable 93.6-11)

Babrius ends the fable there, so that the reader is not certain whether or not the other sheep took the ram's advice. Still, this ambiguity is a happier ending than the one that is found in Aesop, in

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<sup>73</sup> *Life* G96-98.

which the sheep's complete slaughter at the hands of the wolves is described explicitly. In Aesop there is no wise warner; this is Babrius's addition to the fable. Hence, it is not out of the question that the reader might expect Babrius's fable to have a different outcome. At least there, the sheep had warning that their decision was bad, before they finished making it.<sup>74</sup>

As in the previous fable, there is a contrast here between a sole, elderly individual and the foolish mob. Also, again as in the last example, the old character is wise because of his life experience. The ram knows through long experience that wolves are dangerous, and that the dogs are the sheep's only protection. This wisdom, brought on by age, allows him to counsel his young and foolish fellow sheep.

One final example will suffice to show the interaction of age, experience, and wisdom.

Fable 47 is about an old man who, on his deathbed, calls in his sons to give them an object

lesson:

Ἐν τοῖς παλαιοῖς ἦν ἀνὴρ ὑπεργήρως,  
εἶχεν δὲ πολλοὺς παῖδας· οἷς ἐπισκίπτων  
(ἔμελλε γὰρ δὴ τὸν βίον τελευτήσειν)  
ἐκέλευσε λεπτῶν, εἴ τις ἔστι που, ράβδων  
5 δέσμην ἐνεγκεῖν. ἤκέ τις φέρων ταύτην.  
“πειρᾶσθε δὴ μοι, τέκνα, σὺν βίῃ πάσῃ  
ράβδους καταῖξαι δεδεμένας σὺν ἀλλήλαις.”  
οἱ δ' οὐ γὰρ ἠδύναντο· “κατὰ μίαν τοίνυν  
πειρᾶσθ'.” ἐκάστης δ' εὐχερῶς καταγείσης,  
10 “ὦ παῖδες, οὕτως” εἶπεν “ἦν μὲν ἀλλήλοις  
ὁμοφρονῆτε πάντες, οὐδ' ἂν εἷς ὕμας  
βλάψαι δύναίτο, κἂν μέγιστον ἰσχύη·  
ἦν δ' ἄλλος ἄλλου χωρὶς ἦτε τὴν γνώμην,  
πείσεσθ' ἕκαστος ταῦτά τῃ μιῇ ράβδῳ.”

Among the ancients, there was a very old man  
and he had many sons. On them he laid a commandment

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<sup>74</sup> Babrius specifies that the sheep were just about to make a decision when the old ram spoke up: 93.5-6: μωρῇ δὲ ποιμνῇ καὶ τὰ πάντα βληγῶδης / πέμπειν ἔμελλεν (“But the sheep, foolish and bleating all the time, / were about to hand over [the dogs]”).

(for indeed he was about to end his life)  
and he ordered them, if anyone was able,  
5 to bring in a bundle of slender twigs. Someone came, bringing it.  
“Try, sons, with all of your might,  
to break apart these twigs which have been bound together.”  
But they were unable to do so. “Now try breaking them  
one at a time.” Each twig was easily broken.  
10 “O sons, therefore,” he said, “if all of you would be harmonious  
with each other, no one would be able to harm you, even  
if he is the greatest in strength. But if each of you are  
opposed to one another in your opinions, each of you  
will suffer the same things as the single twig.”  
(Fable 47.1-14)

At this point, it hardly needs to be pointed out that the wise father in this fable is an old man – and not just an old man, but a *very* old man and one from the time of the ancients. He wants to teach a lesson to his sons, so that we have here a model of teaching: an older man passing wisdom on to a group of younger men.

However, the old man’s method of teaching needs to be examined closely. The old man in this fable wants to teach his sons about the importance of harmony, and he does so through an object lesson: just as sticks cannot be easily broken when they are bound together, so humans are stronger when they stick together. It is important to note that this lesson (“We are stronger together”) is a common fable moral, but here the character teaches it without using a fable. Instead, he teaches using an object lesson, so that his sons can actually experience the lesson for themselves: they will be able to feel how strong the bundle of sticks is, how weak each single twig is. This, much more than the father simply lecturing them, is an effective way of teaching.

## **V. Babrius: The Good Teacher**

Babrius presents himself in much the same light as the old man of Fable 47: as a wise teacher who understands that a pupil’s active participation is a key part of learning, and who

relies on his life experience. Throughout his book, Babrius places a high value on a student's participation in education. The fables tend to lack morals, and many of them teach a person how to (or how not to) interpret evidence. In other words, merely listening to fables will not educate a person; a person must listen actively, and must use his own intelligence to determine what the fable means. Babrius's use of γνοίης in the first prologue refers to an active learning experience: drawing conclusions for oneself about the fables. In other words, it is Babrius who tells his pupil to think about the fables – not only to learn from them, but to form an impression of them, to make a judgment. Babrius thus recommends that Branchus be an active participant in his learning which, in Babrius's paradigm, makes Babrius a good teacher.

So much we have already established. Now we can return to how Babrius characterizes his own role in the first prologue. Babrius, we may recall, claims that his chief contribution is a stylistic one: he has embroidered Aesop's fables with his own memory, and has softened the iambs (1 *prol.* 17-19). In claiming that he has embroidered the fables with his own memory, Babrius indicates that his fables will be improved through his own experiences. Although Babrius does not often speak in the first person in the fables themselves, there is one fascinating case in which Babrius makes reference to his own personal experience. Fable 57 purports to be about where lies come from. Hermes has a wagon full of lies, which he drives around the world, distributing the lies equally. The wagon breaks down while passing through the country of the Arabs, and the Arabs steal all the remaining lies. Babrius ends by stating the moral in his own voice:

έντεῦθεν Ἄραβές εἰσιν, ὡς ἐπειράθην,  
ψεῦσταί τε καὶ γόητες, ὧν ἐπὶ γλώσσης  
οὐδὲν κάθηται ῥῆμα τῆς ἀληθείης.

Therefore Arabs, as I have experienced,  
are liars and cheaters, upon whose tongue



there sits not a word of truth.  
(Fable 57.12-14)

It is significant that Babrius emphasizes his personal experience here. He knows that the fable about Hermes and the cart is true because in his personal experience (57.12: ὡς ἐπειράθην), Arabs are liars. Babrius thus supports his fable by linking it to his own experience, in exactly the same way that the wise old characters in his fables do. In this way, Babrius adds himself to the paradigm of “good teachers.”

Equally important is Babrius’s characterization of Aesop as a “wise old man” in the first prologue. We have seen already that in Babrius’s fables, the old characters are wise. By specifying that his fables are not from Aesop the slave but from “wise old Aesop,” Babrius indicates that he has derived his fables from the best possible source. This gives the pupil reason to count the fables as better evidence than Babrius’s opening description of the Golden Age: when the fables contradict the traditional description of a peaceful Golden Age, this is evidence that the Golden Age is a lie, not that the fables are. The reason for trusting fables over the Golden Age description is not simply that Babrius himself, as the teacher, clearly prizes fables. It is also because fables are the product of a wise old man, and in Babrius’s paradigm, wise old men are the best teachers there are.

It is time at last to examine Babrius’s second prologue, the interpretation of which depends on the paradigms we have been examining so far. This is the prologue in its entirety:

Μῦθος μὲν, ὃ παῖ βασιλέως Ἀλεξάνδρου,  
Σύρων παλαιῶν ἐστὶν εὖρεμ’ ἀνθρώπων,  
οἱ πρὶν ποτ’ ἦσαν ἐπὶ Νίνου τε καὶ Βήλου.  
πρῶτος δέ, φασίν, εἶπε παισὶν Ἑλλήνων  
5 Αἴσωπος ὁ σοφός, εἶπε καὶ Λιβυστίνοις  
λόγους Κυβίσσης. ἀλλ’ ἐγὼ νέη μουσῆ  
δίδωμι, φαλάρω χρυσέῳ χαλινώσας  
τὸν μυθίαμβον ὥσπερ ἵππον ὀπλίτην.  
ὕπ’ ἐμοῦ δὲ πρώτου τῆς θύρης ἀνοιχθείσης

10 εἰση̄λθον ἄλλοι, καὶ σοφωτέρης μούσης  
 γρίφοις ὁμοίας ἐκφέρουσι ποιήσεις,  
 μαθόντες οὐδὲν πλεῖον ἢ ᾗ μὲ γινώσκειν.  
 ἐγὼ δὲ λευκῇ μυθιάζομαι ῥήσει,  
 καὶ τῶν ἰάμβων τοὺς ὀδόντας οὐ θήγω,  
 15 ἀλλ' εὖ πυρώσας, εὖ δὲ κέντρα πρηύνας,  
 ἐκ δευτέρου σοι τήνδε βίβλον ἀεῖδω.

Fable, then, o child of King Alexander,  
 is the invention of ancient Syrian men,  
 who lived in the time of Ninus and Belos.

5 First, they say, to speak to the children of the Greeks  
 was Aesop the wise, and first to speak fables to the Libyans  
 was Cybisses. But I give you fables with a new muse,  
 restraining the iamb of the fable  
 with a golden bridle just like a warhorse.  
 After the door had been opened by me first,  
 10 others came in, and with a more learned muse  
 they publish poems similar to riddles,  
 having learned nothing more than to know me.  
 But I fabulize with a clear style,  
 and I do not sharpen the teeth of the iambs,  
 15 but, having well forged the horse-goads and well gentled them,  
 for a second time I sing this book for you.

(2 *prol.* 1-16)

This prologue reinforces the reading I have been advocating in this chapter, for it not only underlines the qualities and importance of good teachers, but also distinguishes Babrius's good readers from his unskilled readers. In so doing, it firmly establishes Babrius as a skilled teacher.

The prologue begins with the word Μῦθος. This is significant because Babrius will use this prologue to give his own account of the history of fables, an account that will be factual and down-to-earth in contrast to the fanciful and false account of the Golden Age that appeared in the first prologue. Babrius begins by stating, in his own voice, that fables are the invention of the Syrians. Aesop was merely the first to tell fables to the Greeks, as Cybisses told them to the

Libyans. Babrius thus shows an awareness of the international and complicated history of fables, an awareness that implies that his own research has been exhaustive.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, Babrius again uses the vague third person plural φασίν in this prologue (as he did in the first prologue), but only with reference to Aesop. By using φασίν to describe what people say about Aesop, Babrius admits that what he says about Aesop is common knowledge: everybody says that Aesop was the first to teach the Greeks. This establishes a further contrast between what people in general know, and what Babrius the expert knows. *They* say that Aesop was the first to tell fables to the Greeks, but *I* say that the Syrians were the first of all, and Cybisses the first for the Libyans. In other words, the φασίν represents common knowledge, but Babrius has more specialized knowledge.

Most importantly, perhaps, this prologue includes an address to Babrius's pupil, who is now identified as "the son of King Alexander." In the first prologue, he was merely called Branchus, with no social status given. At this point, halfway through the fable book, the audience is suddenly informed that Babrius has been addressing a young prince the whole time. This revelation – and I do believe it is meant to come as a surprise – has several important implications. First, it once again underlines Babrius's own authority and skill; he is a man who is qualified to teach a prince.<sup>76</sup> More than that, it forces Babrius's wider audience to reassess the fables they have read so far. Because Babrius orders his fables alphabetically, this second

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<sup>75</sup> Theon also mentions regional variations of fable from a wide range of places. On this, cf. Morgan 2007: 57-58.

<sup>76</sup> Sidebottom 2006: 154 discusses how Dio Chrysostom, by delivering his *On Kingship* speeches before a provincial audience, not only increased his own merit as a speaker but also flattered his audience: "Here, every time Dio 'retold' or anyone read one of his works *Peri Basileias*, the illusion of the philosopher's intimacy with the emperor was recreated. A provincial audience was doubly flattered. Not only was it wise enough to be offered such advice, it was the same 'kingly' advice which had been offered to the emperor." A similar argument could be made about Babrius's fables, now revealed to be fables spoken to a young prince: this not only indicates that Babrius is a worthy teacher for princes, but also that the readers are receiving princely advice.

prologue directly follows a series of fables about lions, most of whom are lion *kings*. The lions have a status in common with Babrius's addressee, a fact that is not known when the lion fables are first read. It is not the purpose of this chapter to do an in-depth reading of the series of lion fables, interesting though they are. I would merely like to suggest that somebody who reads Babrius for the first time, suddenly learning that Branchus is the son of a king, directly after reading a series of fables about (lion) kings, has ample reason to go back and reread the fables with this new information in mind. The revelation thus encourages rereading and close thought, qualities of the ideal student in Babrius's paradigm. In fact, many of the fables examined in this chapter could be reread with this new perspective: it has already been noted that Babrius's perspective is usually top-down, in contrast to Phaedrus. Since his pupil is a prince, such a perspective makes perfect sense.<sup>77</sup>

Babrius further states that he writes with a "new Muse," (2 *prol.* 6: νέη μουση) and that he has "well gentled the horse goads" (2. *prol.* 15: εἶ δὲ κέντρα πρηύνας) of the iamb. Hawkins connects this to the first prologue, in which Babrius promised to "soften" (1 *prol.* 19: θηλύνας) the iambs, and argues that Babrius is once again (disingenuously) promising to make his iambs "safe" and to remove their traditional sting.<sup>78</sup> While this is true, the presence of "the son of King Alexander" in this prologue suggests a further line of thought: Babrius offers to make his fables "gentle" because that is the proper way for a philosopher to talk to a king.<sup>79</sup> Such an awareness

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<sup>77</sup> In fact, Dana Fields's article "King in Imperial Fable" reads fables from both Phaedrus and Babrius as "didacticism directed to the monarch himself, which aims to lead him gently toward more ethical rule, comparable to the function of imperial writings on kingship" (p. 35).

<sup>78</sup> Hawkins 2014: 98-99.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Keane 2015: 139 and Sidebottom 2006: 121 for how a mixture of praise and admonition was a key feature of literature and/or oratory addressed to kings. Sidebottom argues that *On Kingship* literature disappeared after Augustus's rise to power, only to reappear during the Second Sophistic with Dio Chrysostom. In fact, Sidebottom argues that it was the Second Sophistic itself that gave Dio the opportunity to write *On Kingship* literature: "The other underlying trend which may have encouraged Dio can be found in the rise of the Second Sophistic. This

of the proper way of speaking makes Babrius a good teacher (for princes). Furthermore, the use of the term κέντρα is marked, especially in speech directed at a ruler. As Kathryn Morgan demonstrates with reference to Pindar's *Pythian 2* and other fifth-century authors, the word κέντρα has tyrannical associations.<sup>80</sup> In fact, *Pythian 2* begins and ends with horse-training metaphors, as Morgan discusses. In the opening of the ode, Pindar declares that Hieron yoked his mares using "gentle hands" (line 8: ἀγαναῖσιν...χερσὶ), an image that not only functions on a literal level, in showing how Hieron prepares his horses for the chariot race, but also on "a metaphorical level where controlling a chariot is a sign of kingly power."<sup>81</sup> Hieron, according to this image, is a gentle ruler. At the end of the poem, Pindar advises the audience to bear the yoke and not kick back against the goad. In so doing, Pindar seems to be urging the audience to accept Hieron's tyranny.<sup>82</sup> In promising that he will "gentle" the goad for his princely pupil, Babrius must be activating a similar kind of image. Babrius promises not only that his own teaching will be gentle, but also, perhaps, that he will teach the son of King Alexander how to use a gentle goad in his own rule.<sup>83</sup>

Later in the prologue, Babrius contrasts himself with his fellow fable writers, dismissing them as mere imitators who do not know anything except how to (badly) copy Babrius.

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cultural renaissance, with its stress on 'Greekness' and the Greek past, was created by the Greek elite from the late first century AD in large part to fill the distressing gap between their contemporary economic and social prosperity and their lack of political autonomy" (2006: 151).

<sup>80</sup> Morgan 2015: 200. In this analysis, she follows Catenacci 1991.

<sup>81</sup> Morgan 2015: 177. She discusses this opening image more generally pp. 175-177.

<sup>82</sup> Morgan 2015: 200.

<sup>83</sup> On gentleness as, itself, a quality that Roman emperors were supposed to possess, cf. Wallace-Hadrill 1982. In particular, Wallace-Hadrill argues that the Roman emperors used a studied deference in their relationships with their subjects, "a ritual of condescension to represent themselves as simple citizens" (1982: 48).

Dismissing one's imitators is, of course, a common trope in literature; here, it helps establish that Babrius is not only more knowledgeable than the general public; he is also more skilled than his competitors in the fable genre. The mention of the imitators, however, does more than simply bolster Babrius's authority. It also represents perhaps the strongest characterization of a "bad" student/reader.<sup>84</sup>

These imitators are, according to Babrius's own description, people who have read Babrius and want to be like him. Yet they fail to do so, because they have learned nothing from Babrius except how to know Babrius (2 *prol.* 12: μαθόντες οὐδὲν πλεῖον ἢ ᾗ μὲ γινώσκειν). It should be immediately clear that this is an important statement for Babrius: the line begins with μαθόντες and ends with γινώσκειν, thus linking it to the μάθοις and γνοιῆς that were Branchus's goals in the first prologue. The imitators, however, have "learned nothing except Babrius": in other words, they have learned nothing except how to imitate Babrius's style, and they are not even very good at that. Babrius creates a clear contrast between his and the imitators' styles: the imitators write fables that are like γρίφοις, or riddles, whereas Babrius writes in a "clear style," λευκῇ ῥήσει.<sup>85</sup> In other words, while Babrius may write fables without morals, the meaning of his fables is still clear to anyone who thinks about them. Babrius's fables are not unclear; they simply require thought.<sup>86</sup> Babrius's imitators, not understanding this, write fables that are

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<sup>84</sup> That the imitators should be considered "bad students" is a point also made by Hawkins 2014: 100 and Hunter 2014: 236.

<sup>85</sup> This contrast has of course been noticed before. Cf. Hunter 2014: 236.

<sup>86</sup> Insofar as Babrius's fables do not spell out their moral, but only hint at it, Babrius's fables are also similar to riddles. However, there is a difference between riddles that can be solved with thought, and riddles which are simply too obscure to be meaningful. Babrius's imitators wrote the latter kind. Cf. the discussion of riddles in Athenaeus 10.448d-459b. According to Athenaeus, γρίφοι are defined as "a facetious question that requires one to use a process of intellectual inquiry to discover what is being referred to, and that is articulated with an eye to a reward or punishment" (448c, trans. Olson). Such a definition fits Babrius's project very well. On the other hand, Athenaeus also includes quotations that complain about riddles being ridiculously obscure (cf., for example, 10.449.b-d, in which speaking in riddles is contrasted with speaking γνορίμως, "intelligibly").

genuinely impossible to understand and hence are more like unsolvable riddles. Presumably these fables lacked morals, like Babrius's, but did not provide the readers with enough information to determine the meaning of the fables.

In short, these imitators have missed the point of the fables; they have not thought about how they are most useful as teaching tools, but have written fables that are unintelligible. The imitators thus represent failed readers and failed students. These failed students have gone on to write their own fable books, thus taking on the role of failed teachers as well. The implication is clear: bad students grow up to be bad teachers. The imitators, then, have a double role in this prologue. They contrast with Babrius, and show that Babrius is better than his didactic competition. They also contrast with the ideal reader that Babrius desires, representing readers who completely miss the point of Babrius's fables.

In all of these ways, Babrius's second prologue reinforces and advances the themes that I have been examining in this chapter. Babrius establishes himself as a good teacher, as contrasted with his contemporaries. He contrasts the negative exemplum of both teacher and student, provided by the imitators, with the positive exemplum provided by himself and by his (ideal) readers.

## **V. Conclusion**

This chapter has chiefly focused on a close reading of the fables of Babrius that help shed light on Babrius's pedagogical strategy. This has, in turn, demonstrated that Babrius uses his fables not merely to teach life lessons, as does Aesop, nor to make social commentary, as does Phaedrus. Instead, Babrius uses fables to illustrate how the student should use and interpret information in the best possible way. Essentially, Babrius uses his fables to teach his students

how to use fables most productively. This, I would suggest, can be seen in light of the common ways that fables were used in schools during the imperial period. Fables, as Becker discusses, were used as the raw material for a variety of rhetorical exercises, most of them geared toward teaching the students how to adapt the fable genre to their own purposes.<sup>87</sup> Babrius is not teaching rhetorical strategies; or at least, that is not his main goal. Nevertheless, his fable collection teaches the audience how to think about and interpret information, rather than simply presenting morals to be learned by rote. Babrius, like a teacher in a rhetorical school, uses fables for something other than simple moral teaching.

Although the dates of Babrius's fable collection are far from secure, Babrius's fable book must be seen as a product of his times. Scholarly consensus maintains that Babrius wrote during the Second Sophistic of the first to third centuries, a time during which education – παιδεία – became an all-consuming focus for Greek intellectuals.<sup>88</sup> Babrius can be seen in this framework as yet another intellectual who wants to talk about education, not by using philosophy or rhetoric, but rather by using fables. This choice would not put Babrius at odds with the sophists who flourished in this time period; as Graham Anderson demonstrates, assigning human wisdom to animal sources was one of many ways in which the sophists played with their material.<sup>89</sup>

Tim Whitmarsh's makes the following observation about the anxieties that attended Greek literature of the Second Sophistic:

Although education is generally presented, in the literature of the period, as the justification for established social hegemonies—the elite rule because they know best how to do so—it also provides the means for the overturning of such hegemonies by making power and prestige accessible to those who are notionally excluded. Now of

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<sup>87</sup> Becker 2006: 168-169.

<sup>88</sup> On education in the Second Sophistic, cf. Anderson 1993: 47-53.

<sup>89</sup> Anderson 1993: 185-188.



course such access was very strictly policed, and the cases where women or non-Greeks have sought to surmount their given conditions are marginalized, belittled, and circumscribed.... Yet it is important not to reduce *paideia* to a front for stabilizing power: to do so would be to misinterpret its characterization in contemporary thought, which focuses fundamentally upon its positive virtues as a self-making system. (2001: 130)

Such a description is strongly reminiscent of Babrius's fable collection, which despite being on the whole socially conservative, nevertheless portrays weak animals learning to be strong and lauds the virtues of self-sufficiency. Babrius's fable book may be nominally addressed to a prince, but it was read by school children in the empire, and it teaches that anyone who knows how to think can learn how to be better. In that sense, it can be educational for anyone and everyone who reads it.

## Chapter 4

### Avianus: Dressing up the Fable Genre

The *Fabulae Aviani* is a collection of forty-two fables in elegiac couplets, prefaced by an introductory epistle in prose addressed to a Theodosius. Unlike Babrius and Phaedrus, Avianus makes no first- or second-person statements within the fables themselves; the only part of the fable collection that contains Avianus's authorial voice is the dedicatory epistle. Also unlike his predecessors, Avianus's literary dependence is clear: nearly all of Avianus's fables can also be found in Babrius. This has led most scholars to assume that Avianus is either a Latin translation of Babrius (this is often coupled with the assumption that any fable found in Avianus but not found in Babrius is simply missing from our extant Babrius<sup>1</sup>) or the versification of a Latin prose version of Babrius.<sup>2</sup> The latter theory is based on two assumptions: first, that Avianus is unlikely to have known Greek, and so must have been using a Latin translation of Babrius, and second, that when Avianus claims in his dedicatory epistle to be versifying fables "composed in rude Latin" (*praef.* 17-18: *rudi Latinitate compositas*),<sup>3</sup> he is referring to his act of translating a prose version of Babrius. As I will discuss below, this latter theory is problematic: as Küppers has

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<sup>1</sup> Thus Duff 1934: 672-673. For a list of fables in Avianus that do not appear in Babrius, see Adrados 2000: 257 and Küppers 1977: 163-164.

<sup>2</sup> I will discuss both of these theories in more detail in my next section.

<sup>3</sup> I use the text of Duff 1934 for Avianus.

shown, there is no reason to think that Avianus could not have known Greek,<sup>4</sup> and furthermore, the many elaborate allusions to and plays on Babrius's wording suggest that Avianus had access to Babrius's original text.<sup>5</sup> I thus follow Küppers and Holzberg in assuming that Avianus is working with Babrius's text directly. I do not, however, assume that any fable that appears in Avianus but not in our extant Babrius must be missing from some original version of Babrius. It is a disservice to Avianus to think that he could not have composed his own fables, or included those he found in other sources.<sup>6</sup>

The dating for Avianus is far from secure, but he is generally assumed to have written in the late fourth or early fifth century CE.<sup>7</sup> The *terminus post quem* for Avianus is the poetry of Claudian since, as Cameron and Küppers have shown, Avianus's fables contain allusions to Claudian's poetry.<sup>8</sup> Beyond that, dating Avianus has traditionally relied on two factors: Avianus's relationship to Christianity and Avianus's relationship to Macrobius Theodosius, author of the *Saturnalia*.

The first point has already been shown by previous scholars to be largely inapplicable, so I will only briefly discuss it. Early scholarship on Avianus assumed that Avianus must have

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<sup>4</sup> Küppers 1977: 192-208.

<sup>5</sup> This is one of the main arguments of Küppers 1977. Cf. also Holzberg 2002: 64-65.

<sup>6</sup> The relationship between Avianus and Phaedrus is less often studied, although it certainly exists. Scholars who touch briefly on this matter include Adrados 2000: 257, Duff 1934: 672; Holzberg 2002: 65, and Küppers 1977: 149-155.

<sup>7</sup> Cameron 1967: 285-386; Duff 1934: 670-671; Küppers 1977: 3-7.

<sup>8</sup> Küppers 1977: 59-64 argues that the only certain allusions are to Claudian's first poem, published in 395, making that the *terminus post quem* for Avianus. Cameron 1967: 385-386 finds an allusion to Claudian's *de Bello Gildonico* of 319, and so considers that the *terminus post quem*.

written before 391 CE, when Theodosius's anti-pagan legislation came into effect,<sup>9</sup> since his fables contain references to the pagan gods and to sacrifice. However, as the work of Cameron has shown, there is no evidence that authors after 391 – whether Christian or pagan – were forbidden to use pagan imagery in their writing.<sup>10</sup> In fact, there is ample evidence that so-called pagan imagery continued in both Christian and non-Christian writers.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the pagan allusions in Avianus do not in any way mean that he must be dated to before 391.<sup>12</sup>

However, there is good reason to use Avianus's relationship to Macrobius as a method of dating. I agree with the scholarly consensus that the "Theodosius" mentioned in Avianus's dedicatory epistle – the man to whom he dedicates his fable book – is Macrobius Theodosius, not any of the emperors Theodosius, as is sometimes claimed.<sup>13</sup> The main reason for this consensus is that the dedicatory letter fits Macrobius much better than it fits any of the emperors.

Macrobius was an erudite man who knew both Greek and Latin, but was not a native either of

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<sup>9</sup> Earlier scholarship often speaks of 391 as being the year that paganism was "outlawed." However, Cameron has shown that such a statement is misleading. Theodosius's legislation was neither as far-reaching nor as innovative as earlier scholars assumed: the law of February 391 was only binding on officials, and it banned nothing that had not already been banned in earlier laws (Cameron 2011: 61-62). On this and Theodosius's other anti-pagan legislation, cf. Cameron 2011: 60-74. For the early argument that Avianus must have written before Theodosius's legislation, cf. Ellis 1887: xx-xxi.

<sup>10</sup> Cameron 2011: 207: "There is simply no evidence that Christians in authority actually punished the expression of pagan sentiments." Cameron also makes this argument in his earlier article (1967: 385). Cf. also Brown 1995: 11-13, who discusses the synthesis of Christian and pagan imagery.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, as Salzman demonstrates, Christian orators and authors deliberately made use of classical imagery in order to appeal to and maybe convert non-Christian elite men. On how Christians coopted pagan literary culture, cf. especially Salzman 2002: 209-211 and Roberts 1989: 123-143.

<sup>12</sup> The fables of Avianus have little or nothing to do with Christianity. Cf. Duff 1934: 675, who says that there is no Christian influence in Avianus that he can detect. Wright 1997 provides a unique insight into Avianus's relationship with Christianity, by showing how later Medieval readers attempted to Christianize him. These readers added their own allegorical interpretations to the fables in order to make them Christian (pp. 12-13).

<sup>13</sup> Jones 1969 is the most recent article I could find that makes a case for the emperor. Jones argues not only that Avianus is addressing the emperor, but that Avianus's name was actually Flavianus. His theory, however, is extremely problematic, as Küppers shows (1977: 51-57).

Greece or Rome.<sup>14</sup> In his dedicatory epistle, Avianus praises his dedicatee as a man who “surpasses the Greeks in Greek learning and the Romans in Latin learning” (*praef.* 7-8: *Atticos Graeca eruditione superes et Latinitate Romanos*). As Cameron has shown, this description fits Macrobius (called Theodosius in his day) very well.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, there is external evidence that Avianus and Macrobius knew each other, since (as several scholars have suggested) Avianus appears as a character in Macrobius’s *Saturnalia*.<sup>16</sup> Cameron has argued, in fact, that Avianus’s fable collection was composed after Macrobius’s *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, but before the *Saturnalia*, a reconstruction I find convincing.<sup>17</sup>

The brevity of Avianus’s fable collection, combined with his limited authorial presence, presents the reader with both an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, since there are only forty-two fables, it is relatively easy to consider Avianus’s text in its entirety: the repetition of themes, morals, and imagery is striking, and helps create a cohesive text. On the other hand, Avianus says relatively little about his authorial purpose. His dedicatory epistle presents his fables as entirely traditional in content, but elaborate and artful – almost artificial – in their

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<sup>14</sup> Cameron 1967: 387 discusses the question of Macrobius’s birthplace. Macrobius says in the *Saturnalia* (1.1.11) that he was born *sub alio caelio* while apologizing for any mistakes in his Latin. Macrobius does not, in the estimation of Cameron and others, seem overly familiar with Greek either. The general consensus is that he was probably born in Africa.

<sup>15</sup> Cameron 1967: 386-389 provides the most exhaustive list of reasons that the dedicatee is Macrobius (he repeats these arguments in *Last Pagans of Rome* as well, with minor modifications [2011: 236-237]). Scholars who agree that the dedicatee is Macrobius include Duff 1934: 669-70; Ellis 1887: xiv-xvii; Holzberg: 2002: 68; and Küppers 1977: 48-50.

<sup>16</sup> This matter will be discussed in my final section. The reasons frequently given for identifying the Avianus in Macrobius’s *Saturnalia* with the fabulist Avianus are not, in my opinion, completely convincing. However, I will provide some additional reasons for accepting this identification.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Cameron 1967: 389 for the argument that the *Fables* come after Macrobius’s *Commentary* (since Avianus seems to allude to Macrobius’s definition of the fable in the *Commentary*) and Cameron 1967: 390 for the argument that the *Fables* came before the *Saturnalia*. Cameron adds additional arguments in *Last Pagans of Rome* (2001: 246-247) when he argues that Macrobius composed his *Saturnalia* after all of its interlocutors were dead – including Avianus.

composition. Avianus's text is also highly allusive: nearly every fable contains echoes of either Vergil or Ovid, allusions which have been carefully catalogued by modern scholars but whose individual purposes within the fables remain largely unconsidered.<sup>18</sup>

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that there is a tension between the dedicatory epistle – which presents elegance as Avianus's central concern – and the fables themselves, which repeatedly show that elegance and beauty are at best useless and at worst actively harmful.<sup>19</sup> Such a tension suggests that Avianus's authorial pose in the dedicatory epistle is not a straightforward one, but rather has been intentionally constructed so as to be undermined by the fables themselves. This is reminiscent of Babrius, who, as I read him, similarly constructed his first prologue about the idyllic Golden Age so as to conflict with his fables, which illustrate a world of savagery and violence. It is possible, then, that the construction of Avianus's fable book is another element borrowed from Babrius: a circular argument, but an attractive one. As Genette argues, it is entirely possible for a dedicatory epistle to take on functions similar to that of a preface: an author might wish to explain why he is dedicating the work to a particular person, which might involve describing some of the content or purpose of the text.<sup>20</sup> This is certainly the case for Avianus. In describing his purpose – a purpose that will be undermined by the fables themselves – Avianus creates a hermeneutic framework that affects how the fables are read.

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<sup>18</sup> In what follows, I am indebted to Ellis's careful cataloguing of Avianus's literary allusions in his commentary (1887). Scanzo 2001 provides a more exhaustive account of literary allusion in Avianus, many of which, being down to the level of the word, are too subtle for me to treat in this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> On the manuscript history of Avianus, cf. Bailey 1978, Duff 1934: 677-678; Ellis 1887: xxxix-xli; Guaglianone 1958; Jones 1940; and Vaio 1984. It is not certain that all of the fables in our collection are originally by Avianus: there is some evidence (discussed by Ellis 1887: xxx) that some fables were excised and then replaced by new fables, so as to keep the number at forty-two. However, the only fable that Ellis is truly suspicious of (based on language and meter) is Fable 23 ("The Craftsman and Bacchus"), although he is also uncertain whether Fables 34 and 38 are genuine.

<sup>20</sup> Genette 1997: 123-126.

A major component of the “elegance” of Avianus’s fables is epic allusion; Avianus “dresses up” his fables using quotations from and allusions to classical poetry, especially that of Vergil. Such a strategy seems at first glance to be entirely unproblematic, both because classical allusion is a major component of late antique style,<sup>21</sup> and because Avianus’s dedicatee, Macrobius, was well known for his antiquarianism and his love for Vergil. Once again, however, the fables call this strategy into question, for within the fabular world that Avianus creates, epic language and epic strategies fail, while simplicity and cleverness – hallmarks of the fable genre – succeed.<sup>22</sup> In essence, Avianus’s fables demonstrate that the attitude Avianus pretends to adopt in his dedicatory epistle is ill-suited to the fable genre; the humble fable genre is not meant to be elegant, and it is certainly not meant to be epic. Avianus’s fable book is thus the most consciously self-reflexive and literary of the extant collections: he is interested in what is appropriate for the fable genre, and what is not.

At the same time, Avianus’s fable book is not solely about appropriate literary styles. His condemnation of “dressing up” what is humble has a social and political component as well. Michele Salzman has discussed the extent to which “status culture” defines and structures late antique culture. Elite men (*clarissima*)<sup>23</sup> saw themselves as elite because they shared certain

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<sup>21</sup> Roberts 1989: 57-58 discusses the centrality of poetic imitation to late antique style: “Fragments of earlier poets, invested with brilliance and color by their original contexts, are manipulated and juxtaposed in striking new combinations, often exploiting the contrast with the previous text in sense, situation, or setting” (p. 57). Roberts also discusses the cento, in which a new poem is created out of lines from earlier poets. On mythological and secular centos in antiquity, cf. McGill 2005. For Vergilian centos, cf. also Bright 1984.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Uden 2009: 111-112 and Holzberg 2002: 88 for the notion that simplicity originally served as the hallmark of the fable genre. Holzberg argues for the *Aesopica* that the simple prose was a deliberate stylistic choice to make the collection seem like the sort of thing Aesop would have written, and Uden agrees, pointing out that Avianus is thus unique in his desire to make the fables resolutely not simple.

<sup>23</sup> Salzman defines the boundaries of “elite” broadly, using the *clarissimus* rank as her baseline (2002: 4). However, she also distinguishes among different kinds of *clarissimi* men, in particular, the differences between “new men” and the old aristocratic families (2002: 97-106).

characteristics, such as a noble birth, wealth, participation in public service, good moral character, and literary taste.<sup>24</sup> Above all, having status meant being recognized as elite by your peers.<sup>25</sup> One major component of this recognition was dress and display: members of the elite were expected to dress in certain clothing, travel with an entourage, and have the money to spend on public displays of various kinds.<sup>26</sup> However, as various emperors broadened and altered the boundaries of the elite class, it became important for the older elite families to distinguish themselves from the “new men” who were now technically *clarissimi* as well.<sup>27</sup> After all, during this period, there were many routes into the aristocracy; even military barbarians could technically reach the *clarissime*.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Avianus’s condemnation of dress and display must be seen in light of the period in which he was writing: in writing fables that condemn humble animals that try to take on elite trappings, Avianus also condemns non-elite individuals (or perhaps even “new men”) who pretend that they are part of the elite class. At the same time, Avianus questions the extent to which dress and display are appropriate markers of social class at all. If anyone can wear elite clothing, then elite clothing itself becomes an empty signifier. Thus, in Avianus’s fables, literary style and social commentary are inextricably bound together.

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<sup>24</sup> Salzman 2002: 20-24.

<sup>25</sup> Salzman 2002: 19.

<sup>26</sup> For the importance of an entourage, cf. Salzman 2002: 19-20. For public displays of wealth, cf. Salzman 2002: 44-46. The matter of clothing is one which Salzman returns to repeatedly through the book; cf. pp. 19, 24, 45, 47, 56, and 128. Roberts 1989: 111-121 also discusses the importance of clothing and display in the late antique period, and tentatively connects this to the literary style of the day (p. 121).

<sup>27</sup> On the changing definitions of “elite,” cf. Salzman 2002: 38-39. On the divisions within elite culture, cf. pp. 5, 41, and 97.

<sup>28</sup> On the military as a path into the aristocracy, cf. Salzman 2002: 128-132.



## I. The Dedicatory Epistle: Fables as Art

Avianus's dedicatory epistle is centered on two themes: his complete authorial control over his material, and his supposed rehabilitation of the inelegant fable genre. These themes are clearly related: Avianus's assertion that he may do whatever he wishes with the fable genre justifies his decision to change the fable's history and generic characteristics as he pleases. In fact, from the opening lines of the epistle, Avianus asserts control over his chosen genre:

*Dubitanti mihi, Theodosi optime, quonam<sup>29</sup> litterarum titulo nostri nominis memoriam mandaremus, fabularum textus occurrit, quod in his urbane concepta falsitas deceat et non incumbat necessitas veritatis.*

While I was in doubt, excellent Theodosius, as to what kind of literature I should entrust the memory of my name, the composition of fables occurred to me, because in fables, elegantly composed falsehood is proper and the necessity of truth is not incumbent. (*praef.* 1-5)

Avianus's stated goal is to preserve the memory of his own name: not to preserve the memory of his dedicatee, not to teach lessons about life, but simply to ensure his own fame. This is a particularly self-centric way of beginning;<sup>30</sup> one might compare Phaedrus, who began with Aesop's name,<sup>31</sup> or even Babrius, who opens in the midst of a lesson about the Golden Age.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Avianus's moment of inspiration, which is described in three words (*praef.* 3: *fabularum textus occurrit*) is strikingly devoid of any names. Avianus is not inspired by a muse or a deity; he is not inspired by the example of Aesop; the genre of fables comes up to him of its

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<sup>29</sup> Duff 1934 here prints the manuscript variant *quoinam*, even though four mss. (C,O,R and T) attest to *quonam*. Cf. Ellis 1887: 1.

<sup>30</sup> Uden 2009: 112 makes the same point.

<sup>31</sup> Phaedrus 1 *prol.* 1-2: *Aesopus auctor quam materiam repperit, / hanc ego polivi versibus senariis* ("The material which Aesop discovered as author, / I have improved with senarian verse").

<sup>32</sup> Babrius 1 *prol.* 1-3: Γενεὴ δικαίων ἦν τὸ πρῶτον ἀνθρώπων, / ὃ Βράγχε τέκνον, ἦν καλοῦσι χρυσεῖον, / μεθ' ἣν γενέσθαι φασὶν ἀργυρῆν ἄλλην ("The race of just men existed first, / Branchus my child, which they call golden, / after which they say another race, silver, came to be...").

own accord, as it were. Again, this keeps the focus on Avianus's purpose and on Avianus's authorship. Finally, Avianus explains his reason for deciding to write in the fable genre: falsehood suits the fable genre, as long as that falsehood is elegantly composed (*urbane concepta*), and there is no necessity for truth. Here we see the first indication of Avianus's interest in the generic boundaries of the fable genre: elegant lies are proper to the fable genre, truth is not.

Avianus's characterization of the fable genre in this passage has attracted much scholarship. Most scholars define *falsitas* as "fiction," and do not see this as particularly problematic.<sup>33</sup> Küppers links Avianus's definition to that of Theon, who famously defined fable in this way: μῦθος ἐστὶ λόγος ψευδῆς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν ("A fable is a fictitious story picturing the truth.").<sup>34</sup> The similarities between the two definitions are clear: both Avianus and Theon assert that fables are false or fictitious in nature, and neither claim that fables are true; Avianus states that truth is not a requirement of the genre, and Theon states that fables merely "resemble" or "picture" the truth. These similarities lead Küppers to state that Avianus's definition of the fable genre is entirely traditional.<sup>35</sup> However, as James Uden points out, Avianus's fable definition is not so unproblematic.<sup>36</sup> For one thing, if Avianus's *falsitas* simply means "fiction"

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<sup>33</sup> For examples, cf. Duff 1934: 681 and Ellis 1887: 49.

<sup>34</sup> Küppers 1977: 173-174. Uden 2009: 113 adds other definitions of the fable, such as those of Priscian and Augustine, who similarly define fable as truthful in content, even if the form is fictional.

<sup>35</sup> Küppers 1977: 174.

<sup>36</sup> James Uden's insightful 2009 article similarly examines how the traditional content of Avianus's fables is at odds with his style, although Uden does so in a way different from what I do in this chapter. Uden focuses specifically on the ways in which Avianus's often vivid descriptions of bodily suffering can be connected to the public punishments of Avianus's day. Cf. in particular p. 110: "The stories Avianus tells are, for the most part, traditional, but the way he tells them is new. Frequently we find when reading these canonical animal stories imagery of bodily suffering as expressions of justice, frightening physical displays of authority and the ideas and vocabulary of late antique criminal punishment." I, in contrast, will not concentrate on the public nature of late antique punishment, but rather on how punishments in Avianus are connected to problematic ornamentation.

with no pejorative sense, that would be unparalleled.<sup>37</sup> Even more importantly, whereas fabulists generally defend the utility and truthfulness of their genre *in spite of* its inherently fictional nature, Avianus does the opposite, so Uden:

[T]he emphatic postponement of *veritatis* to the last position of this sentence also surely suggests Avianus' provocation of the standard accounts of fable as a genre. By dismissing a need for 'truth' as well as endorsing the *stylish presentation of the false*, Avianus directly contradicts ancient fabulists' almost unanimous justification of their genre as truth attractively disguised as fiction. Moreover, contrary to previous writers who de-emphasized literary style in their accounts of fable and recommend plain diction, Avianus makes *urbanitas* a part of his conception of the genre (Uden 2009: 114, emphasis mine).<sup>38</sup>

Avianus, then, is not simply admitting to the fictional nature of fables in a simple or offhand way; he is combatively declaring that the central and most attractive aspect of fables is their *falsitas*, and that, in fact, fables need not have any truth in them at all. Furthermore, as Uden rightly emphasizes, Avianus asserts that this *falsitas* must be stylish: only *falsitas* that is "elegantly composed" (*praef.* 3-4: *urbane concepta*) is proper to fables.<sup>39</sup> Avianus is not just promoting falsehood; he is promoting falsehood that has been elegantly dressed. Thus elegance becomes central to Avianus's conception of the fable genre.

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<sup>37</sup> Uden 2009: 114.

<sup>38</sup> Uden cites Quintilian's recommendation that fabulists use simple language at *Inst.* 1.9.2 (*sermone puro et nihil se supra modum extollente*) (Uden 2009: 114 n. 20).

<sup>39</sup> Cameron 1967: 388-89 links Avianus's definition of the fable genre with Macrobius's discussion of fables in his *Commentary*. Macrobius glosses fables as *fabulae, quarum nomen indicat falsi professionem* (*Comm.* 1.2.7: "fables, whose name indicates a profession of what is false") but then goes on to defend those fables which teach moral lessons, rather than simply entertain. Cameron then argues that Avianus "reflects the same defensive attitude as Macrobius" (1967: 388). However, although Cameron is certainly right to link Avianus's and Macrobius's fable definitions, it is surely not true that Avianus's definition is an exact reflection of Macrobius's. Macrobius is defending the falsity of the fable genre by asserting that the false is justifiable if there is a moral component; Avianus, in a very different way, asserts that elegant falsehood is itself the fable genre's most attractive feature – not something to be excused or defended.

Previous scholars have generally linked this *falsitas* to the fable genre itself: fables concern talking animals and other impossible situations, and they are therefore inherently fictional in nature. This is undoubtedly true. However, I would like to suggest that there is a more immediate referent to the *falsitas* that motivated Avianus to write in the fable genre: namely, the false genealogy of fables that comes next in the dedicatory epistle:

*nam quis tecum de oratione, quis de poemate loqueretur, cum in utroque litterarum genere et Atticos Graeca eruditione superes et Latinitate Romanos? huius ergo materiae duces nobis Aesopum noveris, qui responso Delphici Apollinis monitus ridicula orsus est, ut legenda firmaret. verum has pro exemplo fabulas et Socrates divinis operibus indidit et poemati suo Flaccus aptavit, quod in se sub iocorum communium specie vitae argumenta contineant. quas Graecis iambis Babrius repetens in duo volumina coartavit. Phaedrus etiam partem aliquam quinque in libellos resolvit. de his ego ad quadraginta et duas in unum redactas fabulas dedi...*

For who could talk with you about oration, who about poetry, when you surpass the Greeks in Greek learning and the Romans in Latin learning? You should know that Aesop was our leader in this material, he who, after being instructed by a response of Delphic Apollo, began to tell ridiculous things, so that he could establish words that must be read. But in truth Socrates inserted these fables by way of example into his divine works, and Horace adapted them to his poetry, because under the guise of common jokes they contained lessons of life. These Babrius returned to with Greek iambs and he compressed them into two volumes. Phaedrus also expanded a certain part into five books. From these, I published fables reduced to forty-two in one book... (*praef.* 5-17)

After praising the erudition of Macrobius, Avianus gives a brief history of the fable genre – a history which is, in many ways, unparalleled. First of all, Avianus is our only source for such a congenial relationship between Apollo and Aesop: in Avianus's version, not only does Aesop not anger Apollo through his fables, as is the usual story, but Aesop actually tells fables because Apollo instructed him to do so. Scholars have, for the most part, either expressed surprise at Avianus's ignorance of the real story,<sup>40</sup> or assumed that Avianus must be basing his version on a

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<sup>40</sup> Thus Crusius, who compares Avianus to Trimalchio in his misunderstanding of the past (quoted Küppers 1977: 180).

source unknown to us.<sup>41</sup> Küppers is the first scholar I know of to assume that Avianus is deliberately altering the story, and he argues that Avianus does so in order to increase the merit of the fable genre by giving it a divine source.<sup>42</sup> I agree with Küppers that Avianus's move here is deliberate, and that the point of the alteration is to provide fables with the sort of divine inspiration that other literary genres are afforded. However, it is equally clear to me that Avianus intends for his alteration to be recognized as such, and that Avianus in fact gives large hints that he is aware of and is deliberately rejecting the more common story.

The way in which the opening of the epistle progresses is highly relevant to this interpretation. Avianus first declares that falsehood is the key element of the fable genre, then alludes to his dedicatee's high erudition, and then states that Macrobius "should know" (*praef.* 9: *noveris*, a polite command, as Ellis says<sup>43</sup>) that Aesop began telling fables because Apollo instructed him to do so. Of course, any man with as much erudition as Macrobius would know that this is not the correct story; hence, the *noveris* is ironic. Furthermore, should there be any doubt that Avianus (and his dedicatee) know the real story, Avianus alludes to it again directly afterwards, when he states that Socrates is the next fabulist after Aesop. The only reference we have to Socrates telling Aesopic fables is in Plato: Socrates versifies Aesop on the night before his execution.<sup>44</sup> Socrates's execution was a common link between him and Aesop; both were

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<sup>41</sup> So Ellis 1887: 50.

<sup>42</sup> Küppers 1977: 180-181. Uden 2009: 112 emphasizes the way in which Avianus's rewriting of Aesop's biography (which Uden agrees is a deliberate move) glosses over Aesop's non-elite status: Aesop becomes, not a former slave in conflict with a god, but rather "a literary figure, the *primus inventor* of the genre of fable" who was inspired by a god.

<sup>43</sup> Ellis 1887: 50.

<sup>44</sup> *Phaedo* 61b. Cf. Uden 2009: 112 n. 11 for the connection between Socrates and Aesop. Cf. also Compton 1990: 338-341 for the connections between Socrates's death and that of Aesop. Socrates also tells a fable in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 2.7.9-10, although this fable is not specifically labeled as Aesop's. For the use of fable in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* more generally, cf. Kurke 2011: 288-300.

ugly men with a particular kind of wisdom, and both were executed by angry citizens. By including Socrates as a parallel figure directly after Aesop, Avianus leaves no doubt that he is aware of the tradition that Aesop was executed, but has decided to deliberately omit it.

In essence, Avianus has created a false genealogy for the fable genre, one whose seeming purpose – raising the caliber of the fable genre by giving it a divine source – is undercut by the fact that Avianus does not attempt to hide the fakery. This is the first hint that Avianus’s intention to make the fable genre elegant is not sincere. Much like the men who, during the late antique period, created fake family trees in their desire to avoid the stigma attached to “new men,”<sup>45</sup> so the fable genre has been given a fake genealogy, but one which only highlights the fact that the fable genre’s real origins are nothing if not humble.

This, I would suggest, is the *falsitas* that Avianus alludes to in the opening of his epistle. The fable genre has no requirement for truth, and therefore, Avianus can alter the tradition as he sees fit. So far, Avianus has made two key alterations: he has declared that elegant falsehood is the key feature of the fable genre, and he has rewritten the history of fable genre to make Apollo its source. Of course, both of these alterations work against the definition of “fictional” that is usually applied to fables. Scholars have been misled by Avianus’s *falsitas* because they assume that he, like most fabulists, is referring to the existence of talking animals and talking trees. Instead, Avianus alters the history of the fable genre and the life of the original fabulist Aesop. This is a much different kind of *falsitas*, a kind that is active and that stems from Avianus’s authorial control, and this helps explain why Avianus uses the unusual (and generally pejorative) word *falsitas*. He is marking out (and hence admitting) that his alterations are unusual and problematic, a matter to which I will return at the end of this section.

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<sup>45</sup> Salzman 2002: 70.

Furthermore, the very fact that Avianus gives a lengthy genealogy for fables is unusual. As Uden states, fabulists usually pretend that their only source is Aesop.<sup>46</sup> We saw this with Phaedrus, who repeatedly declares that his only literary source is Aesop (right up to the point that he starts insisting that the fables are his own creation),<sup>47</sup> and also with Babrius, who makes Aesop his source in his first prologue (although he later qualifies this, making that Aesop the inventor of fables only for the Greeks).<sup>48</sup> Avianus, uniquely, gives a long list of predecessors. First there is Aesop, who is divinely inspired by Apollo. Next there is Socrates, who uses fables as exempla in his “divine works.” Next comes Horace, who is drawn by the ability of fables to hide life lessons under the guise of jokes, and so puts them into his poetry. After him comes Babrius, who condenses the fables into two books; Phaedrus, who expands them into five; and Avianus himself, who reduces them to forty-two fables in one book. All these fabulists are linked through Avianus’s repeated use of relative or demonstrative pronouns: Aesop is the leader of this material (*praef.* 8: *huius materiae*); Socrates and Horace both make use of these fables (*praef.* 10-11: *has...fabulas*), which (*praef.* 14: *quas*) Babrius picks up, and some part of which (*praef.* 15: *partem aliquam*) Phaedrus uses, and from which (*praef.* 16: *de his*) Avianus selects his fables.<sup>49</sup> The implication is that all the fabulists are making use of the same original source, namely Aesop (under the inspiration of Apollo).

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<sup>46</sup> Uden 2009: 112-113. Cf. also Holzberg 2002: 63 and Küppers 1977: 179, both of whom argue that Avianus includes this list of predecessors in order to establish the respectability of the fable genre.

<sup>47</sup> Phaedrus 1 *prol.* 1; 2 *prol.* 8; 3 *prol.* 29-30; 4 *prol.* 11-12; 5 *prol.* 1-3.

<sup>48</sup> Babrius 1 *prol.* 15-16, Aesop is his source; 2 *prol.* 1-6, Aesop is only the inventor for the Greeks.

<sup>49</sup> I am indebted to Küppers 1977: 183 for this observation. Previous scholars assumed that the *de his* must refer to Phaedrus directly, which is problematic since Avianus relies much more heavily on Babrius than he does on Phaedrus. Küppers rightly shows that *de his* does not refer to what comes right before any more than the *quas* before Babrius refers back to Horace and Socrates. All these relative and demonstrative pronouns refer to fables in general.

However, they use this common source in highly distinct ways, and there is a clear decline in the quality of the work that they are producing. After Aesop, who was directly inspired by a deity, comes Socrates, who wrote divine works but did not (so far as Avianus says) have a direct line to Apollo. Horace falls still further from this divine source, by prioritizing the humor of fables, although he at least still uses them to teach about life, and hence has some link to Aesop, who used his fables to establish “things that must be read” (*praef.* 10: *legenda*<sup>50</sup>). Babrius and Phaedrus, however, are reduced to a mere number game: Babrius reduces the fables, and Phaedrus expands them. Neither has any link to the divine, and neither is given any purpose beyond expanding or contracting the length of the fable collection. This is most certainly a deliberate move on Avianus’s part, since both Phaedrus and Babrius justify their use of fables in no uncertain terms: Phaedrus, in fact, has a purpose identical to the one that Avianus attributes to Horace (using the humor inherent in fables to cover their deeper meaning<sup>51</sup>), and Babrius declares in his first prologue that he is using his fables to teach.<sup>52</sup> If Avianus has read Phaedrus and Babrius – and his imitation of both suggests that he has – then this must be a deliberate omission on his part. Avianus pretends that Babrius and Phaedrus have no purpose beyond

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<sup>50</sup> So far as I can tell, it is Ellis who first translates *legenda* as “moral maxims,” a translation that is then picked up and repeated by most later scholars. Ellis’s justification for this translation is that *legenda* refers to “lessons or rules of virtue, which as set forth in written compositions would form a proper study for youthful readers” (1887: 50). This is entirely reasonable as an explanation for *legenda*, but reducing this to “moral maxims” without explanation, as some later scholars do, is problematic, as it occludes the basic meaning of *legenda*: things that must be recited and/or read. The point, I would suggest, is not so much that Aesop creates fables that are “moral,” but that he produces fables that are important to use, whether in oratory (“must be recited”) or in education (“must be read”). I go with the translation “must be read” since Avianus’s focus in the rest of the fable genealogy is on the use of fables in written literature.

<sup>51</sup> Phaedrus 4.2.1-7.

<sup>52</sup> Babrius 1 *prol.* 14-16.



rhetorical expansion or contraction. This is a far cry from the original, divine purpose of the fable genre.

In Avianus's constructed genealogy of the fable genre, then, fables originally come from a divine source but then suffer decline. This is, I would suggest, Avianus's version of the Golden Age of Babrius's prologue. Whereas Babrius speaks of a previous age in which animals and humans got along and there was no need for work or strife (1 *prol.* 1-13), Avianus creates a *literary* golden age: decline is expressed in terms of how each author uses fables in his text. This suits Avianus's focus on the fable genre as a literary construction. At first, Avianus's description of his own project seems to make him a part of this decline: as with Babrius and Phaedrus, he emphasizes numbers when it comes to his own fable collection. He is reducing the fables to a mere forty-two, and he is only writing one book. Unlike Phaedrus and Babrius, however, Avianus's fable collection receives an additional (and highly controversial) description: *quas rudi Latinitate compositas elegis sum explicare conatus (praef. 17-18)*.

A literal translation of this line would be, "which, having been composed in rude Latin, I have tried to display with elegiacs." There are two common interpretations of this line. One camp maintains that both the participial clause and the main clause refer to Avianus's project. Duff, for instance, translates this line as, "writing in unembellished Latin and attempting to set them forth in elegiacs."<sup>53</sup> Küppers agrees, and argues that Avianus is underselling his poetry in deference to his dedicatee's erudition, as a sort of *captatio benevolentiae*.<sup>54</sup> There are two problems with this interpretation, however. First, it does not sit well with the way Avianus has

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<sup>53</sup> Duff 1934: 683. Cf. Ellis 1887: xxxiv.

<sup>54</sup> Küppers 1977: 186-187. Ellis 1887: 51 agrees, saying that Avianus "speaks with the modesty of an unfledged author." Holzberg 2002: 64-65 follows Küppers.

been characterizing his work thus far. Avianus foregrounds the elegance of his fables when he states that the *falsitas* of fables must be *urbane concepta*; to go from there to claiming that his fables are *rudis* would be strange indeed.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, *rudis* would be an especially odd way to describe poetry that has been carefully and artfully constructed in elegiacs, as is Avianus's.<sup>56</sup>

The other common translation of this line assumes that *quas rudi Latinitate compositas* must refer to a Latin prose translation of Babrius, which Avianus is now turning into elegiacs.<sup>57</sup> This theory is based on a number of smaller factors. First, although it is well-established that Avianus's fables are largely based on Babrius, the phrase *quas rudi Latinitate compositas* must refer to a Latin text, not a Greek one. Furthermore, if Avianus's point is that he is turning his source into verse, then it must be a Latin *prose* source. Thus, scholars posit that Babrius was translated into Latin prose, and it is this text that Avianus is basing his fables on. We do have some evidence of a Latin prose collection of fables that may or may not be a translation of Babrius: Julius Titianus, according to Ausonius, wrote a collection of fables in Latin prose based upon "Aesopic trimeters."<sup>58</sup> Although Ausonius does not mention Babrius specifically, scholars

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<sup>55</sup> Uden 2009: 114 n. 20 adheres to this first reading but admits that there is a disconnect between Avianus using both *urbane* and *rudi* to describe his style. He argues that "this disingenuous apology for a lack of literary refinement paradoxically underlines the literary pretensions of his text" and connects it to the wider topos of literary apologies. Although I appreciate that Uden thus recognizes that *rudis* is an odd self-characterization for Avianus to make and hence must be disingenuous, I think it is more natural to assume that Avianus is not in fact using *rudis* to describe his own work.

<sup>56</sup> Even Ellis, who believes that Avianus describes his own work with the phrase *rudi Latinitate*, admits that "this is not the first impression to a modern reader" (1887: xxxiv). However, Ellis goes on to argue (1887: xxxiv-xxxv) that in Avianus the "elaborately poetical" is mixed with "the decadent diction of the epoch," which justifies Avianus's use of *rudis*. Ellis's perspective is overly influenced by his low view of the time period, so this argument does not hold up. It might be better to say that Avianus mixes Vergilian language with simple language, which is true, and which I will discuss below.

<sup>57</sup> Cameron 1967: 398-99 provides the best statement of the argument. Cf. also Adrados 2000: 255. Küppers 1977: 166-171 provides a detailed overview of this conflict throughout the scholarship.

<sup>58</sup> Ausonius *Epist.* 16.2.74-81.

who hold this theory argue that the “Aesopic trimeters” must refer to Babrius, and that therefore, Avianus must be working from the prose collection of Titianus.

This theory, like the first one, is highly problematic. First, as Küppers’s careful analysis has shown, there is good reason to suppose that Avianus was using Babrius directly. Furthermore, this theory is based on a large stretch of tenuous evidence: Avianus does not mention Titianus in his list of predecessors, and Ausonius does not state that the “Aesopic trimeters” were written by Babrius. There is very little to tie the two together.

I would like to posit a third possible translation for this line: namely that the phrase *quas rudi Latinitate compositas* refers not to Avianus’s own composition nor to a particular source that he used. Instead, it refers more generally to fables previously written in Latin. In other words, Avianus is stating his own innovation on and difference from the previous tradition: former fabulists wrote in *rudi Latinitate*, but Avianus will bring elegance to the genre by displaying (*explicare*) the fables in *elegis*. This would mean that the *quas* which begins the second clause (*quas rudi Latinitate compositas*) refers not to a specific group of fables, but more generally to fables previously written. This is, as we have seen, the very way that Avianus previously used relative pronouns throughout his fable genealogy; the pronouns always had a general referent, rather than referring specifically to whatever fable author was in the previous sentence. By thus contrasting his fables with the inelegant fables of the past, Avianus emphasizes that the “elegantly composed falsehood” (*urbane concepta falsitas*) that he deemed central to the fable genre has not always been the key feature of the genre. Elegance is the unique twist that Avianus believes he can bring to the fable genre.<sup>59</sup> As we have seen in previous chapters,

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Uden 2009: 110: “the lengths to which Avianus goes to locate his poetry in a purely artistic sphere may equally be read as one of the changes he has wrought to the fable form.”

differentiating one's fable book from past fables is a traditional move: Phaedrus, for instance, expresses his difference from Aesop by asserting that he "added" jokes to the fable genre, whereas Aesop wrote in dry prose.<sup>60</sup> In a similar way, Avianus is differentiating his project from the *rudis* past.<sup>61</sup> This interpretation also fits well with the false genealogy that Avianus gave to the fable genre: the reason the genealogy is false – and must be false – is that fables are not in fact divine any more than they are elegant. Avianus is imposing new traits on the genre, and making it clear at each step that this is what he is doing.

It is important to emphasize that for Avianus, *rudis* refers specifically to the *language* of past authors. The contrast is between *rudi Latinitate* and *elegis*<sup>62</sup> – in other words, between carefully formed and elegant verse, and unadorned, clumsy language. This is why Avianus's characterization of the past as *rudis* does not contradict his fable genealogy in which past authors were more divinely inspired whereas present-day authors have suffered a decline. A divinely inspired author who writes for a noble purpose can still use *rudis* language. In fact, as we will see, this is the very distinction that Avianus – the character based on our fabulist – makes in Macrobius's *Saturnalia*: he values the morals of the past, but criticizes their language. In a

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<sup>60</sup> Phaedrus 2 *prol.* 1-7.

<sup>61</sup> None of this explains, of course, why Avianus limits this contrast to Latin: he contrasts his fables with fables written in *rudi Latinitate*, which completely omits Greek authors. I would suggest that the reason is simply that Avianus is now concentrating on his own text, which is written in Latin: Avianus will write in elegant Latin, and include quotations from and allusions to Latin authors. Thus, for Avianus the specific contrast is between *rudis* texts written in Latin versus his own elegant Latin elegiacs. Using the term *Latinitate* better creates this contrast.

<sup>62</sup> As Holzberg 2002: 63 discusses, elegiac was an unusual meter for the fable genre. The only other examples come from the *Anthologia Palatina*, but "their authors were most probably not interested in the reader's moral edification, since none of the poems so much as hint at a *fabula docet*. These writers were obviously just enjoying the challenge of fitting material taken from the Aesopic narrative tradition into the structure of a typical epigram." Holzberg thus draws a contrast between Avianus, who used the elegiac meter but still cares about moral edification, and the authors of the anthology, who were simply playing around with meter. However, Adrados 2000: 256-257 mentions other elegiac poets who allude to fables, including Solon, Theognis, and Diogenes Laertius. To Adrados's list could be added the *Fasti* of Ovid, written in elegiac couplets which include fables in Book 2 (2.243-266; 304-358).

similar way, Avianus in his dedicatory epistle can value the divine inspiration of past writers, while still being dismissive of their style.

Of course, much like the false genealogy of the fable genre, this characterization of past authors as *rudis* does not hold up under close scrutiny. *Rudis* would be a strange characterization of Horace's poetry, and both Babrius and Phaedrus turn fables into poetry as does Avianus, albeit in different meters. Once again, it seems that Avianus's declaration that he has made the fable genre elegant is not entirely sincere; the holes in his argument are left on the surface and are easy to detect.

Avianus closes his epistle by once again emphasizing his own authorial control over the material:

*habes ergo opus, quo animum oblectes, ingenium exerceas, sollicitudinem leves totumque vivendi ordinem cautus agnoscas. loqui vero arbores, feras cum hominibus gemere, verbis certare volucres, animalia ridere fecimus, ut pro singulorum necessitatibus vel ab ipsis <in>animis sententia proferatur.*

You have therefore a work through which you may delight your spirit, exercise your intelligence, relieve your anxiety, and, if you are cautious, come to know the whole course of living. In fact I have made trees talk, beasts complain with men, birds fight with words, and animals laugh, so that according to each man's needs, maxims may be pronounced even by inanimate things. (*praef.* 18-24)

Avianus's description of what his fables will accomplish is traditional; one might compare Phaedrus, who promises that his fables will cause laughter (1 *prol.* 3: *risum movet*) and give life advice (1 *prol.* 4: *prudenti vitam consilio monet*). This is comparable to Avianus, who here promises that his fables will both delight the reader and teach lessons about life.<sup>63</sup> What is not traditional is his use of *fecimus*. When Phaedrus explains that animals and trees talk in his fables, he claims it is something for which he must apologize.<sup>64</sup> When Babrius describes the world of

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Uden 2009: 113 on how Avianus is activating a common fable *topos* here.

talking animals, he does so in the context of the Golden Age: he says that once upon a time animals and trees could talk to humans, and then he gives some examples.<sup>65</sup> Both Phaedrus and Babrius act as though talking animals and humans simply happen (Babrius, notably, in the context of a supposedly real past); Avianus is the only one of the three to emphasize that animals and trees talk because he makes them talk: *fecimus* (*praef.* 23). Once again, this foregrounds Avianus's authorial control and the fact that these fables are a literary creation.<sup>66</sup>

Avianus, then, uses his dedicatory epistle to create a distinct impression of the past and a distinct impression of himself. Previous authors may have been closer to the divine source of fables, but they also wrote in inelegant Latin. Avianus, on the other hand, creates a text that is *urbanus*, writes in elegiac meter, and foregrounds his role as the author throughout the dedicatory epistle. All the fable authors we have examined are at pains to distinguish themselves from Aesop, but Avianus is the first to do so purely on the basis of style. Avianus says very little about his content, and what he says is entirely traditional. His only innovation, at least according to him, is to make the style elegant. Avianus also betrays an overriding concern with the fable as a literary genre: he defines what characterizes the fable genre and talks about his literary predecessors.

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<sup>64</sup> Phaedrus, 1 *prol.* 5-7: *calumniari si quis autem voluerit, / quod arbores loquantur, non tantum ferae, / fictis iocari nos meminerit fabulis* ("If someone wishes to slander me, / because trees talk, not just animals, / let him remember that we are joking with fictitious fables").

<sup>65</sup> Babrius, 1 *prol.* 1-13.

<sup>66</sup> It is true that Phaedrus also highlights the fact that his fables have been fashioned, calling them *fictis...fabulis* at the end of his first prologue (line 6). Still, there is a difference between Phaedrus's characterization, in which the fables are described as "having been fashioned" (but by whom?), especially since at the beginning of the prologue Phaedrus cited Aesop as the author of the fables. Phaedrus leaves his own authorship vague and implied, at least in this first prologue, although he asserts more and more authorial control as the books go on. Avianus, in contrast, uses the first person verb *fecimus* to describe his process right from the beginning. Avianus is far more direct in his claim of authorial control.

As we will see in the next section, Avianus's emphasis on fables as a newly *elegant* genre will be emphatically undermined by the fables themselves, which repeatedly show that style never triumphs over substance. Avianus's stylistic "innovations" do not work – and deliberately so. In fact, as we have seen, the dedicatory epistle itself hints at the unsustainability of its message. I have already pointed out a number of ways in which Avianus foregrounds the cracks in his own argument: he uses *falsitas* to describe the content of his fables, a word that is difficult to take in a positive way. He also alludes to Aesop's real fate even while he denies it; again, this indicates not only Avianus's awareness of the real story, but also his desire for the reader to be aware and be reminded of the traditional narrative. His genealogy for the fable genre is odd and unprecedented, and his characterization of past writers does not hold up under close thought. However, it will not be until the reader gets to his fables that the true danger of beauty – whether physical or verbal – will emerge.

## **II. The Fables of Avianus: The Failure of Beauty and Art**

Other than mentioning that he will turn the fables into elegiac poetry, Avianus does not explain in his dedicatory epistle exactly how he plans to make his fables more elegant. However, in Avianus's case, there is an easy comparison at hand: because most of Avianus's fables are adaptations of fables of Babrius, it is possible to see how Avianus brings his own style to the fables. As many previous scholars have noted, the main difference between Avianus and Babrius is that Avianus expands the fables: he adds flowery descriptions, gives more detail about the action, and frequently inserts allusions to classical writers, particularly Vergil and Ovid.<sup>67</sup> In fact,

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Cameron 1967: 398 (who contrasts "the simplicity and directness of Babrius with the preciosity, verbosity, and over-ornateness of Avianus"). Duff 1934: 673 summarizes the differences between Avianus and Babrius thus: "In most cases Avianus' version is longer than that of Babrius. Avianus expands his Babrian material, sometimes to

Ellis states that “no remnant of Roman literature is more informed with the diction of Vergil than the Fables.”<sup>68</sup>

These stylistic innovations of Avianus must be seen in light of the so-called “jeweled style” that characterizes much of late antique poetry, as described by Michael Roberts. Roberts suggests that the core of late antique style is the principle of *variatio*, which has two main functions for the late antique poet:<sup>69</sup> it embellishes a simple text, and it also ensures that this embellishment is itself diverse and interesting.<sup>70</sup> Roberts also emphasizes that this *variatio* “was conceived in visual terms,” with such vocabulary as *color* (which is used of both literature and painting), *flos*, *lumen*, and *gemmae*.<sup>71</sup> These metaphorical terms for stylistic ornamentation were often literalized in late antique texts: as, for instance, one poet uses a flowery style to describe an actual meadow.<sup>72</sup> Roberts further points out that late antique style does not arise in a vacuum; classical authors were viewed in the late antique period as the masters of *variatio*.<sup>73</sup> This was one reason that late antique writers so often quoted bits of earlier poets.<sup>74</sup> Roberts’ description fits

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make an alteration in the story (*e.g.* 32, 35, 36), but more often to elaborate the descriptive element with poetical diction which contains frequent echoes of Virgil or Ovid. Thus a strained, even grotesque, artificiality displaces the simple directness of Babrius.” Küppers points out that Avianus does not always expand Babrius, and in fact occasionally shortens him (1977: 96). However, even Küppers admits that in most cases, Avianus chooses to expand.

<sup>68</sup> Ellis 1887: xiv.

<sup>69</sup> Roberts’s book concentrates on poetry (1989: 7-8). It is important to note that Roberts is not claiming that the late antique period had a single aesthetic; rather, he hopes to bring out some common features that influence much of the poetry of the period (1989: 6).

<sup>70</sup> Roberts 1989: 44-45.

<sup>71</sup> Roberts discusses each of these terms in turn (1989: 47-54).

<sup>72</sup> Roberts 1989: 51.

<sup>73</sup> Roberts 1989: 46. He quotes *Sat.* 5.15.14-15, as one example: Macrobius argues that Vergil himself was particularly adept at *variatio*.

<sup>74</sup> Roberts 1989: 57.



Avianus's style particularly well, as Avianus has taken a simple fable text, and has added stylistic embellishments and quotations from previous authors. Furthermore, as we will see, Avianus activates and literalizes the metaphorical terms used to describe the "jeweled style." In all of these ways, Avianus actively engages with the dominant style of his day.

For the most part, modern scholars assert that Avianus's stylistic innovations do not work at all.<sup>75</sup> Even Holzberg, who tries to defend Avianus, ends up doing so in a patronizing fashion:

In Avianus's case the answers [to why he writes as he does] are clearly the following: he decides to write a fable book and finds himself faced with a number of illustrious predecessors in the genre; he plans to outshine them all by trying to make his poems fulfill even more proficiently the requirements this literary form is expected to meet. What must he do? He must ensure that his fables combine fictional narrative with moral edification....And so Avianus crosses rhetorical debate, which weighs the pros and cons of an ethical problem, with elegiac narrative, the preferred model for grooming his poetic diction being the most prestigious writer of dactylic verse and prince of poets, Virgil. (2002: 68)

Holzberg sees Avianus as sincere but misguided. Although Holzberg takes into account what he sees as Avianus's authorial goals, he still applies an external, modern judgment to Avianus's text. My own approach is different. I will examine Avianus's own judgment of his writing: there is, as I will show, an internal argument to be made about Avianus's stylistic choices. Avianus may make use of a style common to his time period, but he does not do so uncritically.

In fact, Avianus's fables maintain a consistently negative perspective toward beauty and artistry. In these fables, beauty – whether it comes from external ornamentation or is from nature – is associated with weakness, failure, and being the victim of violence. On the other hand, plainness (a lack of beauty) or ugliness (the opposite of beauty) are associated with effectiveness

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. especially Duff 1934: 673, who talks of Avianus's "strained, even grotesque, artificiality." For a rundown of the early – and very harsh – judgments of Avianus, cf. Ellis 1887: xxviii-xxx. Ellis's own opinion is measured (1887: xxxv). Even Cameron (1967: 394) has a negative view of Avianus's Vergilian allusions, calling them "for the most part, alas, woefully unseasonable." Cf. also Roberts 1989: 1-3 for the harsh judgments often leveled at late antique literature as a whole.

and power. Furthermore, animals that are ugly or plain are frequently equipped with the powers of persuasion or cleverness, both of them effective strategies in Avianus's fable world. Thus, while beautiful animals repeatedly fail, their plain counterparts meet with success.

Such a message is hardly new: fable books frequently prize cleverness and ugliness. Aesop himself was the epitome of both extreme ugliness and extreme cleverness. However, there are two aspects of Avianus's fables that make this message unique. First of all, Avianus returns to these themes with greater frequency than the other fable authors (especially given the shortness of his fable collection), and, more strikingly, these dichotomies inform even fables that are not strictly about beauty/ugliness. For example, in Fable 34, "The Ant and the Grasshopper," the animal that fails is still described as the beautiful one, even though this fable is not strictly about differing definitions of beauty.<sup>76</sup> Such consistency indicates that these themes are of particular importance to Avianus. Secondly, in Avianus, these dichotomies relate not merely to social class – as might be expected, given that "lowness" is often associated with ugliness and weakness, with cleverness as the only recourse – but also to genre. The reason that ugly, low animals are successful in Avianus is that they use strategies that are proper to the fable genre. Violence and force, on the other hand, are associated with epic, and epic strategies fail when they are implanted in the fable genre. In other words, Avianus is concerned not only with the boundaries of class but also with the boundaries of genre – and the two are inextricably connected. Such a message makes it clear that Avianus's pose in the dedicatory epistle was not a serious one; Avianus does not truly believe that making the fables elegant is a plausible ideal.

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<sup>76</sup> The grasshopper is called *discolor* (34.11), or "multicolored." As we will see later in this chapter, beautiful animals in Avianus very often cite their variegated hues as evidence of their beauty. In this fable, the grasshopper's beauty is beside the point, but the presence of the descriptor connects this fable to the larger theme of beautiful animals being worthless.

The overriding theme of Avianus's collection – that beauty is ineffective – may be broken down into a number of smaller themes. For example, one oft-repeated lesson in Avianus is that external ornamentation is useless and/or harmful when it adorns an animal that is ugly or low. The earliest and best example is provided by Fable 5, “The Donkey in the Lion’s Skin:”

*Metiri se quemque decet propriisque iuvari  
 laudibus, alterius nec bona ferre sibi,  
 ne detracta gravem faciant miracula risum,  
 coeperit in solitis cum remanere malis.*<sup>77</sup>

5 *Exuvias asinus Gaetuli forte leonis  
 repperit et spoliis induit ora novis.  
 aptavitque suis incongrua tegmina membris  
 et miserum tanto pressit honore caput.  
 ast ubi terribilis mimo circumstetit horror*

10 *pigraque praesumptus venit in ossa vigor,  
 mitibus ille feris communia pabula calcans  
 turbabat pavidas per sua rura boves.  
 rusticus hunc magna postquam deprendit ab aure,  
 correptum vinclis verberibusque domat;*

15 *et simul abstracto denudans corpora tergo  
 increpat his miserum vocibus ille pecus:  
 “forsitan ignotos imitato murmure fallas;  
 at mihi, qui quondam, semper asellus eris.”*

It is proper for each person to measure themselves and to be content with praises that suit them, nor should he bear for himself the goods of another, lest the wonders, being stripped off, make him sad and laughable, when he begins to be left in his customary evils.

5 An ass found the skin of a Gaetulian lion by chance  
 and he clothed his face with the new spoils  
 and he fitted the incongruous covering to his own limbs,  
 and covered his miserable head with such honor.

10 But when the grim aspect, terrible in mimicry, surrounded him,  
 and the vigor assumed in advance came into his sluggish bones,  
 then, trampling the food common to the tame beasts,  
 he threw the frightened cattle into confusion across their own fields.  
 Then the farmer grabbed him by his giant ear,  
 and tamed the bound animal with ropes and beatings,

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. Duff 1934: 675. Duff, whose text I use, believes that the four promythia in Avianus were added, since Avianus otherwise uses solely epimythia. However, I follow Adrados 2000 in assuming that the promythia are genuine. I see no reason to excise them simply because they are used infrequently.

15 and at the same time, stripping and pulling off the skin from his back,  
he shouted at the miserable beast with these words:  
“Perhaps you fool strangers with this imitated sound;  
but to me, as before, you will always be an ass.”  
(Fable 5.1-18)

Because this fable also appears in Babrius as Fable 139, it is possible to determine exactly what emphasizes Avianus has added. As one might expect, the fable in Babrius is much shorter (only eight lines long) and the action is straightforward: an ass puts on a lion skin, and believes that this makes him a fearsome sight to all men. He leaps around, and all of the shepherds run. When a gust of wind knocks off his lion skin, however, the donkey is revealed, and he is beaten and told that a donkey should not pretend to be a lion.

Although the basic outline of the tale is similar in both fable collections, Avianus has made several important changes. First, Avianus spends more time describing the process by which the donkey puts on the lion skin (whereas Babrius merely says that he puts it on) and the effect that the skin has on the donkey (whereas Babrius says nothing about how the skin makes the donkey feel). Furthermore, Avianus’s language focuses on how ill-suited the lion skin is for the donkey, given the difference in their basic natures. The lion skin is *incongrua*, unsuitable, and yet the donkey makes it fit, *aptavit* to his body (5.7). In 5.8, the donkey’s head is called *miserum*, whereas the lion skin is described as *tanto honore*. In 5.9, the lion skin’s appearance is that of *terribilis horror*, but on the donkey it becomes nothing but a mime (*mimo*).<sup>78</sup> When wearing the skin gives the donkey courage, it is a false courage: the *vigor* enters bones that are *pigra* (5.10). In other words, although the lion skin makes the donkey appear to be fearsome and

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<sup>78</sup> As Ellis discusses (1887: 60), *mimo* is a conjecture originally proposed by Cannegieter (who, at the time of Ellis’s writing, had produced the only available Avianus commentary, written in 1731), for the manuscript’s *animo*. Ellis states that these two words are often confused in manuscripts, and points out that *mimo* makes much better sense. I agree and follow this conjecture.

courageous, the donkey's true nature as a miserable, sluggish, low-class animal is never altered. This emphasis is missing from Babrius, who says more matter-of-factly that ὄνος λεοντῆν ἰσχύϊος ἐφαπλώσας / ἔφασκεν εἶναι πᾶσι φοβερὸς ἀνθρώποις (139.1-2: "An ass wrapped his flanks in a lion skin / and thought that he was fearsome to all men"). The contrast is still there, of course; a donkey wearing a lion's skin is by nature an incongruous image. Avianus, however, unlike Babrius, spends much time emphasizing this contrast through his word choice. Finally, whereas in Babrius a chance gust of wind reveals the donkey, in Avianus it is a farmer who recognizes the donkey and strips him. The farmer then declares that such a costume can only fool strangers (5.17: *ignotos*). Someone like him, who has known the donkey for a long time, will never be fooled. This, once again, underscores the true ridiculousness of the donkey's attempt to become a lion. In punishment, the donkey is stripped, chained, and beaten by the farmer, a punishment intended to put the donkey back in his proper place.<sup>79</sup> In this instance, wearing external ornamentation is not only ridiculous, but actively harmful: the donkey is physically punished for the assumption of skin that does not fit him.

A slightly different example of this theme is provided by Fable 7, "The Dog That Would Not Bark." This fable centers on a dog with a particularly bad habit: he pretends to be friendly, and then suddenly lashes out and bites people. In order to warn people of the dog's bad character, the dog's master ties a bronze bell around his neck, so that the ringing will warn people of his approach. The dog, however, mistakenly believes that the bell amounts to *praemia* (7.11), and so begins to look down on other dogs (7.12: *similem turbam despiciebat*). Here,

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<sup>79</sup> On the donkey's punishment, cf. Uden 2009: 119-120. Uden points out that this punishment seems over the top for a donkey, and argues (as he does in the article as a whole) that the late antique culture of public, grotesque punishments is here influencing the imagery of Avianus's fables. While this is true, it is perhaps more pertinent here that being stripped and beaten would be standard punishment for a slave, for whom the donkey is a ready analogue.

Avianus's language expresses the true ridiculousness of the dog's arrogance: the dog believes that the bell makes him different and better, but in fact, he is merely looking down on a crowd that is just like him. At the end of the fable, the dog is rebuked by an "older dog from the plebs" (7.13: *senior de plebe*), who tells the younger dog that the bronze bell is not an medal indicating virtue, but rather "evidence of his worthlessness" (7.18: *nequitiae testem*). The young dog of Fable 7, much like the donkey of Fable 5, puts on airs because of external ornamentation. Also as in the donkey's case, the ornamentation makes the dog believe things about himself that are not true: the donkey believes that the lion skin makes him like a lion, and the dog believes that the bronze bell makes him superior to the other dogs. In both cases, this arrogance is shown to be ridiculous. In fact, in the dog's case, the bronze bell is a direct result of his bad character, and evidence of that fact.

There is one final example of a fable which highlights the disconnect between external ornamentation and basic nature: Fable 8, in which a camel asks Jupiter to give him horns.<sup>80</sup> The camel, unlike the donkey and the dog of the previous two examples, is not automatically a low-class or ridiculous animal. In fact, the camel tends to be characterized in one of two ways in the larger fable tradition: either as a large, strong animal,<sup>81</sup> or as one that lacks coordination and therefore looks ridiculous when it moves.<sup>82</sup> These two characterizations tend not to overlap: the

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<sup>80</sup> There is a difference, of course, between a lion skin or a bell and horns, as the horns would actually be part of the camel's body, not something worn. However, the comparison works because (a) the camel is hoping to change his external appearance and (b) the fable focuses on how the horns will make the camel look. The camel believes that horns make other animals *insignes* (8.8) and that not having horns makes him "appear ridiculous to all" (8.6: *cunctis irridendumque videri*). Plus, as I will discuss, there is a contrast in the fable between the appearance that the camel wants to adopt and the ridiculousness of the camel's actual nature. Hence, even though the horns are not "worn" in the same way as a lion skin or a bell, this fable still fits the same basic pattern as the previous two fables.

<sup>81</sup> Thus in *Aesopica* Fable 117, in which Zeus derides the camel's desire for horns because the camel is already large and strong, and Fable 195, in which the first men to encounter a camel are frightened by its bulk.

<sup>82</sup> There are several fables in which a camel's dancing is mocked as ridiculous: Babrius 99, and *Aesopica* 83, 220, and 249. Babrius 55 is a strange exception: this fable is not about the camel's size or lack of coordination, but is

camel is either strong or it is uncoordinated, but not both in the same fable. Tellingly, Fable 8 of Avianus also appears in the *Aesopica* (Fable 117), so we know that in the earlier version of this story, the camel's characterization is that of a strong animal. In fact, in Aesop's version, the reason that Zeus is angry about the camel wanting horns is because the camel is already large and strong,<sup>83</sup> and therefore she does not need horns. The camel's characterization as a ridiculous-looking animal is not relevant to the fable, and so it is not brought up. In Avianus, by contrast, the camel thinks that it seems ridiculous to everyone that the bull has horns and he does not (8.7: *cunctis irridendum*), and he is upset that camels are the only animals that are undefended and open to attack (8.9-10: *et solum nulla munitum parte camelum / obiectum cunctis expositumque feris*). This characterization of the camel as undefended occludes his normal characterization as a physically strong and powerful animal. Nor does Jupiter bring up the camel's strength in his reply, as Zeus does in the Aesopic version. In Avianus, Jupiter simply laughs at the camel (8.11: *irridens*) and says that he is going to take away part of the camel's ears as punishment. Thus, in Avianus's version of the fable, the camel is being characterized in the second way, as an animal that looks ridiculous and inspires laughter. This makes the camel's desire for horns seem akin to the donkey's desire to wear a lion skin: a way for a silly and low animal to take on the valorous characteristics of a strong animal. Naturally, the camel is punished for this desire by being made to look even more ridiculous, through the shortening of his ears (8.12).

These three fables are similar in terms of theme, action, and outcome. They all involve an animal who believes that external ornamentation will earn him respect that he does not deserve.

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instead about a camel being stupid. However, that fable probably relates more to Babrius's misogyny, as the camel in that fable is female.

<sup>83</sup> καὶ ὁ Ζεὺς ἀγανακτήσας κατ' αὐτῆς, εἴ γε μὴ ἀρκεῖται τῷ μεγέθει τοῦ σώματος καὶ τῇ ἰσχύι ("And Zeus was angry against her, if she was not satisfied with the size of her body and her strength").

The donkey believes that the lion skin makes it fearsome; the dog puts on airs because of its bell; and the camel desires horns so that it will no longer be laughable. In each case, the animal is shamed or punished for this belief: the donkey is beaten, the dog is chastised, and the camel is made more ridiculous than before. The message of all three fables is clear: external marks cannot make you anything you are not.

Such a message may clearly be applied to social class: these fables teach that trying to go outside of one's proper (social) sphere is a doomed venture. This message is a common one in the fables,<sup>84</sup> but in Avianus the message takes on a distinctly political flavor. I discussed already Salzman's characterization of the late antique period as one very concerned with status, and in particular, with the importance attached to displays of status. The expansion of who could be *clarissimus* in the third to fifth centuries made it necessary, Salzman argues, for the old elite families to distinguish themselves from the new men.<sup>85</sup> Such distaste for non-elite (or newly elite) men who wear elite trappings can also be felt in these fables of Avianus, especially given the vocabulary that Avianus uses. The lion skin worn by donkey in Fable 5 is referred to by the phrase *tanto honore* (5.8), a word that can refer not only to political office, but also to the visual trappings that come with high office.<sup>86</sup> The donkey, a low creature, is not only wearing clothing that does not suit him, but he is wearing clothing that carries with it elite, political connotations.

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. Zafiroopoulos 2001: 71-80 for this theme in the *Aesopica*, and Morgan 2007: 66-68 for hierarchy in imperial fables.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Jerome 66.7.18-20: *quod Scipio ultra annos pro virtute meruit, nunc sola militia possidet, et agrestia dudum corpora, fulgens palma circumdat* ("that [office] which Scipio won before his time because of merit, now military service alone may possess, and the shining palm encircles bodies that until now were rustic"). Cf. Salzman 2002: 204 on this passage.

<sup>86</sup> Cf., for example, Cornelius Nepos *Thr.* 4.1: *Huic pro tantis meritis honoris causa corona a populo data est...* ("In return for these merits, a crown of honor was given to him by the people..."). As with the example from Vergil, the visible honor is earned by Thrasybulus, in direct contrast to the donkey, who simply picks up a lion skin and wears it.



In Fable 7, the old dog who reprimands the younger dog is described as coming from the plebs (7.13: *de plebe*), and he criticizes the younger dog for believing that the bell he wears represents *munera pro meritis* (7.16) or *virtutis decus* (7.17). The younger dog, despite being from the same class as the older dog (and hence a plebeian) believes that the bell represents distinctions more properly belonging to the senatorial elite. Finally, the camel's central complaint is that other animals are *insignes* (8.8), "distinguished," whereas he is not. He wishes to take on such distinction for himself, but instead has his ears shortened, thus losing what little visual distinction he did possess.

These fables, then, speak specifically about lower class men who might believe that elite trappings make them into elite men. These fables support the status quo by teaching that no amount of ornamentation can hide one's true low nature. At the same time, by demonstrating that ornamentation can be a false signifier, Avianus perhaps suggests that there is something hollow in ornamentation itself. After all, even the donkey managed to fool everybody except the farmer, who knew him well. Elite trappings are no guarantee of high social class or worth.

These fables also have a related meaning, one that relates to genre. In all three fables, the change that the animal wishes to make is expressed in the language of epic. The donkey of Fable 5 again provides the best example. In this fable, allusions to Vergil cluster around the lion skin. Line 5.5 of Avianus's fable (*Exuvias asinus Gaetuli forte leonis*) recalls two different passages from Vergil.<sup>87</sup> *Exuvias...leonis* recalls a similar description from *Aen.* 9.306-307 (*dat Niso*

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<sup>87</sup> Ellis 1887 collects all of the Vergilian allusions for this fable, pp. 60-61. Cf. also Scanzo 2001: 45-47. Scanzo analyzes the metrical similarities between Vergil and Avianus in this passage, and shows that not only is Avianus using the same phrases as Vergil, but the words fall in the same place in the line of verse.

*Mnestheus pellem horrentisque leonis / exuvias*),<sup>88</sup> and Avianus's use of the epithet *Gaetuli* to describe the lion recalls *Aen.* 5.351 (*tergum Gaetuli inmane leonis*).<sup>89</sup> The donkey is not only putting on a lion skin; he is putting on a decidedly *epic* lion skin. Furthermore, in both of the *Aeneid* passages, the lion skin is a gift of valor given by one warrior to another. Thus, not only does the donkey put on a specifically epic lion skin, but he gives to himself a reward for valor that he has in no way earned. Nor do the allusions to the *Aeneid* stop there. *Tanto honore* (5.8), which is used of the lion skin, is also the phrase used to describe the armor given to Aeneas by his mother in *Aen.* 8.617<sup>90</sup>, and *circumstetit horror* (5.9) is used of the fear that grips Aeneas after he witnesses Priam's death at *Aen.* 2.559.<sup>91</sup> Each of these Vergilian phrases, moreover, is applied to the lion skin, not to the donkey, who in fact is adorned by no literary allusions at all.<sup>92</sup> This use of epic language for the lion skin underscores the unsuitability of the lion skin for a decidedly non-epic animal like the donkey.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> So far as I can tell, the only other times that *exuvias* is paired with *leonis* is in the *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus (3.720-21), who is also imitating Vergil, and in the *Fabulae* of Hyginus, who speaks of an *exuvias leonis* that is given as a prize in the funeral games for Patroclus (273.16.5). In all cases, the lion skin has an epic flavor.

<sup>89</sup> The pairing of the adjective *Gaetulus* with *leo* is more common; it occurs not only in the passage referred to by Ellis, but also in Horace *C.* 1.23.10. However, the other allusion to the *Aeneid* that occurs in this line helps strengthen the assertion that this also should be considered an allusion to the *Aeneid* specifically.

<sup>90</sup> *Aen.* 8.617: *ille, deae donis et tanto laetus honore...* ("He, pleased the gifts of the goddess and with such a great honor...").

<sup>91</sup> *Aen.* 2.559: *at me tum primum saevus circumstetit horror* ("Then, for the first time, savage horror surrounded me"). Duff rightly calls this "mock-heroic" (1934: 674).

<sup>92</sup> Ellis 1887: 61 does cite Ovid *Met.* 11.174-7 as parallel to line 5.13, in which Avianus describes the donkey's ears as *magna*, since the Ovid passage is a description of Midas's giant donkey ears. However, the connection is simply that of the donkey's ears being large; there is no specific verbal echo that I see.

<sup>93</sup> In fact, cf. Winkler 1985: 194-198 for a discussion of how "the *vox propria* for an ass's speech in Latin is the root *rud-*, as Varro and others have recorded" (p. 196). Hence, the donkey in this fable may be connected to Avianus's dedicatory epistle, in which Avianus promised that his fables would be elegant rather than *rudis* – a promise that is now shown to be comparable to putting a lion skin on a donkey.

Fable 7, “The Dog That Would Not Bite,” is also peppered with allusions to Vergil.<sup>94</sup> The phrase *crepitantia aera* (7.9), which is used of the bell that the master ties on the dog, appears in Vergil’s *Georgics* 4.151 in a description of the Curetes’ cymbals, which they used to hide the crying of baby Jupiter from his father.<sup>95</sup> This allusion to the “crashing bronze” of the *Georgics* points ahead to the mock epic way that the dog will behave, thinking that his bronze bell (like the bronze cymbals of myth) has a deep significance. Of course, unlike the bronze cymbals of the myth, which did in fact play an important and cosmic role, the dog’s bronze bell has a far more humble and common significance, in fact, a negative one.

More strikingly still, when the older dog rebukes the younger for putting on airs, the opening of his speech (7.15: *infelix, quae tanta rapit dementia sensum*) is a play on a line from *Aen.* 5.465: *infelix, quae tanta animum dementia cepit?* (“Wretch, what great madness captured your spirit?”). This line is spoken by Aeneas to Entellus, who has savagely attacked the younger Dares during their boxing match in the funeral games for Anchises. There are some surface similarities between the two situations: both Entellus and the dog of the fable make a sudden and violent attack, and both are criticized for this. However, the differences are many: in the fable, the dog repeatedly attacks people in this violent manner: it is part of his basic nature. In the *Aeneid*, Entellus’s attack is a response to getting knocked down in that one moment. Furthermore, whereas in the *Aeneid* the line is a direct response to the attack, in the fable the line is instead applied to the dog’s attitude while wearing the bell, not to the dog’s violent behavior.

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<sup>94</sup> The Vergilian allusions in this fable are discussed by Ellis 1887: 63-65 and Scanzo 2001: 48-49.

<sup>95</sup> *G.* 4.148-152: *Nunc age, naturas apibus quas Iuppiter ipse / addidit, expediam, pro qua mercede canoros / Curetum sonitus crepitantiaque aera secutae / Dictaeo caeli regem pavere sub antro* (“Come then, I will narrate the qualities which Jupiter himself gave to the bees, in return for which reward they fed the king of heaven in Dicte’s cave, following the harmonious songs of the Curetes and their crashing bronze”).

Most notably, there is a tension between the epic origins of the line and their introduction into the fable context.<sup>96</sup> Avianus has taken the words of Aeneas, one of Rome's greatest heroes, and has placed them in the mouth of an old dog from the plebs (7.13: *senior de plebe*) that is criticizing another dog for prancing around with a bell. Again, the disconnect between the epic flavor of the quotation and the lowly context of the fable parallels the disconnect between the dog's belief in his own importance and the reality of his situation.

Fable 8 has no allusions to Vergil or epic specifically, but the camel's desire for horns is expressed using military metaphors. The camel wants horns because he is tired of not being defended (8.9: *nulla munitum parte*<sup>97</sup>) and exposed to the attacks of all beasts (8.10: *obiectum cunctis expositumque feris*). This is Avianus's addition; in *Aesopica* Fable 117, no military language is used. Avianus makes this change, I would suggest, in order to sharpen the contrast. In Avianus's version of the fable, the camel is a wholly ridiculous creature, one who can only cause laughter,<sup>98</sup> and yet he wishes to become "distinguished by a pair of horns" (8.8: *insignes geminis cornibus*) like a bull: again, using the language of public honor. The camel's desire to move from being laughable to being horned and able to defend himself can also be seen in terms of genre: low genres like the fable and comedy cause laughter; epic genres are serious. This contrast is subtle, but its presence in the fable is supported by the overtly epic language used in the other two fables with similar themes. The camel is similar to the donkey and the dog, both of

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. Duff 1934: 673 on this line as being "mock-heroic."

<sup>97</sup> Ellis 1887: 66 observes that this is "the language of siege operations," although he also notes that it is used to describe bodies in Vegetius.

<sup>98</sup> The camel being laughable is alluded to twice in the fable, at 8.7 (*irridendum*) and 8.11 (*Iuppiter irridens*).

them physically weak and/or ridiculous creatures that are trying to invade the military world of epic.

Of course, if dressing up a humble animal in epic or military decoration is doomed to failure, then we must ask: what does that mean for Avianus's fables, an originally *rudis* genre that has been "dressed up" in epic language? Avianus is adding epic language and epic allusions to his fables, and as such, he is doing much the same thing as the donkey of Fable 5: he is applying an epic exterior to the fable genre, without changing anything fundamental about the content or message of the fables. In all three of these fables, the epic or military language clusters around the external ornamentation that the animal wishes to put on. Avianus is not simply tossing in epic language haphazardly; he is using it in a highly specific and deliberate way: epic language is associated with an exterior that is false and ultimately ineffective. Avianus's fables, then, are not simply about crossing social boundaries, but are also about crossing the boundaries of genre.

Nor are those the only three fables in which epic language is portrayed as useless. Fable 32 provides a particularly noteworthy example. In this fable, a plowman gets his cart stuck in the mud, and he calls on the gods to help. The phrase used of the man calling on the gods, *vocare in vota* (32.6: *nam vocat hunc supplex in sua vota deum*) occurs four times in the *Aeneid*, and is never associated with failure. At *Aen.* 5.234, Cloanthus calls on the gods for help in a race, and this prayer immediately alters the race's outcome. At *Aen.* 5.514, Eurytion prays before he fires his bow, and this causes his shot to be successful. At *Aen.* 12.780, Turnus prays during his duel with Aeneas, and his prayer is not in vain: Aeneas immediately gets his sword stuck in a tree stump. The only time that the phrase is not immediately associated with success occurs at *Aen.* 7.471, in which Turnus calls on the gods before battle. The scene then switches, and so there is

no immediate happy outcome. Even in this case, however, there is no immediate failure. In the fable, by contrast, the plowman who invokes Hercules is immediately informed by Hercules himself that prayers are useless, and that if he wants his cart to move he should take care of it himself (32.5-12).<sup>99</sup> This fable demonstrates the difference between epic and fable quite clearly: in epic, the heroes are close to the gods, and the gods are frequently willing to intervene in human affairs. In the world of the fable, by contrast, the human characters are frequently portrayed as being on their own, and so they must rely on their own power in order to get things done. Epic strategies like calling on the gods do not work in the world of the fable. Again, this suggests a generic reading in which Avianus is resolutely rejecting that which belongs to the epic genre as being unsuitable for the fable genre.

Avianus's fable collection does not merely criticize low animals – or plowmen – who foolishly wish to take on an epic veneer. He also has a number of fables that criticize low animals for simply trying to make use of affected speech, without any epic allusions. Such fables are clearly social critiques,<sup>100</sup> and the generic element is weaker. However, it would be a mistake to assume that such fables have nothing to say about genre. Avianus's condemnation of affected language in the fables must be connected to his introductory epistle, in which he stated that the fable genre was characterized by elegant falsehood. If animals who speak elegantly but falsely (insofar as their speech does not match who they are) are condemned, then this puts further pressure on Avianus's own use of elegant language in the fables themselves. Once again,

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<sup>99</sup> This fable also appears as Babrius 20.

<sup>100</sup> On the intersection of language and social class in the fable, see especially Bloomer 1997: 73-109, who analyzes Phaedrus's fables. Bloomer's basic argument is that within Phaedrus, characters who speak in ways not proper to their social sphere are punished.

genre critique and social critique are blended: fancy speech cannot make either an individual or a genre any less humble.

Fable 2, “The Tortoise and the Eagle” is a fable about a tortoise that wishes to fly. In the version of this fable that appears in the *Aesopica* (Fable 230), the action is straightforward: the turtle wants to fly and asks the eagle to carry her. The eagle tries to refuse, the tortoise insists, and so the eagle carries her into the air and then drops her. According to the moral, this fable is a warning against ambition.<sup>101</sup> In Avianus, uniquely, the tortoise makes false promises to the eagle in order to convince him to carry her:

*Pennatis avibus quondam testudo locuta est,  
si quis eam volucrum constituisset humi,  
protinus e Rubris conchas proferret harenis,  
quis pretium nitido cortice baca daret:  
5 indignum, sibimet tardo quod sedula gressu  
nil ageret toto proficeretque die.  
ast ubi promissis aquilam fallacibus implet,  
experta est similem perfida lingua fidem...*

Once a tortoise said to the winged birds,  
that if any one of the birds should set her on the ground,<sup>102</sup>  
she would straightaway produce shells from the Red Sea sands  
to which the pearl with its glistening side gives high value.  
5 It was intolerable, that because of her slow pace she, although industrious,  
accomplished nothing and made no progress in the entire day.  
But when she had thus filled the eagle with false promises,  
her treacherous tongue encountered “faithfulness” to match...  
(Fable 2.1-8)

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<sup>101</sup> ὁ μῦθος δηλοῖ ὅτι πολλοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐν ταῖς φιλονεικίαις ἑαυτοὺς καταβλάπτουσιν (“This fable shows that the majority of men harm themselves in struggles for supremacy”).

<sup>102</sup> Line 2.2 is difficult and may be corrupt, as Ellis 1887: 54 and Duff 1934: 685 both discuss. The referent of *eam* is unclear: if it refers to the tortoise, as Duff and Ellis both suggest, then it would mean that the demonstrative pronoun is being used in place of the expected reflexive, *se*. Furthermore, if *quis* is taken with *volucrum* (“one of the birds”), then it, in Duff’s words, would be “implying the rare masc. gender for *volucrum*.” Nevertheless, the sense seems to be that the tortoise is promising that if a bird will set her safely on the ground after carrying her to the red sea, then she will give them the shells.

The eagle then kills the tortoise,<sup>103</sup> who realizes that she should not have sought great achievement without great labor (2.14: *non sine supremo magna labore peti*). The moral of the fable warns against desiring things that are “too high” (2.16: *meliora*).

The tortoise’s false promises, which are added by Avianus, seem at first glance to be entirely pointless. The moral of the fable warns against desiring what is too high, not against speaking falsely. Furthermore, there is the question of why the narrative labels the tortoise’s promises as “false” in the first place. The tortoise seems to honestly believe that with a bird’s help, she can collect enough valuable shells to share. The realization she has as she dies is that there is no shortcut to achievement, not that lying is wrong, implying that she previously believed that shortcuts to achievement existed. It must be true, then, that the tortoise’s speech is *fallax* and her tongue *perfida* not because the tortoise is intentionally lying, but because the things that she promises are impossible.<sup>104</sup> The promises are impossible because they are *meliora* (2.16), better than the tortoise can ever hope to achieve.<sup>105</sup> This ties all of the action together: the tortoise promises things that are impossible and therefore false, and as a result, the eagle punishes her with death.

The tortoise, like the donkey of Fable 5 and the camel of Fable 8, wishes to change her basic nature, and discovers that it is impossible. Although the tortoise believes that she is

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<sup>103</sup> In the Aesopic version, it is clear that the eagle kills the tortoise by dropping her. Avianus is vaguer, stating simply that the tortoise “died, unlucky, by the cruel talon of the bird” (2.10: *occidit infelix alitis ungue fero*). This may still mean that the eagle dropped the tortoise, thus using his talon to release the tortoise to her death (cf. Küppers 1977: 115). However, it is also possible that in Avianus’s version, the eagle never picks up the tortoise at all, but rather kills her immediately upon her asking.

<sup>104</sup> Avianus would thus prefigure the ending of the fable – that the tortoise’s promises would remain unfulfilled – in the beginning of the fable, which is a common technique of his. This is discussed by Küppers 1977: 85-88.

<sup>105</sup> As Ellis 1887: 55 notes, following Cannegieter, *meliora* is used by Avianus specifically to denote what is “higher in position” in a social sense. There is also the fact that pearls are useless to animals, as we see in the fable of “The Cockerel and the Pearl” in Phaedrus (3.12).



industrious (2.5), she cannot truly be so, for she is by nature slow. For the tortoise, however, there is no cosmetic change: the tortoise never attempts to alter any aspect of her physical appearance. Instead, the tortoise's ambition affects her speech, and turns it false. One might recall that Avianus, in his dedicatory epistle, claims that the benefit of the fable genre is that the truth is not a necessity, but elegant falsehood is proper. Yet in the second fable of his own collection, the tortoise's false and poetic<sup>106</sup> speech, brought on by her desire to be better than she can properly be, leads to her death. Elegant false speech, it seems, is not so unproblematic.

There is also a clear social element to this fable. In the Aesopic version, the tortoise merely wishes to fly. That alone could be seen as a social metaphor (a land animal wishes to be literally higher than she should be), but Avianus deepens the social element by having the tortoise desire to fly so as to collect pearls. Not only does she wish to fly, but she wishes to possess jewels, which belong to the upper echelons of society.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, the moral makes the social element abundantly clear:

15     *sic quicumque nova sublatus laude tumescit*  
       *dat merito poenas, dum meliora cupit.*

15     Thus whoever swells with pride after being raised by newly acquired glory  
       pays the penalty deservedly, when they desire things that are too high.

The reference to newly acquired glory (*nova sublatus laude*) makes it easy to apply this fable to new men, who have recently joined the ranks of the aristocracy and now believe that they may truly be considered worthy. This fable warns against such behavior: being raised up does not erase one's true and humble nature.

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<sup>106</sup> Cf. Ellis 1887: 54-55, who points out that much of the vocabulary used by the tortoise also appears in poets such as Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid.

<sup>107</sup> On jewelry as a symbol of status in the late antique period, cf. Roberts 1989: 117-118 and Salzman 2002: 19; 47.



of course, makes his language false.<sup>110</sup> In other words, the fish puts on fancy language as evidence for his nobility, in much the same way as the dog assumes that the bell is evidence of his worth. This fish might also be compared with the tortoise of Fable 2. The fish, much like the tortoise, lays claims to things beyond him, and this affects his language.

Fable 42, the last fable of the collection, provides a final example of speech that is both affected and dishonest. A kid, running from a wolf, takes refuge in a flock of sheep. The wolf then tries to convince the kid to come out using “constructed tricks” (42.6: *compositis dolis*), which consist of the wolf telling the kid that if he remains with the sheep, he too will be sacrificed, so he had better return to the safety of the meadow. The kid, however, is not fooled, and responds that he would rather be sacrificed to the gods than be eaten by a wolf. This fable, unlike the previous two, is not about an animal that wishes to go beyond its station. Still, the theme that affected speech is both dishonest and ineffective remains. The wolf’s words are glossed as *compositis dolis*, emphasizing their artificial nature. In all three of these fables, in fact, the ornamental, crafted speech is associated with dishonesty: the tortoise is (according to the narrative) a liar, the fish is pretending to be something he is not, and the wolf is trying disingenuously to convince the kid to be eaten. Again, this can be connected to Avianus’s dedicatory epistle. Avianus promised to use affected language himself when he boasted that the fable genre is characterized by “falsehood elegantly composed” (*praef.* 3-4: *urbane concepta falsitas*). Avianus’s own fables call into question whether this definition of the fable genre can be trusted: in the fables themselves, falsehood, no matter how elegant, does not do well.

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<sup>110</sup> The lamprey rebukes the other fish *cum salibus*, “satirically” (38.6). This is a clear pointer to the generic nature of this fable: the lamprey is satirizing the fish for his assumption of class markers that do not properly belong to him. Also relevant is that the lamprey offers to refute the other fish’s claim “with the people watching” (38.9: *populo spectante*), connecting this fable to the politics of display already discussed.

In the fables we have examined so far, there has been a close parallel between the social message (the low should not pretend to be high) and the generic message (the fable genre should not attempt to be stylistically high). The fable book itself serves as an illustration of the overarching message that if something humble is dressed up in an elegant covering or with affected language, it becomes ridiculous. However, I have also suggested that Avianus's fables might question the nature of ornamentation itself as a marker for worth; if the donkey can successfully pretend to be a lion among those who do not know him, then this suggests that ornamentation itself might be a hollow signifier. In fact, there are fables that explicitly question the value of ornamentation itself. In these fables, Avianus does not criticize an animal that attempts to dress above its station; instead, he criticizes ornamentation that is natural, part of the animal's actual appearance. This makes it clear that Avianus is not merely criticizing animals for going outside of their proper sphere; ornamentation itself is inherently problematic. Such natural finery is typically contrasted in these fables with plainness or even ugliness, which is praised as being more desirable and more effective.<sup>111</sup>

Fable 15, "The Crane and the Peacock" illustrates the conflict between useless beauty and functional plainness. This fable is about a quarrel that arises between the two birds about their different notions of beauty.<sup>112</sup> The peacock argues that his beauty is greater because his body is multicolored, whereas the crane's body is plain.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, the peacock's tail creates a light

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<sup>111</sup> Cf. Zafiroopoulos 2001: 57 for a discussion of how "practicality" is the basic criterion by which the fables of the *Aesopica* judge behavior. In other words, strict morality does not matter so much as whether or not one's behavior will be effective in a given situation.

<sup>112</sup> 15.3: *namque inter varias fuerat discordia formas* ("For there was discord over variant definitions of beauty").

<sup>113</sup> 15.5-6: *quod sibi multimodo fulgerent membra decore, / caeruleam facerent livida terga gruem* ("because while his limbs shone with multicolored decoration, / a bruise-colored back made the crane dark blue"). Note that one difference here is between variety and plainness: the peacock has many colors, but the crane has only one, which is brought out through the use of both *caeruleam* and *livida*, both of which refer to different shades of blue.

that reaches to the stars.<sup>114</sup> The crane, unable to compete with the peacock in terms of physical beauty, states that she has nevertheless won this argument:

“*quamvis innumeris plumas variaverit ordo,  
mersus humi semper florida terga geris.*<sup>115</sup>  
*ast ego deformi sublimis in aera penna  
proxima sideribus numinibusque feror.*”

“Although an innumerable arrangement diversifies your feathers,  
you carry your flowered skin while always stuck on the ground:  
but I am carried aloft into the air on my ugly wing,  
close to the stars and to the gods.”

(Fable 15.11-14)

In other words, the peacock’s beautiful feathers are worthless, because they do not allow the peacock to fly. The crane’s wings, although ugly, allow her to rise up to the stars and to the gods.

Although the peacock in this fable is talking about her real skin and is thus different from the donkey of Fable 5, who glories in skin that is not his own, there are key similarities between the peacock and the donkey in terms of the language used to describe them. Both the donkey and the peacock take pride in their *honore* (5.8; 15.9), a word that appears only in one other fable.<sup>116</sup> Notably, the pride that the peacock and the donkey have in their supposed *honor* is a lie: in the case of the donkey, the skin is not his own. In the case of the peacock, the lie is twofold: first and most prominently, the peacock’s feathers do not allow him to fly, as the crane points out. In that sense, the feathers are false; they do not do the one thing that feathers are supposed to do.

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<sup>114</sup> 15.7-8: *et simul erectae circumdans tegmina caudae / sparserat arcatum sursus in astra iubar* (“And also, by spreading the canopy of his erect tail / he had scattered an arcing beam up into the stars”). The word *arcatum* is an emendation, accepted by Duff (1934: 704), but which is otherwise unattested. It seems to be constructed from *arcuo*, which means “to curve like a bow.”

<sup>115</sup> The use of *humi* here may be connected to Fable 2, in which the tortoise’s foolish desire to fly caused her death: the tortoise should have stayed on the ground (cf. 2.2: *humi*), rather than desiring things too high. The peacock, like the tortoise, is a creature who cannot leave the ground and so is coded as a low-class individual.

<sup>116</sup> *Honor* also appears in Fable 19, “The Pine and the Bramble Bush,” which will be discussed below, as it is another fable in the “substance over style” series.

Secondly, whereas the peacock boasts that his feathers create a “ray of light” (15.8: *iubar*) that reaches the stars (15.8: *in astra*), the crane is the one who can literally fly into the sky, close to the stars (15.14: *proxima sideribus*). A final verbal connection between the donkey and the peacock is created through the use of the word *terga* in 15.12: the crane states that the peacock carries his back (*terga*) while being stuck on the ground. In Fable 5, *terga* is the word used of the lion’s skin that the donkey wears. The peacock, like the donkey, wears a skin that is visually striking but otherwise useless. The fact that the peacock’s skin is his own does not seem to make a difference; the beauty is false because it is nonfunctional, even if it is “natural” and not put on.

Tellingly, the vocabulary that is used to describe the peacock’s beauty is similar to the vocabulary used to refer to the verbal ornamentation which, according to Roberts, characterizes much late antique poetry. As I discussed already, Roberts argues that *variatio* is a key feature of late antique style, and that the vocabulary used to describe the verbal ornamentation that creates *variatio* is visual in nature: *color, flores, lumen, gemmae*.<sup>117</sup> With the exception of *gemmae*, all of these key terms – or closely related terms – occur in this fable as ways to describe the peacock’s beauty. The peacock’s many colors “diversify” his feathers (15.11: *variaverit*), his back is “flowered” (15.12: *florida*), and his feathers send a ray of light (15.8: *iubar*) into the stars. In other words, the peacock’s beauty embodies the metaphors commonly used for the ornate style. The crane, on the other hand, is carried aloft by her plain feathers. Although there is no logical connection between plainness and flight – the crane does not fly *because* her feathers are plain – the crane implies that the connection exists. The crane states that she is carried aloft by her “ugly wing” (15.13: *deformi...penna*). This implies that her ugliness is in some way

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<sup>117</sup> Roberts 1989: 144-154.

necessary for her flight. In the logic of the fable, the peacock is grounded because of his beauty, and the crane can fly because she is plain. Given the vocabulary that is used to describe the peacock, this is a condemnation not only of functionless beauty, but also of the ornate style itself.<sup>118</sup>

Fable 19 is similar to Fable 15, although it involves two plants, a pine and a bramble bush, rather than two birds. Once again, a great quarrel (19.2: *iurgia magna*) arises over beauty (19.2: *formae*), language that closely recalls the opening of Fable 15, in which *discordia* over *formas* (15.3) leads to *magna iurgia* (15.4). Furthermore, just as the crane of Fable 15 is unable to contend with the peacock in terms of *honore*, so the pine in Fable 19 declares that the bramble bush does not have any *honor* that would allow him to contend on equal terms with her.<sup>119</sup> As a final similarity, the pine brags that her head touches the stars,<sup>120</sup> recalling the light that the peacock bragged shone from his tail to the stars (15.8: *in astra*). However, unlike the peacock, the pine emphasizes her utility: not only does she actually reach into the sky (thus making her more like the crane than like the peacock), but she also furnishes masts for ships (19.7-8). The pine finishes by contrasting this with the bramble's ugliness:

*“at tibi deformem quod dant spineta figuram,  
despectum cuncti praeteriere viri.”*

“But because your thorns give you an ugly figure,  
all men pass you by, despised.”  
(Fable 19.9-10)

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<sup>118</sup> Cf. Roberts 1989: 54, in which he discusses Quintilian's theory that ornate stylizations should only be occasionally used, since “their brilliance depends on contrast with the plainness of their surroundings.” Yet in Avianus's fable, the plainness of the crane actually demonstrates the uselessness of the peacock's beauty. The contrast between plain and ornate style was an important matter for Christian authors also; on this cf. Salzman 2002: 209-219.

<sup>119</sup> 19.4: *meritis nullus consociaret honor* (“no title of merit united [them]”).

<sup>120</sup> 19.5-6: “*nam mihi deductum surgens in nubila corpus / verticis erectas tollit in astra comas*” (“For my tapering body, rising into the clouds, / lifts the upright foliage of my treetop into the stars”). For *deductus* as meaning “tapering,” cf. Ellis 1887: 84-85.

Uniquely in Avianus, the pine focuses on the way that the bramble's thorns make him ugly and therefore despised. In Babrius's version, Fable 64, the pine makes similar boasts about her height and her usefulness to men, but she does not make any comment about the bramble's appearance or thorns.<sup>121</sup> Unlike the peacock, who merely boasts about his appearance, the pine thus argues that both her appearance and her versatility make her superior to the bramble bush, whose thorns make him untouchable to men. The bramble bush's response is to point out that thorns have their uses:

*ille refert: "nunc laeta quidem bona sola fateris  
et nostris frueris imperiosa malis;  
sed cum pulchra minax succidet membra securis,  
quam velles spinas tunc habuisse meas!"*

[The bramble bush] replies: "Now, certainly, you happily profess only good things and you imperiously delight in my evils; but when the threatening axe cuts your beautiful limbs, then you would wish that you had my thorns!"  
(Fable 19.11-14)

Again, the focus here is slightly different than in Babrius. In Babrius, the bramble bush simply points out that axes are always cutting down pines, but that they leave bramble bushes alone.<sup>122</sup> The bramble bush does not link this explicitly to his thorns, although that is certainly implied. In Avianus, the bramble states outright that it is because of his thorns that the axes leave him alone: the thorns serve as a prickly defense, whereas the slender and beautiful pine has no such defense and so is continuously cut down. In Avianus, then, the bramble bush's thorns become the center

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<sup>121</sup> Babrius 64.6. Cf. Küppers 1977: 71, who also notes that this contrast occurs uniquely in Avianus.

<sup>122</sup> Babrius 64.7-9.



of the conflict: they represent the bramble bush's ugliness, but they also represent his power – in much the same way as the crane's "ugly wing" allows him to fly in Fable 15.

Avianus's fable of the pine and the bramble bush recalls not only Babrius's version of the fable, but also Callimachus's fable of "The Olive, the Laurel, and the Bramble" from *Iambus* 4.<sup>123</sup> Callimachus's fable has often been read as a conflict between various literary styles, although there is little agreement as what literary styles are represented by the olive, the laurel, and the bramble respectively.<sup>124</sup> However, Tom Hawkins has recently suggested that the bramble – in both Callimachus and in Babrius – may be associated with the Aesopic brand of fables:

The ethical orientation of Callimachus' fable, now a tool of the Alexandrian literary elite to be used against outsiders and upstarts, becomes all the more surprising because of the suspicion that the person represented by the Bramble has certain Aesopic shadowings. The Bramble represents someone of low status who tries to interfere with those who are of nobler lineage and who wield greater power, and this adheres to the typical pattern of Aesopic behavior as evidenced clearly throughout the *Life of Aesop* but also in Callimachus' *Iambus* 2, which mentions Aesop's fateful trip to Delphi. The person represented by the Bramble is also ugly, since even if the word σιμός should be taken as a proper name it would certainly be understood as a derogatory speaking name (i.e., Mr. Snubnose). The negative aesthetic implications of σιμός, too, tie the Bramble to Aesop, as well as to Socrates. Furthermore, Aesop was most often known as a Thracian (or a Phrygian), and here the Bramble is either Thracian or he behaves like one. (Hawkins 2014: 105)

Of course, as Hawkins goes on to argue,<sup>125</sup> both Callimachus and Babrius reject this "thorny" version of Aesop: Aesop dies in Callimachus *Iambus* 2, and Babrius declares that his iambs have been "softened" (1 *prol.* 19: θηλύνας). Avianus, in contrast, embraces the thorniness of the fable

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<sup>123</sup> Hawkins 2014: 104 argues that Babrius intentionally alludes to Callimachus's fable both in his version of the fable and in his first prologue.

<sup>124</sup> Hawkins 2014: 103 n. 38 summarizes the most recent scholarship on the subject.

<sup>125</sup> Hawkins 2014: 105.

by having the bramble promote his thorns as necessary for protection.<sup>126</sup> Avianus's fable thus makes a strong statement about the power of the fable genre. The implication, at least, is that the pine's beauty leaves her defenseless, whereas the bramble bush's ugliness make him protected. Fables are powerful when they have their sting – a slight jibe, perhaps, at Babrius's decision to soften his.

Fable 40 is again similar to the previous two in terms of language and message. In this fable, the leopard, much like the peacock of Fable 15, is proud because of his variegated skin: (40.1 *distinctus maculis et pulchro pectore pardus*) and believes that this makes him superior to other animals. In this case, the leopard believes that he is superior to lions, because they do not have dappled skin (40.3: *quia nulla graves variarent terga leones*) and are therefore a wretched kind of animal (40.4: *miserum...genus*). Once again we see the key verb *vario* being used of the animal's skin, thus linking this fable closely to literary style. When compared to Fable 5, the leopard's emphasis on his dappled beauty creates a particular kind of irony: the donkey there was a *miserum* creature who tried to hide this fact using a lion's skin (*terga*). The leopard, however, assumes that the lions themselves are a miserable race (*miserum genus*) because their backs (*terga*) are too plain. Furthermore, the logic of Fable 40 is the very logic that the peacock used to dismiss the crane in Fable 15: plainness equals worthlessness. In Fable 40, it is a fox that criticizes the leopard for his mistaken belief:

10           “vade” ait “et pictae nimium confide iuventae,  
              dum mihi consilium pulchrius esse queat,  
              miremurque magis quos munera mentis adornant,  
              quam qui corporeis enituere bonis.”

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<sup>126</sup> The power differential between the bramble and the pine in Avianus is alluded to through the use of *imperiosa* (19.12) to describe the pine's speech: the pine speaks in a manner befitting *imperium*, and looks down on the bramble as beneath her. The bramble is talking back to power, with his thorns as protection – a striking metaphor for the notion, seen in Phaedrus and in the *Life of Aesop*, of the fable genre as a method of protected speech.



more worthy is that ornamentation has no power in and of itself. Worth comes not from external markers, but from one's actions (like the crane who is actually able to fly) or from one's innate character (like the fox, who values cleverness over appearance). In a similar way – to tie the literary message to the social one – elite men saw themselves as worthy not because of their displays of status, but because of their character.<sup>129</sup>

Such logic also helps explain why epic language is treated so poorly in Avianus's fable collection. Fables are worthwhile for what they are: humble stories that teach humble lessons. Adding an epic veneer to such a humble genre changes nothing fundamental about the nature of fables, and so it only makes the epic language appear out of place. Epic language becomes mock-heroic when implanted in the fable genre.<sup>130</sup> Here perhaps is the moment to mention one particularly striking feature of Avianus's fables: direct violence is never a successful strategy, whereas cleverness is. This is not to say that Avianus's fables do not contain violence; as Uden in particular has shown (2009), violent *punishments* are an oft-repeated theme in Avianus's work. However, violent punishments, which occur at the end of the fable and are specifically labeled as such, should be distinguished from the use of violence as a strategy by characters in the fables.

For example, in Fable 18, a lion wishes to kill and eat a group of bulls. Given that the lion's characterization in fables is usually that of a predator, one might expect that the lion's strategy would simply be to attack and kill the bulls. Instead, the lion does not: in fact, the fable

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<sup>129</sup> Cf. Salzman 2002: 21 for "high moral character" as vital to elite self-conception.

<sup>130</sup> A similar – albeit far more dramatic – phenomenon can be observed in Ausonius's *Cento Nuptialis*, in which the wedding night is described using Vergil's language. On this cento, cf. McGill 2005: 92-108. McGill argues (p. 105) that the cento is not "inherently parodic," but that in the case of the *Cento Nuptialis*, the application of Vergilian poetry to low subject matter constitutes parody. In a similar way, using Vergil to describe the humble antics of fable animals brings Vergil's poetry into a state of bathos.

specifically states that the lion cannot attack the bulls because they are too strong for him (18.5-10). Instead, the lion “attacks” the bulls with words:

*Protinus aggreditur pravis insistere verbis  
collisum cupiens dissociare pecus.*

Immediately [the lion] began press the bulls with crooked words,  
desiring to separate the herd by putting them at odds.  
(Fable 18.11-12)

Once the lion successfully divides the bulls, he does in fact kill and eat them in a particularly violent way, by tearing them limb from limb (18.13-14). My point, then, is not that there is a lack of violence, but rather that direct violence is not the lion’s strategy: the lion must first use words, rather than relying on nothing but violence. In most fable collections, there are at least a few examples of strong animals taking advantage of their physical strength to prey on the weaker animals. In Avianus, such fables – in which violence alone is an effective strategy – simply do not appear.

Fable 4 provides a clear example, as it is set up as a contest between persuasion and strength.<sup>131</sup> In this fable, the wind and sun compete to get a man to remove his cloak. The wind tries to blow his cloak off, but this only causes him to clutch it more tightly. The sun, in contrast, shines so warmly that the man takes off his cloak of his own accord. In Babrius’s version of this fable (Fable 18), the moral states that persuasion (πειθώ) accomplishes more than force (βία). In Avianus, the moral simply states that “it is not possible to conquer anyone through marshalled threats” (4.16: *nullum praemissis vincere posse minis*). In other words, Avianus chooses to

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<sup>131</sup> Cf. Scanzo 2001: 28-30. Scanzo argues that this fable of Avianus may be connected to Vergil *G.* 3.237-239, especially in terms of their shared military vocabulary.

negate violence rather than promote persuasion: his moral simply states that violent threats do not work.<sup>132</sup>

Such a message proves true in Avianus as a whole – not only with regard to threats, but also with regard to violence itself. In Avianus, force is not an effective strategy. In Fable 16, an oak tree that tries to resist the wind directly is torn up, whereas the reeds, which bend, are able to survive. In Fable 27, a crow is unable to push over a jar by applying direct force, and so must find a solution through cleverness. In Fable 33, a man cuts open the goose that was laying golden eggs, thinking her full of gold: too late he realizes that the direct and violent approach has left him with a dead goose and no gold. In fact, the only fable in which a direct show of force is successful is Fable 17, in which a man throws a spear at a tigress,<sup>133</sup> which hits her in the foot and forces her to flee. However, in this fable, the man's spear temporarily makes it difficult for the tigress to speak (17.13-14). It is as though this use of a violent stratagem, which hardly belongs in the fable world Avianus creates, temporarily causes the tigress to revert to her speechless, non-fable self.

Instead, the strategies that succeed in Avianus are cleverness, gentleness, and persuasion. The sun in Fable 4, as we have seen, succeeds because it persuades the man to remove his cloak, using gentle warmth. A bald man in Fable 10 is temporarily an object of ridicule (10.9: *quod risus milibus esset*) after the wind blows off his wig, but he is able to turn aside the laughter from

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<sup>132</sup> Uden 2009: 121-122 discusses the prevalence in Avianus of the vocabulary of threats (*minax, minari, minae*) and connects it with his larger argument about the theme of crime and punishment in Avianus. However, he glosses over the extent to which threats are hollow and/or avoided in Avianus.

<sup>133</sup> In Babrius, this fable involves a lion. Küppers 1977: 134 argues that Avianus makes the change because of the nature of the animal's injury: the spear hits the tigress in the foot, which prevents her from running, which is significant because the tiger was known in antiquity for its speed. This neat correlation between injury and type of animal would have been missing if Avianus had kept the lion. Küppers also suggests that the change to a tiger provides a contrast with the next fable, which stars a lion (1977: 137).

himself by being clever (10.10: *distulit admota calliditate iocum*).<sup>134</sup> The goat in Fable 13 drives away a bull with a mere look, not with force. The reeds in Fable 16 do not merely survive the wind by bending, but are actually portrayed as actively causing the wind to die down through this method: *motibus aura meis ludificata perit* (16.18: “The wind, deluded by my motion, dies down”). The lion of Fable 18, despite being a predator, uses clever words to divide the bulls before he attacks them. The boy of Fable 25 outwits a thief by faking tears. The crow of Fable 27 is able to get water from a high-necked jar not by pushing on the jar directly (which fails), but by using her cleverness (27.6: *calliditate*). The mouse of Fable 31, despite being tiny, is able to harass and defeat a mighty bull through the same cleverness (31.8: *calliditate*).<sup>135</sup> All of these fables demonstrate that in Avianus, there is a clear and consistent contrast between force and cleverness: force is never successful, whereas cleverness often is.

Thus, to return at last to Fable 40: when the fox declares that her mind is worth more than the leopard’s beauty, this statement must be seen in the context of the ethical world Avianus creates for his fables. Avianus does not select his fables at random; he specifically chooses forty-two fables in which cleverness, rather than violence, is the successful strategy. By promoting cleverness, the fox is promoting the wisdom taught by the fable genre itself, and she is contrasting this with ornamentation, which is implied to be something that does not belong in the fable genre.

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<sup>134</sup> It is also significant that the fable starts out in a mock-epic way, stating that the bald horseman “comes to the Campus, conspicuous in shining arms” (10.3: *ad Campum nitidis venit conspectus in armis*), a line that, as Scanzo observes (2001: 64) is similar to *Aen.* 8.588 (...*chlamyde et pictis conspectus in armis*). Thus, the fable starts out epic, but ends in laughter, thanks to the horseman’s cleverness.

<sup>135</sup> There is also a Vergilian allusion in Fable 31, as Scanzo argues (2001: 49-50). Scanzo suggests that 31.11 (*Disce tamen brevibus quae sit fiducia monstris*) is based on *Aen.* 10.152 (*edocet humanis quae sit fiducia rebus*). The mouse thus not only defeats the bull, but also speaks in epic tones.

If Avianus thus has a low opinion of naturally beautiful animals, he has a similarly low opinion of beautiful inanimate objects: items that have been carefully crafted are portrayed as fragile and/or powerless. For example, in two different fables of Avianus, crafted jars fare badly. In Fable 11, a fable that also appears as *Aesopica* 378,<sup>136</sup> two jars are going down a river. One jar has been crafted from clay (11.4: *ficta luto*), and the other has been forged in bronze (11.4: *aere...fusa est*). Both *ficta* and *fusa* involve craftsmanship, of course, but whereas neither *fusa* nor *fundo* is a marked word in Avianus's fables,<sup>137</sup> the verb *tingo* is. In fact, in Avianus, it is always associated with falsehood.<sup>138</sup> Thus, by describing the jar not merely as clay (as in the Greek version of the fable, in which the jar is simply labeled as ὄστρακίνην), but as *made* (*ficta*) from clay, Avianus places a little extra emphasis on the clay jar's craftsmanship. This emphasis is subtle, and it would not be particularly marked unless, as I have shown, it were part of a larger theme in Avianus about crafted or beautiful items being weak. The rest of the fable is centered on the clay jar's fear that it will be destroyed. The bronze jar generously promises not to run into the clay jar, but the clay jar is not comforted, declaring that it does not matter whether the bronze jar runs into him or vice versa: if they collide, he will always be the sole victim.<sup>139</sup> This clay jar represents someone who is powerless: in a confrontation with the mighty, such a one will always lose. What is significant here is not so much the message (which is very common in fables), but rather the item used to represent the powerless party: rather than using a weak animal, as is

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<sup>136</sup> Perry 1952: 477. This fable comes from recension IV of the *Aesopica* tradition.

<sup>137</sup> The verb *fundo*, when it appears (Fable 16.17; Fable 27.2) refers simply to pouring.

<sup>138</sup> In Fable 9, a man "plays dead" (9.10: *exanimem fingens*) to escape from a bear, and in Fable 25, a boy pretends that his rope has broken and his golden pitcher has fallen into a well (25.5-6: *ille sibi abrupti fingens discrimina funis / hac auri queritur desiluisse cadum*) in order to trick a thief into diving into the well.

<sup>139</sup> Fable 11.13-14: "*nam me sive tibi seu te mihi conferat unda, / semper ero ambobus subdita sola malis*" ("For whether the water carries me to you or you to me, / I alone will be subjected to both evils").





animals and trees talk. However, in this fable, the craftsman's artistic vision proves useless: the rain cloud declares that the jar will not hold her shape for long, and then a deluge washes the jar away (41.13-16). According to the moral, this fable is a message to the wretched (41.17: *miseros*) not to lament their fate when it is under the control of the mighty (41.18: *subdita nobilibus*). Once again, craftsmanship stands in not only for weakness, but for social powerlessness.

The fables I have analyzed so far constitute nearly half of Avianus's text, and thus establish that the nature of beauty and artistry is a major concern of Avianus. One theme ties all of these fables together: beauty, whether it is put on externally or whether it exists naturally, is associated with powerlessness, failure, and being the victim of violence. It is never portrayed in a positive fashion. Even craftsmanship, which one might have expected to fare well in the text of a man so concerned with style as is Avianus, falls under the same blanket criticism: crafted jars are inherently weak.

The opposite is also true. Just as beauty does poorly in Avianus, so ugliness and plainness have power. We have seen this several times already, as with the crane of Fable 15, the bramble of Fable 19, and the fox of Fable 50. However, this theme is so prevalent that it also exists in fables that are not strictly about differing definitions of beauty. For instance, in Fable 13, which also appears as Babrius 91, a bull is running from a lion and tries to take refuge in the cave of a goat. In Babrius, the goat uses its horns and tries to drive the bull away. The bull puts up with these attacks, saying that he is simply waiting for the lion to pass them by, at which point he will show the goat that a bull is much more powerful. Avianus's fable, unlike Babrius's, focuses on the goat's ugliness. The goat is specifically identified as *hirsutus*, "hairy" (13.3), whereas in Babrius he receives no physical description at all. Furthermore, the goat does not physically

attack the bull in Avianus, but rather drives the bull away with a “sidelong look” (13.6: *obliquo...ore*). This look so terrifies the bull that he flees, and yells back his final remark from a distance;<sup>141</sup> again, this may be contrasted with Babrius, in which the bull speaks to the goat while in the process of grappling with him. Finally, in Avianus the bull’s parting speech to the goat emphasizes the goat’s repulsive physical appearance:

10           *“non te demissis saetosum, putide, barbis,  
illum, qui super est consequiturque, tremo;  
nam si discedat, nosces, stultissime, quantum  
discrepet a tauri viribus hircus olens.”*

10           “I do not tremble at you, you smelly thing, you who are bristly  
and have a trailing beard, but at him, who remains and follows me;  
For if he withdraws, then you will know, you enormous fool, how much  
a stinking goat differs from a bull in terms of strength.”  
(Fable 13.9-12)

Although the bull in Avianus repeatedly insists that he is afraid only of the lion, and not the goat, the action of the fable suggests otherwise: the fact remains that in Avianus, the bull flees at merely a look from the goat, and then shouts back his final comment from a distance. I would suggest that it is the goat’s ugliness that allows him to drive off the bull in this way: after all, in Avianus, ugliness has power.

A different sort of example of the power of ugliness is provided by the next fable, Fable 14. In this fable, Jupiter holds a beauty contest for all the animals. The monkey comes and enters her baby, which is so ugly that it causes Jupiter to erupt into laughter:

*tunc brevis informem traheret cum simia natum,  
ipsum etiam in risum compulit ire Iovem.*

Then when the short monkey drew forward her ugly child,  
she drove even Jupiter himself into laughter.

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<sup>141</sup> 13.5-6: *ast ubi submissa meditantem irrupere fronte / obvius obliquo terruit ore caper...* (“But as [the bull] was threatening to burst in with his head lowered / the goat, meeting him, terrified him with a sidelong glance...”).

(Fable 14.9-10)

The language here is striking: the baby monkey's ugliness has a sort of power even over Jupiter, since it drives or compels him (*compulit*) to laugh. The emphasis in Babrius's version of the fable (Fable 56) is slightly different: Babrius states that "laughter was stirred in the gods" (56.5: γέλως... τοῖς θεοῖς ἐκινήθη). In both cases ugliness is associated with laughter, but only in Avianus does ugliness have the power to compel Jupiter, even if that power is limited to causing him to laugh. In fact, Fable 14 provides a particularly good example of the way that this beauty vs. ugliness dichotomy is related to genre in Avianus. The phrase Avianus uses to describe Jove dissolving into laughter (14.10: *in risum ire*) is a play on a line from *Aeneid* 4.413-14, in which Dido is forced (*cogitur*) into tears (*ire in lacrimas*).<sup>142</sup> In other words, Avianus rewrites a line from epic in a way that perfectly encapsulates the differences between fable and epic: fable drives a person to laughter; epic drives a person to tears. Unsurprisingly, this power of laughter is related to ugliness: one might think of Aesop, the original fabulist, somebody just as short and ugly as the monkey of this fable.<sup>143</sup>

In large part because Avianus's fable collection is short, he is able thus to marshal a number of consistent themes: ornamentation, whether natural or not, is useless at best and

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<sup>142</sup> Cf. Ellis 1887: 76.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Beard 2014: 160-167 for the monkey as a humorous figure for the Romans. Beard emphasizes that it was largely the monkey's (failed) imitation of humans that made them laughable: "What was particularly laughable about these primates was their position on the very boundary between human and animal—and the precariousness of their attempts to imitate human beings. To put it another way, some of the loudest laughter accompanied their *failed* attempts at imitation, which exposed the mimicry for what it was" (p. 164). In the case of this fable, much of the humor stems from the monkey trying (and failing) to win a beauty contest – a human action, but one which the monkey cannot succeed at due to its innate ugliness (on the monkey's ugliness as funny, cf. Beard 2014: 165-166). Cf. also Feeney 2010: 284 for a discussion of the Plautine character Simia, who has "the perfect name for an actor: just like the 'monkey' that the name evokes to a Latin ear, an actor is a clever little fellow who cannot really be trusted, good at tricks and at imitating human beings." For the ape as a humorous creature in Greek literature, cf. McDermott 1935.

actively harmful at worst. Ugliness, on the other hand, is associated with a certain kind of power: the power to defend itself and to cause laughter. I have suggested that these dichotomies relate to genre. Avianus's fable collection is a celebration of the traditional aspects of the fable genre: ugliness, cleverness, and laughter have power, whereas beauty, force, and tears do not. As I have shown, the extent to which Avianus maintains this contrast is truly unique. At the same time, many of Avianus's fables about the uselessness of ornamentation also contain social critique. Ornamentation is not a reliable sign of social class or worth; even when the ornamentation is natural and not put-on, it remains an empty signifier. Nothing external can change an individual's innate nature – for better or for worse.

It is now time to return to Avianus's dedicatory epistle, and consider what the overriding message of the fable collection means for it. Avianus presents himself as a man who wishes to change the nature and history of the fable genre in order to make it more respectable and elegant. He asserts that "elegant lies" are the central feature of the fable genre, he pretends that the fable genre has a long and divine pedigree, and he promises to leave behind the *rudis* past of the genre and instead write elegant poetry. However, we can now see that his dedicatory epistle is not meant to be taken seriously: Avianus's own fable collection teaches that elegance and artistry are alien to the fable genre. The fable genre celebrates ugliness and cleverness, and disdains elegance and empty beauty. Dressing up the fable genre in elegant language is just as ridiculous as dressing up a low animal in finery. On one level, then, the fable book as a whole teaches the same lesson as is taught in individual fables.

This, however, does not go far in explaining why Avianus pretends otherwise in his dedicatory epistle – why he promises elegance if the purpose of his fable collection is to demonstrate that elegance is meaningless on its own. Avianus gives us no clear answer, but he

does, perhaps, suggest one: namely, that Avianus is not mocking himself, so much as he is mocking his dedicatee, Macrobius, and the literary style that Macrobius advocates.

Throughout the dedicatory epistle, Avianus ties his own authorial strategies to his desire to please Macrobius. He decides to write fables because that is the only genre in which Macrobius is not an expert, and Avianus does not wish to step on any toes. His definition of the fable genre as characterized by *falsitas* recalls Macrobius's own discussion of the fable genre in his *Commentary*<sup>144</sup> – except that Avianus does not excuse it away, unlike Macrobius. Avianus introduces his fake fable genealogy with the polite command *noveris*, asking Macrobius to “know” that the fable genre has its own literary pedigree. In other words, Avianus pretends that he is trying to make the fables more elegant for Macrobius's sake. Even Avianus's use of epic language can be tied to Macrobius, since Macrobius was an antiquarian, and one particularly interested in Vergil.<sup>145</sup> In other words, the dedicatory epistle of Avianus can be seen as Avianus pretending to be everything that Macrobius likes: a cultured antiquarian who so values the past that he has decided to make even the fable genre elevated, ornate, and infused with the language of Vergil. This pretense proves to be a joke; Avianus demonstrates in the fables that cultured elegance is ludicrously out of place in the fable genre. In so doing, he not only reestablishes that simplicity and lowness are hallmarks of the fable genre, but he also (perhaps) gently mocks Macrobius for his overvaluing of the classical past.

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<sup>144</sup> See above, note 39.

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Cameron 2011: 257-259 for a discussion of Macrobius's love of Vergil.

### III. Avianus in the *Saturnalia*

My theory that Avianus is playfully mocking Macrobius for his literary tastes finds some confirmation if we accept the hypothesis that Avianus's fables come after the *Commentary* but before the *Saturnalia*; then, Macrobius might be getting back at Avianus in his *Saturnalia*. Indeed, Macrobius's characterization of the fabulist in his *Saturnalia* seems to be based on Avianus's persona in the fable collection: Macrobius presents Avianus as a foolish young man who does not respect antiquity and does not respect Vergil, and, in particular, as someone who does not respect epic *language*. This makes a certain amount of sense, given the way that Avianus continuously associates epic language with failure in his fable collection, and the way in which he depicts artistic and elevated language as ineffective.

The *Saturnalia* is a work by Macrobius Theodosius, dated by Cameron to after 430 CE. Cameron has recently adapted his 1967 argument that the traditional view of the *Saturnalia* does not hold up to close scrutiny. This work, in which a group of learned pagans discusses various antiquarian matters, should not be seen as a text that celebrates or promotes paganism per se – Macrobius himself was most likely not a pagan.<sup>146</sup> Instead, argues Cameron, it is a work that celebrates and promotes antiquarianism. What Macrobius wanted was not a return to paganism, but a “revival of antiquarian scholarship.”<sup>147</sup> In particular, Macrobius was interested in Vergil; this is why so much of the *Saturnalia* is taken up with discussions of Vergil. Among Cameron's many and detailed arguments about the true nature and purpose of the *Saturnalia* would be too long to repeat here, so I will simply refer the reader to Cameron's *Last Pagans of Rome*. The

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<sup>146</sup> On the traditional view of the *Saturnalia*, cf. Cameron 2011: 231. On Macrobius not being pagan, cf. Cameron 2011: 245.

<sup>147</sup> Cameron 2011: 262.

point that matters most for the purposes of this section is that the *Saturnalia* has an antiquarian bent: Macrobius – and most of his interlocutors – truly value and respect ancient authors. Then there is Avienus, our fabulist, who does not.

It is not uncontroversial for me to claim that Macrobius includes our fabulist as a character in his *Saturnalia*. The character from the *Saturnalia* who is often identified with the fabulist is called Avienus, not Avianus, nor does he tell any fables in the *Saturnalia*. However, Cameron has provided ample evidence that the fabulist's name was not Avianus at all, but rather Avienus, and that confusion in the manuscript transmission led to the misspelling that has since become canonized.<sup>148</sup> This means that the fabulist and the interlocutor from the *Saturnalia* share a name at least. More difficult to explain is the fact that the characterization of Avienus does not immediately suggest our fabulist.<sup>149</sup> In fact, the scholars who identify Avienus with Avianus have only been able to point to one section as evidence: Book 2, in which Avienus tells a series of jokes and humorous anecdotes. Cameron takes this as evidence that Avienus is the fabulist, saying, “What more suitable person for Macrobius to have selected as the mouthpiece for his collection of funny stories than a story-teller, a writer of fables?”<sup>150</sup> Ellis agrees, saying that Avienus must be the fabulist because Avienus “tells a number of witty stories” and “recalls the conversation, which had become too abstruse, to lighter subjects more suited to the

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<sup>148</sup> Cameron's arguments are laid out in his 1967 article (pp. 390-396). Here, as on most matters, Cameron and Küppers disagree, with Küppers arguing that the fabulist's name was Avianus, not Avienus (1977: 28). On the matter of the fabulist's name, cf. Ellis 1887: xi-xviii, who was the first to argue that the fabulist and the character of the *Saturnalia* are one and the same. Duff 1934: 670 argues that the fabulist's name is Avianus and does not think the fabulist is the character in the *Saturnalia*, although even he agrees that Macrobius was the dedicatee.

<sup>149</sup> In order to keep a clear distinction between the fabulist and the character from the *Saturnalia*, I will follow the convention of referring to the fabulist as Avianus, and the character as Avienus.

<sup>150</sup> Cameron 1967: 396.



entertainment.”<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, Ellis points out that much of the *Saturnalia* is concerned with Vergil’s poetry, from which Avianus’s *Fables* often borrow. For these reasons, Cameron and Ellis believe that Avienus’s characterization suits the fabulist Avianus.

As Küppers rightly points out, these arguments are weak.<sup>152</sup> Telling jokes and telling fables are far from the same thing, and even if they were, being funny is not even Avienus’s main role in the *Saturnalia*. Avienus’s role, as Küppers shows, is to learn: he starts off as a young, headstrong, and fairly disrespectful man who interrupts his fellow interlocutors, questions everything they say, and dismisses ancient literature. By the end of the dialogue, however, he asks intelligent questions, listens to his elders, and – most importantly – learns. As even Cameron admits, Avienus is the only character of the *Saturnalia* to show development.<sup>153</sup> None of that seems, at first glance, to be suggestive of Avienus being our fabulist. In fact, there is a moment in the *Saturnalia* in which Horus asks Avienus a question about the worship of Saturn. Avienus, unable to answer, refers the question to Praetextatus, who answers it using what he knows about *fabulosus* (1.7.18). Thus, not only does Avienus not tell any fables in the *Saturnalia*, but he is in fact unable to answer questions to which “fables” should provide an answer.<sup>154</sup> If this is a portrait of our fabulist, it is not a flattering one.

However, as I will show, the characterization of Avienus in the *Saturnalia* does in fact match the persona that Avianus adopts in his fables, just not for the reasons previously cited as

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<sup>151</sup> Ellis 1887: xiv.

<sup>152</sup> Küppers 1977: 35-44.

<sup>153</sup> Cameron 2011: 247. On Avienus’s development, cf. also Kaster 1997: 195-196.

<sup>154</sup> *Fabulosus* does not, in this context, refer specifically to fables, of course. However, the fact that such an adjective is used in reference to what Avienus does not know is pointed: if it is a pun, it is one that is not flattering toward Avienus.

evidence. Avianus the fabulist and Avienus the character are both contemptuous and dismissive of antiquity, and have a particular lack of respect for classical language. Avianus promises that he will make his fables elegant, and does so by using Vergil and epic in ways that do not suit their context. In so doing, Avianus stains Vergil and turns him mock-heroic. This persona explains Avienus's characterization in the *Saturnalia*, in which Avienus does not understand the true value of antiquity – at least, not until the end of the dialogue. In essence, Avianus and Macrobius are teasing each other: Avianus writes a fable book making fun of Vergil, and Macrobius responds by writing an unflattering portrait of Avianus in his *Saturnalia*. In the *Saturnalia*, Avienus is rude, must be taught how to respect the past, and puts too much emphasis on what is elegant.

Avienus's rudeness is a central part of his character in the first part of the *Saturnalia*. He repeatedly whispers to his neighbor while someone else is speaking,<sup>155</sup> and interrupting other speakers is called a "habit of his."<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, he treats the past with disrespect: Praetextatus, whose role in the dialogue is frequently that of a mediator, must warn Avienus not to be insolent toward the past, saying *nec insolenter parentis artium antiquitatis reverentiam verberemus* ("Let us not insolently flog the reverence due to antiquity, parent of the arts" (1.5.4). It is important that Avienus is a young man in this dialogue; thus, his disrespect toward the past can be

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<sup>155</sup> 1.4.1; 6.7.1.

<sup>156</sup> 1.6.3: *Tum Avienus, ut ei interpellandi mos erat...ait...* ("Then Avienus, as was his habit of interrupting, said..."). He interrupts again at 2.3.14. Avienus's rudeness is particularly notable in light of Kaster's discussion of *verecundia* as being a key trait of the *Saturnalia*: "In the ideal world envisioned by Macrobius, *verecundia* is so spontaneous as to seem innate. Thus Servius, who possesses a *naturalis verecundia*, is found now deferring as a young man and a grammarian to his elders and betters, now offering a contribution as an expert, according to the propriety of the situation. So too the other guests as a group spontaneously take their places in a hierarchical rank (*ordo*) and know individually when to yield to others' expertise, when to assert their own, how to combine becomingly the two kinds of behavior. And Vergil himself is presumed to have exhibited precisely the grammarian's qualities in his own sphere, delicately coordinating deference and self-assertion in his treatment of the literary tradition" (Kaster 1997: 60-61).

considered parallel with his disrespect toward his elders. Avienus is the sort of young man who will talk over the men he should respect, and so naturally he is also the sort of young man who does not treat ancient literature with the proper respect.

Yet Avienus's problem is not with ancient literature per se, but with antiquarianism: he does not think that it is justifiable for men of his age to be using the language of archaic writers, as he explains:

(1) *Tum Avienus aspiciens Servium: Curius, inquit, et Fabricius et Coruncanius, antiquissimi viri, vel etiam his antiquiores Horatii illi trigemini plane ac dilucide cum suis fabulati sunt: neque Auruncorum aut Sicanorum aut Pelasgorum, qui primi coluisse in Italia dicuntur, sed aetatis suae verbis loquebantur: tu autem, proinde quasi cum matre Evandri nunc loquere, vis nobis verba multis iam seculis oblitterata revocare, ad quorum congeriem praestantes quoque viros, quorum memoriam continuus legendi usus instruit, incitasti.* (2) *Sed antiquitatum vobis placere iactatis, quod honesta et sobria et modesta sit: vivamus ergo moribus praeteritis, praesentibus verbis loquamur.*

(1) Then Avienus, looking at Servius, said, "Curius and Fabricius and Coruncanius, most ancient men, and, more ancient still, those three Horatii, spoke clearly and plainly with the men of their time, nor did they converse with the words of the Aurunci or Sicani or Pelasgi, who are said to have been the first to settle in Italy, but with the words of their own age. You, however, as though you are speaking to the mother of Evander, wish to recall for our use words blotted out by the span of many ages, and you encourage these men present to heap them up, whose memories are instructed by constant reading. (2) You boast that antiquity is pleasing to you because it was honest and sober and modest. Therefore, let us live with the morals of the past, but let us speak with the words of the present." (*Sat.* 1.5.1-2)

The core of Avianus's argument is that men should speak with the language of their own time, not with language that was proper to previous ages. In what immediately follows the passage quoted above, Avienus points out that Caesar, "a man of excellent character and prudence" (1.5.2: *excellentis ingenii ac prudentiae viro*), once declared that he always avoided the "rare and uncustomary word" (1.5.2: *infrequens atque insolens verbum*). Avienus thus quotes the words of an ancient man in support of not using the words of ancient men. There is nothing hypocritical about this for Avienus; after all, Avienus's overall point is that the sentiments and morals of

antiquity are worthwhile, but these morals should be expressed in modern language. Archaic language should stay in the past.

Although Avienus himself does not overtly state that archaic language must be avoided because it does not suit the elegance of the modern age, other interlocutors assume that that is his motivation. In fact, after Avienus's first interruption, in which he protests that the passages quoted by Caecina Albinus contained bad grammar (by which Avienus means, grammatical forms no longer in use), Servius comes to Albinus's defense by quoting parallel examples from Ennius:

*Reliqua autem verba quae Avieno nostro nova visa sunt veterum nobis sunt testimoniis adferenda. Ennius enim, nisi cui videtur inter nostrae aetatis politiores munditias respuendus, noctu concubia dixit his versibus...*

“The other words which seemed strange to our Avienus can be defended through the testimony of the ancients. For Ennius, unless it seems to anyone that Ennius must be rejected amid the more polished elegance of our age, used *noctu concubia* in these lines...” (1.4.17)

Servius sarcastically suggests that perhaps he should not quote Ennius, if anyone (namely, Avienus) thinks that Ennius has no place in the polished elegance of the present age. Servius thus assumes that the reason Avianus dislikes ancient literature is because he thinks that it is unsuitable to the elegance that defines the present age. This view of Avienus is given indirect confirmation later in the dialogue, when Avienus explains that the reason he likes Praetextatus's banquet is “because it combines both the modesty of the heroic age and the elegance of ours” (2.1.2: *quod et heroici seculi pudicitiam et nostri conduxit elegantiam*). Avienus, it seems, does in fact believe that *elegantia* is characteristic of the present age, and that archaic language is thus unsuitable.

Significantly, Avienus's transformation in the *Saturnalia* is from a person who thinks that archaic language should be left behind into a person who is genuinely eager to learn about it. The

turning point for Avienus comes when he promises that he will keep quiet and listen to the other speakers as they discuss Vergil.<sup>157</sup> From that point on, Avienus's role changes from somebody who critiques the past to someone who is eager to learn about it; he spends the rest of the dialogue asking insightful questions and listening politely to the answers. He even thanks his teachers for correcting his former bad opinions.<sup>158</sup> In particular, as Books 5-6 demonstrate, Avienus becomes eager to learn about Vergil. At 5.16, Avienus asks Eustathius to describe all of the places where Vergil borrows from Homer, asking "What indeed could be more pleasant than to hear two preeminent poets saying the same thing?" (*Quid enim suavius quam duos praecipuos vates audire idem loquentes?*). Avienus thus goes from a man who protests against the quotation of ancient authors, to one who appreciates quotation and borrowing – whether it be one ancient poet imitating another, or a man in the present quoting from the past. At 6.7.4-5, Avienus asks about what he thinks are some odd word choices of Vergil – not, as before, in order to prove that the language of the past is obsolete, but because he genuinely wants to know what Vergil's reason might be. Similarly, at 6.9.1-3, Avienus asks why the word *bidens* is applied to sheep. He adds that he once made fun of a grammarian for using such a ridiculous term, which again shows the change in Avienus's character: whereas before he was happy simply to make fun of people who used outdated terms, he is now earnestly trying to learn the rationale behind them. There are many more examples, but these are typical of the change in Avienus's character.

However, one thing does not change in Avienus: he strongly values the morals of the past. We have seen this already in the passages quoted above: in *Sat.* 1.5.2, Avienus declares:

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<sup>157</sup> 1.24.20.

<sup>158</sup> 6.8.1: *Gratum mihi est, Avienus ait, correctum quod de optimis dictis male opinabar* ("Thank you," Avianus said, "for correcting my bad opinion about excellent writing").

*vivamus ergo moribus praeteritis, praesentibus verbis loquamur* (“Let us live with the morals of the past, but speak with the words of the present”), and in *Sat.* 2.1.2, Avienus states that *pudicitia* is characteristic of the heroic age. In the latter passage, Avienus goes on to claim that Praetextatus’s banquet is better than Agathon’s from the *Symposium*, because Agathon allowed a flute girl to be admitted, whereas Praetextatus did not (*Sat.* 2.1.5). For Avienus, any hint of impropriety is problematic. This respect for morals colors much of what Avienus says in the dialogue. When he offers to tell some humorous anecdotes about Augustus, he prefaces his speech by praising Augustus for always showing respect for *pudor*, even as he told jokes.<sup>159</sup> He later offers to talk about mime, since talking about that subject will imitate a celebratory mood while avoiding the licentiousness that an actual mime would produce.<sup>160</sup> This respect for morals may also be a point of comparison between Avianus and Avienus; the fabulist, after all, promised in his dedicatory epistle to teach life lessons through the fables.

This portrait of Avienus is not a particularly flattering one. He is a headstrong young man who must be taught to respect ancient literature. Such a role was a necessary part of Macrobius’s text: he needed a character who would protest the antiquarianism of the other interlocutors, so that they would have the opportunity to defend it.<sup>161</sup> I would like to suggest that Macrobius had good reason to choose the fabulist Avienus for this role. For just as Avienus the character dislikes it when authors like Vergil are used in the wrong context, so too does the fabulist

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<sup>159</sup> 2.4.1: *Caesar adfectavit iocos, salvo tamen maiestatis pudorisque respectu, nec ut caderet in scurram* (“Caesar told jokes, but in a way that preserved his dignity and showed respect for decency, nor did he fall into buffoonery”). On Augustus’s jokes in the *Saturnalia*, cf. Beard 2014: 130-133.

<sup>160</sup> On mime as a humorous genre, cf. Beard 2014: 167-172.

<sup>161</sup> A parallel can be found in Euangelus, who, according to Cameron, is included as a foil for the praise of Vergil (Cameron 2011: 595-597). Essentially, Euangelus criticizes Vergil so that the other interlocutors have an opening to praise him.

Avianus. Avienus the character protests when ancient literature is used in the wrong temporal context: he thinks that people should speak in the language of their own time, not in the language of the past. Avianus the fabulist criticizes ancient literature being used in the wrong generic context: he shows that Vergil (or rather, epic) does not belong in the fable genre. He dedicates this work to Macrobius, a man who loves Vergil – a move most likely intended to tease Macrobius. But Macrobius gets his revenge by casting Avienus as someone who misunderstands antiquarianism. At the center of all of this is the question of how the past – represented in particular by Vergil – ought to be used.

Of course, if this is a portrait of the fabulist Avianus, it is not an entirely accurate one. Avianus in his fables does not criticize Vergil for his word choice or for his odd grammatical structures; he does not, in fact, criticize Vergil at all. What he mocks is Vergil being used in the wrong context; he stains Vergil by implanting him in a low genre. Nor is Vergil's poetry the central or only concern of Avianus's fables; Avianus is concerned with wider questions of what is proper to the fable genre, of which Vergilian language is one negative example. Nevertheless, since Macrobius is writing Avienus as a character, it makes sense that the portrait would not conform entirely to reality. A fabulist who demonstrated that overly ornate and Vergilian poetry is not always proper becomes, in Macrobius, a young man who completely misunderstands Vergilian poetry until his elders correct his wrong impressions.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Avianus's fable book is the most self-consciously literary of the four collections I have examined. While it is true that Phaedrus also emphasizes his authorial craft, Avianus shows far more concern with the boundaries of genre. Phaedrus may distinguish his lively and humorous

fables from the dry prose of Aesop, and he may be eager to establish himself as a unique fabulist in his own right, but he shows little concern with the question of what is proper to the fable genre, and what not. In fact, Avianus's true predecessor in the question of genre is Aesop himself. The *Life of Aesop* was concerned with the boundaries of genre, insofar as Aesop did not start telling fables until he was freed. The stories he told while a slave were not given the generic label *logos*. This created a distinction between types of speech and story-telling in the biography, a distinction with close ties to Aesop's social status. Still, even this distinction, important as it was, did not receive the attention that Avianus lavishes on generic questions in his *Fables*.

It is also true, however, that questions of genre are, in the end, something of a red herring. Avianus pretends in his dedicatory epistle that his goal is to make the fable genre elegant, but this proves to be nothing but a pose. Avianus's actual goal is to demonstrate that elegance is ill-suited to the fable genre, and to use this generic distinction to talk about status displays in the elite culture of his day. The true distinction that Avianus makes in his fable book is between empty ornamentation and innate character: those whose innate character is poor and/or humble are unable to change this, no matter what sort of clothing they wear, no matter what sort of speech they use. On the flip side, those who are truly worthy do not need special clothing; their true value and status comes from their character. Avianus thus demonstrates the difference between external ornamentation and internal character by showing that humble – or even ugly – characters are the ones who have the power. This focus on plainness and ugliness suits the fable genre, and so questions of genre and social critique become inextricably tied together. To put it simply, Avianus's *Fabulae* are one big fable, whose central message is that style will never triumph over substance.



## Conclusion

Avianus Fable 28 tells the story of a farmer who tries in vain to yoke a rebellious ox. First the farmer cuts off the ox's horns, and assumes that this will cause the ox to stop fighting back. He then fastens the ox to a yoke, trusting that at the very least, the long pole will prevent the animal from either head-butting or kicking him. Instead, as the ox struggles against the yoke, his hooves churn up dust which blows into the farmer's eyes. The farmer then declares that this is proof that a "vicious nature" (28.15: *naturae...iniquae*) will always find a way to do harm.

In some ways, this dissertation may be compared to the farmer, and the fable genre to the ox that refuses to be placed in constraints. My goal has been to demonstrate that each of the fable books may be usefully viewed through the hermeneutic frame created by the fabulist's self-characterization, a frame that "constrains" the reading of the fables to a field of plausible interpretations. Yet the fable genre, which is intrinsically multivalent, pushes back against any attempt to limit its field of interpretation. There is never just one way to interpret a fable, and never just one way to read a fable book. Anyone who picks up Phaedrus and reads his book straight through will necessarily be struck by the number of fables that do not seem to have anything to do with coded speech or with slavery. Babrius's fables are not one hundred percent about the nature of education. Readers of Avianus will notice that there are plenty of fables that do not mention beauty or ornamentation at all. These fable books constantly spill over the framing narrative that, as I have argued, is a basic feature of each of them.

This is not a weakness either of my argument or of the way the fable books are structured. Rather, it means that the fable books offer rich interpretative possibilities for any number of approaches. Leslie Kurke approaches Aesop through the lens of an ever-shifting oral tradition, and mines the *Life of Aesop* for evidence of how this tradition might be have been used. John Henderson is interested in what Phaedrus has to say about life in Rome, and so concentrates on Phaedrus's Roman fables. Tom Hawkins uses genre as a lens through which to read Babrius, and demonstrates how Babrius uses and adapts the iambic genre for his own purposes. James Uden considers how Avianus's style and imagery might stem from the political environment in which Avianus wrote. All of these approaches produce readings which reveal new aspects of the fable collections. My own reading has, I hope, brought to light another lens through which the fable books may usefully be read. Each of these authors uses fables in a distinct way, and their self-characterizations provide important clues as to their approach.

Phaedrus, Babrius, and Avianus do share one characteristic, however: they each present themselves as following in the footsteps of Aesop. Although there is no way to know what sort of Aesop text each of them had access to – if, in fact, it was a text at all, as opposed to stories they heard – , it is notable that each of them can be seen as an heir to some aspect of the *Life and Fables of Aesop*, as it was described in my first chapter.

As a freedman in the political realm, Aesop in the *Life* successfully uses fables to give advice while avoiding trouble. He does not explicitly tell the Samians to turn down Croesus's offer or to harbor him against Croesus's wishes. Instead, he uses fables to give the Samians implicit advice, and thus uses fables to grant himself plausible deniability. Phaedrus's fable collection, concerned as it is with fables as a medium for coded speech, takes this idea and explores it at length. Phaedrus's fable book considers not only how fables are useful for slaves,

but also how they are useful for other disempowered groups in the dangerous political arena of the early imperial age. At the same time, this connection between Aesop and Phaedrus is constantly denied by Phaedrus himself, who insists that his true predecessors are the unnamed slaves who – he claims – invented the fable genre.

Throughout the *Life*, Aesop also uses fables to teach people lessons. As a slave he teaches lessons through his actions, and as a freedman he teaches lessons through his words. Even his death at Delphi can be seen as its own lesson: a warning for the low not to speak fables as though from a position of power, and a warning to all not to ignore the advice offered by fables. This educational aspect is seized upon by Babrius. Unlike Aesop, Babrius does not use fables to teach specific lessons – or at least, that is not the only thing that Babrius does. Babrius's fables are also concerned with the nature of learning, with what behaviors and mental processes make for a good student, for a good teacher. As such, Babrius to some extent sanitizes Aesop, by occluding Aesop's role as a slave and depicting him as nothing but a wise old man.

Finally, the *Life* is concerned with the generic boundaries of the fable. Only the stories Aesop tells after being freed are labeled as *logoi*, fables. The stories he tells as a slave are not. Furthermore, the *Life* creates a strong contrast between written and oral fables: oral fables are useful for the low, whereas written fables are inherently problematic. Avianus's take on the generic boundaries of the fable goes in a much different direction, of course. Avianus is interested only in written fables, and is mostly concerned with questions of style. Still, Avianus, like Aesop, in the end connects questions of genre to questions of social class. Just as written fables are problematic for Aesop because he is low, so Avianus concludes in the end that the humble fable genre should not be dressed up in an epic style. Avianus also uses questions of genre to talk about questions of social and political worth.

In the end, the figure of Aesop is as multivalent as the fable genre itself. Like the fable genre, Aesop cannot be “nailed down” to represent a single viewpoint. In demonstrating the hermeneutic frames that inform each of these fable collections, I have not therefore shut down the many interpretative possibilities that the fable collections can offer. The ox cannot be yoked, but I have at least described the sorts of fields that he likes to frequent.

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